

Introduction

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Education is a very diverse field. This is because it is important to learn all that we can if we are to live productively and appropriately. Religious education is one aspect of this diverse field. While many of us may not be aware of what religious education incorporates and may assume that it does not touch our daily lives, this assumption and understanding would be incorrect. For those who attend any kind of faith-based service, program or worship experience, whether or not there is a sermon, homily or speaker, we are, nonetheless, experiencing religious education in some form. A Friends' circle is a form of religious education as is a Hindu service, or *puja*, and a *jumah* prayer session on Fridays for Muslims. If you attended Sunday School or a confirmation lesson or any kind of instruction as a child or adolescent, you experienced religious education.

While these are more obvious expressions of religious education, there are many other forms that may not be as readily viewed as such. For example, a general course in a public school or college about religion can be considered a form of religious education, as such a course seeks to inform and acquaint the student with a better understanding of religion. One might attend a seminar about climate change or the need to be environmentally responsible. Depending on the context of the seminar, the perspective of the presenter or the content presented, there could easily be a dimension of religious education involved. The same is true for any of the social justice, human rights, diversity/equity and human relationship issues that we face today. Religious education can address most issues that we may face in life, beyond those very specific issues of faith and doctrine.

Just as on-going research in secular education expands our knowledge of the world and our understanding of how to live and thrive in it, so too does on-going research into the field of religious education. As we develop and deepen our knowledge of life and the larger issues we face as human beings, we develop new questions about who we are, what our purpose in life might be, and how can we properly take care of this world in ways that further expand our knowledge and wisdom.

Over time, research in religious education has focused on numerous themes and issues. Taking into consideration the geographical context, the faith community's theological perspective, the needs of the community and the passion of the educators involved, research areas have included doctrinal and liturgical themes, effective pedagogical tools, personal faith development, what constitutes spiritual maturity, the nature of interreligious relationships, how to understand and respond to social justice issues, ecology, and developing a world of peace and harmony. That is why we see the articles in this Special Issue address contemporary concerns for religious education research.

One example in Christian religious education of a vital concern that became the focus of religious educational research concerned the key changes that took place between the late 1700s and mid-1800s in western Europe, particularly within Great Britain, and in the urban areas of the eastern United States. These changes arose because of the rise of the industrial revolution. The key concerns that would eventually motivate early research within Christian religious education included the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, child labor laws, the increase in crime and tenement housing, and challenges to personal faith and piety. With time, additional topics became the focus of research, including the concept of the Christian Sunday school, the moral and Biblical imperative to "love thy neighbor" and the need to understand other faith communities (Elias 2002).



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Religious education research has also been conducted by Islamic, Hindu, Judaic and religious educators from other faith communities as well as religious studies scholars. A review of journal articles and book themes outline topics addressed by religious educators have sought to confront pressing issues faced by contemporary Islamic communities. As will be addressed by an article in this issue, the need for curricula, programs and materials that work toward the deradicalization of young Muslims is an important concern for Islamic religious educators. The need to research gender equality has also been a critical issue for research. Within the European context, the nature and quality of religious education in public schools has also been a research topic of critical concern. Judaic research has often focused on an issue that has plagued Judaism for centuries. This is the issue of anti-semitism. In recent years this has expanded to include research about discrimination and hatred. Research has also looked at an issue in Judaism that is common to most religious communities—the impact of secularization on Jewish families and faith together with the related issue of looking at the nature of faith in a commercialized society.

Within the south Asian context, research in Hindu religious education has been focused on the quality of religious education for Hindus both in the schools and in the home out of concern for the faith formation of the next generation. Hindu religious educators in the United Kingdom have also researched the question of what constitutes effective faith formation in today's world so that Hindus learn how to be true to their faith on a daily basis. These specific themes for the diverse faith communities are in addition to the wider social justice issues that all religious educators face in their teaching. Each of these communities also, of course, conduct research on the traditional themes emphasizing theological orthodoxy, pedagogical effectiveness, liturgical practices and worship needs.

As we can see, there are many topics and issues that can become the focus of religious education research. This is why this *Journal* issue is timely and a good resource as each contribution provides a window into the possibilities of greater insight and understanding of both ourselves, religious education and our world. As we begin to consider life after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, religious education research may very well assume more importance in terms of supporting the global healing and reconciling process. At the same time, there are emerging issues, questions and challenges of living in a diverse world that need to also be addressed constructively. Religious education research can help respond to that need as we move forward.

This special edition of the “Religions” *Journal*, “Reflecting on the Possibilities of Religious Education Research,” offers readers an insight into a selection of different yet relevant themes in which religious education research is opening doors so that we can examine and discuss ways in which religious education can play a role in addressing or resolving these important issues. “‘I/you’ An Innovative Research Instrument for Youngsters to Explore Their Life Orientation” by Ina ter Avest, provides findings from an “innovative and explorative” research instrument created by ter Avest that allows for student self-reflection and analysis as they seek to define their worldview, whether positioning themselves religiously or non-religiously. Ter Avest focuses in particular on gaining insight into Muslim youth as to how they form their faith and life orientation, highlighting those youths who are at risk for radicalization.

Using Fowler's view of faith development in adolescents as a baseline, ter Avest then presents insights on faith development in youth based on findings obtained from multiple studies conducted previously in England, Estonia, Ghana and Malawi. Using either special questionnaires or student assignments, the data obtained from these resources addressed youth perceptions of faith in the modern world, faith practices, beliefs and other relevant points. The second source of data comes from the ‘I/you’ instrument created by ter Avest, that was combined together with the PIREd module based on specific lessons that involved dialogue which challenged the youth to explore their own thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding faith and religious pluralism. The instrument gave students the opportunity to explore their own views, experiences and feelings regarding religious plurality with fellow students as they sought to understand their position in relationship to

the faiths and worldviews in the classroom. As noted by ter Avest, the focus on self-analysis and dialogue are important elements for youth during this formative time in their lives.

As ter Avest further notes, the increasing focus within religious education is how to help future generations develop the tools that support the adolescents as they encounter the “other” and open themselves to engage in both dialogue and self-analysis about their beliefs and how to formulate a worldview that will guide them in life. As the article is keen to develop insights into reaching out to Muslim youth who are at risk for radicalization, this is timely and important research in religious education.

Because of the importance of effective teaching and learning of religious content and spirituality with adolescents, another article also focuses on religious education with this age group. “Adolescents’ Perception of Religious Education According to Religion and Gender in Spain,” offered by Maria del Carmen Olmos-Gomez, presents a quantitative study of how adolescents view religion in Spain utilizing analytical-empirical and social research methods. The difference for this article is the added question concerning the impact of gender in such classrooms.

In looking at religious education in Spanish classrooms, Olmos-Gomez had two goals for the study. First the study was an opportunity to develop an instrument that can assess how religion impacts the school as it relates to both the cultural background and the sex of the participants. The second goal was to understand if a relationship existed between one’s perception of religion in school and the variable of gender and religion. At the end of the study, the more notable results certainly have implications for future research in religious education. One of the findings was that Christian women and Muslim men had more positive experiences with religion in school. A second finding was that knowledge of religion supported adolescents’ ongoing development. Third, Christian and Muslim men and Jewish women expected greater autonomy. A final finding was no surprise. The adolescents believed that the religious curriculum in the schools should be studied and reviewed and improved pedagogically as it is important for them.

Norshariani Abd Rahman takes the reader in a different area of research in religious education. This study provides a creative look at how the *tauhidic* elements in Islamic religious education can contribute to understanding our environmental challenge, looking at how it can encourage one to take appropriate action to resolve our ecological problems. “Integration of Tauhidic Elements for Environmental Education from the Teachers’ Perspective” discusses the process and conclusions of a qualitative study conducted within two Islamic boarding schools in Malaysia. By interviewing two science teachers, two Islamic religious educators and an environmental education coordinator, the author sought to see if and how this Islamic concept of *tauhidic* might guide Muslim students to become more active in responding to environmental education.

Acknowledging the small sample size and the need for further assessment, Rahman certainly stimulates the reader to look at the possible contributions of Islamic teachings to further nurture an ethical and moral perspective toward ecology and the environment. As Norshariani concluded, the integration of *tauhidic* elements is only effective when two things take place. First the teachers need to share the values that inform their advice to the students on the environment while also serving as role models. Second, classroom activities help students connect to the genuine meaning of the relevant verses from the Quran or the Hadith. Overall, the author concluded that environmental education requires the cooperation of science teachers and the Islamic religious educators in order to be more effective in environmental education. Although the study was small and revolved around Islamic boarding schools, it does provide us with food for thought as to the possible role of religious education in providing insight into such global issues as environmental education.

The pandemic has certainly affected every corner of the world and all areas of life and work. As we begin to emerge from it and from the almost total shutdown of life as we knew it, we are faced with many questions as they relate to religious education. Monique van Dijk-Groenboer presents in her article, “Religious Education in (post-) Pandemic Times; Becoming a Resilient Professional in a Teacher Academy,” what some of these key questions

are including: Who are we? How do we find our roots again? What direction is right for us now? In essence, van Dijk-Groenboer is looking at resilience in the midst of rapid change, both personally and professionally. The challenge for religious education, as noted in the article, is to articulate these questions with our students so that they are not afraid to face them so they may develop resilience and move into the future. More importantly, religious education teachers also need to develop resilience before they introduce it to their students.

There is a valuable discussion of values and the challenges around such a topic as a foundation for understanding resilience. However, as noted by van Dijk-Groenboer, in order for youth to be resilient, they need to have a greater awareness of their talents and the set of values upon which they base their decisions. It is van Dijk-Groenboer's view that religious education then is well-situated in a school to develop such a discussion of values and how students can make sense of which values are right for them within the range of competing values. The discussion of values is central to the article in that the focus of religious education is at the heart of resilience and decision-making. As noted by van Dijk-Groenboer, in order to be resilient in the new post-pandemic world, students need to make their important decisions based on strong values, values that reflect who they are as human beings. It is also these values that shape one's moral compass which orient one's actions. The author also offers a basic discussion of methodologies that can support such content effectively. These methods include co-creating in inspirational sessions, the use of stories, learning together, agentive-transformative approaches and deep listening. Of course, at the end of the day, the reader is reminded that one's moral compass will be reshaped throughout one's life and that our students need the tools to continue to reflect and reshape their compass.

A second article is also focused specifically on the pandemic. The experience of trauma is certainly an experience that many religious educators working in either theological schools or secular institutions have had to face with their students during the pandemic. As thousands of families and individuals have experienced first-hand the pain of loss and the pain of long-term illness, understanding trauma-informed pedagogies can be extremely valuable. Additionally, understanding the value of trauma-informed pedagogy can certainly aid educators in making a contribution to their students who have experienced trauma caused by violence and racial discrimination as well. This is Darryl Stephens' perspective in his article, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom." Stephens reminds us that trauma is not just an individual experience but can be experienced in different forms from collective, epigenetic and social-cultural forms of trauma to a vicarious form.

The article draws on religious education literature, psychology, neuroscience and public health in order to provide a rich discussion of trauma-informed pedagogy that can be used in the classroom. What is particularly helpful is the discussion of the definition of trauma and the types of trauma that one may experience as well as trauma's impact on survivors. Noting how young this area of study is, the article more importantly discusses the bibliographic contributions of the field. In doing so, it offers the religious educator insight into what might be possible at this stage, looking to a time in which further studies can be developed.

Finally, there is Charles Chesnavage's examination of "Digital Stories as a Creative Assignment to Study World Religions." At a time in which global interreligious understanding is still being challenged by our limited knowledge of faiths and religious communities other than our own and with a lack of sufficient interfaith dialogue, Chesnavage's article presents a helpful methodology for educators. Stories have always been viewed as an effective teaching resource, regardless of the content of the course or the age of the students. Stories help one to learn, to celebrate key experiences, to remember and to heal. While story telling is not a new pedagogical tool, digital story telling using one's cell phone is a new dimension that fits well with today's generation of Millennials and Generation Zs and their almost total reliance on their phones. The students' stories can include music, photos,

images, videos and voiceovers. As noted in the article, students are engaged cognitively, emotionally and spiritually through these digital stories.

The article notes the process used by Chesnavage that involves the distribution of a theme sheet. The types of themes used, as noted in the article, can include religious beliefs, holidays, birth, death, rituals and other central points in the life of a religious community. Chesnavage draws on the work of key religious educators to highlight the valuable contribution that story telling can make to the study of the world's religions and to our own religious sensibilities. While the context for this article is that of a world religions course, digital story telling has broad application in religious education and can certainly play an important role in other essential themes such as spiritual formation, theology, philosophy and faith formation.

Each of the articles in this *Journal* offer insight into the importance of religious education research. They also speak to the hope of continued growth and development of the field of religious education. Although a century ago it was thought that religious education was primarily about transmitting the faith and doctrine, we have begun to see how vast the application of religious education can be because of new and ever-expanding research. It can apply to ecology and the environment, social justice, human relationships, human trauma, and to everyday life. Each issue or theme presented in these articles can certainly be studied further, as noted by some of the authors. That is our challenge as religious educators—to be daring enough to step into the future and look for the ways that religious education might contribute or provide insight, and then to boldly begin the valuable research in that area. This is what will reveal religious education's dynamism and depth.

The articles published in this issue reflect a range of perspectives and research interests in the field of religious education. I look forward to future research that will continue to highlight important and relevant research in the field. Thank you to all of the contributors.

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Reference

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