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Religious literacy: how do we recognize it when we see it, and then what...? Arguments for a reformed use of religious literacy in RE research, international knowledge transfer and teacher training programs

Abstract
To facilitate and strengthen teacher training knowledge transfers, certain theoretical and analytical concepts must be scrutinized, one of which is religious literacy. This chapter starts with a short survey on the use of religious literacy in different international contexts, from which it was found that religious literacy is far from a coherent concept. Despite this, religious literacy is not a redundant term. Quite the opposite. This chapter argues that religious literacy could prove useful in several research areas if there were a transformed understanding and use of religious literacy as a concept. The main objective of this chapter is to initiate this endeavour and suggest a new framing that could assist in a more cohesive and practical use of religious literacy in its own right. The first step is to tie religious literacy closer to its origin in new literacy studies. One important distinction, on the other hand, is to demarcate religious literacy from other established RE research concepts, such as learning about religions. Finally, it is argued that religious literacy should be understood in relation to interpretative repertoires and used to study different linguistic and communication capacities. If we follow the trajectory set out in this chapter, we will enhance our theoretical and explanatory toolbox and our possibilities to develop children and young peoples' sense making in relation to religion in schools.

Keywords: Religious literacy, literacy, learning about religion, World religion paradigm, interpretative repertoires, sense making

1. Religious literacy and International Knowledge Transfer – an introduction

International knowledge transfers (IKT) have often been discussed in comparative national educational system contexts (Beech 2006). However, while discussing problematizing concepts and theoretical approaches are not the same, they are interconnected. To facilitate national and international teacher education knowledge transfers, student teachers, teacher trainers and religious education scholars would benefit from distinctive, relatable concepts as wide-ranging, imprecise concepts can obstruct such endeavors.
Religious literacy has been a popular religious education research focus for some time. However, religious literacy is a ubiquitous term that is generally not uniform, often incoherent and seldom well defined. While some efforts have been made to overview the field (von Brömssen 2013) and reduce the conceptual diversity (Biesta, Aldridge, Hannam & Whittle 2019), others have claimed that the multiple meanings ascribed to religious literacy is a strength (Dinham & Francis 2016) or have applied the term to specific, narrow contexts (Bowling 2021; Ha-lafoff, Singleton, Bouma & Rasmussen 2020; Kjørven 2016; Pae 2021; Rackley 2021). There have been some commendable and fruitful efforts to systematize and categorize religious literacy (Dinham, Francis & Shaw 2017; Goldberg 2010; Shaw 2019, 2020). However, credible as these contributions have been, religious literacy definitions have tended to be too wide-ranging and inclusive. In addition, and despite its popularity, the move from literacy to religious literacy has seldom been explained or thoroughly elaborated on in religious education.

In some sense, religious literacy has become an open signifier, or rather a ‘one size fits all’ term to be adjusted for almost any use or purpose, which raises the following rhetorical question: would a more precise, agreed on and demarcated understanding of religious literacy be better? This chapter seeks to prove that it would. Even though there is a lack of clarity as to the specific meaning of religious literacy, it is not redundant and could be a fruitful term in several research areas; however, to study something, it is generally necessary to know what to look for in the first place.

The objective of this chapter is to elaborate on and discuss this predicament and to suggest a new framing for religious literacy so that it is more cohesive, more practical, closer to its origins in New Literacy Studies (Street 1984, 1998) and distinctively uncoupled from other established religious education concepts. Distinguishing and clarifying the meaning of religious literacy is relevant both to religious education, IKT and teacher education because it is important to know what is being transferred and under what conditions.

### 2. Religious literacy in context

The starting point in this endeavor is to examine the use and adoption of religious literacy in different national and local contexts and for different research purposes, as exemplified in the following.
2.1 Religious literacy in the USA

Diane Moore’s highly influential book *Overcoming religious illiteracy* (Moore 2007) was aimed at the teaching of religion in the USA. Moore is a proponent of non-confessional religion teaching in public schools, primarily because her main objective is to reduce the widespread religious illiteracy in North American society by expanding the number of people who understand the cultural, political and contextual aspects of religion and the various influences it has on people’s daily lives. For Moore, this is related to both citizenship and interpersonal understanding.

However, discussing public school religious teaching in this national context is not without problems as this focus could be unconstitutional. Religious education could be seen to be congregational and confessional education, that is, learning in a specific belief or religion, which is prohibited in American state schools. However, this is not Moore’s intention; quite the contrary. Moore argues that the promotion of non-confessional religious teaching at state schools is clearly in line with the First Amendment as Moore’s approach favors religious literacy over RE because it is more feasible for the US national context.

Stephen Prothero (2007) is also concerned with religious knowledge in North American society and argues that the religious literacy could be further developed by improving: “the ability to understand and use religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices [...] and stories that are employed in American public life.” (Prothero 2007, p. 17). Prothero and Moore share the idea that religious literacy stretches beyond mere facts about religion and that religion should be taught in public schools. They also argue that this is in accordance with American law. Viewed from a national context, religious literacy, rather than RE, becomes an important term for them. However, unlike Prothero, Moore’s citizenship focus indicates that religious literacy can also vary within national contexts.

2.2 Religious literacy in South Africa

Contexts such as South Africa have different reference points (Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum 2021; Roux 2010). Since the 1990s, there has been an ambition to bridge the differences and inequalities in South African society and strengthen social cohesion and human rights. Cornelia Roux argued that interreligious RE at school was an important part of this process and that the teachers’ religious literacy was central to its success. For Roux, religious literacy is related to self-identification and an understanding of other people’s perspectives and worldviews, that is, improving personal religious literacy is a hermeneutical process that involves reflexivity and dialogue (Roux 2010, p. 996).
A decade later, Nthontho and Addai-Muunkum (2021) extended this idea and drew attention to the inclusion of RE in a new non-confessional subject in the South African school curriculum called Life orientation, in which religion is represented in three ways: literacy, creativity and critical reflection. Nthontho and Addai-Muunkum (2021) explored how religious literacy could be a useful tool to fulfil the potential of this subject and drew upon the ideas of Denise Cush (2007) and Robert Jackson (2005), among others, to state that religious literacy can be used to understand the world and that a religiously literate person can argue for a religious (or non-religious) position while maintaining their own position (Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum 2021, p. 438). As religious literacy is closely connected to the school curricula content and outcomes, Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum concluded that religious literacy should be seen as the basis for critical and creative dialogues in the classroom and school forums.

2.3 Religious literacy in the UK

Compared with the United States, the UK’s relationships between the school system, the state and religion are very different, a variable that plays a part in the national understandings of religious education and the use of religious literacy. Andrew Wright (1993, 2000) was one of the first to elaborate on religious literacy in the UK. He alleged that contemporary society had become increasingly religiously illiterate and argued that school education systems needed to address this illiteracy. Taking a critical realism approach, Wright stressed that religious literacy in schools should not be seen as something that can be measured as factual knowledge about the reality ‘out there’ nor as the final learning outcome. Rather he sees religious literacy as the ability to reflect on, communicate and understand religion and posits that such knowledge and understanding is linguistic; understanding the world equates to having the language to do it. He writes: “To understand language requires a reference […] to the open and universal nature of human interaction,” and: “A socially constructed language that gains meaning from the ways in which words are used […] by constructing complex patterns of symbolism, metaphors, models, myths, narratives and stories” (Wright 1996, p. 172). Concerning religion, this means that a person’s religious literacy increases when one acquires, and in various degrees masters, different religious discourses. When students develop this linguistic competence they can discuss, understand and draw conclusions about religion and the truth claims associated with the various religious traditions. The important thing is, however, not the truth claims per se but the ability to discuss and communicate these varied ideas and beliefs. For Wright, the process of understanding the world, including reli-
gion, is a linguistic and social endeavor that evolves throughout life from an early age.

2.4 Religious literacy in Swedish RE teacher education

In Sweden, RE (in Swedish: Religionskunskap) has been a compulsory, inclusive and non-confessional school subject since the 1960s. The current Swedish National Agency for Education regulations for curricula, syllabi and teaching guidelines, as well as schoolbooks, focus on providing knowledge about and from religions and other life views, religion in society, life questions and ethics. While the religious literacy concept is not overtly referred to, the abilities and competencies, I will argue, are associated with religious literacy inherent in this material. For example the reference in the syllabi to societal diversity, global communication, interactions with others and mutual understanding, with significant emphasis placed on understanding others. However, less focus is put on everyday conversations about religion, sense-making or other abilities, such as curiosity, that are important to increase understanding, interactions and tolerance.

A basic overview of popular Swedish teacher education textbooks also indicates this approach. Learning about and learning from religions and life views, life questions and ethics are included and then elaborated on and exemplified through certain teaching strategies. However, there is also content that stresses the dangers of totally fact-based knowledge and argues that an understanding of the differences between and inside the different religions is needed to ensure a contextual understanding. The authors also highlight that discussing, listening and reflecting are important abilities (see for instance: Löfstedt 2011; Odenstad 2014; Stymne 2020). Although there is content that can be classified as the type of religious literacy advocated in this chapter the term is seldom mentioned. While religious literacy is not specifically referred to, there are some exceptions. The most notable (Löfstedt 2018) take on a wide approach that is highly influenced by an international definition of literacy which however does not address or elaborate on religious literacy (UNESCO 2005). For Löfstedt, religious literacy denotes knowledge about religions, the ability to communicate, the ability to use this knowledge in practice as well as to engage in self-reflection; the result is a definition and a scope in its very broadest sense. Religious literacy in this sense is an all-embracing concept for what some think is proper to be taught at school and incorporated into the syllabi.
2.5 Religious literacy in other perspectives

Another slightly different religious literacy definition was given in Ole Kjørven’s dissertation in which religious literacy was examined at a purely textual and empirical level to investigate how ‘literate’ Norwegian RE teachers were about biblical scripture (i.e., the story about the Prodigal son). Therefore, Kjørven referred to religious literacy in a relatively narrow way; however, Kjørven also discussed his results in relation to Moore, Prothero and Wright and concluded that it was difficult to compare their positions. This finding was not surprising and can partly be explained by the respective contextual-dependent approaches taken toward the use of religious literacy.

Religious literacy has recently been applied in wider contexts outside RE (Crisp & Dinham 2020; Dinham 2017; Dinham & Francis 2016; Dinham, Francis & Shaw 2017), such as in studies on the relevant and required religious knowledge needed in the health care system and on the need for religious literacy to be included in UK occupational standards.

2.6 Religious literacy in context – a summary

This short survey makes it clear that there is no uniform understanding of religious literacy. However, three important conclusions can be made. First, there is use of religious literacy, on the one hand, grounded in knowledge about religions and the associated practices and, on the other, based on linguistic abilities as a way to understand and communicate different truth claims. The former is predominant, especially if knowledge about is defined in a wider sense and include contextual and societal understandings of religion. Second, religious literacy has been applied in many different areas, such as Kjørven’s empirical and textual usages in which religious literacy is seen as an analytical and theoretical tool and the normative religious literacy content in school curricula. Third, if religious literacy is to be understood from an international perspective, national contexts must be considered.

Most of these religious literacy understandings share at least three common features: the authors’ concern for a waxing social religious illiteracy; a need for increased religious understanding, tolerance and dialogue that recognizes the religious diversity in society; and a preoccupation and dependence on discrete religious traditions. Despite these commonalities, the popularity of a religious literacy focus seems to increase the lack of clarity regarding its meaning, which has made it difficult and problematic to compare and transfer the concept of religious literacy to teacher education contexts as well as to other fields of research.
There are several ways to resolve this dilemma: detach the common religious literacy understanding from national context dependencies and disentangle religious literacy from the other concepts that contribute to the lack of clarity. Suggestions are given in the following sections to address these ambitions.

3. ‘Religion’ in religious literacy – a wider understanding

‘Religion’ is inevitably a vital part of religious literacy and how we understand and define religion affects religious literacy’s applicability and scope. Marta Shaw’s (2019) dissertation focuses on the need for a wider understanding of religious and non-religious worldviews. However, the benchmark in this study was the common reductionist understanding of religion from the British RE-context, which traditionally has been a world religion approach, from which Shaw sought to frame the wider perspective as one “…that includes more informal and personal experiences and understandings” (Shaw 2019, pp. 16, 59). I agree that religion should not be limited to just the well-established religious traditions. Biesta et al. also suggested a move away from the object of religion to the subject of religion and proposed that the focus should be on what it means: “for someone to live life religiously” (Biesta et al. 2019, p. 29). However, this could be criticized as being a narrow understanding of religion because the focus is on ‘being religious’ and emphasizes belief and religious practice. A wider understanding of religion is needed, one that can be built on the views of Ingvild Saelid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson (2003). For them religion should be understood as an engagement in and communication with or about imagined and hypothetical transcendental realms, gods or other powers. Such position also relates to social, societal and cultural perspectives and first and foremost, interpersonal communication about these imagined powers (Jahnke 2021, pp. 66–67). This wider perspective, which includes the religious elements in such areas as popular culture, sports and fantasies, situates religion here, there and everywhere (Gilhus 2013, 2017). This standpoint opens up a wider communication around religion and should be the domain from which religious literacy is to be formed.

This could also apply to school environments. Studies have found that children and young people think and talk about religion in various ways (Ipgrave 2012, 2013; Jahnke 2021). Because understanding the world is a never-ending social task, when children first enter school, they bring with them a wide range of knowledge and linguistic competencies that are not exclusively related to or drawn from established religious traditions. Consequently, children’s and young people’s relationships with religion should not be limited to learning content about religion or expected learning outcomes. Much, therefore, can be gained if this wider perspective is included in teacher education and becomes part of the
teachers’ competencies. Religious literacy as set out in this chapter is a highly adequate term for this purpose, even internationally.

4. ‘Literacy’ in religious literacy – a concept too far from home?

It is no understatement that literacy is a popular term in many different research fields. The term literacy has been used in many ways and many contexts, such as worldview literacy (Valk, Mualla & Siebren 2020), media literacy (Potter 2008; Wrammert 2021), liturgy literacy (Berglund 2019), epistemic literacy (Pearce, Stones, Reiss & Mujtaba 2019) and biological literacy (Semilarski and Laius 2021). However, there has been no uniform understanding of literacy within or across these fields; in fact, literacy seems to have traveled far from its original meaning (von Brömssen, Ivkovits and Nixon 2020) and undergone some unfortunate changes. Religious education and religious literacy are no exceptions. To mend these definitional issues, it is necessary to understand the ‘literacy’ in religious literacy in context with its original associations in New Literacy Studies (Gee 2000; Lankshear & Knobel 2013; Street 1984, 1998).

Literacy studies emerged from the ideas and teaching of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1975, 1976). One key theme in Freire’s pedagogy was that those from the less-literate working classes should learn to read and write, that is, they need to be able to acquire and access language. However, for Freire, acquiring language was not only the ability to read and write, but an endeavor for liberation, empowering the citizens and increasing societal equality. Consequently, the power relations in this process were important to uncover.

In the 1980s, researchers began to focus on the social contexts and practices in which these processes took place. (Barton & Hamilton 2000; Baynham & Prinsloo 2009; Hall 2013; Street 1998). These embedded literacy practices were redefined from being mere neutral or technical to being political processes (Street 1984, 1998). As literacy became associated with individual language repertoires and sense-making processes (Martin-Jones & Jones 2000; Street & Lefstein 2007), it was argued that literacy needed to be understood as an evolving, ongoing and dynamic process in which the individual, or in this case, the student, had an active part to play in the learning situation rather than being a mere receiver (Barton & Hamilton 2000; Kleve, Penne, & Skaar 2014; Norton 2007; Street 1984).

Even though social and contextual perspectives were crucial to New Literacy Studies, it is important to note that the ‘literacy’ focus was on speaking and mastering a specific language, for instance Spanish, in different social settings. Clearly, learning how to read, write and communicate in Spanish is not the same as doing so in ‘religion’. However, as this focus can be used to understand religious literacy to be the language needed for sense-making in different social
contexts, our interest should be on the overarching ‘language’ of religion in a wider sense. To possess religious literacy is, then, like having the ability to speak and make sense in a variety of Spanish-speaking contexts.

This interpretation means that different religious traditions should not be at the center of our understanding of religious literacy. Neither should religious literacy be used to study phenomena for which we already have adequate and established concepts. A starting point for this demarcation could be to set religious literacy apart from the three related perspectives that are often misleadingly connected to it.

5. Three substantial demarcations: ‘Learning about religion’, the World Religion Paradigm and curricula

Regardless of the contextual variances, the use of religious literacy has often been informed by two common features: the interconnectedness to fact-based or social, dynamic and citizenship-based knowledge about religion (Halaffof et al. 2020; Prothero 2007; Moore 2007); and the presupposition and departure from defined, organized and known religious traditions. These features are the starting point for the discussion in this section.

The first delimitation is to separate religious literacy from its integration with religious traditions. As has been pointed out, religious literacy has often been used in connection with well-known and organized religious traditions in both narrow interpretations associated with a fixed number of world religions and wider interpretations that include a large number of named religious traditions. However, the focus on specific religions still lingers in the background and have confined the scope of religious literacy, a perspective that has been problematized as the World Religion Paradigm (Anker 2017; Bleisch & Schwab 2021; Cotter & Robertson 2016; Masuzawa 2005; Owen 2011).

This interlocking is problematic for several reasons. Not only does it retain the meaning of talking and making sense of religion but also runs the risk of defining religious literacy as being ‘reserved’ as a concept that is mainly about specific religious traditions that do not embrace the atheistic or agnostic viewpoints or religion at large. Enveloping the understanding of religious literacy also runs the risk of only focusing on official, simplified and perhaps even stereotypical forms of the different religions, which for instance can obviate perspectives of lived religion (Ammerman 2007, 2014; McGuire 2008) and the many variations that exist within religious traditions. Religious literacy should not be limited to knowledge about some religions or some religious phenomena but should be seen
as a linguistic tool to make sense of religion in a variety of situations and different parts of life; thus, the earlier analogy with Spanish.

To make some progress in defining religious literacy as an individual concept, it is necessary to demarcate it from learning about religion. Several decades ago, Grimmitt (1987) coined the expressions learning about religion and learning from religion, which have since become well-established within RE research. The main idea was to distinguish learning content, that is learning about, from the more developmental and critical aspect in RE focusing on the individual pupil in relation to what is being taught (Grimmitt 1987).

It could be argued that Grimmitt’s use of learning about was focused on religion in a narrow sense. While this may have been the case, there are benefits in expanding his expression to include knowledge about religions in a wider contextual sense, for instance from social, societal and political perspectives. Therefore, it is suggested that learning about religion needs to be further elaborated. However, as this was not the objective of this chapter, this is a task best left for future discussions. The point is that as there is already an adequate and well-established concept that allows for a discussion on the different forms of knowledge about religions in a wider sense, it is not necessary to attach religious literacy to this.

Religious literacy has also been used to explicitly discuss and study RE teaching, learning and curricula content (von Brömssen et al. 2020; Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum 2021; Roux 2010; Shaw 2019) and it is in this area that the third demarcation is to be found. Curricula, content and learning outcomes are normative and draw from various elements, such as historical events, ideological positions, pedagogical approaches and contemporary political situations. Han-nam et al. (2020) argued that there were several disadvantages to relating religious literacy too closely to school curricula. This chapter also agrees that religious literacy should not be limited to being dependent on, desirable for or equal to any particular learning content or outcomes in schools. Neither should it be used as a tool to investigate and compare what constitutes different national curricula, as has been done previously (von Brömssen et al. 2020). If this were the case, religious literacy would be no more than an empty signifier and a concept that had little or no value as an overarching analytical tool for knowledge transfer or other RE fields. One further argument is that literacy and religious literacy is not related to knowledge per se but an ability and a capacity; therefore, a focus on school content could run the risk of marginalizing the former and promoting more factual knowledge, making it difficult to use religious literacy outside the school context.

The demarcations presented above are the main arguments in this chapter, from which the following suggestion is given. When religious literacy is applied as a theoretical and analytical tool, that is, as a tool to recognize and study language,
literacy practices and sense-making in relation to religion, it is necessary to ask whether it is separated from the World Religions Paradigm in the wider sense, from learning about religion, from curricula and learning content in school and from national and local understandings of the concept. If the answers are no, we need to rework the points of departure.

However, as it is a bad habit to tear things down without reconstructing and establishing something new in its place, the duty here is to give some tentative forward-looking suggestions.

6. **New understanding of ‘religious literacy’: a modest proposal**

It may be surprising to start this concluding section with a maritime theme. As a sailor, I know the importance of navigation; however, this is not entirely why this metaphor for religious literacy was seen to be useful. Biesta et al. (2019) claimed that this metaphor was useful because it highlights: “that being literate means that one is able find one’s way around a particular domain or terrain.” In combination with Wright’s linguistic approach, the navigation metaphor sets the scene for the following argument. However, engaged in language, Wright could be criticized for his emphasis on different religious traditions and their truth claims (see for instance: Franck 2018). This particular perspective in Wright’s argument falls outside the demarcation offered in this chapter for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, Wright’s writing on knowledge and the ability to reflect, communicate and act on knowledge about religion and different truth claims is useful here. Wright also emphasized that language and knowledge were evolving hermeneutic, social processes, both of which are relevant to the arguments presented in this chapter.

This focus on language and communication becomes even more useful when combined with the perspective that people are social and sense-making beings (Gärdenfors 2009). Sense-making here refers to the dynamic and contextual processes through which people experience meaning, within which linguistic expression and mutual understanding are pivotal components because people establish, retain and modify meaning and knowledge through language. Depending on the context and situation, people use several different communication strategies in social interactions, all of which are structured by different socio-linguistic rules, or, as labeled by Potter and Wetherell, interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1992). Edley described these repertoires as “…a range of linguistic resources that can be drawn upon and utilized in the course of everyday social interaction.” (Edley 2001, p. 198). Edley also described interpretative repertoires as being similar to books in a library or the main steps in a dance, the basic understanding of which a person can im-
provise and make sense of new or old situations. In line with the navigation metaphor, they could also be analogized to a sea chart. The greater the number and the broader the repertoires people have access to, the better they are at sense-making different social situations and the greater their ability and potential to understand others.

The suggestion made here is that future discussions should equate terrain or domain with interpretative repertoires and view the latter as linguistic and communication terrains. When applied to religion and RE, these repertoires should be understood as an ability to talk about and make sense of—or to dance, if we use Edleys’ metaphor—religion in different situations and contexts. One notable point, however, is that different religious traditions, or knowledge about these traditions, are not the focus here as that perspective is and should be demarcated. It is precisely here where interpretative repertoires connect to literacy practices and religious literacy, and, for that matter, speaking Spanish. One final point is that speaking about different religious traditions per se, or having knowledge about them, should not be categorized or looked at as being the same as having different repertoires or different forms of religious literacy.

Therefore, to emphasize the modest proposal being given here, one final demarcation is required. As well as proposing that being literate means being able to “find one’s way around in a particular domain or terrain,” Biesta and colleagues (2019) suggested that being literate also included a critical awareness of the power relations within a terrain. While these are unquestionably important abilities, they should not be seen as axiomatic ingredients for religious literacy. Making sense in different contexts and using interpretative repertoires does not necessarily imply a critical perspective. Put differently, a critical view and an awareness of the power relations in a particular social context is not a prerequisite for religious literacy. This demarcation is, perhaps, an area that could be discussed further, not least because it addresses one of the fundamental assumptions in New Literacy Studies.

7. Concluding remarks

It is my hope that the demarcations offered in this chapter can assist in countering the confusing overly narrow or too wide understandings of religious literacy and make it a less ambiguous concept. Religious literacy has a vital part to play in religious education research and teacher education as it could improve the ‘seeing’, investigating and transferring of important knowledge about how children and young people make sense of religion; an ability that is undoubtedly important in a society characterized by religious diversity.
This chapter has merely started the national and local deconstruction needed to come to a common understanding of religious literacy. Therefore, further scrutiny is needed to raise awareness about the different contextual understandings of religious literacy to improve international knowledge transfers in teacher training.

**Literature**


Part III – International knowledge transfer and comparative perspectives. Teacher education in different countries and denominations