

**EASR Working Group on
Religion in Public Education
Seminar: Religious Literacy**



**Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia
March 13–14, 2025**

Venue: Tiepolo-Gravisi Palace, Kreljeva 6, Koper

Thursday, March 13

17.30–18.30 Panel I

- Fredrik Jahnke (University of Gävle, Sweden): Religious literacy, sense making and the art of negotiating
- Patrick Loobuyck (University of Antwerp; Belgium): Science, religion, and the limits of pluralism in education

Friday, March 14

9.30–10.30 Panel II

- Gašper Mithans & Mateja Režek (Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia): The replacement of religious education: atheism in school curricula in socialist Slovenia
- Nadja Furlan Štante (Science and Research Centre Koper, Slovenia): Empowering perspectives – integrating feminist approaches in religious education

11.00–12.30 Panel III

- Christian Moe (Independent researcher, Slovenia and Norway): Teaching religion as counter-radicalization: the case of EDUC8
- Frederik Wallenstein (Stockholm University, Sweden): Swedish subject 'religion and science' in upper secondary schools: problems and opportunities
- Giovanni Lapis (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy): Towards a deconfessionalization of religious education from inside? Preliminary report from an Italian Research Project

14.00–16.00 Public roundtable: **Religious Literacy and Public Education**

- Wanda Alberts (Germany), Jenny Berglund (Sweden), Mariachiara Giorda (Italy), Tim Jensen (Denmark), Aleš Črnič (Slovenia) – chair

The seminar is convened by the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana, the Science and Research Centre Koper and the Slovenian Association for the Study of Religions.

Abstracts

Round table: Religious literacy and public education

Religious literacy is a multifaceted concept that implies an understanding of the diverse landscape of religions and beliefs. In the context of public education it means teaching students about religion on a scientific, non-confessional basis that is objective, but at the same time respectful. Unlike religious instruction, which aims to instil specific beliefs, religious literacy critically focuses on understanding the role religion plays in history, culture, and society. Many increasingly see religious literacy as essential for fostering social cohesion and understanding in multicultural societies.

But this concept is not widely known in the region where the Round Table will take place. Slovenia is the only European country, apart from France, where pupils are hardly taught about religion in public school. And in all other countries of the post-Yugoslav region, only confessional religious education is known. In this context, the concept of religious literacy seems extremely welcome and valuable.

However, the concept also faces several challenges. These challenges primarily stem from its vague definition, lack of empirical support for its purported benefits, and its complex historical and ideological entanglements (which can lead to biases and a narrow focus that may not adequately address the needs of a pluralistic society).

Papers

Panel I

Fredrik Jahnke: Religious literacy, sense making and the art of negotiating

Literacy is a popular concept in many different fields of research. To name but a few: Health, food, media and biological literacy. The field of religious education is no exception; religious literacy has been a very fashionable concept, and still is. However, there is no common understanding or use of religious literacy. Instead, it has become more of an open signifier that can be applied in a wide range of research purposes. This is problematic. In my presentation I will discuss a new framing for religious literacy and argue that a narrower understanding of the concept would be preferable. One step, and perhaps the first one, in doing this is to demarcate religious literacy from, for instance, learning about religion (regardless of how wide we interpret the latter).

Further, I suggest that religious literacy should be closer connected to its original meaning in New literacy studies. Analogically, I would tentatively think about religious literacy as an ability to “speak religion”. In combination with perspectives of sense making, cognition, negotiation, and interpretative repertoires this approach opens to study as well as to improve pupils’ capacity to apprehend – and communicate – their own everyday life experiences in relation to religion, as well as their ability to understand others.

Patrick Loobuyck: Science, religion, and the limits of pluralism in education

At my university, I have taught the course Science and Religion for several years. The course has no theological foundation but is inspired by a religious studies approach to religious education. This means I aim to teach it in an "objective, critical, and pluralistic" manner, borrowing the apt phrasing of the European Court of Human Rights. The course attracts students from diverse academic backgrounds and explores the complex interactions between science and religion, providing tools for critical engagement with both fields.

In this presentation, I will discuss several challenges this approach entails. First, the course addresses different models for understanding the relationship between science and religion (e.g., conflict, independence, or harmony). While these models are historically well-defined, can they still be placed on equal footing in contemporary discussions?

A second challenge concerns the potential bias toward (scientific) atheism. To what extent does a religious studies-based approach to science and religion inadvertently align with atheistic perspectives, thereby jeopardizing its claim to pluralism? I will reflect on this tension, considering how the pursuit of objectivity may interact with implicit disciplinary assumptions. This presentation aims to explore how educators can navigate these issues to maintain a genuinely pluralistic and balanced exploration of this often polarizing subject.

Panel II

Gašper Mithans & Mateja Režek: The Replacement of Religious Education: Atheism in School Curricula in Socialist Slovenia

The paper explores the heterogeneity of atheism and religiosity within the context of the dynamics between the state authorities and the Catholic Church in Socialist Slovenia, addressing the removal of religious education from schools and its replacement with Moral Education. Following the principles of the Communist Party, the authorities promoted "scientific atheism" and treated religion as a private concern, an artifice that would eventually die out, a characteristic of state secularism or atheization. The unveiling of atheization focuses on school education, specifically the postwar curtailment of religious education in public schools and its eventual elimination in 1952 – coinciding with the severance of diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and the Vatican – and the promotion of socialist values through the subject of Moral Education. This subject also covered the historical role of the Church, in particular of the Catholic Church as a majority religion, which was portrayed and presented in markedly negative tones: focusing on the Church's serving of the ruling classes, its conservative nature, clericalism, rejection of socialism and communism, and particularly the collaboration of the Church leadership and most of the clergy with the occupying forces during the Second World War. Statistical surveys confirm that once religious education was removed from public schools and state supervision diminished, enrolment saw a slight increase, and in 1976 and 1982, the number of parents in favour of religious education had grown to match the number of believers. After the share of the non-religious population almost surpassed believers in 1978, the trend reversed into a modest

religious upsurge, i.e. a sign of desecularization common in Eastern Europe and some other parts of the world during that period.

Nadja Furlan Štante: Empowering perspectives – integrating feminist approaches in religious education

This presentation seeks to illuminate the transformative potential of incorporating feminist frameworks into RE curricula. Women's narratives in religious contexts have been overlooked or marginalized, leading to a distorted understanding of religious traditions and their socio-cultural impact. We will argue that a feminist perspective is essential to challenge and change negative gender stereotypes that often contribute to the marginalization and oppression of women. Feminist perspective not only highlights the complexity of gender dynamics within different religions, but also challenges patriarchal structures that often inform religious interpretations.

By incorporating feminist approaches, we challenge these dominant narratives and enable a more comprehensive analysis that recognizes the agency, diversity and contributions of women in all religious traditions.

We will explore key methods for integrating feminist theories into RE and focus on how these perspectives can enhance critical thinking, promote gender equality, and strengthen students' empathy. Using case studies and pedagogical strategies, we will identify practical ways to redesign RE that foreground women's voices and experiences and encourage students to challenge established norms and engage with diverse perspectives.

Through dialogue and collaboration, this presentation will advocate for a shift in education about religions that recognizes the essential role of feminist perspectives and ensures that RE is relevant, inclusive, and reflective of the complexity of the human experience.

Panel III

Christian Moe: Teaching religion as counter-radicalization: the case of EDUC8

Can RE help prevent religious violence in European societies with rising tensions over migration, integration, citizenship, and security? Given the demand for such solutions and the opportunities for enterprising groups to further their agendas, how should advocates of science-based RE position themselves vis-a-vis such instrumentalization and securitization of religion and education? To frame the discussion, I present the case of a recent EU-funded international project, EDUC8 (<https://project-educ8.eu/>): A Belgian-led consortium of mostly theological institutions successfully pitched religious education “and hence religion” as a means for social resilience against radicalization and polarization, drawing in part on REDCo findings. Contrasting their inter- and intraconfessional “insider” approach with a study-of-religion-based RE model, I seek to identify the presuppositions, strengths, and weaknesses of the innovative materials, pedagogical approaches, and hermeneutic strategies they developed. This also connects with the seminar theme, religious literacy, which figures implicitly but importantly both in the project's general theory of religious radicalization and in the specific religious thinking skills they emphasize.

Frederik Wallenstein: Swedish subject ‘religion and science’ in upper secondary schools: problems and opportunities

In the Swedish subject of religion (“Religionskunskap”) in upper secondary schools, ‘religion and science’ is a significant element and has a given place in both teaching materials and in teaching practice in schools. The subject area as such constitutes an interesting field with great potential, not least by offering creative opportunities for teachers to find new ways of teaching and to utilise their subject knowledge in new ways. At the same time, it is clear that the teaching of religion and science has been characterised by a number of problems and inhibiting factors in curricula, teaching materials and teaching practice, and many teachers perceive the subject as unclear and difficult to manage. In the light of the little research that has been carried out in this area, students also seem to find the subject difficult and boring. This situation may seem very discouraging, but in my talk I will present some of these problems as well as discuss some of their possible causes, and argue that many – if not all – of them can be solved by a clearer RS perspective on the subject and in Swedish RE in general.

Giovanni Lapis: Towards a deconfessionalization of RE from inside? Preliminary report from an Italian Research Project.

The Ecumenical Institute “San Bernardino” of Venice (affiliated to Ecclesiastical University “Pontifical University of Saint Anthony”) has received in November 2024 a research grant from the Italian Episcopal Conference in order to rethink the actual epistemological character of RE as defined by the 1984 Concordat between Italian State and the Holy See. The “San Bernardino” institute has set up a research group comprising RE teachers, theologians, educational sciences scholars and study-of-religion’s scholars, including myself.

With this preliminary report, I will share some details of this research project as well as the perspectives of the different actors involved in this ‘experimental’ research group. The aim is to open a discussion about the possibility and modality for study-of-religion’s scholars to work towards a de-confessionalization of RE while cooperating with insiders.