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Article

# Maps and Territory: Templates for exploring and comparing religious traditions in Norwegian upper secondary religious education

**Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen**

Department of Teacher Education and School Research, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Oslo

Email: k.m.hartvigsen@ils.uio.no

## Abstract

This study investigated the implementation of the LK20 educational reform by comparing how three religious education teachers incorporated two core elements of the upper secondary curriculum into their teaching. The focus was on the two digital/paper-based templates (forms) that the educators created to scaffold students' exploration and comparison of religions. These templates, along with transcripts of video-recorded lessons, were first analyzed using thematic qualitative text analysis. Subsequently, the data were examined hermeneutically as two primary cases, one of which was analyzed as two interrelated subcases. These analytical methods were used to evaluate the overall scope of the materials while closely examining and comparing the teachers' templates and how they contextualized them orally during lessons. One teacher employed Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion as the foundational model for her template. The other two teachers collaboratively developed a template focused on specific aspects of religions, including history, rituals, deities, worldviews, and potential sources. Furthermore, the template emphasized the management of exploration and effective communication concerning feedback. During their presentations, all teachers referenced elements associated with the World Religions Paradigm and the interpretive approach, albeit in different ways. Finally, they introduced

tasks to contextualize and prepare students for engagement with the templates.

**Keywords:** religious education, template, exploration, World Religions Paradigm, interpretive approach

# Introduction

The study of religions/religious traditions[1] is a fundamental component of religious education (RE) not only in Norway but also worldwide. The RE curricula introduced in the recent Norwegian educational reform (LK20) include two core elements that emphasize the study of religions: "Knowledge of religions and worldviews" (the first core element) and "Exploration of religions and worldviews through various methods" (the second core element) (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2019a, pp. 2–3; 2019b, pp. 2–3).[2] In addition, ten of fourteen competence aims for upper secondary RE relate to one or both core elements (NMER, 2019b). Thus, knowledge and exploration of religions should be central to classroom practices in Norwegian RE after the recent educational reform.

This study examined how three upper secondary RE teachers incorporated the two core elements and related competence aims (NMER, 2019b) into their regular lessons immediately after the recent curriculum for upper secondary RE (LK20) was implemented. It focused on the two digital/paper-based templates (forms) that the RE teachers created. One template featured introductory text and a table, whereas the other comprised various types of boxes.[3] These templates facilitated students' methodological comparison and exploration of religious traditions. In addition, the teachers' oral contextualization of these templates was analyzed. These templates significantly contributed to the RE lessons and their condensed format—comprising tables and boxes that included categories, definitions, and instructions—offered valuable insights into the aspects of the RE curriculum, religious traditions, methodologies, and sources that the RE teachers prioritized. This study compared the characteristics of these templates and the RE teachers' contextualization efforts to elucidate how RE teachers support students in their exploration and comparison of various religions.

International trends—including the emergence of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), critiques of this paradigm, and alternatives of this paradigm, such as Jackson's (1997) interpretive approach—have shaped Norwegian RE over time. Thus, an important aspect of this study was to examine how these trends influenced the templates and practices in the seven RE classrooms included in the study. However, to capture multiple aspects of the exploration and comparison of religious traditions that the three teachers

[1] The terms *religion* and *religious tradition* are used synonymously, in line with Jackson (2009), Smith and Ramey (2024), and the Norwegian curricula (NMER, 2019a; 2019b).
[2] All citations of the RE curricula are translated by the author, with assistance of GPT UiO (GPT-4 Omni).
[3] The specifics of these templates are detailed in the Results section.

highlighted, a broader main research question (RQ) was formulated: "What are the characteristics of the templates that facilitate the comparison and exploration of religions in selected Norwegian upper secondary RE classrooms, and how do teachers contextualize them?" The supporting research questions (RQs 1 and 2) were as follows:

**Templates:**

| | |
|---|---|
| RQ 1A | "How do the templates thematize religions?" |
| RQ 1B | "How do the templates facilitate the exploration and comparison of religions?" |
| RQ 1C | What additional characteristics do these templates exhibit? |

**Contextualization of the templates:**

| | |
|---|---|
| RQ 2A | "How does the teachers' contextualization of the templates thematize religions?" |
| RQ 2B | "How does the teachers' contextualization of the templates facilitate the exploration and comparison of religions? |

## Knowledge, exploration, and comparison of religions in RE: Insights from religious studies and other disciplines

Over the past fifty years, the teaching of "knowledge of religions" (NMER, 2019b, p. 2) has often adhered to the WRP in both religious studies (Smith & Ramey, 2024) and RE (Anker, 2017; Bleisch & Schwab, 2023). Although the WRP has no singular definition, scholars have identified several key elements, including its focus on the "Big Five" religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These religions are typically presented in an Abrahamocentric order (Cotter & Robertson, 2016), with criteria shaped by the colonialist West (Masuzawa, 2005; Smith & Ramey, 2024; Vencatsamy, 2024) and rooted in the Christian tradition (Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Owen, 2011; Smith & Ramey, 2024; Vencatsamy, 2024). Text-based religions are favored, with the tendency to prioritize the elites within these religions (Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Owen, 2011). Religions are often depicted through an essentialized and ahistorical lens (Vencatsamy, 2024), typically aligning with Ninian Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion (Anker, 2017; Beckmann, 2023). These characteristics have led to increasing challenges to the WRP within religious studies (Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Masuzawa, 2005; Owen, 2011; Vencatsamy, 2024) and RE (Andreassen, 2025; Anker, 2017; Beckmann, 2023; Jackson, 1997; Rasmussen, 2019).

Several scholars have highlighted that while it is easy to criticize the WRP, it is difficult to replace this paradigm owing to its deeply entrenched nature (Anker, 2017), particularly due to pedagogical considerations (Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Smith & Ramey 2024). Consequently, the WRP has been utilized

across educational levels, both globally and in Norway.[4] However, concerning RE, Jackson's (1997) interpretive approach offers a robust alternative, emphasizing ethnographic research while focusing on the complexity of accurately representing religions. Jackson emphasizes a three-level model: religious tradition, group, and individual.

The teaching of "knowledge of religions" (NMER, 2019b, p. 2) is interrelated with how this knowledge is generated. Thus, the second core element (NMER, 2019b) emphasizes that students should use various methods to explore, analyze, and critically reflect on religions and worldviews. However, Norwegian RE scholars have debated which academic disciplines should provide the methods, knowledge, perspectives, and resources that teachers and students utilize in RE. Some scholars, such as Andreassen (2025), argue for a focus on religious studies, whereas others, such as Brekke (2022), advocate for a range of disciplines, including religious studies, theology, philosophy, and history of ideas. Other scholars have focused on applying simplified disciplinary methods in the exploration process, as noted by Skeie (2022), and on the learning outcomes from such explorations, as highlighted by Aukland (2022).

Whereas the abovementioned scholars generally take a theoretical approach, this study examined the comparison and exploration of religions in Norwegian RE classrooms, consistent with recent studies of exploratory classroom practices in Norway (Brevik et al., 2024). Brevik et al. (2024) focused on grades 11 and 12; thus, they did not include RE classroom practices (grade 13). This article aims to fill the research gap on exploratory practices in Norwegian upper secondary RE after the educational reform (LK20) by examining how teachers scaffold students' exploration of religions using digital/paper-based templates.

## Intersections of the WRP and interpretive approach in Norwegian RE curricula

The history of Norwegian RE curricula indicates a shift in focus away from the WRP after the educational reform (LK20). Previous curricula for both lower (NMER, 2005; 2008; 2015) and upper secondary RE (Norwegian Ministry of Church, Education and Research [NMCER], 1996; NMER, 2006) focused primarily on the "Big Five" religions. In addition, the structure and many of the competence aims of these curricula reflect Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion (Andreassen, 2010; Anker, 2017; Beckmann, 2023). By contrast, the critique of the WRP emerged as a significant contextual factor influencing the Norwegian RE curricula (Anker, 2021; Rasmussen, 2019) implemented in 2020 (NMER, 2019a) and 2022 (NMER, 2019b). This critique addressed the tendency of the WRP to present religions from an essentialist viewpoint, reducing them to simplistic, homogeneous entities. In response, the first core element emphasizes the complexity and diversity inherent in religions:

[4] For insights specific to the Norwegian context, please refer to the following section.

## 5 Exploring and comparing religious traditions

> The subject aims to provide knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other religions and worldviews at local, national, and global levels, as well as at the individual, group, and tradition levels. Students should also gain insight into how Christianity and other religions and worldviews are embedded in historical processes and connected with social changes and cultural heritage. They will become familiar with the diversity of religions and worldviews, as well as the internal diversity within different traditions. The subject aims to provide a foundation for reflection on majority, minority, and indigenous perspectives in Norway. (NMER, 2019a, pp. 2–3; 2019b, p. 2)

The phrases "individual, group, and tradition levels" and "the internal diversity within different traditions" indicate the influence of Jackson's (1997) interpretive approach. According to Jackson (2009, p. 25), "Examining the interplay between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider tradition offers a view of religions that acknowledges their complexity and internal diversity, including their varying interactions with 'culture.'" However, the emphasis of the core element on the internal diversity of religious traditions is not simply indicative of the interpretive approach. In spite of the prominent criticism of the WRP's essentialist aspects, internal diversity has also been emphasized by scholars associated with this paradigm, such as Smart (1989).[5] Consequently, the ways in which teachers employ Smart's seven dimensions of religion determine whether the internal diversity of a religion is highlighted or whether a religion is perceived on the basis of standardized formats (Beckmann, 2023).

The second core element emphasizes that the complexity of religions necessitates utilizing diverse approaches and sources for exploration (Anker, 2021). Moreover, it expects students to engage in critical reflection:

> Students are encouraged to investigate and explore Christianity, along with other religions and worldviews, as complex phenomena by employing a variety of methods. Their understanding of religions and worldviews is deepened and challenged through analysis and critical reflection on sources, norms, and the power of definition. Familiarity with different perspectives on and definitions of religions and beliefs is part of the core element and is essential for understanding and managing diversity. (NMER, 2019a, p. 3; 2019b, pp. 2–3)

In the two core elements, most world religions are not mentioned, indicating the initial strategic decision of the RE curriculum committee. The core elements were intended to enable the use of alternative approaches to the study of religions beyond the WRP (Anker, 2021).[6] However, their final version singles out Christianity (Beckmann, 2023).[7] The prominent focus on Christianity may be attributed to its historical significance in Norwegian society (Anker, 2021), but the historical prioritization of Christianity in Norwegian RE curricula is contested (Andreassen, 2017). The fact that Christianity is singled out implies that an important feature of the WRP, namely its Christocentrism (Smith & Ramey, 2024), remains a significant feature of the recent RE curricula.

The first competence aim in the curriculum for upper secondary RE highlights the term "central features" as

[5] See Jackson's (1997) analysis of Smart's approach.
[6] Anker was a member of the curriculum committee.
[7] This reflects a decision made by the curriculum committee at a late stage (Anker 2021).

follows: “The learning objective is for the student to be able to present and compare some central features of Eastern and Western religious and philosophical traditions, including Christianity and Islam” (NMER, 2019b, p. 5). Beckmann (2023, p. 70)[8] draws attention to the use of central features in RE curricula, which he argues could represent the essentialist aspect of the WRP. Moreover, this competence aim illustrates that despite efforts to move beyond the WRP, the binary classification of Eastern and Western traditions (Masuzawa, 2005) persists. Anker (2021) notes that this terminology is primarily used to ensure that religions from different geographical areas are addressed. However, she urges educators to critically examine this division and the historical context associated with such categorizations.

In summary, the first and second core elements (NMER 2019a; 2019b) integrate aspects of the WRP alongside the responses to critique of this paradigm, including the interpretive approach. The second core element emphasizes that the exploration of religions should employ diverse methods and involve critical reflection.

# Materials and methods

This study is part of the EDUCATE project (Brevik et al., 2023). Data were collected during the 2023/2024 school year at two upper secondary schools located in different parts of Norway. The qualitative research design of the study enabled the integration of video, documents, and log data, showcasing varying perspectives on the religious education lessons. In addition to the two templates that the three RE teachers employed, two teacher logs (logs 1 and 2) provided a self-reported perspective on classroom activities, and the video-recorded lessons represented an observational perspective (Brevik et al., 2023). Teachers may express varying views on a lesson through different forms of self-reporting, such as logs completed before and after a lesson. Furthermore, the observational perspective may not align with self-reported viewpoints. This underscores the need for a nuanced research design that incorporates different perspectives. Table 1 presents the data used in this study.

**Table 1.** Overview of the data used in this study

| Schools | Classrooms | Teachers | Video-recorded lessons | Teacher log 1 | Teacher log 2 | Templates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 7 | 3 | 32 | 32 | 32 | 2 |

[8] Beckmann (2023) analyzed the curriculum for primary and lower secondary RE, but the same phrase is also employed in upper secondary RE.

Over the course of two weeks, all RE lessons, that is, four to six consecutive lessons, were filmed in each classroom. According to observation studies, four consecutive lessons provide sufficient insight into teaching quality (Klette et al., 2017). To ensure that the results of the study reflect regular classroom practices, the project video-recorded naturally occurring RE lessons. The RE teachers were asked to teach as usual and not adapt their teaching to any specific topic. Two cameras captured the lessons from the teachers' (Camera 1) and students' (Camera 2) perspectives simultaneously. All the teachers wore microphones, and one microphone was positioned among the students (Brevik et al., 2023). This approach enabled a good visual and auditory impression of the classroom. Video and audio recordings were favored over traditional classroom observations, as they facilitated accurate transcriptions and playback (Brevik et al., 2023), allowing for repeated observation and analysis of how the teachers contextualized the templates and the related classroom interactions.

The teachers completed digital log 1 prior to each lesson and filled in digital log 2 immediately after the lesson was completed (Brevik et al., 2023). In both logs, the teachers recorded the theme of the lesson. To select lessons for qualitative analysis, the teachers' logs were screened to identify lessons that thematized religions. Twenty-eight of the thirty-two lessons belonged to this category. This material was too broad to analyze in depth in one article; however, when the video-recorded lessons were coded based on EDUCATE's observation protocols (Brevik et al., 2023), we observed that all the teachers introduced the templates to facilitate their students' comparison and exploration of religions. The twenty-eight lessons thematizing religions were screened for instances in which the teachers presented the templates. This resulted in the identification of eight lessons that took place at two schools, involving seven classrooms and three teachers. The sampling units (Kuckartz, 2014) were the sections of the eight lessons in which the teachers presented and contextualized the templates.

The recordings from the teachers' microphones were automatically transcribed using Whisper, and the passages relevant to this study were manually controlled by the author. When Whisper struggled with aspects of the vernacular, the transcriptions were heavily revised. The transcripts were carefully read and interpreted hermeneutically to identify themes relevant to the study. The memos facilitated the selection of the relevant codes used for the thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014).

To achieve an overview of the materials, the sampling units were uploaded to NVivo as seven files representing each of the seven classrooms[9] and coded using deductive and inductive codes. As the teachers presented the templates both orally and in writing, the written templates were analyzed using all of the following relevant codes:

[9] In one RE class, the template was briefly introduced and contextualized in one lesson and introduced in full in a later lesson. These sampling units were combined in one transcript.

- Deductive codes that represent the RE curriculum and relevant theoretical approaches to religion: diversity between religious traditions, internal diversity of religious traditions, interpretive approach (subcodes: representation, interpretation, and reflexivity), the WRP (subcodes: employment of the term *world religions*, focus on the "Big Five" religions, essentialized lens, Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion, and separation into Eastern and Western religions), and other religions mentioned; and

- Codes generated inductively on the basis of the materials: presentation of learning aims, presentation of relevant competence aims, tasks that precede the presentation of the template, tasks that succeed the presentation of the template, features that support the comparison of religions, features that support exploration, prompts for reflection, prompts for critical reflection, sections for note-taking, and interactive elements (subcodes: logs and facilitation of communication with the teacher for guidance).

The thematic analysis provided an overview of all the sampling units. However, because two of the three teachers cooperated and thus utilized the same template, the presentation of the results divides the materials into two main cases, one for each template, within which the cooperating teachers' oral introductions of the template are compared as interrelated subcases. Insights from hermeneutical interpretation facilitated a detailed analysis of the transcriptions of the teachers' utterances.

The EDUCATE project was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. All participants gave voluntary written informed consent (Brevik et al., 2023). Students who did not participate in the study were placed in the blind spots of the two cameras (Brevik et al., 2023). The teacher's microphone was muted when nonparticipants spoke during the lesson. If the nonparticipating students moved out of the blind spots during the lesson, they were blurred during the initial processing of the video recordings. If personal information was mentioned or observed during the lesson, this was noted by the person who recorded the lesson and removed (muted or blurred) during the initial processing of the data. In this article, the participating teachers are referred to by the following pseudonyms (Brevik et al., 2023): Martine, Natalie, and Magdalene.

# Results and discussion

## Case 1: Template labeled "Investigating or comparing using Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion"

Martine developed a paper-based template, also available in digital format, based on Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion. The design of the template enabled the exploration and comparison of religions in relation to various assignments throughout the school year. The template was employed in one of the seven RE classes included in this study.

### *RQ 1A–C: Analysis of the paper-based template*

The table constituting the core of the template was preceded by an introductory text that underlined the

following main points: (1) Religion is a phenomenon composed of several elements. (2) Significant differences between religions can make comparison difficult, but elements found in all religions constitute a good starting point. (3) Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion, introduced as a framework in religious studies, were recommended as a useful tool to explore a religion or compare two religions. For future assignments or presentations, the students were recommended to choose one or more of these dimensions to narrow down a problem for discussion.

By highlighting the complexity of religion as a phenomenon and emphasizing the diversity between religions, the introduction of the template was in line with the two core elements (NMER, 2019b). However, Smart (1989) also stressed the internal diversity of religions and the fact that all religions do not feature all seven dimensions to the same extent. Even though Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion are sometimes regarded as representing the essentialist tendency of the WRP, Beckmann (2023) points out that the way Smart's dimensions are employed is essential. Smart's (1989) dimensions could force all religions into the same format, but his approach could also bring out internal diversity (Beckmann, 2023) and diversity between religions. As such, we do not know whether Martine's introduction of the template primarily reflects the curriculum (NMER, 2019b) or Smart's (1989) insights, but her introduction of the template appears to counterbalance the complexity and diversity of religions and the need to reduce this complexity to facilitate students' comparisons of religions. In this manner, the template mirrors the RE curriculum for upper secondary education, which attempts to strike the same balance by focusing on the diversity of religions, the internal diversity of these religions, and the comparison of the central features of religious traditions (NMER, 2019b, p. 5). Simultaneously, it reflects the emphasis on Smart's (1989) work in the previous curricula (NMCER, 1996; NMER, 2006).

The table consists of three columns and eight rows. The first column lists the seven dimensions of religion, each constituting a separate row. Concerning each dimension, the table contains a short explanation and/or guiding questions. The guiding questions primarily facilitate the students' comprehension of each dimension and suggest which information they should gather for each dimension. Regarding "The ritual dimension. The practice dimension: Religious actions," for example, the following information and questions are listed:

- Examples of rituals
- Why are rituals performed?
- Can any of what occurs (practices, objects, symbols, etc.) be linked to mythical time? (Martine's template)

The second and third columns consist of the titles "Religion 1" and "Religion 2," respectively. Under these columns, seven rows are empty so that the students could fill in information pertaining to each dimension.

In summary, the table facilitates the exploration of the different dimensions of each religion and the

comparison of information about the two religions. By emphasizing Smart's (1989) seven dimensions, Martine apparently regards these dimensions as "central features of Eastern and Western religious" traditions (NMER, 2019b, p. 5). While the template embodies key elements of the recent curriculum, the incorporation of Smart's (1989) seven dimensions signifies continuity with the earlier curricula (NMCER, 1996; NMER, 2006).

## *RQ 2A and B: Analysis of the contextualization of the paper-based template in the lesson*

The lesson took place at the beginning of the school year as part of a series of lessons through which Martine introduced terminology and methodology that are important to RE. Martine first introduced a self-made illustration depicting Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion as overlapping circles, arguing that this representation highlights the artificiality of separating the dimensions. The template was then introduced as a schematic visualization of Smart's (1989) model. During the introduction of the template, Martine did not explicitly mention the core elements or competence aims (NMER, 2019b), possibly because this was merely an introduction to the approach. She also did not employ the terminology "Eastern and Western religions" or "world religions," in line with the current criticism of the WRP.

When Martine introduced the different dimensions, she elaborated orally on the points and questions listed in the template. Regarding "The ritual dimension. The practice dimension: Religious actions," she continued: "What is mythical time, then? Do you have any myths that explain, for example, how humanity came to be on Earth? The creation myth belongs to a mythical time." The written and oral introductions to the ritual dimension illustrate that the seven dimensions overlap, similar to Martine's initial visualization of Smart's (1989) model. To exemplify the interrelations between the experiential and practical dimensions, Martine employed an example from the Christian tradition, thereby reflecting the traditional role of Christianity in Norwegian society, the familiarity of many students with this religion, the Christocentric perspective of the WRP, or all of the above:

> If you think about the rituals you know, for example, in Christianity—when you think about communion, you know that people go up to the altar rail, right, and receive a small glass with something like non-alcoholic wine, which symbolizes Jesus' blood. And then they receive a wafer that symbolizes Jesus' body. Would you say that's an experience? Yes, it is, isn't it? It's an experience you take with you, something you participate in during the service.

The quote demonstrates how Martine regularly used examples from the Christian religion to illustrate different dimensions, but subsequently, she points out that some of her students might not have attended Christian service and, thus, might have lacked the knowledge she took for granted in this example. This modification reflects Martine's awareness of her students' diverse backgrounds and her effort to acknowledge their various knowledge bases. Martines' introduction of the template was followed by a task

in which the students were encouraged to choose two religions and take brief notes on the template. The students were recommended to choose the religion they knew best because it would be easier to think of rituals. In this manner, Martine adapted this task to all students.

Martine provided two reasons why students must carry out this task. First, they should familiarize themselves with the structure of the RE textbook to know where to find information. Second, they should learn how to use the template, which will facilitate future comparisons of religions based on different themes, such as rituals. She underscored that Smart's (1989) approach is a tool that can be used to achieve a systematic overview of concepts and elements and to compare them. During this initial task, the students' primary source of information was the RE textbook.

In summary, Martine's template was based on a specific phenomenological approach to religions derived from the study of religions (Smart, 1989). Although this approach is commonly associated with the WRP, Martine's contextualization of it captured the complexity of religions in line with the RE curriculum (NMER 2019b). While she did not explicitly use WRP terminology, her choice of examples from Christianity not only covered many students' backgrounds but also reflected the Christocentric bias of the WRP. In this lesson, the students were instructed to use their textbooks instead of exploring additional relevant sources.

## Case 2: Template labeled "Project template: Eastern and Western religions"

This digital template was created by Natalie and Magdalene to support the students' work on a project that lasted approximately two months. The template included boxes highlighting the comparison of three key aspects of religions, along with suggestions for sources and methods that students could use to explore and compare religions. Moreover, it comprised structures that supported the students' overall execution of the project. Natalie and Magdalene each taught three RE classes, with approximately 30 students in each class.

### *RQ 1A–C: Analysis of the digital template*

The template, located in OneNote, was designed to facilitate a project involving the exploration and comparison of one Eastern religion and one Western religion. The task description, formal requirements, resources, and key competence aims were presented in a separate document. Thus, the template per se primarily consisted of eleven boxes of different sizes. In two introductory boxes, the students must list the two religions they wanted to compare and the final oral product of the project, for example, a podcast, presentation, or video. The template also contained three boxes that focused on three separate themes: (1) history, (2) rites, and (3) deities and worldviews. Thus, Natalie and Magdalene apparently equated these three themes with the "central features of Eastern and Western religious" traditions (NMER, 2019b, p. 5).

The three boxes were divided into one column for each of the two religions that the students chose to compare. In the boxes, the students must give an overview of each theme. Each box contained introductory text. Concerning rites, the term was explained, and examples of rites were provided. The other themes were not further explained, but all the boxes contained suggestions for visual aids that could inform the outline. Pertaining to history, the students were encouraged to add maps, pictures, or timelines. Concerning rites, the students were urged to supply pictures, videos, and drawings. Regarding deities and worldviews, the students were encouraged to present pantheons, pictures, and drawings.

The template also included one box labeled “Internal source and external collaboration,” which was divided into one column for each of the two religions. In this box, the students must provide information on how they would acquire data about the insider perspective of the religion and which “external aids” they would use. The following suggestions were provided: interview with a religious leader, conversation with a religious leader, conversation with a religious adherent, visit to a sacred site, participation in a ceremony, conducting surveys, and performing a rite. These approaches seem to have drawn inspiration from methods employed in social anthropology, in line with Jackson’s (1997) focus on ethnography. When the material was collected (2023/2024 school year), all such approaches were acceptable for upper secondary RE. However, some alternatives could be considered problematic against the backdrop of The Education Act implemented in August 2024, for example, participation in a ceremony or the performance of a rite constitutes religious practice. Such activities are governed by §14-6, which underscores that “Students have the right to exemption from activities in education that they reasonably perceive as the practice of a religion other than their own or adherence to a belief system different from their own.” However, as students were provided with the option to select from various alternatives, they could choose the alternative with which they felt most comfortable. The main focus of the template was a large box where the students could fill in notes for comparison and discussion of the two religions, based on the boxes focused on history, rites, deities and worldviews, and sources.

The template contained four boxes that focused on project execution. The box labeled “Progress log” contained twelve checkboxes that the students must tick when they had completed a task, such as (1) “Read and understood the assignment and competence aims,” (4) “Created an outline for the comparison assignment,” (9) “Requested feedback along the way,” and (11) “Utilized sources with insider perspectives and outsider perspectives.” As indicated by these examples, this log reminded the students of the various tasks they needed to complete throughout the course of the project. The progress log was related to the work log, where students must list what they had done and the date they had done it. These boxes provided scaffolding for students who were undertaking a project spanning approximately two months. Natalie and Magdalene each taught more than ninety students, who examined and compared different religious traditions at different paces. Thus, these boxes enabled them to follow each student’s progress.

The final two boxes were reserved for "Thoughts and notes along the way" and "What do I want feedback on?" The latter box facilitated communication with the teacher throughout the project.

In summary, the template reflected the RE curriculum by examining and comparing what these teachers regarded as three central features of Eastern and Western religions. This template highlighted two aspects of religions that correspond to Smart's (1989) dimensions: the practical and ritual dimensions, and the doctrinal and philosophical dimensions. Other elements of the template were in line with the interpretive approach; that is, the box labeled "Internal source and external collaboration" could bring into play not only group and individual levels of religion (Jackson, 1997; 2009) but also methods employed in social anthropology, such as ethnography. The latter box reflects the emphasis on the methods and sources mentioned in the second core element.

Six boxes facilitated communication about the project between the students and the teacher. The digital format in OneNote allowed the teachers to monitor the students' progress in real time, provide feedback at crucial times, and respond to students' requests for guidance. When the teachers introduced the templates, they enhanced their scaffolding functions.

## *RQ 2A and B: Analysis and comparison of the teachers' contextualization of the digital template in the lessons*

The template was introduced during the first lesson of "Module 3: Eastern and Western religions." Throughout this module, the lessons focused on the "Big Five" religions, in line with the WRP, Sikhism, and Jainism. Moreover, the module culminated in a project facilitated by the template. The contextualization of the template was divided into three main sections: (1) introduction to the module, (2) assignments that explain the main concepts and prepare students for the imminent project, and (3) introduction of the template per se. The concepts of "world religions" and/or "Eastern and Western religious traditions," which all reflect the WRP, were mentioned in most sections. Whereas "Eastern and Western religious traditions" replicated the terminology used in the curriculum for upper secondary RE (NMER, 2019b), the former did not. Natalie and Magdalene did not employ these concepts in the same manner. As they cooperated and, to some extent, employed the same PowerPoint slides, the different ways Natalie and Magdalene employed these terms were interesting and shed light on how they related to the WRP.

Both teachers introduced the module using PowerPoint slides listing the main learning aims and mentioned *world religions* in some RE classrooms. Natalie used this term in two classrooms:

> You should be able to explore the similarities and differences within Eastern and Western religions. You should have insight into and knowledge about the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, that is, these world religions. (Natalie, classroom 1, lesson 1)

> The goal is also for you to gain insight and knowledge about the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the world religions. (Natalie, classroom 2, lesson 1)

While Natalie used the term *world religions*, Magdalene qualified this term and the related terms *Eastern religions* and *Western religions* to remind her students repeatedly that this terminology could be problematic even though this division is utilized in the RE curriculum. Thus, her approach echoes Anker's (2021) encouragement to be critical of this division:

> The major religions, or the so-called major religions, often called world religions, have their origins mostly in the Middle East or India. (Magdalene, classroom 1, lesson 1)

> You will delve deeper into two religions, the so-called Eastern and a Western one. (Magdalene, classroom 1, lesson 1).

We do not know the teachers' motivations for referring to the concept of world religions, but it could be for pedagogical reasons, as highlighted by Cotter and Robertson (2016) and Smith and Ramey (2024).

After the introduction to the module, Natalie and Magdalene presented assignments that were explicitly related to the following competence aim: "The learning objective is for the student to be able to present and compare some central features of Eastern and Western religious and philosophical traditions, including Christianity and Islam" (NMER, 2019b, p. 5). Natalie employed the same task in all three classrooms, apparently to enhance students' comprehension of Eastern and Western religious traditions:

> But first, we're going to discuss a small topic. The competence aim states that you should be able to present and compare some central features of Eastern and Western religious and philosophical traditions. So, I'd like you to discuss a bit at your table. What makes a religion Eastern or Western? Is it that it has the most followers from the East? Is it that the majority of countries have it as an official religion? Is it that it originated in the East? Discuss at your table. (Natalie, classroom 2, lesson 1)

In Natalie's classrooms, students perceived the classification of Eastern and Western religious traditions as conflicting with their intuitive understanding of East and West. Their discussions echoed Beckmann's (2023) critique of such a division. After the discussion, Natalie initiated a plenary conversation on Eastern and Western religions, followed by a PowerPoint presentation of the religions she subsumed under the categories Western ("Christianity, Judaism, and Islam") and Eastern religions ("Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism"). Through this progression, the students first reflected on the significance of the terms *Eastern religious traditions* and *Western religious traditions* before Natalie presented what she regarded as their main features. However, categorizing these religions into groups with shared characteristics could result in essentialization, as feared by Beckmann (2023).

Magdalene moved straight to the PowerPoint presentation of Western and Eastern religions before employing two assignments. The first task questioned the way religions have been divided into Eastern and Western religions, based on a map illustrating this classification:

> The map shows this line that tries to illustrate a kind of divide between Eastern and Western religions, but it's a gross simplification of reality. So I wonder, what are the advantages and disadvantages of simplifying reality in this way? Talk about it together (Magdalene, classroom 1, lesson 1)

Thus, Magdalene drew attention not only to the concepts but also to related methodological issues, followed by a plenary conversation thematizing the advantages and disadvantages of this generalization, the origins of the webpages and authors who presented the map, and bias (these themes were all initially mentioned by the students). Magdalene concluded this plenary session as follows by problematizing the terminology employed by the RE curriculum and intertwining her own and her students' insights based on a PowerPoint slide, which may reduce the danger of essentialization:

> It's good that you say this, because we might have some associations with this concept of East and West that we're perhaps trying to move away from. Because [this division] has also been linked to a sort of—let's call it Western—idea of superiority over the East, which is problematic. And that's a big reason why I think we need to discuss these terms. However, the curriculum has chosen to use them, so we have to engage with these terms. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't approach it with a critical eye. We don't just have to accept it because the curriculum says we should know the difference between Eastern and Western religions. As you mentioned, we need some concepts to talk about the world in a somewhat general, more generalized way. That's how it is, but it's okay to be critical. Or not just okay; I want you to be critical. (Magdalene, classroom 1, lesson 1)

Through her utterances, Magdalene encouraged her students to be critical of the division into Eastern and Western religions, its underlying assumptions, and the formulations employed in the RE curriculum (NMER, 2019b), in line with Anker (2021) and the second core element, which encourages critical reflection on "definitional power" (NMER, 2019b, p. 2). However, Magdalene also pointed out the necessity of employing concepts, elaborated on this point, and shared her thoughts on why this specific terminology was employed in the curriculum:

> So, regardless of the concepts we use to discuss the world, we'll encounter challenges and limitations. In this subject, it's about providing a basis for comparison. And when the division into Eastern and Western religions is used in the curriculum, I think it's to highlight and convey something about the breadth of the selection we're examining. (Magdalene, classroom 1, lesson 1)

Here, Magdalene first introduced the terminology employed in the RE curriculum and then qualified it ("so-called"), criticized aspects of it, encouraged her students to reflect critically, pointed out the usefulness of the terminology, and explained why she thought it was used in the RE curriculum, in line with the clarification by Anker (2021).[10] Natalie only employed this assignment in one of her three RE classrooms. She stated that the map, with its dividing line, represented a gross simplification of reality and asked the students to point out the advantages and disadvantages of dividing between Western and Eastern religions. Thus, Natalie invited her students to reflect, but in contrast to Magdalene, she did not explicitly encourage them to be critical.

[10] Anker (2021) focused on lower secondary RE (NMER, 2019a), but the principle is equivalent regarding upper secondary RE (NMER, 2019b).

In accordance with the competence aim (NMER, 2019b, p. 5), which emphasizes comparing the "central features of Eastern and Western religious" traditions, Magdalene also tasked her students with an assignment that focused on various aspects of comparing religions. This assignment was not employed by Natalie in either of her classrooms.

After the introduction of the template, Magdalene asked the students if they found the template useful or restrictive. When they expressed approval of the template, she explained her rationale for using it:

> The challenge when planning lessons is… We're now in thirteenth grade. I don't want to limit you. I want you to have opportunities so that you can delve into what the subject requires, right. But I also need to have some frameworks, so that you don't fall behind or become confused, or struggle to get started, right. (Magdalene, classroom 3, lesson 1)

Through this statement, Magdalene highlighted key challenges in exploration and project-based learning, particularly the necessity of providing sufficient support that facilitates both the learning of subject content and progress without imposing overly restrictive guidance. This emphasis explains why the template included boxes for project execution in addition to those focusing on subject content and methods.

In summary, despite collaborating on a common template, the two teachers prepared their students to engage with it in markedly different ways. Natalie focused mainly on explaining concepts and terminology, while Magdalene critically evaluated these concepts and encouraged her students to do the same by emphasizing methodological issues related to the comparison of religions.

## Comparison of Cases 1 and 2

The introduction and analysis of the RE curricula underscored the challenges of teaching religion while balancing the WRP with critiques and the incorporation of alternatives, such as the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997), for a more nuanced perspective. The ways in which the teachers incorporated the core elements and associated competence aims (NMER, 2019b) into their templates and lessons reflected their navigation of these challenges. Both templates facilitated comparison and exploration of the religions, but only Natalie and Magdalene's templates scaffolded further aspects of the students' learning process. In the previous section, the manners in which they contextualized their template were compared, with an emphasis on how they employed terminology associated with the WRP. In the following paragraphs, Cases 1 and 2 will be compared to provide additional insights into the research questions.

RQ 1A and B: Whereas Martine's template primarily focused on questions that enabled the generation of information about Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of religion, Natalie and Magdalene's templates focused on three dimensions, two of which coincided with two of Smart's dimensions. Thus, Martine's template enabled students to consider a broader scope of dimensions. This could facilitate exploration of the

"diversity of religions […], as well as the internal diversity within different traditions" (NMER, 2019a, pp. 2–3; 2019b, p. 2), reflecting both insights from Smart (1989) and the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997; 2009). The emphasis on different sources in Natalie and Magdalene's templates facilitated the exploration of individual and group levels of religions, aligning with the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997; 2009). Whereas Martine primarily focused on Smart's (1989) approach rooted in religious studies, Natalie and Magdalene drew upon supplementary insights from social anthropological methods, similar to Jackson (1997).

RQ 1C: The contexts for which the two templates were designed influenced how they scaffolded students' exploration and comparison of religions. Martine's template was designed to support various types of exploration and comparisons throughout the school year, whereas Natalie and Magdalene's template guided a specific two-month project. As a result, more than half of the boxes in the template were created to scaffold students' planning and executing of project-related tasks, enabling both student and teacher monitoring of progress. This template effectively addressed specific practical challenges associated with exploration in RE, including the need for adequate support throughout the exploration process.

RQ 2A and B: As both templates consisted of specific categories, their employment could result in essentialism. However, all three teachers tried to prevent this in different ways. By stating that the students could select among the seven dimensions during future assignments, Martine empowered her students to choose the most important dimensions concerning the religions they explored or compared. This solution could also partially address criticisms that Smart's (1989) model was shaped by a liberal Protestant approach to religion (Andreassen, 2010). Natalie and Magdalene's template was not flexible; thus, in one lesson, Natalie exemplified how students exploring Buddhism could fill in the box on deities and worldviews (classroom 2, lesson 1). Magdalene primarily addressed the problem of essentialism by encouraging her students to reflect critically on the terminology utilized in the curriculum (NMER, 2019b) and the template. Thus, Magdalene invited her students to reflect critically on "sources, norms, and definitional power" to a greater extent (NMER, 2019b, p. 2).

# Conclusion

The two templates and their contextualization effectively facilitated the exploration and comparison of religions within the framework of the recently introduced RE curriculum for upper secondary RE (NMER 2019b). Martine's template aligned closely with the traditional focus on Smart's (1989) seven dimensions, consistent with previous curricula (NMCER, 1996; NMER, 2006), while also emphasizing the complexity of religions (NMER, 2019b). By contrast, the templates developed jointly by Natalie and Magdalene resonated more with the ethnographic approaches advocated by Jackson (1997), while also integrating elements

reflective of Smart's (1989) dimensions. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrated that the exploration and comparison of religions can be supported through various scaffolding methods. However, all teachers seemed to balance insights from the WRP and Smart's (1989) dimensions with critiques of these models, such as the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997). A key implication of this study is that any approach to exploring and comparing religions must aspire to balance the inherent complexity of religions with the necessary simplifications for effective pedagogical delivery.

One contextualization of the template was particularly noteworthy. When Magdalene qualified and questioned the terminology used in the curriculum, in line with Anker (2021), she illustrated to her students that using established concepts should be accompanied by critical reflection. Her examination and critique of the concepts and terminology used in the RE curriculum (NMER, 2019b) are a commendable model to emulate.

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