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Teaching RE through New Religions

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Title: Teaching RE through New Religions

Abstract:

Swedish RE teachers are facing a number of difficulties today: decreasing teaching hours, long lists of required content from the national syllabi, as well as low student interest in the subject. This paper investigates a possible solution to these combined problems: namely, an approach to RE which centers on new religions. Recent research indicates that younger generations engage widely with new religions in their everyday life, such as through popular media (Partridge, 2006; Visuri 2020). For this reason, a focus on new religions might spark student interest. While earlier studies within the field of New Religious Movements (NRMs) focused on so-called "sects" that emerged in the 1960s, there is growing awareness of how "new religions" can also include "older" religions (as well as non-religions, such as atheism) which were all new at one point. Through an emphasis on the notion of "newness" within the study of religion(s), by for instance focusing on how all religions have developed and changed over time (and in some cases declined, and eventually been revived), RE teachers have the opportunity to cover religion as a whole, while leaving the concept of religion open for each student to define, and without overwhelming students with "facts" only. With the definition of religion kept open and unbounded, students get the opportunity to engage analytically with religion(s) as they draw parallels between the old and new. This is an ability which the national syllabi calls for, yet does not offer practical examples of. An approach to religion which centers on the concept of "newness" is, in other words, likely to engage student interest as well as make the subject of RE more relevant for the contemporary Swedish school.

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