



**IRENE**  
Innovative Religious Education NEtwork:  
educating to the religious diversity  
2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

# Religious Education in Estonia

*Innovative Religious Education Network:  
Educating to the religious diversity*

2022

**Silja Härm**



The European Commission's support for the production of this document does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the EC cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# I. Estonian background

- 16th century lutheran country
- 19<sup>th</sup> century modern school system
- 1923 RE as a voluntary subject

# Estonian background

- About 29% of the adult population religiously affiliated (Population Census, 2011)
- During Soviet rule (1940-91) atheist propaganda instead of religious education
- Since 1990s religious education re-established at schools

# Pille Valk (1959-2009)

## **Contextual model of RE:**

- historical-cultural context
- religious landscape
- legal frameworks
- local educational traditions
- the practices of other countries

# RE in Estonia

- RE is a non-confessional subject in terms of teaching goals
- RE is organized as an elective subject
- Syllabi: general knowledge on different world religions, dialogical skills and tolerance
- RE is taught only in 12% of all the schools of general education, including 24% of all the upper secondary schools

# RE in Estonia

2010 new national curricula

Religious Education: an optional, non-confessional subject

Basic school: "Customs, stories and values", "Values and choices", "One world, different religions"

Upper secondary school: "Humanity and religion" and "The religious landscape of Estonia"

# RE models

Responsibility: religious communities, (in co-operation between religious communities and the state), the state and the schools

RE: denominational, religious studies

Voluntary subject, compulsory subject

*Schreiner 2002*

**Estonian model of the RE: non-confessional,  
but organized as an elective subject**

# I. Discussion

Is RE in your countries taught in a similar way as Estonia?

How does historical and political context shape the RE in your countries?

## II. Problems of neutrality and impartiality

The aim of the study:

analyze the professional choices of Estonian RE upper secondary school teachers in the context of the curriculum

# Sample and methods

Semi-structured interviews with 22 Estonian upper secondary school RE teachers in 2015–2016

Inductive content analysis

Education: 10 – university degree in theology, 11 – some training in RE, 5 – entirely self-taught

Religious belonging: 15 – Christians, 6 – no religion, 1 – unknown

- According to the syllabus the subject should „ *not advertise any particular church, congregation or other religious association. The optional course of religious studies is not meant to influence pupils to accept a particular world view as the norm. The task of religious studies at the upper secondary school level is not to guide pupils towards acceptance of a particular religion*”
- All the interviewees claimed to accept the principles

***„Under the circumstances we are living in, in the social arrangement we now have, in a secular non-church educational institution, only impartial approach is to my mind conceivable. If you want something different, you should establish a church school. But even there it is not conceivable nowadays that you impose religion on someone. In any case, school is an educational institution, it is not a congregation. In my view, a school is not a congregation nor church.”***

Lutheran pastor, educated as a theologian and a RE teacher

***„Absolute neutrality both from the side of a teacher and also from the side of students is never entirely possible, because people have ingrained identities. Inevitably a teacher sees the world through some kind of filter. It should be taken into account.”***

Lutheran pastor, theological education

# Bias

The teachers endorse the principle of neutral teaching.  
However some of them are still unconsciously biased

## **Examples of bias:**

- Selection of textbooks and learning materials
- Planning of study trips
- Prioritizing topics according to personal preferences and convictions

# Conclusions

- Most teachers cope with the neutral teaching relatively well
- Biased teachers have usually no RE training
- RE training seems to help teachers to avoid unconscious bias as it promotes self-reflexion and critical thinking

## II. Discussion

Is biased teaching also a problem in your countries?

If so, how to avoid it?

# III. Future prospects

RE in Estonia:

- remain an optional subject
- become a mandatory subject
- removed from the curriculum
- transition to the model of confessional RE

# III. Discussion

Is there any place of RE in contemporary European school?

If so, what should be its aims?