

6



Developing critical realist comparative methods for researching religions, belief-systems, and education

Desarrollando métodos comparativos realistas críticos para investigar las religiones, los sistemas de creencias y la educación

Chris Williams*

DOI: 10.5944/reec.33.2019.23005

Recibido: **2 de noviembre de 2018**

Aceptado: **7 de enero de 2019**

* CHRIS WILLIAMS works within the Centre for International Education and Research (CIER), and lives in London. Before joining Birmingham, he held posts at the universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Cairo, London, and the United Nations. He has also lived in Egypt, Jordan, and South Africa where he set up education projects for street children. He has recently been involved in evaluations of projects in Lebanon for the US Department of Labor (USDOL), in Afghanistan for the European Commission, for Oxfam in Liberia and UNESCO in Palestine. Other research has concerned emergency education in Asia for UNICEF, and disability in India, Thailand, Turkey, and Japan. Earlier research was for the ESRC Environmental Change Programme - 'The environmental effects on human intelligence' - and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation - 'Crime and abuse against people with learning disabilities'. Current work concerns conceptualizing 'Education and global justice', and links between rehabilitation and education in emergency contexts, including the dilemmas of 'apocalyptic information' about global threats. He is also interested in the future of North Korea, and writes regularly for the Korea Herald. His research interests include: Global security, Environmental justice, Education and omnicide, Leadership accountability, Street-working children, Disability rights and inclusion. A 'consilience' (E.O. Wilson) approach to research - interdisciplinary solution-oriented investigation which considers all relevant aspects from neuroscience to international relations. Within the context of 'Educating for global justice', he teaches across the 'International studies in Education' course, and has direct responsibility for 'International study skills' and 'Curriculum design in global contexts'. He has also taught leadership skills at the UN University in Jordan, street children in South Africa, musicians at the Cairo Conservatoire, and adults with learning disabilities in Britain. **Datos de contacto:** E-mail: chrisunula@yahoo.com

Abstract

Education is increasingly implicated in religious and other ideological issues, but contributions from comparative education have been surprisingly rare. From the definition 'belief-systems', this paper reviews relevant comparative methodologies, and proposes that a 'critical realist comparative' approach can reduce methodological weaknesses. It concludes that ontology and epistemology can apply current perspectives on 'fake-news' and 'fact checking'. The UNESCO 'disarming history' framework can encourage non-confrontational educational discussions and the participatory creation of curricula and teaching materials. Appropriate research frameworks entail locating studies in terms of *people, places, and/or systems*, and the methodologies for researching powerful people and organisations can improve data collection methods. *Crowdsourcing* research and online research, including *big data*, increase the scope of these methods. Diverse participation improves research, and the paper provides ideas for involving young people.

Key Words: Education; religion; belief-systems; ideologies; critical realist comparative studies; curricula; teaching materials

Resumen

La educación está cada vez más implicada en cuestiones religiosas y otras cuestiones ideológicas, pero las contribuciones de la Educación comparada han sido sorprendentemente escasas. A partir de la definición «sistemas de creencias», este artículo revisa metodologías comparativas relevantes y propone que un enfoque «comparativo realista crítico» puede reducir las debilidades metodológicas. Concluye que la ontología y la epistemología pueden aplicar perspectivas actuales sobre «noticias falsas» y «verificación de hechos». El marco de la «historia desarmadora» de la UNESCO puede fomentar discusiones educativas sin confrontación y la creación participativa de planes de estudio y materiales de enseñanza. Los marcos de investigación apropiados implican ubicar estudios en términos de *personas, lugares y/o sistemas*, y las metodologías para investigar personas y organizaciones poderosas pueden mejorar los métodos de recolección de datos. La investigación de *crowdsourcing* y la investigación en línea, incluido *Big data*, aumentan el alcance de estos métodos. La participación diversa mejora la investigación, y el documento proporciona ideas para involucrar a los jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Educación; religión; sistemas de creencias; ideologías; estudios comparativos realistas críticos; curricula; materiales de enseñanza

1. Introduction

The influences of religion and ideology within education are becoming increasingly significant and contested in a globalising world (Davies, 2008; 2014). New technologies and social networks provide new ways to disseminate old narratives and anti-social messages, and diverse forms of religious ideology seem implicated in most present-day conflicts. Education, often in the form of ‘peace education’ (AJP 2018), is expected to respond. But an education response should be based on a critical development of appropriate research methodologies and reliable findings.

Public, political and academic perceptions of religion and education are usually bipolar according to the stance of the writer - good or bad - for or against. Positive views may see education as a way to reduce religious violence, as in Northern Ireland (O’Connor, 2002), or to inculcate the values necessary for living in a confusing world, perhaps through ‘character education’ (Sanderse, 2012). Critical analyses usually presents religion as implicated in harmful propaganda such as that from ISIS (Adonis, 2016), or as ‘poisonous’ (Hitchens 2007), ‘delusional’ (Dawkins, 2007), and contrary to mainstream science (Dennet & Plantinga, 2011). Alain de Botton (2012) provides a rare compromise is a chapter on ‘education’ in his book, *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*. Comparative education can contribute more balanced evidence-based approaches.

This discussion therefore first examines relevant precedents and precursors of a comparative education approach to religion and ideology - the *formative methodologies*. For researchers, a central problem within this field of study is the validity of the data and integrity of arguments. The application of *ontology and epistemology* are therefore uniquely difficult and form a core aspect of this discussion. *Research frameworks* and *data collection methods* also present challenges, not least in addressing the power dynamics of interviewees and other data sources (Williams 2012). Relevant approaches must also now embrace emerging strategies such as crowdsourcing research and big data (Williams 2015: 103-7), and a fully inclusive participatory framework. The aims of the discussion are therefore:

(i) to encourage the development of ‘critical realist comparative’ methodologies (Bergene, 2007), to better understand education and religion, which minimise bias and are fit-for-purpose in the present-day context.

(ii) to relate academic research methods to teaching, learning and the participation of young people in research.

2. A review of formative methodologies

There are surprisingly few comparative texts on religion and education, and those that exist usually compare the teaching of religious studies in schools or colleges, and do not consider methods in-depth (e.g. Hinnells, 1970). A comparative education approach (Adamson *et al*, 2007. Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008. Bray, 2007) to examining religion and ideology can be built on a number of other relevant comparative approaches:

- *Comparative history* helps to form a contextual understanding of the origins of relevant educational policies and practice (Lange, 2012), for example why are there many similarities between Jewish and Islamic teachings.

- *Comparative linguistics* compares languages to assess if and how they are related (Anttila, 1989), and whether therefore there has been a historical “educational” influence between peoples of the world, such as Buddhism across Asia (Janda & Joseph, 2004).
- *Comparative discourse analysis* provides ways to examine critically the political meanings underpinning written and spoken texts, such as education policy or messages about race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and physical and mental ability in religious and secular school textbooks (Agiro, 2009).
- *Comparative sociology of religions* focuses on the differences and interrelationships between religious elites and lay masses, and contextualizes how the relationships between religious systems fit within, and are influenced by, the wider socio-political environment including geopolitics and war (Sharot, 2001).
- *Comparative religion* contrasts practices and doctrine, but is usually restricted to the major text-based religions (Muhiyaddin, 1984).
- *Comparative theology* is usually rooted within one religion and compares that with other theological perspectives, but is similarly restricted and usually the ‘root’ religion is Christianity (Clooney, 2010).
- *Comparative ideology* examines lexical, semiotic, psychological and social data ‘within the social environment conditions influencing the selection and retention of specific ideological forms’ (Wathnow, 1982). This approach might examine, for example, why both Catholicism and Communism culminated in an excellent education system in Kerala, India.
- *Comparative anthropology* stems from Frazer’s famous tome, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (Frazer, 1922) (See below). His methods formed the basis for copious studies of ‘belief-systems’, religions (Bock, 1966), ‘mythology’ (Csapo, 2005), and present-day approaches (Bowie, 2005; Lambek, 2008). The *Internet Sacred Text Archive* now provides access to open source religious archives, across a wide range of belief-systems (2018 ISTA).
- *Comparative politics* assesses domestic politics, political institutions, and conflicts in relevant countries. (Mair, 1996. Cambell, 2004. Landman, 2008. Pennings, 2005). The approach may be relevant in theocracies that control educational practice such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ireland or Britain. (In the UK, religious leaders have a constitutional right to sit in the House of Lords, as in other theocracies.)
- *Comparative social policy* can examine the practical outcomes of political decisions, including educational and religious practice (Clasen, 1998).
- *Comparative law* provides understandings of legal traditions – chthonic, Talmudic, Hindu, Asian, Islamic, civil (Roman), common (England, US), which are likely to have influenced educational policy and practice (Glenn, 2000).

- *Comparative media* is relevant in the broader context of public education, for example the BBC has a legal requirement to educate. Studies might focus on media systems, which could include the religious broadcasting channels on the radio and internet (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), or communication and content (Livingstone, 2003), for example the representation of secular opinion in theocratic states.
- *International research* embraces a wide range of comparative and other methods in relation to people and populations, places and mapping, and analysing world systems and official documents (Williams, 2015), for example the global spread of madrassas, creationism and other extremist curricula, and evangelical preachers or paedophile priests.

Most studies of education, religion and ideology are likely to adopt a mixed ('multi') methods approach (Cresswell, 2009) depending on the aims and potential outcomes of the research.

A critical realism comparative approach addresses traditional comparative weaknesses - false claims of causation and inductive methods – which arise from specific observations and complex conclusions. Bergene encourages an 'abductive' approach, which proceeds from incomplete observations, seeks the clearest and most plausible explanations, and takes full account of context (Bergene, 2007).

A familiar example of over-complicated conclusions is the labelling of museum artefacts, biased by 19th century missionary religiosity. If the use or meaning of an object was not known, it was common to use descriptors such as 'ritual' or 'religious'. Models of human beings and animals, especially if found in graves, were often called 'votive offerings'. Only later were simpler explanations discovered - that these were toys belonging to the young corpse (Baxter 2005). Is the 'Sacred Buckskin' in Figure 1 really a religious object? It could well be a precious map or game. Over time, objects may also change from, or to, being religious. A statue used for scaring away enemies or unwanted nocturnal intruders, or frightening naughty children, may only become a 'god' when a biddable local chief agrees with an eager missionary researcher who keeps asking, "You mean it's a god?"(Figure 2).



Figure 1. A 'Sacred Buckskin – Apache' artefact. Objects labelled 'sacred', 'religious', 'votive' may have had simpler uses such as maps or games. (Photo: Author. Pitt Rivers Museum).



Figure 2. 'Feathered god image, probably Ku the god of war'. (Late 18th century). Were so-called 'gods' really just to scare naughty children? (British Museum).

3. Ontology and epistemology – “Fake news” and “fact checking”

The world has become acutely aware of knowledge in the guise of ‘fake news’, and the scope of instant ‘fact-checking’ on the internet. The existence and sources of religious “facts” have become open to scrutiny and questioning at a speed and scale never demonstrated before. Israeli scholar Yuval Noah Harari (2018: 234) explains the problem, ‘When a thousand people believe some made-up story for one month – that’s fake news. When a billion people believe it for a thousand years – that’s a religion.’ This creates practical challenges within research and educational practice, especially with the children of our ‘post-truth species’ (Harari 2018:233). Religious texts only become ‘fake-news’ if people claim the ‘made-up stories’ are factually accurate, without sound objective evidence. Without the ‘fake-claims’, religious texts might provide wonderful stories, insightful human wisdom, and historical and archaeological clues about former ways of living.

Not least is the question of definition. In 1993 the *UN Human Rights Committee*, defined ‘religion or belief’ as ‘theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.’ (UN 1993), which seems to include everyone and everything. One of the many contemporary academic attempts is by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993), for whom religion is a:

“...system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Correct or not, a definition proposing that ‘clothing...conceptions’ with an ‘aura’ so that ‘moods and motivations...seem...realistic’ does not seem to provide firm grounds for robust academic analysis.

Definition is further confused because there is no clear distinction between religious doctrine that is implemented as political ideology and educational policy, for example in Iran or UK, and ideological political systems that are quasi-theocratic ‘political religions’ (Gentile, 2006), as in Soviet Union and North Korea (Keller, 1936, p. 68.). Communist posters often initially portrayed leaders as among the people, but they are eventually elevated to a heavenly haloed position, above their “disciples” who carry the books of their teachings, like Christian icons. (Figure 3.& 7.).

The term ‘belief-systems’ is often more useful, and will be used throughout this paper. It embraces ‘the configuration of beliefs which exists in a society or culture...including scientific knowledge...[and] patterns of religious beliefs and values...which give distinctiveness and coherence to the modes of thought within a society or culture’ (Jary & Jary, 1991).



Figure 3. A poster with Kim Il-sung. The ‘eternal president’ of North Korea, in a heavenly pose above his followers with their books of his teachings. (Photo: Wikimedia commons. Mural outside Songdowon Hotel, Wonsan)

The lack of definitional clarity means that questions of *ontology* – the study of how we know that something exists – and *epistemology* – understanding how we, or others, know something (Evans 2012. Audi 1997) – is uniquely important when analysing belief-systems. In most fields, a simple distinction between “fact” and “opinion” is a generally clear and robust way to delineate evidence. But in religious and ideological discourse, the concept of “belief” often confuses and conflates the two, and is taken to mean anything from absolute certainty, to a guess or hope.

4. Ontology – Fact-checking existence

Mainstream *ontology* asks, how did something (an *entity*) come into existence, how do we prove it *is*, in what way does it *be*, how do we know it is *real*, and how can we *categorize* it? Philip Dick (1978) proposes a pertinent test of existence, ‘Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.’ And John Searle (2006) makes a useful distinction:

- some things are ‘*observer independent*’ – ‘brute facts’ that ‘exist independently of us’ (earthquakes, tides, weather);
- other things are ‘*observer-relative*’ – ‘institutional facts’ that ‘depend on us for their existence’ (citizenship, laws, moral values).

The Earth clearly exists ‘independently’, but nations only exist because of ‘us’. Harari (2015: 24-39) points out that Sapiens are the only animals that can create ‘imagined realities’, including financial systems, companies, and religions. Therefore humans exist objectively as a type of animal, but descriptors such as “nationality”, “race”, “ethnic group” or “religion” are ‘imagined’ distinctions. Places, if described as a “hill” or a “hall”, exist independently. But if these become “sacred sites” or “religious buildings”, they are ‘imagined’ places.

Inevitably, teachers have to address the question, “How do we know that god exists?” A simple strategy when addressing conflicting views is first to find agreements. There is likely to be agreement that gods exist in religious texts (stories, doctrine, ideology, laws, propaganda), the arts (music, performance, paintings, symbols), “sacred” places (religious buildings, shrines, statues), in certain people’s minds (beliefs, hopes, fears), and then eventually in museums. This leads to a discussion of what we mean by ‘exist’ using Searle’s (2006) distinctions (above), and then hopefully agreement that the existence of gods as we know them is ‘observer relative’ – dependent on humans and their activities. Harari provides a similar distinction when he talks of god ‘the cosmic mystery or the worldly lawgiver’ (2018:197). The former god is often conflated with, and used to legitimise, the latter - the ‘observer-relative’ ‘worldly lawgiver’ that creates the problems. The ability of the Roman Senate to turn living people into gods, and the old European ‘God Kings’, are obvious examples. The distinctions between the human and supposedly supernatural creation of gods should be clarified in any religious discourse.

Another conundrum for teachers is the simple “childish” question – “What was there before religion and the gods?”, and “What will be there after religion ends and the gods go?” Many creation myths solve this with the idea that previously ‘nothing’ existed, and the endpoint is addressed by the creation of ‘eternity’. But significant issues arise within the ‘ontology of nothing’, which examines whether nothing exists. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre explores, nothing (1958/2003). Nothing was the basis for many creationist myths, because the existence of nothing provided a void that needed a god to fill it - *Creatio ex nihilo* – ‘creation out of nothing’ (Lodahl, 2001). For many religious advocates, God was the creator who made the world out of nothing, but this requires them to prove that nothing existed. Jacques Lacan argues that nothing does not exist, and therefore a god as ‘the creator’ does not exist (Conor, 2002: 251-255).

Young people can become very engaged when discussing the existence of nothing, without needing to know they are “doing ontology”. A child might ask, “If zero is nothing, but $0 - 1 = -1$, then zero must have been something, otherwise $0 - 1$ would = nothing.” “What do you get if you take ‘nothing’ from a vacuum?” (Savorelli 2018). These “childish” questions also interest some very grown-up academics (Kaplan, 2000), especially how zero shaped religion (Seife, 2000, p83-106). The deployment of nothing goes beyond creation myths and amusing arguments, and sometimes underpins major disputes, such as the false application of the *terra nullis* doctrine by early Zionists who talked of the return of ‘a people without a land [the Jews] to a land without a people [Palestine]’ (Harari 2018: 233).

The concept of the existence ‘eternity’ can be equally fascinating (Eire 2010). Religions shroud their endpoints in phrases like “eternal father”, “eternal law”, “immortal”, and “for ever and ever, Amen”. A child might ask, “So what comes after that?” A similar circumstance arises with the “childish” question, “What comes after infinity? Or, “What is the last number before infinity.” (BBC 2012a.). Political ideologies have similar

problems. In North Korea, the ideology of '*Juche*' (self-reliance) is explained as an 'eternal truth' (*yongsaeng pulmyol ui chilli*) that is 'not meant to be fully comprehensible' (Oh & Hassig, 2000:16). The late Kim Il-Sung now exists as a mummy and the 'eternal president'. Not least, this raises the question, Should new ambassadors to the DPRK present their credentials to a corpse?

This level of questioning must start with cognisance that belief-systems have constructed and controlled major world languages - Latin, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese - to favour the myth-making of their religious ideologies. This means that major assumptions go unchallenged. When non-believers call themselves 'atheists', they are trapping themselves into implying that god exists. The word 'atheist' comes from the Greek *atheos* - 'a' meaning 'without' and '*theism*' meaning 'god'. *Atheist* therefore implies an acceptance that a god exists, because we cannot be 'without' something unless it exists in some form. (There must be a '*theism*' to be 'a'.) The term 'secular' is more useful, provided we clarify that it does not mean anti-religion, but simply 'of the world'. Its early use included 'secular Abbots' - those who left the shelter of the monasteries and worked with people in the world outside. That understanding also clarifies that 'Secular Jews', and websites entitled 'Secular Islam' are not based on an oxymoron (Williams in Archer *et al*, 2006, p667).

Recognising how religions shaped language should lead to better educational discourse about religion. Instead of stating, "Osama bin Laden said that God...", we should say, "Osama bin Laden said that *his* God...", and similarly, "The Pope said that *his* God...". Not least this avoids the inherent contradiction that Catholics and Muslims both aim to create a world of one 'nation'. There is not room on one planet for more than one universal 'nation', or god. In multi-cultural London, children might discuss whether royalists should be singing "God save the Queen", or "*Our* god save *our* Queen.' Curiously the discredited verse 3 (below) uses 'our God'.

Philosophers have now moved on from the age-old questions about whether gods exist independently of human existence, and whether the human mind exists independently of its body (Effingham, 2013). The increasing global influence of violent religious or quasi-religious ideologies prompts new discussions. Real-world problems are often rooted in educational processes that persuade people to believe that certain things exist objectively, without objective evidence. And when people accept, on the basis of belief but not evidence, that gods, heavens and hells exist, it becomes easy to extend that claim to persuade them that this 'god' wants them to kill others, that the reward will be anything they desire in a 'heaven', and if they don't comply they will suffer eternal punishment in the other 'imagined' world of 'hell'. Without the "existence" of gods, heavens, and hells the latter argument would appear as a baseless and wanton provocation to violence.

Scriptures can be misused to build on this myth-making. In Hebrew literature, a new thought is often prefaced by 'Amen', meaning 'I tell you the truth'. In Christian and Muslim teaching, 'Amen' often follows a claim. Shouldn't we be able to assume, without frequent reminders, that religious writers and teachers tell the truth? Political religions use the same device. The main propaganda newspaper of the Soviet Union was called *Pravda*, meaning 'truth'.

Evangelical churches teach that the Old Testament is the word of their god and must be taken literally as "the truth". A child might ask why Genesis (1:3-2:3) declaims that light, water and earth were created before the appearance of the sun and stars on day four. Surely suns and stars must appear *before* light and the geological and biological planet. Judo-evangelical totalitarian beliefs can also lead to serious outcomes. The edict

that the Gibeonites should forever be ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ (Joshua 9:21) was used by the *Dutch Reformed Church* to teach that ‘black’ and ‘coloured’ citizens should be subservient classes and so the South African apartheid system was legitimate.

Numerous other edicts encourage violence. These include the killing and torture of animals and humans (Judges 1:2–6. Numbers 25:8.), genocide (Deuteronomy 20:16-17), killing people who hold different views including family members who try to challenge religious views (Deuteronomy 13:1–5, 12:30, 17:2–7, 13:6.10), rewarding victorious soldiers with virgins to rape from the defeated enemy (Deuteronomy 20, 21; Numbers 31), and the ethic that children can be punished for the sins of their grandparents (Numbers 14:8). The ‘political religions’ (above) are very similar. The idea that children should be punished for the sins of their parents, and that family members who dissent from the prevailing ideology should be exposed and killed, also pertains, and is practised, in Communist North Korea. Edicts like these underpin the religious abuse of children, not least sexual abuse by Catholic priests. In 2017 a private Islamic school in Johor, Malaysia, a boy died as a result of being beaten by a teacher, after then having both legs amputated to try and save his life. His sin was making a noise in an assembly hall (BBC, 2017c).

All ideologies, religious or political, are open to ontological questioning, including familiar grand world theories. Barbara Ward (1966: 121) provides a realistic perspective on Marx’s rhetoric:

"Karl Marx derives his critique entirely from Western ideas and sources... Dialectical materialism, the scientific secret of man’s history...has the grandeur and excitement of a great work of art – the sombre force of a Verdi opera, the flashing vision of Goethe’s *Faust*. But like them, it belongs to the world of imagination, not of fact..."

"The Marxist vision of history, with its cosmic sweeps from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to communism, is not true in the sense that a scientific experiment or a plain record of dates and happenings is true. It cannot be tested. No predictions can be based on it. And it is contradicted by a large variety of facts".

Comparing the ontological bases of religious doctrine and quasi-religious political ideologies provides a way to question and analyse both.

5. Epistemology – Fact-checking sources of knowledge

Similarly, understanding how we, or others, know something is important within studies of belief-systems. *Epistemology* – the study of theories of knowledge (Audi, 1997; Evans & Smith, 2012) – asks questions such as:

- What is the *origin* of the knowledge?
- How did the *empirical research* (and other experience) and *reasoned arguments* contribute to creating the knowledge?
- How *certain* (valid and error free) is the knowledge?
- Was the knowledge created *critically* (sceptically)?

- How has, or might, the knowledge *change* as other knowledge and understandings change?
- To what degree would the knowledge be seen as *generally true* (as ‘a theory’). (Blackburn, 1996)

A comparative perspective also raises questions about *cross-cultural* understandings of knowledge. Anthropologists report that “traditional” or indigenous knowledge might come more from practical experience, dreams and the spirit world, elders and other authorities (Aikman, 1999).

The obvious problems were recognized long ago by Islamic writers. In his comparative study of Muslims and Hindus, *India* (circa 1030), Persian scholar, Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (Sachau, 2002), warned:

"We must distinguish different classes of reporters.

One of them tells a lie, as intending to further an interest of his own, either by lauding his family or nation, because he is one of them, or by attacking the family or nation on the opposite side, thinking that thereby he can gain his ends.

Another one tells a lie regarding a class of people whom he likes, as being under obligations to them, or whom he hates because something disagreeable has happened between them.

Another tells a lie because he is of such a base nature as to aim thereby at some profit, or because he is such a coward as to be afraid of telling the truth.

Another tells a lie because it is his nature to lie, and he cannot do otherwise, which proceeds from the essential meanness of his character and the depravity of his innermost being.

Lastly, a man may tell a lie from ignorance, blindly following what others told him.

Similarly, around 1377, Egyptian historian Ibn Khaldūn complained about ‘Reliance upon transmitters’:

People as a rule approach great and high-ranking persons with praise and encomiums [tributes]. They embellish conditions and spread their fame.

Students often happen to accept and transmit absurd information that, in turn, is believed on their authority". (In Williams 2018: 130, 15)

Religious and ideological knowledge is often based on an ‘argument from an *authority*’ (Salmon, 2006), such as a theologian or despot. The credibility of expert views assumes that:

- the expert is usually correct about the subject,
- there is a professional consensus that the expert is usually correct, and therefore.
- any further opinion from the authority on this subject is likely to be correct.

The views of religious experts are susceptible to the (aptly termed) ‘halo effect’ (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). We might judge an authority to be correct because the ‘halo’ of one particular above-average trait – wealth, tradition, position – can generate a perception that other qualities are above average – honesty, intelligence, diligence. This is one of the reasons why the paedophile Catholic priests went undetected for so many years. If a priest believes, as the Bible claims, that, “Every high priest chosen from among

human beings is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf ...” (Hebrews 5:1), and that he is God’s representative on Earth, then he and his followers are likely to be uncritical of the choice to sexually abuse children in school settings (Robinson, 2012). Religious texts often start with phrases such as, “It is written that...” or “According to...”, which gives an impression the source is an unassailable authority. To the researcher, this discourse should represent a warning – the text is *only* ‘written’ ‘according to’ someone who is probably unknown and may perhaps have never existed.

The (supposed) views of US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, provide a surprisingly relevant checklist for religious and ideological studies: “There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.” The further question is, whose ‘knowns’ count most, and why? (Williams, 2012, p57).

6. Validity – When is religious knowledge ‘fake news’?

In Europe and the US, religion is in decline, and so the traditional sources of wisdom and knowledge are increasingly questioned, not least by young people. In 1984, there were 854,000 regular churchgoers in Scotland; there are now 390,000 (BBC 2017a.). A quarter of congregations have no children (BBC 2017b.). In 1983, 31 % of British people described themselves as ‘no religion’. By 2017, *NatCen’s* British Social Attitudes survey found that it is 53 % (NatCen 2017). Before this, in 2014, a former Archbishop of Canterbury described Britain as a ‘post-Christian’ society that is no longer ‘a nation of believers’ (Ross 2014). The *Pew* surveys in US indicate a religious decline of around 1 % per annum. Half of the present ‘nones’ abandoned their childhood religion, and 1 in 5 now positively ‘dislike’ organised religion (Pew 2017). Gallup research concurs, with more than 33 % of those born after 1981 declaring ‘no religion’. In 1957 that was 1 %. Increasing numbers (26 %) consider the Bible as ‘a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man’, and only 24 % believe it is the ‘actual word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word’ (Saad 2018).

Disciplines such as archaeology are beginning to “speak truth to religion”, and much of the reasoning is based on simple logic and common sense. Keller’s book *The Bible as History* is a seminal example (1983). Keller questions, for example, whether the apparent birth of Christ was in winter. He points out that the freezing temperatures in a desert during winter, after sun-down, would almost certainly have killed any shepherds who ‘watched their flocks by night’. More recent texts include the use of new technologies, which challenge beliefs about dates and genetic links (Insoll, 2004).

The combination of new technologies and common sense provides fascinating new understandings. Europeans, religious or not, believe that crucifixion was a common punishment across the Roman Empire, with crucifixions killing thousands of victims at single events. So there should be numerous remains of crucified bodies, not least because nails and suitably damaged bones would be preserved. In fact, there is only one archaeological example. It also now seems likely that most crucifixions were not executions, but humiliating acts of public torture and display, by tying captors to trees and stakes, designed by state terrorists (Tzaferis, 1970). The findings also indicate that the cross was a T, not the familiar ‘crucifix’ that countless Christian believers present as their logo. And common-sense concludes that victims could not have been nailed through their palms,

because their body weight would have torn their hands off. Our knowledge of crucifixion comes from ancient Greek and other writings, and writers have always been prone to exaggerating death and violence to attract a readership.

Most religious texts were compiled many years after the events they describe. The Bible's New Testament seems to have existed in a rudimentary form only from the end of the 1st century AD, but the form that we now recognise appeared a century later. The oldest known version of the New Testament was written in first-century Koine Greek, which was not the indigenous language of Jesus' community. This presents the likelihood of errors in copying and translation. For example, the paradox of the virgin birth might become less puzzling through knowing the Hebrew word in Isaiah (7:14) is *'almah'*, which simply means 'young woman' not a virgin.

The methods of critical discourse analyses are relevant (van Dijk, 2014). If we look carefully at the children's Hymn 'All things bright and beautiful', sung by countless little children in European and American churches and primary schools, since 1848, it becomes blatant propaganda to preserve the power relationship between the rich and the poor. The chorus conflates the concept of a heavenly 'God' and earthly 'Lords', praising: *All things bright and beautiful/ All creatures great and small/ All things wise and wonderful/ The Lord God made them all.* And verse 3. legitimises the desired power relationships that the 'Lord God' 'made': *The rich man in his castle/ The poor man at his gate/ God made them high and lowly/ And ordered their estate* (Alexander 1848).

We can also ask a simplified 'deconstructionist' question, what is missing or hidden? Where, for example, are the women writers and heroes in religious texts? Why is the *Book of Judith* (Goccaccini, 2012) omitted from Jewish texts and sidelined to the Apocrypha in Protestant Bibles? Is it perhaps because her story tells how she helped her soldiers to win a battle by seducing the enemy general, Holofernes, getting him drunk and having sex with him, and cutting his head off during their love-making. Perhaps that does not fit well with the ethos of a male-dominated clerical profession.

Similarly, where are the newly invented regions in theological discourse? How many people are aware, for example, of the Hòa Hảo religion in Vietnam, created in 1939. Uniquely, it tries to unite Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian belief-systems, under the symbol of a global "eye" (Figure 4.). (Islam was virtually unknown in Vietnam at that time.) Hòa Hảo was also a nationalist political force against French colonial rule. Yet it is now prevented from teaching its ideology by the communist government whose existence was aided by the work of this religio-political movement among peasant farmers (Nam, 2004).



Figure 4. A newly created religion. The global eye of the Hòa Hảo alter and temple windows, Vietnam. (Photos: C.Williams).

The conundrums of ontology and epistemology, can also be addressed through simple comparisons, and questioning illogical claims. The BBC provides a useful checklist for fact-checking religious reports and other potentially biased information through comparisons, for example the apparent dates of photos with weather data (Williams 2015: 120). Logically, countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia must still have witches and sorcerers, because they have laws against witchcraft and sorcery, sometimes resulting in execution (BBC, 2012b.) But to what degree is the ideology of witchcraft just used for political control, as throughout Europe until recently? Similarly, sexuality is sometimes accompanied by ontological claims, which are contested cross-culturally (Herdt, 1991). In 2012, the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claimed, 'In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country...In Iran we do not have this phenomenon.' He forgot that Iranian law formally addresses homosexual acts by men (*lavat* – sodomy) and women (*mosahegheh*), and his courts executed people for breaking these laws (BBC 2012). If there were no homosexuals in Iran, why would there be a need for laws and punishments to deal with homosexual behaviour (Taylor, 2011, p.32)?

These issues of truth and validity are not just a concern in academic spheres. They create practical challenges in classrooms, and are often addressed within the framework of 'teaching controversial/sensitive issues,' within citizenship education (Cowan, 2012). The key strategies are about creating safe spaces for truthful and constructive discussions. In terms of curriculum, the UNESCO *Disarming History* project is evolving useful methods from diplomacy which can be applied to classroom discussions, but also to creating documents, including textbooks and educational materials, about contested issues. In general:

- At first, only include things that everyone agrees about, using basic language ("Japanese military in Nanjing", not "Nanjing Massacre").
- Circulate initial drafts widely for comment, in relevant languages, and discuss responses openly.
- Build acceptance of the process.
- Identify international norms as a basis for discussing contentious material (Children's Rights Convention, ICC Statute).
- Use international terminology from relevant and objective glossaries and lexicons (WHO, IPCC).
- Then work incrementally to agree and phrase contentious material.
- If agreement cannot be reached, explain why, and present all views.
- Do not trade facts politically, only use agreed material.

Although slow, this all builds support for the eventual outcomes (Williams 2015, 233).

The further aspect is how to engage children of the internet age who may dismiss opposing views without thinking about changing their own views. So 'internet literacy' is another vital aspect, which includes trying to link what children are learning at school with how they are using electronic devices and social networking sites beyond

the classroom (Evans, 2004). Young people are more likely to contribute to productive discussions about religious and political ideology through thinking about engaging questions, reformatted from ontology and epistemology, for example:

- How can we fact-check ‘nothing’ and ‘eternity’?
- Why do Christians tell poor men sit at the gates of rich men in their castles?
- Why does the Iranian government kill homosexuals as a punishment for their non-existence?
- When the Punk Rock group the Sex Pistols sang ‘I am an antichrist’, did this mean they believed that Jesus existed, in order to be ‘anti’ him? What would be a better line?

Framing questions as counterfactuals can also be effective:

- If some Islamic countries still have witches and sorcerers, should the next Harry Potter story be set in Saudi Arabia?
- What if crucifixion stories were mainly ‘fake news’?
- What if Judith had married Holofernes – would she be seen as a heroic feminist or a deceitful whore?
- If there were no religions, should we invent one and what would it be like?

The point of these approaches is not to ridicule believers, but to teach “common-sense religious history” based on data and ideas that are credible and interesting. Whatever the method or type of engagement, it is clear that care should be taken to avoid repeating questionable discourse, and thinking about the origins of what we think we know can help. Where did the US idea of an ‘axis of evil’ and ‘good and evil’ come from? The source can be traced back to the Persian prophet Mani (circa 216–276AD) (Richard, 2004). So when, (then) US president G.W. Bush deployed his ‘good and evil’ rhetoric about the ‘axis’ of supposed US enemies, including Iran, he was just repeating an Iranian ideology.

7. Research frameworks and data collection

Research frameworks (Beissel-Durrant, 2004) (also called ‘strategies’, ‘approaches’, or ‘designs’) provide a structure within which different, or similar, data collection methods are used. In the past, research design often started with a decision to use either a *quantitative (positivist)* or *qualitative (interpretive)* framework, but mixed methods are increasingly common (Cresswell, 2009). A starting point for choosing a framework is to decide if the focus of the study is on *people, places, and/or systems*, (Williams 2015, p, 95). Standard frameworks and data collection methods are discussed at length in numerous methods books, and so this discussion only outlines some of the less-familiar aspects that may be particularly relevant to researching belief-systems.

A significant aspect is the need to understand *power, elites, and leadership*, as these dynamics created, maintain, and often defend, belief-systems (Williams, 2012). Not least

is the question, what persona should an outsider researcher adopt when interviewing or observing other religions. Is dressing appropriately for the religion respectful, or is it deceitful (Figure 5). It is also not easy to access busy powerful people, which may require planning and opportunism. Korean PhD researcher Yun-joo LEE explains (Figure 6):

"At first, the security staff would not let me in. I asked for a glass of water, and started talking to them in Arabic, which they liked, and they started asking me about Korea. I then asked to use the toilet, and so they let me enter the building. I came back and they seemed relaxed, perhaps because I had been in and not made a problem. They told me to go where the Pope walked back after the mass. If I saw him then, that was apparently not their responsibility! I could only ask him one question, but it was a very interesting answer which showed that the pope had insight into local circumstances, and was aware of a hidden gender problem that affected men" (Lee, 2010).



Figure 5. The persona of the researcher. A Korean researcher, Yun-joo Lee, wearing Muslim dress to interview an Islamic leader, Professor Muhammad S. Tantawy, Grand Sheik of *Al-Azhar*. (Photo: Yun-joo LEE).



Figure 6. Accessing powerful people. Yun-joo Lee does an opportunistic interview with Baba Shinuda, Coptic pope, Cairo, Egypt. (Photo Yun-joo LEE).

Ethics (moral philosophy) is a central part of researching belief-systems. Research compares the behaviour of people against ethical norms – international law, human rights agreements, traditions, codes, professional standards (Sidgwick, 1981).

- *Theoretical* studies assess and provide the bases for ethical claims.
- *Normative* studies consider the ‘normal’ pragmatic bases of moral behaviour.
- *Applied* studies identify how ethical standards should be used in particular circumstances.
- *Descriptive* research discovers how moral standards are actually applied.
- *Psychological* studies assess moral capacity and agency.

Global ethics considers macro-issues such as distributive justice, religion, and the conduct of international organizations. Contrasting *stated behaviour* (what they say), with observed *demonstrated behaviour* (what they do), is a useful analytical tool. Why, during the Arab Spring in 2012, did a fatwa from *al Azhar University* say that it was un-Islamic for clerics to take part in protests, yet in Tahrir Square *al Azhar* clerics were busy protesting in their Islamic dress (Islamopedia, 2012)?

Ethnography is usually associated with anthropology, and aims to provide a holistic account of peoples or other groups, including their languages, history, and belief-systems (Hamersley, 2007). *Fieldwork* and *participant observation* have been central (DeWalt 2002). *Endogenous* perspectives consider things that come from within a cultural group (food taboos, shrines); *exogenous*, concern external views (nutritional standards, symbolism). Similarly, *emic* accounts come from someone inside a group (“our gods say...”), and an *etic* account comes from an outsider (“their moral values are...”). *Ethnomusicology* (Myers, 1992) (cultural/comparative musicology) now extends to urban music, busking and religious forms such as gospel. Songs, especially national anthems, can provide interesting evidence about beliefs and ideologies. Verse 3 of ‘God Save the Queen’ helps to explain the lingering neo-colonial attitudes in Britain: *O Lord our God arise/ Scatter her enemies/ And make them fall/ Confound their politics/ Frustrate their knavish tricks/ On Thee our hopes we fix/ God save us all.*

Linguistics may be part of an ethnographic study, and can be applied to songs. It investigates the meaning, form and context of languages, how languages evolve, and intercultural communication (Wiseman, 1995). Comparative/historical linguistics (Beekes, 1995) can help to track the migration and interaction of peoples, and the spread of religious ideas. Language can explain power structures within castes structures and religions through phrases such as ‘ritual pollution’ (Harper, 1964). *Lexicography* – using or creating dictionaries – may form part of a linguistics study, and can help to analyse religious encyclopaedias and dictionaries (Cornell, 2017).

Jarad Diamond’s (2010) comparative approach to *historical natural experiments* provides an pertinent approach to researching long-term belief-systems, without necessarily engaging directly with the participants. This examines *similarities* or *differences* in:

- *initial conditions* – relevant starting points. (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church)
- *perturbations* – *endogenous* (internal) or *exogenous* (external) influences (see below). (e.g. Martin Luther. The Reformation)
- *outcomes* – factors that can be shown to have a *causal* link to *initial conditions*. (e.g. The Protestant Church)

Comparisons may be of cases with similarities and differences in *initial conditions* or *perturbations*. The approach needs to be aware of ‘*Confounders*’ - alternative explanations that may interfere with identifying a causal link.

Crowdsourcing research (CS) can relate to all frameworks, and is probably the most exciting development in world research. It entails: ‘an organising entity that outsources research tasks, which that entity could not achieve alone, to large groups of self-selected people (lay and expert)’ (Williams, 2013). CS research may be organized by civil society organizations, companies or governments. Experts may contribute by systemizing and presenting complex data in easily searchable formats and analysing particularly interesting findings. Volunteers and others can be organized to contribute to data collection, data management, evidence testing (triangulation), analysis, the development of relevant technologies and dissemination.

But CS need not depend on the internet, and understanding non-digital methods can inform modern strategies. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (Frazer 1890) (above) was based on questionnaires sent through missionary and colonial networks in many countries including Japan, China, Africa and the Americas. In modern terms, Frazer used social networks for a snowball survey. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (1563) is another pertinent example. This documented ‘persecutions and horrible troubles’ perpetrated by the ‘Roman Prelates’. It included testimony evidence from ‘both men and women, whiche can and do beare wytnes’, including prisoners. The 1583 edition was three times bigger than the first, and four times bigger than the Bible.

Online research (Ford, 2011) can also relate to all frameworks, and includes using the internet,

- as a *research tool* (email, *Skype*, search engines, internet surveys, remote viewing of real-time videos), which can increase the inclusiveness of research.
- as a *source of data* (websites, blogs, social media).
- for *methodological research* – online research about online research – transmission speed, nodes, specific patterns, data blocks, data management and storage.

Methods for using online data fall into two categories – researching *knowns* and *unknowns* – but there are overlaps. When searching for *knowns*, researchers know broadly what they are looking for. They know the likely data sources, or how to find those sources (Ford, 2011), and use data that is collected specially for a particular study. They are usually trying to understand *why* specific things happen, through in-depth analyses of online content for example of extremist groups (Donelan, 2005), and often include researching specific people, or groups such as faith organisations and children (Lobe, 2008).

Online studies about people are usually small-scale, feasible for single researchers, and are explained under headings like ‘digital anthropology’ (Horst, 2012), ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine, 2000), ‘online ethnography’ (Miller, 2001), ‘netography’ (Kozinets, 2009), and ‘social media research’ (Vis, 2014). Studies might focus on behaviour that is uniquely online, such as online grooming. Data collection may simply entail capturing relevant material for later analysis using screen shots, or researchers may make notes like traditional fieldwork notes. Open source software is increasingly available, in specific fields such as international development (Sowe, 2012).

Searching for *unknowns* entails ‘big data’ research – ‘big’ in terms of volume, velocity and variety. Researchers often do *not* know exactly where to look, or even what or who they are looking for, and their studies usually concern *populations*. The data is often by-product or ‘exhaust data’, which was collected initially for a non-research purpose (location of mobile phones, IP addresses). Big data research may occasionally provide answers to research questions, but more often identifies where to look for those answers. Researchers are often searching for *patterns* (clusters, outliers, associations), *networks* (who ‘shares’ with who) and *trends* (frequencies, data flows), perhaps based on keywords in mass *content*. They look for indications of *what* is happening (interest in religious sites, concern about events), and *how* large groups of people organize themselves (social networks, the leaders of religious e-chat), but not *why*.

Simple searches of *big data* can sometimes provide clues for further in-depth research, and can be very easy to do. A name search on *Google Trends* or *Ngram* may indicate periods of online activity or media interest. Looking at the meta-data for simple searches on Google should show the number of internet hits for a particular name and phrase. Sometimes, studying the *human networks* around online networks may be more significant for addressing particular research questions, but these may be hard to access and understand. Some user groups, such as hate-groups, may use chat rooms as a perverse game, but the content may reveal little about what they actually think or do.

However the research is designed, it is particularly important to get different viewpoints about belief-systems. Outsider researchers are inevitably shielded from certain data sources, and so a study design should aim to *triangulate* views from:

- *elites* – select people, often decision-makers, who can provide an *overview* of something – senior religious/political leaders, managers, administrators. But they may present a politicized or self-promotional perspective.
- *experts* – people who can explain *objective knowledge* gained through professional endeavours or specific skills – scientists, historians, artists, musicians, educationists. But their view might reflect a specific school of thinking or disciplinary outlook.
- *representatives* – people who identify themselves with a certain group and may explain *group-related experiences* – tribal or nomadic groups, young/old, male/female, professionals or manual workers, local religious leaders. But they may only represent a partial, perhaps self-interested, viewpoint.
- *locals* – people (including visitors) who know about a particular *location* – town, village, coast – or *setting* – shrines, temples, schools. But they may not be able to explain their circumstances in a broader context.

- *transitory* – people experiencing a movement from one circumstance to another – geographical, political, personal, cultural – who have knowledge about that *change*. But during the period of change they may not fully understand what is happening.

Elites and *experts* are likely to provide *exogenous* or *etic* data; *representatives*, *locals* and *transitory* people will probably provide *endogenous* or *emic* accounts (see below). The same individuals may have different personas or roles in different circumstances. Images, such as political or religious murals or friezes, may indicate a relevant range of human data sources (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Identifying sources of human data from a political frieze. 1. elites – ideological leaders, often elevated to godlike positions. 2. experts – military scholars. 3. representatives – ethnic minorities. 4. locals – villagers. 5. transitory – prisoners. Army Museum, Da Nang, Vietnam. (Photo: C.Williams)

8. Conclusions

Education is implicated in contemporary religious and ideological issues, often now under the headings conflict, child abuse, extremism and terrorism. Sound research is necessary to inform related education policy and practice, but relevant contributions from comparative education have been surprisingly rare. This is in part because of a lack of clear methodologies, yet related comparative methodologies (e.g. comparative religion / ideology / policy / media) can help to form relevant approaches. The starting point is clear definition. The term ‘belief-systems’ - to include faith-based and political religions, and other ideological systems such as aggressive capitalism, communism and neo liberalism – provides a good basis for comparative studies and assists a broader account of relevant data, insights and analysis.

An obvious difficulty in relation to belief-systems, especially religious, is the creation of unbiased ontological and epistemological bases for a study, to ensure a robust academic

framing, and to avoid “for or against” bias. A ‘critical realist comparative’ approach (Bergene, 2007) helps to reduce the traditional weakness of comparative studies, particularly false claims of causation, and leads to simpler and more plausible conclusions.

In educational settings, discussions can be honed to lessen confrontation by first seeking areas of agreement about where gods only exist because of human imagination (e.g. sacred sites, heavens), clearly exist because of human activities (e.g. books, buildings and museums etc), or only exist in terms of personal hopes and beliefs (i.e. in people’s minds). Discussions can be deepened by asking if ‘nothing’ and ‘eternity’ can exist, analysing the construction of religion through language, and comparing the promotion of harm and hatred within diverse forms of ideological texts.

Epistemology might be discussed through exploring current arguments about ‘fake news’ and ‘fact checking’ systems such as that used by the BBC, philosophical approaches such as counter-factual analysis, and non-western historical advice such as that of al-Bīrūnī and Ibn Khaldun. The UNESCO ‘disarming history’ framework helps to create safe spaces for non-confrontational educational discussions and the participatory creation of curricula and teaching materials. ‘Internet literacy’ provides a relevant way to base these approaches on present-day communications skills.

Appropriate research frameworks for international and other comparative research can proceed from locating the aims of the study in terms of *people*, *places*, and/or *systems*. ‘*Historical natural experiments*’ provide a way to frame retrospective analysis. Understanding how to access data from or about powerful people and organisations can inform and improve data collection methods. Ethics, ethnography and linguistics may contribute further insights. *Crowdsourcing research* has a long history in the study of belief-systems and the *online research*, including *big data*, increases the scope of this method. Comparative analysis is likely to be more plausible if based on triangulated views from *elites* (e.g. religious leaders), *experts* (e.g. museum curators), representatives (e.g. community leaders), *locals* (e.g. disability and gender rights groups), and *transitional* people (e.g. refugees, tourists).

Most importantly young people and minority groups are invaluable partners in this area of study, especially if including internet users in other countries. Cross-border and cross-cultural ‘fact checking’ is especially valuable. The outcomes, for any group, can be both educational and analytical, and inclusive border-crossing participation is the best way to enhance balance, and check, validate, and then disseminate research.

9. References

- Adamson, B. M. Mason & M. Bray (Eds.). (2007). *Comparative education research: Approaches and methods*. London: Pearson.
- Adonis, H. A. (2016). *Violence and Islam*. London: Polity.
- Agiro, C.P. (2009). *A comparative critical discourse analysis of teacher editions of secondary American literature textbooks adopted for use in Christian and public schools*. (Unpublished PhD dissertation), College of Education of Ohio University .
- Aikman, S. (1999). *Intercultural education and literacy: An ethnographic study of indigenous knowledge and learning in the Peruvian Amazon*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- AJP (2018). ‘Transforming violence into peace through education’ (Special Issue), *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 6(1).
- Alexander, Cecil (1848). *Hymns for little children*. London: Masters.
- Anttila, R. (1989). *Historical and comparative linguistics*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Archer, L., F. Shain, & C. Williams, (2006). ‘British Muslims’ expectations of the government: Secular or Islamic? What schools do British Muslims want for their children? Review Symposium’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(5), 659 – 671.
- Audi, R. (1997). *Epistemology: A Contemporary introduction to the theory of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Baxter, J.E (2005). *The archaeology of childhood: Children gender and material culture*. Blue Ridge Summit, PA: AltaMira Press.
- BBC (2007). ‘Iran president in NY campus row’, *BBC News Online*. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7010962.stm
- BBC (2012a.). ‘Johnny Ball explains what number comes before infinity’, *More or Less*, BBC Radio 4(3).. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19426353>
- BBC (2012b.). ‘Saudi man executed for “witchcraft and sorcery”’, *BBC News Online*. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18503550
- BBC (2017a.). *Dramatic drop in church attendance in Scotland* - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-39613631>
- BBC (2017b.). *No children in quarter of Church of England congregations* - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41720994>
- BBC (2017c). ‘Malaysia schoolboy beaten by warden dies in hospital’, *BBC News*, 26 April. Available at: [26 April 2017http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39714295](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39714295)
- Beekes, R.S.P. (1995). *Comparative Indo-European linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Beissel-Durrant, G. (2004). ‘A typology of research methods within the social sciences’, unpublished working paper, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. Available at: <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/115/>
- Bergene, A. (2015). Towards a critical realist comparative methodology, *Journal of Critical Realism*, 6(1).
- Blackburn, S. (1996). *Dictionary of philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bock, K.E. (1966). ‘The comparative method of anthropology. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 8(3), 269-280.
- Botton, A. de (2012). *Religion for atheists: A non-believer’s guide to the uses of religion*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

- Bowie, F. (2005). *The anthropology of religion: An introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bray, M. (2007). *Comparative education Research: Approaches and methods*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, Hong Kong University.
- Campbell, L. (2004). *Historical linguistics: An introduction*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Clasen, J. (1998). *Comparative social policy: Theories and methods*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Clooney, F. X. (2010). *Comparative theology: Deep learning across religious borders*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Conor, C. (2002). *A genealogy of nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. London: Routledge, pp. 251–255.
- Cornell (2013). *Religion: A research guide: Encyclopedias & dictionaries*. Cornell University Library. Available at: <http://guides.library.cornell.edu/c.php?g=31572&p=200309>
- Cowan, P. (ed.). (2012). *Teaching controversial issues in the classroom: Key issues and debates*. London: Continuum.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage.
- Csapo, E. (2005). *Theories of mythology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davies, L. (2008). *Educating against extremism*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Davies, L. (2014). *Unsafe gods: Security, secularism and schooling*. London: IoE Press/Trentham Books.
- Dawkins, R. (2007). *The god delusion*. London: Black Swan.
- Dennett, D & Plantinga, A. (2011). *Science and religion: Are they compatible?* New York: OUP.
- DeWalt, K. M. & DeWalt, B. R. (2002). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Dick, P.K. (1978). 'How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later' (public speech). Available at: http://deoxy.org/pkd_how2build.htm
- Diamond, J. & J.A. Robinson (eds) (2010). *Natural experiments of history*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dijk, van T.A (2014). *Discourse and knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donelan, B. (2004). 'Extremist Groups of the Midwest: A Content Analysis of Internet Websites.' *Great Plains Sociologist*, 16(1), 1-27.

- Effingham, N. (2013). *An introduction to ontology*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Eire, C. (2010). *A very brief history of eternity*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Evans, J. (2004). *Literacy moves on: Using popular culture, new technologies and critical literacy in the primary classroom*. Oxford: David Fulton.
- Evans, I. & Smith, N.D. (2012). *Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Ford, N. (2011). *The essential guide to using the web for research*. London: Sage.
- Frazer, J. G. (1922). *The Golden Bough*. Available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/frazer/>
- Frisina, W. G. (1987). *Relational Ontology from a Cross Cultural Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Divinity School.
- Geertz, C. (1993). 'Religion as a cultural system'. In: C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*, (pp.87-125). London: Fontana Press.
- Gentile, E. (2006). *Politics as religion*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Gereluk, D. (2012). *Education, extremism and terrorism: What should be taught in citizenship education and why*. Oxford: Continuum.
- Glenn, H. P. (2000). *Legal traditions of the world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goccaccini, G. (2012). *A pious seductress: Studies in the book of Judith* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 14). Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.
- Godart, G. C. (2008). "Philosophy" or "religion"? The confrontation with foreign categories in late nineteenth century Japan'. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69 (1), 71–91.
- Hallin, D.C. & P. Mancini (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamersley, M. & Alkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hantrais, L. (2008). *International comparative research: Theory, methods and practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harari, Y. H. (2015). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. London: Harper, pp. 24–39.
- Harari, Y. H. (2018). *21 lessons for the 21st century*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Harper, E. B. (1964). 'Ritual pollution as an integrator of caste and religion', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 23, 151–197.
- Herd, G. (1991). 'Representations of homosexuality: an essay on cultural ontology and historical comparison', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1(3), 481–504.
- Hine, C.M. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

- Hinnels, J.R. (1970). *Comparative Religion in Education*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Oriel Press.
- Hitchens, C. (2007). *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. Bloomsbury: Atlantic Books.
- Horst, H. A. & Miller, D. (eds.). (2012). *Digital anthropology*. London: Berg Publications.
- Inkeles, A. & Sasaki, M. (1995). *Comparing societies and cultures: Readings in a cross-disciplinary perspective*. London: Pearson.
- Insoll, T. (2004). *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Islamopedia (2012). Al-Azhar clerics protest in opposition march to the Presidential Palace. *Islamopedia online*. Available at: <http://islamopediaonline.org/video/al-azhar-clerics-protest?page=156>
- ISTA (2018). *Internet Sacred Text Archive (ISTA)*. Available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com>
- Jacquette, D. (2003). *Ontology*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Janda, R. D & Joseph, B. D. (eds.). (2004). *The Handbook of historical linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jary, D. & Jary, J. (1991). *Dictionary of sociology*. London: Collins.
- Kaplan, R. (2000). *The nothing that is: A natural history of zero*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keller, A. (1936). *Church and state on the European continent*. London.
- Keller, W. (1983). *The Bible as history*. London: Bantam.
- Khaldūn, Ibn (1967/2004). (F. Rosenthal, trans.; N.J. Dawood and B. Lawrence, eds). *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Bk 1: Preliminary Remarks.).
- Kozinets, R. V. (2009). *Netography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London: Sage.
- Lambeck, M. (ed.). (2008). *A reader in the anthropology of religion*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Landman, T. (2008). *Issues and methods in comparative politics: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Lange, M. (2012). *Comparative-historical methods*. London: Sage.
- Lee, Y. J. (2010). 'Leadership and development in South Korea and Egypt: The significance of cultural shifts', (unpublished PhD thesis), SOAS, University of London.
- Livingstone, S. (2003). 'On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research', *European Journal of Communication*, 18(4), 477–500.

- Lobe, B. et al. (2008). *Best practice research guide: How to research children and online technologies in comparative perspective*. The EC Safer Internet Plus Programme. London: LSE.
- Lodahl, M. E. (2001). 'Creation out of nothing? Or is next to nothing enough?'. In Stone, B.P. & T.J. Oord (2001). *Thy nature and thy name is love: Wesleyan and process theologies in dialogue*. Nashville: Kingswood.
- Mair, P. (1996). 'Comparative politics: An introduction to comparative. Overview'. In R. E. Goodin & H. D. Klingemann, *A new handbook of political science*. (pp. 309–335). Oxford: Oxford University Press, .
- Miller, D. & Slater (2001). *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. London: Berg.
- Muhyaddin, M. A. (1984). *A comparative study of the religions of today*. Massachusetts: Vantage Press.
- Myers, H. (ed.). (1992). *Ethnomusicology: An introduction*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Nam, Nguyễn Long Thành (2004). *Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the course of Việtnam's history*. New York: Nova Science Publishing.
- NatCen (2017). *British Social Attitudes: Record number of Brits with no religion*. Available at - <http://natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/september/british-social-attitudes-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion/>
- Nisbett, R.E. & T.D. Wilson (1977). 'The halo effect: evidence for unconscious alteration of judgments', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(4), 250–256.
- O'Connor, F. (2002). *A shared childhood: The story of integrated education in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- Oh, K. & R.C. Hassig (2000). *North Korea through the looking glass*. Brookings Institution Press: Washington DC.
- Okabe, A. (ed.). (2011). *Islamic area studies with geographical information systems*. London: Routledge.
- Pennings, P. et al. (2005). *Doing Research in Political Science: An Introduction to Comparative Methods and Statistics*. London: Sage.
- Pew (2017). *America's changing religious landscape*. Available at - <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>
- Phillips, D. & Schweisfurth, M. (2008). *Comparative and international education: An introduction to theory, method and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Richard, F. (2004). *Spirituality in the land of the noble: How Iran shaped the world's religions*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Robinson. G. (2012). *For Christ's sake: Confronting the culture of abuse within the Catholic Church*. ABC Religion and Ethics. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/11/13/3632146.htm>

- Rosenblatt, P. C. (1984). 'Epistemology and ontology in cross-cultural research', *Cross-Cultural Research*, 19(1-4), 112-126.
- Ross, T. (2014). 'Former Archbishop of Canterbury: We are a post-Christian nation'. *The Telegraph*, 26 April.
- Saad, L. (2018). 'Record Few Americans Believe Bible Is Literal Word of God', *Social & Policy Issues* (Gallup)., May 15.
- Sachau, E.C. (2002). *Alberuni's India*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- Sacks, J. (2008). 'Our right to Israel could not be more powerful', *Jewish Chronicle Online*, 10 October.
- Salmon, M. H. (2006). *Introduction to critical reasoning*. Mason, OH: Thomson Wadsworth, pp. 118-119.
- Sanderse, W. (2012). *Character education: A neo-Aristotelian approach to the philosophy, psychology and education of virtue*. Delft: Eburon.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1958/2003). (H.E. Barnes, trans.). *Being and nothingness*. London: Routledge.
- Savorelli (2018). "Childish" questions developed with Eugenio Savorelli, age 13, London.
- Seife, C. (2000). *Zero: The biography of a dangerous idea*. London: Souvenir Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2006). 'Social ontology: Some basic principles', *Anthropological Theory*, 1, 12-29.
- Sharot, S. (2001). *A Comparative sociology of world religions: Virtuosi, priests, and popular religion*. New York: NYU Press.
- Sidgwick, H. (1907/1981). *The methods of ethics*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Sowe, S.K. et al. (eds). (2012). *Free and open source software and technology for sustainable development*. Tokyo: UNU Press.
- Taylor, J. (2011). 'Three men hanged for sodomy in Iran – where "gay people don't exist"', *The Independent*, 8 September: 32.
- Tessler, M. & Nachtwey, J. (1999). *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tzafersi, V. (1970). Jewish tombs at and near Giv'at ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem, *Israel Exploration Journal*, 20(1/2), 18-32.
- UN (1993). *Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1993.
- Vis, F. & Thelwall (2014). *Researching social media*. London: Sage.
- Ward, B. (1966). *Spaceship Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 121.
- Wathnow, R. (1982). 'Comparative ideology'. In: J. M. Armer & R. M. Marsh, *Comparative sociological research in the 1960s and 1970s*, (pp. 121-140). Lieden: Brill, .

- Wildman, W. J. (2010). 'An introduction to relational ontology', in J. Polkinghorne and J. Zizioulas (eds.), *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, pp. 55–73.
- Williams, C. (2012). *Researching power, elites, and leadership*. London: Sage.
- Williams, C. (2013). 'Crowdsourcing research: a methodology for investigating state crime', *State Crime*, 2(1), 30–51.
- Williams, C. (2015). *Doing international research*. London: Sage.
- Wiseman, R. L. (ed.). (1995). *Intercultural communication theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zaharna, R. S. (1991). 'The ontological function of interpersonal communication: a cross-cultural analysis of Palestinians and Americans', *Howard Journal of Communication*, 3, 87–98.