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## Robert Jackson: Religious Education for Plural Societies. The Selected Works of Robert Jackson. Routledge, 2019.

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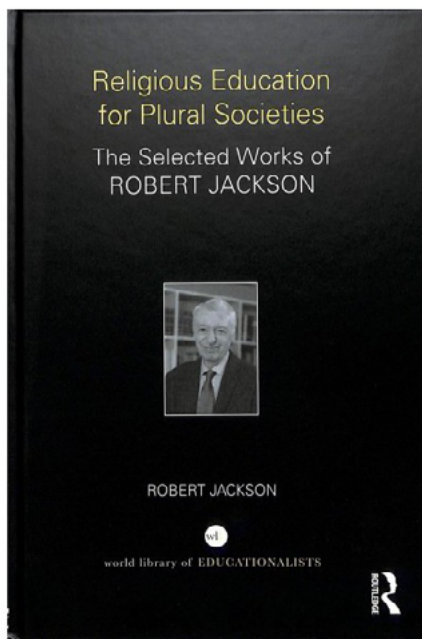
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— ΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΕΙ ΤΟ ΠΛΗΡΕΣ ΚΕΙΜΕΝΟ —  
— FOLLOWS THE FULL TEXT OF THE ARTICLE —

## Robert Jackson: Religious Education for Plural Societies. The Selected Works of Robert Jackson. Routledge, 2019.

Dr. Eszter Kodacsy-Simon, Associate Professor, Lutheran Theological University, Budapest



Religious Education is one of the most diverse subjects throughout schools in Europe, with different countries laying emphasis on different aims, purposes, contents and methodologies. Even so, *The Selected Works of Robert Jackson* is recommended for RE teachers and experts working in all sorts of Religious Education. Jackson's book strongly motivates the reader to reassess the most fundamental question of this subject: What is Religious Education? The author approaches this question from several angles: the aim of RE, the past and present educational context of the subject, the character and nature of RE, the current meaning of central concepts used in the dialogue of this field and teaching and learning methods. Some historical elements are also added in considering this key question. While considering all of these essential aspects raised in the 14 chapters of the book, the reader is also motivated to delve into his or her personal ideas about the decisive elements of RE, and to ask a second question: What is the most relevant and decisive factor in answering the fundamental question of the existence of RE? Is it determined mostly by history and context, – whether it be a pluralistic society with a secular and multicultural background, or another one built on one tradition and led by one religion? Or is the first question mostly influenced

by certain groups within society, whether they be religious and faith groups, church communities, political parties or civil organizations? Can the answer be derived mainly from educational aims and values? How could these areas co-operate in a healthy way, and contribute to a Religious Education that is deeply meaningful and interesting for our children and young people, and that can have enduring effects on their adult lives? Jackson gives one set of answers, based on his personal and academic life, that readers can reflect upon beneficially regardless of their national situation or its particular brand of RE. Jackson conveys his original ideas clearly, discusses important issues, and offers possible answers that will nourish the readers' exploration of these questions.

The book consists of five parts, all parts include an explanatory introduction from Jackson and three or four chapters selected from his writings over his career. Personal and academic dimensions are strongly connected in Jackson's work; therefore, the introduction he offers to his personal history in relation to RE enhance the reader's understanding of the later chapters of the book and of the key concepts of his theory. His search as a teacher and his continuous dialogue with colleagues, insiders and families in identifying a viable RE are what helped him to formulate his approach. The personal story is crucial for the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, whether student, teacher, practitioner, scholar or researcher, not only for the sake of comprehending his ideas about teaching and research, but also for the interest of reliving an academician's personal and professional journey. Thus, it is just as important to see the author as the jazz music-playing RE teacher helping his students in drama classes, or the teacher working with religious practitioners invited to take part in school assemblies, as it is to view him as a researcher confronted with inefficient methodologies or unrealistic educational expectations. With the help of such personal experiences, the reader can be in continuous dialogue with the author, asking the fundamental questions raised above, and can apply the statements of the book to his or her own situation more easily.

Jackson started his empirical researches – out of which three are presented in the second part of the book – four decades ago, through the study of adults and their beliefs in local religious communities. Later on, the religious nurture of children was the subject of Jackson's and his colleagues' inquiries. Through these explorations Jackson found valuable links between such factors as religious traditions and multiple cultural competence, or ethnic background and doctrinal diversity. He also used his personal commitment to develop a broader idea of RE by inviting and utilising religious persons' voices – whom he calls insiders – in the field of teaching and research. As a result of his approach, the aim is what all RE teachers across Europe can find useful: in Jackson's words this is “to develop a knowledge and understanding of the grammar – the language and wider symbolic patterns – used by people within religious traditions, so one might understand better their beliefs, feelings and attitudes.” (p126)

His ongoing research also prompted Jackson to formulate his own interpretive approach which he introduces in the third, perhaps most foundational part of the book. The writings included here open the door to a careful comprehension of Jackson's method and framework by clarifying basic notions like religion, faith or tradition, and also by giving an explanation of the methodological steps of his interpretive approach. The latter includes the representation of religions, interpretation of religions

and reflexivity in relation to what has been learned; and, if carried out with a properly open attitude, reflexivity can result in a deepened self-understanding which Jackson calls 'edification'. The personal element is not only emphasised throughout this process, but also is exemplified in Jackson's life, even while conducting research. The reader can feel Jackson's commitment also when he explains his ideas in the light of his critics, or when he shows how he built on certain scholars' theories, and what nuances made a significant difference for him in the practice of RE.

The studies in the fourth part of the book put the emphasis back on the context of RE, and here the conceptual clarification engages with the situational settings of the subject. The critical scrutiny of and differentiation between concepts such as traditional and modern plurality, postmodernity and postmodernism, nation state and nationality, ethnicity and ethnic identity or multicultural and intercultural education shows how these distinctions can play an important role in the different contexts of our European countries. This analysis fosters our inner search and helps in answering of our fundamental questions about the existence of RE in the web of moral, civic, intercultural, citizenship and values education.

Exploring these questions and contributing to the debate with important answers, Jackson was involved in several international projects, among them the Council of Europe's educational work on religious diversity. The last part of the book focuses on Jackson's writings concerning intercultural dialogue and inclusive education in religious diversity, where human rights and human dignity together play an important role in the process of what he calls 'dialogical liberalism'. Presented with examples like the UK government's law and policy or the Council of Europe Declaration and Action Plan, readers coming from diverse backgrounds will be enabled to reflect more easily on international policy developments.

At a time of social and cultural change, it is an everyday challenge for RE practitioners and experts to engage in continuous revision of their own methods and content in relation to their own context and situation. Robert Jackson's book *Religious Education for Plural Societies* will be a motivating source and helpful guide for all RE experts and teachers in any type of society.