

# Religious Education and Freedom of Religion and Belief

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## Foreword

The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV, <http://www.isrev.org>) is the most important international association in the field of Religious Education. It is an association of 233 Religious Education scholars from 36 countries. A major seminar session is organized in a different country every two years, with the seventeenth having taken place in Canada in 2010. ISREV was founded in 1978 by John M. Hull, the distinguished Australian academic (currently Honorary Professor of Practical Theology at The Queen's Foundation, and Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham), and John H. Peatling, then of the Character Research Project in Union College, Schenectady, New York. The first meeting had research papers from thirty-two scholars attending from ten countries. The seventeenth meeting, in Ottawa, Canada, had research papers from 110 scholars attending from over thirty countries. ISREV has no religious basis or test itself, and has members specializing, for example, in Protestant and Catholic Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and secular traditions. Educationists and policy makers from across the world are interested in the work of ISREV, with members of the government in host countries regularly attending the seminars. In this time of conflict over religion in almost every country of the world, dialogue is needed more than ever.

Each seminar has a broad theme, and the theme for the Ottawa meeting was Religious Education and freedom of religion and belief. That theme is a clear marker of the deliberate attempt of researchers to influence policy makers, professional practitioners, and learners around the world. This book is one of the results of the seminar, a selection of roughly one in ten of the papers presented – a powerful argument for the contribution of Religious Education to freedom in the modern world. Religion is continuing to find its place in a more open and more diverse society, and Religious Education can help people not only understand religions but also understand how

they can work together in a more free political system. The diversity in society is not only a religious diversity, but also a diversity that includes secular humanism and other ‘worldviews’ or ‘stances for living’ – that is, other ways of being and becoming outside religions or religious traditions. Freedom of religion and belief means little if the societies claiming such freedom create a pretence of a wholly neutral or independent space from which people can ‘peer over the wall’ at religious or other ways of being. Ecological campaigners say ‘Don’t throw anything away: there is no place called “away”’. With respect to both religion and education, there is, similarly, no place called ‘neutral’. Everywhere is somewhere, and chapters in this book investigate the history of the development of Religious Education, in particular countries such as England, Canada, South Africa, and Latvia. This is one of the many joys of ISREV. Researchers from around the world come together with their own understandings and their own contexts in order to listen to and talk with people with other understandings and from other contexts.

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote that dialogue is important, not because we should give up our own positions, but because we should make the imaginative leap to the reality of the other person. As Buber’s colleague and biographer said of him, ‘the I-Thou relationship [initially described in Buber’s *I and Thou*] “teaches us to meet others and to hold our ground when we meet them”, ... [which] goes hand in hand with remaining on one’s own side of the relationship’ (Maurice Friedman in the introduction to Buber, 2002: xiii–xiv; see also Friedman, 1999). A number of the chapters in this book refer to dialogue in Religious Education classrooms, as well as political and academic dialogue. None of this is – or should be – the timid dialogue of pretended neutrality or weak compromise, but the robust dialogue amongst people who have and may retain fundamental differences.

I am delighted, as General Secretary of ISREV, to commend this book to its readers. It is itself a contribution to dialogue amongst researchers and all interested in Religious Education, and an example of dialogue amongst the authors themselves. ISREV lives by the vigour of its dialogue, and if this in turn contributes to freedom of religion and belief,

then the value of the research completed by its members, the seminar in Ottawa, and the exemplary material in this volume, will be all the more valuable.

Julian Stern  
General Secretary of ISREV

## References

- Buber, M. (2002). *Between man and man*. London: Routledge.
- Friedman, M. (1999). The interhuman and what is common to all: Martin Buber and sociology. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 29(4), 403–417.