

Reflections on Religious Education from a Swedish Perspective

Kerstin von Brömssen

Introduction

This essay is a reflection on German Religious Education (RE) from the point of view of Swedish RE. The reflections are very comprehensive and general comparisons on the two national constructed RE subjects from »my own eye«. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the thoughts in this essay are my personal reflections and comments. My »eye« on German RE is necessarily »Swedish« as I am Swedish and have my working life in Sweden, even if it also covers participation from my side in international work in RE in the UK, South Africa and in the READY-project.¹

In order to make this essay understandable, I want to problematize this »Swedish eye« and provide a shorter description of my own work as well the Swedish religious educational landscape, before commenting on some aspects on the German RE subject. Thus, the first section of this essay provides a brief description of my own work, a short historical background to the Swedish religious landscape, and a summary of the RE subject in Swedish schools in 2021. The second section of this essay uses my own Swedish eye to comment on five different issues regarding German RE. I chose these five issues because they stand out in relation to Swedish RE. In the third section I discuss some challenges to the RE subject in both national contexts in the future, as I see it, although these challenges may already exist.

1 The READY-project – The three-year Erasmus+ project explored Religious Education and Diversity (READY) by sharing experiences of teacher education in Austria, England, Germany, Scotland, and Sweden through the mutual exchange of diverse forms of religious education; and a consideration of the variety of approaches to subject teaching and learning, in which the question of religious heterogeneity was considered and discussed (Schreiner 2018).

A short autobiography on Religious Education and research

I have been involved in teaching and research in RE since the 1970s, when I was educated as a teacher in RE for intermediate stage or middle school (the age of the children is then 11-13) and then continued my studies for teaching in secondary and upper secondary school in the same field. After working in secondary schools for more than 15 years, I completed my PhD thesis with the title »Tolkningar, förhandlingar och tystnader. Elevers tal om religion i det mångkulturella och postkoloniala rummet« [»Interpretations, negotiations and silences. Students talk about religion in the multicultural and postcolonial space«] in 2003. In this thesis work I used a discursive approach and postcolonial theories when analyzing interviews forty-two students in Grade 8 and their religious positionings and belonging, or not belonging or being uncertain, in a faith-tradition. The interviews were conducted at one secondary school in a multi-ethnic suburb within a major Swedish city. The analysis suggested that the pupils articulated a reflexive knowledge about cultural and religious pluralism, both locally and globally. They also showed quite an advanced translational capacity in order to try to understand and negotiate different religious and values positions when discussing religious events. The study also showed that a considerable proportion of the interviewed pupils had a rich and varied religious language and appropriated a wide range of traditional religious concepts. However, another group showed exactly the opposite, displaying no language capability talking about religion whatsoever. The concept of religion seemed almost empty and devoid of any significant symbolic meaning. For these pupils, the concept and content area of religion became filled with ideas about the ethnic and religious other, sometimes very stereotypically. In these conversations, the discursive construction of »Us, the Swedes« and »Them, the immigrants« became dominant (von Brömssen 2003).

Regarding the RE subject, the pupils in the study did not give this matter much reflection. The RE subject did not seem to engage students in the school, which can have many different causes. Nor was this issue the focus of my research at this time. However, several pupils, especially those with a migrant history in the background, talked about how they discussed religion with their closest friends, but these discussions were mostly conducted outside the framework of the classroom and the teaching situation (von Brömssen 2003).

Since I completed my PhD thesis in 2003, I have continued to teach and conduct research in the field of RE, but also in broader fields of education such as curriculum theory (von Brömssen/Ivkovits/Nixon 2020; von Brömssen/Nixon 2020; intercultural education (von Brömssen/Rodell Olgaç 2010), in sociology of education in the field of children and migration (Bak/von Brömssen 2013; von Brömssen/Risenfors 2014), reception of newly arrived migrants (Korp et al. 2019), on racism(s), (2021) and on teacher education (von Brömssen/Athiemoalam 2018; Abraham/von Brömssen 2018). That is my »eye« for this essay. In order also to understand my viewpoint regarding the RE subject, in the next section I provide a short historical background to the Swedish religious landscape and a summary of the RE subject in Swedish schools in 2021.

The Swedish Educational Landscape

It has long been known that school subjects are constructed out from historical, economical, and social contexts, often from an ambiguous role of the nation-state (Meyer/Ramirez/Soysal 1992; Moran 2009). This is certainly the case for Sweden, which is usually described as a strong Nordic welfare state, characterized by generous, non-tested benefits, a comprehensive element of redistribution in the systems, and consequently high taxes (Esping Andersen 1990). Some researchers have even described the welfare system as the defining character of the country (Berggren/Trädgård 2015). However, Swedish state governance has changed since the 1990s, and Sweden's position as a strong welfare state is now increasingly questioned and discussed (seef. ex. Stigendal 2016; Svallfors/Tyllström 2017). It is worth underlining the importance of acknowledging developments in education as being dependent on the state's propensity to intervene in the various parts of society. Different education systems developed in Europe in different ways, as can be observed in the systems concerning RE (Schreiner 2015; 2018). This was noted already in 1902, for example, when Sadler, a British educational researcher, argued the following after studying the German education systems compared to the British one:

»In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside [...] A national system of education [...] has in it some of the secret workings of national life. It reflects, while it seeks to remedy, the failings of the national character. By instinct, it often lays special emphasis on those parts of training which the national character particularly needs.« (Sadler 1902/1964: 241)

The national character of education has also been noted in large-scale international studies like those of OECD PISA, IEA TIMSS, and PIRLS and education as a dynamic activity is therefore complicated to compare across national boundaries. For an effective comparison to be made, it calls for an understanding of all the parameters to be considered in comparison and this is naturally quite difficult (seef.ex. Schriewer 2006).

However, as Schreiner showed, European processes are increasingly shaping national systems of education through the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation (Schreiner 2015: 139), and not the least through OECD and its assessment test that measure the skills and competencies these bodies have identified as being important in the new century (Sellar/Lingard 2013). Thus, globalization and Europeanization processes strive to promote specific norms, values, and discourses in the field of education, and are currently transforming education policy and education systems in the whole of Europe (Mikulec 2017).

The educational landscape in Sweden has also undergone major changes since the early 1990s, dramatically affected by globalization and neo-liberal marketization and privatization alignments. As Dahlstedt and Fejes argued: »The Swedish education system has become one of the most, if not the most, market oriented in the world« (2019: 1). Beach also commented on this point, arguing that »Swedish education claimed to be more just, equal, inclusive than most, specifically those of the Nordic countries« and that this can be questioned in the present. Beach argued that contemporary market politics in Sweden has worsened the situation in relation to justice, equality, and in-

clusion in education significantly (Beach 2017: 620–621). However, the Swedish public school system is tax-financed and still regulated through the Education Act (2010: 800), which mandates 10 years of school attendance for all children from the year they turn six.

The Swedish Religious Landscape

Sweden is often described as one of the most secularized countries in the world, with highly ›modern‹ and rational views, as well as high self-expression (see World Values Survey Association 2021; Zuckerman 2009). However, research has shown that religion is a difficult concept to both define and measure. Yet, we know from research that the number of members in the Church of Sweden continues to decrease year after year. In the year 2000, the state church ›The Church of Sweden‹ was replaced by the denomination of the same name – a denomination among all others in Sweden. This broke the centuries-old tradition of close relations between the Swedish state and the Evangelical Protestant Church, which had been introduced in 1544 (Hedin 2019; cf. Amnå 2010: 12). At the same time, denominations and religious traditions from the rest of Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa have established organizations and congregations around the country, and Sweden is now at the top of the European countries when it comes to religious diversity and most of the world's faith traditions are represented in the country (Willander 2019).

The issues of tradition, religion, religiosity, and religious identities are complex, and secularization described in research is currently viewed rather as a *change* in relation to institutionalized religion. This is clearly shown in a survey from 2019 from the Swedish SOM-Institute (Weissenbilder 2019; Willander 2019). Participation in worship devotion and prayer has decreased significantly over the last year. This means that many do not have own experience of what it means to participate in the activities of traditional religious communities (Willander 2019) but might nevertheless be part of religious and/or spiritual ›everyday practices‹, often hybrid and in new forms (see, e.g., Plank/Enstedt 2018).

Religious Education in the Swedish school system

As in many parts of Europe, state and church were closely intertwined right from the introduction of public schools. In 1842, the Elementary School Law came into effect and stipulated that every parish had to establish ›at least one, preferably permanent, school with a duly approved teacher‹ and children should start school at the age of seven. At that time, RE was the most important subject, often listed first of the core subjects for the school, and parish priests and clerks remained the organizational and administrative body governing the school in rural areas up until 1930 (Green 2008: 336–341). In 1909, responsibility for school affairs in larger cities was transferred from parish school boards to the city councils (ibid.: 346).

From 1920 onwards, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (the Swedish labor movement's political party) formed a general school policy and demanded a secular education (Hartman 2012: 66). Many debates and revisions were discussed in the subsequent years, and in 1962 a new curriculum prescribed an »objective and informative education« that should not only cover Christianity, but also other non-Christian religions (Osbeck/Skeie 2014: 241). Furthermore, ever since the end of the 1960s, the issue of »existential issues«, »life questions« or »philosophies of life« in the RE subject have been discussed (Sjöborg 2013: 73; Osbeck/Skeie 2014: 246-248). The 1960s marked an »existential turn« in the RE curriculum, where the children's own experience and reflections should be given priority. Thus, the study of religious texts, which had been the dominant tradition in RE, was abandoned (Hartman 2010: 121-123).

Currently, the RE subject continues to be debated, having difficulty finding its core identity and common rationale. Some voices in the debate have argued that RE should be an optional subject, or should be split into parts on history, civics, and philosophy, or constructed as an even broader subject with the name cultural history. The questions concerning the subject's identity are understandable given that the RE subject in Sweden builds on the academic study of religious studies, which is a multidisciplinary subject containing content and perspectives of history, sociology, anthropology, theology, philosophy, ethics, and psychology. Questions then arise regarding what and from which perspectives – if not all those mentioned from the academic subject religious studies – should count as the core knowledge in RE in public schools. In Sweden, as in the UK, the subject has navigated between different knowledge rationales (cf. Kueh 2018). Regarding British RE, Kueh commented that »the subject has been unsuccessful in finding strong, coherent consensus about the status, function and utility of knowledge within it« (ibid.: 53). Similar views can be made about Swedish RE. Some schoolteachers have complained that there are too many perspectives and that too much content is crammed into the subject, especially in upper secondary school (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012: 3). A Finnish RE colleague expressed that the Swedish RE subject is a »horror example« and stated that »It [the RE subject] is nothing. Not religion, not history, not civics, it's something in between all of them« (Livonen 2016). Yet, the same debate is also intense in Finland and there are many competing voices about the construction of the subject there too (see, e.g., Poulter 2017).

However, RE in Sweden, named »religious knowledge,« is a compulsory school subject through all grades from Year 1 in primary school to upper secondary school. In Alberts' categorization, it can be described as an »integrative model« (Alberts 2007), where RE is taught for all pupils in the same class in the same classroom. There are no opt-out possibilities, as the subject is regarded like any other school subject within the curriculum (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11). The subject is described as non-denominational and neutral in a Swedish discourse. In the present syllabus for RE in the Swedish National Curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr 11), the aim of the subject is described as follows:

»Teaching in religion should aim at helping the pupils to develop knowledge of religions and other outlooks on life in their own society and in other parts of the world. By means of teaching, pupils should become sensitive to how people with different religious traditions live with and express their religion and belief in different ways.

Teaching should in a balanced way illuminate the role that religions can play in society, both in the pursuit of peace and resolving conflicts, in order to promote social cohesion and as a cause of segregation.« (Lgr 11: 176)

In the citation above, the expression »outlooks of life« is used instead of »life questions« or »philosophies of life« and this is the term the Swedish Nation Agency for Education uses.

Furthermore, it is stated that teaching in religion should essentially give pupils the opportunities to develop their ability to:

- »analyse Christianity, other religions and other outlooks on life, as well as different interpretations and use of these,
- analyse how religions affect and are affected by conditions and events in society,
- reflect over life issues and their own and other's identity,
- reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models, and
- search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and evaluate the relevance and credibility of sources« (Lgr 11).

As can be seen from the above-stated curriculum, the core content for RE subject shows broad perspectives on knowledge and with its knowledgebase in both social science and humanities. The core content consists of perspectives from different world religions and worldviews and how they are expressed and forming identities, as well as ethical models, values, and issues of life. The subject should be taught in a neutral and non-biased way that respects the views of all pupils (cf. Kittelmann-Flensner 2015: 42-44). It is underlined in the commentary material for the subject that teaching shall assume that religions and other views of life are changeable and interpretable, and thus important to work on similarities and differences, also within different traditions and religions (Commentary material for the syllabus in religious studies 2011: 7). The curriculum also highlights that pupils should be given opportunities to develop knowledge about how to critically examine sources and societal issues related to religions and other views on life and the ability to analyze is emphasized (The National Board of Education 2011).

In practical teaching of RE, a worldview paradigm from a phenomenological approach can be said to have been dominant since the 1960s. Lately, a »lived religion« paradigm (Ammermann 2007; McGuire 2008), where lived religion in people's everyday lives is explored, has emerged and is being increasingly discussed. This is also commented on in the commentary material from the National Board of Education, however partly critical as this perspective might reduce religion to a predominantly private and individualized phenomenon.

»The syllabus's emphasis on the societal perspective, and on lived everyday practice in relation to religion, is important because religion in Swedish public discussion is often reduced to a question of individual outlook on life and faith. For many people in Sweden, and not least in the rest of the world, religion is something more than that.« (2011: 7).

It is argued that studies in »lived religion« might offer a fuller and more nuanced understanding of contemporary religion as religious practices are more eclectic and hybrid than usually taught, and that such an approach would be more relevant and interesting and also connect to young pupils' life more than the traditional and static worldview paradigm (Goldsmith 2013). In today's Swedish curriculum, RE is a subject with a limited number of teaching hours, but still mandatory at all levels in school.

In summary, the Swedish RE subject has been discussed and debated since the 1960s. The debates revolve around the identity of the RE subject and how RE can be relevant and interesting to all pupils in public schools in today's multicultural and secularized Sweden,² but also bring knowledge and skills for the future. The Swedish model of RE is quite unusual from a European perspective. The model builds mainly on the philosophy that if we learn about different religions, traditions, and worldviews from an early age, we become more tolerant and less prejudiced. In many other countries, the philosophy is that if you are brought up in your own tradition, you will become a confident and self-aware citizen and, later in life, will find it easier to meet people with other religions and worldviews.

In the next section, from the background given on the Swedish religious national context and on RE in Sweden, I will comment on the German RE subject out from four different areas: (1) the denominational and faith-based embedding of RE, (2) a democratic state and religious freedom, (3) the possibility of opting out, and (4) the issue of diversity and integration. I will then discuss some common challenges in the field of RE and of researching RE.

German RE – from a Swedish eye

The denominational and faith-based embedding of RE

To start with, I understand »standard« German RE as having a »special status in Schools«, as Olschewski wrote (2017) and being »secured in specific ways« (Wittmer/Waldhoff 2019: 1052). According to German law, RE is part of the curriculum of public schools (ibid.) and »religious instruction shall be given in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned« (ibid.: 1053). However, the law also stipulates a separation of state and religion (Olschewski 2017; Wittmer/Waldhoff 2019), so RE is a joint project of state authorities and religious communities. Another aspect of RE in Germany is that religious freedom is guaranteed based on Art. 4 of the Basic Law. These different aspect from the law guarantees freedom *from* religion as well as freedom *to* religion (Olschewski 2017). In practice, this means that the religious communities collaborate in terms of curricula and teacher training, as well as on schoolbooks (ibid.) and that RE is constructed as a denominational, faith-based, or mono-confessional RE. This means that RE is organized by close cooperation between the state and the religious communities and implies that pupils go to separate classrooms in order to

2 More information on the Swedish RE subject can be found at the homepage for EFTRE (Franck 2017). See: <https://eftre.weebly.com/executive-board.html>.

join separate RE lessons depending on denomination and are taught by a teacher from the same denomination as the pupils. This model was the »original model« in Germany and the two Christian churches – Catholic and Protestant – offered RE. As plurality has increased, other models have also been developed in Germany and Islamic education has been introduced in some federal states (Knauth 2007; Wittmer/Waldhoff 2019).

From a Swedish eye, this mix of layers and structures for a subject in public compulsory schools is hard to grasp. The discourse in Sweden on »a compulsory school for all« and »an inclusive school«, as well as an intercultural education, is strong and seen as very important, at least rhetorically in Sweden. As argued by Haug (1999) the reform of including all children started to develop in the eighteenth century, with the transformation of a highly segregated school into the common and inclusive school for all children in the latter part of this century. Haug (1999) wrote about an inclusive education for children with special needs, but inclusiveness has certainly been a general and strong discourse in education in Sweden. Also, the idea that public schools should be »a public good« (Englund 1996) was, for a long time, a sign of Swedish education and the welfare state and almost no private schools were allowed. As mentioned above, this has changed since the 1990s, when privately run charter schools were introduced in Sweden. Accordingly, Christian and Muslim schools were established. However, all public schools have to be run in accordance with the national Swedish curriculum, where RE is included as a compulsory subject for all students. Any confessional/denominational subjects must be organized outside of the national curriculum time in Sweden.

Unlike Germany, the Swedish school is nationally controlled, and from a historical perspective, Swedish schools have been strongly centrally controlled. The period after the Second World War has been characterized by centralist unitary solutions to school problems and this was a prerequisite for the implementation of compulsory school (Hartman 2005). The main objective was to involve the school in the realization of social goals such as equal opportunity and community fellowship (Telhaug/Mediås/Aasen 2006).

It is also interesting to note that Sweden and Swedish educational philosophies were heavily influenced by the German-speaking part of Europe and what Hartman called »a Protestant teaching culture« until the 1940s (Hartman 2012). After that, Swedish education turned towards the Anglo-Saxon world and educational philosophies in England and the United States, above all the socially democratic progressive pedagogy represented by John Dewey (Hartman 2010; 2012).

Moreover, from a Swedish eye, the issue on separated RE classes raises questions about the purpose of public schools and compulsory education. As argued by Biesta (2009), these questions seem to have become more important again as schools are becoming increasingly unequal and education more competitive in a manner of »teaching to the test« due to an economically driven neoliberal reform agenda (see, e.g., Ball 2016).

When reading about the RE subject in Germany, I came across suggestions on different models, such as a »dialogical model« (Schweitzer 2011) or »cooperative religious education« (Schweitzer/Boschki 2010), and a model of »ethics« like in Berlin (Wittmer/Waldhoff 2019: 1056). From a Swedish eye, these »struggles« and different models in education seem to be various ways of handling challenges in a new pluralistic German society. All states, or regional states as in Germany, organize public schools from their

own socio-cultural and political context. As many people consider education and the construction of RE to be important, the debates on the subject are sometimes intense (*ibid.*). From a Swedish eye, it would be interesting to know who the strong actors in these debates are, in whose interest they speak, and what are the arguments. Unfortunately, I think that the educational exchanges between German and Sweden in the field of RE education and educational research are too limited. We need an in-depth conversation about teaching, with a strong look into the future.

Another issue related to a denominational subject is the question of the educational philosophy underpinning the subject. Thus, which educational philosophical theories and learning theories are used when discussing the subject? I am thinking here about on philosophical perspectives of educational philosophy, such as perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and social reconstructionism and learning theories for the classroom (see, e.g., Aubrey/Riley 2021; Stensmo 2007). I will argue that it is not enough to discuss the RE subject »only« from denomination/denominational categorizations and also insufficient to discuss the academic discipline in which it should be grounded. There needs to be an educational discussion about the aim and philosophical underpinnings of the subject. This was also underlined by Guntrip from a UK context; she stated that there is »a lack of clarity about the purpose of RE amongst teachers and experts which, in too many cases, is leading to low-quality teaching, learning and outcomes within the subject« (Guntrip 2020: 44). I think this lack of clarity of the educational purpose of the subject is also the case in Sweden and might also be the case in Germany too. This issue relates to and would be asked about the German RE from a Swedish perspective; how can teachers and religious communities agree on the aim of the subject; that is, what and how to teach in RE? I am well aware that I come from the Nordic secular welfare states, where RE is constructed in a secular and integrative way and in an agreed national curriculum. However, I think it is necessary to have a broad and critical discussion on the educational aims of the subject for the future, both in Sweden, in Germany, and in many more educational contexts.

A democratic state and religious freedom

I have learned that religious communities in Germany have a say in RE, partly because of the experience of the totalitarian system that misused school and subjects for collaboration according to the dominant state ideology during the Nazi regime. Therefore, the state should not be the only partly responsible for organizing education (Schreiner 2015). It is easy to have respect for this argument; however, despite having great expectations on education, I think these demands are too high to put on education. Education is just one part in society and there need to be many structures to maintain justice, equality and democracy. However, it is interesting to note the demands on education from various decisive events also happened in Sweden after the Second World War. In 1946, the subject of civics was introduced, and it was made a separate and compulsory subject in 1962. Civic education took over much of the role that previous Christian knowledge and history had had as a socializing subject. Knowledge of democracy and human rights are thus important parts of civic education in Sweden today. Democracy is also the value foundation in the Swedish curriculum, formulated as follows:

The school system rests on the foundations of democracy. The Education Act (2010: 800) states that education within the school system aims for students to acquire and develop knowledge and values. It should promote all students' development and learning as well as a lifelong desire to learn. The education must convey and anchor respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society rests. Everyone who works within the school must also promote respect for each person's intrinsic value and respect for our common environment. (Lgr 11, p. »The school's values and mission«).

When reading the citation above to one of the German colleagues in the READY-project, he exclaimed: »But then you have democracy as a religion?« I could not help but agree. So, one of the consequences for education in Germany after WWII was the agreement that RE in Germany would be split between the state and religious communities as I understand it, and in Sweden civics was introduced as a separate and compulsory subject in public schools. The introduction of a new subject in Swedish education had naturally an effect on the time planning for subjects overall, and for RE. The RE subject in Sweden is currently allocated (in total) 70 hours in Grades 4-6, 75 hours in Grades 7-9 (Skolverket 2021), and about 45 hours in upper secondary school. Thus, RE is, in terms of time, quite a marginalized subject in Swedish schools, although it could perhaps have a better position timewise in German schools. The issue of the position of the RE subject leads to another issue, namely the possibility of opting out of German RE.

The issue of opting out from RE lessons

The article on religious freedom gives parents the right to educate their children in the way they choose until the child reaches the age of 12 respectively 14 in Germany (Wittmer/Waldhoff 2019: 1054). This was also the case in Sweden until it was changed in 1997. It was motivated in the Bill as follows:

»The new curricula stipulate that teaching in the school must be non-confessional. The teaching must be objective and comprehensive. It is emphasized that all parents should be able to send their children to school, assured that the children will not be unilaterally influenced in favor of one or the other view.« (Bill 1995/96: 74)

The aim of the subject is described and motivated in the Bill (1995/96: 74) as follows:

»The purpose of teaching the subject of religious studies is to increase students' knowledge of religions and views on life and give them the opportunity to work with their own reflections and questions about existential and ethical problems. The teaching should promote an open discussion about beliefs and views on life and contribute to meetings with people from different traditions, cultures taking place with respect for each other's uniqueness.« (ibid.)

Following arguments of the non-confessional construction of the subject, several of the consultative bodies, like the Jewish Central Council, the Roman Catholic Bishopric and the Swedish Christian Council, have stated that this kind of education is important to all pupils and that pupils have the right to this kind of knowledge. It is further emphasized

that »it is so important that no one should miss it«. The school as the common arena for learning is also underlined, stating »that school is the place where all children should receive an equal education and sufficient knowledge for a future society« (ibid.: 74-75).

Thus, the right to opt-out from RE was removed based on wide agreement from many influential consultative bodies. The issue was not controversial at the time, as few parents had demanded the right for their children to opt out. Instead, there has long been an understanding of the subject as non-confessional and comprehensive, including many aspects of religious traditions, ethics, as well as discussions on existential issues from many perspectives. Moreover, compulsory school can be considered a civil right with the purpose of safeguarding the adult individual's right to grow and be able to take part in a good education (Marshall 1950).

However, the issue for opting out is still a question from parents in Sweden, more often from parents whose background is not Swedish, and then often about a child's participation in physical education lessons or school trips. In an inquiry, girls answered to a greater extent than boys that they should not participate, but also a relatively large proportion of boys stated this answer (8 per cent in the investigation) (Högdin 2007: 11).

It is clear from the discussion of the opting out clause that the German and Swedish RE subjects have different philosophical and educational underpinnings. From a Swedish eye, opting out cannot be an alternative for pupils in public schools. Most Swedes feel that there would then be something »wrong« and would ask whether the content is not worth knowing. Also, as a colleague commented in an RE conference: »In geography you don't learn only about Germany. You learn about the whole world. Why not in RE?«

On children's right to pluralism in education and integration through education

My last comment will touch upon globalization, migration, and the religions and cultural diversity in European societies and in classrooms. This issue has been widely discussed in RE in Europe (see, e.g., Bakker et al. 2009; Council of Europe 2004, 2008; Flen-sner 2015; Keast 2007; Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] 2007; Jackson 2014; O'Grady 2019) and is a crucial question in all nation-states, not least from the perspective of integration, social cohesion and citizenship. As the public school is positioned in a function of the nation-state for educating all students regardless of their sex, race, social background and religion, and fulfilling an integrative function in society by educating all future citizens, a view on the RE subject is interesting. I will comment on just two aspects that I think are important in relation to RE and diversity, both concerning Germany and Sweden. The first dimension relates to the issue of secularization. However contested theories of secularization are, it is unequivocally the case that many young pupils, as well as their teachers, do not position themselves within a specific religion. This has consequences for a denominational, monocultural, or mono-confessional subject (cf. Franken 2017). Who will take part? Here I quote Maxine Green (1995), who in her book »Releasing the Imagination. Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change« stated:

»Speaking of passions, engagements, and imagining can become a way of speaking of an expanding community that takes shape when diverse people, speaking as *who* and not *what* they are, come together in both speech and action to constitute something in common among themselves. »Plurality« is »the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live«.« (Green 1995: 155)

From a Swedish perspective, I think this should be a dimension and part of RE; to let pupils speak as »*who* they are and not *what* they are« in public schools. In the Swedish curriculum this is expressed as follows:

»The school's task is to allow each individual student to find their unique identity and thereby be able to participate in society by giving their best in responsible freedom«

and

»The school must be open to different views and encourage them to be put forward. It must emphasize the importance of personal positions and provide opportunities for such.«(Lgr-11).

Needless to say, the issue about diversity relates to issues of integration, citizenship, and social cohesion, issues that have been raised by the EU and EU as institutions which now seem to govern with softer power across a wider range of educational areas. The main argument of recent European level policies and directives concerns fostering social cohesion through incorporating migrant students (Faas/Hajisoteriou/Angelides 2014), discussed as a broader »civic integrationist turn« (Fernández/Kriegbaum/Jensen 2017). Also, several researchers in the field of RE have discussed the issue of perceptions towards religious and cultural differences and the impact on schools (see Jackson et al. 2007; Knauth et al. 2008; Miedema/Bertram/Troost 2008; Valk et al. 2009). Faas, Hajisoterioub and Angelides (2014: 305) argued that German curricula privileged national and European topics, but attempts were made to address diversity, particularly in geography. Unfortunately, Swedish education in this field is not covered in the mentioned article, but is usually depicted as liberal and trying to pursue multicultural goals, as its philosophy is multicultural (Fernández/Kriegbaum/Jensen 2017). However, the EU sees intercultural dialogue as a tool for achieving a balance between cultural diversity and social cohesion and it has been emphasized in many EU documents, including the »Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education« (Jackson 2014), which policy is directed especially towards RE. The question is if and how RE in public state schools prepare students for encounter with cultural and religious »others« (cf. Miedema/Bertram-Troost 2008: 127). Currently, research in classrooms points in different directions (see, e.g., O-Grady 2019; Kittelmann/Flensner 2015), probably depending heavily on the teacher and the surrounding context of the school.

RE into the future?

There is currently a lot of discussion and many competing views on the future of RE, if a future exists at all (see, e.g., Barnes 2020; Castelli/Chater 2018; Chater 2020; Franck/Thalén, 2021; O'Grady 2019; Pirner et al. 2019; Schreiner 2018). When looking and commenting on the RE subject and the existing models in Germany from a Swedish eye, the two models look different, to say the least. I am humble in the face of this, knowing and returning to the finding of Sadler, also cited above, that:

»In studying foreign systems of Education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside [...] A national system of Education [...] has in it some of the secret workings of national life.« (Sadler 1902/1964: 241)

Yet, there are challenging issues to deal with for the future, not least in education and in the field of RE and adjacent areas, whatever models in the field. These issues concern how we imagine a democratic community that is accessible to children and young people. Decisions in the future will need to be made for example regarding DNA research, genomes, heart transplants and health care, arms sales, and life support systems, as well as climate change and new pandemics. What sort of scientific, religious and ethics literacy ought to be disseminated? Maxine Green asked how much should or can be taught (Green 1995: 32-43).

Finally, both German and Swedish RE are positioned together in questions on decolonizing education and the RE subject (cf. Gearon et al. 2021). As postcolonial theory has shown, Eurocentric epistemologies create binaries such as »occident/orient, civilized/barbarian, modern/traditional, rational/irrational (or emotional), advanced/backward, knower/known, power/weakness and mature/immature« (Said 1979/2016). Forms of language and representations are at the very core of postcolonial theory – who represents, what is represented and how are power relations and power dynamics on »us and them« involved. These are pressing issues in and for RE. I suggest in line with Davies in her discussion of secularism and religion in education, that a key task of a secular education is a critical exploration of different religions. Thus, the negotiation of different manifestations of religious epistemologies is important for promoting inclusion and belonging in a public school RE classroom (Davies, 2014). This is however from a Swedish perspective on RE. I am looking forward to further discussions and debates.

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