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1. Present condition of RE

Religious education, currently referred to as *knowledge of religions*, is a compulsory part of the Swedish school curriculum from year 1 at primary school to upper secondary school. It can be described as an “integrative model”, where education “about” and learning “from” different religions, worldviews and ethics take place in religiously mixed classrooms (Alberts, 2007). This model, which has been in place in Sweden since 1962, can also be described as a non-confessional multifaith compulsory school subject with the aim of providing “objective” knowledge about religions in a pluralistic manner (Berglund, 2014). The curriculum of 1962 is the first to stress “objective” education in RE, even if the subject continued to be called “knowledge of Christianity”. The change from a denominational subject where the Lutheran faith had a special position, with Luther’s catechism as teaching material, into a non-denominational subject on a broad Christian foundation was made in 1919 (Cöster, 1986, 107). Along with the curriculum of 1969, the name *knowledge of Christianity* was changed into *knowledge of religions* (Religionskunskap). Therefore, Christianity was no longer central in the curriculum, which instead dealt with religions and traditions of the world as well as existential life issues and ethics.

Moreover, there is in the subject today no opt-out possibility, as the subject is regarded like any other school subject within the national curriculum (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11) and is grounded in a religious study and social-humanistic tradition. The lack of an opt-out for pupils make the subject “stand out” in a European context (Puskás/Andersson, 2019, 3).

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).

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 on 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).

This integrative and multifaith subject has advocates and critics. Research findings have shown that most pupils agree to that they want to learn in a multifaith way about the diversity of worldviews, life views and ethics (Jönsson/Liljefors Persson, 2006). However, research also shows that the subject might not be as multifaith as it is advertised, and that it might rather be “a Protestant model of secularization” (Berglund, 2014, 177). From another perspective, some religious denominations in Sweden have argued that the teaching “is not education about religion and religions ... but rather education into atheism and secularism” (Berglund, 2014, 173; Puskás/Andersson, 2019, 3f.). Research also show that pupils are not given the possibility to discuss worldviews and ethics as much as they would like to do, or as the curriculum stipulates (Skolinspektionen, 2012) and that teachers often fail to connect to the current religiously diverse situation in the Swedish society (Jönsson/Liljefors Persson, 2006; Brömssen, 2003; Sjöborg, 2013, 73).

2. Historic development and the current context

Historically, Christianity slowly took over from Nordic religious beliefs in Sweden from the ninth century onwards. According to historical sources, a French Benedictine monk called Ansgar was sent to Sweden in 829, but he had little success in converting the Swedes. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 12th century, Sweden had become more or less a Christian country (Nilsson, 1996), before it broke off from the Catholic faith in the middle of the 16th century and became part of the Lutheran Reformation. In 1842 Sweden had its first elementary education statute and from this time and until the end of the 19th century, religious education was the most important subject in school. At that time the purpose of the subject was to make citizens into Christian Evangelical Lutheran believers and to bring them into a strong Christian majority culture (Larsson, 2006). However, from the beginning of the 20th century, religious education gradually changed. The main purpose of religious education was no longer to bring students into a specific confessional faith, but to promote their religious spiritual, and moral life – an education for all (obligatory) that was suitable for children and left adults' quarrels over theological issues outside of education (Larsson, 2006).

Full religious freedom was mandated in Swedish law in 1951, but up until 2000 Sweden had a national church that embraced most Swedish-born people. In 2018, 5.904.830 people belonged to the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church, which represents 57.7 per cent of Sweden's 10.230.185 citizens (Svenska kyrkan, 2019). Sweden is the only Nordic country without a state church, as Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland have all retained theirs. The most common behaviour when it comes to a Swedish citizen in relation to "official" religion is to belong to the Swedish church, seldom participate in church services but consider life rites participation central. This pattern is also common in other Nordic countries and is sometimes referred to as *the Nordic paradox* (Bäckström/Beckman/Pettersson, 2004). This way of relating to the former national church has been explained as the outcome of a spirit of a civil religiosity, which makes the church a symbol of the nation and of national culture (Sundback, 2007). Research in sociology of religion shows that 46 to 85 per cent of Sweden's population can be categorised as atheistic, agnostic, or non-believer (Zuckerman, 2007). According to a Gallup survey from 2009, Sweden was the world's second-least religious country, after Estonia. In Sweden, only 17 per cent of respondents agreed that "religion is an important part of my daily life" (Crabtree/Pelham, 2009).

2.1. A Multicultural Sweden

Sweden is often described as a very homogeneous nation historically, but this is not completely accurate (Brömssen, 2012, 228). There have always been different and mixed populations in the geographical area that we now term Sweden. Since a long time ago, the Sami people, as an indigenous group in the North of Sweden, and later the Roma people and the travellers, have been represented, as have national groups such as Germans, Walloons, Dutchmen, Scotsmen and the Jewish diaspora. Through trade and entrepreneurship, they have transformed Sweden into what it currently is (Svanberg/Tydén, 2005). Today, more than 2 million inhabitants (18.5 per cent of the Swedish population) are of *foreign origin*, meaning that their own or their parents' place of birth was in a country other than Sweden (www.migrationsinfo.se). Nine per cent of the foreign-born population have migrated from Syria and eight per cent have a background in Finland.

Thus, Sweden has been transformed into a multicultural and multi-confessional society, where the largest religious minority group is Muslims. In 2014, five per cent of all Swedes were estimated to have a Muslim background. Also, the Catholic Church, several Orthodox and Eastern Christian communities, Buddhists, Jews, Mandaean, Alevis and the Hindu Society have found places in Sweden.

The freedom to choose religious affiliation in Sweden was given through the Law of Religious Freedom, mentioned above, in 1951. This meant that it was allowed to leave the church without joining any other religious community. Before that, from 1860 people had had the opportunity to apply for exit from the church, provided that they were transferred to one of the approved communities. This also meant that all Swedish citizens automatically belonged to the Swedish Church until they made the choice to leave it (Alwall, 1994). Since 1996, you become a member through baptism in the Swedish Church. Previously, children whose parents were members became members automatically (Svenska kyrkan, 2019).

Partly due to immigration, religion has gained a new kind of visibility in Swedish society. There are several newly purpose built mosques with minarets, religiously articulated dressing codes, celebration of Ramadan, and the founding of free schools with a religious profile. This challenges the majority society's understanding of the role of religion and neutrality in respect of confession (Jäterä-Jareborg, 2010). Regardless of how many people join the respective religions, there is no clear measure of this. Since the 1930s, it has been forbidden to

register people in Sweden for religious affiliation because it is contrary to freedom of religion (migrationsinfo.se).

2.2. Sweden – a Nordic Welfare State that emphasises education

Sweden is often described as one of the Nordic welfare states and has an international reputation for combining generous welfare state entitlements with rapid economic growth, low unemployment and very high levels of labour force participation, particularly among women (Stephens, 1995). The ideas on a welfare state built on foundations that had been laid before the Second World War and have been an important factor in changing the economies of the Nordic countries into service economies. The welfare system especially draws on three parts: a free hospital service, an extensive system of benefits, and a school system that is free from the beginning of the primary school at six years of age until the end of university education (Frimannsson, 2006, 224). Free school lunches were also part of the system (Stephens, 1995). As a whole, the welfare system has the aim of increasing security in the lives of ordinary people and offers them opportunities to develop, plan and live their lives reasonably well. This welfare model was characterised by generous, non-tested benefits, a strong element of redistribution in the systems and, consequently, high taxes. Concerning education, the aim was to equalise opportunities and provide pupils with skills benefiting them in the economy and skills for interacting with other people (Frimannsson, 2006, 227; Oftedal Telhaug/Asbjørn Mediås/Aasen, 2006). However, this welfare model has been challenged over the last 20 years due to globalisation and an increase in international financial competition (Frimannsson, 2006; Stephens, 1995). In Sweden this has led to deregulation, privatisation and “marketisation” of education, where questions of education are debated more and more in economic terms (Dovemark/Kosunen/Kauko/Magnúsdóttir/Hansen/Rasmussen, 2018, 122-141).

The Independent School Reform of 1992 in the first wave of the deregulations (Dovemark/Kosunen/Kauko/Magnúsdóttir/Hansen/Rasmussen, 2018) can be seen as one example of this. This reform made it possible for families to send their children to any school, state-run or independent, without having to pay fees. In Sweden, these independent schools are called free schools but must be approved by the Schools Inspectorate and follow the national curricula and syllabuses, just like regular municipal schools (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2015). Furthermore, the schools must be open for all pupils, irrespective of, for example, their faith, and the teaching staff must have the general qualifications required by the School Act (1985, 1100). A school with a certain confessional orientation should not favour teachers of its own faith at the expense of professionally qualified teachers who do not belong to that congregation (Jänträ-Jareborg, 2010). Furthermore, *free schools* receive their funding from the municipality and the basic amount shall be determined in the same way as when the municipality allocates resources to its own schools (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2015).

During the 2018/2019 academic year, just over one-fourth of the upper secondary school students attended so-called *free schools*. The proportion of students in primary and secondary free schools was 15.2 per cent (Holmström, 2019). However, with equality still being cherished in Sweden, issues such as the growth of a private school market are hotly debated.

2.3. Legal framework for RE

In Sweden, religious education is, like other subjects, regulated by national curricula. Syllabuses and national curricula are linked to the Education Act and constitute legal regulations (förfordningar). There are no formal links between RE and religious communities even if it is possible for these – and other organisations – to have opinions about a new syllabus before it is enacted. New syllabuses are processed by the National Agency for Education, ordered by the Minister of Education and the Ministry of Education, and conducted through work groups where scholars and RE teachers are represented as well as subject experts at the Agency. National tests are administered in order to control students’ knowledge in many subjects, and since 2013 there have also been tests in RE for 15-year-old students.

The first sentence of the aims of the present RE syllabus reads: “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.” (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11). This aim covers rather well the different parts of the subject, labelled “religions and other outlooks on life”, “religion and society”, “identity and life issues” and “ethics”. Tolerance and respect for one another’s world views are stressed as important and are also highlighted among “the fundamental values” of the school in the current curriculum, Lgr 11 and Lgy 11:

“The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality

between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and im-part. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility” (Lgr 11, 9).

As shown above, the Swedish school is not value neutral and states in addition the advocated values to be borne by “Christian tradition and Western humanism” (Lgr 11, 9).

3. Characteristics concerning aims, methods and formats in religious education in primary and secondary schools in Sweden

3.1. Didactical conception and task of RE

The *learning-about* approach to RE (Grimmitt, 1987) has been the dominant approach since 1962, at least formally. The ambition in 1962 was rather far-reaching and stressed, for instance, that the teaching should develop knowledge about the movements that have questioned the truth of the religious convictions (Ecklesiastikdepartementet, 1962). In 1969 the so-called life-question approach to RE was launched and has been characteristic of Swedish RE thereafter, meaning that although students differ in world views, they basically have the same fundamental life questions about meaning, relationships, life and death (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969). Thus, a common RE should take its point of view from these questions and treat different religious traditions as responses to such basic existential questions. The approach has of course been both supported and criticised (Osbeck/Skeie, 2014). However, some studies give reason to suspect that the approach has not, practically, been that much practiced. The learning-about approach seems to have been the dominant one in RE (Osbeck/Pettersson, 2009).

3.2. Ways to deal with religious diversity

Both the learning-about approach and the life-question approach are Swedish approaches that aim to deal with religious and secular diversity. The students’ own religious convictions are not considered to be important and are often left out of education, if the students do not relate to their own positions, which they can do in discussions. Empirical research has shown that pupils are sometimes also asked to act as representatives of a certain faith that they relate to, although this can be “risky” in classes where bullying may be real threat (Lied, 2011; Moulin, 2011; Osbeck/Sporre/Skeie, 2017).

The dominant *learning-about* approach has also been discussed and criticised. For example, its tendency to create a dominant discourse of secularity in the classroom, where “the religious other” are observed and studied and the content is not related to the students’ own worldviews and beliefs has been discussed (Kittelmann/Flenser, 2015). In summary, one might say that Swedish religious education strives to find a balance between a tradition-oriented and an existential teaching (Larsson, 2006).

3.3. Current challenges concerning framework, conceptions and “reality”

The Swedish RE subject is a broad subject whose content is so comprehensive that teachers have found it difficult to work through all the content areas of the syllabus. Life questions and general ethics are areas that seem to have been marginalised (The Swedish School Inspectorate, 2012). Furthermore, the subject in itself seems to have been neglected in teaching. Such a development might have been facilitated through the fact that it has been possible to teach RE as one of four subjects (together with geography, history and civics) in an interdisciplinary subject called *social studies* that, off and on, has had its own curriculum and grading system (Osbeck, 2013). At present, the social studies approach is less common, as there is national testing in each of the four subjects separately.

The test tendency can also be understood as a threat against education generally, since, for example, collective work and teaching based on students’ curiosity risk being marginalised in such a system (Osbeck/Franck/Lilja/Sporre/Tykesson, 2018; Sporre, 2019). Instead of a focus on children’s questions, much of the attention is on learning outcomes. This means that serious challenges for RE concerns such challenges that education and humanities broadly are fighting against in an economic societal logic where such subjects are understood as less beneficial. At the same time as humanities are struggling to show their value for matters such as democracy, creativity, imagination and critical thinking (Nussbaum, 2010), there are specific RE challenges, as shown. Also, increasing secularisation and privatisation of religions and worldviews, as in many parts of Europe, challenges students’ interest and motivation for studying the subject today (Brömssen,

2016). Simultaneously, it could be argued that RE has, in recent years, also strengthened its position through growing openness as well as critical attitudes and discourses of religious tradition and life issues, ethics and value issues. The presence of a large number of pupils with a migration background from many religious traditions has increased the need for knowledge and thereby the need for the subject, many argue.

4. Debates

Debates on the subject of religious education have shifted over time and its character, extent and autonomy in the curriculum have been disputed. A classical debate – one of the largest in Sweden – which took place after the changes of the subject in compulsory school in the 1960s concerned the size and content of the subject in upper secondary school. The proposal to reduce the teaching time of Christianity led to a petition with more than 2 million signatures (Algotsson, 1975).

More recent discussions have concerned whether RE could be divided up and included in other subjects. The argument is that it is a small subject with a relatively large crowding of content. For example, it has been proposed that the subjects of religion and history could be united into one subject. It is argued that religions and different ideas always interact in different stages with history and have emerged in a certain historical situation and a certain historical environment. Another proposal is that both religious education and geography could merge into the subject of civics. Here the argument is that the demolition of certain subjects releases resources that can be used to prioritise the teachers' working environment, by reducing their teaching time, as there will be a big shortage of teachers in Sweden the coming years (Skogstad, 2019). As can be seen when comparing this pattern with the reported development towards a more subject-based teaching and a less interdisciplinary (thematic or social studies) teaching, educational debates have the tendency to move back and forth.

A debate that has been rather intense for a rather long time in the Swedish society is the one concerning religious *free schools*. As mentioned above, it has been possible since The Independent School Reform 1992 to start independent or so-called "free" schools in Sweden, and some of these are confessional schools. The basic argument is that parents have the right to choose an education for their children, as stated in the Convention on Human Rights, and elsewhere. Some critics argue that children in confessional schools risk not becoming integrated into Swedish society as they are, it is argued, exposed to undue influences and do not get the same opportunities as other children to shape their lives. They may be subjected to an authoritative religious education, in contrast to the democratic education of the Swedish curriculum. This specific discourse is often indirectly directed towards Islamic confessional schools in Sweden. However, the vast majority of schools that have chosen to become confessional schools are Christian. It seems to be possible to interpret this debate in relation to a main theme in Swedish educational policy over time, including RE, which also has been visible in this presentation; that is, the aim to shape an inclusive common education (Almén, 2000). The intensity of the debate may be due to the fact that the presence of religious *free schools* challenges the long Swedish tradition of *the same school for all* and forces the model to open up new ways of handling diversity in education and a plural educational landscape.

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