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**Mette Buchardt & Christina Osbeck**



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## **Editorial Nordidactica 2017:1**

# **Epistemologies of Religious Education Research in the Nordic Welfare states.**

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*Abstract: The theme of this special issue is the epistemological conditions and significant features for doing research in religious education in the Nordic region. Historical and institutional conditions make up an important part of the background for understanding. The articles in this issue which are introduced here try to grasp and explore the conditions for scholarly knowledge production concerning the teaching of religion in the states in question: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.*

**KEYWORDS:** RELIGIOUS EDUCATION RESEARCH, EPISTEMOLOGY, INSTITUTIONS, THE NORDIC REGION

As a research discipline *subject matter didactics* or *subject didactics* (“ämnesdidaktik”, “fagdidaktik(k)”) in the Nordic states has, as is the case in for instance other European regions, developed in relation to the academization and professionalization of the educational sciences in general and thus also to the education of teachers (Hofstetter & Schnewly, 2002). This also goes for religious education as an object of research as well as of developmental educational aspirations based on science or aiming at being science (Vetenskap, Wissenschaft). Unlike many other subject didactics, RE is, however, related to two sets of institutional practices that have shown a growing interest in education and religion – an interest with academic consequences – namely school and church. This has meant that RE was an established academic discipline in theological faculties in several Nordic countries, with roots in catechetical and practical theology, before the general interest in subject matter didactics increased from the 1960s onwards, often under the name religionspedagogik[k]/religionspædagogik [Pedagogy of Religion] (Osbeck & Lied, 2012a).

In continuation, the development of religious education research in the Nordic states – today the two republics of Iceland and Finland and the three constitutional monarchies Norway, Denmark and Sweden – has been influenced by shifting relations between church, state and school as these evolved not least during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period was also the years when the so-called Nordic welfare state model developed in the five states in question. The Nordic welfare state model – a policy and a promotional concept just as much as a historical reality – has in welfare state research been described as a model with five exceptions (e.g. Hilson, 2008). The same can be said of the Nordic model for state-driven religious education, indicating that each of the models of the five states in question is an exception (Buchardt, 2015). Nevertheless, some significant similar features seem to have developed across the Nordic states with regard to education in general as well as with regard to the teaching of religion in schools.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century a model for public education free of charge aiming for accessibility – at least in principle – for the whole population from elementary school to the tertiary level, for instance university education, was organized in all five states in question (Telhaug et al., 2006; Buchardt, Markkola & Valtonen, 2013). In this “school for all”, the teaching of religion has – though in different ways and mandatory to different degrees – formed part of the state primary and secondary curriculum, and still does, as opposed to for instance the US. This dates back to the early modern history behind the five Nordic states where the Lutheran creed during the 16<sup>th</sup> century was imposed as a state creed following the German Lutheran Reformation, and although the models are different today, all states share a history in which the evangelical Lutheran churches have been state churches (Stenius, 1997; Markkola & Naumann, 2014; Buchardt, 2017). Despite the varying degrees of confessional affiliation of the school subject, with for instance Sweden having an explicitly non-confessional subject of religion, and Finland at the other end of the

spectrum a division of the teaching of religion along confessional lines, the teaching of religion in schools remains prescribed by the state and a state task.

Though the theme of this special issue is not religious education as such, but the epistemological conditions and significant features for doing research in religious education in the Nordic region, such historical and institutional conditions make up an important part of the background for understanding and trying to grasp and study the conditions for scholarly knowledge production concerning the teaching of religion in the states in question.

### **The questions of and structure of the issue**

This special issue springs from and bases itself on the framing and the papers originally produced for a symposium held at the biannual Nordic Religious Education Conference in Tartu, Estonia 2015. This research conference has since the 1980s brought together scholars of religious education in the Nordic states, where recently also scholars of Baltic religious education have joined as participants as well as on the organizing committee. This also means that the conference includes work conducted by scholars institutionally placed in the Nordic region, but whose research transcends such borders, as well as the other way around: researchers of Nordic religious education institutionally based outside the region, a development which might become more pronounced in the years to come.

In the particular symposium of which this special issue is a result, the subject and object of scholarly discussions were, however, the epistemologies behind research in religious education throughout the traditional North and thus the 20<sup>th</sup> century welfare state in *Norden* – the Nordic region. The concept of epistemologies in this context aims at describing the ways scholarly knowledge about religion and education is produced and structured in relation to disciplinary and institutional structures. The concern of the symposium was, by extension, to examine different conditions for knowledge re/production on Religious Education in the Nordic countries and to discuss how for instance academic disciplines work as frames for ongoing developments of knowledge, primarily research contributions.

What consequences does it have for the production of knowledge – e.g. for research questions asked, examined and answered – whether the study is done within history of religion, comparative religion, sociology of religion, theological academic disciplines such as church history or as pedagogy of religion in a faculty of theology, in or by means of sociology, communication studies, or psychology and/or in the educational sciences, and thus in e.g. sociology, history, psychology or philosophy of education? What does the variedness of the research area mean for the discussion of quality in the field and the direction of the development? And how does that affect the applied didactics of religion?

The presenters were asked to include their own dissertation as an object of analysis in their paper and relate it to one or two other dissertations from the country in which the presenter is institutionalized, and preferably the dissertations discussed should be

from different periods of time. Alternatively, handbooks of RE didactics/pedagogy of religion could be examined. The idea was thus to create a point of departure for exploring and discussing which factors are important to consider when trying to grasp the ways religious education research has been formed in and across states in the North in order to understand its problems and possibilities and to develop its concepts.

The first section of this special issue features the elaborated versions of the papers that deal with each of the five nations. This means that the framing of this section goes along nation state lines with regard to the topics of the articles:

Gunnar Gunnarson deals with RE research in Iceland, whereas Geir Skeie deals with the Norwegian context, and Mette Buchardt with the Danish, all based on defended dissertations having religion and education as their objects. This serves as a basis for sketching out a landscape of the conditions for knowledge production on RE in the countries in question. The same is the case with Christina Osbeck's article on RE research in Sweden and Martin Ubani's on RE research in Finland, but Osbeck and Ubani deal with for instance RE-didactical handbooks as key material as well. The authors in this section are all institutionally based in the national context they write about, be it full or part time.

In the second section two articles cut across these national lines: In two responding articles, Bernd Krupka, institutionally based in Norway, but with an academic background in Germany, and Sven Hartman with an institutional history in Sweden comment on the articles concerning the national contexts, and point to for instance international and disciplinary dimensions across these articles.

All articles point to the fact that several other factors than disciplinary borders ought to be considered in order to understand conditions for and variations of knowledge re/production in the RE field in the Nordic countries, which the articles in this special issue in different as well as similar ways seek to take further.

In the following, we will single out some of these factors and questions that arise not only within but rather across and beyond the articles, but which the articles of this issue in different ways identify and address.

## **Beyond and within disciplinary borders and the institutionalization of RE research**

A complicating factor when it comes to Nordic comparative studies of the meaning of disciplinary frames for knowledge production is that there seems to be differences in the names used for these disciplines. While for instance the distinctions between theology and religious studies are structured relatively weakly in Sweden – all examinations related to religion at Uppsala University are e.g. conducted under the auspices of theology – the differences can be large in for instance Denmark and Norway. Also within the same nation, the meaning of academic sub-disciplines such as sociology of religion can differ to some extent. In short one might say that the objects of research are shifting while the terminology gives the illusion that these objects of research remain the same. Considering this, to compare examples from the

different Nordic states will not necessarily help describe *how* a certain discipline affects the knowledge production since it is in fact different kinds of disciplines that are being studied. Or maybe rather: The comparison is not possible in a simple sense but only possible when unfolded through careful contextualization. This circumstance is on the one hand the limitation of the articles in this issue in a comparative perspective, but on the other hand something which further comparative research might benefit from addressing.

A specific circumstance that affects the shaping of a discipline is the composition of the agents operating in the field. In the articles of this issue there are many examples of influential professors whose individual research profiles seem to have been of great importance to the knowledge production of the institutions in which they were operative. Also the length of their chair holding is of importance. One example of a long-time influential professor is Kalevi Tamminen in Finland who can also be described as one of the founding fathers of the Nordic RE research community (see e.g. Hartman, this issue). However, one might add that individual professors in the academic system are not merely individual agents. A professorship or “chair” is in itself a structure that governs other positions at a department. How social categories such as gender and the class history of the agents take part in shaping the field seems to be an issue to examine further, but it is not elaborated upon in this issue. The oeuvre of such agents and structures might also be one of the keys to understanding the different ways that methodologies seem to have developed in the RE research field in the states in question. In comparison to the other Nordic countries the Finnish RE research, for instance, seems to have been more based on quantitative methodology which thus may be due the dominance in field that the referenced professorship constituted. Certain forms of power produce certain kinds of knowledge and thereby simultaneously hinder and marginalize others (e.g. Osbeck & Lied, 2012b).

A factor that emerges from the articles in this issue, in addition to the impact of the disciplines, is that the knowledge production in a research field that can be understood as RE seems to be intimately connected to the way RE is formed as a school subject.

This in turn means that the knowledge production is related to the ways in which the political field, the school system and the subject have been shaped. RE research often seems to have an applied character, and in order to render this visible it can be useful to distinguish between RE research of a descriptive and prescriptive character even if such categories should be understood as an axis rather than as distinctly demarcated. The boundaries to school and teacher education on the one hand and on the other hand the fact that the political intentions with the RE subjects in the Nordic countries are shifting – which is shown in for instance how much time is allocated to RE in the timetable as well as its status and volume in teacher education – also means that the precondition for a community of RE scholars and research differ in the various countries. Furthermore, the distance between research and teaching for student teachers differs in the current countries. In comparison to e.g. Sweden and Norway, this distance is longer in Denmark where teacher education is not directly connected to researching university disciplines, since it is institutionally placed outside the

universities. This circumstance has possibly also contributed to differences concerning how applied subject matter research tends to be carried out.

The fact that disciplines are constituted by individuals also implies that the contact between people is of interest in order to understand facilitated knowledge production and valued knowledge. These kinds of connections between researchers happen along the lines of the areas of the disciplines, while the connections also move beyond these lines. Networks in which collective interpretations and notions develop seem important to heed in order to understand conditions for knowledge production. Such noteworthy collective practices seem in the RE research field to be both research networks, conferences (e.g. Nordic Conference on Religious Education, NCRE, and International Seminar on Religious Education and Values, ISREV) and international research projects (e.g. Religion in Education. A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries, REDCo, and Teaching Religion in a multicultural European Society, TRES). Other important agents to consider are for instance international teacher organizations and publishing agencies.

One of the possible conclusions, drawing on the articles of this special issue, is that RE emerges as a clearly multidisciplinary area both with regards to the distinct labels of the disciplines which can readily be identified, and in what could be called the internal diversity of contemporary disciplines. This has, as Krupka stresses in his responding article, its advantages and disadvantages. It offers space for academic freedom and creativity, and in that sense space for a multitude of recognized knowledge contribution. However, it also makes it more difficult to discuss criteria for quality in RE research. Critical discussion may not arise, and contributions could be understood as parallel rather than as related to each other. Conversely, one can perhaps also interpret the situation like Hartman does in this issue; RE research needs to be of a multidisciplinary character since the objects of research are varied. Going along with that interpretation, the diagnosis of the multidisciplinaryity of RE research might then call for the development of traditions for clarity of conceptual language, theoretical perspectives, analytical tools in light of the epistemological traditions and institutional structures that are drawn upon in order to build a field-specific but diverse body of knowledge concerning a diverse as well as moving object.

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