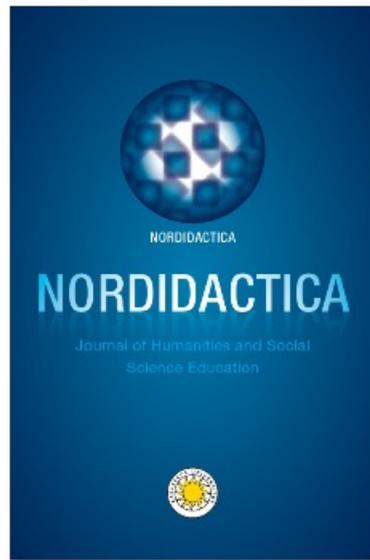


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Where is Norwegian religious education research heading? A discussion based on two dissertations.

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Abstract: Norwegian religious education research has produced more than 30 dissertations since late 1990's and has a strong and growing research record in spite of a rather weak and vulnerable position in academic structures. In order to assess the situation and to discuss future possibilities, the article presents the research context and go on to discuss the dissertations of Geir Skeie (1998) and Bengt-Ove Andreassen (2007). It is argued that they have many similarities, but also differences in the way they address the field and discuss epistemological issues. Theory, method and effects of the dissertations in the research community are mentioned and this leads to a deliberation about the role of academic disciplines in the construction of religious education research. A final discussion concludes that systematic reviews of religious education research would be helpful in order to develop future research and to avoid less fruitful disciplinary rivalries.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, PHD, NORWAY, RESEARCH, EPISTEMOLOGY

About the author: Geir Skeie holds positions as professor of religious education at Stockholm University

The author of this article is identical with the Geir Skeie who has written the PhD that is analysed in the article. This has not been known to the anonymous referees and their valuable comments indicate that they have considered the analysis as being reliable if not entirely favourable.

Introduction

Historically, public education in Norway grew out of church education in the absolutist Lutheran kingdom and the theological interest for religious education followed this into the 20th century. The last remains of the Church school continued in the shape of a confessional subject with emphasis on Christianity placed within a secularised school system (Rasmussen, 2004; Skeie, 2009; Skinningsrud, 2012). Throughout this period, research in the field of religious education had a weak position in most academic institutions and this continued until the 1990s (Skeie, 2004). Before 2000, there was limited interest in religious education at most academic departments.¹ In theology, it was at best seen as part of practical theology and there was hardly any interest at all at the religious studies departments. The former lack of interest in religious education among scholars of religious studies/history of religions probably goes back to the church dominance over school religious education, the power struggle between academic disciplines and epistemologically to the insider/outsider perspective, which is still discussed (Hjelde, 2013). With very few exceptions, religious studies did not produce research into religious education until the new curricula in primary and secondary school at the end of the 1990s removed most elements of a confessional school subject.² From then, Sissel Østberg became a central figure in the field, much inspired by developments in England, and gradually others followed (Østberg, 1998).³

No professorial chairs had been designated to religious education research in theology or religious studies. The few profiled researchers tended to focus on religious education out of personal interest and not because their universities gave priority to the area and they did not necessarily focus on religious education throughout their carrier. This was even the case with Ivar Asheim and Ole Gunnar Winsnes, who both for a period had chairs named after their field of interest (religious education/religionspedagogikk). They are often are mentioned as leading figures in the research (Lied, 2006). Asheim turned towards ethics in the late 1970's and Winsnes devoted much of his research to sociology of religion, especially after the early 1990s. When interest in religious education research started to grow within theology and religious studies towards the end of the last century, it was mainly influenced by the

¹ In Norway the term "religious studies" ("religionsvitenskap") and "history of religion" ("religionshistorie") has been used without much differentiation in meaning, but departements have had different labels for historical reasons. Regarding individuals, the common practice seems to be that one is labelled according to the character of one's basic education at master level (or in some cases PhD). In this article I will use the term "religious studies", and include in this also "history of religion".

² A somewhat special case is religious studies in Trondheim, which came out of Norges Lærerhøyskole, later NTNU, see comments in Lied 2006, 182.

³ This account is simplifying matters a lot, by e.g. omitting that there was a parallel system with alternative life-stances education beteen 1974-1997. An overview with more references is given in Skeie & Bråten, (2014)

curriculum changes and debates of that time (Gravem, 2004; Thomassen, 1998). A later influence, partly benefitting from the first 'wave', was the large, publicly funded program for development of church-based religious education, which started to produce research some years later in theology departments (Afdal, 2008; Johnsen, 2014, 48-52). The focus in this article is however on research relevant for school religious education in public school.

The context – two generations of researchers

Having a weak academic position, religious education research and development was dependent on the teacher educators. Around 1990 they were spread around the country in regional university colleges, without formal university status. Even if research based teacher education had been on the agenda for some years, this academic staff had to cover a range of content issues, including world religions, ethics, philosophy and religious education approaches/pedagogy/didactics. This situation improved from the late 1990's when many new positions were allocated. Due to the curriculum reform in primary and secondary school and expansion of the religious education subject in teacher education, Norway experienced a significant increase in teacher education staff during the 1990's. As these positions were filled, teacher education became increasingly more research-oriented, and PhD started to become a normal entrance qualification. Parallel to this, several established senior employees in the field started to write their PhD's and a substantial amount of these dissertations were oriented towards teaching and learning in religious education. Looking back, it is possible to differentiate between two 'generations' of religious education researchers, even if other ways of systematisation are possible (Lied, 2006).

Among the 'senior generation', some started to do research from the late 1980's, even if there were researchers who delivered their PhD much later in the carrier. Their introduction to the research field therefore came during the period of confessional religious education. The disciplinary background of most belonging to the senior generation was Christian theology and the foci of their PhDs were very different (Afdal, 2005; Birkedal 2001; Brunstad, 1998; Flornes, 2007; Haakedal, 2004; Harboe, 1989; Leganger-Krogstad, 2009; Lied, 2004; Mogstad, 2001; Nicolaisen, 2012; Sagberg, 2001; Sandsmark, 2000; Skeie, 1998; Skottene, 1994; Skrunes, 1995; Vestøl, 2005; Winsnes, 1988; Østberg, 2003). The majority of those still active of this generation are now professors and still involved in or related to religious education research, but they are approaching retirement.

A second, 'junior generation' of researchers came into religious education research some years later, but much earlier in their individual carriers due to the increasing demands for research qualification. They delivered their PhD's partly overlapping in time with some of the older generation, and they had experienced the transition from confessional to non-confessional religious education as part of their socialisation as researchers. Among this generation, religious studies was more prominent as a disciplinary background and many did empirical PhD studies (Andreassen, 2008;

Anker, 2011; Bråten, 2009; Eriksen, 2010; Hovdelien, 2011; Husebø, 2013; Johannessen, 2015a; Jørgensen, 2014; Kjørven, 2014; Lippe, 2010; Sando, 2014; Schjetne, 2011; Skoglund, 2008; Skrefsrud, 2011). This generation will shape the future of Norwegian religious education research. While several benefitted from the international network of some older colleagues, they have also established new networks, and this is particularly noticeable within religious studies/history of religion frameworks.⁴

The dissertations listed above are ‘coded’ as belonging to religious education research by this author and this may be challenged. The criteria used for including PhDs in this list are several, not exclusive, but partly overlapping:

- Authors have been active in the religious education research field over a longer period
- Authors have (had) academic positions as teacher educators in religious education
- Authors’ academic position include the terms ‘religious education’
- The dissertations are much or mainly discussed among scholars of religious education
- The theme of their PhD is directly related to or addressing religious education
- The thesis itself acknowledges an affiliation to or identification with religious education research.

The entire research into religious education in Norway is of course much broader than the dissertations mentioned above, including books, articles and reports published both in Norwegian language and internationally. Research cooperation goes on across generations and across disciplinary backgrounds. There is today a significant body of research done over a relatively short period, if one considers the slow start. The trend seems to be in direction of empirically grounded focused studies, with emphasis on producing new knowledge about teaching and learning in religious education. Several study ‘ordinary’ school practice, by collaborative research (Skeie, 2010) or by other qualitative methods (Fuglseth, 2014). Quantitative studies are and have been few. There is still a strong connection with teacher education, but the debate between disciplines has been less prominent.

Approaching the texts

This article discusses aspects of Norwegian religious education research by comparing two examples of such research, namely the dissertations of Geir Skeie from 1998 and of Bengt-Ove Andreassen from 2008 (Andreassen, 2008; Skeie, 1998). This goes back to a discussion at the symposium “Epistemologies of Religious Education – Examples from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden”, Nordic Conference of

⁴ In addition to informal and shifting networks related to publishing activities etc., I am particularly referring to increasing interest in religious education as a field of research at conferences within International Association for the History of Religions, see: <http://www.iahr.dk/>

Religious Education, Tartu, June 2015. The aim of the symposium was to examine different conditions for knowledge re/production concerning Religious Education in the Nordic countries and discuss how disciplines work as frames for ongoing developments of knowledge, primarily research contributions. The presenters were asked to use their own dissertation in relation to other dissertations from the country in which the presenter was institutionalized, preferably so that the dissertations discussed were from different periods. Alternatively, handbooks of RE didactics/pedagogy of religion could be examined. The form of this article is indebted to as well as framed according to this format, which means that most of the Norwegian religious education research is not discussed, and the article does not give the overview that in many ways is lacking, neither does it justice to the rich research going on. As an illustration; none of the two PhDs mainly discussed in the following include classroom research, while this is a promising development in later dissertations (e.g. Anker, 2011; Eriksen, 2010; Lippe, 2010; Nicolaisen, 2012; Skoglund, 2008). Instead, some issues in this research field are discussed by means of the two examples. Skeie and Andreassen belong to different generations, have different disciplinary backgrounds and represent different methodologies. Both researchers are still active in the field and have published substantially since they delivered their dissertations. Instead of diving into the entire production of the two, their PhDs are used heuristically, in order to discuss how religious education research can be understood. I proceed by discussing how the two scholars have handled the following issues:

- What questions occupy the two generations?
- What kind of methods and material appear?
- How do they frame their investigation methodologically and theoretically?
- How do they see the roles of academic disciplines in relation to religious education research?
- Can there be pointed at some effects of the dissertations on the field of research and on didactics?

It is not possible to do the two dissertations full justice in this article and especially Skeie is covering many issues that will not be commented upon here. In addition comes the obvious limitations of evaluating one's own research and the effects of it. In spite of the differences between the two in theory, method and material, the dissertations appear as useful for a discussion of some epistemological aspects of religious education research on a more general level and with an eye towards the future. Even if examples and issues are referring to the Norwegian context, they should be relevant outside this country, particularly for the situation in the Nordic countries. The overall question is: What are the challenges for religious education research in terms of clarifying its epistemological foundations and what implications does this have for research practice?

Two dissertations

In his thesis, Geir Skeie takes a normative starting point by aiming at developing religious education as a field of research in service of religious education in school. He sees religious education in need of reflection of the challenges raised by plurality as a socio-cultural fact and the questions of how to deal with this in religious education. The perspective is multidisciplinary and to a large extent epistemological, discussing different conceptions of plurality and pluralism, identity and culture, but also the societal aspects of this are addressed. He discusses the approaches of Michael Grimmit and Karl Ernst Nipkow as examples of 'educational' and 'theological' approaches and decides for a third position that takes both religion and education equally serious as contextual and conceptual arenas. He pleads for a dialectical relationship between theory and practice and differentiates between religious education ('religionspedagogikk') as a broad term, pedagogy of religion ('religionsdidaktikk') as approaches to teaching and learning and finally the institutionalised school subject and classroom arena ('religionsundervisning'). Towards the end he discusses the then recent curriculum of Norwegian religious education critically, pointing particularly to the problematic use of Christianity as cultural heritage. Throughout the dissertation, the concept of culture is central and religion is seen as one of the realms of meaning within a broad concept of culture.

In a historical perspective, Skeie (1998) was the first thesis in Norway to address religious and world-view diversity as a main issue for religious education research. He presented a theoretical discussion based on literature studies, starting with the problem: If plurality is a central feature of modernity, what should this imply for basic thinking within religious education? (Skeie, 1998, 7) His background was theological studies and his scholarly discussion partly linked up with former debates in religious education, and partly drew on other areas of research. For Andreassen (2007), diversity seems more taken for granted. He came from religious studies, belonging to the younger generation of researchers and ten years of multi-religious religious education had passed since Skeie delivered his thesis. The study of Andreassen focused on how introductory textbooks for teacher education produced after the changes of religious education curriculum in the 1990's dealt with some key issues in religious education. His research question was: How do the textbooks construct an understanding of the subject of religion of religious education through their perspectives on RE as a school subject, the role of the pupil and the role of the teacher? (2007, 7) By entering into the books with discourse analysis as methodological tool he found a variety of positions, but some were dominating and in a wider perspective hegemonic in the field. The analysis showed that religion was understood mainly as a resource for personal development and meaning-making and the student was understood much in terms of an individual person with preoccupation with identity and existential issues. The role of the teacher was to help students in their life interpretation by presenting religions as recourses for such meaning also to some extent in a role similar to the therapist. The analysis draws on Foucault among others and presents a critique of the way the dominating religious education approach

implicitly inspired by (liberal) theological models of thinking and even with similarities to late modern new-age individualism.

In both dissertations, the authors focus on basic issues in religious education approaches, rather than on practice in school or teacher education. Still, school religious education is present as a background for the discussion and as a field of relevance for the results of the research. Both display this by referring to curricula and practice. In terms of method and material, however, the two dissertations are different. Skeie offers a normative, scholarly discussion of possible and actual positions in the literature. Drawing on content analysis with a hermeneutical basis the focus is mainly on recent scholarly work in religious education theory, but also research literature from other relevant disciplines. In addition, he analyses critically the curriculum of the time by use of content analysis. Andreassen does a descriptive, discourse analysis of five different introductions to religious education (textbooks) for teacher education. Here he establishes formations of concepts and counter-concepts from 'discursive formulations' leading to the establishment of dominating patterns in the individual textbooks. He further develops this towards a mapping of all the books and finds one discourse to be dominant, in addition to some exceptions or counter-discourses that confirm this pattern. In assessing this, Andreassen positions himself as a religious education researcher firmly based in religious studies.

Methodologies and theoretical perspectives

The two investigations are both exploratory, but in different ways. Skeie studies a body of literature that he finds relevant to the research question, which is raising basic issues of religious education as a research field in a contemporary historical and societal context of diversity (plurality). The starting point is an assumption that modern, western societies are diverse and that this is supported by social studies and cultural studies. This diversity is reflected in different areas of scholarly thinking like philosophy, theology and political science and these resources are used in order to outline some elements of a 'cultural' approach to religious education. Andreassen does an analysis of already present religious education approaches, as these appear in textbooks. Drawing on Foucault and discourse theory, the assumption is that such 'power-texts' establish themselves by dominating the field through discursive patterns and that other positions are marginalised. This is also substantiated by theory on polyphony, on textbooks as normative texts and on the role of institutionalised power base. In this way, Andreassen is tying theory and methodology closely together by use of discourse analysis while Skeie is using a 'looser' methodology in his normative and concept-oriented reasoning, and not really presenting a distinct 'method' as such, even if there is a rich theoretical literature presented and discussed.

The methodological choices of the two dissertations are linked to the theoretical foundations they present. Skeie's purpose is oriented towards normative questions, which means that there is a broad theoretical literature processed, and a construction of a theoretical framework for religious education is part of the intention. In order to

make this productive for religious education thinking, Skeie particularly uses theory about culture, with emphasis on the combination of a descriptive and normative dimension in 'culture' and a dialectical view of 'identity' (Poul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz, Johan Fjord Jensen, Thomas Luckmann). His critical discussion of religious education theory is focusing on examples from Germany and England, in particular Michael Grimmitt, Karl-Ernst Nipkow and Trevor Cooling, who all had been preoccupied with religious education and diversity. While he finds Grimmitt to use religion instrumentally for educational purposes, he argues that Nipkow and Cooling in very different ways are bound to their theological/confessional position. Following this, he reconstructs religious education as a field of research, which is drawing on a plurality of theoretical and disciplinary sources, but also is committed to certain normative societal and educational goals that have to be deliberated democratically. Drawing on the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz and others, he argues that religion is a distinct sphere of meaning within a larger 'cultural' world, with its own integrity. This is seen as a reason for keeping religious education part of the curriculum.

Andreassen uses his theoretical perspectives mainly to underpin the methodological purpose of studying descriptively a distinct text-material ('empirically'). The theoretical perspectives are therefore presented as part of the analytical strategy of discourse analysis, drawing on Michel Foucault, Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen and Norman Fairclough, and he uses Mikhail Bakhtin to conceptualise the polyphonic character of his material. In the final parts of the analysis, he uses Basil Bernsteins concept of 'recontextualisation' to describe the transformation of an academic discourse on 'religion' when this is 'pedagogised'. Andreassen argues that the dominating textbook tradition is recontextualising 'religion' as a source of self-development and offering religion as a resource for positive moral values embedded in a discourse of 'goodness'. In effect, he finds this to be close to the understanding of religion in 'new religious movements'.

Both dissertations address the role of academic disciplines in religious education. They both argue that theologically based religious education approaches are not appropriate when the school subject is including a variety of religions and worldviews. This rests on an understanding of 'theology' as based in a specific religious practice, in practice, Christian. Skeie is critical of the previous dominance of theology in the field of religious education and does not see this academic discipline as the ideal basis for developing religious education approaches for public school in diverse societies. While not using the term 'theology', he points to the weakness of a 'insider perspective'. On the other hand, he seems to have received influences from contextual theology, partly through the effects it already had on religious education in Norway (Afdal, Haakedal & Leganger Krogstad 1997). He invites a series of academic disciplines, including theology, to address research questions relevant to religious education (Skeie, 1998, 237-243). This makes it more of a field of investigation than a discipline of its own. The core area of the research field is teaching and learning about religion in the classroom, but issues arising from this practice, should be informed by knowledge coming both from a range of disciplines. In order to understand 'religion'

and 'education', religion in education and religious education, a cross-disciplinary research cooperation is possible and necessary. Here, both theology and religious studies has a central role to play, as long as it is understood as a cooperative relationship with educational sciences and other parts of humanities and social sciences. The role of religious education research is to facilitate the bridging between different disciplines in addressing the issues arising from religious education practice. This practice is understood as part of a broad educational aim (*Bildung*), where introduction to the knowledge about religions and beliefs, also understood as practices is a part. There is a distinction, but also an interrelationship between the practice of teaching and learning and the theoretical and epistemological reasoning of religious education research. This construction of religious education as a research field can be described as inclusive or even pluralistic, but at the price of a more distinct self-understanding. By doing so, religions education research may become vulnerable to the power play of the academic world. Without the strength of being a discipline in it's own right or protected by a strong disciplinary 'parent' the theoretical and institutional infrastructure becomes quite dependent on internal motivation and well-functioning networks.

To the extent he is referring to disciplinary debates, Andreassen critically assess the shortcomings of theological dominance in religious education as well as the problems related to this being married to a student-oriented pedagogy with emphasis on personal development. He is therefore more critical to the contributions of theological approaches than Skeie, possibly seeing theology as always representing an 'insider perspective'. In terms of educational philosophy, he certainly seems to include less discussion about the personal aspects of *Bildung* and more emphasis on knowledge. Andreassen describes the historical background by noting that theology has been the dominating disciplinary background of religious education scholars. In the presentation of the textbooks, and the disciplinary backgrounds of authors is made relevant, but hardly discussed whether this is a necessary or an accidental connection. The main emphasis is on the result of the analysis and the dominating (and deviating) patterns. What dominates in the textbooks, is an understanding of religious education in school as mainly existentially orientated and an empathic understanding of 'religions'. They construct the pupil as a meaning-seeker in search of a life-interpretation and the teacher role is seen as being a personal guide and 'identity-expert'. Andreassen finds Christian theology to be a driving force behind the dominating patterns, but its normative and positive perspective on religion is not anymore limited to Christianity. It is extended to include a variety of religions and worldviews. In short, the dominating textbooks display a pluralistic theology combined with a therapeutic view of education, perhaps in contrast to the conscious intentions of the authors.

Andreassen contrasts this genuinely 'positive' or 'pluralistic' view of religion with the critical, distanced and descriptive outsider-perspectives of religious studies, which he finds to be more in line with the aim of education to develop knowledge about the world. The discourse analysis contributes to the unveiling of a power struggle within the field of religious education where theology continues to have a strong influence

and with no good alternative. More implicitly than explicitly, Andreassen suggests religious studies to provide the type of comparative knowledge about religions that should underpin religious education research and practice instead of a theological perspective (Andreassen 2007, 21, 255-57, 263). Both his critique of the theological bias of the textbook religious education and the implicit alternative, suggests an institutional 'home' for religious education within religious studies. While this can make the field of research less vulnerable than Skeie's position is in danger of, it may threaten to reduce the interdisciplinary cooperation necessary to develop both pedagogical, psychological and philosophical aspects of the research.

Summing up, both dissertations question the former dominance of confessional theology and gives religious studies a central position in religious education research. While Skeie can be interpreted to give theology a place within a broad concept of religious studies ('theory about religion' as he calls it), Andreassen is more critical and even dismissive towards contributions from theology within the framework of public education. Skeie engages in discussion with theological perspectives and treats theology partly as a parallel to philosophy and partly as relevant theory about religion, 'from within'. In spite of differences, both understand education as such as a public enterprise. Still, they seem to have different positions regarding 'Bildung'. Skeie is here more concerned with the personal dimension as a legitimate and important part, while Andreassen focuses on critical thinking and is sceptical towards individualism. Both raise issues about how to relate academic knowledge about religion and knowledge about education to each other as part of religious education research.

In spite of several similarities, it therefore seems justified to detect some generational characteristics to which they belong. Skeie is struggling to come to terms with achievements of religious education research that has developed also within a confessional system, while Andreassen ten years later is arguing a clean break with this tradition, standing firmly in a religious studies position.

What effects did the dissertations have on later research?

It is difficult to assess the reception of the two studies properly, so it will only be pointed towards a few traces of Skeie's and Andreassen's work in dissertations and a few other publications that followed. Seen from a vantage point, both studies are turning points in the short research history. Skeie (1998) was the first to focus on diversity and pluralism and the thesis coincided with the curricular changes at the time. By doing this, it represents a significant shift in research perspective that goes parallel to the educational policy change. After this, almost all PhDs in religious education have taken diversity of religion and belief as a starting point, whatever their individual research question was. The change was probably more an effect of the changes in policy, curriculum and public debate over religious education than a result of Skeie's thesis. Seen in this perspective, Skeie's thesis is marking a generational shift both by its focus on plurality and by coinciding with the curricular changes of the time. Also, similarities and interrelations between Skeie's thesis and international

developments in religious education research was pointing towards the coming generation and may suggest Skeie to be more of a transitional figure than a typical representative of the 'seniors', who came more out of the theological world of thinking.

Robert Jackson from Warwick University became particularly influential in Norway during the 1990s, partly due to Skeie's networking. When Bråten (2009) chose two 'power texts' to discuss religious education research in England and Norway comparatively, she used Peder Gravem's defence of the religious education subject of 2004 and Jackson's presentation of his interpretive approach as examples in order to 'bring attention to differences' regarding 'national styles of academic debate about RE in England and Norway' (Bråten, 2009, 106). In her study, she points to the role of Skeie in development of new perspectives on religious education in Norway through networks. In the national context, she places his work as a continuation of Ole Gunnar Winsnes' perspectives, since he was arguing for an educational grounding of religious education against Asheim's theological foundation (Bråten 2009, 88, 112). This shows influence from the more theologically orientated 'senior' generation in Skeie's research.

In the final chapter Skeie (1998) applies some of the concepts and analytical tools he has developed to critically assess the core curriculum of 1997. He discusses among other things the role of Christian religion as hegemonic national cultural heritage, the essentialist view of identity and the naïve view of dialogue and this captures some of the themes that have been to some extent causing that does not follow the generational divisions. One of the seniors, Peder Gravem were among those who critically commented some of Skeie's views on pluralism and heritage while another, Tove Nicolaisen, were among those who endorsed his 'transversal' perspective on identity (Gravem, 2004, 201-211, 388; Nicolaisen, 2012, 37).⁵

Another aspect of Skeie's work that may have had influence is in the emphasis on practice orientation and of linking practice with theory. On this point, Geir Afdal has found the thesis to be lacking in consequence and pointed towards a hierarchical view on the relationship between theory and practice and a lack of attention to the distinct character of religious education classroom as an activity system of its own (Afdal, 2008b, 2010).⁶ Skeie's later work with action research may seem to pick up his pronounced interest in practice in the thesis and possibly Skeie's doctoral work stimulated later practice-orientated research projects by offering a theoretical basis for these.

Andreassen's thesis represented a landmark in religious education research, by being the first to address the textbook version of religious education approaches and even more by opening a new debate on disciplinary foundation of religious education

⁵ The reason for including Gravem (2004) here, even if this is not his PhD, is that his comprehensive analysis of the religious education subject (curriculum) of the time commented broadly the research in the field.

⁶ Afdal (2010) is not his thesis, but another major publication in recent religious education research

research. He argued that theology was problematic as a foundation, while history of religions/religious studies would be more appropriate. It is still to see broader effects of this, but it is certainly signalling a stronger ownership of religious education research from a 'junior' generation of religious studies scholars. His thesis provided a possible template for investigating textbooks by using the three elements in the classic didactic triangle (content, teacher and student) as the focus of analysis. The special force of his contribution was strengthened by the results of his analysis, which has hardly been contested. He found that that a combination of ideas from Christian theology and student-oriented pedagogy characterised the most used textbooks and that this formed a dominating pattern. He implied that the general trend of the time to play down the role of theology as foundation for religious education was not what happened. Instead, there had been a shift in theological positions, and some kind of pluralistic theology appeared, without having been made explicit by the authors. He also found that the student-oriented pedagogy tended to be therapeutic more than knowledge-oriented, guided by what he called a discourse of 'goodness'. His conclusion was that this was problematic, mainly for educational reasons.

While the analysis of Andreassen has remained strong, several have discussed the perspectives on student-orientation and the implications for 'personal' dimensions of religious education. One example is Heid Leganger Krogstad, who delivered her thesis in 2009. The individual studies that go into this PhD were written over a period of ten years, none discussing the work of Andreassen. In one of the articles, however, she finds that religious education teachers are mainly teaching 'about' religion and that the student-oriented focus on life-interpretation ('learning from religion') is absent from practice. When she addresses this result in the discussion part of the theses, she refers to Andreassen (2007) by pointing at the contradiction between her findings regarding classroom teaching and his findings in the textbook analysis (Leganger-Krogstad 2011, 230).⁷ She does not argue against his results, but mentions several possible explanations for the discrepancy. In effect, she proves that there is a need for more research in order to investigate how the interplay of textbooks, teacher education, teaching, curriculum and student learning really work. This argument is grounded in her contextual approach to religious education where a key question is: 'how do we develop RE in the future as something different from social sciences' (ibid). In her view, an important part of contextual religious education is to include considerations about how encounter with diversity may influence the life-world of students. She finds Andreassen to lack some sensitivity for this issue. Another question is whether this difference of opinion is following the generational pattern or whether it is signalling a different kind of division line.

Also Øystein Lund Johannessen, has raised questions about the role of the personal and identity-oriented aspects of religious education in his dissertation. In his discussion, he argues against Andreassen's worries regarding teachers addressing 'personal' aspects of religious and worldview questions in the classroom (Johannessen

⁷ The references to Leganger-Krogstad are to the book-version of her thesis, produced in 2011

2015, 182). Johannessen finds these identity issues both productive and unavoidable and himself discussed the theme more broadly in the newest article of the thesis, focusing on Christian teachers in the public school (Johannessen, 2015b). Both the contributions of Leganger-Krogstad and Johannessen show that Andreassen's research has resulted in further discussion as well as more targeted research when it comes to personal aspects of the religious education teacher role and more generally the place for identity questions and personal development in the religious education classroom. It is therefore possible that future debates about these issues will take new routes.

Generations and disciplines

A final question regarding the influence of the two examples of research is whether they have contributed to the development of didactics or religious education approaches and if this can be seen as generational transitions. Here, the two are different in one important respect. While Andreassen wrote a textbook himself, Skeie did not do so. At the time Skeie wrote his thesis, there was particularly much controversy about religious education in Norwegian schools. The big changes coming with the 1997 curriculum were still new and his perspectives on religious education could be seen as particularly relevant, in light of the theme of his thesis. Still, he did not write an introduction to religious education teaching and no other did, based on his approach. One explanation could be that there were several introduction books launched at the time. Sverre Dag Mogstad had published an updated version of earlier introductions based on his cooperation with Ivar Asheim and Geir Afdal, Elisabet Haakedal and Heid Leganger-Krogstad published their 'contextual' religious education approach one year before the thesis was delivered (Afdal, Haakedal, & Leganger-Krogstad, 1997; Mogstad, 1997). A few years later Skeie participated in a new introduction to religious education teaching, but only with chapters on the religious education syllabus and on the history of religious education (Sødal, 2001).

The very same three textbooks mentioned above, were the ones considered by Andreassen to represent the 'dominating' pattern of religious education thinking.⁸ After having delivered a critical analysis of the introductions, he followed up by clarifying his own perspectives in a textbook (Andreassen, 2012). Here, he programmatically presents what he terms a 'religious studies based' introduction to teaching religious education, which is an outsider-perspective. Thereby he is also linking up to other scholars with similar perspectives.⁹ This textbook was later complemented by another for pre-school teachers (Andreassen & Olsen, 2014). The

⁸ It should be noted that he uses the fourth edition of Mogstad's book, from 2004.

⁹ In the foreword he refers to the challenge he got from his first opponent at the public defence of the thesis, to write an introduction. This was Tim Jensen from Denmark, who is a prominent representative of the critique of theological perspectives in public religious education and to promote religious studies as the only appropriate foundation. Another representative of this view is Wanda Alberts, who got the first position as religious educator at the department of religious studies at University of Bergen (Alberts, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Jensen, 2008, 2011, 2013).

production and distribution of his own religious education approach as a textbook for teacher education, meant that he took control over the 'effects' of the research, not leaving this to others. By doing this, he exercised a responsibility to secure the research basis of the textbook, which is coming through more clearly than in other textbooks. He built a coherent and comprehensive continuation of his perspectives from the dissertation work and contributed to the theoretical infrastructure of the field by stimulating internal debate. This form of dissemination is different from Skeie, who did not produce an introduction to religious education.

Summing up, the generational perspective suggested initially, seems to have some bearing on the two scholars discussed. Skeie represents efforts to change religious education research towards challenges of diversity and arguing for non-confessional teaching about religion. He also locates religious education research at the crossroads of humanities, social sciences and educational research. Andreassen marks a clear transition of perspective from theology to religious studies, but ten years later and being less preoccupied with mediating between positions. Religious studies has now become firmly established as a disciplinary basis for religious education research, and Andreassen represents one way of positioning this approach. In the end, both are probably not exemplifying of generational traits by representing their distinct positions, but rather pointing towards the issues that their respective generations have been preoccupied with.

What is the role of academic disciplines as epistemological foundation for religious education research?

The two dissertations discussed above represent very different ways of relating academic disciplines to religious education research. In Skeie's case there is a tendency to avoid the identification with a specific disciplinary position at all. He understands religious education as an interdisciplinary field where the problems and issues at stake are the interesting to focus upon. Andreassen is firmly rooted in religious studies, and argues for religious education research as part of this discipline. On the other hand, it is hard to say exactly how this has a definite bearing on his methodology and results. One may therefore ask whether the difference between the two mainly has to do with epistemological differences.

How fruitful is it to discuss different approaches to the study of religious education or even religion in education, mainly from a disciplinary perspective. A more practice-oriented approach would focus on the merits of research done, judged by transdisciplinary standards of good research practice. This would of course include a discussion about the normative assumptions underlying any scientific enterprise.

I started the article by referring to the weak institutionalisation of religious education research and continued by pointing at some promising developments in Norway. In order to assess the role of academic disciplines it is necessary to approach the situation also with an institutional perspective. The following will shortly point to

the future of humanities, the role of educational policy and developments in academic departments as being crucial.

The vulnerability of religious education research is still noticeable and the situation is volatile because of the dependence on policy changes. These are constantly changing the context for religious education teaching in school and teacher education, which affects the research field at large. It is enough to mention the never-ending debate about the role of Christianity in school religious education curriculum and the present debate about religious education in teacher education subjects. While the volatility seems to be something we have to live with, there are also changes that in my opinion point in direction of a more positive long-term development.

The international pressure on humanities paradoxically offers some opportunities for religious education. When humanities are challenged to contribute to societal development, education is often put on the agenda. The Norwegian government is presenting a policy document on education and research in the Humanities in 2017 and the key word here is already clear: 'relevance'.¹⁰ The expertise of religious education research in this field, may be strategically important in order to have a more secure position as part of the humanities (religious studies, theology, philosophy, ethics). Religious education researchers also have experience in cooperation with social sciences (sociology, ethnography, social studies). There may be a potential for cooperating more broadly across humanities and social studies education. More specifically, issues like social cohesion, citizenship, diversity as well as terrorism/security are already part of the religious education discourse and could be areas of collaboration.

I will also argue that a debate about the epistemological foundations of religious education research and practice may vitalise rather than disintegrate the field. Instead of seeing this as a weakness and a lack of identity, it may be a sign of a distinct discourse of religious education as a research field. To be familiar with these discourses is a sign of belonging to the research field. It is especially promising that departments of religious studies now are recognising the importance and of religious education research. The fact that there has been launched a distinct 'religious studies based religious education' (Andreassen 2012) is contributing to this development. Taking into account the content profile of religious education in public education in the last decades, it is no doubt that this fits much better with religious studies than theology, which is also corroborated by the earlier development in England. It is possible that even departments of philosophy will give more attention to the school subject in the coming years, at least there has been increasing interest among philosophers for positions in teacher education within the framework of religious and worldview education.

¹⁰ A document inviting to take part in the development of the policy document has been issued and this mentions relevance to disciplines, society, work life, school and teacher education. See:

<https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8c7fb2b67e904a0c83792049d6e95d95/innspillsinvitasjon-humaniorameldingen-endelig.pdf> (accessed 19.07.2016)

In Norway, several departments of theology have increased their research of church-based Christian education which gives these academic departments a practice-arena of their own within the field of education.¹¹ It is possible that this development will gradually remove the type of theologically founded religious education for school that used to exist in earlier years. The same development may contribute to a stronger framework of research also in school related religious education. One overlapping field of interest may be the investigation of teaching and learning about religion and worldviews in non-public faith and values-based schools. This points towards a field of research that can be termed 'religion, worldviews *and* education' or 'religion and worldviews *in* education'.

Many religious education researchers do not work in departments devoted to research in religion or education, but in mixed departments of teacher education. For bad or worse, these are undergoing changes, due to a row of organisational mergers in the sector that started in the 1990s and is continuing. For research, this may be positive, since it may result in larger and more concentrated faculties with expertise in religions, worldviews and education. The challenge is to maintain the focus on education of teachers and not lose all resources in the transaction costs. The development of more uniform teacher education structures and curricula, from primary to upper secondary education has made communication across institutions easier and at the same time a differentiation of the levels into separate 'tracks' may increase opportunities to cooperate more with the practice level in the future.

Epistemologies of future religious education research – some concluding remarks

The positive possibilities for religious education research suggested in the previous paragraph are dependent on the actions of the community of religious education researchers. With the present level of research in Norway, the individual scholars will continue to produce valuable new knowledge. Still, this does not secure the field of research a sustainable future. Here we can use the dissertations of Skeie and Andreassen as cases. Roughly speaking, they have chosen different strategies for making their research productive in the community of researchers. Skeie put most efforts into broad networking across departments, nationally and internationally and combined this with initiation of and participation in very varied research projects. Andreassen has worked along a somewhat more discipline-oriented line, by continuing to build a religious studies based religious education approach through both research publications and textbook production. As earlier mentioned, both strategies have strengths and weaknesses.

¹¹ This goes in particular for Menighetsfakultetet/Norwegian School of Theology, see: <http://www.mf.no/forskningphd/pagaende-prosjekter/forskning-pa-trosopplaeringsreformen> (accessed 19.07.2016)

The disciplinary strategy is valuable as a support structure of the networks and as a way of securing religious education a 'home' in academia. Even if universities today are constantly changing and reorganising themselves, the disciplinary structures are still recognisable and usually possible to detect even after each 'makeover'. We know that religious education research has suffered from a lack of institutional recognition and prioritisation and this can only be remedied by developing a stronger basis 'at home'. Sometimes educational departments are more difficult to convince about the importance of religious and worldview 'literacy', while religious studies and theology departments today have become more positive towards educational issues. The future position of religious education research in these departments is therefore crucial. It gives individual research possibilities, access to PhD education, and other parts of research infrastructure.

The network strategy is needed in order to compensate for the vulnerability of religious education researchers spread in many different academic departments. It is also necessary to be able to get access to the big research money, which today are mainly available to consortiums of researchers from different institutions. Religious education research needs large projects and not to be left as a small complimentary part of another education or religious studies/theology projects. Broad research networks are also necessary to run conferences, stimulate specialist journals and provide young researchers with opportunities for developing their own research contacts. The resources to run these networks are many and varied, and as long as there are individuals committed to take care of the networks, they thrive.

We have seen that religious education research is sometimes falling between institutional chairs and that research may be affected by this and react differently on it, like in the two cases presented. In conclusion a particular aspect of this will be addressed that has not been taken up much in earlier religious education research debate, but that may be something to consider for the future. The starting point is that religious education research is sometimes indexed in different ways by libraries, search engines, databases, research agencies and higher education institutions. Partly it seems to be indexed as religious studies and/or theology and partly categorised as educational studies. A survey of the researchers would probably disclose that most identified with research into religion, whether this be with a religious studies or a theology perspective, rather than educational studies. Even with roots in religion research, they often point to the similarities, overlaps and cooperation with educational sciences and other disciplines. In addition, many have a perspective on religious education that implies that the context of (secular) education is central. The somewhat confusing self-understanding and positioning of the researchers may be one reason for the inconsequence of indexing, and this in turn is a challenge for research development.

There is a lack of clarity and consensus regarding state of the art in religious education research and this prevents it from moving forward, even if there may be a lot of exiting individual contributions. There is even a necessity to get a better overview of the amount of work published. A national and possibly international initiative to address this through systematic reviews may be exactly what is needed in

the present situation. Some of the debates about disciplinary 'home' or 'identity' in the past have not been productive in order to move research forward and the use of systematic reviews could help getting the epistemological issues 'grounded'. A systematic review would take the starting point in a problem or a thematic issue and scrutinise relevant research whatever epistemological position this may be based in. By building a body of state-of-the-art reviews, it might be possible to establish common ground for discussion central issues in religious education research across epistemological positions. The tradition for doing systematic reviews comes from medicine and natural sciences, but are quickly developing in social sciences and moving into humanities (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Religious education research should take the challenge to address this development.

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BASED ON TWO DISSERTATIONS.

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