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Religious Literacy in Non-Confessional Religious Education and Religious Studies in Sweden

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Abstract: The guidelines for religious literacy of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) argue for a generic understanding of religion as internally diverse, historically dynamic, and embedded in cultures. However, analysis reveals that religious education curriculums in Sweden tend to emphasise religious literacy as a means to diminish prejudice and conflict. Religious education (RE) is seen as giving students the ability to live in an increasingly multi-religious and multi-cultural world. In this paper I argue that fostering religious literacy at all levels of education requires curriculums that include the central elements of the AAR guidelines and adopt a more critical stance towards the concepts 'world religion' and 'religion'. I question the place of 'ethics' in RE and religious studies, especially as ethical models, since this blurs the boundaries between religious and moral education. Ethical models are better suited to the upper secondary school courses in philosophy. The idea of progression from the concrete to the abstract elements of religion must also be challenged. To be able to achieve the goals stipulated in the curriculums, and to avoid reproducing wrong understandings of religiosity, the school subject RE should be more closely embedded in contemporary research.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS LITERACY; CURRICULUM STUDIES; RELIGIOUS EDUCATION; ETHICS; LIVED RELIGION; CRITICAL RELIGION

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For some time, the term *religious literacy* has been discussed in relation to education about religion (e.g., Wright, 1993; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007; Brömssen, Ivkovits & Nixon, 2020). The concept of literacy originated in the late 1800s, primarily in the context of reading, writing, and understanding *texts*. In more recent times, literacy been used in a broader context, so that we now speak of digital media (digital literacy) and the ability to understand health-related issues (health literacy). This development indicates that what counts as ‘text’ has been widened, while the ability to understand a text – the literacy aspect – remains quite similar. From this perspective the term religious literacy, as well as its counterpart religious *illiteracy* (Moore, 2007), concerns the ability to understand, read and decipher cultural phenomena and human activities seen as ‘religious’. This term is itself both a constituting and a contested term in the field of religious studies. The lack of religious literacy has been identified as one of the major problems of the world today, fuelling misconceptions misunderstandings, and prejudices that lead to violence, discrimination and even war. At times, there has been a call for more religious education as a way to diminish conflicts, prejudices and misunderstandings in society (e.g., Lester & Roberts, 2009). In the OSCE *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (2007), one of two guiding principles is that ‘teaching *about* religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes’, while the other is that teaching about religions can ‘enhance religious freedom’ (2007, 12). Three things stand out in these brief quotations. First, the emphasis on the teaching *about* religion, rather than *in* or *from* religion (Vermeer, 2012; Teece, 2010; Grimmitt, 1987), indicates a non-confessional position in contrast to a confessional position where pupils and students may be taught what and how to believe. Secondly, it is the belief aspect of religion that is put in the foreground, rather than other perspectives. The focus is on content (i.e., religions and beliefs) rather than on how religious education could or should be conducted. Furthermore, due to the historical development of the concept of literacy, there is a danger that *religious literacy* ends up being about understanding religious texts, dogmas and beliefs (Enstedt, 2020, p. 64).

Following the line of argument embedded in the religious literacy discourse, the *raison d’être* of the school subjects religion (RE) and religious studies (RS) seems to be deeply aligned with the task of diminishing prejudice, conflicts and related problems in a global, pluralistic society. That means, in short, that there is an ethical foundation for the subject that distinguishes it from most other school subjects in that understanding religion – whatever that may be – is not necessarily a goal in itself. Instead, giving students and pupils the tools to understand ‘religion’ and enabling them to counteract misconceptions and prejudices about religion, so reducing future violent conflicts in a pluralistic world, comes to dictate the primary goal of the subject to which all activities should tend. But if we say that understanding ‘religion’ should be an overarching goal for education about religion, what does this really mean? What kind of knowledge about religion is explicit in the curriculums of Swedish RE and RS and what types of values and underlying presumptions are present in the documents? The aim of this article is to scrutinize how ‘religion’ and religious literacy are expressed and understood in religious education, limiting the scope to RE in primary and secondary school, and the

introductory course in religious studies at universities in Sweden. Even though the focus is on the Swedish context, I will also discuss examples of how religious literacy has been understood in other national contexts, and highlight some of the theoretically embedded problems related to understanding ‘religion’, to be able to shed some light on the situation in Sweden.

Method

To be able to explore the extent to which increased religious literacy is the goal of RE, one has to be more specific about *what* religious literacy may consist of. To answer this question, I turn first to the recent work on religious literacy of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and others. Thereafter, I explore what religious literacy is about in the Swedish context.

In *Curriculum Making in Europe* (2021), editors Mark Priestley, Daniel Alvunger, Stavroula Philippou and Tiina Soini argue for an increased focus on “curriculum making as a social practice, stating that curriculum making is an interactive and non-linear process that occurs and flows across various contexts and sties” (Priestley, Alvunger, Philippou, & Soini, 2021, p. 273). To study curriculum making as a social practice is an important imperative. Since the policy making process is multifaceted and involves various stakeholders, policies often contain conflicting objectives and articulate different voices. Moreover, an intended or unintended resistance to the implementation of policies, or parts of them, may also occur in the social practice of teachers and educators (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). The goal of the present study is to analyse the construction and content of the Swedish curriculums with focus on religious literacy and the concept ‘religion’. I am setting aside admittedly important questions about how the curriculums may affect the educational system, the role of teacher, policy enactment, and pupils’ and students’ religious literacy. Instead, I raise rather classical questions in the field of curriculum studies, concerning content and what kind of knowledge that is regarded most valuable. In the following I examine how the Swedish curriculum for RE is constructed, with particular focus on how ‘religion’ is understood in relation to other concepts and values. As such, this study draws on research conducted in the field *critical religion* that often relies on discourse analysis (Taira, 2016, McCutcheon, 1997), and pose critical questions to the academic and analytical use of the concept ‘religion’ (Horii, 2018). The current RE curriculum for primary and secondary school is produced by The National Agency for Education (Swe. *Skolverket*), while the curriculums for higher education are locally formulated by different universities in Sweden.

In the following, I undertake a document analysis to examine the curriculums that govern RE and RS in Sweden (Bryman, 2016, pp. 545–568). More precisely, I depart from content analysis, described by David L. Altheide and Christopher J. Schneider (2013, p 26-28, 39-74), to be able to extract manifest central themes, values and underlying presumption governing the documents (Foucault, 2002, p. xxii). In the analysis, the different curriculums are more or less seen as temporarily fixed entities, rather than embedded in a wider social practice (Deng, 2012; Young and Muller, 2015).

By doing so, I'm following the example of Brömssen, Ivkovits and Nixon (2020), and their analysis of religious literacy in the curriculum in Austria, Scotland and Sweden. Hence, the emphasis is not put on the curriculum's effect and impact or relevance for social policies, but rather on the documents' internal logic, relations to each other and other similar policy documents. Scrutinizing the presumptions that underpin the RE and RS curriculums also enable me to discern values, (implicit) theories and understandings of 'religion' in these documents.

Religious Literacy and Religious Literacy Guidelines

Since publishing *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (2007), Diane L. Moore has become one of the most cited scholars in the field of religious literacy, even though the concept has been discussed since the early 1990s (Wright, 1993). Moore has also been engaged in the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, and in developing the guidelines of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). When Moore revisited the concept of religious literacy in 2014, she referred to the AAR definition of the term:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place. (AAR Guidelines 2010, 4, quoted in Moore, 2014, pp. 379–380).¹

The AAR has produced guidelines for teaching religion from kindergarten to 12th grade in public schools and for college students in the USA. At the heart of *AAR Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* (2010) lie the following three premises: 'illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective, called religious studies' (AAR Guidelines, 2010, p. 1). This statement indicates that faith-based approaches and confessional theological perspectives are excluded. As regards religious illiteracy, the document states that religious traditions are often 'represented inaccurately' as religious leaders are often allowed to represent the religious tradition and give the 'correct' version. Different religious traditions are also often presented from the perspective that there is a 'pure' tradition that is not affected by historical, cultural and societal changes (AAR Guidelines, 2010, p. 5). These (mis)representations often hold a *sui generis* perspective, which may be more closely related to the self-understanding of the tradition, or its leaders, than to the actual history and characteristics of the 'religion'. Furthermore, the misconceptions that constitute religious illiteracy generate antagonism

¹ This definition is also used in the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School (accessed 2021-01-29).

and prejudices about religion. Anti-Semitism and stereotypes of Muslims are given as two examples to illustrate this. The third premise focuses on the ability of academic RS to diminish religious illiteracy. The AAR poses three central principles that should be taught, and these are picked up and developed by Harvard Divinity School's Religious Literacy Project: 'religions are internally diverse; religions are dynamic; and religions are embedded in culture' (AAR Guidelines, 2010, p. 1). The summary further contrasts the goals of the RS perspective to the faith-based perspective:

encouraging student awareness of religions, but not acceptance of a particular religion; studying about religion, but not practising religion; exposing students to a diversity of religious views, but not imposing any particular view; and educating students about all religions, but not promoting or denigrating religion. (AAR Guidelines, 2010, p. 1)

Much of what is said in the AAR guidelines (2010) for schools serves as a starting point for the *AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines* (2016) for college students. That document specifies the learning goals for college students, including the ability to 'distinguish confessional or prescriptive statements about religion from descriptive or analytical statements' (*AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines*, 2016, p. 4). The AAR acknowledges that students may receive knowledge from sources other than college, but insists that college education be based on RS. There is a tendency in the AAR guidelines to argue for a more 'enlightened' education about religion, often in contrast to a presumed devotional perspective. For instance, it is suggested that teachers could begin religious education by exploring the students' (mis)conceptions of and assumptions about different religions in order to help them 'look at religion clearly' (AAR Guidelines, 2010, p. 12). The RS perspective, more specifically articulated as a cultural studies approach, then works as a corrective to students' misconceptions. Furthermore, it is thought to provide them with tools to become democratic, tolerant and peaceful citizens in a multi-cultural world, with respect and a deeper understanding of others' religions and worldviews.

Even though the US educational context differ from the Swedish context, there are some aspects to consider and lessons to be learned from observing how Moore's more abstract and theoretical concept *religious literacy* is transformed and operationalized into guidelines.² The result of this work can be compared with curriculums in other national contexts, and even though the AAR guidelines are not curriculum text *per se*, they do express normative claims and suggestions about what should be thought regarding 'religion'.

The literature defining and discussing religious literacy is much broader than AAR:s guidelines. Religious literacy is a concept that has been interpreted in many different ways in different national contexts (for an overview see Biesta et al., 2019 and Brömssen, Ivkovits & Nixon, 2020).³ Comparing the curriculums of Scotland, Austria

² There are other relating projects in the U.S., for instance *The California 3 RS Project. Rights, Responsibility and Respect*, where new perspectives for RE in the U.S. is discussed.

³ There is for instance a recent publication on religious literacy in Finland (Sakaranaho, Aarrevaara and Konttori, 2020).

and Sweden, Kerstin von Brömssen, Heinz Ivkovits and Graeme Nixon point out that the ‘current Swedish curriculum stands out as being academic and rationalistic, with the aim of developing a rather distanced and analytic religious literacy in order to understand the world based on a scientific basis. ... Moreover, ethics should be studied based on ethical concepts and models and are not mentioned in relation to the students themselves’ (Brömssen, Ivkovits & Nixon, 2020, p. 144). Religious education in Sweden has also been described as marinated in Lutheran Protestantism (Berglund, 2013). I would add a secularistic *doxa* to the picture (Kittelman Flensner, 2015; Enstedt, 2020). Considering the results from the World Value survey – in which Sweden is characterized by secular-rational values and a high degree of self-expression values – this might not seem to be a surprising description of religious education in Sweden.⁴ But what does this mean for the curriculums that govern religious education in Sweden? And what does that mean for the cultivation of religious literacy? The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (2007) include a number of recommendations to consider. One of these suggests evaluating existing curriculums ‘with a view to determining whether they promote respect for freedom-of-religion rights and whether they are impartial, balanced, inclusive, age appropriate, free of bias and meet professional standards’ (2007, p. 15). In what follows, I will not use human rights, freedom of religion or any other ethical dimension to measure the (in)adequacy of the description, organisation and presentation of religion in the curriculums. Instead, I will rely on a critical evaluation of the concept religious literacy from an RS perspective.

Religion in Non-Confessional Education in Sweden

Religious education is one of the school subjects that derives its knowledge traditions and content from a university discipline, religious studies. However, it is problematic to understand school subjects as merely transferred university disciplines, since school subjects also include other objectives and stakeholders (Deng, 2012; Priestley, Alvunger, Philippou, & Soini, 2021, p. 275). Thus, in compulsory public education in Sweden the RE curriculum is not only based on the academic subjects’ research base. For primary and secondary schools there are several different stakeholders involved in forming RE into an educational subject, which is not only grounded in academic research about religion but also is decided on in complicated curriculum conversations between the stakeholders (Pinar, 2019). Even RS curriculums may be affected by stakeholders, such as the Church of Sweden and The National Agency for Education. However, here the emphasis will be on evaluating RE and RS from a contemporary religious studies perspective, not taking into account the variety of interests that may be involved developing RE. In addition, while university disciplines influence school subjects, the inverse relationship should also be taken into account. If we are to understand religious higher education in contemporary Sweden, we also need to

⁴ <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp> (accessed 2021-01-29).

consider primary and secondary school religious education. This is partly because there is an idea about progression that involves a gradual development through the levels of education, and partly because many university courses in RS are affected by the profile of teacher training programmes. In this article, I investigate the basic idea of progression in RE and RS, starting with the elementary school curriculum:

The teaching of the subject religion will aim to develop pupils' knowledge of religions and other life stances in the pupils' own community and elsewhere in the world. Through teaching, students will become aware of how people in different religious traditions live with and express their religion and beliefs in different ways (Skolverket, 2019, p. 215).⁵

The curriculum also mentions a central *ethical* aspect, namely that RE should 'stimulate students to reflect on various life issues, their identity and ethical stance [and thereby] create the conditions for pupils to develop a personal attitude and understanding of their own and other people's ways of thinking and living' (Skolverket, 2019, p. 215). This statement explicitly focuses on cultivating an ethical element in non-confessional education about religion. The pupils should be integrated into an existing social order, find their place in it and learn to 'act responsibly in relation to themselves and their surroundings' (Skolverket, 2019, p. 215). To be able to do so required in-depth knowledge of both oneself and others, especially – when it comes to education about religion – about people with other religious belongings or other life stances. Ethics thus has a central position in RE for the reasons set out in the framework of the elementary school curriculum:

Ethical values are often closely related to a person's religion or life stance. Therefore, ethics has for long been a central part of the school subject religion. In this field of knowledge, ethical concepts, moral issues and ethical models, conceptions of the good life and ethics and views on humanity in religions and other life stances are dealt with.

...

Religious education should develop students' capacity for ethical reasoning. In order not to limit such ethical reasoning to mere formulations of opinions and points of view that lack clear justifications, it is necessary that the students develop knowledge of ethical concepts and ethical models. Such knowledge enables an analytical approach to the issues being discussed. In order for religious education to become a meeting place for conversation, reflection and argumentation on moral issues relating to human life and relationships, it is necessary to develop knowledge of what an analytical approach entails, both in theory and in practice.⁶

Such an explicit emphasis on moral issues, ethical values and concepts affirms what is sometimes referred to as 'moral education' in places like Scotland. Moral education focuses on the overall aim of fostering and educating democratic citizens ready to live in a pluralistic society. These nurturing elements in RE have been met with criticism

⁵ All translations from Swedish to English are mine.

⁶ Kommentarer till grundskolans kursplan, 28.

(Owen 2011, 263). But what do the RE documents specifically say about teaching *religion*?

The subject's core content in years 4–6 is described as follows under the heading Religion and other worldviews: 'Rituals and religiously motivated precepts, and also holy places and locations in Christianity and the other world religions of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 220). The concept *ritual* is mentioned, as well as *religiously motivated precepts*, rather than ethics, that would work as an equivalent concept. Furthermore, emphasis is put on spatial and geographical perspectives in *holy places and locations* that turn out to be a third theme for the school subject religion. The five world religions – the “big five” – are single out explicitly as the focus of these thematic departures. It is, however, soon made clear that the emphasis should be on the 'key ideas *behind* rituals, precepts and holy places in Christianity and the other world religions, such as those expressed in religious narratives in the Bible and other records' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 220; emphasis mine). The seemingly promising focus in the first sentence turns out to be about religious *texts* and *ideas*. Even more important, and somewhat disturbing, is the idea that there are text-based key ideas *behind* religious practices and rituals. All in all, it is a remarkable statement that, by using the word *behind*, simultaneously signals a temporal relationship and a possible causality between religious rituals and thoughts and narratives and documents, implying that the latter precede the former.

Years 7–9 have an even stronger emphasis on religion as faith and texts, which resonates with the previous foci of RS (Gilhus & Mikaelsson, 2003).

Religions and other outlooks on life

- *central thoughts and scriptures [Swe. urkunder] in Christianity and the distinctive features of the three main orientations of Christianity: Protestantism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy.*
- *central thoughts and scriptures in the world religions Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism.*
- *Various interpretations and practices within the world religions in contemporary society.*
- *The main features of the history of world religions.*
- *New religious movements, spirituality and private religiosity and how these are expressed.*
- *Secular views of life, such as humanism.*

(Skolverket, 2018, p. 218)

The formulation about Christianity is more specific than for other religions and emphasises 'the distinctive features of the three main orientations of Christianity: Protestantism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy' (Skolverket, 2018, p. 221). Besides the essentialist element implicit in the phrase 'distinctive features', this particular quotation illustrates a common way of talking about religion as consisting of different orientations

or branches. Similar statements are made about other religions, even if it is primarily Christianity that is discussed in the curriculum. The documents often reflect the implicit tree model that is commonly used to present the history of religion (Jackson, 2008; Jackson, 2016). In that model the trunk of the tree constitutes the formative period, while the root system – the prehistory of the religion – is usually portrayed as more complicated and diverse. Over the course of history, the tree develops different branches, often clearly labelled, such as the distinction between Shia and Sunni Islam, or between the Eastern and Western Church, or Protestantism and Catholicism. These branches then undergo further branching and may end up, as Thérèse Halvarson Britton describes it, as the lived religion of individuals (Halvarson Britton, 2019, pp. 201–202). The lived religion of individuals may be included in the sentence “[v]arious interpretations and practices within the world religions in contemporary society” (Skolverket, 2018, p. 221). This model indicates that history becomes more complicated and multifaceted the closer we get to the present, while the early history appears to be more uniform and stable. The early phase – the trunk of the tree – appears as the base from which branches protrude. It also indicates that the tree is distinct from other trees; for example, the Hindu tree is distinct from the Christian tree. In this way, the tree model is embedded in a box model – where religions constitute closed entities – as well as in the World Religions paradigm’s essentialist understanding of religion, that is a *sui generis* understanding of religion (McCutcheon, 1997). It is important to say that the tree model, and similar ways of organising religion in education, are not neutral or innocent. In Susanne Owen’s words: ‘Outside of education, it is largely fundamentalists who defend exclusivist categorizations of religion’ (Owen, 2011, p. 261).

Beside the essentialist and exclusivist tendencies in the curriculum, there is also an idea about progression: ‘A basic principle for the content progression from year one to year nine is that it goes from the student-oriented and concrete at younger ages, to further perspectives and more abstract study objects at older ages’.⁷ This idea of progression is most likely based on developmental psychology and theories of learning that argue that children’s thinking is initially concrete and moves towards more abstract reasoning as they age. This approach is reflected in the work of the cognitively oriented developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and the work on moral development of Lawrence Kohlberg (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2018). Problems arise, however, if religion is treated as contextual and embodied for younger students – religion as place, space, rituals – and more as a system of thoughts and ideas for older students. The use of ethical models and concepts in later grades, focusing on religious scriptures, religious beliefs and thinking, illustrates such a shift.

In upper secondary school, the treatment of the relationship between religious *belief* and science is one example of the effect of the idea of progression. The following excerpts from upper secondary school’s Religion 1 have a philosophical character with regard to the knowledge goals: ‘Interpretation and analysis of different theories and models in normative ethics and how these can be applied. Ethical and other moral

⁷ Kommentarer till grundskolan, 22.

notions of what a good life and a good society can be' (Skolverket, 2011). The following paragraph is formulating the core content of Religion 1 in upper secondary school:

- *Christianity, the other world religions and different views of life, their characteristics and how they are expressed and perceived by individuals and groups in contemporary Sweden and in the rest of the world.*
- *Different anthropologies (Swe. människosyn) and perceptions of God within and between religions.*
- *Religion in relation to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity and sexuality.*
- *The identities of individuals and groups and how they can be shaped in relation to religion and views of life based on, for example, religious scriptures, traditions, social media, and historical and contemporary events.*
- *Different perceptions of the relationship between religion and science in the current public debate.*
- *Interpretation and analysis of different theories and models in normative ethics and how these can be applied. Ethical and other moral notions of what a good life and a good society can be.*
- *Analysis of arguments concerning ethical issues based on Christianity, other world religions, views of life and the pupils' own positions.*

(Skolverket, 2011, p. 2)

In the non-mandatory course Religion 2 the emphasis is on “New religious movements and currents, what signifies them and their relation to the world religions” and “private religiosity”, that is “[i]ndividual interpretations of, and expressions of, religious beliefs in a society characterized by diversity.” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 4) Lived religion, religious practices and rituals, embodiment, materiality, food and clothing are largely absent in upper secondary school. It is only in the third course Religion – specialization, which is not mandatory, that “rituals and patterns of action” are given as examples of what can be included (Skolverket 2011, p. 6). This is the only time rituals are mentioned in the syllabus for Religion in upper secondary school. For years 7-9, rituals are mentioned once: “Rites, such as baptism and confirmation, and their function in forming identity and a sense of community in religious and secular contexts.” (Skolverket, 2018, p. 222). It is thus primarily about rites of passage, and not religious practice in everyday life which is otherwise an important part of ritual studies (Enstedt & Plank, 2018). On the other hand, the following is stated in the comments on the curriculum under the heading ‘Plurality and Lived Religion’:

The emphasis on plurality also aims to make students aware that the way people practise and understand their religion in everyday life can differ significantly from the image of the religion given by official advocates – priests, theologians and spiritual leaders. The reason for highlighting this when teaching is to counteract stereotypical images and a predetermined view of religion in relation to people’s actual values and actions. (Skolverket, 2017, p. 5)

Overall, the comments on the curriculum are rooted in contemporary RS and take a critical and problematic approach to the curriculum's imperatives and goal formulations.⁸

In upper secondary school, religion thus risks being reduced to the cognitive, a way of thinking, an ethical model, or a set of logical and rational statements. This reductive and biased representation of religion also risks reproducing an implicit stage of 19th century thinking in which primitive religion was regarded as embodied through rituals and took place in concrete places, while 'advanced' religion – often Protestant Christianity in the shape of liberal theology – took a correct ethical approach that formed the basis of a 'decent' society (see Tylor, 1871).

Higher Level Education About Religion

After reviewing the curriculums for the introductory course in RS at universities in Sweden, it is obvious that the learning objectives coincide in several respects.⁹ The World Religions paradigm (WRP) is present in most curriculums, at least when it comes to how the different courses are structured, and an emphasis on the life stances and ethics are common features. In some cases, as at Lund and Gothenburg, there is a combination of history of religion and the psychology and sociology of religion. It can also be noted that it is mainly in the history of religions that the WRP is spelled out, in a way that sometimes distinguishes Christianity from the other religions by being presented in a separate module. For example, the first module of introductory course in RS at Linköping University deals with four of the five world religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism (Linköping University, 2018). The three following modules have a greater focus on Christianity and Christian theology and tradition, although secular views of life and ethics also appear. This introductory course thus largely follows the same pattern as in primary and secondary schooling with its division between world religions (with a special focus on Christianity), the study of life stances and ethics.

To be able to understand this somewhat arbitrary ordering and division of the subject of religion one has to turn to a report from 1971 (*Utredningen angående den religionsvetenskapliga utbildningens mål och metoder*). The report was produced after the de-Christianization of Swedish elementary schools and set out a way forward for the subject at university level.¹⁰ The report stresses the importance of the study of life

⁸ <https://www.skolverket.se/getFile?file=3829> (accessed 2021-01-29). This material is written in relation to elementary school religious education. There is a similar but more concise commentary on Religion 1 at upper secondary school level. For example, lived religion is not mentioned in upper secondary school commentary material. (accessed 2021-01-29).

⁹ The reviewed curriculums for the introductory course in RS are not explicitly developed for the teacher training program, even though teacher training students may take these courses as part of their education or be able to include at least parts of them as part of their degree.

¹⁰ This was done as a result of the reforms and debate on religious education during the 1960s in Sweden in particular (*Utredningen angående den religionsvetenskapliga utbildningens mål och metoder*, 1971, pp. 8–9).

stances and ethics, as well as social science perspectives, and especially the psychology of religion. There is also a division between Christianity and non-Christian religions. This way of ordering the subject is seen in many curriculums in Sweden.

At Karlstad University, the study of life stances and world religions is clearly stated, just as in primary and secondary school's governing documents. The historical perspective on Christianity is presented as 'some main lines in Western theology and church history, including the reasons that gave rise to different orientations such as the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions' (Karlstad University, 2012). The five world religions are also in the curriculum at Södertörn University. What distinguishes the education at Södertörn is the amount of time given to Islam (7.5 credits) and contemporary spirituality and secular views of life (6 credits) (Södertörn University, 2019). The introductory course in RS at Umeå University consists of modules 'that deal with Christianity's roots, Judaism, Islam, ethical issues, worldviews and attitudes and psychological perspectives on individuals' religious experiences and behaviours' (Umeå University, 2014a).¹¹ The education is organised according to the WRP, the study of life stances, psychology and sociology of religion. What distinguishes Linnaeus University's introductory course in RS is its emphasis on the difference between, as they put it, 'a humanistic scientific approach to religions' and 'a confessional perspective', and the requirement that the student must 'demonstrate an awareness of the diversity of religious expressions and historical variability in the religions treated' and 'conduct a small field study and orally present its results to others' (Linnaeus University, 2018).

At Uppsala University students are expected to attain the ability to 'account for and compare the main features of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and the historical development of these traditions' and 'demonstrate knowledge of what a scientific approach to religion, theology and world views means'. The student should also be able to 'demonstrate basic ability to use historical, anthropological, sociological and psychological methods and theories to understand the role of religions for the individual, group and society' (Uppsala University, 2019). In addition, the course deals with the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Quran and the Bhagavad-Gita, as well as life stances and values in conflict and dialogue. After completing the course, a student should be able to 'analyse a selection of contemporary problems in relation to relevant world views and argue for their [the student's] own position in relation to these [problems] with the help of scientific concepts and theories'. This emphasis on the student's own position seems unique within the framework of curriculums at university level. A similar description is found in the lower levels of primary school. At university level, however, the focus is on analysis, arguments and scientific concepts and theories.

The introductory course in RS at Lund University emphasises social science perspectives and perspectives that underscore religious practice, even though the WRP and a focus on texts are also present: '[After completing the course, the student should]

¹¹ Umeå University also offers an introductory course for 60 higher education credits, which includes Sami and Old Norse religion (Umeå University, 2014b).

be able to identify and account for basic teachings and practices, historical growth and texts in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous traditions and other religious traditions' (Lund University, 2017). The first 12 credits are devoted to History of Religion and Religious Behavioural Science, while the remaining 18 credits deal with Biblical Studies, Church and Mission Studies, and finally Studies in Faith and Worldviews. At the University of Gothenburg, the introductory course consists of five sub-courses (University of Gothenburg, 2016a).¹² In addition to Introduction to Religious Studies and Theology, the introductory course is divided between History of Religion and religious behavioural science (sociology and psychology of religion). The religious history courses cover the world religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East, and Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in Asia. The emphasis is on 'historical development'. The behavioural science courses focus on 'theories, methods and concepts' as well as on religion at 'individual, group, social and global levels'. While the religious history courses are based on the WRP, religious behavioural science is more of a toolbox with a contemporary focus and thematic divisions that can be used in the study of all religions and non-religions.

In the introductory course in RS at Mid Sweden University, the emphasis is on world religions and their history. The world religions are presented as 'Abrahamic religions' – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as well as 'South and East Asian religions', Hinduism and Buddhism (Mid Sweden University, 2020). Stockholm University does not offer an introductory course in religious studies; instead it offers a course on the history of religion (Stockholm University, 2017). The content of the course does not differ much from introductory courses in RS. There are four sub-courses of equal size. The introductory course also covers 'concepts, research areas and explanatory models in the anthropology, sociology and psychology of religion'. The introductory course that follows is arranged according to the WRP: 'Abrahamic religions', that is 'religions originating in the Middle East, that is, Judaism, Christianity and Islam', followed by 'South and East Asian religions', that is 'Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shinto in both history and the present'. In addition, Europe's pre-Christian religions are discussed, that is 'the religious traditions that flourished in Europe before (or in the shadow of) the dominance of Christianity'. A comparative element appears when it is said that the student should be able to 'account for the basic features of Abrahamic religious traditions [and of the religions of South and East Asia] and identify similarities and differences between them'. The term 'basic features' and the stress of comparability, as well as the conception of the 'origins and historical development of religious traditions, basic ideas and rituals as well as relations to social life', reveals an essentialist conception of religion. This does not, however, necessarily mean that this is an expression of a *sui generis* view of religion.

Curriculums are a specific genre. It is therefore difficult to determine how these documents are translated into concrete teaching situations, lesson planning and forms

¹² The University of Gothenburg also offers an introductory course in theology, where biblical studies, church history and systematic theology are taught (Göteborgs universitet, 2016b).

of education. What is clear is that there is a common, cross-university approach to the content of the introductory course, namely that it deals with at least five of the world religions, which are classified under the religions of Asia and those of the Middle East ('Abrahamic'). In the comments to the material concerning elementary school, the picture is somewhat nuanced:

The central concept World religions in the curriculum's first area of knowledge is in itself disputed but has nevertheless been chosen, with regard to established language. The delimitation to the world religions Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism in the syllabus text should, like all central content, be seen as a minimum that does not exclude that other traditions, such as Confucianism, Sikhism or Bahá'í are also mentioned in the education. This selection must, as always, be based on the teacher's didactic considerations, changes in the world around us and the pupils' life-world. (Skolverket, 2017).

The WRP is thus present, at least at the curriculum level, although it is occasionally extended to accommodate other religions. However, such an expansion does not change the basic presumptions of the field itself, but rather strengthens and consolidates them (cf. Sutcliffe, 2016). Study of world views, life stances, ethics and the social science perspectives is also present. Thus curriculums in RE in introductory and upper secondary school, and the curriculums that apply to the first level introductory course in RS at universities in Sweden all emphasise world religions, with the addition of other life stances and ethics.

Religious Literacy in Non-Confessional Religious Education in Sweden

There is a general tendency to emphasise religious literacy as a means of diminishing prejudices and conflicts, and for RE to foster competencies to give pupils the ability to live in a global, increasingly multi-religious and multi-cultural world. Due to the recent national history of Swedish school system, there is, in sum, a focus on 1) the texts, beliefs and practices ascribed to the world religions, 2) ethics, and 3) the study of life stances. This is one of the results of the de-Christianization of Swedish education that began during the 1960s. I would like to draw attention to some of the results of this approach identified above: the emphasis on ethics, progression and the WRP.

The ethical perspective is present at least in two senses. It is part of the curriculum as 'ethical models' about which pupils should attain knowledge. An overarching goal for RE and Swedish schooling in general is to prepare pupils to live peacefully in a pluralistic world. The ethical models tend to be standard philosophical models of ethics, and as such they might be better off in the philosophy course, even though philosophy is not a mandatory subject and is only offered in upper secondary school. The curriculum does not indicate how the ethical models contribute to knowledge about religion, and the ethical models are usually discussed as a separate realm. Even though they may be used in relation to religion, one must always ask what the purpose of the ethical models is and if there isn't another – *better* – way to educate pupils and students

about religion. Why is the ethical model there at all? And what purpose does it serve? How do the ethical models affect the understanding of religion? Has non-confessional religious education simply taken over the moral and ethical imperatives from the previous confessional education?

Concerning the progression expressed in the curriculums, it is clear that RE starts by exploring pupils' own contexts and experiences by letting them engage with their surroundings. This tactile, embodied and reflexive way of cultivating religious literacy is gradually replaced with a more analytical, abstract and textual study of religion. In addition, the curriculum rests on an implicit idea of progression and development from pupils to students, based on the models of cognitive development proposed by Jean Piaget and moral development formulated by Lawrence Kohlberg (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2018). This approach means that religious literacy becomes more focused on rationality, problem-solving and cognition, and ignores possible progression in *how* to relate to nearby religions, narratives and experiences. It does not mean that students gradually progress in their cognitive ability when it comes to understanding and thinking about 'religion', but rather that religion is understood cognitively. What happens to knowledge about religion when religious education is distributed like this? The implicit and explicit idea of progression correlates with an academic and rationalistic basis for religious education, as mentioned above. We must always, as educators, ask ourselves what the purpose of RE and RS is (cf. Biesta, 2013). One may, for instance, ask to what extent the presumptions about progression runs the risk of explaining *away*, rather than explaining, religion (Enstedt, 2020).

The purpose of religious education according to Robert Jackson is to gain knowledge about other people's religiosity (language, faith and practice). Jackson's normative approach is made clear when he stresses that RE is 'important to the personal development of students, and to their lives as social beings, living in complex modern societies' (Jackson, 2016, p. 151). Such a pattern of thought is found, at least in part, in the schools' governing document previously discussed. In stark contrast, Susanne Owen argues that the emphasis on morality and ethics in religious education 'blurs the boundary between RE and PSME (Personal, Social and Moral Education)' (Owen, 2011, p. 262). To avoid the risk of turning RE into moral education, Owen suggests a solution:

In secondary schools, I would propose separating religious education into two subjects, moral philosophy and religious studies, based on a cultural studies approach, and to discard the idea of 'world religions' altogether as a central guiding paradigm. At university, students can specialize in theology, which follows on from moral philosophy, or in religious studies, which would progress more logically from a cultural study of religions undertaken in secondary education. (Owen, 2011, p. 266)

The split suggested by Owen is perhaps as radical as it is unavoidable if one wants to contribute to a non-confessional RE. But let me turn to one important point made by Geoff Teece in relation to the concepts, learning *about* and learning *from* religion, that I mentioned in the introduction to this article. Referring to the OfSTED report of 2005, Teece points out "that many teachers are not comfortable with this model. The major

criticism is that learning about religion lacks depth and that consequently learning from religion is too ‘narrowly conceived only as helping pupils to identify and reflect on aspects of their lives, with lessons used narrowly as a springboard for this reflection’” (Teece, 2010, p. 95, quoting OfSTED, 2005, p. 2). Teece also highlights and gives examples of another important aspect, or rather problem, of RE pedagogy: ‘*learning about* and *learning from religion* were conceived within a human development approach to RE ... which, significantly, stressed that the study of religion should play an *instrumental* role in RE pedagogy’. (Teece, 2010, p. 94). That would indicate that the central role of the RE in schools is to nurture pupils and emphasise human development, what Owen called ‘moral education’, rather than ‘RS’ (without its problematic WRP legacy).

A related problem is articulated by L. Philip Barnes, who argues that the reduced role of moral education in RE is a result of turning to non-confessional religious education that ‘results in a reduction in the potential of religious education to contribute to the moral education of pupils’ (Barnes, 2011, p. 135). In striving for ‘neutrality’ RE leaves the religious sources for morality behind and what is left is abstract forms of ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’, as is the case in Sweden. While I agree that this is the case, and that both morality and ethics should be discussed in relation to religion and not as ‘autonomous realms’ (Barnes, 2011, p. 134), I am not as convinced as Barnes that ethics and morality should be part of religious education. Since the task of contributing to the moral education of pupils is placed on schools, it should not be limited to RE. It is deeply problematic if the rationale of RE is reduced to this task, rather than to bettering the pupils’ knowledge about ‘religion’. On the other hand, since moral development is – or should or could be – part of every school subject, RE is not separate from it but should attain this goal by developing subject specific skills in relation to religious literacy.

At the centre of the critique directed towards the WRP is the way religion(s) are organised in unempirical and unhistorical ways. Suzanne Owen mentions the gap between research and teaching in religious studies, and the gap between education in schools (RE) and universities (RS) (Owen, 2011). At the heart of the WRP lies a text-based understanding of religion, enabling (misleading) comparisons between abstract and idealized versions of world religions. The problem is not only that the textbook versions of world religions are not to be found ‘out there’ as empirical entities, but also, as Owen points out, that the ways in which ‘religion’ is represented in education confirm, and risk reinforcing, specific interpretations of religion. Take the example of Hinduism: ‘the assumptions underlying much academic usage of the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” in Britain are consonant with the radical claims of right-wing Hindu nationalists’ (Searle-Chatterjee, 2000, p. 497; also quoted in Owen, 2011, p. 260). There is a, most likely unintended, risk in RE of reproducing a specific interpretation of, for instance, Hinduism and by so doing confirming – and naturalizing – right-wing version of Hindu nationalists. The risk mentioned by Owen is of course not limited to the British context but may as well be as present in other context, such as the Swedish that I have discussed here. Hence, the very attempt to be descriptive and ‘objective’ in RE may actually legitimize such politicised interpretations. As I have shown in the curriculum

analysis above, the WRP and essentialisation of religion is a recurring patterning in the documents. However, considering teacher agency, that does not indicate that teachers necessarily reproduce the shortcomings of the curriculum (Priestley, Alvunger, Philippou, & Soini, 2021, p. 284). That is first and foremost an empirical question that may be dealt with using other types of material such as classroom observation, interviews with teachers and/or students, and so on. But still, Owen's reminder of this very risk is an important one for educators in both RE and RS.

In the example of Hinduism, there is an obvious political dimension where the concept 'religion' and the notion of a nation are combined. However, as Mitsutoshi Horii clearly shows in the case of Japan, the Japanese counterpart of the concept of religion, *shūkyō* and a Western notion of the nation-state were imported to Japan during the late 1800s. Thereafter these concepts affected the juridical system and the organisation of Japanese society. In fact, as Horii puts it, 'the invention of the category *shūkyō* played an integral role in creating the ostensibly non-religious secular domain, in which the legitimacy of the modern Japanese nation-state was authorised and maintained' (Horii, 2018, p. 55). The main point is that since 'religion' is being made, invented and incorporated in Japanese society, 'the category of religion should be the object, not the analytical tool, of academic research' (Horii, 2018, p. 240). Suzanne Owen and Teemu Taira elaborate on similar problems concerning the category of religion: 'There are no plausible scholarly ways to assess whether 'x' is *really* a religion, because the word is a classificatory tool without a clear reference. However, the category 'religion' is used frequently in public life; it is a tool for the organisation of society as it makes distinctions between different groups and practices in a specific way' (Owen & Taira, 2015, p. 90). In other words, the way that 'religion' is played out, affecting the organisation of society and groups within it, culture and relations, should be critically scrutinized.

The concept 'religion' and the modern notion of the nation-state are both invasive concepts that came to constitute Japanese society. Religion is not a descriptive or analytical concept; it is embedded in power and, as such, affects the ways people live their lives, understand themselves as individuals and as a collective. If we follow Horii's example, there is an educational problem for educators in RE and RS if these concepts are taken as 'given', as descriptions of an empirical world, rather than as concepts, ideas and categories that affect the world in which we live, just as other concepts do. For example, 'race' and 'homosexuality' were once taken as biological and scientific concepts and derived their credibility from science, but they have influenced morals and the organisation of societies (e.g. apartheid). Concepts are used in society. As Gayle Rubin puts it: 'Sexualities keep marching out of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual and onto the pages of social history' (Rubin, 1993, 18). From an educational point of view, there is thus a question about how to transfer these insights into an educational context. Following Owen, Taira, Horii and others in the field of *critical religion*, religious literacy may be about a knowledge of how 'religion' is played out, affecting the organisation of society and groups within it. The students and pupils should learn to critically scrutinize 'religion' in that manner, rather than taking it, more or less, for granted. These essential *critical religion* insights are yet to be included and articulated

in the curriculums in elementary school, upper secondary school and university education in Sweden.

Concluding Remarks

The curriculums analysed in this article largely reproduce an already existing and problematic order in which ‘religions’ are portrayed in fundamentally misleading ways based on a *sui generis* understanding, the WRP, and with blurred boundaries with moral education. Instead, RE should foster the abilities to discern how ‘religion’ is expressed and embodied in different contexts. Starting even in primary school, pupils could engage with a variety of expressions of Hinduism, Christianity, Atheism and New Age practices, and so on. Instead of asking ‘What is Hinduism?’ one could ask questions about how Hinduism is done and expressed in different contexts and from different positions in those contexts, and how, for instance, history, myths, rituals, symbols, texts, clothing, buildings, places, and food are put in to play in the making of Hinduism. The expressions of religion occur at different levels. They occur in everyday practices; in small gestures, in words, in public celebrations, informal meetings, decisions, in formal political laws (about what counts as religion and what not, to give one example; see Owen & Taira, 2015), in the governance of society and societal institutions. What does all this mean for religious education? A lot, I would say.

In this article, I argue that to foster *religious literacy* in elementary school, upper secondary school and university education, the curriculums should include the central thesis in AAR’s guidelines about religious literacy as well as a more critical stance towards the concepts ‘world religion’ and ‘religion’. I have also put into question the presence of ‘ethics’, especially as ethical models, in RE and RS since it blurs the boundaries between religious education and moral education. Ethical models are better suited to the upper secondary school subject philosophy. The idea of a progression from the concrete to the abstract elements of religion must also be challenged. To be able to achieve the goals stipulated in the curriculums, and to avoid reproducing wrong, even prejudicial, understandings of religiosity, the school subject RE should be more closely embedded in contemporary research in religious studies.

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