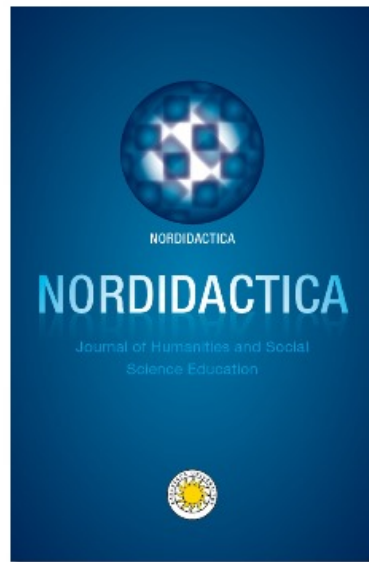


# **Response: the diversity of RE as a research field and the social function of religion as a moral negotiation ground**

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## **Response: the diversity of RE as a research field and the social function of religion as a moral negotiation ground**

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*Abstract: Present changes in religion as a school subject and Religious Education as a research field are generally, and also by most of the authors in this volume, explained by changes in the subject matter of religion, due to increasing religious pluralism. In a functional perspective, the school subject of religion contributes to the legitimizing function of school education for society and its institutions. With religion being a central moral negotiation ground in society, moral debate in society (and not only religious subject matter), and its constitutional role for Religious Education as a research field can explain further diversity of approaches to research in Religious Education. This also raises questions about the field's vulnerability to public instrumentalization and about moral negotiation and its place in religious education didactics.*

**KEYWORDS:** RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, PUBLIC RELIGION, RESEARCH, EPISTEMOLOGY

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The articles this response is aimed at, describe a diversity of approaches in the national discourses of Religious education. While Buchardt discusses diversification as a common epistemological trait of the field of Religious Education in Denmark, where new impulses in interdisciplinary spirit come from the edges of the research field, Skeie addresses an ongoing major paradigm shift from theology to religious science as an important factor in RE research in Norway. Osbeck seems to suggest that the sheer lack of size of the academic field is an important diversifying factor in Sweden. Ubani and Gunnarson describe changes in the development of RE research in respectively Finland and Iceland.

A diversity of approaches is more common than uncommon in academia and seems to be a sign of a vital academic discourse rather than a flaw. Also, interdisciplinary approaches in itself are usually not considered to be a problem. Some of the authors, consider the diversity in the field of Northern religious education to be epistemologically challenging: In their eyes, the field is characterized a diversity of such a degree that the concept of a religious education discourse becomes what Skeie describes as possibly vulnerable (Skeie in this special issue): Research impulses come from various academic environments, and seem to be uncoordinated, so that religious education as a field presents itself somewhat scattered and incoherent.

In my response, I will argue that the high degree of diversity and multiple "ownership" to RE research questions come natural as a characteristic trait of RE for epistemological reasons. Epistemology is about how knowledge is created. As far as I use the word, its main function is critical: Epistemology is about unveiling or discovering preconditions or structures that in some way or other influence, channel or limit knowledge production implying that certain questions will be asked, while others will be shut off. My response will argue that the observed diversity of RE research questions is mainly rooted in the nature of religion in plural societies, functioning as a negotiation ground for moral issues in society.

The diversity of the research context does not only apply for different approaches and research environments, as demonstrated by the articles of Osbeck, Skeie, and Buchardt. In an internationally comparative perspective, Bråten (2014) shows how the RE research discourse is strongly influenced by the respective national context. National variations in the meaning of some key concepts of RE demonstrate the intervowenness of the research field with the national institutional framework of the school subject of religious education in the various countries - to the degree that an univocal conceptual language is difficult to achieve on an international level.

On the one hand, this intervowenness with the various national institutional frameworks of the school subject of religion characterizes Religious Education as a field with an applied character (for instance Osbeck, this special issue). It can be argued that it shares this trait with its close sibling, the field of Education, where a lot of research effort is closely linked and dependent on the national institutional framework of the school system. And while it would be wrong to characterize the academic topic of Education fully as applied, the characterization is still valid to a lot of research done in the field, and to a large degree is pertinent. In other words, both academic fields, Education and RE, are epistemologically under the strong influence

of national policy-making, as schooling is under continuous scrutiny and reform through the political system (Buchardt, this special issue).

RE is, in other words, a field of academic practice closely linked to political premises. While other academic fields tend to consider political interference as a problem, in RE, one seems to interact with and to draw academic stimulation from political interests and political guidelines for religious matters in education.

Both the diversity of approaches and the affinity to national policy-making of RE as an academic field can be understood as a consequence of the function of RE as part of school education, and as such for the legitimization discourse of a society. Of course, the increasing presence of more than one religion in the Nordic societies, mentioned by several authors in this special issue, and the corresponding changes in the subject matter of Religious education as a school subject is an important aspect in this, but it is not the only one, and maybe not even the most influential one.

One of the functions of school as a subsystem in society is legitimization, mainly the legitimization of the institutions and the morale of a society (Fend 1980). This educational task combines both very foundational and elementary aspects of human conduct, but also the appreciation and internalization of complex democratic procedures. It begins with very basic issues in early preschool education; the concept of truth and lying, group behaviour, loyalty and friendship, and performing elementary forms of election and delegation of power, but also the practice and discussion of gender roles begin in primary school, while a basic understanding of and respect for the rule of law and the more complex institutions of society are on the agenda in secondary education.

School culture in general is an important aspect of value formation and contributes to the passing on of the moral consensus of a society to the new generation. There is a vital link between societal morale and the school system, as can be observed in the educationalization of key moral issues in society. Environmental concerns, rules and taboos for behaviour, general secondary virtues and attitudes that increase productivity in society, but also national cultural identity and gender morale are widely discussed as educational concerns and desired values and attitudes often considered easier to implement in school than in adult society.

While the educational system thus has its own affiliation with the moral culture of society, religion plays a vital role in this constellation, too. Traditionally, school culture and religion have been closely interdependent. To begin with, legitimization and value formation took place under the rule of the church, and, since the 19th century, in slowly increasing independence from the church. Especially in the monoconfessional Nordic countries with a history of power symbiosis between state and church, the rule of the church over school culture could strongly be felt. In Norway, for example, while the supervision of primary education by the church ended more than half a century ago, a prohibitive effort by the state is still in process in the form of regulations and decrees to put away with the symbiosis of school culture and the national church. An important part of this symbiosis has always been taken care of by religious education in school, which at least in the Norwegian context has been mirrored by a special status of religious education amongst school subjects.

While thus on the one hand the educational system - in Norway, at least - is still struggling to free itself from the domination of majority religion, one can on the other hand observe that moral key concerns in the Nordic countries, and indeed in many western countries, often are religiously coded, and perhaps more so in recent years than earlier. The dichotomy of Muslim vs. Christian has acquired a key role in the public understanding of globalization and migration issues and given a religious flavour to these issues, a dichotomy that has found its way into the classroom (Buchardt 2008: 194). Religious commitment and church involvement concerning questions of immigration and refugee's rights is strong, and other main issues of moral consensus in society, like environmental concerns or LGBT human rights are strongly debated on the religious arena, just like questions of international trade justice and nuclear disarmament were in earlier decades. While majority church as the major religious institution has lost a lot of its prescriptive importance for the values of the Nordic societies, the religious arena in society still retains its public role as a negotiation ground for a society's value foundation and moral consensus (maybe due to an increasing internal pluralization of the major churches). To elaborate this argument fully, goes beyond the scope of a response, but it is quite obvious that a functional approach to religion on sociological grounds under the premise of a plural society provides a solid theoretical framework for the envisaged role of religion as a moral negotiation ground.

It can be argued that RE as an academic discourse also reflects the moral issues and negotiations of a society. This applies firstly to the status of religion and religious institutions in society itself as an important issue. In an adaptation of Grimmitt's distinction (Grimmitt/Read 1975), between learning into, learning about and learning from religion one could distinguish between didactical approaches in the school subject of RE that communicate with different understandings of the role of religion in society.

To have one religion and its internal view as main reference for the subject corresponds to majority churches with a vital public presence, implying a religious paradigm for societal value consensus with a high overlap of individual morale and church teachings in a society. In spite of the Nordic paradox, (Bäckström/Beckman/Pettersson 2004), describing an individual reservation against church teachings together with a strong feeling of belonging to the church, not all Nordic countries have significant secular voices or voices from other religions publicly challenging majority religion. Thus, the role of majority religion for RE as a research field is characterized by robust structures in the field, described by several authors in this special issue.

The opposite notion, where several religions are reference point for the subject in a more or less parallel way, communicates with an understanding of religion as a private matter that is of no concern in the public sphere, and as such, of no more than indirect relevance to the moral consensus of a society. Consequently, pupil orientation as a didactical approach is labelled 'therapeutic' from this perspective, as one's therapy is not of public concern. This notion plays an important role in the RE discussion in Norway, as the public is challenging and debating the paramount role of its former

state church. The addition of a single letter to the name of the subject has recently been a matter of political compromise involving a majority of parliament. Not many school subjects get that kind of political attention about their names alone.

An understanding of religions as specific actors in the public without implying the same degree of public dominance for any of them, along with a certain degree of individual identification with official religious doctrine, would communicate with a third form of RE, where both inside and outside perspectives from several religions are legitimate subject matter and contribute to religious and moral formation, as well as research perspectives in the academic RE discussion.

Thus, the RE discourse in terms of the definition of the school subject mirrors the status of religion or religions in a society and the understanding of their public role. Paradigm shifts in RE seem to occur, as in Norway, when the societal status of religion changes.

Situated at the intersection between education and religion, the RE discourse also participates in the interconnectedness with the moral discourse of a society of both. Important moral concerns of a society will find their way into the field of RE as educational concerns, and RE as an academic discipline will participate in religion's function of a negotiation ground for the moral consensus of a society.

It is obvious that the discipline participates in the religious coding of globalization and migration issues. RE has adopted a special responsibility for questions of international migration and pluralization. These questions are of central concern for the moral consensus of all European states in our lifetime. Under various headlines and buzzwords, the latest one being borders, this concern has been vital for the religious education discourse for the last 25 years, since the beginning of the 1990s, and possibly longer. According to Ubani (this special issue) for example, the concern with multicultural issues creates more research in the field of RE in Finland than religious studies. And sometimes it is a little unclear how the moral intentions and concerns elaborated in the academic field of RE correspond to a school subject with a rather limited number of teaching hours and resources.

The link between Religious Education as an academic discipline and the societal moral discourse may also explain, why research impulses on religious education come from a variety of research environments, as Osbeck argues, and not in a consolidated way as a discipline: To put it provocatively: As long as the research is for a good moral cause, it seems to qualify as research in religious education. Compare for example the list provided by Skeie where he mentions that social cohesion, citizenship, diversity and terrorism/security are already part of the religious education discourse. (Skeie, this special issue). This comes as a consequence of the academic discourse of RE participating in the religious negotiation of societal value consensus, while at the same time being subject to the educationalization of important societal concerns, as part of schooling in general.

Interestingly, this negotiation function does not only apply to religious education in school. One would expect that Religious Education in the school system to a higher degree participates in matters of public debate than religious education in church.

However, the Norwegian context provides examples for church religious education negotiating the same issues than school education. During the last two decades, the Norwegian Church implemented a large reform of its children- and youth work, financed by the state. Formally, the increase of church finances for the purpose of faith education was granted with the argument that the church lost its baptismal education with the law on education of 1968, when parliament stated the independence of RE in school from church concerns. Interestingly, it took about 30 years, from the late 60es to the late 90es, before this argument was politically successful in Norway, and the reason why church religious education received a renewed political interest in the 90es also witnesses to the interwovenness between the field of RE and public debate. The 90es are considered to be a decade of international opening of Norwegian society (NOU 1995:12: *Oppl ring i et flerkulturelt Norge*), both in terms of immigration and of international cultural influences, a development that parts of the Norwegian public did not watch without anxieties and concerns. In that context, a strengthening of the role of the church seemed favourable in term of securing a Norwegian cultural identity (NOU 2000:26, 32; St.meld.nr.7 (2002):7). Thus, the research topic of Skeies dissertation, focussing a "culturally conscious religious pedagogy" is not a coincidence (Skeie 1998), nor is the focus on the religious and cultural heritage of the country in present Norwegian RE. The reform was not cheap; in 2012, already before it was fully implemented, it made up for between 15 and 20% of central state funding to the Norwegian church (based on figures in NOU 2013:1). The new church curriculum of 2010 "God gives - we share", educationally inspired by Vygotsky and Wenger, with learning by participation as the key concept, is a clear example of a learning-into-religion-approach. References to religious plurality in the curriculum, both nationally and internationally, are very limited. However, increasing pluralism within the church, with LGBT-rights being the prominent issue for the time being, imply that faith education has to develop its own version of an impartial teacher role, a role whose impartiality demands have been a key issue in the didactics of the school subject of RE in Norway. Teacher impartiality in religiously diverse issues is not the only plurality concern that faith education in the Norwegian Church and the religiously neutral school subject have in common. This year, a conference on faith education at Diakonhjemmet University College (*Religi s identitet og l ring "p  tvers". Trosoppl ring i mangfoldige lokalsamfunn. 19.04.2016*) gathered representatives from faith education schemes in the Norwegian Church that are attended not only by children belonging to the Norwegian Church, but also by immigrant children and youth, some of them belonging to non-Christian religions. Thus, the social reality of immigration initiates a didactical debate on religious pluralism within faith education of the Norwegian Church, a didactical space that - at least by some - originally was envisioned as a kind of religious Norwegian church sanctuary. These examples underline my argument that RE as such participates in the role of religion as a moral negotiation ground, independently of didactical concepts and approaches.

To sum up my argument so far: RE as an academic field is of a diverse nature. The reason for this diversity lies mainly in the nature of its subject, religion, and its

legitimizing function in society and for the school system. Due to the function of religion as a moral negotiation ground, a diverse variety of moral issues are also religious issues, and as such turn into concerns for RE as an academic field: a lot of RE research is about what Osbeck describes as prerequisites for teaching and learning processes, e.g. about aims and tasks (Osbeck, this special issue). The diversity witnesses to its scope being defined by the moral debate in society, and not only by religion as an essence or subject matter.

While this argument contributes to the question posed by the initiators of the NRCE symposium, the understanding of religion as a moral negotiation ground and the field of RE as participating in that negotiation, has consequences for the understanding of RE as a school subject and as an academic field.

1. RE is plural in the sense that it is a field of negotiation. Both in the academic field of religious education, but also in religion, a variety of moral stances are present and debated; issues challenging paramount values and everyday life practices and their inherent morale are on the religious agenda. In a good school book, the teaching and learning discourse takes part in and mirrors the dynamic debate of the subject matter at stake (Pingel 2010:74). Looking at religious education learning into/from/about religion, this raises the question to which degree it gives room for negotiation and plural moral stances?

2. At least in one of the mentioned approaches, the claim is made that RE is not normative. However, if religion is understood as a negotiation ground for moral views and stances, this implies that moral stances, truth claims and norms are vital to religion. I have tried to show that they are present in the RE academic discourse, too. This implies that RE has a normative subject matter - not necessarily in the sense that norms are to be transmitted, but in the sense that they are part of the subject at stake. In what way can stance-taking and normativity become a didactical reality in religious education as a school subject?

3. My argument has tried to show that RE as an academic field is closely linked to the public debate on moral issues. This implies the possibility of political instrumentalization. In this issue, Buchardt underlines how Bugge in Denmark established RE as its own field in a certain distance from both the field of theology and Education, but also to pragmatic demands and educational instrumentalism. In a critical perspective, one has to ask whose agenda RE as an academic field is serving or following? The problem at stake is easiest described like this: Who decides - and on what grounds, what is to be learned from religion and what not? In the past, religion has delivered the premises and norms for school culture. Is it possible that we experience the opposite today, with public opinion delivering the borders and presuppositions for the presentation of religion in public? Norwegian sociologists talk about an overarching value consensus in Norwegian society (Øia 2007, 79f.). To which extent defines this consensus the agenda of RE research? Is it possible to describe guidelines for the relation between the society's discourse on moral issues and RE? To which extent and in what subject matters is it necessary for RE as a research field to activate an own academic identity in a critical relation to the public?



4. The former question leads to the final one: What is the proprium of RE? What makes a topic an RE topic? What makes a moral research concern a RE research concern? Is there a body of knowledge that RE researchers can agree upon, that RE is responsible for and centered around? How can this body of knowledge be described?

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