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Discussing didactics of religious education in a Swedish context (conference paper)

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Abstract

In Sweden, the didactics of religious education is perceived as a relatively new field of research. In this study we show that, in fact, the field has very old roots and that there were the beginnings of an academic field of research in the 1970:s. The latter has in large parts been neglected or forgotten. We suggest that there currently is a lack of debate concerning the fundamental views of what the subject should be, as well overarching goals -- the lack of a “big picture”, if you will -- and that active teachers might lack a professional vocabulary. One might even question if there indeed is a field of didactics of religious education in Sweden. In this essay, we seek to look at that question. The main material is an overview of titles used in RE-teacher’s education, which illustrate the debate among scholars of religious education, as well as academic reviews of the subject. This is supplemented by interviews with three teachers. The study shows a fragmented field. No serious attempt is made at defining what the didactics of religious education is in a Swedish context. Few insights are implemented from the international field, such as Germany and England, nor even from the neighbouring countries Norway and Finland. This has repercussions for the teacher’s reflection on their practice.

The curriculum as didactics of religious education

In Sweden, the didactics of religious education¹ is perceived to be a relatively new field of research, and is, as a concept, quite unfamiliar for many practicing teachers. In this study we show that, in fact, the field has very old roots -- as old as the Swedish school, if not even older -- and that there were the beginnings of an academic field of research in the 1970:s which in large parts has been neglected or forgotten. We suggest that currently there is a lack of debate concerning the fundamental views of what the subject should be, as well overarching goals -- the lack of a "big picture", if you will -- and this might be one reason why active teachers might lack a professional vocabulary in RE. A language which would enable them to critically reflect on their teaching of RE. In lack of theoretical tools from the field of didactics of religious education, the curriculum becomes the teacher's sole foundation for their planning. Given this, one might even question if there indeed is a field of didactics of religious education in Sweden. In this essay, we seek to look at that question.

The main material used in the study is an overview of titles used in RE-teacher's education², which illustrate the debate among scholars of religious education, as well as academic reviews of the subject. This is supplemented by interviews with three teachers, all of whom have a long experience of teaching religion in upper secondary school in Sweden ("gymnasieskola"). One of the teachers has specifically studied the didactics of religious education on advanced level and two of them are tutors for university students who will become teachers in the subject.

The study shows a fragmented field. No serious attempt is made at defining what the didactics of religious education is in a Swedish context. Few insights are implemented from the international field, such as Germany and England, nor even from the neighbouring countries Norway and Finland. This has, as we'll see, repercussions for the teacher's reflection on their practice.

What is the didactics of religious education -- in Sweden?

In Sweden the term 'didactics' can, in a broad sense, cover everything that has to do with education. Terms that might be used in English is 'pedagogics' or 'education', as well as 'didactics'. We'll use didactics here to discuss religious education in the context of the Swedish school-system, which is non-confessional. The didactics of religious education is said to be a relatively young field of research in Sweden, but one which has come to thrive during the last years (Osbeck, 2006). A distinguishing trait of subject didactics in general is that it is interdisciplinary (Ongstad, 2004: 80). The disciplines involved could be illustrated as the intersection of two circles; the field of subject knowledge and the field of didactics or pedagogics. The didactics of religious education could thus be described as a

¹ Henceforth, the term 'religious education' is sometimes, though not always, abbreviated with 'RE'.

² Study books in "religionsdidaktik" and "religionspedagogik"; didactics resp. pedagogics of religious education. Study books on what RE is; on how one ought to teach religion in schools (primary and secondary).

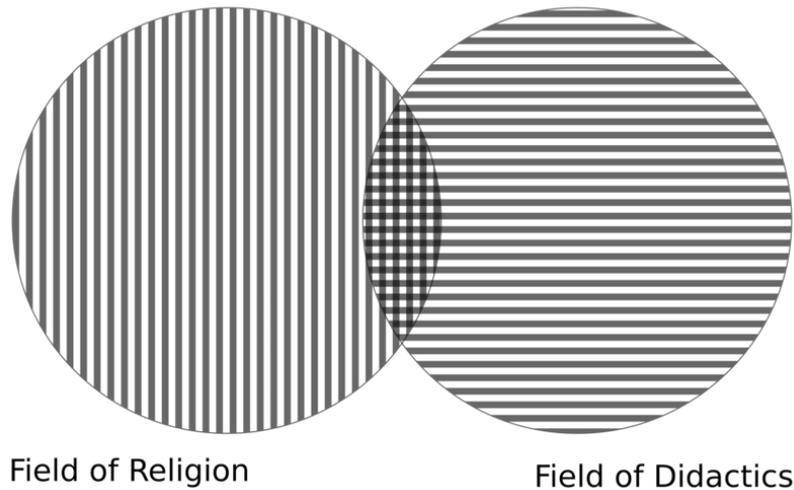


Figure 1: Didactics of Religious education

bridge between the field of science of religion and the field of didactics/pedagogics. When trying to survey the field of didactics of religious education in the context of Sweden, the picture isn't quite that clear-cut.

A complicating factor is that several terms are used denoting the field described above. The primary ones are "the didactics of religious education" ("religionsdidaktik") and "the pedagogy of religious education" ("religionspedagogik"), but there is also "adapted didactics" ("tillämpad didaktik") and "the didactics of Christianity" ("kristendomsdidaktik"). In this paper we use the term didactics of religious education (religionsdidaktik) in an open sense (cf Ongstad, 2004: 85) and we understand the term "religionsdidaktik" och "religionspedagogik" as synonymous and feel no need to separate them. This is not always the case. Sometimes the pedagogics of religion is seen as a broader definition, which cover teaching in the broadest sense (youth school, church, adult education etc.), whereas didactics of religious education then would be understood as being more narrow, covering only the teaching of religion in (youth) school (Kalloch, 2010 :21-22, cf Lilja, 1970, in Falkevall, 2010: 35-37).

In the Swedish Church Law from 1686 it is stated that parents had a duty to teach reading skills (through the study of the Bible) to their household --- that is, children and workers. While priests had a duty to check this learning indeed has taken place (Hartman, 2000: 212). In the school law ("folkskolestadga") from 1842 parts of the responsibilities were taken over by the state. And in 1882 it became mandatory for all children to attend school (skolplikt). (Hartman, 2000: 214) During this time the Swedish school was in effect a schooling into a Lutheran confession. More specifically, a form of religiosity that demands basic literacy of the believer. Gradually, religion was more and more perceived to be a private matter, and the schools took on more responsibilities. (There was more to be learnt than the Bible.) In the curriculum from 1919 Luther's small

catechism was no longer formally included in the curriculum, and the ties to the Swedish church were formally cut. Students now received a non-confessional education in Christianity. In 1962 this was changed into general teaching about religion. In the teaching plan from 1969 "life questions" was introduced ('livsfrågebegreppet') and this strain was enhanced in 1980. In 1994 more emphasis was put on knowledge and reflection about different religions and worldviews. (Hartman, 2000: 216-217) In 2011 there was a significant focus on different religions and worldviews; the relation between religion/religiosity and society, was strengthened --- but the emphasis on the development individual student's worldview, from 1969 and 1980, lessened. (Selander 2011)

The subject pedagogics of religious education ('religionspedagogik') was included 1973 as a subject in higher education, but never got a strong foothold in Sweden. Moreover, the subject was defined differently by different scholars. (Osbeck, 2006: 90-92) Rune Larsson, one of the main proponents, defined pedagogics of religion as follows:

The pedagogics of religion is a scientific discipline which deals with problems connected to the attaining of knowledge, values, and patterns of behaviour that is of a religious or philosophic kind. (Larsson, 1992: 17)

In 2011 Malin Löfstedt defines the didactics of religious education as follows:

[T]hat branch of the science of religion that, from different perspectives, deals with the teaching of religion. (Löfstedt, 2011: 12)

Twenty years has passed between these two statements, but what has happened in between? Do we find a field of didactics of religious education in Sweden? A similar question was raised regarding the didactics of education of history by prof. Schüllerqvist in 2005. In trying to answer, he began with Bourdieus definition of a scientific field; that the field in question has to be autonomous in relation to other fields; that there are specialised actors and debates about common values and power relations (Schüllerqvist 2005: 11, 71). We will take a similar approach.

During the 1970-s and 1980-s there was a debate about religion as a subject in schools, and how it ought to be taught. There were different attempts at defining it --- the embryos of different didactics of religious education, one could say. But in the 2000-s to the present day, we see a fragmented field. There are narrow studies on components within the didactics of religious education, but the bigger picture seems, in general, to have disappeared.

In Sweden, it's possible to discern what might be called two waves of didactics of religious education, the first one from the 1970-s and 1980-s, which peters out in the 1990-s, and a second one which begins in the 2000-s. But the two waves are separative movements, without much contact in between. In the second wave, there

are few references to earlier scholars (although, see Osbeck, 2006, 2008 and Falkevall, 2010).

Considering the history of the curricular subject, it is striking how little especially the second wave looks at the tradition which might be said to have the longest tradition teaching religion: catechesis. (For the Catechetical tradition in Sweden, see, for example, Dahlbom, 1927 and Vallberg-Roth, 2002) The first wave still had some ties to this tradition. (Larsson, 1992: 5-20 and Lendahls, 1986). Striking, because it might be said that up until 1962 the role of the teacher in the subject of religion was in effect that of a catechist. The reason for this (most probably voluntary) blind spot is the effort to consciously move from a confessional subject (in Christianity) to a non-confessional subject that is essentially still undefined. Is it's main task an education in life-questions (Hartman, 1986)? Or is the task of a more general, edifying character, focusing on hermeneutics and the cultural heritage? (Skogar, 2000). Or is it, like Selander (2011) claims the current national curriculum in Sweden is, an education about religious beliefs and practices in the world?

On the one hand, you might settle for the answer that the Swedish curricular subject of religion is all of the above. (Cf. Osbeck 2013.) On the other hand, not having a proper answer means that the character of the subject is fundamentally undecided. We argue that this leads to an arbitrariness with regards to what the teacher actually does in the classroom.

There is an evident risk with a pedagogics of religion which leaves the questions of fundamental views, the questions of goal, content and evaluation, as well as the critical research and future-oriented perspectives unconsidered. The subject loses it's holistic structure and lacks the ability to discuss criteria for the most fundamental questions of teaching (Larsson, s15. Our translation.)

The quote above is from "the first wave". One characteristic trait of the second wave is that fundamental issues are seldom questioned or defined -- perhaps not even described at all. Instead focus lies on pieces within a given framework. Three recent titles, books aimed for teachers-to-be, all have chapters which deals with, for instance, science and religion (Stenmark in Löfstedt, 2011); fundamentalism within religion (Franck in Löfstedt, 2011); what one might teach in class regarding rituals (Hedin, 2014) or how to act as a teacher regarding human rights (Fahlbeck in Falkevall, 2013). If the overarching goal of RE is mentioned, it would be said to be about life-questions, motivated by the national curriculum. (See Falkevall 2010; Hedin 2014.) Or rather: life-questions, as would have been motivated by earlier curriculums. (See Selander, 2011.) Alternatives are not, as a rule, mentioned. This means that if one could say there is a theoretical framework for the didactics of religious education, it would be rather one-dimensional. Typically, a short excerpt from the national curriculum prefaces a chapter, or serves as an introduction, and then the author goes about discussing content (Löfstedt, 2011, Hedin 2014). How said content would be taught is often left unsaid

-- perhaps that is seen as a part of the teacher's professionalism; to develop his or her individual approach. A history of the field is described, but not how the field as such could be understood. There isn't a "bigger picture", a map of possible dimensions and routes to take. The various books and chapters do offer a diversified picture, but in the sense of it being scattered. Johnsson Harrie seems to describe similar results in her overview of the field (Johnsson Harrie, 2011: 14-15). We wonder if the individual parts are, perhaps, more the product of individual author's special interests rather than being included because each part would be an essential dimension of the field of didactics of religious education?

The result of a scattered field

What is the didactics of religious education for teachers? To be blunt, the short answer might be: not much. In the interviews, the teachers were asked to give their view on what the didactics of religious education might be. Follow up questions were asked, to ascertain if there might be some framework or model that they use when planning, even though they wouldn't use the term "didactics of religious education" for this purpose. And the picture was quite clear: there didn't seem to be such a framework (apart from the curriculum). There wasn't any such model. A professional language for undertaking such discussions didn't appear in these discussions.

Here's Maja, explaining what the didactics of religious education is.

Maja: Well that is [faked, low-pitched voice] the questions about...what and...with whom and [how] and when and why and the like, right

interviewer: Mm

Maja: which are to be answered And then.....with regards to the religions I'm thinking that.....well you could set it up in many different ways...um ...in order to reach.....[tsk]these goals that there are.....for...the subject of religion

[---]

interviewer: And these goals...

Maja: Well those in the curriculum, is what I had in mind.

Or take the following example, with another experienced teacher, "Tove".

interviewer: A question regarding your reasoning about teaching. Have you...got any type of...eh...any framework for it? Like this about similarities [between religions, which was mentioned earlier]...that it is...that it is something you might talk about

Tove: Mm?

interviewer: But have you got any...religio-didactical theory or some

Tove: Eh

interviewer: Some...Do you relate to any such at all---

Tove: No...I mean...I really can't say that I but...for me I guess it's...this bit about...My goal...when I...let's say...have a class. First and foremost I need to get a feel for the class

interviewer: Mm

Tove: Where are they

interviewer: Mm

Tove: ...Then my...goal is really to...Naturally partly...eh...to give a knowledge-base. ...[...] But I don't really know if I've...got...really like any...shall we say.....Like ...didactical style or how should I put it but...um

The teachers reflect, and have reasons behind their choices of method, content etc. But in effect this seems to be their own interpretations of the national curriculum, as illustrated in the quote above. In a study by Christina Osbeck (2009), four different religio-didactical intentions are identified, having interviewed four teachers. In her analysis, Osbeck has the embryo of what might become a professional language. But in the interviews, both Osbeck's and ours, such a language didn't seem to be available to the teachers.

How, then, has the teachers ended up with their respective intentions? It is naturally not made in a vacuum, but would be impacted by various factors. In one of our interviews, Lars is asked how he has ended up with his current setup; he explains:

Lars: Both [from] university...colleagues...but also my old college teachers...eh...that I had myself once upon a time Because.....apparently it worked

Not to say that it indeed didn't work, nor that this wouldn't be a good setup. But it's rather arbitrary. This can, again, be related to Christina Osbeck's (2009) findings. It seems to be, more or less, a matter of happenstance that they have their respective emphasis (2009: s197-199; also see Falkevall 1995). Or rather: a result of their respective live-histories.

We suggest that it had been more apt had the teachers come to their conclusions having reflected on alternatives. That they had acquired the suitable knowledge(s) and method(s) required by that particular intention (cf. Osbeck 2009). It would be preferable that different religio-didactical intentions, or didactical perspectives on RE, would be formulated, and that those formulations would be a part of the tool-box available for the teachers. That it was through reflection on these that they had ended up with their intentions or setups. This would be a part of owning a professional vocabulary in the didactics of religious education. It's no surprise the teachers didn't seem to have such, given that such frameworks aren't easily found in the academic debate either. Alternatives aren't shown, and thus no choice has to be made, and no discussion is needed. This might be seen as an argument for saying that there isn't a (Swedish) field of didactics of religious education.

On the other hand, in the German and British contexts, it seems more justified to talk about there being a field. Look at the German example. Different perspectives are given, as well as a professional language. Introductory titles to the German didactics of religious

education, like *Religionsdidaktik - Ein leitfaden für Studium, Ausbildung und Beruf* or *Lehrbuch der Religionsdidaktik - Für Studium und Praxis in ökumenischer Perspektive* offer several religious-didactical dimensions and principles, that the teacher-to-be can relate to. A tool-box is offered, containing different sets of tools; perspectives one might have on the purpose and manner of teaching. This gives them a vocabulary, a professional language that can be used when reflecting on their own teaching. In the UK an introductory title like *Pedagogies of religious education: Case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE* (Grimmitt, 2010) would mention models like Smart's (1968) phenomenological approach or the interpretive approach (Jackson, 1997) -- to name a few. There is a discussion in the German and British contexts; there is a debate. And this is one of the distinguishing features of a field. (Cf. Schüllerqvist, 2005) There are different options, choices every teacher should make. What is Esthetical edification, and how does one go about integrating that dimension into RE? What is interreligious learning? Performative teaching of religion? And so on. Different models are described, which might be used for tackling different dimensions that could be included. A holistic image of the field is thus painted. Enabling the teacher to make informed choices, having reflected on goals to attain (or not); available models to use (or not).

This is something the Swedish context lacks, where the life-history of the teachers seems to be more important than critical reflection (cf Osbeck, 2009).

interviewer: Do you know if there are different ways of...thinking about the setup [...] [of teaching RE] that might go under different...labels

Maja: Mm

interviewer: Different models or theories

Maja: Mm

interviewer: Do you know if there are such...Which...like...That's according to that model. That one teaches according to that model or

Maja: Yes there might be but if so I don't remember what they're called

interviewer: Mm

interviewer: Does it work well without such or might it be something which could contribute?

Maja: Like some sort of concept? [...] That might be...that you could have some different entrypoint that you're...thinking of Like that you'd, instead of life-questions, would think...um [breathes out] Nah I don't know what you mean [laughs]

Currently, at least one of the teachers clearly didn't know what else, than life questions, could be the subject matter of RE. Having that as the sole possible entry point would mean a restriction of possible content and methods. No other way of thinking seems

to be conceivable. This could perhaps be described as troubling, given that life-questions is no longer the main topic in the current curriculum (cf. Selander, 2011).

The teachers didn't seem to have a map of the dimensions that might be included, or a description of the theories or models ("tools") that might be used. Nor is one offered by scholars, as far as we have been able to see. This map, these dimensions, must be constructed from the Swedish situation, but can make use of the terms and theories constructed in, for instance, the German and British discourses. The religio-didactical intentions identified by Osbeck (2009) is a good place to start. Perhaps these could be related to the different stances found in the other contexts mentioned. The effort of verbalising the dimensions relevant for the Swedish situation is perhaps the most important challenge for the didactics of religious education in Sweden (cf. Uljens, 1997 and Schüllerqvist, 2009). Arguing about how the map should look like, and which models should be included, is what, in fact, would make this an independent, scientific field --- set apart from general didactics (cf. Schüllerqvist, 2005). But also independent from the national curriculum. Currently the national curriculum more or less defines what the didactics of religious education in effect is, instead of the direction of influence being the other way around.

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