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Relationships, Opportunities, Tensions

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Between Religious Studies, Religious Education, Teaching Education and Religion and Education: Relationships, Opportunities, Tensions

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Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to explore the entangled and complex relationships between the Swedish subject areas *religionsvetenskap* (Religious Studies), *religionskunskap* (Religious Education), *religionsdidaktik* (Religion and Education), and Theology. First, I will offer a brief historical overview of the development of the modern, non-confessional subject of Religious Education in Sweden and its immediate relation to the field of Religious Studies. Then, I will focus on the field of Religious Education today, situating it within the complex matrix of historical and contemporary Religious Studies, Religious Pedagogy, and Theology. After touching on the demarcation problem between Religious Studies and Theology, I will consider whether and/or how these tensions and positionalities might affect Religion and Education as a field. What is the role of Religion and Education in this complex situation?

The Twin-Birth of the Swedish State in the 1960s: Religious Studies and Religious Education

The founding of the academic study of religion is often traced back to the British-German Orientalist Friedrich Max Müller and his 1873 publication *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. Scholars in Sweden quickly jumped aboard the emerging new discipline and the country can in many ways be viewed as pioneering in the non-confessional study of religion. Stockholm World's Fair of 1897 hosted one of the world's first Science of Religion Congresses; Swedish scholars were among the first to found a non-confessional society for the study of religion (*Religionsvetenskapliga sällskapet*, 1906); and, the country established one of the world's first and still existing professionships dedicated to the study of religion (History of Religions at Stockholm University, 1913). Despite these early installments, it took until the late 1960s and early 1970s before the subject area Religious Studies was created as a discipline at Swedish universities.

The establishment of Religious Studies in Sweden was directly linked to changes in the elementary and high school curricula during the 1960s (Berntson 2020). After losing its non-confessional status in 1962, Christian Education (*kristendomskunskap*) was in 1969 re-named Religious Education and the subject was broadened to include the study of additional forms of religions (Berglund 2014). While Christian Education, in the case of high school education, was taught by

lecturers educated at Theological departments, the new subject of Religious Education called for teaching education that corresponded with it.

The history of the establishment of Religious Studies in Sweden starts with the so-called RUMO investigation (*Utredningen om religionsvetenskapliga utbildningens mål och organisation*) of the late 1960s. Two decades prior, Swedish intellectual and Humanist Ingemar Hedenius' book *Tro och vetande* (Belief and knowledge, 1949) was published, being the first of its kind in its strong critique of Theology. The publication caused a very infected debate to play out in the national newspapers, and its impact cannot be understated when considering the developments that followed in the Swedish context.

In 1969, the Swedish state organized a special investigations group to consider the country's academic study of religion, which was motivated by the low production of low production of examined students for the Theological departments in the country.¹ The investigation's report proposed a number of new directions for the future study of religion in Sweden, emphasizing a more "general" and a non-confessional approach which was thought to have wider societal relevance.² In light of this, the Theological departments were asked to denounce their confessional approaches, and "general" Religious Studies courses and departments opened up throughout the country. While Historians of Religions and academically "homeless" Religious Studies scholars by the end of the 1800s had attempted to free themselves from confessional Theology, the two groups would now share departments and go under the same category of "Religious Studies."

Religious Studies and Theology: Relationship, Demarcations, Identities

As we have seen, fuming debates over Theology's place in 1950s and 1960s Sweden led, together with changes in the school curricula, to the state eventual decision to make Theology into a Religious Studies subject and to publicly denounce its confessional status. What followed is a continued debate over how Theology and Religious Studies scholars ought to understand themselves in relation to each other, as well as whether or where the lines were to be drawn between the two types of scholarship.

While many Theologians regard themselves as Religious Studies scholars as well as Theologians (reflecting their state-sanctioned identities), there are a number of Religious Studies scholars and Historians of Religion who argue that their form of research is inherently different from that produced by Theologians (Larsson & Sorgenfrei 2019). One of the reasons that the first camp questions the notion that Theology belongs to Religious Studies is often grounded in a view of Theologians as implicitly confessional, despite the fact that they must be explicitly non-confessional following state decisions. Moreover, some scholars argue that Theology can be viewed as an "insider" rather than an "outsider" perspective on religion, opposed to the oft-stated

¹ SOU 1973:2

² UbU 1971: 3. Eller 1971:89

methodological agnosticism, or non-normative approach of most forms of Religious Studies. Another example is the difference in foci: while Religious Studies focuses on human beings and their culture (of which religion is considered a part), Theology's objects of study are matters of divine, rather than human, nature (Larsson & Sorgenfrei 2019).

Bridging the Gap between Religious Education and Religious Studies? Religion and Education in Sweden

Now that we have considered the birth of Religious Studies and its relationship to Theology, we will turn to the development of a third research field, namely Religion and Education (*religionsdidaktik*). The field has a growing relationship with the subject of Religious Education, and also seeks to add to the understanding of religion within and outside of the Swedish school (Berglund 2021). While scholars and teachers in Sweden today agree that the school subject of Religious Education differs quite significantly from the academic discipline of Religious Studies, school politicians of the 1960s largely subscribed to the old logic that educators must have “pure” academic knowledge prior to their development of pedagogical knowledge (Hartman 2005). For this reason, a scientific background in Religious Studies was thought to deliver the kinds of knowledge needed in order to teach about religion in school. Today, scholars and teachers realize that Religious Studies theory and methods do not necessarily translate into Religious Education teaching knowledge or skills. Swedish Religious Education is not simply Religious Studies for children and adolescents; rather, adhering to a special kind of curriculum (being a school subject), the subject is meant to foster democratic citizens with literacy in Swedish culture and norms who are tolerant and open to cultures beyond the Swedish (to the extent that one can speak of such a thing in monolithic terms). The field of Religion and Education, which will be considered in more detail later on in the paper, seeks to bridge this gap between Religious Education and Religious Studies, making it highly relevant not just to Religious Education teachers, but also to Religious Studies scholars who in many cases are their educators.

Established in 1973 and closely connected to the new school subject, Swedish Religion and Education was meant as an alternative to the Theologically grounded Religious Pedagogy (*religionspedagogik*, Dalevi & Niemi 2015; Berglund 2021). Today, some scholars consider Religion and Education to be a sub-discipline to Religious Pedagogy, while some others see it as part of Religious Studies and with some ties to the Science of Education (Berglund 2021). Those who emphasize its ties to Religious Pedagogy trace the roots of Religious Education back to the 1800s Theological pedagogical education (Gustavsson 2020). Following the Finnish Theologian Kalevi Timmanen's introduction of the more general and less Christianity-focused “Religious Pedagogy” in the 1960s, Swedish universities established both Religious Pedagogy and Religious Education fields. While the former had clear ties to Theology, the latter struggled to anchor itself in any specific department, seeing as it related to several different ones. Following this, despite the organizational efforts and the research that emerged, the field of Religious Education was decentralized and did not have its own departments at any university for some time (Dalevi &

Niemi 2015). However, since at least the early 2000s, the interdisciplinary field of Religious Education has started to gain a strong foothold in various university departments in Sweden with organizations such as The National Organization for Teachers of Religious Education (*Föreningen lärare i religionskunskap*) and The National Forum for Research in Religion and Education (*Nationellt forum för religionsdiktisk forskning*) as well as the seminar series National Venue for Religion and Education (*Nationell religionsdidaktisk mötesplats*).

Until recently, the Swedish field of Religion and Education has tended to focus on four areas of research: research concerning students, teachers and other actors within the school *milieu*; textbooks and other forms of content; the aim or purpose of Religious Education; and the kinds of methods used in the Religious Education classroom (Osbeck 2006; Berglund 2021). There is also a growing number of Religion and Education studies that draw attention to the ways in which the subject area is itself formed by specific ways of understanding and dealing with “religion,” even if the subject’s content, name, and confessional status changes.

A number of scholars have highlighted the ways in which Swedish Religious Education is entrenched in liberal Lutheran Protestant understandings of religion. Additionally, scholars have pointed to the ways in which the construction of the “World Religions Paradigm,” the idea that religions can be clearly categorized into belonging to stable and fixed boxes, emerged out of a Protestant worldview. Such a worldview centers Christianity as its subject, and only allows for a Western-centric investigation of other forms of religiosity. While the notion of World Religions emerged out of a wider European and North American context, Swedish scholars have highlighted how Christian Education still “haunts” Religious Education in a variety of ways. Through a more positive focus on Christianity and the treatment of other religions (particularly Islam) in less nuanced terms, Swedish Religious Education is clearly not as “objective” as it might appear on the surface. Jenny Berglund (2013) has argued that a deeper analysis of the kinds of logic at play in Swedish Religious Education reveals that it is “marinated” in liberal Lutheran Protestantism. A key example is the “Life Questions Pedagogy” (*livsfrågepedagogik*) which, she argues, clearly rests on Lutheran creation theology.

The Relationship between Theology and Religion and Education in Sweden

As we have seen, Religious Studies and Religious Education both share a complicated and historically significant relationship with Theology. Religion and Education can be said to have a history that is historically entangled with the Theological field as well, not least because it emerged already positioned against the Theologically grounded Religious Pedagogy. Being a Religious Studies sub-discipline, Religion and Education is also immediately and unavoidably put into dialogue with Theology, and becomes part of the demarcations debate between this field and Religious Studies. With the remnants of a Lutheran Protestant Theology still present in Religious Education today, this brings Religion and Education into a complicated situation regarding its identity and demarcations.

Being a Religious Studies “support” discipline to Religious Education, the still-existing Christian elements within the latter makes for a complex relationship with Theology. With the tensions between Religious Studies and Theology still present, does Religion and Education, then, by extension, need to demarcate itself from Theology? If so, how and what sort of consequences could it such a demarcation lead to?

These questions lack easy answers, and matters are made even more thorny when one considers the state of Swedish Religious Education today. While the bulk of Religious Education can be regarded as emerging from a Religious Studies body of research, Life Questions and the aspects of Religious Education that pertain to student identity formation can be more closely related to Theology. Seen in this way, it appears as though Religion and Education scholars might need to have some sort of dialogue or exchange of ideas with Theologians. On the other hand, if scholars of Religion and Education want to help further move Religious Education closer to an objective stance on religion, one which invites and engages all students and helps foster students with religious literacy beyond the Christian context, then a more explicit connection to Theology might stand in the way for a stronger connection with Religious Studies.