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What About Transformative Religious Education?

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Introduction

Religious Education in a post-secular age assumes that religion is still an influential factor in shaping culture and society and affects people's daily lives. Over the last two decades it has been pointed out that religion is playing an increasingly important role in the society, both in dialogue between people of different religions and in the context of social tension and conflict (Weisse 2010, 188). Therefore, some scholars have questioned last century's secularisation theories (Berger 1999, 1–18) or even described them as a myth (Bellah 2001). Religious diversity has become an important part of the pluralism of society, and religion is back on the agenda in Western societies in the media as well as in political and general discourse. Different religions and life views are now one possibility of many for developing spiritual or religious beliefs. Young people, born into a modern society, learn that the values, beliefs and lifestyles available

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to them are no longer based on a single ideology (Ziebertz et al. 2006, 204). Studies show that young people are aware of the religious diversity in society and among friends, and they are positive towards cultural and religious diversity. At the same time, the daily life of many of young people is secularised. Religion, religious activity or the church is not a significant part of their daily life, and they look at their own and others' religious views as a private matter and they believe in their own personal way (Gunnarsson et al. 2016, 108). However, other studies suggest that young people, coming from a wide range of social, cultural and religious backgrounds, show themselves to be aware of the increased importance of religion in their life and society. Young people in Europe want to broaden their knowledge of the religious dimension and of different religious traditions because they take religion seriously as a factor for dialogue and conflict and share a strong desire for people from different backgrounds to live together in peace (Knauth and Körs 2011, 221). School is one of the first places where children have daily contact with different values, religions and worldviews. Children do not leave their values and convictions outside the classroom, and therefore the religious dimension of human experience is of relevance to multicultural education because this dimension is a part of the culture and identity of a large number of individuals (Milot 2007, 22).

Religious education is therefore an important part of educating people in so-called multicultural or pluralistic societies. The knowledge about different religions can contribute to recognition of the importance of respecting everyone's right to practice their religion or beliefs and increase understanding of social complexity and enhance social cohesion (*Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, 2007, 13). Societal changes call for changed emphases and approaches in religious education. How can we organise the teaching and learning about religions, what approaches can we use and what goals do we consider important?

In this chapter I will take changes in religious education in Iceland as an example and discuss how it has become a part of social studies and how the social studies, including religious education, is connected to what is called the fundamental pillars of education in the National Curriculum Guide. That leads to questions about approaches and

objectives of social studies and of religious education. In that regard I will discuss the question if so-called transformative education is possible in religious education.

Changes in Religious Education: Iceland as an Example

Over the last decades, Iceland has faced rapid social changes and the languages, cultures and religions of Iceland's population have become increasingly diverse. It called for changes in legal framework and school curricula. In 2008, new legislation changed the name of the RE-subject from being "Christian knowledge, ethics and religious studies" to "religious education" (Compulsory School Act, No. 91/2008). In the following curriculum, a major change was made. Now the religious education became a part of the social studies curriculum together with history, geography, sociology, life skills education and ethics (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 2013). Before that, in 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland issued the general part of the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for the Preschool, the Compulsory school and the Upper secondary school. In all three curricula, there is a chapter on what is called the fundamental pillars of education. The chapters describe six fundamental pillars of education that are to be mirrored in school activities. The fundamental pillars are literacy in the widest sense, education towards sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. They were all supposed to be visible in learning and teaching, working methods, organisation and development plans of schools and furthermore, in its relations with its local community (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 14). This implies that the curricula of the subject fields should take account of these fundamental pillars of education. With the following subject areas curriculum guide of 2013 for compulsory schools, the curricula of individual subjects were merged into larger entities and religious education thus became a part of social studies as mentioned

before. That entails, among other things, that the role of religious education is primarily described in the context of the subjects that are included there. But what about the fact that the curricula of the subject fields should take account of the previously mentioned fundamentals of education? How and to what degree do the six fundamental pillars of education appear in the curricula of social studies and therefore in religious education?

In the beginning it is useful to see how The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide discusses the role of the fundamental pillars. According to the Curriculum guide they “refer to social, cultural, environmental and ecological literacy so that children and youth may develop mentally and physically, thrive in society and cooperate with others. The fundamental pillars also refer to a vision of the future, ability and will to influence and be active in maintaining society, change it and develop” (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 14). And furthermore: “They are socially oriented as they are to promote increased equality and democracy and to ensure well-educated and healthy citizens, both for participating in and for changing and improving society and also for contemporary employment” (p. 14).

Here we can see a number of different emphases: social, cultural, environmental and ecological literacy; children’s and youth’s mental and physical development so they can thrive in society and cooperate with others; ability and will to influence and be active in maintaining society, changing it and developing it; promotion of increased equality and democracy; promotion of well-educated and healthy citizens, both for participating in and for changing and improving society. These are comprehensive goals and emphases and one can wonder how individual subjects can contribute to them.

If we look at how the subject area in the Icelandic National Curriculum guide describes the role of social studies, we find the following description:

Social studies are those subjects that pertain to society and culture in an informative and critical manner. They are founded on the duty of each society to educate pupils about values such as equality, democracy, concern and respect, and the importance of these values for a happy life. [...] Social studies are intended to assist pupils in responding to the challenges of their

environment and immediate surroundings in a sensible manner and to define for them their responsibility for the means that individuals choose in order to find their way among people anywhere. Social studies are intended to enhance pupils' understanding of certain basic qualities of human life and their division, by explaining how they entail various duties, rights and values as an inseparable part of social and ethical reality. Examples of such qualities are justice, knowledge, freedom, friendship, respect and responsibility (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 201).

It is clear that the description of the role of social studies reflects many elements of the fundamental pillars of education. They should educate pupils about values such as equality and democracy, and two of the fundamental pillars are equality and democracy and human rights. Social studies are intended to assist pupils in responding to the challenges of their environment and immediate surroundings, and one of the fundamental pillars is education towards sustainability. Social studies are also intended to enhance pupils' understanding of certain basic qualities of human life and their division, qualities like justice, knowledge, freedom, friendship, respect and responsibility. This is in line with fundamental pillars like health and welfare, equality, democracy and human rights. This is also in line with the description of the role of the fundamental pillars.

There is no doubt that the description of the role of social studies includes important elements of the fundamental pillars of education in the National curriculum guide. The question is how the different subjects of social studies, such as citizenship/life skills education, geography, history, religious education, and ethics, approach the teaching and learning so that the essentials of the fundamental pillars can be achieved. In this chapter I will not discuss different approaches in religious education, but instead refer to my discussion in the book *Challenging Life: Existential Questions as a Resource for Education* (Gunnarsson 2018, 70–72). Nevertheless, I argue that contextual approaches are more useful in religious education in times of great social change and growing religious diversity. In this chapter my interest is in what might be called “transformative education” in social studies and therefore in religious education.

Transformative Education in Social Studies?

In recent years some scholars have discussed the importance and value of transformative education in order to promote young people's ability to cope with complex reality. In the description of the role of the fundamental pillars of education, we see emphasis on the ability and will to influence and be active in maintaining society, changing it and developing it. We also see emphasis on the promotion of increased equality and democracy and of well-educated and healthy citizens, both for participating in and for changing and improving society. The question is whether transformative education can be of help to achieve these goals.

I will first take two examples from the discussion on transformative education, that is, James A. Banks (2008) and his discussion on transformative education in citizenship education, and Joseph M. Kirman's (2003) discussion on transformative education in geography and ethics.

Banks (2008, 135–137) discusses the issue in the context of multicultural societies and multicultural teaching with a particular emphasis on the position of different community groups, especially minorities, and in view of the danger of children of foreign origin not experiencing themselves as real citizens in the country in which they live, partly because their history and culture are not accepted as equal to the background and culture of the majority in society. He emphasises, among other things, the necessity of transformative education in order for students to acquire clear and thoughtful awareness of cultural, national, regional and global identities and how they are interconnected and came to be. Thus, they learn to know, accept and respect each person's cultural identity and self-image. He believes that such education is based, among other things, on enabling students to acquire the necessary information to identify problems in society and to acquire the ability to challenge inequalities within their own community, society and the world at large. It should also lead to the ability to take action to create a just and democratic society. Transformative citizenship education should thus help students clarify their own values and value judgements, as well as being an incentive to engage in thoughtful individual or collective civic action. Such education thus involves critical thinking or what has been called critical citizenship

education. In addition, Banks mentions that transformative education involves cooperation rather than competition between students with different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

In the opinion of Banks (2008, 136), transformative education implies that students acquire the knowledge, values and skills that make them what Clarke (1996, 6) calls deep citizens. In that regard, Banks discusses the different levels of civic and democratic consciousness. The lowest level is the awareness of legal civil rights and obligations without any further impact on active participation in the political system. At the next level, there is some activity, particularly with participation in elections and suchlike. In the third stage, there is a democratic consciousness that involves not only participating in elections but also direct efforts to actualise existing laws and conventions, for example, by taking part in protests, writing articles and publicly discussing important and controversial issues, particularly to support and maintain existing social and political structures. In the fourth stage, which Banks calls transformative citizenship, there is the ability and willingness to engage in civic action aimed at activating values, moral principles and ideals beyond those of existing laws and conventions. Transformative citizens thus take action to promote social justice and equality, even if their actions violate, challenge or dismantle existing laws, conventions or structures. Banks maintains that while transformative teachers accept and respect students at all these levels of citizenship, they should help them to become transformative citizens.

Here are various things worth considering and discussing, and placing in the context of the school's role, the fundamental pillars of education, and the subject matter of social studies. But first let's take a look at Joseph Kirman. When Kirman (2003, 93–95) discusses transformative geography education, he refers to Noddings' (1984) existential philosophy of caring and, not least, to the moral aspect that is interwoven with it. Thus, caring does not involve just acting according to given rules and customs, but lovingly and wholeheartedly. The moral aspect, in Kirman's (1992, 9) opinion, expands the caring beyond personal one-on-one relationships to all relationships. It includes a good standard of values for actions based on love, kindness and respect for human dignity, where love includes unselfish care for the welfare of others, kindness leads to active

helpfulness and human dignity revolves around respect and nobility, which is inherent in all human beings. This ideology and its moral aspect, in Kirman's opinion, include criteria for what is right and wrong both in personal and extended relationships. Transformative geography therefore expands attention from limited personal connections and interests to expanded moral connections with care for all life and the earth as a whole as a guide. It also includes geographical aspects relating to human rights and seeks to divert attention from what is to what ought to be and is inquiry driven. On this basis, Kirman (2003, 95) presents three fundamental elements of transformative geography:

1. Critical thinking—the issue studied carefully
2. Decision-making—made on the basis of the data and information generated by the study
3. Actions—based on decision-making, action is taken, either individually or collectively.

In Kirman's opinion, transformative geography requires action and thereby links him to the ideas of critical geographers and radical humanism. Ethics, human rights and sustainability are the guiding principles here. Thus, we see similar emphases here as with Banks. Transformative education should lead to action with the aim of making the world a better place to live.

Here we can of course reflect on the ideas of Banks and Kirman and their relation to the role of the school and social studies teaching. What should it be? We can of course have different opinions about that, but we are immediately faced with the fact that the emphases of Banks and Kirman are directly related to the various emphases we see in the fundamental pillars of education, such as sustainability, welfare, democracy, human rights and equality. We also see similar emphases with them and in the description in the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide of the role of social studies, which has previously been referred to. From this it can be concluded that transformative education is appropriate if the intention is to attain what the fundamental pillars deal with and are intended to bring about. It is not to be doubted, however, that some consider that the emphases of Banks and Kirman go far and are even considered rather

political. How far can the school go in encouraging students to take action in matters that might be seen as political or controversial? Biesta (2010) points out that in discussions about democratic education there is a strong tendency to see the role of education as that of preparation of children and young people for their future participation in democratic life. The same emphasis can be seen in the Icelandic Compulsory School Act (No. 91/2008). Biesta discusses the work of Hannah Arendt with special focus on her ideas about the relationship between education and politics and finds out that her writings on the subject seem to be informed by a “developmentalistic” perspective in which it is maintained that the child is not yet ready for political life, so education has to be separated from politics and seen as a preparation for future participation in political life (Biesta 2010, 556–575). This might be seen as an argument against the idea of transformative education as we see it in the writings of Banks and Kirman. However, Biesta continues and points out that Hannah Arendt’s writings on politics and the role of understanding in political life point in a different direction as they articulate what it means to exist political—that is, to exist together in plurality. Her writings highlight that political existence is neither based on, nor can be guaranteed by, moral qualities such as tolerance and respect. Therefore, Biesta argues for a democratic education that focuses on creating opportunities for political existence inside and outside schools and how we can learn from political existence. “The students ‘learn democracy’ through their participation in the contexts and practices, that make up their everyday lives, in school, college and university, and in society at large” (Biesta 2011, 6).

The question remains of how to achieve the competence criteria of the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide in social studies which are based on and refer to the fundamental pillars. The fundamental pillars should be integrated into the National Curriculum Guide at all levels of education and therefore it can be argued with good reason that social studies are in many ways well suited to achieving their goals. If we agree with Biesta’s views on democratic education and that the emphases and approaches of Banks and Kirman may apply in various branches of social studies, such as citizenship/life skills education, geography, ethics and so forth, then the question arises as to whether transformative education, as

they describe it, can apply in religious education, especially in view of the fact that religious education, like other subjects, is supposed to contribute to the previously mentioned fundamental pillars of education.

What About Religious Education?

In the well-known report *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, one of the main conclusions is a strong emphasis on the value of knowledge about different religions. This knowledge can contribute to recognition of the importance of respecting everyone's right to practice their religion or beliefs, increase understanding of social complexity and enhance social cohesion. At the same time, knowledge about religions can reduce disputes and conflicts that result from a lack of understanding of the beliefs of others. It is also emphasised that the most effective is that religious education go hand in hand with inculcating respect for the rights of others, even if there is disagreement about religions and beliefs. Freedom of religion and belief is a universal human right, and it involves a commitment to respecting the rights and equality of all people. (Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools, 2007, 13–14).

The guiding principles set out in the report then lay out the guidelines for what to look out for when organising and conducting religious education in public schools. The focus is on issues such as fairness, accuracy, academic professionalism, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values, religious freedom, mutual respect and understanding. Here we find emphases that have parallels in what Banks and Kirman talk about in their discussions on transformative education, issues such as human rights, equality, respect and so forth. Here there are also emphases that are analogous to what we see in the fundamental pillars of education according to the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools.

It is known that religious education in public schools is considered sensitive and difficult, and it is therefore possible to wonder how it can become transformative. For example, it cannot include indoctrination in certain religions or beliefs, at least not in a public school with a joint religious education for all students. Teachers in public schools are

responsible to all of their students, and by extension to their parents. In a multicultural and pluralistic society, it is important to keep this in mind. Elizabeth Campbell (2003, 83) emphasises that in the capacity of the professional role, the teacher is not simply a lone individual or private citizen, free to express opinions while being answerable only to an internal conscience. When teachers speak they may be seen to be speaking with the authority of the institution or the school and the profession of teaching behind them. This means that teachers are not supposed to express or foster their personal beliefs or to indoctrinate students into particular religions or beliefs.

On the other hand, religious education can undoubtedly include indoctrination in what was mentioned above, that is, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values, religious freedom, mutual respect and understanding. Can we then talk about transformative education in that regard?

Here, I find it interesting to recall what Michael Grimmitt (1987, 224–226) maintained about 30 years ago in his discussion of religious education when he distinguished between “learning about religion” and “learning from religion”. Learning about religion, according to Grimmitt’s definition, implies that students learn about the world’s major religions, their traditions, convictions, doctrines, values, and rituals, as well as their influence on individuals, communities and cultures. He is of the opinion that learning about religions involves objective knowledge and, first and foremost, provides students with a general understanding of religions. On the other hand, learning from religion, in Grimmitt’s sense, involves what students learn from their religious education about themselves, about being able to understand fundamental questions of existence and their own experiences, and to consider how they can respond. They are trained in understanding fundamental values and learning how to interpret them. At the same time they learn to pay attention to the shaping effects of one’s own beliefs and values on personal development and about their potential for identifying the spiritual dimension of their experience, as well as about the need to be responsible for their own decision-making, especially in matters of belief and conduct. Grimmitt maintains that this assimilation of knowledge leads to better self-knowledge and personal understanding, that is, promotes subjective knowledge.

It can be argued using various arguments that what Grimmitt says about learning from religions is close to what is said when discussing transformative education. The idea, then, is that it is not enough to acquire objective knowledge about different religions and beliefs, but at the same time lessons should be drawn from learning about religions. Thus, religious education can contribute to strengthening self-understanding and personal convictions and proficiency in comparing one's own opinions and convictions with other kinds of opinions and convictions—and even challenging one's own assumptions and opinions, if appropriate.

Religious education in the spirit of transformative education could thus promote proficiency in giving arguments for one's own convictions while leading to tolerance and respect for the attitudes and rights of others. As such, it can lead to an understanding of the importance of human rights and religious freedom, and the value of standing on one's own convictions. It can then lead to the ability and willingness to take action when those rights are trampled upon or dishonoured in any context. This is in harmony with the emphasis of Kirman and Banks on the ability to take action when appropriate, with the aim of making the world a better place to live in.

Conclusion

In the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools, it is stated that religious education is “intended to enhance the understanding of prevailing religions and different religious traditions based on tolerance and broadmindedness” (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 202). Here, the concepts of tolerance and open-mindedness become key concepts. And in the competence criteria of social studies, emphasis is placed, among other things, on the students being able to “explain with examples the diversity of human life and people's different origins, respect people's freedom to different religions, life values, opinions and ways of life” (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools—With Subject Areas, 208). This is in line with the fundamental pillars of

education in the Curriculum. The question is: How can we achieve those goals? Possibly, transformative education, as an approach in religious education, can contribute to this. When Banks (2008) talks about transformative citizenship, he emphasises the ability and willingness to engage in civic action aimed at activating values, moral principles and ideals. Transformative citizens thus take action to promote social justice and equality. When this is placed in the context of religious teaching, the issue is not about indoctrination in certain religions or beliefs, but about understanding of the diversity of human life and people's different origins and respect for people's freedom to different religions, life values, opinions and ways of life. This is about human rights and the ability and willingness to take action when they are not respected. The three fundamental elements of transformative geography Kirman (2003) presents can be of help when working with this in the RE-classroom, that is (1) critical thinking when the issue is studied carefully, for example, by studying and discussing examples where human rights or people's freedom to different religions and beliefs are in question; (2) decision-making, where the students wonder, on the basis of the data and information generated by the study, what to do about it; and finally (3) actions, based on the decision-making, where the students discuss what they can do about the matter and make decisions about doing something either individually or collectively. The students are to learn to exist together in plurality, as Arendt emphasises when she talks about what it means to exist politically. Religious education is important in that regard when we think about growing religious diversity. It can be a part of what Biesta (2010) calls a democratic education that focuses on creating opportunities for political existence inside and outside schools and how we can learn from political existence. Human rights and freedom of religion and belief is a part of that political existence. Transformative religious education can among other things teach students to safeguard those values and take action when trampled on. In this way the students have not only learned about different religions and religious diversity; they have also learned from religions (Grimmitt 1987) as they are trained in understanding fundamental values and how to interpret them and act upon them.

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