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RE and the Complexity of the Knowledge Problem(s)

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Introduction

Researchers have recently sounded the call to develop a clear knowledge base for non-confessional Religious Education (RE) (see, e.g., Kueh, 2018; Franck, 2021). In order to justify the existence of the subject in schools, it is not sufficient to refer to the positive effects that the subject might have on society and the individual, be they the fostering of democracy or the flourishing of the individual or something else; first, we need to figure out what kind of knowledge has the potential to create such desirable effects, a type of knowledge that has its own intrinsic strength and is not understood to be merely an instrument.

The ambition to establish a clear knowledge base must also be understood against the school subject's complicated background in countries where non-confessional religious education has evolved. This background comprises historically close ties between religion and education, like the

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national church's influence on the content of instruction. This also involves the fact that the schools have previously been a venue for collective worship (Kueh, 2018). Even though much of this has ceased apace with changes in society, uncertainty can nevertheless linger regarding the character of the school subject, to what extent it has liberated itself from the past and created an identity of its own, free from religious bonds (this situation may vary across countries). The project of developing a clear knowledge base can be understood in this context as an attempt to definitively cut the ties with this background and to dissipate the uncertainty that has engulfed the subject and its place among other school subjects.

However, the complicated background of the school subject and the difficulty of formulating a clear knowledge base constitute only one aspect of what has come to be called “the knowledge problem.” A further challenge of the same dignity, but thus far less discussed in relation to RE, is the far-reaching (intra-)academic criticism that has been levelled against Religious Studies (RS), namely, that its most central concept—the concept of religion—is not valid as an analytical category. If this criticism is sound, this entails that the knowledge generated in RS does not enjoy the self-evident scholarly validity that has been taken for granted, which in turn negatively affects RE, which has unquestioningly been able to rely on RS as its “supplier” of specialised academic knowledge.

To be sure, it is a well-known phenomenon that various humanities and to some extent social scientific subjects suffer from internal strife between different fractions, with various perspectives battling each other. In philosophy, we have the familiar conflict between analytic and continental philosophy (though this has been moderated considerably). But what makes RS special in this regard is that the issue largely centres on the circumstance that the concept can be said to constitute the scholarly domain itself (RS is understood here in a broad sense to be synonymous with, in German, *Religionswissenschaft*, or, in Swedish, *religionsvetenskap*, meaning “science of religion”). In other words, the discussion is not merely about different orientations within a subject area, which can be said to be the case with the example from philosophy.

There can thus be no doubt that RE is indeed vulnerable to the criticism, long been promulgated within RS, of the use of religion as an analytical category. The question that arises is instead: just how vulnerable?

Is it sufficient within RE to account for previous points of departure that have uncritically rested on the concept of religion, for example, by trying to abandon “the world religion paradigm,” or does RE need to take a step further by in some sense liberating itself from parts of RS, just as it freed itself from the national religion and certain forms of academic theology? But in that case what would this radical move involve? Does that not entail a dissolution of the idea of non-confessional religious education or, on the contrary, would it entail the freedom to recreate this concept on the basis of prevailing intellectual and cultural conditions? When these questions are posed, an intellectual quagmire is uncovered, one that we are tempted to slowly step away from. But this is not a serious position to assume.

In this chapter, I will attempt to hold together the two aspects of this expanded understanding of the “knowledge problem”— the question of what might be able to constitute a knowledge basis for the school subject and the alleged cracks in the foundation of RS as an academic endeavour. By way of introduction, I present some of the strategies for dealing with the knowledge issues that can be related to the first aspect. This will be followed by a review of the criticism that has been levelled against or can be levelled against RS from different quarters, thus addressing the second aspect. The chapter’s latter part consists of an expanded discussion of “the knowledge problem” in that it relates the two aspects to each other.

The Knowledge Problem—Two Strategies to Ensure a Solid Knowledge Base

Different strategies can be discerned to bring order to the knowledge question and clarify what type of knowledge should be conveyed in RE. Two models will be discussed here: the “science model” and the “knowledge model.” The former has existed for a longer time, while the other, which is based on the concept of powerful knowledge (PK), is under development. Much of the rich discussion that has been carried out regarding knowledge questions in relation to RE, especially in an

Anglo-Saxon context, will be omitted here, owing to space restrictions (see, e.g., Jackson, 2008; Wright, 2008).

As is evident from its designation, the “science model” is characterised by a strong emphasis on scientificity. The answer to the question of what type of knowledge is to be conveyed in RE based on this model is simple in a way: it is the academic, specialised knowledge that is produced in the various subdisciplines that are usually subsumed under “the study of religion” at university departments. In this model, there is thus a hierarchically ordered relationship between RS and RE. The former delivers knowledge to the latter. The scientific rigour of the subdisciplines that make up RS guarantees that the instruction in RE will be academically reliable and will pass on genuine knowledge, albeit in a simplified and pedagogically adapted form.

The question of what kind of knowledge RE is to convey is thus answered by referral to RS. As far as I can see, there is no genuine knowledge problem in ordinary forms of the science model; the main issue is rather one of scientific *purity*: to strictly monitor that the knowledge passed on in RE is not combined with some form of confessional features or, alternately, propagating an existing (semi)confessional RE to be transformed into a non-confessional RE.

A characteristic of the science model is the strong emphasis on learning *about* religion, which stands in contrast to both “learning in” and “learning from” religion; however, learning from the *study* of religion is fully compatible with the science model. Another characteristic, which reflects the close ties to the thinking of modernity, is its idealised image of the knowledge that is generated in RS. Researchers in RS are assumed to occupy an observation point similar to that of researchers in entirely different academic fields. In other words, the point of departure is a rather homogeneous concept of science.

In Sweden in the 1960s, when the subject of *kristendomskunskap* (literally “Christianity knowledge”) was changed into what was regarded as an entirely non-confessional activity and eventually changed its name to *religionskunskap* (literally “religion knowledge”), the scientific model was the self-evident point of departure. The shift to a strict “learning about” also contained an echo from an anti-metaphysical turn in Swedish philosophy that took place in the early twentieth century but assumed a new form

under the influence of British empiricism and international analytical philosophy, which took over the leading Swedish universities after the Second World War. All of this also coincided with a period in Swedish cultural life that was characterised by born-again progressive thinking, where “religion” was regarded by influential intellectuals as more or less a thing of the past, something that could hamper progress and that we therefore needed to be liberated from.

A contemporary representative of the scientific model is the Danish scholar Tim Jensen, who, in a large number of works, has pleaded for “a study-of-religion(s)-based RE” in public schools (see, e.g., Jensen, 2021). In his case, the model is not characterised by the anti-religious attitudes that marked Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s; Jensen has a considerably more open approach that reflects today’s altered society. But the basic features seem to be roughly the same: a strong emphasis on learning about religion where the teaching must observe water-tight bulkheads between learning about and learning in/from religion. It is important to point out in this context that this opposition is connected in turn to a concept of science in which it is meaningful to speak of “scientifically based knowledge in general” (Jensen, 2021, p. 181). Jensen thus appears to embrace the notion that there is some kind of essence— “something”— in all activities bearing the name of “science” and being carried out at universities:

There is, thus, as I see it, something that qualifies as science and can be seen as different from non-science, and there is something that qualifies as (more or less) scientific studies of religion(s) to be distinguished from other approaches, including religious and some theological approaches, to religion. (Jensen, 2021, p. 186)

Jensen links this essence with, among other things, methodological agnosticism and being “‘impartial’, trying [one’s] best to be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’” (p. 186). The positive value words in the quotation are treated as overarching labels of sorts, with a common content, regardless of a subject area.

The other strategy, the “knowledge model,” has certain similarities to the first one, but there are also crucial differences. As already touched

upon, it represents an attempt to transfer the knowledge sociologist Michael Young's concept of "powerful knowledge" to the school subject of religious studies. Such a transfer is not without problems, however, because the powerful knowledge (PK) concept is easiest to explain if natural science is taken as an exemplar, which not least applies to the requirement of generalisability (Young, 2015).

When the PK concept is transferred to subjects in the humanities, a vagueness arises. In an article from 2019 written together with Johan Muller, they discuss the difference between physics and history as subjects. Referring to other researchers, they propose that these disparate subjects have differing "progression types" (p. 12), which is a result of their differing knowledge structure: "hierarchical for Physics, horizontal for History" (p. 12). They also accept the notion, derived from Counsell (2018), that physics and history as school subjects evince "distinctive pursuit(s) of truth" (Muller & Young, 2019, p. 12). Unlike the science model, this model does not treat the concept of science as a homogeneous entity; instead, a characteristic of "true" knowledge (powerful knowledge) is that it can have different meanings in different contexts (Young, 2015). The crucial boundary does not go between science and non-science, but between knowledge that is specialised and disciplinary in contrast to everyday knowledge (Young, 2013). Another difference, which reflects the approach of sociology of knowledge, is the emphasis placed on all knowledge being historically situated (Young, 2010), albeit not bound to the conditions of its genesis.

The absence of a unified template for how the concept of powerful knowledge should be understood in every context in which instruction is given means that no useful concept has been elaborated for non-confessional studies of religion in school. A further difference in relation to the science model is thus that the knowledge model can be said to point to a "conceptual vacuum," a lack of theoretically expounded solutions to the knowledge problem in regard to certain subjects.

Nevertheless, several contributions have been made towards developing a theoretical basis for the school subject of religious studies. Richard Kueh has provided a rationale for developing a powerful knowledge base consisting of five concept-centred principles (Kueh, 2018). According to Kueh, "concepts are paramount" (p. 64), and the first principle states,

“RE brings substantive knowledge into the realm of disciplinary knowledge through concepts” (p. 64). A second principle distinguishes between under-socialised and over-socialised knowledge, while a third stresses that “truth claims” can be “comparatively, critically and competitively juxtaposed in a critical realism framework” (p. 64). A fourth principle engages with the concepts of identity and culture, while the fifth one stress that we live in an “inherently diverse world” (p. 66). This very brief summary does not do justice to Kueh’s concept, but it provides a background to the optimism—“the possibility of human progress” (p. 67)—that Kueh gives expression regarding the potential for the school subject of religious studies:

For Religious Education, powerful knowledge constitutes the *concepts that unlock a greater understanding* of the world; of the religions of the people who inhabit it; of human cultures and societies; of beliefs and values; of language and text; and of interpretation and thought. (p. 67, original italics)

However, Olof Franck has recently (Franck, 2021) pointed out that the concepts—truth, identity, culture, and diversity—that constitute the basis for Richard Kueh’s five principles are not sufficiently specified: “These concepts are, however, quite general, and they can all be linked to different topics and different discourses. It is not obvious what role they can or should be expected to play in the development of powerful RE-knowledge” (p. 166). With reference to Meyer and Land (2005) as well as Niemi (2018), Franck proposes that the development of so-called threshold concepts could offer a way forward in concretising what powerful knowledge could mean for non-confessional RE.

A salient similarity between the two strategies—the science model and the knowledge model—is that the scientific foundation for RE, knowledge adopted from RS, is treated as being more or less unproblematic. Regarding powerful knowledge, it can be said that it is precisely one of its points that the knowledge conveyed in a school subject has its base in “specialized knowledge” (Young, 2013). Problematising this reliance on RS—by pointing to the inherent complications of the academic concept of religion—presents major implications for both models, which will be made apparent, even though the knowledge model, with its greater

flexibility in allowing the possibility of resting on a differentiated conception of science, is impacted to a lesser extent.

The critique of the concept of religion comprises several dimensions. It is not just a matter of the scientific foundation for RE being under question, or at least fraught with reservations. The criticism entails on a deeper plane, which has consequences for the principle of “knowledge through concepts,” a sceptical approach to the academic formation of concepts. Just as theoretical concepts can open the door to a deeper understanding of reality, they can also contribute to the distortion of our understanding of reality in the service of various powerful interests. This dual capability, which appears to be a difference between, on the one hand, the humanities and the social sciences and, on the other hand, natural science, needs, as I see it, to be worked into a humanistic understanding of powerful knowledge.

The Collapse of the Analytical Category of Religion

In the field of research that has been called *critical religion*, criticism has long targeted the concept of religion and the research that has made use of that concept as an analytical category. A further criticism of the academic use of the same concept, inspired by Wittgenstein’s later language philosophy, will be briefly presented here. The former critique is that the concept of religion as an analytical category contains a hidden normativity, whereas the latter aims to draw attention to an inherent mechanism of reinterpretation in the use of scientific language.

The principal argument from researchers in critical religion consists in the fact that the concept of religion has previously been treated as a universal category in RS, that it claims to describe something that has existed everywhere in all times, while, on closer analysis, this concept has proven to be a Western construction with Christian accoutrements (Fitzgerald, 2000). In other words, this is a radical interrogation that raises the issue of whether there is anything that corresponds to this category of religion

if we go outside the Western context, which makes talk of different “world religions” that can be compared and classified seem suspect (Owen, 2011).

The Swedish scholar of religion David Thurfjell (2016) summarises the criticism that critical religion has directed towards the scientific use of the concept of religion as follows: “instead of contributing to our knowledge and understanding, it can lead to the consolidation of Christian thought structures and the rendering of other folk groups as incomprehensible” (p. 264, my translation). According to Thurfjell, the concept of religion runs the risk of appearing to be the opposite of “descriptive, neutral and non-normative” (p. 262, my translation).

The critique of the concept of religion in the field of critical religion constitutes a comprehensive discussion that involves multiple aspects, only a few of which can be briefly treated here. One common argument is that the analytical category of religion has unclear boundaries. For instance, should spirituality—a very broad concept in itself—count as religion? Another objection to the category is that it tends to create artificial boundaries between what is identified as religion—moral teachings, rituals, philosophical systems and so on—and similar cultural phenomena that are encountered outside of what is designated as religion (cf. Thurfjell, 2016). As has already been made clear, a major feature of the criticism is that other cultures are ascribed characteristics that do not exist there: a reinterpretation occurs that reflects the observer’s own frames of reference.

The criticism of the concept of religion has led to attempts in various subdisciplines to formulate a generally valid definition of the concept of religion with the help of terminology that does not presuppose any specifically Christian intellectual features. However, according to Nongbri (2013), “all the noble efforts to de-Christianize it [religion] ... [have been] to some extent futile” (pp. 11–12). Such “cleansing” definitions still rest on an essentialist-coloured fundamental idea in that they persist in the presumption that it should be possible to formulate “religion as a universally definable category that can be defined in relation to a middle point” (Thurfjell, 2016, p. 267, my translation). The notion of such a middle point cannot be afforded any empirical support, however; on the contrary, it is contradicted by reality.

Among certain scholars in RS, there has been a shift in perspective as a result of the critique of the concept of religion, for example, a greater interest in studying the use of the term “religion,” the actual discourse surrounding this term, instead of chasing the elusive phenomenon of religion. Others have scaled down their research to make cross-cultural comparisons of certain aspects, such as rites, or to settle for examining individual phenomena, which does not presuppose a universal definition of religion (cf. Madsen, 2012). However, Nongbri points out that there is considerable lag in the research world:

it is still common to see even scholars using the word “religion” as if it were a universal concept native to all human cultures. In my own area of specialization, the study of ancient Mediterranean world, every year sees a small library’s worth of books produced on such things as “ancient Greek religion”. (Nongbri, 2013, p. 7)

It is not strange then that the concept of religion has not been assigned a prominent role, with some exceptions (see e.g., Alberts, 2017), in the discussion of RE or the syllabus for training teachers of RE in teacher education, despite the obvious relevance of such a discussion.

What has probably also blocked a discussion of the concept of religion in RE is the existence of prestigious disciplines with a natural science component where the concept of religion continues to be used as a universally applicable analytical category. Special mention should be made here of the cross-disciplinary orientation Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), a subdiscipline of Cognitive Science, which has attracted a great deal of interest recently. Publications in CSR had increased to 3000 per year by 2011, a rise of 314% calculated against the preceding decade (White, 2021, p. 2). An example of a research question that this branch considers meaningful is, “Why is religion so prevalent around the world?” (p. 2).

A partly different criticism of the academic use of the concept of religion can be levelled by scholars in philosophy of language. The focus here is on the logic of intra-scientific language use. If we take, for example, quantitatively oriented sociology of religion’s studies of the status of Christianity in Sweden, which was previously my own field of research

(Thalén, 1997; 2006), we find that the language used here is characterised by an extremely high level of purported general validity. Concrete and historically determined boundary demarcations like Evangelical Lutheran versus non-Evangelical Lutheran or Christian versus non-Christian are replaced by language use where the boundary goes between religion/religious versus non-religion/non-religious. This new line of demarcation thus hovers in a linguistic space over the boundaries of confessions and traditions. It is thus possible to speak of the discipline's own language use, a constructed formation of concepts in which even word and phrase combinations that include the words "religion" and "religious" are assigned the same maximally ramped-up generality.

What are the consequences of applying this language use in empirical studies? Two inter-related mechanisms can be discerned. By enshrouding the individual observations of, for instance, a decline in the frequency of christening or confirmation, which has to do with events relating to a historically determined and chronologically definable church formation—Church of Sweden—in this language use, the observations are elevated to an absolute plane, where, instead, they are about a weakening of *religion* or a declining *religious* interest. In other words, we have a reinterpretation, a translation of sorts of empirical findings, the entire point of which is to claim enhanced general validity, but which also entails a higher level of abstraction. Because the terms "religion" and "religious" in the language of sociology of religion follow a logic that is not bound to historical or other demarcations, an image is invoked of an ongoing, major process of change: observations of a reduced frequency are interpreted not only as a weakening of the Church of Sweden (hardly a jarring fact to anyone who lives here), but also as a weakening of *religion*, which stands out as considerably more exciting and interesting. Are we seeing the end of religion, or will it be transformed into something new? And so on.

The first mechanism thus is about translating empirical observations into an absolutifying language use, whereby empirical observations are afforded a higher degree of general validity. The second mechanism, a consequence of the first step, is about how the formation of concepts, if we stick to the example above, creates the appearance of us, people in the Western world, being drawn into *a massive process*, which is professed to

be sociology of religion's object of study. The scientific concept apparatus, when interpreted literally, that is, when we ignore the fact that we are dealing with a translation and instead perceive our own activities as descriptive, thus tends to create a mythology.

How can the creation of this mythology be more clearly understood? What has been transmuted via scientific language into being about "the transformation of religion" tends to be perceived as an underlying, hidden process in the society that the scientific language is supposed to be about or depict, that is, what is created is a reality correlate to our own constructed language use. The content of the method of study is projected onto reality by the description and the reinterpretation becoming blurred in a conceptual fog (cf. Thalén & Cananau, 2022, pp. xiv–xvi). My own studies in philosophy of science dealt with Swedish publications in sociology of religion from the 1980s and 1990s, but the situation does not appear to have changed appreciably whether we limit ourselves to Sweden or look at the scientific scene in the outside world. A relatively fresh example of a grand formulation is the following:

The decline of religion, common across the developed world and now evident even in the USA, is not an accident and nor is it the work of committed atheists. It is an unintended consequence of a series of subtle social changes. Modernization changes the status and nature of religion in ways that weaken it and make it difficult to pass successfully from generation to generation. (Bruce, 2017, p. 5)

The language-philosophy critique converges on important points with the criticism that has developed in the field of critical religion. Both views, though with different emphases, reject that the concept of religion is a universally applicable analytical category. Where they differ, among other ways, is that the language-philosophy method focuses on language's power to generate misleading images: "A *picture* held us captive" (Wittgenstein, 1997, p. 48). That method's sphere of applicability is also considerably broader in that—in principle—it has a critical edge directed towards all social and behavioural science research which is unable to distinguish between the form of observation and the object of study.

The heading of this section is “The Collapse of the Analytical Category of Religion.” But it would be more correct to speak of “collapses” in the plural, one visible and one more invisible, with the latter involving an increased distance from the Enlightenment tradition. The criticism from the field of critical religion has grown into a potent intellectual movement in a few decades, effectively undermining the concept of religion as an analytical category. But in parallel with this we can observe a declining trust in science in society in general, which represents a danger, of course, but also, seen from another perspective, a sobering up. In the latter case, it is a matter of a more sensible view of human reason, an abandonment of the notion that we have access to a vantage point elevated above time and space, a “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986). Attempts to produce universal definitions of religion and the thought of religion as a universally applicable category were intellectual instruments that were at home on such an imaginary platform.

The principle promulgated in this chapter (more about this below)—that even what purports to be science and is pursued at state-funded academic institutions of learning needs to be treated with discernment—can be seen as an expression of a similar altered approach.

The Concept of Belief—the Next Object of Deconstruction?

Thus far, much has dealt with the unsuitability of studying phenomena outside of a Western context with the help of the concept of religion, but how about the study of Christianity in its original context? With RE in mind, it might seem important to illuminate the issue of whether the concept of religion is at least useful for the study of Christianity, not least because it is often afforded a prominent place in syllabuses for RE. Indeed, shouldn't the modern concept of religion be perfectly suited for such studies, considering its Christian roots?

To be able to discuss this matter, we take our point of departure in the thinking of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a pioneer in his day when it comes to criticising the concept of religion, even though some of his views are now considered outmoded (McCutcheon, 2019, p. 28).

A prominent theme in Smith's writing is that the modern concept of religion is coloured by an intellectual legacy that is philosophical in nature—European rationalism—tied to the thinking of the Enlightenment. If we factor in this aspect, the problem complex that is inherent in the culturally inherited concept of religion is broadened to also comprehend much-debated issues in contemporary philosophy. In other words, the difficulty in finding equivalents to what we mean by “religion” today outside of a Western context is a result not only of the Christian bias in the concept but also, to at least the same extent, of the philosophical mould.

In his famous work *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), Wilfred Cantwell Smith delineates how the concept of religion gradually undergoes a process of intellectualisation from the Renaissance onward (pp. 32–50). During the Renaissance and the Reformation, religion was still about an attitude to God and was more or less synonymous with personal piety. Only in the 1600s can we begin to discern a transformation of the concept, a kind of reification, where it gradually turns into an impersonal object, a system of ideas or doctrines, on the basis of which we can make judgements and which we can speak of in the plural—religions. The original question of how we should live has thus been transformed into a matter of the truth of metaphysical assertions:

In pamphlet after pamphlet, treatise after treatise, decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or are not true, something whose *locus* is in the realm of the intelligible, is up for inspection before the speculative mind. This interpretation had by mid-eighteenth century sunk deep into the European consciousness. (Smith, 1991, p. 40)

According to Smith (p. 43), a final step in this evolution of the concept of religion is the advent of an abstract general concept of religion. It can be described as a kind of super-category that designates the sum of all individual systems of learning that could be classified or counted as “religion.” This is where we find the historical roots of the abstract concept of religion that has become part of the repertoire of the social sciences, among other fields.

As the aforementioned quotation indicates, the words “believe” and “belief” (true or not true propositions) are closely related to the Enlightenment concept of religion—they are among its principal components. The words are marked by the same intellectualism—which means that the contemporary use of these words in academic and other contexts involves similar inherent problems as the concept of religion faces. It is my impression, however, that the problems surrounding their use have unfortunately been largely overlooked in the contemporary meta-discussion of the concept of religion.

What is important to point out here is that the shift in meaning that can be traced regarding the word “belief” and its close equivalents, such as “doctrine,” follows a somewhat different pattern. In terms of the concept of belief, it is a matter of a shift from background to foreground. In Calvin the matter of the true worship of God is still the overarching issue, whereas “doctrines,” sacraments and the interpretation of Scriptures, together with other features of the Christian faith, rather constitute means for attaining such piety (p. 39). A hundred years later a reversal has taken place where doctrines—beliefs—are called “the Christian religion,” constituting a new foreground, while personal practice of belief has been relegated to the background.

The scope of this reversal becomes clearer if we add certain components from the field of history of science and ideas. It is not merely a matter of a new foreground but also a matter of this new foreground assuming a starkly altered character. After the Middle Ages, a revolutionary shift in authority took place in the West (Taylor, 2007). It is no longer God but rather human reason that occupies the centre, an autonomous reason that in leading philosophers of the Enlightenment is directed towards scrutiny of knowledge on the basis of purportedly eternally valid principles (which reason itself put in place). The ontological discourses of the scholastics about the nature of being were thus replaced by theories of knowledge (which is juxtaposed with the inherited tradition), and the role of the human subject becomes central.

The fact that doctrines/beliefs were placed in the foreground during the Enlightenment entailed that in a historically new way they became *optional* by being the object of rational critical scrutiny. Here we also add, as Gavin Hyman (2010), among others, has brought forward, the advent

of an altered image of God after the medieval period where God shrinks and becomes one part of reality. This issue of choice—what we are to believe in—thus eventually becomes primary, superseding the issue of how we should live.

This extremely concise summary of ideas in history, which is designed to remind us how the concept of religion, including its components “believe” and “belief,” is intertwined with the Western philosophical tradition, also offers perspectives on some of the central issues under discussion today in connection with RE. One such issue is the proposal that RE should be completely or partially transformed into worldview education (cf. CoRE, 2018), an idea that, among other things, encompasses the notion that instruction should provide pupils with the groundwork to form their own “worldview.” This proposal can initially seem democratic, but at the same time it entails, because “worldview” is normally perceived as being synonymous with a set of “beliefs” in the sense discussed here, that the pupil, without consent, will be schooled into a rational ideal that is anything but self-evident.

However, for Cantwell Smith, who is Christian, the major issue was about how the modern concept of belief had slipped into the practices of Christian churches and become part of their own self-understanding:

The idea that believing is religiously important turns out to be a modern idea. It has arisen in recent times, in ways that can be ascertained and demonstrated. I might almost sum up the implication of my thesis, as distinct from the thesis itself, by saying that a great modern heresy of the Church is the heresy of believing. Not of believing this or that, but of believing as such. (Smith, 1985, p. v)

It is not necessary to share Smith’s involvement in the situation of the Christian church or his reformist ambitions to readily see the inappropriateness of using in education a concept formation—the contemporary use of the terms “religion,” “believe” and “belief”—in the study of Christianity that tends to offer a false picture of the entire segment of Christian tradition that preceded the Enlightenment:

Faith is not belief, and with the partial exception of a brief aberrant moment in recent Church history, no serious and careful religious thinker has ever held that it was. (Smith, 1979, p. 127)

But, if we wish to turn it all around and see the possibilities for a pupil studying the Christianity section in RE, it could surely open up perspectives to be exposed to Smith's narrative. The fact that knowledge can open new perspectives entails in this proposed case not that a pupil acquires a new theoretical concept but that the pupil receives knowledge that challenges notions that are thought of as self-evident in the cultural context the pupil lives in.

A New Intellectual Platform for RE?

How should the science model and the various suggestions for a new knowledge model based on powerful knowledge be regarded in the light of this aggregated criticism of the use of the concept of religion and related language tools?

Two things need to be kept distinct: on the one hand, the criticism that can be levelled against each of the models separately and, on the other hand, the criticism that can be levelled against their shared trust in research in RS as being scientifically solid. Nevertheless, these two aspects need to be commented on together, as they are inter-related.

Is research in RS science? This question is actually entirely too comprehensive, as research in RS comprises myriad activities that differ from each other regarding method and content if we take into consideration all the subdisciplines and moreover that the question of what characterises science itself is a huge and long-debated issue. But purely in principle, if we indulge ourselves and go big, it is nonetheless possible to maintain that theoretical activity in RS that is based on a non-deconstructed variant of the concept of religion as an analytical category, or alternatively is based on a universal definition of religion formulated in non-religious terms or operating with an abstract distinction between religion and not religion, cannot claim to be a *descriptive* activity.

But if such activity in RS cannot be characterised as descriptive, what is it then all about? Broadly speaking, activity of this sort in RS—whether it is called “science” or not—rather appears to be a translation activity, consisting in translating various cultural phenomena by placing them in a predetermined interpretive framework that in some cases shows clear signs of various forms of Christianity *and* normally involves abstractive logic. With such translations, an intellectual matrix of theories is created, but this is not to say that these creations are innocent, as they can be shown to be used in political contexts (cf. Fitzgerald, 2007).

If we wish to pursue this thinking one step further, it is easy to characterise parts of activities in RS, both the practices themselves and the intellectual outcomes, as a kind of academic meta-religion, which entails that the distinction vis-à-vis academic theology with pronounced confessional features is blurred or it entirely disappears. This conclusion is by no means new. According to Fitzgerald (2000), RS should be described as a form of “ecumenical theology” (p. 7).

The consequences of this critical perspective for the science model are far reaching. As has been pointed out above, it is central to the science model that *learning about* should be understood as descriptive in contrast to, above all, *learning in*, which is about, simply put, indoctrination. This opposition can no longer be maintained; what we have instead is, generally speaking, two separate practices that are creative in nature, one of which is inspired by science and the other usually not.

The collapse of the concept of religion as an analytical category is accordingly, in drastic terms, the collapse of the science model as an intellectual platform for RE. Instead, this platform stands out as a seriously misleading ideological superstructure to RE. In a country like Sweden, where the science model has been a self-evident point of departure for RE, this means there is no longer a captain in the pilot house. The activity is carried on in schools by tradition, but its original intellectual underpinnings are invalid.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to point out that only a certain interpretation of the expression “learning about” has been rejected here as outmoded, an interpretation where “learning about” and “learning in” are elevated to an absolute plane, assuming a virtually metaphysical

role. Criticism of this binary pair of opposites does not mean that all forms of distance to a phenomenon or an area are rejected, merely that any such distance must be specified in relation to the issue at hand. What it means to “see something from the outside” thus needs to be treated case by case and can vary depending on the subject, for example, if it is a matter of history, philosophy or biology.

The situation for the knowledge model is somewhat different in comparison to the science model. This is owing to the fact that the knowledge model does not rest on, or need to rest on, the same binary thinking. Thus, the consequences for the knowledge model of the criticism of the concept of religion and closely related concepts are indeed complicating but do not have to be undermining. On the other hand, it should be made clear that the disintegration of the science model strengthens the need for a deeper and more elaborated knowledge model to serve as a new, sustainable platform for RE.

As discussed above, among the complications, we find the need for an altered and more critically oriented relation to RS, a greater (intradisciplinary) distance, where some form of selection is necessary. Theoretical concepts cannot be adopted wholesale; instead, their possible value for RE needs to be examined. Such selections entail in turn that the academic discussion of RE's knowledge content and concept formation needs to include a critical meta-platform—here research from critical religion can make contributions, as it can be said to have already done.

There are many indications that such an elaboration of the knowledge model would lead to an increased differentiation of the concept of science, a greater emphasis on the difference between (parts of) RS and science pursued in entirely different areas, which ought to be able to influence the future design of RE.

When the matter of selection arises, a natural follow-up question arises: what kind of alleged knowledge or concept formation needs to be handled with caution in RE? Because subdisciplines, like history of religion, have to some extent already incorporated the criticism of the concept of religion, this is probably not where a caution sign needs to be placed, even though the earlier pronouncement from Nongbri regarding the study of the ancient world points in a different direction. On the

other hand, as has been touched upon above, the historical background to the Western concept of religion still constitutes a blind spot in social scientific area:

our current most commonly used social scientific categories, especially those defining “religion” and the “secular”, have been deeply shaped by Western Protestant theological concepts and are still connected with unspoken assumptions about the constitution of the world and the meaning of history – assumptions that are empirically unverifiable and virtually theological. (Madsen, 2012, p. 26)

A rule of thumb might be that the more a subdiscipline in RS claims to make use of methods similar to those of natural science, the more there is reason to critically scrutinise the knowledge claims and treat them with caution. This is not motivated by any animosity towards natural science—as long as natural science remains natural science—but rather by the fact that the high level of generality in natural scientific theories is not transferrable to RS.

Why would such a rule of thumb be important? If RE becomes marinated in some form of scientism, for example, falls back on universal explanatory models that treat religion as a totality, it will not be possible to fulfil demands for an impartial approach. My impression—right or wrong—is that proponents of the science model, in their zeal to purge religious/confessional features from RE, have been considerably less concerned about the risk of winding up in the ditch on the other side of the road.

It may sound paradoxical, but to be intellectually acceptable, RE needs to be less “scientific” in the future.

Final Comments

Criticism similar to that levelled against the concept of religion can of course be turned against non-confessional RE as an idea and practice, namely that RE reflects a Western understanding of the concept of religion. In Swedish syllabuses, for example, the “world religion paradigm” is universally prevalent as far as I can determine. Research has already shown

that so-called essentialist thinking is present in Swedish teaching materials in RE (Hylén, 2012; Wiktorin, 2022).

What supports such an assessment is the observation that the world “secular” as an antonym to “religious” contains within itself the same understanding of religion as the Western concept of religion, albeit in negated form (cf. Fitzgerald, 2007). The consequence of this intimate relationship is that the secular—both as a concept and as a way of life—passes on a fundamental Christian pattern. If non-confessional RE is seen as an attempt to provide secular teaching on the subject of religion, then this attempt is still—at least indirectly—a passing on of Christian tradition, albeit in a watered-down form that, to an untrained eye, can be difficult to recognise as Christian.

To proponents of the science model, this type of cultural analysis presents substantial problems, because the model in its purest form includes the ambition to achieve a definitive break with the past, and in this sense assumes an observational approach. Thus, the model corresponds with what can be regarded as a defining feature of modernity, namely, the belief that such a break has actually taken place. Non-confessional RE, as it was first developed in Sweden, *is* a modern project.

For the knowledge model, which affirms the historicity of humans and knowledge, even though its proponents maintain at the same time that it is possible to lift yourself above it, the cultural framing that surrounds and is conveyed further by RE need not be an insurmountable problem. Nothing hinders the possibility of a knowledge that, within this inherited cultural framework, elevates itself over particular historical circumstances and individual experiences, as long as this “elevating” or “transcending” is not confounded with natural science, where general knowledge has a specific intra-scientific meaning.

In conclusion, I want to state that the fundamental philosophical problem in non-confessional RE is about how intellectual distance can be achieved to what is popularly called “religion”—how this distance should be more closely understood and realised. This problem is not specific to RE, but rather something that haunts the entire Enlightenment tradition and remains an unsolved question in what is usually loosely termed “Western culture.” There has been a slow erosion of the platform for the critique of religion and theology that has been cultivated in the

Enlightenment tradition, which also includes the concept of intellectual distance to religion on which this critique was based. At the same time, it has come to light that the secular is burdened by considerable theological baggage that has merely been relegated to a cellar space to await a more meaningful and more precision-driven critique than modernity has been able to muster.

When both established religion and its opposite—the secular—lose their cultural moorings, and are no longer able to find support in the premises of modernity, a considerable amount of uncertainty is created. It is in this precarious situation that the quest to find a new intellectual platform for RE needs to seek its point of departure.

It could also be said: RE's most fundamental intellectual problems are not its own. On the other hand, RE offers a window, a peephole, through which can be observed the problem complex that is normally hidden from view in the culture. To wish to abolish non-confessional RE because RE is somehow not neutral, should anyone want to suggest as much after having been made aware of the criticism levelled against the concept of religion, would merely be an empty gesture. A tenable notion of the intellectual distance to what we used to call "religion" but in future should use another name for is missing in action not merely in RE, but in the entire cultural context that embeds the pursuit of such education.

On the other hand, the attempts to achieve clarity in the knowledge base for RE, which has been a leitmotif in this book, are not merely a contribution to the development of a particular school subject but also encompass the entire way of life that has evolved in the West and has been called, for a time, "secular."

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