6 Dealing with Religious Diversity: The Aims and Realities of Religious Education in Sweden

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Abstract In several Western countries there is now a growing awareness that teaching RE may contribute to greater social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society. This chapter examines the relationship between the official aims and intentions of the Swedish state regarding RE and school students' attitudes to this subject. It argues that we must consider the cultural context in which such education takes place; in this case, Sweden has developed over a short period of time from a mono-cultural society with a Lutheran state church into a religiously and culturally diverse society, while the country can furthermore be seen as highly secularized on the individual level. The aims of RE are analyzed through the study of official documents. Students' attitudes regarding RE and religious and cultural diversity are monitored by a nationally representative classroom questionnaire, and with observations drawn from focus group interviews with students aged 18–19 in upper secondary schools. The investigation presented in this chapter leads to the conclusion that there is currently a gap between the lofty intentions of the state regarding the teaching of RE and students' attitudes to it. This reflects how Swedish society constructs itself as secular by depicting being religious as the "other." An urgent task for future studies is, therefore, to identify how the teaching of RE could be further developed so as to better realize the current high aims for the subject in a society as increasingly diverse as the Swedish one.

6.1 Introduction: RE in a Secularized and Diverse Context

Sweden has been characterized as one of the most secularized countries in the entire world (Pettersson and Esmer 2005, 2008). Two recent reports on young peoples' attitudes in Sweden proved that religious ignorance among upper secondary students correlates with prejudices. The reports argued that a lack of know-

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ledge about religion may be related to the harboring of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes (Löwander and Lange 2011; Skolinspektionen 2012).

In light of this, it is indeed interesting to take a look at the institution of RE in the Swedish school system. In this chapter I will look more closely at the Swedish case by first examining the government's motives for promoting RE in Swedish schools. These are regulated by the *Skollagen* (the Education Act) and by the national curricula of RE, which all are binding for both state as well as private schools. The first research question is therefore: What is the purpose of RE in this highly secularized Swedish society? Attention will then shift to the attitudes toward religious diversity existing among school students. These attitudes are monitored by means of a questionnaire circulated among students regarding their take on RE and religious and cultural diversity, being complemented by some focus group interviews with students on their views of religion in society. The second research question is then: What is the relationship between students' attitudes to RE and religious and cultural diversity on the one side and variables such as cultural traditions, a foreign background, and religiosity on the other? Taken together, answering these two research questions illuminates what the government's ambitions are for RE in Swedish schools and offers a preliminary evaluation of whether these goals are being met. On a general level, doing this will also help to shed light on what the chances are of fostering a greater sense of social tolerance if close attention is not paid to the surrounding cultural context.

6.2 Religion and the School in Sweden

Mandatory education in Sweden goes back to the establishment of the *Folkskolan* ("People's School") in 1842. During the 19th century public education was closely linked to the Evangelical Lutheran state church. The overall image of Swedish society at the time was that of a highly homogeneous peasant country, with the teaching of Christianity being related to the Lutheran Catechism. During the modernization process of the 19th and 20th centuries, this situation came to change however. Industrialization and urbanization created competition with the church regarding popular mobilization, and the workers' associations, temperance organizations, and free church movements (Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, etc.) represented the new possibilities of modern life (Gustafsson 2000). Even though the church stepped up to the challenge, its monopoly on worldviews was gradually diminished and a functional differentiation process unfolded affecting many societal institutions, including the education system (Bexell 2003; Bäckström 1999). In 1919 the content of the school subject of Christianity was changed from its Lutheran profile to a more general Christian one, focusing on

the ethical teachings of Jesus—an orientation found to be instrumental in promoting values of solidarity in society. During the 1950s and 1960s the subject of Christianity started to also include focus on other religions, the morning prayer was abolished, and the role of church officials in relation to the upper secondary schools was scrapped. Eventually the nondenominational subject of *Religionskunskap* replaced Christianity as a subject in school, with it having a focus on providing an outside perspective on religions. Instead of instruction in a specific religious tradition, the new subject gave orientation about a range of religions, mainly focusing on the so-called "world religions"—but also on ethical and existential issues. Using Grimmitt's classic typology, this was a shift from "teaching into" a certain religious tradition to "learning about" religion (Grimmitt 1973; Löfstedt 2011).

In relation to religion and its role in Swedish society, there are three principal distinctions that can be made in those contexts where some kind of policy on religion can be discerned. These three distinctions, which all are relevant to the Swedish case, are: a) whether there are confessional schools, b) what form of RE exists therein, and c) what other activities and relationships are there between the school and organized religion, referring to any rituals and official connections between state schools and religion. To begin giving a picture of religion in Swedish schools, it is necessary to draw attention to the provisions of the *Skollagen* as well as to the general clauses found in the introductory chapters of the standard curriculum. Herein the emphasis lies on objectivity, meaning the neutrality and nondenominational status of education in Sweden—and that all education "shall be based on science and proven experience" (Skollagen 2010). These statutes also stress that parents shall be able to send their children to school "confident that they are not influenced in any particular ideological direction."

Regarding the first of the three distinctions mentioned above, it can be said that denominational schools have been allowed in Sweden since the free school reform of 1992. The number of free schools with a denominational orientation is very low; about 1 percent of all students attend a denominational school in Sweden. All schools—including both free and denominational ones—must follow the Education Act and the national curricula *(Läroplan för det obligatoriska skolväsendet, Läroplan för gymnasieskolan,* Skolverket 2011). As for denominational schools, the regulations distinguish between teaching (which cannot be denominational) and education (school activities outside of teaching in classroom, which can be denominational—but if so, these are voluntary). A central argument when passing the law permitting denominational schooling was that any prohibition would lead to denominational schools going underground, avoiding public monitoring—something which was seen as a negative eventuality. The rights of

parents to choose education in accordance with their beliefs according to the European Convention on Human Rights were of course also central in the debate, but in the Swedish discussions this was clearly balanced with the right of the child to education and to both a positive and a negative freedom of religion (Berglund 2008, 2013; Löfstedt 2011).

When it comes to existing forms of RE, since the reforms of the 1960s brought an orientation toward world religions, ethics, and existential issues has taken precedence—being taught by those who were trained in a university and who are employed in the same way as the teachers of other subjects are. Not seldom do teachers of RE also teach other humanities subjects such as Geography, History, and Social Studies (Löfstedt 2011; Olivestam 2006).

Concerning the third aspect, that of other activities and relations between the school and organized religion, these are sometimes a matter of debate. We can give one example of such points of contestations: It concerns the general school assembly that closes the school year, being sometimes held in a church. This is often the case, especially in primary schools—among large sections of the population it is seen as a taken for granted tradition, despite some criticism thereof based on the separation of church and state as well as the negative freedom of religion arguments (Sjöborg 2014, forthcoming). The *Skolinspektionen* (Swedish Schools Inspectorate) ruled (2010) this to be allowable, as long as a school assembly held in a religious space is carefully directed by the school—with the aim of fostering school comradeship, tradition, and inclusion—and that the act is voluntary. In various debates and rulings overseen by the Inspectorate it is understood that the individual integrity of the student is not infringed upon by being in a church building with other classmates or by singing a Christmas carol, but that it is impinged upon by reading the Lord’s Prayer or singing a Christian hymn. However, it can be noted that some traditional Christmas carols are in fact Christian hymns. The issues raised in such discussions have concerned not only end of year ceremonies, but also Christmas nativity shows and traditional craft markets around Christian holidays (Sjöborg 2013a).

6.3 High Aims: Learning to Deal with Diversity

We will now turn the focus for the rest of this chapter to the second of the distinctions mentioned above: RE. According to the standard curriculum, the subject of RE pursues certain core aims—in both primary and secondary schools. We will focus here specifically on the standard curriculum for the upper secondary school, because it is at this school level that we also studied students’ attitudes. The current curriculum stipulates the aim of RE to be that:

> "students widen, deepen, and develop their knowledge about religions, worldviews, and ethical models, and different interpretations of these," (Skolverket 2011b, author's translation).

Noticeable here is the emphasis on religions (which in other sections of the standard curriculum is referred to as world religions, and often includes the Old Norse and Sámi religions) and worldviews (such as New Secularism, Existentialism, Ecosophism, etc.), along with on ethical models. However, of specific interest here is the following passage that concerns one sentence that was added by the government late in the political process:

> "knowledge about and understanding of Christianity and its traditions is particularly important as this tradition has provided the value foundations for Swedish society," (Skolverket 2011b, author's translation).

Such an addition reflects a politico-cultural discourse related to cultural heritage, which was present in the two rounds of revisions of national curricula made by Conservative–Liberal governments (in 1994 and 2011 respectively).[5] Keeping these formulations of RE's central aims in mind, they are combined with dense statements like this:

> "The teaching shall start out from a view of society characterized by openness regarding lifestyles, attitudes to life, and differences between people and give the students the opportunity to develop a readiness to understand and live in a society characterized by diversity. The students are to be given the opportunity to discuss how the relationship between religion and science can be interpreted and understood, for instance regarding issues such as creation and evolution. The teaching shall lead to the students developing knowledge about how peoples' moral attitudes can be motivated by religions and worldviews. They should be given opportunities to reflect over and analyze other peoples' values and beliefs, and thereby develop respect and understanding for different ways of thinking and forming a life. The teaching should also give the students the opportunity to analyze and evaluate how religion can be related to, for instance, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic background," (Skolverket 2011d, author's translation and emphasis).

There is clearly a normative aspect in the standard curriculum for RE—one that is salient also in the new syllabus for the subject (Skolverket 2011c). According to the latter, RE "provides advanced knowledge, as well as greater understanding of people with different religions and views of life." The specific contribution that the subject of RE should make is outlined in a detailed manner. Indeed, the subject's aim can be seen as a part of civic education or *Bildung*. The goal of greater understanding is central therein. The quoted passage illustrates the centrality of analysis of, and reflection around, the relations between values and beliefs

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5 It should also be noted that the religious–cultural–political addendum of Christianity in the sections "Aims" and "Core Content" is not reflected in the section about "Marking Criteria," wherein only the expression "world religions and worldviews" is used.

on the one hand and peoples and institutions such as groups and societies on the other. Understanding is thus thought to arise from the analysis of and reflection on values and beliefs. This represents an instrumental view of RE related to diversity in society, one which can be noticed also on the European level of policy making. The increasing religious and cultural pluralism of Europe is sometimes understood by policy makers as a potential social problem and a challenge to social cohesion. Researchers on RE (Jackson 1997; Weisse 2010), alongside institutions like the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE 2007), have argued that RE is important to increase intercultural understanding. In other words, there are high expectations from Swedish society vis-à-vis RE. At the same time, it should be noted that these high expectations on the part of the state can be problematized: Why is it that specifically religious diversity needs to be "dealt with," or, put differently, subjected to understanding? Is it perhaps the case that the Swedish state in this way constructs itself as secular by construing the "other" as religious (cf. Lövheim and Axner 2011)? Against this background, it is interesting to contrast these expectations with the actual experiences of school students and to listen to their own views on RE.

6.4 RE and Society—The Students' Perspectives

Our questionnaire circulated among upper secondary school students in Sweden included several items that are of interest to this chapter. The study was conducted in 2009–2010 among a representative sample of school attendees, with 1850 pupils participating (Sjöborg 2013b). The study also included a set of focus group interviews, used to illustrate the quantitative data on the students' relationships to religion through RE. We will focus on two aspects here: attitudes to RE and attitudes to religious and cultural diversity within Swedish society.

Table 1 demonstrates the results for five statements regarding attitudes to RE. What are the effects of different variables? While there are interesting, though minor, differences between the subgroups of a foreign or Swedish background, or a Muslim and Christian tradition respectively, the most important differences in Table 1 are actually found in Columns 6 and 7. With the exception of Muslim students disagreeing with the statement that RE should be mainly concerned with Christianity, it was religiosity that brought out the most salient differences in relation to the statements examined. Almost two thirds, 64.6 percent, of religious students believed that RE increases understanding between people, while only little more than one third, 39.3 percent, of nonreligious students agreed with this statement. Of the religious students, 56.4 percent said RE helps them make up

Table 1: Attitudes to RE in Relation to Ethnic Background, Cultural Background, and Religiosity[6]: Percentages that agreed with Five Proposed Statements (4–5 on a 5-step Scale).

	All	Foreign back-ground	Swedish back-ground	Muslim tradi-tion	Christian tradition	Non-reli-gious	Reli-gious
	n=1850	n=328	n=1417	n=158	n=837	n=1473	n=377
RE increases understanding between people	44.7	53.0	43.1	53.1	51.3	39.3	64.6
RE helps me to make up my own mind	41.4	52.3	38.9	46.6	49.5	37.3	56.4
RE gives me know-ledge to better understand society	42.1	49.8	40.4	49.7	48.1	37.2	60.6
RE should mostly be concerned with Christianity	16.7	21.0	15.8	11.0	24.0	14.6	24.4
RE should cover all religions just as much equally	57.3	70.0	54.9	68.4	58.1^{ns}	52.9	73.7

their own mind about what to believe while only 37.3 percent of the nonreligious agreed here. 60.6 percent of religious students said RE helps them better

6 *Ethnic background:* By foreign background is meant that the person and/or both of his/her parents were born outside Sweden. With Swedish background is meant that a person either was born in Sweden or that at least one of their parents was. *Cultural background:* The questionnaire included an item on the question of to what degree the respondent felt they belong to certain traditions. 45.2 percent of all pupils stated that they belong (moderately, quite a lot or completely, Steps 3–5 on a 5-step scale) to a Christian tradition, while 8.5 percent stated that they belong to a Muslim tradition. *Religiosity:* The questionnaire included an item on religious self-definition, where 10.9 percent answered that they consider themselves as “religious” while 16.7 percent agreed with a self-definition as “believer.” Since it is obviously possible to combine different identities, there was some overlap in the sense that 174 respondents agreed quite a lot (4) or completely (5) with both of these self-identifications, while another 79 respondents agreed moderately (3) with one of these labels and quite a lot or completely with the other. Due to this outcome a new category was created from the self-definitions of “religious” and/or “believers” (Steps 4 and 5), named as the new category of “religious”—consisting of 377 individuals, or 20.4 percent of the students surveyed. Thus, henceforth “religious” refers to this said new category. The latter category is compared to all other students, labeled “nonreligious.”

understand society, compared to 37.2 percent of nonreligious students saying so. This shows that religious students appreciated many of the key features of RE, which is interesting in relation to the high aims of the subject discussed above. The main finding from Table 1 is that it is religiosity—rather than ethnic background or cultural tradition—that brings about differences in attitudes to RE. This also pertains to the statement about greater understanding between people, one of the main goals of RE. This result is consistent with the findings from several countries regarding students' attitudes to the teaching of RE in schools (Jozsa et al. 2009; Sjöborg 2013b; Skeie and von der Lippe 2009). In Table 2, we present the results concerning students' attitudes to religious and cultural diversity in Swedish society.

Table 2 presents the results for the attitudes to six statements regarding religious and cultural diversity in society. The first column ("All") shows the results for all students. 68.3 percent of all students agreed with the statement on the general freedom to speak about one's religion at school or work. 34.4 percent stated that clothes and symbols related to religion should be allowed in Swedish workplaces. These two items reflect one's freedom of religion perspective: it was noticeable that for the statement concerning *speaking* about religion a little more than two-thirds agreed, while for the statement regarding *visual representations* of religion only one-third did. This is worth noting since it represents a distinct difference from when it comes to tolerance of religion: the results here indicated that the degree of tolerance may shift depending on whether the matter concerns someone's freedom to speak about their religion or someone's freedom to wear visual representations of it. One interpretation could be that the visual presence of religions is perceived as being more provocative than a verbal one is. Regarding the items on the banning of Christian church bells or Muslim calls to prayer, 22.2 percent agreed with the statement on the former while 42.2 percent agreed with the statement on the latter. Such a result may reflect a greater level of unfamiliarity with the presence of Islam than with Christianity in Swedish society among the students surveyed. Two statements concerned immigration and assimilation policy. 52.3 percent agreed that immigration to Sweden should be restricted, while 61 percent agreed that immigrants should adapt to Swedish values. From the wording of the first of these statements it cannot, however, be discerned whether the respondents wish to keep the present restrictions or rather are urging an increase in the existing restrictions on immigration.

The subgroup comparisons provided some interesting results. Students from a Muslim tradition were less in favor of banning Muslim calls to prayer and actually opposed a prohibition on the ringing of church bells to the same extent as

Table 2: Attitudes to Religious and Cultural Diversity in Society on the Basis of Ethnic Background, Cultural Background, and Religiosity

	All	Foreign back-ground	Swedish back-ground	Muslim tradition	Christian tradition	Non-religious	Reli-gious
	n=1850	n=328	n=1417	n=158	n=837	n=1473	n=377
Everyone ought to be able to freely talk about their religion in school or at work	68.3	72.9^{ns}	67.6	63	71.8	66.3	75.9
The ringing of church bells should be banned if disturbing to the neighborhood	22.2	18.3	23.1	14.1	16.7	24.2	15
Muslim calls to prayer should be banned if disturbing to the neighborhood	42.2	32.6	44.2	15	43.7	43.9	36.1
Immigration to Sweden should be limited	52.3	37.2	54.9	28.4	55.4^{ns}	55.2	41.3
Clothes and symbols related to religion (veil, turban, cross, etc.) should be allowed in Swedish workplaces	34.4	47.7	31.6	55.9	35.7^{ns}	30.5	48.8
Immigrants should adopt Swedish values	61	48.6	63.7	39	61.6^{ns}	63.8	50.8

other students did. As regards the statement on the prohibition of Muslim calls to prayer, nonreligious students and students from a Christian tradition were more in favor of this than other subgroups were. In general, the nonreligious students can be seen as having been about as open to religious and cultural diversity as other subgroups except regarding the wearing of clothes and symbols and adaptation policy, for which they were less tolerant.

Taken together, the results in Tables 1 and 2 show that even though just over four out of ten students agree with the central aims of RE (RE increases understanding between people, RE helps me make up my own mind of what I believe, RE gives me knowledge to better understand society), the stark differences that are apparent between religious and nonreligious students brings to our attention that RE does not really seem to instill greater intercultural or interreligious understanding. It is, however, necessary to remember that this is not a controlled effect study and the results could, for instance, differ over time or if the survey was repeated again after a completed course of RE.

6.5 Listening More Closely to the Voices of the Students: Focus Group Interviews

A limited number of the students surveyed were also interviewed in focus groups. These group interviews revealed that, when talking about religion and religion in school, the students would stress central late modern values such as autonomy, individual freedom, and reflexivity when describing themselves and their view on religion (Sjöborg 2013a; Rosvall 2013; Witkowsky 2010). Depending on whether or not these students are religious, this comes in different forms: *Students claiming not to be religious* often refer to a scientific discourse for constructing autonomy. From the focus groups, the following representative ways of stating this can be highlighted: “Religion is something that people used to believe in before, in the old days, when they did not know better. Now we understand more”; “They cannot help it, they were raised that way”; “It can be good to know at least something about religion when you go to, like, Thailand.” These illustrative quotes demonstrate that among these students religion is constructed as something that is distant in time or place, a phenomenon that is not associated with modernity, progress, and science. In this way, these pupils construe themselves as autonomous and reflexive. *Students claiming to be religious* talk, meanwhile, of their beliefs existing in contrast to commercial and superficial ideas, which they feel impose restrictions and limitations on the freedom of thought of the majority of society. These students construct religion as something that enables them to be autonomous. They stress their reflexivity, and underline their freedom with regards to both: 1) the demands to be and behave in a certain way in majority society and 2) that they have not accepted any religious dogmas uncritically. Summing up the impressions from both categories, the students construct as different the respective “other” that they feel opposes modern central values. These others are seen as not being as independent and free as they themselves are. This was true among both the religious as well as the nonreligious students inter-

viewed. From these focus groups, it can be seen that both these categories of students—religious and nonreligious—choose to construct the other by stressing their own agency and reflexivity.

The interviewed students live in a time when autonomy and freedom are seen as core values. They also live in a society that, as compared to other ones around the world, can be said to be permeated by these values to the extent that their way of talking about RE and religion is colored by this specific cultural context. Esmer and Pettersson (2007) even characterize individual integrity and autonomy as sacred values in the Swedish context, and demonstrate that traditional religious values are rather invisible on a micro level.[7]

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we have shown that the intended purpose of teaching RE in the highly secularized Swedish society is that school students learn to deal with social diversity, specifically by deepening their knowledge on world religions, ethics, and existential issues. The hope herein is to increase tolerance and respect for people with different worldviews, enabling greater cohesion in a culturally and religiously diverse society. The second topic that we addressed was the relationship between school students' attitudes to RE and religious and cultural diversity on the one side and variables such as cultural traditions, foreign background, and religiosity on the other. The main point made was that it is necessary to take into account the cultural context in which these students live. Our interpretation is that in such a highly secularized society as the Swedish one, the learning *about* approach (orientation concerning world religions, facts) has clear limitations, at least if the above mentioned high aims with regard to the subject are to be reached. This investigation established some gaps in attitudes between nonreligious and religious students concerning RE and religious and cultural diversity. Religious students are more likely to appreciate RE's key features, and hence appear more tolerant. A reasonable interpretation of this finding is that the formulation of RE aims and the means of measuring tolerance are closer to a religious worldview than to a nonreligious one. Expressed differently, the findings suggest that religious students understand better what RE is meant to be and to achieve, and it is therefore easier for them to agree with statements on tolerance.

7 It is also necessary to remember that even though the interview groups contained members of different major and minor religious traditions and denominations, such as agnostics, Assyrian Orthodox, atheists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, active and less active Lutherans, Muslims, and Pentecostals, the need to relate to the Swedish cultural norm of individual integrity and autonomy when talking about religion held strong.

Taken together, addressing these two research questions has thus illuminated what the Swedish state's ambitions are regarding the teaching of RE in the country's schools, and offer a tentative evaluation of whether these goals are currently being met. On a general level, this points to the difficulties that will be faced when it comes to fostering a sense of greater social tolerance if careful attention is not paid to the surrounding cultural context.

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