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## **Transition in RE in Finland**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter will discuss key questions regarding religious education in Finnish state schools. It will focus on how various aspects explain why the subject of religious education seems to be characterised by lack of an identifiable core so is restricted in its ability to react to emerging societal changes and subsequent demands. The discussion will first focus on the basis and developments of RE in Finnish public education. This will be followed by a description of the characteristics of Religious Education as a modern academic research discipline in Finland over the course of 50 years. These sections will be followed by an analysis of the current situation as has been recently described in “Contextualising dialogue, secularisation and pluralism. Religion in Finnish public education” (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019) by leading Finnish researchers of religion and religious education. Finally, the chapter will conclude that the changed societal reality in Finland towards post-secularity requires new critical ways of looking at RE and religion in public education: it requires ‘thinking otherwise’ on both philosophical and practical levels, and subsequently in research too.

### **Key words**

religious education, public education, school, post-secularity

### **1. Introduction**

In this chapter, we will discuss key questions regarding religious education in Finnish state schools today. Recent years have shown that issues related to dialogue, citizenship skills, social integration have moved into the forefront when discussing religious education (Jackson 2014a). Similarly, several researchers have analysed the challenges that diversification, secularisation and post-secularity create for education in religious and non-religious worldviews in Finnish state schools (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019a). When we refer to Finnish society in a post-secular context, we do not wish to overstate the rising impact of religion in Europe, but acknowledge the resurgence of public religion and the emergence of an increasingly pluralistic public sphere in Finland too. We convey criticism of the secular normativity of schools and of the liberal-secular foundation of the mainstream approaches of multicultural education, which have emerged against a backdrop of the notion of post-secularity (Coulby & Zambeta 2008; Ubani 2013a). In the Nordic context too, scholars have

criticised the othering of non-secular and non-Western worldviews in educational thinking and practices (see e.g., Berglund 2017; Poulter, Riitaola, & Kuusisto 2016).

Currently in Finland there is an increasing demand to develop integrated practices of religious education towards the Nordic parallels (Åhs, Poulter & Kallioniemi 2017). In contrast to most Western and other Nordic countries, in Finland RE is legislated so that students are divided into separate classes based on their religious affiliation, yet the aims are similar to the other countries in that instruction does not include faith formation or devotional objectives (Rothgangel, Jackson, Jäggle & Skeie 2014; Kallioniemi & Ubani 2016; Ubani & Tirri 2014). The current rapid developments in municipalities and schools toward resolving the demands on religious education in terms of dialogue, integration and multiculturalism as questions of practice – arguably overlooking the legislative, philosophical and moral aspects of integrated instruction - seems to indicate that in Finland RE as a subject and the respective scholarly output has for a long period remained relatively sedentary in relation to current questions of dialogue, diversity and encounter. Practical solutions to integration can to some extent be interpreted as post-secular realities that make local authorities use their power and adopt independent solutions regarding ways of organising RE, overtaking the slower mechanisms of democratic policy-making with regard to RE in state schools.

As indicated above, the starting point of the article is that various developments have contributed to a situation where the subject of religious education is to some extent marred by lack of focus and cohesion, rendering it restricted in its capacity to react to societal changes while still maintaining a core identity. Some studies have highlighted, for instance, a so-called secularist framework in which the subject has existed in an isolated position in state education for decades (Ubani 2019). Evidently, there are elements in history that can be identified as contributing to the current lack of substantive cohesion and the instrumentalisation of the core elements in Finnish religious education. To understand change in curricular and scholarly thinking, however, it is vital to elaborate on the broader socio-cultural context in which different types of changes are embedded. In our examination of the current situation with regard to RE, we wish to recognise the complexity and multi-layered nature of historical trajectories (Popkewitz 2011). One needs to understand the power used in particular historical processes through which shifting conditions, effects and understandings of school subjects have been produced (Poulter 2016). It is also critical to see what knowledge emerges through the subject itself and to understand RE in the making of an educated person. As Poulter, Rissanen and Ubani (2019, 221) remark, RE is a tool for advancing new forms of civic hegemonies, which should also be critically approached.

In order to examine the current situation in a comprehensive framework, this chapter will first focus on the basis and developments of RE in the course of Finnish public education. It will then discuss the characteristics and developments of Religious Education as an academic research discipline in Finland. Finally, the focus will be on the current situation as has been recently analysed in “Contextualising dialogue, secularisation and pluralism. Religion in Finnish public education” (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019) by leading Finnish researchers of religion and religious education in Finnish state education.

## **2. The historical trajectory surrounding RE in Finland until the 2000s**

The historical trajectory of Finnish RE illustrates not only a deep socio-cultural secularisation but also an educational shift that has pushed RE towards being a more heterogeneous school subject. As Finnish RE has traditionally been understood as a place for strengthening knowledge of students' own religion and religious identity, this understanding is currently challenged due to the diversification of life styles, values and identities. There is also new knowledge on the identity formation process, non-religiosity and pluralism, which question this traditional role of RE. What is also significant is the weakening role of theology in educational discussion and research, and also the reluctance of RE scholars to engage with traditional theological knowledge to tackle the challenges posed by a post-secular mentality. The following historical trajectory is based on Poulter's (2013) doctoral thesis, which aims to identify the key elements in the formation of religious education in the course of Finnish comprehensive education.

Starting the historical analysis from the beginning of Finnish mass education in the 1860s, it is important to note the state taking over responsibility for education from the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church and connecting this process to wider ideological, political and economic attempts at modernisation (Koski and Filander 2012). Together with the overall educational ethos characterised by the unifying trinity of Christian morality, RE (which at that time was the confessional teaching of Lutheran Christianity) embraced the Lutheran faith and nationalism. The role of RE was to perform a socialising and civic task by nurturing religious life. Strong emphasis on national unity, community and reconciliation was further announced in the aftermath of the First World War, resulting in Finnish independence in 1917 and a civil war soon after. Children were to love and honour their home, religion and fatherland. The Christian moral code legitimised the purpose of the school, and religious and secular aims were seen as identical. The aim of RE was to lead them to knowledge of God by studying the Bible and arouse their willingness to fulfil God's will (Poulter 2013, 137–164). In 1923, the Religious Freedom Act came into force, followed by the definition of RE as a confessional subject of the majority religion, which allowed exemptions for pupils of other religious affiliation or non-religion, organised the teaching of Orthodox Christianity and created a separate subject for secular pupils (Saine 2000, 107).

The period after the Second World War meant fragmentation of the Christian value base in education and societally. This was marked by rapid economic growth, industrialisation, migration, urbanisation, secularisation and strengthening of the political Left. In a relatively short time, Finland became a modern country, which also signified a deep fragmentation of its Christian value base (Innanen 2006, 60–61). In educational thinking, inspired by the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948), recognition of individual rights together with an emphasis on democracy were advocated (Kähkönen 1976, 172–173). In RE, however, religion was strongly acknowledged for promoting ethical development and membership of society. It was no longer solely Christian dogma that dictated the aims of RE; more general educational goals and societal facts were now given space. In the 1970s, school

reform introduced a marked ideological shift from the old school system. The goal of RE was to help children reflect on ethical issues but now, particularistic Lutheran ethics were replaced by liberal ethics that emphasised individual values and personal life questions. Teaching of world religions also meant that the cohesion based on Christian dogma was fragmented in RE (Poulter 2013, 164–180).

The last decade before the new millennium was characterised by increasing internationalisation, the rise of neo-liberalist politics and a deep economic recession. A secularised and pluralised society called for individual freedom and self-realisation as the ultimate values of education (Launonen, 2000). As background disciplines, educational sciences were replacing theological disciplines and taking a step away from the understanding of religion as 'religious'. Religion in RE was mainly reflected in cultural and societal dimensions and, through moral education, the aim was to get pupils to see their own responsibility in the world. The subject was now intended to provide students with the elements required to construct a personal worldview. As a counterweight to individualism, existential questions, tolerance and the skills needed for living in a multicultural society were emphasised in RE (Poulter, 2013, 181–190). As Finland received quite a large number of immigrants in the 1990s, there was an impetus to reflect the religious rights of the minorities vis-à-vis the status of the majority. In curricular development, several so-called minority religions like Islam and Baha'i were established as part of RE (Innanen 2006; Saine 2000, 191-199).

The beginning of the 21st century ushered in a new awareness of a complex and polarised world where the understanding of diversity of religions was of ultimate concern. The individual was understood as a learner experiencing constant change, and communication between different worldviews, recognition of social responsibility and global ethics were seen as vital (Poulter 2013, 190–196). In 2003, the Freedom of Religion Act was reformed and, as a part of that, RE continued to be organised according to the denomination of the pupil. However, 'confession' was changed to expression of 'one's own religion' (Basic Education Act, Amendment 2003/454, 13§). Interestingly enough, this change in principle did not result in any change in the content of RE. It can be assumed that the conservative views saw this as a pivotal moment to anchor RE to the denominational basis and to object to the increasing secularisation of school.

The current national curriculum (2014) continues to emphasise the diversity of religions and worldviews as a starting point for learning. However, the way to manage diversity has been to formulate shared aims for learning for all religions and to prove the overlapping elements in RE. The curriculum also contains strengthening elements of skills-based thinking that are a sign of the instrumentalisation of the subject (Poulter, Rissanen & Ubani 2019, 221).

The way Finnish RE has managed to adapt to the shifting educational visions as a part of the educational success of Finland has been rather reactive. Having a foundation in the unquestioned secular-Lutheranism, RE has not been able to seriously challenge its own rationale in the changing world and find a voice independent of political and religious/

ideological interest groups. The way to respond to the challenge posed by increasing pluralism has been to create a system, which visibly recognises diversity but is lacking coherence. The current model of RE has been justified but also problematised by the arguments that recognising the right of minorities and children to their own religion maintains democratic principles and serves as a prime example of the multicultural ideal (see Poulter, Kuusisto, Malama, Kallioniemi 2017). The multiplication of different religions taught in segregated classes offered an answer to a difficult societal situation in the 1990s when Finland was getting more multicultural and there was a need to react to the challenge posed by newcomers who did not share the same religious, historical and national narrative. However, this decision has led to the diversification of visions of RE compatible with multicultural ideals, while intercultural initiatives between different religions and non-religious worldviews have recently been debated both in academic and public discussion.

### **3. A developing Finnish research community around RE**

#### *Formation of religious education as a modern research field in Finland*

In addition to curricular developments, there also exist parallel developments in the Finnish academic research that can be identified as contributing to the lack of substantive cohesion in RE. As in other Nordic countries, until the 1990s Religious Education in Finland as an academic discipline is perhaps most conveniently to be viewed in relation to Practical Theology (Buchardt & Osbeck 2017; Räsänen 2017). Religious Education as a modern academic discipline was established in the era of Kalevi Tamminen and lasted from the late 1960s until the 1990s. Similarly, the outlook of religious education in school was traditionalist theological. Following research by Goldman (1964) and similar to many Western countries (Kallioniemi & Ubani 2010; 2012), Psychology of Religion was the discipline that Religious Education relied on (Ubani 2017), although it was also always aware of developments in educational studies (Räsänen 2017). Räsänen describes much of this period as the era of the individual-empirical paradigm, one of five major subsequent paradigms in Finnish Religious Education research. In Tamminen's era, Religious Education in Finland became internationally connected (Räsänen 2017). Arguably much of Tamminen's era was dominated by traditionalist theology and Psychology of Religion stage perception on children's development. Other disciplines such as Religious Studies and Anthropology contributed for most part merely to the content of RE, and educational sciences to some extent limited the practice of religious education (Ubani 2017).

For 30 years from the 1960s, the field of Religious Education in Finland was to a great extent dominated by the views represented by Tamminen. This can also be seen in the research produced in that era (Ubani 2017; 97; Räsänen 2017). Tamminen's role in the establishment of what can be termed the Nordic Religious Education research community has been duly acknowledged elsewhere (Osbeck & Buchardt 2017; Hartman 2017). With regard to Religious Education in Finland, his 30 years as the Chair of Religious Education was even more foundational. Hartman (2017) has described how research in Religious Education in

different Nordic countries has varied in its dominant approaches. What is distinctive in Finnish research compared to other Nordic countries is that, according to Haartman, the scholars tend to work on empirical materials with a behavioural sciences approach (p. 119). This emphasis on empirical studies has been characteristic of Religious Education in Finland since the era of Tamminen.

Speaking of Tamminen's era, it must be admitted, however, that the possibility for greater discussion of religious education in the discipline of Religious Education was also limited because of a limited number of practitioners in its research. For instance, the field gained its second and third professorships only around the turn of millennium. In other words, it was not merely a question of power and paradigms but also a question of the sheer number of independent practitioners. It can also be added that the match between Religious Education as an academic discipline and religious education as a school subject started to dissolve visibly in the 1980s, notwithstanding previous minor differences (Ubani 2017). Until then, Religious Education was the uncontested uniform academic counterpart of religious education in state education, and even after that – if not until today – some aspects especially related to Psychology of Religion are still somewhat recognised in, for instance, RE didactics books (see Ubani 2013b).

After the mid-1980s, it became evident that Humanistic Psychology was gradually challenging and substituting Psychology of Religion in the understanding of the pupil in Religious Education. However, as stated earlier, this change had a more profound effect on religious education as a school subject than on research in Religious Education. The humanistic psychological viewpoint was largely represented in the work of Hannele Niemi and can be perceived as one of the influences on Kirsi Tirri's and Arto Kallioniemi's work in Religious Education (Ubani 2017). However, all these scholars have been quite eclectic in their production. Suffice to say that, while Psychology of Religion as a discipline is today still functioning mainly at the University of Helsinki in the work of Räsänen (2002), this school can be recognised as a contributor to the academic debate surrounding the subject of religious education in the 2000s. However, their work represents a more fundamental change in the scholarly communities surrounding religious education. Coinciding with the retirement of Tamminen, it was Niemi and later Kallioniemi and to some extent Tirri who were active in the strengthening of the Didactics of RE as the academic framework for religious education rather than Theology. In other words, their work was instrumental in founding the Didactics of RE as an (applied) educational science. It should be noted that Pyysiäinen's study on the confessionality of RE was in this sense already a non-traditional study on religious education, as it fitted well with its departure from theological premises. However, together with the changes in curricula during the 1990s, the shift became particularly evident in the latter part of the decade.

*Characteristics of the emerging Finnish RE-scholarly community after the turn of the millennium*

In Finland, the 2000s witnessed the activation of a new scholarly community with regard to religious education: Religious Studies. Behind the redefining of the nature of the subject as given according to one's own religious education, scholars of Religious Studies such as Sakaranaho became active, especially with regard to the minority religions and Islam in particular (Sakaranaho 2018; Sakaranaho & Jamisto 2008). However, the contribution of Religious Studies was not and has not been strong in this field in Finland. It could be that, at this time, much of the focus was on the legitimisation of the subject in state education and there religious studies had little to offer or were given little space. Suffice to say, the role of religious studies in religious education has until this day remained remarkably minor, especially as it was often portrayed as offering a suitable option to managing plurality in societies. It could be that the linkage of Religious Studies to education and didactics in particular has been weak in Finland in particular, which arguably has limited its role in the academic discourse in Religious Education.

In the 2000s, however, it was Multicultural Education that became the shared source of influence for scholars discussing religious education (Ubani 2017). When looking at recent studies on the subject (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019a), it is evident that, perhaps for the first time in the history of the discussion, there are enough independent researchers focusing on religious education to form a scholarly community with a critical mass, and that these seem to share at least some premises with regard to conceptualising plurality in the classroom. They are thus sufficiently grounded in multicultural education to be able to start to contribute to cumulative knowledge building (Ubani 2017).

While the construction of research-based knowledge has been criticised for being weak and fragmented (Ubani 2017, 102), recently there have been initiatives towards the research-based discussion of issues related to religion in state education (Ubani, Rissanen & Ubani 2019b). Suffice to say, Rissanen, Ubani and Poulter (2019) have also recognised that this has become so prevalent that it risks recognising minority within-tradition perspectives and perhaps even secularist outlooks in the scholarly discussion. Anyway, in the Finnish context it has been stated that the number of researchers connected by different theories from Multicultural Education is exceptional and may provide a platform for a dialogical discussion about the core of religious education. It could also be that, depending on the kind of multiculturalism advocated among the researchers, Religious Studies could also become more relevant, especially its new recognition and research knowledge of the diversity of non-religious outlooks and (partly aided by this) its merits in conceptualising worldviews in an inclusive manner. However, arguably without developing an adherence to the didactics of RE and educational discourse, its relevance will remain narrowed down to content knowledge production.

The presentation and analysis of studies of religion in Finnish state education (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019a) by leading scholars from Finland can be viewed as an effort to overcome lack of cohesion in research that has not made cumulative knowledge production possible, but likens studies in Religious Education to 'guerrilla attacks' (Osbeck 2017) where isolated studies occur based on the individual interest of the student. Furthermore, at the



moment philosophical research on religious education is quite scarce (see Poulter 2013). It could be that the dominant empirical nature of studies as identified by Haartman (2017) as characteristically Finnish could prove problematic in the development of the field and in its contribution to the development of religious education as a school subject.

The analysis by Ubani (2017) shows that, during the history of Finnish Religious Education research, there have been only a few dissertations that focus on the fundamental issues current in religious education as a subject, both philosophical in their approach. One is by Pyysiäinen (1982) who studied the concept of confessionality in the context of religious education, and the other by Poulter (2013) who examined the role of religious education in civic education. Both these studies question the nature of the subject. All other studies on the list (p. 97) focus on issues close to RE but do not offer much in developing current RE. They produce knowledge about aspects related to RE, but little research-based support for developing the subject. One distinction could be the study from the field of law by Hokkanen (2014), which advocates integration in the subject, but can be seen as an afterthought to the discussion on the legitimacy of RE. This study has not really been acknowledged in academic or public discussions concerning RE. It seems that the discussion on the role of religion has shifted from the legitimation discourse in the 2010s, thus limiting its contribution to Religious Education. Similarly, questions related to confessionality in education (Kimanen 2015; see also Ubani 2018a). while being at the core of the current solution, seem rather to be issues belonging to the former discourse and at the moment not widely acknowledged.

Currently in religious education, it can be argued that several key issues lack either conceptual clarity, contextual sensitivity or both.[SP5] Such an issue is what is termed dialogue of religions/dialogue of beliefs/dialogue of worldviews/inter-religious dialogue in education (Ubani 2019). Arguably, while the field was preoccupied with questions of the legitimacy of RE as a subject in the context of Freedom of Religion in the first decade of the 2000s, research on other core elements related to the subject remained to some extent stale. Such topics include the core of religious education in the 2000s, learning in religious education and the role and nature of worldview development in religious education. Arguably, if the next wave of case studies on religious education focusing on integrated religious education (Åhs, Poulter & Kallioniemi 2016; 2017; Kimanen & Poulter 2018; Korkeakoski & Ubani 2018; Ubani 2018a; 2018b) are to be significant contributors to the core development of the subject, the questions related to the role of worldviews in education and dialogue in education are issues that need to be resolved, not only on practical but also philosophical levels.

#### **4. Current challenges in Finland in framing the core of RE for a post-secular society**

The development of RE as a school subject and academic discipline alongside societal changes has been described above. In short, in Finland the shift from a confessional to a liberal paradigm of RE (see e.g. Wright 2004; Barnes 2007) in argumentation concerning religious education has occurred gradually, starting as early as just after the Second World War and accelerating during the past decades as the multiculturalisation of society and the

globally increasing political significance of religion have increased the emphasis being put on the social aims of RE. Finnish RE has followed developments in the wider European context; the legitimacy of RE in Europe is increasingly understood to lie in its potential to contribute to a democratic European society. For instance, in the Toledo guiding principles of religious education (ODIHR 2007) and the European Council's recommendations concerning RE (Jackson 2014b), knowledge about religions and beliefs is regarded as valuable because it promotes respect for freedom of religion, democratic citizenship and social cohesion, and reduces conflicts caused by lack of understanding.

At the moment, it seems that in Finland this form of liberal RE and its social educational aims are receiving rather unquestioned support, both from the Finnish scholarly community and in public debate. This is at least the mainstream discourse through which the legitimacy of RE in contemporary Finnish post-secular society is argued. However, the post-secular and religiously diverse context also indicates that there are a multitude of interest groups around RE with their own particular needs and wishes regarding the subject and, while these groups (e.g. religious minority groups) also rely on liberal RE discourses (e.g. what RE needs to be in order for it to promote human rights and peaceful coexistence), they may interpret the core of RE in different ways. Thus, this consensus around the liberal aims of RE hides the fact that the ideas concerning the intellectual core of liberal RE are somewhat dispersed, both among experts and the general public. The core seems to be understood differently depending on whether the emphasis is put on the educational needs of the religious/worldview minorities or the majority. In addition to the perspectives of stakeholder groups, differences in RE scholars' argumentation also reflect this tendency. A recent book (Ubani, Rissanen & Poulter 2019a) in which most of the contemporary RE scholars in Finland reflect on their key theoretical and empirical findings provides an overview of the current views on RE in the Finnish academic community. The following observations are based on a meta-analysis of these book chapters (see also Rissanen, Ubani & Poulter 2019).

In accordance with the liberal paradigm, RE in Finland is supposed to "give a basic competence for living as a citizen in a postmodern multi-religious society" (e.g. Ubani & Kallioniemi 2012) and contribute to human rights education (e.g. Matilainen & Kallioniemi 2012). However, there is lack of cohesion in the ideas of what contents of RE would best serve the pursuance of these aims, and different approaches can be detected from the argumentation of Finnish RE scholars. First, one prominent approach for pursuing the social aims of RE is to emphasise broad understanding of religions and worldviews developed through shared discussions (often termed 'dialogue') with the aim of promoting mutual understanding in a diverse society. The underlying interest is to reduce discrimination by increasing familiarity and reducing prejudices, and in this way to support the actualisation of human rights in society. For this interest, knowledge based on the (western) phenomenological study of religion boosted by students' own experiences and knowledge serves well, and an integrated model of RE is seen as a favourable option. Sometimes RE is seen as an arena for the development of common values across worldviews and global citizenship, but this discourse does not necessarily pay attention to the power dynamics of worldview plurality in society, nor does it differentiate students' knowledge needs based on

their background or minority/majority position in the society.

Second, another line of argumentation deals with RE as a space where commitment to human rights and other key societal values is promoted by seeking the legitimation of and commitment to these values from the perspective of students' 'own religion or worldview'. This argumentation is sometimes used to defend the potential of the current Finnish religious education model to pursue the aforementioned social aims of RE. This discourse is based on a rather technical interest in knowledge since educators are given the task of strengthening students' commitment to liberal human rights values by promoting interpretations of religion that are compatible with them. Also, the interest groups around religious education – mostly minority religious communities – seem to rely on these claims when they argue for the maintaining of the current Finnish model. They regard religious education as important for the identity development of minority students, and hold that knowledge about their own traditions helps students to find a way and willingness to commit to a democratic multicultural society. However, researchers also detect problems in this approach. The disciplinary basis of knowledge is ambiguous: the interpretation of the basic sources of religious traditions could indicate drawing from theological disciplines, but in reality it seems that deep theological scrutiny is not regarded as practice of the subject. Instead, educators (in a broad sense teachers, curriculum designers, text book authors) pick and choose material from religious traditions to support 'learning from' religion for the benefit of predetermined educational values. Educational sciences play a significant role in formulating the aims of the subject, and scrutiny of religion is not necessary based on disciplinary perspectives but on the power of educators to selectively use religion as a resource for the promotion of educational goals (see e.g. Rissanen 2012).

Third, a more critical interest in knowledge occasionally is expressed by Finnish RE scholars, but in contrast to the contemporary mainstream approaches of intercultural/ multicultural education, which are grounded in critical and emancipatory interests, the critical practices of RE have been to a large extent in a marginal position. Komulainen (2005) developed a critical and post-liberal theological argumentation for RE compatible with the challenges of secular and multicultural paradigms, but his efforts received little attention. However, it could be argued that, to truly promote the social aims of RE such as democratic citizenship and human rights values in a multicultural society, space needs to be made for the plurality of knowledge in education and RE. This seems to be an interest of some minority RE groups, too. For instance, the emphasis on 'Western Islamic studies' has been criticised by some Islamic education teachers (Onnisekä 2011, 137).

Fourth, what the studies show is that the examination of RE should acknowledge the broader context surrounding the subject in public education, that is, how religion is being handled as an entire school educational endeavour (Ubani & Ojala 2018). Conclusively, what the different studies indicate is that the handling of religion in state schools in general is in a state of transition, and that this transition influences the discourses and development agenda around religious education. It seems that, predominantly in the Finnish context, post-

secularity translates to the transition from the secularist handling of religion to cultural interpretations of religion. In this situation the visible presence of religions is becoming increasingly normalised in school life although in a reduced manner (Ubani 2019).

Arguably as a consequence, religious truth-claims, what is to be understood as ‘religious’, are no longer under scrutiny. However, the post-secularising context treats majority and minority religions differently. While Lutheranism is still handled more or less in a secularist framework and pushed to the private sphere, Islam and other minority religions are being handled in terms of multiculturalism, and their more visible presence and recognition as identity markers are defended. The Finnish case also shows that Lutheranism as a majority worldview position is an ambiguous matter: while church membership is still very high and Lutheranism can be seen as part of the state establishment and national heritage, it is not clear what culturalised ‘secular-Lutheranism’ in terms of Finnishness or as a part of educational values and ideals means today. However, essentialising the treatment of secular-Lutheranism among educators, policy-makers and sometimes also scholars influences Finnish discourses on religion in education and religious education.

### **Discussion (Grounding RE ‘otherwise’)**

In this chapter, we wish to argue that the changed societal reality in Finland towards post-secularity requires new critical ways of looking at RE and religion in public education. It calls for rapid action in ‘thinking otherwise’ (Poulter 2013), as RE as a subject and the research surrounding it have had problems in adapting to the present societal situation. The aforementioned transition in Finnish RE certainly serves as a unique national case for RE as a school subject and as a meeting point for different knowledge conceptions embedded into shifting educational ideals. However, it finds parallel developments in other European countries too. Barnes (2020, 185) in his attempt to identify the crisis of RE in England argues that RE professionals themselves have engaged with powerful policies, pedagogies and practices, which result in shallow responses to identify the core of RE. We have a similar challenge in Finland as scholars face pressure to design their research vision according to the changing political visions. We also recognise the need for a reflexive reading of the history of RE and criticality in estimating the underlying assumptions of new answers that in part have contributed to the alleged fragmentation of the core of RE. Scholars need to understand how our understanding of the current state has been moulded through national and local policies, voices and ideas, and how the collective thinking has been shaped by scholarly knowledge production in which we also see our role.

While closely observing British debate on RE, Finnish RE scholars never seriously engaged in the debate on critical religious education in their own context (Wright 2007; Barnes 2007). A particular challenge today is to think how multiplicity in the forms of different ‘own religions’ taught at school could translate into the genuine plurality of many theologies, and to create a dialogical space between them. Seeking perspectives outside the mainstream liberal framework for RE, we suggest viewing the contribution of theology in the form of the appreciation of theologies of different religions, something that has been widely neglected.,

We therefore suggest viewing theology as a relevant dialogue partner in the classroom, not something inherently connected to confessional nature of RE but rather powerful in contributing to inclusion and the recognition of diversity in and through RE, and buffering against the instrumentalisation of RE to shifting political agenda.

On the other hand, instrumentalist views and approaches to RE as a securitisation tool with the aims of preventing different forms of radicalisation and controlling religion (see e.g. Berglund 2015, p. 4) may also acknowledge the relevance of theology. The need to familiarise students with, for instance, sacred texts and the history of their interpretation has been mainly argued as an important part of Islamic religious education, and as an effort to ‘protect’ Muslim youth from radicalist propaganda grounded in the shallow and fragmented reading of the Qur’an (Rissanen, 2012). However, in current post-secular Europe, it is necessary to acknowledge how the instrumentalisation of religion for political purposes concerns Islam and Muslims, and to pay attention to the ways, for example, in which the populist right-wing parties endeavour to frame their agenda as a defence of ‘Christian values’ and promote an image of a (homogenous) Christian culture under threat. Since religions are increasingly being used for political propagandist purposes, an important question is whether the ‘social aims’ of RE can be met by the religious studies-based analysis of religions and their societal and cultural impact, or whether RE should take religion as seriously as it is taken by political actors and give all students (theological) tools to read and interpret religion profoundly. Outside the RE community, the new need for theology sometimes seems to be more readily acknowledged. An interesting example of this was when a Guardian editorial (25 December 2019) called for an examination of the “theological roots of liberal vision of Christianity” in defence of the cultural appropriation of Christianity for aggressive xenophobia.

However, instead of promoting ‘the right interpretation’ of religion (e.g. liberal Islam or liberal Christianity) and seeing RE as a measure used by the state to control religions, protection from the simplifying use of religions in political rhetoric could come from the aims of developing theological literacy and increasing epistemological pluralism in RE with an aim to educate students also to ‘see otherwise’. Thus, in the Finnish case this would mean not only drawing from different theological traditions in the different RE curricula, but also familiarising all students to some extent with different theological traditions.

Thus far, Finnish RE has managed to deal with diversity in a manner that does not create dialogue and critical reflexivity between different religious theologies on an epistemological level. Recognition of particular religious identities in the name of a multicultural right, manifested in the segregative RE model, does not translate to the recognition of different knowledges, so does not create a space for the investigation of inter-theologies. Epistemological pluralism (Andreotti, Ahenakew & Cooper, 2012) not only attempts to give voice to different ways of knowledge, but also takes seriously those voices that have been subordinated to the hegemonic understanding of forming the core knowledge in RE. From an educational point of view, it is important to bring these differing even conflicting understandings of religious truth claims into the forefront of instruction about RE.

Nevertheless, it is important to discuss, whose religious truths we give a voice to and on whose terms. Real liberal education is the freedom to be critical of one's own assumptions and background, not blindly rejecting traditional knowledge but investigating its roots, sources and claims of truth (Poulter 2013, 223).

Furthermore, epistemological pluralism could also mean thinking, asking, knowing, being and relating 'otherwise' as a scholarly community of RE. If knowledge of other theological traditions such as Islamic theology were given space in wider academic discussion, and if scholars of RE brought the plurality of knowledges in RE to the forefront, that would give an alternative basis for avoiding the instrumentalisation and thinking of the core of RE. If education is reduced to the simple acquisition of competences and skills, it misses the point of what is educational in the sense of *Bildung* (Rothgangel 2014, p. 20-21). Reflecting the knowledge basis of RE is ultimately a question of what knowledge is of most worth (Autio 2017, 48–49). If RE continues to be rooted firmly in educational sciences, it must take seriously the epistemological claims from different religious traditions. Instead of continuing to neutralise religious content in RE, critical awareness in thinking of the core elements of RE could be epistemologically framed as 'otherwise', which challenges secular-liberal, Lutheran hegemonic and 'traditional' positions.

However, currently the rising understanding of non-religiosity and the concept of a worldview increasingly parallel to the concept of religion challenges the understanding of the core of RE as the conceptual focus of the subject. The dialogue with secular worldviews has to be seen as a vital part of the future of RE but the burning question is whether we can use religion and worldview as parallel concepts and approach them in a common pedagogical framework? Putting more emphasis on worldview as an umbrella concept and developing approaches of 'worldview education' are signs of moving further away from theology as the disciplinary basis of religious education, and may limit the understanding of religion as a distinct 'sociological category' (Rothgangel 2014) .

Knowledge in RE should not be subordinate to other knowledge in the educational system, nor should it be based merely on technical interest in promoting students' commitment to the dominant values in society with the help of religion. Rather, dominant values and truths could also be critically examined with theology-based knowledge. This implies, that nothing – even human rights, liberal democratic values or the other ideological groundings of the education system itself – is too sacred to be critically examined in RE. In regard to the Finnish debates on the organisation model of religious education, relying on critical interest in knowledge does not necessarily indicate favouring a certain model, but it implies the necessity to allow space for minority knowledge in RE in one way or another. From a disciplinary perspective, this means that not only knowledge formed in the western (and Christianity-inspired) study of religion is taken into account; knowledge(s) formed in other theological traditions (e.g. Islamic theology) would also be given space. Giving space to minority knowledges cannot mean giving space only to the knowledge that minority students bring to the classroom. Altogether, it is vital to keep in mind that questions about whose knowledge and what

knowledge interests should be furthered in RE are fundamental, and precede the questions concerning preferable models for organising RE in an increasingly post-secular situation.

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