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Introduction

The teaching of religion in primary and secondary schools has in most countries been dominated by the confessional teaching of religion within a setting where both students and teachers are adherents of the specific religion that is being taught. In some countries, a system of non-confessional teaching has been introduced, with most of the topics concerning religions which neither students nor teachers are adherents of. This double system can also to a certain extent be seen at the university level. Theological departments, can be either confessional or non-confessional, but are mainly dedicated to the study of the religion practiced by the majority in that society, the religion to which most of the students and teachers within the department belong. Departments of religious studies, on the other hand often function in a liberal arts context, and are dedicated to the non-confessional, secular study of all of the world religions, regardless of the religious persuasions of the students and teachers within the department.

The multi-religious character of most societies of our time challenges teachers and students within all levels of education to develop new models for studying religion, ones which can more adequately equip students for their everyday life and professional careers in these societies. In such settings, a confessional study of religion may no longer be sufficient preparation. Likewise, a non-confessional teaching of world religions should take into account as well as take advantage of the fact that there are often students or teachers present who are adherents of the religious tradition being studied. Another important factor is that no basic knowledge of religion can be taken for granted. The teachers must adapt the learning process to the fact that when the holidays, traditional texts etc. of the majority culture in that particular society are studied, there will be many students in the classroom who lack a basic knowledge of this religion, either because they come from a different culture, or from a completely secular background.

This is not merely a challenge but also opens up a world of possibilities. For instance, within the primary and secondary levels of education, the study of religion must not merely be restricted to acquiring knowledge about the basic tenets, historical development, and fundamental texts and rituals of the various religions of the world. It can also entail using elements from these religions, for instance, in the teaching of ethics, as well as the development of social skills which will enable the students to function in society. The study of the various religious traditions can thus go beyond “my religion” and “your religion” and develop into a study of the accumulated religious
heritage available to humankind at large, similar to how we can benefit from the works of philosophers and artists from other settings, works that perhaps a few generations ago were inaccessible beyond their own cultural milieus. Within university departments, new insights and perspectives can be gained from the facts that all of the world’s religions are studied by scholars from different religious and cultural backgrounds, and that these scholars can meet in fruitful dialogue on their subject of study.

All of these new aspects of a multi-cultural society challenge teachers and scholars of education to reflect upon what takes place in the classroom and to develop new teaching models and strategies for learning. In many countries this has provoked an intense discussion concerning which model should be chosen for religious studies in primary and secondary education, and what responsibility state-owned and private schools have in this respect. This has also been reflected in discussions on the responsibility of the states in facilitating the training of religious clergy, for instance imams, that are to function in countries where Islam is a rapidly growing minority religion.

The centrality of this question was a focal point of the conference Religion on the Borders. New Challenges in the Academic Study of Religion which was held 19–22 April, 2007, at Södertörn University College, Stockholm. A significant portion of the conference sessions were dedicated to issues dealing with the teaching of religion in a globalized, multi-cultural world, and related issues, and the conference thus provided a meeting place for scholars from all over the world who share a common interest in this field of research. All of the articles in the present volume were originally presented at this conference. The special emphasis on teaching religion was generously supported by the Swedish Research Council. In addition, the conference was given financial support by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Religionsvetenskapliga sällskapet and the Sigtuna Foundation.

Religion on the Borders was a special conference of IAHR (International Association of the History of Religions) but attracted scholars far beyond the various disciplines of Religious studies. All in all approximately 400 scholars from all over the world participated, making it the largest Religious studies conference ever held in Sweden. The organizing committee was made up of Marja-Liisa Keinänen, Peter Jackson and David Thurfjell, in addition to the editors of the present volume. Out of the various publications that will no doubt come as a result of the conference, we would especially like to mention the special issue of Temenos. Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion (nr. 44, 1, 2008) where the key-note presentations as well as responses to them can be found. Several of these presentations explicitly address the problems and possibilities of teaching religion in a multicultural setting.

In this volume we have divided the papers into five sections, each of them reflecting a specific aspect of teaching and religion in a multi-religious set-
The presentations address different levels of education, ranging from primary school to university.

The first section is titled “Teaching about Religious Diversity in Schools” and includes two papers where questions concerning confessional teaching of religion and non-confessional teaching about religion are discussed. In the first paper, Wanda Alberts presents an evaluation of different European approaches to religious education. She includes different models of school curricula on religious education from various European countries in order to draw conclusions as to what types of religious education are desirable from a study-of-religions point of view. Elina Hella, in the following paper, discusses the educational basis for teaching and learning about religion from a Finnish perspective. She takes as her point of departure the combination of a pedagogical theory called ‘the variation theory of learning’ and a theoretical model of ‘critical religious education’.

The second section is called “A World of Many Truths” and includes four papers. In the first, Andrew Wright argues that the academic study of religion could be conceived as a quest for religious, theological, and spiritual literacy. In his paper he explores the implications and challenges of two rival epistemological traditions – constructivism and critical realism – for this quest. In the second paper, Sharon Todd shows how the concept nation is involved in the erection of borders, both religious and sexual, that seek to limit Muslim girls’ and women’s participation in public institutions (particularly in schools). She suggests that the idea of nation needs some rethinking if it is going to have anything at all to do with future democratic possibilities. In the third paper, Lovisa Bergdahl addresses the question of borders in religious education. She challenges the secularist downgrading of religion to the private sphere, as well as the essentialist understanding of religion that comes to the fore in official documents on religious education in Sweden and elsewhere Europe. In the final paper within this section, Guadalupe Francia discusses the difficulties of integrating equal knowledge standards as well as guaranteeing the recognition of cultural and religious minorities, taking physical education and the right to learn how to swim as an example.

Section three has “School Ethnography” as its point of departure. In the first paper, Jonas Svensson discusses how elements of Islam are utilized in Islamic religious education (IRE) to establish boundaries towards others in the town of Kírsúmu, Kenya, where Islam is a minority religion. In the second paper, Kerstin von Brömssen discusses how students in Swedish schools talk about others, scientism and gender. She shows that religion and ethnicity are very important in the socialization of pupils. In the last paper in this section, Jenny Berglund shows how teachers at Muslim schools in Sweden handle the lack of suitable teaching materials. She relates some of the existing strategies among teachers in choosing teaching materials that they claim suit the pupils’ situation in Sweden.
Section four deals with “Inter-Religious Teaching” and includes three papers. In the first paper Deborah Weissman discusses how teaching religion in an inter-religious context can be a form of peace-building. She draws on experiences from teaching in the Middle East, where extremism, xenophobia, and violence unfortunately are everyday aspects of teaching. The following text by Bülent Şenay addresses the question of what reflexive teaching about other religions can be. He argues that a hermeneutics of Otherness is a viable road. In the last paper within this section Pim Valkenberg states his commitment to the idea that we all can learn from violence and prejudices in interreligious teaching. He brings forward the ambiguity of the narrative about Abraham as a point of departure for learning about a history of violence that is based on mutual prejudices but is also a symbol that can be used to build bridges between religions.

The last section includes two papers that illustrate classroom experiences from Sweden. In the first paper Dorothea Rosenblad describes a narrative method called “The Children of Abraham/Ibrahim project” that has successfully been used in Swedish schools to overcome prejudices between pupils from different religious backgrounds. In the second, Ingela Visuri explores the border between culture relativism and prejudice when discussing gender issues in Islam.

All of these papers indicate the everyday challenges that teachers meet in today’s multi-religious world. These are challenges that need to be discussed not only at the classroom level, but also among scholars of religion and education, and among policy-makers. The aim of the present anthology is to inspire such discussions.

_Lena Roos & Jenny Berglund_