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ABSTRACT  This article takes as its starting point the changing cultural, social and academic landscape in Sweden which has created a need for new ways of teaching and doing research in theology and religious studies. Against this backdrop, the article explores concrete work with a research circle, at Uppsala University, with upper secondary religious education teachers, as a way of working closer to practice and thereby including non-academic actors in knowledge production. The research circle, as a form of action research, where a group of teachers formulate a problem or research questions built on actual research and challenges they have met in their practice, is described and preliminary results are elaborated. Furthermore, the article expands on the possibility of transferring the method of research circles into other areas within theology and religious studies. Finally, the feasibility of the method for transforming an academic discipline and renegotiating the understanding and role of theory and practice is explored. The article concludes that research circles offer an interesting and fruitful method, among others, that blurs the borders, not only between theory and practice, but also between research and education, and calls for a suitable practice theory.

For the past thirty years, religion has gone from being a relatively private, individual phenomenon to being significantly more visible in Nordic societies. This increased visibility, together with other factors of change, such as globalization and migration, have reshaped the cultural setting in various ways in many counties world-wide. In

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Sweden, this change has led to a multi-cultural situation, with increased visibility of religious expressions and markers, together with a polarization between religious and secular views and perceptions. Simultaneously, the commitment and formal affiliation to institutional religion, especially Christian churches have declined. Simply put, a minority of the Swedish population is highly involved in different religions and religious activities, while the majority places themselves outside religious communities or contexts. Many researchers thus believe that there is an ignorance of, and an inability to deal with issues related to religion and that there is a great need for more well-informed and balanced discussions about religion.\(^1\) This situation has fundamentally changed the landscape for theology and religious studies.

Not only is knowledge about religion and theology required and even requested in this situation. The view of and ways of knowledge production within academic theology and religious studies also need to be scrutinized. The reasons for this are not only external, relating to new societal conditions, but also internal. One such reason is the long, complex, and persistent debate about theological knowledge, ranging from ideas about theology as the queen of science to viewing it merely as the history of Christian ideas, or universally valid to only local theologies. And the use of the adverbs merely and only points also toward a power dimension, where certain knowledge is more valuable than other knowledge. One such value-laden dichotomy in knowledge production, both within theology and other academic fields, is represented by the theory-praxis divide.

Within the framework of major development-work started in 2016, the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala has initiated a process of developing a research subject that incorporates traditional practical theological fields with more recent trends in sociology of religion, and didactics of religion. One strand and important incentive is to work “closer to practice”.

As part of the exploratory development process, we have started an experimental project by initiating a so-called research circle in the area of didactics of religion. The research circle constitutes a kind of continuing education for religion teachers in secondary and upper-secondary schools, drawing on their practical knowledge, but also contributing to an increased scientific understanding of school practices and religion teachers’ work situation.

The purpose of this article is to investigate whether the research circle as a method could constitute a way of working closer to practice and thereby include non-academic actors in knowledge production. In
other words, the article investigates this method’s theoretical and methodological potential for a practice-oriented research subject. Eventually, we will return to a broader discussion of possibilities and impediments when transferring this method to other more theologically orientated practices.

New conditions: theoretical and methodological challenges

Life and work in academia have changed dramatically during the last centuries in the Nordic counties, going from an exclusive and small branch for the few and wealthy, to comprehensive specialized research and mass-education. Furthermore, the rationale has shifted from general education (Bildung) to more vocational training. In recent years, higher education faces an increasing expectation of utility and of displaying its contributions to societal development. Theology and religious studies are no exception in this respect.

The reforms at the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University from 2016 to the present are thus driven both by cultural and social transformations, and growing demands on higher education to be a utility for society. There are different strands that such an endeavour may take, and a comprehensive faculty – with historical, linguistic, empirical and philosophical subjects related to religion – can harbour various approaches. The strengthening and expanding of empirical studies is a plausible strategy, including the use of “new” methods such as ethnography and action research. Furthermore, it seems plausible to extend the empirical approach to new subject areas. The focus of study may then shift and include a variety of religions and religious communities and their interactions with society, secular worldviews, and “new” groups, such as children, the elderly, migrants, or combinations of these groups.

The transformation of the educational system started in the mid twentieth century. Simultaneously with this, we have seen the rise of the psychology of religion and sociology of religion within the Faculty of Theology. The subject history of religions, established during the previous century and still in many universities a part of faculties of humanities, was also incorporated into the Faculty of Theology during the late 1990s. In these disciplines as well in other existing subjects, e.g. systematic theology and ecclesiology, there was and still is a turn to culture, both in theory and method. The aforementioned development of a new research subject especially marked this development.
The heritage and competencies in the academic theological setting at Uppsala University, and in other Nordic universities, is shaped by a dominant Lutheran Christian tradition. However, during the twenty-first Century, the subject areas for research and student population have changed dramatically. Today, students come to study religion for a variety of reasons, belong to different religious traditions and embrace various worldviews. One important group of students on the rise is the one composed of those who aim at becoming a teacher of religious education in public school. Just like at the universities, religious education in all schools is a non-confessional subject, and in Sweden is compulsory for all pupils.

Teacher education makes an interesting case in this exploration. There are several reasons for this: First, the education of teachers of religious education in public schools involves an interesting mix between their practice as teachers and our practice as researchers and educators. Second, teacher education has been contested, debated and subjected to multiple reforms. However, this “turn to practice”, could also be explored and extended to other professions in need of religious education, such as ministers, deacons, journalists, and social workers.

Before moving on to teacher education and the aforementioned research circles, a few words should be said about the theoretical and methodological perspectives that we use in our study. The development in theology and religious studies that we have described does not only call for a subject area calibrated for new groups of students. It also calls for new ways of studying religion. When we “turn to practice”, questions about theory and practice arise. What is practice? How is practice related to theory? What is theory? These kinds of questions are dealt with in other articles in this special issue of *Studia Theologica*. But in view of the reform of the at Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University, one strand has been to investigate and question the binary opposition between theory and practice by finding new ways of doing academic research in religious studies and theology.

Traditionally, there is a given tension, or opposition, between theory and practice, and in academia, the focus on theory not seldom down-plays the importance of practice, extending the chasm between theory and practice. However, theory and practice are connected through a process of abstraction and application, and trying to explain this connection by way of theory is to de-territorialize practice, and reterritorialize theory. Instead of polarizing and accusing theorists of being detached from the “real world” – or, for that sake, accusing practitioners of not having any real understanding of what they are doing – we are
interested in bringing the two realms closer together. This kind of approach is not ignorant of traditional empirical methods, but tries to resist the dualist opposition between theory and practice. Instead of understanding theory as general and abstract and the world as concrete and particular, both of them offer points of departure. The “turn to practice” is thus not neutral. Instead, it heightens the power balance within the academy and hierarchy of knowledge, and thus the traditional binary between theory and practice. However, in the wake of developing a new subject area and trying out new methods, the understanding of theory and practice may, or will most likely change. The case of religious education in schools provides a fruitful starting point for a renegotiation of theory and practice.

In order to find ways to make a rapprochement between research in religious education and the work of teaching, between research and practices outside the academy, we have looked at different types of methods where the purpose is to research close to the activity being studied, and where a central goal is to develop the practice. Action research is a commonly used umbrella term for these kinds of methods and aims to solve real problems in different practices, based on a scientific approach. This kind of approach seeks to democratize knowledge production and foster opportunities for empowerment by those involved. The power dimension and the affinity with feminist, postcolonial, and post-structural positions is often highlighted.

Interactive research in turn is a form of action research that also aims at change and development. What distinguishes the interactive method from action research is that the participants from the activities studied are regarded as co-producers in the research process, and that it does not lean heavily on a political empowerment agenda. The interactive research method thus conducts research together with other actors to a greater extent than action research generally does. Moreover, interactive research is more limited than action research and involves a “systematic dialogue between researchers and stakeholders, in order to practice democracy”. Interactive research aims to conduct research together with people actively involved in practice in order to develop mutual learning. Interactive research can be described as having three purposes:

- A scientific purpose that is about contributing to long-term, critical knowledge and theory-development concerning the practice or activity at hand;
A practical purpose to contribute to development and change processes in different types of endeavours, such as schools for instance;

An educational purpose that aims to contribute to joint competence development among researchers and practitioners.9

In this article, we lean on the interactive approach as a methodological perspective since the aims and purpose of this method correspond well with the aims of the research circle method, especially regarding the democratic and mutual objectives.

Teacher education

For the past ten years, the Swedish school system has become an increasingly important issue for politicians and society as a whole. The reason for this is, among other things, worsening school results (PISA) and contested school reforms. In the wake of these discussions, the need for more research-based teaching in schools has been raised, as well as more practice-oriented teacher education.10 One of the objectives of the educational reform at the Faculty of Theology is to improve the education for teacher students. This is done by making the content of their studies more relevant to their forthcoming profession, for instance by creating a closer relation between research, proven experience, and concrete classroom situations. In other words, the intention is to bring theory and practice closer together.

The problems of a too great distance between theory and practice have been present in the debates about teacher education for a long time. Already in the early twentieth century, the legendary educational reformer John Dewey wrote about the gap between theory and practice in teacher education.11 In the early twentieth century, as the knowledge of psychology and pedagogy grew strong, teacher education became more and more an arena for providing student teachers with theoretical knowledge to be used in their approaching profession, as a way of changing education. Some researchers have called this approach the “theory-to-practice-approach” since it starts in theory, but aims at changing practice. A closely related approach is “the technical-rationality model”, a model that is based on the idea that “professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique”. The technical-rationality model presupposes that theories can help teachers make better decisions in their professional life. It is also stated that these theories must be based on
scientific research, and the theories used in teacher education must be chosen wisely. On the other hand, there is also research pointing to the difficulties teacher education has in making a lasting impact on teacher students’ future professional choices. When they enter professional life, it is too hard for a single teacher to change established patterns and habits. Instead of using the theories and knowledge learnt at teacher education, the newly educated teachers view colleagues in schools as role models. There are, however, more radical views of the relation between theory and practice in the field of religious education. Researching religious education may itself be regarded as a social practice. Such a perspective will also shift the way we view the meaning of application, implementation or recommendation in the relation between research in religious education and the practice of teaching religion. In this explorative stage, we will use an open and flexible view on the nature of research in religious education, acknowledging at the same time, however, the strong tradition and common use of language in labelling research in religious education as theory and teaching as practice.

At the Faculty of Educational Sciences at Uppsala University, the need for a reformation of teacher education has been met by a number of measures. Among other things, adjunct lecturers have received part-time employment, an arrangement that guarantees a closer relationship to “school reality”. Another measure has been to start up a number of research circles in which primary and secondary school teachers have been able to take part in recent research. Since the Theological Faculty works closely with the Department for Teacher Education, we were given the opportunity to start a research circle in didactics of religion.

The research circle

A research circle is a form of interactive research where a group of participants, for example, teachers, formulate a problem or research questions built on challenges they have met in their teaching practice. These problems are then explored together with a researcher at the university. The idea is that an on-going dialogue between researchers and professionals will constitute a foundation for the development of praxis for both parts. Parts of this work in a research circle take place over a longer period. This is necessary because the circles aim at creating conditions for long-term, qualitative changes in the work of the practitioners who participate.
The historical roots of research circles are the Swedish so-called “study circles”, which have been a popular method for life-long learning in modern Sweden. The study circle methodology started at the beginning of the 1900s and provided a way to continue the education of a broad mass of people that had not had the opportunity to study for more than 5–6 years at a primary school. The labour movement, together with the non-state churches and the sobriety movement, drove the movement forward. Nowadays, study circles engage a huge amount of people in Sweden. The number that has been mentioned is about 1,25 million, though the number of single individuals is considerably less since many participate in several circles. What distinguishes the research circle from the study circle is that in a research circle, there is an ambition to create new knowledge, and, in the long run, to spread this new knowledge.

The overarching aim for the research circle at the Faculty of Theology is to develop a platform for strengthening the relationship between nearby schools and the faculty, and to foster an exchange of experiences and ideas. There are, however, several objectives:

First, the project aims to strengthen didactic work as a subject in both schools and at the university. Through the creation of a common platform, we will be able to learn more about each other’s practices, which in turn can generate closer relationships and better teaching and research. Second, the project aims to identify current didactic dilemmas and challenges (in close cooperation with the Faculty of Theology and current research) related to the central content of the syllabus for religious education in secondary and upper secondary schools. By doing this, we will explore what teachers find difficult in teaching religion, and conversely, what challenges university teachers when educating future religious education teachers. Third, the project aims to develop and test different methods and teaching strategies that will hopefully advance teaching practice. Fourth, the project aims at investigating the research circles’ potential for generating research questions for further research projects.

The start

The first research circle at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala started in August 2019. However, the preparatory work began the year before, together with the operation developer for the upper secondary schools in the municipality and FoSam (“Forum för Samverkan”), which is a
centre for collaboration between university, primary and secondary schools, and preschools, situated at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at Uppsala University. Together with these external partners, issues such as financing, number of participants, reports, etc. were discussed. Another important partner in the preparation work was ULF – “Utveckling, Lärande och Forskning” (English: “Development, learning, and research”) – a national network aiming at institutionalizing a closer bond between universities and schools.

In June 2019, the scientific leader of the forthcoming research circle participated in a conference for teachers in the municipality, to inform them about the upcoming project. The occasion gathered more than twenty teachers and resulted in several registrations of interest. At the beginning of August 2019, the forthcoming research circle had seven interest registrations. The optimal number of participants in a research circle is normally between four and eight, which made this an optimal group size. Eight teachers joined the group on the second occasion. The participating teachers came from seven different schools: seven from upper secondary schools and one from a secondary school. Four of these upper secondary schools are more theoretically oriented, while one hosts vocational programmes and one is aimed at pupils with special needs.

The first year

So how has this specific research circle worked? In August 2019, the first meeting took place. On this first occasion, the most important purpose was to get to know each other and to set the scene for the work. Since a research circle should build on democratic principles, the participating members were invited to discuss the structure and content of the circle together with the researcher. This resulted in four sessions in the autumn, and four in the spring, each session comprised of three to four hours. The focus of the first meetings was to take part in recent research in didactics of religion, which meant reading and discussing a certain number of scientific articles. These first meetings also included lecturers by two colleagues at the faculty. Parallel to reading scientific literature, the participants started to formulate their research questions for a forthcoming development project. The research questions were to build on current research and their own proven experiences from teaching religion. The development projects can be compared to small-scale
research projects aimed at improving actual practice. The design of the projects was done by the participants in consultation with a couple of researchers from the department. Since methodological issues are particularly important in empirical studies, a researcher specialized in these was invited on one occasion to comment on the participants’ methodological considerations.

The plan for the research circle was to finish the development projects in spring 2020 and to concentrate on the presentation of the results for a wider audience in autumn 2020. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, these plans had to be revised. The new plan is to finish the projects in spring 2021 and to present the results at the beginning of summer 2021. These presentations will be done in two ways. First, all participants will write an article in a thematic issue on research circles in the religion teachers’ national journal, *Religion och livsfrågor*. The journal is published four times a year and includes both academic articles on religious studies research and articles on concrete classroom teaching, and is primarily aimed at professional religious education teachers. This special issue on research circles will be published in May 2021. Second, the participants will present their results at a conference arranged for religious education teachers in the municipality of Uppsala at the beginning of autumn 2021. The decision to carry out the final report both orally and in writing was taken jointly in the group after careful considerations.

**Preliminary outcomes**

What are the results so far? Even though the project is not finished yet, it is possible to present some results and to draw some preliminary conclusions from the project. The main impression is that there has been a very positive and constructive learning atmosphere within the research circle. The attendance has been high and the engagement during the sessions intense. The participants have been well prepared, and the discussions have been of high quality. In cases where something has been difficult to grasp, the participants have dared to ask further questions, which have urged them to go back to the texts and deepen their understanding.

Moving on to the content of the sessions, reading the literature provoked a lot of new insights and thoughts in the participants. This is not least shown in the themes that were chosen for the development
projects, that is, their own “research projects”. For instance, one teacher took as a point of departure the problem with the so-called “secularistic discourse” that seems to appear in some RE-classrooms, a discourse that runs the risks of alienating the pupils from religion altogether and creating us-versus-them thinking. When reading the research, this teacher realized that he barely gave the pupils the occasion to reflect critically on their values and beliefs and that his teaching was very much focused on facts, not on engaging the pupils in self-reflexive exercises. These new insights resulted in expanded lesson content, new methods, and new forms of examinations.

Another participant worked on her planning for a course about new religious movements. The starting point for the project was to find ways to form teaching that avoided exotifications and stereotypes. This was done by using new methods aimed at enabling students to gain a deeper level of understanding of why people are drawn to these types of organizations.

Yet another teacher formulated a development project that focused on identity formation and worldviews. Her point of departure was a methodological approach that trains the pupils to reflect more critically on their understandings and values. More concretely, she started by addressing sociological and psychological theories on identity formation, at the same time asking questions of a self-reflective character.

Two of the participants did their project together. The reason was that they wanted to compare and explore how teaching on a specific topic worked in two different types of secondary school programmes: one preparatory class and one vocational class. The topic they decided to work with was “food, religion and identity”, based on the idea that food is something that concerns all, both religious and non-religious pupils. The topic was chosen based both on their own proven experience that many non-religious pupils have difficulty understanding how religion can be important to people, but also based on current research which shows that religion in the classroom tends to be about “the others”.

Research circles as bridge between theory and practice?

The purpose of this article, as stated in the introduction, is to discuss whether the research circle as a method could constitute a way of working closer to practice, and thereby include non-academic actors more generally in knowledge production. More particularly, the
purpose is to explore the theoretical and methodological potential of the method for a practice-oriented research subject.

Starting with the first task, the outcomes so far indicate that the research circle constitutes a meeting place where more theoretically oriented didactical research meets with everyday challenges in school. This creates further possibilities to discuss and review current research results, based on teachers’ concrete classroom experiences. Moreover, the circle has stimulated the participants to reflect on their practices, which has generated new ways of structuring and teaching religion. The project has also given the participating researchers the opportunity to learn more about “school reality”. This has, in turn, has generated new ideas of how to structure and implement teaching for student teachers. The shared discussions and reflections on research and tested experience have also given us ideas for future research and resulted in an application for a research school in didactics with a focus on teaching practice.

To sum up, the research circle, with religious education teachers as an example, serves both an educational and a research purpose. It provides new scholarly knowledge and ideas for further research in academia, but also knowledge that can be used to enhance teacher education and for religious education teachers’ practices. In this final section, we will highlight and reflect on two problems that arise in expanding the “turn to practice” to other professional groups. First, the suspicion of, or presumed problem with becoming confessional in academia, and second, the earlier mentioned problem of hierarchy of knowledge, and the persistent binary between theory and practice.

**Research circles in other areas?**

The research circle method could be expanded to other professionals educated at the Faculty of Theology, such as ministers, deacons, and co-workers in other religious organizations. Expanding the method to professionals that are obliged to study theology means limiting the circle to ministers, preferably in the Church of Sweden. Some deacons take courses, or do a master, but not as part of the prerequisites for becoming a deacon. A priest, however, must have a one-year master’s in theology before beginning their final practical education, which is organized by the Church of Sweden.

But could the method smoothly be transferred to ministers outside the Church of Sweden or other faith-based professions? In Sweden, all governmental bodies, including universities, should remain objective and
unbiased. Given the history of theology in academia, but also recent debates and objections to university education being formed in close co-operation with the Church of Sweden, the question of what an appropriate or acceptable relation between academia and a confessional organization or confessional interests is, cannot be overlooked. The critique, or the problem, in its different shapes and rhetoric, is that faith-based arguments, views or logic, should be separated from neutral state universities. This, in turn, challenge the university and the researcher to reflect on their positionality.

Let us sketch an example. A question or a problem for a research circle could relate to the decreasing confirmation rate in the Church of Sweden, a fact that has attracted much focus lately. In a research circle, scholarly knowledge on how youth learn religion could foster projects that aim at improving education for confirmands, in addition to attracting youth to confirmation altogether. This kind of project would not create any confessional problems at a first glance. General knowledge about the existential questions and interest many youth have, together with didactics and pedagogy could be used in order the enhance work with confirmands.

However, digging a bit deeper, one can ask about the purpose of confirmation. There is, of course, no clear-cut answer to this question. One answer could be to enhance the youth’s knowledge and foster experience of the faith of the Church of Sweden, thereby giving them the chance to take a stance, and eventually find their faith in relation to the church. The first part of this objective seems open and non-prescriptive. But what about the last, which aims at attracting believers and doing so by proclaiming a specific faith? Some would say that this is an inappropriate goal in academic work, crossing the border and becoming confessional in one’s objectives. Is there then a difference between a research circle with religious education teachers and one with ministers? How can we distinguish or judge between an acceptable project in relation to a faith-based organization and one that is not? The question is thus context-sensitive, and the answers will differ between countries, cultures, and religious organizations.

The Swedish theologian, Karin Johannesson elaborates and distinguishes between different conceptions of confessionality. Initially, she states that the scientific context is built on two premises: that no assumptions must be given a privileged position, and that scientific argumentation must be open for inter-subjective investigation. This is a minimalistic description of the requirements for academic theology. Different understandings of confessionality could then be distinguished
in order to make clear what is acceptable in academic theology, such as having a religious organization as a funder, demands on religious affiliation or the question of the legitimacy of confessional interest and relevance in academic theology. These different conceptions of “confessional” do not exclude the research circle from faith-based contexts or participants, as long as the conditions are not dictated by a funder or a religious practice/person.26

Confessional normativity is perhaps the most important or urgent problem concerning research circles with religious practitioners. This has to do with whether or not research and education are based on or even postulate religious assumptions from specific confessions. If these kinds of assumptions are not open for inter-subjective evaluation, they could not be part of academic work.27

To sum up, we do believe that research circles could be transferred into other fields in our department. There could not be any privileged assumptions, and in a research circle, it must therefore be possible to evaluate all assumptions inter-subjectively, also religious assumptions. The confessional influences in academic work are in this way not different from any other problem presented to scientific or scholarly work that is relevant for human life. Furthermore, the research circle must be open to anyone that wants to take part, and not limited to ministers or persons belonging to a specific faith.

Turning and returning to practice

The second purpose of this article was to explore the research circles’ theoretical and methodological potential for a practice-oriented research subject. To be able to answer this question, we return to the basic endevour of creating a new research discipline, interested in “turning to practice”.

The transformation of cultural conditions creating demands on education and prerequisites for research is not only found in society and “outside” religions and faith traditions. The faith and lives of religious persons and communities are naturally a part of cultural and social change. From an academic point of view, it would be more accurate to talk about transmutation of the border between what is labelled “religious” and “non-religious”, and what is meant by “secular” and “non-secular”. This urges us in academia to widen and re-shape our focus, theories, and methods concerning different and changing religions and faith traditions, but also to perceive and address the existential questions and needs that arise in a post-Christian and secular social context.
Traditionally, practice in a Nordic theological setting has dealt with the practices related to Christian churches and believers. Practical theology as a subject in academia has thus historically been shaped by and for the education of ministers, mainly in the national churches. However, gradually, this practical education has morphed into being more and more a matter for several different churches, and in Sweden, the confessional education of ministers and other faith professionals is performed outside the university. The practical training of ministers is organized differently within the Nordic countries. Contrary to Sweden, in Norway and Finland, practical education is part of university education. However, in Sweden, research is still conducted at universities that is highly relevant for, or could be a part of, that professional training.

The return to practice is also a matter of academic power and hierarchy among disciplines. Change and transformation of subjects in academia has occurred through history, and matters of power and hierarchy have been part of this gradual transformation. The early division of theological branches made by Friedrich Schleiermacher, where practical theology is the crown and historical and philosophical theology are the body and root respectively, is now turned upside-down. Practical theology in Sweden was gradually transformed into “the scientific study of church practice”. And pastoral education has, as previously mentioned, been a matter for the church since 1980. This process dethroned practical theology, and like in other parts of the world, systematic theology became the crown.

At the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala, this meant that the former discipline of practical theology was changed into ecclesiology at the beginning of the 1990s, which occupied itself with constructive and critical reflection over a presupposed divine revelation as it is framed in the Christian church. This form of disciplinarity, more in line with systematic theology, was however, gradually affected by the general cultural turn, as part of the contemporary and international empirical development and use of ethnographic methods.

We now face the challenge of forming a discipline “turned to practice”, carrying both the long heritage of practical theology and the younger development of the disciplines of sociology of religion and didactics of religion. There are affinities, not least in the study of religious practices, both within churches and other contexts. This interest is visible in the theological fields labelled “lived theology”, “ordinary theology”, and “empirical theology”. Within sociology of religion, we see a similar trend in the rise of “lived religion”. Also in didactics there is a return to practice. It is noticeable both through a more practice-oriented
teacher education (see above) and through an increased focus on concrete classroom research. This return, or turning to practice, brings forth the old and persistent theory-practice binary, as well as differences in how theory is conceptualized.\textsuperscript{34} One of the reasons for starting up the research circle in didactics of religion was the desire to find new ways to bridge the gap between research and praxis, between theory and practice. This endeavour has just begun, and we recognize the comprehensive and challenging task of renegotiating the understanding and role of theory in practical theology and sociology of religion. This work also challenges established academic roles between teacher and student in the research circle, as well as blurring the borders between research and education. However, the turning to practice must be done consciously, without underestimating power structures. As the practical theologian Bonnie Miller-Lemore puts it: “The theory-practice dichotomy functions in ways similar to more commonly recognized dualisms, operating to suppress and control knowledge”.\textsuperscript{35} When turning to practice, we thus join feminists and postmodernists who criticize western rationality from the standpoint of what and whom it excludes.

Forming a discipline turned to practice, this value-laden dualism creates at least two interrelated problems. First, one enters the long and winding road of defending and defining practical knowledge, “techne” and “phronesis”, and the study of/with laymen, ordinary people, and their understanding and way of living with their religion or worldview. Second, and related, the academic status or place in the hierarchy of a discipline turned to practice is precarious. What is to be the place, role, and status of a subject that does “practical academic work”, blurring the line between researcher and student, and research and education; but more profoundly, one that calls for a renegotiation of the meaning of theory, and thereby the understanding and role of practice, both inside and outside of academia.

A final reflection thus refers to the need for a practice theory that puts practice at the centre of social reality. A strong conception of practice, elaborated by Geir Afdal (see his text in this issue), could offer a fruitful base and countermove to the risk of devaluing practice-oriented research. However, such a conception stands in contrast not only to everyday common-sense, but also to dualistic scholarly traditions that form and inform academic hierarchies.

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Notes

2. The shift from exclusive to broad-reaching education in academia, directed by governmental initiatives and social requirements, has put more focus on developing specific abilities and skills.
3. Higher education in Sweden and other Nordic countries is public and state funded. All governmental bodies should be non-confessional, and must not favour any religion or other faith. Moreover, universities gradually have become subject to several governmental policies, including gender equality, sustainable development, and cooperation with society.
4. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.
9. Ibid.
10. Angervall et al., “Research or Teaching?”
12. ibid.
15. The word didactics originally comes from the Greek word didaktikos, which means “teaching”, or the “doctrine of teaching”. Today, the concept is often used to describe processes related to teaching, and includes both theoretical reflections about teaching and concrete classroom action. Similarly, didactics of religion concerns theoretical reflections about teaching and the actual classroom situation. Didactics, then, is a field that works with issues both in theory and practice. Didactics of religion as a research field has historically focused more on the processes behind teaching than the concrete classroom processes. See for instance Osbeck, Kränkningens livsförståelse.
16. Lahdenperä, “Forskningscirkel som samproducerande kunskapsprojekt.”
17. Rutgersson and Åberg, *Cirkels betydelse*.
19. https://www.forumforsamverkan.uu.se/?languageId=1
20. https://www.utbildningsvetenskap.uu.se/ulfavtal/
23. In 2009, the Swedish Council for Higher Education sharply criticized the university for courses that were given in co-operation with the Church of Sweden’s Educational Institute. It resulted in a discontinuation of the courses.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Edgardh, “Praktisk teologi.”
30. Rasmussen, “Century of Swedish Theology.”
31. See Edgardh, “Praktisk teologi.”
33. See McGuire, Lived Religion; Ammerman, “Lived Religion”; Ammerman et al., Everyday Religion; Ammerman, Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes.
34. Miller-McLemore, “The Theory-Practice Binary.”
35. Ibid.

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