

**VARIATION IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF
LUTHERANISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

**Meaning Discernment of Students and Teachers in
Finnish Upper Secondary Schools**

Elina Hella

*Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of
the Faculty of Theology, at the University of Helsinki in Lecture Hall
13, Main Building, Fabianink. 33, on the 14th of December, 2007, at
12 o'clock.*

Helsinki 2007

ISBN 978-952-92-3065-5 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-952-10-4402-1 (PDF)

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful for many so many people who have helped me learn through variation in my research journey! I thank my supervisor Prof. *Kirsi Tirri*, who has supported me in so many ways and to my advisor Prof. *Päivi Tynjälä* for feedback along the way. I thank Dr *Ulla Runesson* and Prof. *Bo Dahlin*, who pre-examined my thesis and offered me critical comments which were crucial for clarification of my writing and helped me revise the thesis into its final form.

I have been honoured to have been able to visit and receive advice from Prof. *Ference Marton*, the 'Father' of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning as I applied his research approach to my doctoral research. Thank you so much, Ference, for your time, in-depth feedback, expertise and interest in my study. I am grateful to the staff of the Department of Pedagogy and Didactics, Göteborg University for making me feel part of such an inspiring research community during my visits. Thanks to the Department of Education at the University College of Borås for welcoming me as a visiting researcher. Special thanks to Dr *Kristina Alhberg* and Dr *Gerlese Åkerlind* for your insights, encouragement and friendship.

I thank the students and teachers who participated in the study. I also thank my home institution, the Department of Practical Theology, which accepted one article in its series. I am also grateful to the *British Journal of Religious Education* for accepting the two other articles of this thesis for publication, one of which was co-written with *Andrew Wright*, Professor of Religious and Theological Education at King's College, London. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn in a community of theologians and work as a full-time researcher as a member of the Finnish Graduate School of Theology sponsored by the Academy of Finland. I thank especially Prof. *Eila Helander*, the Head of the Graduate School for valuable advice in my doctoral studies. I am also grateful for having received financial support from the University of Helsinki Research Funds, the Finnish

Church Research Institute, the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the Chancellor of Helsinki University and the Finnish Concordia Fund.

Thanks to all my colleagues and dear friends for being there for me in and out of the academia, especially *Henrietta Grönlund*, *Eija Hanhimäki*, *Eija Lakso*, and *Dr Martin Ubani*. My deepest gratitude belongs to you, *Andrew*, for your various advice and support as well as for your wisdom and faith. And I thank my precious daughters *Juliana* and *Mariana*, my parents and my brother and his family for their love – kiitos!

Anno Domini, 2007

Elina Hella

Abstract

The study investigated variation in the ways in which a group of students and teachers of Evangelical Lutheran religious education in Finnish upper secondary schools understand 'Lutheranism' and searched for educational implications for learning in religious education. The aim of understanding the qualitative variation in understanding Lutheranism was explored through the relationship between the following questions, which correspond to the results reported in the following original refereed publications:

- 1) How do Finnish students understand Lutheranism?
- 2) How do Finnish teachers of religious education constitute the meaning of Lutheranism?
- 3) How could phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning contribute to learning about and from religion in the context of Finnish Lutheran Religious Education as compared to religious education in the UK?

Two empirical studies (Hella, 2007; Hella, 2008) were undertaken from a phenomenographic research perspective (e.g., Marton, 1981) and the Variation Theory of Learning (e.g., Marton & Tsui et al. 2004) that developed from it. Data was collected from 63 upper secondary students and 40 teachers of religious education through written tasks with open questions and complementary interviews with 11 students and 20 teachers for clarification of meanings. The two studies focused on the content and structure of meaning discernment in students' and teachers' expressed understandings of Lutheranism. Differences in understandings are due to differences in the meanings that are discerned and focused on. The key differences between the ways students understand varied from understanding Lutheranism as a religion to personal faith with its core in mercy. The logical relationships between the categories that describe variation in understanding express a hierarchy of ascending complexity, according to which more developed understandings are inclusive of less developed ones. The ways the teachers understand relate to student's understandings in a sequential manner.

Phenomenography and Variation Theory were discussed in the context of religious education in Finland and the UK in relation to the theoretical notion of '*learning about and from religion*' (Hella & Wright, 2008). The thesis suggests that variation theory enables religious educators to recognise the unity of learning about and from religion, as learning is always learning about something and involves simultaneous engagement with the object of learning and development as a person. The study also suggests that phenomenography and variation theory offer a means by which it is possible for academics, policy makers, curriculum designers, teachers and students to learn to discern different ways of understanding the contested nature of religions.

Keywords: Lutheranism, understanding, variation, teaching, learning, phenomenography, religious education

Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli etsiä lukiolaisten ja uskonnonopettajien erilaisia tapoja ymmärtää luterilaisuus. Ymmärtämisen variaatiota tarkasteltiin etsimällä keskeisiä samankaltaisuuksia ja eroja tutkitun opiskelija- ja opettajaryhmän tavoissa muodostaa merkityksiä luterilaisuudesta: erotella luterilaisuus ja siihen kuuluvia piirteitä muista asioista tai ilmiöistä. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys perustui fenomenografiseen tutkimussuuntaukseen ja sen piirissä kehitettyyn oppimisen variaatioteoriaan. Sen mukaan oppiminen perustuu tietoisuuden laajenemiseen asioiden välisistä suhteista ja kykyyn erotella yhä monimutkaisempia merkityskokonaisuuksia. Tutkimustehtävä jakaantui kolmeen kysymykseen ja kuhunkin kysymykseen vastaavaan artikkeliin:

- 1) Miten lukiolaiset ymmärtävät luterilaisuuden?
- 2) Miten uskonnonopettajat ymmärtävät luterilaisuuden?
- 3) Kuinka fenomenografia ja oppimisen variaatioteoria soveltuvat uskonnon oppimiseen ja uskonnosta oppimiseen suomalaisessa koulun uskonnonopetuksessa, verrattuna englantilaiseen uskonnonopetukseen?

Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin fenomenografisen tutkimuksen mukaisin metodein. Aineisto sisälsi 63 lukiolaisen ja 40 uskonnonopettajan kirjoitelmaa sekä 11 oppilaan ja 20 opettajan nauhoitettua ja litteroitua haastattelua. Analyysin tulokset eli kuvauskategoriat kuvaavat sekä luterilaisuuden merkityssisältöjä että niiden rakennetta.

Kahden ensimmäisen artikkelin (Hella, 2007; 2008) empiiriset tulokset kertovat siitä, miten luterilaisuutta voidaan ymmärtää opiskelijoiden ja opettajien näkökulmasta. Luterilaisuuden merkitys vaihteli lukiolaisilla viidessä kategoriassa uskonnosta henkilökohtaiseen Jumala-suhteeseen, jonka keskuksena on armo. Opettajien neljä ymmärtämistapaa muodosti yhä moniulotteisemman jatkumon lukiolaisten käsityksille. Kolmas, teoreettinen artikkeli (Hella & Wright, 2008) tarkastelee fenomenografian ja variaatioteorian pedagogisia sovellusmahdollisuuksia *uskonnon* oppimiseen ja *uskonnosta* oppimiseen suomalaisessa ja brittiläisessä uskonnonopetuksessa. Artikkelin korostaa variaatiota opettamisen ja oppimisen välineenä ja oppilaiden kriittistä, mutta kokonaisvaltaista erilaisten katsomusten kohtaamista syvällisen ymmärtämisen perustana. Sen mukaan kriittinen uskonnonopetus mahdollistaa katsomuksellisen lukutaidon kehittymisen variaation avulla ja samalla oppilaan persoonallisen kasvun sekä identiteetin ja maailmankatsomuksen muodostumisen. Tutkimus palvelee erityisesti evankelis-luterilaisen uskonnonopetuksen kehittämistä ja arviointia luterilaisuuden merkityksen ja uskonnon oppimisen kannalta.

Avainsanat: luterilaisuus, ymmärtäminen, variaatio, fenomenografia, opettaminen, oppiminen, uskonnonopetus

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INTRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis presents an empirical study of the variation in the ways in which a group of students and teachers of Evangelical Lutheran religious education in Finnish upper secondary schools understand 'Lutheranism'. The study constitutes research in the interdisciplinary field of religious education. The interdisciplinary perspective is shown in the way in which 'Lutheranism', traditionally seen as a theological movement within Christianity, is approached from a pedagogical point of view.

The law for the Upper secondary schools follows the Act of Religious Freedom (2003) according to which, religious education in the Finnish school system is based on individual students' rights to be educated according to their 'own religion'. In order to understand the knowledge base for religious education and the meaning of the subject it is necessary to define what this means in the context of Evangelical Lutheran religious education. To this purpose, this thesis argues for the necessity to define what is meant by the concepts of 'Lutheranism' and 'religion' in religious education, as constituted from the varying perspectives of the scientific research community in the field, the curriculum, teachers and learners.

In this doctoral study, Lutheranism was not the object of research *per se*; rather it was approached as an object of students' and teachers' understanding. Since one of the teachers' tasks is to enhance student understanding of Lutheranism, the object of the study was the different ways in which students and teachers relate to Lutheranism, in particular the variations in ways of understanding it and its implications for religious education.

The aim of understanding qualitative variation in understanding Lutheranism was explored through the relationship between the

following questions, which correspond to results reported in the original refereed publications:

- 1) How do Finnish students understand Lutheranism?
- 2) How do Finnish teachers of religious education constitute the meaning of Lutheranism?
- 3) How could phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning contribute to learning about and from religion in the context of Finnish Lutheran Religious Education as compared to religious education in the UK?

Variation in understanding Lutheranism as the object of the study was approached both from an empirical and a theoretical perspective. *The first focus* was on identifying and describing qualitative variation in students' and teachers' understandings of Lutheranism. For this purpose two empirical studies (Hella, 2007; Hella, 2008) were undertaken from the qualitative research perspective of phenomenographic research specialisation. These two studies focused on the content and structure of meaning constitution in students' and teachers' expressed understandings of Lutheranism. *The second focus* was on finding educational implications of such experiential variation in understanding Lutheranism in order to improve learning in religious education. For this purpose the study drew on the underlying theoretical assumptions of the phenomenographic research tradition and its development into a pedagogical theory called 'the Variation Theory of Learning'. The empirical findings from the two phenomenographic studies were analysed and discussed in the light of this theory in order to draw educational implications for religious education. *The third focus* was on discussing the applicability of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning to religious education in relation to the twin notion of 'learning about and from religion' and in the context of the theoretical framework of critical religious education in Finland and the UK (Hella & Wright, 2008). Academic discussion on this theoretical notion of 'learning about

religion' and 'learning from religion' originates from curriculum development in religious education in the United Kingdom.

Based on the theoretical framework of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning, the study suggests a *relational* pedagogical approach to research on religious education in order to find implications for the development of teaching practices in religious education. This perspective is relational, as it focuses on the internal relationship between the person and the world, the interrelatedness of intentional acts of understanding, teaching and learning. The understanding of Lutheranism as an object of teaching and learning is approached from the perspective of the learner. The primary focus is on practices that aim to communicate the subject matter to the learners in order to improve their understanding of what they are supposed to learn (see, e.g., Pang & Marton, 2005a). From the relational pedagogical view adopted here, teachers' understandings of Lutheranism are seen to be related to the way in which they go about teaching it, and hence also to student learning.

Implications for religious education are searched for in terms of how the understanding of Lutheranism could be constituted as a subject matter of religious education in order to enable students to develop their understanding of Lutheranism. Furthermore, the study discusses the role of Lutheranism and religion in religious education in the context of the school subject of Evangelical Lutheran religion.

The thesis is structured in four parts. Part *I Background of the study* is an introduction to the disciplinary context which the study belongs to. The study is seen to be related to the background of current research into religious and spiritual education. Promoting the understanding of Lutheranism was seen as a task of religious education, and thus the role of the concept of Lutheranism was analysed in terms of curricular starting-points expressed in the previous Framework Curriculum for the Senior Secondary School (1993) and the current National Core Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School (2003) contents and aims of religious education.

These documents had been used in the Evangelical Lutheran religious education of the two groups of students who participated in the study. The relationship between theology and pedagogy is related to the study of Lutheranism as it appears to students and teachers of religious education.

Part II *Theoretical framework of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning* introduces the theoretical position of the pedagogical perspective to the study as well as the methodological approach from which the empirical investigation was carried out. The theoretical basis is on *phenomenographic research specialisation* (e.g., Marton, 1981) and the *Variation Theory of Learning* (e.g., Marton & Tsui et al. 2004). This part starts with an overview of the historical development of the phenomenographic research movement, which can be seen as a continuum from phenomenography as an empirically based research approach to the Variation Theory of Learning. The application of phenomenography and Variation theory to the object of study is described in terms of the focus on understanding of Lutheranism as the object of learning, and learning about and from religion through variation. The Variation Theory of Learning serves as a tool to find pedagogical implications for teachers on how variation can be used in teaching to enhance students' understanding of subject matters in religious education. The focus is on how the relationship between the pedagogical framework and theological content forms the standpoint from which Lutheranism as a subject matter in religious education can be understood and how the results can be linked to the construction of a knowledge base for learning about and from religion.

Part III *Research design and phenomenographic methods* describes the aim of the study, the methods with which the empirical data were collected and analysed, the participants in the study and the methodological principles on which the practical procedures were based and the ethical principles that were followed. The empirical data consist of 40 teachers' and 63 students' written accounts of their

understandings of Lutheranism, together with follow-up interviews with 12 students and 20 teachers, focused on their reflections on their understandings previously expressed in writing and designed to clarify their intentions.

Part *IV Results and Discussion* briefly summarises the main outcomes derived from the empirical study as and examines the theoretical and practical implications of the findings reported in the original refereed publications:

Hella, E. (2008). Variation in Finnish Students' Understanding of Lutheranism and its Implications for Religious Education: A Phenomenographic Study. *British Journal of Religious Education* (in press).

Hella, E. (2007). Variation in Finnish Religious Education Teachers' Understandings of Lutheranism: A Phenomenographic Study. In K. Tirri & M. Ubani. (Eds.), *Giftedness and Holistic Education. Yearbook 2007 of the Department of Practical Theology*. Publications of the Department of Practical Theology 111 (pp. 109–124). Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Hella, E. & Wright, A. (2008). Learning 'About' and 'From' Religion: Phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and Religious Education in Finland and the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education* (in press).

The original thesis of paper III was my own. I drafted the sections 'Problems of Learning 'About' and 'From' Religion' and 'Phenomenography and Variation Theory of Learning'. Wright and I co-drafted sections 'Learning about and learning from religion in Finland and the UK' and 'Critical Religious Education'. Overall I contributed c. 75% of the paper, Wright c. 25% hence my designation as the primary author.

This part also includes methodological discussion which focuses on an evaluation of the research process and procedures and discussion of results in terms of the theoretical and practical implications of the study. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological implications of the findings are discussed in relation to the phenomenographic research and research on learning as seen from the perspective of the Variation Theory of Learning. The main findings bring a challenging perspective to the critical discussion of the role of Lutheranism and the nature of the school subject 'Evangelical Lutheran Religion'. Educational implications are drawn and discussed for learning about religion and especially by elaborating the role of Lutheranism as a content of religious education in relation to student learning. The findings also relate to the current international discussion on the role of religion and spirituality in religious education as well as the constitution of the knowledge base for religious education.

I BACKGROUND OF THE THESIS

In this part religious education is introduced both as a disciplinary and practical context for the study. In the first chapter, the educational context of the study, Evangelical Lutheran religious education, is introduced in terms of its aims and contents in relation the concept of Lutheranism. Contemporary questions and concepts in research in the interdisciplinary field of religious education are introduced. The second chapter views current research approaches to religious education in relation to the most dominant research issues. Critical religious education is introduced as the appropriate framework within which to explore the various questions raised by this study, in particular that of knowledge constitution. The thesis also discusses the twin-notion of learning ‘about’ and ‘from’ religion, a central pedagogical issue of discussion in current research into religious education, is introduced in relation to the study. Finally, the understanding of Lutheranism as theological phenomenon is formulated from the researchers’ standpoint within the disciplinary context adopted for the empirical research.

1. Disciplinary and Practical Context of Religious Education

1.1 Lutheranism in Evangelical Lutheran Religion

In Finland, schools draw up their own local curricula and annual plans in accordance with the National Core Curriculum for the Secondary School (2003, 14). The document understands learning as the “result of a student’s active and focused actions aimed to process and interpret received information in interaction with other students,

teachers and the environment and on the basis of his or her existing knowledge structures”. The concept of ‘knowledge structures’ implies the cognitivist-constructivist paradigm in which the learner is seen to possess the cognitive capacity to store knowledge after actively processing information ‘received’ from the outside world through social interaction. This view of learning includes both individual and the social construction of knowledge.

In Finland, religious education is a non-confessional compulsory school subject in the state school system. Religious education is implemented if at least three pupils within a municipality are members of a registered religious community, which has its own framework curriculum accepted by the National Board of Education. The educational practice is generally based on the single faith tradition ‘according to students’ own religion’. Because 85% of Finland’s population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, most students study the compulsory non-confessional school subject called ‘Evangelical Lutheran Religion’. Also, if there is a minimum of three students, who do not belong to any of them, they are required to attend the subject called ‘Ethics’ or they may choose to attend the religious education classes provided for the majority of students.

Even though Lutheranism is referred to in the name of the school subject “Evangelical Lutheran Religion”, it is not defined in the National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (2003). There are three compulsory courses in the Evangelical Lutheran Religion (pp. 163–164). The core contents of *Course 1 Nature and significance of religion* include the definition and exploration of the fundamental questions of the nature of religion, religion in the community and individual experience of religion. *Course 2 The Church, culture and society* contains the formation, historical development and influence of Christianity and the work of Christian churches (formation of doctrine, interaction between worship and art, political and social significance, form of different denominations in different parts of the world, as well as the manifestations of Christian

traditions and ecumenical foundations). *Course 3 Human life and ethics* is focused on ‘the fundamental questions’ of life, suffering and death, Christian conceptions of God, humanity, nature and salvation and the conceptions of good and evil, which allow exposure to the Lutheran viewpoint to Christianity. There are also two voluntary specialisation courses, *Course 4 'Worlds of Religions'* and *Course 5. 'What Do Finns believe in?'*

No specific aims for understanding Lutheranism have been identified in the Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary School (2003). However, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004) for comprehensive school children 7–16 years of age uses the concept as it states that

the point of departure in Lutheranism is to introduce the pupils in diverse ways to religious culture and bring out the main factors from the standpoint of the pupils’ development and growth (p. 202)

Still, there is a lack of meaning of Lutheranism as a religious culture and explanation of how learning about such a culture may contribute to learning from it for the development of the pupil. What is the point of view for defining these ‘main factors’? Such a normative statement implies that there are some distinctive features of religious culture that are considered educationally critical for students’ development and growth. Furthermore, this statement brings up further questions of what is meant by ‘the main factors of religious culture’ and by the ‘standpoint of pupils’ development and growth’ and how these two are related.

Apart from the aim of religious education in creating conditions for developing the cultural literacy of the students by using various methods, the role of teachers and teaching in religious education in creating such conditions is not dealt with in the National Core Curriculum (2003) What is expected to be *learned about* ‘Evangelical Lutheran Religion’ has not been clearly defined. Instead aspects of Lutheranism are more or less explicit in the course contents related to

Christianity, which are studied amongst other religious traditions. Knowledge about religion seems somewhat unproblematic, whereas in their learning from religion, students' engage actively with the knowledge received about religion. Such knowledge appears 'more or less given' instead of making explicit the 'contested' nature of knowledge (see, Skeie, 2006), as constituted from variation in worldviews or mutually conflicting accounts of reality.

According to this Core Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School (2003, 162), religion is seen 'as part of culture and society and of individual and community life'. The curricular knowledge of religion is to be constituted from the sources of different religious traditions as well as research and material communicated by the media (p. 162). However, the definition of religion is left for teachers' responsibility. Furthermore religion is seen as a social and cultural framework for the development of a student's own philosophy of life and identity (p. 162) Therefore, religious education aims to develop the students' 'cultural literacy' (p. 162). Religious education appears as a tool for cultural understanding of the role and meaning of religion as part of cultural and intercultural encounters than in terms of its intrinsic value for the students (cf. Wright, 2004b). However, the general assessment criteria in the Core Curriculum focus on the development of the students' spiritual thinking. The question is how the focus on understanding religion in cultural terms and developing the students' spiritual thinking are connected.

1. 2 Research in Religious Education

Religious education signifies the interconnection between religion and education, yet the relationship between the two is an issue of continuous debate, as has been the case between content and the process of education in the history of pedagogical research. Religious education as an interdisciplinary field of research draws knowledge

from several disciplines, such as theology, philosophy, religious studies, psychology, sociology, ethnography.

The concept of religion and its role in religious education is a disputed issue that has been a recent focus of conversation. The question is: is it possible to talk about religion as a phenomenon *per se*, as having a universal nature, or as a common category of different religious traditions; if so, on what grounds? Religion is considered such a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that sometimes its role or nature has not been defined in the curricular context of religious education. There is little empirical research about how teachers' and students' identify religion in religious education (see, Vermeer, 2004). However, Dahlin (1989; 1990) studied how the nature of religion was conceived by Swedish teenagers in the ninth grade of comprehensive school. His study is discussed with the results of variation in students' understanding of Lutheranism reported in the first study of this thesis (Hella, 2008). The distinctive nature of religious education and the necessity to define the subject matter of the subject has recently been brought back into the centre of discussion (Everington, 2000; Maybury & Teece, 2005). The issue of the distinctiveness of the subject has been explored by addressing a set of interrelated critical questions, such as:

- What is the purpose of religious education? (Everington, 2000, 185)
- What is meant by religion in religious education? (Skeie, 2006)
- What is distinctive about religion as a way of understanding the world?
- What is the subject focus in religious education?
- What is the discipline from which conclusions are drawn for religious education?
- What is it that makes religious education distinctive in understanding its usual goals of understanding ultimate meaning, purpose of life, beliefs about God, self, nature of

reality, moral issues and being human? (Maybury & Teece, 2005, 180–181)

Previous research on religious education in the Finnish school system has mainly been reported in Finnish. Furthermore, most of the studies in English have been quantitative surveys, for example of teachers' and students' attitudes towards religious education (Kallioniemi & Siitonen, 2003) and conceptions of religious education teachers (Räsänen, 2006). Kalevi Tamminen's (1991) longitudinal studies on religious development in childhood and youth have received significant international acknowledgment.

In the contemporary European context there is a substantial amount of research on religious education that is focused on the theoretical explication of the nature, role and aims of religious education (see, Hella & Tirri, 2008). Empirical research has focused on the psychological conditions of the students, such as cognitive-developmental factors that influence their religious and moral thinking, as well as values and attitudes towards religious education (Jackson, 2004). The religious thinking of the student as seen from the research perspective of cognitive-developmental psychology has played an important role in religious education for the past few decades (e.g., Goldman, 1968; Fowler, 1981; Tamminen, 1991). In recent developments, emphasis on cognitive skills and development has been added, with a focus on the emotional, social and attitude factors, the role of religious experience, spirituality, religious symbols in the language system and role-taking as relevant aspects of the identity formation of the students (Tirri, 2003).

Today religious education aims to help students make sense of plurality between and within religious and secular traditions in current multi-cultural encounters between peoples. Issues of diversity and difference have become important in the context of growing multiculturalism and religious pluralism. Plurality refers to diversity of meanings, values, beliefs and worldviews. Pluralism as a challenge

for religious education has been analysed by Ziebertz (2004) at different levels: between religious and secular traditions, within religions and within individual people's attitudes and worldviews.

In most European countries religious education in state schools has abandoned the traditional confessional model of induction into a particular faith community. Wright (2007b) identifies this as a consequence of an ontological shift from Christian to a liberal worldview within European societies along with growing pluralism. The focus is on the human being as the centre of the universe rather than God. Human beings are seen as discoverers or creators of meaning. Wright (2007a, 2007b) draws on Rawls (1993) to identify two versions of liberalism: comprehensive and political liberalism. Liberalism in general stresses freedom and tolerance. Comprehensive liberalism affirms a closed worldview in which freedom and tolerance constitute *ultimate values*, whereas political liberalism is a pragmatic process, in which freedom and tolerance provide a *practical framework* for exploring contested worldviews. The main concern of comprehensive liberalism is for the stability of a plural society, rather than the pursuit of truth as advocated by political liberals. This raises the question of whether religious education should be reduced to moral education. Wright (2003) stresses the need for religious literacy, intelligent thinking, feeling, communication and action in the light of contested truth claims with the main focus on religion as important in itself; a secondary focus must be on the factor that society needs religious literacy if tolerance is to be deep. According to such a view, problems with liberalism as a closed worldview are the following: (1) it produces liberal confessionalism; (2) tolerance is an undetermined concept, we must not tolerate anything; (3) freedom is also an undetermined concept, freedom can be abused, for example in the use of drugs, supporting racist politics etc. (Wright, 2007b, chapter 3).

1.3 Religion, culture and spirituality

Religious education operates with the conceptual framework of culture, religion, spirituality, theology, faith and belief. There are varying interpretations of these concepts and no agreement for a shared ground for religious education to approach issues related to these concepts (see, Hella & Tirri, 2008).

Hull (2002) builds on the conceptual differences between meanings of culture, religion, spirituality and faith by looking into distinctions, such as actual vs. potential, extension vs. transcendence, finite vs. infinite. The starting point of his approach is to look at the spiritual formation of personhood from the point of view of potentials which transcend the biological.

Culture refers to the ways in which a set of myths, actions and institutions which place human life within a symbolic framework actually functions (Hull, 2002). Culture has a spiritual dimension as it transcends the biological, but *spiritual* is seen as something that helps humans to transcend earlier levels of achievements in order to become truly human.

Spirituality is ‘the whole of the human considered from a certain point of view, that of personhood continually transcending itself...the spiritual process as the process of humanisation’ (p. 172). The cultural, the mental, the social and the spiritual refer to aspects that lift us above the biological, but spiritual refers to realising the potential of *transcending* previous levels (p. 172–173). Thus, a spiritually educated person is characterised as one who is inspired by freedom and the love of living in solidarity with others.

In line with Hull, Hay (1998, 145) talks about spirituality as our relation to the world, a way of being in the world as a dimension of shared humanity. In other words, spirituality is the concept that deals with our relationship with reality as it gives meaning and purpose to life (see, Hella & Tirri, 2008). Wright specifies that spirituality means ‘our concern for the *ultimate* meaning and purpose of life’ (Wright,

2000, 7, my emphasis). Accordingly, not only does spirituality deal with questions about the immanent meaning and purpose of life, but also with questions about the existence or non-existence of transcendental reality. Furthermore, spirituality has a dynamic character as it is defined as “the developing relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is – or is perceived to be – of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth” (Wright, 1998a, 88).

Religion is seen as the climax of the spiritual quest, since in religion the transcendent, which is the main characteristic of the spiritual, may attain its height (Hull, 2002). Religion has a potential of reaching this climax, but may not actually reach the highest spirituality. According to Hull (2002) the spiritual search is answered in religion, in which we transcend our humanity to the limit where there is no further transcendence. Therefore, *religion* includes the spiritual, but there may be spirituality outside religion. Hull (2002, 173) draws attention to the distinction between *extending* and *transcending* humanity as he refers to the latter as that which lifts us to a new level of ontological vocation:

Religion at its best does not offer us a mere extension of our senses or knowledge at the same level, but lifts us to a new level. Religion relativises all human achievements by placing them under the domain of the transcendent itself. Religion sets human life against its ultimate limit. Through religion, the finite discovers itself as finite in the presence of the infinite. The temporal discovers it self through religion to be faced with the eternal. In the presence of perfect love, partial love discovers itself to be partial.

Faith is seen by Hull (2002) as a ‘trustful response to the object of religious worship’ in the context of religion: when we reach the limits of our ability to conceive transcendence, that which we encounter we call God (p. 171). Wright (2000), talks about faith also in more generic terms as an affirming response to the spiritual quest for truth about reality, according to which people live their lives as atheists,

agnostics or religious believers. The philosophy of religion makes a distinction between faith as a generic response to spiritual quest, and *religious faith* that refers to the response to the truth claims of a religious community through the formulation of beliefs in theological statements. It is the truth claims about the existence or absence of transcendence presented and shared by people of the same community which identify the community as religious or secular individuals within them as religious or secular believers. Therefore, religions or religious traditions are here considered as faith communities, as they identify themselves in relationship with what they believe to be the truth about the ultimate or transcendent reality. Such truth claims also serve as a mirror for individuals when making judgments about their own way of life in order to live truthfully, according to their faith. Religion is therefore a communal horizon within which doctrines, as responses to spiritual questions, are formulated into a common theology: talk about God or transcendence.

The on-going conceptual debate about the relationship between religion and spirituality shows that there is variation in understanding spirituality in the dimension of immanent vs. transcendent reality due to different responses to the questions of the existence or non-existence of transcendent reality. The decline of traditional religion has raised the need to explicate the meaning and role of spirituality in education and particularly in religious education (e.g., Wright, 2000; Tirri, 2004). According to Kotila (2006) spirituality and post-modernity belong together: the concept is as vague and complex as the post-modern quest for meaning and purpose. In contrast, the traditional Christian piety which has always been the core of Christianity in the form of prayer, experience, values and living, as it gives personal and existential meaning to the doctrines, ethics and rituals combining the personal and the communal aspect of religion (p. 81).

1.4 Christian theology, faith and belief

In the proceeding presentation of key definitions of culture, religion and spirituality and faith, it was my contention that Christianity as a whole, and specifically Lutheranism as part of it, can best be discerned from other religious traditions by its truth claims about the ultimate order-of-things as expressed in their core beliefs and values in the heart of their faith (see, Wright, 2004a).

Christian theology refers to systematic reflection on the intellectual content of Christian faith (McGrath, 1999, 26) and is understood as the primary multi-faceted and internally contested ‘insider’ discourse of religious adherents as mediated by research conducted by academic theologians. For example, Lutheran theology articulates the self-understanding of the community of Lutheran Christians as they understand the core aspects of their beliefs and practices. Though fields of philosophy and the social sciences present relevant understandings of religious traditions, they are considered to interpret such traditions from the ‘outside’ and offer a secondary discourse, which provides an important supplement to primary theological discourse, but cannot replace it. Theology represents a multi-faceted discourse, ranging from liturgical practices, through the accounts of faith provided by ‘ordinary’ believers, to the work of academic theologians. According to McGrath (1999, 2) Christian spirituality concerns

the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and with the scope of Christian faith.

The distinction between belief and faith is an important one. In this thesis, I understand belief as an assent to a set of propositions/ truth claims (e.g., I believe God exists). I understand faith as a trusting personal relationship with the object of belief, generically as a life

lived in response to beliefs (e.g., I believe God exists *and* worship him and seek to live a life in relation to him). However, I understand belief to be an important aspect of faith (i.e., I seek to live a life in relation to God, *because* I believe it is true that God exists).

Classic Christian theology makes a conceptual distinction between ‘faith which is believed’ (*fides quae creditur*) and the ‘faith by which it is believed’ (*fides qua creditor*). The former refers to the propositional content of faith formulated by the Christian community; the latter refers to the gift of personal faith received from God as a response to God, which is acted out in everyday life.

Following McGrath (1999), I claim that theological discourse communicates the faith-world of particular religious community, as it identifies itself in relation to the reality of God. Thus, it deals with fundamentally ontological human-God relationship in the epistemological level of truth claims about the reality of God within the context of religious tradition and culture.

Moore (2003) argues that the question of realism in Christian faith must be approached from the ontological perspective: from the point of view of the object of faith and referent of the language. A traditional realist position to Christianity claims that God exists independently of our awareness of him and of our will, but we can know him; our language is not completely inadequate medium for talking about God truthfully (Moore, 2003, 1–2). Such a perspective differs from ‘religious realism’ which focuses on religion and faith as human phenomena. Furthermore, Moore (pp. 7–9) argues for a Christocentric Christian realism rather than just generally theological realism: it is Christian rather than non-Christian, Christocentric rather than generally theological: the emphasis is on the substantial core of Christian faith. The focus on Christ has distinguished Christian faith and theology from other philosophical and religious outlooks.

2. Approaches to religious education

The following three main approaches to religious education can be distinguished in terms of how the role of religion is seen in religious education: 1) the phenomenological approach, 2) the contextual and interpretative approaches, and 3) the critical approach (Hella & Tirri, 2008). In this thesis, I affirm the critical religious education approach, as it offers a basis for religious education that is open for variation in worldviews as a means to learn from similarities and differences between religious traditions in order to engage with and constitute knowledge about the world of religious diversity. It considers the in-depth dimension of religious traditions, namely that they are not to be considered *only* as part of social reality, since their reference point transcends the empirical domain.

2.1 *Phenomenological approach*

Religion has been seen as a generic category for different religious traditions as seen from the phenomenological philosophical framework. Phenomenological research is seen as a tool to explore the common features of different religious traditions through investigating experiences of religion in individual life-worlds. The focus is on the common phenomenological features of different religious traditions. Phenomenology, as represented in the classroom, focuses on thematic teachings across discrete religious traditions and searches for the essence of religion underlying them. Hence, there have been debates about how many religions should be included in classroom teaching: the 'big six' world religions or also the others, including New Age traditions, for example. Key figures in this approach have been Ninian Smart (1968) David Hay (1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2006) and John Hull (1998).

The phenomenological perspective as practiced in religious education has been seen to be looking for similarities in religions through exploring the richness of individual experiences in them (Grimmitt, 2000b), or individual life-worlds through which the religious dimension of life is seen to be revealed. Pupils are invited to bracket out their own opinions and worldviews in order to engage with religious traditions empathetically, in order to understand the particular the perspective of religious adherents. There is a separation between learning about and learning from religion (Smart, 1968), without clarification of how the two are related, both in terms of the content and process of learning in religious education. Phenomenological studies on students' experiences of religions have been criticised from the 'narrowly descriptive' focus on the surface appearances of religious phenomena, while ignoring the pedagogical relevance of their deeper underlying structures (Wright, 2004a). From the phenomenological perspective, religions are seen as culturally diverse expressions of common transcendent experience, and spirituality is a universal dimension of humanity. Here the key educational task to sensitize pupils to the dimension of transcendent experience (Hay, 1998; 2006).

2.2 Contextual and interpretative approaches

Religion has also been seen as a contextual phenomenon. The contextual approach to religious education focuses on religion in its context, namely addressing local manifestations of religion. From this perspective it has been argued that western academics have imposed the view of religions as discrete systems and failed to recognise the internal diversity within traditions and the 'grey borders' between them. The notion of a 'discrete religion' is seen as a western construction. Instead of focusing on a particular religion as a discrete phenomenon, the contextual approach deals with individual

spirituality. A key figure in the constructivist or interpretative version of contextual approach is Robert Jackson (1997; 2000; 2004). Jackson (1997; 2000; 2001) focuses on the contextual dialogue between students' meanings and the meanings of religious traditions through teaching, which aims to encourage conversation, mutual understanding and modification of meanings. According to Jackson (1997) it is possible to construct a tradition, but without a clear substantial identity. The contextual approach reflects a shift from philosophy to sociology and ethnography. The concept of 'religious competence' has been introduced by Heimbrock, Scheilke & Schreiner (2001) as an analytical tool to enable students to deal with religious pluralism (see, also Skeie, 2006). The contextual approach has been adopted to deal with such questions.

A more radical version of contextual religious education is presented in the post-modern approach of Clive Erricker (2001; Erricker & Erricker, 2000a; 2000b). This approach can be seen as radical constructivist or anti-realist, as the focus is on the individual construction of religion, without any acknowledgement of shared meanings or the substantial reality of religious traditions. The focus is on the deconstruction of religion and its replacement with individual spiritualities and experiences. Transcendent experience has been seen as one dimension of diverse human experiences, the creation of one's own worldview. This view has been criticized by Wright (2007c) for the forms of spiritual education focusing on freedom of pupils to adopt arbitrarily any worldview they prefer and tolerate the worldviews of others, even those unworthy of tolerance. Religion and spirituality are approached mainly as loosely connected individual or social constructs with no distinctive identity (Wright, 2007c).

2.3 Critical religious education and religious literacy approach

Critical religious education is a theoretical approach to religious education. The key figure in this approach is Andrew Wright. According to Wright (2004a; 2007a) discrete religions have no essence, but they have substantial identities based on shared, collective intentionalities, rather than on individual beliefs. Whereas ‘essential identity’ refers to an eternal, unchanging identity dislocated from socio-cultural variation; ‘substantial identity’ identifies the fact that, despite socio-cultural variation, it is possible to identify collective agreements about the proto-typical features of a tradition that though not unchanging are nevertheless close to the mainstream of that tradition. Some features of religions are at the heart of the tradition, but do not form an unchanging essence. For example, most Christians accept the doctrine of incarnation, whereas other issues are not so central, such as the role of the Pope. Furthermore, it is a proto-typical feature of Christianity that initiation is through infant baptism (Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Reformed and Lutheran Churches etc.). This allows us to identify infant baptism as proto-typical of Christianity. Nevertheless, a small minority of Christian traditions depart from this proto-typical feature (e.g., Baptists follow adult baptism, the Salvation Army does not baptise either adults or children). Thus, infant baptism can be seen as more proto-typical than adult baptism, which in turn can be seen as more proto-typical than the rejection of baptism. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit is thus not essential to Christianity, but nevertheless constitutes a major proto-typical feature that enables us to distinguish Christianity from all other religious and secular traditions. Christianity is a changing, evolving and multi-faceted tradition, but it is possible to identify substantial historical continuity of its core identity.

Critical religious education approach advocates pupils’ critical engagement with contrary perspectives of different religious traditions

(Wright, 2004a). A key tool to this approach is philosophy and theology, specifically philosophy of critical realism and theologies of religious traditions. Critical religious education addresses the importance of the same dialogue between these two horizons of meaning, but it is focused on questions of ultimate truth rather than mutual understanding (Wright, 2000).

Critical religious education adopts the philosophical framework of critical realism, which is based on ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality (Wright, 2004a; 2007a; see also, Archer et al., 2004).

Ontological realism assumes that reality exists independently of human knowledge about it: God's existence or non-existence constitutes the actual order-of-things, which is unaffected by what we believe. Bhaskar (1997, 56) makes an analytical distinction between three ontological domains: the empirical, actual and the real. The *empirical domain* means the totality of objects, events and our experiences that we are able to be aware of. The *actual domain* means the totality of aspects of the world, regardless of our awareness of them. The *real domain* includes the prior ones, but also their underlying mechanisms.

According to *epistemic relativism*, all knowledge is contested, partial and situated and theory-dependent; also conceptually mediated but open to new interpretations and people have different beliefs about the way things are in the world (Danermark et al., 1997).

In contrast with anti-realism and post-modern constructivism, *judgemental rationality* means that even though our knowledge is partial and contested, we can make informed judgments between varying accounts of reality. Furthermore, faith is not to be seen as an arbitrary and irrational act of imagination, but necessary basis of understanding the world. Different worldviews represented in different faith communities, whether secular or religious, represent different truth claims about the existence or non-existence and the nature of reality, and its 'ultimate' origin in transcendent reality.

Therefore critical religious education encourages teachers and students to engage with conflicting worldviews in an informed and critically reflected manner. According to Wright (2007a, chapter 3) religions, as faith communities, embrace transcendent realism: their discrete identities are based on the different truth claims they make about transcendent reality. In this view, 'truth' refers to the order-of-reality which exists independently of our existence and transcends our ability to perceive it.

Wright (2004a) has criticised contemporary approaches to religious education for viewing religious traditions as cultural realities that need to be integrated into liberal societies through the cultivation of mutual understanding and tolerance in a reductive and anti-realistic manner which ignores the truth claims and visions of the good life offered by religious traditions. Though he agrees that the cultivation of tolerant attitudes towards religion is an important dimension of liberal religious education, he argues that a more fundamental task is to engage with their substantial truth claims, on the understanding that they offer potentially valid accounts of human flourishing. In this view, religion and spirituality are approached in terms of key features that are related to distinctive identities between religious traditions, as they express different responses to the questions of truth, meaning and purpose of life (Wright, 2007b). Such identities can be discerned in terms of their core values and beliefs.

Wright's notion of 'religious literacy' (1993) refers to the ability to attend and respond to the truth claims of religion. He has elaborated the concept by making a distinction between religious, theological and spiritual literacy. Whereas *religious literacy* refers to skills and abilities and competencies to achieve appropriate knowledge with regard to the phenomenon of religion, *theological literacy* refers to such skills in relation to questions of transcendent reality (putative or real) which religion intentionally focuses on and *spiritual literacy* in relation to that which is perceived to be ultimately valuable, ultimately real and ultimately true (Wright, 2007d).

According to this approach, students should 'learn from' religion not merely by learning to be tolerant of different religious traditions, but more fundamentally by engaging with and responding to their substantial realistic truth claims and visions of the good life represented by different religious and secular traditions. This is the basis for the pursuit of truth and wisdom with which to engage with the world.

Based on the ontological engagement with religion in the process of learning about and from religion (Hella & Wright, 2008), religion not only plays a secondary role for the students in enhancing learners' tolerance and freedom in the multi-cultural global context, but also is of primary importance in students engagement with reality. Similarly, Wright (2004b, 2005, cf. White, 2005) has argued for in-depth intrinsic value of religious education, because religions have more or less intrinsic meaning and value for religious adherents in their life-world, engagement with reality. From this perspective religious education cannot be reduced to a branch of moral education; the pursuit of questions of ultimate truth, and the implications of this for the living out of truthful lives, should be at the heart of critical religious education. Hence a key dimension of religious literacy is the ability to attend and respond to the truth claims of religion. Critical realism constitutes a framework for the understanding of our place in the world, while remaining open to revisions of our knowledge about reality.

Critical realism offers an interpretative framework for the relationship between ontology and epistemology that acknowledges that we are part of reality in an internal relationship with it, but reality transcends our ability to achieve knowledge about it. This tension is obvious in religious education, which deals with disputed themes related to abstract ideas beyond our immediate perception and verifiable empirical evidence. Wright (2004b) suggests that judgemental rationality is the key to deal with and make informed judgements between different accounts of reality and its ultimate

source and origin which are referred to by religious traditions. The framework of critical religious education offers a potentially sound basis for developing non-confessional religious education, which deals with a variety of religious traditions that provide different understandings of reality.

II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PHENOMENOGRAPHY AND THE VARIATION THEORY OF LEARNING

The second part introduces the theoretical framework of the study, which is based on the combination of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning, as the latter builds on the theoretical groundings of the former. The principles and theoretical underpinnings of phenomenography as a qualitative research approach are outlined in terms of non-dualistic relational ontology and epistemology and applied to the object of this study. The theoretical development of phenomenography towards a methodology has led to the development of ‘the Variation Theory of Learning’. The theory is used in this study to discuss how an understanding of Lutheranism can be constituted as an object of learning for religious education. The results of the empirical study are discussed with the Variation Theory of Learning in terms of how aspects of understanding of Lutheranism could be dealt with as dimensions of variation which can be used by teachers of religious education to enhance a student’s learning of it.

3. Phenomenographic research specialisation

This chapter introduces the etymological and historical roots of phenomenography as a qualitative research specialisation and its implications for the theoretical development of the Variation Theory of Learning. The relationship between the two is seen as a *continuum*, but it is argued here that the key aspect in which they differ is the way in which the concept of ‘variation’ is approached.

The ontological underpinnings of phenomenography affirm the *internal relationship between the person and the world* or aspects of it, such as *Lutheranism*. This internal relationship has epistemological implications for using the different *ways of experiencing Lutheranism as units for knowledge constitution* in carrying out the present phenomenographic study, for phenomenographic pedagogy, which is based on the relational nature of learning and for the relational approach to the teaching-learning practice. From this theoretical basis the study adopts a view of developmental phenomenography (Bowden 2000a, 2000b; Bowden & Green, 2005), which views phenomenography as a tool for developing teaching and learning in religious education, rather than having a ‘pure’ phenomenographic knowledge interest in describing how Lutheranism as a concept and an aspect of the world appears to people. Phenomenography can reveal the qualitative differences in understanding of the subject matter and the development of understanding from one level to another. Variation theory elaborates the underlying nature of different ways of understanding the world, in terms of analysing the dynamics of awareness due to which understanding of what is seen as the same thing differ qualitatively. Furthermore, it examines the necessary conditions for learning as a qualitative change in the dynamics of awareness that make it possible for people to understand things in new and changed ways.

3.1 Continuum from Phenomenography to the Variation Theory of Learning

The term ‘Phenomenography’ comes from Greek words ‘phainomein’ (phenomenon) and ‘graphein’ (to describe) (see, e.g., Kroksmark, 1987). The beginning of phenomenographic research tradition could be traced to the early 1970s when a Swedish research group: Ference Marton, Lars Owe Dahlgren, Lennart Svensson and Roger Säljö (see,

Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson & Säljö, 1977) started their empirical studies on learning in Gothenburg. The term “phenomenography” was first used by Ference Marton (1981) to refer to a research specialisation that is directed to investigate variations in the experiences of certain aspects of the world. According to Dall’Alba (1996; see also Dahlin, 2007) Amadeo Giorgi, an educational psychologist had pointed out in the mid-seventies that the research interest of the Gothenburg group was described by some phenomenologists as having a phenomenographic nature, as it focused on variations in the ways in which a phenomenon appeared to people, in contrast with the phenomenological focus on the structural basis of those variations in the essence of the phenomenon itself.

The early phenomenography was referred to ‘as a method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them’ (Marton, 1986). Over the years, however, the underlying ontological and epistemological standing points of phenomenography were elaborated more closely. Alongside this process, it also became evident that phenomenography is not a method, but a research approach (e.g., Johansson, Marton & Svensson (1985), or – as it is commonly referred to – a ‘research specialization’ (e.g., Marton, 1981; 1994a), which has its theoretical underpinnings in non-dualistic, relational ontology, which have been adopted from phenomenology. However, phenomenological assumptions, especially as seen by Edmund Husserl, have been interpreted as a way that serves pedagogical knowledge interest. Rather than focusing on the phenomenon *per se* in order to identify its ‘essence’ as revealed in the richness of individual life-worlds, phenomenography focuses on ‘mapping the collective mind’ (Marton, 1994a) or the ‘structure of collective awareness’ (Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenography stresses the importance of learners’ experience of a subject matter as the necessary base for learning (Marton, 1994a). It focuses on the qualitative differences between individuals’ understandings as critical

for their learning about a specific content and for teachers' teaching to enhance students' understanding of the content in question (Marton & Booth, 1997).

The relationship between the original phenomenography of describing the different ways in which people see certain phenomena' empirically and the 'new phenomenographic' theoretical interest on the issues, such as 'what learning is', and 'how learning can be developed', can be seen as the 'two faces' of the same movement. The continuity between the two phases of the development within the phenomenographic tradition led to the establishment of the 'Variation Theory of Learning' (Marton & Booth, 1997; Bowden & Marton, 1998; Marton, 2000; Marton et al., 2004). The theory formulates the necessary conditions for classroom learning: what makes it possible to learn and how.

The continuity between phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning is based on the same theoretical assumption of an internal person-world relationship and stresses *variation* in learning and understanding of the world. However, variation is approached from different angles: phenomenography focuses on variation in *collective* understanding of something, whereas the Variation Theory of Learning focuses on variation as an educational tool to enhance *individual* learning about something. Phenomenography explores variation in ways of experiencing and learning about a certain aspect of the world on the collective level of a particular group by uncovering the critical differences between individual ways of understanding a specific content (e.g., Marton, 1996). Thus, it reveals the key features of the learners' understanding of particular content as a group in a particular context. This informs the educators of what aspects should be in the focus of teaching in order to engage with the students' understanding of the content in question and help them learn in relation to the educational aims of the curriculum. Therefore, it is both the aspects focused upon by the learners and those defined by the curricular aims that constitute the *educationally critical aspects* for

teaching to enhance student learning of the subject matter. The Variation Theory of Learning focuses on the empowerment of actual learning of the individual through variation in the critical aspects of the subject matter. In other words, the Variation Theory of Learning presupposes phenomenographic knowledge of the critical aspects of the subject matter in order to vary those aspects systematically and promote learning of it in the educational practice.

3.2 Internal relationship between the person and the world

As we focus on understanding and learning of a certain aspect of the world, the question of ‘what can be understood or learned?’ and ‘how knowledge of the world can be gained?’ must be dealt with. These epistemological questions are necessarily related to the ontological question of the existence, origin and the nature of reality. Knowledge and understanding of the world requires a relation between the learner and the world.

Marton and Booth (1997) have dealt with the epistemological question of learning ‘what is possible to learn?’ by looking into Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, in which Socrates is asked whether one can be taught a virtue without knowing what that virtue is. The question of ‘how can we gain knowledge about the world?’ entails a dualistic separation between the inner and outer world which leads to ‘Meno’s paradox’: it is impossible to search for knowledge of something, if you do not first know what you are searching for (Marton, 1996). This is a *learning paradox*. Plato rejected the idea of gaining knowledge of the world itself: one cannot gain knowledge about a virtue, without knowing what to look for. Thus, he concluded that gaining knowledge is based on recollection of the knowledge stored inside the immortal soul. Marton (1996) points out that the same logical problem of the locus of knowledge remains whether placed inside the immortal soul of the individual or in the outside world because of the clear-cut

dualistic ontology. The same problem has been associated with the constructivist paradigm, as it has been seen to assume two separate entities: the person separate from the world, which is why it ends up with the need for a mediating mechanism between the two in order to produce knowledge and awareness of the world. Therefore, the knowledge construction process as seen from the dualistic framework is problematic, regardless of whether the focus is on the individual cognitive acts (cognitive-constructivism) or on the social discourses (social constructivism). Broadly speaking, constructivism cannot answer the question of what produces the meaning of the phenomena in the world and how (Pong, 2000).

As an alternative to the dualistic ontological perspective to learning, the phenomenographic perspective focuses on the unity of the learner and that which is to be learned. It suggests that the learner and that which she/he is supposed to learn cannot be separated. Therefore, it has been placed into the constitutional paradigm with phenomenology; this position has been differentiated from the dualistic philosophical stance of constructivist paradigm (Marton & Neuman, 1989; Trigwell and Prosser, 1997; Pong, 2000).

Phenomenographic ontology and epistemology are based on a non-dualistic relational stance, rather than on a distinction between the 'inner' world of a person and the 'outside' world. As Marton and Booth (1997, 13) summarise the non-dualistic perspective of phenomenography:

There is not a real world 'out there' and a subjective world 'in here'. The world [as experienced] is not constructed by the learner, nor is it imposed upon her; it is constituted as an internal relation between them.

From this relational perspective adopted from phenomenology, the person and the world are seen in an internal relationship with each other. Even though some of the concepts and ideas have been adopted from phenomenology, they are often used in quite a different way to

describe the purpose and the knowledge interest of phenomenography. Similarities and differences between the two have been elaborated by Uljens (1989; 1992; 1996). One of the main differences between phenomenology and phenomenography is the way in which a certain concept or phenomenon under study is seen and approached. Phenomenology focuses on the nature of phenomenon and its essence from the 'first person' perspective as it appears to the researcher through the richness of individual experiences. In contrast, phenomenography focuses on how that, which appears to be the same in the world, is perceived and constituted differently by different people. The focus of phenomenography is therefore the varying relationships between the person-world relationships collectively. Knowledge represents the experiential the internal relationship between the knower and the known (Marton & Booth, 1997). However, it also means that the world or an aspect of it can never be reached as such, nor is there any access to the 'essence' of them.

In the early phenomenographic studies, it was found that different phenomena were perceived, experienced, conceptualised in a limited number of different ways (e.g., Marton, 1986). Even though there is always an infinite number of features to the phenomena, there is only a finite number of ways of experiencing certain phenomenon at a particular point of time due to limitations of human experience (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Based on Brentano's (1874/1995) notion of *intentionality*, human awareness and all mental acts, such as perceiving, experiencing, understanding and learning, are always directed towards something (Marton & Neuman, 1989; Marton & Booth, 1997; Runesson, 2006). Based on this key assumption, knowledge is neither subjective, nor objective, but relational reflecting the world as subjective and objective reality at the same time (Uljens, 1989; Marton & Booth, 1997).

The internal relationship between person and world means that an individual's experience of the world is partially present to them.

The person would not be the same without experiencing the world. The question of knowledge constitution is based on changes in this internal ontological relationship. The world changes us as we come to experience in a new way, and we – however slightly – change the world as a result of that experience.

It is not possible to describe the world independent of our descriptions: the describer and the description be separated from each other. The learning paradox does not exist in the constitutional perspective, according to which knowledge is constituted in the person-world relationship, through ways of being aware of the world. This is described by Marton (1996, 177) as follows:

There are not two worlds, the real world on the one hand, and the experienced on the other. There is one world, which is real, and it is experienced. That is not to say that our own experience is all there is, but our (experienced) world is surely a part of the world. And so is our collective experience, the totality of all the different ways in which we experience the world which is a subset of all the possible ways of experiencing it. In actual fact we experience the world as transcending our own experience of it. Seen in this way the dualist notion of the world out there (the real world) and the world in here (the world as perceived) is replaced by the world as experienced by me as a part of the world as a whole, when learning, my world is growing. The learning paradox thus disappears.

3.3 Ways of experiencing as units of knowledge constitution

From the point of view of non-dualistic epistemology, knowledge cannot exist independently of the knower; instead *knowledge is constituted in the relationship between the knower and the object knowledge* (e.g., Marton & Neuman, 1989). According to Marton (1996, 172):

the basic unit of phenomenography is experiential, non-dualistic, an internal person-world relationship, a stripped depiction of capability

and constraint, non-psychological, collective, but individually and culturally distributed, a reflection of the collective anatomy of awareness, inherent in a particular perspective.

Knowledge is gained through experiences of people as they direct their attention to a certain aspect of the world. This does not necessarily mean a direct sense experience with the physical world but engagement with ideas, and other people's understandings of the world.

Phenomenography does not make claims about individuals, the world or phenomenon as such, or about psychological conditions of perceptions or thoughts abstract from the content (Marton, 1986). Therefore, understanding and learning are never separated from the object. Instead, the person who experiences the act of experiencing and the object experienced are internally related. According to Marton (1996) when we do something, we experience doing that something in relation to the situation in which we do it, but we hardly experience a certain conception guiding the act.

The basic concept of early phenomenography, a 'conception', has been used interchangeably with an 'experience', a 'perception', an 'apprehension', an 'understanding' and a 'way of experiencing'. According to the notion of *intentionality* referred to earlier, experiencing, thinking, conceptualising or understanding are not seen as functional processes of the mind *per se*. Instead, they are seen from the point of view of the human tendency to always think, feel, experience *something* in the world around us (e.g., Marton, 1986). Marton (1996) explains that someone may call a certain kind of experience thinking, but the focus is on the object of such experience, such as Lutheranism, which may not be present to our senses, but present to us. To make the non-dualistic stance more explicit, 'conception' has, therefore, often been replaced by *way of experiencing and understanding* something in phenomenography. Marton (1996, 163, 173) uses the term 'experience' rather than

‘conception’ because it points to a relationship with the world rather than an event in the mind; this can be expressed as “*Cognosco ergo sum*” (I experience, therefore I am) rather than Descartes’ formulation “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am).

The researchers’ discernment of the different ways of understanding the phenomenon in question is presented in categories of description. The categorised understandings are structured logically in relation to each other and form a system ‘called outcome space’. It describes variation in the structure of collective awareness, usually in the form of inclusive hierarchy, which reflects the line of development from undiscerned understanding of the phenomenon as a whole towards more discerned and complex whole-part relationships.

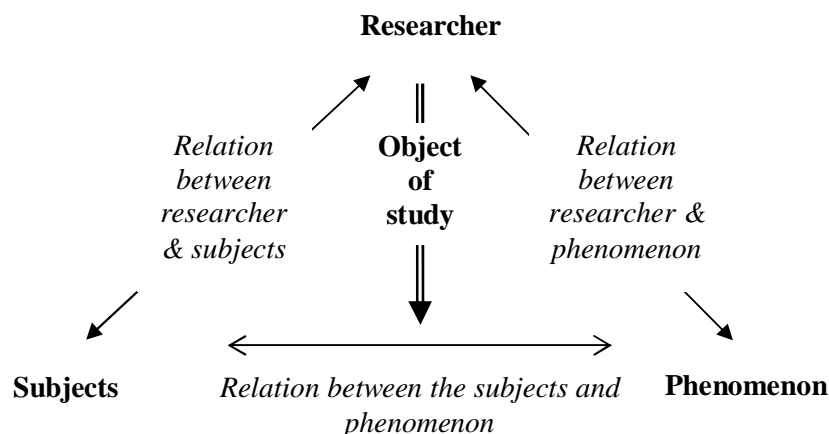
3.4 Relational research and pedagogy of phenomenography

Bowden (2000a) stresses the importance of distinguishing between phenomenography as a research approach and its theoretical underpinnings in a particular understanding of learning. He draws attention (1996, 52) to a distinction between ‘developmental phenomenography’, that serves an educational purpose of enhancing learning, and Marton’s (1986, 38) notion of ‘pure’ phenomenographic interest in understanding any aspect of the world around us. However, phenomenography has its roots in studies on learning; therefore it holds a pedagogical interest in serving as a tool for developing teaching in terms of enhancing learning from the learners’ perspective. In the phenomenographic research tradition, teaching and learning are seen as fundamentally related and this connection is expressed by talking about a ‘teaching-learning’ process: teaching is focused on enhancing student learning, thus the aims for teaching should be defined in terms which aim for student learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Bowden (2005) has referred to the concept of *relationality* in order to describe how knowledge in phenomenographic research practice is constituted in the relationship between the researcher, the subjects (students and teachers), the phenomenon (e.g., Lutheranism) and the object of study (e.g., the relationship between the students' and teachers' understanding of Lutheranism). Drawing on the relational ontology and epistemology of phenomenography, Bowden (2005) describes phenomenographic research as co-constituted from the relationships presented in *Figure 1*.

The researcher's own relationship with the phenomenon is present in the research process and interpretation of the object of study, which is the relationship between the phenomenon and people who participate in the study. A researcher's encounters with these people in the data collection situation as well as her/his ability to engage with and discern meanings in the data are related to the results. Furthermore, the research process itself influences and changes the researcher's way of seeing the phenomenon and the object of research as a whole.

Figure 1 Phenomenographic relationality (Bowden, 2005, 13)



Phenomenography adopts a relational view of learning. Based on the notion of intentionality, there is no learning without the content of what is learned (e.g., Marton & Booth, 1997). The question of how people learn is necessarily a question of what they learn, because what is learned (the outcome or the result) and how it is learned (the act or the process) are internally related aspects of learning and thus cannot be separated from each other (Marton, 1988). This characterises the relational nature of learning. In several studies, people who were asked to describe how they learn or understand something, or how they understand the meaning of learning, described their understanding or learning, or the meaning of learning in terms of outcomes of learning (e.g., Marton, 1988; Helmstad, 1999; Ahlberg, 2004). This has implications for researchers and teachers as learners who must relate to the particular content in question; the phenomenographer should put herself in the same position as the teacher, who must relate to the object of inquiry to learning about the phenomenon as others perceive it. Teachers must relate together what is understood about the content of teaching and learning from different perspectives: from the perspectives of the research and the students in order to enhance students learning about it. Therefore, Marton (1988) argues, because people's ways of learning represent their relations to certain aspects of the world around them, research into learning and into educational practice should consider these relationships as a whole and not just focus on the individuals or the disciplinary content *per se*.

Phenomenography also adopts a relational view of teaching. Phenomenographic pedagogy emphasises the importance of teachers' awareness of the relationship between what is and should be understood about the curricular content in order to promote student learning about it. When the teaching practices seek to enhance student learning, the learning tasks must be designed so that they have personal meaning for the learner. Integrating curricular content into students' life-worlds involves identifying educationally critical aspects

of the content as understood by the learner in relation to the aims for what should be learnt. Thus, it is important to identify how understanding of the subject matter is constituted within the group of students before teaching begins. A teacher ought to identify and reflect on variation in the ways in which students understand that which is to be learned, and go about the learning task in order to support change in their understanding.

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) offer a relational ‘constitutionalist model’ of learning and teaching: a particular learning situation is constituted from different aspects within the teaching-learning context. They describe how variations in teachers’ and students’ experiences of the current educational situation is related to variations in their prior experiences, which bring those aspects of awareness to the foreground that lead to variations in approaches to teaching and learning and to variations in the outcomes. These aspects are simultaneously present in student learning, some more to the foreground of students’ awareness than others at any particular moment.

Phenomenographic pedagogy is focused on developing more effective teaching in terms of enhancing learning that is meaningful and results in qualitatively changed ways of seeing an aspect of the world (see, e.g., Trigwell, & Prosser & Ginns, 2005). In order to improve learning, it is important to acknowledge how the learning situation appears as a whole to the learner, how the teaching situation appears as a whole to the teacher, and how the two are related to each other. Entwistle et al. (2000) conclude from the basis of empirical study on conceptions and beliefs about ‘good teaching’ that the sophisticated conception of teaching implies expanded awareness of the relationship between teaching and learning and the strategic alertness to classroom events. Marton & Booth (1997, 179) have described good teaching in terms of pedagogy that depends on meetings of the awareness of teachers and learners:

Teachers mould experiences for their students with the aim of bringing about learning, and the essential feature is that the teacher takes the part of the learner.

Teachers' ways of acting are related to the intentional nature with which they direct their awareness to aspects and people around them in the real world (Marton, 1994b, 29; Marton & Booth, 1997, 111). Therefore, the way in which teachers understand the subject matter, and the intentionality with which they approach it in their teaching, can be seen as a critical precondition for their students' understanding.

4. Variation Theory of Learning

The Variation Theory of Learning is an approach to pedagogy which was developed within the phenomenographic research tradition (Marton, Tsui et al., 2004). It is an empirically-grounded theory of learning that focuses on the conditions which underpin pedagogical practices and make it possible to learn about the world and grow in relation to it. The Variation Theory of Learning is concerned about developing more powerful ways of relating to the world in order to enhance our learning about it and promoting certain skills and competences in relation to it. Our knowledge and understanding of the world is constrained by our abilities to engage with the world in certain temporal and spatial context, due to our limits of perception. The theory focuses on the necessary conditions which make it possible for us to learn about the world around us within these limitations.

4.1 Focus on necessary conditions for learning

Variation theory builds on the phenomenographic understanding of learning as qualitative change towards a widening of the ways of experiencing the world, a widening of our awareness (Marton 1996;

Marton & Booth, 1997). The internal relationship between the processes of learning and the content or the subject matter as seen from the perspective of the one learner has been emphasised with expressions of purpose ‘toward pedagogy of content’ (Marton, 1989) and ‘toward pedagogy of learning’ (Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004). These expressions have been used to refer to the importance of seeing education as fundamentally about enhancing learning about certain content. As seen from the non-dualistic relational epistemological point of view, the teacher’s task in knowledge constitution is to bring students’ into relationship with that knowledge through their teaching in that context (Martin et al., 2000; Runesson, 2005a).

In planning a school lesson, or a course, teachers must take into account the curricular aims, individual characteristics and life-worlds of the students, as well as the conditions in the classroom situation. When starting teaching, the curricular objectives must be translated into specific teaching aims. The ways of seeing something in the learning situation and the ways of acting upon it are dialectically intertwined. They can be differentiated in terms of focus, aims and ways of handling the content of learning (Bowden & Marton, 1998, 78). In order to help students to learn it is necessary for teaching to meet those conditions that make it possible for students to learn about that which is to be learned (Marton et al., 2004).

The Variation Theory of Learning aims at the kind of pedagogy that enables learners to learn by experiencing the subject matter in a new way (Pang & Marton, 2005a). Instead of focusing on who is doing what in the classrooms, the focus is on learning of a particular curricular content or subject matter. From this perspective, it is the conditions for learning about a certain curricular content that are important: what teachers should do and what learners should do. This requires helping the learner to relate to and engage with what s/he is supposed to learn, *the object of learning* (e.g., Runesson, 2005a).

The theory emphasises that for learning to successfully take place, learners must experience variations in their encounter with the

object of learning. According to Marton and Booth (1997) differences in the ways a phenomenon or concept, such as Christianity, is experienced has to do with differences in discernment. Learning means a widening of awareness in terms of qualitative change towards an increasing ability to discern new aspects of the object of learning according to certain educational criteria. In order to be able to discern something, the learner must experience variations corresponding to the dimension in which that something is to be discerned: the *dimension of variation*.

The Variation Theory of Learning relates to the framework of differentiation theories of perceptual learning (Marton & Pang, 2006). It goes back to the distinction between ‘enrichment theories’ and ‘differentiation theories’ distinguished by Gibson and Gibson (1955). According to the enrichment theories, memory images are added with a new sensation in the constructive process of perceptual learning, whereas the differentiation theories suggest that initially vague percepts become more and more differentiated through perceptual learning. Thus, the process of learning is characterised as continuous discrimination and discernment, as described by Marton and Pang (2006, 199):

Noticing and giving attention to a feature of a situation amounts to the discernment of that feature, and the discernment of a feature amounts to experiencing a difference between two things or between two parts of the same thing.

Research carried out from the perspective of this theory, is focused on what is learned in order to explore the limits of what is possible to learn (e.g., Marton, Tsui et al., 2004; Marton & Pang, 2006; Runesson, 2006). The theory is based on three underlying assumptions about learning and experience, *variation*, *simultaneity* and *discernment* (e.g., Bowden & Marton, 1999, 8): variation presupposes simultaneity of different aspects; discernment of a certain aspect is possible only if there is variation. *First*, to learn something in a certain

way, a person must discern features of that thing. *Secondly*, to discern a feature, the person must experience variation in that feature. *Thirdly*, to be able to discern something within a certain aspect, features of that aspect must be experienced simultaneously. Learning does not only mean a growing ability to discern new aspects, but also to hold more aspects in the fore of awareness at the same time (e.g., Pang, 2003). The focus is on developing the learners' capabilities to discern certain aspects of the world and hold them in focal awareness simultaneously (Fazey & Marton, 2002).

If learning amounts to being able to discern certain aspects of the phenomenon and keep them in focal awareness, the question is how different ways of experiencing something can be brought about (Pang, 2003, 153). The most sophisticated form of learning is a widened understanding of a phenomenon, a qualitatively changed way of experiencing the phenomenon in a deeper and more complex way (Marton & Booth, 1997).

4.2 Object of Learning

If learning is seen to be relational in nature – as follows from the principle of intentionality – it always has an object. Therefore, it is necessary for education to define that object, in terms of what should be learned. To avoid arbitrary learning, teachers should also have a clear aim for the kind of capabilities students need to develop in relation to a particular content, the intended learning outcomes (Lo et al. 2004, 191). Following the phenomenographic perspective to teaching, the aims for teaching should be defined in terms orientated towards student learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Variation theory argues that for learning to take place students must experience variation in the educationally critical aspects of the object of learning (Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004; Marton & Pang, 2006). As seen from the viewpoint of relational ontology, there is an

internal relationship between two aspects which constitute the object of learning. According to Marton, Runesson and Tsui (2004, 4) the object of learning has a *general aspect*: the nature of that capability, the act of understanding and a *specific aspect*; the thing or subject matter to be learned. The specific content of learning has also been referred to as *the direct* object of learning, whereas the ability students are supposed to develop has been called the *indirect* objects of learning (Marton & Pang, 2006, 194-195; Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004, 4). Although these aspects are analytically separated, they cannot exist without each other (Marton & Pang, 2006, 196). The content or the meaning of phenomenon, on which students focus, is not the outcome of learning itself (Marton, Runesson, Tsui, 2004, 4). It is the ability to use that content (the indirect object), such as discernment and understanding that is the target or result (Marton & Pang, 2006, 196). Teachers' foci should not only be on what is to be learnt but also on how learners go about learning about the subject matter. Therefore, it is necessary for teaching to define the aims for what kind of capabilities students are supposed to develop in relation to the subject matter under study.

Teaching is about ways of 'making it possible for students to appropriate a specific object of learning'. (Marton & Pang, 2006, 193–195) To define this object of learning, teachers should be aware of the critical differences between the ways in which students understand the subject matter in question. According to Marton and Pang (2006, 196) the term 'object of learning' (rather than 'learning objective' referring to aims of teaching or learning) includes both conditions and outcomes of learning. Therefore, the content of *Lutheranism* (the specific/direct object), for example, cannot be the aim or the outcome of learning in itself. It is the ability to use and apply that content to one's personal understanding (the indirect object) that is the target or result (Marton & Pang, 2006, 196)

Teachers can, according to Runesson (2005a), identify the critical aspects that form the subject itself: for example, deciding what

aspects are important for students to learn about the subject matter and how it should be constituted to make it possible for the students to learn about it. In order to make it possible for students to learn, teachers not only have to identify the critical aspects of the subject matter from the point of view of the curriculum, but they also have to identify the critical aspects of students' understanding of the subject matter within the study groups they are teaching. Critical aspects focused on by teachers in their own understanding of the subject matter also inform what they perceive as critical for their students to learn.

The object of learning is dealt with in three steps. First, the aims for what and how something is to be learnt is an object of teachers' awareness as they go about designing teaching; this is the *intended object of learning* (Marton, Runesson, Tsui, 2004, 4). The way in which teachers structure the conditions of learning is of crucial importance for what is possible for the students to discern the critical aspects of the intended object of learning. Secondly, what students actually encounter in the learning situation is the *enacted object of learning*, which is constituted jointly in the classroom interaction between the teacher and the learners. Thirdly, what the students actually learn, the resulting ability to act in relation to the content, is the *lived object of learning* (p. 4).

4.3 Dimensions of variation as critical aspects for learning

The Variation Theory of Learning has introduced the concept of 'dimension of variation', which been developed as a research tool for capturing the structural relationship between different ways of experiencing in terms of critical aspects of learning (Marton & Tsui et al., 2004).

Qualitative differences between ways of understanding are seen as differences between the ways in which a phenomenon are focused

upon, while other aspects are implicit in the background of the awareness. Differences between aspects focused on and those seen in the periphery can be analytically discerned as a structural aspect of experience. This refers to the way in which the meanings are discerned in terms of its whole and the parts and how that which constitutes the whole of the phenomenon is discerned from other phenomena. According to Runesson (2005b; 2006), the way in which something is seen, how the meaning is constituted, forms a pattern of discerned and undiscerned aspects related both to parts and wholes and to foreground and background. The foreground relates to notion of *figure/ground* structure of awareness, which was first introduced in Gestalt psychology (Gurwitch, 1964). What is perceived as figural in the fore of awareness is the ‘figure’ against the background, as the ‘ground’.

Every aspect of the world can be a dimension of variation, and the capability to discern an aspect is seen as a function of the variation that is experienced in that aspect (Pang & Marton, 2005b, 162). To experience or understand something in a certain way, certain aspects of the object of learning must be discerned at the same time: discernment of these aspects is critical for learning.

Certain ways of understanding are due to the patterns of aspects discerned and focused on as a result of variation experienced corresponding to those aspects. Variation theory is thus focused on the dynamics of awareness; the different ways of understanding particular situations in terms of aspects that appear to the fore of awareness due to particular experienced patterns of variation. Therefore, in order to understand something in a certain way, it is necessary to bring about those patterns of variation and invariance that correspond to the particular way of understanding that is intended to be learned (Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Tsui et al., 2004, Pang & Marton, 2005b).

The dimension of variation means a dimension or an aspect in which the variant and invariant features between ways of experiencing the phenomenon can be discerned. From the framework of variation it

is thought that by using the dimensions of variation to keep some aspects invariant, while other aspects are varied, more effective ways of learning can be accomplished. When a certain feature of a phenomenon varies while other features are invariant, the varying feature is discerned (Pang & Marton, 2005b). Thus, differences in student's discernment of particular aspects of the object of learning are critical for their learning about it (Runesson, 2006; Pang, 2003). Every aspect discerned can be opened up for further variation by contrasting that which is already known, however partially, with new aspects that relate to the prior knowledge. While one aspect of a phenomenon is varied, others must be held invariant in order to experience contrast between aspects that appear simultaneously and thus be able to discern one aspect from another (Runesson, 2005a).

For instance, one could not discern Christianity as a distinct understanding of ultimate reality if everyone was Christian. Therefore, what is distinctively Christian in relation to other religious perspectives and religious traditions is discerned against the background of other religious and secular worldviews. Furthermore, in order to discern Lutheran Christianity, one must experience variation within Christianity, for example between Lutheran and Anglican interpretations of Christianity as well as contrasts between varying aspects of Lutheranism, such as cultural and theological aspects (Hella, 2007; 2008). Similarly, a certain aspect or feature such as the image of God as loving forgiving cannot be discerned without contrast with image of God as cruel and unforgiving. In other words, variation must be experienced via the corresponding dimension of the image of God in order to understand God as forgiving.

The task of education is to help learners to discern aspects that are thought to be critical for learning in terms of the curricular aims, and contents students are supposed to learn, for what purpose, and what kind of skills and capabilities are seen important for students' growth. However, students' prior experiences play important part in what is possible for them to learn. Therefore, aspects that are found

critical for student learning in one group do not necessarily apply to other groups as such.

5. Application of Phenomenography and Variation Theory to Critical Religious Education

5.1 Critical religious education in Finland and the UK

This study adopts phenomenography and the Variation Theory as an analytical framework for the researcher to identify the disciplinary tools necessary to discern meanings related to discourse within the discipline of religious education. It is suggested that the Variation Theory of Learning' offers a potentially valuable pedagogical tool for religious education. The assumption is that this theory helps students to learn through variation in and between religious traditions; this is important because the model of critical religious education adopted here focuses on the contested nature of religion as an object of knowledge. In order to understand different religious worldviews it is necessary to attend to variation in the insider as well as outsider discourse of religious tradition as mediated by theological research and research into religious studies.

The relationship between RE in Finland and the UK was focused on because both traditions are seeking to develop religious education against the background of a shift from confessional to liberal frameworks. According to the Finnish Core Curriculum, *Evangelical Lutheran Religious Education* should emphasise Christian responses to fundamental questions about the meaning of life, while *Ethics* should relate them to a wider range of worldviews and philosophies of life (National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools, 2003, 163–165, 170–173). The core contents of Evangelical Lutheran Religious Education deal with fundamental questions of religions and

human life, such as the meaning of life; most emphasis is placed on the Christian responses to such questions through the core contents of conceptions of God, humanity, nature and salvation, good and evil (especially in course 3) (pp. 163–165). Similarly, according to the *National Framework for Religious Education* in the UK, the subject should provoke ‘challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality... and what it means to be human’ (DfES / QCA, 2004, 7). However, religious education in the UK includes references to the teaching of both religious and secular worldviews, unlike in Finland where these two have been divided between the two subjects. Also, Ethics deals with questions of meaning of life, good life and worldviews, philosophies of life, ethics, identity and self, nature and structure of reality (pp. 170–173).

Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Religious Education aims at making it possible for the students to understand worldviews and religious convictions of others through reflection between one’s own and others’ understandings of religion(s). RE is supposed to create conditions to understand religions’ and ‘command concepts, skills and knowledge which will enable students to discuss, reflect on and analyse various religious questions, moral questions and become capable of ‘critical assessment of information concerning religions’. The objectives are defined in terms of learners’ development of skills that follow from the acquisition of knowledge as a two-phase process, as in the representation of ‘learning about religion’ followed by ‘learning from religion’ for students’ personal development (Grimmitt, 1987, 2000b)

Current models of religious education tend to favour a liberal approach that seeks to enable students to ‘learn about’ and ‘learn from’ a range of different religious traditions without critical engagement with their validity and truth (Hella & Wright, 2008). It can be argued that in many instances ‘learning about’ religion involves the description and categorization of religious phenomena in

a manner that encourages relatively superficial levels of insight; at the same time, 'learning from' religion often involves only students expressing their personal beliefs. Generally, there has been a growing tendency to focus on students' personal development by learning *from* religion through pupil's personal reflection on their personal preferences and received worldviews in a manner that embraces what is to be learned *about* religion in a taken-for-granted fashion, rather than by exploring how students actually understand the substantial truth claims of religious traditions or how they judge their ontological status.

The philosophy of Critical Religious Education is concerned with contested claims about the true nature of reality and truthfulness of our relationship with it (Wright, 2007a). According to Wright (2003) to learn from religion, students must be exposed to learning about religion through critical engagement with contested knowledge of different religious traditions in relation to secular traditions. Furthermore, critical religious education suggests teaching to pursue students' search for the truth in order to help students to become religiously literate, able to make informed critical judgements to understand their own life-stance and relation to the ultimate order-of-things. Wright (2007a) emphasises the importance of retaining a focus on religious and secular diversity; religion is to be seen as a contested issue both by different religious traditions and by secular traditions.

5.2 Learning about and learning from religion in religious education

The general question of the meaning of religion and its role in contemporary world is reflected in the questions of the relationship between religious content and process of learning in religious education. A conceptual division between *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* is connected to distinction of knowledge acquisition and personal development in general education. The

separation between these aspects can be traced back to the tension between ‘traditionalist’ subject-focused and ‘progressivist’ learner/child-focused educational traditions. Such a distinction also distinguishes between content and experience as well as objectives and processes (e.g., Wright, 2004a).

The concepts of *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* appear in the work of Grimmitt (1987) and have been adopted as the attainment targets in model syllabuses for religious education in the United Kingdom (SCAA 1994) as *AT1 Learning about religion* and *AT2 Learning from religion*. By making an analytical distinction between the two concepts but relating the concepts together Grimmitt brings together content knowledge about religion and the pupils’ life-worlds and personal development. He wants to pursue students’ ‘critical consciousness’ and ‘self-awareness’ as critical pre-requisite for the development of moral, religious and spiritual awareness (p. 141). The process of teaching about religions

does not merely fulfil the intention of informing pupils about religious beliefs and values but also that of helping pupils to use religious beliefs and values as instruments for the critical evaluation of their own beliefs and values. While this will involve pupils in learning *about* religion, it will also involve them in learning *from* religion about themselves. (p. 141, emphasis in the original)

On this view learning about religion provides factual information, while learning from religion enables students to make ‘critical evaluations concerning the truth claims, beliefs and religious traditions and religion itself’ (p. 225). Grimmitt stresses that ‘learning about religion’ is not enough. This implies two sequential rather simultaneous processes of engaging with and becoming aware of the reality referred to by religious beliefs. Attfield (1996, 79) notes that it is common to use these concepts by separating knowledge and understanding on one hand, and skills on the other. Such a view of knowledge appears ‘more or less given’ in contrast with making

explicit the ‘contested’ nature of knowledge (see, Skeie, 2006). A critical analysis of the concepts of learning about religion and learning from religion has been carried out by Wright (2003) who sees them as indiscernible aspects of the same process: in order to learn from religion, critical engagement with learning about religion through a search for the truth must be pursued. Critical religious education views the pursuit of true knowledge of ultimate reality as simultaneously the pursuit of truthful living in relation to ultimate reality. On this reading there can be no distinction between learning about and learning from religion. To learn about the world is simultaneously to learn how to relate appropriately with the world.

5.3 Understanding of Lutheranism as a theological phenomenon

According to critical religious education, the proper object of knowledge to be explored in the classroom cannot be reduced to the socio-cultural dimension of religion; rather it must focus on conflicting accounts of the ultimate nature of reality. Consequently, the understanding Lutheranism adopted here focuses primarily on its theological dimension and secondarily on its socio-cultural dimension.

First, its primary focus is on God as seen from the point of view of Luther’s theology. As such, it focuses on Lutheranism as a community of believers within Christianity that identifies itself in terms of its interpretation of the core of the Christian faith in the Triune God.

Second, Lutheranism can also be identified as a cultural tradition, and approached as a social construct, as a linguistic label by which a community identifies itself in the socio-cultural and sociological discourse, placed it in the level of social reality. Dawson (1999, 2), for example, defines sociology as a ‘human science which seeks regularities within the specific densities and local character of culture as that unfolds over time in an understandable narrative....’It

also subjects the inwardness of human culture to a certain amount of external re-description' (Dawson, (1999) Furthermore, Martin (1999, 3) describes Christianity as 'a language and mode of understanding' in the context of other 'human understandings and insights. However, the reference point of this understanding is beyond the scope of sociology.

If the nature of Lutheran community is fundamentally defined as a *faith* community by its relation to the ultimate or transcendental reality – the reality of the Triune God for the Christian community – Lutheranism cannot be separated from the reality of God with which it is in relationship. Christians think that the questions of truth and truthful living are meaningful and have to be answered in relation to God. As seen from the realistic point of view, in order to be truthful to the theological origin of Lutheranism, the key educational criteria for understanding Lutheranism should not only involve social, cultural and individual descriptions of the appearances of Lutheranism, but especially theological questions by which Lutheranism contributes to the questions of the truth claims of Christianity about the reality of God.

Lutheranism's theological dimension necessarily involves ontological and epistemological questions about God. The starting point, however, is that Lutheran theology is internally contested: there is variation within Lutheran theology at many levels, both amongst lay members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as well as amongst academics. Lutheran theology may be seen in terms of its inner structures, as well as in terms of its relation to other Christian theologies. Furthermore, Lutheran theology may be seen to be constituted strictly from Luther's theology or from later theological developments within research into Lutheran theological tradition. For example, Finnish Luther research following the so-called 'Mannermaa School' differs significantly from the century of Luther interpretation dominated by German Protestant theologians' (Braaten & Jensson, 1998, viii).

The primary interest is in the realistic theological truth claims of Lutheranism, rather than Lutheranism as a historical or a cultural phenomenon; further, following the Finnish interpretation, Lutheran theology is seen as an attempt to do justice to the theology of Luther himself. The precise meaning of Lutheranism's realistic theological truth claims is contested. In setting out to establish my understanding I rejected two extremes. First, that there is some eternal, unchanging 'essence' of Lutheran theology. Second, that Lutheran theology is so diverse that there are as many meanings of Lutheran theology as people who discuss it. My position seeks to mediate between these two extremes. I worked with two principles. First, that the collective understanding of Lutheran theology held by the Lutheran community as a whole, despite being contested, is nevertheless more significant than individual understandings (Wright, 2007b). Thus, for example, the Augsburg's Confession states a collective understanding of Lutheran theology shared by those Lutherans who subscribe to it. Second, that Lutheran theology contains 'proto-typical features' (Flood, 1999) that, though not being 'essential' features, are nevertheless close to the heart of Lutheran self-understanding.

Lutheran theology shares with other Christian traditions a belief in the Trinity, incarnation and an economy of salvation stretching from creation, the fall of humanity, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the transformative role of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world, through to the final judgement and the perfection of creation. Within this broadly shared, proto-typical ecumenical consensus Lutheran theology offers a distinctive emphasis. This emphasis is on a freely given grace of God, poured out on human beings regardless of their good works. Lutheranism, that is to say, offers a distinctive theological stress on justification by faith, not by works. Although, the precise nature of justification is the subject of considerable debate, both with the Lutheran tradition itself (e.g., Braaten & Jenson, 1998; Mannermaa, 2004) and in the Christian Church as a whole (McGrath, 2005), nevertheless it is

reasonable, for the purposes of this thesis, to adopt as a starting point the view that Luther's stress on the gift of grace as the major prototypical feature of Lutheran theology. This is in line with McGrath's (2004, 10) identification of three key aspects of Luther's view of faith:

- 1) Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical reference
- 2) Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
- 3) Faith unites the believer to Christ.

In line with these key aspects, the understanding of Lutheran theology adopted here is shaped by Finnish Luther research, which also emphasises the Christocentric ontological focus of Luther's original writings. According to Mannermaa (2005) Luther's theological focus is the justification by faith which emphasises ontological union with Christ, rather than forensic, voluntary ethical commitment to faith as represented in later Lutheran theology represented in neo-Kantian German protestant theology. The key idea of Luther's theology from the perspective of Mannermaa and his colleagues is '*in ipsa fide Christus adest*' ('in faith Christ is really present'), which means the ontological participation in Christ and the life of God through faith rather than volitional obedience represented by the dominant German tradition (Braaten & Jenson, 1998, viii; Mannermaa, 2005) Hence, Lutheran theology aims to define truthfully the key aspects of the original ontological groundings of theology that serves as a basis for the self-understanding of Lutherans as they identify themselves in relation to the reality of God and other people in the language of the traditional language of the faith-community.

5.4 Understanding Lutheranism as an Object of Learning

The present study adopts Bowden's (2000a; 2000b; 2005) notion of developmental phenomenography to approach variation in ways in which upper secondary students (Hella, 2008) and teachers of

religious education (Hella, 2007) understand Lutheranism. The study is developmental in nature, as it aims to develop the teaching and learning of Lutheranism from the theoretical perspective of phenomenographic pedagogy and to apply general implications of its principles to the field religious education. It also applies the Variation Theory of Learning to the field of religious education as an analytical tool to reveal those patterns of variation and invariance that are necessary for students' deep discernment of Lutheranism. The educationally critical aspects of Lutheranism as the object of learning are constituted from two perspectives: *first*, from the academic and curricular perspective that set the basis for the educational aims for constitution of the intended object for learning and *secondly*, from the perspective of students' ability to discern the meaning of Lutheranism as the object of learning.

In order to identify the educationally critical features of Lutheranism as a subject matter for religious education, teachers need to translate the 'scholarly disciplinary knowledge' to 'didactic disciplinary knowledge' (Booth, 1997, 139). This means that teachers ought to engage with various perspectives on Lutheranism within Lutheran theology as well as in social studies in order to find criteria for key aspects of Lutheranism. What makes some aspects of Lutheranism as the object of learning more critical than others is determined by two aspects. The educational aims serve as the basis for deciding what aspects are critical for developing students skills and competences in relation to Lutheranism as a subject matter, as they reflect the didactic disciplinary knowledge constituted from the academic knowledge of the subject and from the pedagogical knowledge of teaching-learning processes.

The educationally critical aspects emerge from the standpoint of the academic knowledge. The standpoint of the academic knowledge as interpreted by the researcher forms the point of view from which the conceptual categories are constituted, nevertheless remaining as open as possible to the meanings expressed in the data. The point of

view adopted in the study embraces variation of different understandings, however addressing the theological dimension of Lutheranism as a particular point of view to Christian understanding of God. However, the standpoint of academic knowledge is contested, and there are varying views on what is the disciplinary basis for religious education. This study searched for students' and teachers' understanding of Lutheranism by searching for a hierarchy of inclusiveness in the ways in which students' and teachers' different ways of understanding are related to each other. This method of constituting was seen as indicative of width with which students and teachers were aware of different aspects of Lutheranism. This process also affected my own understanding of Lutheranism and increased my awareness of my own theological standpoint.

From the phenomenographic research perspective Lutheranism can be thought of as a totality of all the possible ways of experiencing it. Lutheranism is therefore present a reality to different people in different ways. Individual ways of experiencing Lutheranism are inexhaustible, but a limited number of qualitatively different ways of experiencing can be found when focusing on commonalities discerned through critical differences between individual understandings (Marton & Booth, 1997). People perceive Lutheranism differently and thus, describe it differently making different claims about the nature of Lutheranism as it appears to them. This is not to say, that Lutheranism is not real, but it is experienced and described according to the way it appears to people and the way in which it makes sense to people. From the critical realist perspective Lutheranism represents a community and socio-cultural culture and which provides truth claims about Christian understanding of God. In other words, Lutheranism itself can be seen as a complex shared way of understanding and being in relationship that which it refers to. In this view, the understanding of Lutheranism can be judged against how Lutherans define their relationship with what they in relation to. If one tries to follow the way in which Lutherans generally define themselves, there are better

and worse ways of understanding it. However, such criteria make it necessary to ascertain the critical aspects between the ways in which Lutherans identify Lutheranism. In the context of Buddhism, for example, Buddhist interpretation of Lutheranism may be judged to be wrong as seen from the perspective of how Lutherans define themselves, because it is contradictory to the complex of logically related ways of experiencing it.

Following on from my pre-understanding of Lutheranism as a theological rather than merely cultural phenomenon, I see that understanding of Lutheranism as an object of learning requires engagement with both the theological and socio-historical dimension of Christianity as a whole. This theological dimension shares many common theological features with other Christian traditions. However, its major proto-typical feature is that of the gift of grace. Therefore, I offer the following definition of the object of learning. In the context of this thesis, the object of learning is that students develop a wider and more developed understanding of Lutheran theology in general, and specifically of its major proto-typical feature. Thus, the educational aim would be to help students understand Lutheranism as that tradition of realistic Christian theology that stresses the grace of God and the unconditional gift of faith apart from human deeds. There is no fundamental distinction between learning about and from Lutheranism here. Lutheran theology claims that we live in the world into which God has poured His freely given and unconditional grace. Students can simultaneously learn about and from this proto-typical feature. To learn about this claim is simultaneously to reflect on our beliefs about the world and the possibilities opened up to us if Lutheran theology is true. Specifically, Lutheran theology claims that the good life is one lived under God's grace, in which every aspect of our life is shaped by divine grace. Thus, students engaging with this object of learning will simultaneously ask questions about its truth and ask questions of the implications of its truth claims for the way they live their lives. This combines the concerns of confessional religious

education, that children engage with theological discourse and consider its implications for their lives, *and* the concern of liberal religious education that students take responsibility for their own lives and make autonomous decisions about their beliefs and actions. It is this combination of theological truth claims and autonomous response that is distinctive of a critical religious education.

For teaching to enhance students' understanding of Lutheranism as a framework for understanding the students' own religion, teachers ought to be aware of how the meaning of Lutheranism is constituted by students: what are the critical aspects for students' discernment of the meaning. This calls for teachers' reflection on their own understanding of the scholarly disciplinary knowledge in relation to the curricular aims and students' understandings of the subject matter (Booth, 1997, 137–138). Therefore, in the present research, Lutheranism was approached from the 'second-order perspective' of phenomenography (Marton, 1981, 177): as it appeared to the teachers' and students' as they focused on the concept and expressed their understanding of it.

From the Variation Theory perspective learning is seen in terms of discernment of certain aspects that are experienced of the content, such as Lutheranism. Making learning possible means making it possible for the learner to discern the aspects that are seen to be critical in the understanding of Lutheranism. Discernment of a certain aspect of Lutheranism presupposes experienced variation in that aspect. The qualitative differences that mark the critical aspects of students' ways of understanding Lutheranism serve as content for teachers' teaching in order to enhance student learning (see, e.g., Svensson & Högfors, 1988).

When learning about Lutheranism is in question, the object of learning is defined in terms of developing a wider and more differentiated understanding of Lutheranism. To facilitate students' learning about Lutheranism, teachers need not only know what meanings students assign to Lutheranism, but also of the qualitatively

different ways in which students experience the meaning of Lutheranism: the ways in which the meaning of Lutheranism are constituted by the students. For this purpose, teachers should be aware of the critical differences between the ways in which the meanings of Lutheranism are constituted by the students, because those differences mark the aspects that students are able to discern about Lutheranism within the study group. This helps teachers to see what aspects are critical for students understanding of Lutheranism in order to develop their understanding of Lutheranism.

The *critical aspects* of understanding Lutheranism, the aspects by which one way of understanding Lutheranism differs from another, were identified through phenomenographic analysis of the qualitative variation within a group of students and teachers of religious education. The outcomes of how students *structure* their understanding the *content* of Lutheranism in particular context can be captured with phenomenographic analysis.

III STUDY DESIGN AND PHENOMENOGRAPHIC METHODS

This part specifies the aim of the empirical study, the studied groups of students and teachers, and specifies the methodological procedures and the quality criteria employed.

6. The Aim of the study

The aim of the present study was to investigate qualitative variation in ways of understanding Lutheranism as experienced by students and teachers in Finnish upper secondary school and to find pedagogical and educational implications of such variation for religious education. The research questions correspond to the original refereed articles as shown in the following *Table 1*.

Table 1 Research questions with corresponding articles

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	ARTICLES
I How do Finnish upper secondary students understand Lutheranism?	<i>I Variation in Finnish Students' Understanding of Lutheranism and its Implications for Religious Education: A Phenomenographic Study</i>
II How do teachers of religious understand Lutheranism?	<i>II Variation in Finnish Religious Education Teachers' Understandings of Lutheranism: A Phenomenographic Study</i>
III How phenomenography and variation theory can contribute to understanding learning about and from religion in religious education?	<i>III Learning 'About' and 'From' Religion: Phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and Religious Education in Finland and the UK</i>

The aim of identifying variation in understanding of Lutheranism in Finnish secondary school and the educational relevance of such variation for religious education was approached through three interrelated objectives.

First, the first two research questions of the study addressed qualitative variation within and between ways in which a group of upper secondary students and a group of teachers of religious education understand Lutheranism. In the study, ‘ways of experiencing’, ‘understanding’ and ‘seeing’ Lutheranism were used synonymously. They were identified and analysed in terms of content and structure of meanings by means of the following questions:

- 1) What were the key meanings of Lutheranism expressed by the students and teachers?
- 2) How were these meanings discerned and constituted by the students and teachers?

Second, the Variation Theory of Learning was used as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool to identify the educationally critical aspects of students’ and teachers’ understanding of Lutheranism - discerned through similarities and differences within and between the two groups - for developing teaching and learning about Lutheranism in religious education. This objective was dealt with by addressing the following questions:

- 3) What is the relationship between how students’ and teachers’ discernment of key meanings of Lutheranism?
- 4) How does this relationship between students’ and teachers’ understand illustrate the development of understanding of Lutheranism and how could it contribute to inform teachers about ways of enhancing understanding of Lutheranism (the object of learning) in religious education?

Third, phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning were related to the discussion of the theoretical notion of ‘learning about religion’ and ‘learning from religion’ and to the philosophical framework of critical realism in order to analyse the nature of such a twin task for religious education. Furthermore, phenomenography and variation theory were focused on as a potential pedagogical framework for organising the practice of religious education in relation to a variety of worldviews with respect to theological and spiritual questions.

7. Participants and data collection

7.1 Students

The first set of data was collected from two student groups. *The first student group* included 33 students from one upper secondary school of the capital area of Helsinki. It included 33 upper secondary 17-19-year-old students from a school in central Finland and included 15 female and 18 male students. Thirty students were members of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, 3 were civil registered students, 2 of whom identified themselves as Pentecostals, who nowadays have established an official position as a registered religious institution. *The second student group* included thirty upper secondary 17-year-old students from a school in central Finland and included 18 female and 12 male students in study group of religious education starting the course of church history and knowledge. One female student was 18. All the students, except one – a Mormon – were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The distribution of students in the primary written data is shown in *Table 2*. Students were chosen to represent average students in order to represent as much variation within a group of students as possible.

In the first phase, written data was collected from students during religious education lessons of 45 minutes; in the first student group data was collected by the researcher without the teacher's presence, and in the second student group the data was collected by the teacher. *In the second phase* of data collection, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst the students in the first group using open-ended questions to clarify and deepen the interpretations of meanings derived from the writings. Students were asked to comment on their writing in order to deepen the interpretation of meanings and to clarify any unclear statements. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place in the school. They were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Table 2 Distribution of students in two upper secondary schools represented in the written data (also, Hella, 2006, 142)

DATA COLLECTION			Female	Male	Total
GROUP 1. Helsinki	N= 33 Essays Dec 1997	<i>Compulsory course 2 on knowledge and history of the Christian Church</i>	10	11	21
		<i>Voluntary course 7 on Biblical studies</i>	5	7	12
Total			15	18	33
GROUP 2. Jyväskylä	N=30 Essays Aug 2004	<i>Compulsory course 2 on the knowledge and history of the Christian Church</i>	18	12	30
Total			33	30	63

7.2 Teachers

The teachers of religious education, who represent the second set of data, were chosen for maximum variation from the registered members of the *Association for Finnish RE teachers*, specifically to represent upper secondary school teachers. Forty teachers responded

to the writing assignment. The teachers represented 24 municipalities including the capital and rural areas. All of them were qualified teachers, who had a Master's degree in theology. Written responses were received by mail or email. Twenty teachers were interviewed as volunteers including 14 female and 6 male teachers from different age groups ranging from 27 to 65 years of age. They represented different stages of theological and teacher education and teaching experience within the range of 1 year to 37 years. Six teachers, two female and four male, were also ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and two of them, a female and a male teacher, were also teacher educators.

In the first phase, the teachers were asked about their background information including questions about their age, education for religious education, teaching experience and religious groups which they might feel close to and religious movements. These may have influenced their thinking.

Variations in the background information of the individual teachers were only taken into consideration in terms of contributing to variations in meanings emerging in the data. This is based on the phenomenographic view of all prior experiences being more or less in the background of the awareness in the certain moment of experiencing different phenomena in their context (see, e.g., Marton & Booth, 1997). In order to achieve the aim of investigating qualitative differences in the expressed experiences, only internal features of the experiences were taken into consideration. Background variables were considered external factors that have analytically indiscernible influence on experiences unless explicit in individual expressions of experience.

In the second phase, twenty teachers of religious education, assigned as volunteers for the interview, were interviewed. Interviewees selected the place for the interview. Thus, most of the interviews took place in those schools in which the teachers worked. One teacher was interviewed in a café, one in the studio of the library

and a few teachers in their homes. The teachers represented villages in the countryside, small towns and larger cities including the capital area. The teachers were first asked to reflect on their previous writings to add, change or comment on their writings and explain expressions that were hard to comprehend and elaborate their understanding of Lutheranism. They were also asked to read examples of students' writings in order to evaluate and comment on them with respect to their own aims for students' understanding of Lutheranism and to define their understanding of Lutheranism in general.

7.3 Writing assignment and follow-up interviews

The primary data consisted from students' and teachers' responses to a written task. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the students and teachers, in order to ask them to reflect on their prior answers to check what they meant by some of their unclear expressions. These reflections were used to verify the meanings discerned by the researcher, rather than used as a separate data set. The data was collected according to the phenomenographic procedure, which has been described as a process of discovery (Marton, 1986). Phenomenographic interviews are typically audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, as the transcripts, or the written responses are in the focus of the analysis.

Both groups of research participants were asked the same projective question in order to compare teachers' understandings of Lutheranism with students' conceptions of Lutheranism. This writing assignment was framed with a description of an imaginative situation of a trip to Spain with a friend in the students' case and with a colleague in teachers' case. The idea of this essay design was to give a concrete starting point for the reflection of one's own understanding of an abstract phenomenon. The assignment was described in the following way:

You are finally touring Europe with your colleague/friend on a trip that you have been enthusiastic about. You have planned the route before and now arrived in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. There you have become familiar with a young Spanish person who has decided to introduce you to the local circumstances and help you to find a place to stay. After a tour of the city you stay alone with the Spanish person. You discuss many different things and this young companion of yours is very interested in Finnish people and Finnish culture. To your surprise, you notice that this person is very open about religious issues asking you the following question: “I have heard that Finnish people are Lutheran. I know there are Lutherans in other places in the world, like in North-America and Germany, but I have never really understood what Lutheranism is about. *Could you tell me how you understand Lutheranism?*”

To help students become familiar with differences and similarities between different cultures, different role-playing methods are applied in Finnish religious education today. Some teachers also claimed that they use similarly constructed assignments in their own teaching. This kind of approach was applied to the writing assignment used to collect written narratives from the students in this study. Because Finnish Lutheranism is a minor Christian denomination in Catholic Europe and has historical roots in Catholic Church, the relation of Lutheranism to Catholicism was considered an aspect of cultural awareness and grounds for mutual interaction between people. Therefore, the question was framed with an imaginative situation of a trip to Spain, where the student is meeting a young Spanish person asking the student to tell how she/he understands Lutheranism.

The framed situation implies the possibility for a teacher adopting an educational relation to the phenomenon. It also implies a possible focus on Lutheranism in Finland or in the above mentioned countries in relation to the Catholic Christianity existing in Spain. This implication was not made explicit in order to allow the student to relate Lutheranism into another kind of religiosity and religious

surroundings. Comparing the situation between Lutheranism and Catholic or other form of Christianity or religious phenomenon is in line with the idea of experiencing variation in order to be able to discern certain aspects of the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). The given implications mean that the imaginative essay assignment has its influence on ‘situational appropriateness’ (Åkerlind, 2003, 47) of which aspects are held in focal awareness in the particular context. The imaginative situation and the writing situation have their ‘relevance structure’ (e.g., Marton and Booth, 1997, 143). Thus, the combination of real life and the writing task with an imaginative situation brings individually different aspects to the fore of awareness.

The open question was designed to give an opportunity for students and teachers to express their understanding of Lutheranism as freely, openly and fully as possible (see, also Booth, 1997). The framing of the question was expected to be reflected in teachers’ ways of understanding Lutheranism in a given context, which directs the person to what is seen more relevant than something else (Marton & Booth, 1997, 143). This constructed situation can be approached as an educational relation between the teacher and the young person as a learner. Furthermore, the follow-up interview focused on spontaneous questions to elaborate meanings in-depth. The idea of the interview was to allow probing questions to follow spontaneously from students and teachers’ reflections on their written expressions. The interviews aimed to clarify the meanings by asking for examples and probing questions like, “What do you mean by this?” “Could you clarify what you intended to say?” whereas questions that were considered to be too leading, and perhaps too related to other phenomena were left out.

8. Analysis

8.1 *Discernment of meanings*

The phenomenographic analysis has been conducted according to principles of Marton (1986; 1994a), Sandberg (1996) as well as Marton and Booth (1997), Bowden & Walsh (2000), Bowden and Green (2005) and Åkerlind (2003, 2005a).

The phenomenographic focus of this thesis is on the key differences between ways of understanding of Lutheranism within the group of students and teachers and the relationship between these two groups. In contrast with phenomenological focus on the richness of individual experience and describing religion as a phenomenon *per se*, the phenomenographic focus is on the qualitative differences between individuals' ways of constituting meaning (e.g., Marton & Booth, 1997, 117). Thus, every expression of meaning was interpreted within the context of the group of written responses or meanings as a whole, in terms of similarities to and differences between other responses within the group of students and the group of teachers (see, Åkerlind, 2005a, Åkerlind, 2005b).

Meaning always presupposes discernment: One can never discern a feature which is always present (cf. Marton & Tsui, 2004; Marton & Pong, 2005). According to this theory (Marton & Pong, 2005) discernment is possible only through the simultaneous experience of variation. It is impossible to discern something that is always present. If we talk about the meaning of Lutheranism, for example, it is different from something else. But in order to know that this is the meaning of Lutheranism, it must have been discerned from something else. Therefore, variation makes it possible for the learner to learn, because in order to discern meanings, they must be discerned from other meanings, and that means that variation between different meanings is experienced simultaneously. According to Marton and Pong (2005) every feature discerned corresponds to a certain

dimension of variation in which the object is compared with other objects.

The meaning formation can be traced down to utterances found from the data which are found to be related to questions asked. Such utterances are selected and marked. Marton (1986) describes the relationship between the utterance and the meaning in the following terms: the utterance is related to the context from which it was taken, whereas the meaning of the phenomenon is narrowed down to, and interpreted in terms of, the data as a whole. Therefore, utterances can be understood as embryonic or intuitive forms of meaning constituted from delimited and selected quotes through differences and similarities discerned in comparison between them. This 'pool of meanings', which is discovered in the data, forms the basis of the phenomenographic analysis. The focus has therefore shifted from the context of individual transcripts from which the meaning was discerned to the pool of meanings brought together into categories on the basis of their similarities and differences. The phenomenographic focus is therefore not on individuals, richness of individual meanings in the context of their written responses, or on the phenomenon itself, but rather on the 'pool of meanings' - groups of quotes which describe the variation in the key meanings of the phenomenon discerned and focused on by participants of the study. Marton (1986) further reminds us that while sorting the quotes and identifying the attributes of each group, the boundaries separating individuals are abandoned. In this way, the groups of quotes are arranged and rearranged to constitute categories. Categories are discerned and differentiated from one another in terms of their differences. (Marton, 1986, 42–43)

The analysis focuses on parsimony of key differences and similarities between individual ways of understanding Lutheranism (Åkerlind, 2005a, 2005b). The overall meanings discerned and focused upon by the individuals were related to the whole 'pool of meanings' which was found from the whole data in terms parsimony of key differences and similarities between the meanings.

A way of understanding Lutheranism was analysed in terms of the structure of awareness at a particular moment, that is, the aspects of Lutheranism that were seen to be present explicitly in students' and teachers' focal awareness and those that are not (see, Åkerlind, 2003). An experience or way of understanding of Lutheranism was understood in terms of discerned aspects of Lutheranism in relation to each other and to the overall meaning or whole experience of Lutheranism (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, the conceptions or ways of understanding were analysed in terms of what constitutes the overall meaning of Lutheranism in the foci of students' and teachers' awareness (the referential aspect of experience) and *how* this expressed meaning of Lutheranism was constituted from its aspects and discerned from its context (the structural aspects of experience). The structural aspect is identified in terms of an internal and an external horizon: the former refers to the way in which constituent aspects of the meaning of Lutheranism are related to each other and to the meaning as a whole; the latter refers to the way in which the overall meaning is constituted in relation to its context as discerned from other related phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997, 87-88).

The present study followed the example provided by Bowden (2000b), according to which repetitive reading of data is necessary for the exploration of all possible perspectives to be found from the data. In addition, the meanings were discerned in relation to the whole written response, rather than sections of it (p. 53). It may be impossible to discern an individual way of understanding of Lutheranism holistically in a particular situation without trying to grasp the relationship between all the aspects focused upon as expressed in writing.

All of the material that has been collected forms a pool of meaning. It contains all that the researcher can hope to find, and the researcher's task is simply to find it. This is achieved by applying the principle of focusing on one aspect of the object and seeking its dimensions of variation while holding other aspects frozen. The analysis starts by

searching for extracts from the data that might be pertinent to the perspective, and inspecting them against the two contexts: now in the context of other extracts drawn from all interviews ... now in the context of the individual interview. One particular aspect of the phenomenon can be selected and inspected across all of the subjects, and then another aspect, that to be followed, maybe, by the study of whole interviews to see where these two aspects lie in the pool relative to the other aspects and the background. (Marton & Booth, 1997, 133)

In practice, defining of the analytical unit of the way of understanding Lutheranism took place in a two-stage analysis. *In the first stage*, the referential i.e. meaning aspect was discerned in terms of overall meanings addressed. The meaning unit was formed by marking the themes that were addressed in comparison with the differences and similarities between individual transcripts. *In the second stage*, the structural aspect was identified; the units of meanings were focused upon in terms of variation in how they were constituted from their aspects and how they related to the overall meanings. To decide that there was enough evidence to discern the two analytical aspects required continuous reading and checking the meanings and their structural relations in the data.

The relationship to Lutheranism – whether seen as a social phenomenon or a way of understanding (transcendental) reality in social discourse – is real to them as they relate to it in different ways by attributing meanings that connect to their own lives. When students conceptualise their relationship with Lutheranism, the way they do so illustrates the internal relationship between the student and Lutheranism.

8.2 Constitution of categories into an outcome space

In the present study, the ways of understanding Lutheranism were presented in categories of description, which are drawn from the

written responses of students and teachers. The categories are based on the most distinctive features that differentiate one way of understanding of Lutheranism from another in the hierarchical system called 'outcome space' (see, Marton 1994a). The 'different ways of understanding', or conceptions, are represented in the form of categories of description, which are further analysed with regard to their logical relations in forming a hierarchical system outcome space. The category of description refers to those ways of conceiving, understanding or experiencing which have a basic structure and content in common.

It is common in phenomenography to express the categories with their subcategories. The subcategories correspond to the aspects, the relationships of which constitute the key meanings in focus of particular ways of understanding as represented in the main categories. In the present study, I chose to describe the main categories in terms key meanings and their constituent aspects without labelling the subcategories.

The categories were formed and described in terms of two analytical aspects of variation in meaning of Lutheranism: what the overall meaning of meaning of Lutheranism is in each category, and how the meaning of the whole is constituted from its aspects and discerned from other things or aspects of the world (e.g., Marton & Booth 1997, 87–88). Furthermore, the distinctions through which the meanings of Lutheranism were discerned in the corresponding 'dimensions of variation' were analysed.

The two sets of categories or meanings were constituted in the repetitive process of testing and adjusting the meaning constitution against the data until reaching a more stabilized system of meanings (see, Marton, 1986, 42). It was a hermeneutical process of continuous reading and sorting the expressions to verify the meanings against the data. Such an approach requires 'interpretative awareness' (Sandberg, 1996, 137ff), that is, awareness of one's subjective influence on the process of interpretation and the outcomes of the analysis. This

requires understanding the relational nature of phenomenographic analysis, acknowledging how one's own relationship with the phenomenon, the theoretical assumptions, and the ability to discern meanings and understand the phenomenographic way of relating to the object of the study may influence the analysis.

The categories are not equivalent to the individual conceptions, but refer to the key features of them as faithfully as possible. The purpose of research is to focus on finding a limited number of qualitatively different ways in which the phenomenon in question is experienced in certain context, whereas individuals move between different ways of understanding the phenomenon in different contexts of time and place (Bowden, 2000a).

Phenomenography is developmental in the sense that it helps teachers to plan learning experiences that result in developed understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bowden, 2000a, 4). According to Bowden's (2000b, 50) view of developmental phenomenography, the hierarchy of categories displays the relation between different ways of understanding the subject matter and thus provides a basis for decisions about teaching and assessment. The outcome space reflects the development of understanding from one level to another. The focus on understanding the relationships between the learners' different ways of understanding the subject matter and approaching learning is a distinguishing feature of phenomenography in relation to other research approaches (Bowden, 2000b, 50). According to Bowden (2000b, 48–49) phenomenographic research mirrors what good teachers do: they try to find tools to enable the students to change their understanding by trying to understand what students are doing in their learning. Phenomenography provides a method of discovering what meanings underlie the way students see particular phenomena and act upon them in particular situations. The task for teachers is to discover students' ways of understanding of the subject matter or concept under study and devise ways of helping them change their understanding. (p. 51)

The analysis proceeded from identifying the various ways of understanding and clarifying the features of each way of understanding – by comparing and contrasting it with other emerging understandings found in the data – towards a more refined, more complete and more consistent formulations of categories.

The categorisation is supported with empirical evidence, along with a search for logical support provided by persuasive arguments. Phenomenography has fundamentally to do with learning. The hierarchical structure of the relationships between categories of description describes the structure of learning as expanding awareness of the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997).

The data collection and analysis was conducted by the author, though another person, who had conducted a qualitative Master's thesis in practical theology, transcribe ten of the interviews with the teachers. The categories were constituted by reading the data several times until I as a researcher was familiar with the data as a whole. In continuous relationship with the data, through reading, comparing and contrasting the 'utterances' and limited extracts from the data, I was able to group some key meanings together in terms of teachers and students intentions. I went back to search the evidence of the key meanings considering the data as a whole, and all that was seen to be related to the meaning found. I read what was said in the context of individual response and what was said by others, and how the meaning appeared in the data as a whole. I arrived at the point where a stable set of categories began to emerge. I then looked for the relationships between the key meanings described by these different categories or preliminary categories. Finding some kind of logic between the categories required analysing the relationship between the referential and the structural aspects. This required continuous re-reading and checking of aspects found against the data (see, e.g., Prosser, 2000).

Marton and Booth (1997; see, Dahlin, 1999) present three primary criteria for judging the quality of a phenomenographic

outcome space: Categories must be 1) distinctive in relation to the prior ones, 2) logically related, usually as a hierarchy of inclusiveness and 3) parsimonious: limited to the critical variation in experience observed in the data be represented by a set of as few categories as possible.

The interpretation of the different ways of experiencing Lutheranism was established in the categories of description. They describe the parsimony of the overall meanings of Lutheranism discerned and focused upon between individuals within a group, not individual ways of experiencing Lutheranism. The ways of understanding a phenomenon as described in the categories are logically related to one another, typically by way of hierarchically inclusive relationships (Marton & Booth, 1997). The logical relationships between the categories constitute the outcome space that represents the variation of different ways of understanding Lutheranism (see, Marton & Booth, 1997). The outcome space is a representation of the dynamics of the collective awareness of Lutheranism within a research group at a particular point in time and space (see, Marton & Booth, 1997). The outcome space also necessarily reflects the researcher's way of constituting the qualitative variation in understanding Lutheranism, i.e., my relationship with the object of research.

Consequently, the researcher aims to constitute not only a set of different meanings, but a logically inclusive structure relating the different meanings (Åkerlind, 2005a, 323) According to (Åkerlind, 2005a, 323) the categories of description constituted by the researcher to represent different ways of experiencing a phenomenon are thus seen as representing a structured set, the 'outcome space'. This provides a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically (see, Hella, 2007), despite the fact that the same phenomena may be perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances. Ideally, the outcomes represent the full range of possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question,

at this particular point in time, for the population represented by the sample group collectively.

8.3 Interrater reliability procedure

An interrater reliability test is sometimes used in phenomenographic research (e.g., Ahlberg, 2004). Two independent interraters were used in this study to check the reliability of the labelled categories by reading through the written responses of the respondents after the analysis was finished. The categories were only checked but not revised after the procedure, but the two interraters' reports were used to reflect on which category was closest to an individual student's or teacher's response in order to reconsider the decision of which category the response represents. The person was different in two cases: a teacher of religious education, to whom the procedure was explained, checked the students' responses, and a fellow doctoral student in religious education checked the teachers' responses.

The interraters located each written response into categories, based on the main focus of the response. They were informed about the hierarchical relationships between the categories, and were asked to place each response in all the categories they might represent. They were notified that the highest category represented in the response was inclusive of the others and therefore to be considered the main category, from which the interrater agreement would be drawn in comparison between the researchers' interpretation.

The procedure was used to test the correspondence and reliability of the categories of description in relation to the students' and teachers' responses. This procedure also produced information of how distributions of students' and teachers' responses were divided in the two outcome spaces.

The interrater reliability in categorisation of students' data was based on independent anonymous scoring of 63 students' written

responses and on 40 teachers' written responses. The index was calculated by the formula (number of rater agreement) / (number of narratives) or as follows:

$$ir = \frac{\text{n of rater agreements}}{\text{n of responses}}$$

The interrater agreement (ir) was 0.70 in the students' case and 0.85 in the teachers' case (see, *Appendix 1, Appendix 2*). The differences in the author's and the interrater's ratings seemed to be due to different interpretations of what aspects of Lutheranism were perceived to be related to the key meaning of Lutheranism in students' and teachers' foci. As the interraters marked aspects that belonged to the other categories as well, it became explicit that at the individual level, some students and teachers focused on meanings represented in, for example Category 2 and Category 4, but not Category 3. This indicates that even though the meaning of Category 3 is not made explicit and thematised in the focus of awareness, its meaning is implied in the highest category that represents the meaning in focus of the way of understanding of Lutheranism that is logically inclusive of aspects represented in prior categories. This procedure itself would be more reliable if the interrater was as familiar with the data as the author, which would be the case between members of a research group who conduct a study together. Based on the final analysis and interrater reliability procedure the distribution of individual students' responses are represented in *Table 3*, which shows the distribution of individuals students' responses in each category.

Table 3 Distribution of individual students' responses in each category

Categories	Students	
	Author	Interrater
1	5	8
2	28	20
3	16	23
4	11	10
5	3	2
Total	N=63	

The correspondence of teachers' individual responses to the categories is shown in *Table 4*.

Table 4 Distribution of individual teachers' responses in each category

Categories	Teachers	
	Author	Interrater
1	4	5
2	15	14
3	16	13
4	5	6
Total	N=40	

8.4 Quality in phenomenographic research

The main criterion for evaluation amongst the complexity of the multidisciplinary family of qualitative research methods focuses on the question of quality. The traditional concepts 'validity' and 'reliability' are largely seen as inappropriate quality markers, as they are based on a positivist paradigm which cannot be applied to qualitative research *per se* (Seale, 1999, 3, 8). According to Smith and Deemer (2000) these concepts have largely been replaced by a variety of concepts based on competing claims of what counts as quality. This is a result of the influence of post-modern relativism and

constructivism, which has questioned the modernist assumption that reality can be described objectively. Furthermore, the criteria for quality vary and change alongside acceptance of relativism as a human condition in the world (p. 878). Positivist social research is based on faith in universal validity and value neutrality through control of the natural world and separation of theories from observable facts by which the truth of the theories can be tested (Seale, 1999). In contrast, qualitative researchers explore the objects of their study in their natural settings, where everyday experiences take place, trying to make sense of them through the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 3). Furthermore, it is largely recognised by qualitative researchers that the knowing subjects, the researchers themselves, are part of any understanding of what counts as knowledge or makes claims of knowledge (Smith & Deemer, 2000, 877).

The quality criteria of phenomenography focus on the consistency between the purpose and aims, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie phenomenographic methods (Bowden, 1996; 2000a; 2005; Dall'Alba, 1996; Sandberg, 1996). The relational nature of phenomenographic research makes it impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between the evaluation of the research process and the outcomes. Evaluation of phenomenography must therefore consider: the internal relationship between the researcher and the object of study; the relationship between the participants and Lutheranism; and methods and process of data collection and analysis in relation to the outcomes. According to Bowden (1996, 56ff) research should be planned, collected and analysed around a specific purpose, which provides the focus that guides the action.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2) the varying qualitative approaches are organised around an interpretative perspective and practices that aim to make the world visible. Trigwell (2000) follows phenomenographic procedure in discerning

phenomenography in the dimension of qualitative research approaches in terms of key similarities and differences between them.

Phenomenography focuses on an aspect of the world *as experienced* by people (second order perspective), rather than an aspect of the world *as it is* (first order perspective). This differentiates phenomenography from positivist quantitative approaches, as well as from positivistic qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory. The underlying assumption of a *non-dualistic* ontology further distinguishes phenomenography from positivist approaches, with their focus on investigating a world independent of people's experience, and from cognitivist and constructivist approaches which explore people's internal constructions of the outside world. Furthermore, phenomenographic focus on *variation* in ways of experiencing the meaning of phenomena differs from focus on discovering the most frequent meanings, or the core meanings of phenomena *per se*, as is the case with phenomenology. Finally, the focus on constituting internal *structural relations* between different ways of experiencing phenomena distinguishes phenomenography from research approaches which explore variations in experience *without* looking for relationships between the different ways of experiencing found, such as traditional content analysis.

In Trigwell's (2000) view phenomenography is differentiated from research that aims to 'discover' meanings. Perhaps 'discovery' is seen to denote naïve realism of the positivistic approaches, which rely on the claim that 'real' reality can be described objectively, whereas critical realism assumes that reality can only be partially known. Such realistic approaches to social research accept that although we always perceive the world from a particular viewpoint, the world itself sets the constraints for what is possible to perceive and knowledge is always mediated by pre-existing ideas and values, whether acknowledged by researchers or not (Seale, 1999, 26–27).

Säljö (1996, 21) has criticised phenomenography for de-contextualising the individual statements as they appear in the

particular situation and reading 'purely linguistic differences and choice of wording' as 'indicators of differences in conceptual content'. However, the meaning discernment is always related to two contexts: the interview or the written response to which it belongs and all the data. As Dahlin (1999, 195) points out, the first context is important, because the same expressions may mean different things. Therefore they must be read against the original context to find out the intention that underlies the expression. The second context is necessary to make comparisons and see variation (p. 195).

According to Dahlin (1999, 195) the validity of phenomenographic research is based on three factors: 1) the logic of the system of categories emerging from the analysis, 2) the correspondence between the results and what is known from prior studies, and 3) the plausibility of the categories, i.e. to what extent they are recognisable as representing actual or possible human experiences.

IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part includes a summary of results and a methodological discussion on the research process and procedures as well as the discussion of the outcomes of the study, which are reported in the original refereed publications.

9. Summary of Results

This chapter summarises the two empirical studies on variation in students' and teachers' understandings of Lutheranism (Hella 2007; 2008) and the theoretical analysis on phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning in relation to learning 'about' and 'from' religion in religious education in Finland and the UK (Hella & Wright, 2007). In the former two papers students' and teachers' understandings were explored in terms 1) what key meanings of Lutheranism were expressed by the students and teacher and 2) how these meanings were discerned and constituted by the students and teachers.

9.1 Variation in Finnish Students' Understanding of Lutheranism and its Implications for Religious Education: A Phenomenographic Study

I How do Finnish upper secondary students understand Lutheranism?

This paper presents an empirical study of qualitative differences in Finnish upper secondary students' understanding of Lutheranism and suggests how knowledge of such differences can contribute to teaching and learning in religious education. The study investigated

different ways in which Lutheranism was discerned and its meanings constituted by a group of upper secondary school students.

The outcomes from the phenomenographic analysis are presented in five categories of description. Starting with Category 1, the categorisation represents a widening of understanding of Lutheranism in terms of discerning ever more complex relationships between its aspects.

The key differences between the students' understandings can be described in terms of variation in focus across the five main aspects represented in each category, according to which Lutheranism was discerned as: 1) religion vs. non-religion, 2) religious tradition (cultural differences), 3) true vs. nominal Christian way of life, 4) personal vs. mediated relationship with God 5) Core of faith: mercy/freedom vs. guilt. The categories of descriptions are summarised in *Table 5*.

Table 5 Categories of description representing the referential and structural aspect of students' ways of understanding Lutheranism

Meaning (Referential aspect)	Dimension of variation (Structural aspect)
<i>Category 1: Lutheranism as a religion</i>	1) Religion vs. non-religion
<i>Category 2: Lutheranism as a Finnish Christian way of life</i>	2) Religious tradition (cultural differences)
<i>Category 3: Lutheranism as Nominal Christians and Real Believers</i>	3) True vs. nominal Christian way of life
<i>Category 4: Lutheranism as a personal relationship with God</i>	4) Personal vs. mediated relationship with God
<i>Category 5: Lutheranism as faith in salvation as the gift of God</i>	5) Core of Faith: Mercy/freedom vs. guilt

The outcomes show how individual students' understandings differ critically from each other. They illustrate those aspects of Lutheranism the students were able to discern and considered meaningful in their understanding of Lutheranism. The study highlights the importance of seeing the subject matter from the learners' perspective in order to improve their understanding. For this purpose, teachers should have a clear idea of *what* students should learn – as defined normatively by the curriculum – about a particular subject matter in relation to what students already understand. The study illustrates what aspects of Lutheranism a group of students' were currently able to discern, and suggests that teaching must engage with those aspects if the students' understanding is to be enhanced.

9.2 Variation in Finnish Religious Education Teachers' Understandings of Lutheranism: A Phenomenographic Study

II How do teachers of religious education understand Lutheranism?

This empirical study explored qualitative variation in ways in which Finnish secondary teachers of religious education described their understanding of Lutheranism. The purpose of the study was to explore the implications of this variation for the teaching and learning of Lutheranism, and thereby to contribute to the developing understanding of the subject matter of religious education.

This paper illustrates how different meanings of Lutheranism are constituted and expressed by the upper secondary school teachers of Evangelical Lutheran religious education. The study aims to contribute to teachers' awareness of their intentions in explaining Lutheranism to students in order to allow them to reflect critically on their ways of understanding Lutheranism which underlie their teaching of it. In doing so, it sets out to inform teachers about what

they need to understand about Lutheranism when teaching the subject in the classroom – understanding that is a necessary prerequisite if student are to develop an appropriate understanding of that subject matter.

The outcomes of the phenomenographic analysis are presented in four descriptive categories. Starting from Category 1, the hierarchical relationship between categories represents a widening of understanding Lutheranism in terms of the discernment of more complex relationships between different aspects of Lutheranism.

The key differences between teachers' understandings can be described in terms of variations in focus across the four main aspects represented in each category: 1) historical, 2) socio-cultural, 3) doctrinal and 4) spiritual by which the key meaning of Lutheranism was discerned as a 1) historical movement based on faith of Martin Luther; 2) social practices within Lutheran culture; 3) the doctrine of justification as a basis for life and 4) theological viewpoint to Christian answers to spiritual questions. The categories of descriptions are summarised in *Table 6*.

Table 6 Categories of description representing the referential and structural aspect of teachers' ways of understanding Lutheranism

Meaning (Referential aspect)	Dimension of variation (Structural aspect)
<i>Category 1. Historical movement based on faith of Martin Luther</i>	1) theological and historical context before and after Luther
<i>Category 2. Social practices within Lutheran culture</i>	2) historical vs. socio-cultural
<i>Category 3. The doctrine of justification by faith as a basis for life</i>	3) dogmatic vs. ethical (internal horizon)
<i>Category 4. Theological viewpoint to Christian answer to spiritual questions</i>	4) theological vs. dogmatic (external horizon)

The study reveals the qualitative differences in ways in which teachers describe Lutheranism in terms of their discernment of, and focus on, different aspects of Lutheranism. These aspects have been identified as dimensions of variation in which distinctions were made by the teachers in their discernment of the meaning of Lutheranism. The qualitative differences between the four categories show the sequence of progressive discernment marked by a growing ability to discern and relate together different aspects of Lutheranism at the same time. Therefore, these aspects are critical for *teachers' learning* about and from Lutheranism.

9.3 Learning 'About' and 'From' Religion: Phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and Religious Education in Finland and the UK

III how phenomenography and variation theory can contribute to understanding learning about and from religion in religious education

The paper addresses the relationship between the twin tasks of enabling pupils both to learn about and learn from religion in the state education systems of Finland and the UK. Recognising that the relationship between these two tasks is the subject of considerable confusion, it argues that the most appropriate way to view the connection is fundamentally ontological. We begin by outlining briefly the way in which both Finnish and British religious education identify learning about and learning from religion as core tasks. We then consider three accounts of the relationship between the twin tasks that we believe are inadequate, before outlining our own proposal, namely that the unity of religious education is to be found in the common quest for the good life, a quest that inevitably raises fundamental ontological questions about the meaning and purpose of life and hence of the nature and structure of the ultimate order-of-

things. We then offer an overview of phenomenographic research and the Variation Theory of Learning, in the belief that these offer a way of establishing a viable pedagogic connection between learning about and learning from religion. This leads, finally, into a description of the critical approach to religious education that we wish to advocate.

Our core contention is that the unity of the twin tasks of learning about and from religion lies in a common concern to empower pupils to live good lives, and that this requires them to attend to fundamental questions about the ultimate nature and meaning of the universe in the light of contested religious and secular responses. In contexts in which the ultimate nature of reality and meaning of life is fundamentally disputed religious education must necessarily be a critical process.

The paper argues that phenomenography can reveal critical knowledge of the qualitatively different ways in which students understand a given religious phenomenon. Thus it provides a teacher with critical information about their pre-understanding prior to the start of the learning sequence enables the teacher to relate the phenomenon being taught to the experiences of students and possible tensions between students' prior understanding of key aspects of religion across groups of students as a whole. We suggest that variation theory enables religious educators to recognise the essential unity of learning about and from religion, as learning is always learning about something, simultaneous engagement with the object of learning and development as a person in relation to the object to be learned about.

10. Methodological discussion

This chapter focuses on the research process and procedures in terms of the criteria for quality in phenomenographic research as a distinct

way of doing qualitative research amongst a variety of qualitative research approaches. This involves critical reflection on issues that relate to the positivist concepts 'validity' and 'reliability' by focusing on the relationship between the researcher, participants, the object of study as well as the research process and outcomes. Furthermore, some theoretical issues concerning the research approach are discussed in the light of the evaluation of the relational nature of this study.

10.1 Evaluation of research process and procedures

According to Seale (1999, 31) a good qualitative study makes explicit the researchers' underlying methodological awareness. Therefore, I have aimed at critical reflection on my study in relation to the relevant methodological literature in order to discern the critical aspects that make the research process, procedures and their underlying assumptions explicit to the reader. I consider this to be my intellectual and ethical responsibility as a researcher.

I followed the phenomenological notion of 'bracketing out' of the researchers' own pre-assumptions, as these influence the collection and description of the data in order to engage openly with the data (see, Ainsworth & Lucas, 2000). This meant being cautious not to let my own experiences or perceptions prevent, limit, distort or lead the way in which students and teachers themselves related to and expressed their relation to Lutheranism. However, Wright (1998b) points out that the hermeneutical tradition following Gadamer recognises the researchers' own horizon of meaning as a necessary part of the interpretative process as one tries to understand the perspective of the other. The latter view is reflected in Sandberg's (1996) notion of 'interpretative awareness' as a quality criterion for reliability. From this point of view, I tried to be aware of and reflect on my own discernment of meanings of the object of study and my

influence on the analytical process, while aiming at openness for variation in understanding of Lutheranism expressed by the participants of the study.

The data collection was conducted according to the phenomenographic principle of ‘maximum variation sampling’ (Green, 2005, 35), since it was considered important to acknowledge that variations in participants’ backgrounds are likely to be reflected variations in meanings in the data. Data was gathered with respect to voluntary and anonymous participation in the study. Permissions for collecting the data from the students were asked for from the head teachers of both schools represented in the study.

The framing of the question was expected to contribute to and be reflected in variation in students’ and teachers’ ways of understanding Lutheranism in a given context, because every situation has a certain relevance structure, the experience of what situation calls for, which directs the person to what is seen to be more relevant than something else (Marton & Booth, 1997, 143). The framing of the written task was reflected in comparison between Lutheranism and Catholicism against which Lutheranism was more or less explicitly discerned by the respondents. Some participants in the study, teachers in particular, also used expressions that referred to the conversation with the imaginary person. The constructed situation allows a possible focus on an educational relation between the teacher and the young person as a learner. Variations in approaches to the situation could be considered an aspect of the object of study, in which case the teacher-learner relation could be made more explicit to the respondent. However, the focus of the present study was delimited to the meaning constitution of Lutheranism by using the same design with teachers as was originally used for the group of students, so that the relationship between students’ and teachers’ understandings of the same concept in identical situation could be explored.

The benefit of the written task, as formulated with an open question, is that it allows the respondents to express their personal

relationship with the phenomenon or concept under study freely and in a compact form. Nevertheless, it may also produce data which is too sparse and unclear due to the writer's difficulties in written expression which may obscure their underlying intention. Therefore, the written task sets limits on finding the respondent's own intention, unless there is an opportunity for clarification through discussion directly after the writing situation. On the contrary, the benefit of the open and in-depth interview – the most common phenomenographic data collection method – is that it gives a researcher an opportunity to probe the interviewees' intentions in different ways; however, the interview situation is much more prone to the influence of the interviewer.

The complementary interviews were conducted with participants who volunteered and interviewees were selected from those participants whose statements represented varying meanings and/or needed further clarification in order to discern their underlying intentions as they reflected on their responses to the original written task were selected for interview. The interviews served as a confirmative procedure rather than as a separate data set, as the comparison of understandings of Lutheranism in two different contexts was not in the final interest of the study. The interviews started with reflection on the written responses but also involved further open questions on teaching and learning of Lutheranism, but this data was excluded from the thesis as the aim and research questions reached their final, more crystallised form.

During the interview I tried to direct my awareness to the research questions in order to keep my mind focused on an open in-depth understanding of the interviewees intentions, and prevent leading, closed questions or affirmative comments during the interview (see, Bowden, 2000b). However, it was important to create such conditions for the interview that the interviewees could feel free to express and reflect on the subject in their own natural ways. For this purpose, the teachers' were asked to choose the place for the interview in which they felt most comfortable.

The existence of two sets of data drawn from written responses as well as from the interviews, raise issues of their relationship. In the first set of students' data as well as in the teachers' data the written responses were supplemented by interviews. These interviews were intended to clarify issues arising from the written data. In all cases, these interviews confirmed the preliminary readings of the written data. In the second set of students' data it was not seen necessary to supplement the written responses with interviews. Minor reason for this was the clarity of the data; the major reason was the clear compatibility of this set of data with the previous set of data, which had already been analysed. This was not considered problematic for four reasons. *First*, the selection of students was based on 'pure phenomenographic interest': my concern was to discover how students in the age range of 17 to 19 years understood Lutheranism regardless of varying religious background and educational experience. If my interest had been developing *their* understanding, it would have been necessary to understand their pre-understandings of Lutheranism prior to educational intervention. Since this was not the case, my choice of research sample identified two groups in case critical aspects between them appeared. Therefore, it was reasonable to combine the two sets of data. *Second*, no new critical aspects emerging suggested that they reflected similar outcome spaces of understanding Lutheranism. *Third*, since phenomenography is not concerned with individual understanding, but collective understanding, and given the similarities between both sets of data, it seemed reasonable to combine the two outcome spaces. *Fourth*, I had a general developmental phenomenographic interest in finding *general* educational implications for understanding Lutheranism, rather than *specific* implications for either of the two groups.

An *interrater reliability* test used in this study may be associated with the positivist paradigm, as it has its roots in quantitative research. Therefore, reliability in qualitative research is often referred to as or replaced by other concepts, such as credibility,

trustworthiness, applicability, consistency of findings (see, e.g., Seale, 1999.) Phenomenographers focus on credibility and trustworthiness of the categories in relation to the conceptions they identify and describe in the data.

Reliability in qualitative research does not equate with objective accounts of reality. Rather the aim is to understand the intentionality with which participants relate to the phenomenon in question; such understanding requires recognition of the subjectivity of the researcher. Nevertheless, interrater procedure has been transferred to the field of qualitative research as it constitutes a significant means of confirming the validity of the interpretation of the data. Using the interrater procedure the present doctoral research adopted an approach, which Seale (1999) calls 'subtle realism', in which different researchers try to identify the same meanings in the data. He refers to Armstrong et al. (1997), who argue that

since things have not been resolved on the ontological level, exercises in interrater reliability (or, by extension, replicability) have their place in generating trust and exposing a research text to some testing circumstances (Seale, 1999, 42).

As the chosen form of reporting the results restricted the space for using quotes from the data for allowing the readers to follow the analysis and to check the trustworthiness of the analysis in relation to the data, the interrater procedure was seen as an appropriate way of testing whether the identified meanings can be found from the data by someone other than the researcher. In the present research the concern was to achieve validity in describing data. However, the interraters' accounts must be read critically, as they neither have the same experience of phenomenographic methodology, nor the same familiarity with the data as the researcher. Furthermore, individual accounts do not necessarily match with the categories as such, because they are the result of comparison between the individuals within a group. Rather these understandings reflect a more general level of

understanding Lutheranism that can be found between individuals, whose accounts of Lutheranism vary across time and place. However, 0.70 and 0.85 interrater agreement suggests that to a large extent the same meanings were found from the data, by two independent interraters.

10.2 Methodological implications

Following the assumptions of variation theory, it can be argued that the researchers' ability to perceive the object of study depends on variation experienced in the encounter with the data in different situations. Therefore, in order to reach an interpretative self-awareness of my own understanding and learning about the object of research, it was necessary to reflect on my discernment of meanings from the data by comparing my current and earlier notes that make explicit the contrast between the two understandings at different points in time. This assumption is based on the Ahlberg's (2004) finding that university students' experienced 'view-turns' – experiences of changes in their ways of experiencing something during their educational placement as they focused on the meanings of two situation at the same time and thus were exposed to variation between them.

Categories of description correspond to individual ways of understanding of Lutheranism; there is relation between them, though they are not identical. However, I interpret such a relation realistically: categories describe the meanings discovered from the data, the social reality of students' and teacher's understandings of Lutheranism in terms of what is possible for me to discern due to limitations of my perception. However, the meanings are not identical to the words, as there are different ways of expressing the same thing. However, my meaning constitution of the object of study is not identical with the reality of students' understandings of Lutheranism in the data, even

though there is a relation between the two. From the constructivist perspective I would construct an inner representation of the data that resembles the reality that is intertwined with language of the local socio-cultural environment. Ontological non-dualism of phenomenography refers to person-world relation in contrast with a mind-world dualism represented in inner images of the mind of the outside world. Similarly, critical realism recognises our relation to reality, which we dwell in, though there are different aspects of the same reality.

Although some of the basic assumptions of critical realism may not initially appear to be compatible with the basic assumptions of variation theory, there are some obvious connections, as explicit in Marton's writings (e.g., 1981, 1986, 1996) and phenomenographic discourse that implies a relation to the real world by utilizing concepts, such as 'revealing', 'perceiving' and 'discerning', 'constituting' and 'discovering'. Therefore, phenomenography could benefit from critical discussion of its underlying theoretical assumptions in relation to the realist as well as the cognitivist and the constructivist approaches. This may help phenomenographers develop discernment and clarification of the ontological assumptions that underlie their research, whereas currently it is possible to choose contrary positions amongst the theoretical debate between constructivism and realism. This is also shown in variation in researchers' views in the dimension of constructing vs. discovering meanings as a basis for category formation (Walsh, 2000). Such a contrast is also implicit in the contrary views on using a co-judge for checking the reliability of researchers' findings in order to validate the results (see, Sandberg, 1996). Such a clarification might contribute to the internal coherence of the research approach, the consistency between the theoretical assumptions about ontology, epistemology and methodology.

The present study has aimed to make its theoretical underpinnings of phenomenography and Variation Theory of Learning explicit: my own discernment of meanings in the data is seen to be

dependent on my ability to discern similarities and differences between different accounts of Lutheranism due to variation experienced in the encounter with the data in different situations against the background of my prior knowledge. In addition, as brought to a context of religious education, the adopted theoretical and methodological framework has been contrasted with existing perspectives in the field, which has brought me to contrast the adopted perspective with alternative ones, such as phenomenological, contextual (constructivist) and realist critical approaches to religious education. Due to my ability to perceive the key features of these approaches, the critical realist perspective would appear to be the most convincing of these perspectives regarding the coherence of its theoretical arguments with regard to the relevance structure of this study.

Following this methodological discussion, I conclude that the study presented here represents phenomenography as seen from a realistic point of view: it does not claim the certainty of absolute findings (positivism), nor complete relativism (constructivism). Rather it claims that all research is value-laden and theory-dependent and requires judgmental rationality in making critical judgements between varying theoretical positions and methodological choices. Finally, the findings are open to revision and further exploration.

11. Discussion of results

In this chapter the significance and relevance of the results of the three studies are discussed in the light of the aim, educational purpose and academic context of this study. Furthermore, some implications for further research, policy making and curriculum design as well as educational practice in religious education are outlined.

11.1 The relationship between the studies

Two empirical studies were undertaken from qualitative research perspective of phenomenographic research specialisation (Hella, 2007; Hella, 2008). The two studies focused on the content and structure of meaning constitution in students' and teachers' expressed understandings of Lutheranism. The findings were discussed against the Variation Theory of Learning in order to draw educational implications for religious education. The applicability of phenomenography and the Variation Theory of Learning in religious education was then analysed in relation to the theoretical notion of '*learning about and from religion*' in religious education in Finland and the UK (Hella & Wright, 2008).

From the perspective of developmental phenomenography (Bowden, 1996; 2000a; 2005) adopted in the study, the purpose of the two empirical studies was to find educational implications of what and how teachers could learn to help students learn about and from religion - and Lutheranism in particular - as a subject matter of religious education to develop as persons in relation to the surrounding world. The idea was to find pedagogical tools for teachers to use these understandings in teaching to enhance students' understanding of Lutheranism. The intention was also to inform and challenge the religious educators and curriculum designers to think of the possibilities for curricular development in terms of clarifying the role of Lutheranism in the curricular aims and contents as a subject matter and characterisation of the subject of Evangelical Lutheran Religion as a whole.

The two empirical studies reveal the differences in ways in which students and teachers describe Lutheranism. The students moved from understanding Lutheranism as a religion in general distinctive of other phenomena to understanding Lutheranism as part of Christian culture in comparison with other religious traditions and

specifically as intertwined with the Finnish cultural way of life. When Lutheranism was understood in this way some students also included in their understanding the focus on the internal differentiation between the real believers and the nominal Christians in terms of external appearances of Lutheran beliefs in the Finnish way of life. When students focused on Lutheran faith, this sociological level receded into the background as they characterised the theological aspects of faith as a dynamic human-God relationship. Finally, the most complex way the students understood Lutheranism included, yet related all the prior aspects around the focus on the core of Lutheranism in the salvation as a God's gracious gift. This shows that some students not only engage with the socio-cultural dimension of Lutheranism, which forms the framework for learning about one's own religion in the Evangelical Lutheran religious education in the Core Curriculum for the Secondary School, but also with the theological dimension of Lutheranism, which includes the ontological questions of the reality of God.

The teachers' understanding of Lutheranism builds on Luther's theological standpoint on the justification by faith in the relation to Catholic Church in the historical context. Some teachers focus on the ethical implications of Lutheran faith in the socio-cultural dimension of contemporary Finnish society in relation to the background of the historical dimension, whereas others focus on their doctrinal basis the theology of Martin Luther. In doing so, they emphasised justification by faith in the spiritual dimension beyond the ethical dimension of the social responsibility for the contemporary society. Furthermore, including the prior aspects in the background, the most complex way teachers understood Lutheranism focused on Luther's emphasis on God's grace and justification by faith as a viewpoint to Christian understanding of the reality of God in an ecumenical context and in relation to the fundamental spiritual and existential questions shared by all humanity about the meaning and purpose of life.

A teacher can learn by comparing the relationship between students and teachers understanding. There is a relationship between students' and teachers' understandings. The key aspects focused upon by the students appear in different form and structure in teachers' outcome space, however in the latter in more complex and elaborate way. Therefore, the relationship between the two outcome spaces as a whole forms an analogy of phenomenographic idea of learning as widening of awareness.

A primary task of Lutheran religious education is to enable students a deep understanding of Lutheranism. Such a deep understanding must focus on the proto-typical theological features of the Lutheran tradition rather than just relatively superficial socio-cultural appearances. The phenomenographic research presented here provides teachers with evidence of the various ways in which students focus on, or fail to focus on these key theological issues. Further, the empirical research also sheds light on teachers' discernment of the proto-typical theological features of Lutheranism. The significance of this is two-fold: a) students are able to focus on theological features, though not all of them do and all of them could do so in greater depth; b) in order for teachers to introduce critical theological feature, they must be aware of them themselves. The empirical evidence presented here suggests that most teachers possess such theological understanding. However, as we have seen, the curriculum tends to focus on Lutheranism as a socio-cultural reality rather than its proto-typical theological features. Hence the conclusion to be drawn is not that the teachers lack the knowledge to enable students to develop a deep understanding of Lutheranism; the issue is not one of the teacher's theological knowledge. Rather, the issue is a pedagogical one. Teachers' seem to lack a curricular framework and an accompanying pedagogy capable of providing a framework within which a deep theological understanding can develop. Thus, the first two empirical papers provide important evidence of the understanding of students and teachers and of the discernment, a lack of discernment

of the critical features that need to be addressed in the classroom. In order to develop a theological understanding of Lutheranism as the object of learning the critical features constitute from the combination of contrast between the proto-typical features of Lutheran theology, and the students' and teachers' discernment of them. Furthermore, in order to develop students' ways of understanding Lutheranism teachers need to be aware of what critical aspects of Lutheranism they can offer to the students. The key meanings discerned focused upon by the students and teachers correspond to the dimensions, in which they have experienced variation in order to have been able to discern the particular meaning in focus. Phenomenography reveals the implicit distinctions that students and teachers necessarily make as they discern the meanings. Furthermore, in order to widen students' awareness of the discerned aspects, they must be subjected to further variation by holding that aspect, which is already thematised and explicit, 'frozen', invariant while varying different 'values' of the in the dimension in focus. Such a pattern of variation vs. invariance is necessary for enhancing learning about Lutheranism as the object of learning in more complex ways. The implication of this for learning about and from religion in general was the focus of the third paper, to which we now turn.

The third paper argues for the compatibility of phenomenography and Variation Theory of Learning with the critical religious education approach based on the philosophy of critical realism, which raises questions about their theoretical foundations. The majority of critical realists reject a dualistic ontology in favour of a non-dualistic or monistic ontology (e.g., Niiniluoto, 1999, 21ff). This is compatible with the non-dualistic ontology of phenomenography. A dualistic ontology affirms an ontological gulf between the person and the world. According to this view, the learner experiences the-world-as-it-appears-to-her rather than the-world-as-it-is-in-itself. In a non-dualistic ontology the learner indwells the world and is an intimate part of it. Because the learner is part of the world, every act,

thought and statement of the learner, brings about a change in the world. This may appear incompatible with the critical realist claim that the world exists independently of human knowledge and experience. However, this is not the case. This is because the learner indwells experiences and knows the-world-as-it-is-in-itself directly. But her knowledge is only partial. If she knew the world totally, she would be God. As a fallible human being her knowledge of the world lacks both breadth and depth. There are things she knows only superficially (depth) and things she does not yet know (breadth). In deepening and broadening her knowledge she does not cross a qualitative gulf from herself to the world, as in dualistic epistemologies. Rather, she moves from what she already knows into deeper and broader understanding of the world she is already part of.

Thus, Bhaskar (1997) distinguishes the domains of the *same* world as experienced (transitive objects) and the domain of the *same* world as it exists independently of human experiences (intransitive objects). These domains are part of the same world. For example, DNA existed in human beings long before human beings had knowledge of DNA. DNA is part of the one world that human beings indwell (Wright, 2007, 8ff). Thus, the existence of the reality of DNA independent of human knowledge and experience does not constitute a clearly dualistic view of the relationship between knowledge and experience and reality. (Bhaskar, 1997, 56)

Critical religious education advocated in the third paper seeks to avoid religious, atheist and liberal confessionalism. It does so by presenting different religious and secular worldviews as contested: the aim of critical religious education is two-fold. *First*, in line with confessional approaches, it seeks to enable children to engage with the contested truth claims of a diversity of religious and secular traditions and to present them as conflicting accounts of the ultimate nature of reality. *Secondly*, in line with the liberal commitment to freedom of belief and rational autonomy, it seeks not to impose the truth of one worldview, but rather to develop appropriate levels of religious,

theological and spiritual literacy, thereby empowering students to respond wisely to contested accounts of the ultimate reality and ultimate meaning of life by reflecting on their own beliefs in the light of contested alternatives. Hence, critical religious education is concerned to take into account the fact that according to some religious beliefs, other beliefs are simply wrong or false and should be eliminated.

11.2 Implications for religious education

Education focuses on two key questions: (1) what constitutes that which is to be taught and learned and why; and (2) how is it possible for teaching to bring about learning about that which is to be learned? The first question deals with the constitution of the knowledge base of religious education and the second with the constitution of the necessary conditions for learning about and from religion in religious education.

(1) What constitutes the knowledge base for religious education?

All education necessarily adopts an epistemology and ontology - whether or not the educators are fully aware of that or not, it is the responsibility of the educators to be aware and make the theoretical assumptions underlying educational practices explicit and open for revision. Phenomenographic pedagogy and religious education are no exceptions to this rule. The aims that direct human growth are defined according to the values of the social community, which defines itself in relation to what it considers to be true about the world. Even if these aims seem to have no direct link to their underlying values, or these values are implicit, they entail certain assumptions about reality. Whereas educational philosophy is interested in revealing the nature of underlying values of education and growth as a person in relation to the reality and accessibility of it (Pring, 2005). It is my contention that

the ontology and epistemology broadly shared by phenomenographic research tradition and critical realism constitutes the best ontological and epistemological framework currently available, because of their inclusiveness and acceptance of contested meanings. Thus, for example, phenomenographic research is able to ask questions within both naturalistic and theological worldviews. Similarly, the tradition of critical realism embraces both naturalistic (Niiniluoto, 1999) and theological ontologies (Archer et al., 2004).

In terms of liberal religious education the critical approach is both open to a variety of contested truth claims and affirms the autonomy of the student. However, though critical religious education focuses primarily on liberal religious education, it can also be applied to confessional religious education. The Variation Theory of Learning argues that it is only possible to understand a phenomenon by contrasting what it is with what it is not. This suggests, for example, that confessional Christian education, which adopts Christian truth claims as normative, can only introduce students to a deep understanding of Christianity by contrasting distinctive Christian truth claims with other religious and secular alternatives.

Critical religious education accepts that different religious and secular traditions advocate contradictory accounts of reality. Thus, for example, the secular claims that Jesus was merely a good moral teacher are ultimately incompatible with Muslim claims that Jesus was a prophet of Allah, which in turn are ultimately incompatible with Christian claims that Jesus was a God incarnate. Different forms of confessional religious education proceed by identifying one particular truth claim and encouraging students to accept it (e.g., confessional Christian religious education advocates truth claims of Christianity, confessional Muslim religious education the truth of Islam). Following Wright (2007a) my contention is that liberal religious education, as currently practised, tends to adopt a similar confessional form. On the one hand, its focus on religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon, at the expense of theological truth claims, tends to imply

the naturalistic/materialistic worldview: here the major aim tends to be to promote tolerance between conflicting religious and secular traditions rather than address contested theological truth claims. On the other hand, some forms of liberal religious education *do* address theological issues, however, in the interest of social harmony and the freedom of belief they tend to advocate a universal theology in which all religious traditions offer salvation/enlightenment and as such are presented as equally true (Day, 1985).

Critical religious education seeks to adopt an epistemology and ontology that is inclusive of as many different religious and secular worldviews as possible. Inevitably its ontological and epistemological commitments will shape the pedagogy of religious education. However, since such commitments are unavoidable, because there is no view from nowhere, what critical religious education seeks to establish is a working framework within which different worldviews can be debated in a manner that is as open as possible to their distinctive truth claims. First, it is argued, that the framework of critical religious education which draws on philosophy of critical realism offers an ontological basis for dealing with questions of what critical religious education argues for a moral imperative to make judgements to which we live by. For this purpose it is necessary to ask questions such as:

- What is reality like?
- What must I do?
- How must I live (live with others)?

In order to deal with these questions, critical religious education stresses the importance of critical engagement with variation in different religious and secular traditions as they offer different truth claims and visions of a good life as responses to these questions. It draws attention to the contested nature of knowledge base for religious education as constituted from varying contradictory perspectives and the necessity to reveal the contested nature of knowledge for the learner, in order for them to make their own informed judgements of

how to live their life in harmony with the way things are in the world to grow in relation to it.

The results challenge religious education to address the theological as well as socio-cultural aspects of Lutheranism. In order to understand Lutheranism as a religious or theological phenomenon or concept, it is critical to ask the ontological question of what is the reality that Lutheranism is in relation to. Christian theology involves the ontological and epistemological questions about God and ultimate reality. Such questions are contested in their nature as we have partial understanding of reality.

As an understanding of reality Lutheranism is contested in its ontological nature. The normativity of teaching of Lutheranism is therefore acknowledging that Lutheranism is contested. This is the necessary condition for deep understanding of Lutheranism and for teaching to promote such understanding. What is needed is the interpretive framework that can inform the constitution of knowledge for religious education for pedagogical practice of teaching through variation in the classroom. When adopting the framework of critical realism, the normativity of education is the critical pursuit of the truth about ultimate reality.

Thus, the study supports the argument that the search for truth about the ultimate order-of-things, represented in both religious and secular traditions should be considered educationally critical for teaching of religious education in order to promote students' understandings of different religious and secular worldviews. Such an approach relates the horizon of religion as constituted from academic research to the teachers' and the students' horizons of meanings in an informed manner. Furthermore, it is crucial for learning that the necessary conditions of perceptual learning are met, in order to build a shared space for teachers and students to learn from each others ways of understanding the subject matter at hand.

(2) How learning about and from religion can be made possible?

It is argued that by adopting the pedagogical framework of the Variation Theory may provide means to organise the teaching-learning process in such a systematic way that makes it possible for students to learn about that which is supposed to be learned. The Variation Theory of Learning focuses on how the qualitative differences between individual ways of understanding a particular phenomenon are linked to their ability to discern the aspects of the phenomenon, that are *educationally critical*. Variation theory focuses on the epistemological constraints and possibilities for our gaining knowledge about the world due to limitations of our perception. Our way of understanding of reality is limited by our abilities to discern and constitute meanings about the world around us. From this perspective, the normativity of education is to promote perceiving of that what is possible to perceive. In other words, education has a critical role in constitution of the conditions which are necessary to understand the world better. This means that variation must be experienced in the critical aspects of the object of learning. In this way, religious education can make it possible for the students to learn *about* religion and learn *from* religion to develop as persons in harmony with the way things are in the world (Hella & Wright, 2008).

I suggest, that phenomenography serves as a tool for researchers and teachers of religious education to discern and relate together the qualitative differences in understanding a particular religious subject matter as seen from different perspectives. Thus, it makes it possible to understand religion in a deeper, more complex and wider way. Educationally critical aspects of understanding religion are constituted from different perspectives:

First, the critical, core or key aspects of knowledge of religion is constituted from the perspectives of *academics*: as academic interdisciplinary knowledge about religion, which sets the knowledge base for understanding of religion(s) from the perspectives of religious studies, theology, philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion etc.

Second, the academic knowledge about religion serves as a basis for the educationally critical aspects for curricular knowledge as constituted by the educational policy-makers and curriculum designers.

Third, educators and teachers' interpret are the interpreters of that knowledge in relation to pedagogical knowing of what it takes to constitute such knowledge in the way that makes it possible for learners to learn in relation to the educational aims, namely what is critical for students to know about religion.

Fourth, in order to translate such knowledge for classroom interaction, teachers not only need to act as translators and mediators of academic knowledge, but they have to relate the educationally critical aspects of the subject knowledge to students' prior understandings of the subject knowledge.

Fifth, these understandings are limited by students' prior experience of the subject matter, and the human limitations of perceptions, which constitute that which they can perceive about the subject knowledge made available to them in a particular learning situation. Therefore, different aspects discerned and focused upon by the students and teachers in a particular situation constitute the 'shared space' between the aspects that form the framework within which it is possible for learning to take place. In other words, these shared spaces for learning take place in the academic level, curricular level and classroom level and make it possible for the researchers, teachers and teacher educators as well as students to learn from each other as they define and constitute the meanings of religion by focusing on different aspects that are critical for differences in knowledge constitution of the subject.

11.3 Implications for further research

This study contributes to the discussion about ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (Schulman, 1986) or ‘didactic disciplinary knowledge’ (Booth, 1997), which refer to the combined perspective of pedagogical knowledge about the educational processes of teaching and learning teaching and education in connection with the disciplinary knowledge of the interdisciplinary field of religious education together. As emphasised earlier, phenomenographic tradition addresses that teaching and learning are always related to something, a particular object, thus, it is separate from the personal development. There is no learning from religion without learning about religion or vice versa. Rather than generalising teaching and learning per se, the question is how a specific content can best be taught in order to enhance the learners’ understandings of it. Skeie (2006), as well as Vermeer (2004) call for a perspective of empirical research on the constitution of the knowledge base in religious education.

The phenomenological approach to religious education focuses on describing the essential structure of religion and spirituality as a basis of their variations in individual life-worlds. Despite the close relationship between phenomenography and phenomenology through relational ontology, phenomenography does not define or characterize the essential nature of the relationship between person and transcendence as a phenomenon itself through individual life-world, like a phenomenological research does. For example David Hay (2000a) describes spirituality from phenomenological point of view in terms of relational consciousness. A phenomenographer describes the differences and commonalities between individual ways of experiencing transcendence or ‘God’ in order to find some differences and commonalities that mark aspects that are seen critical for their learning of those aspects. Phenomenographic interest is not to label

the relationship between the individual and God as spirituality, but to identify the key differences between different experiential relationships with God as different ways of experiencing or understanding God. Spirituality is defined as a relational consciousness or spiritual awareness and religious understanding instead of understanding of religion; the phenomenological studies tend to lose focus on the same object as experienced in different ways, and focus on different objects as seen in the light of the same underlying structure. In this respect, phenomenological perspective is problematic for defining the object of learning in religious education. From this point of view it is important for religious educators to be aware how students understand the object of learning, and help them engage with the object to enhance their understanding of it.

Furthermore, this informs the researchers and teachers of religious educations of what is necessary in order to clarify the substantial knowledge base for religion in religious education. This involves questions of what should be learned about Lutheranism in religious education and how it could be taught in order to connect with the pre-understandings of the learners and make it possible for the learners to develop their understanding about Lutheranism further. Dahlin (2007) emphasises the question of what kinds of variations are made available about a particular discipline in the classrooms. Therefore, variation theory serves as a tool to analyse the kind of knowledge that is being taught in the classroom when religion(s) and religious phenomena are constituted as an enacted object of learning in religious education.

Contextual and interpretative approaches to religious education focus on the local and contextual variations of religious culture in the life of the individuals-in-communities. Religious traditions are seen through meaning negotiation and meaning making as individual and social constructions from the perspective of social sciences and focus on the socio-cultural aspects of religion and view religions as part of individually and socially constructed cultural reality. This is reflected,

for example, in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary School (2003, 162), according to which religion is seen 'as part of culture and society and of individual and community life'. According to Wright (2006) such a perspective, however, ignores the different substantial realistic transcendent truth claims and visions of the good life offered by discrete religious traditions. Thus, teachers ought to focus on the ontological questions about the existence or absence of transcendental reality in addition to the socio-cultural aspects in order to promote students' understandings of different religious and secular worldviews (Hella & Wright, 2008). In order to take religious and secular diversity seriously in the plural world, people need to engage with variation in worldviews to discern the different ways in which people tackle with spiritual questions about their place in the ultimate order-of-things in order to live their life in relation to their faith.

This study has dealt with the questions addressed by Everington (2000), Maybury and Teece (2005) and others about the purpose, role and subject focus of religious education stressing the importance of engaging with variation in disciplinary perspectives involving both secular worldviews to make sense of the contested nature of knowledge about religion by offering Variation Theory of Learning as pedagogical means to do so. The study contributes to phenomenographic research as well as research on religious education, especially on the development of critical religious education, as Wright (2007a) draws on the results of students' understandings of Lutheranism, which constitute part of this thesis in order to develop his model of critical religious education. Furthermore, the study serves as a basis for a cross-cultural research project between University of Helsinki and King's College of London University in to be undertaken from the Learning Study perspective on developing pedagogy of learning for critical religious education.

10.4 Concluding remarks

The study addresses experiential engagement with variation in ways of understanding a subject matter of religious education as a necessary condition for learning about and from the subject matters of religious education. Learning is approached from the learners' perspective: focus is on how Lutheranism is understood and focused on by the students and the teachers as learners, who can relate to each others' understandings and learn about and from them. The ways in which the meaning of Lutheranism is constituted and what aspects of Lutheranism are focused upon by teachers and students are seen important for teaching to enhance learning about it. Teaching is based on enhancing students' understanding of the subject matter through engagement with variation in aspects that are crucial for understanding Lutheranism according to certain educational criteria. Furthermore, the curricular designers could learn from the research into key aspects of experiential variation in curricular contents. This could enable them to revise the curricular aims and contents to meet the common meanings of the subject matter and relate them to the academic disciplinary knowledge of the subject matter. In addition, in order to make learning possible, the aims of *what* students are supposed to learn should focus on *how* it is possible to provide students with conditions that make it possible for them to learn.

This study suggests structuring the necessary contents in the way that allows teaching and studying of the subject matter through variation. If different ways of understanding of the subject matter can be discerned in terms of different aspects of the subject matter in focus, these aspects are critical for students' learning must be met in teaching. The experiential variation in key aspects of the subject matter are seen relevant for religious education in terms of how they are taken into account in teaching of Lutheranism to support student learning. The ways in which teachers take into account students' understandings of Lutheranism influence teachers' teaching and that

which is possible for students to learn about and from Lutheranism in relation to worldviews of different religious or secular traditions. The present thesis uses phenomenography to identify the variation in understanding of Lutheranism amongst and illustrates its value as an analytical tool to reveal those dimensions of variation in teachers' and students' meaning discernment of religion that are crucial for teaching and learning oriented towards developing students understanding of the subject matter in question.

Finally, the presented study encourages researchers and teachers of religious education to adopt a pedagogy which requires them to adopt the role of the learner and learn from different ways of understanding the 'horizon of religion' as an object of learning. This involves aiming at making it possible for the students to learn about the subject matter of religion: to develop a widened awareness of variation in religion and learn through engagement with different religious traditions and their underlying worldviews, to learn from them to make informed judgements of them to develop a coherent worldview of their own, one that allows them to grow as persons in relation to the reality they indwell. Religious tradition provide variation in ways of experiencing contrasts between the known and unknown in the encounters with transcendence, as described by Hull (2002, 173):

Through religion, the finite discovers itself as finite in the presence of the infinite. The temporal discovers it self through religion 'to be faced with the eternal. In the presence of perfect love, partial love discovers itself to be partial.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interrater agreement of distribution of individual students' responses in correspondence to categories

Student	Author	Interrater
1	2	2
2	2	1
3	4	4
4	3	3
5	2	2
6	3	3
7	1	1
8	3	1
9	3	3
10	3	2
11	2	1
12	1	2
13	2	2
14	2	3
15	2	3
16	2	3
17	5	4
18	2	3
19	1	1
20	2	2
21	1	1
22	3	3
23	5	3
24	3	3
25	2	2
26	4	4
27	2	2
28	2	2
29	4	3
30	2	2
31	2	2
32	3	3
33	4	4

34	3	3
35	4	4
36	2	2
37	2	2
38	2	2
39	2	2
40	2	3
41	2	2
42	2	3
43	2	3
44	2	2
45	2	3
46	3	3
47	5	5
48	4	4
49	5	5
50	4	4
51	2	2
52	3	3
53	3	3
54	3	3
55	3	3
56	4	4
57	2	2
58	4	4
59	2	2
60	2	1
61	3	1
62	3	3
63	4	4
Total agreement	70%	

Appendix 2 Interrater agreement of distribution of individual teachers' responses in correspondence to categories

Teacher	Author	Interrater
1	2	2
2	4	4
3	3	3
4	1	1
5	3	2
6	3	3
7	3	3
8	3	3
9	3	3
10	1	1
11	2	1
12	2	2
13	2	2
14	3	3
15	2	2
16	2	2
17	3	3
18	4	4
19	2	2
20	4	4
21	3	2
22	2	2

23	3	3
24	3	3
25	2	2
26	2	2
27	1	1
28	2	2
29	2	2
30	2	1
31	2	4
32	2	2
33	3	3
34	3	3
35	4	4
36	2	3
37	4	4
38	3	3
39	3	3
40	3	3
Total agreement	85%	

THE ORIGINAL REFEREED ARTICLES I–III

I

Hella, E. (2008). Variation in Finnish Students' Understanding of Lutheranism and its Implications for Religious Education: A Phenomenographic Study. *British Journal of Religious Education* (in press).

II

Hella, E. (2007). Variation in Finnish Religious Education Teachers' Understandings of Lutheranism: A Phenomenographic Study. In K. Tirri & M. Ubani (Eds.), *Giftedness and Holistic Education. Yearbook 2007 of the Department of Practical Theology* (pp. 109–124). Publications of the Department of Helsinki 111. University of Helsinki: Department of Practical Theology.

III

Hella, E.* & Wright, A. (2008). Learning 'About' and 'From' Religion: Phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and Religious Education in Finland and the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education* (in press).

* Hella as the primary author with contribution of c. 75%