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ALEKSANDRA SOONISTE

Religious Literacy of Estonian Basic School Graduates

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To my family – my everything

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Article I: The publication is co-written with Olga Schihalejev. The author of this thesis is the first author and main contributor of this article. The author developed the analytical tool by combining the curriculum content analysis model by Levander and Mikkola with the four-part framework of religious literacy by Francis and Dinham (2015), and conducted the analysis of the Estonian national curricula. Section 3, *Religion in Estonia*, was written by Olga Schihalejev. She also contributed to the theoretical background and provided critical feedback on the overall structure and content of the article.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

International organizations and frameworks

AAR	American Academy of Religion
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
COE	Council of Europe
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Estonian education context

NCBS	National Curriculum for Basic Schools (Estonia)
NCUSS	National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (Estonia)

Research projects and surveys

REDCo	Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries

Academic disciplines and concepts

RE	Religious Education
RS	Religious Studies
R&W literacy	Religion and Worldview Literacy

Government bodies and public institutions

Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (UK)
PEW	Pew Research Center

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the challenges and opportunities for cultivating religious literacy within the Estonian education system. It examines how religious literacy is represented in national curricula and assesses the competencies of basic school graduates in this area. Given Estonia's highly secular educational landscape, religious themes are largely absent from formal schooling (Sooniste & Schihalejev, 2022). My motivation for this research stems from over two decades of teaching religious education, during which I have witnessed the difficulty of creating meaningful content that resonates with students while addressing the cultural and societal changes shaping their lives. These experiences have driven me to explore how education can better equip students to understand and engage with religious diversity in a rapidly changing, interconnected world.

Religious literacy, broadly defined as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to engage constructively with religious diversity, is increasingly recognized as a vital educational goal (Dinham & Francis, 2015). It goes beyond factual knowledge about religions, requiring the ability to critically analyze their influence on social, cultural, and political life (Moore, 2015). Global frameworks such as the Council of Europe's *Competencies for Democratic Culture* (2016) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2020) emphasize the importance of preparing students to navigate diverse beliefs and perspectives. Yet in Estonia, religious literacy receives little attention in both policy and practice, raising the question: How can Estonia's education system better integrate religious literacy as a civic competency rather than religious instruction?

To address this, the first research question of this study asks, "To what extent is the discourse of religious literacy (implicitly and explicitly) represented in the national curricula 2011–2024 for basic and upper secondary schools in Estonia?" This question is fundamental for understanding the presence, visibility, and significance of religious literacy within the Estonian educational framework, particularly given that religious education is not a mandatory component of formal schooling. Instead, religious themes are often integrated into broader disciplines such as history, literature, and social studies (Betlem, 2006; Jaani et al., 2010). This fragmented approach raises concerns about the consistency and depth of students' engagement with religious concepts. Additionally, given the predominantly secular orientation of the Estonian educational system, it is crucial to examine how the curriculum supports religious literacy—whether explicitly or implicitly—and whether it effectively prepares students to understand, respect, and engage with religious diversity.

Building on this foundation, the second research question seeks to assess the effectiveness of this educational approach in fostering religious literacy among students. Specifically, it examines the level of religious literacy attained by Estonian basic school graduates. Given the multifaceted nature of religious literacy, this inquiry is further refined into two sub-questions:

- How do Estonian basic school graduates perform on assessments designed to evaluate the academic dimensions of religious literacy?
- What competencies do these graduates demonstrate in relation to the practical, instrumental aspects of religious literacy?

By exploring these dimensions, the research aims to examine both the extent to which the curriculum incorporates skills related to religious literacy in the curriculum and students' actual literacy levels, thereby providing insights into the effectiveness of current educational practices.

Although not a primary research question, the findings allow for some reflection on the methods, content, and themes that may effectively support the development of religious literacy among basic school students. The responses suggest patterns and insights that point to potentially actionable approaches and curricular elements capable of enhancing students' competencies and engagement with religious literacy in meaningful ways.

This thesis contributes to the broader discourse on religious literacy by offering practical recommendations for improving its place in Estonia's education system. The study begins with a theoretical framework defining religious literacy and its educational significance. It then examines Estonia's national curricula and concludes with an empirical study evaluating students' competencies. Additionally, this thesis develops an instrument for measuring religious literacy, designed to assess students' understanding of religion as a category, their dispositions toward religious diversity, their factual and conceptual knowledge of religions, and their skills in critically engaging with religion's role in society, as outlined by Dinham and Francis (2015). This tool provides a structured approach to evaluating different aspects of religious literacy, including an awareness of the constructed nature of religion as a category, factual and contextual knowledge of religions, critical engagement with religious influences in society, and intercultural competencies necessary for navigating religious diversity in a secular context. By conceptualizing religious literacy within a secular society, the study explores how it can be framed not as religious instruction but as an essential civic skill, as proposed by Walker et al. (2021), enabling individuals to understand and critically engage with religion's role in culture, politics, and global affairs. Together, these parts provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of religious literacy in Estonia and suggest ways to enhance its role in schools.

PART 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Religious Literacy: an Overview and Definitions

The concept of religious literacy has developed in response to shifting societal landscapes, particularly the increasing diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews (Moore, 2008; Davie & Dinham, 2018; Melloni & Cadeddu, 2020). Initially, religious literacy focused on understanding major religious traditions, as exemplified by Vladimir de Lissovoy's mid-20th-century program aimed at enhancing future teachers' comprehension of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism. His initiative sought to provide accurate knowledge, correct misunderstandings, and emphasize commonalities among religions, fostering social cohesion (de Lissovoy, 1954). However, religious literacy became an even more urgent concern following the 9/11 attacks, as scholars like Stephen Prothero emphasized its necessity for navigating the complexities of globalized societies. Prothero warned that religious illiteracy was dangerous because religion, in addition to being a powerful force for good, has also been a catalyst for division and conflict. His approach, like de Lissovoy's, involved measuring students' baseline knowledge of religion and then bridging this with a deeper, more contextually relevant understanding (Prothero, 2007).

As scholarship evolved, religious literacy was increasingly viewed as more than just knowledge acquisition. Diane Moore, whose definition has been widely adopted, emphasizes a cultural studies approach that examines religion as a lived experience shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. She argues that religious literacy includes the ability to critically analyze the intersections of religion with various aspects of society, moving beyond static doctrinal knowledge (Moore, 2008). Similarly, UK scholars Dinham and Jones (2010) advocate for a civic dimension of religious literacy, presenting it as a crucial competence for building an inclusive, multifaith society. They emphasize the importance of equipping individuals with the understanding and awareness needed to engage respectfully with religious diversity. Expanding on this, Dinham and Francis (2015) outline a four-part framework that highlights the need to understand religion as a category, reflect on personal dispositions, gain contextual knowledge, and cultivate the skills required for peaceful coexistence. Research by Brömssen et al. further illustrates how interpretations of religious literacy vary across educational settings, reflecting different national policies and curriculum traditions, reinforcing the argument that religious literacy is not a singular concept but rather an adaptable framework shaped by societal needs (Brömssen et al., 2020).

The evolution of religious literacy has led to the emergence of alternative literacies that highlight different dimensions of engagement with religion and belief systems. Theological literacy, for example, delves deeper into religious doctrines, sacred texts, and theological reasoning, equipping individuals within religious traditions to engage meaningfully with their faith (Eriksson, 2010). In contrast, spiritual literacy, though still underdefined in pedagogical discourse, concerns an individual's ability to navigate existential questions and explore

interconnectedness with self, others, nature, and transcendence without necessarily engaging with formal religious structures (Jirásek, 2023). Faith literacy, as described by Andrey Rosowsky, focuses on the practical engagement with religious texts, rituals, and linguistic elements that sustain religious identity across generations. Unlike religious literacy, which aims to foster broad societal understanding, faith literacy is more embedded within religious communities and emphasizes continuity of tradition (Rosowsky, 2015).

Interfaith literacy expands upon religious literacy by focusing on the knowledge and skills required for fostering positive relationships across religious traditions. Eboo Patel and Cassie Mayer argue that interfaith literacy involves not just factual understanding but an appreciation of shared values and historical moments of cooperation, such as medieval Spain's coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims or the collaboration between Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel during the civil rights movement. This literacy, therefore, plays a key role in promoting social cohesion by emphasizing both difference and common ground (Patel & Mayer, 2011).

Moral literacy, as developed by Nancy Tuana, extends beyond religious frameworks and concerns the broader ethical competencies required for navigating moral dilemmas. It consists of three interrelated components: ethics sensitivity, which enables individuals to recognize ethical issues and assess their significance; ethical reasoning skills, which provide the ability to evaluate moral arguments and principles; and moral imagination, which fosters empathy and the ability to envision ethical alternatives. Moral literacy is fundamental to responsible citizenship, as it cultivates an individual's ability to make ethical decisions in both personal and societal contexts. This links it to interfaith literacy, as both involve navigating moral and philosophical differences while seeking ethical coexistence (Tuana, 2007).

Building on her earlier work on "religion and worldview literacy" (Shaw, 2019), Martha Shaw (2022) introduces *worldview literacy* as a more developed and focused educational model. This concept represents a shift away from traditional understandings of religious literacy, which have often centred on the acquisition of factual knowledge, and toward a more critical and reflective approach. Worldview literacy aims to connect religious and citizenship education by encouraging thoughtful dialogue, interpretation, and inclusive engagement with both religious and non-religious perspectives. Rather than treating religion and worldviews as separate categories, this approach views them as part of a shared, evolving framework through which people make sense of the world. It challenges simplified or stereotypical portrayals of religion and draws attention to the social and political forces that shape how religion and belief are understood. By presenting worldviews as fluid and shaped through personal and collective interpretation, this model helps learners develop the skills and awareness needed to participate in democratic societies. Influenced by critical pedagogy and progressive education, Shaw's concept of worldview literacy emphasizes personal reflection, lived experience, and ethical engagement as essential parts of learning in a diverse world (Shaw, 2019, 2022).

As Moore and others assert, religious expressions are inherently influenced by the prevailing social and political environments in which they manifest. Similarly, the attainment of religious literacy is contingent upon an understanding of the contextual dynamics and the actual religious milieu within a given setting. Instead of viewing religious literacy as a fixed concept, it is more accurate to consider it in plural terms, as a flexible framework that adapts to specific contexts (Moore, 2016; Francis & Dinham, 2015). The evolving discussion of religious and worldview literacy reflects a broader trend in education that moves beyond static knowledge models toward a more integrated, reflexive, and dialogical approach. In doing so, these literacies collectively contribute to fostering a more critically engaged, ethically responsible, and socially cohesive society (Burns, 2020; Jakobsson, 2020).

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Religious and Related Literacies

Type of Literacy	**Key Contributors**	**Definition and Key Features**
Religious Literacy	Diane Moore (2008)	Understanding religion as a lived experience shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. Emphasizes critical thinking and context over static doctrinal knowledge; rooted in a cultural studies approach.
Religious Literacy	Adam Dinham & Stephen Jones (2010) Adam Dinham & Matthew Francis (2015)	A civic skill essential for inclusive, multifaith societies. Framework includes understanding religion as a category, personal dispositions, contextual knowledge, and coexistence skills.
Religious Literacy	Kerstin von Brömssen et al. (2020)	Varies across national and educational settings. Highlights religious literacy as an adaptable, context-dependent framework.
Theological Literacy	Anne-Louise Eriksson (2010)	Engagement with religious doctrines, sacred texts, and theological reasoning. Aimed at individuals within faith traditions; supports deep understanding and internal engagement with religious beliefs.
Spiritual Literacy	Ivo Jirásek (2023)	Navigating existential questions and exploring interconnectedness with self, others, nature, and transcendence. Less tied to formal religion; emphasizes meaning-making and personal reflection.
Faith Literacy	Andrey Rosowsky (2015)	Practical engagement with texts, rituals, and language sustaining religious identity. Community-focused; emphasizes tradition continuity rather than broad societal understanding.

Type of Literacy	Key Contributors	Definition and Key Features
Interfaith Literacy	Eboo Patel & Cassie Mayer (2011)	Knowledge and skills for positive interreligious relationships. Stresses appreciation of shared values, cooperation in history, and social cohesion.
Moral Literacy	Nancy Tuana (2007)	Ethical competence in navigating moral dilemmas. Composed of ethical sensitivity, reasoning, and imagination; essential for citizenship and overlaps with interfaith engagement in addressing moral/philosophical diversity.
Worldview Literacy	Martha Shaw (2022)	Critical engagement with religious and non-religious worldviews as dynamic and evolving. Bridges religious and citizenship education; emphasizes interpretation, reflexivity, power critique, and dialogical engagement in plural democratic societies.

1.2. Key Terms of the Study: Definitions and Rationale

Although recent scholarship—particularly in the UK—has increasingly adopted the term *religious and worldview literacy* (Shaw, 2019; Shaw, 2022), this thesis deliberately uses *religious literacy* as the central concept. This decision is grounded in both theoretical and contextual considerations.

First, *religious literacy* has a broader and more internationally recognized conceptual foundation. Scholars such as Diane Moore (2008), Dinham and Francis (2015), and Prothero (2007) have developed robust frameworks that define religious literacy not merely as factual knowledge, but as a multidimensional competence that includes understanding religion as a lived, contextual, and dynamic phenomenon.

Second, the analytical framework of this study is explicitly based on the four-part model developed by Dinham and Francis (2015) and elaborated for educational contexts by Shaw (2019), which includes the dimensions of category, dispositions, knowledge, and skills. While Shaw herself moves toward *religion and worldview literacy* to reflect the inclusion of non-religious perspectives, the core structure of the framework remains rooted in *religious literacy* as the organizing concept. This study fully integrates non-religious worldviews within the content, particularly in the category and dispositions dimensions, without requiring a terminological shift.

Third, using the term *religious literacy* allows for meaningful comparison with the international literature and empirical tools, such as the REDCo project, Pew surveys, and Moore's U.S.-based work. It supports coherence across both

the theoretical and empirical parts of the thesis, including the development of a measurement instrument based on international precedents.

Finally, the Estonian context influenced this choice. In Estonia—a highly secular society with minimal curricular inclusion of religion—the term *religious literacy* may already seem unfamiliar or even contentious. Introducing an even broader and less established term like religious *and worldview literacy* could dilute conceptual clarity in a setting where basic engagement with religion is still emerging. At the same time, this study explicitly acknowledges the value of including non-religious worldviews and treats them as integral to how students interpret and relate to religious diversity.

Within this thesis, religious education (RE) operates as an umbrella term for any pedagogical endeavour—formal, non-formal, or informal—that engages learners with religious or worldview content, whether the approach is confessional or non-confessional, compulsory or elective (Jackson, 2004; Grimmitt, 1987; Conroy, 2015). Using RE in this inclusive sense positions the research within the wider comparative discourse on how religion is addressed in schools, museums, youth organisations, and other learning environments worldwide.

By contrast, Religious Studies (RS) in this thesis primarily refers to the Estonian elective subject *usundiõpetus*, officially translated as "Religious Studies". Defined in the national curriculum as a non-confessional, pluralistic subject (Ministry of Education & Research, 2011), it forms the empirical focus of the thesis. Using RS in this sense aligns with Estonian policy documents and classroom practice, distinguishing it from the broader notion of Religious Education (RE).

However, RS is also used in its academic sense—as the critical, multidisciplinary study of religion. This meaning is particularly relevant when engaging with scholarship such as Marcus (2022), who situates religious literacy within the academic discipline of religious studies. Accordingly, the term RS in this thesis carries both a national-curricular and academic meaning, each made clear by its context.

1.3. Religious Literacy in Policy: The European Approach

The motto of the European Union, *United in Diversity*, underscores the importance of fostering harmony in multicultural societies. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union emphasizes freedom of religion, the right to education aligned with individual religious beliefs, and respect for religious diversity (European Union, 2012). This principle is further elaborated in the Council of Europe's (COE) document, *Competencies for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies* (2016). This document provides a comprehensive framework for educators to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate pluralistic environments and live as democratic citizens in contemporary Europe.

The framework outlines 20 competencies grouped into values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Within the domain of knowledge, religion is addressed as a critical component. This is articulated as follows:

Knowledge and critical understanding of religions, which includes:

- knowledge and understanding of the key aspects of the history of particular religious traditions, of the key texts and key doctrines of particular religious traditions, and of the commonalities and differences which exist between different religious traditions;
- knowledge and understanding of religious symbols, religious rituals and the religious uses of language;
- knowledge and understanding of the key features of the beliefs, values, practices and experiences of individuals who practise particular religions;
- understanding of the fact that the subjective experience and personal expressions of religions are likely to differ in various ways from the standard textbook representations of those religions;
- knowledge and understanding of the internal diversity of beliefs and practices which exists within individual religions;
- knowledge and understanding of the fact that all religious groups contain individuals who contest and challenge traditional religious meanings, and that religious groups do not have fixed inherent characteristics, but are constantly evolving and changing (COE, 2016, p. 54).

These definitions are further elaborated in another COE policy paper, the *Reference Framework of Competencies for Democratic Culture* (2018a, 2018b), which introduces proficiency levels for each competency. Religion and belief are explicitly integrated throughout the document, with learning outcomes categorized into values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. The addition of critical understanding within the knowledge domain equips students to make informed decisions in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (COE, 2018a).

At the values level, a student who advocates for tolerance toward different beliefs demonstrates the basic level essential for a democratic society (COE, 2018b). In terms of attitudes, showing interest in learning about diverse beliefs, values, traditions, and worldviews marks a basic level of engagement (ibid.). Curiosity about differing beliefs and cultural orientations signifies an intermediate level, while expressing respect for religious differences exemplifies an advanced level of attitude (ibid.).

Religious themes are deeply intertwined with knowledge and critical understanding. Students at the basic level should reflect critically on their own worldview as one among many. At the intermediate level, they should describe the similarities and differences between religious traditions, analyze religious symbols and rituals, and evaluate the societal roles of religions and non-religious

convictions. Higher levels of knowledge involve understanding the history, texts, and doctrines of specific religious traditions, recognizing the diversity within religions, and explaining how personal expressions of religion can differ from traditional representations. Advanced learners are expected to articulate the evolving nature of religious groups and the internal diversity of beliefs and practices within them (COE, 2018b).

The *Competencies for Democratic Culture* framework includes 447 descriptors of democratic competencies, 16 of which explicitly address faith and religion, while more than half implicitly promote religious literacy by fostering cultural understanding, tolerance, and critical engagement with diversity. Analyzing this framework in the thesis is crucial for understanding how religious literacy is embedded within European educational policy. While the document does not explicitly define religious literacy, it integrates it into a broader set of democratic skills, emphasizing knowledge, critical thinking, and intercultural engagement. Rather than treating religion as a separate subject, it presents it as an essential part of democratic life, requiring both understanding and reflection. The framework aligns most closely with critical religious literacy, encouraging students not only to acquire knowledge about religious traditions but also to analyze their evolving nature, internal diversity, and societal roles. However, while the framework provides a strong conceptual foundation, it remains somewhat abstract and requires adaptation to specific educational contexts. Despite this, it highlights the role of religious literacy in fostering respectful dialogue, democratic participation, and social cohesion. By examining this policy, the thesis situates religious literacy within a broader European effort to prepare students for engaging meaningfully with religious and cultural diversity in contemporary societies. This aligns with international initiatives such as the OECD's *PISA 2018 Global Competence Framework*, which emphasizes students' ability to examine issues of local, global, and intercultural significance, understand and appreciate the perspectives of others, and engage in open, appropriate, and effective interactions across cultures (OECD, 2020).

To explore how religious literacy is applied in formal education, the next chapter examines concrete examples from the UK and the US, where religious literacy has been more explicitly integrated into educational policies and curricula.

1.4. Religious Literacy through Education: England and the US Perspectives

Religious education encompasses a wide range of aims and approaches. It is commonly categorized into three broad models: learning about religion, learning from religion, and learning into religion (Grimmit, 1987). These models reflect different pedagogical orientations. Learning about religion typically refers to non-confessional, multifaith, and inclusive instruction (Jackson, 2019) and aligns closely with academic models of religious literacy that emphasize factual, conceptual, and procedural knowledge (Marcus & Ralph, 2021; Moore, 2008).

Learning from religion encourages students to reflect on their own values and experiences in light of religious perspectives (Hella & Wright, 2009), resonating with models of religious literacy that emphasize reflexivity, personal engagement, and the development of interpretive skills (Shaw, 2019; Dinham, 2015). Learning into religion, on the other hand, generally refers to confessional instruction that seeks to nurture personal faith and is commonly found in faith-based educational contexts (Berglund et al., 2016). While this approach is not typically associated with academic models of religious literacy, it may still foster certain forms of religious understanding and engagement. In practice, religious education often blends elements from these different models, depending on national, institutional, or curricular frameworks (Dinham & Shaw, 2017; von Brömssen et al., 2020), which in turn shape the kinds of religious literacy that can be developed.

Religious literacy, while closely connected to religious education, is not synonymous with it. As Parker (2020) notes, religious literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable individuals to understand and engage with diverse religious and non-religious worldviews. However, religious literacy is not equivalent to religious education, nor is it synonymous with the term *religion and worldviews*. Rather, it describes the capabilities that should be developed through and across a student's engagement with religious education. Religious literacy is therefore not the subject itself but one of its key aims—though the subject may have other objectives as well. This distinction has given rise to ongoing debates about whether religious literacy should remain the domain of religious education or become a broader educational aim that spans multiple disciplines (Biesta et al., 2019; Marcus & Ralph, 2021; Dinham & Shaw, 2017). While religious literacy may originate within the context of religious education, its broader significance extends well beyond a single subject area.

This thesis examines the relationship between religious education and religious literacy by exploring both the potential of religious education to promote religious literacy and the limitations that hinder its effectiveness in doing so. The central discussion in the literature does not dispute the importance of religious education for fostering religious literacy. Rather, it focuses on whether religious education, in its current form, is capable of supporting the development of the knowledge, skills, and critical dispositions needed to navigate religious diversity in contemporary societies. Scholars such as Jackson (2019) emphasize that religious education is essential to addressing religious illiteracy. He advocates the interpretive approach, which highlights the dynamic, diverse, and culturally embedded nature of religions and encourages critical reflection through representation, interpretation, and reflexivity.

Similarly, Marcus (2022) situates religious literacy within the academic discipline of religious studies education, arguing that religious education should not be reduced to moral instruction or personal formation. He supports a framework grounded in factual, conceptual, and procedural knowledge, encouraging critical engagement with religion's role in public life. This builds on earlier work by Marcus and Ralph (2021), who incorporate Bloom's taxonomy to emphasize both cognitive and affective dimensions of religious literacy education.

Shaw (2019), drawing on Dinham's (2015) four-part framework—category, disposition, knowledge, and skills—develops a model of religion and worldview (R&W) literacy. Her model positions religious literacy as a form of praxis, encouraging students to engage with religion and worldviews as lived, dynamic, and contextually shaped realities, rather than fixed systems of belief. Reflexivity, self-awareness, and intercultural competence are central to this approach.

Despite its potential, scholars have pointed out significant limitations in how religious education is currently practiced. One major concern is the persistence of essentialist portrayals of religion. Jackson (2019) warns that oversimplified representations undermine understanding and reinforce stereotypes. Shaw (2019) echoes this concern, criticizing the continued reliance on the World Religions Paradigm, which often presents traditions as monolithic and unchanging.

Other scholars highlight structural and pedagogical issues. Hannam et al. (2020) caution against making religious literacy the sole aim of RE, arguing that the subject must also support personal, philosophical, and spiritual development. They further contend that religious literacy competencies exceed the scope of what RE alone can deliver, and thus, must become a goal of education more broadly. Conroy (2015) critiques the instrumentalization of RE in schools, where it is often reduced to exam-focused instruction or vague moral guidance. Similarly, Enstedt (2022) finds that non-confessional RE in Sweden, while emphasizing ethics and cognitive rationalism, often neglects the lived realities of religion and worldview, including non-religion, embodiment, and identity.

To respond to these challenges, scholars propose rethinking both the aims and structures of religious education. Hannam et al. (2020) advocate embedding religious literacy across the curriculum. Conroy (2015) calls for the professionalization of RE, grounded in theological and philosophical rigor and reflective pedagogy. Enstedt (2022) argues for incorporating critical religion studies, including questioning dominant narratives and interrogating the category of religion itself. Schweitzer et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of developing religious education and religious literacy together, supported by robust theoretical models, assessment tools, and empirical research.

In sum, religious education remains a vital foundation for cultivating religious literacy. However, to fulfill this role, it must be critically reimagined. As the literature shows, religious literacy should move beyond rote learning and exam-driven teaching (Conroy, 2015; Schweitzer et al., 2022); be grounded in academic, non-devotional approaches (Marcus & Ralph, 2021; Enstedt, 2022); reflect the lived, diverse, and dynamic nature of religion (Shaw, 2019; Jackson, 2019; Enstedt, 2022); include conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive dimensions (Marcus & Ralph, 2021; Moore, 2008; Shaw, 2019); foster reflexivity and critical thinking (Hannam et al., 2020; Shaw, 2019; Enstedt, 2022); and support civic and pluralistic engagement (Marcus & Ralph, 2021; Dinham & Francis 2015; Shaw, 2019).

To better understand how education can support religious literacy in practice, this thesis also examines two educational systems where the concept of religious literacy has significantly shaped policy and curriculum: the United States and the

United Kingdom. These two countries offer distinct but complementary pedagogical models. In the United States, religious literacy is conceptualized as a civic competency and is developed through integrated, non-confessional instruction across multiple subjects. In contrast, the United Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of RE as a distinct subject in the curriculum. In recent years, however, the goals of religious literacy have increasingly guided reform efforts there as well (All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, 2016).

Including both cases allows for a meaningful comparison between two viable models—one integrated and secular (U.S.), the other subject-based and pluralistic (UK). These models provide important insights for understanding the foundational role that religious education can play in developing religious literacy. They also offer concrete reference points for assessing and potentially enhancing the Estonian context. Their inclusion is justified by the fact that key academic definitions and frameworks central to this thesis—such as those by Moore (2008), Dinham and Francis (2015), and Shaw (2019)—have emerged from or been applied within these two systems.

1.4.1. Religious Literacy in the U.S.: An Integrated Educational Approach

In the United States, teaching about religion is permitted only within the framework of the First Amendment, ensuring that it remains academic, neutral, and non-devotional. Unlike in some education systems where Religious Education (RE) exists as a standalone subject, the U.S. model strictly separates teaching about religion from religious instruction. As a result, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) proposes cultivating religious literacy through an integrated approach, embedding it across multiple disciplines such as history, literature, and social studies rather than offering it as an independent subject (AAR, n.d.). The AAR guidelines emphasize equipping students with an informed understanding of religions within their cultural and historical contexts while ensuring that education remains constitutionally appropriate and free from indoctrination. This decentralized model allows for curriculum flexibility while maintaining compliance with constitutional requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

To comply with constitutional principles, religious content in public education must meet the Lemon test, ensuring that it serves a secular purpose, neither advances nor inhibits religion, and avoids excessive government entanglement in religious matters (Congressional Research Service, 2020). Schools may educate about religion, but they cannot promote or discourage religious belief. The First Amendment Center, following the principles established by Haynes and Thomas (2007), advocates for the academic study of religion as essential for a well-rounded education while ensuring neutrality. Their framework clearly distinguishes between teaching about religion, which is constitutional, and teaching into religion, which is not. According to these principles, schools should approach religion academically, not devotionally; they should strive for student awareness

of religions without pressuring students to accept any particular belief. Schools may sponsor the study of religion, but not the practice of religion, and they may expose students to a diversity of religious views without imposing any particular perspective. Furthermore, education about religion must be inclusive, informing students about various beliefs without promoting or denigrating any religious or non-religious worldview. These guidelines ensure that religious literacy is developed within an educational rather than faith-based framework, maintaining objectivity and constitutional integrity in public schools.

Despite these policies scientific research indicates that while the U.S. education system promotes religious literacy as a civic competency, its implementation remains superficial. Since public education allows only learning about religions, assessments of religious literacy primarily focus on religious knowledge, measuring students' familiarity with religious traditions, texts, and historical contexts rather than examining broader dimensions of religious literacy, such as critical analysis, personal dispositions, or interreligious engagement skills. Surveys on religious knowledge have consistently shown low levels of understanding. For example, Stephen Prothero's (2008) religious literacy quiz revealed that even college students struggled with basic knowledge of world religions. The 2019 U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz similarly found that many American adults lack fundamental awareness of religious traditions and their societal impact (Pew Research Center, 2024d). While Pew also incorporated a "feeling thermometer" to gauge attitudes toward religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2019a), it provided only generalized and indirect conclusions, making it difficult to assess nuanced dispositions or deeper aspects of religious literacy.

Diane Moore characterizes this as "widespread illiteracy about religion", arguing that while factual knowledge of religious traditions is necessary, it is not sufficient (Moore, 2008). Instead, she calls for a more nuanced, inquiry-based approach that examines how religion intersects with culture, politics, and identity, rather than just presenting religious beliefs in isolation. AAR has sought to address these shortcomings by developing guidelines for teaching about religion that emphasize contextual and critical engagement (AAR, 2010).

Alongside religious literacy, U.S. schools also emphasize character education, which is conceptually distinct but complements civic religious literacy by fostering ethical awareness, responsibility, and social cohesion. As Edington (2002) notes, character education has become one of the fastest-growing school reform movements, shaped by collaboration between educators, parents, and students. Although not explicitly tied to religious literacy, character education aims to equip students with the values and skills necessary for navigating diverse societies, reinforcing broader educational goals of tolerance, respect, and democratic engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In this sense, character education functions as a parallel framework that, while not explicitly religious, aligns with the civic objectives of religious literacy by preparing students for ethical and pluralistic engagement.

The constitutional and decentralized structure of the U.S. education system provides flexibility in addressing religious literacy while also resulting in variations in how religion is taught across different states and school districts. While policy ensures neutrality, research suggests that students' knowledge and engagement with religion remain limited. Current approaches primarily emphasize basic awareness of religious traditions, with less focus on exploring the broader societal, historical, and cultural dimensions of religion. At the same time, the inclusion of character education alongside religious literacy initiatives reflects a growing emphasis on ethical and cultural competencies in schools. Efforts to enhance teacher training, curriculum resources, and interdisciplinary teaching methods may contribute to further developing religious literacy within this framework. The next chapter will introduce the UK model, which takes a different approach to incorporating religious literacy into education.

1.4.2. Religious Literacy in England: The Role of Religious Education

In England, Religious Education (RE) policy aims to provide an inclusive and balanced exploration of religion and belief systems without promoting commitment to any particular faith. According to policy documents, RE is a compulsory subject in all publicly funded schools, but its content is determined locally due to the decentralized nature of the education system in England (Pépin, 2009). The National Curriculum in England mandates that "All state schools are also required to make provision for a daily act of collective worship and must teach religious education to pupils at every key stage" (Department for Education, 2013). However, the actual curriculum content of RE is determined by local authorities, allowing syllabi to reflect regional religious demographics while maintaining alignment with national guidelines. Policy further requires that "Every locally agreed syllabus must reflect that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). This locally agreed syllabus model enables RE in England to address regional diversity while adhering to national legal requirements.

The aims of RE, as outlined in English policy, focus on developing students' ability to explore and question beliefs, identity, morality, and ethics. It aims to enhance understanding of Christianity and other major world religions while fostering personal reflection and spiritual development. According to the Department for Education (2013), RE encourages students to explore and express their own beliefs—whether religious or non-religious—and examine how faith influences ethics at personal, institutional, and societal levels. Additionally, it is positioned as a tool for countering anti-democratic or extremist ideologies and promoting a sense of identity and belonging. RE policy also emphasizes social and moral development, including respect for others, challenging prejudice, and fostering empathy and compassion.

While the RE framework in England aligns with some aspects of religious literacy, research highlights a distinction between the two concepts. Religious

literacy extends beyond classroom-based religious education by incorporating a broader understanding of how religion intersects with cultural, societal, and global issues (Moore, 2015; Parker, 2020; Walker et al., 2021; Seiple & Hoover, 2021). While English RE policy aims to provide knowledge and promote tolerance, studies suggest that religious literacy requires deeper engagement with the complexities of religion's role in modern society.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, operating in the UK Parliament, underscored this distinction in 2016. It noted that although high-quality RE is essential for fostering religious literacy, it is not sufficient on its own (Bruce et al., 2016). The group's findings highlighted the importance of ensuring that RE content meaningfully engages with the complexity of religion in contemporary life. However, it also acknowledged structural challenges, including the need to improve teaching resources and enhance teacher training to better support religious literacy. These findings suggest that while English RE policy establishes a framework for teaching about religion, its effectiveness in promoting religious literacy depends heavily on the depth and quality of its implementation.

1.5. Religious Literacy and Education in Estonia

Although Estonian education strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2022) draws on different EU policy documents, including the Council Recommendation on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning, which relies on the above-described framework for democratic competencies (Council of the European Union, 2018), the aspects that could possibly foster the cultivation of religious literacy have not reached the national curriculums of Estonian formal education. Presently, the Estonian basic education system is undergoing modifications to adapt to the requirements and opportunities of modern society. A new curriculum will be implemented in schools starting with the academic year 2024-2025. However, the changes related to intercultural competences are still limited in scope. Current research is based on the results of the curricula that were used from 2011 to 2024.

Confessional religious education in Estonia is exclusively available in private schools, which have the autonomy to incorporate their unique features related to worldviews or pedagogical traditions into the national curriculum (Käpp, 2018).

Public schools have the option to offer Religious Studies (RS) as an elective subject. Accurately estimating the percentage of basic school students receiving religious education is challenging due to a lack of comprehensive data. However, in 2020, among 486 public basic schools in Estonia, only a small number provided religious education. Specifically, six schools offered religious education during the first stage of study (grades 1–3, ages 7–10), five during the second stage (grades 4–6, ages 11–13), and seven during the third stage (grades 7–9, ages 14–16) (Schihalejev, 2020). Based on these figures, it is estimated that approximately 3% of basic school students in Estonia's public schools received religious education.

The subject field syllabus for RS was established in 2011 and has seen only minimal revisions during the recent updates to the national formal education curricula. If chosen, RS must be taught as a nonconfessional subject in accordance with the syllabus outlined in the national curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). The curriculum stipulates that "religious studies do not endorse any specific church, congregation, or religious group" and is guided by principles of freedom of religion and thought (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011, app. 9). The national curriculum delineates the learning content and course objectives for each stage of study: the first stage (grades 1–3) emphasizes customs, stories, and values; the second stage (grades 4–6) focuses on values and decision-making; and the third stage (grades 7–9) centers on the exploration of different religions (ibid.). This indicates that there is one elective RS course, consisting of 35 lessons, each lasting 45 minutes, scheduled once every three school years. However, the actual distribution of lessons may vary depending on school-specific decisions. Notably, there is no public school in which RS is offered consistently across all three stages of study, which highlights its limited and fragmented implementation.

The educational goals of RS in basic school are well aligned with the general principles of religious literacy as outlined by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Diana Moore. In the Estonian curriculum, the subject of RS at the basic school level states that the *subject of religious studies at the basic school level strives to direct the students to:*

- *respect different convictions based on world views that are not against humanity and recognise prejudiced and labelling attitudes;*
- *provide examples of how the principles of freedom of religion function, their limits and violations in society;*
- *know the geographic distribution of larger religions and the corresponding main historical reasons globally and in Estonia and describe the basic traits of the major world religions, including: a) explanation of how religions are manifested in the lives of individuals and society, providing examples from the past and present; b) name the most important stories and personalities of the religions studied, including their source texts; c) describe and analyse connections between culture and religion; and d) compare the main principles of ethical choice-making of the religious and non-religious world views studied;*
- *awareness of their own values and analyse the role of values in their own activities and those of other people; formulate traits of their own world view and analyse their own world view-based convictions in the context of the religions studied, pointing out similarities and differences;*
- *justify the importance of adherence to values and moral norms in society and provide relevant examples; and*

- *discuss the influence of different world views on the lives of individuals and society, providing examples, both positive and problematic* (NCBS, 2011 app. 9).

The educational goals of RS in upper secondary schools support more instrumental aspects of religious literacy, stating that *the elective subject of religious studies at the upper secondary school level strives to direct pupils to:*

- *be capable of respectful communication with people of different world views and discussions of attitudes towards different world view issues, recognise in their own behaviour and that of others prejudiced attitudes and know how to oppose them when their own or friends' rights are violated;*
- *provide examples of how the principles of freedom of religion function in practice, what boundaries exist in society and how they are breached, and how religion and politics are connected;*
- *characterise the historical factors that influenced the distribution of different religions across Estonia, know the religious movements that are widespread in Estonia and name their doctrines and rituals;*
- *discuss how different world views influence us on individual and social levels, both positively and problematically, and know the simpler scientific methods of religious research; and*
- *be aware of their main value judgments and analyse the role of values in their own actions and those of others, phrase the primary features of their own world view, and analyse their worldview convictions in the context of the studied religions.*

Although these goals align with the broader concept of religious literacy as defined by the AAR (2010), and further elaborated in European contexts by Dinham and Francis (2015) and Martha Shaw (2019, 2022), their implementation is limited because RS remains optional at both the basic and secondary education levels. The inclusion of RS in basic schools is decided independently by each school and depends on the availability of lesson resources, which are allocated based on the school's priorities. At the upper secondary level, RS remains an elective subject, though it may become compulsory within certain fields of study if included in a state-approved curriculum (Usundiõpetus, n.d.).

In recent years, the topic of religious education (RE) in Estonia's formal education system has resurfaced as a subject of active debate. Findings from the sociological survey *On Life, Faith, and Religious Life 2020* (EUU, 2020) revealed that 62% of adult Estonians support the inclusion of RE, specifically courses introducing world religions, as a mandatory component of formal education. Following these results, discussions among various stakeholders have considered the potential implementation of RE. In October 2024, the Cultural Commission of the Estonian Parliament deliberated on the matter, exploring two possible approaches: integrating knowledge about religions into existing subjects or

introducing RE as a standalone subject. During a recent public discussion, the Ministry of Education and Science indicated that the broader inclusion of Religious Education (RE) in formal education would not be feasible before 2035, when the national school curricula are scheduled for revision. According to the chief expert for the field of curriculum development at the Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia, all necessary public debates on the issue are expected to be completed by then (Riigikogu, 2024).

1.6. Cultivating Religious Literacy

Religious literacy is challenging to cultivate because religion defies precise definition. Chae Young Kim (2019) argues that no single definition captures the complexity of historical and contemporary religious phenomena. Religions are constantly shaped by regional, cultural, and personal contexts, making them inherently dynamic and multifaceted (Kim, 2019). Consequently, religious literacy requires not only factual knowledge but also a range of competencies to critically and effectively apply that knowledge in diverse contexts. While supporting religious literacy in school, a balance between intellectual rigor and pedagogical clarity is essential to ensure both the integrity of the subject matter and its relevance to a broad and diverse student population (Freathy & John, 2019).

For this reason, the inclusion of pedagogical content in this thesis is essential. While religious literacy is a theoretical concept, its realisation depends on how it is taught. Pedagogical frameworks play a crucial role in shaping how religious ideas are communicated and internalised in the classroom. Understanding the educational structures that support or hinder the development of religious literacy helps to connect theory with practice.

Inspired by U.S. science educators who introduced the concept of "Big Ideas" to promote long-term understanding through coherent, narrative-based key concepts (Bell et al., 2010), Exeter University adapted this model for Religious Education in their project Big Ideas for Religious Education (Brine et al., 2017). This initiative identified six overarching "big ideas" that represent the core understandings students should develop through RE. Rather than presenting isolated facts about specific religions, the approach encourages students to grasp the interconnections between central religious and worldview concepts. While some critics argue that the model may oversimplify the diversity and complexity of religious traditions (Freathy & John, 2019), it nevertheless aligns closely with the goals of religious literacy, particularly in fostering reflective, coherent, and contextual learning.

The project articulates aims that closely mirror key definitions of religious literacy, including Diane Moore's. Students are expected to:

- understand the ideas, practices, and contemporary expressions of diverse religious and non-religious worldviews;
- recognise how religions and beliefs intersect with and influence all dimensions of human experience;

- engage with profound existential questions concerning meaning, ethics, and humanity;
- become familiar with key approaches to the study of religion;
- develop personal values and beliefs through reflective enquiry;
- cultivate intellectual curiosity about religious issues as a lifelong pursuit;
- become responsible, informed citizens within diverse and changing societies (Brine et al., 2017).

The goals also include equipping students with the ability to:

- use terms like "religion", "non-religion", and "secular" appropriately and critically;
- develop substantive knowledge of various religious and non-religious traditions;
- analyse connections between religion and broader societal contexts;
- articulate and evaluate personal beliefs while respecting others' views;
- conduct independent enquiries into religion and worldview issues;
- engage thoughtfully and respectfully with religious and non-religious people (Brine et al., 2017).

The abovementioned targets include both instrumental as well as academic dimensions, which are multifaceted and composed of various subcategories. To help conceptualise how this knowledge can be structured and implemented in the classroom, the framework developed by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills) proves useful. Although it is context-specific to England, it offers a clear, pedagogically grounded typology of knowledge that closely aligns with the aims of religious literacy and supports curriculum design.

Ofsted (2021) identifies three key types of knowledge:

- Substantive knowledge – content knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions, including beliefs, rituals, artefacts, texts, and key concepts.
- Disciplinary knowledge – understanding how knowledge about religion is generated using academic disciplines such as history, sociology, and theology.
- Personal knowledge – awareness of one's own beliefs and assumptions in relation to what is studied, fostering reflexivity and identity formation.

To support the integration of key dimensions of religious literacy into classroom practice, Martha Shaw (2019) developed a model for *religion and worldview literacy* (R&W literacy). This model builds on the framework proposed by Dinham and Francis (2015), as outlined in the chapter "*Religious literacy: an overview and definitions,*" and extends it by explicitly including non-religious worldviews.

Shaw adapts the framework for educational use, making it relevant to the practical needs of teaching and learning in diverse classroom settings.

The R&W literacy model goes beyond the cognitive aspects of learning to include affective and critical dimensions. It highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that promote reflexivity, critical thinking, and respectful engagement with difference—skills that are essential for preparing students to navigate a pluralistic and interconnected world.

1.6.1. Category

Religious literacy begins with clarifying the category of religion and belief, which involves addressing common misconceptions, such as the divide between religion and secularism and the perception that religion threatens rational modernity. A crucial aspect of this process is gaining insight into secularism and recognizing the true diversity of the religious landscape (Dinham & Francis, 2015). As Dinham and Francis (2015) argue, religious literacy requires moving beyond simplistic binaries—such as religious versus secular or private versus public—and acknowledging that religions are dynamic, contested, and expressed in diverse ways. Engaging in religious literacy goes beyond mere preparation; it necessitates active participation in discussions. This engagement requires exploring the complexities of various religions and beliefs, including their theological foundations, traditions, and lived experiences, while also drawing on social scientific, theological, philosophical, and critical perspectives to understand how religion is characterized and problematized.

According to Shaw, the concept of religious literacy as a theoretical model highlights the discrepancy between how most people perceive religions and worldviews and how they are represented in policies and some religious education, as there is a significant gap between these idealized views and the actual diversity of religions and beliefs that exist in society. There is a need for a more comprehensive portrayal of various religions and worldviews, which should include a range of both formal and informal practices, the role of religion and belief in personal identity, and the fluid characteristics of religious and belief systems (Shaw, 2019).

1.6.2. Dispositions

After exploring religion as a category, the next step involves examining disposition, which entails assessing both personal and organizational attitudes toward religion and belief. This underscores the significance of acknowledging and reflecting on emotional and intellectual biases, expectations, and possible barriers that could hinder constructive discussions about religion. It is essential to recognize and address these underlying assumptions, even if doing so reaffirms existing perspectives. The goal is to heighten awareness of these attitudes to foster more thoughtful and open interactions with religion and belief (Francis &

Dinham, 2015). Shaw sees it as a reflexive element of religious (and wordview) literacy, that contributes to epistemic awareness while interpreting and making sense of something by relating it to one's prior experiences, assumptions, or "fore-meanings." In the context of encountering religion and belief as the "other" (something unfamiliar or different from one's own perspective), students can better understand these unfamiliar concepts by reflecting on their own pre-conceived ideas, beliefs, and experiences (Shaw, 2019).

1.6.3. Knowledge

The limited knowledge about religions (as noted by Prothero, Moore, Dinham, and others), coupled with the increasing religious diversity within society, forms a central argument for the need to promote religious literacy among the population. Grace Davie calls for "a more developed knowledge of religion together with the ability to speak well about the subject" (Davie, 2015). In the framework of religious literacy, knowledge is less about propositional truths with definitive answers and more about situated understanding that is deeply connected to its social context. This underscores the significance of recognizing religion as a lived experience, manifesting in the everyday lives of individuals and communities (Shaw, 2019). Diane Moore explores the distinction between devotional expression within a religious community, where members may justifiably assert the correctness of their interpretation or practice (orthodoxy or orthopraxy). However, from an academic and non-sectarian standpoint, it is crucial to recognize the existence of multiple valid interpretations of any given tradition. Moore contends that this non-sectarian approach is the most effective means of fostering a broader public understanding of religion (Moore, 2015).

Dinham and Francis identify knowledge as the third step in acquiring religious literacy, following the examination of religions as a category and the consideration of attitudes toward the subject. This step involves addressing the content of the subject, emphasizing the importance of both knowledge and language for effectively navigating discussions about religion and belief. It focuses on understanding the specific information necessary to comprehend the subject and the vocabulary required for meaningful engagement in these conversations (Francis & Dinham, 2015). Additionally, the discourse of religious literacy highlights the construction of knowledge through the categories used and employs a reflexive methodology that connects the knower and the known within a hermeneutic circle (Shaw, 2019).

Shaw (2019) also demonstrates that the three types of knowledge—substantive, disciplinary, and personal—developed throughout the learning process align with the concept of "powerful knowledge." According to Deng (2022), powerful knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping independent and responsible individuals who are capable of succeeding and thriving in both the present and future world. These three types of knowledge—defined by Ofsted (2021). Substantive knowledge refers to content knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions; disciplinary knowledge addresses the ways this content is studied and

interpreted through academic methods such as history, theology, and sociology; and personal knowledge involves students' reflection on their own values and identities in relation to the subject. Collectively, these knowledge types not only enhance subject understanding but also promote reflexivity and critical engagement—core aims of religious literacy.

1.6.4. Skills

The skills element represents the final stage in the Dinham and Francis taxonomy, focusing on the practical application of competencies related to religious literacy. This is especially important in contexts where individuals encounter religious plurality and diversity in contemporary society (Francis & Dinham, 2015), and it requires a self-aware approach (Shaw, 2019). These skills are applicable in various settings, including professional environments. From a student perspective, the development of these skills is motivated by a need to engage more confidently with difference in everyday life, as well as by the expectation to interact effectively with diverse perspectives in professional environments (Shaw, 2019). Therefore, integrating these competencies into education not only supports inclusive classroom dialogue but also helps prepare students for their future roles in diverse societies.

In the development of religious literacy, each stage builds on and connects to the others (Shaw, 2019). While it is possible to discuss religious categories without deep knowledge, personal reflection, or specific skills, effective application depends on prior engagement with core concepts, an understanding of one's own perspective, and some contextual awareness.

According to Shaw's (2019) model of R&W literacy, the four stages—category, disposition, knowledge, and skills—are not linear but function as parallel, ongoing aspects of learning. Together, they form a comprehensive and integrated approach to religious literacy.

1.7. Examining Religious Literacy: an Overview

1.7.1. Approaches to Measuring Religious Literacy

The study of religious literacy has evolved through various assessment instruments, each reflecting different methodological approaches and conceptual understandings of what it means to be religiously literate. The methodologies used range from simple quizzes assessing factual knowledge to complex mixed-methods studies incorporating qualitative and quantitative approaches. This section outlines the key instruments used in major studies on religious literacy across different contexts, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and the aspects of religious literacy they assess as evaluated by the author of this thesis.

United States

De Lissovoy (1954) employed a quiz-based assessment consisting of eight questions to evaluate the religious knowledge of future teachers, focusing on Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism. The quiz measured factual knowledge and was used to assess changes in understanding following a four-year educational program. While this approach effectively measured knowledge retention, it lacked depth in exploring attitudes toward religious diversity or the role of religion in social cohesion.

Prothero (2008) developed a 15-question religious literacy quiz, covering multiple religious traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The assessment focused on factual knowledge of religious texts, figures, and doctrines, reflecting a knowledge-based model of religious literacy. However, like De Lissovoy's work, it did not engage with personal beliefs, interreligious understanding, or attitudes toward religious diversity, making it a limited tool for assessing religious literacy beyond factual recall.

Pew Research Center (2010, 2019c) conducted two large-scale, probability-based national surveys that measured U.S. adults' religious knowledge and attitudes. The 2010 telephone survey asked 32 knowledge questions and nine additional items on topics such as world religions, atheism, and religion in public life (Pew Research Center, 2010). The 2019 online follow-up retained the 32 knowledge items (Pew Research Center, 2019c) and added a 0–100 *feeling-thermometer* scale to gauge affect toward 13 religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2019a). Analyses of the 2019 data show that religious, social, and demographic factors are linked to knowledge scores (Pew Research Center, 2019b). Although both datasets reveal an association between higher knowledge and greater openness to diversity, the surveys focus almost exclusively on factual recall and leave broader dimensions of religious literacy—such as critical or personal engagement—largely unaddressed. In summary, religious literacy assessments in the U.S. have primarily relied on quiz-based methodologies, effectively measuring factual knowledge but offering limited insight into how individuals engage with religion in social or personal contexts.

Europe

The REDCo Project (2006–2009) (Weisse et al., 2009, Schihalejev, 2009), coordinated by Wolfram Weisse, employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how students engage with religious diversity in schools across Europe. This included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, video recordings of lessons, and a large-scale quantitative survey. While the project sought to understand students' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, it did not aim to assess their religious knowledge. The quantitative component involved the distribution of a structured questionnaire to over 8,000 students aged 14–16 in eight European countries. This instrument included multiple sections that explored students' experiences with religious education, their personal views on religion, and their attitudes toward religious diversity and coexistence. Using Likert-scale questions,

the survey addressed a broad range of topics, such as the presence of religion in schools, the visibility of religious symbols, peer relationships, and interreligious dialogue. It also collected demographic data such as age, gender, nationality, citizenship, language spoken at home, and religious affiliation, enabling comparative analysis across different cultural and national settings (Valk et al., 2009).

A qualitative questionnaire was also used to explore the personal experiences and views of 14–16-year-old students regarding religion. It included background questions and open-ended prompts that encouraged reflection on concepts like "religion" and "God," sources of religious knowledge, and experiences with religious diversity. Students were also asked about the role of religion in school and their opinions on religious education. While the questionnaire offered rich, personal insights into students' worldviews, it did not assess their actual religious knowledge (Knauth et al., 2008).

Michon (2011), in his doctoral thesis, employed grounded theory to investigate adolescents' religious literacy through an innovative mixed-methods design. He conducted 36 semi-structured group interviews with 204 students across 27 schools in France and Germany, and complemented these with a survey administered to 276 adolescents. The questionnaire, delivered both during interviews and in classroom settings, focused on religious knowledge, attitudes toward diversity, and sociographic variables. A central element of Michon's methodology was the *entretien ludique*—a playful interview format developed specifically for this research. Designed to reduce the social and symbolic distance between adult researcher and adolescent participants, this method created a relaxed and interactive environment that encouraged more open and authentic responses. Drawing inspiration from board games like Trivial Pursuit, the format involved group-based tasks where students moved game pieces and responded to religion-related questions based on the categories they landed on. The playful interview incorporated a wide range of activities, including factual questions, visual recognition tasks, drawing exercises, photo elicitation, and mental mapping. These components aimed to reveal both school-based and informal religious knowledge shaped by family, media, and culture. The use of ludic tools grounded in adolescents' everyday cultural references allowed Michon to access context-sensitive and nuanced forms of understanding often missed by more traditional methods.

Kimanen & Kallioniemi (2018) used projective testing to explore students' emotional and interpretative responses to religion and worldview-related themes. Participants aged 15–17 were presented with images designed to stimulate reflection and imagination, encouraging them to project personal meanings and attitudes. This visual approach was combined with an online survey completed by 558 students, measuring religious knowledge and attitudes toward religious diversity. Projective testing allowed access to deeper, often subconscious responses that might not surface through direct questions. It also made the tasks more engaging, particularly for students less confident in written expression. However, the method posed challenges in interpretation, as the subjective nature of responses made standardization difficult. Despite this, the use of images proved effective in capturing nuanced perspectives on religion and the Other within a visually oriented youth culture.

Australia

Singleton et al. (2019) employed a mixed-methods design in the *Worldviews of Australia's Generation Z* (AGZ) study to investigate how young Australians engage with religious, spiritual, gender, and sexual diversity. The research combined a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,200 participants aged 13–18, conducted across all Australian states and territories, with data weighted for age, gender, location, and phone status. The survey, carried out in late 2017, measured religious affiliation, belief in God or a higher power, and attitudes toward diversity and education. It also explored key aspects of religious literacy, including students' knowledge and understanding of religions, their dispositions toward religious minorities, and their capacity to engage with religious diversity. The qualitative component included 11 focus groups with 94 students aged 15–16 in three states and 30 in-depth follow-up interviews with selected survey participants from across the country (excluding Tasmania). These methods provided both statistically significant trends and deeper insight into students' perspectives on belief, identity, and diversity.

1.7.2. Comparison and Reflections

A key distinction emerges in the methodological focus of religious literacy studies across different regions. In the United States, religious literacy assessments reflect the constitutional emphasis on studying religion in a neutral, academic, and non-devotional way, especially within public education. As such, instruments tend to focus on factual knowledge through quiz-based formats. These tools are effective in revealing what people know about religious traditions but generally do not assess how individuals personally engage with or feel about religion.

In contrast, European and Australian studies incorporate broader methodologies that extend beyond knowledge-based recall. These include qualitative interviews, projective techniques, and visual tasks, all designed to capture students' emotional, social, and contextual engagement with religion. This reflects educational traditions where religious literacy includes not only knowing about religions but also developing the capacity to reflect on one's own views, understand others, and navigate religious diversity in everyday life.

1.7.3. Summary of Findings

The cumulative findings from international studies on religious literacy reveal significant disparities in both knowledge and engagement across cultural and educational contexts. While factual knowledge constitutes a foundational element of religious literacy, research consistently indicates that broader factors—such as exposure to religious diversity, national education policies, and the influence of social networks—play a crucial role in shaping individuals' religious understanding and attitudes (Alper et al. 2019; Weisse et al. 2009; Michon 2011).

One prominent trend is the positive correlation between religious knowledge and attitudes toward religious diversity. For example, the Pew Research Center (2010, 2019) found that respondents with higher religious knowledge scores also demonstrated more favorable views of religious outgroups, suggesting that education can foster greater tolerance and interfaith understanding.

In addition, educational systems and curricula have been shown to significantly shape religious literacy. The REDCo project (Weisse et al. 2009) and Michon's (2011) comparative study in France and Germany demonstrated that national education policies, historical contexts, and curricular emphases directly affect the extent to which students engage critically with religious diversity.

Moreover, emotional and affective dimensions also contribute to religious literacy. Studies by Kimanen and Kallioniemi (2018) in Finland and Singleton et al. (2019) in Australia emphasize that structured exposure to religious diversity—especially through projective techniques or interfaith dialogue—can positively influence students' emotional responses and reduce bias, extending the concept of religious literacy beyond mere factual recall.

Taken together, these findings suggest that a comprehensive understanding of religious literacy requires the integration of both knowledge-based assessments and attitudinal or experiential components. Such an approach acknowledges not only what individuals know about religion, but also how they respond to, reflect on, and interact with religious diversity in contemporary society.

Building on insights from international studies, the following section of this thesis focuses on the Estonian context by examining how the religious literacy of basic school graduates is shaped by national educational frameworks. Previous research has shown that the structure and content of education play a critical role in influencing students' understanding of religion. To explore this relationship, the analysis begins with a review of the Estonian national curriculum to investigate how religious literacy is conceptually and pedagogically framed. This is followed by an empirical examination of students' religious knowledge, attitudes, and engagement with religious diversity. To support this analysis, a structured, quiz-based questionnaire was developed, taking into account both the theoretical framework of the study and the specific characteristics of the Estonian educational and cultural environment. While European studies have often emphasized attitudinal and qualitative dimensions, and U.S. research has focused more narrowly on factual recall through standardized quizzes, this study aimed to combine the strengths of both approaches. The instrument was designed to assess four key dimensions of religious literacy—category, disposition, knowledge, and skills—while allowing for consistency, comparability, and potential longitudinal use. Given the secular nature of Estonian society, where students may have limited exposure to or comfort with religious topics, the survey was administered anonymously to help reduce discomfort and support more open and honest responses. Although no single method can fully capture the complexity of religious literacy, this instrument offers a contextually sensitive and balanced tool for examining how young people in Estonia understand and navigate religious diversity.

PART 2. MEASURING RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF ESTONIAN FORMAL EDUCATION

2.1. Research Design

This study aims to assess the current state of religious literacy within Estonia's formal education system at the basic school level and, where relevant, to offer empirical data to inform conclusions and guide future steps.

2.1.1. Designing the Inquiry

The research questions outlined in the Introduction provide the conceptual foundation for this study and reflect its dual focus on educational policy and student experience. This chapter elaborates how these questions shape the overall research design by structuring the study across three interconnected dimensions.

The first step focuses on curriculum analysis. The study begins with an investigation of how religious literacy is articulated—explicitly and implicitly—within the core national curriculum documents that shape basic and upper secondary education in Estonia. This inquiry establishes the educational context in which students are expected to develop competencies related to religion and worldview diversity. In Estonia, religious education is not a compulsory subject in public schools; instead, religion-related content is frequently embedded within broader disciplines such as history, literature, and social studies (Betlem, 2006; Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). This integrated yet fragmented approach raises important questions about the coherence, consistency, and pedagogical depth with which students are introduced to religious concepts.

Within this policy context, the analysis examines whether the national curricula effectively prepare students to understand, respect, and engage with religious diversity, as well as broader cultural and social dimensions of belief. It also considers whether the curriculum provides students with the conceptual tools and skills needed to navigate pluralistic societies. Identifying how religious literacy is represented in curricular discourse is thus essential for uncovering both its limitations and its potential, especially in a context where non-confessional religious education is optional and minimally implemented.

The second strand of the study shifts from curricular intentions to student experiences. It investigates how students respond to and reflect this curricular framework by assessing the religious literacy of Estonian basic school graduates. The empirical survey examines both academic and instrumental aspects of religious literacy—ranging from factual knowledge and conceptual understanding to attitudes, interpretive capacities, and the ability to engage with religious and worldview diversity in a respectful and informed manner.

Finally, the third aspect reflects on pedagogical implications that arise from the survey findings. While not a primary research aim, the analysis identifies content, methods, and thematic approaches that appear supportive of fostering

religious literacy in the Estonian classroom. Rather than prescribing a single model, it highlights context-sensitive strategies that promote inclusive and meaningful engagement with religion in a secular education system.

These three dimensions not only structure the theoretical inquiry but also inform the practical design of the study. The following chapter describes how this framework was operationalized through a two-stage research process.

2.1.2. Research Process and Methods

To operationalize the study's conceptual framework, the research was carried out in two main stages. The first involved a systematic analysis of the Estonian national curricula for both basic and upper secondary education. This analysis focused on evaluating the extent of religious content, the contexts in which religious themes appear, the emphasis on religious literacy, and the presence of content that may implicitly support the development of religious literacy. The second stage involved assessing aspects of religious literacy among basic school graduates. No existing tool fully measured all four aspects of religious literacy—category, dispositions, knowledge, and skills—necessitating the creation of an original survey tailored to these dimensions. In addition to examining all four dimensions of religious literacy, this measurement tool acknowledges that religious literacy is inherently context-specific and therefore must account for both global and local religious contexts.

2.2. First Stage: Analysis of the Estonian National Curricula

The empirical data used for this analysis are the general provisions, general parts, and full texts of compulsory subjects and subject field syllabi of the currently valid (entered into force in 2011) Estonian national curriculum for basic schools (NCBS) and the national curriculum for upper secondary schools. Optional courses and subjects were excluded, as the research focuses on analyzing compulsory learning content for all general education students in Estonia. Although the curriculum texts reflect the values of the period when they were created, this analysis interpreted them through the lens of contemporary societal values to address the research questions.

The units of analysis were "units of meaning" that signaled content related to religious literacy, either explicitly or implicitly, ranging from single phrases to lengthy descriptions. A two-step process was applied to analyze these units.

The first analytical tool used was Levander and Mikkola's core curriculum analysis, which categorizes relevant curriculum descriptions into four types: brief implicit (using only a few general terms about the topic), brief explicit (using a few specific terms), extensive implicit (providing several general terms), and extensive explicit (offering detailed theoretical concepts and their specific applications and connections) (Levander & Mikkola, 2009). In this research, implicit units of meaning include curriculum content that supports the development of

religious literacy, although this literacy is not stated directly; instead, it is subtly integrated into discussions of cultural diversity.

The second analytical tool was developed based on the model of religious literacy proposed by Dinham and Francis (2015) and elaborated into an educational model by Shaw (2019). The units of meaning, previously categorized using Levander and Mikkola's core curriculum analysis framework, were then organized according to their content into the relevant sections of categories, dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

The integration of the two analytical tools revealed the nature of the discourse of religious literacy according to present within the curricula and assessed how the curricula address various aspects of religious literacy concerning the content, competencies, and skills outlined within them. This research resulted in the publication "Religious Literacy in National Curricula of Estonia" (Sooniste & Schihalejev, 2022).

2.3. Second Stage: Measuring the Religious Literacy of Estonian Basic School Graduates

2.3.1. Designing a Survey Instrument

An original survey instrument was developed to measure various aspects of religious literacy. It was designed specifically to address the study's primary research questions. The instrument evaluated the key dimensions of religious literacy—category, disposition, knowledge, and skills—as outlined in the theoretical framework. Given the sensitive and potentially unfamiliar nature of the topic for students, anonymity was prioritized to encourage honest and open responses while minimizing social desirability bias.

The survey instrument was developed with the intent of serving as a comprehensive tool that encapsulates all four aspects of religious literacy while maintaining adaptability to evolving contexts. Its design allows for adjustments based on the specific characteristics of different sample groups, ensuring relevance across diverse educational and cultural settings. Additionally, the instrument was structured to support repeatable examinations of the same sample over time, enabling longitudinal analysis. This feature makes it a feasible resource for measuring religious literacy in varied environments, facilitating both comparative studies and the assessment of trends in religious understanding across different cohorts.

The survey employed a semi-structured questionnaire for several reasons. This format ensured consistency across participants, facilitating comparability of responses and enabling scalability for future research. At the same time, open-ended questions and opportunities for comments allowed respondents to articulate their views in greater depth, yielding richer insights into their perspectives.

The questionnaire comprised four main sections, each targeting a specific dimension of religious literacy. The first section focused on assessing students'

ability to identify religion as a category within various contexts. Questions began with familiar scenarios, such as the cultural and religious significance of Christmas. They then gradually moved toward more complex and interpretative tasks that required analytical thinking, such as presenting arguments for and against a given issue or interpreting a piece of artwork (Appendix 1).

The second section explored students' dispositions toward religion and its intersections with education, culture, and policy. These questions were contextualized to reflect the everyday realities of young people in Estonia. The themes included students' attitudes toward religious education, recognizing that perceptions—whether negative, such as viewing the subject as irrelevant or biased, or positive, such as approaching it with curiosity and openness—can significantly influence the development of religious literacy. These perceptions may be shaped by various factors, including teaching approaches and classroom dynamics. The questions also explored students' perceptions of adherents of different faiths. To enable broader comparisons, some questions were adapted from the REDCo Project (Valk et al., 2009), though most were tailored specifically for the Estonian context.

The third section focused on students' knowledge of religions, applying Diane Moore's framework for religious literacy while situating the questions within the context of the Estonian religious landscape. While particular emphasis was placed on Christianity and Judaism to reflect local historical and cultural contexts, the questions also addressed other major religions. They included tasks such as identifying accurate religious statements, answering multiple-choice questions about practices like yoga, and explaining the core beliefs of various religious traditions. These knowledge-based questions were informed by content from school textbooks and aimed to evaluate both foundational understanding and higher-order cognitive skills.

The final section assessed the skills component of religious literacy. It presented students with real-life hypothetical scenarios requiring them to demonstrate competencies such as effective communication with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, gathering reliable information, and interpreting religious expressions within cultural contexts. Skills such as critical inquiry, respect for cultural diversity, and positive engagement with differences were integral to this section, reflecting key competencies outlined by Shaw (2019).

Overall, the survey instrument aimed to provide a comprehensive approach to evaluating religious literacy and ensure alignment with both theoretical frameworks and the unique characteristics of the Estonian educational and cultural landscape.

2.3.2. Methodological Challenges and Limitations of the Survey

In this section, I will outline the primary limitations of the survey identified during the study. First, translating Dinham and Francis's theoretical framework into a survey instrument posed considerable challenges. To address this, where feasible, items from previously published and methodologically rigorous

questionnaires, such as those from Pew Research and the RedCo project, were incorporated. Still, it had to take into account the local religious landscape and the fact that content related to various aspects of religious phenomena—and the competencies connected to them—is almost entirely absent from our formal education resources; therefore, the survey could not incorporate more complex or specific religious content.

One limitation of the survey is that it was administered within the context of a social studies class, which may have influenced students' responses due to the subject matter and classroom environment. This context could have shaped how participants interpreted questions or the extent to which they felt comfortable expressing their views

In terms of category (Appendix 1), the survey tool primarily assessed students' willingness to discuss religious and non-religious aspects rather than their actual ability to articulate these topics. As such, responses may reflect the students' motivation to engage rather than a comprehensive evaluation of their knowledge and communication skills. This distinction is important in light of Michon's (2019) findings, which show that many adolescents in secular and multicultural contexts demonstrate cognitive indifference—a limited ability to connect with religious themes due to their absence from everyday experience and personal relevance. Thus, a lack of detailed responses may indicate not just low knowledge, but a broader indifference shaped by minimal religious socialization.

With regard to dispositions (Appendix 2), the instrument did not fully adhere to the taxonomy of religious literacy, particularly in exploring the roots of students' attitudes or the experiences shaping any negative perceptions. Including self-reflective questions proved challenging, and given the limited emphasis on religious education in Estonian schools, there was concern that students might feel uncomfortable answering personal questions. Instead, the survey focused on capturing current religious views, emotions, and beliefs from a social perspective, thus providing a broader understanding rather than an in-depth exploration of individual dispositions.

The knowledge component presented difficulties in addressing the diversity within and across religions. Also, a question asking whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in reincarnation revealed limitations. Although the survey intended to assess more than simple familiarity with religious terms, the word "reincarnation"[1] was translated into Estonian, which led to varied interpretations. Some respondents described Christmas as the day of Jesus' reincarnation, while others commented that Muslims, Jews, and Christians believe in reincarnation in heaven. This highlights how interpretations of terminology can differ, which may affect the accuracy of responses in a multicultural context. Additionally, a

[1] In Estonian, the term *taassünd* (literally "rebirth") is often used to translate the concept of reincarnation. However, outside of a specifically religious studies context, *taassünd* may be interpreted more broadly by learners—for example, as a Christian believer's spiritual rebirth after death or entry into heaven. This can lead to confusion between the cyclical rebirth central to Hinduism and Buddhism, and the linear, one-time afterlife perspective common in Christian theology.

question asking students to identify correct statements from a list of ten (Appendix 3) was designed to test their ability to recognize accurate information about religions. However, the format allowed students to engage with the content in a relatively passive manner, as it did not require them to assess or explain each statement individually. This structure may have encouraged guessing or selective focus on familiar terms rather than a thoughtful evaluation of all items. If the task had prompted students to mark each statement as true or false—or to justify each choice—responses could have offered more precise insight into their actual understanding and reasoning. A further limitation of the instrument is the uneven complexity of knowledge questions. While Christianity-related items often required specific historical knowledge, questions about distant religions tended to focus on more general or globally familiar concepts. This may have made the latter easier to answer correctly, potentially influencing the results.

A limitation within the skills (Appendix 4), component is that it encompassed all previous aspects—category, dispositions, and knowledge—which meant that the analytical categories primarily depended on dispositions, apart from the specific question on the Last Supper. This dependency could affect the clarity and focus of responses within the skills section, as the intertwining of categories might obscure specific skill-based insights.

2.3.3. Recommendations for Improving the Survey Instrument

To improve the relevance and effectiveness of the survey instrument in future studies, several adjustments can be made to all of its main components: category, dispositions, knowledge, and skills. These changes should not only consider the cultural, educational, and religious context of the participants—particularly in secular or religiously distant settings—but also reflect the everyday interests, values, and concerns of young people during the time of the research.

The design of the survey can affect the willingness to respond. If the survey feels disconnected from the lives of the sample (students) or becomes too demanding—whether due to the time it takes, the difficulty of the questions, or the personal nature of the content—students may lose interest or respond in a superficial way. According to Lynn (2008), the more relevant a survey feels to the respondent, the more likely they are to participate. At the same time, participants can experience what is called "survey burden", which includes the time needed to complete the survey, the mental effort required to answer questions (cognitive burden), the emotional discomfort caused by sensitive questions (sensitivity), and the perceived risk of revealing personal views or experiences (risk). These factors should be carefully considered when refining the survey.

The "category" section, which currently focuses on students' willingness to discuss religious and non-religious topics rather than ability, could be improved by adding short, realistic scenarios, including references to everyday culture—such as music, online content, or games—can make the questions feel more relatable. It is also useful to separate the concepts of willingness, interest, and

confidence in speaking about worldviews to gain a clearer understanding of students' engagement.

The "dispositions" section could be improved by adding simple, reflective questions that do not require students to reveal personal or emotional experiences directly. For example, students could be asked whether their views on religion or non-religion have changed over time or what might have influenced those views. Linking worldview topics to values that are important to many young people—such as fairness, climate action, or inclusion—may also make this section more meaningful and less emotionally demanding.

The knowledge section should aim to test more than just recognition of terms. Some key religious concepts, such as "reincarnation", may need to be tested in advance with student groups to ensure that their meaning is clear. Instead of using only multiple-choice questions, the survey could include items where students are asked to explain their answers or respond to examples from media or real life. This would allow students to show their reasoning and give a more accurate picture of what they understand. It is also important to include questions that reflect the diversity within religions and include non-religious perspectives, so the content feels balanced and inclusive. Additionally, care should be taken to ensure a similar level of complexity across all questions.

The skills section currently overlaps with other parts of the survey, especially dispositions, which makes it harder to assess students' actual abilities. In future versions, this section could include short texts, conversations, or dilemmas, asking students how they would respond from an empathetic or respectful point of view. These tasks could also focus on interpretation, comparison, or critical thinking.

In conclusion, improving the survey is necessary in order to assess students' religious literacy more thoroughly. However, the revised instrument must also respect students' comfort levels and readiness to participate. If the questions are too demanding, unclear, or personal, students may feel uncomfortable and disengage from the process.

2.3.4. Political Setting of the Survey

Because religious literacy—particularly in its dimension related to personal attitudes—is closely linked to the wider cultural and political context, it is important to consider the timing of the survey. Although the survey tool was composed prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the data collection took place shortly after the war began—an event that triggered a strong emotional and patriotic response in Estonian society. This heightened sense of vulnerability and solidarity may have influenced participants to express stronger support for measures like mandatory military service, reflecting a broader atmosphere of defensiveness and national unity rather than their typical or long-standing attitudes. For example, one student wrote: "Well of course—we all have to stand up for our country and make an effort for it. We can't just send people to war who haven't gone through any kind of training." Even among those who opposed compulsory

service, concerns were still shaped by the perceived threat of war. As another student noted: "You never know the full background, but somehow it needs to be ensured that people aren't just dodging military service. People with such beliefs could be dangerous to their fellow soldiers if they are let in." These comments suggest that both support for and concerns about conscription may have been shaped not solely by personal conviction, but also—at least in part—through the lens of current events and a heightened sense of collective security.

Furthermore, the survey took place prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks on Israeli civilians and the ensuing conflict involving Hamas and Hezbollah, which have likewise shaped public opinion regarding both Jews and Muslims. Although no official data on these shifting attitudes is available, increased polarization and more pronounced personal views on these issues are evident in various media outlets and public statements.

This underscores the context-dependent nature of religious literacy and highlights the need to prepare students to be well-informed and capable of critically evaluating diverse information sources. Such preparation is essential for avoiding overly simplistic worldviews and anti-democratic attitudes.

2.3.5. Survey Implementation and Data Analysis

The survey, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Tartu University, was conducted in 2022. Invitations explaining the research objectives and the concept of "religious literacy" were sent to school leaders and social studies teachers. Schools that found the survey relevant facilitated its administration, mainly during social studies classes. Students completed the survey independently via an online link. It's worth noting that the social studies context might have influenced responses. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with students informed of their option to leave the survey incomplete. Data collection was carried out using the LimeSurvey tool, and analysis was performed with IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0, employing both descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. This research resulted in two publications in 2024: 1) Measuring the Academic Aspects of Religious Literacy of Estonian Basic School Graduates (Sooniste, 2024a); 2) Measuring the instrumental aspects of religious literacy of Estonian basic school graduates (Sooniste, 2024b).

2.3.6. Sample

The survey focused on the basic school graduates due to the fact that the basic education in Estonia provides the mandatory minimum for general education, covering grades 1 to 9, and can be completed in primary, basic, or upper secondary schools. All students follow a standardized curriculum for mandatory subjects, making Estonian basic education highly uniform. After completing basic school, students diverge into different educational paths, which leads to a varied range of experiences. They may choose general secondary education at an upper

secondary school, vocational training at a vocational institution, or enter the workforce. Because of these distinct options, education is no longer uniform, and a sample from any single pathway would not adequately represent the entire age group.

According to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (Riigikogu, 2010), graduates of basic school are expected to be creative and well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in various roles, including within family, work, and public life, and choosing educational paths that align with their interests and abilities. Schools provide age-appropriate, safe, and supportive learning environments that foster students' interest in learning, critical thinking, self-reflection, and self-expression, while also supporting the development of a strong social and cultural identity. Therefore, if religious literacy is essential for success in society, basic school graduates serve as an appropriate sample to determine whether this knowledge is present within that segment of the population.

A total of 169 basic schools were invited to join the survey, aiming for 374 respondents to achieve a 95% confidence level. In the end, 29 schools participated, gathering 392 respondents from both large urban and small rural areas. With around 13,000 students graduating each year, the survey's margin of error is about 4.87%. Only public schools following the Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools were included, excluding private schools due to their alternative educational approaches.

Participants were basic school graduates aged 15 to 16. Among the 392 respondents, 190 identified as male, 160 as female, and 33 as "other". Fifty-six had studied religion in the last three years, 38 had done so previously but not recently, and 298 had never studied religious education (RE). While only 3% of Estonian basic schools offer RE as an optional subject, 24% of the respondents reported taking RE, suggesting that schools offering RE were more likely to participate.

Private school students were excluded from the study due to their distinct educational settings and curricula, which often differ significantly from the standardized national curriculum followed by public schools. Many private schools, particularly those with a confessional orientation, integrate religious education as a core component of their teaching, which contrasts with the optional and non-confessional approach in public schools. Including private school students could have introduced variables that might skew the results and hinder comparisons focused on the national curriculum's impact.

This exclusion ensures that the study's findings remain representative of the public education system, where religious literacy is not a mandated subject. However, it also highlights a limitation: the results may not fully capture the broader spectrum of religious education practices in Estonia. Future studies could explore private schools as a separate category to provide a more comprehensive understanding of religious literacy across diverse educational contexts.

2.4. Results

The primary objective of this study was to assess the educational framework and evaluate the actual competencies of basic school graduates necessary for achieving religious literacy, a critical skill for thriving in a diverse society. The results include descriptive statistics, with each aspect of religious literacy analyzed separately in the measurement section. The aspects were not aggregated, as the study aimed to identify which dimensions of religious literacy are better supported in formal education, which competencies are less emphasized, and how the compulsory school curriculum aligns with the survey outcomes.

2.4.1. First Stage: Analysis of the Estonian National Curricula

This stage of the study, presented in Article I, focused on the analysis of the Estonian national curricula for basic and upper secondary schools (2011–2024) to answer the research question: To what extent is the discourse of religious literacy (both implicitly and explicitly) represented in the national curricula for basic and upper secondary schools in Estonia? The analysis employed the taxonomy of religious literacy developed by Dinham and Francis, which includes four key dimensions: categories, dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

The findings of Article I indicate that the curricula inadequately address the diversity of religions and worldviews in contemporary society. Religion is largely restricted to institutionalized traditions and treated as a historical or cultural phenomenon, with little attention given to non-institutionalized or individual belief systems that are increasingly present in modern contexts. As a result, there is minimal guidance for engaging with religion as a dynamic and conceptual category, limiting opportunities for students to understand its relevance in present-day society.

In terms of dispositions, the curriculum provides only limited support for developing students' attitudes toward religious diversity. This dimension is vital for fostering personal development, self-reflection, and moral growth, and for challenging prejudices and stereotypes, as highlighted by Shaw (2020). According to the findings in Article I, this aspect is most clearly addressed in the foreign language curricula, which follow the action-oriented approach of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR places language learning within broader social and cultural contexts, recognizing religion as part of sociocultural knowledge and existential competencies (Council of Europe, 2001). However, outside of foreign languages, explicit references to dispositions toward religion are either absent or only briefly mentioned in subjects such as mathematics, technology, physical education, and the natural sciences. Where dispositions are included, they tend to remain implicit, which limits students' opportunities to critically reflect on their own attitudes or engage meaningfully with the beliefs of others.

The dimension of knowledge, as revealed by the curriculum analysis in Article I, is presented in a predominantly historical frame. In history curricula,

religious content focuses on the ancient origins of world religions: Judaism is introduced in grades 4–6 in the context of ancient Eastern civilizations, and Islam appears in grade 7 during studies of the Middle Ages. Post-Reformation developments are notably absent from the basic school curricula, and in upper secondary education, the coverage of religion concludes with the 19th-century conversion movement in Estonia. This narrow scope limits students' ability to understand the complex social, political, and cultural dimensions of religion, and overlooks its internal diversity—both of which are central to religious literacy as defined by Moore (2015). The curricula of other subjects, such as Language and Literature and Technology, also tend to depict religion as culturally and temporally distant. While these subjects promote general values such as tolerance and acceptance, they do not address the contemporary presence or significance of religion in society. As noted by Francis and Dinham (2015) and Moore (2015), a meaningful understanding of religion's relevance in present-day life, its plurality, and its embeddedness in wider social processes is a prerequisite for developing religious literacy. The analysis presented in Article I shows that these prerequisites are not yet fully met in the Estonian curricula.

The fourth dimension, skills, concerns students' ability to apply their knowledge and engage constructively with religion in various contexts. Article I shows that while the curricula contain implicit elements relevant to religious literacy—such as general intercultural competencies and civic education goals—specific skills for engaging with religion are underdeveloped. For instance, some history syllabi include religion-related vocabulary, and the general education goals of the national curricula promote civic responsibility and respect for diversity. However, religious literacy also involves more targeted skills, such as the ability to interpret religious symbols, analyze how religion intersects with culture and politics, and evaluate religious narratives critically (Moore, 2015). These are largely missing from the curriculum. Respect for religious and ethnic diversity is encouraged, but it is often framed in terms of distant cultural practices, disconnected from students' immediate environments or lived experience. For example, while the curriculum expects basic school students to "name major religions represented in Estonia and describe their practices" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011), it offers no clear content or guidance to support the development of this competency. Moreover, the treatment of religious topics is often tied to historical periods, particularly up to the Middle Ages, leaving modern-day applications of religious knowledge and engagement unaddressed.

In summary, the findings of Article I demonstrate that the Estonian national curricula take a fragmented and historically limited approach to religious literacy. They largely overlook key aspects such as contemporary religious diversity, the presence of non-institutionalized beliefs, and the development of dispositions and skills necessary for engaging with religion in today's pluralistic society. While there are isolated elements that support religious literacy, these are neither coherent nor comprehensive. The results suggest a need for curricular reform that aligns more closely with broader definitions of religious literacy, as articulated by scholars such as Moore (2015), Dinham and Francis (2015), and Shaw (2019),

in order to better prepare students for life in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

2.4.2. Second Stage: Measuring Religious Literacy of Basic School Graduates

The second stage of this study (Article II and Article III) sought to address two key research questions:

- How do Estonian basic school graduates perform on assessments evaluating the academic dimensions of religious literacy?
- What competencies do these graduates demonstrate regarding the practical, instrumental aspects of religious literacy?

This phase aimed to determine whether the deficiencies in religious knowledge and competencies identified in the curriculum analysis were also reflected in the assessed dimensions of religious literacy among Estonian basic school graduates.

In today's educational landscape, students acquire information from a variety of sources beyond the school environment, including religious knowledge. Michon (2011) highlights the significant influence of informal sources such as media, peers, and the broader environment in shaping adolescents' beliefs about religion.

The REDCo project (Schihalejev, 2009) previously found that nearly half of Estonian students cited school as their primary source of religious information, while media predominantly portrayed religion in a negative light. However, findings of Article II reveal a shift: school and social media now serve as equally important sources of religious knowledge for over half (56%) of respondents. Other sources include internet platforms (46%), travel experiences (36%), books (31%), family (26%), and friends (21%). Notably, 6% of respondents indicated that they do not obtain any information about religion at all (Article II).

The 2009 study also reported that Estonian students rarely or never discussed religion. Similarly, the current findings suggest that this trend persists, as friends were identified as the least relevant source of religious knowledge. This implies that religion remains largely absent from social conversations among Estonian youth.

These results underline the evolving dynamics of how religious knowledge is accessed and highlight a continuing gap in fostering meaningful discussions about religion within both formal and informal settings.

Academic aspects of religious literacy. Category

Shaw (2019) distinguishes between the academic and instrumental aspects of religious literacy within the Dinham and Francis taxonomy. The academic dimension, encompassing the "category" and "knowledge" components, focuses on scholarly inquiry into religious content, while the instrumental dimension emphasizes

personal development and the skills needed to engage with religious phenomena. In line with this framework, the survey analysis presented in Article II examined the academic dimension of "religion as a category", evaluating students' ability and willingness to discuss religious and non-religious aspects of various cultural and social phenomena, including weddings, Christmas, the construction of a mosque in Tallinn, and religious references in street art.

The findings of Article II reveal a general hesitation among Estonian basic school graduates to engage with religious phenomena in society. Although all the questions were designed to allow for both religious and non-religious interpretations, only the question about the meaning of Christmas elicited responses that were predominantly religious. This can be attributed to Christmas's status as a national public holiday and its celebration in both schools and families. On average, students provided two different interpretations of Christmas: approximately one-third associated it with the birth of Christ and slightly fewer with gift-giving. However, misconceptions were also present—some students, for instance, incorrectly associated Christmas with the death of Jesus. Only about 10% of respondents mentioned practices such as attending church or praying, suggesting a limited connection to lived religious experience.

For other cultural phenomena included in the survey, responses were largely framed in secular terms. In the case of church weddings, students most commonly associated them with tradition or described them as legal contracts between a man and a woman. Religious interpretations were the third most frequent category, followed by descriptions of weddings as cultural events or as civil agreements between individuals and the state.

The question about building a mosque in Tallinn was particularly revealing. More than half of the respondents either left the question unanswered or indicated that they were unable to provide a response. Among those who opposed the construction of the mosque, the objections were mostly non-religious in nature, referring to practical concerns such as cost or lack of space. In contrast, those who supported the idea offered more diverse arguments, often referencing cultural and religious rights, such as freedom of religion and the importance of providing Muslims in Estonia with a place of worship.

The question involving Banksy's Consumer Christ was the most engaging of all. It elicited more original and thoughtful responses, with approximately one-third of the respondents offering comprehensive interpretations that drew on multiple contexts. In stark contrast to the mosque question, which more than half left unanswered, only 17% of students chose not to respond to the Banksy item. This suggests that students are more willing to engage with religious themes when they are presented in ways that are culturally familiar, visually engaging, or provoke critical reflection.

These findings, as presented in Article II, support the earlier curriculum analysis in Article I, which identified the "category" dimension of religious literacy as the least emphasized area in the national curriculum. The curriculum offers minimal support for developing the conceptual understanding of religion or encouraging dialogue about its role in society. As a result, students often lack

the confidence and conceptual tools to meaningfully engage with the religious dimensions of social and cultural issues. While most students demonstrated ease in discussing the secular aspects of the presented phenomena, their responses indicated a limited capacity to engage with the religious dimensions to the same extent. This reflects a gap in both curriculum content and pedagogical support for treating religion as a relevant and meaningful category in contemporary life.

Academic aspects of religious literacy. Knowledge

The survey included 15 questions addressing statements related to various world religions and the Estonian religious landscape. Recognizing that most Estonian students lack formal religious education, the questions were fact-based and focused on fundamental religious concepts derived from school textbooks on history, social studies, and elective courses. They did not explore the internal diversity or more complex aspects of world religions.

The analysis in Article II indicates that, on average, respondents answered 7 out of 15 questions correctly, with a median score also of 7. Although no participant achieved a perfect score, the highest number of correct responses recorded was 13 (Chart 1). The results indicate that many Estonian basic school graduates lack fundamental knowledge about religions. For instance, fewer than half of the respondents (48%) correctly identified Ramadan as a celebration in Islam, and only 42% knew that, according to the Bible, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. When the questions required slightly more specific knowledge, the accuracy rates dropped significantly; for example, only about 9% of respondents correctly identified Saturday as the holy day for Jews. The two questions addressing the Estonian religious landscape also yielded low accuracy rates. Approximately 40% of respondents were aware that there is a synagogue in Tallinn and that the Lutheran Church originated as a result of the Reformation.

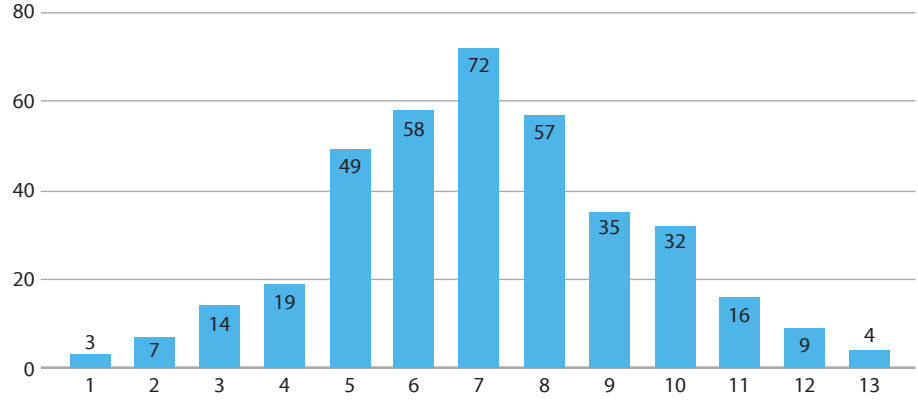

Chart 1. Knowledge about religions. Total number of correct answers

The earlier curriculum analysis presented in Article I revealed that religions are often portrayed as geographically and historically distant. This finding is further supported by the survey results in Article II, where questions about Buddhism and Hinduism—traditions commonly introduced in historical contexts—received the highest accuracy rates. This suggests a disconnection between curricular content and the development of a deeper and more contemporary understanding of religious diversity.

Instrumental aspects of religious literacy. Dispositions

The analysis of students' dispositions toward various religious phenomena, as presented in Article III, explored how young people respond to religion in both educational and societal contexts. The survey focused on four domains: religion in school, religion and education, religious persons in the classroom, and religious phenomena in society.

In the domains of religion in school and religion and education, students were asked to evaluate the extent to which they agreed with statements about religion's presence in schools and the potential benefits of studying religions. These questions aimed to assess how students perceive the role of religion in education and its potential to promote understanding, values, and awareness.

Questions addressing students' dispositions toward religious individuals and phenomena in society presented hypothetical scenarios and required respondents to express their feelings or attitudes toward specific situations. Participants were provided with options to indicate their dispositions: positive, negative, neutral, or, in some cases, "I do not know this religion." These scenarios involved both interpersonal and societal contexts, such as encountering classmates of different religious backgrounds or responding to cultural and religious phenomena in their community. This approach aimed to explore students' attitudes toward religion in various contexts, offering insights into their openness, understanding, and potential biases.

Unlike the REDCo project, this survey did not investigate students' personal beliefs or religious practices but instead focused on their attitudes toward various societal phenomena. While this approach avoided probing sensitive topics, it had limitations, such as not addressing the origins of these attitudes or the experiences that influence negative perceptions. Including self-reflective questions was challenging, particularly given the minimal emphasis on religious education in Estonian schools, raising concerns about students' willingness to engage with personal topics. The survey primarily aimed to examine contemporary religious thoughts, feelings, and beliefs from a social perspective, exploring how individuals develop religious beliefs within society.

This section of Article III highlighted several aspects that should be addressed within formal education and identified potential strategies to support the development of students' attitudes in a more inclusive and tolerant direction. Firstly, this study showed a correlation between familiarity with a religious group and more favorable attitudes toward it, consistent with findings by Kimanen & Kallioniemi

(2018). Christianity, being the most common religion in Estonia, received the fewest negative or "I do not know" responses. In contrast, Rastafarianism, as the least familiar religion, had the lowest number of positive responses and the highest proportion of "I do not know" answers, which influenced the distribution of positive and neutral attitudes. Although Judaism holds a significant place in Estonia's religious landscape, previous findings on knowledge indicate that it remains unfamiliar to Estonian youth. Similarly, in this section, Jews, along with Muslims, received the highest proportion of unfavorable responses, at approximately 10–11% of respondents. These findings indicate that negative attitudes toward Jews in Estonia exceed those typically reported among younger respondents in Western European countries—such as the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and France—where such attitudes generally range from 3–6%, according to a Pew Research Center survey (Wike et al., 2019).

Secondly, a promising finding of this study indicates that negative attitudes toward unfamiliar subjects decrease when the subject is presented with a relatable story or specific qualities. The more detailed and descriptive the hypothetical scenario provided to students, the fewer negative attitudes were expressed. For example, an anonymous Muslim student received 11% negative responses, while a Muslim family in the neighborhood wearing culturally characteristic clothing received 9% negative responses. Notably, a Muslim hip-hop singer, Khaled Siddiq, described in a detailed scenario, elicited 76% more positive responses compared to previous questions about Muslims, with only 8% expressing negative attitudes. This offers a promising foundation for developing both academic and practical competencies in intercultural and religious education.

Finally, the results regarding religion in school indicate that Estonian students are more supportive of religious expressions perceived as universal rights accessible to all, such as wearing modest religious symbols. In contrast, they are less supportive of practices viewed as privileges specific to religious individuals, such as the right to miss class for religious reasons.

When these findings are considered alongside the curriculum analysis presented in Article I, a clear pattern emerges: the limited presence of explicit religious content in the national curricula appears to be mirrored in students' knowledge gaps and hesitant or negative attitudes toward religious phenomena. While students seem generally more open to broad cultural diversity, explicitly religious content often receives less support. This suggests that the absence of religion in curricular content may hinder students' ability to develop informed, reflective, and inclusive attitudes.

Instrumental aspects of religious literacy. The skills

The final component of religious literacy, as examined in Article III, integrates all the previously discussed aspects—category, dispositions, and knowledge. In this section, students were presented with a hypothetical narrative about an exchange student, accompanied by four questions designed to explore various

dimensions of intercultural competencies. These included openness to other cultures, the ability to share one's own culture, and different communication skills.

The results of Article III revealed that while most Estonian youth are open to engaging with people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds, they lack key intercultural competencies. Approximately 30% of respondents demonstrated limited skills, as defined by Robert Jackson, in interacting, listening, and gathering information about other religious groups. Within this group, around 10% expressed negative or offensive comments, reflecting findings on dispositions where a similar proportion exhibited negative attitudes toward Jews and Muslims.

When asked about introducing their own culture to outsiders, one-third of students struggled to articulate aspects of their culture, and only half referenced local holidays or traditions. This lack of cultural awareness was further emphasized by responses to a question about da Vinci's Last Supper, which less than half of the students recognized, despite its presence in textbooks and the National Curriculum. This suggests difficulties in applying historical and cultural knowledge to broader contexts.

Students found it easier to discuss unfamiliar religious expressions than to explain their own Christian heritage to others. These findings underscore a significant gap in students' intercultural skills and religious literacy, highlighting the critical role of education in fostering these competencies.

The earlier curriculum analysis presented in Article I revealed that while skills are the most addressed dimension of religious literacy in Estonian curricula, they are predominantly linked to content that is either historical or geographically distant. Moreover, the curricula often present these skills in general and vague terms, such as "values different cultures" or "understands different value systems," without supporting these objectives with adequate learning content or activities to achieve these outcomes. This disconnect is reflected in the study's findings, where students do not exhibit the ability to navigate religious phenomena effectively.

The results also highlight that the development of competent skills—the ultimate goal of religious literacy—is dependent on earlier stages of acquisition depending on the prior acquisition of foundational elements. Without the ability to discuss and conceptualize religion as a category, examine personal dispositions toward religion, and acquire foundational knowledge about reflecting on one's own dispositions and gaining substantive knowledge of basic religious concepts, achieving proficiency in skills remains unattainable.

Addressing these gaps is essential for preparing students to navigate and engage with a culturally and religiously diverse world. The findings of Article III indicate that the promotion of religious literacy within formal education is currently supported only in an indirect and general manner within policy documents. Furthermore, the competencies students acquire do not align with widely accepted definitions of religious literacy, which are essential for success in a pluralistic society.

Building directly on these results, five additional insights emerge from the survey that sharpen the overall picture of graduates' strengths and weaknesses.

First, there is a clear curricular gap: because contemporary religious manifestations are largely absent from the national syllabi, students leave school without the conceptual tools needed to navigate a multicultural society. Second, this omission helps explain their marked reluctance to discuss religion; most prefer secular angles unless a topic is anchored in culturally familiar material such as street art or popular music. Third, the data show that engagement rises sharply when religion is framed through personal narratives and recognisable individuals—for instance, a scenario featuring hip-hop artist Khaled Siddiq prompted far more positive responses toward Muslims than abstract questions did. Fourth, students display greater tolerance toward familiar traditions like Christianity, yet their factual knowledge appears broader for geographically and h*istorically distant religions;* as noted in the study's limitations, this contrast may partly reflect differences in question structure rather than a true disparity in depth of knowledge. Finally, respondents struggle with self-reflection: they can comment on unfamiliar religious expressions more readily than they can explain their own symbols, practices or holidays. Together, these five findings underscore the need for curricular content, pedagogy and teacher preparation that link contemporary religious realities, narrative-based learning and structured opportunities for personal reflection with robust factual study.

2.5. Conclusions

Developing religious literacy among Estonian students demands close attention to the country's particular cultural and educational environment. Estonia's strongly secular orientation and relatively rigid curriculum structures—set against a backdrop of growing diversity—leave many pupils without the conceptual tools needed to engage thoughtfully with religious phenomena. Dinham and Jones (2010) observe that genuine engagement depends on dismantling stereotypes and fostering informed dialogue, goals that require locally tailored strategies rather than wholesale imports from other systems.

Current policy discussion centres on two unresolved questions (Teearu 2024; Riigikogu, 2024). One is whether any religious content belongs in compulsory schooling at all (Ruul, 2023). The other asks how such content should be organised: as a dedicated religious-studies (RS) course or dispersed across several subjects (Soom 2023; Schihalejev, 2023). Whatever arrangement eventually prevails must respect cultural sensibilities yet still equip learners for a multicultural society. Each model involves trade-offs. A stand-alone RS course would require a limited cohort of specialist teachers who could be trained through existing university programmes, while an integrated model obliges a broader range of educators to address religion within their disciplines and thus demands more extensive professional development (Härm, 2021). Because religion, society and culture are intertwined (Moore, 2008), cross-curricular competencies remain essential whichever structural route Estonia adopts.

Although many international scholars argue that religious literacy should not be confined to a single subject (Parker, 2020; Biesta et al., 2019), Estonia's optional RS syllabus is, for now, the only policy document explicitly aligned with this view. Schihalejev (2023) therefore calls for dedicated teaching time and specialised preparation if RS is to present diverse traditions accurately. Survey results reinforce this conclusion, showing that students hesitate to discuss religion and need more than factual knowledge: they must be able to evaluate information critically, distinguish religion from non-religion (Shaw 2019) and cultivate the dialogical skills highlighted by Jackson (2014) and the Council of Europe (2016).

Improving that situation begins with updating content. Religion should not appear solely as distant history but be linked to contemporary issues such as migration, interfaith cooperation or climate activism; doing so makes its continuing social relevance clear (Moore 2008). Learners respond more readily when religious themes emerge through culturally familiar media—music, popular culture, street art, social platforms—because these entry points connect abstract ideas to everyday experience, an approach championed by the "Big Ideas for Religious Education" project (Brine et al., 2017). Engagement deepens further when lessons feature personal narratives: named individuals with recognisable stories foster empathy and reduce prejudice, as Dinham and Francis (2015) and Shaw (2019) have shown. Starting from what students already know—most often Christianity—and progressively exploring less familiar worldviews builds confidence while broadening horizons, echoing findings from Finland and earlier REDCo research (Kimanen & Kallioniemi, 2018).

Effective pedagogy should also invite self-reflection. Many Estonian pupils struggle to articulate their own cultural or religious background, suggesting limited opportunities to examine personal values and assumptions. Classroom activities such as storytelling, creative projects or exhibitions can strengthen self-understanding and encourage open dialogue with others. Yet such work is unlikely to flourish unless the timetable guarantees time for religion and worldviews; cross-curricular references alone have proved insufficient (Sooniste 2024a, 2024b). Allocating compulsory lessons would ensure systematic coverage for every learner and align with the Council of Europe's Competences for Democratic Culture (2016).

Finally, none of these reforms can succeed without well-prepared teachers. Both pre-service courses and continuing professional development must supply educators with substantive knowledge and practical strategies for handling sensitive topics, facilitating discussion and connecting religious content to broader social contexts.

Although religious literacy in Estonia remains unevenly supported, the study identifies clear paths forward. By making religion more visible, relevant and reflective—and by investing in teacher expertise—schools can give all students the understanding and skills required to navigate an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

SUMMARY

This doctoral thesis explored how religious literacy is represented in Estonia's national education system and to what extent basic school graduates possess the competencies needed to navigate religious diversity in contemporary society. Situated in one of the most secular countries in Europe, Estonia presents a unique context for examining religious literacy as a civic, rather than confessional, educational aim.

The study was guided by three main research questions: (1) How is religious literacy represented—explicitly or implicitly—in Estonia's national curricula for basic and upper secondary education? (2) What is the level of religious literacy among Estonian basic school graduates, across both academic and instrumental dimensions? (3) What methods, content, and themes appear effective in supporting the development of religious literacy in this context?

To answer these questions, the thesis employed a two-stage research design. First, a detailed analysis of the national curricula revealed that religious literacy is inconsistently and minimally addressed. Religion is typically presented as a distant historical or cultural topic, while contemporary relevance, conceptual clarity, and engagement with religious diversity remain underdeveloped. The four key dimensions of religious literacy—category, dispositions, knowledge, and skills—are unevenly distributed across the curriculum, with dispositions and category receiving the least attention.

The second stage of the research involved the development and implementation of a comprehensive survey instrument, tailored to the Estonian context, to assess the religious literacy of basic school graduates. The results highlighted several key patterns: students demonstrated modest factual knowledge of religion, greater openness to familiar religious traditions, and a clear preference for non-religious explanations in most cases. However, when religious topics were presented through culturally relatable formats—such as art, music, or personal narratives—students showed increased engagement and empathy. Their ability to reflect on their own cultural or religious background was limited, and critical skills for navigating religious diversity were underdeveloped.

Together, the findings suggest that current educational policies and practices do not adequately support the cultivation of religious literacy as defined in international frameworks. Yet the study also identified promising opportunities—especially in using contemporary cultural references and personal narratives—to make religious literacy more relevant, accessible, and impactful for students.

This thesis contributes both a theoretical framework and an empirically grounded assessment tool for measuring religious literacy in secular educational settings. It provides actionable insights for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers, and makes the case for framing religious literacy as a civic competency essential for democratic participation, intercultural understanding, and ethical reflection in a pluralistic society.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questions about Category

1) What is a church wedding about? Mark all that apply:
   – culture
   – tradition
   – religious ceremony
   – legal contract between people and the state
   – legal contract between a man and a woman
   – other

2) Why do some people get married in a church? Write down as many reasons as you know.

3) Christmas has different meanings to different people. List as many different meanings as you can.

4) Recently, there has been a discussion about building a mosque in Tallinn. Present up to five arguments to support the building of the mosque and up to five arguments to oppose it.

5) Street artist Banksy's work often draws attention to the problems of society. What could be the message of this work?

Appendix 2. Questions about Dispositions

Religion and school:
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
Do not agree 1…2…3…4…5 Totally agree
1. School menus should consider students' religious beliefs.
2. Students should have the right to wear modest religious symbols at school (crosses, etc.).
3. Students should have the right to wear more visible religious symbols at school.
4. Students should have a right to miss some kind of lesson for religious reasons.
5. Schools should provide students with an opportunity to pray or meditate if they wish.

Religion and education:
To what extent do you agree that studying religions helps one to:
Do not agree 1…2…3…4…5 Totally agree
1. understand others and live peacefully together
2. understand the history of your country and the world
3. understand contemporary events
4. form values
5. learn about your own worldview

Dispositions towards religious people in the classroom:
How would you feel (positively, negatively, neutrally; I do not know this religion) if your new classmate were:
- A Christian
- A Jew
- A Muslim
- A Buddhist
- A Rastafari

Dispositions towards religious phenomena in society:
1. How would you feel (positively, negatively, neutrally) if a Muslim family came to live in your neighborhood and they wore clothing that was characteristic of their own culture?
2. How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) if a Syrian Christian culture center were built in your town?
3. Famous hip-hop artist Khaled Siddiq is coming to visit Estonia. As many of his songs have Islamic content, several protests are being held against him. How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) about it?
4. How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) towards the fact that Estonian young people can refuse military service for religious reasons and choose a replacement service instead?

Appendix 3. Questions about Knowledge

1. Below choose only those statements that you think are true. If necessary, explain your answer. You can also explain the statements that you believe are not true.
   - Islam is older than Christianity.
   - Buddhism originated in Japan.
   - The god of Islam is Muhammad.
   - New Testament is a holy scripture for both Christians and Jews.
   - Lutheran church emerged as a result of the Reformation.
   - Hindus and Buddhists have the same scriptures.
   - The house of worship for Jews is a church.
   - There is a synagogue in Estonia.
   - The pope is the spiritual leader for all Christians.
   - Jews, Christians and Muslims do not believe in reincarnation.

2. With which religious tradition is Yoga most closely associated?
   Choose one of the following options:
   Judaism
   Hinduism
   Islam
   Zoroastrianism
   Do not know.

3. Where was Jesus born, according to the Bible?
   Choose one of the following options:
   Athens
   The Vatican
   Nazareth
   Mecca
   Bethlehem

4. Ramadan is holy to which religion?

5. What does monotheism mean? Choose one of the following options:
   - One god is more powerful than the others.
   - There are several gods.
   - There is no god.
   - There is only one god.

6. What day of the week is holy for Jews?

Appendix 4. Questions about Skills

1. Exchange student Amila from Sri Lanka is coming to live with your family for a year. According to the data from the 2012 census, 70.2% of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist; 12.2% is Hindu; 9.7% is Muslim; and 7.4% is Christian. How would you prepare for Amila's arrival? What should you research and consider before she comes?

2. How should a Sri Lankan student prepare herself for life in Estonia, in your school, and in your family? What are the important holidays and traditions here, and how are they celebrated?

3. Amila from Sri Lanka sees a picture of this painting in your textbook and asks you to explain to her why this painting is important and what is depicted in the painting. How would you explain to him the importance of this painting in Western culture and what is expressed in the painting?

Source: Wikipedia

4. Now Amila shows you a picture from her hometown, Dambulla Temple. What do you think is depicted in the picture? What questions would you ask about this picture to learn more about Amila's faith and culture?

Source: Wikimedia commons

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Eesti põhikoolilõpetajate religioonialane kirjaoskus

Religioonialane kirjaoskus on interdistsipliaarne pädevus, mis hõlmab teadmisi, hoiakuid ja oskusi, et mõista religiooni tähendust ühiskonnas ning suhelda sisukalt ja lugupidavalt usulise ning maailmavaatelise mitmekesisuse tingimustes. Kaasaegsetes pluralistlikes ühiskondades käsitletakse religioonialast kirjaoskust olulise kodanikupädevusena, mis toetab demokraatlikku osalust, kultuuridevahelist dialoogi ja eetilist refleksiooni (AAR, 2010; Walker et al., 2021; Dinham & Francis, 2015). Diane Moore'i käsitluses tähendab religioonialane kirjaoskus võimet mõista, kuidas religioon põimub sotsiaalsete, kultuuriliste ja poliitiliste struktuuridega ning avaldub erinevates kontekstides (Moore, 2014). Dinham ja Francis (2015) on loonud neljaosalise raamistiku, mis jagab religioonialase kirjaoskuse järgmistesse komponentidesse: religiooni kui kategooria mõistmine, hoiakute kujundamine, faktiteadmised ning praktilised oskused mitmekesises maailmas toimimiseks. Martha Shaw (2019) on seda edasi arendanud, rõhutades refleksiivsuse ja kriitilise mõtlemise keskset rolli ning pakkudes välja haridusmudeli, milles akadeemiline (kategooria ja teadmised) ning instrumentaalne (hoiakud ja oskused) aspekt toimivad paralleelselt.

Rahvusvaheline hariduspoliitika, sealhulgas OSCE ja Euroopa Nõukogu, peab religioonialast kirjaoskust inimõiguste ja demokraatliku osaluse tagamise vahendiks (OSCE 2007; Council of Europe 2008b). Uurijad on toonud esile, et religioonialased teemad muutuvad õpilaste jaoks tähenduslikuks eeskätt siis, kui need on seotud isiklike lugude, visuaalse materjali, popkultuuri ja eluliste olukordadega (Shaw, 2019; Sooniste, 2024b).

Religioonialase kirjaoskuse empiiriline mõõtmine on arenev valdkond. Enamik varasemaid uuringuid on keskendunud teadmistele (Prothero, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2019), kuid hiljutised uuringud on püüdnud hinnata ka hoiakuid, refleksiivsust ja sotsiaalset suutlikkust (Weisse, 2009; Michon, 2019). Käesoleva uurimistöö raames töötati välja originaalne mõõtevahend, mis võimaldab hinnata nelja religioonialase kirjaoskuse mõõdet korraga (Sooniste, 2024a; 2024b). Küsitlus koosnes kategooria, hoiakute, teadmiste ja oskuste plokist, hõlmates kokku mitukümmend nii avatud kui ka valikvastustega küsimust. Küsimused olid inspireeritud varasematest rahvusvahelistest uuringutest (REDCo, Pew) ning kohandatud Eesti konteksti, arvestades siinse kultuuriruumi ja usuõpetuse puudulikkust. Küsimustiku piiranguteks olid mõne mõiste (nt reinkarnatsioon) erinev tõlgendamine, samuti see, et mõnele küsimusele ei olnud vastamine struktureeritud, mis raskendas vastuste tõlgendamist. Lisaks oli keeruline mõõta refleksiivseid hoiakuid kvantitatiivselt ning isikliku usulise kogemuse uurimine oli eetilistel kaalutlustel võimalik vaid piiratud ulatuses.

Käesoleva uurimistöö uurimisküsimused olid järgmised: 1) millisel määral ja mil viisil on religioonialase kirjaoskusega seotud sisu (nii otseselt kui ka kaudselt) esindatud Eesti põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklikes õppekavades? 2) Milline

on Eesti põhikooli lõpetajate suutlikkus vastata religioonialase kirjaoskuse akadeemiliste mõõtmete (religioon kui kategooria ning religioonialased teadmised) hindamisülesannetele? 3) Milliseid pädevusi demonstreerivad põhikoolilõpetajad religioonialase kirjaoskuse praktiliste, instrumentaalsete aspektide (hoiakud ja oskused) osas?

Et Eesti on üks maailma sekulaarsemaid ühiskondi ning religiooni käsitletakse koolihariduses pigem harva, keskendub käesolev uurimus kahele tasandile: esiteks analüüsitakse, kuidas on religioonialane kirjaoskus esindatud riiklikes õppekavades, ja teiseks hinnatakse põhikooli lõpetajate teadmisi, hoiakuid ja oskusi nelja mõõtme lõikes. Esimeses etapis analüüsiti aastatel 2011–2024 kehtinud põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklikke õppekavasid. Analüüs põhines Dinhami ja Francise neljaosalisel raamistikul ning kasutas Levanderi ja Mikkola kontseptuaalset eristust õppekavade analüüsimiseks (otsene-kaudne; lühike-põhjalik). Tulemustest selgus, et religiooni käsitletakse peamiselt ajaloolise või kultuurilise nähtusena ning puudub süsteemne käsitlus religioonist kui sotsiaalsest, mitmekesises ajas ja ruumis muutuvast nähtusest (Sooniste & Schihalejev, 2022). Hoiakute kujundamine oli minimaalselt esindatud, peamiselt kultuurilise mitmekesisuse üldkontseptsioonina. Faktiteadmised olid killustunud ja paigutatud ajaliselt kaugematesse teemadesse. Oskused puudutasid valdavalt ajalooliste sündmuste mõistmist ning ei hõlmanud tänapäevaseid sotsiaalseid oskusi mitmekesises ühiskonnas toimetulekuks.

Teises etapis viidi läbi üleriigiline küsitlus 392 põhikooli lõpetajaga. Uuringust jäeti välja erakoolid, et keskenduda riikliku õppekava mõjule. Kasutati spetsiaalselt Eesti kontekstile loodud ja kohandatud mõõteriista, mis hõlmas kõiki nelja mõõdet (Sooniste, 2024a; 2024b). Akadeemiliste aspektide (kategooria ja teadmised) tulemustest ilmnes, et religioossete nähtuste käsitlemisel eelistavad õpilased sekulaarseid tõlgendusi. Religioossed seletused ilmusid valdavalt tuttava või kultuuriliselt huvipakkuva konteksti kaudu (nt jõulud, Banksy kunst). Faktiteadmised olid tagasihoidlikud ja ebajärjekindlad, paremad teadmised olid kaugematest religioonidest, samas kui Eesti usulise maastiku kohta oli teadmisi napilt (Sooniste, 2024a).

Instrumentaalsete aspektide (hoiakud ja oskused) analüüs näitas, et kristluse suhtes oldi üldiselt positiivselt meelestatud, samas kui vähem tuntud religioonide (nt islam, judaism) suhtes esines teadmatusest tulenevat ebakindlust ja negatiivseid hoiakuid. Kõige empaatilisemad vastused ilmnesid siis, kui religioossed teemad olid seotud isikustatud olukordadega. Näiteks muusik Khaled Siddiqi näitel vähenesid negatiivsed hoiakud märkimisväärselt (Sooniste, 2024b). Oskuste hindamisel ilmnes, et noored suutsid paremini tõlgendada teiste religioonide sümboleid kui enda kultuurilisi või religioosseid viiteid. Enesereflektsioon oli nõrk ning valmisolek argumenteeritud aruteluks usulise mitmekesisuse üle piiratud.

Kokkuvõttes näitavad tulemused, et religioonialane kirjaoskus on Eesti koolihariduses killustatud ja süsteemse toeta. Õppekavades sisalduv potentsiaal jääb tihti realiseerimata ning sõltub suurel määral õpetaja individuaalsetest otsustest ja pädevusest. Siiski pakub uuring mitmeid võimalusi arendusteks. Näiteks võiks õppekavades selgemini defineerida religioonialase kirjaoskuse eesmärgid ning

lõimida need üldpädevustesse. Õpetajakoolituses tuleks pöörata enam tähelepanu religiooniga seotud teemade neutraalsele ja kultuuritundlikule käsitlemisele. Positiivseid arengusuundi võiks toetada õppevaraga, mis kasutab narratiivseid, visuaalseid ja isikustatud käsitlusi. Lisaks võiks kaaluda kaasava ja interdistsiplinaarse õppevormi juurutamist, kus religioonialased teemad lõimitakse ajaloo, kirjanduse, ühiskonnaõpetuse ja kunstiõpetuse ainekavadesse.

Religioonialast kirjaoskust tuleks käsitleda kodanikupädevusena, mis toetab teadlikku ja sallivat ühiskonda. Eesti kontekstis tähendab see vajadust luua haridussüsteem, mis võimaldab noortel orienteeruda mitmekesises maailmas, mõista erinevusi ning kujundada refleksiivset ja kriitilist suhtumist religiooniga seotud nähtustesse. Käesolev uurimus pakub nii teoreetilist raami kui ka empiirilist tõendusmaterjali, mis toetab hariduspoliitikat, õpetajakoolitust ja õppekavaarendust eesmärgiga edendada usulist ja maailmavaatelist kirjaoskust Eesti hariduses.

PUBLICATIONS

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name:	Aleksandra Sooniste
Date & Place of Birth:	29 December 1975, Tartu, Estonia
Citizenship:	Estonian

Education

2021–…	University of Tartu, PhD studies (Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies)
2012	University of Tartu, Master of Arts (MA) in Theology, Faculty of Theology
2001	University of Tartu, Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Theology, Faculty of Theology

Professional Experience

2015–…	Member of the Board, Tartu Catholic Education Centre
01.09.2008–…	Development Manager, Tartu Catholic Education Centre
01.09.2002–…	Teacher of Social Subjects, Tartu Catholic Education Centre
01.09.2007–30.08.2008	Head of Studies, Tartu Catholic Education Centre
02.09.1996–23.05.2009	Teacher, Tartu Herbert Masing School

Language Skills

English	fluent (spoken & written)
Russian	conversational
German	with a dictionary
French	with a dictionary

Main Research Interests

Faith in early childhood
Project- and problem-based learning in religious education
Constructivist learning approach
Religious literacy

Teaching / Study Materials

2024 — Renewal of National Curricula by the Ministry of Education and Research – member of the Religious Education working group

Schihalejev, O., Olt-Kleebland, M., Sooniste, A. (2020). *Religious Education Textbook for Lower Secondary School. Encounters. Values and Choices.* Maurus Publishing

Schihalejev, O. et al. (2016). *Religious Education Workbook for Primary School. Encounters. Traditions, Stories and Values.* Maurus Publishing

Online materials in the series "Encounters" (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Orthodoxy, Baptism, constructivist approach, discussion-based lesson, field trip & outdoor learning)

Publications

Sooniste, A. & Schihalejev, O. (2022). Religious Literacy in National Curricula of Estonia. *Religions*, 13(5), 411. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050411

Sooniste, A. (2024a). Measuring the academic aspects of religious literacy of Estonian basic school graduates. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 36(2), 207–237. https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-20231157

Sooniste, A. (2024b). Measuring the instrumental aspects of religious literacy of Estonian Basic School graduates. *Nordidactica*, 14(2024:2), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.62902/nordidactica.v14i2024:2.26010

Conference Presentations

Sooniste, A. (28 August 2024). *Religious Literacy of Estonian Basic School Graduates: Encountering Cultural Phenomena.* Paper presented at Lotman Days 2024: Learning in Transformation, Tartu, Estonia.

Sooniste, A. (July 2023). *Religious Literacy of Estonian Basic and Upper Secondary School Graduates.* Paper presented at the JURE 2023 conference, Thessaloniki, Greece.

ELULOOKIRJELDUS

Nimi: Aleksandra Sooniste
Sünniaeg ja -koht: 29.12.1975, Tartu
Kodakondsus: Eesti

Haridus

2021–…	Tartu Ülikool, doktoriõpe (usuteaduse ja religiooni-uuringute eriala)
2012	Tartu Ülikool, magistrikraad (MA, usuteaduskond)
2001	Tartu Ülikool, bakalaureusekraad (BA, usuteaduskond)

Teenistuskäik / Töökogemus

2015–…	Juhatuse liige, Tartu Katoliku Hariduskeskus
01.09.2008–…	Arendusjuht, Tartu Katoliku Hariduskeskus
01.09.2002–…	Sotsiaalainete õpetaja, Tartu Katoliku Hariduskeskus
01.09.2007–30.08.2008	Õppejuht, Tartu Katoliku Hariduskeskus
02.09.1996–23.05.2009	Õpetaja, Tartu Herbert Masingu Kool

Keelteoskus

Inglise keel	kõnes ja kirjas
Vene keel	suhtlustasandil
Saksa keel	sõnastiku abil
Prantsuse keel	sõnastiku abil

Peamised uurimisvaldkonnad

Koolieeliku usk
Projekt- ja probleemõpe religiooniõpetuses
Konstruktivistlik õpikäsitlus
Religiooni-alane kirjaoskus

Õppematerjalid

2024 — Haridus- ja Teadusministeeriumi riiklike õppekavade uuendamine – usundiõpetuse töörühma liige

Schihalejev, O., Olt-Kleebland, M., Sooniste, A. (2020). *Usundiõpetuse õpik II kooliastmele. Kohtumised. Väärtused ja valikud.* Kirjastus Maurus

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