In doing theory of religious education our attention is mainly directed towards the politics and practices of religious education. We try to incorporate and use other theories and research in order to make a coherent and fruitful account of what religious education is and ought to be. Not that often does the discussion concern the practice of theorizing and researching religious education itself. That is, when we relate to other theories, we usually do it with the intention of building or re-building a theory. What I am concerned with here is the building process itself. What are we doing when we are theorizing and researching religious education?

There are of course a number of ways of doing such self-reflection and a number of issues to discuss. In this article I want to address the relationship between religious education research and teaching religious education. I will do this from a certain perspective, namely what broadly could be called a neo-Aristotelian one.

One key issue in the self-understanding of research and theorizing of religious education is how it understands its role in relation to the community of practice at schools on one hand and to educational policy on the other. To put it bluntly: is the role of religious education researchers to help or develop the practice and politics of religious education, or is it to produce knowledge of the field from a detached point of view? In the last case it would be the task of the practitioners and politicians to find use of the research-based knowledge. The researchers have no responsibility whatever for the development of the practice and politics in question. The issue of the role of religious education research concerns the question: what is a theory of religious education?

This issue of role and identity of theory and research is of course discussed in the broader discipline of education, particularly in philosophy of education. One may claim that educational theory is challenged or even threatened on two fronts. Firstly, educational theory is criticized from the field of practice and politics for not being useful enough. Secondly, educational theory is criticized by other research for
not being scientific enough. Several writers experience the situation as one of exclusion from educational politics and practice on one hand and intrusion by other disciplines like economics, politics and sociology into the field of education on the other. Education as a research discipline is squeezed from two ends.

This may not be felt just as acute in religious education research because it is a more peripheral discipline, but the role of religious education research and religious education theory is unclear and need critical discussion.

Theory, Research and Practice

Before I proceed, a brief note on concepts. I understand “theory” and “research” as overlapping, but also distinct concepts. This means that I conceive “research” broadly, comprising both empirical research and text-based theory. “Theory” can be understood as research-based accounts and everyday-accounts. “Theory” in the first sense can also be understood more specifically as the analytical tools that are used to analyze the material or data. In my mind there is only a gradual difference between theoretical and empirical research, in the sense that both works on theoretical assumptions and towards greater theoretical clarity. They both also work with some kind of material and with more or less explicit conceptions of reality. I also understand the distinction between research and everyday theories as a matter of degree. This means that I find it useless to operate with one definition of theory. It has to be understood in context. “Practice” does here not only refer to education, but also to research (the practice of research). In this context it means that theories are produced in two distinct practices, in religious education in schools (and elsewhere) and in religious education research. I have elsewhere analysed this relationship as a one between different activity systems (Afdal 2007; 2008).

My contribution in this article is from a neo-Aristotelian point of view. Neo-Aristotelianism as a label is used in different contexts as a description of a collection of heterogeneous thinkers. What they have in common is an attempt to turn to the writings of Aristotle and use his conceptions to question taken-for-granted conceptions in the discipline in question. Because their understanding of contemporary challenges and reading of Aristotle differ, the theories will also be diverse. In order to make the analysis concrete, I will start with an understanding of