Karin Kittelmann Flensner

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Karin Kittelmann Flensner
University West
Trollhättan, Sweden

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Foreword

This book is based on the research that formed the basis of my dissertation "Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden" that I defended in the autumn of 2015. Judging by the reactions in the aftermath of the dissertation, it seems clear that talk of religion arouses much emotion in our pluralistic and secular societies. This book focuses on questions about the discourses or different ways of talking about religion that emerge when the school subject of Religious Education is on the schedule, but it also seeks to make a contribution to the discussion about the role of religion in the public sphere and aims to problematise secularistic positions as neutral in relation to religious positions. It is my hope that the book can contribute to reflections about and greater awareness of positions taken for granted and the processes that construct and maintain "us" and "them", especially in educational settings. The study that forms its basis was conducted in Sweden, a country that is often referred to as "the most secularised country in the world". However, I believe that issues related to how to enhance democratic values such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion and how to manage education in increasingly pluralistic, but also increasingly polarised, societies are crucial in our time and are therefore not limited to Sweden.

I myself am a teacher, and I have been working in upper-secondary schools for roughly ten years. When working as a teacher of Religious Education I often experienced professional dilemmas in trying to reach all students who had various backgrounds and relations to the subject matter which I as a teacher had to deal with. I tried to fulfil the demands of the curriculum and syllabus while simultaneously striving to manage expectations from students with different relations to and opinions about religion and religions in a respectful and professional way. In my work, questions of how to operate in this minefield arose as did questions about why religion in some respect was such a sensitive subject. When looking for research concerning these questions, I found that there were very few studies that had looked into what happens in the classroom in general. There were even fewer studies that had taken an interest in what happens in the classrooms where various school subjects are taught and still fewer studies of Religious Education classrooms, and this became the starting point of this study. One way of approaching classrooms where

different school subjects are taught is through a lens that focuses on the interplay between subject content, students and teachers. The classrooms are affected by the articulations of teachers and students as well as by the subject of instruction (content). However, the classroom is also highly influenced by societal features and discourses in the society of which it is a part.

Disposition

This book consists of nine chapters. In the first chapter, the field and focus of the study are introduced, and the following one offers a presentation of sociological perspectives of the religious landscape in contemporary society, with an emphasis on religion and youth. Chapter 3 gives some perspectives on what a school subject can be and discusses assumptions of knowledge underlining different ways of organising and perceiving education. Religious Education is organised in very different ways with different goals in different countries, and in Chap. 3 different models of religious education are therefore outlined. In this chapter, the reader also is given an overview of the historical background and development of contemporary Religious Education in Sweden. This study is a classroom study, and in order to outline the current state of knowledge within this field, a review of classroom studies of Religious Education has been conducted and is presented in Chap. 4. In Chap. 5, the methodological and theoretical approaches of the study are defined. For a more thorough and detailed account of the theoretical and methodological considerations involved, I refer the reader to the actual thesis (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015).

The results of the study are presented in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 and focus on the discourses of religion, religions and worldviews that were articulated in the Religious Education classroom practice observed. In Chap. 6, it is shown how a secularist discourse was articulated in the Religious Education practice. This discourse was at some points challenged by a spiritual discourse, and in Chap. 7, this way of talking about religion, religions and worldviews is outlined and analysed. There were also articulations in the Religious Education practice observed that linked Sweden to a Christian heritage and which defined Sweden as a Christian country. The way that Swedishness was constructed is presented in Chap. 8. In Chap. 9, the study is summarised and discussed in relation to its implications for the subject of Religious Education in secular and pluralistic classrooms.

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Chapter 1
Framing of the Issue

Abstract This book is about Religious Education, a school subject that manoeuvres in the midst of a field that, on the one hand concerns crucial knowledge in a pluralistic society and, on the other hand, deals with highly contested questions in a society characterised by diversity and secularity. Increased migration and travel, changing conditions with regard to social media and the use of the Internet are some of the factors that have contributed to a more pluralistic society. This development has also contributed to the new visibility of religion. Simultaneously, secularity (In the literature, the words secularity and secularism are often used interchangeably. I will, however, in line with Possamai (Sociology of religion for generations X and Y. Equinox, London, 2009) and Scharffs (Relig Hum Rights 6(2):109–126, 2011), distinguish between the two concepts and use the word secularity descriptively when referring to secularity as a result and part of theories of secularity that try to grasp the role of religion in the contemporary world. I will use secularism as a normative and ideological stance, with reference to proponents who often can be described as anti-religious and who advocate that the public sphere should be kept free from religious expressions) has increased, not least in the case of Swedish society, and questions pertaining to the freedom of religion in the public sphere are a subject of debate.

> *Student*: There are a lot of prejudices, I guess. Because, I mean, in the media, Islam is, like pictured a terrible religion that oppresses women and whatnot. So then you get a lot of prejudices. Everybody has perhaps not had Religious Education or read or know much about Islam. And then you believe everything the media say.

The student cited above perceives Religious Education[1,2] as a tool for working against prejudice and for increasing knowledge and understanding. In the classroom

[1] I use the term "Religious Education" as this is internationally used for both confessional and non-confessional versions of the subject in different contexts and with different aims. See, for example, the British Journal of Religious Education. Sometimes the term "Religion Education" is used to mark the non-confessional character of the school subject based on a Religious Studies approach (cf. Berglund 2013; Jensen 2008).

[2] In the literature, the words secularity and secularism are often used interchangeably. I will, however, in line with Possamai (2009) and Scharffs (2011), distinguish between the two concepts and use the word secularity descriptively when referring to secularity as a result and part of theories of secularity that try to grasp the role of religion in the contemporary world. I will use secularism as a

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practice of Religious Education, students and teachers meet and dwell on questions of pluralism, religions and worldviews, of prejudice and tolerance, and of how they themselves and other people perceive the world.

The role of publicly funded education becomes in this context complex. Teaching and schools can both be seen as mediators of tradition as well as constructors of national, mono-cultural projects, but they also serve as the main forum for creating social cohesion between diverse subcultures. The currently compulsory school subject of Religious Education (henceforward RE) in Sweden can be described as *non-confessional*[3] as it is stated in the curricula that it should be neutral in relation to different religions and worldviews[4] and not promote any religion more than another. In the syllabus of Swedish non-confessional RE, it is stated that:

> Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterized by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop a preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterized by diversity (Skolverket 2011a)

Meanwhile, RE has its roots in the Swedish national state church, the Church of Sweden, and its traditions and was originally introduced to strengthen the "pure evangelical Lutheran doctrine" of the citizens, although this goal had already been abolished in the early 1900s (Algotsson 1975; Hartman 1996). However, the subject is nonetheless intended to transfer certain values such as tolerance and respect for different lifestyles and worldviews. This means that there are several points of tension within the subject area *per se* that teachers have to deal with.

The Swedish subject of RE can also be described as *integrative* (Alberts 2007, 2010), as students share the same classroom regardless of personal relation to the subject.[5] Due to increasing pluralism in Sweden, students from different backgrounds and having different relationships to the subject matter meet in the classroom. School can thus be seen as a reflection of society, and if society is characterised in terms of pluralism, this will in various ways affect what happens in classrooms. Although the Swedish school system in many ways is marked by growing segregation (Bunar 2010), the classroom can still be seen as a place where people with different backgrounds share a common space and learn about and discuss topics which for many students are very personal. However, Sweden is greatly influenced by secularisation (Andersson and Sander 2009; af Burén 2015; Thurfjell 2015; Zuckerman 2009), and

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normative and ideological stance, with reference to proponents who often can be described as anti-religious and who advocate that the public sphere should be kept free from religious expressions.

[3] The Swedish word [*icke-konfessionell*] is usually translated *non-confessional* but the term also indicates that the teaching is nondenominational.

[4] In the English translation of the syllabus for Religious Education (Skolverket 2011c), the National Agency for Education uses "outlooks on life" for the Swedish word [*livsåskådning*]. I use the English word "worldview", as this translation seems to better correspond to the Swedish concept and is more frequently used in research (cf. Westerlund 2013). The concept of worldview will be further elaborated upon below.

[5] The subject is mandatory at all levels of primary and secondary schools as well as in all programs of upper-secondary schools, and it is not possible to opt out. In this sense, the subject has no special status and is like any other school subject.

this means that in the same classroom there is often a large group of students who do not consider themselves religious at all and who have vague notions about the different religious traditions and what it possibly could mean to have a faith and be a part of a religious tradition (Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Sjöborg 2012). In the same classroom, however, there are students who in different ways and to varying degrees see themselves as part of different religious traditions and who have their own personal interpretation of that particular tradition.

This book is based on an ethnographic study in which I conducted participant observations of RE lessons at three upper-secondary schools during the school year 2011–2012[6] both in vocational programs and in preparatory programs for higher education. My main focus was on how the school subject of RE can be socially constructed in practice, but many aspects affecting its social construction are of a general character and have relevance for different educational settings as well as for other school subjects. Academically, the study is positioned at the intersection between the fields of Religious Studies and Educational Science and takes in this sense an interdisciplinary approach. Taking an interdisciplinary approach is always a balancing act since different disciplines have different traditions and theories, and many readers tend to approach the text from the vantage point of one field or another. The study can disciplinarily be described as belonging to the area of *Religious Education didaktik* [Swedish: *religionsdidaktik*][7] which is one of several sub-disciplines of Religious Studies (cf. Berglund 2010) which include the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion and the history of religion. The school subject of RE shares the aim of Religious Studies to describe and analyse aspects of religion and religions from different perspectives. However, the subject of RE (together with all other school subjects) also has general educational aims concerning learning and the personal development of students while at the same time having aims concerning democratic values such as tolerance and equality. Thus the social construction of the subject of RE is of interest both from societal and democratic perspectives, but also from the perspective of educational science and, moreover, as an example of how subjects can be constructed in practice. From a Religious Studies perspective, little is known about discourses of Swedish non-confessional, integrative RE and thus this study is a contribution to filling that gap.

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[6] In 2011 a new curriculum was introduced in Sweden – both for the compulsory school and for the upper-secondary school – and it was gradually implemented over 3 years. This means that some classes studied RE according to the old curriculum, Lpf94 (Skolverket 2006a), and syllabus for RE (Skolverket 2000a) while others studied RE according to the new curriculum and syllabus, Lgy11 (Skolverket 2011a, b).

[7] The Swedish connotation of the word *didaktik* as in *religionsdidaktik* is more in line with the German perception of the word *didaktik* than the Anglo-American connotation of the word *didactics*. In the Swedish understanding of didaktik, the concept includes both theoretical and practical aspects (for a discussion of the use of the concept in different contexts, see, e.g., Hamilton 1999; Kansanen 2009; Wahlström 2015). As there is no exact corresponding concept in English, I follow the example of Kansanen (2009) and use the German (and Swedish) term *Religious Education Didaktik* to mark the broader educational content of the word than, as I understand the case to be, the word didactics usually has in the English-speaking world. Religious Education didaktik refers to both theoretical knowledge of the field of RE as an area of research and to the practical art of teaching in RE.

Chapter 2
The Religious Landscape

Abstract How do young people in today's society perceive and talk about religion? How do migration, globalisation and secularisation influence young peoples' attitudes to religion? The study presented in this book concerns the school subject of Religious Education, and all school subjects must be understood in relation to their historical, political, social, and religious contexts. This section aims to describe some aspects of the religious landscape and young peoples' perceptions and attitudes toward religion based on research conducted in the field that constitutes the context of Religious Education. In descriptions of religiosity in the Western world, not least in Sweden, secularisation is a concept that has been used in order to describe the changes society has undergone. However, the concept is contested, and scholars disagree on what it means and whether it is a useful concept to describe and understand religiosity in contemporary society. Therefore, I begin this section with a brief summary of different perspectives on the concept of secularity before I turn to the matter of research concerning the attitudes of young people toward religion.

The social construction of school subjects is in this book perceived as being an interplay between the articulations of teachers and students concerning content. Neither students nor teachers enter the classroom as a *tabula rasa* but instead have experiences, impressions and opinions which influence the classroom discourses that come into play. In this sense, the classroom is part of society, and discourses prevalent in other arenas thus become part of the classroom discourse. This section will therefore highlight research contributing to the understanding of how young people deal with, position themselves and manoeuvre in a pluralistic religious landscape.

2.1 Secularity and Pluralism

Sweden is quite commonly referred to as one of the most secularised countries in the world, often by Swedes themselves (af Burén 2015; Thurfjell 2015; Zuckerman 2009). In the academic debate on secularity, it is emphasised that secularity can mean slightly different things. In sum, secularity can be characterised as a

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transformation process in which secular institutions are increasingly taking over previously religiously dominated tasks such as education, healthcare and social security. It can also be described as a decline in religious beliefs and religiously motivated acts and a separation of religion from the public sphere into the private (Cassanova 2003; Dobbelaire 2009; Taylor 2007). In this sense, the expansion of the welfare state, where the state stands as the patron of citizen security, can be seen as one major cause of secularisation. In a secular society, religion and politics are separated, and scientific knowledge is considered to be the only source of valid knowledge. According to the secular rationale, people should manage their lives based on rational principles (Davie 2007).

Bruce (1996) recognises individualism to be of crucial importance to the secularisation process. He sees the Lutheran Reformation as the starting point for increased rationality and individualism, which undermined collective religious beliefs. Other studies argue that secularity does not mean that religion disappears, but rather that it reduces the influence of religious thinking, religious practices and religious institutions in society as a whole, i.e., the role of religion is diminishing (Demerath III 2007). In trying to understand which aspects have changed, Hervieu-Léger (2000) highlights the significance of language, as she describes religion as "chains of memories" that relate the individual to traditions. She argues that the quest for meaning has not decreased, but that secularisation has entailed a breakage of the chain of collective memory due to modernity, fragmentation and individualisation. Secularisation thus involves a kind of collective loss of memory where fewer and fewer individuals share the same interpretation of symbols and language with which they can talk about religious phenomena.

Others emphasise the importance of pluralism for understanding secularisation (Berger 1969; Taylor 2007). Berger (1969) coined the phrase "the sacred canopy". It refers to the systems of meaning that protect individuals by providing context and meaning. In a secular society, competing systems of meaning emerge, and the plurality of meaning systems in itself contributes to secularisation. Davie (2007) states that although pluralism can obviously have different consequences, pluralism affects how we think at a fundamental level. In a society where there are no established truths, individuals must make their own decisions about how to relate to different traditions. Unlike the situation in a non- pluralistic society (if there ever was such a thing), everyone must choose, and this could of course mean that some opt out of religion as their sacred canopy. Taylor (2007) highlights the multitude and plurality of choices as one of the most crucial and important aspects of secularity: "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2007, p. 3). No matter which aspects of secularisation one chooses to emphasise, secularisation affects what may be defined as religious or not (Asad et al. 2013).

In recent times, the concept "postsecular" has been coined in order to describe changes in contemporary society where the role and function of religion in the public sphere have been transformed, but not in the way that the Enlightenment and

modernistic theories of secularisation expected. To refute and nuance theories of secularisation, postsecularism is used to point to the empirical fact that religions have not disappeared, neither as a private interpretation of the meaning of life, nor in the public realm as predicted by secularisation theorists. The expression "the new visibility of religion" seems to be used interchangeably to grasp the social and political changes in the wake of increasing globalisation, migration and thus growing diversity within societies and the development of media through which attention in the last decades is brought to religion as a social and political phenomenon (Davie 2007; Esposito et al. 2008; Skeie 2009). Postsecularism is also used to mark the development of numerous parallel interpretations, which may or may not include a religious/spiritual dimension – it is up to the individual to decide – and thus gives way to a certain degree of relativism. Habermas uses the concept in a normative way and sees mutual recognition between religious and non-religious individuals as a prerequisite for dealing with differences and diversity in a pluralistic society (Carlsson and Thalén 2015). Sigurdson (2009) perceives the postsecular turn as a change in how to understand the present where the religious and the secular cannot be separated but instead constitute a hybrid.

Aspects of secularity, postsecularity and pluralism might be possible to prove or rebut empirically, but they nevertheless all comprise imaginings of the contemporary and thus influence the conversation about religion(s) and the secular that takes place in the RE classroom.

2.2 Youths, Secularisation, Pluralism and Individualism

How do teenagers manoeuvre in this pluralistic, secularised landscape? Here, studies from Europe and the USA concerning religion and youth will be presented. Knauth et al. (2008) discern two opposing trends – on the one hand, secularisation is spreading in the sense that religion is becoming less socially significant. On the other hand, there are signs that participation in religious rites such as church services in Pentecostal churches in England are on the rise. There are findings suggesting that religion is becoming more privatised. For example, in a study of Russian adolescents, only 2% reported that they attended religious services, but 50% believed in God (Bertram-Troost et al. 2008). This can be seen as evidence that Davie (2007) is right when she says that the religious change that took place during the 1900s can be described as people believing without belonging to a specific group. The main conclusion from their study is that pluralism as a societal phenomenon really has won acceptance in the new generation and there is a great awareness of the fact that a large number of competing religions and conceptions of reality does exist (Bertram-Troost et al. 2008; Davie 2007).

Obviously, it is the case that an enormous variation of ideas appears within a generation – there are adolescents for whom religion is a central part of a worldview that characterises their daily lives, and there are young people for whom religion plays no role whatsoever. There are, moreover, the large number of variations that

exists between these positions. Madge et al. (2013) classified attitudes young people have toward religion into four categories: strict adherents for whom religion and tradition were central in their lives; flexible adherents to whom faith was important, but who also adapted beliefs and practices in relation to the relevant circumstances and who even prioritised other things in life; pragmatists who saw religion as important but who did not strongly identify with their faith; and bystanders for whom religion was unimportant. But regardless of category, it is crucial to emphasise that religiosity is an expression of personal agency and an active personal choice. In the study carried out by Knauth et al. (2008), some young people described religion in a personal, subjective way, while others saw it more as a social phenomenon. Even if they belonged to the latter category, however, they perceived religion as a way of viewing life that they either embraced or were critical toward. In regard to having a personal faith, faith in God, ideas about life after death, paradise, salvation, and the belief that the world was created by a divine force were perceived as relevant issues by the young people in the study, and many also reported that they had their own religious experiences. Many stated that religion gave them comfort, support, strength, and moral guidance to help them distinguish between good and evil. Religion offered a sense of belonging, the feeling that they were part of a larger context, and a sense of fellowship and group affiliation. But there was also a large group of young people who stated that religion did not play any role in their lives at all (Knauth et al. 2008). Demographic changes related to migration and increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity influence how young people relate to and identify with religious traditions.

The image of a pluralistic Europe where a large group of teenagers can be described as secular was confirmed in the quantitative REDCo study (Valk et al. 2009).[1] Most secular is Estonia, where only 15% describe themselves as believers, while almost two-thirds of those in Germany and Spain consider themselves to be believers. Between 10 and 20% of young people in the study described themselves as Muslims, while other religious affiliations, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, New Age, etc. are too small to be statistically evident. Summarily, the qualitative data that emerged in the previous study is confirmed in a quantitative study (Valk et al. 2009). The fact that many young people lack experience of religious practice and the fact that the family is the most important source of knowledge and experience of religion were confirmed. It was also shown that most teenagers do not talk about religion very often. The question of whether they have a religious identity or not is not easy to answer, as this concept has different meanings. It is clear that organised religion does not appear to be particularly attractive in the eyes of young people, but this rejection of religion does not necessarily entail a clear atheistic stance. Between 30 and 40% of the teenagers question believed there is a higher

[1] This study was part of the REDCo-project: *Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries* (REDCo), which was an EU-funded project between 2006 and 2009, aimed to increase knowledge about religion in the educational sector. Participating countries were Germany, Spain, Norway, Estonia, France, the Netherlands, Russia and England (REDCo 2013).

power that in different ways has control over various events. Many believe that religion has played an important role in history, and some identify themselves as part of a Christian culture. For one group, religion is very important in their everyday lives, and this group is dominated by Muslims and charismatic Christians (Valk et al. 2009).

Individualism and religion as a personal, active choice are stressed in several studies. Flory and Miller (2010) conducted an interview study in an American context and discerned a number of characteristic features of post-boomers' positions in relation to religion (the age group that is currently around 30–40 years old). They perceive religion as a choice, not an imperative. Religious labels are not particularly important for this group, and a large majority are fairly tolerant of other beliefs and appreciate religious pluralism. The post-boomers take a sceptical stance toward external religious authorities and hierarchies and see religiosity less as a fixed set of beliefs than as a search for religious experiences and higher values. The central concerns are authenticity, honesty and openness, rather than religious authorities. They have no problem with being eclectic in religious terms, and many create their own hybrid of religious beliefs. The post-boomers want to change the world and highlight that religion must denounce and work against injustice and inequality. They are truly postmodern and take a sceptical stance toward all claims to universal, eternal truths, as everything depends on the perspective from which it is described.

2.3 Family, Friends and Media – Influences on Young People's Religious Beliefs

The factor that has the greatest impact on young people's religiosity is the family – if the family is religious, the likelihood that a young person identifies as a believer in any sense is much larger than if the family is non-religious (Bertram-Troost et al. 2008; Madge et al. 2013). Day (2011) conducted a study in the British context and concludes that social affiliation, not religion, is central for meaning, morality and "transcendence", even to young people who identify as Christians. Being Christian in Day's (2011) study is more of an ethnic identification than a religious one. School (and not just RE), friends and various forms of media are other influential factors. The non-religious young people build their understanding of religion on mass media and to some extent upon what is taught in school. That such a large group of young people in Sweden do not have any personal experience of what religion can mean has implications for how young people understand the concept of religion and related issues (Sjöborg 2012; Torstenson-Ed 2003).

Rejection of religion can also be seen as a matter of the younger generation questioning the hegemonic older generation. Knauth et al. (2008) conclude that young people describe their religious/non-religious affiliation not only as a repudiation of their parents' beliefs, but also in terms of representing a new generation that rejects outdated religious beliefs and religious oppression. Friends and youth culture are

more important for young people's opinions than for those of previous generations. In the cases of several countries in the REDCo study, it was found that religion is not something young people talk about, and their social environment is characterised by a sceptical approach toward religious ideas –to be religious is simply not cool and is not associated with status. It is also possible to discern a view of religion as something you can consume or abstain from if you want, as you might turn to God, for example, during life crises.

Islam comes across as a special case among religions in several studies, and the image of Islam and Muslims often appears to be one-dimensional. In their research on the complexity and variability of Islam, Otterbeck and Hallin (2010) illustrate the great variation in interpretations and attitudes, as well as the importance religion has for a group of young adult Muslims in Sweden and Denmark. In a study carried out in Norway, von der Lippe (2011) shows that young people position themselves in relation to discourses of religion and diversity which include themes such as: immigration as frightening, immigration as a factor leading to increased crime, the Islamisation of society, the Muslim terrorist, Islam and Muslims as a homogenous group, and the norm of Norwegians being white. These discourses influence perceptions of religion in general and Islam in particular, regardless of whether the young person in the study was a Muslim or not. One of many interesting differences between Christians and Muslims was that Christians often played down their Christian identity in secular contexts, mentioning that they were afraid of being teased, and many of the Christians described themselves as ambivalent in their Christian identity. They used, for example, expressions such as "jiggle Christian", "Christian now and then", "very light Christian", "occasional Christian", and "a bit Christian". Being a Muslim, which for many believers encompasses visible markers such as clothing and dietary rules, was not described in the same ambivalent terms, even though Islam has in many communities strongly negative associations. Young people having experience of migration (self or parents) and who belonged to a minority group expressed to a greater extent that religion was important in their lives (Ipgrave and Bertram Troost 2008).

In a European comparison, there are significant differences in experience between different countries, but also within the countries in terms of the experience of heterogeneity and pluralism (cultural, ethnic, religious, etc.) (Jozsa and Friederici 2008). However, a clear dichotomy between believers and non-believers is found in all countries. Those who discuss religion are often those who themselves have a faith – but this also depends upon the context in which they live and if their friends share their interest in religious matters. Students who attend schools where different religions are represented discuss religion to a greater extent than students in more homogeneous schools, but there must be a "critical mass" represented for the discussion to take place. Reasons for students not to discuss issues related to religion were that they thought it was boring or irrelevant, or that they did not believe in God or did not believe that they are helped in their lives through religion. Other reasons may be that it was thought of as uncool, the fear of being teased, or that religion is a sensitive issue and can activate conflicts. In Spain, religion was perceived as a "girly" topic, and this is why males rarely discussed the issue. In Estonia and Russia,

young people say that they do not discuss the issue because they do not know much about religion, which can be a legacy from the socialist Soviet era. Young people across Europe perceive religion as being a private matter – in France, a school based on the principle of laïcité is seen as a public place, and this is the reason why religion should not be discussed there. Young believers in France often discuss religion with others who share their faith. These young people talk about specific matters of faith, while non-believing young people (if they talk about religion) take up to a greater extent issues identified in the media such as fundamentalism, terrorism, and the papal elections. In Russia and Estonia, questions more often have the nature of philosophical and existential reasoning (Jozsa and Friederici 2008).

A large group of adolescents in the REDCo study (Knauth et al. 2008) lack personal religious experience, and it is clear that participants understood the subject very differently. When describing their experiences of religion and related matters, positive experiences dominated and often involved taking part in religious ceremonies or meeting a believer. Negative experiences included such things as forced participation in a boring church service, but more often opinions were of a more general kind with reference to the media. It is interesting to note that the positive attitudes are based on personal experiences, while negative attitudes have a more general and abstract character.

2.4 Tolerance

The hypothesis that religious people are less tolerant and less open to dialogue than non-believers was tested but not confirmed in the REDCo quantitative study (Valk et al. 2009). On the contrary, the answers indicate that young believers are more tolerant and interested in dialogue with people of different faiths. Tolerance is something that was perceived as being favourable by all, believers and non-believers alike. Also, the reason not to discuss religious issues might not be intolerance – for example, it might be due to the possibility that if one lacks a personal faith one might not have enough knowledge, or the "appropriate" language, to talk about these issues. Young believers expressed that they had great interest in discussing religious matters (Valk et al. 2009). Madge et al. (2013) argue that the discourse of tolerance and respect for liberal individualism that they found in their study serves as a unifying "glue" for society in a Durkheimian sense.

Many express that they want to learn what religion means (learning about religion). However, a majority do not want to receive teaching about religion, at least not in school. Based on students' responses, it is difficult to determine if the school subject of RE contributed to paving the way for diversity, tolerance and dialogue, which to a great extent depends upon the fact that teaching is designed so differently in the different countries. An interesting result from Germany is that it does not seem to be the teaching per se that had the greatest influence on tolerance, but it was instead the experience of personal contacts and meeting people from different backgrounds in the classroom that matters most. A segregated society and not least a

segregated school-system, where people of different backgrounds are separated and never interact, has a crucial, negative impact on the development of tolerance and respect (Valk et al. 2009).

When comparing the REDCo-countries, Béraud (2009) concludes that individuals who belong to a religious minority, for example, Muslims or charismatic Christians in France, can be described as being the most openly positive toward diversity and dialogue. Dialogue is seen in a positive light by everyone, but many believe that this alone is not enough to guarantee a peaceful coexistence. When students were asked about what is needed for a peaceful coexistence, knowledge tops the list followed by common interests, having a joint project, doing things together and personal contacts. Many express a vision and ideals of tolerance, but at the same time many young people never meet people of different religious, cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, which means that their ideals are not tested in practice (Valk et al. 2009).

An overwhelming majority of respondents believe that it is possible to live together in peaceful coexistence despite belonging to different ethnic and religious groups (Béraud 2009). The keywords that emerge are tolerance and respect. It is possible to discern a different attitude depending upon whether you are discussing pluralism in regard to the macro-, mezzo- or micro-level. On an abstract macro-level, almost all people are positive. At the mezzo-level, it appears that certain groups, such as “extremists”, and some specific religious practices are perceived as being obstacles to a peaceful coexistence. On the individual micro-level, there are many concrete examples showing that it is possible and rewarding to live in a pluralistic society, and they mention friends, neighbours, classmates, and trips to foreign places. When it comes to the most private matter, however, in the form of inter-religious marriage, many people believe that such a thing is too difficult. Possible conflicts are identified between different religious groups, but not between religious and non-religious people. Religious pluralism is seen as positive in the sense that everyone has an opportunity to choose what kind of life they would like to lead. The prerequisite for pluralism is the sharing of some basic values such as tolerance and mutual respect (Jozsa and Friederici 2008).

Studies from the Swedish context are consistent with European and American research. Risenfors (2011) suggests that the discourse of tolerance and the importance of respecting other people’s beliefs, something that many young people adhere to in theory, may conceal a great deal of disinterest and indifference – they are simply not very curious about other people’s beliefs. She describes these attitudes as discourses of tolerance and consensus. The discourse of tolerance plays the role of a hegemonic discourse in which differences are downplayed, and the pupils express a desire to reach a consensus.

2.5 A Distant Relationship – Swedish Youth and Religion

The image emerging in research about the relationship between Swedish youth and religion does not differ to a very large extent from the picture above. In both quantitative (Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Sjöborg 2012) and qualitative studies (von Brömssen 2003, 2009, 2012; Risenfors 2011) of how young people view religion, a picture of an essentially individualised and privatised religiosity emerges. The concept of religion has partially been emptied of its traditional content. In the context of school, discussions concerning religion is more about other people and their religions. Religion is not important in many young people's lives, compared to other things (Lövheim and Bromander 2012), and being religious is not regarded as especially "cool" and is even considered to be outdated (von Brömssen 2009, 2012). On the basis of interviews about the meaning-making of young adults, Gustavsson (2013) also concludes that individualism and the personal life-project are central in the minds of her interviewees. She distinguishes between a realist, a spiritual, and what she calls "a third" position in relation to existential questions, where the third position oscillates between a religious and a non-religious interpretation of the meaning of life. af Burén (2015) also points out the fact that a large group cannot be described as either religious or secular, but encompasses positions that go beyond this binary categorisation and embraces seemingly contradictory views such as being partly Buddhist, Christian, atheist or something else simultaneously. She uses the word "semi-secular" to describe this position.

A clear majority (60%) of young people in Sweden define themselves as non-religious, while 32% see themselves as part of the Christian tradition, and 6% regard themselves as belonging to the Muslim tradition (Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Sjöborg 2012). There is a sharp distinction between how believers of different affiliations look upon religion compared to those who do not perceive themselves as being believers. Migration and ethnicity seems to be important factors in understanding the differences in how young people think about and perceive religion. von Brömssen's (2003) study highlights the ethnification of religion in the speech of teenagers. Religion was attributed to the "Ethnic Other" by pupils born in Sweden and who had parents born in Sweden, while they mainly associated being Swedish with having no religion. To pupils born outside of Sweden or having a parent born outside of Sweden, religion to a higher degree made up a part of their identity. The imaginings of these different groups contributed to a situation in school where pupils with different backgrounds, self-perceptions and views of religion "met without meeting" and reinforced prejudices and stereotypical images of "the Other". Sjöborg's (2012) quantitative study points in the same direction and shows that ethnicity, religion, gender and even class-background (in terms of parents' educational backgrounds and programs at upper-secondary school) affected how students related to the subject of RE. Those who choose to define themselves as religious emphasise that this is a result of their own conscious and active choice, and they highlight the importance of positioning themselves in this way. This result was confirmed in Homquist Lidh's (2016) study in which she interviewed adolescents with

Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish or Christian backgrounds. In Sjöborg's (2012) study, the religiosity of "the Other" is, however, described to a larger extent as an expression of culture, tradition or oppression.

In the study conducted by von Brömssen (2012), differences in approaches to religion emerge between different schools, but also between different educational programs in upper-secondary schools. For students who did not position themselves as believers, religion was talked about as a private matter that was neither important nor particularly "cool". If religion was discussed, it was instead spoken about as a cultural phenomenon which in itself could help the individual to endure difficulties but which could also be dangerous at a group and societal level and also be a source of conflict and war. Students argued that RE contributed to their knowledge so that they were better able to understand and criticise religions. In the science programme [Swedish: *Naturvetenskapsprogrammet*], issues of faith and science were often discussed, and scientific discourse was then completely hegemonic. Students who held a different opinion in these matters did not express them in class for fear of getting lower marks. Students in the nursing programme [Swedish: *Omvårdnadsprogrammet*] discussed religion from a somewhat different perspective, one which was more related to issues of cultural encounters and ethical dilemmas in healthcare.

To summarise this section – in Swedish, European and American research, a situation emerges in which many youths live in a pluralistic context and encounter people of different backgrounds on a daily basis. Religion is, however, seldom the topic of discussion among young people, and when religion is discussed in school, the research seems to indicate that it is generally constructed in a distanced way, as something associated with "the Other". Religion has become one of many choices; it is not something above questioning. Religions appear in many contexts as outdated, and individualism seems to be an overriding principle and value. Different discourses of religion dwell side by side, and some concepts such as religion and tolerance seem to be floating signifiers that have different meanings in different contexts and groups. This study does not focus on the views of young people per se but rather on the social construction of RE in the classroom. The subject is, however, seen as being constructed in the classroom in the interplay between students, teachers and content because the perceptions of students also affect the construction of the subject.

Chapter 3
Religious Education as a School Subject

Abstract Is Religious Education like any other school subject or is it a special case? Do we talk about the same thing when we use the concept Religious Education? What are the relations to the university subjects of Theology and Religious Studies? Religious Education is a school subject that shows considerable variation between countries with regard to content, objectives and design. In many countries, there is a strong relationship between national identity and religion and thus the social construction of Religious Education. In this chapter, perspectives on school subjects are elaborated on and an overview of different models of Religious Education are given. The educational system is characterized by the national history and the specific context of which it is a part and so is the subject of Religious Education. In order to give the reader a background to the current Swedish Religious Education, the development of Religious Education and factors that have framed the subject are outlined and the present-day subject according to the current syllabus is presented.

3.1 The Development of School Subjects

When societies became more complex regarding social differentiation[1] one consequence was the division of labour and the accompanying development of specialised knowledge. In the aftermath of this development, the need to organise the transfer of knowledge to the next generation through various educational institutions emerged. Over the centuries, discussions about what is worth knowing, what to include as part of an education and what might be acceptable to leave out have been intense and are still ongoing. Knowledge has traditionally been organised in different areas and in different school subjects. School subjects can be seen as an area of knowledge that functions as the hub around which a school organises its educational activities (Goodson and Marsh 1996). This book is concerned with how

[1] This occurred at different times in different parts of the world and is closely linked to the political and economic development of the societies in question – for example, the Greek educational system arose in a more organised form some two thousand years before the first embryo of the thirteenth-century school system existed in the area that eventually would become Sweden. The first National Education Act was introduced in 1571 during the Swedish Lutheran Reformation and the nationalisation of Sweden as a nation state. It should be added that education in pre-modern societies was by no means available to the general public but only to the children of the elite.

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a school subject is socially constructed in practice. But what is a school subject? The premise is that all subjects must be seen as social constructions that have been shaped throughout history based on different social, political and economic needs and interests.

Swedish RE has evolved from being a subject with a confessional orientation to becoming a subject having a scientific base in the discipline of Religious Studies. It is, however, not possible to perceive RE as a mere simplification or a "watered down" version of religious studies. RE and its didaktik comprise a branch of religious studies but also constitutes a field of its own with its own specific conditions and aims (Berglund 2010; Löfstedt 2011). These additional objectives concern, for example, the goals of developing critical thinking skills and the promotion of democratic values stated as general objectives in all subjects in the curricula. Drawing on theories of learning and applying them to RE, it as a subject also includes pedagogical considerations of, for example, how to organise teaching for different students in order to enhance learning.

3.2 The Curricula and Perspectives of Knowledge

To formulate curricula has been, and is still, a way to try to influence children and young people and, subsequently, the desirable development of society in general. Curriculum theory analyses the curriculum in historical and political contexts and considers the curriculum as an expression of ideological positions (Deng and Luke 2008; Englund 1986; Englund et al. 2012; Goodson and Marsh 1996; Goodson and Pinar 1995; Lundgren 1989). The curriculum thus becomes the object of political struggle – What knowledge is advocated and favoured? What perspectives and whose knowledge are given precedence? Should teaching primarily constitute a conservative institution – one that seeks to preserve – which ensures that children be subordinated to society, or should education prepare pupils for playing an active role in civic life? What type of activity dominates the classroom – the reproduction of facts, or conversations on how teaching content can be understood, or something in between? A curriculum indicates what society perceives as being important knowledge and, subsequently, what is considered less important. The content of different school subjects is from this perspective of central importance for a society (Englund et al. 2012; Goodson 2005; Goodson and Marsh 1996). Bråten (2013), who developed a model of comparative studies in RE, argues that when comparing school subjects in different countries, research must take into consideration the specific dimensions of supranational (global), national and subnational processes, and she distinguishes between four levels of curricula: societal, institutional, instructional and experimental. This highlights the complexity of what a subject is and how it is shaped in practice.

In the tradition of curriculum theory and related fields, school subjects (and curricula) can be scrutinised through the lens of educational philosophy. In the last century, it has been possible to distinguish (at least) four main approaches that

concern perspectives on the focus of teaching and the primary aim of education:[2] *Essentialism*, whose proponents see the transfer of knowledge as the main task for education and who have a strong focus on facts, see the school subject as being closely related to the academic discipline. *Progressivism* is associated with the pedagogical visions of John Dewey, and in contrast to essentialism puts the learning of the individual at the centre. The pupil in the tradition of progressivism is seen as a "bearer of knowledge", and teaching is not (exclusively) based on academic, scientific knowledge, but rather on the pupil's experiences, and questions constitute the basis for teaching. Englund (1986, 1997) also discerns a tension between the educational approach that sees classical education and the transfer of traditions and cultural heritage as the main task of public education – labelled as *perennialism* – and the approach that is described as *reconstructivism*, i.e., teaching that puts society, critical thinking and the civic competence of the individual at the centre. According to Englund (1997), the essentialist perspective has dominated education in Sweden, but it has been somewhat challenged by progressivism. The empirical result of this study can be seen in light of these perspectives.

The current curricula of Lgy11 (Skolverket 2011b) have a clearer essentialist profile than their predecessors, and their appearance was preceded by intense public debate (Selander 2011). The Swedish school system underwent major changes in the 1990s, and this also affected the perception of school subjects. One of the fundamental alterations was that the "steering system" was reformed toward a management by goals approach, inspired by New Public Management (see, for example, Paradeise et al. 2009; Richardson 2010; Waldow 2010). This meant that the government formulated a number of goals to be reached in the various activities, but how this was to be done was a flexible matter. This way of thinking was also reflected in the curricula. Rather than articulate what teachers should teach, a number of goals the students should have achieved after completing the course was formulated – the focus shifted from teaching to learning. In the rhetoric of the curricula of 1994, factual knowledge was deemphasised in favour of skills or abilities. In the debate, the proponents of this type of curriculum saw a dismantling of what they perceived as a "Taylorist school" (essentialist, in Englund's wording) which was then replaced by a school designed to meet the demands of the late modern/post-modern and post-industrial society, which included a more relativistic and relational approach to knowledge.

> One way to describe what is happening now [2001] is the following: The school's organisation of work is changing from having been a division between subjects and lessons, age-homogeneous, schedule-controlled classes, where everybody does the same things at the same time in a vertically led activity, where the teacher dominates and controls what happens, to a more flexible organisation of work characterised by integration and driven by small workgroups who are organised as projects, where relations between teachers and students are more horizontal, less time is divided and the rooms are more flexible and reflection on what is going on increases (Skolverket 2001, p. 29 own translation).

[2] For a similar categorisation, see, for example, Deng and Luke (2008), who distinguish between approaches characterised by academic rationalism, social efficiency, humanism, and social reconstructionism to differentiate approaches in education.

More than a decade later, it is obvious that in the dispute between "traditionalists" or "essentialists" who promote a structured, school-subject and teacher-oriented education and "progressive" proponents who advocate reality-related, thematic, subject-integrated, pupil-oriented teaching, the traditionalists have been the successful party. The design of the curricula of Lgr11 (Skolverket 2011c) and Lgy11 (Skolverket 2011b) emphasises factual knowledge to a larger extent, but the criteria for marks are described in terms of different abilities or skills at different levels regarding how to deal with facts – i.e., the ability to analyse, reason and use critical-thinking skills, etc.

RE has in many countries been the subject of heated debate. Should it be part of the compulsory school system? Should it be confessional? Is it first and foremost part of a perennialistic project that transfers traditions, or can it be constructed in a progressivistic way? In different countries, the solutions to these questions have varied.

3.3 Different Models of Religious Education

Religious Education is a school subject that shows considerable variation between countries with regard to content, objectives and design. In many countries, there is a strong relationship between national identity and religion and thus the social construction of RE (Eriksen 2010). Willaime (2007) argues that the construction of the subject can be seen as an indicator of how the relations of "Church-state" and school-religion are designed in the various nations. In countries where the national identity is closely linked to a particular denomination, there is clear evidence of this in the curricula and syllabi. History, politics and migrations patterns are also factors influencing the way RE is organised as well as how the national educational system is structured and funded. In many countries, RE does not exist as a compulsory, non-confessional school subject. In a simplified overview of RE, three different models for dealing with religious education can be discerned: no RE in public schools, confessional RE and non-confessional RE.

To stress how diversely RE is organised, a presentation of different models of RE will briefly be outlined: In some countries, religion and thus RE is considered to be a strictly private matter and something that parents can arrange to suit their preferences – if they wish. In Europe, it is only France that applies this model in line with the principle of laïcité, and there is no RE as a specific subject within the public school system, but the religious instruction French students are offered is linked to voluntary teaching through various religious organisations (Willaime 2007). However, issues related to religion are the subject of teaching included in other subjects and religion features particularly prominently in the curriculum content for Art History, History and French. This model is also applied in publicly funded schools in the United States. However, in France, beginning in September 2015, a subject called Morale Laïque was introduced that in some respects resembles aspects of the Swedish subject of RE.

Another way to organise RE, which is at the moment the most prevalent one in Europe, is that students are separated by denominational affiliation and are taught about their own faith (and sometimes about other religious traditions) from an inside and confessional and thus denominational perspective. This model is applied in countries such as Belgium, Finland, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Syria etc., where students are separated based on religious affiliation and are often taught by representatives of their own religions; here, the curriculum and teaching materials used are dependent upon religious orientation. In some countries (for example, Greece, Cyprus, Italy and Malta) only Christianity is taught, but it is possible to opt out. In countries such as Luxembourg, Belgian Flanders, Germany, Austria, Romania, Finland, and Spain, the pupils can choose between instruction regarding different religious traditions, an "ethics" alternative, or opt out entirely.

The third category is non-confessional RE, where students are taught together regardless of religious affiliation, and instruction is meant to provide students with a neutral and objective picture of different religions. This model of non-confessional RE that Alberts (2007) calls "integrative RE" is found in countries such Norway, Sweden, England, Wales, Switzerland, Botswana and South Africa (Björlin 2006; Dinama 2010; Dreisen and Tayob 2016; Willaime 2007). These models apply to publicly funded state schools, but it should be noted that in most countries there exist private schools run by different religious denominations that also offer confessional RE. These two ways of constructing RE (confessional/non-confessional) can also be described in terms of a theological approach/Religious Studies approach. Another dimension within RE, one more rooted in educational theory, concerns to what extent the subject and/or teaching can be described as content-oriented or student-oriented. Yet another way of categorising the subject is to look into who is responsible for the subject – the state, the denomination or a combination.

All over the world there exist various models for the design of the school subject of RE. Within both confessional and non-confessional RE, there are also different pedagogical models that advocate different course designs based on their view of learning and what is considered relevant knowledge in RE. In Sweden, this type of educational modelling is rather unusual in RE, possibly with the exception of "life-question pedagogy" (Dahlin 2004; Hartman 1986a, b; Löfstedt 2013), but in Europe, and not least in the British context, a number of different pedagogical models are designed and they are to varying degrees empirically based. There are different ways of labelling and characterising these models. Almost every author advocating a certain approach to the pedagogy of RE also includes a chapter describing the field of competing pedagogies and in doing so also characterises and positions him- or herself ontologically and pedagogically in different ways. See, for example, Barnes (2014), Erricker (2010), Gearon (2013), Grimmitt (2000), Jackson (1997, 2004) or Wright (2007).

In the educational debate about RE, it is common to distinguish between teaching and learning *in religion*, *about religion* and *from religion* (Grimmitt 1987). Denominational/confessional teaching is perceived as teaching in religion; the aim is to strengthen the students' own religious and moral development, provide students

with knowledge of their own religious beliefs, values, and traditions, and strengthen their religious identity. Teaching about religion means a type of RE where teaching and learning have a non-confessional foundation and are based on the academic discipline Religious Studies. Beliefs and religious expressions of different religions are treated as one among many forms of human activity. Learning from religion highlights the potential for personal development through RE touching upon life issues of an existential character and providing opportunities for students to reflect upon their own views in relation to the various religions' answers to these questions (Berglund 2009; Grimmitt 1987; Teece 2010). As will be shown below, the Swedish curriculum for RE has through the years gone from a purely confessional course in Christianity, to during the twentieth century following a course that emphasises learning from religion, to finally adopting the current curriculum, which particularly emphasises the pupils' analytical skills in relation to religion as a societal phenomenon, i.e., learning about religion (Osbeck and Pettersson 2009).

3.4 The Development of Religious Education in Sweden

To provide an understanding of the context in which the subject is situated and the discourses of religion(s) in relation to the school subject of RE in Sweden, I will here present the historical roots and development of the subject of RE[3] with an emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then analyse the subject in the two syllabi that were in use when this study was carried out. During the history of education, the pendulum has oscillated between teaching as a transmission of traditions and facts and student-centred teaching that puts the student's personality, development and democratic education at the centre, and this is evident in the development of Swedish RE.

Throughout the history of Sweden, the development of the state, religion (in the guise of Christianity and the Church of Sweden) and education have been closely intertwined. The geographical area that eventually would become Sweden is said to have been Christianised during the tenth century. King Gustav Vasa (1496–1560) saw the possibilities of using the Church in the consolidation of the nation state and pushed through the Reformation. In 1593 the "pure evangelical Lutheran doctrine" was adopted as the only permitted religion, and Luther's catechism became a unifying ideology.[4] When Sweden as a country grew and the nation state expanded, the Swedish government, like that of other European states, emphasised the unity of the people, language and religion, even more so after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.[5]

[3] In this section, I do not distinguish between the subject of RE in compulsory school and in upper-secondary school.

[4] In the year 2000, the Church of Sweden was separated from the state. Thus Sweden now has no state church, and the Church of Sweden is one among several denominations.

[5] Sweden is often described as a homogeneous country, but this must be viewed in light of official propaganda and the image the government has wanted to convey. Sweden has never been a com-

In Protestant churches, the Bible had a prominent position, and early on the Swedish clergy drew attention to the importance of having a literate population. According to the Church Law of 1683, the responsibility for teaching reading and the contents of what was called Luther's Small Catechism was placed on the shoulders of parents and Masters. The Church, represented by the priest, would control the knowledge in annual catechetical meetings [Swedish: *husförhör*]. In Sweden, this arrangement persisted even after a general elementary school had been established in 1842. To be able to read the Bible and to know the catechism were the qualifications for taking Holy Communion, which in turn was the requirement for becoming an accepted member of society (Alberts 2007; Hartman 2000). The roots of what we now call RE therefore constituted the very reason for the creation of the public educational system, and RE was the early school's main assignment, accounting for the bulk of instructional time. For an overview of Religious Education in Swedish grammar schools and upper-secondary schools from 1807–1911, including curricula/policy documents, names and teaching times, see *Appendix 1*.

Religious Education and the Emerging Democracy

In the political discussions about general education that took place during the nineteenth century, liberals emphasised the importance of education and civic knowledge for both individuals and for society, while conservative commentators saw risks in educating the general public. The solution and compromise resulted in Christianity playing a prominent role in the newly established elementary school. The minister became chairman of the school board, and one of the aims of elementary school was to prepare students for becoming confirmed members of the Church of Sweden (Almén 2000). Hartman (2000) argues that there was a turning point in the late nineteenth century when schools became responsible for religious upbringing. Compulsory school attendance was introduced in 1882, and the responsibility for religious education was formally transferred from the parents to the public school in 1883. It can be seen as a paradox that the responsibility for religious upbringing was moved from the private sphere to the public at the same time that Swedish society was moving toward secularisation in the sense that the influence of religion in the public realm declined. RE was thus of great importance in the early elementary school, and school's educational and fostering role was closely linked to the subject of RE along with teaching Swedish and history.

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pletely homogeneous society, neither linguistically nor religiously. During much of its history, the borders were drawn differently, and in the eastern half of the empire (present-day Finland), the majority of the population spoke Finnish. A large group of these Finns were Orthodox believers. In the north lived (and live) Sami and Torne Valley Finns [Swedish: Tornedalsfinnar], and in the urban areas lived crafts- and tradesmen from different part of the world. Also within the borders of the Swedish nation state lived (and live) non-sedentary groups such as different Romagroups, Travellers and travelling Jews (Hazell 2011; Svanberg and Tydén 1999).

The great social transformations of the nineteenth century related to industrialisation and urbanisation led to changed demands on the kind of knowledge schools were providing. Mathematics and science became more important, and there was a heated debate concerning the role of classical languages versus modern languages in upper-secondary schools. “Subject overload” [Swedish: *ämnesträngsel*] was debated (see, for example, Nordlund 1921), and it was argued that some subjects had to be left out or that the time allotted to them had to be reduced. RE was during the nineteenth century never at risk of disappearing from the schedule, but in the reform of 1905, where the government tried to tighten the regulations for the different kinds of upper-secondary schools, the subject got less time except for in the cases of those who chose the classical program at upper- secondary school (Nordlund 1921). Meanwhile, popular movements such as the labour movement, the temperance movement and the Free Church movement[6] grew strong with demands for democratisation, universal suffrage, civil rights and different kinds of freedoms. Within these groups, parents for various reasons opposed their children being taught the doctrine of the Swedish Church in the form of Luther’s catechism. Parents belonging to Free Churches considered starting their own schools (Gerle 2007). In this situation, the authorities chose to prioritise school unity over religious unity. This was done in 1919 by renaming the elementary school subject *Christianity* (previously *Biblical History* and *Catechism*), and in 1928 the name of the subject at the upper-secondary school level was changed from Christianity to *Knowledge of Christianity* (see *Appendix 1*). The subject should, according to the syllabus, focus on the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount and some church history. Luther’s Small Catechism was no longer used as a textbook on the subject, and the subject would no longer serve as preparation for confirmation in the Church of Sweden (Alberts 2007). Almén (2000) argues that this type of arrangement became a precedent for how the Swedish school system would deal with the growing diversification of society:

> The way Swedish authorities tried to solve this conflict discloses an attitude which since then has grown into a specific Swedish school policy. The unity of the school system was defended when the religious unity was lost… School unity was defended out of fear of a segregated society. If all parents could trust the same school, then all youth could be educated in the same milieu, sharing a rich common frame of reference, having childhood friends with backgrounds formed by other opinions and perhaps also by other social conditions. This fear and this dream were important factors behind the evolution of ‘the Swedish model’ (Almén 2000, p. 63).

The subject became “broad” in the sense that distinguishing details of Christian beliefs were avoided in order to make Christians of different denominations accept the subject’s construction.[7] Knowledge about “important non-Christian religions” should also be part of the subject in upper-secondary schools (Bergqvist and Wallin

[6] In 1858, the prohibition to attend religious meetings not organised by the Church of Sweden [Swedish: *konventikelplakatet*] was abolished. In 1860, one was allowed to leave the Church of Sweden on the condition of entering another denomination, a condition not abolished until 1951.

[7] The right of pupils of other faiths to opt out of the teachings in Christianity can be found as early as in the Grammar School Charter of 1859. Catholics and Jews were instead given the opportunity to receive RE in their own communities, and doing so would not affect the possibility of graduating from upper-secondary school (Bergqvist 1905).

1928). The school commission of 1946 (Ecklesiastikdepartementet 1948) emphasised that the teacher, when teaching about Christianity, had to be aware of the students' various backgrounds and avoid everything that could be perceived as a "personal attack" [Swedish: *sårande angrepp*] on somebody else's worldview and instead encourage permissiveness and broadmindedness with regard to freedom of thought. In this document, it is also stressed that it is not the task of the school to influence the students in terms of encouraging them to embrace any specific worldview. Instead, through the teaching of RE, students should get the opportunity to create their own personal view of life (Ecklesiastikdepartementet 1948).

The "Objectivity Requirement"

Religious freedom in the sense that Swedish citizens could leave the Swedish Church without entering another denomination was not introduced until the 1950s.[8] In 1962 a nine-year compulsory school were implemented, and in this educational reform the (civic) educational and fostering role was thereby taken over by the subject of civics. In the compulsory school, the name of the subject was changed to *Knowledge about Christianity* [Swedish: *Kristendomskunskap*] and objectivity requirements were introduced into the syllabus. A similar development occurred at the upper-secondary school level during the same period. In upper-secondary schools, the issue of objectivity was stressed already in the 1940s (Ecklesiastikdepartementet 1947),[9] and in the proposal of the government commission of 1960, the name was changed to *Knowledge of Religion* [Swedish: *religionskunskap*] (Ecklesiastikdepartementet 1963) and it was implemented in the curricula of 1965 (Skolöverstyrelsen 1965). The teaching of RE, then, was to be *about* religion, unlike before when teaching RE was equated with teaching *in* Christianity.

[8] Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Swedish constitution: "The public institutions shall combat discrimination of persons on grounds of gender, colour, national or ethnic origin, linguistic or religious affiliation, functional disability, sexual orientation, age or other circumstance affecting the individual […] Everyone shall be guaranteed the following rights and freedoms in his or her relations with the public institutions: freedom of worship: that is, the freedom to practice one's religion alone or in the company of others […] No one shall in his or her relations with the public institutions be coerced to divulge an opinion in a political, religious, cultural or other such connection. Nor may anyone in his or her relations with the public institutions be coerced to participate in a meeting for the shaping of opinion or a demonstration or other manifestation of opinion, or to belong to a political association, religious community or other association for opinion referred to in sentence one" (*The Constitution of Sweden: the Fundamental Laws and the Riksdag Act,* commented upon and translated by Isberg and Bradfield 2012).

[9] It is, however, questionable if the subject can be described as having been non-confessional before the syllabus of 1965, as Christianity constituted the overwhelming majority of the teaching content, and the instructions were, compared to more recent syllabi, extremely detailed. Non-Christian religions were described as "foreign religions", a label that was later changed to "non-Christian religions" in the syllabus of 1965.

The RE syllabus of 1962, written for use in the compulsory school, contained a detailed body of facts relating to the history of Christianity, church history, and knowledge of the Bible. The selection of content was motivated by cultural and historical arguments – in the syllabus, it was indicated that contact with other cultures had increased and because of this the students needed to have knowledge of their own cultural heritage. But the subject was also motivated through arguments that the subject included existential and universal issues. The syllabus of Lgr 62 stated that the subject was to be objective:

> Christian Religious Education must be conducted in a way that *does not violate the individual's right to freedom of thought and belief.* Therefore, instruction should be *objective* in the sense that it provides factual knowledge about the meaning and content of different creeds, without authoritatively seeking to influence pupils in forming opinions (Skolöverstyrelsen 1962, p. 121, italics in original text, own translation).

At the same time, the subject was to educate and discipline the pupil:

> Through facts dealt with within the subject, issues related to pupils' own attitudes toward life are actualised. Norms and ideals of life, which are relevant to their personal growth and which foster the pursuit of truth and seriousness in life, can thereby be transferred (Skolöverstyrelsen 1962, p. 121, own translation).

The "objectivity requirement" led to an animated debate (see, for example, Algotsson 1975; Hartman 1996), which ultimately concerned the core of religious freedom: what rights do individuals have to practice their own religion in a society? Do parents have the right to choose to give their children a religious education? What impact could/should schools, paid for with taxpayers' money, have on pupils? What beliefs and values are the smallest common denominators in a diversified society, which is increasingly characterised by pluralism?

In the RE syllabus of 1965 for upper-secondary schools (Skolöverstyrelsen 1965), traces of increasing secularity and the ongoing debate about religion are discernible. The subject was divided into six areas of content:

1. Analysis of the Human Condition in Modern Times
2. Ethical and Moral Questions
3. Christianity
4. The Worldview Debate
5. Non-religious Attitudes Toward Existence
6. Non-Christian Religions

The subject thus dealt with the contemporary debates on religion and worldviews. Under the heading "The Worldview Debate", issues such as religion and the question of truth, Marx's and Freud's views on religion, religion and science, humanism, naturalism and existentialism are mentioned in the syllabus as non-religious attitudes toward existence.

In the 1960s, a number of studies showed that students perceived the subject as being uninteresting. However, there was an interest in discussing existential issues on a more general level, and this was introduced into the subject in the next curriculum, which came in 1969. The subject in compulsory schools was again renamed

and, following the example of upper-secondary schools, the name was changed to *Knowledge of Religions* [Swedish: *religionskunskap*], despite strong protests from representatives of non-conformist churches (Algotsson 1975).[10] Ethics and life issues were introduced as explicit content within the subject. Hartman (2000) argues that the greatest difference in the syllabus of 1969 compared to the older syllabus was the way to approach religion in educational settings. Instead of exclusively focusing on the study of religious scriptures and external religious expressions such as rites and rituals, the students' own experiences and existential concerns were emphasised and were introduced as the central starting points for teaching.

During the 1970s, "life-questions pedagogy" was a dominant approach in RE, at least in the syllabus of 1969, Lgr 69 (Skolöverstyrelsen 1969), and of 1980, Lgr 80 (Skolöverstyrelsen 1980). The life-question pedagogy developed according to results of research on worldviews and how people construct a personal worldview and an interpretation of the meaning of life (Bråkenhielm 2001: Hartman 1986a, b; Jeffner 1973; Löfstedt 2013).[11] Hartman (2000) argues that through using this pedagogy, which based on the students' own existential questions about life, teachers were able to deal with the factual content of RE in a better way, as it satisfied the objectivity requirement but did so in an individualised way which lessened anxiety about not being objective enough and thus loosened up the "objectivity cramps" that many teachers had experienced (Hartman 2000).

Fundamental Values

In schools, Christianity, seen as a unifying set of values, has been replaced by the values of democracy, equality, freedom of choice, and human rights. In Swedish secularised society, the so-called *fundamental values* [Swedish: *värdegrunden*] have replaced the function previously held by Christianity as a moral compass, even though some wording related to Christianity still exists in the curricula. According to Colnerud (2004), concepts of fundamental values can be seen as "an expression of the secular school's attempt to reconnect with a moral curriculum code" (Colnerud 2004, p. 81, own translation). What is it, then, that makes up the fundamental values in the two most recent curricula, i.e., Lpf 94 (Skolverket 2006a) and Lgy 11 (Skolverket 2011b)? The values that society desires pupils to embrace are formulated in this way:

> The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are

[10] The changes in the syllabus of RE together with a decrease in teaching time in both compulsory and upper-secondary schools led to protests. About two million people signed petitions opposing these changes. From this wave of protests, Lewi Petrus and Birger Ekstedt from the Pentecostal Church took the initiative to form a new political party, the Christian Democratic Coalition, (KDS), which today has been renamed the Christian Democrats, KD.

[11] Worldviews will be further elaborated upon below.

> the values that the school should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching in the school should be non-denominational (Skolverket 2011b).

The formulation "Christian tradition and Western humanism" has in particular been contested and debated. Is there one single Christian tradition? And which branch of humanism does the syllabus refer to? Different traditions, both within Christianity and the humanist tradition, can be contradictory at certain points while being compatible in regard to others (Sigurdson 2002). Moreover, it is stated in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) as well as in the curriculum of Lgy 11 (Skolverket 2011b) that teaching should be nonconfessional and non-denominational. Hence, the values school should represent and impart rest on religious grounds, but have been disconnected from them. Sigurdsson (2002) chooses to interpret the requirement of nonconfessional education as a requirement of inclusiveness and not as an exclusive approach to a particular tradition relating to other traditions and the common life of the community.[12] Sigurdsson (2002) argues that fundamental values as formulated in the curriculum can contribute to education by its underlying assumption that every individual is a free, responsible human being who has the ability to practice critical thinking. He also believes that fundamental values can add a critical distance to the nation state and instead contribute to solidarity generated from below: "The Kingdom of Sweden is not the only (or primary) significant identifier of the individual, but the traditions offer a number of ways to realise Swedish citizenship, ways that can also challenge both current customs and the prevailing legislation" (Sigurdsson 2002, p. 147, own translation). In this way, the formulations of the curriculum can play a role in strengthening democracy.

In RE, questions of ethics and values are central, and this becomes a more complex task with increasing pluralism in Swedish society: Hartman formulates the dilemma as follows: "How should we, as part of a mandatory, united school system and in a society characterised by increasing pluralism, teach about matters concerning worldviews and existential issues"? (Hartman 2000, p. 238, own translation).[13] Franck (2008) argues that RE has the potential to be a forum for inter-cultural, communicative dialogue even if this means that a number of tensions arise which teaching cannot sidestep. These tensions can be found in the very aims of the subject in the syllabus:

> Teaching in the subject of religion should aim at helping students broaden, deepen and develop knowledge of religions, outlooks on life and ethical standpoints, and where applicable different interpretations of these. Knowledge and understanding of Christianity and its traditions are of special importance since this tradition has nurtured the values underpinning the foundations of Swedish society. Teaching should take as its starting point a view of society characterized by openness regarding lifestyle, outlooks on life, differences

[12] Tesfahuney (1999) does not discuss fundamental values *per se*, but instead argues that education can be described in terms of a mono-cultural and ethnocentric project.

[13] Upper-secondary school is in theory not mandatory, but 98% of all teenagers attend one of the eighteen national programs, and RE is a mandatory subject. Therefore, the dilemma expressed above is just as relevant in the case of upper-secondary school.

> between people, and also give students the opportunity to develop preparedness for understanding and living in a society characterized by diversity. Students should also be given the opportunity to discuss how the relationship between religion and science can be interpreted and under-stood, regarding, for example, questions about creation and evolution.
>
> Teaching should lead to students developing knowledge of how people's moral attitudes can be understood on the basis of religions and outlooks on life. They should be given the opportunity to reflect on and analyse people's values and beliefs, and thus develop respect and understanding for different ways of thinking and living. Teaching should also give students the opportunity to analyse and assess how religion can relate, amongst other things, to ethnicity, gender, sexuality and socio-economic background (Skolverket 2011a).

In the quote above, it is clear that the subject moves within the fields of tension concerning pluralism and is to handle precisely the challenges that a pluralistic society entails. While Sweden's Christian heritage and its impact on Swedish society are distinctively formulated, the teaching is to be based on the premise of openness to different views.

Religions and Worldviews

A characteristic of Swedish RE is that the subject since 1960 has included both teaching about religions and teaching about non-religious worldviews. Religions and worldviews are contested concepts, and this is why something needs to be said about how they have been used in the Swedish debate related to RE.

To define the phenomenon which in everyday language is referred to as "religion" has occupied scholars within the field for centuries, and there exist vast numbers of definitions, but none has gained supremacy, and there is no consensus on how to define this concept. The definitions are influenced by the historical and political contexts in which they arise. Many of the definitions tend to be ethnocentric and assume implicitly Western, Christian and Enlightenment ideas and ideals and, for example, emphasise beliefs rather than acts (Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997).

One way of trying to understand religions is to define aspects or dimensions as characteristics of religion. For example, Smart (1977) highlights six dimensions of religion: the ritual dimension, the mythological dimension, the doctrinal dimension, the ethical dimension, the social dimension and the experiential dimension as central in the process of understanding religion and what religion might mean to a believer. Other dimensions could be the narrative dimension and the institutional dimension (Rydving 2013).

A common way of categorising definitions of religion is to divide them into substantial and functional definitions. Simply put, substantial definitions are attempts to define the characteristics of religion, i.e., what religion is. Substantial definitions often contain expressions about the objects of beliefs, beliefs in a divine/spiritual/supra-empirical being or about the relation of man to something holy.[14] Substantial

[14] See, for example, definitions offered by Tylor (2010 [1903]), Robertson (1970), Hill (1973), Spiro (1966).

definitions come close to a common, everyday understanding of what religion is, e.g., "to believe in a god", but can be criticised for being ethnocentric and for assuming characteristics of Western and Christian notions to be universal. Functional definitions focus on what religion means and does in the lives of people or the function religion has in groups and societies. Many of the functional definitions of religion focus on human beings as seekers of meaning and on how they relate to conditions of existence. One criticism of functional definitions of religion is that they are so vague and general that anything people find to be meaningful can be defined as religion (Furseth and Repstad 2006).

There are, as will be described below, resemblances between functional definitions of religion and definitions of worldviews. The divide between substantial and functional aspects also occurs in relation to the concept of worldview.

What is a worldview? In the syllabus of RE, the Swedish word [*livsåskådning*] is used, which in this book has been translated as "worldview", but there does not seems to exist an exact equivalent word in English that corresponds to the Swedish concept of *livsåskådning*. Jeffner (1973) states that the English terms worldview (equivalent to the German word *Weltanschauug*), *outlooks on the world*, *philosophy*, *philosophy of life*, *life-philosophy* and *ideology* seem to be used to cover the same content. In recent doctoral theses, *livsåskådning* and related concepts have been translated into English as *life-view* (Gustavsson 2013), *view of life* (Risenfors 2011) *life philosophy* (Falkevall 2010; Gunnarsson 2008) and *life-understanding* (Osbeck 2006).[15] The word has evidently been used in Sweden since 1848 ("Livsåskådning" 2015), and is, for example, used in the syllabus from 1928 (Bergqvist and Wallin 1928) where it is stated that the subject Knowledge of Christianity should include teaching about Christian beliefs and worldview [Swedish: *livsåskådning*].

The concept became the subject of debate in relation to a book by Ingemar Hedenius from 1951, *Att välja livsåskådning* [*To Choose a Worldview*].[16] As part of his critique of Christianity, he outlined the concept of worldview, which he states concerns beliefs about life and humankind, the history of the universe and some moral convictions. In 1973, Jeffner outlined a definition of the concept that has been widely used in research ever since its first appearance in which he also includes a basic attitude toward life. He defines the term worldview in this way:

> A person's worldview refers to a person's central value system and his or her basic attitude as well as to that part of the person that the person considers to be self-knowledge and knowledge of the world around him/her, which affects his/her central value system or one's

[15] The German word *Lebensanschauung* is a direct linguistic parallel. In Norwegian, the equivalent concept is *livssyn*, and in Danish it is *livsanskuelse*.

[16] Hedenius was a highly controversial person engaged in the public debate, and in 1949 he wrote *Tro och vetande* [*Believing and Knowing*], a critique of theology, the Church's role in society and the truth claims of Christianity. His atheistic and secularistic position resulted in the following comment made by the orientalist professor Henrik Samuel Nyberg: "There is no God and Ingemar Hedenius is His prophet" (Nordin 2004, p. 518, own translation).

basic attitude in a way that the person is willing to accept (Jeffner 1973, p. 18, own translation).

This definition of a worldview thus contains theories about human beings and the world (a cognitive element), a central value system with values and norms (an action-oriented element) and a "basic attitude" or "life mood" (an emotional element) which Jeffner describes as the way the individual perceives his/her situation in the world to be – with a fundamental feeling of hope or despair, trust or distrust, optimism or pessimism. There is an interplay between the components of the worldview, but in light of Jeffner's definition, theories about the world, i.e., the substantial and cognitive aspects of the worldview, come about as fundamental since these affect the value system and the basic attitude toward life. Using this definition, organised religious as well as non-religious worldviews could be studied, and religion thus becomes a subcategory of worldviews. In the literature, a distinction is made between organised worldviews and personal worldviews (Hartman 1986a, b, 1994; Jackson and Mazza 2014; van der Kooij et al. 2013). Organised worldviews can be described as being developed over time and as relatively coherent, established systems of beliefs and rituals. Examples of organised worldviews in the above sense could be religious worldviews such as Christianity and Hinduism, and non-religious worldviews such as existentialism, Marxism, feminism, ecosophy, humanism, and worldview perspectives in psychology and science (Bråkenhielm 1991, 1992). The wording concerning worldviews in the syllabus of RE in Lpf 94 and Lgy 11 has been interpreted as to include teaching about these specific worldviews and is commonly included in RE textbooks as examples of non-religious worldviews.[17] The course of RE at upper-secondary schools thus often includes teaching about existentialism, feminism, humanism and Marxism (cf. Löfstedt 2013). This understanding of worldview is in line with the term non-religious convictions used in the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.[18] The concept of non-religious convictions takes the religious position as its starting point and is a negation and is thus relative. The concept of worldview might be perceived as a more neutral concept compared to non-religious convictions as it encompasses both religious worldviews and non-religious worldviews, as well as worldviews between and beyond (Jackson and Mazza 2014).

Jeffner's threefold definition has been the starting point for an extensive amount of empirical work aiming at mapping and understanding the constructions and functions of worldviews in different contexts (see, for example, Bråkenhielm 2001; Falkevall 2010; Gunnarsson 2008, 2013; Hartman 1986a, b, 1994; Risenfors 2011). In the wake of the empirical work, a discussion of the functional aspects of the worldview has been highlighted. One critique concerns the fact that the definition tends to overemphasise the substantial and cognitive aspects of worldviews at the

[17] Examples from three RE textbooks for upper-secondary schools: existentialism, feminism, Marxism and ecosophy in Mattson Flennegård and Eriksson (2013); humanism and existentialism in Ring (2013); or secular humanism, atheism, Marxism and existentialism in Björlin and Jämterud (2013).

[18] Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)12.

expense of the functional aspects (Gunnarsson 2008). In empirical research, the meaning and function of the personal worldview has been more in focus. Hartman (1986a, b) uses Jeffner's definition but adjusts it since he conducted research on worldviews espoused by children and youths. In this publication, Hartman distinguishes between an organised worldview and a personal worldview. Admittedly, a personal worldview can be influenced by an organised worldview, but a personal worldview is the approach, perception or attitude of the individual with regard to questions about humankind, society, God, the world, reality, and values. Hartman also analyses how these attitudes are put into action, i.e., not just as a way to think about life, but as a way to live it. In this sense, Hartman argues that all humans have a personal worldview or, in his later work, a "personal interpretation of life" (Hartman and Torstenson-Ed 2007). Instead of focusing on the worldview per se, the focus is on human beings as meaning-makers and the process of interpreting different aspects of life. It has also been emphasised that personal worldviews are many times fragmented, inconsistent and contradictory (af Burén 2015; Gustavsson 2013; Risenfors 2011).van der Kooij et al. (2013) elaborate on what a distinction between an organised worldview and a personal worldview can imply in RE. They define an organised worldview as one that prescribes answers to existential questions, contains moral values and aims at providing a meaning for life. A personal worldview also answers existential questions and contains moral values, but having a personal worldview furthermore means experiencing meaning in life, and the personal worldview influences both acting and thinking. van der Kooij et al. (2013) also take up pedagogical problems with, and the benefits of, using these two concepts in RE. When discussing organised worldviews in RE, it is important to problematize the relation between the two – even if a person sees herself as embracing a certain organised worldview, this does not mean that her personal worldview is identical to the organised worldview, nor are organised worldviews ever monolithic.[19]

Research on the worldviews of children gave rise to the life-question pedagogy mentioned in the background above. In this approach, pupils' existential questions comprised the centre of teaching. Hartman (2000) argues that issues related to religion are abstract. To make children develop knowledge and conceptual understanding, the way to go is to concretise. In order to concretise this abstract content, the teacher needs to use the children's experiences and interest, and in order to do this it is important to know what children are thinking and wondering about. Life-question pedagogy is related to the concept of worldview, but takes as its starting point the questions of children, not a certain religion or a particular organised worldview.

[19] Cf. Jackson's (1997, 2004) Interpretive approach with representations of religions, interpretation, reflection and edification.

Summary of the History of Religious Education in Sweden

Using Grimmitt's (1987) terms, Swedish RE developed during the twentieth century to become a subject that included teaching and learning about religion as well as teaching and learning from religion, but not in religion. The development of the subject of RE during the 1900s can be described as having progressed from a subject having both an educational and a fostering character as well as having been a subject with a societal conservation function to becoming a subject of individual liberation and societal analysis and mirroring. In Lpo 94 (Skolverket 2006b) and Lpf 94 (Skolverket 2006a), RE can be seen as being more focused on individual and community development, as ethics and the relation between individuals and society became more prominent themes (Olivestam 2006).

> Pupils reflect individually and in groups upon what being tolerant toward different people's ways of viewing life entails. Pupils argue for their own way of interpreting the meaning of life, with respect for the rights of others' interpretations of the meaning of life (Skolverket 2000a, own translation).

In the current curricula, Lgr 11 (Skolverket 2011c) and Lgy 11 (Skolverket 2011b), the elements of personality development have been toned down in the syllabus for RE (Skolverket, 2011a, d) in favour of facts about religion and the role of religion in society (Björlin 2011; Selander 2011). In summary, the development of RE in compulsory schools can be described as stemming from the pure teaching of the Lutheran Protestant faith to the teaching of Christianity (1919), the study of Christianity (1962), the study of religion (1969) and ending in teaching about religion and life issues (1980, 1994). Willaime (2007) and Tomasson (2002) point out that RE in Swedish schools is a good example of how secularisation has become increasingly widespread in a country, and perhaps even contributing to it.

One question is whether RE throughout history can be regarded as one subject or several. Goodson, Anstead, and Mangan (1998) highlight that there is a tendency to over-emphasise historical continuity. It is at least possible to perceive RE before the 1960s, with its strong confessional element, as essentially different from the contemporary Swedish subject of RE. The table in *Appendix 1* attempts to summarise the development of the subject of RE in the grammar school that eventually evolved into the upper-secondary school of today.[20]

[20] For a similar overview of the development of RE in the early "folk" school and compulsory school, see Hartmann 2000. Because until 1962 there existed a "parallel school system", some of the school forms were partly overlapping, and the table should be read with this in mind.

The Development of Upper-Secondary Schools

It is not easy to follow the course taken by a school subject in different school types, as, over the years, there have existed parallel and overlapping types of schools. Is it possible to talk about the same subject when the aims and contexts vary to such a great extent?

Upper-secondary school [Swedish: gymnasium] was originally a school to which only the privileged elite had access. Upper- secondary schools were established in the seventeenth century and originally had a close connection to the existing cathedral schools and, later on, so-called trivial schools. The training given in these early schools resembled university education, with its disputations, and it was possible to take a degree in philosophy or theology. In 1649, the Swedish government stated that that there should be three different school types: trivial schools, upper-secondary schools and universities. Under this reform, the education of priests was moved to the university. Trivial school consisted of four years and could be extended two years with more practical and commercial-oriented training, the so-called apologist class. The upper-secondary school had its position between the trivial school and the university. Latin and the catechism were the main subjects, but gradually more classical subjects such as Greek, Hebrew, theology, history and poetry were introduced. Modern languages, practice-oriented mathematics and science were first added into the apologist classes but were then gradually introduced into upper-secondary schools. In 1849, trivial schools, apologist classes and upper-secondary schools were merged into one organisation, the so-called grammar school [Swedish: *läroverk*], but the organisation of the different types of schools and the progression in the school system are partly unclear (Florin and Johansson 1993; Hartman 2005). Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a lively debate on the position of classical education in relation to more utilitarian-oriented knowledge and the position of the classical languages versus that of the modern ones. The result was a division into different programs where the students could choose a specialisation between a more science-oriented program and the more classical bildung-oriented program. Gradually, the possibility to opt out of certain subjects increased. In 1842, the government introduced a law [Swedish: *folkskolestadgan*] (SFS 1842:19) that required each municipality and parish to offer all children education, and in 1909 a "middle school" was established, which amounted to a total of 6 years of compulsory schooling. With the passing of the school charter of 1905, grammar schools [Swedish: *läroverk*] was divided into higher and lower schools [Swedish: *realskola*] in which the lower part was based on the first three years of elementary school. In theory, this meant that it was possible for children of non-privileged families to advance in the educational system. This reform also allowed for coeducation, which meant that girls were admitted to secondary schools. In 1928, it was stated that the lower part of grammar school [Swedish: realskola] or girls' school education was an entry requirement for upper-secondary school studies. In 1962, the parallel school system comprised of elementary schools, secondary schools and grammar schools was abolished, and a 9-year comprehensive school was introduced. Vocational training

had traditionally been handled by different guilds or industries, but in 1964 vocational education in so-called fackskolor was incorporated into the general upper-secondary school system. Until 1994, these vocational courses were part of a two-year programme while the preparatory programmes for higher education consisted of three or four years of study. Today, all programmes consist of three years, and by choosing certain courses, a vocational programme might lead to eligibility for higher education, even if this possibility was limited by the current curricula of Lgy11 (Skolverket 2011b). Thus from being a theological seminary for the elite only, upper-secondary school today is attended by 98% of all students, distributed among eighteen national programmes: twelve vocational programmes and six preparatory programmes for higher education (Arfwedson and Arfwedson 2002; Korp 2006; Lundgren 1989; Lundgren et al. 2012; Richardson 2010; Skolverket 2011b; Thelin 1981).

Religious Education in Comprehensive School and Upper-Secondary School

Is there any difference between the subject of Religious Education in compulsory schools compared to the subject of RE in upper-secondary schools? When the subject is discussed, debaters rarely differentiate between the different types of schools. However, the different types of schools have had to adapt to different conditions, for example, how to conduct teaching in terms of time available and the age of the students. The teaching of RE in regard to older pupils originally had clearer links to a school whose main purpose was to provide an education for the clergy, while the purpose of teaching younger children was to be educational and fostering. With the educational reform of 1905, the primary school was established for young children, and secondary and upper-secondary schools for older children. At grammar school, university-educated teachers of different disciplines taught the different subjects. These teachers were almost exclusively male (Florin and Johansson 1993). This contributed to the fact that the university discipline had a stronger impact on education for older students than for younger ones.[21]

Reforms of RE have caused heated public debates, whether they concerned changes in compulsory schools or in upper-secondary schools. Still, it seems that commentators in the 1960s found it somewhat easier to accept changes in upper-secondary schools than in primary schools, for example, when the name of the subject was changed to Religious Education [Swedish: *religionskunskap*] or when it

[21] Originally, teachers of all levels in the school system were men. Women were employed as teachers primarily for younger children, but were excluded from teaching boys in secondary schools until 1918. After a hard struggle led by female academics, unmarried women were allowed to be appointed to the posts of senior lecturer or lecturer at grammar schools. Classroom teachers in primary schools, preferably female teachers, were educated at teacher-training seminaries and not at universities (Florin and Johansson 1993).

was decided that the subject was to be non-confessional (Algotsson 1975). The debate when writing the current RE syllabus mainly concerned whether Christianity should be mentioned explicitly, thus being granted a special status, or if the formulation that the subject would treat "world religions" would be enough. Again, a distinction was not made in the debate between the subject in primary schools or in upper- secondary schools. In the final version, Christianity is specifically mentioned both in the syllabus for comprehensive schools and the one for upper-secondary schools:

> Through teaching in the subject of Religious Education, pupils shall be given the opportunity to develop their ability to analyse Christianity, plus other religions and worldviews as well as different interpretations and practices within these (Skolverket 2011c, own translation).
>
> Teaching in the course should cover the following core content: Christianity, the other world religions and different outlooks on life, their characteristics and how they are expressed by individuals and groups in the present, in Sweden and the world (Skolverket 2011a).

The Syllabi for Religious Education in 1994 and 2011 – A Comparison

As participant observations were conducted during the school year of 2011–2012 when the curricula for Lgy 11 (including a new RE syllabus) were introduced, participant observations were made both at lessons where the teaching was to be organised according to Lpf 94 and according to Lgy 11, and therefore the two syllabi will here be compared. According to the National Agency for Education, there are few changes in the subject between the two syllabi.

It is somewhat problematic to compare Re 1201 (Skolverket 2000a) to Religion 1 (Skolverket 2011a),[22] as they are formulated to describe what students ought to know in line with two different grading systems. Both operate within the framework of goal-related grading criteria for the different levels, but Re 1201 (Skolverket 2000a) starts with a number of goals that students must attain, and these are then followed by the criteria for Pass [*Godkänd – G*], *Pass with Distinction* [*Väl Godkänd – VG*] and Pass with Excellent *Distinction* [*Mycket Väl godkänd- MVG*]. The link between objectives and grading criteria is not entirely clear. There are, for example, content and abilities in the criteria that are not specified in the objectives. To obtain a VG, the student must have met the criteria for G, and an MVG student must have met the criteria for G and VG. The syllabus for Religion 1 (Skolverket

[22] The curriculum consists of one general part. The present curriculum (Lgy 11) has, for example, four main sections: core values and tasks, overall goals and guidelines, goals for all national programmes and upper-secondary school subjects. All subjects have a specific syllabus. In Lpf 94, the syllabus is structured based on aims, goals to strive for, the character and structure of the subject, goals the student is to achieve and assessment criteria. The mandatory course of RE in Lpf 94 is named *Knowledge of religion A* [*Religionskunskap A*] and has the code Re 1201. In Lgy 11, the syllabus is structured based on aims, core content and knowledge requirements for the different marks. The mandatory course of RE in Lgy 11 is named *Knowledge of religion 1* [*Religionskunskap 1*] and has the code RELREL01.

2011a) is designed in such a way that first the "overall aims" are stated and then a list labelled "core content" which is intended to shape the content of teaching is presented. Then the criteria for the marks E, C and A follow, where A is the highest. To get the mark D, the criteria for E have to be achieved well as the "predominant" part of C criteria, and to get a B, all of the C-criteria have to be attained and even the majority of the requirements for an A. The criteria do not have the character of a list but should be the basis of an overall assessment of the pupil's knowledge (Skolverket 2011a). The same factual content is involved at all levels, but the pupil demonstrates that he or she can engage with it at different levels. For a comparison between the two syllabi concerning content and skills, see *Appendix 2*.

In sum, world religions and worldviews, how they are expressed, and ethical models are the core of both courses. Religion 1 more clearly emphasises the importance of religion as a social phenomenon than Re 1201 does, which instead emphasises the pupil's own reflections, understanding and positioning. In Re 1201, one declared objective is understanding: "The pupil presents knowledge of Christianity and other world religions and outlooks on life that enhance understanding of different lifestyles among people in the pupil's immediate surroundings" (from the criteria for *Pass*, Re 1201, own translation, Skolverket 2000a) and the student must take a personal stance. Several criteria are value-related rather than knowledge-related, for example, as the pupil must respect other people's interpretations of life in order to get an MVG: "The pupil argues for her/his own way of interpreting the meaning of life with respect for the rights of others to their own interpretations" (from the criteria for *Pass with excellent distinction*, Re 1201, my own translation, Skolverket 2000a). In Religion 1, the pupil's analytical skills rather than personal development are at the centre. This can be seen as a return to the syllabus of the 1960s, with its emphasis on learning *about* rather than *from* religions. The pupils are to present interpretations and perspectives, plus draw valid conclusions about different relationships, but the student's relationship to facts is not subject to assessment. However, a new theme has been introduced – faith and science, and the teaching shall include different views of the relationships between religion and science in the public debate. In Re 1201, there is also a dimension based on gender that addresses the relationship between the sexes with respect to religion. In Religion 1, the intersectional perspective is articulated more distinctively as religion in relation to ethnicity, and sexuality and socio-economic status are explicitly mentioned as part of the core content. The course must also include teaching about how identity is created in relation to religion and how matters relating to views on the meaning of life are made present in written sources as well as in traditions and historical and contemporary events.

The National Agency for Education declares that the subject at the upper- secondary school level has not undergone any very large changes compared to the previous curriculum, apart from the fact that religion in contemporary society is emphasised more, and historical aspects are included in the compulsory school curriculum. There is also an intersectional perspective taken, and new content involving faith and science is included.

Chapter 4
Classroom Research Concerning Religious Education

Abstract What is going on in the Religious Education classrooms? What themes are highlighted in research about the Religious Education practice? Comparably, there is a deficit of empirical research that looks into the classroom practice both in Religious Education and other subjects. A large number of the literature discussing the Religious Education classroom practice, how the subject ought to be designed and taught are not recommendations based on findings from empirical research. However, in this chapter, the reader will get an overview of international research and thus the current state of knowledge related to Religious Education with a special focus on empirical research concerning the Religious Education classroom practice. Both studies from confessional and non-confessional forms of Religious Education and from primary and secondary schools are included in this presentation.

Research on Religious Education comprises several scientific fields and has its roots in both educational science and areas concerning aspects of school subjects and subject-matter didaktik but also the disciplines of religious studies and theology. Classroom research has undergone a number of phases and trends having various areas of focus, methods and theories. In overviews of educational research (cf. Gordon et al. 2007; LeCompte 2009; Sahlström 2008), early classroom research is described as mainly focusing external behaviour and dominated by quantitative approaches. In the last few decades, qualitative approaches that seek to contextualise learning have gained more influence. Themes that have dominated classroom research have been, for example, analyses of classroom rules for turn-taking (Initiation-Response-Evaluation, IRE), questions concerning who dominates classroom conversation, and students' (lack of) influence in the classroom. More sociologically and ethnographically inspired research has focused various aspects of gender, class and power, and the classroom as an arena serving to maintain power structures in society. International as well as Swedish research in educational science seems to have moved toward various aspects of learning and to be more oriented toward research aimed at developing classroom practice and promote students' learning (The Swedish Research Council 2014). When it comes to subject-related classroom studies focusing on the content of subjects and learning, studies on language-learning, mathematics and science dominate (Sahlström 2008). Classroom

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studies in other subjects, such as RE, are in comparison extremely few (Johnsson Harrie 2011; Osbeck 2006, 2012).

4.1 Empirical Classroom Studies of Religious Education

It is worth noting that a large number of the literature discussing the RE classroom practice, how the subject ought to be designed and taught are not recommendations based on findings from empirical research. However, in this section the reader will get an overview of international research and thus the current state of knowledge related to RE with a special focus on empirical research concerning the RE classroom practice. Both studies from confessional and non-confessional forms of RE and from primary and secondary schools are included in this presentation.[1]

A common denominator in many of the studies are various aspects of societal religious diversity and pluralism in relation to RE. How can teachers relate to and handle a pluralistic society and classrooms that in different ways are characterised by diversity? (See, for example, Baumfield 2007; Bender-Szymanski 2012; Everington 2014; Everington et al. 2011.) How does this affect the choice of teaching methods and the selection of material (ter Avest and Bakker 2009; Berglund 2011; Green and Oldendorf 2005; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Rissanen 2012)? How is the multi-religious, pluralistic society mirrored in curricula and the social construction of RE as a subject (Alberts 2010; Boeve 2012; Cardinal 2009; Fakirani 2013; Mueller 2005; Passe and Willox 2009)? What are students' experiences of diversity or belonging to a minority (Moulin 2011, 2015; Sjöborg 2012; Thanissaro 2011a, b; Zilliacus and Holm 2013)? It is interesting to note that the question of how schools should respond to and manage diversity is just as relevant regardless of whether the article is written based on confessional or non-confessional RE. Conversely, the solutions vary, depending on different social, national, and institutional conditions. This is highlighted by Bråten (2013), who through document analysis, observations, and interviews, designed a comparative model to analyse reasons for various responses to the challenges being different in different countries.

In the following teaching and learning in RE along with RE as a tool for gaining societal cohesion will be presented. The section will be structured along the content-oriented themes of *Learning*, *Meaning*, *Dialogue*, *Identity* and *Implications of confessional/non-confessional models of RE.*

[1] For a systematic review (Moon et al. 2000; Hammersley 2007) of classrooms observations of RE see Kittelmann Flensner (2015)

Learning

In the discussion regarding what the subject of RE is, should be, and should not be, the concepts of learning *in* religion, learning *from* religion and learning *about* religion recur (Cf Grimmitt 1987). Teece (2010) analyses a number of teaching sequences, and argues that the concept of "learning from religion" that is held up high in official documents in the UK is problematic: What is to be taught? How? How do we know what someone learned? Is it learning from religion, a specific religion or religions in general? What do we mean by religion as a general concept?

In the research project 'Does Religious Education Work?' Conroy, Lundie, Davis, Baumfield, Barnes, Gallagher, Lowden, Bourque and Wenell have used various methods including ethnographic studies at 24 British schools to answer their main question. Of course there is not a simple no or yes to that question but they conclude that RE in many cases fails to achieve aims concerning learning, understanding and meaning partly due to the numerous (and disparate) responsibilities and resources attributed to the subject. They also points to the fact that subject deals with issues that might be personal to some students and that they are not comfortable discussing their inner thoughts in the classroom. In a Swedish context this is also highlighted in the ethnographic study of Risenfors (2011) were some students express that they don't want to discuss their personal opinions in the RE-classroom but prefer to talk with their friends after class.

Just as Conroy et al. (2013) Arweck (2016) and Lund Johanssen (2013) stresses the role of the teacher. Based on results form of "the Diversity Project" Arweck (2016) maintains that "the structured frame of a lesson enables the student to express matters which are deeply personal without being personal in the way they express them" (Arweck 2016, p. 64) and the teacher thus functions as a moderator with knowledge of religious and nonreligious positions. The challenge of making the content of RE relevant to the students and include their previous understanding and at the same time is include all students is highlighted by Lund Johannessen (2013). Based on classrooms observations of RE he stresses the importance of the teachers professional contextual knowledge which must be an explicit, transparent, critical, modifiable and distanced cultural competes.

Religious literacy is a common concept in literature dealing with Religious Education (see for example von Brömssen 2013; Carr 2007; Wright 2007) but the concept is not so frequently applied to empirical research. Moore (2007) maintains that a major problem in contemporary multireligious and pluralistic USA is religious illiteracy and argues for the need of Religious Education from a Cultural Studies approach. She frames learning in terms of literacy and gives examples from experiences and evaluations from the classroom practice and highlights difficulties or risks such as: "the treatment of religious practitioners as "experts" on their own tradition by virtue of their faith commitments, an over simplistic view of religious faith and practice, understanding how to reconcile competing interpretations of

God, and the assumption that "other" religions are uniform and simple versus diverse and complex" (Moore 2007, p. 145).

School is a complex context. On the one hand, the overall aim of education is that the students should learn, reflect, develop and reach their full potential to become whole persons and be able to be active citizens. On the other hand, society, partly through laws and curricula, but not least through different forms of summative assessment, governs which objectives every individual must reach and requires teachers to measure and assess whether the students reach these objectives. This may be in conflict with the overall goal of education. This dilemma is addressed by Dinama (2010), who analyses the implementation of a multi-faith curriculum in Botswana. In classroom practice, the task of getting the students to pass the national exams rather than getting them to reflect and participate in dialogue became the priority as the tests exclusively focused on facts, even though the overall aim of the curriculum was to promote values such as independence, freedom, tolerance, and understanding. A similar observation is made by van Eersel et al. (2010) and by Conroy et al. (2012). In an action research project aiming to improve classroom practice through the use of self-assessment and reflection upon learning as a tool for learning, Fancourt (2010) shows how students' meta-reflections on learning can be used as a resource in teaching. O'Grady (2010) argues that reflection and learning cannot be separated; they presuppose each other. Reflexivity regarding position and practice is also highlighted as absolutely central to professionalism in the teaching profession (Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; White 2010). From a German confessional context, Heil and Ziebertz (2004) discuss the conditions for the RE-teaching profession. They argue that society is characterised by pluralism and that individuals to varying degrees relate to the Christian content because teachers need to assume an abductive approach where the teacher constantly oscillates between what should be taught, students' understanding, and the modification or transformation of Christianity in order to make teaching relevant and effective.

What is being taught in the classroom and what ought to be taught? These issues are addressed, but usually the actual content is not subject to analysis, with the exception of Naeslund (2009), who discusses what invited representatives of different communities actually say during Religious Education classes. Most studies provide references to specific subject matter, but they emphasise more general themes and discuss, for example, the notion that students should have the opportunity to gain some perspective on their own learning (Heil and Ziebertz 2004) and develop an understanding for other ways of thinking (cf. Watson 2011).

Not just what the teaching was about but also how teachers and students talk in the classroom affects the learning of RE. The study done by Osbeck and Lied (2011) focuses on learning in RE and how it is related to hegemonic speech genres in the RE classroom. They highlight two dimensions in classroom discourse as principally significant: respectful or mocking valuation of religion, and whether the boundaries of religions and beliefs are defined as fixed or open. The discourses in the classroom subsequently affected what it was possible to learn.

Dialogue

Dialogue and various aspects and models of dialogue pedagogy were highlighted in several studies (Castelli 2012; Osbeck and Lied 2011; Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; van Eersel et al. 2010; Watson 2011). Within the framework of the REDCo project, several of the studies had the aim of investigating what facilitates and obstructs dialogue in the classrooms (ter Avest et al. 2009). Reasoning about the importance of dialogue for learning and human interaction constitutes the theoretical inspiration for several of these studies. Partly, dialogue is examined in relation to how teachers use dialogue as a pedagogical tool with a didactic, educational science focus (Schihalejev 2009; van Eersel et al. 2010). Schihalejev (2009) describes factors such as teaching methods, how teachers formulate questions and the atmosphere in the classroom as important to facilitating or obstructing dialogue. Dialogue in RE is partly discussed as a way to contribute to positive social development and social cohesion (Castelli 2012; Watson 2011). Watson (2011) builds on theories of interfaith dialogue and classroom dialogue as a basis for the development of children's spirituality. Based on the results from empirical classroom studies, she sees dialogue as a possible way to create social cohesion. Castelli (2012) argues that dialogue has to do with developing an understanding of others, but also the pupils' ability to articulate their own belief systems, which is of central importance in a society where we as human beings constantly encounter different beliefs, both religious and secular.

Meaning

The concepts of sense and meaning are emphasised as central to RE in several of the articles. Some feature learning as synonymous with meaning-making (Eke et al. 2005; Osbeck and Lied 2011), and Lehmann (2008) describes discourse in RE and the English-language classroom as "situated meanings". The teacher's work is thus to assist the students' construction of meaning. Conroy et al. (2012) describe the discourses that have shaped the goals of RE, implying that the search for truth has been replaced by the search for meaning. They argue that the subject of RE (in England) contains complex and conflicting objectives, which means that students perceive the subject as vague and unimportant. One way to resolve the problem of meaning in non-confessional RE is, according to Lundie and Conroy (2012), to organise instruction around contested issues and, even more importantly, to organise teaching based on students' experiences and perceptions. In both confessional and non-confessional RE, the phrase "spiritual education" occurs. The term is defined in slightly different ways, but Hyde (2006) argues that spiritual education

concerns the notion that education should convey a sense of fellowship and connectedness with the self, others, and the transcendent universe.[2]

Identity

Pluralism, individualism and the claim that the national imaginary is related to Christianity even if one does not perceive oneself as religious, seem to be two recurring themes in classroom studies of RE (cf. Anker 2011; Eriksen 2010; Klingenberg 2005; von der Lippe 2009). Several studies discuss identification and positioning. Buchardt (2010) demonstrates how Muslim-ness is constructed in Danish RE [Danish: *Kristendomskundskap*, i.e., Knowledge of Christianity] which is supposed to be non-denominational and non-confessional. In the classroom, Danishness is equated with Christianity. Muslim and Danish become thus incompatible positions. This is in clear contrast to the Finnish Muslim RE teacher in Rissanen's (2013) study who emphasises that one can be both Finnish and Muslim and that there is no conflict between these identities, or the Swedish Muslim teachers in Berglund's (2009, 2011)[3] study who want to emphasise that there is no contradiction between science and religion, i.e., between a secular or religious worldview, and that it is possible to embrace both. Berglund (2009, 2011) describes it as "a struggle of space": first, there is an internal struggle for precedence about which interpretation of Islam that ought to be valid, but there is also an external struggle in order to make their voices heard in the community. Berglund's (2009, 2011) classroom study is rare within the field of RE in that it focuses on the content of teaching. Lehmann (2008), who compares the teaching of English and the teaching of religion (Humash classes) in an orthodox Jewish secondary school, also notes that teachers expect different identities in the various subjects. In the Humash class, there is an assumption of a "we", that is, "we Jews", while more and different identities occurred in English class. In a German project with cooperative RE, where Catholic and Protestant teachers worked together, talk of "us" and "them" also occurred: "We do not do that in our church" and "We pray to the saints; they don't" (Schweitzer and Boschki 2004). Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) highlight the way Irish schools take on an unreflective attitude when it comes to issues of race, culture and religion. The Irish self-image includes a notion that Irish society is Catholic, white and Gaelic, which is a description that can be problematised and nuanced as it is no longer correct, and it also prevents individuals from gaining access to their rights of freedom of religion. van Eersel et al. (2010) discuss how to use just the term "other" as a tool for learning – we are all "other" in relation to someone else, and learning

[2] There are different definitions of Spiritual Education, but the concept usually refers to education as meaning-making, to see the whole human being in every pupil. "Spirituality" in this educational context refers to the relational dimension of being or relational consciousness (Hay and Nye 2006).

[3] Both Rissanen (2013) and Berglund (2009, 2011) made observations on Islam Religious Education (IRE).

is about being able to take on different perspectives and problematise our own views. van Eersel et al. (2010) show that teachers often stop at the first step of just describing differences, and instead of analysing similarities and differences in perceptions, much of the time used for instruction concerns facts and getting students to deliver the "right answer".

Implications of Confessional/Non-confessional Models of Religious Education

In many countries, RE means dividing students into different groups based on religious affiliation. A number of the contributions discuss the implications of this approach. Is divided or segregated RE divisive or unifying? Cardinal (2009) has compared the Muslim and Christian RE in Syria.[4] Students are divided on the basis of religion, but all Christians and all Muslims study together, regardless of denomination, so in that sense the curriculum is ecumenical. Moreover, there are also many similarities between the different courses in terms of structure and themes, for example, tolerance, human rights, citizenship, women's rights, religious pluralism, and national unity. In the classrooms, there are also many similarities in the way teaching is carried out. Cardinal (2009) argues that the confessional system can be as unifying as non-confessional and integrative RE – the purpose is to create dialogue and mutual understanding between different religious groups. RE in Syria is, according to Cardinal (2009), an attempt to find a balance among religious autonomy for different groups but would establish a sense of belonging to the same nation. Nationalism is emphasised in both Muslim and Christian RE as the unifying glue. Rissanen (2013) as well as Zilliacus and Holm (2013) touch upon the same discussion but base their results on empirical findings from the Finnish context. In Finland, there are 13 different types of RE, and Christians are divided into Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other groupings. Although the students are divided up based on religious affiliation, the subject is characterised as non-confessional as no religious practices such as praying occur in the classroom, but the subject aims at strengthening religious identity. However, while students seem appreciate the opportunity to meet others who share their faith, there is also a downside to grouping the students – they want to be like everyone else (Zilliacus and Holm 2013). In groups where the students are divided up on the basis of faith, students are expected to assume an insider perspective on religion. Sometimes there are tensions in the classroom when the group is expected to share the same beliefs, and many of the articles bring up how to handle different perceptions of religious beliefs, as many different interpretations and perceptions are to be found within the same religion. This sets the scene for a kind of teaching where there is a right answer in a completely different way than occurs in

[4] Cardinal's study (2009) was conducted before the outbreak of the hideous war in 2011 which is still going on in Syria when this is written in 2017.

non-denominational RE (Heil and Ziebertz 2004; Rissanen 2013; Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; van Eersel et al. 2010) or other school subjects (Lehmann 2008). The confessional element also affects the perception of the teaching profession and the teacher's authority. Lehman observes that in religion class, teaching practice could be summed up thusly: "Essentially, the tradition spoke and the classroom participants listened" (Lehmann 2008, p. 312). Singing and the use of religious songs is a heated subject in the Swedish public debate. Haakedal (2013) studied the use of signing in Norwegian non-confessional RE. Is it possible to use religious songs, and what is a "religious song" in a non-confessional school context? This distinction is difficult to draw and Haakedal (2013) maintains that the school is not and should not be neutral in terms of ethics and values and argues for using songs that includes universalistic values such as empathy and reciprocal caring.

In denominational and confessional RE, including students' prior understanding is emphasised as a pedagogical method and tool to get the pupils to grasp the content of the subject. In studies concerning this orientation of RE it seems more common to express clearer ideas of what the teachers wants the students to think and believe about specific religious issues. In class, the teacher presents the notion that there exists one Christian view of marriage (Heil and Ziebertz 2004), or a limited number of interpretations of Mikra'ot Gedolot (Lehmann 2008), or a Muslim view of homosexuality (Rissanen 2013). In the non-confessional realm, it was more common for the teaching, instead of being content-oriented, to be student-oriented, where students' own thoughts and beliefs about content are at the centre and form the hub of the actual teaching (Conroy et al. 2012; Eke et al. 2005; Fancourt 2010; Stern 2010).

Regarding non-confessional RE, studies draw attention to the fact that the subject is not as neutral as it claims to be. Thomas (2011) shows that teaching about African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not given equal space in Ghana compared to the majority religions of Islam and Christianity. A similar conclusion emerges from Kittelmann Flensner and Larsson's (2013) analysis of videotaped Swedish RE lessons from the 1960s. Although the curriculum declared that teaching would be neutral, the dominance of Christian content meant that the teaching could not be characterised as neutral and objective. Croché (2013) examines the conflict between Western scientific discourse and religious discourses in Senegal and finds that a religious discourse dominates classroom speech, which is something she perceives as being problematic when teaching about science.

4.2 The Religious Landscape and Classroom Research in Relation to This Study

The sections in this book that focus on classroom research aim to contextualise the course content in relation to contemporary society, which is characterised by features of secularisation and different aspects of diversity. How do young people relate to religion in this context?

A review of classroom research concerning RE shows that social, ethnic and religious pluralism and diversity have a great impact on RE classrooms all over the world, regardless of whether they are confessional or non-confessional. Pluralism in society and in the classroom raises questions of neutrality but also of how to draw the line in relation to "us" and "the Other". Religion emerges as both a unifying force and a disruptive one, just as nationalism and the question of the extent to which religion is related to national imaginations also do. Thus, possible positions for different people in relation to religion and nationalism is also an issue dealt with in research. Among the studies examined, there is also research with a focus on learning, meaning-making and dialogue.

This study aims to analyse how the subject of RE is constructed in classroom practice through the discourses of the classroom. Upon entering a Swedish RE classroom, one is struck by the diversity of backgrounds and views, regardless of whether the classroom can be described as "multi-ethnic/multicultural" or not. As will be shown in the findings, the questions and problems presented in the articles are highly relevant in relation to this study. However, different studies have different points of focus and, for example, the question of secularity was not very prominent in the articles but was a striking feature in the classrooms of this study.

Chapter 5
Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

Abstract The overall aim of the study presented in this book is to explore how Religious Education was constructed in practice in a contemporary Swedish pluralistic context. How, then, could this goal be achieved? And what is a school subject in practice? What is possible to observe of a subject in a classroom? Since the interest of this study specifically concerns the expressions of a school subject in practice, it was apparent early on in the processes involved in carrying it out that the empirical data collected would concern classroom events, focusing on the interactions between students, teachers and the subject's content. In this chapter the methodological considerations made in the study are presented as well as the theoretical approaches of analyses.

My point of departure is that teaching is a process where teachers, students and subject interact and together create the lesson. All teachers who have taught the same lesson twice, with the same material and arrangement in different classes, know that two lessons will never be identical. This is related to many factors such as students' prior understanding, group dynamics, the teacher's relationship to the group, their current emotional state, and additional factors (see, for example, Gredler 2005). Despite, or perhaps because of, this teaching experience, I initially had difficulties in choosing a focus. What was to be observed? What significance did the relationships between the students in the group and the teacher-student relationship have for what was said and could be said in the classroom? What influenced how the subject turned out to be in practice? What was essential to pay attention to in order to understand what happened in the classrooms in question? Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) stress the importance of being well informed and prepared before going into the field, but also that the researcher has to stay reflexive throughout all stages of the research process. They maintain that the problem area and research questions seldom are finished before the field work begins (which was the case regarding the research processes of this study) – it is when a concrete environment is selected that it becomes clear if the questions are relevant and even possible to answer in the current context.

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5.1 Ethnography

In order to reach the goal of the study, an ethnographic approach and methods associated with ethnography were used. Ethnography is sometimes described as merely a collection of methods used to conduct empirical research with participant observation as the prime method for data collection. The term can also be described as a perspective or approach based on epistemological assumptions about how to acquire knowledge about the world (Geertz 1973), but it can also be used for the results of the study (Macdonald 2007). Atkinson et al. (2007) argue that ethnography is characterised by its diversity, and research with an ethnographic approach has been used to refer to diverse social phenomena, from early anthropological descriptions of lifestyles and beliefs of "distant" people to descriptions of various groups and institutions in the local community. Such studies have different theoretical starting points, different points of focus and different claims of knowledge. The common denominator is that the approach is an interpretive one which aims at understanding social phenomena and practices, human behaviour and thoughts and the significance and meaning of different phenomena to different people (Atkinson et al. 2007).

Ethnography in School Settings

There has been a number of ethnographic studies carried out in a school environment. The school is and has always been the subject of conflicting interests: traditions and values are to be transferred to the next generation, and children and young people are educated to face societal changes. The school is an arena that both reproduces and produces values, perceptions and identities (see, for example, Ball 1981; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Mac and Ghaill 1994; Willis 1977). Thus, school is interesting to study from a variety of perspectives, and ethnographers have studied social interactions involved in creating social power structures related to class, gender and ethnicity etc. In this process, school has often been seen as a representative for the state and a manifestation of how a society treats oppressed groups (Gordon et al. 2007).

Green and Bloome (1996) distinguish between ethnography of education and ethnography in education. This distinction refers to the difference in focus. Sociological and anthropological studies that use school and education-oriented environments as one of several possible settings for a study often aim to illustrate how different groups experience different social phenomena, and the school then becomes an illustration of this phenomenon. These studies are often characterised by strong theoretical framing, and this type of ethnography is characterised as ethnography of education. Ethnography in education, however, aims at describing and

analysing particular school and education-related issues. Yet Green and Bloome (1996) admit that the boundary between these two categories is often a blurred one. Using these terms, this study would be of the latter kind, i.e., an ethnographic study in education.

One difficulty in carrying out ethnographic studies in schools is that everyone, including the researcher/observer, has themselves gone to school and therefore school is a well-known environment, which might make it more difficult to discern what is actually happening there. Gordon et al. (2007) testify to this difficulty. Anthropologists using ethnography have traditionally striven to make the unknown known and familiar, but the school setting requires the researcher to take a step back in order to appreciate subtle structures and events in this environment. Delamont and Atkinson (1995) outline strategies that can be used in "fighting familiarity", such as studying the unusual and abnormal, studying the "other" cultures within the culture, studying education in non-educational settings or adopting, for example, a gender or theoretical perspective in order to view the familiar environment with new eyes. The description of educational ethnography by Lund and Sundberg (2004) has served to guide the research processes in the case of this book:

> … [educational ethnography is a] sort of theoretical reconstruction of human meaning-making in specific cultural contexts. By empirically starting in the particular rather than the general, the concrete rather than the abstract, the contextual rather than the decontextualised, the time-bound rather than the timeless and the complex and ambiguous rather than the simple and unequivocal, one tries to reconstruct the pedagogical practice (Lund and Sundberg 2004, p. 40, own translation).

This formulation highlights that the ethnography of education implies a specific epistemological position. In this study, teaching and learning are not considered to be linear processes in line with IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) where the teacher is perceived to be the sender or initiator and the student is seen as a mere receiver or responder to the content. The ambition of this study can be summarised thusly: to take a position in the classroom as an observer, i.e., to sit in the RE classroom and notice what is said, how it is said and how meaning is constructed in the specific setting as shown in Fig. 5.1.

In this study, the classroom is perceived as a discursive practice and the speech of the teachers and the students, together with teaching materials used, have been treated as "text" that constitutes the discourses of RE.

Through analysis of the particular and concrete in the RE classroom, delineations of RE practice emerge that will hopefully contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the subject of RE.

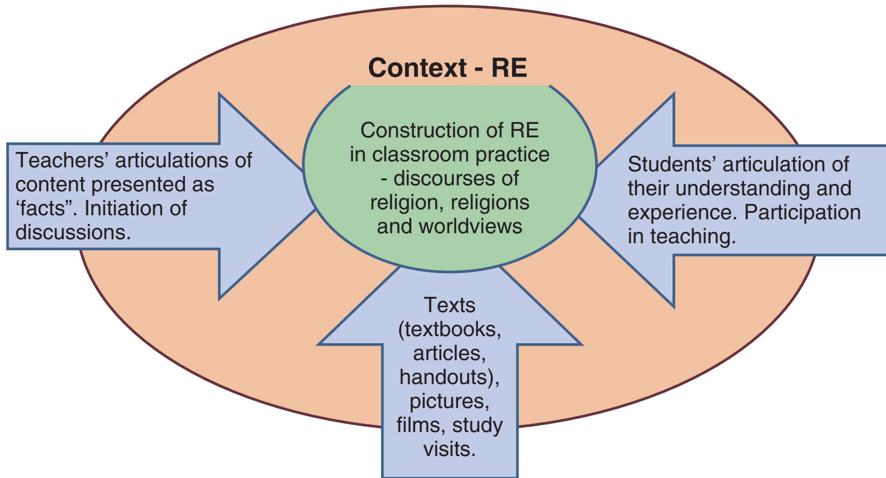

Fig. 5.1 Model of analysing discourses of religion, religions and worldviews in classroom practice

5.2 Empirical Data

The empirical examples were retrieved from participant observations conducted during 125 lessons of Religious Education in three upper-secondary schools where I shadowed 13 teachers in 24 different classes, both in vocational programmes and preparatory programmes for higher education. An overview of the observations of the different programmes is presented in Table 5.1.

The schools in question are quite large public schools having 1100–1700 students each. One school is situated on the outskirts of one of Sweden's major cities, one is located in a rural area and one is in a middle-sized city. The selection of schools was based on the idea that the students could be assumed to have a variety of social backgrounds, for example, when it comes to socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. I spent 5–6 weeks at each school and participated in the ordinary teaching and class activities.[1] Fieldnotes were conducted during the observation and written material such as assignements and tests distributed in class were collected. Whole class teaching and discussions in smaller groups were audiorecorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The excerpts in chaps. 6, 7 and 8 are from these transcripts otherwise is stated. In Appendix 3 there is a list of the audiofiles.

In Sweden, for reasons pertaining to research ethics, it is not permitted to ask what an individual's religious affiliation is, as this is considered to be sensitive, personal data (SFS 1998:204; SFS 2003:460; SFS 2008:192). There were, however, students in all classrooms that in small group discussions or private conversations shared that they considered themselves as belonging to different Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu traditions, but there was also a large group that can be described in

[1] In Appendix 3 there is a list of the dates of the audiofiles.

Table 5.1 An overview of the observations

Programs preparatory for higher education	Lessons	Vocational program	Lessons
The social science programme [*Samhällsvetenskapligt program*]	42	The child care and recreation programme [*Barn- och Fritidsprogrammet*]	16
The technology programme [*Teknikprogrammet*]	20	The business and administration programme [*Handelsprogrammet*]	11
The natural science programme [*Naturvetenskapligt program*],	17	The electrical and energy programme [*Elprogrammet*]	9
The art, music and drama programme [*Estetiskt program*] (together with the natural science programme)	4	The construction and installation programme [*Byggprogrammet*]	3
		The industry engineering programme [*Industriprogrammet*] together with the vehicle and transport programme [*Fordonsprogrammet*]	3
Number of observed lessons	83		42

terms of being “privately religious” or believers in “something”. There were thus students in all classrooms who described themselves as believers in different ways and to varying degrees.

5.3 Discourse Analysis

The participant observations of the lessons were recorded as audio files. These were then transcribed and mainly analysed through discourse analysis (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) and curriculum theory (Englund 1997, Ongstad 2012). Discourses are closely linked to the concept of meaning. In sum, a discourse can be described as a specific way of talking about and understanding various occurrences that allow certain practices and positions while restricting others. There are a plethora of different discourse analytical orientations, but all share the view that language is constitutive of social reality, and the meaning of the same word is dependent upon the specific context or the discourse in which the word is uttered. Discourses can be described as “formation systems” which in turn shape perceptions of objects, concepts, subjects and approaches. This book analyses the school subject of RE, and classroom practice is seen as an arena in which meaning is created through language use; hence, the analyses will focus on the discourses at play in the classroom. In the classroom situations observed, there were different ways of speaking about the RE content, i.e., there were different discourses at play.

Within all discourses, there is an effort to fix the role and meaning of different words (signs), and there is a continual negotiation taking place concerning which

interpretation should be related to the different words. In discourse analytical terms, there is an ongoing discursive struggle. In cases where a discourse has gained hegemony, the meaning stands out as natural and obvious. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) call the fixing of a sign's meaning a "moment". "Element", however, is when a sign can have varying meanings, but in discursive practice there is always a desire to fix the meaning (closure), i.e., making moments out of elements and thus limiting the number of possible articulations. Some elements are very open to being loaded with different meanings; Laclau and Mouffe (2001) refer to these as floating signifiers. One example of a floating signifier is the concept of religion, which, while prevalent in different discourses, is a word that may have very different meanings in different contexts. As will be shown in the empirical chapters below, in the secularist discourse religion had connotations of oppression and ignorance whereas religion in the Swedishness discourse was related to ethnicity and cultural heritage. The fixing of meaning in a particular area is what constitutes a discourse. Discourse analysis emphasises that all such fixings of meanings are temporary and subject to discursive struggle (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Howarth 2000). This means that what is said in the classroom is not considered to be an expression of each individual's personal understanding and perception. While it is very possible that it is, that is not the focus here; statements in the classroom are considered just as much to be a part of discourses. I describe and analyse the discourses at play in the RE classroom and relate them to examples of the same discourses articulated in other arenas.

All practices that create a relation between elements are described by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) as articulation. Put another way, articulation is the concrete way things are formulated in a specific context and are loaded with meaning. The concept of articulation can thus both describe and explain how a discourse changes, but also the reproduction of a particular way of describing and understanding the social reality. The focus of analyses in the case of this study is the content of RE as it is articulated by teachers and students in the classroom, i.e., what is said, how it is said and what meaning is ascribed to the articulations in that particular context. In order to explain the functions of the analytical concept within discourse analysis, Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) distinguish between discourse analytical concepts that answer questions of what and those that answer questions of how: The concepts of sign, moment and element answer the following question: what makes up the discourse in terms of its construction? Articulations, on the other hand, focus on how the discourse is constructed. The concept of articulation is thus relational and concerns the question of how different signs are tied together and contrasted and hence how the meaning of the signs changes, subsequently producing a new fixing (moment). Articulations are used to analyse how the practical use of language creates (changeable) images of the content of RE through certain signs given a certain meaning in discourse. Articulation therefore also concerns the question of contingency. Discourse in this sense is perceived as a structure, but the analyses also concern how this structure, through the articulations, becomes contingent and changeable and hence places focus on the practice of language in the classroom.

As the focus of this study was related to how the content of RE was articulated, I highlight articulations that together constitute a cluster of articulations as they are

close in content and meaning, which in turn together create the discourses examined (Risenfors 2011). I use the term articulation cluster, sometimes referred to as nodal points. In Chaps. 8, 9 and 10, I will not focus on the close linguistic relation between signs constructing the nodal points or how the chains of equivalence are constructed, as the focus of the study concerns the content of the subject, and this is why I choose the term articulation cluster.

It was clear that there were specific ways of speaking within RE classroom practice and that certain ways of speaking dominated other ways of speaking. Central to the poststructuralist way of seeing discourses is the concept of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Hegemony in the context of discourse analysis is based on the idea that certain ways of talking about the world in specific contexts have greater impact than others and are thus perceived as a more "natural" way of speaking and therefore become hegemonic in relation to other discourses within the same field. However, one should keep in mind that every discourse, even the hegemonic ones, is a partial and temporary fixing of meaning. Various discourses may come in conflict with, or imply an antagonistic attitude toward, each other, but within discourse there is, as was previously mentioned, a desire to limit the number of articulations and exclude other possible ways of describing reality. The so-called hegemonic intervention means that there are attempts to suppress alternative views of reality in an articulation, dissolve antagonism, restore coherency, and fix elements across discourses that collide (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). The classroom conversations are analysed and understood as part of the discourses that exist both in the classroom and in other parts of society. These discourse analytical premises give rise to questions that have guided the analysis, such as: What is possible to articulate, and what is impossible to articulate concerning different religions, religiosity, secularity and pluralism, i.e., what discourses come about when RE is on the schedule? Are some discourses hegemonic in relation to others? What words and concepts (signs) build the discourses, and how are they loaded with content and meaning? To the extent that it occurs, how are negotiations of the hegemonic discourses of the classroom implemented? Which positions are legitimate and which are illegitimate? How do the wordings in the classroom relate to the discourses that occur in other parts of society? Through these kinds of starting points, articulations in the classrooms are analysed.

Chapter 6
"I'm Neutral!" – A Secularist Discourse

Abstract A secularist discourse appeared in all classrooms, both when talking about religion in general, about specific religions and about ethics. The secularist discourse was constructed through clusters of articulation of: *Prime time of history, Diversity of views, A neutral position, Criticism of religion, Science and faith, Individualism, Modern myths, "Man is the measure of all things"* and *Religion as a private matter*. This and the two following empirical chapters will analyse the content of the discourses of religion, religions and worldviews in the context of Religious Education in classroom practice. What is highlighted when religion, religions and worldviews are discussed, and how is it talked about? However, everything is articulated in a certain way, and how something is articulated has consequences for how it is perceived, and this is why questions of what and how are not separable.

Western society, including Sweden, is greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideas and traditions of thought. In this philosophical tradition, secularity/secularism[1] constitutes a key element, and this was apparent in the empirical material. In the following section, it will be shown how the secularist discourse emerged in the classroom practice observed. The discourse analytical perspective states that there is a continuously ongoing discursive struggle between different ways of speaking in order to pin down, i.e., fix, the meaning of the discourse. When this happens, this way of speaking appears as obvious and natural and can be described as being hegemonic. This means that alternative ways of speaking are excluded. In concrete terms, the subject of analysis is the articulations of teachers and students in the RE classroom, which can be seen as interrelated in various ways and as giving them significance and meaning within the discourse. The analyses of the classroom observations reveal how the clusters of articulations are linked (Howarth 2000; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

[1] For a distinction of the concepts, see, for example, Scharffs (2011).

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6.1 Prime Time of History

A "chronocentric" view of history was articulated both by teachers and students and constructed religion as a passed stage in history. Religious was something people used to be in previous historical periods, before one knew better.

When religion was discussed during the RE lessons, there was a constant comparison between religion in history and religion (or non-religion) in contemporary society. As a consequence, an image of religion emerged that associated religion with history rather than modern society:

Excerpt 1

Student: In the past, in the eighteenth century or so, or I think … religion seeks power. One guesses about what has happened, and that way they got power over people who didn't know very much. That's how it is in Islam … so we think that it's so today as well. It's still like that. But now we're secularised and so we don't need religion in that way. Religion told us what to do, how we should live, but there's no need for that anymore.

This excerpt comes from a discussion about what religion might be.[2] This student argued that religion previously played an important role in society but does not anymore. He associated religion with the exercise of power and tampering with people who could be manipulated because of their ignorance. It is also implied that this is how it works in Islam even today and thus that Islam in this way is a historical remnant. That religion was associated with lack of knowledge and oppression was a common perception expressed in the classrooms observed and also indicates a view of contemporary society as more enlightened than the dark, unenlightened past.

The following excerpt brings up the same line of thought as the previous one but also stresses individualism, independence and a sense of morality that emphasises human dignity as phenomenon associated with our time:

Excerpt 2

Student: I think society as a whole was more brutal in the past, like when executing people one hitched them to two horses and let them run. That's very brutal. And they didn't care too much about the specific person, not the individual. But then, as we have progressed, we've done it in regard to how others are viewed as well, that you care about others, and don't just lump them together, but each person is unique and special. So I think that helps a lot, and we have also learned more about morality and what is right and wrong and that you do not do certain things. While in the past it was a little more about fighting and plundering and … […] Now it's money and stuff, though they sometimes still hide behind their faith. That's what I think, society or the world has progressed so far, so I don't understand why still, why there are so many still living in the past, who are like this, really extreme. I really don't understand that.

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[2] In all classrooms, the teaching included this kind of task where the students were instructed to reflect upon what religion "is", how the concept of religion might be understood, and what they associated with the word religion. In most cases, this was followed by a lecture including different definitions of religion and a presentation of different branches of the science of religious studies: history of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion, theology, etc. This way of teaching – to begin with students' preconceptions and then introduce the new knowledge and new concepts – is generally a standard teaching model in the Swedish school system that is influenced by cognitive and socio-cultural beliefs about learning (Gredler 2005; Lundgren et al. 2012).

This excerpt also comes from a discussion about what religion "is". Religion was in these discussions mainly associated with the exercise of power over people who are less well-informed, and religion was seen as something that possibly filled a function in the past. Now, as times have changed and things have progressed, these students claimed that there is no need for religion, and they had a hard time understanding why people still cling to religious ideas. It is interesting to note that the first student specifically mentions Islam and that the second one mentions extremists as somehow "left" in an antiquated time. One view articulated by students and teachers was that religion might possibly have had a rational function in history from an evolutionary perspective,[3] but that this is a stage we have passed, which is why rational and sensible behaviour and beliefs in our time do not consist of anything belonging to the religious sphere. Through these articulations, the notion that we now live in an age where evolution has almost reached perfection is consolidated.

The idea that "other people" (non-Western) are stuck in an earlier stage of development is something Fabian (2002) highlights as being dominant in anthropological research and part of articulations that contributed to creating those studied as "the Other". Their religiosity was thus of a more primitive kind than the religiosity of the researcher, and there are traces of these views in the classroom discourse. Not surprisingly, studies confirm that this view is also common among Swedish adolescents (cf. von Brömssen 2003, 2009). The modern project that has so strongly influenced the worldview in the West has its roots in the Enlightenment and involves a view of time and historical evolution as being parts of a continual movement forward, upward, to higher altitudes and new levels of development, and the people living now are accordingly seen as being more rational, logical and sensible than those belonging to previous generations (Fabian 2002; Liedman 1999). Religion is consequently associated with everything that stands in opposition to the above positioning, and this view was articulated in the classrooms. Through these articulations, it was indicated that people who for some reason still believe and cling to religious beliefs thus belong to lower stages of evolution that dominated in earlier historical periods and that we now live in the prime time of history where religion is a bypassed stage.

6.2 Diversity of Views

That we live in a society where different views are represented and where nothing is more accurate than anything else was articulated as a fact in the classrooms. In relation to what was described as "the religion's exclusive truth claims", diversity and pluralism were articulated as problematic for religious people. Accordingly, religion and religious people were associated with intolerance while non-believers were associated with tolerance. The downside of diversity was articulated as uncertainty.

[3] Cf Excerpt 18.

The claim that there could be just one truth was seen as an obsolete and almost ridiculous idea and as a consequence of the ignorance and lack of knowledge of ancient times that we are today "cured" of. Simultaneously, the secularist discourse limited possible variations in views. One class which discussed what Luther's theses would have contained if he had posted them today related this to the diversity of views in contemporary society:

Excerpt 3

Teacher: Those questions you got, are there some that you definitely can't find the answer to?
Student 1: "If Luther were active today, what would his theses be about, do you think?" That nobody believes in God anymore?
Teacher: What were the theses about? Anders?
Student 2: But what would his theses be about if he were alive today?
Teacher: Yes, that's right. But I can't help you with this. You have to figure it out yourselves.
Student 2: But I don't believe in God. There's evidence that Jesus didn't create the Earth or anything. Just as an example. There's evidence of that, right?
Teacher: So you're saying that his theories were about concrete things that have already been solved today now so there's nothing?
Student 2: I don't know what they're all about!
Student 3: Wasn't he like a theologian or something like that? Isn't it those who believe in the message and the … well, religion? He based it on things like that, but we don't believe that's the truth, you could say. And now we know much more about all the other religions and so. Now we know more.
Teacher: Would he have had as much success today if he'd gone on to re-formulate or to reinterpret the scriptures?
Student 3: No.
Student 1: No.
Teacher: Why not?
Student 1: Much easier to believe in different things now.
Teacher: Mmmm, there's an openness now that makes it very difficult to become an authority or be a leader today, right? And as you so rightly said, there are of course MANY different religions. And especially from here [*in Sweden*], we have an overview of many religions.

A natural premise in the secularist discourse seems to be a non-religious position. In the above exchange, several of the students stated that "nobody believes in God anymore" and "I don't believe in God", and these articulations were used as markers of neutrality despite the fact that they say that it is "easier to believe in different things now". Neutrality markers can be specific linguistic expressions that contribute to an articulation seeming obvious and natural. The use of the Swedish words "*ju*" [of course] and "*vi*" [we] in the above excerpt has this function of creating a shared understanding – "we" in this classroom take it for granted that none of us believe in God. This dialogue illustrates some seemingly contradictory aspects of the secularist discourse, and the word "believe" can be seen as a floating signifier. In this secularist discourse, notions of non-religious positions are strong, but so are notions of individualism, freedom of choice, and diversity. The word "believe" is both used with reference to a shared non-religious worldview and is linked to reliable (and possibly scientific?) proof of a specific view, i.e., that "Jesus did not create

the world". The word is also used with reference to a relativistic stance according to which it is possible to believe different things in the modern, pluralistic world compared to the old days where there only existed one way of believing and one truth. The meaning of the word "believe" in the secularist discourse is not fixed, and one possible interpretation of this ambiguity within the secularist discourse is that it is possible to believe in different things in contemporary Sweden, as long as they encompass the non-religious worldview.

The existence of parallel ways of interpreting the world was articulated as being self-evident (cf. Taylor 2007), and during all observations there was never any discussion about this point – "I have the right to my opinions and so has everybody else". The premise that all humans have the right to think and believe whatever they wish was articulated at a theoretical level, although in practice, concerning concrete issues, the level of tolerance of divergent opinions was lower in many cases. For instance, the student in the above excerpt assumes that an atheistic, non-religious position is embraced by "us" enlightened, modern people. Another way to describe this is that the students partly learned what they were supposed to say in school, but they had not appropriated this discourse of tolerance, and their utterances can to some extent be described as unreflective adherence.

Another aspect of the secularist discourse related to diversity of views was disorientation – the students articulated that they simply did not know what to think:

Excerpt 4

Student: So, in the olden days, one used to be more confident, that [religion] was the only thing available. Now nobody knows what is true, that is, you can't know that it's the truth, instead, one can only speculate as to what to believe, if you believe that it's true or not.

This student associates uncertainty and relativism with modern society and compared this to times passed when religion presented one, unquestionable truth. However, not choosing was not an option – that everybody must create their own worldview was emphasised in classroom practice in relation to several topics of discussion. The emphasis was on the individual's act of choosing and thus the construction of the individual's worldview rather than on having a consciously articulated worldview. Nevertheless, even if you create your own worldview, that worldview has nothing to do with truth or exclusive truth claims, only speculation. This had, as will be shown in this chapter, implications for how religion was constructed discursively in the classroom. One could imagine that this would lead to a curiosity about how other people think, but in many cases students instead articulated indifference toward others, e.g., "people may well believe what they want, as long as I can believe what I want".

Some students argued that there might be contradictions in relation to groups that they perceived as more sure about and confident in their beliefs. One student formulated this view as follows:

Excerpt 5

Student: Many Christians probably feel that they are losing their grip. Even the Church of Sweden itself has lost a lot of its grip lately. The Catholics are losing trust as well … and immigration, there are more immigrants, and people probably feel threatened by that too. They have lost their identity. There is an identity crisis for us in the West.

The ambiguity and vagueness of beliefs were not perceived as being problems until one had to interact with other groups. Implicit in this student's reasoning was that immigrants bring with them alternative religions and views. The uncertainty then became evident to the individual and was articulated as a problem.

Opinions and perceptions concerning diversity articulated in the classrooms correspond to some characteristics of modern society that imply a (historically comparable) great freedom to choose our lives; on the other hand, choosing then becomes an inescapable requirement (cf. Giddens 1991; Ziehe 1993). Simultaneously, as expressed by the student in Excerpt 4, "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2001, 2006) also entails some levels of loneliness when the responsibility rests heavily on the individual for matters in regard to which previous generations could turn to history and culture for guidance. The excepts in this section can be seen in light of this, and today people's minds are marked to a much greater extent by the fact that we live in an ever-changing society, which means that the present is the only thing we can really be sure about. The student's articulations about living in a society where there exist parallel and competing worldviews can also be seen as a sign of internalising a pluralistic society. Dealing with uncertainty and a feeling of an ever-changing environment are some of modern society's hallmarks. The concept "liquid modernity" has been used to describe the anxiety and the feeling that there is nothing permanent to which one can relate (Bauman 2001, 2006). The existence of many parallel truths was apparent in the classroom practice and might be understood as a sign of secularity (cf. Taylor 2007). However, when the secularist discourse was at play in the classroom, the diversity was limited to non-religious views.

6.3 A Neutral Position

In the RE classrooms observed, a non-religious, sometimes atheistic, position was considered to be a "neutral" and "objective" position in relation to the content of the subject.

Non-religious Views Seen as Neutral

In the secularist discourse, a non-religious position is considered to be an unbiased and objective point of view. In the following excerpt, the students were given an assignment to define the word "secular":

Excerpt 6

Student 1: Secular? It's non-religious.
Student 2: Non-religious?
Student 1: Yes.
Student 2: But must it have to do with religion? Could it not be that it's optional, not optional but…
Student 3: I wrote objective too…

Student 1: Like, secular, I think that's a strange word, but, like, multi-dimensional, that it should not be just one focus on something. And when it comes to religion, one should be allowed to have different religions in school.
Student 3: I have no idea what secular is. I thought it said secondary.
Teacher: They sometimes say that Sweden is secular.
Student 1: Well, yes, I understand vaguely what it means, but I can't define the word.
Student 3: Non-religious, objective, I've written. That works, right?
Teacher: Yes, or, a little like this – that religion doesn't matter so much in society, so differentiating between religion and…
Student 1: Yes, objective is a good word.

As shown in this dialogue, the students had a rather vague idea about the meaning of the term "secular", but they associated it with such words as non-religious and objectivity. The teacher tried to introduce aspects of religiosity in society into the discussion, but the students did not seem to understand how it was related. In their reasoning, secular became synonymous with non-religious and objectivity.

To consider oneself a non-believer was perceived as a neutral position in relation to religion and religions. In the following excerpt, some students discussed how they saw their relationship to religion:

Excerpt 7

Student 2: But, as for me, I don't follow any religion, but I go by what I think!
Student 4: Yes.
Student 2: Religions are more like people who just blurt out a load of things that you yourself don't believe in.
Student 1: I'm neutral!
Student 4: Exactly!

Their own position was thus described as "neutral" and thereby legitimate, as the word neutral in the classroom was loaded with positive connotations, while religious people "just blurt out a load of things".

To talk about religion from a non-religious perspective was seen as the natural way to talk about religion. Adhering to religion was articulated as a biased position in comparison to a non-religious or atheistic position:

Excerpt 8

Student 3: I thought about it like this, that if you're not exposed to religion until you're like 15 or something and introduced then, how many people would be religious then? Because people are INDOCTRINATED from the time they are little.
[…]
Student 1: I wouldn't say that atheism is a faith, rather it is a non-belief. Then if you want to choose to believe in something, you can always do that, of course, but…

These students, who a few minutes earlier had expressed that they saw themselves as atheists, seemed to say that if a child under 15 comes into contact with religion, there is a strong influence, i.e., indoctrination, which makes it difficult to see clearly. The word "indoctrination" is in this context loaded with negative connotations. That the children then would be socialised into some other worldview, such as a secular or an atheistic one, was an interpretation these students did not share. This view, i.e., that religion involves an influence of a special kind that cannot be compared with any other form of influence, recurred in the various classrooms observed. That

contact with the non-religious worldview would mean a similar form of influence but in another direction was something with which none of the students agreed. Put differently, the neutral comprised the secular. The construct of religion in the classroom was also put together by negation, by naming what it is not (making your own choices, individualism, neutrality, etc.) in pairs of binary opposites. Thereby articulations about religion do not just discursively construct religion, but also the secular worldview.

Atheism as Neutrality

By assuming that the non-religious worldview is a neutral perspective, atheism was also made neutral. An indication of this is that both teachers and students quite often stated their atheistic position in whole-class discussions. Atheistic interpretations of life were, compared to other positions, articulated in a way that made them seem obvious:

Excerpt 9

Teacher: I have an atheistic interpretation of life. I think that when life is over, it's over. But one can think differently about this. I'm extreme in this respect, I don't celebrate Christmas or any other religious holidays; some think that's strange.

Excerpt 10

Student 1: Is there anybody here that is a believer?
Student 2: I think that…
Student 3: I'm not like, I'm not a believer. I don't know. I haven't, like, had the energy yet to think about that
Student 4: I'm an atheist!
Student 1: My parents are, like, super-non-Christian, like, totally extreme. So, for me, it's like this: it's not very nice to say this, but I feel this way – the Christians, it's unintelligent. I really think so!

In the discussion in Excerpt 10, two of the students take an atheistic position, and religiosity was associated with unintelligence. To take a position as an atheist was never questioned or even asked about. Unlike those (few) who positioned themselves as religious within a certain tradition, students and teachers who took an atheistic position did not get questioned about how they viewed the world or why they had taken this position.

In one of the classes, the very start of the RE course consisted of a lecture about perception psychology with a person who was presented as "a neuroscientist from the university".[4] This researcher took a clearly atheistic position:

Excerpt 11

External lecturer: We learn things. The brain's job is to learn. Babies recognise their parents' voices already at birth. The brain begins to learn from the very beginning. The last

[4] To invite experts from various fields to speak to a class is not unusual in Swedish schools – such individuals may be representatives for companies, organisations, political parties or religions.

thing we learn in life – if we are Christians, we meet the light in the tunnel. Or like me, who is an atheist, I will see that – shit – I was right!

[*Collective laughter from the class*.]

In the following lessons, there was a discussion about the lecture, but the fact that the lecturer was speaking from an atheistic point of view was not discussed or even mentioned. Atheism was frequently articulated as a neutral and objective approach in relation to religion. It was a legitimate position in the classroom for both teachers and students (even if the teacher in Excerpt 9 describes her position as "extreme"). The invited researcher and the teacher's declarations of their atheistic beliefs in the above excerpts are also examples of how the secularist discourse was enforced as their utterances might have had a special authority in the classroom.

Atheism as Normality

A group of students asked their teacher when they would get to read about atheism. When asked why they wanted to learn about atheism, one of the students responded:

Excerpt 12

Student: Yes, it [atheism]'s interesting. It's a unique thing. It's relevant today because there are many people who, or yes, convert to – you can't really say that, because there's no…I get, I don't like to call it atheism. I like to call it being normal instead. That's a better way to put it.

The student in Excerpt 12 equates atheism with being normal. Why he is reluctant to call it atheism is not apparent. Perhaps this is because it signals that it is one of many worldviews, and he sees his position as self-evident. Normality is always created in relation to the deviant, the abnormal. In this context, normal – religious were constructed as binary oppositions.

In the classroom, atheism was associated with truth and clarity of vision, to firm and steadily face the truth even if it is not "fun", such as the conviction that there is no continuation of life after death, or that there is no divine power to turn to when life is difficult. On the other hand, atheism was not discussed as a specific worldview *per se* but as the antithesis of religion. Humanism, however, was part of the teaching content in some classrooms. In one of these classes, the teacher showed the film *Humanisterna: The Movie* by Henrik Thomé (2009), which was produced by *the Swedish Humanist Association* (Humanisterna 2015). The film aims at describing the organisation's criticism of religion and their motives for this criticism. The film criticises religion as a social phenomenon and advocates secularism as the model of a modern society. In the film, religiosity is more or less equated with fundamentalism and extremism; consequently, religion is a threat to human rights and to an open democratic society. The film was shown, but then lesson time ran out, and there was no follow-up discussion during this nor during the following lessons. Atheism in its own right was never made explicit or discussed in relation to the movie or, to my knowledge, at any other time during the course.

The idea that a secular position in relation to religion would be tantamount to a neutral position has its roots in the Enlightenment view of religion. At that time, the critique of religion and a secular position were part of the criticisms of the regime and existing power structures, but conditions for the criticism of religions differ in many respects in contemporary pluralistic and globalised society compared to the autocratic France of the 1700s. That teachers and students to a significantly higher extent articulated in whole-class discussions that they were atheists, compared to those who expressed having a religious identity, can be interpreted in several ways. First, it might have been the case that the number of atheists was much larger, and if that is so, it is a sign of secularity in itself. However, the fact that it was unusual for students to openly position themselves as religious, although in small groups and in private conversations they could say that they saw themselves as Christians, Muslims, or Jehovah's Witnesses, can be interpreted as an expression of the secularist discourse limiting the ability to take positions that were not secular. In every classroom, there were students who both described themselves as believers or religiously oriented in a more general sense, as well as students who positioned themselves by saying that they were members of various churches or that they were active in various religious organisations, but they kept quiet about this in whole-class discussions. However, it was much more common for students to articulate that they saw themselves as atheists when they were speaking to the whole class. This was also the case for the teachers. From a discourse analytical point of view, there are no neutral positions, but a secularist position also represents an approach and an attitude to the subject (Asad et al. 2013).

6.4 Criticism of Religion

To discuss the content of RE critically and problematise different perspectives on religion and religions was a central feature of the RE classroom practice observed. However, the criticism was sometimes of a condescending nature.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills were highly regarded both by teachers and students, and it is also emphasised in the curricula that the teaching in all subjects should help students to develop critical thinking. In the context of RE, one teacher described the relationship between spirituality and critical thinking in this way:

Excerpt 13

Teacher: But perhaps we are spiritual in a completely different way than the rest of the world. Above all else, [Sweden is] also a country where one is very critical, because it is obviously also a part of this … about philosophies of life, it's also the fact that you obviously have to be allowed to be critical of philosophies of life. You have to critically examine them and see what they are about, what they say. Indeed, we have to be critical of all sorts of narratives about how we should live our lives.

This excerpt seems to indicate that the self-image includes the notion that "here in Sweden we are critical and examine thoughts and ideas carefully". Several of the teachers tried, as in the example above, to make the students reflect on "all sorts of stories about how we should live our lives". The formulations in the curricula regarding critical thinking aim to develop the student's ability to carry out a scientific analysis, to critically analyse and evaluate facts and circumstances, and can in this regard be seen as a contribution to the creation of meaning or "an offer of meaning" (cf. Englund 1997). It is, however, worth noting that the discussion about critical thinking seems to be based on a notion that it proceeds from a neutral position.

The content of criticism in the classroom was articulated through: highlighting "anomalies" that occur in the name of religion, such as terrorism, the oppression of women, etc.; problematising the concept of religion as such; discussing equality, abortion, homosexuality, etc.; and exemplification of how different religious groups perceive these things so as to give students an idea of how religion is used and appears in different contexts. The problem of theodicy was discussed and how different branches, religious and non-religious, perceive free will, determinism, the possible existence of a human soul, and the moral responsibilities of humans. Articulations concerning these subjects can be seen as part of the cluster of articulations of the criticism of religion, which comprised a central part of the secularist discourse.

To Criticise

In some contexts, critical thinking and to critically examine were equated with criticising in the sense of complaining and condemning. There was in many of the classrooms observed a permissive climate for dropping negative comments about religion and religious people. The following "jokes" were articulated in a specific classroom, but circulated in several of the classrooms in this study:

Excerpt 14

"God is like Santa Claus. He doesn't exist, but some believe that he does!"
"The Bible is toilet paper, the Qur'an is toilet paper, and what do the Jews have? Toilet paper rolls?"[5]

These kinds of comments were articulated as jokes and generated laughter. Some teachers did not hear the comments, and some allowed this type of comment to be made. Others tried to discuss them and conclude that we all think differently; what is sacred to one person may not be sacred to someone else. In the criticism of religion, different religions were represented in different ways. In the following excerpt, religiosity was associated with mental illness and insanity, but Buddhism

[5] The Swedish word [Swedish: *toa-rullar*] means toilet-paper-rolls and sounds similar to the Swedish word [Swedish: *tora-rullar*] that means Torah scrolls. Cf. the classroom study by Osbeck and Lied (2011) where the very same "joke" occurs. They conclude that different kinds of speech genres in the classroom determine the possibilities of learning.

escapes such criticism. The excerpt comes from a lesson where I talked to two students who were complaining about having to study RE:

Excerpt 15

Karin: But isn't it exciting [to study RE in order] to understand how other people think?
Student 1: Well, not when you know how… Absolutely crazy! Like, if someone would come up to you and say "I have an imaginary friend, and he tells me how I should live. If I'm nice to him, I get to live forever in paradise". Then he would, someone like that would be locked up then! But somehow it's acceptable simply because there are lot of people that do that. It's like group pressure. Because that's what religion is! Or Christianity anyway. Buddhism is the only religion that works. It's like, well, be nice! Don't kill anybody!
Student 2: Then you feel good!
Student 1: Yes, it's good not to do that. There is no God and no … Yeah, stupid, fucking holy war or some shit like that! It's just: "Be nice, then everything will be fine". That's true too…

The student expressed here a critical position toward religion in general. It was evident, however, that the criticism of various religions took account of slightly different aspects. Buddhism evades criticism as it according to the students' reasoning is not quite a religion since it does not involve a god. This representation of Buddhism is in line with a well-documented, common representation of Buddhism in the Western world in general and Sweden in particular (Thurfjell 2015).

Criticism That Is Not Permitted

Many of the students expressed the opinion that it is not possible to criticise Islam in the same way as one could other religions. If you do, you will be accused of being a racist:

Excerpt 16

Student: Because if you say something that is offensive to them, you're considered a racist. That's what I think. It's so very difficult to express what you think when it's like this, just because what others think of us then gets so damn weird.

Excerpt 17

Student 1: No, because it gets very much like this, race-sensitive and… we're very nice here … And for them, there's a little extra mollycoddling for them than what we get as, like, militant atheists.
[*Collective laughter in the group*]
Student 1: I feel oppressed!
Karin: So if you're a militant Islamist, we mollycoddle you, but if you're a militant atheist, so, is that what you said?
Student 1: Actually, a little! Yes, as I perceive it, anyway
Karin: Oh, okay. … Then, in what way does one mollycoddle Muslims like that?
Student 2: Well, but that's because it, their faith is more important than my anti-beliefs, or what to call atheism.
Karin: Do you think it's like that in Sweden?

Student 2: Yes, it is! Really. Because I'm, like, not allowed to say that they, they can say, yes, you will burn in hell, but if I say that your god doesn't exist and you're an idiot to believe in it! Well, then I'm a racist who should, well, then I'm a bad person.
Karin: Okay… Are you a racist if you criticise someone's religion?
Student 2: Yes, in Sweden today, it's like that. But I see it as a necessity!

In the above dialogues, it is shown that the students perceive religions in general, and Islam in particular, as being responsible for creating wars and conflicts, but also that they perceive it as being taboo to express this opinion.[6] Criticism of Islam was in this context linked to racism which was something Student 2 in Excerpt 16 also said – that religious views were respected to a much greater extent than non-religious people's views. He expressed that his atheistic worldview did not receive the same kind of respect and that the right of freedom of religion, to freely practice and to freely express religious opinions, was respected much more than the right to avoid religious influence. This opinion was articulated in various discussions in the classrooms observed and reveals the conflict in the concept of freedom of religion (cf. Roth 2012).

Critical thinking is emphasised as one of the most important abilities that education in both primary and secondary schools should work to develop. The curricula of upper-secondary school state that: "The students should be trained in critical thinking, to scrutinise facts and circumstances and to realise the consequences of different alternatives" (Skolverket 2011b, p. 7, own translation). Non-confessional, integrative RE in Sweden should, according to the syllabus of RE, entail discussions that feature the constructive criticism of religion: "Teaching should give students the opportunity to analyse texts and concepts, critically examine sources, discuss and argue" (Skolverket 2011a). During the participant observations conducted, students had the opportunity to practice and develop these critical competencies. There were, however, also lessons where critically examining something was equated with criticising it, in the sense of condemning and disapproving. Simultaneously, students said that they were not allowed to articulate criticism of religion, especially concerning Islam. Criticism of Islam seemed to be governed by a different kind of logic than criticism of other religions. On the one hand, Islam was the religion that received the most criticism in the classroom and was associated with the most negative connotations. Paradoxically, on the other hand, it was repeatedly articulated in the classrooms that it is taboo to criticise Islam. This paradox can be seen as the backdrop for the rhetoric of right-wing parties where they cultivate a martyrdom in this area and see themselves as courageous truth-tellers (Malm 2011).

[6] Across Europe and also in Sweden, there is a debate going on in which right-wing populist parties struggle for greater influence. These groups argue that there is an ongoing Islamisation of the West. Many of them claim that you cannot criticise Islam as it is not "politically correct" to do this, and that critical facts about Islam are silenced by mainstream society. See, for example, Malm (2011).

6.5 Science and Faith

In the RE-classroom practice observed, the relationship between science and faith, i.e., between knowledge and beliefs, was the subject of discussion. Articulations here concern the role and function of science vs. religion.

Religion and faith were in many cases constructed as contradictory, and science was linked to articulations of facts, reality and truth. During the observations, not a single incident of any student or teacher questioning the theory of evolution or other theories of science occured.[7] Articulations related to science and faith could be constructed through evolutionary, psychological and scientific explanations of religion's origins and religion's existence with reference to fear of death. For example, one teacher commented upon a student's work in which she, from an evolutionary perspective, discusses why religion exists:

Excerpt 18 (Written Comment on Student Work)

Teacher: That was a really exciting image! And suddenly it strikes me that perhaps it is human vulnerability and loneliness that feed religious sentiment…Sometime long ago, someone made up an imaginary friend because he was lonely…and so it was an evolutionary advantage for that person…

The teacher highlights the notion that being religious might have given an evolutionary advantage and articulates religious beliefs as "made up, imaginary friends". She uses a scientific language and interprets religion from an evolutional theory approach. The relationship between religion and science is a subject that has occupied philosophers for many centuries and is central to a secularist discourse. It is also a subject matter that is clearly stated in the syllabus of RE in Lgy11 (Skolverket 2011a) but was even addressed in the classroom where the older syllabus of Lpf 94 (Skolverket 2000a) still applied. It was articulated that science in many ways has replaced the role of religion:

Excerpt 19

Teacher: Science, is it the ultimate truth? Is it science that owns the truth? Can science be a means to get on the right side?
Student: Science can of course also be wrong. But it's more taboo to say that, [compared to] religion, if they say that something is true.
Teacher: That's interesting, that it should be taboo! There are many people who are provoked by the truth claims of religions.
Student: I don't know. Maybe it's because religions are more difficult to change. Science changes, but it's hard to change what was written 2,000 years ago.

In this dialogue, the teacher and the student discussed the truth claims of science and religion. To the teacher's surprise, the student argued that it is taboo to criticise science. Both the reference to the taboo of criticising scientific truths and the teacher's surprise over the comment can be seen as a sign of the supremacy of a scientific

[7] Some other studies point in another direction. Sjögren (2011) found that teachers are afraid of conflict and thus in order to not offend anyone present religious worldviews as equal to scientific worldviews and leave the questions for the students to decide.

interpretation of the world. When asked about the truth claims of religions, the student points to the inherent changeability of science, which he sees as lacking in the case of religion.

In the Natural Science Programme and the Technology Programme, science and scientific methods have a central role in the teaching, and the students are socialised into an identity as "scientists" [Swedish: *naturare*] and "technicians" [Swedish: *tekniker*] (cf. Beach 1999; Hjelmér 2012). A scientific worldview was constructed as opposed to a religious worldview. The teachers who taught within these programs expressed that this sometimes meant difficulties in teaching about religion, since these students, in line with the hegemony of science, were very critical of religion. Some teachers tried to problematise and challenge these opinions by describing trust in science as a belief or worldview. Articulations of differences between "faith" and "knowledge" were discussed, and one teacher introduced the concepts of "objective truth" and "subjective truth":

Excerpt 20

Student 4: Like, there are religious people who I guess are aware that there is no proof and so forth, and that they understand that people believe in God or something. It could be a sort of truth that they pray, they believe quite strongly that God exists, for example. But they themselves understand that people can choose not to believe that. They want proof and so on.

Teacher: Yes.

Student 4: Then it's a truth to them, but at the same time they know that there's no evidence for it. So, it's still a sort of truth, even if they don't actually have the evidence.

Teacher: But can there be two truths at the same time? A subjective view that is true for you as individuals and a truth which perhaps is objective and that everyone can agree upon? A tough question…

Student 1: I think so. Absolutely. Or I can know something about myself. I can say that I see myself as maybe very humble, for example. It's a truth for me, but it may not be for anyone else, because that's not what they've seen of me. Then it's like a truth for me, or like what Adam said, so I absolutely think there can be two different truths. And that's what I meant too when I spoke up before about the difference between believing and knowing. I think it goes together.

Teacher: I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but I suddenly had a thought – believe and know, and sometimes both have weight, both claim to have the Truth with a capital T. The scientist standing there with his white coat who says that "this is the truth of the relationship that elements have to one another", and so we have, like, the believer who says "this is true", "we have proof of this". There can be a struggle between different epistemological theories, and so it may be that they have different claims on what is right and wrong. You will take the philosophy course later; then you will look into that. But if we think that faith is something that you hold to be true, and one can believe in the scientific method. I say that is also a belief.

During these observations, I occasionally met this type of more exploratory discussion, one which opened up for several alternative kinds of articulations. The teachers played many times the role of "devil's advocate" to challenge what was taken for granted. In some classrooms, the secularist discourse created one single unequivocal truth that was not problematised nor explored but the articulations of both students and teachers were pronounced with an absolute certainty that did not invite nor encourage further tentative conversations. In other classrooms, the teachers

created a climate where more thoughts could be circulated simultaneously, and different positions could hence be explored. Even in these classrooms, the secularist discourse was vibrant, but it did not become hegemonic, as the teacher opened up for alternative positions – how a discussion was led also affected the content. One example of this was shown above in Excerpt 20, and another example of this kind of discussion was when the teacher introduced the topic of free will and whether a human being has a soul from a biological and from a religious worldview. The teacher brought in different articulations, and the students reflected on the meaning of different ways of thinking.

Excerpt 21

Teacher: This priest situates the Christian view of man and puts it in contrast to a biological one and says that if we have no spiritual essence we are just biology, chemicals, and so, then we could not really be morally responsible for any actions. And free will, here, would not exist. What do you say about this? Are we only matter, just chemicals and a set of genes?
Student 1: Yes, perhaps we are.
Student 2: Morals, morality, are also neurotransmitters in the brain. If you want to see it that way
Teacher: Well, in such cases. But then we can't be responsible for our actions.
Student 2: What do you mean?
Teacher: How can we be if we only are chemicals?
Student 3: A machine that does what you have programmed it to do!
Student 1: Maybe that's not quite how I think it is…Or…

The teacher presented different positions and contradictions related to science and faith and the possible consequences of different ways of thinking, and he opened up for the possibility of holding either a biological or a religious view of man, or both simultaneously, and different positions within them. In this context, the discussions concerning religion and science became more nuanced. This was articulated in a context in which the students were expected to argue, discuss, reason and think for themselves, and the students could express uncertainty. How the topic was introduced and problematised influenced how the students related to the topic.

In one of the observed classes, the RE course itself, as previously mentioned (Excerpt 11), started with a lecture given by an invited researcher who introduced himself as "a neuroscientist from the university". He gave a lecture that essentially touched upon psychological research about perception. Among other things, he spoke about the brain creating "false memories":

Excerpt 22

External lecturer: We see and hear what we want to see. But we create false memories. Our brains make us believe that things have happened that have not happened. I have, for instance, a memory of lying under a grapevine, picking grapes and eating. Of course, I had diarrhoea afterwards. Three years ago, I looked through a photo album of me as a child, and saw myself lying under the bush – I had created a false memory based on the image. And I had obviously heard my mother talking about it. It's not that hard to create false memories.

Teaching about this perspective on religion in the context of RE is important and relevant, both with respect to the wording in the syllabus and the general academic

discussion within the field of religious studies. The perspectives and the worldview of the lecturer were, however, not made explicit to the students, nor were cognitive perspectives on religion discussed during this and the following lessons. As this was articulated in the context of RE, these articulations created the impression that religious people more or less pretend and invent their beliefs, which enhanced the obviousness of the scientific perspective.

Through articulations about science related and compared to different aspects of religion, a religious interpretation of the world was constructed as less valid in relation to a scientific worldview. To question the supremacy of science was not possible. Religions were understood in terms of functional and evolutionary explanations. This approach to religion and RE is in line with cognitive science, which tries to understand and explain religious beliefs and behaviours in terms of cognitive capacities and the structures of the mind. Religion is regarded as a mental product that originates in cognitive structures in the brain and is a consequence of the evolutionary process. The reason that people believe in gods or other supernatural entities is that the brain is predisposed to imagine hidden causal forces in nature, and this is then attributed to the capacity to act independently (cf. Boyer 2001; Brelsford 2005). In the classrooms observed, there were never any explicit references made to this kind of research.

6.6 Individualism

Individualism was held in high esteem in the classrooms and had positive connotations in articulations of the autonomy of the individual and making one's own choices. Religion and being religious were difficult to reconcile with individualism, as religion was associated with submitting to collective rules and following doctrines.

My Own Choice

Individualism was often articulated and positioned as incompatible with being part of a collective community, for example, a religion. Articulations of individualism and the autonomy of the individual were tied to a secularist discourse. Religion was strongly associated with coercion and following rules. When encountering religious people, individual agency was often the focus of interest. One student had, as part of his RE class, met a Catholic monk, and he told the class about the question he posed:

Excerpt 23

Student: The Catholic monk, I tried to ask: how do you see right and wrong? And then he said – the Church's view is like this and like this and like this. When he had stood there talking for five minutes, I tried again. Yes, but how do YOU perceive right and wrong, and then he said, well, like the Church does. My conclusion was that this person doesn't think much for himself, and not very independently either, and then, yes … that was the conclusion I came to.

In other words, religious people do not themselves choose what to do or think.[8] They must submit to the rules for how to dress, what to eat, and how to celebrate the holidays. They must pray at special times and in special places, and they must follow religious leaders' statements about what is right and wrong in all sorts of contexts. Doing anything with reference to religion or God (who could be articulated as fictional, see excerpts 15 and 18) was impossible if you wanted to be seen as a modern, strong, independent, individualistic Swede. One sign that individualism was a dominant ideal was that even students who have a faith stated that they choose their faith and that they choose selectively and independently what they embrace of the religious tradition that they still see themselves as part of:

Excerpt 24

Student 2: Yeah, but things that religions say that you should follow. Because you belong to this
Student 1: Just because it is so.
Student 2: Yes, because you belong to this religion. But I don't feel like that. Sure, I'm a Muslim, but I don't do … [what] people say, what THEY want me to believe in
Student 1: You decide!
Student 2: Yeah! Right!

These students articulated the importance of making individual choices in relation to religion. Based on the observations of RE, individualism seems to be an absolute value in a world where pluralism and relativism otherwise were articulated ideals. The articulations emphasising individual choice and agency can also be seen in relation to the academic discussions of the implications and consequences of modernity, individualism and secularity, sometimes referred to as the "subjective turn", i.e., the emphasis on emotions and wellbeing rather than on duties and obligations (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This, of course, has implications for how religiosity is understood and articulated. As in the above excerpt, "the subjective turn" entails that it is the choice of the individual that creates religion and tradition, and not tradition and religiosity that create the faith of the individual.

Religion, especially Islam, was associated with submitting to (irrational) rules, and Islam was the religious tradition that was articulated as being the most difficult one to reconcile with individualism. In the excerpt below, fasting during Ramadan was discussed:

Excerpt 25

Student 5: So, if you don't fast, do you donate money to the mosque instead then?
Student 6: It's not an obligation! But you do that, you know, out of free will, just so
Student 1: Even if you're 30 years old, so you don't have to fast, then. It's up to you.
Teacher: But there are so many Muslims who do fast.
Student 1: Yes, yes, of course. If you are religious, then you should do it. That is so.
Teacher: But it's not the case that if you are Muslim and don't fast that something happens. It is, as you say, still voluntary.
Student 1: Exactly!
Student 3: It is voluntary to go to the mosque, it is voluntary to

[8] See also Excerpt 8.

Student 4: PRAY! Fasting and all that is voluntary.
Teacher: It is one of the foundations
Student 1: You choose what you want to do!

Student 5 was asking her Muslim classmates about what they are compelled to do as Muslims. The students that positioned themselves as Muslims emphasised the voluntary nature of their religion. These students eagerly emphasised the voluntary nature both regarding religious practices and beliefs. They performed some religious practices but not for reasons of tradition or oppression – fasting was a result of their own conscience, a voluntary choice, and not something that they unquestioningly only submitted to or were forced to do.

One aspect of individualism, which is also visible in the excerpts above, was that there was no higher authority than the individual, and this was articulated in different ways in relation to a discussion of what might be described as sacred or holy and, if so, why. Holiness was a concept that the students seemed to have difficulty relating to: it had no concrete meaning to most students. Phenomena that were nevertheless articulated as being sacred were, for instance, their own private family relations, which had no (traditional) religious connection. If something were to be considered holy, this was not due to any religion – it was up to each individual to decide if something was to be regarded as sacred or not:

Excerpt 26

Student: Just because religion says what is sacred, it's not necessarily sacred to me. I don't respect objects or places for their own sakes, but [I respect] the people who think that those places are sacred.

Put differently, there was no authority outside the individual – every individual must take a stand and create his or her own personal version of religion (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 2005).[9]

Individualism and the Rights of Children

The importance of making one's own choices was also articulated in relation to children in religious movements, which was a subject that aroused much emotion. The students maintained that parents should not be allowed to bring their children into religious movements. They argued that children cannot defend themselves and cannot make their own choices and concluded that: "I feel sorry for the kids". These articulations resolved a general view concerning the children of religious people in general - children should not be forced to go to churches, mosques or temples or be subjected to "religious influences" in the form of religious stories or participation in various forms of religious activities for children. The students articulated that

[9] Having said this, it must be noted that individualism in the sense of making a personal decision is not only reserved for modern, contemporary people. The Lutheran Reformation, eighteenth-century pietism, and nineteenth-century revival movements are all examples of movements that emphasised the repentance of the individual and the importance of a personal faith.

children could not make a conscious choice of their own if they were heavily influenced by religion at an early age. In one class during a discussion of children in the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON), the teacher tried to highlight and problematise this secularist position by saying:

Excerpt 27

Teacher: [*is ironic*] I understand that your parents withhold from you their jobs and businesses and their personal life and friends and hobbies. In that you are not involved at all, right?
Student 1: That, I think I have to protest against.
Teacher: You do?
Student 1: My mom and I share both work and hobbies. I am with my mom every day. And her job, I know just about EVERYTHING, we talk about it all the time.
Teacher: Then you have to be incredibly influenced by your parents?
Student 1: Yes.
Teacher: Is it negative or positive, or was there any choice there?
Student 1: I know for certain that I do not intend to do the same kind of work that she does … And we have our own company, and of course I am also, I know all about the bookkeeping there and how it works and so on, they don't directly withhold anything.
Teacher: But should they not do things in a way so that you could develop into a full-fledged person, Elinor? So you did not have to work with the business and horses and everything. You might be able to get involved in… Formula One or something instead?
Student 1: Yes….
Teacher: Do you understand what I'm getting at? It is difficult, if you're living together as a family, to withhold your values from your children, what you yourself believe in, and what you yourself are living in the midst of, whether it is about faith or companies or jobs or money or whatever it's about … we all live in this in some way. We will of course be influenced by our parents in some respects. It's like that for everyone. And the question is whether it is more right or wrong? They're in a community?
Student 2: But I feel that religion is a little bit worse
Teacher: It's worse? Could this be related to the fact that we are so secularised?

Religion was articulated as "a little bit worse", or as having a stronger impact than other things. However, in this specific context, the students' secular, taken-for-granted positions were made explicit and challenged by the teacher.

The Highest Authority

The individual was seen as the highest authority. Many students found religiously motivated acts to be strange, and it was hard to understand, for example, why religious people asked God for forgiveness. It was perceived as being much more important to ask the offended person for forgiveness. To find yourself, believe in yourself and create your own personal philosophy of life was articulated as central:

Excerpt 28

Student: I just wanted to add one thing there. This thing about just believing in yourself. I think it's harder to do that than to believe, then, than to have a belief in some god or

> something. I think it's harder to really find yourself and believe, know what you believe in when it comes to yourself, within yourself. So I think it's a little because of this that there is religion, because it's' a little bit easier. Than to believe in yourself.

This excerpt shows how in the classroom discourse a belief in God was replaced with a belief in humankind; theology was replaced with anthropology. In line with this, individualism in a very clear way appears as being natural, and it is articulated as more "difficult" to choose a personal way than to "believe in some god or something". This reasoning served as an explanation to account for why people in the world surrender and choose to believe in religions to such a large extent: human weakness. However, strong individuals choose their own way. Religion was also associated with submitting to a whole tradition and following the interpretations of religious leaders.

There was a strong aversion to conforming to a fixed box: "buy[ing] a whole concept of religion". Identity construction is all about the individual's own choices, and choosing does not mean unreflective subordination. During the observations, I noticed that students did not seem to identify with the society they live in. They did not think of themselves as part of that society. What mattered to them was their own family and their closest relations; relationships were something that many students characterised as being "sacred" (cf. Day 2011).

In classroom discussions, it was highlighted that the most common form of religiosity in Sweden is private religiosity, which was articulated as individuals independently incorporating elements from different traditions and religions:

Excerpt 29

Teacher: It is often said that the most common form of religiosity in Sweden is what we usually describe as PRIVATE RELIGIOISITY. So I have taken a box, and then I have taken a bit from there, and a bit from there and a little from there and stuff like that. And so I blended my own religion that doesn't look like anyone else's, but of course can resemble, if we imagine, because it is obvious that most of us have something Christian in here as we still live in a country that previously was Christian.

Depending upon which definition of secularity is applied, the above excerpt can be seen as being part of the secularist discourse. Religion is attributed to the private sphere and is seen as an individual project.

Individualism was articulated as a central value in the classroom practice observed. In surveys and research describing perceptions of Swedes, individualism is a value that is held in high esteem and is greatly appreciated (Berggren and Trägårdh 2006). Swedes like to think of themselves as highly individualistic, and this was apparent in the discourse of the classrooms. These articulations of individualism can be seen as an example of how the "subjective turn" and sacralisation of the individual were constructed in relation to religion within RE. The obsession with analysing how and what one feels can be seen as one of the hallmarks of modernity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The self, how I feel, and what I believe are at the centre. An individual living in the contemporary world needs to feel that this is right for me, that I can embrace my own beliefs, and not because I am supposed to embrace them because of belonging to a certain tradition or institution. This ethos stems from an ideal of authenticity rooted in Romanticism where a core value is that

modern individuals develop their true selves, their own unique personality, what has been called the crucial importance of "becoming myself" (Risenfors 2011; Sigurdson 2009). This "subjective turn" affected discourses of religion, since religion and individualism in some respects were articulated as being incompatible. Religion in general, but Islam in particular, was associated with submitting to collective rules. This association is not unique to the RE classroom. Hjärpe (2012) concludes that the idea that religious affiliation is a determining factor for human behaviour; the notions that religions are static and unchangeable and that religious people blindly obey religious leaders are commonly found in Swedish political debates but are empirically proven to be incorrect. However, traces of such reasoning were evident in the RE classrooms observed. Buddhism was the religious tradition with the most positive connotations, and the motives for this representation were mainly related to individualism. Buddhism was portrayed as a worldview with no god passing judgment and where the individual has the freedom to follow rules or not.

6.7 Modern Myths

In the classrooms observed, it was frequently articulated that religions previously gave answers to existential questions; now, other things provide meaning. Discussions revolved around questions and ideas that help people to find their way in life today as well as narratives that guide people in contemporary society.

In order to make the content of RE relevant for their students, the teachers tried many times to compare the religious content to similar non-religious features that they assumed would be closer to the students' experiences. One example of this pedagogical approach is the excerpt below, which comes from a lesson where religious myths were discussed. The teacher did make an effort to get the students to bring themselves and their contemporary world in relation to the concept of myth, but the students were stuck in their way of thinking about religions and also tended to interpret the term "myth" as equivalent to a lie or falsehood.[10] In other words, both teacher and students stated that "We are not governed by religious myths today". But the teacher was trying to clarify what he meant and asked what "grand narratives" or modern myths students as Western youth believe in today (cf. Lyotard 1984). Eventually, the teacher gave his own version of some of the myths that govern contemporary Sweden:

Excerpt 30

Teacher: I would argue that there are lots of myths about happiness, what creates happiness in a person's life. For example, about money – If I have a lot of money, I will be happy. Or if I have this body index, I will be happy. Beauty, health… status, gadgetry, that kind of stuff creates happiness. I think there are a lot of myths in our society. If I go shopping, I'll be happy, The kind of myth that we, on the one hand, know is not true, but on the other hand, we follow it. We do certain things.

[10] The Swedish word [*myt*] has this double meaning and can be translated both as a grand narrative often used in relation to religions and worldviews, but also as a lie, a false narrative.

Happiness, fulfilment, beauty, and health, but mainly acquired through consumption, were values that the teacher articulated as having replaced the religious conceptions of what provides meaning and satisfaction. In this excerpt, the teacher states that "we know it is not true", i.e., that consumerism and materialism can provide happiness, but we live as if believe it. In this sense, this is an example of a secular interpretation of life. The teacher below is using the same line of reasoning as the one in the quote above:

Excerpt 31

Teacher: I feel that there is a grand narrative about beauty in our culture. It is the narrative of how we should look. And it is dictated to us and related by advertisers, of those who want to sell things and products to us, make-up companies, and the music industry… that is for me a grand narrative that is told in our culture today.

Many of the teachers tried to relate their teaching to their pupils' own experiences and "translate" and relate concepts such as faith, holiness, and myth to the experience of the students. The connection between similar aspects within religious and non-religious worldviews were, however, not made explicit, but the focus in the observed lessons was on how the students related to these concepts. That health, happiness and materialism are central in "our" culture was frequently stated during many RE lessons in different classes, and as in the above presented excerpts, teachers (not mentioning the name of Lyotard 1984) concluded that these new non-religious narratives have replaced the religious grand narratives.

It was thus determined that religious myths had been superseded by other non-religious myths. All myths contain utopian notions of a good life, a good society, etc. According to the perspective of discourse theory, myths can be understood as part of the creation and maintenance of hegemony. For a myth to arise, it requires a shift in discourse, and the function of the myth is to "nail down" this shift and create a new space for the elements of the discourse. The myth can be seen as fundamentally hegemonic because it contains norms, values and assumptions and thus helps to create a new objectivity (Laclau 1990). In the classrooms observed, there was no discussion or open disagreement about the myths that the teachers articulated as hegemonic in contemporary Sweden, but the reference to the myths of today was articulated with a critical edge, thus indicating that the myths of materialism and consumerism are somewhat false myths.

6.8 "Man Is the Measure of All Things"

According to the syllabus, a compulsory component in RE is ethics. The ethics part of RE in the classrooms observed can be seen as part of a secularist discourse as questions about what was considered right or wrong had no references to anything other than the individual's own perception or to shared views in society. Democracy, equality and human dignity were articulated as absolute moral values.

You Decide

The reason that something was considered right or good was because we think it is right or good, i.e., because human beings have decided upon it. In the following excerpt, it is shown how articulations concerning ethical matters were constructed with the human being as the ultimate judge:

Excerpt 32

Teacher: But, at any rate, today there is plenty of free space for the individual to decide for him- or herself. And it hasn’t always been so. It used to be a criminal offense in Sweden not to go to church on Sundays; it’s not so now. There were harsh penalties for sexual relations outside of marriage. It’s not so today. It was clear what one could and could not do before. Someone told us, the law said, the priest said, the teacher said, it was like this: do this, do this, don’t do this. Today, when there’s not so much control anymore, a great deal more responsibility is placed on the individual. We have to think, what do we want to govern our lives, really? Based on what, do I want it to be by chance every time, or a gut feeling, or what do I want to be governing me anyway? What determines me? Is it my mood that will decide?
Student 1: No.
Teacher: No?
Student 1: It varies.
Teacher: It varies, yes. And what do you think should determine how we act? This is why it’s important to reflect upon this, and this is what we will be working on now. We will be thinking a lot. One can say that ethics is about making decisions about how you want to live your life. It’s a matter of learning to think independently. To dare to resist, to find a personal conviction concerning right and wrong, learning to resist peer pressure and bad leaders and stuff like that. It’s important to say that ethics distinguishes between what is, what a person BELIEVES is right and what IS right. That Nazism once thought it was right, that their views were good, and that slavery was okay, and things like that. Just because something was considered right one time doesn’t mean that it IS right, just because you believe so. But you are on your own when it comes to moral issues. So you have to give it some thought.

It is thus up to the individual to decide what is right and wrong, but at the same time this teacher articulated that there is something absolutely right or absolutely wrong. However, nowadays one has to rely upon personal judgments and opinions in order to make the determination. It was mentioned in the classrooms observed that within religions there are beliefs about right and wrong, but because there are so many different religions and interpretations, one must decide for oneself. In these discussions, we see examples of what Taylor (2007) argues is the main cause of secularity – that pluralism and the diversity of available choices leads to secularisation.

Questions of right and wrong were related to the function of religion in different contexts. In the past, God decided what was right and wrong. Now, you have to decide yourself:

Excerpt 33

Teacher: Mmm… Humankind’s eternal question, what is right and what is good? How do we get religion into this? What do religions have to do with questions about right and good?

Student 1: I thought, Christianity, the Ten Commandments, that you should follow them, that you should not kill, and…

Teacher: That's right. In that respect, God has already decided that this is right and that this is wrong. Then you don't need to think about it anymore. All you have to do is smile and follow orders.

Student 1: I'm thinking of karma. If you do something good, then something good will happen, you, like, get it in return? It's somewhat like a rule, one could say.

Teacher: It sure is.

Student 1: To follow that.

Teacher: Yes.

Student 2: I think, therefore, personally, that ethics is something that is about what we conceive ourselves, and one's own ethics. You can't follow someone else's, but rather find your own.

Teacher: Yes. A little bit difficult?

Student 2: You should understand human behaviour, but I don't think we should follow what someone else says about how to behave.

Teacher: Isn't it hard to figure out? Now I'll think of what I think is the right thing to say and do and act? Now I myself will define: Is this wrong or right? It's incredibly ambitious, but can you manage to do this, do you think?

Student 2: Yes.

[*The teacher laughs, surprised.*]

Again, here we see an example of humankind as the measure of all things. In the excerpt, the link between religion and ethics was touched upon, and the view that there are beliefs about what is right and wrong within religions was expressed. When teachers and students discuss what they believe, the individual is at the centre. The image of the religious person as a mere non-thinking follower was reinforced, as the teacher says that within religion God has already decided and therefore you do not have to "think about it anymore, all you have to do is smile and follow orders". Student 2 in the excerpt above stresses her individual agency as she argues for the importance of individual choices.

In the contemporary Swedish classrooms observed in this study, hardly any direct references to the Bible were made, with two exceptions: the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. When they were taken up, it was also mentioned that these interpersonal rules (with the exception of the first three commandments dealing with obligations to God) are to be found in all religions:

Excerpt 34

Teacher: Another example is what is called the Golden Rule, which can be linked to this. The Golden Rule is actually something that exists in ALL religions. And you've definitely heard the Christian version of it. Is there anyone who can say what it is?

Student 1: Act toward others the way you yourself want to be treated.

Teacher: Yes. All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, you shall also do unto them. That is the Christian version. We'll see how it's worded in other religions … [accesses it on the computer]. Yes, everyone writes a little differently, but this Golden Rule exists in all of them.

The teacher displays a list of formulations that are articulated as the Golden Rule in Baha'i, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Confucianism, Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism.

The Golden Rule was thus referred to as a global social rule and an ethical rule easy to embrace regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation.

Central Values

When students were asked what they saw as important moral rules, a number of themes were brought up with some variation: the importance of showing respect for others, being tolerant, telling the truth, and abstaining from stealing and killing. However, these were perceived as being right because humans think that they are that, not because a god of some sort has said that these are the rules to follow, or because they are found in a religious text.

Values articulated as absolute moral values were democracy, human dignity and equality. Human dignity was seen as an absolute value with references to ancient times, natural law, but above all else the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of the teachers pointed out that the human dignity of believers is an intrinsic value because they perceived human beings as formed in the image of God, but that we now assume just the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the basis for our view of human dignity. Regarding the opposite, i.e., absolute evil, Hitler and the Nazi crimes committed during the Holocaust were frequently and in different contexts articulated as the reference point of evil. The genocide in Rwanda and Breivik’s mass murder on the island of Utöja were other examples of articulations of evil, but these were compared and problematised in light of the Holocaust.

Some of the teachers tried in the context of the ethics part to discuss the responsibility every human being has toward other human beings. This was, for example, done through using articles about some children having been harassed by Israeli soldiers on the West Bank and an article about the beggars who have become a common feature in the streets of Sweden in recent years and who evoke a lot of feelings. What is my responsibility in regard to these matters? What is evil? Is indifference to the suffering of others a form of evil? Do all human beings have the same value? Why? After a long discussion about human rights and the equality of all human beings, where the teacher had tried to get the students to motivate why they considered humans unique among living creatures, the teacher concluded:

Excerpt 35

Teacher: You won’t ever find any proof that human beings are unique and special. You won’t find a special equation that says yes, THAT’S why humanity has a special value. On the contrary, it is a kind of conviction or valuation that one can argue more or less wisely in favour of.

During the lessons observed, issues relating to the “meaning of life” were discussed from a personal life-question approach – what is it that is important in your life? In several classes, students were asked to rank values and to describe what was important and unimportant in their lives. One example is from a class that did this exercise as part of the RE course’s teaching on ethics:

Excerpt 36

Health	Beauty	Sex	Power
Financial security	Career and success	Being remembered by future generations	Intellectual stimulation
Security	Peace and quiet	Receiving love	Being outdoors
Family	Property	Partner	Children
Job satisfaction	Appreciation	Humour and joy	Giving love
Having a good relationship with god	Fellowship	Adaptability	Excitement, challenge, adventure
A life of luxury	Being good at something	Being together with family	Friendship

In the discussions related to this task, values related to one's personal life were central to the students' reasoning. The students were to pick out ten things and rank them. Most of the things chosen were things like health, family, security, and economic security. A majority of both male and female students emphasised family as the most important, including relationships with friends and love. Children were something everyone wanted. Financial security was valued highly by several. One female student thought a career was important. She said that her parents work a lot and that she had been raised to believe that it is important to have a good job. The male students who were in the same group did not share that view, i.e., that a career was more important than relationships. A "good relationship with God" was one suggested option, and most argued that it was totally unimportant since they themselves stated that they did not believe in God. In the follow-up discussion, the teacher brought up the concepts of intrinsic values, utilitarian values and instrumental values.

Ethics constitute a central part of RE, and many of the teachers in the lessons observed used tasks that encouraged the students to elaborate upon how they perceived different values. Family and close relationships were articulated as essential and important. On the one hand, this can be understood as part of a secularist discourse in which, in the words of the Greek sophist Protagoras, "man is the measure of all things". Conversely, this can also be seen as an example of the sacralisation of the self and human relations, which can be understood as a result of modernity. From Max Weber's point of view, modernity is perceived as the take-over of science and rationality as the sole providers of truth, which consequently results in the problemitisation of meaning. The lack or difficulty in experiencing meaning is answered by "trying to be true to oneself", "trying to listen to your real feelings" and "following your heart". "With external reality having lost much of its former capacity to endow life with meaning, the deeper emotional layers of the self are left as the straw to clutch at in seeking solace for these problems" (Aupers and Houtman 2010, p. 11). In the excerpts in this section, relationships were articulated as the most important factor for existential wellbeing and experiences of meaning.

6.9 Religion as a Private Matter

A central aspect of a secularist discourse is that religion ought to be private, and public space should, according to this logic, be kept free from religion. Schools and classrooms can be viewed as public spaces, but during RE the students are expected to get involved in discussions about religion. In the classrooms observed, there was an unwillingness to talk about personal religious perceptions. Religion was also considered to be a private matter, and this was shown through articulations of ambivalence toward religion in the public sphere.

Religion Is Private – What Is Not Articulated

A discourse-analytical assumption is that a hegemonic discourse controls what is said and how it is said but also what is not said. If a secularist discourse is hegemonic, religion becomes a very private matter, which makes people reluctant to talk about this matter in "public". A sign of this is that the concept of religion was referred to in general, quite detached terms – for example, "religious people", "believers", "we in Sweden", "Christians", "Muslims" and so on – instead of positioning oneself as a religious subject, as a believer, "I think" or "as a Christian I believe", etc.

There are differences in articulations about different religions but also differences in articulations at different school programmes. In the context of the secularist discourse of religion, I will, however, point to the fact that despite the fact that in all the classes there were students who in smaller groups and in private situations positioned themselves within various Christian traditions, during the 125 lessons in which the observations were carried out, only once did a student openly and on her own initiative in a whole-class discussion position herself as Christian. However, there was a number of times in vocational programmes where students positioned themselves as Muslims while speaking to the whole class. This, I believe, was partly related to the fact that they constituted a fairly large group, i.e., about a third of the classes where this occurred. However, students in vocational programs generally took a more personal approach in the classrooms and talked more about things that can be characterised as private topics compared to preparatory programmes for higher education. In the academic programmes, students' behaviour can be described as having adopted a more rigorous version of the "school-ethos", and the student culture differs between academic and vocational programmes in terms of how private the students are expected to be.

During the observations of a preparatory programme for higher education, there occurred an instance of a teacher who trespassed the border between the private religiosity of the students and the public sphere of the classroom. Right at the end of the lesson, the teacher asked outright "are anyone of you religious?" Some of the students called out "Henry! He's a Pentecostal!" One of the students who shouted out Henry's name told those seated around him that another friend once attended

services with Henry "and it was the worst thing he had ever been through. Everyone was screaming and speaking in tongues". Henry himself looked as if he wanted to crawl under his desk and responded very tersely, that, yes, he is a Christian. The teacher continued to ask students with an immigrant background if they were Muslims, and they admitted that they were, but I interpreted their body language and their monosyllabic answers as meaning that they really did not want to talk about it in class. The lesson ended and the students quickly left the classroom. It was not clear to me why the teacher posed these questions in the class, and to my knowledge he never used the information in subsequent classes.

Freedom from Religion

Religious freedom, both in the sense of freedom to freely practice religion and freedom to avoid religion, made for lively debates. On the one hand, there were clear articulations of "everybody should be allowed to believe whatever they want". In the discussions it became apparent, however, that it is not always easy to know where to draw the line between the right of an individual to freely practice his or her religion and the right to avoid religion. This line seems to be crossed when religious expression has implications for choices of how to live in the community, and religion thus becomes visible in the public sphere. Through articulations of freedom of religion, religion was constructed as a social feature that ought to be kept in the private sphere.

Freedom of religion was articulated in relation to specific incidents in which religious freedom was at stake. In these contexts, students debated the veil prohibition in France, the minaret ban in Switzerland, the European Court's decision in the case of Italy where it approved of crucifixes in the classroom, and Geert Wilders' xenophobic statements. In these discussions, religion was constructed as a source of conflict. One solution students advocated was to restrict religion in the form of symbols and religious expression in the public sphere:

Excerpt 37

Student 2: Yeah, we said it's important to have mosques and churches and everything. That there should be every alternative in the community. That there should not only be churches in Sweden; one should be allowed to choose. But, then, one should not build one area where there is a church in the middle and everything, because then you feel pretty forced and so, in that community, if everyone goes there. So it's a bit like that …

Student 3: But we must be able to build a church somewhere, otherwise people might not know about it.

Student 2: Yes, but maybe not in the middle…

Teacher: What, do you mean, would happen then?

Student 2: No, but then one feels…Yes, but if like 75% of everyone in the area goes there, then you might feel forced.

Student 4: Subconsciously.

Student 2: Yes, but just that we should go there because it is there, and you live in the area.

Student 2: I just thought of this with the school that the woman from Italy[11] who wanted her children to have a secular upbringing. But like Charlie said, we understand why. She wants her child to have a non-religious upbringing, and so he sees a cross all day long. Because then he starts thinking about that cross, so then there will be a line of thought in his head.

It was of great importance to many students that one should be able to avoid being influenced by religion. As in the case of the discussion about children in religious movements mentioned above, religious symbols were perceived to be somehow "stronger" and more influential than other symbols, such as logos and brand names in commercial advertising.

The secularist discourse had a different impact on representations of different religions, but sometimes the debate about religious freedom had undertones of xenophobia and Islamophobia. When Christianity was discussed as a "religion", Christianity was just as problematic as the term religion in general. However, in comparison to Islam, individualised and secularised Christianity had positive connotations. Islam was articulated as a problem from a secular point of view, and Islam was described as different from other religions:

Excerpt 38

Student 1: It works really well. Just look at Sweden. Just the particular religion of Christianity. It's as good as it gets, although we're individualists. There aren't any problems until other religions clash [with it]. Like Islam. Like the example she gave that 41% of Swedes don't want to mix with Muslims. That's exactly what it's about. Only Christianity is as good as it gets just because it's about individuality. It should be like that in the rest of the world too.

Student 3: So you think there should be one religion?

Student 1: No religion at all. You can have your own opinion, you can believe whatever you want, and no one's stopping you from it. But you don't belong to organised groups, because that's what leads to conflicts. If a Muslim comes here with a burqa or something like that, then we have, oh, look at her.

Islam was articulated as problematic from a freedom of religion perspective. Islam was described as "more" than a religion, i.e., an all-encompassing religion and a "life-adjustment". Thus "true" Islam was constructed as being incompatible with a secular, Western society. In connection with these discussions, statements were made that "they" (i.e., Muslims) will actually have to adapt to "us" (i.e., a secular way of life) where religion is kept private and unnoticeable in public:

Excerpt 39

Student 1: Ok, at the risk of sounding a bit cruel or something, but just because they've got this kind of a religion, they should not be allowed to have a masquerade. Should they be allowed to enter completely masked, if a Swede would not be allowed to come in with a mask on? One ought to be able to see who's there.

[11] Referring to case of *Lautsi and Others v. Italy*, (ECHR, March 18, 2011) where the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the requirement in Italian law that crucifixes be displayed in classrooms of state schools does not violate the European Convention on Human Rights (https://rm.coe.int/1680665b09).

Student 2: Although it is part of their religion, they must accept how we do things in Sweden.

Excerpt 40

Student 1: We … we talked about that, in our culture we try to have freedom of expression and religion, that everyone should have the right to have their own beliefs and stuff, and it should be multicultural, and everyone can believe what they want. And that's why there can be a clash between this.
Teacher: Yes. That it is difficult to define where the boundaries lie between the one and the other? Mm. Group three?
Student 3: They argue the case that the minarets may exert an influence, forcing others in Switzerland to become Muslim. But don't church towers also do that, if one is to use the same argument? So, if one is to tear down the minarets, then one must tear down the church towers too.
Teacher: You mean that they are a bit inconsistent?
Student 2: Yeah, they just look in the direction of Islam, and think; there are like churches all over Europe.

Visible religious expressions, such as the veil, minarets and church towers, were articulated as problematic in the public sphere. In the name of consistency, Student 2 in Excerpt 40 notes that if minarets are considered problematic in the public sphere with regard to the freedom of religion, this also ought to affect Christian buildings and symbols. The general view in the discussion was that in order to implement freedom of religion in society, no religious symbols ought to be allowed in the public sphere at all.

Not everyone agreed with the description of Sweden as secular. For example, one student who described herself as an atheist was of the opinion that she, as an atheist, has to defend her choice not to celebrate Christmas and that Sweden is greatly influenced by Christian traditions:

Excerpt 41

Student: But, for example, I'm an atheist, and people think I'm sick in the head because I don't celebrate Christmas. Sitting at home on Christmas Eve and… So, I mean, the Christmas Eve that I have is just like ANY other day, an ordinary Saturday or something. I can't watch anything on TV that isn't about Christmas or Christianity or anything related to it. And, the thing is that I have to defend myself because I don't like to see my relatives and celebrate someone's birthday. And it's the same with Easter. The Easter break, I don't mind. That's all very well, but, yes, Easter, maybe one doesn't celebrate that much perhaps, but still I have to have time off for something I don't believe in. I mean, I can't get rid of the fact that we live in, that Sweden is a Christian culture.

This student felt that her views were in question because she renounces the celebration of Christian festivals and says that it is not possible to avoid being reminded of them when, for example, watching TV. The quote also illustrates the difficulty of drawing a line between religion and culture. Christmas festivities with Christmas gifts, Christmas foods, Christmas dinner with family and friends and the decorations in the shops, in public places and in homes are widespread. Indeed, references to the Christmas feast are certainly frequent on television during the Christmas season.

One aspect of the classroom discussion about religion is the fact that many of the students did not have a personal relationship with, or experience of, religious concepts. One could describe this in terms of being "religiously illiterate" (cf. Wright 2004) or having a "loss of collective memory" (Hervieu-Léger 2000), where increasingly few share a language to talk about this dimension. This contributes to secular discourse becoming hegemonic, as many are not aware of other ways of relating to religious matters. This also contributes to making religion a private matter, as religion in many ways is articulated as strange and even dangerous to people who get their only information about religion through the media (Sjöborg 2012).

6.10 Implications and Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate and give examples of the way a secularist discourse was articulated in the RE classroom. This has been illustrated by the presentation of how a secularist discourse in the classrooms observed was structured around a number of articulation clusters: Prime time of history, diversity of views, a neutral position, criticism of religion, science and faith, individualism, modern myths, "man is the measure of all things" and religion as a private matter. Together, they formed a specific way of talking about world.

During the observations, it was striking how much of the speech in the classroom was marked by ideas of the Enlightenment, i.e., perspectives and views of history and religion that take their intellectual legacy from that particular tradition of thought. When the secularist discourse was at play, certain things appeared as unquestionable and obvious. For instance, there was a conception of time in which history is seen as a linear, evolutionary line, implying that humanity goes from lower to higher stages of development and where religion becomes representative of something obsolete. Other features were not as obvious, and this can be described in terms of a discursive struggle. Individualism and pluralism were articulated as core values characterising our times. This also contributed to legitimising a rejection of religion, since religion in general was articulated as contradictory to individualism. In analysing the classroom utterances, it seemed that non-religious and atheistic positions were more significant in this discourse than those of freedom of choice and pluralism of personal views. In theory, freedom of choice and pluralism encompass a variety of positions, but when the secularist discourse was in play, it was not possible to express religious or non-secularist positions. Another sign of the non-religious supremacy within this discourse was the way students spoke of atheism in terms of normality and neutrality.

In the classrooms observed, it was emphasised that science in many ways has replaced the role of religion. Religion was explained by the quest for explanations: people have always sought after answers to "the big questions" of life's origins and explanations for natural phenomena. Today, science has given humanity the answers and therefore there is no longer any need for religion. According to this line of reasoning, a religious worldview appears irrational, unintelligent, ignorant and tanta-

mount to closing one's eyes to the truth. Instead, reason, critical thinking and scientific methods are ways of gaining true knowledge; things that might be reasonably assumed to be true are indisputable guiding principles. In the scientific approach, a basic premise is openness and being prepared to reconsider one's arguments – if one is proven wrong. It was articulated that science has settled its explanations, those that religions previously provided, and that the religious explanations have been proven wrong through scientific methods. Science is thus associated with truth and credibility and, in many cases, is put in opposition to a religiously based worldview. In sum, the secularist discourse contributed to a certain perspective on religion which implied a detached approach to religion and excluded religious positions. This might have implications for reaching the aims of RE that concern diversity, respect for people of different backgrounds and an understanding of different perspectives.

Chapter 7
"We Are Stardust…" – A Spiritual Discourse

Abstract In the empirical material collected, students and teachers sometimes referred to a reality beyond human reason and concepts that can be characterised as denoting a spiritual dimension. In the context of this study, a spiritual discourse concerns articulations of "ultimate concern", of the essential conditions of existence, of the wonder and awe life inspires, and where the possibility that there might exist supra-empirical phenomenon or beings, i.e., gods or something divine, is not excluded, and that life might have some kind of continuation after death. This challenged in some respects the secularist discourse and in other ways reinforced it but can nevertheless be seen as part of another discourse. The spiritual discourse was constructed through clusters of articulations of a spiritual dimension; *A personal interpretation of life; What is a human being?; Concepts with religious roots; and Your time on Earth.*

To understand how RE is constructed in practice, I seek to identify, describe and analyse the dominant discourses at play in the classroom and how they are related to each other. In the classrooms observed, the secularist discourse was strikingly prominent in the conversations that took place. Nonetheless, in the classroom practice, there also existed contrasting articulations about religion, religions and worldviews that contained articulations of spirituality and an interpretation of life that might include, or at least did not completely rule out, the possible existence of spiritual or non-empirical dimensions. In this chapter, these "cracks and intersections", i.e., signs that were fixed in different and perhaps contradictory ways compared to the secularist discourse, are examined (cf. Lindgren 2006; Risenfors 2011). These floating signifiers are of central importance to discovering challenges to hegemonic discourses and the interplay between the different discourses.

7.1 A Spiritual Dimension

The concept of spirituality got its significance in the RE practice observed in that it was organised and fixed by other distinct signs bearing mainly positive connotations, such as: "something bigger", a feeling, a kind of warmth, love, strength, joy, hope, balance, and harmony. Spirituality was moreover articulated as something you control yourself, i.e., you

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are not "born into" or "get indoctrinated into" something, which being religious was associated with. Spirituality was thus linked to individualism and individual choices, and this was stressed as being crucial.

In the RE lessons observed, there was a way of talking about religion and religions that did not primarily focus on traditional religious organisations and practices but more on concepts such as spirituality, holiness, and the possibility of life after death. When teachers and students used the word spirituality [Swedish: *andlighet*], it concerned a sense of the existence of "something bigger", some kind of divine power or energy, and questions concerning a part of life that science cannot provide reliable answers to, such as life after death. A critical stance toward religion was comparatively more frequently articulated than positions that can be characterised as "spiritual", but articulations of this kind were voiced and they were used in a tentative and non-absolute way. Simultaneously, declaring a spiritual position or articulating that one assumed the existence of a spiritual dimension in life was more common than describing oneself as a part of any of the traditional world religions.

Excerpt 42

Student 1: But something like that I have, maybe I can believe that there is something supernatural, whether it's a good or evil force, or it may be the...
Student 2: But then you're not, like, CHRISTIAN, I mean someone who really, really believes in something.
Student 1: No.

Thus there was strong reluctance to articulate positions within the Christian religious tradition, but to see oneself as embracing a spiritual dimension in a more vague sense was acceptable. The concept Christian had in the above excerpt connotations of extremism, "the kind that really, really believes in something". Renouncing traditional religions but still accepting aspects of spirituality was articulated in various ways:

Excerpt 43 (from student essay)[1]

In my world, there is no god with a capital G. There are no holy scriptures to follow, nor any prophet that preaches what s/he thinks you ought to think. I believe in a spirit, a feeling, a soul, a warmness, or why not call it love?

This student articulated, in line with an individualistic approach to life, a view that she does not put her trust into the form of religiosity she associated with traditional religions. Nonetheless, she described a spiritual dimension of life that somewhat exceeds empirical, material existence. Spirituality is often defined as a somewhat broader concept than religiosity and one that involves more aspects and dimensions of human existence (Marler and Hadaway 2002). If religion is about external phenomena such as buildings, religious doctrines, formalised rituals and contact with a transcendental god that exists outside of man, spirituality concerns

[1] In this chapter, several quotes from student texts are included where students articulated positions that can be seen as challenging the secularist discourse. It seems to be easier to formulate these views in individual written assignments than in the classroom itself, although this type of statement also occurred there. I will return to a discussion of this at a later point.

personal experience, finding the true, inner and authentic self, and connecting with the divine within (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Woodhead 2010). This distinction could be articulated in this way:

Excerpt 44 (from student essay)

I belong to those who don't know what to believe. I'm the kind of person who wants to know for sure what something means before I get involved in anything, mostly to avoid being drawn into the unknown. I can, to a certain extent, believe in a good god who is there for everybody, but it doesn't necessarily need to be a "religious god", rather more on the spiritual side. I somehow think that what I call God is where I get my strength from, my joy, hope, willpower, and the kind of love that you can't get anywhere else.

Even this student distinguished between traditional religiosity and spirituality. That the articulation is tentative and uncertain is also characteristic for the spiritual discourse. Unlike a religious position, a spiritual position was articulated as being easy to combine with a scientific view of existence:

Excerpt 45 (from student essay)

That is where my private religious side shows too. For me, balance, harmony, and, as I said, control are important. I believe in the scientific story of creation, about the Big Bang, and even other things such as atomic research. Before the Big Bang and after this life, then? That is where spirituality comes in. Knowing what happened and what is happening, I can't, but I believe in life before and after this.

This student labelled as spirituality things beyond what science could explain. She also positioned herself as privately religious. As mentioned in the previous chapter, private religiosity was in the classrooms observed presented as the most common form of religiosity in Sweden. On the one hand, the population of Sweden was described as secular, but on the other hand, a majority were said to embrace a spiritual dimension as part of their personal interpretation of life:

Excerpt 46

Teacher: We [in Sweden] are unusual, a rather unusual nation, but maybe not as exceptional as we think. Because actually 80% of us somehow believe in something beyond the physical. About 15% of the population of Sweden believes that there is, or have, a personal god, 35% that there is something spiritual, some spirit or life force, 28% [belong to the group that thinks]: I don't really know what to think. Then you haven't said no, but you haven't said yes either, and these people are usually called agnostics. I can't say yes or I can't say no, because I have not really made up my mind. But one ends up, so to speak, in the upper half here. And then about 20%, people who really have said no to this, there is no god or any spiritual life force, everything is entirely physical. And then one would never think that it could look like this in the world's most secular country, as Sweden sometimes is portrayed. And it is perhaps that our state, so to speak, our state, our school system, our common room, it is very de-Christianised. But it doesn't say that WE as individuals are. Just because you live in a secular country, you don't have to be a secular person yourself.

The teacher concluded that 80% of all Swedes can be described as spiritual in one sense or another. She made a distinction between a secular society and a secular person and seems to equate being a secular person to being a non-religious person, and she did not differentiate between nation, state or society. This quote is from a context where the teacher tried to describe the kinds of ideas that dominate Swedish

society. Before this excerpt, the teacher had spoken of how unique and unusual we are in Sweden, referring to the "Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map" (World Value Survey 2015) where Sweden scores the highest of all countries both on self-expression and secular-rational values compared to survival values and traditional values. Does the teacher's claim that 80% of Swedes can be described as spiritual disturb the image of Sweden as the most secular country in the world? On the one hand, the teacher made the distinction between a secular society and a secular person – that a person might live in a secular country and still be an individual believer. It is accordingly doubtful whether these articulations challenge a secularist discourse about religion since religion becomes a matter of choice through the beliefs of the individual and is entirely deprived of its social significance. Nonetheless, these articulations about the Swedish population being predominantly spiritual allowed for positions outside of the secularist discourse.

Sometimes seemingly paradoxical positions were articulated. A student in the technology programme positioned himself as "not religious whatsoever". During the same conversation, he said that he had several friends who sang in a Satanist band, and this was something he was uncomfortable about due to the religious aspects of his friend's activities and convictions. He also said that he promised his mother never to play "spirit in the glass".[2] I asked why, if he still does not believe that there is anything divine or religious "whatsoever"? He could not quite explain - he said he was scared of "ghosts and stuff", and in the end he concluded, "I don't believe in God, but I don't want to disturb him" "Disturbing" seemed to be the same as getting involved with occult things.

When Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Frisk and Åkerbäck (2013) describe the type of spirituality that they believe is partly replacing traditional religiosity, they refer to ideas emanating from "the holistic environment", i.e., environments that are usually associated with New Age movement, New Religious Movements and esoteric movements. In the classroom discussions observed, it was rare for anyone to voice explicit references to the holistic environment, but in the written material, for example, several students said that they thought that the description of them in terms of the zodiac signs really fit and that horoscopes could provide guidance in life:

Excerpt 47 (from student essay)

> When I miss having a god as a spirit that explains things, I have the ancient art of the "horoscope". I do believe in the astrological personality descriptions. I was born under the sign of Libra. The stars say I'm charming, sociable, intelligent, positive in its so-called polarity, diplomatic, loyal, have trouble making decisions, prefer balance and harmony – "the scales" have to be in balance.

Excerpt 48 (from student essay)

> The attributes of the zodiac signs tell me what personality type I am and what is right for me. As I said, this may seem a little loopy in many people's eyes, but I guess this is yet another sign of how important it is for me/us to feel secure in life, especially in these confused teenage years when the first (?) identity crisis knocks at the door and must be

[2] This is a game well known to many schoolchildren. It is a simplified version of the *Ouija board* and has its roots in Spiritism as a way to contact spirits.

> negotiated with. I think the meaning of the zodiac signs for me in my life has to do with the above-mentioned compromise I was "juggling with". I mix rational science and the mythology of the zodiac/horoscope to find my own balance. Both science (learning style) and the stars (the zodiac) explain who I am, but it feels like only the stars explain why. While religious believers find their security and support in their religion, I find security in who I am, answers to why, and support when I occasionally lose my balance.

To believe in astrological signs might be perceived as being irrational from a scientific, secularistic point of view, but these students do not think so, and spirituality is in this sense not constructed as contradictory to science. The stars provide answers through reason. The spiritual dimension in the shape of trust in zodiacal signs thus contributes to providing meaning and coherence in life, which the last student seems to think, in line with Weber (1965 [1930]), that science has difficulty doing.

As revealed in the previous chapter, the concept of religion was perceived as a negative one in the classroom, while spirituality and related concepts had more positive undertones. This difference is well established in various studies (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hill et al. 2000; Schlehofer et al. 2008; Woodhead 2010). Research descriptions of spirituality refer to things such as an inner personal experience; to be true, authenticity; finding an inner balance; contact with the divine within; or discovering the true, real self. This kind of spirituality has more the nature of an attitude, i.e., an approach to life, and can be exercised in different places, e.g., while taking a walk, when practicing yoga, when taking a bath, etc. (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013). The concept of spirituality was in the RE practice observed articulated as something positive and uncomplicated and compatible with the individualism in the secularist discourse. In contrast to religiosity, it did not seem problematic to unite spirituality with a scientific worldview. The articulations of spirituality can also be seen as an example of positions that do not fit in the traditional distinction made between religious and non-religious but can instead be described as semi-secular (af Burén 2015) or as a "third position" (Gustavsson 2013).

7.2 A Personal Interpretation of Life

This section will describe and analyse what a personal interpretation of life might be and how it was constructed in the classroom. It was articulated that "all people have to create/formulate their own interpretation of life, your own worldview".

The articulation, "a personal interpretation of life" was used by teachers in teaching and assignments, and this is why the teachers' voices and formulations initially dominate this section. During the RE lessons observed, there occurred discussions of what a worldview and a philosophy of life are. What is an interpretation of life? What and where do we come from? What is the meaning of life? Two of the classes were assessed based on their ability to describe their own worldviews and interpretations of life, but the tasks and the instructions had slightly different designs. One of the classes was to describe their personal "holy space":

Excerpt 49 (from the project plan handed out to the students)

Holy Spaces

Where do you go when it gets to be too much? Where do you find strength? Or in whom? Where is your holy space? What is important in life? What controls your life? Who rules? What do you base your decisions on? What is right and wrong – in your opinion, and why is it so?

We all have a life story and a worldview. Many times the two are related - the story of our life is perhaps what has influenced our worldview or our worldview has helped to influence our lives and govern the choices we have made and are making.

We all have a self-image and a worldview that we have put together and are putting together – throughout life – with the building blocks of life around us. It can be from other people, thoughts already contemplated, worldviews of various kinds or entirely new things. Or maybe we are building the opposite – to rebel?

This project is about life (but so are all our projects) - your own and someone else’s.

The premise articulated in the classroom for this project was that all people have both a worldview and a “holy space”, i.e., something that gives the individual strength and meaning, which may be religiously influenced or not. In this project, students would describe her or his own worldview and meet a person who had a radically different worldview and compare the two. They had five weeks at their disposal, and this constituted the entire RE course. A worldview was in this classroom presented as consisting of four dimensions or levels:

Excerpt 50 (writing on the whiteboard)

1. An ethos or basic view of life, positive or negative
2. An ethical dimension with notions of right and wrong
3. Ontological conceptions of life and humankind
4. Notions of a transcendent, non-material reality

The project *Holy Spaces* draws heavily on the tradition of worldview studies emanating from Jeffner’s (1973) definition of the term worldview. His definition includes theories about humankind and the world, a central value system and a basic attitude. As mentioned earlier, this approach has been frequently used in Swedish research concerning worldviews ever since the 1970s (see, for example, Bråkenhielm 2001). The teacher described the fourth dimension, i.e., notions of the transcendent, in this way:

Excerpt 51

Teacher: The fourth level, then ... [draws a pyramid on the board]. Here [at the top] is the religious level. So, in some way, some sort of divinity, something transcendent. If something is transcendent, it is outside what is worldly. It is beyond the physical world, but I mean, in front of me there are lots of oxygen and nitrogen atoms that are invisible. But the transcendent is thus beyond all that we can possibly grasp and have any understanding of, [all that] exists and is observable, yes, beyond all that. And then there is the divine. So if we imagine that we are looking at worldviews, one can imagine a worldview without God. It stops, so to speak, on the third [level], or maybe you have something else up there. Here you might have your best friend Tylor, who you follow. Here you might have your charismatic leader, here one might have... Maradona, if you are interested in soccer. What do I know? It’s still the case that one can have a worldview without something divine, but still have something up here, but it’s still the case that it’s not divine, so to speak; it is by definition not a religion, although there are both religious

studies psychologists and sociologists who believe that football can be seen as a religion, but it does not actually have this divine aspect. When one has a god in the package, then that person's worldview becomes a religious worldview. If you always have this triangle, I think, you can always meet people because then you can always ask them, ok, what does your triangle look like? Mine looks like this.

The teacher thus concluded that all people have a worldview, but not all of them have this fourth dimension, which is characterised by something transcendent. At the same time, she explained that a certain worldview can have this fourth dimension without the divine, i.e., that idols and charismatic leaders can fulfil the same function as a transcendent divinity.

The other class where life questions also had a central role had a slightly different approach. There, the life-question perspective was part of a final assignment for the students who during a semester had worked with world religions from the perspective of conflict, community, and ethics:

Excerpt 52 (from assignement description of the theme *Meaning and Interpreting the Meaning of Life*)

Meaning and Interpreting the Meaning of Life
Where do we come from? Who are we? What is the meaning of life?
In the theme *Meaning and Interpreting the Meaning of Life*, we discuss these existential questions based on world religions, other worldviews and our own perspectives. In these discussions, we also try to include current social issues, technological developments and also apply historical and future perspectives.
The overall goal is that the student will gain new perspectives on existential issues and achieve higher self-knowledge by formulating his or her own worldview and express his or her full potential by making use of both emotion and reason, logic and aesthetics.
Assignment: Based upon world religions and worldviews, reflect upon your views regarding the meaning of life.

The design of this task aims more clearly than is the case regarding Holy Spaces at helping students to reflect upon life in relation to world religions and worldviews, while in Holy Spaces there was a greater focus on the student's own perceptions, but both components were included in both projects. These projects can be seen as the backdrop of life-question pedagogy. Life -question pedagogy has a strong tradition in Swedish religious education. In the curriculum from 1969, Lgr 69 (Skolöverstyrelsen 1969), the concept of life questions was introduced, and Hartman (2000) argues that by using the children's existential questions instead of beliefs and dogmas as a starting point in the teaching of RE, much of the "objectivity cramp" many teachers experienced, as they were afraid of not being objective enough, was dissolved. This approach also worked well in what is becoming an increasingly heterogenic, pluralistic and postmodern society (cf. Dahlin 2004).

It was clear in both of these tasks that students' personal development and self-knowledge were seen as important by the teachers. The subjective element, i.e., the student's own thoughts, was a central part of the instruction, but it differed whether this was the main goal of teaching or if it was a tool for helping students to learn about, analyse and understand different worldviews. Since the RE course has a very limited time at its disposal, several of the teachers in this study expressed the feeling that there is a contradiction between having students reflect upon their own world-

view and interpretation of life versus knowledge and analysis of others’ worldviews and interpretations of life. This can be seen as an example of the tensions within the subject, between learning about and learning from, between religious education as knowledge orientation or existential reflection and personal development (Almén 2000).

Even those teachers in this study who did not explicitly use life- question pedagogy tried to use different ways of getting students to see similarities between their own personal approach and the interpretations presented as part of the teaching. By giving the student specific questions about specific details in different religions, the students were encouraged to reflect upon their own beliefs. For example, when discussing whether Buddhism can be perceived as a life-affirming religion or not:

Excerpt 53

Student 1: I think its self-denial, because it, I think, is what we talked about, that one should be celibate and not have any part in it. I’ve lived with, or have grown up with, a mom and dad and a brother, lots of friends, boyfriends, that I have it near me all the time. And so it feels really weird not to have anything like that. Like, according to them, you can live better without it.

Teacher: Mmmm… What is it in Buddhist notions that says that you should not have these close relationships?

Student 1: They should not have any desires.

Student 2: Because it will end in suffering.

Teacher: It will end in suffering of some kind.

Student 2: But I think at the same time, even though everything has an end, it’s clear that it’s really hard then. But you move on, and so you still have a memory of what’s been good. That is, if my mother were to die, and if we all died tomorrow, then I won’t remember her because she died, but rather I will surely remember my mother because she was my mom and I like her.

Student 3: Linda’s not going to think that, oh, I wish I’d never known her, then I would have avoided this suffering.

Student 2: Then the suffering would have been not having had a mom instead.... But as they are brought up to believe that they shouldn’t have any desire, and they shouldn’t be like that, then surely it’s not self-denial for them. For them it’s life-affirming, and they want it that way. They think it’s good based on their faith and it...

Teacher: Very good, Hanna. You have touched upon an important point, that they are perhaps experiencing peace of mind, in that not...

Student 2: The monks do at least.

Teacher: Yes, one can experience something in a different way. You can experience a peace of mind that can fill, if you fill yourselves with relationships, then they might fill themselves with something else.

Students here discuss the Buddhist concepts of desire and suffering, as they understand them, and relate them to their reality and interpretations of life. What is it that the teacher in this conversation encourages and thereby enforces? The teacher wants students to look at the Buddhist beliefs from different perspectives. When the student Hanna points out that even if she herself does not share the view that everything in life is suffering, she still believes that others may come to different conclusions, and this is met with a positive response from the teacher. But at the same time, people who occupy this position are not present in the classroom, and the Buddhists embracing the idea of *dukha* are easily made into “the Other”; although there were

students of different faiths in the classroom at the time, to my knowledge none were adherents of the Buddhist traditions. The teacher concluded that students present in the classroom create meaning through relationships but that Buddhists construct meaning and peace of mind through their faith.

To illustrate how the spiritual discourse was articulated when the students were asked to reflect upon their personal worldview and the above-mentioned fourth level concerning the transcendent, six examples from student-written assignments are provided below:

Excerpt 54 (from students' assignments)

I think there is a "higher power", but it's not a god or a person. I can't describe what it is, but somewhere there is something that keeps an eye on us. I also believe in rebirth, but it's not necessarily the case that you become a person again. You could just as well come back as an animal or a plant. I have always (since I was little) believed that in the next life you become what you love most in the life you are living right now, so in my last life I was something or someone who loved a girl or woman, and in that way I became that in this life.

As I wrote before, there is no god for me, but I believe in a higher power in the afterlife. I believe in spirits and energy. Death is not the end but is more like when you move on to another dimension. Almost like a video game, when you pass one level you start on the next.

My belief is that if there is something immense, then it is something watching over us. Maybe not an old man sitting atop a cloud but something spiritual. I think there is something supernatural out there, whatever it may be.

For me, God is something that cannot be described. I do not see him as a human being but as a superhuman force that is in some way in each of us, whether they are believers or not. Since I myself am not entirely a believer and am unsure of God's existence, it still feels good, the thought of having someone by my side.

It's like this. I am a Christian but not a strong believer like many other Christians, but I believe that God exists somewhere and wants to help us people who live on the Earth below, because he's the one who created us. I'm sure of this when I think there is some divine Lord out there around the world who wants what is good for all people, and when we humans need God's help, I believe that the Lord is there and wants to help. That's why I ask for God's help when I need it. However, I only ask if there are big things happening when I need help and I do not think I'll manage. I believe that God helps me, although it might mostly be my imagination, but when I pray, I feel like God is trying to help me in the best way because it often turns out that there are good results after I have asked.

Who is God? For me, God is a power that exists in our minds. A force that gives us strength every day. It is God we can pray to when we are at a disadvantage and need comfort but also when we have to make hard choices in life. I neither go to church nor read the Bible, but I can believe anyway. Honestly, God is for me something you keep to yourself.

When I started reading the students' texts, I was really surprised. Based on how the students had talked about the religious dimensions of existence, I was not expecting 17 of 22 students to describe that they embraced beliefs in a higher power, spirits and energies and the divine as a supernatural power. In the examples above, we also see instances of students who believe in reincarnation, which seems to be a common perception among many of the students. The students above describe the divine as a shelter where they seek support and comfort. Why did this not come up in the classroom utterances? Is it, as the last student writes, that God is something that one keeps to oneself? Students obviously had other thoughts than what was possible to

express in the classroom, but most stress that they are not "strong believers", and their beliefs lean more toward spirituality than religion.

Of those who position themselves as lacking the spiritual dimension, some express that they can be "envious" of people who have a strong faith, but articulate a positive, or at least respectful, attitude toward people who embrace these kinds of beliefs which were rare in the classroom discourse. Instead of dismissing believers as feeble-minded and deluded as we saw in the previous chapter, the students expressed that there possibly also existed positive aspects of belonging to a religion, and they expressed an understanding of what it could possibly mean to people even if they themselves were not part of this.

When the spiritual discourse was at play, the distinction between a materialist worldview and a belief in the transcendent was not very clear, and students expressed both pantheistic and transcendent views, while simultaneously describing themselves as atheists. In line with this are the following excerpts from a group of male students in a conversation with a teacher. They had just had an oral examination about Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the three students clearly positioned themselves as atheists, and at the end the teacher asked a general question about how they view life:

Excerpt 55

Teacher: But what do you say, does it not feel a little scary that you just are born and die and that's all there is?

Student 1: I'd love to believe in something.

Teacher: He [the pastor the class met on a study visit] sees this as proof of God's existence, that people feel that there must be something. He said so himself.

Student 1: I'm not completely closed to the idea of some sort of creator but not a god, somehow. I'm more, have a tendency toward, if I were to believe in something that was more supernatural than the Big Bang, it would be more like the idea that we are in a lab. Or that we are an experiment for someone else. Because, from what I see, it's not impossible. Size doesn't matter as much as, well, the universe, what is it when there is something, the universe may be just one marble in….

Teacher: A marble. Yes, that is a scary thought….

Student 2: I think there are many who feel that they, there must be a creator because everything is so, yes, intelligent design, and everything like that. But wouldn't it be even more amazing if all of this happened by accident? We are, like, one of many, many millions and billions of things that could happen, and so it happened.

Teacher: As proof, many times, one can still find evidence of how things have changed, in animals and humans and the like, that one can find evidence for. We've changed. It is a kind of development, that it might well be said that there is evidence for, Darwin and….

Student 2: But there are many who don't believe in it too...

Student 1: I'm thinking about that, how we would look to someone who was studying us, who lives in a world where the speed of light doesn't matter, so time doesn't have the same function, so they might like how our society has developed and suddenly a rocket is shot into space and we landed on the moon, and so we go back and all that. One can, like, see how we expand into the universe... Then I'm pretty convinced that the Big Bang happened, and that we, in that there are relatively concrete evidence, anyways. It's also a bit cool that we're part of the universe, everything is in us and we are in everything, we're stardust. All the stars we see are made up of the same components.

Teacher: Are you not afraid? "What the heck, what am I – little me – in all this"?

Student 3: But do people really feel small? When you have, if you look up at the sky and think that all this is in me and I am in everything….
Teacher: Well, yes. Then one is immense. I exist.
Student 3: I feel immense when I look up at the sky.

When the student says "I'd love to believe in something", the teacher refers to the Pentecostal pastor whom the class met the previous week on a study visit and says that longing to believe can be considered evidence of the existence of God. 5 min earlier, these male students had described themselves as atheists but nevertheless formulate statements that could be described as pantheistic and spiritual: "It's also a bit cool that we're part of the universe, everything is in us and we are in everything, we're stardust". This is consistent with the terminology used by Lapierre (1994), who argues that one aspect of modern spirituality is "wonderment and amazement of life and creation". It is also interesting to note how the spiritual discourse affects the teacher's position. Instead of "being the teacher with a capital T" who examines the students regarding their knowledge and claims authority through his position as a teacher, someone who is traditionally associated with the possession of knowledge and truth, this teacher now primarily becomes a fellow human being who is also struggling with "the big questions". In this conversation, the teacher gives the impression that he perceives the existential questions to be almost frightening and distressing: "Are you not afraid? 'What the heck? what am I – little me –, in all this?'" This can also be seen as a biased and tendentious position. The students articulate another pantheistic view and instead describe themselves as a part of everything: "all this is in me and I am in everything". This gives them a feeling of existential security. Noticeable is also that in the conversation the teacher withdraws from his statements and follows the students' way of thinking.

That life questions were part of instruction and that the students were encouraged to formulate their own worldview/interpretation of life partly challenged or rather nuanced the secularist discourse, as this meant a possibility for different approaches and less overconfident answers to emerge. Occasionally there was in the classroom talk about a spiritual dimension as a possible position in a less judgmental way – that some have it and some do not. Embracing a spiritual dimension as part of a personal worldview was something that one could do, more or less, which makes it consistent with individualistic thinking, and not something associated with the traditional world religions perceived as "pre-packaged box-religions" that had negative connotations. To say that there is something that is holy to me made it possible to position oneself as a believer of something (maybe not religious), and this did not exclude a spiritual dimension.

7.3 What Is a Human Being?

On numerous occasions, the discussion in different classrooms turned to why religion exists at all, and it was held that "humankind", which is meaning-seeking by nature, sees patterns and wants to understand how everything is connected.

The Human Being as a Seeker of Meaning

When the spiritual discourse was in play, "we" widened to include all people on Earth, not just "we, the secularised" or "we, who are part of modern society" etc., which were common articulations in the secularist discourse. Through using the word "humankind" – in Swedish, this is followed by the definite article and appears in the singular form [Swedish: *människan*] – universalist claims were made. Certain existential premises were articulated as relevant and crucial to all human beings on Earth and as questions that everyone must come to terms with. These questions are hallmarks of human existence:

Excerpt 56

Teacher: Why do people believe? Already in the ancient Lascaux caves in southern France one can see in the carvings that are thousands of years old that they had ideas about the future, life and death, happiness and things like that.
Student: But, then, man has, like, always believed. For many it has been a way of dealing with death and life's difficulties. Yes, and... People need something bigger than themselves in order to feel secure.
Teacher: Can't we just choose to ignore such things? Pack them in a box and send them off and not bother to even think about them? The meaning of life and death, what is this nonsense? Can't we just consume and be happy?
Student: I think that in difficult times, people have always searched, to believe that things will, it will be better, that there is something waiting around the corner.

In this conversation, the quest for meaning was attributed as being characteristic for the human species. That "humankind" must inevitably reflect upon and respond to questions about a reason for existence, ultimate meaning, and how to relate to the uttermost existence was presented as fact. It was thus articulated that people have always wondered about the future, life, death and happiness. In the excerpt above, the secularist discourse is subordinated to articulations like "people need something bigger than themselves in order to feel safe". However, it is important to note that this only occurred when speaking about religion in general terms, not when speaking about a specific religion or institutionalised tradition. Religion and the need for answers to existential questions was talked about from an outsider's perspective. In one respect, this can be seen as part of a spiritual discourse, but at the same time the reasoning is constructed at the onset of a secularist discourse, since the argumentation is based on rational arguments about human needs – humankind is at the centre, not any spiritual or supra-empirical reality. Religion could in this context be described as something genuinely human and as something that has always existed.

In the following excerpt, the students follow the same line of reasoning but added that faith can provide answers to existential questions:

Excerpt 57

Student 1: I think faith exists because we want to explain the inexplicable. Humans are curious by nature and like to explain things.
Student 2: People don't want to leave the big questions to mere chance. We want answers.
Student 3: Faith can provide security. If you find an answer in religion, you avoid worrying.

This excerpt refers to the meaning of life – people need to experience meaning, and people have throughout history turned to religion to find it.[3] In the classroom practice observed, humans were described as seekers of meaning and as creatures who have the ability to create meaning through personal life-interpretations. This interpretation of life does not have to (but might) be religious. Here, the tradition of Jeffner (1973) and Bråkenhielm (2001) in which all humans are inevitably seen as having a (more or less consciously articulated) worldview was prominent. By referring to human beings in general, e.g., "humans are curious", "people don't want to leave the big questions…" instead of, e.g., positioning themselves as the subject by using the pronoun I as in "I am curious", "I don't want to leave the big questions", or "I want answers", an outsider's perspective was enforced. However, the pursuit of meaning and the experience of being part of something bigger were repeatedly articulated. By using expressions with universalist connotations, the legitimacy for claims of humankind as meaning-seeking was secured. These claims were also made through references to scientific research.

In the following excerpt, the teacher read aloud to the class from an article; she also returned to the reasoning in the article several times and referenced it in various discussions:

> Excerpt 58 (Reading aloud in the classroom 27 September 2011. Article written by Anderch, Katarina, Göteborgs Posten 22 May 2011)
>
> "Research shows that to feel good people need to have a sense of hope and belonging and we need to have some kind of interpretation of existence. It need not be a religious interpretation of existence. [...] Humans are the only species who seek meaning, who can't help doing it. This is related to our having the ability to perceive time. Animals are not able to dwell on yesterday or worry about tomorrow. Our brain is designed to look for patterns and meaning. Throughout history, it has helped us to survive. But our search for connections doesn't confine itself to the present. Our awareness of time allows us to think ahead and understand that we can make a difference. The existential problem is a major part of our stress. We find it very difficult to relax and just live in the moment because of this ability to pursue long-term goals".

Again the human being was articulated as a seeker of meaning, which opened up for religious/spiritual positions and interpretations. Still, this articulation gave a scientific, biological explanation for the human quest for meaning. The human species has, contrary to other species, the ability to perceive different perspectives of history and time, and through this reflect upon life. The quest for meaning had thus given an evolutionary advantage. In this sense, spirituality and religion were also compatible with a secularist way of understanding life.

[3] Cf. Weber (1965 [1939]), who discusses modernity and that the marginalisation of religions might create a problem of meaning.

The Human Being as Comprising a Soul

Do humans have a soul? And, if so, what does that mean? In a classroom discussion presented in the previous chapter (Excerpt 21) where the teacher outlined a biological view of humankind and contrasted it with a religious view of human life, the discussion also addressed whether human beings have souls or not, where the soul is located and what implications this has for how to perceive human life. This was a class of technology students who studied science, and the discussion wound up shifting between these two perspectives – that on the one hand humans can be described and understood in terms of neurotransmitters, serotonin and dopamine levels and chemical reactions or, on the other hand, the perspective that there is something more than the material world. Some students leaned toward a more strictly biological view of man, while others were less sure of what they thought and argued that a biological and scientific view of man did not necessarily rule out the notion that human beings have a soul:

Excerpt 59

Student 1: Can you have both a religious and a biological view of humankind?
Teacher: Yes, you can.
Student 1: Yes, one can. I think we're made of matter, or, like ... but I think we have a soul.
[...]
Teacher: You said that we are made of matter?
Student 1: Yes, you're not made of nothing, right? But you can still have a soul. That, we don't know.

This type of more tentative conversation, where the teacher presented different positions and on several occasions pointed out that there are also differences of opinion *within* the different paradigms, opened up for the possibility of taking positions both inside and outside the secularist discourse. When talking about religion, spirituality and related matters, the detached outsider position was by far the most common. In the excerpt above, however, the student posed her question from an inside perspective. She reflected upon what she herself thought about these issues. She also challenged the teacher's somewhat dualistic outline of different views of humankind. In the classroom discussion, the teacher returned to the student and showed through his question that he was interested in how and what she thought.

Whether humans have a soul or not was addressed in relation with articulations about humanity, free will and the responsibility people have for their fellow beings. The idea that humankind is characterised by having a soul (in contrast to other species) was occasionally articulated as a somewhat religious idea and a consequence of the notion that human dignity derives from human beings having been created in the image of God. In the following excerpt, the teacher wants the students to discuss why humans are considered to have a certain value just because they are humans:

Excerpt 60

Teacher: How can we argue that everyone has the same human value?
Student 1: Religions argue for every human being's unique value based on religion, that a human being's value is derived from God. If everybody is descended from Adam and Eve, then we have the same value.
Teacher: Yes, the idea that all human beings have value has its roots in Judaism, Christianity, and partly in Islam, in the West. There is a higher power that gave some kind of validity

and strength to the argument. A human being is unique and special. But we'll never be able to find proof that this is exactly why. Rather, this is a kind of belief or value that one can argue for more or less wisely, right?

Student 2: My thoughts are based on the idea that this can be about our ability to reason.

Student 3: Yes, it's all about intelligence.

Teacher: Well, you can think that it is about our special ability, that we humans wherever we live in the world have reason, an ability to think clearly, insightfully, see the consequences of various courses of action, for example. To think rationally. And then one may ask whether this is what distinguishes us from all other creatures? Can a…dog think rationally?

[*Giggling in the classroom*].

Teacher: I'm no expert, but really, we don't know enough to be able to define this so easily. What distinguishes a highly talented chimp from a man? It might well have something close to human dignity soon? And thus have their human rights respected? An extremely controversial position is the people who may have some form of developmental disability, such as Downs's syndrome. Who are human, but think differently. Should they be downgraded then? "Yes, they're not real people. We'll pause for you here". It's important to know how to argue here. What do you think about this concept that has more to do with religion, that we have a soul? A spiritual core? Some inner part that is unique, something spiritual. Is that what gives us a value? Or are we just atoms? What do you think?

The teacher asked the students what it is that gives humans a special value compared to other species, but the students were a bit reluctant or hesitant to adopt the teacher's reasoning, and it cannot be determined by their response how they viewed a possible human soul. In this lesson, the teacher connects human dignity with the concept of the soul, which is an old notion in the Western history of ideas, having existed ever since antiquity: Is the soul material? Does human worth lie in the soul? Have atoms no value? (cf. Joas 2013). By using words such as "core" or "just atoms", the teacher positions himself in relation to different discourses. On the whole, the discussion constantly shifted between different discourses: On the one hand, one of the students brought up the notion that religions argue that human beings have a unique value because they are created in the image of God, and the teacher asked if human beings get their unique value because they have a soul, "a spiritual core". On the other hand, other students brought up the idea that human dignity is associated with reason and intelligence, which the teacher then tried to problematise by juxtaposing a talented chimpanzee with a mentally disabled man. In this discussion, the teacher attempted through his questions to demonstrate the limitations of an argument and challenge beliefs that the students had taken for granted.

Are humans equal to their souls? In that case, where is the soul seated? What is reason in relation to soul? Many times, in different classes, it was obvious that many students had not thought much about these issues, and various assumptions collided:

Excerpt 61

Student 1: You don't have your brain anymore [when you die], it's just your soul!

Student 2: But my soul is my brain! Right?

Several of the students: No.

Student 2: What is a soul, then?

Student 3: Yes, what is a soul?

Student 1: A soul is, like, a soul.

Student 4: Consciousness.

Student 1: Consciousness is when you're thinking.
Student 2: No.
Student 1: Of course it is.
Student 3: What is a soul?
Student 4: It's you!
Student 3: I don't know what a soul is.
Student 2: I don't believe in the soul.
Student 1: Me neither. But I don't know what it is to begin with. I thought that was what you were thinking with, the soul.
Student 4: The inner essence….

As in the previous excerpt, the discussion oscillated between different discourses. To some students, the existence of the soul was natural, but some declared that they "don't believe in the soul".

The idea of a humankind created in the image of God has evolved into the idea that all humans carry a divine essence, and the immortal soul has played a critical role in the way people have perceived themselves and their place in life. Joas (2013) argues that the concept of the soul began to be seen as problematic by empiricists and materialists in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, instead of completely abandoning the idea of human beings possessing a soul, under the influence of psychology, pragmatism, ideas about human intersubjectivity, and theories of the social construction of the individual a shift has taken place. Notions of the soul were abandoned in favour of notions of the self: from soul to self, from cosmology to psychology. When the students discussed the concept of the soul, we see examples of both of these perceptions of soul and self.

7.4 Concepts with Religious Roots

In RE there is a strong tradition of teaching about particular facts in the religious traditions such as the Five Pillars, the Eightfold Path, facts about Jesus' and Mohammed's lives and so on. The teachers felt that a large group of the students lacked knowledge of these facts, which was why they devoted a good deal of classroom time to teaching them. This section will focus on the concepts of holiness, sin, and forgiveness, where the first was related to a general religious dimension and the latter to the Christian religious tradition.

Holiness

The adjectives "holy", or "sacred", [Swedish: *helig*] stood for a concept that students clearly associated with religion but also a concept several students found difficult to relate to.[4] In one classroom where the concept of holiness was discussed, several students described their close personal relationships as sacred or holy:

[4] One of the teachers chose to organise a larger section of class time based on the concepts of faith, holiness, ethics and morality, myth, ritual and views of humanity. He designed the lessons so that students received a booklet with facts from the encyclopaedia about the concepts, but he also

Excerpt 62

Teacher: But let's go on. The concept of holiness. It can be a rather vague concept, but it's among the most important concepts. What does it mean?
Student 1: Inviolable.
Student 2: I think it's a tricky word. I think of Aladdin's lamp, it shines so….
Teacher: From the Disney movie? Yes ... More descriptions of the concept?
Student 3: Invaluable, close to God. Might be different depending upon the way different people inside or outside religions perceive it.
Teacher: If you were to go to yourself - how do you use the word? What does it mean to you?
Student 4: No, I don't think that word should exist. It means nothing.
Student 1: It's an adjective to describe something indescribable, so of course it's a difficult word. But you must surely be able to talk about things, and then we have to have words.
Student 3: For religious people, it means something, and that we ought to respect.
Student 2: But it need not only be that. If, for example, someone has been working for a month and, after 30 days, gets to sleep in, then that is holy.
Teacher: It's a religious term that refers to something inviolable, something especially important and lofty for anyone. Is something inviolable for you, something especially important?
Student 4: I still don't like the word. But I have stuff from relatives who are dead. And they are precious to me. They mean a lot, I can, like, remember them.
Teacher: And if anyone were to criticise them or say that they are useless, would you be upset?
Student 4: Mm….
Student 1: Relations, they are sacred to me, some relationships I have. No one may talk shit about them.
Teacher: Is it the relation itself that is holy, or is it the person?
Student 1: The relationship, I think, that I have this special relationship with them.
Student 5: Old objects, things that have been passed down in the family. Maybe it is not holy, that's too strong a word. But respect. You don't want to destroy these things.
Student 3: Maybe life itself. Not to take someone's life. That's not something you can get back.
Student 5: A place can be sacred. At our summer house there is a hayloft, which is a very special place to me. That's where Grandpa sat and read to us. It was also where the maids and the workmen used to pray. That makes the place sacred to me. I would never do anything to change it or anything.
Teacher: A sacred place. It's very common for people to create their own holy places, in the woods or on a rock or somewhere.
Student 5: Couples in love do that often, create their own rituals and places. It becomes sacred to them.
Teacher: Exactly, the wedding day becomes a marker. There can be slight differences in the reasons why something is sacred. Either you justify the holiness of a site with another reality, that God ordained it, or based on personal motives. This relativises things, the personal is only sacred to me.

Is "holiness" a religious concept? If you do not consider yourself religious, can you still relate to the concept? Organising teaching based on religious concepts and

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included poems, short fiction and song lyrics. The examination consisted of a discussion of the concepts in small groups of 6–10 students. The concepts were, however, not related to how they can be perceived in different religious traditions (cf. Smart, 1977), but were in principle discussed based on how the student saw these concepts.

analysing how the concepts can be understood in different traditions are rooted in the phenomenological tradition that dominated both the study of religion and the teaching of religious education for most of the twentieth century (Jackson 1997; Smart 1969). The teacher in the above example describes the concept of holiness as essential to understand what religion is about.[5] Several different positions emerged in the conversation about what holiness can mean. When the teacher asked what the concept of holiness might mean, he got a reply in which students tried to answer neutrally, i.e., that the word means inviolate, invaluable, but also having associations with something divine, i.e., "close to God". In this situation, the teacher asked what the word meant to them personally, and he got fairly different answers. One student said that it is an empty concept that does not mean anything and, moreover, that "it should not exist". When the concept was described as religious, the students had difficulties relating to it. Holy was associated with "them", i.e., "the religious", but it was nevertheless the case that everyone has to respect that religious people perceive things and places as being holy. One of the students introduced a non-religious use of the word when she defined as sacred the first morning she could sleep late after a long period of work. When, at the teacher's request, other students tried to describe something that is inviolable for them, they described things that evoked memories and which they associated with important events or persons, relationships, life itself and holy places. Not least holy were relationships, something everybody seemingly could agree upon as being holy or inviolable.[6]

That the discussion in the classroom in question involved these articulations is not unique – that bonds with others are perceived as sacred can partly be seen as part of the "subjective turn" in which meaning and authority are constructed from the inside through subjective experiences and not by reference to an external divine power (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The discussion can also be seen against the backdrop of the secularisation process, where the divine is ascribed to the private sphere and the increasing sacralisation of the private sphere and everyday practices (Ammerman 2013). Meanwhile, the need for holiness, i.e., something inviolable, seems to remain whether related to something divine or not. But, as the teacher pointed out, this relativises what is perceived as holy and makes it a matter of personal choice. What is holy to me is maybe only holy to me and not to other people.

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[5] Cf. classical religious studies and notions of the concept of holy: Nathan Söderblom describes the distinction between sacred and profane as characteristic for all religions, and he emphasises the holy as more central in religious thinking than the idea of the divine (Söderblom, 1914). In the beginning of the twentieth century, Rudolf Otto coined the term numinous to explain the concept of holy. He defines the "numinous" as non-rational, non-sensory experience or feelings whose primary and immediate object is outside the self (Otto, 2010 [1923]).

[6] It may seem like a paradox that family and close relationships are portrayed as the main factor that gives meaning while individualism is hailed as an inviolable ideal. Unlike communities where the individual is totally dependent upon relatives and friends to cope with everyday life, the state in Sweden guarantees individual freedom by expanding the welfare sector where social insurance (parents insurance exempted) is linked to the individual and not the family. Maybe it is precisely this that enables the sacralisation of personal relationships in a secular context, that it is an individual choice whether they should be considered sacred or not.

Sin and Forgiveness

Some concepts had a clear connection to a specific religious tradition. Here, the concept of sin and forgiveness will be outlined as articulated in relation to the spiritual discourse. In RE lessons where the teaching content concerned Christianity, sin appeared as one of the most central concepts that strongly characterised the construction of Christianity in the classrooms observed. The articulations showed that even though many students deprecated a religious position, they still had strong opinions about these concepts in a way that did not occur in relation to concepts presented as belonging to other religious traditions. This concerned both their own experiences and how they related to Christian practices such as baptisms, funerals, confirmations, marriages, etc., but also in regard to opinions on certain beliefs, instance, e.g., sin. The following excerpt illustrates how the concept of sin was articulated as a way of escaping responsibility:

Excerpt 63

Student 1: My parents are, like, super-non-Christian, like totally extreme. So I have this, it's a bit mean to say this, but I feel like, Christians, it's unintelligent. I really think that. Because I can't relate to how you might think that you can blame everything on someone else. Yes, but, like, I beat my wife, but go and confess, so all sins, all sins disappear. I'm forgiven.

Student 2: That, I think is very difficult. Forgiveness of sins is so difficult for me. That you should go and apologise to God instead of going and talking to the person you have hurt.

Student 1: It turns into a stereotypical life, but then it's not my fault, it's God, God's will then, it is God's will that I shot that guy.

Student 2: Yes really!

In addition to an articulation of a view on sin and forgiveness, this statement contains an illustration of students largely deriving their knowledge of Christianity from movies and various forms of media. The fact that confession only occurs in the Catholic Church and not in the Church of Sweden or any other of the denominations of Protestantism was something these pupils seemed to be unaware of or at least did not discuss.

Because of their students' lack of knowledge about religious concepts or key Christian terms, many of the teachers tried to find parallels in the students' world of experience to compare with, and this gave a certain slant to the way religion was brought up in the classrooms observed. In one classroom, the teacher gave the pupils the task of discussing what sin was in the time of Jesus, what it was five hundred years ago and what is regarded as sin today. In the classroom, words like "whore", "smoke", "drink", "fuck" were tossed around. "That's all that's bad, right"? The teacher said that incest and paedophilia could be regarded as sins today. He stated that for the Church, sin has always been associated with sex outside of marriage and that for the Church sin is linked to punishment.

Excerpt 64

Teacher: Engaging in these kinds of things [sin], then you will have to take the elevator down, to hell, that is. They have used hell to scare people.

The students concluded that people were more religious in the time of Jesus than they are today and that what is regarded as sinful has varied in different times and cultures. The teacher indicated that the concept of sin is not used today. Despite this, the students were asked to define what was perceived as sin today, and they delivered an exposé of various "sins". Much of what the pupils brought up as sins – stealing, adultery, etc. – may have been considered taboo or "sinful" in many cultures in different historical periods, but there was no discussion of why the pupils brought up these things or if they actually believed that something was regarded as sinful. The religious, Christian definition of the concept of sin as that which separates man from God was not taken up. Nor was the way other religions handle what is considered taboo or to be a sin or the societal function of prohibiting certain deeds.

One of the teachers described Christianity with reference to the concept of sin as a negative worldview in comparison with other worldviews, both religious and non-religious ones.

Excerpt 65

Teacher: A good example of a default attitude toward life that is negative, it's awful to say, but when you talk about these things, you have to look at the prototype, then, the original. Christianity is by definition a negative view of life. And it is that way due to the attitude toward sin, especially original sin in Christianity. That each one of us actually is born sinful. We must be baptised in order to get out of there. Ergo the unborn children end up in limbo in Dante's hell because they had not yet been baptised.

The teacher could conceivably have Jeffner's (1973) "basic attitude to life" in mind when she states that Christianity is a negative worldview and as such it encompasses what is basically a negative attitude to life. What sin or original sin could possibly be was not explained nor discussed during this lesson. Note that the teacher in this quote refers to what she calls "the prototype". Though the teacher at other times expressed that she did not want to talk about religions in the way she did here, in the classroom there was no opening for anybody else to nuance or problematise the statement. That Christianity is a negative view of life appeared to be an undeniable truth. On the one hand, the utterance was strongly negative, but, on the other hand, she almost used an insider perspective of Christianity.

In relation to the discussions of sin, some of the teachers brought up the concept of forgiveness as a key element in Christianity. One teacher had an oral exam in smaller groups, and one of the concepts the teacher wanted the pupils to understand was sin. In the following excerpt, the conversation concerns sin and forgiveness:

Excerpt 66

Teacher: Yes. All people are sinners, right? You are sinners, right? "But I have not done anything wrong". Well, you're a sinner anyway. Just by living, you are a sinner. But how are you saved?

Student 1: Salvation. Forgiveness.

Teacher: You get forgiveness. If you go to a high mass you receive the forgiveness of sins. You acknowledge that you are a sinner, but you get the forgiveness of sins. It's great!

[*Insecure laughter among students. They do not know if the teacher is being sarcastic or not.*]

Teacher: But you have to accept it in your heart. You can't, you must receive forgiveness of sins; otherwise you will not be forgiven. You need to receive Jesus. But it's a great message, really! If you accept Jesus, your sins are forgiven, and then you will have eternal life.
Student 2: It may be dangerous too.
Student 1: It depends on how you have sinned. If you, like, always are forgiven.
Teacher: Yes, but God sees through you. You can't, if you take Catholicism and go to confession and ask for forgiveness, but not in your heart, then you will not after all, God won't buy it. He's not easily fooled. He sees if you're serious and ask for forgiveness. Otherwise, you're a sinner because you're trying to fool God. It's not possible to go to confession and say yes...
Student 2: In that case, the priest ought not to give forgiveness because God speaks through him.
Teacher: Yes, you could say so.
Student 2: Then it's the priest who is deceiving you.
Teacher: But the priest says that IF you accept Jesus your sins are forgiven.
Student 2: But you end up in hell anyway, for God sees through him.
Teacher: Yes, but he gives you the opportunity to receive God into your heart, and if you do, you receive the forgiveness of sins. But if you say "Fine, now I'm here without sin" but actually you haven't, you're faking it, then God sees through you. That's what Christians believe.

For an oral exam, the teacher does a great deal of the talking, and the pupils' thoughts on the matter hardly come through. But the excerpt is typical in regard to several aspects: Again sin and forgiveness are associated with and exemplified by Catholic confession, and the pupils are consistent in their view that a general policy of forgiveness for all deeds is not desirable and is even dangerous. If one is forgiven after committing murder, for example, one would most certainly murder again.

To relate to religious concepts based on an understanding of the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation, the pupils were asked what forgiveness meant and what one can forgive. This teacher described very clearly how Christians, in this case Catholics, dealt with sin. He went through the different steps of Catholic confession: consciousness of sin, contrition, confession, absolution/forgiveness and penance:

Excerpt 67

Teacher: You could put it this way: is there forgiveness for all? Or should I just forgive, does one forgive only their own...? At this point, we are actually touching upon a new concept. A concept that we call mercy. But it's really God who ultimately gives mercy. Can other religions be forgiven? Here, there are differing notions, so to speak, one can, so to speak, reach God from other religions. Here, there are some differing beliefs within Catholicism. There is one called "no salvation outside the Church", and it means that one can only become righteous if one goes through the Church. Then there are others who usually are described as having more inclusive beliefs. We think that there is a divine spark in everyone so therefore everyone everywhere can reach God. With or without God, with or without the priest, so to speak. Doesn't this sound like a pretty good thing in a way?
Student 1: Lie to yourself.
Teacher: Lie to yourself.
Student 1: You can do, like, anything, or does he accept everything, the priest? Or, yes, God, then?
Teacher: Yes, in the end, it's only God who can forgive.
Student 1: Then he, yes, the priest says, yes, you will be forgiven by God?

Teacher: There are actually some acts in this context…I have linked to the Catholic Church's website. There are some acts that actually are in fact unforgivable. And among them are acts such as paedophilia and….
Student 2: But if we say that someone has committed a murder or something like that?
Teacher: Murder is not [unforgivable], murder can be forgiven.
Student 2: Yeah, but if we say that one is forgiven by God, then, one can end up in jail anyway?
Student 3: Then I can just kill someone and then I will be forgiven. So I go and kill somebody, no one, and so I'm forgiven!
Teacher: But can you not actually think like this, that someone….
Student 3: But if you kill someone again and are forgiven every time!
Teacher: Okay.
Student 3: Then you could go to various confessionals. There's no one who knows.
Student 1: It's like lying to yourself in that way. One believes that, yes, now I'm forgiven.
Teacher: But it still requires, this consciousness of sin, repentance.
Student 1: But you know that you did something stupid. There's nothing strange about it.
Teacher: But you must have regret, you know.
Student 1: But I can feel that, like, damn, I did it again! But it was fun doing it. It's perhaps not often ordinary people doing that kind of stuff.
Teacher: If we take the example of Breivik, who is a current topic. He can't go to confession, for he regrets nothing.
Student 2: But he admits, after all, what he's done.
Student 1: But he can say that….
Student 3: Yes, all he has to do is say "I regret what I've done".
Teacher: No, it is not just a matter of saying so.
Student 2: What does one have to do then?
Student 1: A polygraph!
[*General laughter in the classroom*].
Student 3: You could lie to the old man in the booth, but you can't lie to God!

Forgiveness seemed to be a concept that students related to, but it was not necessarily articulated as a religious concept, although it was brought up in teaching under that labelling. One question that the students asked was whether forgiveness is for everyone or just Catholics/Christians. In answering, the teacher brought up different perspectives on the concept of mercy, i.e., mercy for all or only those who belong to their own religion. In this excerpt, the students did not give the concept of mercy any attention, maybe because the concept was new to them. The teacher presented different Christian approaches toward other religions, for example, "no mercy outside the Church" or other, more inclusive approaches. Do people need forgiveness? From whom? Why? The discussion oscillated between different discourses, and the teacher tried to bring up the idea that human beings need forgiveness, that there is a human need to forgive and be forgiven (By other human beings? By God?). At the same time, he described how the Catholic Church has seen this. But the students did not buy his argument – if there is no real need for forgiveness, why is it needed? Further, it seemed that the general consensus of the class was that some things are unforgivable. Moreover, how do you know that someone is really repenting? The view that there is no forgiveness for some things – for example, murder – was expressed. This kind of uncompromising and rather tough stance when it comes to issues of crime and punishment was common in classroom discussions observed. As shown in the excerpt, the teacher tried to problematise and

nuance the matter: Breivik[7], for example, cannot receive forgiveness in this way of viewing sin because he does not repent; that is the premise.

On the one hand, in this section one can see examples of attempts to take an insider perspective, e.g., “Christianity perceives this like this and like this” (apart from the fact that it is questionable whether one can speak of a religion thinking or doing anything at all). There was no explicit “they” in the discussion. But at the same time, no voices were speaking in the first person from within a religious tradition: “I believe…” or “I think…”, for example. And again, in all of these classrooms, there were students who would have been able to talk from a perspective from within when it came to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.

When it came to Christianity, both teachers and students had many more comments on specific details about concepts compared to other religions. In the syllabus, it is stated that: “Teaching in the subject of religion should give students the opportunities to develop […] the ability to analyse religions and outlooks on life based on different interpretations and perspectives” (Skolverket 2011a). To do this, several of the teachers in this study stressed that the students must be able to understand and use various religious concepts. However, this is not always easy as many of the concepts are perceived as foreign or unfamiliar in a secular environment. Students with no knowledge or experience of anything religious many times found it hard to relate to some of the concepts that lacked an obvious corresponding concept outside of the religious sphere. The concepts of sin and karma are examples of religious concepts that are quite irrelevant without their theological connection. Other concepts such as myth and ritual occur in both religious and non-religious contexts. Personal religious experience is not a prerequisite in non-confessional RE. Focus is, as is also the case in religious studies, put on descriptions of what people belonging to different religious traditions do and say they believe and experience and the significance and meaning they attribute to that experience. What the stimuli that give rise to these experiences may consist of is not the subject of interest. Nevertheless, this aspect of both lack of knowledge as well as lack of personal experience was brought up by some of the teachers as something they had to take into consideration when teaching. Even if the teachers did not use the concept of religious literacy per se, their need to address it can be seen as an example of religious literacy being upheld as a matter of central importance by scholars from different perspectives (Jackson 1997, 2011; von Brömssen 2013; Wright 1996 2004).

[7] On 22 July 2011, the summer before this study and this particular observation were conducted, the right-wing extremist Anders Bering Breivik detonated a bomb in Oslo’s government district, killing eight people. He then carried out the massacre of 69 young people at the youth camp of the Norwegian Labour Party [*Arbeidernes Ungdomsfylkings*] on Utöja. He was sentenced to Norway’s harshest penalty, 21 years in prison with the possibility of prolongation for five years at a time if he is considered a danger to society, so-called “storage” [Norwegian: *forvaring*]. For a discussion of how this terrorattack has been dealt with in the Norwegian context see Anker and von der Lippe (2015) and von der Lippe and Anker (2016)

7.5 Your Time on Earth

Humans are mortal. We will all die. Life is short, or at least finite. These articulations were formulated as premises for human life, and these articulations recurred in the RE classrooms observed, leading to discussions about different perspectives on life and different views on what happens after life ends.

Existential issues related to the purpose of being – and the fact that all humans share the existential truth that our time on earth is limited – were articulated in the classroom practice observed:

Excerpt 68

Teacher: Two more thoughts that are important to carry with you throughout life are these. They are troublesome thoughts. No one has asked to be born. No one has asked to be born. We are only here, right? We're here. Mom and Dad had a little fun. And so the result is that I'm standing here right now. That isn't something I've asked for. But I'm here. I'll live my life. And I also know that I'll die. Everyone will die. Are you okay with this? Then there are questions: What happened before life? And what happens after life? That's when religion comes in. Or science, perhaps, in some contexts.

The tone of this excerpt signals seriousness toward life and questions about life, and the teacher stresses their importance even though they are difficult thoughts. He brings up two premises of life which are beyond human control: that existence is not the choice of the individual and that death will come to all humans sooner or later. In this context, he linked these premises and related questions to religion but also opened up for the fact that science might provide answers. When students were asked to define the concept of religion, beliefs about life after death were conveyed as a part of what students' articulations about what religion is all about. It was also articulated as an explanation for religion existing at all – people are afraid of the unknown and try to predict what will happen to them:

Excerpt 69

Student: I believe that humans have a constant need to always seek the answers to everything, to the big questions in life, how life came about and the world came into being, and what happens after death. And I believe that for certain people faith can be a tool, or a notion that you can get answers to these questions that you have. But I think that a faith can be anything from an ideology, to a religion and worldview, practically anything.

In the discussions observed, it was also articulated that everyone, regardless of whether one has beliefs that could be called religious or not, has some sort of idea about what happens when we die. When the baseline of discussions was existential, questions of existential conditions came to the forefront and were not linked to specific religious traditions. Thus, other discourses than the secularist one were activated, and it became easier to comprehend and elaborate upon different perspectives and approaches to these issues simultaneously. Or, put another way: when questions about the meaning of life and the concept of death were mentioned in this existential way, i.e., that the matters concerned issues of "ultimate concern", statements of this nature were not perceived as "religious" with the negative connotations the concept of religion often had in the classrooms. When a spiritual discourse

was at play, the focus was on universal existential matters common to all humankind rather than religious traditions. This opened up for assuming positions that can be described as spiritual and/or existential. One need not be considered "religious" in order to embrace views on life and death:

Excerpt 70

Student 2: I think it's [*the reason why religion exists*] about fear of death, with regard to these questions. No one wants it to end. Everybody WANTS it to continue. The humanists said that when life is over, it's like when a light goes out, then it's black. I think many people don't want that, that it should be so.
Teacher: Yes, fear might control…
Student 3: There is much in life that's tough. I think people believe so they have something to lean on.
Student 1: Something to turn to when times are tough. That you can be forgiven if you've done something stupid, to rely on something, to have hope.
Teacher: People believe in order to be released from guilt and not be afraid…
Student 2: Security, that there is always something bigger than yourself.
Teacher: For some, you say. Do all people need answers to these kinds of questions?
Students: Mm… [*murmur of agreement*].
Student 2: Everyone wants to get answers to questions about what happens when you die.
Student 4: But I think the question is irrelevant. We will see. It will be proven…
Student 2: I think people want to know. It's not something you sit and think about every day, but it might be interesting to sit and think about those kinds of big questions. Or if there is life in the universe.
Student 1: Or why we exist.

In this excerpt, religion and faith are articulated as things that provide meaning, security, consolation, forgiveness and an answer to the question about what happens after death. In this discussion, it was stated that all human beings need these things, even if one of the students did not agree and instead found these questions irrelevant.

Two concepts were present in all the classrooms observed: linear and circular views of time. In some classrooms, it was articulated as a simple fact that different religions have different perceptions of time. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a linear view of history and human life – there was a moment of creation when God brought the Earth into being, then history has unfolded as a long series of events, and at the end, or on Judgment Day, the Earth will perish in one way or another. Even human life on Earth is described in these traditions as linear – we are born, we live, we die, and after death there is some form of continued existence. An atheistic view of life was also described as linear in terms of birth and death, but also as excluding any form of continuation. The linear view was contrasted with the circular perspective in Hinduism and Buddhism where both the universe and the human soul are reborn in an endless cycle, even if the goal is to avoid reincarnation. Occasionally this information led to discussions about how the students themselves viewed time and life:

Excerpt 71

Student 1: It's a cycle.
Teacher: Yes, it's a cycle. Some parts are still, that you will not escape anything, really. All people are connected in various ways. Yes. What's your own, where do you end up in this? Deeds and time, we have talked about. How should one look at time? Can it be like this? The cyclical? Or we can see life as a journey from birth to death?

Student 2: One can only guess beforehand. You never know what happens afterwards.
Student 3: There's nothing that's been proven. You don't know what happens. So you have to live according to what you think right now. And then, if there was talk of reincarnation, then you have to redo everything.
Teacher: Yes, this works of course even if you don't believe in Buddhism or Hinduism or Christianity or Islam or Judaism, so you can still have an idea of time as cyclical, going around like this, or linear, that we are born and so we die. Period.
Student 1: Cyclical!
Teacher: Cyclical? What are you thinking?
Student 1: No, but... if you do something that you really regret in life so, maybe you can do it again. I do something….
Student 2: The problem is that you don't know what you've done, because you won't remember what it is….
Student 1: You don't know that. Perhaps it is there, like, subconsciously, it might turn out….
Teacher: What you do still influences others.
Student 3: Yes, but it is the act. If I do something, in ten years it might have affected me, so, yeah, but, it's important to think about ... But, like, karma, I think is a little more than just thinking about receiving faith as a gift [referring to an earlier discussion of Luther's views on faith]. Karma, I can influence myself. There, it's more control of my own life, so to speak.

The teacher presented different perspectives on time, which are rooted in different religious traditions, and he said that one can embrace these perspectives regardless of whether one sees oneself as part of a specific tradition. The doctrine of karma was seen as fair and as something I, as an individual, could control. Even some of the students who clearly declared themselves to be atheists could in this type of classroom discussion express that they somehow expected a life after death, even if they did not see themselves as believers:

Excerpt 72

Student: After all, you think in that way, that all the dead are in heaven somehow. You've got that within you.

This was articulated in a discussion about religious and non-religious versions of ceremonies such as baptism/child dedication ceremonies, confirmation/humanist confirmation, marriage and burial. Many of the students expressed the view that they did not want a religious ceremony because they did not believe in the religious content. Others stressed the importance of tradition, where religion was one part of it. And, in this context, the discussion led to whether there might be any continuation of life after death. In the classrooms observed, students articulated beliefs in something, i.e., that life continues in some way. These articulations confirm the thesis of Margry (2012) who maintains this "something-ism" as the main religion in northern Europe. Another student wrote in an essay that she could imagine life as something continuous:

Excerpt 73 (From a student essay)

Energy can't be created nor destroyed, only transformed. Maybe we're also some kind of energy that's just converted. But in that case there must be some kind of balance, so that there's just enough of everything, or however you want to express it. In that case, the balance has been very much disturbed, given that the world is becoming overpopulated. But I can certainly imagine that life is something continuous.

In this excerpt, the student, who was enrolled in the Technology Programme, quoted the law of the conservation of energy, which is the first law of thermodynamics. She also applied this principle to human existence and was not averse to the idea that "life is something continuous". Energy, positive or negative, as something permeating the universe and humans, is a central theme of holistic environments. This articulation can be seen as the backdrop to ideas where proponents of a holistic perspective maintain that there is no contradiction between metaphysics and theoretical physics. In the context of New Age thinking, modern physics is seen as supporting ancient religious ideas and ideas related to energies, for example, that all matter consists of vibrating energy. Despite, or due to, using rational scientific language, the student can position herself as scientific, rational and spiritual.

Many students seemed unaccustomed to speaking of life's border areas, however, when, for example, death and related themes became the subject of conversation. A spiritual discourse was activated rather than a secularist one, and students articulated beliefs in some form of continuation of life after death. Questions of this existential character also have a long tradition within Swedish RE. In the 1962 curriculum, it says, for example: "Through facts that are dealt with within the subject, issues related to pupils' own attitudes of life are actualised. Norms and ideals of life, which are relevant to their [the students] personal growth and which foster the pursuit of truth and seriousness in life, can thereby be transferred" (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962, p. 221, own translation).

7.6 Implications and Concluding Remarks

Spirituality, just like religion, is a concept that does not have an obvious definition either in the empirical material of this study or in literature concerning the matter. The definitions found in the literature have arisen in the wake of debates about modernity and religion's role and function in modern, secularised society. Weber argued that modernity implies a disenchantment of the world. Through rationality, science, and the control of nature, humanity has lost a magical, spiritual dimension. This also implies the loss of a dimension that contributes to the creation of meaning in our lives (Weber 1965 [1930]). Another way to put it using terminology borrowed from Weber is not to call it the new visibility of religion but rather a re-enchantment of the world where spirituality, personal inner experience and conscious presence are at the centre. Among people active in institutionalised religions, a relatively large group does not mind describing themselves as both religious and spiritual, whereas individuals active in alternative religious movements are reluctant to describe themselves as religious but feel more comfortable with defining themselves as spiritual or as seekers (Berghuijs et al. 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Schlehofer et al. 2008).

In the classrooms observed, the secularist discourse was challenged or nuanced and problematised by articulations phrased as questions about the human quest for meaning throughout history and about humankind still having a need for meaning

and for seeing one's own life in a larger context. In addition, it was acknowledged that many people have a worldview, i.e., a philosophy of life, which may not necessarily be religious, but which might include a spiritual dimension. The spiritual discourse was built up through the articulation cluster of *A spiritual dimension, A personal interpretation of life, What is a human being?, Concepts with religious roots* and *Your time on Earth.* When the spiritual discourse was in play, it left the door open for things related to "something bigger", which was articulated as what picks up where science cannot provide answers and touched upon questions concerning, for example, life after death or the meaning of life. This was referred to as a "spiritual dimension of existence". This way of talking about spirituality had an individualistic character, which facilitated the reconciling of the spiritual and secular discourses. Spirituality had in this context positive connotations, such as "something bigger", love, strength, hope, balance, and harmony, which made it easier to say that you believe in something spiritual compared to deities associated with traditional religions. Questions about conditions of human existence were articulated in the classrooms observed as universal existential human issues or as the spiritual dimension of humankind. In other words, no direct references to New Age or holistic environments were made, but in the classroom perceptions about the sacred, of contact with something greater, a divine power, being true to oneself, etc., were articulated. In talking about the fact that all people must formulate their own worldview and interpretation of life, it was also mentioned that a worldview might include a spiritual dimension. The way this was articulated meant that it became possible to take positions outside of the secularist discourse without being perceived as being unintelligent or irrational. Spirituality became a floating signifier since it was loaded with different meanings and thus was given different meanings in different discourses.

How does the life-question approach affect the discourses about religion in the classroom? By starting with existential questions and a personal interpretation of life, it became possible to put the individual interpretation and approach to the different religious and non-religious traditions at the centre. One could imagine that this would open up for other discourses than the secularist discourse since it has a pluralist tone from the outset. However, an interesting finding in this study is that the secularist discourse in the classroom where they worked with sacred spaces was totally hegemonic and highly critical of religion. It was therefore surprising to find that in the written assignment in which students articulated how they perceived the fourth spiritual dimension (presented above) as a part of their philosophy of life that 17 of 22 students responded that they believe in: God; a divine power; spirituality; a god or something beyond all measure; a force from which we derive strength; not a defined god, but rather a higher power; spirits; and energies of God as something that is there for all people, etc.

A secular approach in the literal sense does not rule out (also depending upon the definition of religion; for discussions of this topic, see, for example, Hellman 2011; Maclure and Taylor 2011; Saler 2000) a religious dimension in a personal worldview. However, the way the secularist discourse was articulated in the classrooms observed often included articulations of hostility toward religious expression that

was not perceived as strictly private – according to the logic of the secularist discourse, religion is perceived as a private matter and should not be shared with others in the public sphere. The spiritual discourse was triggered when the teachers and students were trying to understand what religious phenomena could possibly mean for different people of different faiths and when the students in various ways were encouraged to consider what they themselves believed. When it became apparent that almost everybody in some way or another held beliefs, religious or non-religious, about life after death or the origin of the universe, etc., the degree of tolerance for different opinions became higher. When teaching one-sidedly focused on the history of religions or external facts about religions such as the sacraments of Christianity, the pillars of Islam, or Hinduism's pantheon of gods and goddesses, it seems that the secularist discourse was activated to a much greater extent. When the spiritual discourse was at play, it meant that religious interpretations of life became one of several possible interpretations of life and one of several options for meaning.

Chapter 8
"In Sweden, We Are Christian" – A Swedishness Discourse

Abstract The previous chapters have shown how articulations of a secularist way of relating to religion dominated the utterances about religion and Christianity in the classrooms observed but also how the secularist discourse was challenged by a spiritual discourse. However, the concepts Christian and Christianity were signs that were occasionally given another meaning. Even if Sweden was articulated as a secular country, it could also, during the very same lesson, be stated that Sweden is a Christian nation. This chapter, having the subtitle "A Swedishness discourse", involves articulations about how, who and what "we" are, or, just as importantly, how, who and what "we" are not. These articulations are labelled a Swedishness discourse and this discourse of religion is distinguished by notions of national characteristics. The Swedishness discourse was built up through descriptions of what is Swedish and hence what is not Swedish and articulated as un-Swedish through clusters of articulations of *Sweden as a Christian country, Alienation and threat, "We have Santa Claus" – holidays, religion and culture, "In Sweden we are secular, individualistic and tolerant"* and *"Like worshiping Mickey Mouse": othering of the religious*.

In line with Anderson's (2006) definition, the nation in this study is seen as an imagined community.[1] Perceptions of the nation thus have a bonding, but also a differential, function, and this chapter will highlight articulations of imaginings of Sweden and "the Swedish". When the Swedishness discourse was at play, the position of Christian, being part of Swedishness, became a possible one to take. The self-image of Sweden articulated in the classrooms observed included notions of Sweden as a Western European country where tolerance and individualism were central themes. An important element in the construction of the nation and what is Swedish was to define the boundaries of what is considered Swedish and thus what is articulated as "un-Swedish". Articulations with a strong repudiation against "them", which

[1] Anderson's (2006) widespread definition of the nation as an imagined community reads: "It [the nation] is an imagined political community as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, p. 6).

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included religions in general (and may also include Christians), and Islam and Muslims in particular, also contributed to the construction of this discourse.

8.1 Sweden – A Christian Country

Occasionally a national discourse was prevalent in the classroom practice observed. When this discourse was at play, students and teachers articulated Sweden as a Christian country, and a collective national "we" associated Christianity with a national cultural heritage. In some respects, these notions challenged the secularist discourse. However, a striking feature was that associations of Swedishness as related to Christianity consisted of partly contradictory articulations.

In the classrooms observed, Sweden was frequently referred to as "a Christian country", and this was often presented as an accepted and unquestioned truth.[2] Against the backdrop of Swedish national history, articulations in the non-denominational RE classroom that conclude that Sweden is a Christian country are not particularly as unexpected as one could imagine in a non-confessional subject. Issues such as national identity or Swedishness were never explicit topics during the lessons, but articulations referring to Sweden, the Christian (Lutheran) religion, and Swedish traditions were expressed when talking about other things. The dialogue below is a typical example of articulations of Sweden as a Christian country and Swedes as Christians. The students in question discussed the meaning of the concept "secular":

Excerpt 74

Student 1: Does secular mean being free from religion?
Student 2: Yes, it's been separated from, yes, religion completely. Sweden is secular, so the state and the Church….
Student 3: There are, like, different degrees.
Student 1: But you can't say that Sweden is non-religious.
Student 2: No, it's not, but we keep Church and state apart.
Student 1: Since the year 2000, so it's not really that long ago.
Student 2: So the Church has no claim on what the state should do.
Student 3: But we still live pretty much according to Christian values.
Student 2: Yes, we do.

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[2] Since the 1000s, the geographical area that now comprises the nation of Sweden was considered to be part of the Christian world, and throughout the history of Sweden, Church and state have been closely interrelated. In the Swedish self-image, there exist strong mono-cultural notions of being a "unified society" [Swedish: *enhetssamhället*] consisting of articulations of one nation, one king, one people, one faith, one language. The unity of faith in the protestant Church of Sweden was one of the cornerstones in the nation-building process, and this is a central part of instruction. The ideology of one "unified culture" has dominated major parts of Sweden's national history, and in this pre-modern thinking there was no distinction made between Church and state. Division into one secular, worldly entity that the state would be responsible for, and one spiritual part of life that the Church is responsible for, is a historically young construction. In the case of Sweden, the unity of Church and the unity of culture and nation was one and the same (Brohed 1999). This made Swedish culture historically strongly associated with Christianity.

Karin: Mm... When you say you can't say that it's not religious, what do you mean?
Student 1: There are still Christian and Protestant values.
Student 3: Sweden is still seen as a Christian country.

In the above discussion, the students mentioned Sweden as an example of a secularised country and stood by the definition that politics and religion should be kept separate (cf. Demerath III, 2007). However, one of the students brought up the notion that secularity also has something to do with the degree of religiosity. And, if so, is Sweden irreligious? They knew from previous lessons that Sweden is considered a secular country, "the most secular country in the world", and that many people in Sweden do not want to describe themselves as Christians. Nonetheless, Christian values were something they agreed upon. Even if a person does not see himself or herself as religious, one can still embrace such values. Yet, there was never any attempt made to define what those values comprised in concrete terms, or what made them specifically Christian. The excerpt is typical in linking the concept of "values" to Christianity. Some teachers pointed out that these values are shared by Jews and Muslims, but in neither case were these values concretised.[3] In the quote above, there is also one of the many examples of how the pronoun "we" was used by students and teachers: "we still live pretty much according to Christian values". This can be seen as an articulation of identification with what is Swedish and the construction of Swedish culture as something unique and exclusive.[4] A similar use of "we" in order to generate identification with the collective Swedish culture was found by Danielsson Malmros (2012) when she asked upper-secondary school students to describe how they reacted to the various aspects of Swedish history.

Describing Sweden as a Christian country did not mean that everyone in Sweden was perceived as Christian in a religious sense. Instead, this related to history and a sense of belonging:

Excerpt 75

Student: One has, after all, a sense of belonging. You're raised in a Christian country, in the Christian…Even if you're an atheist, you're living in a Christian country. It's like the foundation.

This student interprets religion and faith in societal and national terms – even if you are an atheist, you live in a Christian country. The articulation can be seen in light of ideas about the nation as an imagined community (Anderson 2006) or notions of religion as a component of the national identity in terms of myths, metaphors, symbols and answers to questions concerning who "we" are (Baumann 1999;

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[3] In the (much contested, see, for example, Hedin & Lahdenperä 2000; Linde 2001) opening paragraph of the curriculum, it is stated that: "The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart. In accordance with *the ethics borne by Christian tradition* and Western humanism, this is to be achieved by nurturing in the individual a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching should be non-denominational". (Skolverket 2011b, p. 4, my italics)

[4] Cf., for example, Ehn, Frykman and Löfgren (1993), Lozic (2010) and Mattsson (2001).

Smith 2003, 2008[5]). The student articulated Christianity as a fundamental part of what he perceives as being Swedish – Christianity constitutes a national sense of "belonging", which is not related to religious beliefs but is part of the (national) identity. The relationship between nationalism and religion is complex and can be understood in many ways. It can be seen in light of the public debate on notions of the national (in this case Swedishness), homogeneity, and monoculturalism (Brubaker 2012).

For both students and teachers, the question of who was to be regarded as Christian or not proved to be a difficult one. Being born in Sweden was associated with Christianity. In line with the above excerpt, Christianity is in the following excerpt correspondingly articulated as first and foremost a "meeting place":

Excerpt 76

Teacher: It's interesting how you see yourselves. If you're merely born in Sweden and baptised and confirmed in Sweden, which of course is some kind of standard model to many but not all, are you then automatically a Christian? Kevin and everyone else. How about that? Who is Christian?

Student 1: Christian is a very strong word. Does going to church every Sunday and reading the Bible make you a Christian? Or are you a Christian because you believe?

Student 2: It's up to you to decide for yourself.

Teacher: I don't know.

Student 1: If, therefore, one is... One can still be a Christian, but you don't have to believe in the Bible and go to church and all that... I don't know ... it's more like a meeting place.

The teacher linked being born in Sweden to participating in Christian rituals such as baptism and confirmation. According to the Church of Sweden's official statistics, about half of the children born in Sweden are baptised and about 30% of teenagers attend confirmation classes (Svenska kyrkan 2015). The students were reluctant to embrace the epithet Christian in a religious sense, but in their articulations Christianity still had some function in the community and in the construction of Swedishness.

The articulated fact that Sweden was to be described as a Christian country generated questions concerning the labelling of all inhabitants as Christians, and this was discussed in different ways. Just like the student above said that one can be an atheist in a Christian country, the teacher in the following excerpt went into great detail about being atheist and Christian at the same time:

Excerpt 77

Student 1: Where is the biggest criticism of religion ... or atheism...?

Teacher: Where the people are most atheistic? Yes, then you would probably be up here. (Points at northern Europe on a map). Sweden, I would think, would be in the top five,

[5] Brubaker (2012) distinguishes between four approaches of the relationship between religion and nationalism: the first treats religion, nationalism and ethnicity as equivalent and corresponding objects. The second uses religion to explain specific examples of nationalism in terms of origin and power structures, etc. The third approach consists of the approach mentioned above, which perceives religion as part of nationalism and a contributor to the content of the imagined community. The fourth approach focuses on specific forms of religious nationalism as a distinct alternative to secular nationalism.

I think. Then the question is how to apply the word Christian. You may well be an atheist and say: "Are you a Christian?" "Yes, I am a Christian but I'm an atheist". How the hell can you say that? That one is a Christian and….

Student 2: [*interrupting*] You are agnostic!

Teacher: But you're born into a Christian tradition, right? We use the word Christianity in the sense of being a believer. If someone asks whether you are a Christian, then you answer, "No, I'm not a believer" and so on. Then you say that you're not a Christian. However, others would still say that Sweden is a Christian country and the majority of people there are Christians. But if you ask a Muslim or a Jew "Are you a Jew?", they say "Yes, but I don't believe in this stuff about God and this and that". "But are you a Jew, then?" "Yes, of course I am a Jew". It's more like a label. If I was born to a Jewish mother, then you're a Jew, right? One need not be a religious Jew. But you're still a Jew. It's the same with the term Muslim, huh. You don't need to be especially religious, but if you ask whether the person is a Muslim, "Yes, of course I'm Muslim". It's a label. We use the word Christian up here in Scandinavia in a completely different way, which includes going to church; otherwise, you're not a Christian. But you can be an atheist and a Christian [*simultaneously*].

As the teacher pointed out, it is more common to associate the term Christian with beliefs and church attendance. And if one does not share those beliefs or visit church services, most people do not perceive themselves as being part of Christianity. But this teacher argued that one can be Christian in a cultural sense, and this goes for Jews and Muslims as well. His reasoning is more common when it comes to Judaism, which is usually described both as a religious and an ethnic category (Andersson and Sander 2009). Christianity does not usually have this double meaning unless one includes the word "culturally", as in, e.g., culturally Christian or culturally Catholic (cf. Baumann 1999).

Nationality and belonging to a religious community can be seen as a constantly created and negotiated identity. Mattsson (2005) highlights five principles: *born in Sweden*, *citizenship*, *kinship*, *culture or language* and *appearance* as dimensions of "the Swedish" which in various ways interact and are activated, emphasised or de-emphasised in different contexts. In the excerpts in this section, both notions of Swedishness and being a Christian and the relation between the two are negotiated. Azar (2006) argues that definitions of the national are and must be flexible if they are to survive, and they function as structures of power in order to keep the boundary between inside/outside intact. In the context of the RE practice observed, the Christian heritage was sometimes emphasised but it was toned down or completely rejected when the secularist discourse was in play.

8.2 Alienation and Threat

Many students did not articulate identification with any specific religion in the classroom practice observed, and as they encountered different religious traditions they did not quite know what approach to take. In this feeling of alienation, religiosity was sometimes perceived as being threatening.

The classroom discussions observed occasionally circled around questions concerning collective identity and religion: What is "our religion"? And what does it mean if we respond that "our religion is Christianity" or if the answer is that "'we' have no religion"? These became problematic questions in the encounter with different worldviews in the context of RE and when encountering the religiosity of "other people" from less secularised countries where religion plays a more noticeable role in the public sphere, both for individuals and for community life. But it must be stressed that this does not relate to specific encounters in the classrooms between non-believers and believers rather it was in theoretical discussions of what "we" experience in the encounter with "others". In the following excerpt, the students talk about themselves as part of Western Europe, Scandinavia and Sweden:

Excerpt 78

Student 1: We in Western Europe have lost more and more of our religion. And then some people come along who might have a stronger faith than we do in many cases. Not everyone has to have that, but quite a few do anyway. Not everybody is an extremist. However, what happens is that we in Western Europe, we feel this "where did our identity go, should we not keep our religion". You feel threatened by a threat that may not even actually exist.

Teacher: Yes, it is interesting that secularisation has gone quite far in Western Europe, perhaps especially in Scandinavia. So, to answer the question "What is our religion?" it is not easy to answer. Maybe there doesn't even exist anything shared as perhaps used to be the case.

Student 2: It is, after all, we are living in a society where we are basically Christian. So you may still see it as the religion of Sweden.

This was the way in which the conversation went back and forth – on the one hand, identifying as a religious person was not taken for granted, as many completely lacked religious connections both to traditional religious beliefs and to religious practices. Religion was associated with the (ethnic) other (von Brömssen 2003). This raised the question of what is it that is common and shared in a society, a function religion has filled in the past, but no definite answers were provided.[6] Following Anderson's (2006) idea of nations as imagined communities, these students articulated religion as a community-building factor that is lost because others (implicitly immigrants who belong to a religion other than Christianity) have a stronger faith. As shown in previous chapters, the discourse that dominated the classrooms observed was strongly critical of religion and resulted in a distant and sceptical attitude towards issues related to religion. However, on the other hand, articulations associating Sweden and Swedes with Christianity were also raised. The religiosity constructed as Swedish obviously had nothing to do with extremism. Immigrants

[6] Tesfahuney (1999) argues that European education is built on the basis of ethnocentric monocultural notions which include a variety of norms, values and descriptions of what it means to be Swedish and thus what constructions of the deviant, i.e., of "the Other", exist. These norms are seldom analysed, as they are part of positions perceived as being "neutral". Lahdenperä (2001) argues that the educational system conveys and socialises the students into the shared (mono) cultural heritage. In this (unconscious) identity-building process, collective prejudices and beliefs are created, maintained and used in the same way as the creation of the image of "us" and the image "the Other" is.

were perceived as having a stronger faith, even if "not everybody is an extremist". It was spoken about as a fact that immigrants have a different (foreign) religion and that religion is important and central in their lives. Thus immigrants are constructed as "more religious" and, consequently, threatening. The lack of religion does not seem to be a major problem before encountering other people with different backgrounds. More confident religious roots of non-Swedish people were perceived partly as something un-Swedish, but also as a threat:

Excerpt 79

Student: Many Christians probably feel that they are losing their grip. Even the Church of Sweden has lost a lot of grip lately. Catholics are losing trust as well... and immigration, there are more immigrants, and people probably feel threatened by that too. They have lost their identity. There is an identity crisis for us in the West.

It is interesting to note that the students in both of the last excerpts used the word "threat", i.e., that they felt "threatened" by immigration and the religiosity of the immigrants. When does insecurity regarding identity turn into fear of strangers and even into xenophobia? Why is the religiosity of other people a problem? In the globalised, pluralistic postmodern society there arises a demand for fixed reference points. Even students who did not describe themselves as Christians and who had vague notions about Christianity's religious content still identified with Christianity in a cultural sense. National characteristics do not say much about how people live their lives, but instead describe how Swedes present themselves and, through this, the story of Sweden is in itself "Swedishizing" Sweden (Ehn et al. 1993; Hall 2000). By talking about identity in terms of binary oppositions without any intermediate or hybrid positions, both what is Swedish and what is "the Other" are constructed (Hall 2005).

8.3 "We Have Santa Claus" – Holidays, Religion and Culture

One area where articulations of Swedishness were clearly linked to Christianity and where Christianity and Swedish culture completely merged was when holidays, especially Christmas, were discussed.

Holiday traditions and culture were linked to Christianity in a quite natural and unquestionable way:

Excerpt 80

Student 1: Many of our holidays are Christian, too, even if we aren't religious.
Student 2: We don't celebrate, like, Ramadan, regardless of whether one is Christian or not.
Student 1: Even if you don't really celebrate like this religious kind of Christmas…you may not have a nativity set and so on, or….
Student 2: But here, what is Swedish, much of society is based on traditions and things that are Christian. Swedish culture has quite a lot from Christianity. So, if we have any religion, it's Christianity.
Student 1: If there is anything that affects us, it is Christianity.

In discussions about Christmas as part of Swedishness, the link was articulated as obvious and unproblematic. When talking about Sweden as a Christian country, there was some uncertainty and tentativeness in the articulations that parried the secular discourse. When it came to Christmas, this was clearly a Swedish tradition and was easy to embrace, regardless of whether it was perceived as being a religious tradition or a cultural one. Meanwhile, these opinions were based on monocultural ideas of a homogeneous Sweden, where everyone is expected to act in much the same way. It became evident in some of the classrooms observed that, for various reasons, not everyone in Sweden celebrates Christmas, which disturbed the picture of a homogeneous, mono-cultural Sweden, but not the notion of Christmas as part of Swedishness, which was a solid part of the Swedishness discourse. In the excerpt above, Christianity is disconnected from its religious content and is linked to traditions and culture. In this context, it was emphasised that "our" feasts, "our" traditions and "our" culture are linked to Christian roots and this was done by defining that which is not a Swedish tradition: "We don't celebrate Ramadan".

Celebrating Christmas was basically taken for granted in all the classrooms observed and was something talked about as if it were a fact. The Christmas holiday was primarily related to practices, not beliefs.[7] The celebrations can be seen as a hybridisation of Christianity, Norse religion, folklore, and commercialism. Not all students were clear regarding the religious background of the Christmas holiday, as will be shown in the following excerpt. This lesson was held on the first of December, and the teacher was about to introduce Christianity. She did so by asking the students if they had started to prepare and decorate for Christmas yet:

Excerpt 81

Teacher: Have you started to decorate for Christmas at home, then?
Student 1: Yes!
Student 2: No.
Teacher: What have you put up?
Student 3: Advent candles.
Teacher: Hey, can you stop! You seem to be very "busy" in this half of the classroom!
Student 3: The positive half is busy for once!
[*General laughter*].
Teacher: You seem to be VERY "busy". Yes. Advent candles. You've put up Christmas candles. Where does this come from, then? Besides the box you took them out of. Symbolically, where is it from?
Student 2: Is it a symbol of something?
Teacher: Yes, it's actually a symbol of something.
Student 3: The star, I know.

[7] What follows is a basic description of the content and practices of the Christmas celebration in Sweden: The month before Christmas, many people, a clear majority, put electric (usually) seven-armed candlesticks in their windows and hang colourful electric Advent stars there as well. If they have candle holders for four candles, one is supposed to be lit every Sunday before Christmas, and many bring home and decorate a Christmas tree. On Christmas Eve, it is customary to celebrate Christmas with relatives and family, giving each other presents and eating loads of Christmas foods. The months before Christmas, the shops are full of Christmas decorations and advertisements related to Christmas.

Teacher: Wait a minute, Lisa. Yes?
Student 5: Judaism, huh?
Teacher: Yes, good! In what way?
Student 1: They had that, the seven ... seven-armed candlestick.
Teacher: That's right, they had the seven-armed candlestick. And where was it, then, the seven-armed candlestick?
Student 2: Synagogue?
Teacher: No.
Student 2: No, what is it called….
Teacher: The other….
Student 2: In the temple!
Teacher: In the temple, well, there it was, and then it disappeared in 70 A.D. Do you remember?
Student 6: Is it Jewish stuff?
Student 7: You have Jewish stuff in your window!
Teacher: Yes, you have one of the oldest Jewish symbols placed in your window.
Student 6 [*cries out*]: No! Fuck!
[*The teacher doesn't hear or takes no notice of the comments of student 6 and student 7 but continues the lesson*.]
[…]
Student 3: What is the Christmas star from, then?
Teacher: Yes, surely some of you have put up the star as well. Where does it come from?
Student 1: The star that shone when Jesus was born.
Teacher: That's right, the Star of Bethlehem, and I thought that could be our starting point today and actually start with Jesus when he was born and when the star was shining. Because that is the background to the stars we hang in our windows. How many of you have stars? Mm, there are many who have them too. And so have you the menorah too, the Jewish candelabra.
Student 6: No!!! Damn, I don't want anything Jewish!
Student 5: What was the Christmas star again?
Teacher: It was the Star of Bethlehem that shone when Jesus was born. But we're going to work in groups later, and we'll look at the various traditions surrounding Christmas and the roots they have.
Student 6: No, but damn. I don't think it has to do with religion!

In the classroom discussion from which the above passage comes, it was assumed that everybody celebrated Christmas and decorated their homes with Christmas decorations. The teacher wanted the students to see and reflect upon the religious roots of everyday objects. The fact that one student articulated strongly negative opinions about the religious connection to the Christmas holiday and her negative statement regarding the Jewish origin of the Christmas decorations were ignored by the teacher and were not commented upon. This student had admitted to having Christmas decorations in her windows, but to her, they had no religious significance, and she was provoked by this information that she obviously had not reflected upon previously. I interpret the student's remarks as anti-Semitic, as she expressed strong disapproval toward Judaism and Jews. However, it must be pointed out that negative comments about Jews and Judaism were unusual in the classrooms observed. During the observations carried out for this study, this occurred only on one other occasion. A similar opinion was expressed by a student who did not want to go on a

field trip to a synagogue because he does not like Jews. Negative comments of this kind were far more frequent in connection with Islam and Muslims.

The following scenario also highlights the issue of Swedish culture in relation to Christianity. The starting point was an assignment the students were given where they were to investigate the background of some of the Swedish Christmas traditions:

Excerpt 82

Assignment

Investigate the background of one of the Christmas traditions we have in Sweden. Choose what you want to investigate! Why do we have Santa Claus? Why do we give Christmas presents? Why do we eat [Christmas] ham or have candles in the windows?

The students presented the assignment orally. In the presentations, it was shown that many of the traditions associated with this particular Christian festival had evolved over a number of centuries. It became apparent that the traditions were different in different parts of the country, were different in different families, and that many of the traditions had roots in Christianity, Judaism, the Norse religion and ancient Nordic folklore. All this surprised many of the students and generated interesting discussions. Religions and traditions were represented as being constantly changing and multidimensional. However, when starting the project, it became clear that several of the students did not celebrate Christmas due to their religious backgrounds, in this case, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses. Two of the students with a Muslim background raised their hands when everybody was about to start the assignment and said "we don't celebrate Christmas" (field notes 5 December 2011). They expressed that they did not feel included in the "we" who were visited by Santa Claus or ate Christmas ham, which was the implicit premise in the formulation of the assignment.

During the observations at the three schools, two people – one student and one teacher – said that they did not celebrate Christmas because of their atheistic beliefs (see Excerpts 9 and 41), and they felt that they were regarded as "weird" because they chose not to do so. Most of those who described themselves as atheists still celebrated Christmas and articulated Christmas, like the students in the Excerpts (80 and 81) above, as primarily a cultural phenomenon, not a religious one.

8.4 "In Sweden We Are Secular, Individualistic and Tolerant"

In the classrooms observed, students and teachers often liked to associate what is Swedish with concepts such as tolerance, openness to different ways of life, individualism, rationalism and secularity. When talking about religion and trying to describe the kind of religiosity Swedes have, this was a premise.

The secularist discourse in the classrooms contributed to constructing religious people in general as "the Other". A recurring event was that in their speech both

teachers and students assumed everyone in the classroom to be a non-believer. Elsewhere, other people might be religious. This was of course not true – there were students in every classroom of this study who in other contexts positioned themselves as believers, as religious, as Christians, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, as believers in spirits, etc., but the fact that “we in Sweden” were positioned as solely secular and non-religious was repeated:

Excerpt 83

Teacher: We’re so ENORMOUSLY secularised in Sweden. Religion has no place in most people’s lives in any way. We may go to church once a year because there’s some kid getting baptised or someone dies or something like that. And then we don’t go there. That’s pretty much the religiosity we have.

Here, the teacher explicitly referred to the concept of secularisation, but in the classrooms observed in this study secularisation was not problematised or discussed to any great extent. The term secularity was used synonymously with people not believing in God, attending services, saying prayers, or identifying with any specific creed.[8] In articulations of the Swedish self-image, tolerance was a central value.[9] The following quotes come from a student who in the context of the RE course met a Catholic monk whom he perceived as being “ethnically Swedish”:

Excerpt 84

Student 2: Our Western view of how Muslims are and behave, that they are supposed to be savages or something like that, in contrast with a Catholic monk, who actually lives in Sweden, who sits there and says “it’s wrong to be gay”. I think it would have been quite funny.

Teacher: That’s perhaps not the media image of Catholics?

Student 2: No, Catholics aren’t a problem. It’s, like, pretty close, like, Italy, they’re Catholics. What’s wrong with being Catholic? There’s nothing wrong with that. So, when it comes so close actually, there was someone [another student] who got pissed off and had to go out and things like that when they sat down and listened to what he said. And this is, like, a Swedish guy. It’s quite interesting.

The student articulated astonishment over the fact that a Swedish person expressed such negative views on homosexuality, saying that “it’s wrong to be gay”. Intolerance toward homosexuals was something he associated with Muslims, not Christians, which he obviously associated with something Swedish and Western European. If the expression of negative attitudes toward homosexuality had come from a Muslim, it would have been more in line with the expectations of the student. He did not expect this intolerant position from a Swedish person, Christian or not. The student is positioning himself as Swedish and Western. Christianity was perceived as Western and “near”, and it became problematic when this monk then gave voice to perceptions that students thought of as intolerant. In the conception of what is Swedish, there is a strong monocultural notion of consensus.[10] A “Swedish guy”

[8] Cf. Davie (2007) and Taylor (2007, 2011)

[9] Cf. Danielsson Malmros (2012) and Hjerm (2000).

[10] Striving for consensus and mutual understanding has been a strong and influential ideal during the twentieth century, not least in the labour market, often referred to as “*Saltsjöbadandan*” based

should not have opinions that differ from the norm, which is un-Swedish per se. The religion that is perceived as "Swedish" must include tolerance and individualism:

Excerpt 85

Student 1: It works really well. Just look at Sweden. Just that particular religion of Christianity. That's as good as it gets, although we're individualists. Problems don't occur until there is a clash with another religion. Like Islam. Like the example she gave that 41% of Swedes don't want to mix with Muslims. That's exactly what it's about. Only Christianity is as good as it gets just because people can be so individual. It ought to be like that in the rest of the world, too.

[…]

Student 2: Or it's about them thinking freely. I mean, I know a priest, or my, on my dad's side, there's a guy who is a priest, a theologian. And he doesn't mind gays getting married, he has no problem with it at all, and that's the way he sees it. Then there are of course those who refuse. Yes, as I said, we're individualists here in Sweden, you've got the opportunity to choose for yourself. Not a collective interpretation like "this is how we see life". But the Mormons, they have more like "this is how we see the Bible, this is our theory". But here in Sweden, based on the Church of Sweden, it's more about individual thinking.

In the conversations about Swedishness observed, individualism was particularly and repeatedly emphasised, as was shown in the previous chapters and in the excerpt above. Christianity was in this context interpreted in light of individualism as a basic fundamental value in Sweden. Individualism and individual choice were highlighted in positive terms. For example, Christianity in Sweden is said to work "just fine", and the relative (who is referred to as a priest and theologian) of one student is labelled as "a normal guy" due to the fact that the kind of Christianity existing in Sweden leaves room for personal interpretations. Another instance is when it is mentioned that the Church of Sweden has chosen to consecrate same-sex couples, which was assumed in the conversation to be an example of a tolerant attitude. If one were to take a different position on this issue, it would be seen as submitting to a collective interpretation, and this was perceived to some extent as being "un-Swedish".

In the classrooms observed, all religions were articulated as problematic according to the secularist discourse, but some religions, such as Islam, were seen as being more problematic than others. One reason for this was that Islam was strongly associated with subservience to strict regulatory intervention and was thus difficult to reconcile with the individualism and freedom of choice that were so highly valued. The image of Islam is ambiguous, and in the classrooms observed there was a constant negotiation of how Islam should be defined. Within the framework of the Swedishness discourse, descriptions of Sweden as a multicultural and pluralistic country were also offered. Even this was framed by referring to the fact that the religiosity existing in Sweden was characterised by freedom of choice and individualism. The following excerpt contains examples of articulations of pluralism which still include monocultural connotations:

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on the agreement between the employer and labour organisations. For a discussion of how this striving for consensus operates in contemporary Sweden, see, for example, Martinsson (2006).

Excerpt 86

Teacher: If you think of Sweden as such a pluralistic country, that we believe in many different religions. We can choose whether we want to be atheists or how we want to live. We choose very much by ourselves, right? And Islam is also influenced by this. And Christianity too. But this is still one of the most important points. Then it is the case that many Muslims sort of do as they wish. There are also Muslims who are secular. Who are a bit more modern, who eat pork, and so on, yet who are still Muslims. So you can't say that "you're not a Muslim because..." like that. "You're not wearing a veil so you're not Muslim". On the contrary, in Sweden there is still a choice.

Individualism and personal choice are made hallmarks of Swedishness – everybody chooses what they want to believe, if they want to believe and how they want to relate to various religious doctrines. Christianity was interpreted in terms of individual choice – the position of not choosing as an individual but instead opting to follow the existing religious conventions was articulated as being obsolete and non-compatible with being a modern enlightened person. For Swedes, it seemed good to be individualistic, but Muslims were not expected to do as they pleased; instead they were expected to adhere to a uniform Islam. The teacher stressed the freedom of choice for Muslims in Sweden and that "modern" Muslims choose not to follow Islamic food regulations. This teacher worked in a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous class, and several of the students – some wearing hijabs, some not – described themselves as belonging to different Muslim traditions. This particular teacher wanted to show a nuanced view of both Christians and Muslims – one can be a Christian or a Muslim in a variety of ways, and she wanted to challenge the image of Muslims as being completely subjected to following religious rules, which was an element that the teaching of Islam constantly reacted and related to. At the same time, she articulates something about Sweden and Swedishness – Sweden is pluralistic and is characterised by diversity and freedom of choice for individuals. Her articulation was followed by a heated debate on the distinction between religion and culture and how religion and culture affect different communities:

Excerpt 87

Student 2: But I was at the airport in Tunisia, then there were girls, they wore those the costumes, it had grilles here! [referring to a burqa].
Student 3: I know! Those are the ones who are stupid!
Student 6: They're fucked up!
Student 1: That's not religion, that's their culture!
Student 3: That's not Islam!
Student 6: It certainly is religion! Do you know why?
Student 1: No!
Student 6: Yes! That is religion!
Student 1: Okay, how do people dress in Sweden?
Student 6: You can dress any way you like because people don't care!
Student 1: Yes, okay, how do people dress in Europe? Does it say in the Bible that you should put on your shorts and put on this and that?
Student 6: That's quite a different thing! No, you know, you don't know, listen!
Student 1: No, in Europe you live like that! And in those countries, they live like that!
Student 6: But you don't know how the people are over there!
Student 3: That's not Islam! That's their culture!

The students involved in this discussion have backgrounds in various parts of the Middle East and did not agree on what was to be regarded as religious practices in relation to what was to be seen as cultural practices. In contrast, they agreed that "in Sweden, you get to do what you want" as opposed to Tunisia, and that Christianity and the Bible did not affect culture in terms of how people choose to dress. One interesting feature here is that these students also use the pronouns "they" and "theirs" about Muslims and people and traditions from the Middle East, but they do not use the pronoun "we" for Sweden. Islam and Muslims are thus constantly referred to as "the Other". In Excerpt 24, the same articulation is discernible: "Sure, I'm a Muslim, but I don't do ... [what] the people say, what THEY want me to believe in". Could this be because they do not unambiguously identify with a Swedish "we"? Research shows how students who themselves migrated or who have parents who migrated were constructed in school and in other contexts as "immigrants" and therefore special, different and not an integral part of Swedish culture. In Sweden, anyone who does not conform to this idea of Swedishness is regarded as an immigrant and has to explain where they "really" come from even though they were born in Sweden, and when they visit their parents' home country, they are regarded as being Swedish. This experience sometimes results in an ambivalent attitude toward positioning oneself as Swedish (Lozic 2010). However, individualism and freedom of choice were in the classrooms of this study portrayed as something that "they" – in this case Muslims in Tunisia and Iraq – did not have because of their religion but which existed as a precious value in Sweden. In the classes that had several students who were born, or who had parents who were born, in a country other than Sweden, this question of culture and religion came up on several occasions. For example, a boy compared Muslims in Sweden with the Christians in Iraq – they are a minority but are still quite numerous. In this context, another person brought up that in Iran all women are required to wear a veil and men must wear long trousers and a t-shirt (no vests) regardless of whether they are Muslims or not and this was described as the culture of the country. It was thus stated that in Sweden people dress the way they want to, unlike in Tunisia, Iran or Iraq.

Although Sweden in many ways is segregated, it is a country that in the past five decades has received many immigrant groups. This means that numerous Swedes (21%) were born, or have parents who were born, in a country other than Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2015). Most Swedes thus have relatives, classmates, colleagues or neighbours of "foreign origin". When articulations of "Swedishness as tolerance" are in the foreground, it is entirely possible to simultaneously be both Muslim and Swedish. Students with different religious and ethnic backgrounds share the same classrooms, and in most cases this is a non-issue, i.e., nothing that is in focus:

Excerpt 88

Student 1: Our friends, many of our friends are Muslims. On our football team, there are many Muslims.

Teacher: Well, maybe you grew up with a certain knowledge that it might not be so incredibly strange, really.

Student 2: Our friends, the Muslims I know, they do it to make things easier. They do not care at all about their religion, really. They do it just because of their parents, and hanging out with family during Ramadan and that kind of stuff, they just go with the flow.

[…]

Student 1: They're out partying and whatnot, they don't care at all about that. I don't know if they've been influenced by us or something. Because the Muslims have Swedish buddies and Swedes have Muslim friends, and there will be the lessons learned from each other as well.

Being Muslim and Swedish seemed to be no problem for these students as long as they "don't care about religion", and being Muslim seemed to be a marker of cultural identity. It appeared to be acceptable to believe what you liked, as long as their behaviour was like everybody else's, i.e., "They're out partying and stuff, they don't care at all about that". It may be tolerable to skip the partying for celebrating Ramadan once a year only if the rest of the time you act "like most people". Nevertheless, one may note that these students talk about "Swedes" and "Muslims" as identity markers (cf. Otterbeck and Hallin 2010). However, did they express the view that their Muslim friends are not Swedish. As I perceived this classroom particular conversation, that was not their opinion. This might be compared to Buchardt's study (2008, 2010) where Muslimness is incompatible with Danishness and Erikse's (2010) study on how Muslimness and Norwegianess are negotiated. While this particular investigation does not primarily concern identity, and I did not put questions to students concerning whether they saw themselves and others as Swedes and Christians, Swedes and Muslims, etc., but the empirical data is based on articulations during lessons observed in classrooms. The Swedish self-image of tolerance and respect meant that the official position of the teachers, which were also articulated by students, for example, in the excerpt above, was that there are no problems being a Swedish Muslim and that you can be Swedish in many different ways under the condition that you act "like most people" and do not display a behaviour that can be perceived as being deviant. Tolerance had limitations, as will be shown in the next section of this chapter, but tolerance is still a central value in understanding the discourse of Swedishness in the classrooms observed.

National Swedish surveys show contradictory trends: on the one hand, Sweden emerges as a country having a population that to a great extent welcomes immigration. Meanwhile, there is also a growing acceptance of xenophobic parties, and in the 2014 election, the nationalistic, xenophobic Sweden Democrats became the Swedish parliament's third largest party. The party's main concern is to limit immigration and to stand up for "Swedish values" Other more extreme right-wing populist parties are growing as well. This means that views and the public debate have become more polarised (Demker 2014). Both these trends were distinguishable in the classroom practice observed.

8.5 "Like Worshipping Mickey Mouse": The Othering of the Religious

In this section, it is worth noting that talk about religion and Christianity is constructed in relation to something else. When religion and Christianity are constructed in relation to the secularist discourse, it generates other connotations compared to when religion and Christianity are constructed in relation to Islam and multiculturalism.

The collective "we" in the classroom was seldom positioned as religious, but it may be noted that some religions and religious practices were more closely associated with otherness than others – to express beliefs related to private religiosity and to be interested in spiritual matters in general might not be incompatible with the secularist discourse. However, to have a faith that implied consequences for reasoning with regard to social and political issues was talked about as problematic and not compatible with being a modern, rational, individualistic Swede. Mentioned examples of this were, in particular, people described as extremists and fundamentalist Islamists. But even choosing food, raising children in a religious way or organising everyday life around prayer times and religious holidays on the basis of religious beliefs was talked about as "strange" and even dangerous. In this way, the national identity was constructed through the othering of religious people.

As the excerpts earlier in this and the previous chapter have shown, religious people in general were talked about as "they" even if there were students of different affiliations in the classroom. Religious people in general from different traditions were described as being "strange", "crazy", "deceived" and "unintelligent" – "they" are different from "us":

Excerpt 89

Student 3: I think the Seventh-day Adventists were the most fun because they were really crazy! It was great to talk to them, really. It was especially fun when you came so far in your questions that they really couldn't answer, so we had to leave, because they couldn't say anything more. It was the best!

Karin: In what way were they crazy?

Student 3: They really were, like, black and white: there is a heaven and there is hell, and all the wars and all the natural disasters, everything is the angel Lucifer who is the devil who has, like, betrayed God. It really is like that, that's exactly what they believe, like it was in the old days, I feel like. They aren't at all innovative!

Excerpt 90

Student: Believing in a god that nobody has seen, I think that's unintelligent. Because if I go around and believe in God, and believe that he will help me, then it's clear that I'll experience that he does. They see all this stuff because they believe so strongly. That's how it is, I think. But they say, "no, no, it's only you who can't see". But I think…, like, it's not logical that there would be a god.

In the above excerpts, religious people were constructed as people who living in the past and who are "not at all innovative". Moreover, negative characteristics were attributed to them as a group. The student in the second excerpt argues that one sees what one wants to see. But the idea that there could be a god is, according to her,

irrational, and to believe this is thus unintelligent. Following her reasoning, the conclusion is that non-religious people have seen through this myth as they are governed by reason and logic. Religious beliefs were generally presented as outdated and unintelligent. Both of these excerpts can be seen as part of a secularist discourse, but this self-image and description of Sweden and Swedes as modern, enlightened and rational is also part of a national discourse about Sweden as "the most modern country in the world".

In line with this, many students articulated that religion is the result of some people's lively imaginations and that this should be addressed in RE. Such a view follows the reasoning of the neuroscientist's lecture presented in excerpts 11 and 22 – people see what they want to see. In the following excerpt, one student expresses that he wants the RE course to pay more attention to the connection between fairy tales and religions:

Excerpt 91

Student: I don't understand how you can't see a connection between religion and fairy tales. This isn't brought up enough in my opinion. But you become…it's like I should start worshiping Mickey Mouse, for example.
[*General laughter in the class*].

To speak in this way was still a bit provocative, but it introduced humour into the classroom, and classmates and teachers laughed. This was articulated in a context where the class had met with representatives of various religions and philosophies, such as representatives from the *Church of Sweden*, the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, *Tibetan Buddhism*, *Western Buddhism*, *Secular Humanism*, *Conservative Judaism*, the *Catholic Church* and the *Uniting Church in Sweden* [Swedish: *Equmeniakyrkan*]. One of the students told the class that he did not receive answers to his questions, i.e., the representatives gave evasive answers. The teacher wondered what he had asked:

Excerpt 92

Teacher: What questions did you ask?
Student: I asked how they looked at…that if a person has an imaginary friend, then that person is considered to be crazy, psycho, that he is not well. But if several people do it, it's a religion. So I wondered how they related to this.
[*General laughter in the class*].

The student does not explicitly refer to Richard Dawkins (2006) who in the introduction to his introduction quotes Robert M. Pirsing, the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: "When one person suffers from delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from delusion it is called Religion" (Dawkins 2006, p. 28), but the student's articulation is close to Dawkins', and this was not the only time this implicit reference was made by different students in different classrooms. The terms "fantasy lover" or "imaginary friend" came up several times in different classrooms when talking about believing in God. Through articulations like the one above, or that "the author of the Bible must have been high on drugs" and "religious people are mind-fucked" and other negative formulations, the dis-

tance to religious people was increased and they contributed to enforcing the secularist discourse and constructed a united "we" of the non-religious members of the class. As secularity was linked to intelligence, rationality, and logic, religiosity was associated with the opposite. It was also expressed many times that religion is "weird" in the sense of being hard to understand. A great deal of the students observed could in many cases not at all relate to religion or what functions it might have in either the lives of people in general or in communities that are less secular than Swedish society. For example, some students articulated these views after seeing a documentary about the so-called untouchables, Dalits, of India. The documentary was shown as part of the RE course when learning about Hinduism:

Excerpt 93

Student 1: It's crazy how there are so many strange things. It's hard to believe how anyone can have such a wild imagination to come up with everything.
Student 2: How many are there who believe in this? Who is it who believes in this?
Student 3: Not only that…you think…how did this come about? Who has said…where has it, like, come from?

Teachers also sometimes articulated in the same terms that, "we" have a hard time understanding how "they" think, i.e., this is a "foreign" way of thinking. The following conversation took place during a lesson when the students were working in groups on Hinduism and Buddhism and the teacher circulated among the students in the classroom:

Excerpt 94

Teacher: But I find it hard sometimes to, like, totally accept Buddhism, for it is, after all, something foreign, too. Yes.
Karin: It's interesting the attention different religions get in...
Teacher: Yes, in the media and not least in the textbooks. They [*Hindus and Buddhists*] are hard to understand. I mean, we have NOTHING similar to this. It's difficult. Hinduism is even more difficult to understand, I think, to grasp. It's…there are so many varieties of them. Nothing is for everyone, somehow, but everything is only for them and them, a few million here and something applicable there. Yes...it's a hodgepodge….

The teacher assumed a collective we, as she argued that "our" beliefs are different from Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Her articulation can be seen as a monocultural legacy of the unified society, despite her ambition to promote diversity and pluralism.

People belonging to different religious traditions were often constructed as "the Other", Muslims and Islam even more so. As mentioned earlier in this section, the national discourse works in another, more distinct way when Christianity is the subject being discussed compared to when Islam is brought up. A negative image of Islam was constructed through associations of Islam with oppression, suicide bombers and blind obedience. Everybody – students and teachers alike – those with a Muslim background as well as those with other backgrounds, all related to this negative image, even people who thought that this image does not provide a fair view of either Islam or Muslims.

That the word Islam means submission or to submit was articulated as a core fact about Islam both in the teaching done and textbooks used in the classrooms observed in this study. The Swedish word for submission [Swedish: *underkastelse*] has a rather negative connotation and literally translated means “throwing under”. It is reminiscent of slavery and oppression. In one class, at the end of the lesson, the teacher wanted the pupils to write down a summary of the content of the lesson in which the teacher had presented “the basics” of Islam. When they were about to begin writing, one student asked:

Excerpt 95

Student: This bit about Islam, it meant submitting? Or was it oppression?

In this excerpt, the student links Islam to oppression even though the word was not mentioned in class, and this can be seen as a sign of how strong and natural the negative image of Islam is. It was also mentioned that Islam can be translated as both peace/serenity and submission and that Islam means submission in the sense that the Qur’an and the Prophet’s example are the best instructions for how life should be lived. That Islam means peace and serenity was received with surprise and wonder, as the image of Islam expressed by many students did not contain any representations of peace and serenity but rather dictatorship, violence, suicide bombers, terrorist attacks and war. There were no images presented that embodied how peace and serenity could be associated with Islam. There was nothing in the teaching that could challenge the dominant image in this particular regard.

In Excerpt 84, the student starts his reasoning with “Our Western view of how Muslims are and behave, that they’re supposed to be savages or something like that” and a “Swedish guy” that he refers to was clearly not Muslim. “We” were clearly not Muslim (and I want to stress that there actually were students with Muslim backgrounds in most of the classrooms) and “our” holidays are not Muslim: “We don’t celebrate, like, Ramadan” (Excerpt 80). Swedishness was related to tolerance, individualism and modernity and religion and religious people in general, but Islam was specifically linked to everything seen as being the opposite of these. Islam was mainly associated with something strange, foreign and unknown in Swedish culture:

Excerpt 96

Student 1: It’s fairly new in Sweden, too.
Student 2: Approximately one hundred years.
Student 1: There hasn’t been much discussion before….
Student 2: I don’t know when the first….
Student 1: Muslims came here….
Student 2: Muslims came here…the first immigrants from Muslim countries and so, but it’s not very far back in time.
Student 1: It’s only now that they, like, came in large crowds [*droser*]. There has certainly been more Muslims who lived here.
Student 2: In large crowds [Swedish: *droser*]!?
[*Laughter among the others in the group*].

Student 1: Yes, but there have certainly been Muslims who have lived in Sweden for many, many years, but it's only now that they come in large numbers and really start to be more noticeable […] Although it wasn't like that when the Finnish immigrants started coming to Sweden, that people were afraid of them? But this is more foreign.
Student 2: Yes, it is.
Student 1: That's pretty far from our culture, or our culture, or the Christian culture that's been in Sweden before.
Karin: Mm… But what is "far from"?
Student 1: I don't really know. It's portrayed as being quite foreign. That it's another religion in general makes, like, a big difference...

One aspect of the national discourse concerns the notion of Sweden and Swedishness related to the geographical area in which the nation state of Sweden has its territory. Many of the articulations presented in this chapter include statements such as "we in Sweden are ...", "a person living in Sweden", "in Sweden", and "If you are born in Sweden". This indicates that what is said applies within the geographical borders of Sweden, and this is something that is perceived as being Swedish. Sweden and Swedish culture were spoken about in positive terms and were things that many students and teachers identified with.

Islam was presented as "more" than a religion compared to religion in the "Swedish" sense, where religion was confined to a limited part of life. One teacher described the difference between Islam and "our" perception of religion (which one might assume was some form of Christianity?) as, in the case of the former, a more all-encompassing religion, an approach to life compared with "our religiosity", which was presented as a separate part of life:

Excerpt 97

Teacher: But the word religion for Muslims is a somewhat broader concept than what we usually mean by religion, so to speak. And the first thing we have to learn and keep in mind is that Islam, it's an ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE somehow. It's not only a distinct part of life, but it's a way of life, an attitude to life. So I thought maybe I'd start with this, the words ISLAM AS AN ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE and say something about it.
Teacher: Because when we talk about religion then you don't think about an attitude toward life, right? What do you think of? If I say: Religion? Christianity? What do you think of then?
Student 1: Church.
Teacher: The Church? Well, yes. What more are you thinking about?
Student 2: Faith.
Teacher: Faith, yes. But then for Muslims it is…then it is how you behave throughout life, to one's closest family, to the Creation, animals, to nature and family, how I eat or what I eat, how I dress, indeed a gigantic task in life. An attitude toward life, an attitude toward one's whole life.

The teacher began her lesson with the Islamic story of creation and explained the task of humankind as being the representative of God on Earth and that this task entails bearing a great responsibility. This means that Islam was not only related to what is usually characterised as religious or spiritual matters in a Swedish context, such as belief in certain doctrines, but also extends to all questions and situations that emerge in life. This particular group consisted of students from two different classes, a circumstance which perhaps contributed to the lack of discussion; the students

seemed to be shy and insecure in this constellation. An interesting aspect of the excerpt above is that there actually were pupils with Muslim backgrounds present, but they did not make themselves known in the class discussion. The teacher used the pronoun "they" with reference to Muslims throughout the entire lesson, while the pronoun "we" was supposed to refer to "Christians in a secular sense" and to those whose actions in everyday life, unlike Muslims, were not influenced by any religion.

Similarly, the Christian students in the classroom, of which at least one belonged to the Pentecostal church, did not actively engage with the description of Christianity as a limited part of life, which, for example, some Christians – Pentecostals and others – might object to.

The following excerpt shows that being a Muslim and being Swedish at the same time was problematic when it came to certain issues, such as the veil:

Excerpt 98

Student 1: Okay, at the risk of sounding a bit cruel, but, like, just because they've got this religion, they shouldn't be allowed to dress up. Should they be allowed to enter a place completely masked if a Swede wouldn't be allowed to come in fully hidden from view? It's like…one ought to be able to see who it is.
Student 2: Even if it is part of their religion, they must accept how we do things in Sweden.

Discussing Islam and the veil was a hot topic. Some stated that "they" have to adjust to Swedish society and thus perceived the veil as being un-Swedish. Others motivated their rejection with reference to the veil as an expression of oppression, stating that women were forced to wear it, even though this link to force and oppression was not unopposed. However, this discussion about veils encompassed different positions. Other students made a distinction between different kinds of veils, and a hijab was seen as a "normal" veil, for example, "the kind that my mother/friend/neighbour/mother's colleague wears is okay", whereas a niqab or burqa, as was discussed in the above excerpt, was not. One class read about the first female police officer to wear a hijab as part of her uniform, and in the discussions this was presented as a good thing.

8.6 Implications and Concluding Remarks

A striking feature in the classroom practice observed was articulations of "we", i.e., of how "we" are in Sweden. It was related to both Sweden as a country with a Christian cultural heritage and to articulations defining "the Other", the deviant. In the latter case, the secularist and the national discourses enforced each other. Criticism and negative articulations regarding Sweden or being Swedish were essentially absent. In the classroom practice observed, Swedish culture had positive connotations, such as individualism and tolerance (cf. Ariely 2011; Berggren and Trägårdh 2006; Danielsson Malmros 2012; Hjerm 2000). This stood in contrast to the "rest of world", "in other parts of the world", and "in other countries" where

there are views, behaviours and practices that are different and un-Swedish. Although nobody claimed that Sweden is still a "unified society" [Swedish: enhetssamhälle], there were strong notions of Sweden as a homogeneous society, and these ideas became clear in the encounter with "the Other" (cf. Azar 2006; Mattsson 2001, 2005).

One can ask why this is and what implications for connotations of "Swedishness as Christian" this might have. It was apparent that when Sweden was described as Christian in the classroom practice observed there were vague references made to religiosity and spirituality. Nevertheless, Swedish society can largely be described as post-Christian and strongly influenced by the Lutheran Protestantism that dominated Swedish society for centuries. This will consequently affect how teachers and students relate to the subject. Berglund (2013) describes RE as being "marinated in Lutheran Protestantism" despite the fact that the subject is supposed to be neutral and objective. The very notion of how the concept of religion is understood tends to focus to a high degree on beliefs and not on practices or other aspects that can be described in terms of lived religion. Holidays and festivals given attention are primarily Christian, and in discussions about Christianity, this particular religion is loaded with positive connotations of values of liberal democracy whereas other religions tend to be associated with authoritarian rule. The Lutheran heritage can hence be seen as part of an unarticulated and unconscious pre-understanding even though there is no explicit reference made to this worldview. In Swedish RE, as well as in the classrooms of this study, the religious traditions touched up were mainly represented through "the man, the book and the faith" (Berglund 2014), which also can be seen as part of a Lutheran heritage. When the students were asked what they perceived as religion, they replied "faith" and "church" (Excerpt 97). The two holidays referred to the most were Christmas and Easter, although holidays such as Eid al-fitr/Bajram, Chanukah, Vesak and Diwali were also talked about in the classrooms, especially when there were students that were part of the different religious traditions who celebrate these holidays.

Lahdenperä (2001) discusses curriculum statements on shared values as being either an excluding or an including discourse. She points out that Sweden is and has for a long time been a multicultural society in terms of population, but the national identity and the school have been ethnically and monoculturally Swedish. The results in this chapter confirm her findings. The question is: what happens in society itself when classroom practice implies monocultural notions, i.e., when a large group of the students can be described as being post-national and have roots in many cultures, and thus have a multicultural identity? In the RE classroom practice observed, there were tendencies toward encompassing a national imagination that encompassed diversity, but simultaneously there were articulations stressing "the Swedish" in a more monoculturalist way.

The Swedish educational system can in many respects be described as monocultural and it thus creates images of both self and other. It is clear that Muslims are often taken to represent “the Other”. This is the case in school, in society, and in the public debate (Gardell 2011; Larsson 2006; von der Lippe 2009). The risk that RE might contribute to othering is highlighted in several other studies (cf. Alberts 2007; Bråten 2013; Moulin 2011, 2015; Osbeck and Lied 2011). This entailed a distanced approach in relation to religion as such and toward believers. Religious people were articulated as “the Other” (cf. Loomba 2005; Said 2003 [1979]). When religious people belonging to various traditions are made “the Other” in the classroom and this is not problematised and presented as one of several positions in relation to the subject content, this might inhibit the understanding of different interpretations and different people with diverse backgrounds, which is part of the aim of the subject of RE.

Chapter 9
Concluding Discussion

Abstract Classroom practice reflects in many ways the society in which it comes into being, and in it traces of societal discussions and dilemmas are clearly discernible. However, different school subjects frame the discussion in different ways, and discourses found in a classroom where Mathematics or English is being taught will differ from those that emerge in the Religious Education classroom. The aim of the study that was presented in this book is to examine and analyse how Religious Education can be socially constructed in classroom practice in the contemporary, pluralistic context of Sweden. This has been done through analysing teachers' and students' articulations in relation to RE lessons in order to understand what discourses of religion, religions and worldviews might be articulated in the context of Religious Education in classroom practice. The analysis has focused on the discourses and how they are articulated, and I will in this final chapter discuss the possible implications of these discourses in relation to the construction of the subject itself. First, a summary of the results will be presented, and thereafter a discussion of relations between the discourses and how different concepts emerged in different discourses will be given space. The difficulties in, and aspects of, analysing a subject in practice will be elaborated upon as will the didaktik implications of the discourses for Religious Education practice.

9.1 A Brief Summary of the Results

Even if the educational system can in some ways be seen as inflexible, conservative and difficult to change, education and school subjects are marked by the times of which they are a part. Just as Swedish society has undergone major changes in the last century, so has the subject of RE in Sweden. From having a confessional orientation in Christianity, the subject today is non-confessional and is greatly influenced by notions of secularism that are prevalent in Swedish society. This study concerns the social construction of RE in classroom practice. All of the classrooms observed were different, and there were many processes in play. Nonetheless, three discourses of religion, religions and worldviews were discernible in all of them – a secularist one, a spiritual one and a Swedishness discourse.

A secularist discourse was hegemonic during the lessons observed and implied that religion was something outdated and belonged to a time before science had

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provided humankind with reliable answers. A non-religious, atheistic position was articulated as a neutral and unbiased stance in relation to the subject matter and was associated with being a rational, critically thinking person. Individualism and making individual, rational choices were articulated as superior values in relation to different aspects of religion.

This discourse was, however, challenged at some points through other ways of talking about religion, which in some respects included features that can be labelled spiritual. In the classrooms observed, existential questions about the continuation of life after death and the meaning of life, and articulations about the existence of “something greater” were articulated. When this spiritual discourse was in play, the articulations were of a less certain kind and had the character of explorative discussions. Being “religious”, or being part of a religious tradition that is considered to be one of the world religions, was linked to articulations of oppression and submitting to irrational rules. Spirituality, on the other hand, was associated with private religiosity and personal choices as well as with finding an authentic self and aspects of something divine inside oneself. In this sense, the spiritual discourse was perfectly compatible with the individualism of the secularist discourse. The spiritual discourse challenged the secularist discourse in the sense that a spiritual dimension – a continuation of life after death or the possible existence of some kind of supra-empirical energy or being – was articulated as possible component of a personal worldview.

Articulations of Sweden as a Christian country also challenged the secularist discourse to some extent. In the Swedishness discourse, Swedishness was linked to the Christian history of Sweden and to Christian traditions and values. This discourse, however, was activated when defining a “we” in relation to “the Other”, not when talking about personal beliefs.

How the teaching was organised tended to initiate different discourses. Through instruction structuring the content religion-by-religion, the secularist discourse tended to come into play and dominate the classroom conversation in contrast to when a thematic approach was used. The results of the observations indicate that when the secularist discourse dominated the classroom practice, this resulted in difficulties reaching the aims of the subject concerning diversity and tolerance as they are stated in the curricula; furthermore, this discourse also hindered the students from developing a nuanced understanding of the RE content.

9.2 Discourses of Religion, Religions and Worldviews

Upon entering the classrooms and when conducting participant observations, I did not know which discourses of religion, religions and worldviews would be articulated in the RE practice. Early on during the observation period, I was struck by how strong the articulations of a secularist character were in the classroom and how this way of talking dominated the RE classroom. The analyses of the transcribed audio files showed that the secularist discourse was hegemonic and was the dominant discourse of religion, religions and worldviews in all classrooms observed. A

secularist way of approaching the subject content was perceived as a natural and objective one to take. However, a discourse, even a hegemonic one, is always a partial and temporary fixing of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). As has been shown, other discourses that in some respect challenged the hegemonic secularist discourse could also be detected in the classrooms. Still, these discourses had to operate within a framework of the secularist discourse.

Which views of religion, religions and worldviews emerged in the classrooms observed? In the formulations in the syllabus where it is stated that the teaching "should aim at helping students broaden, deepen and develop knowledge of religions, outlooks on life and ethics" (Skolverket 2011a), complexities and difficulties of the concepts of religion and worldviews (outlooks on life) are not apparent. Largely absent in the RE practice observed were aspects of religion that can be described as "lived religion" (see, for example, Ammermann 2013; McGuire 2008). The very concept of religion as first and foremost referring to texts and dogmas rather than to religion as practice and to materiality reflects a Western, historically Protestant view of religion. As this perspective has dominated the scientific study of religion, it is not surprising that this particular view of religion was articulated in the classrooms observed. This view of religion can thus be seen in light of the secularist discourse, which appropriated concepts such as neutrality, objectivity, rationality, and modernity. Simultaneously, this view of religion can be seen as part of a Swedish national discourse where religion is attributed to a limited part of life and first and foremost concerns institutions and cognitive aspects such as institutionalised defined beliefs and dogmas (cf. Excerpt 97).

There was an ongoing discursive struggle over concepts such as religion and Christianity. In the secularist discourse, religion and Christianity had connotations of oppression and submission. Admittedly, in the spiritual discourse religion was constructed as the opposite of spirituality, which had connotations of a milder, personal and more individualistic form of religiosity. But religion, as constructed by the spiritual discourse, was also associated with the quest for meaning and in this sense something genuinely human. Christianity, too, was given different meanings. In the secularist discourse, for instance, it was seen as one among the world religions and consequently had the same negative connotations as any other religion. However, in the Swedishness discourse, Christianity was associated with Swedishness, Swedish traditions, and history. In this context, Christianity was articulated as an example of a religion associated with individualistic, secularist values.

Individualism

The analysis shows that individualism in the classroom practice observed emerged as a superior value, one that everybody had to relate to regardless of discourse. To be seen as an individualistic, conscious, rational, acting agent was articulated as being of the utmost importance. This was shown, for example, through negotiations of the voluntary nature of religious acts within Islam (Excerpt 25) and articulations

about a secular Sweden where private religiosity dominates (Excerpt 29). Individualism was articulated as a core value not only within the secularist discourse but also in the spiritual discourse. When this discourse was at play, the individual was at the centre, and spirituality was associated with finding and affirming a true, authentic inner self. In the spiritual sphere, individual choices and autonomy were constructed in contrast to religiosity, which was instead associated with blind obedience and subordination. In the spiritual discourse, the divine was articulated in terms of a force, power or energy, which admittedly might affect the individual but which cannot control or punish him or her, as could a "traditional religious god".

Articulations related to individualism operated in slightly different ways in the private discourse compared to the academic, rational discourse. In the private discourse, individualism was articulated in terms of more student-oriented instruction, and there first-person articulations such as "I think" and "I'm a Muslim" were expressed. In the academic rational discourse, which was more prevalent in programmes that were preparatory for higher education, making individual, independent choices regarding all kinds of topics was an absolutely essential value. The students rarely articulated their personal positions regarding any religious tradition but instead used articulations in the third-person, which gave the conversation a more general character. It is worth noting, however, that it was possible to articulate positions in the first person if these were related to atheism, even in programmes that were preparatory for higher education, and this can be seen as a sign of the hegemony of the secularist discourse.

Individualism was strongly linked to perceptions of Swedishness. To the degree that Swedishness and religiosity were related, they were subordinate to individualism. Christianity was accepted as long as it could be characterised as being individualistic (cf. Excerpt 38). Swedishness also seems to be a central value in the RE classroom, and although it was associated with individualism, it can still be described in terms of a collective and shared identity, which is why the link to individualism is to some extent inconsistent. This paradox is commonly cited in literature describing Sweden (see, for example, Berggren and Trägårdh 2006). "Swedishness" and the "Swedish mentality", for example, are characterised as strong, private individualism accompanied by public collectivism and a constant quest for consensus together with a strong belief in the state as a guarantor of individual freedom and equality. Individualism and the simultaneous pursuit of consensus had implications for how to talk about Swedishness and religion in the classroom. Nationalism has had a remarkable ability to unite people and get them to ignore personal, social and economic (and religious?) differences. But nationalism is by nature also distinctive – people who are not perceived as part of the nation (regardless of the grounds on which the nation's sense of community is built) are inevitably "the Other". The foundation of nationalism is "us" and "them". When the nationalist discourse was at play in the classrooms, articulations of religious positions were linked to identity rather than to religious beliefs. Through the othering of certain groups, a more coherent "we" emerged.

Something-ism

In the two classes where students were asked to formulate their own worldview and what and how they thought regardless of whether they identified with one of the world religions or not, a few students clearly identified with some of the world religions. The largest groups formulated positions that included a spiritual dimension, a "belief in something". This "something-ism" is recognised in research and rather than being a belief in a personal god (or several), it implies vague, non-committal articulations of beliefs in some supernatural, transcendent being and is therefore easier to reconcile with individualism than traditional religions. "Something-ism" is in some ways already the biggest "religion" in northern Europe (Margry 2012). This is consistent with the picture conveyed in the student essays and to some extent in the classroom discussions. That so many students in their written essays articulated a position of a "something-ism" that can be described as spiritual but did not by far articulate this to the same extent can be seen as a sign of the hegemony of the secularist discourse.

All the discourses, except to some extent the private discourse, excluded religious subject-positions. Despite the fact that the secularist discourse encompassed notions of freedom of thought and the existence of many parallel truths, a religious subject-position was associated with strongly negative connotations. A relativistic approach toward truth claims in general was frequently articulated (see, for example, excerpts 3 and 4), but the dismissal of religiously related perspectives was articulated as false in absolute terms. The understanding of the concept of religion was based on the perception of religion that is related to religion as an institution, texts and dogmas, not to religion as lived practices, and this contributed to the exclusion of religious subject-positions (cf. McGuire 2008). However, a discursive construction of a subject-position containing a personal worldview seemed to be a possible position in the RE practice observed regardless of discourse. These personal worldviews might include perspectives that could be described as being spiritual or religious. How can this be understood? One possible reason might be that notions of a personal worldview opened up for the existence of parallel and divergent interpretations of life. In the classrooms observed, demands made on a personal worldview in terms of consistency and coherence seemed be lower than was the case for a worldview stemming from an organised religion, and the personal worldviews were not examined in the same critical way. The way a personal worldview was described in the classrooms observed was perfectly compatible with individualism and was thus a possible position to take, even if it in individual cases might include ontological positions beyond the secularist, non-religious realm.

Representations of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism

RE instruction should, according to the Swedish syllabus, be non-confessional and neutral in relation to different religions and worldviews. However, as was revealed in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8, different religions were represented in different ways in the classrooms observed. This has been shown in the empirical chapters, and I will here summarise images of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism in relation to the secularist, spiritual and Swedishness discourses as interesting features of the way these religions emerged in the empirical material of the study.

Within the secularist discourse, Christians were articulated as "they", and Christianity was described as a negative worldview (Excerpt 65). In small-group discussions, students who positioned themselves as Christians expressed the opinion that they saw themselves as a minority group in a secular culture (cf. Holmqvist Lied 2016; Moulin 2011, 2015). These students articulated that they had no problem with meeting and respecting atheists but they on the other hand felt that they were not always met with the same respect. When Christianity was constructed in relation to Islam, Christianity appeared as being rational and Western, but in relation to the secularist discourse Christianity became one of many religions and an example of something obsolete and irrational. Christianity and Islam were partly constructed in relation to each other, where Christianity became modern while Islam was seen as retained in a time that had passed. Islam was about submitting to (irrational) religious rules, which was not consistent with individualism. In conjunction with teaching about Islam, Lars Vilks' roundabout dogs[1] and Mohammed cartoons were discussed in the classrooms observed, and this instance became in many ways just another example of Muslims (over)reacting, or being irrational and strange. Islam was thus often represented in the classroom by extreme groups, not moderate, liberal ones (cf. Otterbeck 2005). Buddhism, on the other hand, was articulated as being perfectly compatible with the secularist discourse, and it was stressed that there is no god in Buddhism, a factor that was seen as being positive and more "rational". Buddhism in the RE classrooms observed seemed in many respects to be a sensible, "feel-good philosophy" consistent with an individualistic approach. Buddhism is, as one of the students articulated (Excerpt 15): "Be nice! Don't kill anybody! There is no god and no... Yeah, stupid, fucking holy war".

When the spiritual discourse was in play, spirituality and religiosity were articulated as being utterly separate. Islam was never referred to in relation to any spiritual dimension, while Buddhism was spirituality, not religion. However, it was a rather abstract kind of Buddhism that was articulated, i.e., the idea of Buddhism, not so much related to knowledge and facts about Buddhist practices and doctrines (cf.

[1] In 2007, the artist Lars Vilks presented cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in the guise of a "roundabout dog", a kind of street installation in Sweden. This led to both international and national reactions as well as to a heated debate about the freedom of speech in relation to respect for religious believers. In the debate, the intentions of this "art" were questioned. For a discussion of Lars Vilks' "art" that relates his activities to increasing Islamophobia in Europe, see, for example, Malm (2011) and Orrenius (2016).

Thurfjell 2013). When Christianity was the topic of conversation, the discussions sometimes tended to move toward existential issues, which can be seen as being related to the spiritual discourse, and this was the case more frequently in relation to Christianity compared to when other religions were discussed.

The analysis shows that the kind of Christianity that was constructed in relation to the Swedishness discourse was a Christianity related to history and tradition and not a Christianity that "stands out" (see, for example, Excerpt 85), but one which instead was created as something different to "dangerous" Islam. Christianity, unlike Islam, was described as something that does not pervade one's entire life but is instead a separate part of life. In the classrooms observed, it was articulated that "they" must adapt to "us", and in this sense Islam was constructed as something different to what is Swedish. That God in Islam is described as merciful and as a peacemaker was a fact that had difficulty "reaching" students, partly due to the fact that there were no counter-images presented in relation to the mainstream media image of Islam that associated Islam with suicide bombers and terrorism (cf. von der Lippe 2009). Buddhism was not seen as "typically Swedish" but was however associated with certain values such as tolerance and respect and thus became easier to incorporate.

9.3 Social Constructions of a Subject in Practice

As a practice is always unfixed and changeable, one can ask whether it is possible to describe the construction of a subject through analysing classroom practice, which in the case of this study has been considered as a discursive practice. Nevertheless, or maybe because of its shifting character, I argue that it is important to look into the classrooms and not avoid processes and complexities of the classroom practice as this is where the actual education takes place.

A classroom practice is constantly shifting – students act differently and say different things, instruction relates to different themes, teachers use various strategies to awaken students' interest while trying to fulfil their expectations and challenge their earlier understandings (Deng and Luke 2008; Englund 1997). Considering the wide variation in what takes place in the different classrooms from lesson to lesson, is it still possible to talk about construction of a school subject in this unfixed changing practice? I argue that it is possible to talk about RE as a specific practice. The same discourses recur in different classrooms and are articulated by different people in somewhat different ways but with similar meaning. To compare with a vocational practice where a certain vocational jargon (i.e., discourse) recurs, the subject frames the articulations in similar ways. For example, we hold that there certain discourses characterise a given profession, i.e., a vocational practice. This does not mean that all aspects of the vocational jargon/discourse are constantly in use; sometimes other discourses come to the fore. Nevertheless, it is possible to maintain that a certain vocational practice is characterised by certain discourses (Billett 2011; Granér 2004), and such is also the case with RE practice. The study was carried at a time

when one syllabus (Skolverket 2006) was being phased out and replaced with a new one (Skolverket 2011a). Only two of the classes followed the new syllabus, and how the new syllabus affects RE classroom practice needs to be studied further. Based on the results of this study, however, there were no apparent differences in the classroom practice in classes that studied according to each respective syllabus. When asked, the teachers emphasised the similarities between the new and the previous syllabus and concluded that they could continue teaching the way they used to. This can be seen as an argument for the importance for researchers entering the classroom to gain understanding of the construction of school subjects.

On the other hand, is it possible to turn this around and argue that these discourses also construct practice? Ongstad (2012) maintains that the process moves in both ways. All articulations within a school subject are influenced by "structuring forms of communication" at the macro-level, which he describes as the potential meaning of articulations. How this is articulated in the classroom affects the way the discourses are interpreted and understood. RE practice can thus be seen as being social and communicative actions within a discursive practice (cf. Ongstad 2012). How the subject is understood, or how the "offer of meaning" (Englund 1997) is perceived, is dependent upon both the text (content) and the context, i.e., the perceived content in a specific context, and who it is that creates the premises for meaning making. In this sense, the discourses articulated in the RE classroom can be seen as constructing the subject.

Students' understandings and expectations influence what happens in the classroom. One feature that makes RE to some extent special is that some students have a personal relationship to the subject, regardless if this involves a religious or nonreligious position. Today, many students have no personal relationship to religious traditions (i.e., the subject content). However, sometimes during the observations the students related to religions and worldviews as if it might be possible to have a personal relation to the content, i.e., the possible choice of becoming an insider of a religion. This might contribute to students expressing opinions out of a personal conviction and a personal worldview, even if they articulate the opinion in the third person and in generalist terms as in the case of the academic rational discourse.

The subject is non-confessional and derives its content from the academic discipline of the study of religion and in this respect has the outsider perspective. Regardless of this, the insider's (i.e., emic) perspective on beliefs, practices, religions and worldviews is just as important if aims related to understanding worldviews held by other human beings, as stated in the syllabus (Skolverket 2000a, 2011a), are to be reached. In the lessons observed, the students were sometimes encouraged to reflect upon how they perceived the RE content on a personal level. Put differently, within the subject, there are possibilities for relating to themes linked to interpretations of life and which might thus be linked to the process of identity construction. Therefore the "offer of meaning" in RE might include meaning-making on another level compared to several other school subjects. This can also be seen in relation to the debate within the RE field of learning in, learning about and learning from (Grimmitt 1987; Teece 2010) and notions of reflexivity and edification (Jackson 2009). Reflexivity within RE can be defined as "…the

relationship between the experience of researcher/students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret" (Jackson 2009, p. 25). Reflexivity therefore concerns one's own understanding in relation to new knowledge. Jackson points out that RE is not just about learning about others, but also concerns learning about oneself and traditions the students are part of. The worldviews of the students become a factor in the understanding and interpretation of a religious tradition. Reflexivity is also about reflecting upon the content of the instruction and, in a detached manner, critically examining various religious practices. This competence is central to a multi-religious society, where respect for differences and being able to take on different perspectives are important and part of intercultural education and learning. To reflect upon one's own learning process is also part of what Jackson (2009) describes as *edification*.[2] In this sense, all genuine learning involves learning about and learning from – new knowledge gives new insights and perspectives and might be an opportunity for reorientation. And in this respect RE is just like any other subject.

Another aspect related to the contingency of the subject and RE as an "offer of meaning" is linked to the private discourse and the focus on reproducing facts. The students' analytical abilities, stressed in the syllabus, were neglected in classrooms where the private discourse dominated and the students did not get to practice and thereby develop their cognitive skills and analytical abilities. This result can be seen in relation to studies analysing other subjects (Andersson Varga 2014; Korp 2006; Norlund 2009). Another problem with a one-sided focus on "surface facts" might be that the students' knowledge becomes shallow and a poor base for understanding and analysing aspects of religion, religions and worldviews in different contexts. If religion is reduced to trivial facts, the subject does not enhance understanding of what religion might mean, neither in society nor in a person's life, which is stated as a goal of RE in the syllabus.

9.4 Didaktik Implications for Religious Education Practice

Due to secularity and increasing societal diversity, RE is found in the midst of the field of tension and questions of freedom of religion vs. secularity, monoculturality vs. multiculturality, and questions of how to create homogeneity in heterogeneity, i.e., about tolerance and neutrality.

[2] Jackson (1997) argues that even though there are similarities in the way Gimmitt uses learning in/about/from and the concept of edification, there are differences in how they view religion as a coherent system of beliefs and the way that Grimmitt sees learning as an overall aim for all students. In the context of non-confessional RE in Sweden, which includes both religious and non-religious worldviews, I would, however, suggest a more neutral definition of the concept of edification – you can learn important things about the world and yourself through studying worldviews, regardless of whether you strongly dislike them or not. In this sense, you can both learn about but also from learning about Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as learning about Satanism, Nazism and destructive sects.

Constructs of "we" and "the Other"

The school has historically been and still is the one institution that contributes to the construction of an imagined monocultural society (Carlsson and Rabo 2007; Mansourim 2015; Tesfahuney 1999). It thus reproduces and maintains opinions and discourses perceived as normality and truth. The secularist discourse was hegemonic in the RE classrooms observed, which meant that positions perceived to be outside that norm appeared as being abnormal and deviant. When the secularist discourse became hegemonic, religion and faith were associated with outdated irrational and unintelligent attitudes. This discourse in combination with the national discourse contributed to the othering of religious people in general and Muslims in particular. The Swedishness discourse was admittedly linked to a Christian history and to traditions rather than beliefs, but above all this discourse was a discourse where Swedishness was defined by talking about features incompatible with Swedishness. To be "extreme", i.e., to have a faith that affects everyday activities or that was visible in the public space, was perceived as being un-Swedish – religion could possibly be accepted as long as it was kept within the limits of what was perceived as being "moderate". In principle and in the name of tolerance, religious minorities were accepted, but deviation from the majority norm was not accepted (cf. Otterbeck and Hallin 2010).

Hall (2005) emphasises that identity construction is something contextual (rather than something historical) and that in a global world boundaries between "us" and "other" emerge. There was a strong tendency toward creating a "we" in the classroom. This predisposition might be part of human nature, and identity processes are created in terms of binary oppositions, e.g., in closeness and distance, me and you, and us and them. The question is how this "we" is constructed and in relation to what and to whom? (cf. Danielsson Malmros 2012) A "we-and-them mentality", in which "we" was characterised by an identity based on anti-Muslimness rather than on a Christian identity, was discernible in the classrooms of this study (cf. Malm 2011). Sweden has been a nation where the relationship between ethnicity and nationality has officially been identical. The construction of Sweden as homogeneous and monocultural has been maintained not least through the school system, teaching, textbooks, literature and the media (Carlsson and Rabo 2007; Ehn et al. 1993; Lahdenperä 2001; Larsson 2006; Tesfahuney 1999).

In the syllabus for RE, it is stated that "They [the students] should be given the opportunity to reflect upon and analyse people's values and beliefs, and thus develop respect and understanding for different ways of thinking and living" (Skolverket 2011a). Based on the observations I conducted and analysed, it is my argument that in Swedish RE-practice, talking about religion and individuals who consider themselves and/or are considered by others as part of a religious tradition in the way it was done impedes an understanding of people of various religious worldviews and of social phenomena related to religion. Through an unreflective approach to these discourses, RE can, in a worst-case scenario, contribute to creating, reproducing and maintaining stigmatising beliefs about people with different backgrounds and thus

contribute to segregation and intolerance. Dealing with this stereotyping of "others", I maintain, is one major challenge for RE (cf. ter Avest et al. 2009). If the secularist discourse and othering of those having religious beliefs becomes dominant in the RE classroom, this has consequences both for individual students and society and is also problematic from a didaktik of RE perspective, as the objectives formulated in the syllabus are subsequently not reached.

There is much written about RE as a meeting place for students with different background as well as about the subject's potential for creating social cohesion and contributing to tolerance and respect (Castelli 2012; Jackson Miedema et al. 2007; O'Grady 2009; Watson 2011). I share the view that education in general and specific subjects, like RE, may function as a positive and integrating factor in the creation of a society characterised by tolerance and respect and as a forum that might counteract prejudice and contribute to empathy. Still, classroom studies of RE highlight that classroom practice in different ways tends to contain segments that do not contribute to a mutual understanding or respect for individuals (Buchardt 2008; Eriksen 2010; Osbeck and Lied 2011), which is in line with the results of this study.

Managing Diversity

The fact that the discourses identified in the empirical material of this study exist in the classrooms is not surprising as they are well documented in other contexts (cf. af Burén 2015; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Thurfjell 2015). The Swedishness discourse and the discourse of othering present in relation to RE is also recognised in other studies (see, for example, Buchardt 2008, 2010; Eriksen 2010). However, secularism in relation to the RE classroom is not studied in this way. In the classrooms observed, the secularist discourse was used as a way to manage diversity, as secularism was perceived as being a neutral perspective. In a society characterised by diversity, one needs to learn to manage differences. In secularism, religion has been made into something special, a special case. In this context, I would like to highlight Taylor's (2011) proposal that we treat religion as "a difference among differences". In the debate on secularity, Taylor (2011) argues for a redefinition of a secularity that comprises how democratic societies deal with diversity. From this perspective, religious beliefs should be treated like any other beliefs that exist in a pluralistic contemporary society – no position, neither Christian, Muslim, atheist, religious nor non-religious, has "more right" to dominate than any other. Religion should not be treated as a "special case" but as an idea among other ideas, and Taylor (2011) stresses that this also applies to non-religious attitudes. In the classrooms observed, the secular discourse was sometimes used deliberately as a way to manage pluralism, as it was perceived as being a neutral position in relation to the subject content, i.e., to the variety of views and opinions that exist within the subject, but also in relation to students' personal experiences and perceptions. The secularist discourse become a way of dealing with pluralism in the classroom and the community. From the perspective of Taylor's (2011) approach to secularity, this

is problematic, as it treats religion as a special case and not one opinion among others.

Schools are located in the intersection between public and private spaces. On the one hand, a school is a public sphere and part of the state that allocates resources and sets the framework in the form of school law, curriculum and syllabus. Meanwhile, the classrooms are populated by people, i.e., by teachers and students, and the classrooms are part of their everyday life. The students are also expected to engage in learning which inevitably involves the student as a person. Freedom of religion must be an ongoing process, where people meet and live together in spite of and because of similarities and differences. A secular, non-religious perspective is a relevant and legitimate perspective in non-confessional, integrative RE, but it is not a neutral perspective, which means that it might be problematic if it becomes hegemonic as it excludes other equally relevant and legitimate perspectives in RE practice.

Whether Sweden ever was a homogenous country can be debated; however, today Sweden is indisputably a multicultural country in terms of background, language and religion.[3] So, is it possible to challenge and nuance the hegemonic secularist discourse so as to increase the opportunities for a more multifaceted understanding? After engaging in participant observation in different classrooms for more than a hundred lessons, it is my claim that just the awareness of and reflections about the fact that these discourses tend to dominate classroom practice can contribute to teachers becoming able to nuance what is being said in the classroom, how the discourses are articulated in the classroom, and how various articulations can be perceived from different perspectives. In "an education of small gestures" (Bergdahl 2010), it matters what is done in the classroom, what questions are asked, how these questions are formulated and how we see and relate to each other through glances, gestures and tones of voice. This is critical for how students can relate to questions about religion, democracy and diversity.

When the spiritual discourse was in play, the secularist discourse was nuanced, which permitted several different ways of talking about religion to coexist. By talking about religion as one among many worldviews it also became possible to speak about a spiritual dimension as part of some people's worldviews. Based on a psychological perspective, it was articulated that humans by definition are interpretive and meaning-making beings. In this process of interpretation, different people choose different ways and come to diverse conclusions. Hence, it became possible to understand that there exist different positions, i.e., spiritual, religious and non-religious.

[3] More than 21% (Statistics Sweden 2015) of the population were born in another country or has two parents who were born in another country, and the number of people and families having one parent born in another country or having a husband, wife, son-, daughter-, brother- or sister-in-law with background from a place other than Sweden is doubtlessly considerably greater.

Different Ways of Organising Teaching

It is worth noting that the way instruction was organised also activated different discourses. When teaching was organised based on religion- after-religion plus ethics, it tended to activate the secularist discourse to a greater extent compared to a thematic organisation based on themes and concepts. When each religion was treated separately, the focus was more often on facts about dogmas and texts.[4] Although the same aspects of religions reappeared in the different religions, the comparative perspective was not very prominent, but every religion tended to be presented as a different "package" or object. Although many of the teachers stressed that they presented a "prototype" or simplified picture of the different world religions and that there were many different traditions within the broader tradition, etc., this still contributed to the essentialisation of religion and to making religion and believers seem strange and irrational as followers of this "package", regardless of whether the essentialisation was positive or negative (cf. Hylén 2012). Because individualism was articulated as such a central value, any follower of a fixed "worldview package" – religious, ideological or otherwise – appeared as a less independent person. This way of presenting religions as (solely) dogmas and texts also reduced nuances and contributed to a more categorical approach in which the answers were right or wrong and where teaching content was assessed in terms of good or bad and true or false. All descriptions of reality must necessarily be simplifications of a complex, multidimensional and changing world. Generalisations are necessary, both in order to be able to communicate with other people about complex features but also as a condition for understanding and orientating oneself in life. The problems arise when we believe that these simplifications are the whole reality, that Catholicism "is" the seven sacraments and the doctrine of papal infallibility, or that we know what Islam "is" if we know the five pillars of Islam and that Mohammed is the Prophet and messenger of God. If the teaching of these facts is not related to historical, social and religious contexts and practices and in different ways made to involve questions about what the sacraments or pillars possibly can mean for different groups and individuals in different contexts, it is a kind of "offer of meaning" that does not to any great extent contribute to students' understanding and meaning-making.

When organising the teaching thematically, based on different themes and concepts while including personal worldviews and a life-question-approach, the spiritual discourse was activated to a higher degree compared to when the teaching was structured according to a string of world religions. In the thematic way of working, the explorative, tentative and reflective conversations were more frequent, and RE in terms of an "offer of meaning making" was made more nuanced and multidimensional. This result can be seen as the backdrop of research emphasising

[4] Generally, the teaching contained origin and history, important people, sacred texts, central beliefs and two or three main branches. Berglund (2014) points to the fact that this way of organising the content of the teaching is strongly influenced by a Lutheran Protestant understanding of religion.

communicative aspects of RE classrooms and dialogue as a method and pedagogical tool (Castelli 2012; Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; van Eersel et al. 2010; Watson 2011) or research concerning life-question pedagogy within RE (Hartman 1986a, 1994; Löfstedt 2013). The secularist discourse tended to generate articulations of a definite character and the conversations became more comprised of fixed statements than tentative dialogues. Osbeck and Lied (2011) argue that the way the classroom discourses are articulated, e.g., respectfully or mockingly, or whether the boundaries of religions and beliefs are defined as fixed or open, affects what is made possible to learn, and this study is in line with their result.

When teaching was organised thematically, the comparative perspective was at the centre. Thematic teaching generated other types of comparisons, which contributed to making visible other and possibly additional aspects and nuances. I maintain, based on the observations I made of teaching and the students' reasoning[5] that thematic teaching or teaching based on concepts and questions of life compared to teaching based on the religion-by-religion organising principle has greater potential to develop students' conceptual understanding and capability to generalise, compare and identify similarities and differences between and within different traditions. Put differently, teaching based on themes and concepts contributed to a greater extent to students developing second-order concepts and a scientific language (Vygotskij, 1975[1972]) or a vertical discourse (Bernstein 1999). Another advantage that one of the teachers in my study highlighted was that students who saw themselves as part of a certain tradition perceived a comparative discussion of, e.g., gender, death, or the sacred in various religious and non-religious traditions as less "intimidating and threatening" than when an entire religion was presented, and some students then felt they had to explain and defend "their" religion. Criticism and discussions became more nuanced when it became clear that, for example, within the same religion there exist a number of different approaches and that there are similarities and differences both between and within the different religious traditions and non-religious worldviews. If students are given the opportunity to reflect upon how they perceive different concepts and questions, it may become easier for students who do not have any personal religious experiences and reference points to understand and see similarities and differences between different religious and non-religious traditions and worldviews. At the same time, all choices have both advantages and disadvantages. An educational choice of this kind affects both the didaktik how-question and also questions regarding content selection. Different ways of organising teaching generate different kinds of knowledge, which inevitably means that some content must be deselected, and the teachers of this study expressed that they were uncertain whether or not the students got all the facts that traditionally make up the "canon" of RE. A risk with the thematic teaching and learning based on concepts and life-questions that appeared during the observations was a tendency for the teaching to instead become one-sidedly student-centred and that the teaching was then limited to the perspectives of the students, e.g., how they perceived such

[5] This assumption is based on my observations of the reasoning displayed by students in the classrooms I observed. I have not tested the students' reasoning abilities in any systematic way.

things as holiness, forgiveness or myth. The perspectives and prior understanding of the students are important when many of them lack the knowledge and experience of central religious concepts. However, just because students are given space to reflect upon how they understand concepts and questions of life does not mean that teaching cannot recognise the way the same concepts are perceived in different religious and non-religious worldviews. This aspect of teaching can be seen both against the background of life question-pedagogy (Hartman 1986a, 1994; Löfstedt 2013) and also as being inspired by the phenomenology of religion (Smart 1969, 1977).

Regardless of whether one chooses to organise teaching based on religion-religion plus an ethics section or from a phenomenological and/or life question-inspired lesson plan based on themes and concepts, it seems important to oscillate between an insider's and an outsider's perspective. The teaching of all subjects, not least RE, aims at making the familiar strange and the strange familiar in order to broaden understanding and give the students new perspectives.

9.5 To Be a Teacher of Religious Education – A Mission Impossible?

Schools can be seen as a reflection of our times – dilemmas, difficulties and problems that exist in society are also found in the classroom, perhaps in an especially concentrated manner. In recent decades, religion has emerged as an increasingly important factor in understanding social processes. Globalisation and migration mean greater demands on knowledge and respect in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and pluralistic. Religious Education is situated in the intersection between the public and private spheres and is a forum where the boundaries of religious freedom are explored, discussed and challenged. Religious Education can from this perspective be seen as being situated in the eye of the storm, admittedly strongly influenced by the surrounding winds, but in a more moderate and sensible space with somewhat different conditions compared to the public debate for discussing and problematising these phenomena. Based on a given framework of democratic values and human rights such as mutual respect, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, there are within RE opportunities to clarify different positions and discuss various aspects related to religion. Much of the previous research drew attention to the importance of dialogue in relation to the RE classroom (Castelli 2012; Osbeck and Lied 2011; Schihalejev 2009; Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; van Eersel et al. 2010; Watson 2011). Dialogue has primarily positive connotations and is seen as an end in itself and as a special form of communication that contributes to learning. Sometimes it is stated that the classroom needs to be a "safe space" (cf. Everington 2015; ter Avest et al. 2009). Based on the observations I made, I share the view that students need to feel safe in order to face what is new and what can be perceived as being foreign and also to dare to expose lack of knowledge. Meanwhile,

a classroom must not be "too" safe. Dialogue is often presented in opposition to disagreement. I would emphasise that disagreement, in the sense of differing views about content, is an integral part of every classroom practice and can serve as a resource in teaching. Students' prior understanding needs to be challenged and problematised – otherwise no learning will take place. However, it is the teacher's task to ensure that students are not offended or harassed in the classroom practice and that in this sense the classroom is a safe space where there is tolerance for different views (cf. Skeie 2009).

All the teachers in this study had the ambition to enhance their students' understanding of religion and religiosity. In their work, they encountered different impediments, which they handled in different ways. An obstacle many of the teachers pointed to was the time at the course's disposal. In about 30–40 h during one semester or an academic year, everything should be done – teaching about and reflecting upon different aspects and nuances of various religious traditions, non-religious worldviews and ethics, as well as the assessment of this. Alongside this, there is a variety of group processes, positioning and relationship-building taking place. Learning is a process that needs time.

The analysis also showed that the teachers in many cases did not follow up on comments of a condescending nature. The reason for this might be that they simply did not hear the comments, or that they did not perceive them as problematic, or that they did not know how to deal with them. The results of this study point to the importance of teachers being aware of the discourses dominating the classroom practice in order to make various perspectives explicit but also to the significance of teachers' professional skills concerning how to enhance a constructive dialogue in the classroom. Teaching Religious Education might be difficult, as the task is multifaceted and includes complex considerations and compromises. It is, however, an extremely important job, and ultimately I perceive all teachers, not least teachers of Religious Education, as being "front workers" of democracy.

Appendices

Appendix 1

The subject of Religious Education in Swedish Grammar Schools and Upper Secondary School 1807–2011

Year	Curricula or policy document	Name of the subject	Teaching-hours/week
1807	**The School order of 1807** [*1807 års skolordning*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*] including church history, morality and natural law	4–5
1828	**The committee report of 1828** [*1828 års kommittébetänkande*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	5–6
1843	**The school audits of 1843** (**New elementary school)** [*1843 års skolrevision (nya ementarskolan)]*	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*] including bible Greek	3
1856	**The Grammar Schools Charter of 1856** [*1856 års läroverksstadga*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2
1859	**The Grammar Schools Charter of 1859** [*1859 års läroverksstadga*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2
1873	**The Grammar Schools Charter of 1873** [*1873 års läroverkstadga (riksdagsbeslut)]*	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2
1878	**The Grammar Schools Charter of 1878** [*1878 års läroverksstadga]*	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2
1895	**The teaching curriculum of 1895** [*1895 års undervisningsplan*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2
1905	**The New grammar schools Charter** [*Nya läroverksstadgan*]	**Christianity** [*Kristendom*]	2

(continued)

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Year	Curricula or policy document	Name of the subject	Teaching-hours/week
1928	**The New Grammar School's Charter together with teaching plans** [*Nya läroverksstadgan jämte undervisningsplaner*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*] Strong emphasis on the history of religion, Church history, knowledge of the Biblical narratives and the life of Jesus. Knowledge of the Eastern and the classic ancient religions. The teaching should take place *"in a manner that promotes the disciples' religious and moral development"*.	2
1933	**The Grammar School's Charter of 1933** [*1933 års läroverksstadga*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*] Instruction should *"urge the disciples to serious reflection on religious and ethical issues, impart a deeper insight into the history of Christianity and its faith and belief, and in connection therewith a more thorough knowledge of foreign religions"*	2
1940	**The Board of Education report of 1940** [*1940 års skolutredningsbetänkande*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*]	2 h/week 3–4 years
1952	**"The New Upper Secondary School" The Royal National Board of Education proposed provisional reform of Upper Secondary School** ["*Det nya gymnasiet" Kungliga skolöverstyrelsens förslag till provisorisk gymnasiereform*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*] A general knowledge subject, must be included in all Upper Secondary Programs. Personality fostering; "*The subject of Knowledge of Christianity could more than most other subjects be an instrument for personality and character fostering, which is the school's most important task. The teaching of this subject should give students awareness of the issue's seriousness and life-changing importance, and based on their own experiences and their own preferences build a personal philosophy of life"*.	1–2 h/week 3–4 years

(continued)

Year	Curricula or policy document	Name of the subject	Teaching-hours/week
1955	**Methodical instructions for the teaching of Knowledge of Christianity in Upper Secondary School** [*Metodiska anvisningar för undervisningen i kristendomskunskap i gymnasiet.*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*] Church History and Church Knowledge, The Christian faith and view of life. Secularization. Teaching should relate to contemporary society and contemporary debates of religion Teaching should take up statements that question the Christian worldview, *"Christianity and idealism, creationism and evolution, Nietzschean Ûbermensch and Christian "man of faith", Christian and secular approach to social problems".*	1–2 h/week 3–4 years
1960	**Syllabus and methodological guidelines Upper Secondary School** [*Kursplaner och metodiska anvisningar för gymnasiet 1960*]	**Knowledge of Christianity** [*Kristendomskunskap*]	1–2 h/week 3–4 years
1965	**The Swedish Government's Official Report on the Upper Secondary School** [*1960 års gymnasieutredning*]	**Knowledge of religion** [*Religionskunskap*]	
1965	**The 1965 curriculum for Upper Secondary School** [*1965 års läroplan för gymnasiet*]	**Knowledge of religion** [*Religionskunskap*]	2–3 h/week in one year, only certain programs
1970	**The Curriculum for Upper Secondary School, Lgy 70. Different syllabus for two-year vocational programs and three to four-year programs that are preparatory for higher education.** [*1970 års läroplan*]	**Knowledge of religion** [*Religionskunskap*]	
1994	**The Curriculum for the Voluntary School Forms, Lpf 94** [*1994 års läroplan för de frivilliga skolformerna, Lpf 94*]	**Knowledge of religion** [*Religionskunskap*]	30–50 h i.e. 45 min-1 h/week in one year. All programs
2011	**The Curriculum of 2011 for Upper Secondary School, Lgy 11** [*2011 års läroplan för gymnasieskolan, Lgy 11*]	**Knowledge of religion** [*Religionskunskap*]	30–50 h i.e. 45 min-1 h/week in one year All programs

Appendix 2

Comparison of syllabus of Religious Education in terms of content and skills in the curricula of Lpf 94 (Re1201) and Lgy 11 (RELREL01)

	Content Re1201	Content RELREL01	Skills in Re1201	Skills in RELREL01
Aim/central content	How religion and belief are reflected in the way people think and act Christianity, world religions and views of life; expressions, beliefs, ideas Relate subject content to everyday life and work Ethics and morals Values in Society Different ways of thinking about life, faith, ethics Importance of having one's own values	Christianity, the other world religions and different outlooks on life, their characteristics and how they are expressed by individuals and groups in the present, in Sweden and the world. Different views of human beings and God within and between religions. Religion in relation to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity and sexuality. The identities of groups and individuals and how they can be shaped in relation to religion and outlooks on life, such as written sources, traditions and historical and contemporary events. Different views of the relationship between religion and science in current public debates. Interpretation and analysis of different theories and models in normative ethics, and how these can be applied. Ethical and moral views of what a good life and a good society can be. Analysis of arguments on ethical issues based on Christianity, other world religions, outlooks on life, and students' own standpoints.	Describe Understand Know Relate (connect knowledge) Communicate Identify Take a stand Reflect Understand	Know Interpret Analyse Analysis of arguments

Mark: Pass [G]/E	Rites, traditions, ways of life in different religions and views of life Such knowledge about Christianity, other world religions and philosophies that increases understanding of different lifestyles Ethical and moral thinking Fundamental values	World religions and some outlooks on life, their characteristics and expression historically, in the present, in Sweden and in the world. Different interpretations and perspectives on world religions and outlooks on life in relation to individuals, groups and societies Similarities and differences between world religions' views of Man and God, How identity can be shaped in relation to religion and outlooks on life, How religion can relate to ethnicity, gender, sexuality and socio-economic background. Different views on the relationship between religion and science. Normative ethical theories and models, Reasoning about what a good life and a good society can be based on virtue ethics and other ethical approaches.	Compare Presents Understand Communicate Values Relate to	In basic terms give an account of Explain simple relationships -draw simple conclusions Support their reasoning with simple arguments. Give some examples Do a simple analysis In basic terms describe Apply simple reasoning
Mark: D	–	Same as for E	–	The mark D means that the knowledge requirements for the mark E and most of C are fulfilled.

(continued)

	Content Re1201	Content RELREL01	Skills in Re1201	Skills in RELREL01
Mark: Pass with distinction [VG]/C	The significance of the views of life for the individual and society, nationally and internationally Ethical problems Ethical reasoning models What tolerance means	Same as for E	Provides examples Identifies Applies Motivates Reflects individual and in group	In detail gives an account of and analyses Draw well-grounded conclusions Support their reasoning with well-grounded arguments Give some examples Draw well-grounded conclusions Make a well-grounded analysis Can in detail describe Give well-grounded arguments Apply well-grounded reasoning
Mark; B	–	Same as for E	–	The mark B means that the knowledge requirements for the mark C and most of A are fulfilled.

Mark; Pass with Excellent Distinction [MVG]/A	Similarities and differences between Christianity and other world religions' basic ideas and expression Attitude towards women, socially, current and historical perspective Ethical theories – related situations, current social issues Life interpretations	Same as for E	Detects Applies Shows Arguing with respect	Can in detail and in a balanced way give an account of and analyse Explain complex relationships and draw well-grounded and balanced conclusions Support their reasoning with well-grounded and balanced arguments. Make a complex analysis Describe complex relationships Draw well-grounded and balanced conclusions In detail and in a balanced way describe Give well-grounded and balanced arguments Apply well-grounded and balanced reasoning

Appendix 3

List of Excerpts

Excerpt 1 (audio file 28 September 2011).
Excerpt 2 (audio file 13 October 2011)
Excerpt 3 (audio file 8 November 2011).
Excerpt 4 (audio file 7 October 2011)
Excerpt 5 (audio file 14 October 2011).
Excerpt 6 (audio file 14 October 2011).
Excerpt 7 (audio file 2 April 2012).
Excerpt 8 (audio file 14 March 2012).
Excerpt 9 (audio file 26 October 2011).
Excerpt 10 (audio file 13 October 2011)
Excerpt 11 (audio file 26 September 2011).
Excerpt 12 (audio file 09 November 2011).
Excerpt 13 (audio file 30 September 2011).
Excerpt 14 (from field notes 2 March 2012).
Excerpt 15 (audio file 9 October 2011).
Excerpt 16 (audio file 10 November 2011).
Excerpt 17 (audio file 9 November 2011).
Excerpt 18 (written comment on student work).
Excerpt 19 (audio file 11 October 2011).
Excerpt 20 (audio file 4 October 2011).
Excerpt 21 (audio file 7 December 2011).
Excerpt 22 (audio file 26 September 2011).
Excerpt 23 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 24 (audio file 2 April 2012).
Excerpt 25 (audio file 18 February 2012).
Excerpt 26 (audio file 11 October 2011).
Excerpt 27 (audio file 7 December 2011).
Excerpt 28 (audio file 11 October 2011).
Excerpt 29 (audio file 3 October 2011).
Excerpt 29 (audio file 3 October 2011).
Excerpt 30 (audio file 27 September 2011).
Excerpt 31 (audio file 29 September 2011)
Excerpt 32 (audio file 10 November 2011).
Excerpt 33 (audio file 8 October 2011)
Excerpt 34 (audio file 16 November 2011)
Excerpt 35 (audio file 18 October 2011).
Excerpt 35 (audio file 18 October 2011).
Excerpt 36 (distributed to the students 17 November 2011).
Excerpt 37 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 38 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 39 (audio file 10 November 2011).

Excerpt 40 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 41 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 42 (audio file 13 October 2011).
Excerpt 43 (from student essay).
Excerpt 44 (from student essay).
Excerpt 45 (from student essay).
Excerpt 46 (audio file 3 October 2011).
Excerpt 47 (from student essay).
Excerpt 48 (from student essay).
Excerpt 49 (from the project plan handed out to the students).
Excerpt 50 (writing on the whiteboard, field notes 29 September 2011).
Excerpt 51 (audio file 29 September 2011).
Excerpt 52 (from description of the theme Meaning and Interpreting the Meaning of Life).
Excerpt 53 (audio file 10 November 2011).
Excerpt 54 (from students' assignments)
Excerpt 55 (audio file 14 March 2012).
Excerpt 56 (audio file 4 October 2011).
Excerpt 57 (audio file 11 October 2011).
Excerpt 58 (Reading aloud in the classroom 27 September 2011. Article written by Anderch, Katarina, Göteborgs Posten 22 May 2011).
Excerpt 59 (audio file 7 December 2011).
Excerpt 60 (audio file 18 October 2011).
Excerpt 61 (audio file 21 October 2011).
Excerpt 62 (audio file 11 October 2011).
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Excerpt 68 (audio file 2 September 2011).
Excerpt 69 (audio file 4 October 2011).
Excerpt 70 (audio file 11 October 2011).
Excerpt 71 (audio file 30 November 2011).
Excerpt 72 (audio file 2 December 2011).
Excerpt 73 (From a student essay).
Excerpt 74 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 75 (audio file 14 October 2011).
Excerpt 76 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 77 (audio file 29 February 2012).
Excerpt 78 (audio file 19 October 2011)
Excerpt 79 (audio file 14 October 2011).
Excerpt 80 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 81 (audio file 1 December 2011)
Excerpt 82 (From task distributed 5 December 2011).

Excerpt 83 (audio file 7 December 2011).
Excerpt 84 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 85 (audio file 6 October 2011)
Excerpt 86 (audio file 28 February 2012).
Excerpt 87 (audio file 28 February 2012).
Excerpt 88 (audio file 4 October 2011).
Excerpt 89 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 90 (audio file 13 October 2011).
Excerpt 91 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 92 (audio file 6 October 2011).
Excerpt 93 (audio file 2 April 2012).
Excerpt 94 (audio file 29 November 2011)
Excerpt 95 (audio file 21 November 2011).
Excerpt 96 (audio file 19 October 2011).
Excerpt 97 (audio file 7 November 2011).
Excerpt 98 (audio file 10 November 2011).

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