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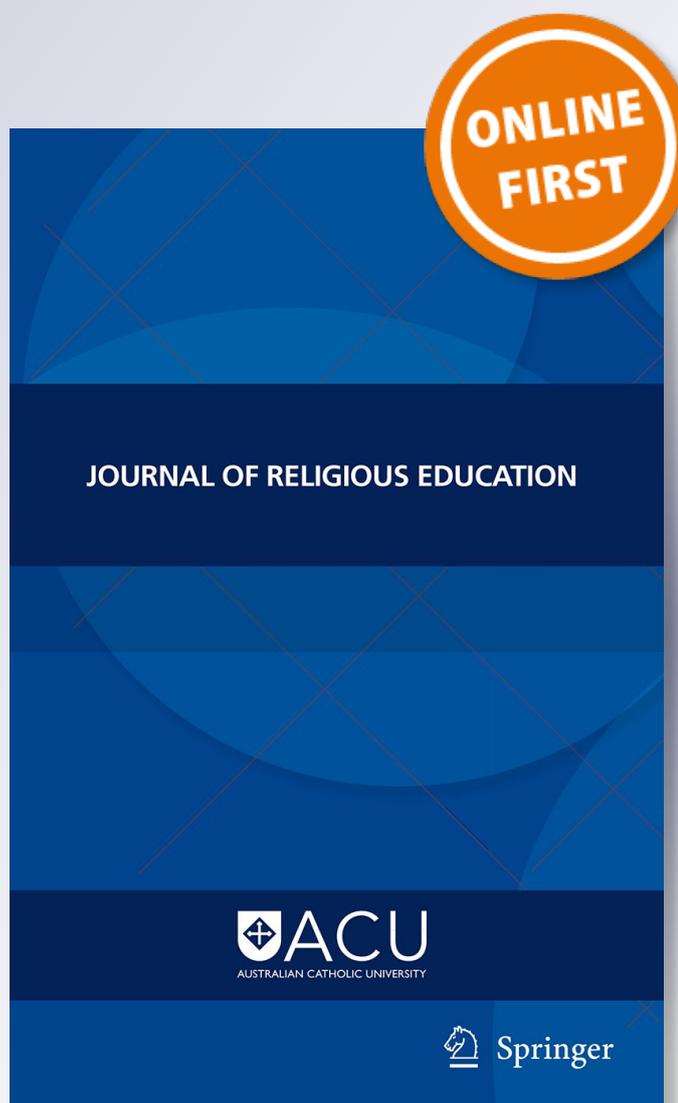
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# Some ethnic Swedish students' discourses on religion: secularism par excellence

Kerstin von Brömssen<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** Having been almost abandoned during the latter part of the 1900s, religion and youth is currently a growing field of research in Europe. Since people thought that secularisation would eradicate religion as a phenomenon, there was obviously no major reason to investigate young people's attitudes towards religion. Since that time, the understanding of the world and its complex relationship with religion has changed, and this now attracts much discussion. In Europe, this not only concerns religion and youth among different migrant groups, but also research on religion and youth of those born and raised in Europe itself and integrated into the historic majority. The aim of this paper is to revisit and reanalyse the results of two qualitative research projects based on interviews with young students in schools who identify themselves as Swedish. I analyze their discursive constructions on their own religion and the religions of 'others'. The data point towards a strong secularist discourse, where the Swedish students identify themselves as having a modern and rational worldview. On the other hand, they regard religion and religious people as old-fashioned and irrational. The focus in this article concerns articulations constructing this overarching secularist discourse, which I discuss in light of the contemporary debate on secularisation and secularism. However, most of the young students in the research appreciated the subject of Religious Education in Sweden as a means towards understanding the world. This was especially so in discussions on Religious Education with upper secondary school students, whereas younger students found religion to be more boring and traditional; thus the subject having difficulties in relating to the younger students' experiences.

**Keywords** Sweden · Religion · Youth · Secularism · Students · Discourses

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## 1 Introduction

The meaning and impact of secularisation is a subject of much discussion in Europe today, and researchers often mention Sweden as one of the most secular countries in the world (see Zuckerman 2009, pp. 55–69). In a summary from the World Values Survey, Sweden is described as being “not normal”, but “extreme”, explaining this by stating that “Sweden’s position tells us for example that God has no natural place in our everyday lives, that we are not questioning homosexuality or abortion, and that we trust others” (World Values Survey<sup>1</sup>). This is the view people have of Sweden, but they often collectively allude to all the Nordic countries in this regard, albeit with some minor differences.

However, the grand narrative on secularisation, where people predicted that religion would disappear in Europe as a result of the Enlightenment paradigm, is downplayed in recent research (Grote 2014). Critics argue that religion takes a variety of approaches, and that religion remained important throughout the eighteenth century and subsequently (Haakonssen 1996; see Grote 2014). This debate, initiated by historians, relates naturally to the debate in sociology concerning the secularisation theses of religion (Berger 1999; Dobbelaere 2004; Martin 2005; Pollack et al. 2012). Thus, combined with events where religion has explicitly, and sometimes violently, come back to the forefront of the global scene, religious narratives and discourses among young people provide an interesting topic for research. Also, having been almost abandoned during the latter part of the 1900s, religion and youth as a field of exploration is currently growing in Europe (Bailey and Redden 2010; Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010; Hemming and Madge 2011; Possomai 2009). This paper adds to this research by focusing on the views of ethnic Swedish students towards religion.

However, this research is not unproblematic, since it is difficult to define what is meant by the terms ‘religion’ and ‘youth’. They are both ascribed various understandings and interpretations. The category ‘youth’ might be a useful category when analysing trends and general patterns of religious change, but must be used with caution since the group of young people is not homogenous (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010, p. 2; see Possomai 2009, pp. 2–5). Also, the term ‘religion’, originating from a European viewpoint during the sixteenth century, together with the concepts ‘secular’ and ‘secularisation’ are ascribed different understandings, and elicit competing discourses (Calhoun et al. 2011, pp. 3–30; McCutcheon 2015, pp. 119–141; Smith 2008).

In the midst of competing discourses on secularisation and religious belonging and beliefs since the end of the Second World War, European nations have deepened their cultural complexity and become more ‘multicultural’ than ever before. This is not the least obvious in the Nordic countries, where migration, pluralisation and multicultural issues are intensively researched and discussed (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012; Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2013; Eastmond 2011; Kivisto and Wahlbeck 2013; Olwig 2011; Petersson and Johansson 2013; Skeie 1995). This obviously has far-reaching implications for education, where discussion on multicultural and intercultural issues has been prominent for quite some time (see for example, Banks 2015; Coulby 2006; Coulby et al. 1997).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iffs.se/en/news/sweden-the-extreme-country/> [Online 160608]. The secularisation theses account for the decline in church affiliation and attendance in Europe. But, 77% of Europeans stated that they believe in God, and in some Catholic countries this figure is around 90%. In Sweden, <55% of people think of themselves as religious [Halman et al. (2011) *The European Values Study*, p. 56].

With this description of today's complex societal background, the intention of this paper is to highlight and discuss a specific discourse on religion; namely, a secularist discourse articulated by young students from the Swedish majority population. Thus, the aim of this work is to make such discourses known in order to understand what part religion plays in some young peoples' lives, as well as to discuss implications and challenges for religious education within a classroom that will be ultimately dominated by a secularist discourse.

## 2 Prior research on religion and youth

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the role of religion in the lives of young people in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The research field is quite diffuse, with a wide variation of theoretical perspectives and vantage points (Giordan 2010, p. X; Hemming and Madge 2011, p. 38).

One area of research is the study of religion and youth from a sociological perspective, predominantly using quantitative research methods. These studies show that European youth do not generally participate in religious activities, nor do they possess much religious knowledge (Valk et al. 2009; Klingenberg 2014; Niemelä 2010; Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Madge et al. 2014; Mason et al. 2010; Pickel 2010; Astley et al. 2012; Sjöborg 2012, 2013; Vincett and Collins-Mayo 2010; Voas 2006; Weisse 2011; Ziebertz et al. 2009). Not surprisingly, there are significant differences between the attitudes to religion of young people who have connections to organised religion and those who do not. For the latter group, at least in the Swedish research, school stands out as the main arena for discussion and learning about religion (see Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Sjöborg 2012, p. 37). However, qualitative research within the field of sociology also shows that youth do not view religion as being especially 'cool' (Knauth 2008, pp. 207–245). As Abby Day (2009, p. 263) very tellingly puts it: "The question for them [the young people] is not so much 'does God exist?' but, 'why would it matter?'" In Day's studies, belief, authority and transcendence are oriented towards social relationships, that is, family, friends and close trusting relationships (Day 2009, p. 276). Religion, especially in the traditional organised form, is questioned and talked about as inflexible and dictatorial (Day 2009, 2011).

Another research tradition, using mostly qualitative methods, is interested in issues of socialisation and the transmission of religion to youth, especially within 'multicultural' and 'multi-ethnic' societies, specifically focusing on youth with ethnic backgrounds different from the majority population of the society in which they live. These studies show the complex religious negotiations and interpretations of youth from minorities, their intersection with ethnicity/race and gender, and how they often challenge the religious understanding of the older generations (Bigelow 2008; Herrera and Bayat 2010; Jacobson 1998; Østberg 2003; Risenfors 2012; Ryan 2014). Naturally, this affects religious education, which is another closely linked research area. Studies in the educational area again show that education is very country-specific, and often linked to both national and European societal discourses regarding secularisation and 'Othering' (Anker 2011; Buchardt 2010; Hakimali Merchant 2016; Kittelmann Flensner 2015; Knauth 2008; von

<sup>2</sup> One sign of this is the UK-funded research programme *Religion and Society Programme*. <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/> [Online 160608] as well as *REDCo: A European Research Project on Religion in Education*, (2006–2009). <http://cordis.europa.eu/documents/documentlibrary/123869721EN6.pdf> [Online 160608].

der Lippe 2011; Nicolaisen 2012; Osbeck and Lied 2012). As the European discourses with regard to secularisation seem to come through strongly in the above-mentioned studies, I will discuss this concept in the next section before turning to the empirical analysis.

### 3 Secularisation

The ‘modes of secularisation’ have long been a relatively unexamined set of suppositions, as Calhoun et al. (2011, p. 3) argue in the introduction to their work *Rethinking Secularism*, but these have recently come under more intensive investigation. However, the concept of secularisation is complex, ambiguous, and subject to variations and distortions when it is applied in different contexts (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 21). Its contemporary meaning originates from the European Enlightenment, but has Christians roots with a connection to early Christian thinking concerning Earthly existence and eternal life with God (Calhoun et al. 2011, p. 11). In this paper, I will follow Calhoun (2011, pp. 75–91) who states that the concept of secularisation in present liberal theoretical thinking appears fundamentally as an opportunity for tolerance and neutrality. Within this overarching discourse, Calhoun differentiates four dimensions of articulation, which are: “the classification of religion as essentially a private matter; an ‘epistemic’ approach to religion shaped by an attempt to assess true and false knowledge; the notion that a clear and unbiased distinction is available between the religious and the secular; and the view that religion is in some sense a ‘survivor’ from an earlier era—not a field of vital growth within modernity” (Calhoun 2011, p. 77). I will use these four dimensions as tools in the analysis of my empirical material.

### 4 Data, methods and ethics

The data for this study originated from two different research projects that studied students’ articulations on religion, and will be reanalysed in this paper, inspired by Calhoun’s four dimensions on secularisation.<sup>3</sup> In the first project, I individually interviewed students in the 12–13 year age group on the concept of ‘religion’. Initially, I asked the students to draw a mind map of their associations with religion, and the drawings and words on the mind map led to a discussion on these associations (von Brömssen 2003, pp. 124–125). In the other project, students who were a little older, namely upper secondary school students aged 18, were initially asked whether religion could be viewed as a resource in their lives. From this starting point, I conducted nine focus group interviews with five or six students in each group (von Brömssen 2012, pp. 131–155). The individual and the focus group interviews are here both viewed as social interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview is thus seen as an interactive and discursive process (Aull Davies 1999, pp. 97–98; von Brömssen 2003, p. 106). Data gathered from the interviews are analysed as “a negotiated text” (Fontana and Frey 2000, pp. 663–664) in order to identify trends in the conversations that are taking place. The author transcribed the

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<sup>3</sup> This project was based on a survey of a representative sample of young people aged 16–24 years that was conducted in Sweden in 2008. As a result of this survey, individual researchers from different scientific disciplines were asked to contribute to a deeper understanding of how religion plays a role in young people’s lives. In connection with this study, I conducted nine focus group interviews (2009–2010) with students aged 18 in two different upper secondary schools (cf. von Brömssen 2012, pp. 131–155).

interviews, and identified discursive themes and patterns. In the reanalysis for this article, I used articulations made by three students from the individual interviews and three from the group interviews, all of whom identified themselves as Swedish, and they were the ones who most strongly articulated a secularist discourse (von Brömssen 2003).

I performed the research in compliance with ethical standards set forth by the Swedish Research Council (Codex.se<sup>4</sup>). In the first project, students and their parents signed an informed consent which outlined the aim and purpose of the project. This was not necessary for the second project because all the students who took part in the focus group interviews were above the age of 18. All students are referred to by using pseudonyms.

## 5 'I don't belong to a religion'

In the interviews, students with an ethnic Swedish background often articulated that they themselves did not belong to, or believe in, any religion. For example, when referring to the upper secondary school he attends, Jonas states:

*Jonas:* "We are not many here who follow a religion that I know of. Perhaps most are culturally religious or secular."

The notion of 'culturally religious' is also used by Klara who explains that she celebrates Christmas, but it doesn't represent the true meaning of Christmas. "It's sort of more culturally," she says. These two students, both in their third year in upper secondary school, are quite knowledgeable about religion, and describe their standpoint as being both culturally religious and secular. The younger students in grade eight in elementary school don't mention such concepts. They articulate their views more like Kristoffer does:

*Kristoffer:* "I might as well not say anything about it (religion) really, because I do not belong to any religion... to me it seems that there are no benefits with that...I have heard that it creates security and solidarity and so, but...I don't think so really. There are other ways to create that..."

Above all, Kristoffer is critical of religion because, according to him, belonging to a religious tradition is not a free choice. He sees religion as coercion, at least within Islam.

*Kristoffer:* "Yes... in any case within Islam, where...I don't know how it is within Christianity, I know Muslims more than Christians...yes active Christians, anyway."

Kristoffer talks about peers whose patterns of behaviour are, according to him, limited by religion. As he lives in a 'multiethnic' part of town where Muslims are in the majority, he refers to Islam as the religion that puts restrictions on his peers. He mentions friends who may not eat or do what they want. Kristoffer argues that his own limits are not influenced by religion. This is because he believes that his parents do not have an ethos marked by religion, and therefore that he is not socialised into this way of thinking. Paradoxically, Kristoffer talks on the one hand about religion as a tradition being socialised into, as in Islam, and on the other hand as something that should be chosen by free will.

Kristoffer's reasoning in part connects to the idea of religion as being essentially private, and possibly only extending to members of the family. This connects with Calhoun's argument about a liberal view of religion as essentially a private matter, and that it

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<sup>4</sup> <http://codex.vr.se/>.

should stay that way. Religious arguments can only be valid if they conform to ideal rational arguments (Calhoun 2011, p. 77).

Kristoffer later strengthens his perspective on religion when he discusses beliefs in religious myths. According to him, such thinking is “stupid and unnecessary”. He then makes a comparison with rational scientific models of thinking. He says that, even if such scientific models have proved to be wrong many times, “it will be right sometime”. Kristoffer’s views help to construct an ‘us and them’ between the students for whom religion is an important part of life and those who think that they are more mature in their thinking, and therefore able to embrace more modern explanatory models. Kristoffer uses ‘time’ as a category for differentiation, which is in line with arguments made by Johannes Fabian in his work *Time and the Other: how anthropology makes its object* (1983/2000). In this work, Fabian takes a historical look at anthropology in order to display the use of ‘time’ as a category for differentiation. Western thoughts are ‘here and now’, whereas the objects of the anthropological researchers are ‘there and then’ and labelled the ‘savage’, the ‘primitive’, and a part of the ‘underdeveloped’ world. Fabian writes: “It (time) promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream” (Fabian 1983/2000, p. 17).

Also the second dimension in Calhoun’s notions of secularisation, the ‘epistemic’ approach to religion shaped by an attempt to assess true and false knowledge, is applicable to Kristoffer’s views of religion versus science. It is obvious to Kristoffer that scientific theories can explain the world, and that religious myths in line with this thinking are “very far-fetched”. He says that he can’t understand how people can believe in such things.

Johanna, a student with a Swedish-Dutch background also identifies herself as a non-believer. She says:

*Johanna:* “There is nothing that I believe...I have no religion and I do not believe in anything. For me...I feel that it is...to me it feels wrong... because it is so, I think it is very inflated and...that it is very, very uncool...or yeah...”

Johanna argues that religion is inconsistent, “bloated” and “corny”. She likewise speaks about life as “limited and brief”, and argues that a belief in a higher power would not increase the meaning of life for her. It is a matter of life here and now. When Johanna reflects about issues of life, and the meaning of life, she says that it’s the same as asking oneself, ‘what is the meaning of grass?’

Johanna is critical of the religious message that she has experienced mainly in the Church of Sweden, and asks rhetorically:

*Johanna:* “Why can’t we just live... why must there be a higher power at all?”

Johanna does not want to “brood”, she says, because you still cannot get answers about these things. Talking about such issues does not give her the knowledge she can benefit from now. When talking about religion, Johanna says that she doesn’t think about these kinds of issues, nor does she have the answers.

Rorty also takes a critical stance against religion because of the tendency of religions to divide people.

*Rorty:* “The goal is the same, but still, I’m thinking, why should there be so many religions that divide people all over the world? It creates...it destroys the harmony. If it only was the goal that was important, I wouldn’t have a problem with that, but then, no, no, I do not like it (religion)...”

Several of the interviewees expressed the view that religion is a source of war and conflict. Some of the students, especially those in upper secondary school, stressed that religion as a dimension might be helpful on the individual level, but dangerous on the group level.

*Klara:* "At the individual level, it might often be a good tool, but when in groups it can become a major obstacle, and create much conflict..."

Thus, overwhelmingly they constructed religion within a critical framework whereby they see religion as the root to the division of the world's people. The students could only articulate a positive view of religion when applied to an individual life crisis, for example (von Brömssen 2012, pp. 140–141).

## 6 Being Swedish and being 'foreign'

Mattias, another student in grade eight in elementary school, identifies himself as 'half-Norwegian' as his father was born in Norway. In the discussions, Mattias often uses the category 'foreign', and to this category he associates issues of religion. Mattias mentions on several occasions that religion is not associated with 'Swedish' or with 'Swedes'. He says:

*Mattias:* "...other people...I think, other people...foreign, I don't think of Swedes. They have no special...religion...the foreign they have...many who pray and so... the Somalis, or the Somali and people like that, they must have...wear a veil, the girls must wear veil and stuff..."

When continuing the conversation and talking about why the girls wear a veil, Mattias states emphatically:

*Mattias:* "They want! Even if they are in Sweden, religion is still functioning...Even if they have moved here to Sweden."

To further understand Mattias' strong construction of 'foreign' being associated with religion, I continue by asking if he can think of any religion or religious phenomenon that can be associated with Sweden and with being Swedish. Mattias replies that, when talking about religion, he just starts to think about 'foreign' religions.

*Mattias:* "Somali...The Somalis I think...and Arabs and stuff...praying and wearing a veil."

*Interviewer:* "Then it is Islam that you think about most?"

*Mattias:* "Yeah, right. It is true."

Mattias is surprised when I summarise my impressions, and call attention to the fact that it seems that, when speaking about religion, he always refers to Islam. Mattias speaks in very general terms about "foreign" people like "Somalis and Arabs", and about interpretations of them that he has for the most part picked up from the media. Implicitly, it is clear that, when Mattias talks about religion, he refers to Islam, as did also Kristoffer (mentioned above). This can be viewed in light of the 'multicultural' suburb where the school is situated. The religion perceived by the Swedish students is Islam. Thus, concerning themselves and other Swedes in the area, in their eyes religion is invisible. Here it is possible to apply Calhoun's third dimension on Mattias' views, which concerns the notion that a clear and unbiased distinction is available between the religious and the secular (Calhoun 2011, p. 77). For Mattias, it is clear that the category of 'religion' does not

concern Swedes, nor does it apply to a Swedish lifestyle. In his articulations, the concept of religion is only associated with ‘foreign’ people, and first and foremost with Islam. Thus, the interplay between the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘nationality’ comes to the fore.

However, the concept of religion is ambiguous and hard to define, and when the students in the upper secondary school reflect on the concept, they state that they probably come into contact with and use religion much more implicitly than they usually realise. But then, as Jonas explains, “it’s not religion in the form of believing in a superior Being”, but as applicable to norms and ethics. Here Lisa adds to the discussion, and says that “all societies are based on such agreements”, so then, when talking about religion in this way, “we use religion all the time”.

## 7 The discourse of Buddhism

During the interviews, Kristoffer and Johanna both mention an interest in Buddhism, and this religion is the only one mentioned in a positive light. Kristoffer has an older friend who was interested in Buddhism, and then he also became interested. Kristoffer has difficulty in understanding the basics of the Buddhist philosophy, but says it is an “interesting religion”.

*Kristoffer:* “I have a friend who was reading Buddhist books, then we talked a little bit about it, I think it was quite an interesting religion in some way, but...I do not think in quite the same way as in Buddhism...well, you become nothing in the end... Nirvana... and the notion that everything is suffering, I don’t think so really...”

Johanna also mentions Buddhism positively, as she has had a Buddha statuette at home for some time. She admits that she doesn’t know much at all about Buddhism, but has generally a positive attitude towards this religion.

This preference for Buddhism in the Swedish religious discourse is something David Thurfjell (2013, pp. 122–140) explores in a book chapter with the title *Why Buddhism is so popular among secular Swedes*. Thurfjell argues that, among other things, the Swedish view of Buddhism is a western sanitised construction of Buddhism, compatible with a rational and scientific understanding of life (Thurfjell 2013, p. 132). Therefore, Thurfjell argues that, in Buddhism, Swedes see pictures of themselves recreated (2013, p. 137). It is worth noting that Kristoffer articulates in his interview that Buddhism is “a pretty interesting religion”, a choice of words that were not used in relation to any other religion during the interviews.

## 8 Tolerance and neutrality

According to Calhoun (2011, pp. 75–91), the concept of secularisation in present liberal theory fundamentally provides grounds for a discourse on tolerance and neutrality. He argues that this is an overarching discourse, and the students often echo this discourse in their interviews. Like Kristoffer, one student articulates that “it [religion] doesn’t touch me, if they (other friends) get involved, if they think it’s fun, it’s OK”. On the one hand, the discourse of toleration seems more or less to have acquired a meaning in the sense of a lack of curiosity and a disinterest in the phenomenon of religion. For example, Johanna demonstrates this when she stresses that the different meanings of religion are irrelevant to

her friendships. She also expresses the idea of religion as being each individual's private affair, that is, religion is something essentially private (Calhoun 2011, p. 77). On the other hand, the students in the elementary school mention that they quite often quarrel with each other when talking about religion and religious issues. This seems to be the case when religion intersects with gender, ethnicity and nationality. In such cases, the different positions taken by the students become contentious, and situations become tense. But, as the discourse of toleration is strong, the students say that they prefer to avoid the subject of religion.

## 9 Religious education at the crossroads in Swedish education

As noted by Hartman (2011, p. 9), formal education has grown out of a need to pass on a religious tradition with certain values from one generation to the next. In Sweden, Religious Education has been an important school subject for decades, embedded in the tradition of Lutheran Protestant interpretation, and labelled 'Christianity'. It was for many years the most important subject in school, and covered several hours a week (Hartman 2011). During the 1900s, the subject changed dramatically, and in today's curriculum it is part of the humanities and social sciences, encompassing a broad content, and with just a few hours of instruction (Hartman 2011, pp. 28–29). It is sometimes characterised as 'integrative' since all students, irrespective of their own background and tradition, are taught in the same classroom, and are supposed to learn about and from different religious traditions (Alberts 2007; Kittelmann Flensner 2015, pp. 30–44).

The students in the interviews have conflicting views on the subject. Kristoffer, for his part articulates that he thinks the subject is unnecessary and old-fashioned. He says:

*Kristoffer:* "I do not really think we should have religion as a school subject [...] I think it is old-fashioned...I do not think we need to continue with it... so yeah [...] I would like to have more choice...Yes, especially when it comes to religion, that you can choose yourself... you should not be forced to read about Islam and...Christianity and Judaism or anything."

On the other hand, students in the upper secondary school articulate quite appreciative reviews on the subject. But they also comment that the subject was much less interesting in elementary school. There, its purpose was to learn facts in order to pass the test, but now in upper secondary school the students are encouraged to analyse and discuss (von Brömssen 2012, pp. 150–151). Nils underlines the importance of the subject when stating:

*Nils:* "Thus, above all, it is still, perhaps not in Sweden in the same way as in other countries, but it is still an extreme concept [religion] and central to the whole society, the whole international community... you are constantly bombarded with news about the conflicts that have a religious extension and then, you absolutely have to, even if only in a general way, you should have the information and be able to see the world from a religious perspective... if you get new perspectives, it can only strengthen you, whether you agree with this perspective or not, you develop as a person..."

Interestingly enough, Nils makes a direct association between knowledge about religion and the need to understand conflicts, which he "is bombarded with" from the media. The discourse on religion as a cause of wars and conflicts is another dominant discourse in the produced data. This is not surprising as youth in Sweden state that they are most often exposed to religion through media (Lövheim and Bromander 2012, p. 68).

## 10 Concluding discussion

Sweden is often mentioned as one of the most secular nations in the world. The reanalysis of the individual and focus group interviews concerning students with a predominantly ethnic Swedish background, show that they are dominated by a secularist discourse. The students articulate all four dimensions mentioned by Calhoun (2011, p. 77), although naturally to varying degrees. The first dimension, religion as essentially a private matter, often comes to the fore in the students' discussions. According to the students, if someone chooses to believe in and belong to a religious tradition, this is up to the individual, and is not the concern of the public. Furthermore, the ethnic Swedish students often singled out the specific lack of individual freedom in religion. This is probably due to the fact that most of the students in school who identify themselves with a religion belong to Islam, but are also influenced by the media. The students mention the media as a source of knowledge when talking about religion and learning about religions. Earlier research has also shown this. Furthermore, the students often took it as an unquestioned fact that religion is the cause of war and violence.

The second dimension, an 'epistemic' approach to religion shaped by the attempt to assess true and false knowledge, is also very evident, especially when referring to science and what the students perceive as 'true' knowledge. Religious 'myths' are quite simply seen as false, and the students seek a scientific explanation. As a consequence, the distinction between the religious and the secular, as mentioned by Calhoun as his third dimension, is evident. Furthermore, religion is associated with old-fashioned thinking and belonging to an earlier era in time, thus constructing a model of progress and development that does not include religious thinking. This connects to Calhoun's fourth dimension on religion as a 'survivor', and not a living dimension today. According to the students, religion is something that the 'Other' might connect to, but not Swedish people.

In the interviews described and analysed here, not one student identified herself or himself as Christian, which is still the majority religion in Sweden. Some students in upper secondary school described themselves as 'culturally Christian', which obviously seems more neutral and distant. However, obviously there are many students in Sweden today who identify themselves as Christians, and who actively participate in religious activities. This makes me critically examine the sample used in this research. One reason for not meeting any of them in the interviews might be that it isn't 'cool' to mention being Christian, and therefore they have suppressed this position. On other occasions, they may have identified themselves differently, since interactive discussion is situation-sensitive and context-sensitive. This could be the case, even though their way of talking makes this hard to believe. The students expressed their articulations convincingly and with little hesitation. Thus, when listening to the students with predominantly ethnic Swedish backgrounds, by preference they constructed a secularist discourse.

This of course raises questions in relation to Religious Education in contemporary Sweden. How can Religious Education as a subject relate to ethnic Swedish students' experiences when being constructed within a strong secularist discourse? Young people in this research predominantly recognise the value of the subject of Religious Education in Sweden as a means to gaining an understanding of the world. This is naturally positive in itself; however, one may ask what possibilities there are for learning, not only about the 'Other' who the students often identify as 'religious', but also how they might expand their learning and knowledge about themselves as human beings.

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