Reflections on pupils' talk about religion in Sweden

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Religion is an increasingly dominant force in global affairs and in different social activities around the world. Sociologist Peter Berger (1999: 9) states that 'The world today is massively religious, is *anything but* the secularised world that had been predicted (whether joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity'. Yet, as noted in other studies (Subedi et al. 2006: 218), religion and religious perspectives are not often discussed in relation to multi/intercultural education. Within the field of multi/intercultural education, issues like nation, culture, ethnicity, race/racism, class, gender, sexism, linguicism and heterosexism are often listed in the literature. In the recent *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (Banks and McGee Banks 2004), there is no chapter on religion specifically and in many other books on multi/intercultural education and identity, religion is scarcely ever mentioned. One could perhaps argue that since the breakthrough of rationality and scientism in the West[1], the interest, understanding and ability to interpret issues through a religious prism have been reduced. On the other hand, in work dealing with religion and new religious perspectives, not much is mentioned concerning public education, religious influences and plurality in schools.

With an interest in issues relating to youth and religion in connection with a 'multicultural' Swedish school, this chapter aims to discuss pupils' talk about religion from multicultural contexts.[2] The main purpose is to describe and analyse discursive constructions of pupils' talk about religion from a multi-

1 The concept of 'the West' is problematic to use. Discourses using dichotomies like 'modern' versus 'traditional' and 'West' versus 'East' often hide and cement colonial and Orientalist understanding of the world. Here 'West' is used for an understanding of an unfair division of the world and a distribution of power from East to West, especially since the era of European expansion. This division has consequences in social reality as well as for the production of discourses and practices. For discussion on how this type of 'colonization of reality' works in colonial and postcolonial settings, see authors such as Edward Said and Valentin Yves Mudimbe.
2 This chapter is a further exploration and discussion of the results of my thesis (2003). *Tolkningar, förhandlingar och tystnader. Elevers tal om religion i det mångkulturella och postkoloniala rummet. (Interpretations, negotiations and silences. Pupils' talk about religion from within multi-cultural and post-colonial spaces).*

cultural school environment concerning their own religion and the religions of others. The term discourse is used here to refer to ways in which spoken words and language are used by specific pupils to construct realities for themselves, based on beliefs, shared values and experiences.

In this essay I shall locate the context for my research and outline some features of the changing Swedish cultural landscape, specifically in relation to education and the subject of 'Religion' in Sweden. Even though my empirical work does not relate to the Swedish education in the subject *per se,* pupils' perspectives and talk are embedded (also) in educational experiences. In the second part of the chapter I discuss some general findings of my empirical research and elaborate on two specific themes that I found located within talk by the pupils.

Sweden – a changing cultural and religious landscape

Changing demographic patterns also affect religious diversity. Historically, Christianity slowly took over Nordic religious beliefs in Sweden from the 9th century onwards. As far as can be traced back in history, Ansgar, a French Benedictine monk, was the first to preach the Christian gospel in what is now Sweden. He arrived in 829 on the isle of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. Even earlier, the so-called Vikings had prepared the ground for new religious patterns as they had been in touch with Christianity during their travels eastwards and westwards.

In the middle of the 16th century Sweden became part of the Lutheran Reformation and broke off from the Catholic faith. Full religious freedom was stated in Swedish law in 1951, and until 2000 Sweden had a national church which embraced most Swedish-born people. In 2005, 77 per cent of Swedish citizens still belonged to the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran church.[3] The most common behaviour when it comes to a 'Swedish' citizen in relation to 'official' religion is to belong to the Swedish church and to participate in church services on special occasions (Pettersson 2004).

In 2006 religious diversity is a noticeable phenomenon in Sweden. The Muslim community is quite a big religious congregation in Sweden with more than 100,000 registered members. There are about 100,000 Roman Catholics, more than 100,000 Orthodox Christians and 10,000 Jews.[4] Approximately 25,000 are followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Bahá'í. Apart from these 'world religions' we also see several religious constellations under the name of 'New Age' and/or new religious movements (Andersson and Sander 2005).

In the aftermath of modernisation and the expansion of scientific knowledge, religious phenomena have been predicted to disappear. This prediction, the so-called secularisation theory, has been much debated. The concept of seculari-

[3] www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik/pdf/medlem_tabell.pdf
[4] http://www.integrationsverket.se/upload/minoritetsreligioner%202003.pdf. These statistics are the only officially noted statistics of registered members, reported by the congregations themselves. The Muslim congregation in Sweden may well contain 200,000–250,000 people, many not officially registered as members.

sation is multi-layered and has different meanings in different contexts, but very simply it can be understood as signifying that religion 'means less and less to more and more people' (Hagevi 2002: 43, my translation).[5] It is in this sense that the concept is used in this essay. In international research today the concept of secularisation is called in question, and researchers often prefer to talk about religious changes. Religions tend to adopt new forms and patterns, and some researchers even talk about religion and its revival (Sigurdson and Svenungsson 2006).

In Sweden, public talk about religion is not often heard outside the religious sphere[6] and Sweden is regularly mentioned as one of the most secularised nations (Grenholm 1994, p. 131). This does not mean that Swedish people have no interest in religious, spiritual or philosophical issues, but an interest in what can be called traditional religious issues and traditional lifestyles is diminishing. Religion has become a private affair and lifestyles are highly individualised (Gustafsson 1997). Whether or not this really means secularisation can be questioned. One can state that the production of discourses about a highly secularised Sweden is common, but it is also a fact that taking part in religious rituals is still quite common in Sweden. Also new signs of religion occur, not least in films and literature, and new ritual behaviours develop in a globalising and religiously interrelated world (Tehranian and Lum 2006). Some argue that we can detect a flourishing alternative religiosity in Europe which parallels the global tendency, depending on what notion of religion we use (Knoblauch 2003).

Education and the subject of Religion in the Swedish school

The Swedish school today, in public and curriculum discourses, is a meeting place for different cultures (Lpo 94, Lpf 94, Lpfö 98). According to the Swedish Education Act, all children and young people should have equal access to education. It is well underlined that all children should enjoy this right, regardless of gender, where they live, or social and economic factors.

Religious education, in the name of Christianity, was one of the main subjects in the public Swedish school at its start in 1842 (Hartman 1994). Since then, it is probably one of the school subjects that has changed the most, but always with much public debate and heated feelings.

Hartman states that 'the public school during its first 75 years was a school for religious education' (1994: 11, my translation), the main purpose being to supply relevant teaching to support the Lutheran church's confirmation in the 'right' faith (cf. Linné 2001: 28). The vicar of the church's congregation was the obvious leader of the school board, and the influence of the Lutheran church

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[5] The concept of secularisation was first used by Max Weber but since the late 1950s it has been in use especially by American sociologists. The political scientist Jeff Haynes (1998) analyses the secularisation process in five different areas: a constitutional secularisation, a policy secularisation, an institutional secularisation, an agenda secularisation and an ideological secularisation. An account of, and perspectives on, the debate are given by Tschannen (1991).

[6] The 'religious sphere' means here, for example, churches, special media programmes or newspapers, which focus on religion and religious issues.

was immense. Also the school day was deeply embedded in religion and a strong imprint in Lutheran religious life. Every day there was morning prayer with worship, hymn singing and reading from the Bible. According to the two first curricula (1878 and 1889), there was one hour of teaching in Christianity every day five days a week; in the public school there were two or two and a half hours of teaching from the Lutheran Cathechism, one hour of reading from the Bible and almost two hours of Biblical history every week (Linné 2001: 33). Within this setting, schooling was designed to provide students with absolute values and a training, or more negatively an indoctrination, in faith.

At the turn of the 20th century, social changes in Sweden due to technical and political forces challenged the traditional Lutheran church as well as the above-outlined educational system. New curricula were formulated within shorter and shorter intervals in 1919, 1962, 1980 and 1994. Step by step the Swedish school as well as religious education changed. In 1969 there was a change of name of the subject from Christianity to 'Knowledge about Christianity', but already in the curriculum of that year there was another change of name of the subject to 'Knowledge about Religion' (hereafter also called Religion) to reflect demands from a more pluralistic society (Hartman 1994: 15-17). The most interesting and sensational feature of both the 1962 and the 1969 curricula was the claim of objectivity (Lgr 62, p. 217). This led to heated controversy and great uncertainty among many teachers about the meaning of objectivity. Textbooks in the subject were examined and a lot of them were not found good enough, when measured against the perceptions of objectivity (Hartman 1994: 16).

The rupture of the Swedish schools' attachment to the Swedish Lutheran church has been quite rapid and radical, compared with other European countries. Already the curriculum of 1962 mentioned above adopted a more neutral outlook on life, and most people in Sweden agree with this today.

In spite of this, the subject of Religion in Swedish schools is still obligatory both in the compulsory school system and in the upper secondary school, but within a discourse of neutrality and plurality. Basic values in the curriculum of 1994 (Lpo 94, Lpf 94)[7] state that 'Education in the school shall be non-denominational. The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in social life by giving of their best in responsible freedom'. Values such as democracy, understanding, compassion, objectivity and open approaches, equivalent education and rights and obligations are underlined (Lpo 94, Lpf 94). In the curriculum there is an emphasis on human ability to understand, reflect, interpret, and improve oneself and one's environment through rational thought. These basic values and abilities are quite far from the traditional religious and educational discourses formulated only seventy-five years earlier.

The subject 'Knowledge about Religion' in the curriculum of 1994 (Lpo 94) is given a minor place within the timeframe for social studies in the syllabus for the compulsory school system. Education in the subject of Religion is formulated within three perspectives, namely belief and tradition, ethics, and

[7] The Swedish curricula as well as syllabi translated into English are found at http://www.skolverket.se/

issues concerning life and its interpretation. The main goal formulated in the 1994 curriculum states that the subject of Religion should contribute to:

> developing the ability to understand and reflect about oneself, one's life and surroundings and develop a preparedness for acting with responsibility […] to promote an open discussion on issues concerning religious belief and outlook on life, as well as creating curiosity and an interest in religion. A deeper knowledge of religion and outlooks on life makes this possible. In an international society based on ethnic and cultural diversity, how people think, act and shape their lives is of growing importance. The subject contributes to an understanding of traditions and cultures, and thus provides a foundation for confronting xenophobia, as well as developing pupils' respect for tolerance (Lpo 94).[8]

Thus, the educational approach tries to formulate a quite open-ended, explorative and critical education in Religion, which incorporates knowledge and discussions about traditional religious world-views, but also about alternative religious understandings such as mystical experiences, altered states of consciousness, meditation techniques, and secular ideologies such as humanism and existentialism. The aim is not to establish religious conviction, but to further pupils' reflections. It is directed towards mutual understanding and fostering tolerance and respect in a society with co-existing differences. Swedish schools are diversified, and pupils of different beliefs and life perspectives are instructed together. This is regarded as a tool to recognise and validate plurality as interesting, legitimate and something to learn from.

The Swedish syllabus has moved from giving precise instructions on content to specifications on the quality of knowledge, which are essential in the subject. This is a radical change in pedagogical approach and has given teachers a much more central role. Teachers, together with the pupils, have to plan the content, construct the teaching in line with the goals to be aimed at in the curriculum and syllabi, and assess students' achievements according to the goals.

In line with this approach, the content can differ in one school from another, and young people learn different contents. The idea is that the content has to relate to the local school as well as to the children in each classroom, but the qualities of knowledge gained in the process can be just the same. The rationale underlying these ideas is inclusive, multicultural and multi-faith.

Even though the outlook of the subject Religion in the 1994 curriculum is quite explorative, inclusive and multicultural, it is discussed by some educationalists as being a backlash from the curriculum of 1980, not least when it also states that 'In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this (values) is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility' (Lpo 94). This statement relating to Christian tradition and Western humanism created a big controversy at the time when the curriculum was being drawn up in the beginning of the 1990s, but can be seen in the light of new directives from the

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[8] http://www3.skolverket.se/ki03/front.aspx?sprak=EN&ar=0506&infotyp=24&skolform=11
&id=3886&extraId=2087

conservative government that came into power in Sweden in 1991 (Linné 2001: 47). The formulation comes into direct collision with the paragraph stating a non-denominational education (see above). The evidently contradictory statement was quietly dropped from the curriculum for the pre-school formulated in 1998 (Lpfö 98).

It has to be stressed, however, that curricula and syllabi are drawn up within ideological and political spheres sometimes (often?) far from educational praxis and schools. Educational praxis is by nature embedded in many social contexts and is never neutral. The subject of Religion at all levels in Sweden is therefore often biased towards European Christian and Lutheran perspectives and understandings. Christianity in its Lutheran form is still centred within the subject of Religion, which is one of the critical issues being discussed in the field of religions and religious education (see, for example Murray 2006). Thus, some critics say, education in Religion can still serve the interests of some, while restricting opportunities for others. Instead of fostering tolerance of differences and respect for diversity, stated as values in the curriculum and syllabi, it might even contribute to stereotyping and xenophobia, quite contrary to intentions, not least if beliefs and traditions are presented in a distorted fashion in the classroom.

Furthermore, most Swedish schools' social and cultural settings are characterised by Swedish Christian traditions, which has led to heated debates. The major Christian festivals are state holidays and are quite often prepared for in schools, especially in the lower grades. This is often the case with special arrangements around Advent, Christmas and Easter. Heated controversies have arisen in relation to the tradition of arranging the school's last day before the summer vacation as a ceremony in a Swedish church, if there is one not far from the school. Many Swedish people regard these special arrangements, deprived of their religious meanings, as part of 'Swedish culture'. Others get upset at the taken-for-granted views and the poor reflections from what can then be called a mono-cultural Swedish school (Tesfahuney 1999). Traditions within other faith communities are still not much recognised in schools, which gives the impression that no other faiths or festivals are part of Swedish society.

Partly because of a fear of losing the tradition and faith and risking children becoming culturally and religiously alienated in what some argue is a mono-cultural Swedish school, parents of both Christian and Muslim faiths in Sweden have established independent schools, the so-called 'free schools'. Quite a number have started since permission to start schools not run by the state was given in 1992.[9] Irrespective of the aim of the school, most of them follow the national curriculum, but can arrange supplementary education as well. Some schools arrange confessional religious education during extra time, but also language, arts and sports are subjects given as supplementary education.

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[9] Permission to start schools not run by the state was given after years of political debate in Sweden. See, for example, *Skolor som alla andra. Med fristående skolor i systemet 1991-2004.* Skolverkets rapport No. 271. http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=1537

The empirical study

The empirical data for this essay consist of material from two different interviews administered individually to the participants.[10] Altogether 41 pupils were interviewed. The following questions were brought into the focus of the investigation:

> How do pupils talk about their own religion and ethnicity?
> How do pupils talk about the religion of others?

Interviews were conducted and analysed especially with eleven pupils. The stated national, ethnic and religious identities of the pupils were all their own chosen positions. The interview is seen here as a partly restricted social setting, in which both the interviewee and interviewer interact and together produce information in discursive processes (Aull Davies 1999). In this sense interviews constitute a kind of identity work in which self-images are created, interpreted and reinterpreted. In this text some of the pupils' statements will be presented and discussed. The focus is on talk from some of the Muslim pupils (with Pakistani, Iraqi and Lebanese backgrounds) as well as some of the pupils identifying themselves as 'Swedish'.

Religion as a language – for some

Being socialised in a religious system reveals itself through the ways in which pupils perspectivise and talk about the world. In my study, the pupils from a Muslim background, in particular, are very clear and articulate when expressing their world-view, even if they also have a great many questions that are unanswered by their religion. Talk in relation to a religious world-view and with the use of traditional religious concepts is often used here by many of the Muslim pupils to articulate the ethical and moral grounds for one's behaviour. Keya, for instance, says when talking about Islam and his belief in God:

> Keya: [God is]…the guide…no, he is the one who decides for me, but in the right way…because I myself can have wrong thoughts.
> Interviewer: And how do you know what God has said?
> Keya: […] in the Quran, as I said, that's the guide to what is wrong and what's right.

Nasrin underlines the Muslim belief as providing safety in her life:

> Nasrin: My religion […] it's safety…there is *something* up there who you know helps you…it's very secure having this (a belief in God) around in society.

Samira talks about God as a creator in an almost poetic style:

> I look upon God like this: he is not created…he can't be made of plastic, he can't be transparent, he can't be anything, [but] he is something, still he is

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[10] All were volunteers and had been given a guarantee of personal and institutional anonymity. They were informed that they could withdraw their cooperation at any time without explanation (although none chose to exercise this option). Also parents were informed and gave their permission. The interviews were conducted with pupils from grade 8 (13–15 years old) at one specific secondary school in a multi-ethnic suburb within a major Swedish city. The pupils were selected to provide as broad a representation as possible regarding positioning in relation to religion, biological sex, ethnicity and national background.

> nothing…he is not a father, he is not a human being, he is something he hasn't created…I feel when I pray to him that he helps me, unless what is happening…when I have lost something or there is something in the family …or something, he is always there, God for me.

Later in the interview Samira comes back to her talk about God and states that believing in God is very special and a 'big thing' for her, although of course she respects people who are non-believers.

For the Muslim pupils in my study a belief in God is a matter of course. None of them express a totally non-believing standpoint during the interviews, even if not everything in their Muslim traditions is appreciated.

But 'having' a religion is not the way in which these pupils talk easily about their faith. I interpret this as being due to difficulties in defining the concept of religion. In many parts of the world 'religion' is more or less integrated into many different forms and ways of living within a given family tradition (Hjärpe 1992: 127). This, of course, creates difficulties in knowing how to talk about 'my religion', which represents talk from within a Western and individualised discursive construction.

The concept of religion is much debated and a critical discussion is found among writers like Talal Asad (1993) and Richard King (1999). The critique concerns the view of the concept of religion in the Western world, which they claim is cut off and apart from history, and from social and political life (Asad 1993: 28). The dilemma in talking about the concept of religion is clearly heard in the Muslim pupil's talk. Keya, for instance, exclaims in the discussion about his religion:

> Keya: Religion is!!? (He laughs)
> Interviewer: Mm…
> Keya: Well, the Middle East![…]Yeah! Everything there.

Thus, for Keya religion is an integral part of most dimensions of the culture of the Middle East, where he and his family were born, and therefore he positions himself automatically as a Muslim. He does not separate tradition from culture or culture from religion, he says, but he is eager to discuss this issue.

In Western writings and discourses about Muslims the categorisation of ethnic, cultural, religious and political Muslims is sometimes used (Roald 2001: 18). This can be criticised in the same way as the concept of religion, as being constructions and divisions from a Eurocentric perspective – scientifically 'cut off' from historically specific elements, static and separated from power relations.

Positioning oneself as not 'having' a religion can then appear impossible. Would it be the same as declaring that one has no family, no traditions and no belonging in the world? Nonetheless, these pupils know about the Western way of categorising the concept of religion, but there is an ambivalence in their talk. One can reflect on how appropriate the school subject of Religion is, according to the above-mentioned critique of the concept of religion. The Muslim pupils are further interested, in particular, in making comparisons between their religion and its world outlook and that of other religions, like Christianity

which they know is the most common faith historically in Sweden. Nasrin, for instance, confronts me during one of the interviews when discussing whether Jesus is the son of God.

> Nasrin: …you are Christian, aren't you?
> Interviewer: Yes…
> Nasrin: Well…if God loves his son…so why did he allow them to crucify him? I think that is quite wrong…if God loved him…yeah, we (Muslims) also believe in Jesus, of course, but we don't believe the way you do…he, you know the one who snitched?
> Interviewer: Judas?
> Nasrin: Yeah, he became Jesus if you know what I mean?
> Interviewer: Yes.
> Nasrin: And Jesus arrived in Heaven, and later… He and our last Prophet, well, we have twelve prophets…he and Jesus will come back together…and if I was to judge and saw my son die…I wouldn't let that happen, of course not! But if God…well, he's created everything so he can decide whatever he likes!

Nasrin is very eager to talk about and discuss religious issues during the interviews, and I am often asked when I want to talk to her again. Her national family background is in Iraq and she positions herself as a religious Muslim within the Shi'ite tradition. Her religious faith is important to her and she wears a *hijab*. In the discussion above, she refers to the Christian belief that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified. This belief is one of the big controversies between Muslims and Christians. Nasrin as a Muslim regards the belief in the cruci-fixion as abominable and wants to discuss how Christian people can really hold this belief.

Talking to Nasrin about getting to know more about religious faiths, she declares that she would like to know more and have more teaching about religious faiths, especially Islam, but also about the three religions belonging to what in the Muslim tradition is called 'the People of the Book': Judaism, Christianity and Islam. She describes how Muslim pupils in school discuss and compare religious ideas and traditions, but she says she has not had much teaching about Islam in the Swedish school. Instead, she asks her parents and for some years she has participated in Quran-teaching in the city on Saturdays.

As shown above, religion as a source for identity constructions is something that, albeit with variations, is apparent for almost all the pupils in my investigation from a Muslim background, represented here by talk from interviews with Nasrin, Keya, and Samira. It seems clear that religious socialisation gives rise to greater religious curiosity as well, and it seems possible that pupils who have developed an articulate religious language and an ability thereafter to discuss and interpret religious narratives and myths find it easier to take part in, and find meaning in, such conversations later on (see also Geels and Wikström 1999).

Resistance to religion and tradition within talk from Muslim pupils

Several scholars of Islam with an interest in research about youth and identity have discussed the tendency amongst today's Muslim young people to both question and resist what they term as the older generation's all too narrow,

traditional and, in their eyes, twisted interpretation of Islam (cf. Abdullah 1995, Jacobson 1997). This is a strong tendency also among the Muslim pupils interviewed in my research. Often questions arise about what is permitted or appropriate when living in a society like Sweden.

> Keya: […] there are lots of *haram* (forbidden) things that aren't mentioned in the Quran…in some places they say it's forbidden to watch birds when you don't know whether it's a male or female…that's what I've heard anyway.

Keya is in quite strong opposition and almost a bit frivolous when discussing the religious tradition he knows of, even though he also strongly underlines that he belongs to a Muslim family and probably always will. He says:

> […] if you don't accept you can't live as expected (in Sweden)… Because right now we are in a society where there are many faiths…many nationalities…then you have to accept that you and you and you and you…otherwise it's not going to work.

In Keya's talk there are competing discourses. On the one hand, he expresses great respect for somewhat more collective and 'traditional' practices in the family, respect for God and Muslim traditions, and on the other hand there are strong articulations of individual choice and an ability to decide for oneself what is right and wrong. In this way identities develop, take shape and operate in the context of social and competing relations, which are critically structured by people's group membership. This kind of 'identity-work' that Keya's talk is located in is common to all, especially young people, but presumably is harder in a minority-majority context. For individuals, the complex political, economic and historical relations give rise to manifestations of shifting identity constructions. Research on intergroup/intercultural relations has shown that such relations can have positive effects, but also potential dangers (Simon 2004: 100-155).

In Ismail's talk there are also varying and competing discourses. He talks about his own position, using the word 'hypocrite' several times during the interviews. This is a common way of talking within a Muslim religious discourse, and Ismail expresses very clearly his ambivalence towards his faith and religious upbringing. Ismail, like his family, belongs to the Ahmadiyya tradition and often takes part in the youth group in the Ahmadiyya Mosque in the city. He finds the teaching interesting and relevant while he is in the Mosque, but when he is among 'mixed' friends in school or in his housing area he becomes very doubtful and ambivalent towards the Ahmadiyya faith and way of living. He says he wants to have the ability to live and be accepted like other Swedish friends. This is a big conflict for him. The conflict escalates because his father is very religious and often converts other people to his faith.

Ismail has a bad conscience, but he also says that he knows many friends who have the same feelings. He thinks all children and young people in his situation in Sweden and the Western world must feel the same.

All religious systems need reformulation and reinterpretation when encountering new and shifting cultural and religious contexts. Many of the young Muslims in my research talk about the need for such *ijtihad*. Nasrin, among others, who has participated in Quran-teaching on Saturdays in the city,

rejects the view taken by some in her religious tradition that women cannot work outside the home, and asks me whether this is stated in the Quran or not. She is also very upset and frustrated about a conflict in her family which has to do with a man who is already married, who wants to marry her aunt.

Quite often the family's country of origin is present as an active reference point for the pupils when they talk about their own religion, ethnicity and life projects. The concept of transnational youth, where cultural and religious identifications are spread over multiple geographical territories, might be of relevance here. More research on children and young people is needed, however, to get to know the meaning of identity-moulding in complex social settings within the framework of immigration. For these immigrant (transnational) youth, school is often the setting where they are socialised into the dominant discourses of the society, or excluded from it by various means (Carlson 2006). Abdullah (1995) also raises the question of the subject of Religion and relevant education, which is a burning issue in all countries in Europe (cf. von Brömssen 2003).

'Swedish' pupils' talk about religion

As shown above, religion as a source for identity construction is something that, albeit with some variations, is apparent for almost all the pupils in my investigation from a Muslim background. This is in strong contrast with what can be said about the pupils of 'Swedish' origin. These pupils are mostly positioned in and by their discourses as secular and materialistic.

Only one of the 'Swedish' pupils interviewed talked about religion in quite a positive way, and that was when Kristoffer talked about Buddhism. He did not know very much about Buddhism, so he said, but he found it interesting, partly because of its atheistic approach. The family of another 'Swedish' girl, Isabella, were active members of a Swedish free church, but Isabella had now abandoned it. She found it narrow-minded, and herself also questioned by other (Swedish) friends. 'Swedish' pupils call in question beliefs not grounded in science. Both Kristoffer and Johanna find it very inappropriate that some people refer to religious myths when explaining the world; they regard this as stupid, old-fashioned and certainly not useful.

Religion in the talk of 'Swedish' pupils is very often connected with problems, especially wars both in history and now, and this talk is extended to issues in relation to problems with a theistic belief in God. The theodicy problem deals with the question of why a morally omnipotent God who possesses all power and knowledge permits evil and suffering in the world. This problem is formulated by Mattias in his talk:

> No, I don't believe in God. If there had been a God…well, a good God…why doesn't he stop wars and such things? If he is there, he would do that, but that doesn't happen! So there is no reason for me to believe in Him…

Thus, discussions on such religious themes are not much appreciated by the 'Swedish' pupils and their own talk is not often grounded in religious discursive constructions. 'There isn't much to know (about life after death),' as

Kristoffer puts it, and this could be seen as a significant statement. This difference in talk about religion between the two categories of pupils corresponds with suggestions about Sweden as a secular and secularising society as discussed above. The reconstruction of religion and religious identities spoken about by some researchers is not apparent within the discourses of religion and identity produced by the pupils in my investigation.

Time and the Other in 'Swedish' pupils' talk about religion

In the well-known work of Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How anthropology makes its object* (1983/2002), he analyses the constitutive function of time in Anglo-American and French anthropology. Fabian refers to a phenomenon that he calls the 'denial of *coevalness',* by which he means 'a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse' (1983/2002: 31). The term *coevalness* was chosen by Fabian to mark a central assumption that 'all temporal relations, and therefore contemporaneity, are embedded in culturally organised praxis' (ibid.: 34).

A discourse somewhat like Fabian's coevalness or allochronism is heard in the talk from pupils who position themselves as secularised and 'Swedish'. Religion and religious traditions and practices are talked about and constructed in discourses connected with pre-modern 'foolishness', lacking scientific credibility and deprived of individuality and free will. Time works here as a difference-generating category and a discursive construction developed by the 'Swedish' group, with which they articulate and construct understandings about people from ethnic backgrounds that differ from their own. People from other backgrounds than Swedish are denied contemporaneity and localised outside 'Western' time horizons in a way that also makes it not only possible, but also logical, for 'Swedes' to deny any value in internal knowledge of other religious systems and their world-views. One of the 'Swedish' boys, Kristoffer, says:

> I don't think we should have religion as a subject in school …I don't think it is something…I think it's old-fashioned…I don't think we should continue to have that...I wouldn't like…I would like more freedom of choice.

Kristoffer continues to talk about friends, especially Muslim friends, who according to him live too restricted lives.

> Kristoffer: Yeah, I'm thinking of friends who are not allowed to eat what they want and can't do what they want…
> Interviewer: Can you do whatever you want, then?
> Kristoffer: Not always, but then it isn't connected to what religion my parents got…

A discourse making a construction of religion as belonging to an old-fashioned time, when family tradition prescribed what you should think and believe, is very often present in the talk from the 'Swedish' pupils. We, the Swedes, are not like that, they say. In these pupils' talk, Swedes are 'enlightened' in the sense of having scientific and rational world-views. This form of dogma can be

called scientism, which means that science is seen as the absolute and only justifiable access to the truth (Sorell 1994). Kristoffer explains this quite explicitly when he discusses his own world-view:

> Kristoffer: Yeah, I think religious people make a simple-minded impression…
> Interviewer: Mm…how do you think the earth was created, then?
> Kristoffer: Well, I don't know really, but I don't think it happened in that kind of (religious) far-fetched way…I think there is a natural explanation for it.
> Interviewer: So you think a natural science theory would explain it?
> Kristoffer: Yes…it has changed many times, but sometime it will get right.

Also Johanna, positioning herself as 'Swedish' and secularised, points to religion as something 'stuck-up' and useless to think about: 'It's the same as asking and thinking about what is the meaning of grass…'.

In Johanna's view, there is no need for religion. Life is here and now, ethical issues have to be grounded in the actual situation and, according to her, religious beliefs do not give answers that are useful in modern times.

Mattias' talk is in line with this. Through his talk he constructs religions as belonging to 'them', not 'us'. He says:

> Mattias: Well, for example, foreigners, they have more of religions and such things…they come here …with their religions…and Swedes react to that /…/ Other people…I think of other people, foreigners, I don't think of Swedish people…they don't have a special religion …foreign people, they have many people who pray and such things…Somali people and people like that… the girls must wear a veil.
>
> Interviewer: Do you know why they do that?
>
> Mattias: Why they wear a veil?...They want to!! Even if they are in Sweden, their religion is still there…even if they've moved to Sweden…

In Mattias' talk there is a sharp division between 'us' and 'them'. 'Swedes are not religious, but they are', he says. Religion appears here as a clear difference-constituting category between 'us' and 'them'. When I ask Mattias if he and his schoolmates discuss different religions and lifestyles with each other, he looks almost perplexed and says:

> No, no, no! We don't think about how they live…we are friends!

It seems that discussing the subject of religion is frightening and might even threaten friendship. This is also confirmed by Johanna. She says:

> We try not to talk about religion. Then we get angry…well, we get cross and sore at each other…

The fear of commenting, of asking about or discussing religion, is also something both Berg (2001: 107-109) and Ehn (1981) comment on. Due to fears of not getting the multicultural co-existence with each other to work in daily life, sensitive issues are avoided in discussion. Ehn calls this 'peaceful ethnic coexistence' (1981: 155). The 'Swedish' pupils in my research seem to act in the same way. They try to avoid the issue of religion, in the way Johanna talks about it above, because they know from experience that it is a controversial issue. Why it is a controversial issue the pupils cannot explain.

This is interesting and remarkable. One might think that, while it seems that most 'Swedish' pupils are not very involved in issues of religion, they could remain aloof from it, but this does not seem to be the case. Perhaps the feeling of being questioned about religion is too disturbing and challenging when one is relying on (and believing in) discourses about secularised Sweden and the secularised Swedish people.

As noted earlier, theories directed towards secularisation are very much discussed and contested among researchers – and among Swedish school-pupils, discourses which border on secularisation as well as scientism seem strong. The scientism discourse places Swedes in the modern and enlightened position, whereas religious believers, especially the Muslims in the school, are positioned as old-fashioned traditionalists. This very clearly demarcates the borders between 'us' and 'them'. Discourses containing representations regarding the Others' religious beliefs construct borders and 'meetings which are not meetings', as Zygmunt Bauman puts it (1995: 191-197). To 'meet without meeting', here exemplified within differences of religion, reconfirms the 'foreigner' and makes transgression and hybridisation of cultural and religious differences difficult.

The talk articulated by pupils who position themselves as Swedish is within discourses of 'the Enlightenment project' (McIntyre1981). It is a search for a rational or worldly basis for one's beliefs and actions. A religious epistemology stands, for the 'Swedish' pupils, as something that is in conflict with 'the Enlightenment project' and, as such, something that is based on loose speculations and infantile, old-fashioned and backward discourses. Religious people are, in the 'Swedish' pupil's view, stuck in out-dated lifestyles, which do not belong to the contemporary world. The Swedish pupils are very convinced that they themselves are objective, neutral and outside all religious influences. 'Us' and 'them' are clearly constructed in discourses related to religion, faith and beliefs in this Swedish school.

Talking about gender

Both Samira and Nasrin talked in relation to issues connected with 'modern times', and both expressed a hope that what they talked about as 'modern ways of living' had influenced their own mothers and the demands that were placed on them. However, neither of them was absolutely certain that this was the case and Samira, in particular, expressed both fear and worry. These worries were associated with Islam in the talk by the Muslim girls, even though the structures of purity and honour they associated them with are not primarily religious phenomena emanating from Islam or any other religion (Roald 2001: 240-242).

Neither of the Muslim boys in the sample, Keya and Ismail, expressed an understanding of gender that is consistently associated with Muslim maleness in the major media outlets of Swedish mainstream society, namely, an understanding of Islam and Muslim men as exclusively masculine (strong and brave) and patriarchal. Ismail and Keya both demand respect and equal treatment for both sexes, and are clearly angered by any tendencies toward

religious discrimination against children, young girls and women of Islam. Keya is quite upset, saying:

> …in some countries girls are not allowed to go to school. The Quran doesn't say anything about that!...Why is that? She can wear a *hijab* and go to school, that doesn't matter, but as I said, in some countries they have violated women…and exaggerate.

Nasrin refers to the theme of chastity and connects the view with her religion, Islam. She is somewhat ambivalent about the regulations when it comes to boys, but she herself will (try to) stick to her religion, and the ethics she refers to is prescribed there. Both in the Quran and in the Sunna there are rules constructing borders in detail between the sexes (Roald 2001: 145-183), even though there are various ideas in the Islamic sources. Nasrin has a feeling about a change in the future, which is in line with what research shows. Cultural and religious patterns are flexible and constantly on the move. Roald summarises this by saying: 'It is important to note that existing social attitudes are unconscious factors in the interpretation of social issues in the Islamic texts… When circumstances change, attitudes are modified to fit the existing situation' (2001: 184). When Samira talks about her future she says:

> …I want to educate myself, have a job and …everything has to be good, then you buy a car and good things like that…and then you have to marry, but I don't think I shall dare to marry, but I *have* to marry…

From the Muslim pupils' talk, it is clear that the boys do not put such big demands on themselves as the girls do. The boys' talk was less restricted; they seem more free to experiment and try parts of different lifestyles and still be a Muslim, even if this also sometimes puts pressure on the boys and they have to negotiate. Ismail talks at length about his feelings of often putting on a show and of not being a trustworthy Muslim. But, as he says, he lives in Sweden and wants to be accepted by his friends and therefore he has no choice. Worries, especially in connection with marriage and future family life, were also common among the boys:

> Ismail: […] but then you understand *it* (!). [Islam? Tradition?] You have to marry someone who is Muslim…and then I think…I want to marry someone I love…if she is a Muslim, it's good. But then my parents say, well, you *can* marry someone else, but it means problems for your children who don't know what religion they belong to…

Religion is seen here as an important factor in life, which contributes to a good and secure family life. Consensus about religion in the family is important, but Ismail favours marrying someone he loves. 'If she is a Muslim, it's good,' he states, but is a bit worried about how this can be worked out. Ismail, like many other young people, tries to negotiate between different discourses and lifestyles. For all pupils who position themselves as Muslims, Islam plays a role, but this role varies among them. The pupils negotiate and try to get their lifestyle to fit their families' approaches, as well as lifestyles they talked of as being 'here in Sweden'. Changes are demanded of the pupils even if they also appreciate and value Islam as 'their' religion. Their discussions can perhaps be captured in the question: 'How can I live as a Swedish Muslim?'

On plurality in diaspora

The investigation emphasises that identities constructed and negotiated during early childhood and adolescence are quite strong and are carried on with variations from the religious and ethnic environment within which one is socialised. The dialogue of early socialisation forms an identity that develops and is in constant flux during the rest of one's life. Even though identity constructions are flexible throughout life, they are not changed like items of clothing. The material of identity formation comes from the family and the society one grows up and then lives in. Immigrant young people whose cultural identifications are spread over multiple geographical territories are in a special process of being incorporated into, or excluded from, certain categories of the 'host society'. 'Having' a religion and identifying with Islam in Swedish schools are not at the top of the agenda, as seen from the perspective of the Swedish pupils.

Transnational conditions and an awareness of living in a diaspora, in the broader post-colonial sense of this concept, are high amongst all the pupils who articulate an ethnic identity other than 'Swedish' in my investigation. Quite often the pupils' country of origin is present as an active reference point for them when they talk about their own religion, ethnicity and life projects.

The way in which the pupils spoke can be characterised as extending from *there* (roots) to *here*. Sweden becomes here – just one place amongst several possible real and imaginary alternatives on the path of life – at the same time as they are constantly reminded about their roots through various and different categorisations in the new country.

Questions about culture, religion and ethnicity can be seen as different expressions of the same fundamental problem concerning issues of power, justice and equality within the cultural and religious sphere. Religion appears here as a clear difference-constituting category between 'us' and 'them'. However, religion is also increasingly presented as an important geopolitical question, which means that issues of religious identity and the struggle of/for religious articulation in the multicultural society are important both to observe and to investigate, not least in education. School is a kind of social laboratory where pupils from a multitude of different backgrounds meet. The school could be seen as a site of possibility for positive and rewarding meetings, but often pupils articulating an ethnic and religious background other than Swedish talk about it as a place where the identity of being the Other is imposed on them, positioned as immigrants who belong somewhere else with a foreign language – and, in addition, a foreign religious language. For the Swedish school and the subject of Religion, it is a demanding task to develop into a multi/intercultural school, not only in the rhetoric but also in the curriculum and syllabi.

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