

Discussing Religion – Discourses in Plans for Thoughtful Dialogues

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Abstract

This paper analyzes discourses in method materials for thoughtful dialogues in the classroom. It focuses on materials presenting religious and moral subjects. ‘Thoughtful dialogues’ refers to a family of interrelated methods for philosophizing with students, e.g. philosophy for/with children, and Socratic seminars, using open-ended questions, and an investigating and collaborative interlocution. The questions guiding the study were:

- What discourses can be found in methodological materials for thoughtful dialogue addressing the subject religion?
- Are questions in the materials used to address faith, morality, and teaching? If so, how?
- How are the discourses found in the methodological materials related to the discourses in religious education in a highly secularized country (Sweden)?

In this study a social constructionist/poststructuralist approach is taken, where knowledge is considered contextual and social, and where an action or stance therefore can be considered as impossible or natural depending on how the world is perceived within the dominating discourse. Our analysis was carried out by using a revised version of Fairclough’s (2013) three-dimensional conception of discourse, presenting an analytical frame for empirical discourse research: Analysis of texts, of discursive practice, and of discursive events as instances of social practice.

The results show three discourses in the material. The discourse of *critical thinking in school* is the most frequent, and aims at transforming teaching. *Faith* is normally not a part of the agenda. The *teaching philosophy in school* discourse does not address faith, and moral questions and the egalitarian dialogue are elements used to justify the teaching of philosophy in school. The third discourse addresses faith and suggests a *critical thinking in religion* discourse, challenging the present hegemonic discourse in western societies. Religious education in secular countries tends to focus on teaching about the world religions from an outsider’s perspective whereas the methodological materials for thoughtful dialogues tend to focus on moral questions when exploring religious texts.

Religious education in school could be considered from two factors: 1.) The attitude toward questions of faith and 2.) The approach to knowledge. Questions of religious faith might be addressed in education, or not. Knowledge might be seen from a fundamentalist point of view, where a set of true facts are presented to the students, or, as in the opposite position, attaining knowledge includes critically examination of facts and values. This will give four different approaches to religious education in school: Dogmatic religion, dogmatic atheism, examining theology, or examining philosophy excluding theology.

Questions of faith and religion need to be discussed with others: Thoughtful dialogues could be used in classrooms and other contexts for dialogues about faith, and religious and theological questions,

and thus helping the individual to form a relationship or grounded base on which he or she can reflect on matters of faith and belief or disbelief, both on her or his own and with others. This approach is in accordance with the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Introduction

In a public debate in March 2013, organized by the Swedish Minister for Integration, Erik Ullenhag, the researcher Anne-Louise Eriksson stated that one problem in Swedish schools and debate is that religion is invisible (also cf. Klasson Sundin, 2014), and that an atheistic philosophy of life is favored (Kyrkans tidning, 2013). This will in the end be a threat to democracy, she continued, nourishing bias in society against religions and bias within closed religious groups. This stance was met with protests during the debate, and the Director of Education, Claes-Göran Aggebo, established that the National Agency of Education (Skolverket) is opposed to religion being marginalized.

Curricula in many countries present religious education as a subject area. However, religious beliefs and faith in modern society are often considered matters of personal and inner reflection (Bäckström et al, 2004). The *World Value Survey* (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) measures how people in the world perceive major areas such as religion, politics, economics, and social life. Two dimensions dominate: traditional / secular-rational values and survival / self-expression values (see Appendix A). A nation's orientation within the two dimensions will explain the population's view on life to a high extent. The traditional/secular-rational values dimension reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not. The second dimension, the polarization of survival or self-expression values, is linked with the transition from industrial societies to post-industrial societies. There has been a shift in orientations from traditional toward secular-rational values in almost all industrial societies (*World Value Survey Cultural Map 2005-2008*). An increasing share of the population takes survival for granted and priorities have shifted from economic and physical security toward an increasing emphasis on self-expression and quality of life. High ranking of self-expression values tends to produce a culture of trust and tolerance, valuing individual freedom and self-expression, and resulting in high rankings of interpersonal trust, and active political engagement. These are the attributes that the political culture literature defines as crucial to democracy (*World Value Survey Cultural Map 2005-2008*).

However, an important distinction between secularization and secularism could be made (Gardell, 2011). Secularization refers to the process of separating religion from the state and its institutions, from politics and economy. Secularism, however, is an ideology that involves ideas on how the state and or political power should relate to religion and matters of faith. As such secularism can treat religion as negative, and as a result diminish religion to the private sphere, or eradicate religion and its claims. Alternatively, the state can view religion positively as one of many worldviews that enriches the life of the citizens, and avoid involvement in the questions of truth when it comes to religions or atheism.

'Thoughtful dialogue' refers to a set of comparable methods used in schools and other contexts to philosophize with children and youngsters, e.g. Socratic seminars, Philosophy for/with Children (P4C, PWC), and Deliberative Dialogue (Pihlgren, 2010). The ultimate goal is to enhance and develop students' understandings of the fundamental democratic values such as considering different points of view, openness to other's opinions, and ability to critically analyze values and ideas. The thoughtful dialogue could be defined as a collaborative, intellectual dialogue about ideas and values,

based on an inspiring material or question, facilitated by open-ended questions, and resulting in enhanced conceptual understanding (Roberts & Billings, 2008). The methods draw from a wide range of universal traditions. The traditions of Leonard Nelson (1965) in Germany, Hans Larsson (1925) and Oscar Olsson (1911) in Sweden, Mortimer Adler (1982a) in the USA, and Mathew Lipman et al. (1980) in Great Britain describe a set of methodological steps to attain similar objectives (Pihlgren, 2008). All the traditions lean heavily on Aristotle's (1998) idea, that intellectual habits of mind can be trained, and that this training will result in the individual attaining intellectual virtues, which will later result in practical wisdom, i.e. to be able to make productive choices, when confronted with a multitude of (incongruent) ideas.

The facilitator poses both planned and spontaneous questions about the ideas and concepts being investigated (Billings & Pihlgren, 2009). Questions planned prior are designed to help participants move from a fairly simple thought process to a deeper and more sophisticated analysis. More specifically, texts, pictures, or problems are used to facilitate taking a distance from the Self, when discussing the ideas. This tool reflects the Socratic *elenchus* as Popper (2007) describes. The cumulative refuting interpretation is a systematic and critical analysis of the ideas, sorting out those which do not pass the test. The adjusting part of refuting interpretation is a result of a creative, intuitive process, where new "bold" ideas are found and tested (Lindström, 2008). This is meant to apply both to the individual and to the group. The interpersonal and intrapersonal processes are considered interdependent: the individual influences the group and vice versa (Pihlgren, 2007).

The approach used in thoughtful dialogues could present students with the opportunity to investigate and form their personal ideas on believes and disbelieves in cooperation with others, if given the opportunity. In this paper we will present the analysis of the discourses presented in some of the method materials related to various approaches of using thoughtful dialogue in the classroom, and specifically when used as means to discuss religious and moral subjects with students. We are interested in whether the methodological materials of thoughtful dialogues and their suggested questions will present opportunities for the students to form their own ideas about faith, religion, and belief. How religious questions are dealt with in thoughtful dialogues has not been investigated before. This is a highly interesting subject since religious beliefs at least in the Western society generally have tended to be categorized as a personal matter (Bäckström et al, 2004). We will in our conclusions argue that:

- Questions of faith and religion need to be discussed with others.
- The methodological materials for thoughtful dialogues tend to focus on moral questions when exploring religious texts.
- Thoughtful dialogue could be used for dialogues about faith, and religious and theological questions, and thus helping the individual to form a relationship or grounded base on which he or she can reflect on matters of faith and belief or disbelief.

Design and theoretical base

The aim of this study is to investigate how religion and moral subjects are presented in methodological materials of thoughtful dialogue. The chief questions guiding the study are:

- What discourses can be found in methodological materials for thoughtful dialogue addressing the subject religion?

- Are questions in the materials used to address faith, morality, and teaching? If so, how?
- How are the discourses found in the methodological materials related to the discourses in religious education in a highly secularized country (Sweden)?

The study analyses eight seminar plans suggested for thoughtful dialogues in the classroom with students, grade 4-8, and addressing religion or morality. The plans were chosen from materials from Great Book Seminars (*Junior Great Books*, 1992), Deliberative Dialogue (*Touchstone Readings*, 1996), *The Paideia Seminar* (2002), P4C/PWC (Børresen & Malmhøst, 2004, Lipman, 1981), Socratic Seminars (*Våra bästa samtal*, 2009, *Fler eftertänksamma samtal*, 2013), and the Socratic Dialogue (van Rossem & de Swaef, 2008) and are used as material in Swedish schools¹, practicing thoughtful dialogues. One plan from each material was chosen. In materials not specifying religion (P4C/PWC, Socratic Dialogue) plans addressing ethical dilemmas were chosen.

Discourse analysis as theory and method

In this study a social constructionist/poststructuralist approach is taken, where knowledge is considered contextual and social, and where an action or stance therefore can be considered as impossible or natural depending on how the world is perceived within the dominating discourse. We have chosen to use a less complicated form of discourse analysis as method and as theoretical base (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Discourse analysis was traditionally used as a linguistic tool when understanding texts, dealing with element and relations within the language. However, Foucault's influence has led discourse analysis to a more critical stance. According to Foucault, what is believed to be 'the truth' is created between subjects discursively. The discourse will decide what will be possible to say and what will not. Several differing discourses can exist within one field. Each discourse is constructed by signs, concepts, symbols, and actions, giving a specific phenomenon a unified meaning. The accepted, hegemonic, discourse will have the power to dominate what is accepted or not, but there will most likely be alternative discourses, competing for power and challenging the dominating discourse, although they are actually a part of the existing discourse field. The discourse is ever changing.

Discourses attempt to fix webs of meaning through 'nodal points', particular systems of meaning or chains of signification (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Other signs will be organized around the nodal point. Nodal points in this study are the concepts of faith, teaching, and moral development, helping us to find the specific signs forming the discourses and giving the studied material meaning. Signs will get their meaning in relation to each other through articulation (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). The concept 'faith' could be interpreted in different ways, but when other signs are added, we might understand how the concept is interpreted within a certain discourse. This will function as a frame, excluding other meanings of the sign. Signs without fixed meanings, 'elements', are used to justify and legitimize the own discourse. The discourse will attempt to transform elements to signs by clarifying their meaning, and a discourse and its representatives have the power to exclude the elements that do not fit within the existing norms of the field.

Not everyone has a natural right to talk in the name of the discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Some are considered having a higher claim on truth than others. A priest or an imam might have a higher claim on interpreting 'faith' in a religious discourse, a philosopher in a philosophical discourse. Individuals might by this be able to position themselves differently within different

¹ The original texts were used in the analysis.

discourses, affecting how their contribution is valued and what power they might have. However, power is not considered an individual factor, but evolves in relations, limiting some people and giving others opportunities (Bergström & Boréus, 2005).

Discourse analysis and Foucault's theories have been important to feminist theology and postmodern theology (Sigurdson & Svenungsson, 2006). In these theologies the question of agency is highly relevant, as well as the understanding that the individual is a complex web of relations and limits. Contrary to the perception that not all are allowed to talk in a discourse, feminist and liberation theologians often argue against a hierarchical understanding of truth and instead embracing dialects and biases, as bringing something new to the table (Ringe, 1998, Westhelle, 2010a). In postcolonial theology Foucault is used in the struggle for liberation, especially in pointing out the necessary connection between truth speaking and freedom (Westhelle, 2006).

Our analysis was carried out by using a revised version of Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional conception of discourse, presenting an analytical frame for empirical discourse research, see figure 1.



Figure 1. Fairclough's (2013:73) three-dimensional conception of discourse.

Fairclough suggests that three dimensions should be addressed in an analysis:

1. Analysis of (spoken or written) language texts.
2. Analysis of discursive practice (processes of text production, distribution, and consumption).
3. Analysis of discursive events as instances of social practice (the wider social practice that the analyzed communication is part of).

These three dimensions were analyzed separately. The text analysis was concentrated on the formal features of the text, specifically vocabulary and phrasing, modality (the degree of affinity shown within text and between text and illustrations), and ethos (what identities are constructed?). The relationship between the texts and the social practice is mediated by the discursive practice. This analysis was concentrated on intertextuality – what influences from other genres and texts that could be found in the texts, and contextuality – what socio-cognitive and contextual dimensions of production and interpretation have influenced the texts. The analysis of the social practice was done by comparing the results to research presented in the literature section and focused on the three nodal points, if the discourse practice reproduced the field or transformed it, if there were hidden structures of inequality or new ways to present reality, and the consequences of the social practice.

The concepts of validity and reliability have to be treated differently in qualitative research and in discourse analysis, where the object itself is to uncover subjective discourses that the researcher might take part in (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). We have tried to make the analysis transparent, making it possible for others to take a critical stance to our findings. Comparison with other research has served as validation. The results have been discussed with fellow researchers e.g. at the 5th Conference of Philosophy of Education Society of Iran at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman. However, this is an interpretation of the discourses and not a 'true' reality.

Literature

In this paper we have chosen to use Swedish conditions when considering religious education as a school subject. These are conditions familiar to us but we also believe there is a generic reason to make this choice. Sweden's population is the most secularized-rational country in the world, highly valuing self-expression, according to the *World Value Survey Cultural Map 2005-2008*. The Swedish population has moved from embracing traditional survival values to its present point in less than a hundred years.

This literature section will focus on three nodal points. *Faith* is a central concept in religion. *Morality* is an important part of the curricular content in several countries. The analyzed method materials are designed to work within a school context as means to teach students, motivating the nodal point *teaching*.

Faith

According to the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* all children have the right to freedom of religion (Article 14:1):

States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Education should also, according to the convention, develop students' abilities to discuss and respect human rights and freedoms (Article 29).

The definition of religion is a well debated question (Bowie, 2000). However, in this paper we focus on one function of religion, namely that of being a mind frame for, and giving guidance to, individuals in finding answers to questions like 'Does God exist?', 'What will happen to me after death?', 'How are humans connected to the world?'

The noun *faith* has several meanings, according to *Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2006, p. 386):

1. Allegiance to duty or a person, 2. Belief and trust in God, 3. Complete trust, 4. A system of religious beliefs.

Faith is an expression of commitment to what you believe in. It does not require proof. Faith requires action and is a foundation of identity of the believer (Goba, 1998). In this text, faith is used as belief and trust in God/a higher power, and as a system of religious beliefs.

Theology, God-talk, is the study of God and God's traits and relationship to the universe. The Christian theological thinking is diverse and complex, as is the Bible. As the Bible is read in a new context it is understood in new ways. Same can be said of other religions, although the importance of

the Holy Scripture differs. In Islam, the Quran is viewed as perfect. There is a broad tradition of embracing philosophy and a space for freedom within Islam. Discussions are common and welcomed (Hedin, 2006). The questions and interpretations of the Quran are dependent on the social, political and personal context (Larsson, 2006).

Although, historically, the focus of theology often has been dogmatic truth there are strands of interpretations that open up for dialogue and critical examination (Westhelle, 2006). Many Christian feminist, post-colonial and liberation theologians are critiquing the common conception of faith and religion as hierarchical model of truth, and state the idea that secularization leads to the end of religion as false (Pui-lan, 1998, Westhelle, 2010b), the point being that a healthy theology needs critical and self-critical examination. A public intellectual discourse on religion and matters of faith is the protection against the misuse of religion, thus moving away from absolute theology to a resolute theology, in which the object is to nourish hope (Jackelén, 2011, 2013). Such theology does not claim to own the truth but rather to live in relation to God, other people, and the creation (c.f. Hammar, 2006). This kind of God-talk is rather a dialogical model of truth where each person contributes to the whole, and bias is something to affirm (Pui-lan, 1998, Ringe, 1998).

Selander (1994) suggests that the students' interests are essential in the 'pedagogy of life-questions', and assumes that there are fundamental existential questions². 'Questions of life' are part of what constitutes religious systems, but could also be considered part of an individual's or a society's life philosophy, reducing religion to one of many possible philosophies. In his book 'How to think about God' (1982) the American philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, one of the seminal thinkers of thoughtful dialogue in education, takes on the challenge to sort out questions of faith by rational philosophical reasoning with help of historic philosophers. He notes that certain questions will not be solved unless you take a leap of faith, and listen to your heart. Wright (2004) argues that the philosophical neutrality evoked by post-modern advocators is alien to human convictions and experience of faith. Faith is reduced to questions of morality, a liberalistic way that risks emphasizing colonial and imperialistic values. He argues that the contentious issues of faith, values, and trust ought to be highlighted.

However, if questions of faith are treated as dogmatic truths instead of open for reflection and critical analysis this might be problematic (Falkevall, 2010). This argument might motivate the use of thoughtful dialogue in religious education. Swedish archbishop Antje Jackelén argues that theological discussion needs to be a part of the public communication in order for the society to be democratic and multicultural (Jackelén, 2013). The thoughtful dialogue tries to go beyond generalizations and avoid exclusions.

Morality

In the present Swedish national curriculum (Skolverket, 2011a) moral education is presented as 'fundamental values'³, and not explicitly connected to the subject matter religion. The aspiration to clarify what fundamental values schools should emphasize occurred in several western societies when an ongoing change within society was noticed, from norms and values which had been seen as common for all of society to less static and predictable norms (Bäckström et. al. 2004, Friedman,

² Selander (1994) mentions three areas 1. Seeking meaning in practical every-day situations e.g. relations or sexuality; 2. Questions of life borders: decease, suffering, death, grief, guilt-forgiveness; 3. Questions of how reality is constituted: materialism/ idealism, is there a God, etc.

³ Swedish: "Värdegrund".

2005). The official values differ somewhat between the countries⁴. However, western societies today consist of a number of different groups with thoughts about what is correct and proper behavior. It is in other words difficult to identify fundamental values (Hedin & Lahdenperä, 2002). Traditionally, when moral was considered in reference to a religious system, the base of the moral values presented was possible to unveil. This is more complicated in the case of 'fundamental values'. The Swedish curriculum refers to historic traditions, and religious education is motivated by its importance when understanding the fundamental values of society (Larsson, 2006).

Several methods concerned with teaching what is considered fundamental values, 'emotional competence' or social skills have no effect on the moral behavior of students, and some even tend to create and reinforce conflicts, bullying, and retaliation among students (Skolverket, 2011b). An examination of Bible texts presented to children in various 'Children's bible' books for children shows that the stories were skewed toward a moralistic, fostering content, when compared to the original, complex Bible texts (Dalevi, 2007). Similarly, Quranic schools often have an authoritarian trait, where student should listen and obey and the teacher presents a set of truth that the students should learn. In modern times this teaching method has been criticized by Muslim reformers (Hedin, 2006).

Letting students analyze moral and ethical questions can be controversial, either from a developmental point of view, where the child is considered too young to philosophize, or from a political point of view, fearing a corrupt society if children are allowed to question the societal moral (cf. Goldman, 1984, Wynne & Ryan, 1993). These viewpoints are argued to be false – children philosophize naturally, and have to do so in a democratic society (cf. Matthews, 1980, 1996, Nussbaum, 1997, Pihlgren, 2008). On the contrary, using thoughtful dialogues has been pointed out in research to have positive effects on thinking, social abilities, and ethic reasoning (Pihlgren, 2008, Orellana 2008, Robinson, 2006).

Teaching

Religious education in Sweden, as in other European countries, has shifted focus from education in or about one religion, to inter-religious education focusing on democracy and tolerance, and preventing bias (Jackson, 2007, Sigurdson, 2014).

Religious education in Swedish schools was dominated by the Church of Sweden in the beginning of the 20th Century, teaching Christianity to students (Hartman, 1994). In the 1960ies, the subject changed to be non-confessional, with the goal to teach students 'life philosophy'⁵ and later focusing students' rights to discuss 'questions of life'⁶. Knowledge about and understanding of the world religions has been the main focus in the later curricula (Jeffner, 1997). Falkevall (2010) states that 'questions of life' became the concept of religion, presenting religion as an intellectual matter. Falkevall, as well as Sporre (2007) points out that the assumption of 'questions of life' is problematic from a multicultural, as well as a feminist point of view – the values are likely to represent a hegemonic point of view. To some extent this can be traced in Swedish school books and materials in religious education and how religions, other than Christianity, are represented (Härenstam, 2006).

⁴ A comparison of the Swedish curriculum's (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a) fundamental values and the present Austrian curriculum's (BGBl, 2005) equivalent to fundamental values shows both differences as well as similarities. As an example, the Austrian curriculum expresses that school shall contribute to children's development of morality and religious values (something that is not expressed in the Swedish curriculum), but also to democratic and social values (also emphasized in the Swedish curriculum).

⁵ Swedish: "livsåskådningar".

⁶ Swedish: "livsfrågor".

However, in Sweden, the presence of religion in society has now boosted through immigration and the multi-cultural society (Sigurdson, 2014). Sigurdson (2014) claims that this might be signs of a post-secular state in Sweden and in Europe, where a more pluralistic situation is occurring. This societal change calls for changes in teaching religion to students – they have to be able to relate to religious questions (Sigurdson, 2014, Klasson Sundin, 2014). A relevant way of teaching religion, in which believers of all faiths feel justly treated and included, will help the integration in the multicultural society (Hedin, 2006).

The teacher's style when using text books

The planning and teaching style of a teacher determines how teachers will make use of text books (Zahoric, 1991). A thorough analysis (Pihlgren, 2013) of classroom observations and teacher interviews investigating what criteria were important when enhancing students' cognitive development unveiled four teaching styles among the observed teachers:

- *The common teaching style*, where the teacher controls the content of what is to be learned by planning to evoke an understanding of a defined content of knowledge, and then gradually strengthen this by using short motivational elements. The dialogue is controlled by the teacher most of the time, and questions are focused on evaluating the students' knowledge or memory of what is being taught.
- *The student investigative teaching style* where the teacher starts by introducing material, and centering on the activities of the students, leaving the teacher to present a context that will inspire the students to develop on their own.
- *The scaffolding teaching style* where the teacher plans what is to be taught and how in ways that lead to students' higher order thinking. Activities facilitate students' understanding of how different areas of knowledge are related. The teacher presents new knowledge and also poses open-ended questions leading the students on to analysis and higher level generalization.
- *The moralistic teaching style* seems to lack planning toward a cognitive goal. The teacher is rather focused on teaching the students how to behave or to induce certain morals in the students.

The common and the moralistic teaching style were more often used to teach children facts or a set of agreed societal values, whereas the scaffolding and the student investigating style were used to invite students to examine knowledge and values critically.

Wiedel (1988) states that the message and contents of what is taught must be reflected in the teacher's actions and methods, and the way the teacher teaches, to be effective. This is equally important in religious education.

Results

Three discourses were found in the plans for thoughtful dialogues. One example of each is shown here. The results are presented according to Fairclough's (2013) three dimensions: analysis of written language texts, of discursive practice, and of discursive events as instances of social practice.

“Allah will provide”

Text

“Allah will provide” is a North African folktale from Great Book Seminars, and the seminar is intended for students grade 4 (*Junior Great Books*, 1992). The text is accompanied with a thorough plan for seminar and classroom activities before and after. Work material for students is provided. The other seminars intended for the same age group are not related to religion or fate, although some texts are related to ethical questions.

The story tells of Bou Azza, a woodcutter who works hard until the day that he encounters a snake and realizes that Allah provides the snake with food, a small bird. He goes home and sits down, declaring to his wife that he will not work anymore, since Allah will provide for him, as Allah did with the snake. Bou Azza’s wife desperately goes into the woods to find something to sell, to get them food. While picking mushrooms she finds a big pot filled with gold, so heavy that she cannot carry it back. When returning to Bou Azza he refuses to help, saying that Allah will help her if she is meant to have the gold. The wife asks her brothers to help her and Bou Azza and his wife can live in wealth for the rest of their lives. Bou Azza tells all his friends that they ought to stop working, since Allah will provide for them. Although they feel he is wrong they cannot contradict him.

The vocabulary and phrasing in the story is descriptive and graphic. Bou Azza is presented as an “honest woodcutter” (p. 191) and the snake as in control:

The snake was staring at the bird with its beady black eyes, swaying its long, slender body back and forth, and occasionally spitting out its evil-looking, forked tongue (p. 192).

There is an accurate illustration showing the scene where Bou Azza encounters the snake. The text is ambiguous when it comes to ethos. Bou Azza changes from the encounter with the snake: From being a hardworking provider he sits waiting for Allah to provide, forcing the wife to work. Morally, this could be seen as an act of evil, but it does pay off. The wife finds the treasure. The snake is described as evil-looking, but is also the origin to Bou Azza’s new idea, and connected to Allah. Bou Azza concludes that Allah has provided for the snake but he does not seem to consider the fate of the small bird.

The vocabulary and phrasing in the seminar plan and work material differs from that of the story. A reduced language is used, concentrated on giving instructions to the teacher or the student. The students are asked to interpret the text and specific words in the text. Several interpreting and open questions are presented to help the teacher to facilitate an open discussion. However, the choices of questions and instructions skew and reduce the interpretations somewhat. Bou Azza is described as being either wise or foolish. The fortune of the snake and of Bou Azza is described as good luck. The students are also asked to write about what their lives would be like if they were more like an animal. The ethos could be summarized in the question put to students in the work material:

What would happen if everyone in the world behaved like Bou Azza and decided not to work? (Teacher’s guide, p. 56)

Discursive practice

The story relates to traditional folktales, whereas the teacher and student material relate to school textbooks and teacher aids in layout and structure. The material is produced to be used in schools

and the layout is familiar to teachers. However, the questions asked differ from the traditional textbook questions where answers are predictable and there is one correct answer to a question. These are open-ended and encourage critical thinking, philosophizing and reflecting. The story is open toward interpretations concerning fate, but the questions in the work material, and to some extent, the seminar plan, exclude such interpretations in favour of questions of a more or less established moral.

Social practice

The three nodal points are addressed. Questions of *faith* are, as we have seen, embedded in the story itself, but these are lost in the material. The teacher/student materials concentrate on the *moral* questions raised by the text, and reduce the interpretations. The material is presented in a traditional textbook fashion but introduces a scaffolding *teaching* style, where the material encourages higher order thinking. The material thus aims at transforming teaching by using the familiar element layout to present a philosophizing and analyzing approach, a discourse of critical thinking in school. Questions of faith and beliefs are here elements without fixed meaning, and used to justify the seminars in religious education, as in any other school subject.

Other texts in the same discourse

Four more texts were found within the same discourse. “The Bhagavad-Gita”, and “The Koran” are Touchstone Seminars (*Touchstone Readings*, 1996), and “Tao Te Ching” is a Paideia Seminar (*The Paideia Seminar*, 2002). These three materials use original religious texts. The advice to teachers is focused on how to keep an exploring and analyzing quality in the dialog and in the interpretations of the text. No specific seminar questions are presented. In “When are good actions genuinely good?”, a Socratic Dialogue (van Rossem & de Swaef, 2008), the fiction story of Jane Eyre is used, and several lesson plans and open-ended questions are presented. In all four seminars, traditional work book and textbook formats are used to present a discourse of critical thinking in school.

Nous chapter 1:2

Text

This story, presented in *La barna filosofere* (Børresen & Malmhøster, 2004) is one of Matthew Lipman’s stories about Pixie (Lipman, 1981). It is one of several stories directed toward discussing ethical dilemmas. This story is intended for students in grade 5-6. A general plan for the P4C seminar is presented in the book. This specific text includes exercises to use in the classroom. There are no stories presenting content explicitly related to religion or faith.

Pixie gets a scarf from her aunt, while her sister Miranda gets a box of chocolate. Pixie does not want the scarf. At night she wakes up and wonders what time it is. She finds Miranda’s watch behind the chocolate box. A piece of chocolate sticks to her finger. Miranda wakes up and starts to scream. The chocolate box drops on the floor and Miranda steps on it when she chases Pixie back to her bed. Pixie enjoys eating the piece of chocolate, even though Miranda hits her.

The vocabulary and phrasing in the story is descriptive. Pixie is relating rather objectively what happens:

Right then Miranda woke up. I got so upset that I tore down the box of chocolate from the bedside table and the chocolate spilled all over the floor. (p. 157)

Some obvious moral dilemmas are presented: Pixie takes a piece of Miranda's gift and enjoys it. On the other hand, Miranda has not offered her, even though there are several pieces. The aunt gives the sisters different presents; Miranda's is more attractive to both of the girls. Who is to blame?

The language in the instructions to the teacher is reduced, elaborating the concept of gifts. The teacher is asked to help the children to sort out what could be considered a gift and what could not by asking them to discuss a series of questions, e.g: "Johnny asked Lucy to help him with his homework. Was the help a gift?" (p. 158). The dilemmas of the story are reduced to a lesson, teaching the children to sort out the meaning of the concept "gift".

Discursive practice

The story relates to texts in children's books, and the teacher instruction relates to teacher aid manuals in language and structure, particularly to instructions in the school subject philosophy. The book is produced as an introduction to teachers, and is focused on philosophical clarity and tools of investigation.

Social practice

Not all nodal points are represented. *Faith* is not. *Moral* dilemmas are presented in the story, but the teacher aid is concentrated on *teaching* children the concept "gifts" and philosophical categorization. The presented seminar plan in an earlier section of the book is open and egalitarian, and comparable to the student investigative or scaffolding teaching style presented in the literature section. However, the suggested actions in the teacher aid are more comparable to the common teaching style, where the teacher controls the content of what is to be learned. The egalitarian seminar plan rather seems to be an element without fixed meaning, used to justify the activities as thoughtful dialogues. As the teacher aid is presented next to the story, there is a risk of reducing the seminar activities to a discourse of philosophy lessons.

Jacob and Esau

Text

The Socratic Seminar about the original Bible text of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 15:21-34, 27, 28:1-4) is introduced in a collection of seminar plans for classrooms in different subject matters (*Våra bästa samtal*, 2009). Seven plans concerns the subject religion. The seminar plan is intended for students in grade 5 and higher. A seminar plan directed to the teacher, presenting questions, is provided.

The Bible text tells of Rebecca being infertile and how God, listening to her husband Isaac's prayers, makes her pregnant with twins, Jacob and Esau. Esau is the first born and will inherit the property from Isaac. One day, when Esau comes home, hungry from hunting all day, he sells his primogeniture to Jacob for a bowl of soup. However, the inheritance needs Isaac's blessing. Rebecca helps Jacob to disguise himself as Esau, who is hairy, which Jacob is not, to fool the blind Isaac. Isaac now gives Jacob the blessing.

The vocabulary and phrasing in the text is descriptive and to some extent graphic. Being the original Bible text it has an archaic character. As with the story "Allah will provide" the ethos is ambiguous: Who is entitled to the inheritance if the boys are twins? Should a mother help one of her children against the other? Is it wrong of Jacob to fool Isaac when Esau has sold his birth right? Is it fair of Esau to blame Jacob? The text also addresses faith: Isaac prays to God and God hears him. Rebecca asks God why the children kick in her womb and God answers:

*Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger. (Genesis 25:23)*

The seminar plan is reduced to a short presentation of the text and open-ended seminar questions. The questions are mostly concerned with the motives of each family member. There are two questions concerning faith: "How has she [Rebecca] interpreted God's message?" and "What would you consider to be the most important: God's message or the responsibility as a parent?" The dilemmas in the Bible text seem to be represented but the questions concerning faith are not as frequent as the Bible text would give rise to.

Discursive practice

The original Bible text is used, implying that its subject will be about religion, belief and faith⁷. The plan stays close to the text in questions. It has the form of a worksheet or an instruction, and is intended for the teacher to use as a help in seminars held in class. The questions are open-ended and encourage critical thinking, philosophizing and reflecting.

Social practice

The three nodal points are represented. Questions of *faith* are addressed both in the text and in the plan, though not as frequent or as exploring as the questions of *morality*, which encourages analysis of the dilemmas in the text. The approach to *moral development* is hence exploring, not teaching.

The material introduces a scaffolding *teaching* style, encouraging higher order thinking. As with "Allah will provide", this material seems to aim at transforming teaching to present a new philosophizing and analyzing approach. However, the Jacob and Esau seminar represents a different discourse – a discourse aiming at critical thinking and exploring theological areas. The approach is not completely successful; the questions of faith and belief are too few and too shallow.

Another text in the same discourse

One more text was found within the same discourse: "Abraham sacrifices his son", a Socratic seminar (Fler eftertänksamma samtal, 2013). The seminar uses the original Bible text.

Analysis

The results show that three discourses were found in the material. The discourse of *critical thinking in school* is the most frequent, and aims at transforming teaching. Although sometimes using religious material as ground texts, *faith* is not a specific issue in this discourse, and almost seems to be avoided as a subject for discussion. The "Nous" material represents another discourse, a *teaching philosophy in school* discourse, where faith is not addressed, and moral questions and the egalitarian dialogue are elements used to justify the teaching of philosophy in school. The "Jacob and Esau" material introduces the discourse of *critical thinking in school*. However, this discourse does not use the familiar signs of school book/teacher aid layout. Questions of faith and beliefs are addressed and the instruction or worksheet layout presenting open-ended questions suggests that critical thinking within the philosophical area is addressed – here a *critical thinking in religion* discourse.

⁷ How different Bible texts are interrelated is not an issue here and is therefore not commented on.

Hegemonic discourses in Swedish religious education

All three discourses relate to school and teaching, but for different reasons. *Critical thinking in school* and *teaching philosophy in school* use signs from the prevailing school discourse to try to introduce new elements within the school field: critical thinking or philosophical tools and rigor. *Critical thinking in religion* addresses the school subject religion among other school subjects. But the aim here seems to be to introduce a new element in the hegemonic discourse – to open up for critical thinking about theological questions, even if the result is somewhat faltering or shallow.

As we have seen in the literature section, Swedish religious education in school has, during the 20th century, included at least three different discourses. The early *Christian discourse* was focused on teaching students an established religious doctrine. This discourse does not occur in the examined plans. In Sweden, the *questions of life discourse* occurred later, and focused on students' right to discuss and explore moral questions and practical every-day situations e.g. relations or sexuality. Questions of faith and belief were not addressed. The discourse of *critical thinking in school* relates to the *questions of life* discourse, students are encouraged to discuss and explore moral questions and situations, there seems to be reluctance to address faith, and there is confusion on what values could be discussed or not.

The prevailing discourse in Swedish religious education is focused on learning about the world religions from an outsider's perspective. Another approach might have been chosen: The students might for example have been invited to try out different religions (as often is done with different sports in sports education). However, in the present hegemonic discourse faith and belief are addressed as knowledge about the conceptions of believers in different religions, and moral questions are treated as fundamental values, separated from religion. The *teaching philosophy in school* discourse does not address religion or theology but it seems close to the modern *fundamental values* discourse of Swedish education. The material seems focused on learning about and understanding philosophy. If the suggested seminar plan is used, *teaching philosophy in school* would be closer to the *questions of life* discourse.

The *critical thinking in religion* discourse is not related to any of the hegemonic discourses in Swedish religious education during the 20th century. Like the *questions of life* discourse, students are encouraged to discuss and explore moral questions and situations, but the material is also concerned with questions of faith. The plan seems to go beyond the present discourse and aims at introducing a new approach within the field, where questions of faith, beliefs and disbeliefs are open to discussion. This discourse seems closer to the intentions in *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, where children's rights to a spiritual life (Article 14:1) and children's rights to discuss for them important questions are stressed. In accordance with earlier referred research one might argue that giving students the possibility to philosophize about questions of faith will counteract fundamentalism (cf. Matthews, 1980, 1996, Nussbaum, 1997, Pihlgren, 2008, Westhelle, 2010, Jackelén, 2013).

Discussion: Practicing theology in the classroom

In the debate related at the beginning of the article, researcher Anne-Louise Eriksson argued that the fact that religion is invisible in Swedish schools might be a threat to democracy: The lack of discussion might nourish bias in society against religions and bias within closed religious groups, with risks of reinforcing a segregated society. The Swedish example implies that religious education shifts, from dogmatic religious teaching about a right faith, to embrace facts about different religions and

allowing students to discuss questions of life or learning fundamental values. The theological questions about faith have been excluded, in favor of issues of general morals, 'fundamental values' and every-day life. This could be problematic from several points of views: Fundamental values in a multi-cultural society are difficult to define. They are also hard to disclose and examine critically, and could tend to exclude groups or to present certain values as dogmas. These are the Swedish conditions and they cannot be supposed to be a natural line of development everywhere, even if Jackson (2007) has shown that the same tendencies are found in Europe as a whole.

The World Value Surveys concludes that high ranking on self-expression values and secular-rational values produces a culture of interpersonal trust, and active political engagement, attributes that the political culture literature defines as crucial to democracy. Does this mean that theological questions are impossible to discuss in an advanced society? No, Wright (2004) would argue – to invoke philosophical neutrality in questions of faith is alien to human conviction, and will reduce religion to questions of moral. This study, as well as others, (cf. Dalevi, 2007, Hedin, 2006) has shown that materials for students are skewed toward a more moralistic and simplified content. The problem does not seem to be if it is possible to discuss questions of faith, or to use critically examining methods like thoughtful dialogues to do so. The problem rather lies in whether or not this is considered a threat to society, or religion, or to certain morals. As mentioned earlier theologians argue that the critical and self-critical dialogue is necessary not only for a healthy theology or faith but also for a democratic multicultural society (Jackelén, 2013). Bias, normally understood as something to avoid, is perceived as the gift you bring to the table; something you have to examine critically but with your unique contribution to the whole. This lifts the diversity of humankind (Ringe, 1998). A respectful and including way of teaching religion will help the integration process of the multicultural society (Hedin, 2006).

Hence, we might consider religious education in school from two factors: 1.) The attitude toward questions of faith and 2.) The approach to knowledge. Questions of religious faith might be addressed in education, or not. Knowledge might be seen from a fundamentalist point of view, where a set of true facts are presented to the students, or, as in the opposite position, attaining knowledge includes critically examination of facts and values. This will give four different approaches to religious education in school, se figure 2:

- A. ***Dogmatic religion***, nourishing a fundamentalist approach to knowledge and addressing questions of faith. In this approach, faith is seen as true dogmas and right/wrong ways to believe. What is considered true morals, based on a certain religion, is taught and the teacher mediates the material to the students.
- B. ***Dogmatic atheism***, where religious faith is seen as superstition, a personal matter, and not worth exploring, where morality is treated as a set of fundamental values, based on more or less societal agreements, and is taught by the teacher to the students.
- C. ***Examining theology***, encouraging a rational critical theological examination of questions of faith and of morality, and using scaffolding, dialogic, and critically examining methods (cf. Wiedel, 1988).
- D. ***Examining philosophy excluding theology***, where the approach to knowledge, teaching methods and morality is the same as in C, but where theological questions are excluded from the philosophical examination, probably because religion is seen as a personal matter or as superstition that cannot be analyzed, or all views are accepted, encouraging relativism.

Religious education in this position will most likely focus on teaching facts about different religions, and on discussing moral dilemmas in a non-religious context.

		The attitude toward questions of faith	
		Addressing questions of faith	Avoiding questions of faith
The approach to knowledge	Fundamentalist approach	<p>A. DOGMATIC RELIGION</p> <p>FAITH: Religious faith is seen as true dogmas and right/wrong ways to believe.</p> <p>MORALITY: True morals, based on a certain religion are taught.</p> <p>TEACHING: The teacher mediates the material to the students.</p>	<p>B. DOGMATIC ATHEISM</p> <p>FAITH: Religious faith is seen as superstition, or a personal matter, and is not seen as worth exploring.</p> <p>MORALITY: A set of fundamental values, based on societal agreements are taught.</p> <p>TEACHING: The teacher mediates the material to the students. Religious education focuses on teaching facts about different religions.</p>
	Critical examination approach	<p>C. EXAMINING PHILOSOPHY INCLUDING THEOLOGY</p> <p>FAITH: Rational critical theological examination of questions of faith is encouraged.</p> <p>MORALITY: Moral questions are examined, analyzed, and discussed.</p> <p>TEACHING: Scaffolding, dialogic and critically examining methods are used.</p>	<p>D. EXAMINING PHILOSOPHY EXCLUDING THEOLOGY</p> <p>FAITH: Religion is seen as a personal matter or as superstition and cannot be analyzed, or all views are accepted, encouraging relativism.</p> <p>MORALITY: Moral questions are examined, analyzed, and discussed.</p> <p>TEACHING: Scaffolding, dialogic and critically examining methods are used. Religious education focuses on teaching facts about different religions.</p>

Figure 1: Four different approaches to religious education in school⁸.

The discourse of the current Swedish curriculum, as well as in several other Western countries seems to hesitatingly balance between approaches B and D. Maybe this can be explained by secularization, separating religion from the state and its institutions. This might have led to a position of secularism, an insecurity of how to handle questions of faith in school when a state religion is no longer part of a governmental ideology (cf. Gardell, 2011).

On the other hand, one might suspect that countries categorized in the *World Value Survey* as cherishing traditional values tend to belong to position A. Almost all of the examined discourses of

⁸ The positions should be seen as archetypical, and teaching religion in school will probably move between different positions on the scale, rather than being fixed in one specific approach.

thoughtful dialogues could be categorized as D. There is however one exception, the *critical thinking in religion* discourse, which aspires to belong to C.

Even though this study is not valid for more than the eight plans we examined it has shown some interesting patterns that might be explored deeper in further research. The modern religious communities in Western societies seem open to dialogues about thoughts on theological questions as ways for individuals to understand and develop their personal beliefs (Hammar, 2006, Jackelén, 2011, 2013). Theology is in itself a rational, systematic and critical approach to discussing and analyzing questions of faith. Is this a sign of a new approach toward religious education? If so, thoughtful dialogues might serve as a useful tool when encouraging students to think about the facts they have learnt. However, this calls for an expansion and improvement of the materials offered to teachers, helping them to approach religious texts and questions of faith in a critical, and theologically based manner, without simplifying the complex material or moralizing. If we are to find a new way to handle the human urge to think about questions of fate, the teacher will have to serve as an exploring role model.

Ultimately, failing to address matters of faith in a safe space of open and critical thinking in schools open the road to either leaving the matters of faith to the fundamental religious institutions or pushing down, what according to the declaration of human rights, is a human need and right.

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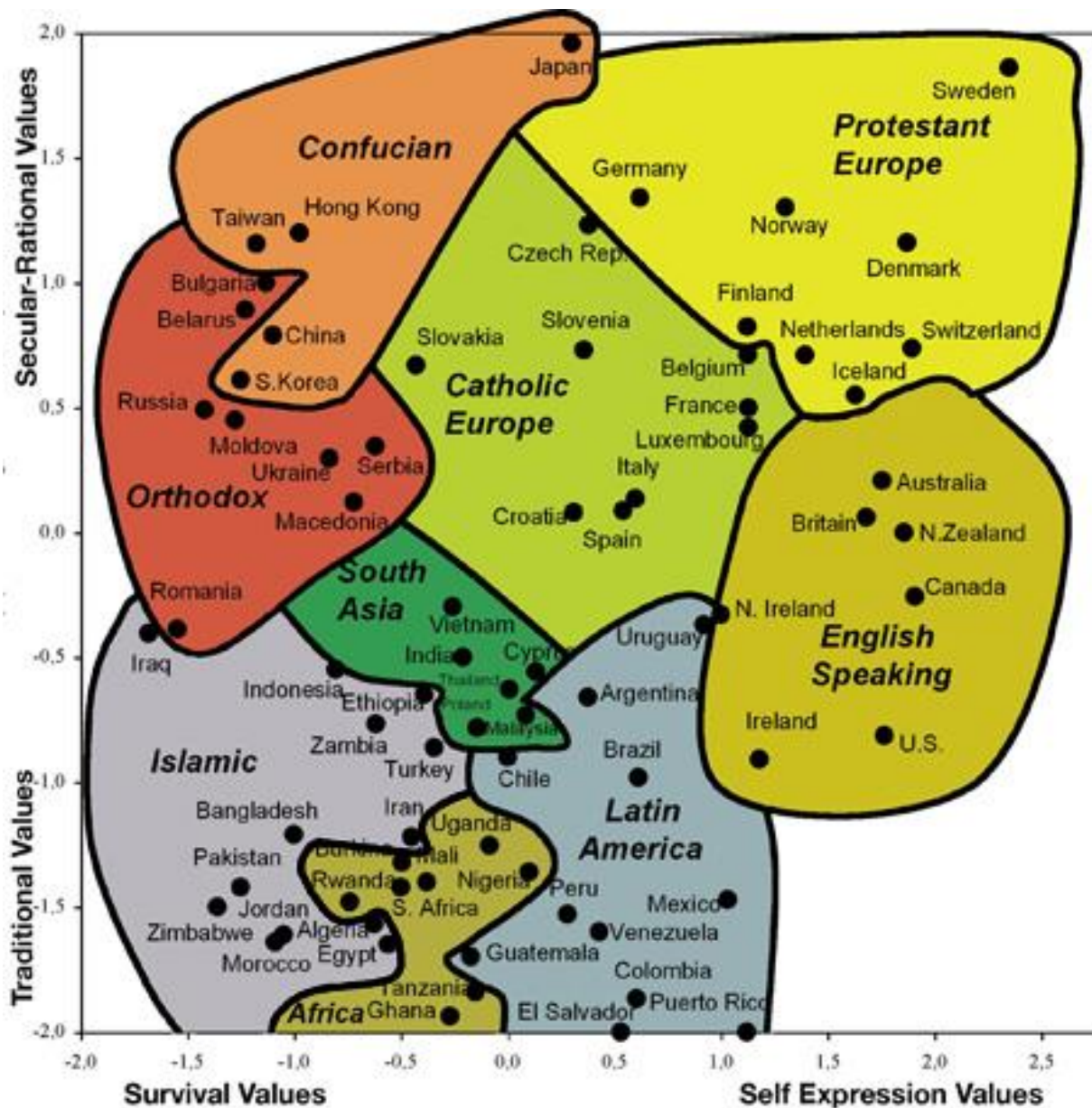
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The Traditional/ secular- rational values dimension:

- This dimension reflects the contrast between societies in which religion is very important and those in which it is not.
- A wide range of other orientations are closely linked with this dimension.
- Societies near the traditional pole emphasize the importance of parent-child ties and deference to authority, along with absolute standards and traditional family values, and reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide.
- These societies have high levels of national pride, and a nationalistic outlook.
- Societies with secular-rational values have the opposite preferences on all of these topics.
- There has been a shift in orientations from traditional toward secular-rational values in almost all industrial societies.

Survival/ self-expression values:

- This dimension is linked with the transition from industrial society to post-industrial societies.
- An increasing share of the population takes survival for granted and priorities have shifted from economic and physical security toward an increasing emphasis on self-expression and quality of life.
- Self-expression values give high priority to environmental protection, tolerance of diversity and rising demands for participation in decision making in economic and political life.
- These values also reflect mass polarization over tolerance of outgroups, including foreigners, gays and lesbians and gender equality.
- The shift from survival values to self-expression values also includes a shift in child-rearing values, from emphasis on hard work toward emphasis on imagination and tolerance as important values to teach a child
- Finally, societies that rank high on self-expression values also tend to rank high on interpersonal trust.
- These are the attributes that the political culture literature defines as crucial to democracy.

For more information see *The World Value Survey Cultural Map 2005-2008*:

http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs/articles/folder_published/article_base_54_2014-03-01