

# Freedom of religion and secular education: Teachers define the meaning of religious freedom in everyday school practice

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**Abstract:** Questions about freedom of religion versus secular values have increased as a controversial topic in European public debate during the last decades. The aim of this article is to shed light on these issues by focusing on the definition of “freedom of religion as a human right” among teachers working with younger pupils in the Swedish school system. From a holistic perspective on religion and children’s education, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with teachers working in primary school, as well as teachers in the leisure-time center, examined through discourse analysis. This study provides insights into how two different groups of teachers interpret and apply these potentially conflicting values in everyday school practice. At the end of the article, I reflect upon the consequences of the Swedish, secular and individualistic values that were dominant in the teachers understanding of freedom of religion, in relation to the challenges of a multi-religious school and society.

**Keywords:** Freedom of religion; human rights; primary school; leisure-time center; discourse analysis

## Introduction and research question

Sweden can be described as one of the most secularized countries in the world. Religion has been highly privatized and largely kept away from the public sphere. The school system is a key example of this process (Sjöborg & Botvar, 2012). The secular paradigm is now being challenged by processes related to immigration and globalization (Casanova, 2014). A central question in a plural society is the implications of freedom of religion as a human right (UN General Assembly, 1948).<sup>1</sup> Is it an absolute freedom or should there be limits? In European law (ECHR, 1950) parents have the right to bring up children in their own religious tradition. Children also have their rights, but their autonomy is governed by judgments of their maturity. Freedom of religion is highly valued as an important goal in the Swedish national curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011/2017) and the Swedish Education Act (2010:800). At the same time, they require an objective, neutral and non-

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1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights not only supports freedom of belief and religious practice, it also includes the freedom to change one’s religion or belief (UN General Assembly 1948).

denominational education, creating ambiguous demands on teachers. This reflects the ambiguous relation between religion and human rights in the Swedish society, where religion is often constructed as a private matter and human rights discourses are used as a common denominator (Sjöborg, 2015).

The aim of this article is to shed some light on the meaning-making processes involved in the definition of “freedom of religion as a human right” among teachers working with younger pupils in the Swedish school, year 3. From a holistic perspective on religion and children’s education, a qualitative study was conducted with primary school teachers and teachers in the leisure-time center. The research question can be summarized in the following:

- *How do teachers define the concept “freedom of religion as a human right” in relation to everyday education practice?*

## Background

The leisure-time teachers assist teachers during school and they provide care and education in the leisure-time center. The Fundamental values, formulated in the beginning of the Swedish national curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011/2017), work as a common basis for the two groups of teachers in the study regarding issues of freedom of religion. Fundamental values are imparted and instilled in all subjects (which includes the leisure-time center), and can be characterized as a citizenship education:

*The education should mediate and anchor respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values that the Swedish society is based upon (...) In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching in the school should be non-denominational.*

(National Agency for Education, 2011/2017)

The quotation above illustrates the importance of citizen education in the Swedish national curriculum. In the curricula for the leisure-time center the concept “education” is given a broad interpretation where care, development and learning forms a whole (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Religion education is part of the assignment for the primary school teachers since they are responsible for their pupils to reach the educational goals.<sup>3</sup> This is, however, not the focus of this study.

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2 The curriculum for the leisure-time center stresses that education in the leisure-time center should complement the pre-school class and the school through a higher grade of situated, experiential and group-oriented learning, built on pupils’ needs, interests and initiatives (National Agency for Education 2011). In the article the teachers in the leisure-time center will be named *leisure-time teacher*.

3 The Swedish national curriculum for religion education, year 1-3, focus on local community and storytelling. Christian tradition is central, pupils are required to learn psalms and the basics about the ecclesial year (National Agency for Education 2011).

## Review of the literature

Previous studies on respondents' interpretations of freedom of religion, in a Nordic context, have involved young people's interpretations (Sjöborg & Botvar, 2012; Sjöborg & Botvar, 2014; Sjöborg & Botvar, 2018; Sjöborg, 2012; Sjöborg, 2015). These studies were conducted through quantitative method and indicated a positive evaluation of religious freedom. While personal religion had a limited effect on attitudes toward political and judicial rights, there was an effect of experienced discrimination and perception of conflicts related to ethnicity.

Thornberg (Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013) studied teachers' views on values education towards the younger ages of the Swedish school system, using qualitative methods. Thornberg found that values education for these teachers were primarily about intervening when things happened, such as conflicts or fights between students, breaking rules or being mean to other students. Teachers claimed that a significant part of values education was unplanned, occasional, reactive, and situated. Because of this, their values education practice was mostly or partly unreflective or unconscious. Thornberg could also see problems for the teachers in finding a relevant language to talk about values with their pupils.

Issues of religion in Swedish schools have been studied using qualitative methods primarily in relation to Religion education (See Kittelmann-Flensner, 2016; Osbeck, 2017; Löfstedt & Sjöborg 2018). The number of studies in this research area is limited. The studies that have been conducted were mainly focused on teachers working with older pupils. Kittelmann-Flensner (2016) found in her observations of religion education in upper secondary school that a secularist discourse was hegemonic in the classroom practice. It also implied a norm of talking about religion, religions and worldviews as something outdated that belonged to history. The secularist norm was also strong in Löfstedts and Sjöborgs (2018) qualitative study on teacher's personal view on religion in relation to Religion education. They found that teachers who had a religious belief met challenges; they had to balance their personal view with the professional demands of neutrality.

Otterbeck (2000) made qualitative interviews with teachers on the topic of Muslim pupils in the Swedish school system. Significant in these interviews were the limited knowledge about Islamic traditions by the teachers, together with insecurities in how to interact with the parents on topics related to religion.

The theoretical framework that informed the study and on which this article is based is grounded in social constructionism; the assumption that the world around us can be understood primarily through certain ways of categorizing our knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967/1979). Furthermore, discourse analysis has been important in order to understand how categories are actively constructed in social texts, the interview data of the study. I drew here primarily on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987). As discourses provide the language for talking about a topic, they also construct the lived reality: "They do not just describe things, they *do* things. And being active, they have social and political implications," (ibid. 6).

Civic education, the goal of the Fundamental values, has become an increasing challenge for teachers in a plural society. Biesta's (2006) approach to education has been useful

in my understanding. Drawing from Hanna Arendt, he focuses on the ways in which human beings “break into the world” as unique individuals. Yet, without plurality, it is impossible for something new to break into the world. The role of the pedagogue is to give responsible responses to what and who is other and different. Instead of an instrumental view on education, the pedagogue should think wider: plurality “is the core condition of education (...) a plurality that only exists in interaction” (ibid. 89).

Berglund (2014) promotes an “ethnographic eye” on religion in everyday life in order to avoid stereotypes. The categorization of religion into stereotypical monolithic systems involves a risk that we also categorize people into “we” and “them”. A similar perspective is given from Jackson (2007) based on his studies in the British school system. He advocates an “interpretative approach” to religion, an approach that also is critical of simplistic representations of cultures, and of the relationship between religion and cultures when they are seen as internally homogenous. Jackson also brings forward the dangers of letting children be representatives of their parent’s religion. Berglund’s and Jackson’s perspectives are directed primarily towards Religion education, but they are also useful for understanding religious diversity in relation to everyday school practice.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Swedish national curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011/2017) and the Swedish Education Act (2010:800) requires an objective, neutral and non-denominational education. This reflects the secular idea of differentiation: the separation of different public spheres, such as education, from a religious subsystem. As a consequence, religion is constructed as a private matter (Casanova, 1994). For the teachers in the study, demands of a neutral education have to be balanced with respect to freedom of religion in school practice in addition to their own personal view on religion. I drew on Dobbelare’s theory of compartmentalization in order to understand these challenges. He (2002) uses the term to explain differentiation between religion and other spheres on the individual, as equivalent to differentiation on a societal level. Compartmentalization is described as the strategy individuals adopt in order to cope with different roles that do not fit well together. For a religious person, this process takes place when there is a distinction between their religious faith and their views on political and social issues, such as work roles or political preferences. It also regards persons with a secular view on religion: “the secularization of the younger generations is made up by persons who overwhelmingly think in a compartmentalized way and who for more than fifty percent are unchurched” (ibid. 178).

## Method and context

The study is based on individual qualitative interviews with 18 teachers. The interviews were conducted in three schools in a Swedish city (six interviews per school).<sup>4</sup> Of the 18 participants, 14 were women and four were men. Nine of the informants worked as primary school teachers; the others had their assignment both in school and in the leisure-time center. All worked with pupils of year 3. The informants were chosen on the premises that they

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4 The interviews were conducted in November-December 2016. They took place in the local school context, in the classroom or a group-room, after the pupils have ended the school day. The transcription from the recordings has been adapted to written language codes, using punctuation, etc.

worked together with the same group of pupils in year 3. It meant three classes per school where a primary school teacher worked together with a leisure-time teacher. I did not choose the informants on other grounds. It turned out that they had all worked at the school for at least a year and that they all had a teacher's degree in accordance with their assignment.<sup>5</sup> The schools were chosen on the basis of their differing ethnic pupil populations. The teachers are presented with fictitious names in the article. The schools are named School A, B and C.<sup>6</sup> School A had a low percentage (4%) of ethnic diversity, School B had a higher percentage (17%), and School C was almost exclusively pupils of non-Swedish ethnicity. The interviews ranged in duration from 35 to 90 min, they were recorded on a portable mini-disc recorder. Of central importance in the interviews were questions concerning the definition of the concept "freedom of religion as a human right", as well as the implications of these issues in everyday school practice.

Discourse analysis was used as a method to analyze the interview data. Early in the process I searched for regular patterns in the variability of accounts. Potter and Wetherell (1987) use the term "interpretative repertoires" for these patterns. A "repertoire" is a register of terms and metaphors that are drawn upon to evaluate actions and events. By definition, interview talk is interpretation work concerning the topic in question. There is, nevertheless, a close interdependence between descriptive and evaluative language. Furthermore, function was stressed during my analysis: what are the uses and functions of different repertoires, and what problems can be recognized by their existence? (ibid. 138-149).

Regarding the findings in this study there needs to be a note of caution. The sample in the study limits transferability, since it was sampled from only 18 teachers working in year 3, on three schools in one Swedish town. From a qualitative approach, the intent is, however, to reach a wider and deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes involved in teacher's interpretations of freedom of religion. This has been done through carefully conducted interviews that gave the informants time to reflect, as well as a close reading of the interviews and a thorough analysis using discourse method.

## Results

The findings will be presented under headlines named by the different interpretative repertoires that were found in the interview material.

### Freedom of religion is constructed as a positive value

Freedom of religion as a general concept is highly valued among the teachers in the study. There is a striking consensus in favor of the idea that everyone should have the right to believe and practice their religion. This excerpt from the interview data is typical: "It must be

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5 The leisure-time center provides care for pupils of age 6-12. The leisure-time teachers in my study had pupils of age 6-10.

6 The teachers that participated in the study are the following:  
 School A: Eva; Hanna; Maria (primary school teachers). Annika; Lars; Ann (leisure-time teachers).  
 School B: Karin; Åsa; Kristina (primary school teachers). Lena; Linda; Erik (leisure-time teachers).  
 School C: Monica; Jennifer; Nahid (primary school teachers). Gunilla; Per; Jonas (leisure-time teachers).

regarded as obvious, I think, to have the right to practice whatever religion you want” (Lars, leisure-time teacher, School A). The formulation shares the same pattern as most of the other teachers; it can be characterized as an interpretative repertoire. Freedom of religion is constructed as a positive value, a common denominator. It shows correspondence with the results found in Sjöborg (2012; 2015). The teachers often relate their view on freedom of religion to professional requirements in the national curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011/2017) and the Education Act (2010:800).

### Concerns about freedom of religion conflicting with other human rights

Further on in the interview most of the teachers express concern about religious freedom in relation to other human rights, such as children’s right to choose their own religion, women’s (and girls’) rights, and freedom of expression and thought. Teachers at School C relate their evaluations to experiences with pupils in the local school context:

*We want them (the pupils) to be more open-minded and feel that it is good to live in a place like our society. That you are allowed to think and to think what you want - this is freedom of religion. You don’t want a child to say ‘you can’t do this’, instead it’s fantastic that we have this freedom in Sweden.*

(Gunilla, leisure-time teacher, School C)

In a similar way as Gunilla, Jennifer refers to her teacher experience when she wants to implement a new way of thinking in her pupils:

*For me, freedom of religion is an obvious matter, but for many (children) here, it is not obvious, they grow up in a religion and that will be a natural part of them. But I hope that these children will be able to make their own choices sometime later in life (...) For a more modern society, I think, we are perhaps moving towards more freedom from religion, but we are not there yet.*

(Jennifer, primary school teacher, School C)

At the same time as Jennifer expresses concerns for children’s rights to choose their own religion, she constructs a clear secularist view on religion: the extinction of religion as a consequence of modernization and rational thought (Casanova, 1994). The excerpt shows that her personal opinions on religion also informs her professional assignment. The secularist worldview is hegemonic and religion is constructed as something outdated, which shows similarities with the study conducted by Kittelmann-Flensner (2016). Another typical excerpt from the interview data has a similar pattern:

*It is an important human right, but difficult since religion and culture are so interwoven. I dislike that women are oppressed in the suburbs. I think Sweden is too passive about these issues. Swedish rules should be kept. Personal belief is ok, as long as it does not interfere with anyone else. The school should be non-denominational, I’m against faith schools.*

(Kristina, primary school teacher, School B)

What is possible to hear in the excerpt is an understanding of a “we” and a “them”; a “we” that is more of a general statement and not referred to local school practice (Berglund, 2014). Kristina’s opinions on religion has been diffused with her professional assignments. Furthermore, it expresses the Swedish secular view of religion constructed as a private matter (Sjöborg & Botvar, 2012). In the last sentence, the formulation meets the requirements in the national curriculum and the Education Act. This is another typical excerpt where the teacher’s statement about children’s rights in a similar way is informed by these documents:

*Everyone has the right to practice their religion, but all pupils must have an objective education. Children should have information on everything, and be able to create their own view. I am referring to children's rights in general. There is a risk with Muslim schools and Jehovah's Witnesses that these children will be limited.*

(Eva, primary school teacher, School A)

Whereas teachers at School C relate their concern for freedom of religion to their experiences with pupils in the local school context, the teachers at School A and B describe their concern in a more general sense. There is a close interdependence between the described concern and an evaluative language when the teachers formulate their concern for freedom of religion in relation to other human rights. The evaluation is clearly informed by topics debated in politics and media. The teachers at School A and B do this to a higher degree, compared to teachers at School C. For all teachers there are also evaluations that meet the professional requirements in the national curriculum and the Education Act.

### A secular, Swedish and individualistic view on religion

Even though the teachers approach the topic from different angles, it is possible to recognize a regular pattern when the teachers formulate their concern for freedom of religion in relation to other human rights. An interpretation repertoire is constructed that highlights Swedish, secular and individual values on religious freedom. The informants relate their interpretations many times to what is described as Swedish values, often in relation to the national curriculum and the Education act. Two of the teachers stand out as exceptions. One of them shares the understanding of religious freedom as an important human right with the other teachers, but he differentiates himself in that he does not believe that it includes him:

*It is clear that you should have the right to believe what you want (...) When it comes to myself, I am very careful not to talk about it (his Christian faith). I have not experienced that there is freedom of speech, I cannot express my opinion so that I feel safe. The risk if I express my opinion is that I will be bullied. Therefore, I am very careful not to do it. Unfortunately, I have bad experiences from my former workplace where I was ordered to the principal's office to sit down and receive a lecture about not to teach creationism. I have studied the curriculum; I have not provoked anyone when it comes to belief. I don't understand anything. Is it ok to threat a human being like this?*

(Jonas, leisure-time teacher, School C)

Jonas' account is a striking illustration of the Swedish secular paradigm where religion is constructed as a private matter, to be kept away from the public sphere (Sjöborg & Botvar, 2012). It also illustrates the hegemonic secularist norm that Kittelmann-Flensner (2016) found in her classroom observations of Religion education. As Lövestedt and Sjöborg (2018) shows in their study, teachers with a personal belief met challenges in Religion education, they had to balance their private view with professional demands of neutrality. In a similar way, Jonas statement is a clear example of compartmentalization, as he has learnt to separate his religious belief from the professional demands of neutrality (Dobbelaere, 2002). Nahid is the other teacher that differentiates herself from the majority of the teachers in her definition of religious freedom:

*I think every person has the right to choose what they think and believe in, but at the same time, there are also some limits (...) I think that those who make these kinds of caricatures (Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons) they have gone over the limit, it has nothing to do with freedom. Then I have trampled on others, I have not shown respect to their thoughts and ideas.*

(Nahid, primary school teacher, School C)

A close reading of the text suggests that Nahid's definition of freedom of religion is mixed together with her understanding of freedom of speech. She clearly positions herself against what she believes is the way that these issues are treated in Sweden: a freedom of speech that has gone too far. Compared to the other teachers, she does not bring up any of the concerns about religious freedom. Nahid describes herself as a Muslim. She expresses a strong desire to make her pupils think wider and accept other religions. Yet, she stresses that she has to be neutral when she talks about religion: "Religion is such a sensitive subject. I cannot influence with my thoughts and ideas. It's wrong to say that they can choose, their parents have often already made that choice." This excerpt shows a compartmentalized way of thinking, separating her personal view on Islam in relation to the parents (Dobbelaere, 2002).

The fact that Jonas and Nahid both work at School C raises questions about their interpretations in relation to the local school context. Yet, Jonas shares the concerns about freedom of religion with the other teachers in the study when he describes the everyday school practice: "You want to talk to them (the pupils) on a deeper level, to be able to introduce new ways of thinking (...) many times I feel that there is some kind of collective agreement on how to think and believe." From what is expressed in the interview, Jonas' statement is related to his relations to colleagues (where he keeps a low profile about his belief), not to the pupils. Despite the fact that Jonas does not express secular views, he shows a clear positive evaluation of individualism. For him to have a religion is an active choice on an individual level. As a comparison, Nahid expresses positive evaluations on collective norms, such as children following their parents' choice. Nahid and Jonas are the exceptions in the interview data, where most teachers define freedom of religion from a secular and individualistic view; many times, they also promote what they define as Swedish values. Still, Jonas shares the interpretational repertoire of individualism with the other teachers. This relates to international surveys where Sweden is one of the countries where individuality is evaluated to a very high degree (Ingelhart & Welzel, 2005).

For the majority of the teachers there is a concern for professional demands of neutrality in relation to a personal negative view on religion, whereas two teachers show their concern in relation to having a personal belief. In both cases, there is a clear separation between personal views on religion from the professional demands of neutrality, which complies with *Compartmentalization* (Dobbelaere, 2002).

### School A and B: Implications of freedom of religion understood primarily as practical problems

After defining their understanding of freedom of religion, the teachers went on to talk about the implications of this concept in relation to everyday school practice. For most of the teachers at School A and B, issues related to freedom of religion are limited to diet restrictions for Muslims and tensions around Christian elements. Two teachers at School B mention issues related to physical education for Muslim girls that were solved by a separate dressing room. Diet restrictions are solved by a vegetarian alternative in the canteen. Tensions around Christian elements are dealt with by talking to parents and refer to the national curriculum. The pupil might also be given permission to refrain from the activities.

The tensions around Christian elements concerns the end of the school year ceremonies taking place in church, the singing of hymns and celebration of Christian holidays, activi-



ties related to the Lutheran Church of Sweden. The topic is brought up by all teachers in School A and B. Secular parents have protested against the activities from a general standpoint, requiring a non-denominational education. Jehovah's Witnesses and some Muslims have required that their children should be relieved from the activities in order to protect them from Christian influence. According to the National Agency for Education (2012) the national curriculum states that visiting churches, singing hymns and celebrate Christian holidays are part of education and regarded as "tradition, not religion". As a consequence, pupils can be forced to participate. The tensions described concern the principle of freedom of religion: Is it right to force a pupil to participate? It also concerns the separation of church and state in a secular state (Berglund, 2013; Thurfjell, 2011).

Except for one teacher, Lena, the teachers in the study do not problematize the Lutheran Christian tradition in the national curriculum as an enforcement on pupils with other beliefs. On the other hand, some primary school teachers describe these elements as an important part of education in order to learn about Swedish history and traditions. These evaluations are clearly informed by the formulations in the national curriculum, described above (National Agency for Education, 2012). Lena is the only exception among the teachers in her critical view on school graduation in church, which she defines as a violation against freedom of religion:

*Everyone is entitled to their own beliefs as long as they subscribe to the human rights of human equality (...) The only exception to this (freedom of religion) in this school is the ceremony in church before Christmas. The language of the church room is strong; this is a religious room. When you come here it means indirectly that you accept the religion.*

(Lena, leisure-time teacher, School B)

It is, despite Lena's critical view on school graduations in church, possible to identify an interpretative repertoire in the interview data; the evaluation that the implications of freedom of religion is understood primarily as practical problems among the teachers at School A and B. Problems that (if they appear) are solved by referring to the national curriculum in interaction with parents and through pragmatic solutions. The following excerpt is typical of this pattern: "I might have had some few Muslim pupils over the years, but it has not been noticeable or changed anything," (Maria, primary school teacher, School A). One of her colleagues, Hanna, shares a similar view on the mix of pupils, but she expresses a different view on how to deal with issues related to freedom of religion:

*I think that we talk too little about each one's religion. This is because the majority come from Sweden and are born in a home where you do not talk about religion at all. Then maybe Muslim pupils get affected by some sort of taboo, and despite this you try to talk about it, but then you want your pupils to talk about it too, and that is hard. In the world in general, I see that these are amazingly difficult questions (...) Some religions have got a bad reputation which can be hard for a child at this school. I can tell from their body language that they are not proud of their religion. That's why I found it even more important to work with these questions, to prevent prejudices.*

(Hanna, primary school teacher, School A)

Like Lena, Hanna is an exception from the evaluation that freedom of religion has little implication on everyday school practice. Hanna's statement is interesting since she gives a critical evaluation on the consequences of avoiding "difficult questions." This statement is reinforced by her experience of children's body language being affected by their religious

affiliation, which is a worrying account. However, the matters she describes are all part of the goals in the Fundamental values (National Agency for Education, 2011/2017). From a close reading of the text, it is possible to understand the attitude from her colleagues as an avoidance of dealing with questions concerning tolerance, plurality and religion in everyday school practice. These questions are sensitive since they are all related to the challenges raised by immigration and debated in the politics (Berglund, 2014). Religion is also many times presented in harsh ways in media. At the same time as teachers at School A and B claim that religion has little implication on their school practice, they mention the effects of media coverage on religion on their pupils. This excerpt illustrates this pattern:

*Children bring up questions about things they see on TV, why do people kill because of religion? We should not take a position as teachers. But when it concerns IS and these extreme expressions of Islam it is harder to stay neutral.*

(Annika, leisure-time teacher, School A)

While these violent expressions of religion can be discussed with the pupils in relation to the Fundamental values (Hakwoort & Olsson, 2014), Annika expresses an insecurity when it comes to distinguishing between religious practices in general and the extreme versions of religion. I interpret this insecurity not only as related to the professional demands of neutrality; it also shows a stereotyped view on religious traditions (Berglund, 2014; Jackson, 2007). It is possible to talk about these issues in a nuanced way with the pupils. As Biesta (2006) points out, it is important to bring up “difficult questions”, in order to confront pupils with what is “other” and different. Nevertheless, in order to do so, the teacher needs knowledge of religion to make this happen (Dinham & Francis, 2015). Earlier in the interview, Annika expressed that she neither had an interest in religion or a closer knowledge. She did acknowledge this, however, as a problem: “We never talk about these issues in meetings with the staff. Mathematics and Swedish are the main topics when we meet”. Other teachers at School A and B bring up similar interpretations.

### School C: Implications of freedom of religion understood as practical problems *and* ideological problems

The majority of the teachers in the study describe similar concerns around the requirements of neutrality and their personal negative view on religion (except for Nahid and Jonas). For teachers at School C they also come close to the politicized and mediatized image of religion in their local school context, where many of their pupils also have relatives in war zones.

When it comes to the implications of freedom of religion on everyday school practice at School C, the teachers mention Muslim parents requesting that their children should refrain from singing hymns and celebrating Christian holidays (the school have no ceremonies in a church), as well as diet restrictions for Muslim pupils. These issues have been solved in a similar way as in School A and B. Implications of freedom of religion is understood as practical problems, but it is also understood as ideological problems. I identify this as an interpretative repertoire for the teachers at School C that contrasts from the other teachers in the study. This excerpt is a typical formulation of this pattern:

*Religion is very natural here, especially with the Muslim children since they live to a high degree in a strict religious environment. We have had problems to get the Muslim girls to learn how to swim in previous years. Now we start in pre-school class, the Education Act is more clear on this issue now. There are no religious reasons against swimming. However, we show respect by going with girl-groups or boy-groups.*

(Monica, primary school teacher, School C)

None of the teachers express that they have to violate freedom of religion in order to meet the professional requirements. Yet, some issues cannot be solved, such as parent's demands of separation of sexes: "When a girl tells me she is not allowed to play with boys in school because of her religion, it's impossible for us in school to meet the demands of her father (...) but it's tough to deal with," (Per, leisure-time teacher, School C). Per's statement has connections to Otterbeck's (2000) study of Muslims and the Swedish school system in the description of problems concerning interactions with the parents on issues related to religion. When it comes to teachers' limited knowledge of Muslim traditions, as described by Otterbeck (2000), teachers at School C express that they learn about religious traditions from their interactions with pupils. Issues around implications of religion are also brought up on staff meetings, primarily when there have been problems. The discourse constructed on these issues has connections to Thornberg's (2008; 2013) studies on values education as something that primarily took place in order to intervene when things happened, to avoid conflicts.

The teachers at School C express that they want to learn more about religious traditions, at the same time as they claim that they have learned the basics by interacting with the pupils. Since ideological problems are an implication of freedom religion on School C, knowledge of religion is central in order to deal with the challenges (Dinham & Francis, 2015). Knowledge is also important for avoiding stereotyped view on religious traditions (Berglund, 2014; Jackson, 2007). This is also related to simplistic representations of cultures, as Jackson (2007) points out, and the risk of seeing religion and cultures as internally homogenous. By learning about religious traditions from the pupils, there is also a risk that they become representatives of their parent's religion, instead of supporting them in finding their own worldview (Jackson, 2007).

### Questions about religion are brought up more often in the leisure-time center compared to the classroom

There is still one interpretation repertoire that has to be presented, which is related to the variations between the two groups of teachers in the study. In the interviews, leisure-time teachers mention spontaneous questions around religion raised by the pupils themselves; this is mentioned more often compared to the primary school teachers. The questions raised by the pupils can be difficult, almost philosophical, and they are many times related to media coverage. Compared to school, the schedule in the leisure-time center is less structured, which opens possibilities to spend time on dealing with these issues on an informal basis. Many times, pupils bring up questions about things they heard in the classroom. However, some of the leisure-time teachers emphasize that the structural conditions have been impaired over time. Large numbers of pupils in the leisure-time center restricts the possibilities to sit down and talk about important matters. This is problematic since the leisure-time center, in accordance with a holistic view on children's education, which promotes pupils'

own initiatives, should be a place for pupils to practice democracy, in order to reach the goals in the Fundamental Values (Orwehag Hansen, 2013).

## Discussion

The teachers interviewed expressed positive attitudes towards freedom of religion. They often related those attitudes to the professional requirements of the national curriculum and the Education Act. I identified in the responses interpretation repertoires that highlight Swedish, secular and individual values of religious freedom. Two of the teachers stand out as exceptions: a practicing Christian and a Muslim. For them, freedom of religion is primarily understood in terms of practical problems, such as diet restrictions for Muslims and tensions around Christian traditions. Among the teachers at School C it is *also* understood as ideological problems which are more difficult to resolve, such as parents' demands for separating students by gender.

In the presentation of the interview data, I have tried to highlight some of the complex experiences that these eighteen teachers have developed in their interactions with pupils on issues related to freedom of religion, as well as their definition of the concept. Their interpretations can be problematized from the Swedish, secular and individual values on religious freedom that are dominant in the material. At the same time, it is important to have an awareness of the strong requirements of the national curriculum and the Education Act on the teachers, in relation to the demands for freedom of religion. These conflicting demands are discernible in the interview data; tensions around visiting churches and celebrating Christian holidays (tensions that are aroused from secularist as well as religious standpoints), but also the challenge to meet demands from strict religious parents in a segregated school. To meet these challenges teachers should need a profound knowledge of religious traditions, something that the teachers in the study have not been part of. This should be taken in consideration when their interpretations are problematized. As Thurfjell points out: "Perspectivism, self-reflection, methodological agnosticism and contextualization have to be brought into the discussion on what non-denominational teaching means in a 'post-Lutheran majority culture'" (Thurfjell, 2011, p. 216).

Freedom of religion is today approached from different interpretations, related to immigration and globalization that challenge the secularist paradigm (Casanova, 2014). Yet, a secular state management works as a guarantee for a multi-religious society (Leirvik, 2014; Bangstad, 2013). Leirvik describes secularity as a non-hegemonic condition; no one religion can control the public sphere (Leirvik, 2014). We need, however, a constant critical reflection and discussion on how the secular norm is constructed in a plural society. The Fundamental values stress values like tolerance and human rights (Hakwoort & Olsson, 2014). There is a risk that the younger generations with little or no literacy about religions are restricted to stereotypical images of religion in political debate or mediatised forms. Religious literacy is not only facts about the world religions, to a high degree it is also cultural competence (Dinham & Francis, 2015). This competence is brought forth in interaction with what is different and challenging (Biesta, 2006). As pointed out above, Hanna, one of the teachers in the study, recognizes that issues of religion "are amazingly difficult ques-

tions (...) That's why I found it even more important to work with these questions, to prevent prejudices." A wide, holistic approach to education that focuses on the ongoing critical reflection and discussion is a good starting point for this work.

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