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Reality Can Bite: Perspectives of Young People on the Role of Religion in Their World

Marie von der Lippe

Abstract: Despite the vast research on young people and identity issues in recent years, little is still known about the role of religion in adolescents' lives across various ethnic, religious, and belief-related scenarios. The overall sense is that young people in general do not care about religion, and religion is of little or no importance in their daily lives. This article contributes to that discussion through extensive qualitative interviews with students from different ethnic, religious, and non-religious backgrounds. An analysis of these interviews yields explanations that complicate and sometimes even challenge widely held assumptions about young people and religion, and add new information and nuances to the general understanding of the interplay between ethnicity, religion, and skin colour. This study is part of a larger European project on young people and religion in education (REDCo). Focusing on students aged 14-16, and their discursive constructions on religion and diversity, the findings also contribute important knowledge to school in general, and for religious education teachers in particular.

KEYWORDS: RELIGION, IDENTITY, ETHNICITY, DIVERSITY, YOUNG PEOPLE/ADOLSCENTS, DISCOURSE, SCHOOL, AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction

This article focuses on young peoples discursive constructions related to religion and diversity, and how they perceive the role of religion in their own lives. The research reported and discussed below has been conducted as part of a larger European project on young people and religion, “Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies in European Countries” (REDCo). The REDCo project was running from 2006 until 2009, and is one of the first comparative studies in Europe to have been done in this field. In order to make comparative analysis across the participant countries in REDCo, qualitative and quantitative surveys were conducted in eight countries¹ (see Jackson et al., 2007; Knauth et al., 2008; ter Avest et al., 2009; Valk et al., 2009; Alvarez Veinguer et al., 2009; van der Want et al., 2009). This article is based on the results from the Norwegian study.

Several recent Norwegian studies have examined the relationship of religion, ethnicity, and identity (Andersson 2005a; 2005b; Jacobsen 2002; 2006; Østberg 1998, 2003; Prieur 2004; Vestel 2004). These studies have focused more on children and young people from minority backgrounds, and how religion (especially Islam) and ethnicity are included in their ongoing identity focus. Other studies have addressed the Christian tradition, and the role of Christianity and religious beliefs in young people’s lives (Birkedal 2001, 2008; Brunstad 1998; Holmquist 2007). These latter studies have focused on young people with a Norwegian background. In the research on youth more generally, there has been little attention paid to religion as a separate topic. In a large survey of youth and cultural diversity in Oslo, (Øia and Vestel 2007) religion was not addressed as a topic that related to “youth and identity management”, but rather included in a chapter on “values”. The results presented in this article contributes particularly to this ongoing discussion, first because it includes young people both from majority and minority backgrounds, and secondly, because it focuses on how religion is included or not included in young people’s lives and their effort to form their own identity. By combining quantitative surveys with qualitative individual interviews, this project contributes new knowledge about young people and the role of religion in pluralistic societies.

Results from REDCo

As part of the REDCo project a qualitative survey with 154 students (von der Lippe 2008) and a quantitative survey with 707 students (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009) was conducted in secondary schools. Students aged 14-16 were recruited from various cities and schools, and asked about their perceptions of and experiences with religion in their own lives, at school and in society. In both the qualitative and the

¹ England, Estland, Frankrike, Nederland, Norge, Russland, Spania og Tyskland.

quantitative surveys we found that the majority of Norwegian adolescents had little or no interest in religion (von der Lippe 2008; Skeie and von der Lippe 2009).² In the quantitative survey 44% of the students answered that religion was of no importance to them. Another large group answered "neither important nor unimportant" (28%), while a third group (28%) said religion was "important" or even "very important" to them. A closer look at gender differences showed that more boys than girls found religion "absolutely not important" (33% boys / 20% girls). On questions about "belief in God, some sort of spirit or life force" 40% of the students did not believe in any of these, while one of three students believed "there is a God". The smallest group (27%) believed there is some sort of spirit or life force (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009:275-276).

Comparing Muslim and Christian students and the importance of religion, Muslims seemed to evaluate religion to be more important than their Christian peers. Even if the number of Muslims (57) in the quantitative study was smaller than the number of Christians (265), a significant larger percentage of Muslim students (60%) found religion to be very important compared to the Christian students (12%). The percentage for those who found religion to be important was almost equal in the two groups (23% /26%). Another significant result was that 12 % of the Christian students found religion to be of absolutely no importance, while none of the Muslims shared this position. The largest group of Christians placed them self in the category "neither important or unimportant", while only 8 % of the Muslim students had chosen this alternative (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009:277).

When asked whether they believed that religion could be a factor in or even a cause of exclusion, most of the students, independent of religious/non-religious background, said that it did not. Most students thought people should be free to believe whatever they liked and that religion is a personal matter. At the same time, they were not quite sure if talking about religion leads to peaceful coexistence, and they said they had rarely engaged in such dialogues (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009:293). Some of the students with a religious background claimed to be afraid of talking about religion because of prejudices and stereotypes toward their own religion. A more widespread attitude was, nevertheless, that the majority of adolescents were simply not interested in these kinds of questions or discussions (von der Lippe 2008:159-60).

On this background it was of interest to make individual interviews with a sample of the students to have their individual stories. These subsequent interviews showed that there was no obvious one-on-one relationship between ethnicity and discursive constructions about religion or between religious affiliation, religious belief, and the personal importance that students place on religion. In both the qualitative and the quantitative surveys, the students tended to be very positive towards religious plurality and thought people with different religions could live peacefully together (von der Lippe 2008, Skeie and von der Lippe 2009:297). The interviews revealed on the other

² For more results from the other participant countries see Knauth et.al. 2008 and Valk et.al. 2009.

hand that several of the students had experienced prejudices, negative attitudes and exclusion because of religion, ethnicity and/or skin colour. In other words, reality can bite! In the following results from the individual interviews will be analysed and discussed.

Data and Methodology

As part of the larger study, individual interviews with 20 students between the ages of 13 and 15 were conducted. The students came from four schools in Bergen,³ and had Christian (8), Muslim (6) and non-religious backgrounds (6). The sample consisted of 11 girls and 9 boys of different national and ethnic backgrounds (Norwegian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Somali, Filipino, Creole, Yemeni, Zanzibari, and some with mixed Norwegian/non-Norwegian parentage). All twenty interviews were one-on-one interviews, which became conversations with the researcher. The interviews were conducted at the students' schools and lasted for approximately one hour. All the interviews were recorded on a digital MP3 player. A theme-based interview guide (Kvale 1997) was used to ensure that important topics and questions were addressed in a semi-structured way. That means the students were asked the same questions, but not in the same specific order. Consequently, it was possible to follow the many side discussions that emerged during the interviews and made them seem more like conversations. The theme of these "conversations" was the adolescents' perceptions and attitudes toward religion and religious diversity, divided into several sub-topics; like family, friends, school, multicultural, prejudices, tolerance etc.

Each interview was coded (open coding) and categorised before final topics were identified and developed. The interviews were then thematically compared and arranged. To identify the interpretive repertoires that young people adopt in their conversations about religion, multi-culturalism, and identity, variability was the important criterion. Variability is central to effective discourse analytical work because it illustrates how the informants construct events and phenomena. Revealing the patterns and variations in the students' expressions across the interviews and within each interview, helped the researchers illustrate the different interpretive repertoires that these students drew upon in their conversations.

By using discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; 2008; Jørgensen and Phillips 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2002; Potter and Wetherell 1987; 1992), it was more possible to examine the repertoires that seemed to be available to the students and the language that they adopted and constructed. The analysis thus moved between micro and macro discourses, between an individual level (experience, language, subjectivity) and a socio-cultural level (discourse, power relations, and socio-political contexts). The goal of the discourse analytic work was to reveal the discursive practices among the adolescents clearly and precisely.

³ Most studies of religion and multi-culture in Norway have until recently been conducted in Oslo. Oslo is, however, atypical in regard to number of inhabitants from an immigrant background, and this is reflected in the school population. One of the main reasons to conduct this study in Bergen was therefore to choose a city (Norway's second largest) which, compared to the national context, is more representative of other cities.

Results from the twenty interviews are briefly reported and discussed below. To demonstrate some of the complexity in the data, this paper focuses in particular on four of the students who participated in the study (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009, von der Lippe 2010). Two were ethnic Norwegian, one was from Zanzibar, and one had a “mixed background”, as he put it himself. One was Christian, one was Muslim, another believed in different things, and one of them did not believe at all. These four students represent the range of positions found in the data collected.

Findings from interviews with twenty students

The oral interviews revealed a more diverse population of students than the previous surveys, and made the picture more complex. While the quantitative survey e.g. showed that Muslim students found religion to be more important than did their Christian peers, the interviews revealed greater plurality within the various groups. While some of the Muslims prayed five times a day, other Muslims never did. Independent of how important religion was in their daily lives, all the Muslims considered their Muslim identity to be a very important part of who they were. None, even if they thought Muslims as a group were stigmatized in the Norwegian society, were ashamed of their religious identity. To the contrary, several Muslim students stated that they were proud of their religion.

In contrast, many of the Christian students claimed in the interviews that it was perceived as rather un-cool to be Christian, and they often found it embarrassing to disclose their religious affiliation. Some thus chose not to speak about their Christian belief. Several of the Christian students, especially those with a Charismatic background, were more devout than some of their Muslim peers and found religion to be a very important part of their daily lives. For them, it was considered very important to tell others about their Christian affiliation. The individual interviews revealed a more complex image of young people’s relationship with religion and diversity (von der Lippe 2010), than it was possible to account for in the quantitative survey (Skeie and von der Lippe 2009).

In short, religion is not important to a majority of young people, but it is still very important to a significant group of adolescents. In general religion is not more important to individual Muslim adolescents than to Christians, but it seems like it is more important for Muslim adolescents to display their Muslim identity, than it is for Christians. While Muslims emphasize their Muslim identity independent of how important Islam is to them in their daily lives, it is only the most dedicated Christians who talk about their Christian affiliation when among their peers. The interviews with the Muslim students show that there are many ways of displaying a Muslim identity, and that Muslim youth, like other adolescents, have various approaches to having a religious identity. For some, religion is important in their daily lives and gives meaning to existential questions they ask, while it for others, religion is purely a categorical identity. To some, being Muslim is related to their ethnicity as Kurds or Somalis, and more of a cultural than religious part of their identities. None of the

Muslim students were embarrassed by their faith or backgrounds and had never deliberately minimised their religious identity. There might be several explanations for this view. One reason may be related to the Islamic belief that Muslims are born into Islam, and that their religious affiliation and Muslim identity are non-negotiable and cannot change or be discarded. What they can negotiate, however, is the kind of Muslim they want to be. In other words, the question is not about being Muslim or not being Muslim, but instead what kind of Muslim to be. The Christian students, in contrast, seemed to be much more likely to be challenged by their non-religious peers and asked why they bother to be Christians.

The interviews further revealed a situation where being Christian is considered to be un-cool among young people and for some of the Christian adolescents produces a lot of risk. As one of the boys said, "On the one hand, I am afraid to disappoint God, but on the other I do not want to be perceived as 'the Christian guy'". One time when he was asked if he was Christian, he said that he was not because he felt pressured not to say that he was. Afterwards, he felt guilty and ashamed. When this incident happened, he was acting in a local play at the local theatre and a journalist came to interview him. To compensate for his mistake, one of the first things he said in the interview was that "I am a Christian". He then felt better. Some decades ago, being Christian in Norway was a rather unquestioned identity, while today it seems that "secular" or "non-religious" has become normalised and a more common position.

In general, adolescents find little interest in religion and related issues. At the same time, there are some young people who are sceptical of the idea that a single religion has the exclusive right to the truth (Holmquist 2007), and are opposed to religious fundamentalism (von der Lippe 2008), but who still believe in their own way. Several recent surveys of young people in Norway have shown that young people are open to and curious about alternative types of religiosity (Birkedal, 2001, 2004, 2008; Botvar 2009; Brunstad 1998; Holmquist 2007; Winje 1998, 1999). In this research, however, this trend was not prominent. Although some of the young people said they believe in their own way or have taken ideas from several religious traditions, no one mentioned having alternative religious beliefs related to new religious trends in society. The same observation is made in Kerstin von Brömssen's (2003) study of young people and religion in Sweden. At the same time, the interviews demonstrated that there is no one-to-one relationship between a religious or non-religious position and interest in existential issues. This finding adds new and valuable information to the discussion on young people and the role of religion across different ethnic, religious and belief-related lines.

Findings from interviews with four students

Maria – "I've been a Christian all my life"

Maria (15) identified as Christian and considered religion to be very important in her life. She was born and raised in Bergen by Norwegian majority parents and

attended a Christian charismatic private school. Her parents were married, and both were active in the church that was affiliated with the school. Maria practiced ballet every day and had many friends at the dance studio who were not Christian. When she was younger, she chose to be baptised, and it was her own choice to be confirmed. This is quite common within the Charismatic movement. Among the students I interviewed who considered themselves to be Christian, Maria was one of the most devout.

At school Maria never had to question what it meant to be a Christian: "Here I only have Christian friends. It has been so easy to be a Christian". At the dance studio, she had gradually been forced to put into words what it meant to be Christian. According to Maria, her non-Christian peers had little knowledge of Christianity, and she had repeatedly experienced prejudices against her faith and the school she attended. Maria found that young people she met became sceptical when they heard which school she went to, and she always hoped that they would not ask before they became better acquainted with her. "Well, I do not know where they get it from, maybe TV, but when I say what school I go to, I become a bit like oh no, do I have to say it, because then they judge me at once."

For a period of time, conflicts within the church and between the school and neighbours in the area led to negative media attention (see Vassenden 2000). According to Maria, this made it more difficult to get to know new people: "I think it is harder now, because when I was a child I thought it was quite common to go here. It was a school where there were Christians, so in a way I thought everybody were Christians." Although Maria faced much opposition, she felt a great responsibility to speak about what she believed in and to be a good example to others. The religious discourse she drew upon was both rich and layered and related to how she presented herself, how she looked at her own role as a Christian, and how she explained the society around her:

Maria: I'm trying not to say like you must be a Christian, but I try to tell, so they can see through me, and think, "oh yes, I want to be like her." I want people to think. So they can think, "what are you doing so you can be like that, and why are you so happy?" That's the way I want people to avoid being left behind.

Marie: Do you feel happy?

Maria: Yes. Or very lucky. Well, of course I have bad days as well. I'm quite human, but I'm as happy as I am. I do not understand how I would manage to live without having something to believe in, just live and die like that. I do not understand how they at the dance studio, can just live for the dancing. They are like, "I have to, I need to become a dancer, it is now I am living", and such stuff. Well, I think I may well be a dancer and stuff, but life here is so short. Now I can somehow understand that the years go so quickly, like Christmas again, right? Now I have grown so old. This life is so short, and I feel like we are running out of time to connect people to Jesus. We need to get as many as possible with us. That is why I live, to get people to join, and, yes, anyone who can.

Maria was quite concerned with existential questions, and her faith in salvation gave her life both meaning and direction. The interview excerpt here shows how Maria reflected on her own religious beliefs and how these perceptions developed and constituted in meeting with others. Partially, she felt a responsibility for helping more people experience the joy she felt as a Christian to have eternal life, and partly she did not understand those who could only find meaning in what they were doing in their everyday practice (such as dancing). Through social interaction, Maria had developed a clear Christian identity, and this identity she acted out in the arenas where she was involved. She negotiated her own position in her interaction with others who did not share her faith. This situation once again affected the way she understood herself both inside and outside her church.

Compared to other students I interviewed, especially those with a Christian charismatic background, Maria was less worried about what other adolescents might think of her. Her belief seemed to give her some kind of strength to cope with the challenges. Other Christian students saw their beliefs as a personal and private matter, and nothing they wanted to call attention to personally. Some had even lied about their beliefs to avoid being stigmatised or ridiculed. This response reveals a situation where being religious, and especially Christian, is today considered to be un-cool.

Maria was born into her religion and had early religious experiences both within her family and in her congregation. She met the same religious ideas and repertoires at school and was being strongly socialised into a Christian belief and lifestyle. She drew on Christian charismatic repertoires when she spoke about her beliefs and what they implied for her and others. She also chose to stand out as a Christian even where it might be problematic to do so. Instead of avoiding these situations, as some of her Christian peers obviously did, Maria seemed to be driven by a personal motivation to help others to achieve eternal salvation. This view likely related to the religious movement to which she belongs and to the fact that her parents had held important positions within the congregation. Despite her openness, however, she felt stigmatised because of the school she attended, and she wanted people to get to know her before she mentioned her religious school affiliation. While some deny their faith in the presence of non-religious peers, Maria was forthcoming about what she believes, and it appeared that her religious identity actually became stronger in the face of any resistance.

Safya – “I’m very fond of my religion”

Safya (15) identified as Muslim, but as she said, “not a strict Muslim”. She attended a public school where about 10% of the students had minority backgrounds, and she was the only Muslim in her class. She was born in Zanzibar and came to Norway with her mother and brother when she was a small child. Safya performed music, and was a band member. She had many friends in the multicultural environment in the city centre and at the international cultural centre. Safya viewed Islam as an important part of her life, but she was not practicing her religion daily. She

did not wear the hijab, and emphasised that she was not forced to do anything that related to religion:

I'm very fond of my religion. I keep thinking that I will continue to be a Muslim, because all my family is Muslims. And they are not really, really strict. They are not like that. But that's why I like it, and we can take it as it comes, Mom says. So for example, headscarf and stuff, I'm not wearing that, and they do not force me.

Safya rarely reads the Qur'an, but she is fond of stories about the Prophet. She prays only occasionally and did not have a personal relationship with God. She followed the Islamic food regulations, particularly the prohibition against eating pork, and the last couple of years she had fasted during Ramadan. Safya was accustomed to describing herself as a Muslim. When meeting others, "I describe myself as Safya, Muslim, and I like it. I do not care about what others say. If they say, 'Oh, why do you bother to be a Muslim, you cannot eat pork', I answer, 'You can live without pork, you know. I can do it, I have not died yet.'" Both her sense of humour and use of irony were striking. This was true of many of the students I interviewed. Instead of appearing to be seen as too serious about matters that they cared about, they used a disarming kind of humour in their conversation with their peers.

There was a strong tension between what Safya experienced as prejudice and criticism against Islam and Muslims through the media and public debates and her own personal experiences. In Safya's view, Muslims are collectively stigmatised, and she constantly works to disprove any negative stereotypes. This is one of the main reasons why she emphasises her Muslim identity. By playing out her Muslim belonging in a social environment characterised too often by Islamophobia and scepticism toward Muslims, she risked a lot.

The interview with Safya soon revealed that Safya's discursive constructions of her religious identity closely related to ethnicity and skin colour. Norwegianness is still associated with whiteness, and Safya was ensured of experiencing much racial prejudice because of her African background and dark skin. As a child, she was called "brown cheese". She also related an episode where the lights were suddenly switched off in the classroom, and where several students laughed and said they could not see her in the dark. These experiences made Safya very aware of skin colour:

I will never feel Norwegian. I feel African, and I am proud of it. I love my skin colour. I must just say, I love my skin colour. If people are kidding with that, I do not care, because I love myself like I am [...] but how can I feel Norwegian when I look in the mirror every day? It is not possible.

Safya found that religion, ethnicity, and skin colour did make her different from the majority population, and it was evident that her "body" made an impact on how she presented herself, and how she was met by others. At the same time, Safya wanted the freedom to define herself as who she truly is -- as female, Muslim and African.

Other studies have indicated that dark skin is associated with being Muslim. While whiteness seems to conceal information about religious faith (as in Maria's case), non-whiteness tends to be interpreted as "religious" (Andersson and Vassenden 2009). Safya has not been bullied or harassed because of her religion, but rather because of her skin colour. At the same time, she believes that the media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media is negative, stigmatizing Muslims as a group. This is one reason why she does not wear the *hijab*. On the one hand, she would like to use a headscarf to be recognised as a Muslim; on the other hand, she is afraid that the *hijab* would limit her both in terms of what she could do and in how she would be perceived by others.

Although religion played no significant role in Safya's everyday life, she insisted that she was a Muslim and took pride in her African background. While Safya's categorical identities as "African" and "Muslim" were related to societal macro structures, her "negotiation" of these categories was also part of her social and personal identity (Andersson 2005b). The repertoires she drew upon were neither specifically religious nor ethnic, but rather characterised by her multicultural youth culture. Safya was not much concerned about existential issues or the meaning of life, and in many ways her religious identity was more related to religion as a social and cultural phenomenon. In this sense, Safya and Maria had quite different approaches to their religious identity. However, just as Maria wanted to show people that it is possible to be a "cool" girl, a good dancer, and a devout Christian, Safya wants to offer an alternative depiction of Muslims from those conveyed only by the media. In this perspective, the two girls had much in common. Each wanted to have the right to be religious in her own way and to give people another image of her religious people. In today's secular culture so characterised by religious stereotypes, neither has chosen the easy way out.

Thomas – "I have my own religion"

Thomas (15) has taken his own ideas from several religious traditions. He was interested in rap and break dancing and presented himself as a hip-hopper. He went to the same school as Safya, and was born and raised in Bergen. He has a Norwegian mother and his father is from Portugal. The parents were divorced, and he lives with his mother. By retrieving items from different religious traditions, Thomas put together his own worldview:

I have my own religion. I have taken many things from different religions. I believe in karma, if it gets you back. Not stealing, not lying, not murder and stuff like that. It's taken from many different religions in a way. So I would say, I do not know if I believe in God or Jesus. I think there's something up there, but I do not know if it is God.

Thomas has thought a lot about what happens after death and is concerned about reincarnation: "I want there to be rebirth, but the realism tells me that we are only an organism, and we only live now. But I do not like it somehow. I want it to be

something more than it just turns black.” In other words, Thomas was concerned with existential issues. He also thought that the idea of karma could help explain things in life, which in other ways would be hard to explain. He said that he was influenced by his mother’s thoughts, but when asked whether she was religious, he replied “No. She is like me.” Thomas found meaning in different religious systems, but perceived himself as non-religious. Although he did not see himself as a Christian, he chose to be confirmed: “I confirmed first because of the money. Everyone wants money, right? But, I also wanted to learn more about Christianity.” Thomas’s loose affiliation with a variety of religious systems did not impose any obligations or labels on him, and he felt free to believe whatever he wanted. In this way his religiosity seems to fit with his global hip-hop identity. This syncretistic or eclectic approach, where ideas from several belief systems are put together in a new way, is not unique. According to several surveys on young people’s relationship to religion (Birkedal 2001; 2008; Brunstad 1998; Winje 1998; 1999; Øia and Vestel 2007), young people commonly do borrow ideas from several traditions today.

Thomas has frequently met with questions related to his religious ideas, but he has never seen this as a source of conflict or exclusion. Rather his experience of being different pertains more to his appearance. Despite his Norwegian mother and Norwegian citizenship, strangers have called Thomas “a fucking foreigner” and told to “go back where you come from!” His classmates have called him a “monkey”, but he said he does not care and believes a lot of it was due to their poor self-esteem:

They have called me monkey because I have hairier legs than they do, and have slightly darker skin colour than them. Then they call me monkey. And why am I a monkey? I ignore them, because I think it’s just stupid. It’s like I cannot bother to use my time on it somehow.

Thomas presented himself as a mixture of Norwegian and Portuguese. To him, Norwegianness is connected with whiteness and blond hair, while he has brown hair and brown skin. Therefore, he did not feel that he was quite Norwegian. At the same time, he has a Norwegian passport and a Norwegian family: “I am a mix somehow.” When asked what he thought is Norwegian Thomas answered: “It is to go with socks and eating porridge and a bit daemon-like. When I think of a Norwegian man, he is like that. A gnome with a hat, and a beer belly. A bit like that.” By ridiculing what it means to be Norwegian, he constructed an image of the Norwegian appearance as something with which he did not wish to be identified. In Thomas’s constructions of identity, neither religion nor ethnicity stands out as clear or unique identity markers. Still, Thomas’ encounters with others affected his self-understanding and how he negotiated his own identity as being “mixed”. With a Norwegian mother and Portuguese father, he assumed both a majority and a minority position. The minority position is ascribed to him insofar as he is perceived by others as non-Norwegian.

Through hip-hop, Thomas has met other young people like himself, and across ethnic, cultural and religious differences they seemed to have formed a strong

community and a shared sense of belonging through rap and breaking.⁴ Thomas may be seen as part of a youth culture that is oriented beyond the national (Norwegian), and toward a global identity (Vestel 2004:106). This global attitude may also resonate with Thomas's religious ideas, where he goes beyond one single tradition and picks whatever he likes in "the religious market". Somehow Thomas can play with these different ideas because then there is nothing at risk. His identity challenges are not related to religion, but rather to his mixed majority-minority identity, which is more of a social-cultural issue perhaps.

Hanna – "I do not believe in something that cannot be proven"

Hanna (15) told me that she did not believe at all. At the same time, she had reflected more on existential issues than had many of her peers. She was born and raised in Bergen by Norwegian majority parents and attended the same public school as Safya and Thomas. She was an active athlete and trained every day. Her parents were divorced and had shared custody. They did not talk much about religion or religious issues at home, and neither of her parents was religious. They were, however, members of The Church of Norway (as 80% of the Norwegian population is) "but my Mom says it's only because she does not bother to resign".

Hanna grew up in a multicultural environment and had many friends with both majority and minority backgrounds. Asked if she believed in something religious, Hanna responded: "I do not believe in something that cannot be proven in a way [...] I cannot believe that there is a God when there is nothing that can show it". Despite the fact that she did not believe in anything, Hanna decided to be confirmed in church, mostly because of the family, especially her grandmother who was "old-fashioned and very Christian". Another incentive was the gifts. Hanna felt that the Christian faith was very distant to her, and she felt no need to believe in something other than the here and now. She sometimes thought of the meaning of life and what happens when we die, but has found that there is nothing more: "When we die, I think it is the end. Nothing happens. Then you're dead forever. I do not think there is any special meaning to life. It is only what you make of it". Just the fact that she does not believe in anything provided more meaning to her life: "We live only once, and this is the one life we have. So then you have to make something out of it". Hanna's non-religious identity and well-formulated ideas cannot easily be related to discourses she met in her surroundings. However, even if she seldom talks about religion at home, she comes from an intellectual family that might have influenced the way she talked. Hanna thus

⁴ Many hip-hoppers orient themselves away from narrow national identities, and find greater resonance in other, more global belongings. In a Swedish study of young hip-hoppers, Ove Sernhede found that most of his informants, even though they had Swedish citizenship, did not feel like Swedes. Instead, they used the generic term "blackheads" (2005). With clear references to a famous rapper (Kool G Rap), one of the youths said: "Alienation is Our Nation' and 'Reality is Our Nationality'" (Sernhede 2005: 277). Hip-hoppers use language to challenge established and dominant social discourses. They challenge the usual notions about the world by establishing so-called counter-discourses. Sernhede interprets this philosophy as ongoing and innovative identity work, where young people redefine their alienation, by asserting power over traditional definitions. The new cultural patterns they set up display, on the one hand, frustration and pain over the lack of acceptance and inclusion in the Swedish society and, on the other hand, a potential positive force to break with established structural patterns. This double discourse may well apply to Norwegian hip-hop communities as well (Vestel 2004; Sandberg 2008).

developed her ideas in search of meaning and direction in life without being specifically religious.

Hanna made many of her friends in the city centre through friends of friends. Some felt Norwegian - others did not. Hanna believed the decision to identify oneself as Norwegian or not was a personal one:

If you are Norwegian, I think you decide for yourself. If you look at yourself as a Norwegian, then I think you're Norwegian. But if, for example, one comes from Iraq to Norway, and even if you are part of a Norwegian environment and say I'm Iraqi, then you are. But if you say no, I think I'm Norwegian, so you are.

Hanna thought the general scepticism of diversity was related to a lack of experience and fear of the unknown. She believed there should be no problem in living together in a multicultural society, but a few elements must be present for that scenario to work:

It's a few things in Norway; you need such things as going to school and to learn Norwegian, right. So if you come to Norway, it is in a way quite fundamental to function in Norway, but that you have your religion, and eat the food you are used to, or do things that you're used to where you come from, I think everyone should be allowed to.

Being White and secular, Hanna has no so-called external signs of Otherness in the Norwegian context, and she seemed to possess a higher degree of freedom related to categorical identities like religion, ethnicity, and skin colour, than did the three others in my study. "Secular" and "White" seemed to be unmarked positions, whereas "Christian" presumably had its own position some decades ago in the Norwegian society. When asked what is Norwegian or who is Norwegian, she insisted that individuals alone determine to what extent they want to identify with being Norwegian or not. The most important thing, according to Hanna, is whether one "feels" Norwegian.

Hanna was drawing on several discursive resources for her secularity. She reflected on life from a "here and now" perspective, and positioned herself in part through typical scientific discourse ("I do not believe in something that cannot be proven"). Kerstin von Brömssen found similar patterns in her study of young people and religion in Sweden (2003), where especially young people with a majority Swedish background were characterised by scientific discourse. Further, von Brömssen associated this notion with the "Enlightenment Project" (MacIntyre 1981), where religion loses its position. From such a perspective, religious explanatory models stand in contrast to the Enlightenment Project's rational epistemology and are considered relics of the past. Hanna used an "autonomy discourse" that emphasises the right to personal autonomy and freedom. Safya and Thomas were to some extent also drawing on the same discourse of personal freedom. This position has been much

debated as it relates to views of young people in the “new modernity” (Krangle and Øia 2005).

Discussion

It is important to focus on three main results of this study that relate to identity issues: 1) Religious identity is only one of several identities; 2) young people’s identities are not fixed, but constantly in motion; and 3) the parts of the identities that are under pressure are the most pronounced. This finding is in line with Sissel Østberg’s earlier studies on young Muslims in Norway (Østberg 1998, 2003), and Mette Andersson’s research on young people with minority backgrounds in Oslo (1999, 2005a, 2005b), and also with various international studies on ethnicity, religion, and identity (Malouf 2003; Sen 2006). This discussion also relates to that of the sociologist, Richard Jenkins (2009) and his three orders of identity: *The individual*, *the social*, and *the institutional*.

According to Jenkins, the individual identity order is the “human world” of embodied individuals and what is going on “in their heads”. The social order is the human world, which consists of social interaction, and the institutional order is the human world of patterns and organizations (structure) - the established ways of doing things (2009:42). One of Jenkins’s main arguments is that our individual identity does not give meaning in isolation, but only in its relation to others (2009:43). In meeting with others and through social interaction, our identity takes full shape. Looking closer at the interview with Maria then, it was the moment when she realized that not everybody is a Christian that her own Christian identity became prominent. In her family and at school, no one questioned her religious identity. This part of her had never been challenged, and she had not questioned it herself. It was when she moved out of her “own group”, and stood in front of non-Christian youths, that her Christian identity became a religious label. The prejudices she met among friends at the dancing theatre (social order), were largely influenced by what Jenkins would characterize as the institutional order. These prejudices were not based on the personal experience of others with Christians or the Charismatic school that Maria went to, but rather the stereotypes present in the media. Although the Christian identity was only one of Maria’s multiple identities, it was in particular this part of her identity that she eventually chose to highlight.

Some of the same situation was true for Safya. In principle, she could choose and prioritize between her various identities. Still, she chose to emphasize those that came under the strongest social pressure: Muslim and African girl. She considered even beginning to wear the *hijab* in order to highlight her Muslim identity. In the absence of inclusive categories, such as “Norwegian Muslim”, she emphasized the parts of her identity that were the most challenged. The latter identification was also the case with Thomas. As a child, Thomas experienced negative comments about his “foreign” look, and became aware that he was neither white nor blond. But instead of telling people that he was just as Norwegian as everyone else, he chose to promote that part

of his identity that he considered to be the most vulnerable. He called himself “mixed”, and found that many people in the hip-hop community had the same background as he did. This was also one of his rationales for joining that community. By creating a sense of belonging through joining the hip-hop community, he felt stronger, and the dancing helped him be more confident. To the contrary, his religious identity was never challenged, so it was not important to Thomas to emphasize this part of his identity. As a non-religious ethnic Norwegian, Hanna never met prejudices in the same way as the others in my interviews did. Belonging to the Norwegian mainstream culture, her various identities had never been challenged. She was not concerned about fronting her own “Norwegianness” or her secular beliefs, but instead, she thought that anyone who wanted to should have the possibility to call himself/herself Norwegian, and to believe in whatever they liked.

The study indicates that young people to a great extent focus on that part of their identity that is under pressure. They may choose to emphasize different identities (the individual order) in various situations, and negotiate these different identities when in interaction with others (the social order). They also work against what they perceive as structural prejudices (the institutional order) by giving new content to established categories. Maria does so by emphasizing her Christian identity, but at the same time as she wants to be seen as a “cool” girl and a good dancer. By emphasising her Muslim and African identity, Safya wants to deliver another representation of Islam than the one represented in the media. Even if she is not a practicing Muslim, she is still a Muslim. In this way she wants to challenge the established images of Muslim girls in the Norwegian society. Although Thomas has a Norwegian mother and a Norwegian passport, he emphasizes a mixed identity. What the three of them do have in common, however, is a shared experience of exclusion and a shared belief in personal choice of beliefs and practices. On the contrary, Hanna has never experienced exclusion because of her ethnicity, skin colour or worldview, and had no need to promote her identity as White and secular.

Young people can perform a discursive competence, where religious and ethnic categories are constantly defined and redefined based on the belongings they want to make relevant for their environment at the moment. At the same time, they position themselves in relation to dominant discourses about multi-culture. That does, however not mean that they accept these discourses as “truths”, but rather that they position themselves in relation to existing discourses by confirming, denying, or discussing those discourses. An analysis of the interviews with these four students shows that young people today have individual ways of describing themselves in terms of ethnicity, religion, and diversity. By looking closely at how they describe their own positions and the arguments they use to do so, it is also possible to analyse how these young people describe and understand “the Other”.

Pedagogical Reflections

Focusing on young peoples discursive constructions on religion and diversity, and how *religion* is included or not included in students effort to form their own identity, the findings in this article also have interest for school and intercultural learning in general, and for religious education teachers in particular. The discursive analysis reveals that there is much to learn from how young people *talk*. Using Jenkins concepts of identity orders in the analysis, it becomes quite clear that young peoples individual identity is largely influenced by discourses produced in the social and institutional identity order. This is of relevance in an educational and pedagogical perspective, as school represents both the social and institutional order in student's daily lives.

Through the use of various and sometimes competing discourses, the adolescents negotiate meaning. This has an impact on how they perceive and present themselves, and how they perceive and present others. What they say can be accepted or rejected depending on the situation they take part in. How other students receive their self-presentation in e.g the classroom, will thus affect how they see themselves. It is therefore of value to make students more aware of how they talk about others, and to help them developing skills for entering into dialogue. Teachers also need to learn how to organise and moderate debates in the classrooms about controversial religious issues and conflicting worldviews.

Another finding of importance was how the students' discursive constructions on religion and diversity were closely connected to those that related to ethnicity and skin colour. This same finding was also distinct in Kerstin von Brömssen's study of young students in Sweden where she investigated discursive constructions about religion in a multi-cultural school environment (2003). Other recent studies have in line with these results indicated that dark skin colour largely is associated with religion in general and Muslims in particular, while whiteness seems to conceal information about religious faith (Andersson and Vassenden 2009). In other words "secular" and "white" – like Hanna – seem today to be unmarked and unproblematic positions, while "religious" – like Maria and Safya – and "coloured" – like Safya and Thomas – activate other more negative discourses. In a multicultural school environment this knowledge is of importance to both school management and teachers, but also to students in order to deconstruct negative stereotypes about the Other. It is therefore, as recommended by the REDCo project, important to incorporate education for understanding and tolerance, and to prepare educators in different subjects to treat religious topics relevant to their subject, ensuring the inclusion of students regardless of their religious or non-religious background.⁵

Reality can bite, but it does not always have to hurt.

⁵ *Policy Recommendations of the REDCo research project:* □
http://www.redco.unihamburg.de/cosmea/core/corebase/mediabase/awr/redco/research_findings/REDCo_policy_rec_eng.pdf

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