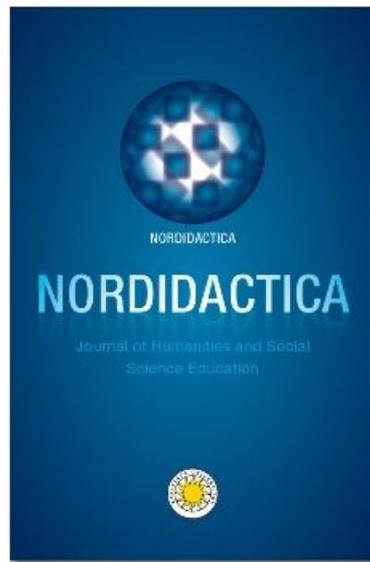


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Contrast to Christianity and Buddhism in  
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## 'Asphalt Islam'

# A Multimodal Comparative Analysis of Islam in Contrast to Christianity and Buddhism in Educational Films

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*Abstract: This study employs a comparative and multimodal analysis to examine Islam's portrayal in Swedish educational films, contrasting it with Christianity and Buddhism. Comparison is essential for understanding each religion's representation within the same material, while the multimodal approach, focusing on visual, auditory, and textual elements, captures the nuanced portrayals of 'rough' versus 'soft' religions. Islam is depicted as 'rough,' characterised by minimal soundscapes, suburban visuals, and framed within a Sunni normative perspective. Such a comparative lens reveals discursive values and biases, encouraging self-reflection and awareness. Teachers must be mindful in selecting educational films and understand how they can be used to foster a more balanced perspective. This portrayal depicts Islam as 'asphalt Islam', emphasising its association with urban, marginalised settings and highlighting the importance of critical engagement with these educational materials.*

**KEYWORDS:** SWEDISH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, ISLAM, MULTIMODAL, COMPARATIVE, EDUCATIONAL FILM, ASPHALT ISLAM, ROUGH AND SOFT RELIGIONS, BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY

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## **A Focus on Islam**

The purpose of this article is to explore how Islam is portrayed in comparison to other religions in Swedish educational films. Studying educational material on Islam for Swedish religious education (RE) is highly relevant today. One reason for this is that Swedish and Norwegian research on RE shows that some teachers express uncertainty when it comes to teaching about Islam (Kittelman Flensner, 2015; Toft, 2018). The reasons for this uncertainty can be understood in light of both national and international negative media coverage of Islam, which fuels negative attitudes and associations towards Islam (Axner, 2015; Brune, 2006; Larsson, 2003; Olseryd, Wallin & Repo, 2021). This leaves teachers in a difficult situation. Research from Sweden also shows that among students, Islam is the religion that elicits the most negative associations and receives the most criticism, yet students perceived it as taboo to criticise (Berglund, 2017; Kittelman Flensner, 2015). Furthermore, research has shown that some teachers try to counter the negative media image by presenting a more positive image by liberalising and romanticising Islam (Toft, 2018; Wright, 2004). Meanwhile, in an attempt to represent Islam from various angles, the representation of Islam is often based on societal debates highlighted in the media, which typically focus on themes such as Islamism and terrorism. This binary teaching results in the focus being on these specific themes rather than the different perspectives, which in turn reproduces stereotypical preconceptions (Toft, 2018).

In terms of the Swedish school system, research shows that Christianity is often considered the norm, while Islam and Muslims are often portrayed as the problematic 'Other' (Berglund, Gilliam, Selimović, 2023). This situation stems from how religion as a category is constructed (King, 1999). Religion as a category is constructed through social and cultural processes. The concept of religion is not a fixed, objective category but rather a product of historical, cultural, and political circumstances. This construction affects how various belief systems and convictions are perceived and classified, influencing how they are presented and interpreted in various contexts, such as education and societal discourses (King, 1999; Thurfjell, 2016). In the Swedish context, this often means that Islam and Muslims are framed in contrast to 'normative' Christianity, impacting both the content of teaching and how students perceive religion. Thurfjell (2016) argues that the term 'religion' itself, when applied to other traditions, often reveals more about the user's perspective than the described traditions' characteristics.

However, negative attitudes towards Islam are not new in Europe. Portrayals of Muslims as a homogeneous group date back in time, with medieval Christian depictions of Saracens, ideas that have been transmitted, developed, and restructured over time. The medieval crusades, fear of the Turks during the Ottoman Empire's dominance, and European colonisation of much of the Muslim world are historical events that have left their mark on today's perceptions of Muslims and Islam (Gardell, 2010).

To be able to say something specifically about how Islam is portrayed in educational films, this study will compare educational films on Islam with educational films on Christianity and Buddhism. The reason for choosing Christianity is that Sweden is a

country historically and currently dominated by Protestant Christianity, and many Swedes identify with some type of Christian tradition (Thurfjell and Willander, 2021). Buddhism is chosen because previous research has shown that Swedish textbooks often present a simplified image of Buddhism (Härenstam, 2000; Thurfjell, 2015; Wiktorin, 2022), but in a quite different way than the simplified way Islam is portrayed. When Islam is portrayed as a rule-bound and sometimes fanatic religion (Frank, 2014; Härenstam, 2006; Otterbeck, 2005), Buddhism is generally considered a 'good' religion, with positive associations such as being a soft and peaceful religion. Sometimes, it is even questioned whether Buddhism is a religion at all or rather a philosophy (Härenstam, 2000; Thurfjell, 2013, 2015).

### **Religious Education in Sweden**

To better understand the broader context in which these portrayals take shape, it is useful to consider the historical development of religious education (RE) in Sweden. The Swedish education system, especially its religious education, is unique compared to other countries due to its historical and cultural context. With roots in the former Lutheran state church, Swedish schooling has undergone significant secularisation. In 1842, compulsory education was introduced, focusing heavily on Lutheran religious instruction. The curriculum shifted in 1919 to a more citizen-focused education. In 1962, a non-denominational school subject was introduced: 'Knowledge about Christianity', and by 1969, the subject changed the name to 'Knowledge about Religion' (*religionskunskap*), marking the transition to a more all-inclusive non-denominational subject. This transformation also reflected the move from a more theologically grounded approach to one grounded in the study of religion, emphasising knowledge about various world religions. Today, RE is a mandatory subject from primary to upper secondary school, and since 1996, it has not been possible to be exempted from the subject (Berglund, 2021). It is designed to be taught in an 'objective' way, with an inclusive and pluralistic perspective (Skolverket, 2013, 2018), ensuring that no specific worldview is prioritised over others. In the Swedish curriculum, 'sakligt och allsidigt' is officially translated to 'objective and pluralistic.' The translation of 'sakligt' to 'objective' may not fully convey the nuanced meaning. I suggest a better translation, impartial and factual (Skolverket, 2013; 2018). The curriculum emphasises the importance of understanding various religions and worldviews to prepare students for living in a diverse society. This approach is referred to as the democratic mission of RE, encouraging respect, critical thinking, and mutual understanding (Skolverket, 2022a).

### **Film in Swedish Education**

Considering this educational landscape, it is also relevant to examine the role of film as a teaching material in Swedish schools. Sweden has a long history of using film as an educational material in teaching. The first film magazine published in Sweden discussed educational films back in 1909. Later, in 1922, the Swedish Film Institute released a catalogue of approximately 500 educational films. Film scholar Marina Dahlquist (2008) describes that the purpose of these educational films was primarily

public upbringing, information, and enlightenment. Despite the long history of educational films, Dahlquist (2008) claims that research on this topic has been insufficient. Increased digitalisation has made a broad range of educational films easily accessible for teachers and encouraged the incorporation of film and media into education at all levels, from preschool to upper secondary school (Ekholm & Kleveland, 2001; Skolverket, 2024). As a result, the use of documentary and feature films in Swedish schools has become widely adopted in teaching (Broberg, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, many educational films are, as chapters in RE-textbooks, often produced in line with the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). As a scholar in curriculum studies and the history of religions, Johan Wickström points out that the World Religions Paradigm is a concept that organises diverse religious practices into distinct, clearly defined categories, like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and others, often organising them in tables and under similar headings. Although there are, as Wickström also points out, pedagogical advantages with this type of organisation since it illustrates similarities and differences between religions and helps pupils to learn basic facts, there are also disadvantages, and the WRP has been heavily criticised (Wickström, 2022; Owen, 2011). Emerging in the 19th century, the World Religion Paradigm has, according to Tomoko Masuzawa, distinguished Western religions from others; according to Masuzawa (2005), WRP has been used to simplify the understanding of different religions in RE. This approach has not only influenced academic discourse but also shaped public perceptions of religion, embedding a specific understanding of religious diversity in the collective consciousness. Suzanne Owen (2011) argues that it is primarily rooted in Western Christian perspectives and often simplifies complex religious landscapes (King, 1999).

However, since 1991, there has been no institution that examines teaching material in Sweden; the responsibility of reviewing lies instead on, for example, the schools, head teachers, and teachers. In addition, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) does not prioritise the review of educational materials (Von Brömssen, 2011, pp. 20-21). In other words, there is an open market for educational materials. This means that private or public producers create textbooks and educational films, which schools, in turn, purchase or utilise. There are no permanently fixed guidelines on what kind of educational films should be used or how they should be used.<sup>2</sup> Teachers have the autonomy to select the materials they deem most suitable for their pedagogical approach. As such, it is crucial that educators are equipped with the necessary resources to make informed decisions when it comes to selecting high-quality educational materials, especially audiovisual material with its multilayered impact on viewers.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, the curriculum for upper secondary school emphasises the importance of digital teaching resources multiple times. A typical example is film within this category, which becomes a teaching resource within the context of education. Digital teaching resources are a broad category that includes digital content, with films being a typical example falling under this category as a teaching resource.

<sup>2</sup> However, from July 2024, the government has decided on regulatory changes that, among other things, ensure that textbooks are used in teaching (Regeringen, 2024)

## A Comparative Perspective on Educational Film

A comparative perspective is of interest since, in line with Otterbeck (2005, p. 796), I argue that when analysing how a certain religious tradition is depicted in teaching materials, it is necessary to compare how other religious traditions are portrayed in the same context. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to examine how Islam is portrayed in comparison to Christianity and Buddhism in Swedish educational films. Wickström argues that the ways in which religions are compared can reveal underlying societal norms and values, depending on how these comparisons are framed. Similarly, Härenstam (2000) suggests that the portrayal of a religion often reflects the norms of the society that produced the material rather than the religion itself. Drawing on these perspectives, this study aims to uncover the societal norms shaping the representation of Islam and aims to highlight some of the educational implications that could be important.

### Empirical Material

For this study, educational films produced by HamarkFilm have been chosen. HamarkFilm is a commercial company that produces educational films for Swedish schools on all levels and in all school subjects. On their website, they say that the films that they produce are produced in Sweden and that they follow the current curriculum of primary and lower secondary school. They also point out that their films are fact-checked and developed in collaboration with experts and educators. The films on Christianity are produced by Hamark Film in cooperation with MNM (Media in Motion). Each religion is divided into six themes: 'Sacred Scriptures' (*Heliga skrifter*), 'Rules of Life' (Levnadsregler), 'Spiritual Leaders' (*Andliga ledare*), 'Sacred Rooms' (*Heliga rum*), 'Religious Holidays' (*Högtider*) and 'Faith and Identity' (*Tro och identitet*). Each of the films is 9–12 minutes long. In the films, the viewer meets religious adherents, experts (such as priests, imams, and monks), and scholars who discuss various themes.

The reason for choosing HamarkFilm for this study is that they produce comparable films. It is possible to compare how Islam is presented in relation to Christianity and Buddhism within the same Swedish-produced material to ensure that the analysis could provide meaningful insights. By using films from the same producer, in this case, HamarkFilm, it is possible to make a direct comparison between the religions since they are treated using the same themes and structures. HamarkFilm has chosen to structure its films around the above-mentioned themes, which aligns with one aspect of the study's theoretical framework.

Other options, such as 'Klubb Abraham', produced by UR, were excluded because the series, although it includes Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, contains no film about Buddhism. UR has also produced educational films on these religions that are of interest in this study. However, these films are aimed solely at upper secondary school students, while HamarkFilm's films target grades 4–6, 7–9 and upper secondary school. This gives a broader age range to work with, strengthening the analysis. Additionally, each film comes with a written teacher's manual, which is available online, offering

suggestions for lessons. These manuals are not included in the analysis. The focus here is on the films themselves, as they are the primary medium through which students encounter religion. While the manuals are important for teachers, they are supplementary to the audiovisual material and therefore fall outside the scope of this study, which concentrates on how religion is represented in the films.

### **Concerns in Comparative Religious Education**

Johan Wickström (2022) discusses comparison as a method within the study of religion and religious education. He identifies several epistemological and phenomenological problems with comparisons in religious education and warns us of the risks of biases and reductionism if comparisons are made without critical awareness (Wickström, 2022, pp. 50–53). At the same time, he emphasises that comparisons are central to knowledge–building but that they have often been conducted with significant bias (Wickström, 2022, p. 68), which has educational consequences for religious education. These considerations form part of the theoretical framework for this analysis.

While challenges and biases in comparison within religious education are discussed by Wickström. Michael Stausberg (2011) provides a more comprehensive perspective on the role of comparison in the study of religions. He argues that comparison is not merely a methodological tool but a fundamental approach for revealing similarities and differences between religious traditions. Stausberg also highlights that comparison is crucial for understanding how religious beliefs and practices both shape and are shaped by broader cultural and societal contexts. In this study, Stausberg’s insights are central to examining the portrayal of Islam in relation to Christianity and Buddhism in educational films, revealing the societal narratives and values that underpin these representations.

To address these challenges, one proposed approach is to limit comparisons to specific aspects of religions rather than attempting to cover all elements simultaneously. In this study, the comparison categories are based on the themes presented by the films themselves, such as 'spiritual leaders' and 'rules of life.' These categories, embedded in the structure of the films, serve as the foundation for the comparative analysis, aligning with Wickström’s recommendation to narrow comparisons in order to achieve a deeper understanding. Furthermore, in a comparative analysis, *thick descriptions* are of importance (Geertz, 1973). This means that comparisons must be situated within their broader cultural and social contexts and that the purpose of the comparison is not only to find similarities and differences but to deepen understanding by placing these comparisons in the appropriate context (Wickström, 2022, p. 69). As Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 3–30) argues, *thick description* involves capturing the meanings and nuances of social actions, allowing for a richer understanding of cultural practices. In this study, the films will be analysed not only for their content but also for the underlying societal narratives they reflect. By using *thick descriptions*, this analysis aims to uncover the ideological and cultural frameworks that shape how Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism are portrayed in educational films.

Another central aspect is the critique of the schematic table comparison, often used to compare religions in education. The table format risks reducing and oversimplifying complex religious phenomena, which can lead to stereotyping and inaccurate generalisations (Wickström, 2022, pp. 48–49). This critique is particularly relevant to this study, where the films often use predetermined categories to present religions.

In line with the critique of the World religion paradigm, how religion is often conceptualised as a fixed, universally understood category. Wickström argues that this view, shaped largely by Western, particularly Christian, perspectives, can obscure different religions' unique social and historical contexts.<sup>3</sup> (Wickström, 2022, pp. 55–56). This becomes particularly problematic in educational settings, where such framings may unintentionally present Christianity as the normative model against other religions, like Islam and Buddhism. By doing so, educational materials risk homogenising complex religious traditions and reinforcing stereotypes.

This critique is highly relevant when analysing how religions are portrayed in educational films. The films may rely on predefined categories, reflecting a Christian–influenced understanding of religion. These categories may not fully capture the diversity of non–Christian religions, such as Islam, and may reduce them to simplified, essentialist representations. Applying Wickström's framework, the analysis can reveal how these portrayals reflect broader societal norms and values, particularly the tendency to frame religions through a Christian–centric lens, which may influence how Islam is understood in the Swedish context. This study does not include a systematic political–economic analysis of educational film production. While such conditions are briefly noted, the focus here is on cultural and societal contexts, and the political-economic dimension is therefore a limitation.

Finally, in line with Wickström, I argue that comparisons can reveal underlying societal norms and values. By examining how Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism are compared in these films, it becomes possible to identify both manifest and latent norms and values underlying the portrayal of these religions. Wickström's framework will be used to analyse how these films reflect or challenge dominant cultural narratives about religion, with a particular focus on Islam.

### **Comparative and Multimodal Approach**

On top of using the comparative approach as the theoretical departure point, the films have also been compared using a two-step multimodal analysis, where an analysis scheme with columns has been built, focusing on visual, auditory, and textual elements:

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, 'Christian perspectives' primarily refer to Lutheran Christianity as I understand it.

TABLE 1

*Analysis scheme*

Time and sequence	Visual modality and aesthetics	Soundscape	Vocal and textual modality

In this scheme, each element is represented by a specific column. In the visual column, particular emphasis is placed on analysing location and background drawing on a social semiotic approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Auditory analysis focuses on diegetic and non-diegetic sounds<sup>4</sup>, which can significantly influence the audience's perception of realism and thematic tone in a film (Brown, 1994, pp. 92–97). Meanwhile, textual analysis examines dialogue, expert commentary, and film titles.

*Denotation* and *connotation* are essential concepts for analysing images in this study. In the first stage, the analysis was based on *denotation*, which is a description of the actual images. This means that images were described in a neutral way without any associative evaluations, focusing on the manifest content. In other words, the literal meaning of an image. The second stage was *connotation*, which involved analysing the image based on associations. Associations here meant what thoughts the image provokes for the viewer and what latent underlying purposes the chosen image might serve (Barthes, 1972; Hjelmslev, 1961; Saussure, 1960). Another term for *connotation* is *cultural association*, which refers to associations common to a group, such as values or experiences (Ekström & Moberg, 2008; Hansson et al., 2006; Rose, 2016).

In the first step, where *denotation* was in focus, the material was categorised using colour codes to provide a clear overview of the film's components. In this step, the focus was on the visual, auditory, and textual elements. The analysis unfolds in multiple stages, based on thematic categories in which the films were initially produced, such as 'Rules of Life' (Levnadsregler). Each category was analysed one at a time, examining how Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are portrayed within that specific theme. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the depiction of each religion and facilitated the comparison of how the religions are portrayed within the different themes. After analysing one theme, the study moved on to the next theme, ensuring that all three religions were analysed within each thematic context. In the second step, the visual, auditory, and textual elements were analysed with *connotations*. It is through *connotations* that the values represented by these religions are made visible, revealing latent cultural assumptions, an approach consistent with social semiotic analysis (Kress

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<sup>4</sup> Diegetic sounds are the sounds that the characters in the movie can hear, such as music, conversations, or background noise. Non-diegetic sounds, on the other hand, are sounds that have been added in production, which only the viewers hear.

& van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, pp. 134–137; Rose, 2016, pp. 194–197).

## **Presentation of the films – Islam, Christianity and Buddhism**

The films about the three religions were divided into thematic categories, as mentioned. Each film begins with the narrator setting the theme for the film. For example, in the film 'Rules of Life' (Levnadsregler), the narrator talks about norms and rules in society that help people live together without causing harm. The narrator then refers to the golden rule, explaining that it exists in the major religions. Furthermore, the films are structured in a way that questions appear on a black screen throughout the films, and scholars, experts, or adherents provide the answers. On an overarching level, all films portray *lived religion* to varying degrees. This refers to how people practice and experience religion in their daily lives beyond official doctrines and institutions (Utriainen, 2020). For instance, the films focus on adherents who discuss and answer questions on various topics, often reflecting on their personal experiences and views on religion. The viewer is taken along as they visit churches, mosques, and temples, as well as their homes.

The perspective presented in the films on Islam can be understood as Sunni; this is not outspoken, but the absence of Shia artefacts, holidays, and leaders indicates a Sunni version of Islam. The films on Islam portray lived religion by capturing moments of joy and everyday life among its adherents, shown through scenes of everyday Muslim life, such as a family sharing iftar (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018) and the mosque being used as a central religious space for prayer and social activities such as soccer and coffee breaks (Islam – Heliga rum, 2018). Furthermore, rituals like ablution (*wudu*) are shown in detail to illustrate the importance of purity before prayer, emphasising both physical and spiritual preparation for prayer. Additionally, the films on 'Faith and identity' (Islam – Tro och identitet, 2018) emphasise how Islam is an integral part of an individual's identity and collective life. Children and youth are shown in various situations where they participate in mosque activities, and scenes from home illustrate how faith and practices are deeply rooted in everyday life. This creates a comprehensive depiction of Islam as something that permeates all aspects of life and shapes both individual identity and social belonging, but with latent associations to communal practices and social cohesion. In the films on Islam, the Quran is presented as the central sacred text and as God's word. Emphasis is placed on its holiness, for example, the need to be ritually clean before touching it. It is shown as meaningful both individually, as personal guidance, and collectively, as something that unites the Muslim community (Islam – Heliga skrifter, 2018).

Moreover, the film on spiritual leaders (Islam – Andliga ledare, 2018) describes imams as the most important religious authorities in Islam. They are portrayed as leaders who not only lead prayers and preach but also provide guidance and support to members of the congregation, reinforcing their role as an integral part of the local Muslim

community. The films on Islam also feature minimal non-diegetic soundscapes, keeping the auditory elements grounded in the depicted realities.

The significance of Ramadan and Eid is highlighted throughout the film 'Religious Holidays' (Islam – Högtider, 2018). Ramadan is presented as a time for fasting, reflection, and community, with scenes showing communal meals (*iftar*) and prayers. Eid is depicted as a celebration emphasising joy and togetherness, with a particular focus on generosity and the participation of children. Additionally, the celebration of Ramadan is depicted in a facility resembling a warehouse or sports centre, where various activities are arranged for children, including a bouncy castle, highlighting the social aspects of these holidays. The films about Islam do not focus on symbolic representations; instead, the focus is on religious practice being shown more directly through ritual actions rather than symbolic imagery.

The presentation of Christianity is in many ways similar to that of Islam in that it focuses on individuals and their family relationships. Conversely, the films on Christianity (Kristendom – Levnadsregler, 2018) adopt a solemn tone, presenting multiple interpretations of the religion. Throughout the narrative, the viewer encounters different denominations of Christianity (Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox), each contributing to a rich tapestry of theological discourse (Kristendom – Andliga ledare, 2018). In the films about Christianity, the dual commandment of love is emphasised, while other commandments are portrayed as voluntary. Furthermore, the narrator discusses symbols such as five red roses symbolising Jesus' five wounds, the Advent star representing the Star of Bethlehem, and the stories behind these symbols. This is depicted through an animation portraying the journey of the three wise men following the star. Meanwhile, non-diegetic music plays in the background. The narrator elaborates on the celebration of various holidays, their histories, symbols, and significance for followers. In this film, there's an emphasis on historical narratives conveyed through images or scenes that reinforce the narration. Additionally, scenes from inside churches are shown where followers participate in these holidays by lighting candles and singing various hymns, with less emphasis on images from their everyday lives or apartments and more focus on the church itself.

In the films on Christianity, the church is emphasised as a central religious and social space (Kristendom – Heliga rum, 2018). It functions as a place for worship, education, and community gatherings. Different Christian traditions are described, and their architectural and ritual differences are highlighted, illustrating their diverse theological expressions.

The Bible's significance is highlighted as the core sacred text within Christianity, detailing its translation into different languages to ensure that it is accessible to all believers (Kristendom – Heliga skrifter, 2018). This accessibility is particularly emphasised in the Protestant tradition, which focuses on the importance of personal understanding and interpretation of the scriptures. Regarding faith and identity (Kristendom – Tro och identitet, 2019), the film illustrates how Christianity is a critical source of meaning for individuals. Religious affiliation is presented as a fundamental part of personal and collective identity, influencing values, life choices, and daily actions.

In the films about Buddhism, the emphasis is placed on individual practice and the journey toward personal enlightenment. The celebration of key holidays, such as Vesak, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, is highlighted, showing how these occasions foster community and reflection (Buddhism – Högtider, 2018). The films also focus on the ethical guidelines that Buddhists adhere to, such as the Five Precepts, which serve as a moral foundation (Buddhism – Levnadsregler, 2018). These precepts include principles such as not harming living beings and refraining from theft. The films depict a more individualistic approach to practice compared to the collective rituals shown in the films on Islam and Christianity, emphasising meditation and self-discovery rather than communal activities, with a focus on solitary figures in nature (Buddhism – Tro och identitet, 2018).

In addition to individual practice, the films about Buddhism explore sacred spaces by showcasing a variety of temples and stupas that play a crucial role in the spiritual life of Buddhists (Buddhism – Heliga rum, 2018). The architecture of these temples reflects the diversity within the Buddhist tradition, with some temples being simple and others more elaborate. The films also provide an overview of sacred scriptures, focusing on the *Tripitaka*, which consists of Buddha's teachings, monastic rules, and doctrinal commentaries (Buddhism – Heliga skrifter, 2018). They emphasise the importance of the oral tradition preceding the written scriptures and the differences in interpretation between various Buddhist schools, including Theravada and Mahayana. In terms of spiritual leadership, the films present monks as key religious authorities who embody the teachings of Buddha (Buddhism – Andliga ledare, 2018). These spiritual leaders are responsible for guiding laypeople in their understanding of Buddhist ethics and practices, offering both religious services and personal advice to help followers navigate ethical and spiritual dilemmas.

## **Results and comparative analysis**

In this section, the comparison will be discussed in two different ways. First, in relation to Wickström's approach and then in relation to a multimodal methodology. In the latter, five themes will be presented. Three of these themes emerged through the use of a multimodal methodology, with a focus on visual, auditory, and textual elements. In addition, two themes emerged during the analysis of the films, highlighting differences that became apparent through comparison. These final two themes reflect the insights gained from the analytical process. However, an analysis of the categories in which these films were produced will be presented first.

### **The Role of Categories in Shaping Religious Representations**

An important aspect that needs to be addressed is the six categories that the producer has chosen to divide the religions into, such as rules of life, spiritual leaders, sacred texts, sacred spaces, holidays, and faith and identity. These categories can be understood in line with Wickström's critique of tabular formats regarding comparative categories. Moreover, these categories are clearly derived from the curriculum for grades 4–9

(Skolverket, 2022b). The categories of spiritual leaders and holidays are also relevant but are not as directly expressed in the core content of the curriculum.

The category called rules of life focuses on the practical aspects and the norms surrounding religious practice. This leads to a certain reductionism where the complexity of how people live their faith is simplified to a list of rules. At the same time, in RE, rules of life can become a way to discuss ethics and morality on a more universal level, independent of specific religious beliefs. Such categories as 'rules of life' in these educational films, though specific, play a constructive role in RE by highlighting shared ethical principles across traditions. Wickström (2022) notes that such categories, like moral guidelines, help students understand how religious practices shape everyday life. This approach, which can be related to Ninian Smart's (1968) phenomenology categories, focuses on tangible expressions of faith, making it easier to discuss universal ethical values. Rather than reducing religion, it can create a platform for meaningful engagement with ethical living, fostering inclusivity and understanding between different traditions. The category also reflects a secular understanding of religion, where the focus is on norms and ethical guidelines rather than on faith or divine prescriptions (Smart, 1968). This suggests that Swedish society prioritises practical ethics and ways of living over religious dogmatism. It may also reflect a desire to create a common ground for understanding between different religious traditions. Especially considering how these films about rules of life begin, with a narrator discussing the golden rule that contributes to a better society.

In the film about Islam (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018), the concepts of *haram* and *halal* are partially in focus. For example, when a male imam explains the meaning of *halal* and *haram* while the concepts appear on screen in large letters. The focus here shifts to Islam as a religion with clear prohibitions and rules to adhere to, making it more rule-oriented compared to the film about Christianity. In the Christianity film, God's Ten Commandments are mentioned, but participants from different denominations speak about them in various ways. For example, it is revealed that these are not really rules but rather guidelines and that it is not mandatory to follow them (Kristendom – Levnadsregler, 2018). The representation of Christianity in these films becomes more adaptable and open, indicating tendencies among its followers to relate to the rules differently. The open portrayal of rules in religion aligns with the film about Buddhism (Buddhism – Levnadsregler, 2018), where the rules in Buddhism are depicted as voluntary and promising to follow.

According to Wickström, these normative categories shape not only how religions are represented in films but also what is considered acceptable or relevant in Swedish public discourse. When the categories do not fit naturally, especially in the case of Islam, it can lead to a distorted representation. For example, a pattern emerges where categories such as spiritual leaders and sacred spaces work well in films about Christianity, where the church's hierarchy and the symbolic significance of sacred buildings are central. However, these categories seem more imposed in the films about Islam. Regarding spiritual leaders, the term *spiritual* does not quite align with how imams are traditionally perceived in Islam. While priests in Christianity have a clear hierarchical and spiritual authority, often seen as mediators of God's grace, imams play

a more decentralised role. Imams provide guidance and interpretations of the Quran and hadith but lack the central spiritual authority that priests hold (Encyclopaedia of Islam, Imam, 2012; Olsson & Sorgenfrei, 2015, p. 70). This illustrates how the chosen categories risk obscuring the multifaceted aspects of Islam.

The same issue applies to the category of sacred spaces, where churches in Christianity hold special significance both as religious and cultural symbols. In the films about Islam, mosques are often presented as functional gathering places rather than spiritual or sacred spaces (Islam – Heliga rum, 2018). This makes the category somewhat less suitable in the films about Islam, where the focus is more on the practical use of the mosque rather than on its symbolic significance as a holy place, reflecting Wickström's argument that categorisations can influence how we perceive and interpret religions.

The category of 'Faith and Identity' often highlights an individualised view of religion, where faith is portrayed as a private matter rather than a collective experience. This may indicate a society striving to respect and acknowledge the individual's right to their faith, but it can also lead to a lack of understanding of the communities and traditions that shape people's religious identities. This becomes evident in the films about Christianity and Buddhism, which portray religion at the individual level, especially clear in Buddhism (Kristendom – Tro och identitet, 2019; Buddhism – Tro och identitet, 2018). In the films about Islam, however, family and the collective are instead predominant. Examples include when Ramadan is celebrated, and multiple people celebrate together. Holidays are often presented in these films based on their social and cultural significance rather than their religious roots (Islam – Tro och identitet, 2018; Levnadsregler, 2018; Högtider, 2018).

Based on Wickström's theory, these categories shape not only the representations of the religions but also what is considered acceptable in Swedish public discourses. The categories create a picture of religion that is simplified and sometimes stereotypical, risking the obscuration of the deeper and more multifaceted aspects of faith and practice in Swedish society. To understand these representations, it is essential to consider the cultural context in which these films are produced, especially in an increasingly multicultural Swedish context.

Moreover, the films are produced according to the World Religions Paradigm, which categorises religious knowledge into organised segments such as sacred scriptures, spiritual leaders, sacred spaces, and rules of life (Owen, 2011; Masuzawa, 2005). Furthermore, the introduction of the Five Pillars of Islam (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018) adheres to an educational format that, while effective for foundational learning, potentially oversimplifies Islam's vast and varied practices. This approach, emblematic of the WRP as critiqued by Owen (2011), risks reducing the Islamic faith to a series of checkable boxes, potentially perpetuating a limited and stereotypical view of Islam.

### **Varied Religious Practices and Rituals**

The films about Christianity have a more extensive and nuanced portrayal of religious practice, with scenarios including individuals lighting candles, praying or

singing, listening to and participating in sermons. As Meyer (2009) argues, the aesthetic dimensions of religious practice, including the use of light and music, not only convey religious messages but also create an immediate emotional experience for the viewer, reinforcing the individual's connection to the sacred and collective religious experience. This is in contrast to the films about Islam, where religious practice is only shown when individuals are praying in the mosque, at home or in public. This visual representation can reinforce specific discourses (Rose, 2016; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). In the case of the films on Islam, the lack of varied religious expressions promotes a limited and stereotypical view of Islam as a strictly rule-bound religion.

As mentioned, Ramadan is celebrated in what is probably a sports facility, and different activities are shown to be aimed at children. Moreover, in the film about Islam, there are scenes where the viewer is invited into the homes of some of the adherents, who share iftar (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018; Islam – Heliga Rum, 2018; Islam – Högtider, 2018; Islam – Tro och Identitet, 2018). The films about Buddhism reflect similar scenarios to those in the films about Islam, where religious practice is only shown when individuals in temples pray (Buddhism – Levnadsregler, 2018; Buddhism – Heliga rum, 2018; Buddhism – Högtider, 2018; Buddhism – Tro och identitet, 2018). Furthermore, in the film 'Islam – Heliga rum' (2018), maximalist tendencies emerge where it is evident by adherents that Muslims pray five times a day.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in 'Islam – Levnadsregler' (2018), several participants indicate that wearing the hijab is seen as a necessity within Islam, yet there are also participants who do not wear the hijab; they, too, say that they consider it a requirement but have chosen to delay wearing it for personal reasons. It is also mentioned by adherents that a Muslim does not eat pork. This focus on practices aligns with prior research indicating a tendency to portray Islam as rule-bound (Otterbeck, 2005). Following these scenes, a scholar of religion provides a study of religion perspective regarding the hijab; it is explained that historically, in the Mediterranean region, the hijab has symbolised high status. As for pork, it is explained that pork has been considered to contain trichinosis; hence, religion has adopted this prohibition.

Even though the films about Islam focus on lived religion, they lack variation and nuance in comparison to the films on Christianity and Buddhism. However, an exception occurs in the film Islam—Levnadsregler (2018), where a scholar of religion highlights that there are variations in how practising Muslims follow the rules of life. It is shown that while some adhere strictly to the rules, others choose to follow certain rules to varying degrees.

### **Denominational differences**

The films (Islam – Andliga ledare, 2018; Islam – Högtider, 2018) about Islam do not distinguish between different traditions or denominations within Islam, nor do they

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<sup>5</sup> A maximalist interpretation of religion is one that aligns with the views of the most devout and actively engaged practitioners, emphasizing the comprehensive application of religious principles to all aspects of life. See Lincoln (2002).

explore how holidays may be celebrated differently across Islamic denominations. There is no mention of Shia practices or holidays, such as Ashura, despite their significance within Shia Islam.

In contrast, in the films about Christianity, as mentioned, there are more nuanced portrayals of theological differences, not only between protestant, catholic and Orthodox Christianity but also specifically in relation to the church of Sweden. There is also a nuanced portrayal of differences between the denominations regarding acceptance of marriage, female priests and gay marriage. This aspect is portrayed with a sense of pride by one female priest, reflecting the Church of Sweden's progressive stance. The proud tone and smiling speakers connote a sense of inclusivity when mentioning how other churches do not accept LGBTQ rights, but the Swedish church does.

The film about Christianity (*Kristendom – Högtider*, 2021) explores how religious holidays are celebrated across different denominations, highlighting the diverse interpretations within each. In the film *Buddhism – Högtider* (2018), a scholar of religion discusses the various ways in which Buddhist holidays are practised across different denominations, such as Theravada and Mahayana. The scholar provides valuable insights into how these holidays differ based on regional and doctrinal variations, giving the viewer a broader perspective on Buddhist practices. For example, the narrator mentions that almost all Buddhists celebrate holidays such as Vesak and Dharmaday, but the scholar clarifies that in the Theravada tradition, Vesak, which commemorates Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, is often celebrated as one combined event. In Mahayana Buddhism, however, these events are spread out and commemorated on different days throughout the year.

Moreover, the scholar explains that the way these holidays are celebrated can vary greatly, allowing for personal and cultural adaptations. One of the adherents adds to this by discussing how Western Buddhists primarily focus on meditation and study, but more recently, they have begun to incorporate the celebration of holidays into their practice.

### **Multimodal implications – ‘Ceremonial’, ‘Natural’ and ‘Asphalt’**

Unlike films about Buddhism and Christianity, which often highlight visually striking elements such as ornate temples and or lush gardens, films about Islam tend not to focus as much on aesthetically appealing landscapes or the architectural beauty of mosques. There are some exceptions; in the film *‘Faith and identity’* (*Tro och identitet*, 2018) introduction, interior shots of a mosque are shown. These shots are aesthetically pleasing, meaning they possess a visual beauty highlighted through detailed architecture, harmonious proportions, and thoughtful use of colour and light. However, most of the film is devoted to everyday environments, creating a sense of Islam as part of daily life. The film depicting *‘Andliga Ledare’* (2018) in Islam presents many scenes from inside mosques, showcasing their elegant yet simple décor, with red carpets and open spaces. In addition, the minbar, crafted from wood, stands as a focal point, adding to the aesthetic appeal of the mosque's interior.

On the other hand, a significant portion of the film 'Levnadsregler' (2018) was shot in a gravel parking lot and indoors in the suburbs, portraying Islam as rough. Furthermore, mosques were not visually emphasised; either they were depicted as mere functional spaces with wide shots, or the focus was not on the aesthetics of the mosques. In addition, most of the films about Islam are shot indoors, capturing scenes set in apartments or offices. In contrast, films about Christianity frequently feature more appealing aesthetics, with abundant candlelight and sweeping shots of church interiors and sermons. For instance, these scenes are filmed calmly during sequences where a narrator's voice speaks or an expert or participant is featured. The camera moves smoothly or sometimes remains still, connoting a serene atmosphere. In some cases, the camera focuses on lit candles or a statue of Jesus. At the same time, someone speaks, combined with calm background music or organ music, to pass over to the next scene. This enhances the scene's spiritual and reflective tone (Kristendom – Tro och identitet, 2019). These Christian settings are often complemented by scenes of priests conducting ceremonies and swinging censers that swirl incense, further enriching the religious ambience and sensory experience for the viewer.

Similarly, in the films about Buddhism, the aesthetics were captivating, featuring visually pleasing temple scenes alongside serene natural landscapes and gardens. The temples are often shown with intricate architectural details, such as ornate carvings and elaborate roofing, which are characteristic of traditional Buddhist architecture. An exemplary scene showcases a temple adorned with Buddha statues and decorated with lotus flowers, emphasising these elements' spiritual and cultural significance. The exteriors of these temples typically display the distinctive features of Buddhist architecture, such as the King Chulalongkorn pavilion. The surrounding landscapes are lush and green, filled with trees and other verdant flora, creating a tranquil backdrop that enhances the peaceful atmosphere. Inside the temples, scenes involving participants in prayer are filled with warm colours and often with incense (Levnadsregler, 2018; Andliga ledare, 2018; Tro och identitet, 2018; Heliga rum, 2018). Such scenes connote a sense of calm and reflection, aligning with the themes of meditation and mindfulness.

The films about Islam have more hard cuts in comparison to the films about Christianity and Buddhism, and the camera quality is noticeably superior in the Christianity film, with higher resolution and sharper imagery. The reason could be that the films about Islam were produced in 2018, and the films about Christianity in 2019, but also the fact that another production company was involved alongside in the production of the films about Christianity. Since the films about Islam are shot in a parking lot and a possible sports hall, Islam can be understood as portrayed as rough, with asphalt and suburban settings, in comparison to the other two religions. This type of picturing has latent socio-economic implications, framing the religion within lower socio-economic contexts. This portrayal suggests that Islam, as a religion, is inherently tied to poverty or lower-income environments. Such depictions align with socioeconomic realities where Muslims in Sweden represent one of the most economically disadvantaged religious minorities, largely situated below the middle class. The outcome perpetuates a broader stereotype of Islam as a 'poor religion,' reflecting societal biases rather than challenging them. In Sweden, this association is

reinforced because many Muslim communities face higher levels of socio-economic marginalisation than most non-Muslim groups (Willander, 2019, pp. 70–71).

### **Soundscapes and emotional guidance**

In films about Islam and Buddhism, titles are presented against a black background accompanied by dramatic music, signalling the transition to new themes or questions that are then addressed by participating experts and practitioners. This method is used to emphasise the significance of the discussions that follow. In contrast, in the films about Christianity, titles are displayed against backgrounds of religious symbols, accompanied by a sound effect resembling the sound of glitter. This presentation is intended to mark the beginning of new discussions or themes related to Christianity.

There is also a clear distinction when it comes to music. In films about Islam, there is far less diegetic and non-diegetic music. The absence of music results in no emotions being automatically enhanced through sound, which may reduce the immediate emotional response to what is shown or said. On the other hand, this can also serve to enhance the participants' narratives, as the focus is entirely on their words. This can lead to deeper reflection by the viewer, as they are given space to interpret the narrative without the guiding influence of music. According to Brown (1994), film music often plays a crucial role in shaping a viewer's emotional experience by acting as an 'emotional guide.' Through its use, directors can influence how different scenes are perceived and understood, as music does not simply serve as a backdrop but becomes an active component of the narrative structure. It can enhance visual action, establish moods, or even provide contrast, adding layers of meaning that can alter the viewer's interpretation (Brown, 1994, pp. 17–19).

However, there are exceptions in one scene: a family breaks their fast during the iftar. They sit together, eating and laughing simultaneously as non-diegetic Arabic pop music plays during this scene, contributing to the atmosphere (Islam – Högtider, 2018). In one instance, a non-diegetic sound, *Nasheed*<sup>6</sup>, is used when an adherent is shown praying while the voice of an imam is heard in the background, explaining that regretting one's sins is equivalent to never having sinned. Which continues as the scene transitions into the closing credits (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018). Additionally, there is a notable tendency in films to use the call to prayer (adhan) as a non-diegetic sound when presenting scenes involving Islam, often when introducing Islam (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018). This usage extends the impact of the call beyond its immediate context within the narrative, influencing the viewer's emotional and cognitive response to the scene.

By embedding the call to prayer in this manner (the same can be argued with *Nasheed*), filmmakers can subtly shape audience perceptions, reinforcing certain themes or emotions associated with the portrayal of Islam. It can reinforce a religious experience or a positive feeling, as religion is much about aesthetics, or, in contrast, it

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<sup>6</sup> 'Piece of oratory, a chant, a hymn and a form of vocal music.' *nashīd*. In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Glossary and Index of Terms* (2012).

can provoke negative associations for the viewer. Religious sounds, such as the call to prayer and *nasheed*, function as *modes of binding*.<sup>7</sup> (Meyer, 2009), creating a sensory connection that can either mediate religious devotion or, for some, evoke discomfort, depending on the social and cultural context in which they are experienced. In Sweden, the call to prayer has been a point of societal debate. Critics have argued that it represents an 'alien practice' that challenges Swedish norms, with some associating it with the broader fears of the 'Islamization' of Sweden. In extreme cases, it has even been linked to concerns over terrorism or religious extremism, particularly by nationalist groups who view public expressions of Islam as incompatible with Swedish identity (Ringmar, 2019). This societal context can influence how viewers perceive the call to prayer in films, either as a meaningful religious symbol or as a source of tension and discomfort.

In contrast, the film 'Tro och identitet' (2018) about Buddhism uses both diegetic and non-diegetic music. In the introduction, the same images and music are used in all the films about Buddhism, meaning non-diegetic upbeat music. In contrast, images of temples and gardens are shown with strobe light effects that capture the viewer's attention and contemplation. Furthermore, the participants are often seen alone in the images, sharing their experiences and in conjunction with non-diegetic Buddhist music, characterised by meditative tones and traditional instruments such as singing bowls and flutes, to enhance the spiritual atmosphere, effectively contributing to placing the viewer in a meditative state and more deeply engaging them in the film's themes of mindfulness and inner peace. In addition, there are also interspersed scenes while the participants talk. These scenes include people on the beach, people socialising and talking, or individuals meditating, as well as some images from nature, often in combination with downbeat background music. This can enhance the viewer's feeling of emotions such as peacefulness and harmony.

In the same film on Christianity, scenes from the church where individuals participate in communal rituals, such as lighting candles and listening to sermons, are combined with personal stories. With simultaneous music, both diegetic in the form of choral singing and non-diegetic through calm melodies, it is interwoven with the stories. It thus enhances the sense of harmonious and peaceful faith and identity within Christianity. An example of the use of music is where diegetic choir music seamlessly accompanies the transitions from an expert discussing the sacred scriptures of Christianity to a church with a focus on the choir and then to a female priest speaking about the components of the Bible, with the choir's music continuing to enrich the background as the scene shifts to the priest (Kristendom – Heliga skrifter, 2018).

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<sup>7</sup> *Modes of binding* refer to the ways in which sensory elements, like sounds, images, or rituals, connect people emotionally and socially to religious beliefs, practices, or communities. They are the sensory experiences that 'bind' individuals to their faith or shared religious identity (Meyer, 2009).

### **Reflecting Swedish Society's presuppositions of different traditions**

There are differences in how questions are posed in the films on Islam and Christianity (Tro och identitet, 2018; 2019). The question raised in the film about Christianity is: 'Are you perceived differently as a believer?'. These questions reflect a certain attitude within Swedish society towards religion, where being religious is often perceived as somewhat deviant and perhaps even met with scepticism. This perspective can be understood in light of Sweden's Lutheran–Protestant heritage, which has influenced the perception of religion and its negative association in Sweden (Thurfjell, 2015). However, in the film about Islam, the question is formulated: 'What is it like to be a Muslim in Sweden?'. Wickström's theory helps illuminate how such framing can reveal underlying biases and societal norms within Swedish public discourse. The way the question is posed in the film about Islam suggests that being a Muslim in Sweden is viewed as somewhat out of the ordinary and something that does not belong to the broader cultural context. While this portrayal could reflect cultural perceptions, it also indicates an attempt to include Muslims in Swedish society, representing a positive effort to broaden the understanding of and acceptance of religious diversity.

In the film about Buddhism, such a question is not posed at all. Instead, the question is: 'Can one be a Buddhist without believing?' One adherent says yes, it is possible. This reflects a broader trend in Swedish society, where the religious aspects of Buddhism are often downplayed (Thurfjell, 2013, 2015).

All films provide an insightful picture of the contemporary Swedish society in which they were produced. A recurring theme that is particularly highlighted is the perspective of gender equality. The films posed questions that were answered by participants or experts, questions such as 'Does the Quran primarily discuss men or women?' (Islam – Heliga skrifter, 2018), 'Do the same rules of life apply to men and women?' (Islam – Levnadsregler, 2018) and 'Do men and women use the sacred space in the same way?' (Islam – Heliga rum, 2018) illuminate how religious scriptures and practices are interpreted and applied. The answers to these questions often suggest that progress towards greater gender equality has either already been made or is underway, which is portrayed as a positive development. In addition, the topic of hijab is also addressed in the film 'Levnadsregler' about Islam, which once again reflects Swedish society and its discourse on hijab. This topic has been a current and recurring point in public debate (Larsson, 2005, pp. 97–101; Integrationsbarometer, 2007, p.70).

### **Discussion and concluding remarks**

In this study, I compared educational films about Islam with educational films about Christianity and Buddhism. My analysis has highlighted several significant themes and modes of representation for understanding how Islam is depicted in these educational films. The depiction of Islam aligns with previous research regarding the oversimplification and generalisation of the religion (Otterbeck, 2005; Härenstam, 1993, 2006). The limited focus on denominational diversity aligns with previous observations that educational materials may simplify Islam's internal diversity

(Otterbeck, 2005). Additionally, categories sometimes prioritise dominant narratives, which may leave certain religious traditions less represented (King, 1999).

However, a difference in these films is that their perspective on Islam brings forward Islam as a lived religion, which showcases the everyday lives of Muslims. The prominent aspect is how Islam is presented as a *lived religion* where family relationships and everyday practices are central. The films about Islam frequently include children and youth playing and having fun, both in mosques and other contexts, which contributes to an image of Islam as deeply integrated into the believer's lives and highlights the community aspect of the religion. For this reason, I want to bring in Axelson and Stier's research (2020), which focuses on how religion can serve as a communal resource, fostering social cohesion and cooperation within local communities. Their study highlights how religious traditions, including Islam, are crucial in promoting collective identity and belonging. Similarly, the portrayal of Islam in these films emphasises its communal nature, where shared practices and relationships within the family and broader religious community are central. This communal aspect aligns with the collectivist values often associated with Islam, as opposed to the individualistic tendencies in more secular contexts. Axelson (2022) discusses the tension between secular and religious values, where secular societies often emphasise individualism, while religious communities, particularly those associated with Sunni Islam, are portrayed as more collectivist.

My analysis shows that the portrayal of Islam in comparison to Christianity and Buddhism in these educational films presents a contrast between what I term 'rough' and 'soft' religions. Where Islam is often depicted as rough through imagery of asphalt and suburban settings, which contributes to a harsh and strict image of the religion, while this may be attributed to factors such as production budget, availability, and location, the outcome still frames Islam as what I have conceptualised as 'asphalt Islam'. The absence of a soundscape in the films reinforces this portrayal of Islam, as the lack of auditory elements does not soften or deepen the emotional experience, which connotes Islam being perceived as a strictly rule-governed religion. Here, I use 'asphalt Islam' as a multimodal descriptive term to explain how Islam in Sweden is portrayed in comparison with Christianity and Buddhism, and not as a claim about Islam's essence.

Additionally, it can be argued that the rough portrayal of Islam emphasises its association with lower socio-economic settings (Willander, 2019, pp. 70–71), contrasting sharply with the middle and upper–middle–class contexts often depicted in films about Christianity and Buddhism. For example, films about Buddhism or Christianity frequently show neighbourhood areas and indoor scenes set in villas where participants discuss their faith, highlighting a class distinction in the representation of religions. Representing Islam in equally 'serene' settings as Christianity or Buddhism might create a distorted picture by ignoring the structural inequalities and marginalisation that characterise many Swedish Muslim communities. Such a representation would risk creating a false equivalence that ignores the different social positioning of religious communities in Swedish society. The 'asphalt Islam' portrayal, while potentially problematic in its lack of contextualisation, at least corresponds to

empirical realities rather than presenting an idealised image that obscures social conditions.

Consequently, the current societal issues and debates are thus reflected and reproduced within the framework of religion. This reasoning is supported by both Wickström and Härenstam's (2000) argument that educational materials produced in a society tend to reflect and reinforce that society's prevailing values and norms, and so does comparing religions.

Here, Wickström's argument is crucial in that comparison brings about and involves didactical implications necessary for teaching RE. In order to shed new light on how films can be used as educational resources in teaching Islam, it is necessary to understand how different religions are portrayed. As Wickström argues, it is crucial to make conscious decisions when teaching about religion with a comparative approach.

Thus, this study argues that these films about Islam are good resources for demonstrating lived religion, but they need to be problematised in certain areas, such as the lack of variation of denominational traditions, multiple perspectives and interpretations, and how lived religion can look distinct in different countries, cultures, and even denominations.

## **Final Reflections**

This study highlights that while structured categorisations in educational films can provide useful frameworks for teaching about religion, they also present limitations. Drawing on Wickström's theory, categories like 'spiritual leaders' and 'sacred spaces' offer consistent and accessible entry points into complex ideas. For instance, the 'Faith and Identity' category can serve as a focused starting point for discussions around identity and religiosity, making it easier for students to engage with these concepts.

However, these categories risk reinforcing specific perspectives, particularly those rooted in a Christian framework that may not align with the structures and values of other religions such as Islam. This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to educational materials, where films are integrated with textbooks and other resources to provide historical context and highlight the diversity within religious traditions. Films should not stand alone but be part of a broader pedagogical strategy that addresses the multifaceted nature of religions.

Educational materials are invariably influenced by cultural and societal norms and values. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to adopt a critical perspective, reflecting on how these norms shape the selection and representation of religions. The choices made by producers shape the content of these films, and it becomes the teacher's role to identify both their strengths and limitations.

Ultimately, teachers and student teachers should view films and other educational materials not as neutral or complete representations but as tools requiring critical examination. In line with Otterbeck's (2005) question, "What is reasonable to demand?", it becomes clear that expecting educational films to provide a completely balanced and comprehensive representation of any religion is unrealistic. Educational materials

inevitably reflect the social contexts in which they are produced, and complete impartiality remains an impossible standard. However, what becomes crucial is that teachers are aware of these limitations and the specific type of representation being presented. This awareness enables teachers to recognise when they are showing students 'asphalt Islam', a contextualised, Swedish-specific portrayal and to supplement this with additional perspectives. The pedagogical responsibility shifts from expecting films to be perfectly balanced to ensuring that educators understand what type of Islam is being depicted and can contextualise this for their students.

The multimodal analysis proves particularly valuable in this context. It is through the interaction of visual elements, auditory and textual framing that 'asphalt Islam' emerges as a representational mode. Understanding these multimodal components becomes didactically important for teachers in two ways: first, as a tool for what we could call for critical religious media literacy that helps educators recognise how visual, auditory, and textual elements work together to create specific impressions of religious traditions; and second, as a pedagogical resource that can be used consciously in teaching to discuss how representation functions and what different modal choices communicate about religion and society. When teachers develop multimodal awareness, paying attention to how images, soundscapes, and text interact in educational films, they become better equipped to help students understand that what they see is not simply 'Islam' but rather Islam filtered through specific representational choices that reflect Swedish social contexts. This multimodal consciousness becomes essential for the responsible use of educational films in religious education.

This does not mean that the current representation is unproblematic, but rather that the solution lies not in creating equally 'aesthetic' portrayals across all religions, but in developing pedagogical approaches that help students understand how social context shapes religious representation. The goal becomes helping students recognise that different representational modes, whether 'ceremonial', 'natural', or 'asphalt', reflect both the social positioning of religious communities and the cultural frameworks through which they are viewed.

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'ASPHALT ISLAM'. A MULTIMODAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAM IN CONTRAST TO CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM IN EDUCATIONAL FILMS

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