

## **Truth claims, commitment and openness in Finnish Islamic and Lutheran religious education classrooms**

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This article examines how two Finnish religious education (RE) teachers, one in Islamic and one in Lutheran RE, seek to construct openness when dealing with religious truth claims and religious commitment, the key areas in which indoctrination might take place. It also observes how these constructions work in the classroom and explains them in the light of teacher intentions and pupil pre-understandings of the RE classroom setting. Focusing on Islamic RE contests secular and Protestant discourses concerning the practices of RE in Europe, especially in denominational settings. Comparing the two contexts, Islamic minority and Lutheran majority RE, also helps to avoid over-interpretations about the impact of Islam. The issue is approached by combining classroom observations with teacher and pupil perspectives expressed in interviews. The findings suggest that there was frequent mismatch between teacher goals and pupil interpretation. In order to 'do openness' in the classroom more effectively, RE teachers should regard openness and critical thinking as learning objectives instead of mere circumstances of learning.

### **Introduction**

Teachers should not impose certain belief systems on their pupils; this is an important point in teachers' ethical codes in open societies. This issue has caused a lot of debate around religious education (RE), especially in denominational settings, either in faith schools or systems where RE is arranged separately for each religious group. The teachers face a challenge to provide a deep understanding of the religious tradition whilst simultaneously avoiding indoctrination.

The issue of religious commitment within RE has been dealt with extensively in the literature. For instance, Thiessen (2007) has introduced the term 'religious education from and for commitment', in which the teacher is committed to a religion and openly fosters the development of religious identity in the pupils. Critical reflection and openness towards different views are the keys to avoiding indoctrination in this kind of RE (also Watson, 2012). Critical reflection is also important for Wright (2004). According to Wright, in non-denominational RE classrooms, religious truth claims should be scrutinised critically instead of asserting in an unreflective manner that all of them are equally valid, simultaneously creating a safe space for those pupils who choose to believe in those truth claims.

The teachers of denominational RE classrooms could also benefit from other guidelines for non-denominational settings. Skeie (2017) drew a distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' impartiality. Attributes of the former include being objective, critical and pluralistic, whereas the latter is cautious, avoiding focusing on pupils' own religious beliefs and causing conflict. Jackson and Everington (2017) defined impartiality as teaching without

discrimination and with freedom of expression. It entails having the skill and sensitivity to set one's own personal commitments in a wider context.

To sum up, teachers need skills to use language that encourages diverse views and critical thinking. The key topics where these are needed are religious truth claims and religious commitment. Apart from teacher discourse, however, pupil discourse also plays a part in classroom interaction. Consequently, the participants' life histories and preunderstandings influence discussions. Mismatches between pupil expectations and teacher intentions are not uncommon (Kumaravadivelu, 1999).

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do two Finnish RE teachers, one in Islamic and one in Lutheran RE, seek to construct openness when dealing with religious truth claims and religious commitment?
2. How do pupil expectations and classroom interaction impact on the construction of openness in the classroom?

Studying Islamic RE provides a new perspective on secular and Protestant discourses concerning the practices of RE in Europe. However, comparing the two contexts, Islamic minority and Lutheran majority RE, helps to avoid over-interpretations about the impact of Islam. Observing the topic is particularly interesting in the Finnish educational system where RE is separative (Alberts, 2012) with curricular goals to provide specific information about the religious tradition and religious community to which the pupil belongs (a non-religious option is provided for those not affiliated with any religion), but RE is not supposed to socialise into any religious tradition against the pupil's will (Sakaranaho, 2013; Kimanen, 2015).

Riegel and Leven (2016) studied Catholic RE teachers in Germany, where the RE teacher's duty is twofold, to provide a model of a religiously committed person and create an atmosphere of freedom. In their case study, two of the three teachers used an affirmative style when teaching religious truth claims, that is, they did not open the discussion for critical remarks. However, they seldom indicated that they held those beliefs personally. The third teacher, in contrast, used a dialogical style in which he presented his own, religiously committed views and invited the pupils to discuss them. The study shows that studying how truth claims are taught may inform and improve practice.

When Finnish teachers and pupils of minority religions were interviewed, the teachers generally emphasised the freedom of choice pupils and families had concerning religious matters, but assumed that pupils would have a feeling of togetherness due to their shared religious background. Consequently, pupils with weak affiliation felt uneasy in the classes (Zilliacus, 2013; Zilliacus & Holm, 2013). Here, I will take a closer look at how commitment is addressed in RE classes. By commitment I mean here religious affiliation, belonging and activity. The formation of religious commitment and perceptions of autonomy related to it have been discussed elsewhere (Kimanen, 2018).

## Methods and data

Methodologically, this article follows Kumaravadivelu's (1999, p. 472) idea that 'classroom discourse lends itself to multiple perspectives depending on the discourse participants' preconceived notions of what constitutes learning, teaching, and learning outcomes.' Therefore an analyst of classroom discourse has to 'take into account discourse participants' complex and competing expectations and beliefs, identities and voices, and fears and anxieties.' This requires two types of data.

First, teacher and pupil interviews are analysed to discover their preunderstandings about RE as a subject. These understandings are examined as different interpretative repertoires, that is, 'register[s] of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events,' also often called discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.138). Different interpretative repertoires may also have different functions and be based on different sociocultural resources.

Second, classroom observations are analysed to find out how the teacher seeks to construct openness in the RE classroom and to detect possible mismatches between teacher goals and pupil expectations. The assumption is that just as interviewers 'do neutrality' in interviews (Rapley, 2004), teachers who wish to maintain an atmosphere of freedom in their RE classes 'do openness' in order to communicate this intention to their pupils.

The data consists of 20 observed lessons, 10 in Lutheran and Islamic RE respectively, and interviews with both teachers, 12 Islamic RE (IRE) pupils and five Lutheran RE (LRE) pupils, partly interviewed in pairs to decrease power imbalance in the interview situation (Eder & Fingerson, 2001). The lessons were assumed to contain the contents most committed to the specific religious tradition in the eighth-grade curriculum: the Quran, concepts concerning God, and the life of the Prophet in the IRE, and the life of Jesus, early church, Lutheran Reformation and Lutheran Church today in Finland in the LRE.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed by dividing them into extracts and labelling the extracts by both topic (e.g. the goals of RE) and discursive practices (e.g. RE as a 'normal' subject). Audio recording the lessons was not possible for ethical reasons, but I wrote down as much classroom talk as possible. Lengthy sequences of teacher talk (the pupils mostly had only short lines), were thus abbreviated, but the shorter ones were recorded relatively accurately. Instances where truth claims or religious commitment were discussed were identified in the field notes. All the names are pseudonyms. In the field diaries, as I gradually got to know the pupils, I started to use their pseudonyms, instead of mere 'pupil'.

## Results

### Teachers' objectives

The IRE teacher, Saara, balanced between two competing interpretative repertoires of RE, one stressing knowledge of one's own religion and the other promoting interfaith tolerance.

Somehow for some reason, however, the first thing that comes into my mind [as the objective of RE] is, well, to gain knowledge about one's own religion, but then, instantly the second thought, that in my view always should come first, and what I at this moment see as the most important [--] is after all tolerance and creating dialogue, and understanding, understanding first towards one's own religion and then also towards the other religions. And then, so that it is possible, you have to know your own religion, what kind of actions it urges, and then of course morals and ethics [--] but, after all I somehow think that it is the education for tolerance and education for peace what is like the... the essential, why RE should be [a school subject]. (IRE teacher interview)

Saara changes the priority of the two objectives several times here. She also justifies their interrelation: Islam provides an ethical obligation for tolerance, and understanding one's own background is a necessary prerequisite for understanding others. Yet the constant back-and-forth movement emphasises the competition between discourses.

Saara also problematised the nature of RE and reflected on issues that might enhance commitment:

I don't feel that education in one's own religion should be bringing [pupils] up as believers, but on the other hand, is it there like a hidden guiding principle as we think that you have to teach the religious skills, too, and knowledge so that it [religious practice] is possible if the person wants it. (IRE teacher interview)

The pupils seem to want emotionality and constructing faith, but that would be confessional. (IRE after-class discussion, 23 October 2015)

It is important to note the last point in the first extract. Saara articulates a common justification of IRE and pupil autonomy within it, namely that teaching the Islamic way of life creates an opportunity, not an obligation (cf. Rissanen, 2014, p. 128). This reflects the Islamic notion of education: the mind, the body and the soul have to be educated so that the Muslim accepts a covenant, *mithaq*, i.e. acknowledges God as their Lord, and takes the responsibility, *amana*, of fulfilling the obligations and consequently has to know those obligations (Hussain, 2004, p. 319). Thus the right to religious practice is emphasised as a justification for Islamic education in public school.

In the extracts above Saara also constructs RE as a subject with internal tensions between religious commitment and neutrality. In the latter extract she also describes the pupils as religiously committed. However, elsewhere Saara also talked about them as diverse,

especially in terms of diverse Islamic orientations, cultural backgrounds and the level of commitment in the family:

Diversity is often displayed, first through cultural differences [--] that people come from diverse language groups and countries and there are a bit different ways to practice religion. Well then second, not necessarily visible but a quite big difference is, of course, the differences between the orientations of Islam, that is to say, mainly of course when there are also Shia pupils in the group [--] so they have been very quiet about the issue, sometimes due to the atmosphere in the group, that it hasn't been pleasant to express that one belongs to a minority oneself. [--] And then of course the third, like, and maybe in practice the biggest issue that affects the pupils' different relationships to religion is after all how religious their homes are, like with what intensity they, like, observe religion at home or if they observe it at all, so that's perhaps what shows in the pupils' attitude to religion and then of course in the knowledge and skills and even sometimes in negative attitude. (IRE teacher interview)

Here Saara positions the pupils predominantly as products of their homes and home cultures. She describes the Shia pupils as in a disadvantageous position because of the predominance of Sunnis, and implies that the Sunni pupils are also responsible for the situation. Later in the interview, Saara constructed a similar position on the less committed pupils:

[In the situation where Islamic rules are discussed and some pupils judge their peers] the part of the pupils who don't observe religion in the same way or and aren't committed, they may feel kind of awkward [--]. (IRE teacher interview)

The dominant interpretative repertoire in the interview of the LRE teacher, Elina, was the cultural significance of RE. Elina repeatedly stressed the cultural aspect of religion, for instance in this excerpt:

I somehow always think that whatever views the pupils had on religion on personal level, [I hope] they still would accept that religion is part of our culture and society. (LRE teacher interview)

Cultural membership was thus a key feature of her pupils' identity:

- Elina:* But the Western culture and this where we are, it unites. And there for example celebrating Christmas, celebrating Easter, churches as buildings, that is where you find kind of familiar common things, even if we did not share views on religion on personal level.
- Researcher:* Mm, yes. But that Lutheranism then in itself is quite...
- Elina:* Well, er, Lutheranism as a name can be kind of strange for the pupils. That pupils, even on the eighth grade, question really that are we, do we belong to that Lutheran [church], now... (LRE teacher interview.)

Elina constructed a position for herself as an expert on religious issues on a cultural level and for the pupils a position of members of a culture, often ignorant of the religious dimension of it.

To make her position clear to the class when introducing the course as a whole and its first lesson about Jesus, she told the pupils explicitly that the goal of RE is not to make them believers:

If in the history class I tell about Hitler, nobody thinks I am converting the pupils into Nazis, and if in RE class I tell about Jesus, I am not converting either.' (Field diary, 17 March 2016.)

In the interview Elina also mentioned that one way to signal the non-indoctrinatory nature of RE was not to spend much time on dogmas, and indeed the pace in her lessons was quick. Elina understood that I was interested in hostile or critical voices in the classroom, and tried to provoke them by choosing certain topics for class discussion, for instance the role of the church and the historical issues about Jesus.

### **Pupils' interpretations**

Pupils had two main interpretative repertoires concerning RE. First, they talked about it as an ordinary school subject:

- Zabra:* The kind of [RE teacher is good] who more like tells you the things rather than gives you papers that you have to read. Like, I am the kind of pupil that I learn better by listening than by reading for myself and so [--]. (IRE3.)
- Susanna:* A good RE teacher can, like, demonstrate things, and [pause] explain them in a way you can understand. And, I don't know... [quickly] I don't think there is a difference from teachers of other subjects. (LRE4.)
- Laura:* Well in the way that you don't just write things in your notebook, for instance you can make handicrafts [--] and watch films and even go and explore different places. (LRE2.)

In these extracts good RE teaching is not boring and helps the pupil to learn things.

Second, the pupils talked about RE as learning a religious way of life:

- Researcher:* Well what benefit could someone have from education concerning religions [as a goal of RE]?  
[long pause]
- Niilo:* Well, perhaps like, you know a bit if you have to arrange a funeral or something, so you kind of know how to deal with it a bit [--]. (LRE1.)
- Hakim:* [--] for instance, in the future, then you are like "may I eat this, may I eat that", and then you eat them. You hadn't been taught them [if there was no IRE at school]. (IRE6.)
- Researcher:* Why would that [learning about the Quran in IRE] be important?
- Yusuf:* 'Cause some people don't read the Quran.
- Mebdi:* That's right. And they only, like, make their own decisions.
- Yusuf:* Right. For instance some people who really aren't good believers, so when we speak about the Quran [in class] they will realize what the Quran is. I don't know what there is in the Quran, it's awkward, you know. (IRE2.)

The difference between the groups was in the frequency of the discourses. Niilo (accompanied by Olli in a pair interview) was in fact the only one to talk about RE as having practical relevance, whereas all the Muslim pupils talked about RE in religious terms. It is also worth noting that Yusuf did not position himself as a good believer, neither did Mehdi in other parts of the interview, but they connect religious socialisation with religious education. It is thus an important discursive resource they use when talking about religious education. Learning about the Quran was mentioned in two interviews (IRE2, IRE4).

The interpretative repertoires were not necessarily conflicting, like in this extract answering my question how RE should be taught at school:

- Khalima A.*: Somebody who believes in what they teach us, and he/she could for once teach something new. [--] So that we would do something new, not writing all the time.  
*Naado*: Like going to mosques, you know? (IRE1.)

Going to mosque was presented here as a refreshing activity but also tightly connected to the religious nature of RE, highlighted by a reference to the teacher's faith, and it was mentioned also in two other interviews (IRE3, IRE7).

In one instance talking about instructions on life in IRE lessons revealed competing interpretative repertoires:

- Musa*: [--] you can give hints, do this, do that...  
*Amiin*: ...but then again if you are forced then it starts to irritate [--]  
*Researcher*: Yes, yes. Well, how should one talk about Islamic rules in lessons?  
*Amiin*: Like, how that's done or something like that.  
*Musa*: Islamic rules are a bit different because... All the Muslims probably obey them because... everybody like fears Allah because... He can do anything. [--] So if you don't obey them, you know that you just end up bad.' [Both the boys continue describing the fate of the disobedient.] (IRE 4.)

In this extract the boys first talk about religious rules similarly to how they had previously talked about any instructions on life given by the school. Then Musa suddenly realises that they are talking about Islamic rules and resorts to the religious discourse; Amiin follows him.

IRE pupils also had an additional interpretative repertoire to justify RE at school that the LRE pupils did not use, namely the right to religion, (IRE1, IRE2, IRE6):

- Researcher*: What is the use [of IRE] for the entire society?  
*Hakim*: Well they follow the religion they have. Like for instance the Catholics, they also follow their religion, so Muslims also follow their religion, so. (IRE6.)

The pupils resorted here to a similar repertoire to their RE teacher's, but their linguistic and discursive resources were more limited. For instance, Hakim does not explain in the

extract above why following one's own religion is important. The function of Islamic education is so self-evident that it does not need justification, which reveals a dominant interpretative repertoire. Then he compares the situation of Muslims to that of Catholics and thus highlights the equity point of view. Talking about IRE as a symbol of societal recognition is a wider discursive practice among Finnish Muslim youth (Kimanen, 2016, 273; Rissanen, 2014, 128).

Talking about the Quran, mosque and importance of knowing Islamic rules shows that the Muslim pupils very much derived their understanding of IRE from another source familiar to them, Quranic schools (see Berglund 2017; Sai 2018). In fact, they seemed not to have vocabulary to describe the difference between school RE and religious socialisation in the family or religious community. The only one to refer to this was Abdi when answering my question about what his parents say about school RE.

*Abdi:* Well, when my parents talk about religion they speak, like, [--] from their own heart and where their heart belongs, but then at school you mustn't be so... like a believer and... like, you have to explain that... one doesn't have to wear a scarf and... like, you can be yourself. (IRE7.)

It is important to note here that Abdi does not say that he cannot be himself at home. Instead, the extract shows that he had learnt from his parents that at school the teachers have to maintain a spirit of autonomy but that the parents lead their offspring on the path guided by their hearts and tradition. Having learnt this distinction at home, Abdi, although struggling, managed to describe the difference in words. For some reason, attempts by the pupils' former RE teachers to verbalise the distinction had not been embraced.

### **Commitment in RE classrooms**

Instances where religious commitment was discussed often revealed a mismatch between teacher goals and pupil expectations. In many cases, the teachers used different strategies to 'do' openness, but the pupils' reaction reflected expectations that RE requires a degree of commitment. This extract is from an IRE lesson:

*Teacher:* Discuss in your group what God means to you.  
*Pupil:* What are you supposed to answer?  
*Teacher:* One can't say... Talk a bit, if you dare, but everybody should say something. You don't have to tell me, but tell each other.  
 [Not much discussion occurs in the groups.]  
*Pupil:* God means to us everything, more than anything.  
 [The second group did not have much discussion.] God is light.  
*Pupil:* Everything, without God people would not be here.  
*Pupil:* It is about everything you think and do.  
 [Pupils do not seem to be interested in each other's views.]  
 (Field diary, 6 November 2015.)

Saara tries to establish an atmosphere of freedom by refusing to give an example of a desirable response and by saying that she does not have to know what individual pupils



think about God. The pupils, however, resort mainly to standard phrases when the group work is debriefed. Those phrases are not interesting for the other pupils because they do not reveal anything personal.

The overall atmosphere in the IRE classes was restless and the pupils appeared uninterested. However, the only occasions when the pupils showed other than committed positions in their talk were like this:

- Pupil:* We were talking about whether an adult has to know the Quran by heart.  
*Teacher:* Good question. How many of you have read it through?  
 One pupil raises a hand.  
*Pupil:* Masha Allah! [Great! God wanted that!]  
 [Wondering how long reading the Quran takes and how boring it is.] (Field diary, 30 October 2015.)

Again, Saara refuses to answer the pupil's (indirect) question about what a good Muslim should do. Instead, she offers the pupils the opportunity to compare experiences but also shifts the target from learning the Quran by heart to reading it. The pupils admire reading the Quran through with an Islamic phrase, but convey that it is not the most interesting project for them on personal level. Another example was an incident when some of the pupils asked the teacher about the wives of Muhammad in a confused tone (field diary, 13 November 2016). Open criticism in IRE class thus was practically non-existent.

In the LRE class the social setting was different. In the following excerpt Elina has given an overview of the course requirements mentioning that she was going to assign some chapters for the course exam.

- Pupil:* From the Bible you mean?  
*Teacher:* (abruptly) No, from the textbook! (Field diary, 17 March 2016.)

The pupil assumes that studying RE might include studying the Bible. The teacher, for her part, is astonished at this assumption after she had emphasised the informative nature of RE. Another occasion reveals other assumptions:

- Pupil:* [probably in response to another pupil's language] You aren't allowed to swear in this class!  
*Pupil:* Well, are you allowed [to swear] in other classes? (Field diary, 21 April 2016.)

Swearing is here assumed to particularly offend religion. The first pupil's utterance may reveal an assumption that RE class requires certain commitment to religious norms. It may also be partly a joke that relies on drawing attention to swearing and religion in the same context. The second pupil, however, normalises the RE class by pointing out that swearing is prohibited in general.

On the following occasion Elina sought to engage the pupils by comparing historical facts with the current situation:

*Teacher:* In the Middle Ages the church had an important role. Does the church have an important role nowadays? Who said no?  
[Nobody confesses, some point at Niilo.] (Field diary, 1 April 2016.)

Nobody raises a hand but as Elina hears a silent ‘no’ she wants to continue the discussion on that response. Actually, she needed that answer to highlight the difference between the Middle Ages and modern times. The pupils, however, seem to think that denying the role of the church would be an undesired act in RE class. Simultaneously, the pupils avoided showing commitment to church, like Suvi in the following: ‘I once went to a club in church.’ [small laugh] (Field diary, 22 April 2016.) The report of engagement into church activities is reduced by talking about the past and with insecure laughter to indicate that the relationship to the experience is not serious.

In the following, the LRE pupils discuss belonging to the Lutheran Church. The topic aroused one of the most intensive discussions during the observed lessons.

*Teacher:* If you think about the Lutheran Church in Finland, 70-80% [of the population] belongs to it. However, there is debate about leaving the church. Why do people leave the church?  
*Venla:* They don’t believe.  
*Heikkä:* They aren’t interested.  
*Suvi:* They don’t want to pay taxes.  
*Henri:* There are so many people.  
*Susanna:* Oh, you mean that some come and others go?  
*Henri:* Yeah...  
*Teacher:* Why do especially young men in the capital region have a low membership rate?  
*Venla:* They are gangsta [an expression used by teenagers, means people who want to be cool, derived from English slang].  
[--]  
*Teacher:* Is it a bit far from their life?  
*Suvi:* It doesn’t mean anything to them.  
[--]  
*Teacher:* Why does somebody still want to belong to church, 75% do anyway?  
*Susanna:* Half of them are seniors, they are about to die and want to go to heaven.  
*Venla:* My granny didn’t believe before but now she does.  
*Teacher:* Why do many parents baptise their children?  
*Heikkä[?]:* Because they have been themselves and they suppose the child wants it too, tradition.  
*Venla:* You are allowed to have a wedding in church. (Field diary, 22 April 2016.)

Five pupils participate in the discussion, four actively. In a small class of 12 pupils this shows exceptional interest in the topic. Elina gives balanced treatment to both perspectives, staying in the church and leaving it. She opens the discussion, leads the pupils to certain points, and does not elaborate on pupils’ responses. Elina is doing openness through minimal interference and interrogating methods, although not all of her questions are open-ended. The pupils do not explicitly reveal personal standpoints. They offer short responses, but gently mock or criticise both options. Leaving the church is

identified with pretending to be ‘cool’ and perhaps being greedy (unwilling to pay taxes), and belonging to it as opportunism and non-reflective sticking to tradition. Susanna, who in the interview talked about her family being active in a charismatic congregation, takes here the opportunity to position herself critical towards the church in front of her classmates without revealing her religious commitment.

### Truth claims in RE class

The following excerpt from an IRE lesson illustrates well how making or not making a truth claim is a very complicated matter from a discursive point of view.

- Teacher:* Does oral tradition remain [the same]? Of course not. Some questions are associated with the early phase [of the Quran, like] how can we know that it is immutable and that it contains just the same words. Have you ever thought about this? How can you know that the Quran is authentic?
- Pupil:* You just have to believe.
- Teacher:* [in a thoughtful tone] You just have to believe. Some things just are like that, but humans have also been given assurances so that it is easier to believe. It [the Quran] was checked after writing it down. [--] Pages have been found that are not the same as in the Quran today. It may be associated with the early phase when it was checked. (Field diary, 23 October 2015.)

Here Saara begins with a critical remark: because the Quran was known only in oral form for a long time, it is doubtful whether its wording remained the same. She goes on encouraging the pupils to think about this fact. Then Saara asks a question: ‘how can you know that the Quran is authentic?’ Here she uses the word ‘know’ instead of ‘believe’. This question does not initiate a critical discussion. The pupil rejects critical reflection and sets willingness to believe without questions above knowledge. With the tone of her voice, Saara does not praise this attitude or set it as an example for the others. She goes on affirming that there are things that just have to be believed, but wants to draw the pupils’ attention to this case where there are certain grounds for the belief. At the end of the excerpt Saara makes another critical remark: there are ancient manuscripts that differ from the canonised Quran. As at the beginning, this is just in order to teach the pupils the Islamic response to this criticism, but the truth of this explanation is softened with the word ‘may’.

The text is actually full of competing discourses. Religious truths and critical remarks take turns in Saara’s speech, and she softens the religious truth claims with wordings and the tone of her voice. The final result is that Saara offers the possibility to reflect critically on Islamic beliefs but also guides pupils towards religious lines of thought. She uses language that pupils could use to deal with criticism of Islam in their lives, but the pupils are not engaged in this learning process. The discussion is not entirely open, but Saara uses more open language than the pupils.

The pupils’ resistance to Saara’s more open position is also clear in the following extract:

- Teacher:* This [multilayered character of the Quran] explains why we for example have different schools of law. You can have different answers that are both correct. It is interesting to compare and combine them. It is said that if you are drunk you can't go to mosque to pray.
- Pupils:* No, you can't. You have to realise.
- Teacher:* Taking [the verse?] separately, somebody might think that alcohol [in itself] isn't forbidden. In the beginning it was forbidden to go to mosque when drunk, later intoxicants were forbidden altogether. (Field diary, 30 November 2015.)

It is remarkable that during this sequence the pupils listened very attentively and reacted spontaneously, which was not common in the observed IRE classes. Saara intends to teach about interpretation of the Quran, and she begins in an open vein stating that different schools of law may provide different correct responses to questions concerning the Islamic way of life. What catches the pupils' attention, however, is talking about instructions concerning alcohol, not interpreting the Quran. Again, no open discussion takes place. A similar occasion arose when Saara sought to teach interpreting the Quran through the example of holy war. Pupils were keen on discussing killing and getting killed but not willing to critically review the notion of *jihad* in the Quran. (Field diary, 20 November 2015.)

Whereas Saara mixed religious stances with softening and critical language, Elina kept them mostly separate. When teaching about Jesus, she used scientific language:

- Find a partner and try to think of things that are alleged about Jesus, but can't be investigated;  
A religious idea [expectation of the Messiah] was connected with death on the cross.  
(Field diary, 17 March 2016.)

Here words like 'allege', 'investigate' and 'religious idea' communicate that Elina is talking from the perspective of scientific research. Language of commitment is absent, and the level of abstraction is high. The pupils are provided with both truth claims and an opportunity to review these critically.

The only occasions when Elina talked about truth claims without using distancing, scientific language were on a lesson about the reformer Martin Luther.

- Teacher:* Today we will talk about Martin Luther, the founder of our Lutheran Church, he also began his career in a monastery. Last time you wondered whether one can leave the monastery.
- Smv:* Apparently one can.
- Teacher:* Yes. There is nothing in the Bible that you should retreat to a monastery.  
(Field diary, 1 April 2016.)
- Teacher:* Salvation is like a gift, you can't be saved on your own merit. That's why it was new at that time, although it was like from the Bible. (Field diary, 1 April 2016.)

In addition to calling Luther ‘our’ reformer, Elina communicates here Lutheran dogmas about monasticism and salvation without distancing language or critical remarks. The approach is different partly because, as Elina reported herself, she intended to bring the historical facts closer to the pupils. This may have led to underlining the connection of Luther to today’s Lutherans. Another reason may have been that Elina knew criticism about the existence and religious significance of Jesus better than criticism concerning Luther, that is, the resources she could resort to were different in these two cases.

Neither of Elina’s approaches resulted in lively, open discussion. Pupil participation was scant in the lesson on Luther, and the pupils considered the assignment on things alleged about Jesus difficult. The only statement about Jesus that the pupils produced without heavy teacher guidance was this: ‘Nobody knows what he looked like. He didn’t exist.’ (Field diary, 17 March 2016.) On the surface it seems that the pupil makes an incorrect argument. The fact that there is no certain knowledge about what Jesus looked like is not a solid basis for arguing that he did not exist. However, the response shows that the pupil had perhaps interpreted that the assignment was to find false claims about Jesus. Maybe this interpretation led the pupil to pick a piece of information and make a negative claim about Jesus’s existence.

### **Teacher’s religious commitment in RE class**

The teacher’s own convictions are a debated issue. Sometimes, if the teacher’s religious views are strongly expressed, this can be sufficient to make the pupils think that they are expected to adopt those views (Fancourt, 2007). In this study, the teachers told the pupils only little about their own religious commitment. Admittedly, as Saara wore a scarf, a certain degree of commitment was visible in her dress even without words. On two occasions she revealed something about her personal faith.

- Saara: I don’t want to be intrusive, but it would be interesting to know what kind of thoughts reading the Quran has aroused. Does it feel affirmative, that “yeah, I’m a Muslim?”
- Pupil 1: No, I’m scared all the time.
- Pupil 2: Happy.
- Saara: I have to tell you a true story. Some people were outdoors in Seurasaari [a popular recreation area in Helsinki] a few years ago. They stayed for a while to listen when a man recited the Quran. Then a passer-by stopped and sat down. [--] He/she didn’t understand the language. [--] He/she had felt that he/she had to stop. (Field diary, 30 October 2015.)

In the beginning of the excerpt, Saara again uses a softening phrase, ‘I don’t want to be intrusive.’ She asks the pupils to share their feelings when reading the Quran, but gives an example in the form of a closed question that describes a proud Muslim deriving strength from the Quran. The first pupil to answer denies this prospect by saying that she is scared when reading the Quran, but this implies a committed position as well. After two pupils have answered, Saara goes on to give an example of the Quran having an impact on people. Instead of following up for instance the fear caused by the Quran, Saara joins the pupils as a committed Muslim by telling a story about the effect of the Quran.

On another occasion, Saara told her pupils that she had attended Quranic lectures for Finnish-speaking Muslims.

Teacher: I have attended lectures on Quranic exegesis where a native speaker of Arabic went through the Quran in Finnish and we were allowed to make notes with a pencil.  
 Raise your hand if your mother tongue is different than Arabic.  
 [Some pupils raise hands.]  
 Raise your hand if you have read the Quran in another language than Arabic.  
 [Versions in Finnish and Somali are mentioned.] (Field diary, 23 October 2015.)

Saara engages the class by asking them to share their experience of non-Arabic Qurans, thus normalising reading translations (or interpretations) of the Quran side by side with the original Arabic text. Similarly to the preceding extract, Saara joins the pupils by revealing facts about her religious commitment: I read the Quran, you read the Quran, I read a translation, some of you use a translation.

The only occasion when Elina talked about her personal religious affiliation was the following. The class was discussing different worldviews outside the Lutheran majority church.

Elina: What does “agnostic” mean?  
 Henri: One who believes in scientific explanations [of the world]?  
 Elina: But do you [plural] know that many church members believe in science. I am a church member as well, but I do believe in scientific explanations.  
 [Goes on explaining the term ‘agnostic’.] (Field diary, 22 April 2016.)

Elina uses here her own example as a tool to demonstrate that having a scientific worldview is not limited to people outside the church. As Henri’s response reveals an assumption that science and religion are in some kind of conflict, it is probable that Elina also wants to explicitly tackle her pupils’ possible prejudices that she as an RE teacher would not have a rational worldview.

## Discussion

In the two observed RE classes the teachers ‘did openness’ through different strategies. When addressing truth claims they made critical remarks and provided different interpretative options. When dealing with commitment they posed open-ended questions and sought to communicate that critical voices were allowed. They talked little about their own commitment and did not force anybody to reveal theirs, although some assignments seemed to assume some degree of commitment.

There were some differences and commonalities between the two RE classrooms described here. The IRE teacher balanced critical and open claims with religious stances and vice versa. Her pupils expressed almost exclusively committed positions towards Islam, but were not very committed in the classroom activities. The LRE teacher mostly

maintained a scientific approach, but sometimes the pursuit of pupil engagement led to more committed teacher discourse. Her pupils avoided expressing religious commitment.

The analysis shows that the Muslim pupils' notion of IRE was little influenced by the secular surroundings. They derived their understanding of RE very much from Quranic schools, and they had not embraced distinctions between school religious education and religious socialisation of the family or religious community, although officially this distinction is vital in the Finnish RE context. It is interesting to note that Swedish Muslim young people interviewed by Berglund (2017) had faced ridicule when talking about memorising the Quran and thus learnt to not to talk about their supplementary Islamic education. For them it was essential not to appear too religious in the secular school context. Their Finnish, slightly younger, peers, however, did not show any sign of apology when identifying school religious education with learning about the Quran and Islamic way of life, although memorising the Quran was not mentioned. The LRE pupils identified RE more with other subjects, but at times they were also confused about what was expected of them in RE the classroom. This difference is in line with a comparative study (Josza 2009) between six European countries (not including Finland), according to which the percentage of young people who agreed that pupils should be guided towards religious beliefs at school was higher among Muslim pupils than their Christian peers.

There were several occasions when the teacher's initiative did not produce the desired outcome. Especially the IRE pupils bypassed the teacher's discreet invitations to open reflection and critical thinking, and got most engaged in classroom discussion when there was an opportunity to talk about Islamic way of life. Generally, creating lively classroom discussion that would enhance learning on the topic at hand proved to be difficult.

The limitation of this study is that it is about only two teachers and classrooms. Being a case study, it provides a set of possible patterns: how the challenge of denominational RE and pupils' religious freedom may be met and how those solutions work with certain pupil expectations and levels of abstract thinking. However, as both teachers and pupils always use certain sociocultural resources when shaping strategies and expectations, their perspectives are never entirely individual. Some of them have also been connected with previous research results. Classroom interaction is a relatively new approach in the study of RE, so more research is needed in order to establish theories and methodologies, and to gain information on the pupil and teacher discourses in other contexts and on further topics.

## **Conclusion**

Kumaravadivelu's concept of mismatch between teacher goals and pupil interpretation describes very well what happened when the teachers of this study sought to 'do' openness when dealing with religious commitment and truth claims. Despite the teachers' efforts, the pupils' expectations of religiously committed RE, especially in the Islamic case, led to religiously committed discussions. In the Lutheran case the pupils balanced between

avoiding positioning themselves as too critical in front of the teacher and as too positive in front of other pupils.

In both classrooms the pupils spoke in very concrete terms, whereas the teachers provided examples of abstract language and conceptual argumentation. However, the pupils were not offered an opportunity to explore the language and practice using it themselves. An implication for practice is that in order to 'do openness' in the classroom more effectively, RE teachers should regard openness and critical thinking as learning objectives instead of mere circumstances of learning.

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