

‘WHY CAN’T YOU JUST EAT PORK?’

Teachers’ perspectives on criticism of religion in Norwegian religious education

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Abstract

Over the last 20 years, religious education in Norway has received massive public and academic attention, due in part to clashing opinions regarding the role of such education in a generally secular society. As a result, the subject's name and curricula have been changed or modified several times. Currently, the curricula for 'Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics' (KRLE) states the teaching must be *critical*. This empirical study examines how teachers themselves interpret this requirement. We particularly emphasise the role of criticism of religion, including both the teachers' planned teaching about criticism of religion and the criticism spontaneously uttered by students. The findings demonstrate students' criticism of religion often is of a moral, secular or ridiculing character, and is frequently based on prejudice, stereotypes, generalisations or essentialist notions. This article discusses how teachers can use students' spontaneously uttered criticism of religion as a starting point to develop intercultural competence through education.

Keywords: *Religious education, criticism of religion, stereotypes, prejudice, intercultural competence*

1. Introduction

In Norway, religious education is non-confessional and compulsory for all school students from grades 1-10. Traditionally, religious education has had strong connections to the Lutheran church but, due to increased cultural and religious diversity in wider society, and the overall secular context, a new subject, 'Christianity, Religions and Philosophies of Life' (KRL) was established in 1997. The same year, a group of parents, with support from the Norwegian Humanist Association, brought proceedings against the state demanding their children be exempted from KRL. This was rejected in all Norwegian jurisdictions, but taken up by the UN Human Rights Committee and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In autumn 2004, the Human Rights Committee determined Norway needed to implement changes by spring 2005. The government chose not to permit full exemption from the subject, but to amend the Education Act so that partial exemption was easier to grant. The amendment also emphasised that the subject should involve neither preaching nor the favouring of particular religions or philosophies of life. In summer 2007, the ECtHR reached its verdict, ruling that KRL did not adequately ensure human rights were fully respected, and Norway was required to rectify their weaknesses. The Court stated the subject should be *objective, critical and pluralistic*, and that different religions and philosophies of life should be treated in an equitable and factual way. Consequently, new changes to the Education Act and the subject's curriculum were adopted in 2008 (Rundskriv F-08-05 2005; Lovdata 2008; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2008; Skeie 2009). These requirements are essential for the subject to be considered 'an ordinary school subject which normally will bring together all students' in a public school (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2008). The subject was subsequently given a new name, 'Religions, Philosophies of Life and Ethics' (RLE). In 2015, after a political debate in which the Norwegian Christian Democratic Party had a strong voice, the subject's name was changed again, to 'Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics' (KRLE), and it was

specified that about half of the teaching time should be applied to Christianity (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, p. 1).

In the current curriculum at secondary school, criticism of religion is both explicitly and implicitly present. Explicitly, a competence goal states that the student should be able to ‘present examples of criticism of religion from different philosophies of life’ (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, p. 8). More implicitly, criticism of religion is found in competence goals that direct students to learn to ‘reflect on the relationship between religion, philosophy of life and science’ and to ‘discuss current issues that arise in the encounter between religion, culture and society’ (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, p. 8). While the purpose description underlines that *teaching* in KRLE must be critical, it does not elaborate on what critical teaching means. This places teachers in a difficult position, because the curriculum is normative, and all teachers are obligated to follow the guidelines.

In this article, we examine the gap in current research, namely empirical studies on how teachers themselves reflect on the meaning of ‘critical teaching’. It is important to distinguish between teachers’ thoroughly planned critical teaching (which might include teaching *about* criticism of religions, or a partial criticism of elements *in* a religion) and students’ spontaneously uttered criticism of religion. We focus on teachers’ opinions regarding criticism of religion in KRLE, the types of criticism of religion spontaneously uttered by students and the teachers’ subsequent reflections on that criticism. Three research questions are raised in this study:

1. *Should KRLE teaching be critical of religion, and if so, what sort of criticism do teachers consider legitimate?*
2. *What criticisms of religion do students voice during KRLE?*
3. *How do teachers reflect on how to handle students’ spontaneous criticism of religion?*

Our study relates directly to ongoing debates on how to develop intercultural competence and democratic culture through education; as such, we discuss our research in relation to national policy documents and the work done within the Council of Europe on this matter.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Norwegian educational policy documents and the academic debate on KRLE

In Norway, general and cross-disciplinary educational policy documents state that critical thinking is a central skill for all students. The ‘critical thinking and ethical awareness’ section of the general curriculum clarifies this competency allows students ‘to use reason in an exploratory and systematic manner in the face of concrete practical challenges, phenomena, expressions and forms of knowledge. . . . Students should also be able to understand their own experiences, views and beliefs may be incomplete or incorrect’ (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017, §1.3). The section ‘democracy and participation’ states:

The schools should promote democratic values and attitudes as a counterweight to prejudice and discrimination. . . . All participants in the school community must develop awareness of both minority and majority perspectives and create space for cooperation, dialogue and debate (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017, §1.6).

Furthermore the Education Act requires schools provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for an individual's convictions (Lovdata 2018, §1-1). Below this general policy level are the various subject curricula, all of which include a description of the subject's purpose *and* several competence goals on various topics. As mentioned, KRLE's purpose description states the teaching must be critical. It also notes 'the different world religions and philosophies of life must be presented with respect' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, p. 1). One KRLE secondary school competence goal states students must learn to 'show respect for people's religious beliefs, rituals, sacred objects and places' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, p. 8).

The Norwegian academic debate within the didactics of religion field centres on the way religions and philosophies of life are taught in class and how educators should interpret 'critical teaching'. Sødal and Eidhamar (2009) argue that critical teaching implies students should learn to ask questions and explore the various aspects of religions and worldviews, including the parts that produce negative emotions, but criticism must always be based on accurate knowledge. Others, including Andreassen (2016), note the importance of including criticism of religion and 'outside' perspectives. Andreassen, who regards religion as a cultural phenomenon, is critical of didactics that consider religion as exclusively positive, and teaching that goes too far in highlighting what religions have in common. Meanwhile, Enger (2012) claims schools, partly due to a misunderstanding of professionalism and partly out of a desire to generate stability in a subject long considered to be controversial, have failed to present religious education as a critical subject. He calls for critical reflections on elements in religious traditions that threaten human rights and dignity, to which schools and our entire society are committed.

2.2. Criticism of religion

Several studies have suggested different categorisations of criticism of religion. Leirvik (2011) developed a historically oriented typology that follows the philosophical thinking of the Enlightenment period. He identifies five main categories of criticism of religion: 1) a *rationalist critique* of belief in divine intervention and what is considered to be superstition; 2) an *empirical critique* of the idea of a good God and a full-scale creation; 3) a *modernist critique* that considers religion in its authoritative forms an obstacle to social and political progress and human autonomy; 4) a *moral critique* that sees religion as both oppressive and violent; and 5) a *historical-critical review* of the Holy Scriptures. Criticism of religion can also be based on the diverse disciplines within philosophy, such as ontological, epistemological or ethical criticism (Skirbekk, 2011). These criticisms tend to be normative, while categorisations that are more descriptive tend to be based on observations of a certain practice, such as classroom interaction. Such a categorisation was done by Kittelmann

Flensner (2015) when she found secularist discourse and criticism of religion prominent among students and teachers in Swedish classrooms.

2.3. Intercultural and democratic competences

For the past two decades, the development of intercultural competence through education has been high on the Council of Europe's agenda (see Council of Europe 2008; Huber and Reynolds 2014; Jackson 2014). The mission of the Council of Europe, a human rights organisation with 47 member states, consists of three elements; human rights, democracy and rule of law. The field of education should help accomplish this mission through a focus on intercultural, citizenship and human rights education, and, since 2002, the religious dimension of intercultural education (Jackson 2014). Writing more generally about intercultural education from a Council of Europe perspective, Barrett (2013, p. 6–8) outlines an extensive list of core components of intercultural competence. When describing Barrett's components we present one selected example under each that is relevant to our study. These core components combine *values* (e.g., valuing pluralism of perspectives and practices); *attitudes* (e.g., being willing to question what is usually accepted as 'normal' according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience); *knowledge and understanding* (e.g., awareness and understanding of one's own and other people's assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes, explicit and implicit prejudice, and overt and covert discrimination); and *skills* (e.g., multiperspectivity—the ability to decentre from one's own perspective and to take other people's views into consideration).

The Council of Europe publication *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (2018) is particularly relevant to our study because it highlights a competence described as *knowledge and critical understanding*. This includes critical understanding of the self, one's own cultural affiliations and one's own cognitive, emotional and motivational biases. It also includes a critical view of religions; for example, 'knowledge and understanding of the internal diversity of beliefs and practices which exists within individual religions' (p. 55).

3. Method and data

In this study, we employ qualitative empirical research methods in collecting the reflections and experiences of teachers. The research process and all findings result from our own and our informants' interpretations (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The data were collected during autumn 2016 and spring 2017; the material consists of 6 interviews and a short survey with 16 respondents. All informants and respondents are teachers working in Oslo or the surrounding area. Due to the focus of our research questions, we consider the teachers' reflections, assessments and experiences our primary focus; therefore, student interviews are not included.

It could be argued that there are several limitations inherent in our chosen method. First, there may be discrepancies between what the teachers say and what they do or think. Tjora (2012) reminds us researchers must be aware informants might want to present themselves in a positive way. As such, the teachers' responses regarding critical teaching and legitimate

criticism of religion might be coloured by their chosen self-presentation. Second, what the teachers remember and describe will inevitably be influenced by the nature of students' utterances. When we ask what kind of criticism of religion students make in KRLE, it is likely students' expressive or extreme statements will be more easily remembered than neutral descriptions and well-reasoned arguments. While evaluating the teachers' reflections on how to handle students' spontaneously uttered criticism of religion, we must also take into account that there are aspects or accounts from the classroom interaction that will be either emphasised or left out. With these considerations in mind, our assessment is that this methodological approach, and our findings, can offer new insights into teachers' reflections on criticism of religion in KRLE.

3.1. Interviews

We sought to generate data that could provide new insights concerning the teachers' descriptions, reflections, assessments and interpretations. We followed Patton's (1980, p. 206) outline of four types of interviews—1) informal conversational interviews; 2) the interview guide approach; 3) standardised open-ended interviews and 4) closed quantitative interviews—and subsequent evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of each, ultimately choosing an approach that lies somewhere between Type 2 and 3. Like the *interview guide approach*, the topics and issues to be covered were specified in advance. However, we asked the same basic questions in the same order, rather than alternating the sequence, making our approach close to *standardised open-ended interviews*. The strengths of the interview guide approach are that logical gaps can be anticipated and closed, and that the interviews remain conversational. Meanwhile, a benefit of standardised open-ended interviews is the informants answer the same questions in the same order, which facilitates the organisation and analysis of the data. By combining the two types of interviews, we aimed to compensate for their associated weaknesses; for example, the interview guide approach can inadvertently omit salient topics, while the interviewer's flexibility can result in substantially different responses. In order to reduce the shortcomings of standardised open-ended interviews we tried to ensure a certain degree of flexibility in the interview situation itself.

We conducted 6 semi-structured in-depth interviews of teachers, each lasting 50–90 minutes. The informants were all ethnic Norwegians, 1 man and 5 women aged 27–45. The gender bias results from the fact that those particular teachers volunteered to participate in the study. The six teachers were working at different levels in secondary schools (8th–10th grade), and all were teachers of KRLE at the time. The schools were in part selected because the student composition was culturally and religiously diverse. The interviews were conducted at the workplace or in a café near the school. They were all audio-recorded and transcribed.

3.2. Questionnaire

The interview's written counterpart is the questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). In this study, we used a questionnaire to gather supplementary data. We wanted to obtain a deeper understanding of teachers' thinking about criticism of religion in the school context, as

well as a broader picture of how often students express criticism of religion in the classroom and the kinds of criticism expressed. The questionnaire was handed out in conjunction with a lecture we presented on criticism of religion, and the respondents are different from the ones interviewed. We provided oral instructions before handing out the questionnaire, explaining to the potential respondents that we wanted detailed answers. The questionnaire focused especially on spontaneous criticism of religion. Sixteen teachers, all working in secondary schools in the Oslo area and teaching KRLE, social science or both, submitted completed questionnaires. Four of the sixteen teachers were only teaching social science; nevertheless, criticism of religion is also highly relevant to this subject as it is concerned with the role of religion in society.¹

We asked three open questions:

1. Should there be room for criticism of religion in religious education/social science, and if yes, what sort of criticism of religion?
2. How often would you say that students spontaneously utter criticism of religion in class?
3. What sort of criticism of religion do students express spontaneously in class? Can you give examples?

The teachers were not specifically asked to comment on their own skills in handling negative comments about religion in the classroom. Nevertheless, several elaborated on challenges teachers face when confronted with students' spontaneous criticism of religion, and reflected on how to handle it.

3.3. Analysing the data

This study uses a deductive and inductive content analysis. In accordance with procedures for content analysis, all data are coded (Gibbs 2007) and categorised (Kerlinger 1970). We use *frequency* as a tool to identify topics that appear often in the material; according to Cohen et al. (2011, p.567), '[F]requency may give an indication of the significance of a concept'. But as Anderson and Arsenault (1998, p. 104, cited in Cohen et al. 2011, p. 568) state, 'Content analysis only analyses what is present rather than what is missing or unsaid'. We compensate for this weakness by using *strength* as a tool when analysing the material. Here, 'strength' refers to statements that seem to be of particular importance to the informants. Finally, we compare themes and statements to uncover similarities, differences and patterns. Deductively, the initial categorisation process is guided by the research questions but as the work continued, new categories arose inductively from the material itself.

¹ Our material is not sufficient to elaborate on the differences between the nature of criticism of religion in these subjects.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Should KRLE teaching be critical of religion, and if so, what sort of criticism do teachers consider legitimate?

4.1.1. Legitimate and non-legitimate criticism of religion

All six interviewed teachers and the sixteen respondents acknowledged the curriculum's competence goals that enable critical discussions of religion.

The interviewed teachers position themselves as critical of authoritarian forms of religion and the perceived potential elements of conflict and violence in various religions. However, they assume somewhat different positions regarding how criticism should be expressed in the classroom. Based on consideration for the students, two teachers were reluctant to express criticism of religion. One said, 'I keep in mind all the time that no-one should feel like I'm trampling on their religion. It is very important for students that their religion and philosophy of life are presented in a fair and accurate way'. Another teacher noted, 'As long as a person experiences the meaning of existence through religion, and if this meaning is also good for society, then I am not critical'. She continued, 'The critical element should not have a prominent place in the subject, because there is no cover for that in the curriculum. In the school subject, it is primarily about understanding'. This teacher also worried about criticism based on hate, which she explained might occur in a class where various religious groups are represented. Nevertheless, they both believe there should be room for students to express criticism of religion.

Three of the interviewed teachers were more firm in their belief that criticism of religion has a crucial and legitimate place in religious education. The first emphasised that instilling liberal values, such as gender equality and acceptance of homosexuality, is an important argument in favour of criticising religions. The second teacher highlighted the difference between religion itself and people's interpretations of religion:

The teaching must avoid the idealisation of religions. There are many conflicts and wars that have occurred in the name of religion and a teacher should not avoid mentioning this. However, a teacher must also explain that it is not necessarily the religion itself that creates the problems, but the people that use and abuse religion.

The third stated:

Religions have, or have had, many functions, both positive and problematic. To understand religion only as a problematic phenomenon is one-sided. Religions can be culturally meaningful, even if you are not a believer yourself.

One teacher, who described herself as generally critical of religion, said:

Religions are used to create much pain in the world.

Applying the categorisation of criticism of religion outlined by Leirvik (2011), we see a recurring partial moral and modernist criticism. Only one of these teachers can be said to promote the general criticism of religion.

The questionnaire respondents were all open to various forms of criticism of religion. Moral criticism was emphasised frequently and evident in statements like, ‘Everything that is illegal or collides with society’s norms should be criticised’ and questions such as ‘Maybe we should teach more about Christian and Muslim fundamentalism?’ In a few statements, it is uncertain whether total criticism of religion is regarded as legitimate; for example, one teacher stated, ‘Teaching in KRLE should be open to all types of criticism’. Several asserted that students’ questions and critical expressions should be given time and space in the classroom, yet a few teachers had reservations, including: ‘Criticism of religion that is directed at religious content or personal views is not OK’ and ‘The difference between intolerance and criticism of religion is important’.

4.2. What criticisms of religion do students voice during KRLE?

When we analysed the material, we sought to examine the types of criticism of religion the students were reported to have expressed. We highlight the three categories that appeared most frequently in our material: *moral-type criticism*, *secularist-type criticism* and *ridiculing-type criticism*.

4.2.1. Moral-type criticism

Moral criticism of religion can be directed toward religion in general, a specific religion, or religious denominations, sects, cults or individuals. The target of such moral criticism can be rules, texts, values, beliefs or practices. Much of the criticism involved topics such as abortion, gender issues and sexual orientation. In addition, when students expressed criticism of religion, it was often aimed at the religion’s perceived violent and oppressive tendencies. For example, teachers reported students making remarks such as, ‘Religion creates so much conflict in the world!’, ‘Religion oppresses’ and ‘It is best to abolish all religions since they can lead to conflict and violence’. They also reported frequent questions and statements involving Islam, including ‘Why do Muslims say it is OK to kill in the name of God?’, ‘Are all terrorists Muslims?’, ‘All Muslims are like ISIS!’ and ‘Muslims are more violent than Buddhists!’ This places Muslim students in an unpleasant situation and precipitates defensive responses such as ‘Jihadists do not believe in God!’ and ‘Jihadists are misinterpreting religion!’

4.2.2. Secularist-type criticism

Secularist-type criticism rejects religion as a meaningful phenomenon, considers it fundamentally problematic and, in particular, sees a conflict between religion and science. In our material, teachers often reported examples of the last. For example, students often required empirical evidence to support religious beliefs; when this was not available, they concluded that religions are false or ‘Religion is outdated!’ In dialogues about religion and

philosophy of life in the classroom, students adopted positions for and against faith. Statements such as ‘God does not exist!’ and questions like ‘Why do we need to learn about things that are not true?’ occurred frequently. Students also demanded justification (‘Why should we believe in this?’) and protested that they should not be required to learn about religions (‘Religion has no legitimate place in school!’).

4.2.3. Ridiculing-type criticism

Most teachers reported instances of what we label ‘ridiculing-type criticism’. Such criticism is directed toward what students perceive as ‘weird and strange religion’. Like moral criticism, it can be targeted at religion in general, a specific religion, or religious denominations, sects, cults or individuals. Our findings indicate this type of criticism is typically directed toward religious individuals’ beliefs and practices, especially images of gods and various doctrines. For instance, religious belief is alleged to be a sign of stupidity: ‘You are completely stupid to believe in that’ and ‘Religious people are idiots’. We find many examples of students criticising images, concepts and ideas of the gods of Hinduism and Christianity. Students remarked upon the number of deities in Hinduism, not understanding how it is possible to believe in the existence of so many. They also criticised the attributes of Hindu deities, asking, ‘How can someone have eight arms?’ and ‘How can someone have the head of an elephant?’ In addition, some students ridiculed Hindu concepts such as karma and reincarnation. Students regularly mocked the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the narrative of Jesus’ birth: ‘How can a virgin give birth to a child?’ Ridiculing criticism can also target a specific group; for example, one teacher reported hearing, ‘Those Pentecostals . . . they are really crazy!’ Finally, this type of criticism can also be directed toward religious people who follow dietary regulations. This can be powerfully ridiculing and even patronising, such as when an ethnic Norwegian student asked a Muslim fellow student, ‘Why can’t you just eat pork?’

4.3. How do teachers reflect on how to handle students’ spontaneous criticism of religion?

Several teachers remarked that spontaneous criticism of religion and extreme statements are challenging to handle. One noted, ‘I feel that we have too little time, and we also have little knowledge of how to work with extreme statements’. Another teacher stated:

When a student says, ‘It is better to lose blood than lose respect’ . . . I notice that I fall short again, because I wish I had enough expertise to say, ‘What do you mean? Where does it come from?’ And we discussed a little about it . . . but I do not have the knowledge [to speak authoritatively on the subject of honour-shame culture].

Several teachers also expressed the view that they felt uncomfortable in the face of students’ spontaneously uttered criticism, because it could hurt other students, or it could be interpreted as disrespect. One teacher commented, ‘I am afraid that someone will feel offended if I cannot give enough information or present it in a pleasant way’.

It appears teachers feel they lack competence concerning handling criticism of religion or extreme statements. This lack of competence includes knowledge of specific religions as well as useful pedagogical methods and strategies that would allow them to cope sufficiently with students' expressions. Nevertheless, our analysis of the informants' reflections reveals three primary means by which teachers respond to students' spontaneously uttered criticisms of religion: *multiperspectivity, knowledge and internal diversity of religions*.

4.3.1. Multiperspectivity

Sometimes, students' criticism of religion parallels wonderment and curiosity. On other occasions, it is based on their perceptions of religions, which could be classified as prejudices, stereotypes and essentialist notions. When prejudice arose, teachers attempted to help the students see other perspectives. One teacher remarked:

It's about changing the perspective . . . so I say, 'Why do you think they do this?' [W]e try to find the background for things. . . . I think it's easier to show respect for each other when one understands it a little more.

Another teacher stated:

In my class, some Muslim boys are really critical about homosexuality but, you know, there are a lot of Muslim boys who are homosexual, so I say to the students, 'How do you think life is for these Muslim boys?'

One aspect of multiperspectivity is seeing one's own beliefs, practices and general viewpoints from an outside perspective. This concept is also a central aspect of critical thinking as described in Norwegian national policy documents (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017, §1.3). A few teachers adopted this reflexive approach:

If students say only idiots have a religious belief, then the goal will be to let them mirror themselves a bit. . . . [My] focus is that the students should look at their own statements . . . their own attitude and critical utterings.

Another teacher said, 'I ask questions that make students rethink their own viewpoint'.

4.3.2. Knowledge

Several teachers believe knowledge helps counteract students' un-reflected, one-sided views and prejudices. One teacher emphasised the importance of knowledge in order to have informed and nuanced conversations and discussions in class. In Norway, as in other countries, Muslims are often in the target of harsh criticism that embodies essentialist notions. One teacher highlighted the value of using knowledge when students direct criticism at Islam in the aftermath of terrorist attacks and other incidents of violence:

[The teacher asks] ‘Is there anything you have learned about Islam in religious education that indicates that this is correct behaviour?’ And then we repeat and repeat that this is not good practice in Islam, and it is not ordinary Muslims who do these actions.

4.3.3. Internal diversity

In the face of generalised perceptions, several teachers discussed the value of understanding the internal diversity in every group. One teacher stated, ‘It is extremely important that they [the students] understand that, even though a human being belongs to a religion, it does not mean that everyone practises in the same way or holds the same beliefs’. A group often at the centre of generalist notions are Muslims; another teacher remarked, ‘I remind them that not everyone is like that, even though they are all Muslims’. One teacher underlined the importance of showing internal diversity within religious groups, but pointed to the gap between teaching about religions she knows well, and those with which she is less familiar:

I know Christianity well and Christianity is thoroughly treated in textbooks and we have a lot of time to teach Christianity. . . . But I do not even know five different Hindus, a group who live very differently, and therefore I will unintentionally present Hinduism more generally, and that makes me sick.

5. Discussion

There are two primary challenges for teachers to address concerning criticism of religion: 1) specific religious traditions that include ideas and practices that collide with the school’s core values and 2) student criticism of religions based on generalisations, stereotypes and prejudices. These challenges must be seen in connection with Norway’s national policy documents, which, as mentioned in the theory section, require both critical teaching *and* respect for personal convictions and religious beliefs.

Our findings reveal that, even if teachers consider partial criticism of religion legitimate (e.g., criticising authoritarian or violent elements in religions), they may be reluctant to express criticism themselves in class. Often, they address this by referring to respect for the students, indicating teachers occasionally experience tension between critical teaching and criticism of religion on the one hand, and valuing and respecting the students’ beliefs on the other. Thus, it seems most teachers in our sample support Enger (2012) and Andreassen’s (2016) view in theory, but find putting it into practice in the classroom more demanding.

Our study also shows students’ criticism can be balanced, based on generally accepted knowledge and expressed as wonderment and curiosity. Yet just as often, students base their criticism on prejudice, preconceptions, stereotypes, generalisations and essentialist notions. Teachers report this can create tension between students and consequently generate polarisation in the classroom. The teachers find themselves in a difficult situation, expected to respect the opinions and beliefs of both the students who express criticism *and* the student

who are offended. This polarisation might point to a need to develop students' ability to not only criticise, but also to *handle* criticism directed towards their own beliefs and opinions. Jackson (2014) believes students need to experience the classroom as a 'safe space' where all opinions can be expressed in a civil way without judgement, ridicule or exclusion. However, Iversen (2018) finds the term 'community of disagreements' more useful in describing the classroom, arguing groups do not need to share key values to experience cohesion and inclusion.

We have seen that policy documents require respect for *beliefs* and *opinions*. Therefore, we draw attention to what has become evident in this study, namely that beliefs and opinions often are expressions of generalisations and prejudices such as 'Muslims are more violent than Buddhists' or 'Religious people are idiots'. It seems policymakers have not adequately taken into account everyday classroom occurrences. Whether addressing criticism or respect, it is crucial to draw a demarcation line between the person who holds the belief and the belief itself. While it is not necessary to respect every belief or conviction, the individual must be respected. Likewise, teachers and students should develop their ability to respectfully disagree with a person's opinions and beliefs—or the way an opinion is being expressed—while not criticising the individual.

When examining teachers' reflections on how to handle students' spontaneously uttered criticism of religion, we found that *multiperspectivity*, *knowledge* and *internal diversity* are regarded as useful strategies. This is in accordance with of the Council of Europe's (2008, 2018) core elements of intercultural and democratic competences (Barrett 2013; Huber and Reynolds 2014; Jackson 2014). However, the strategies adopted by teachers in our sample are typically not included in their school's management documents, but instead based on the individual teachers' own experience or competence. Several teachers in our study explicitly stated they experienced students' criticism of religion and extreme opinions as exceedingly demanding and reported lacking competence in handling it. This supports research findings gathered in the Council of Europe's publication *Signposts*, which suggest teachers' competence in the face of prejudices must be strengthened (Jackson 2014). Several other studies indicate teachers want to avoid controversial topics in class, and feel they lack the competence to prevent and handle prejudices or to integrate conflict perspectives in religious education (Anker and von der Lippe 2015, 2016; Athelsteinsdottir, Engilbertsson and Gunnbjørnsdottir 2009). Gay (2012) found a tendency among teachers to avoid potentially sensitive topics out of fear of causing offence to students from certain minority groups.

The Council of Europe has produced extensive work on the competences teachers need to cope with demanding educational settings, where students' beliefs, values and opinions clash and criticism of religion is based on stereotypes or prejudices. We would also like to draw attention to Milton Bennett's (2004) Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which describes six stages of developing intercultural competence. The first three are *ethnocentric*, indicating 'beliefs and behaviours that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned' (p. 62). The most ethnocentric stage is *denial* of cultural difference, stage two is *defence* against cultural difference and stage three is *minimisation* of cultural difference.

The next three stages are *ethnorelativistic*, meaning the ‘experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviours as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities’ (p. 62). Stage four is *acceptance* of cultural difference, stage five is *adaptation* to cultural difference and stage six is the *integration* of cultural difference into identity. While Bennett’s model is about approaches to cultural differences, we believe it can be a useful tool for teachers in addressing students’ criticism of religion. Often moral, secular or ridiculing criticism is an expression of stage two, defence; a typical trait at this stage is the notion that the world is divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’, where one’s own culture is regarded as superior to other cultures. Bennett (2004) argues that the goal is ‘not to introduce more sophisticated understanding of difference’ but rather to establish commonality and techniques that visualise the ‘common humanity of all cultures’ (p. 66).

It is interesting to note that there are no examples in our material that indicate students have viewed their own beliefs from an outside perspective, and hence are able to criticise their own religion or worldview. This draws attention to the need to develop students’ reflexivity and ability to examine their own biases. Finally, it is clear the religiously and culturally diverse KRLE classroom needs interculturally competent teachers with relevant theoretical knowledge and methodological skills who are able to see themselves from an outside perspective—teachers who recognise, understand and work with criticism of religion using the students’ perceptions of the world as a starting point.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. The curriculum's purpose description states teaching 'must be objective, critical and pluralistic'. Do you often think about this when you teach?
2. What does it mean that teaching in KRLE must be critical?
3. How do you facilitate critical teaching in KRLE?
4. Should there be room for criticism of religion in KRLE and, if so, what kind of criticism of religion? (Why? Why not? What are the positives and negatives?)
5. What do you think about the relationship between critical teaching and presenting religion and philosophy with respect?
6. Do you have examples of good critical teaching? Or bad critical teaching?
7. How often would you say that students utter criticism of religion in class?
8. What kinds of criticism of religion do the students utter? Can you give examples?
9. How do you handle this kind of criticism?
10. Are you afraid to offend anyone with your critical teaching? If so, does it have any impact on how you teach?
11. Are there specific aspects of religious beliefs or practices that you are extra critical of?