Article

Learning about What? Non-Confessional Religious Education after the Dissolution of the Binary Categories 'Religion' and 'Secular'

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Abstract: The binary division between 'religion' and 'secular' as an analytical tool has long been criticised within the research field of 'critical religion' in religious studies. There has also been a parallel critique in the academic discussion about post-secularity. Recently, sociologists have picked up and deepened this criticism, as expressed in Mitsutoshi Horii's book *'Religion' and 'Secular' Categories in Sociology: Decolonizing the Modern Myth* (2021). Based on a critical processing of Horii's application to sociology, the aim of this article is to discuss the challenges for non-confessional religious education (RE) that the ongoing dismantling of this binary division entails. In particular, it looks at how a non-confessional RE could be designed that transcends the binary division and how powerful knowledge could be understood in a non-binary context.

Keywords: powerful knowledge; critical religion; non-confessional religious education

1. Introduction

The binary division between 'religion' and 'secular' as an analytical tool has long been criticised within the research field of 'critical religion' in religious studies (Nongbri 2013). A parallel criticism also appears in the academic discussion about post-secularity, which has pointed to a loose demarcation between these two entities (Hurd 2015; Nynäs et al. 2015). Recently, sociologists have picked up and deepened this criticism, as expressed in Mitsutoshi Horii's book *'Religion' and 'Secular' Categories in Sociology: Decolonizing the Modern Myth* (2021).

However, the binary division between 'religious' and 'secular' is not only encountered in scientific disciplines. It also forms the background to various practices, which is particularly clear when it comes to the non-confessional school subject of religious education (RE). Much of its identity can be said to rest on the idea that teaching about 'religion' should be secular in nature and clearly distinguished from so-called 'religious activity'. According to Horii (2021), if we broaden the perspective further, the binary division (with hierarchical elements such as 'higher' and 'lower') constitutes a supporting frame for Western self-identity.

But what happens to the concept of a non-confessional religious education if the word 'secular' loses its meaning because the word 'religion' has become difficult to use? That some kind of loss of identity occurs in the school subject when the binary division is shaken is inevitable. The problem that is discussed here relates to how religion is taught in schools, although as is clear from Horii's book, it also affects the sociology of religion, where the secular encounters similar difficulties.

Horii's attempt to deconstruct the binary division is directed against any form of hierarchisation, where the secular—whatever that means—is represented as 'better', 'higher' or more 'enlightened'. Horii (2021) regards such judgements as a myth that maintains a colonial order of Western dominance. A consequence of Horii's approach seems to be a cognitive levelling, where no essential differences can really be discerned between Christian, Muslim, other practices and the study of them—everything is on the same cognitive level. But is this relativistic approach the only way to undo binary thinking? Are there

other meanings of 'secular' or 'non-religious' that are not binary-impregnated, that do not convey a hierarchical order, but that would be useful for drawing a clear line between research/teaching about certain 'religious' practices and the practice of them?

In relation to the concept of powerful knowledge, the question is what kind of knowledge can this concept convey if it cannot be classified as secular in the binary sense? At the same time, the question of how we avoid the content of powerful knowledge being coloured by binary thinking becomes central. At the end of the article, I make a division between two types of constructions of powerful knowledge in RE: a legitimate one that transcends the binary distinction and a more dubious one that maintains this distinction.

There is already an ongoing scientific discussion about the importance of 'critical religion' for the design of RE (Alberts 2017), although this has mainly focused on the various elements of RE, such as the difficulties in leaving out or not reproducing the so-called world religion paradigm in teaching (Owen 2011). In this article, I take a step further and discuss the implications for secular identity in the design of non-confessional religious education.[1] Here, I argue that an academically up-to-date non-confessional RE cannot be secular in the binary sense.

An important step in processing these questions is to capture the binary meaning of 'secular'—in this case in a school context, taking Sweden as an example. However, prior to this, a brief overview of the academic discussion about the limitations of the concept of religion and a summary of Horii's application of this discussion to sociology would be helpful. What I consider to be unresolved questions in Horii's approach are also addressed. The second part of the article is aimed at modifying Horii's approach and sketching the contours of a non-confessional RE that transcends the binary division between 'religion' and 'secular', but that does not result in a complete levelling of knowledge. Finally, a revised concept of powerful knowledge is suggested.

2. Theoretical Considerations

The criticism of the academic use of the concept of religion as an analytical tool is primarily about the fact that it is Western in character and therefore not universally applicable. In the research field of critical religion, the main criticism of the concept is that it contains a significant Christian element, which means a focus on an individual's faith, church organisation, moral teaching and the importance of a holy scripture (Thurfjell 2016). However, the Western influence can also be associated with Enlightenment thinking, which is about the intellectual dimension of religion coming to the fore and becoming more abstract. This latter criticism has been advanced by the comparative religion scholar W. C. Smith ([1962] 1991), who can be regarded as one of the forerunners of the field of critical religion.

The Christian element in the concept of religion means that descriptions of religious phenomena outside a Western context can be misleading. People are led to invent religion in places where none has existed before (Masuzawa 2005). Enlightenment thinking leads to descriptions of Christian phenomena in pre-modern times being misleading. For example, Smith ([1977] 1985) believes that the contemporary use of the word 'belief' has no central role in early forms of Christianity. According to him, this is a misconception that the Christian churches also share.

According to critical religion researchers, solving the problems surrounding the academic use of the concept of religion is not possible. Nongbri (2013) claims that all attempts to empty the concept of a Christian content have so far been fruitless. Thurfjell (2016), in agreement with other researchers in the field, emphasises that the whole project of capturing a universal core in everything called 'religion' is doomed. The idea of religion as a universally identifiable category thus needs to be abandoned and cannot be saved with the help of new definitions. Older sociological notions of religion—classic secularisation theory—that it should have an end point have today been replaced by critical religion researchers with the realisation that the concept of religion as a theoretical tool has an end point.[2]

In the critical discussion about the concept of religion, Mitsutoshi Horii (2021) connects two lines of thought cultivated within critical religion: the above-mentioned notion that the concept is loaded with a Christian cultural heritage and that the concept of religion has had an important political role in legitimising the territorial and cultural expansion of the colonial powers, a criticism that has mainly been advanced by the researcher Timothy Fitzgerald in a number of books (see e.g., Fitzgerald 2007). This means that Horii's criticism coincides with a project to pursue decolonisation in the sense of undoing coloniality. The project primarily aims at the role of sociology as a kind of intellectual superstructure to a colonial Western oppression, a superstructure that according to Horii (2021) is most clearly expressed in the value-laden division between 'religion' and 'secular'.

At a theoretical level, Horii's strategy in the book is to deconstruct the binary division between religion and secular by demonstrating what is common to these two seemingly opposite entities in order to show how they "belong to the same totality by sharing essential commonalities with each other" (Horii 2021, p. 9). The goal is thus to blur the difference between religion and secular, which Horii describes as being "... to demolish the hierarchical relationship between social sciences and Sociology, on the one hand, and other modes of being and knowing which are formally regarded as 'religious', on the other" (Horii 2021, p. ix). In the book, Horii intends to push this ambition to its ultimate limit:

> When we realize what we call 'religious' and 'secular' are actually qualitative equivalents, we must admit that social theories, for example, belong to the same categories as 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Buddhism', 'indigenous religions' and the like. (Horii 2021, p. ix)

If we were to design a non-confessional RE in school based on Horii's thought model, we would get a very different kind of teaching. It would most likely take the form of a religious dialogue, in which different religious and secular practices conversed with each other side by side. There would be no opportunity to rise above this plurality or direct any criticism towards any of the parties participating in the dialogue. Any such attempt at a broader perspective could be perceived as a remnant of colonial oppression or an attempt to impose a Western view. The label 'non-confessional' would also be misleading here, as in practice, the teaching would be multi-confessional in nature. The only thing that would remain of the non-confessional would be the impartial and democratic framework where all the pupils' voices have equal value. The concept of powerful knowledge, with its emphasis on conveying 'general knowledge', could not be incorporated into this multi-confessional concept.

However, there are significant theoretical weaknesses in Horii's approach. In his case, the criticism of the hierarchical elements of the binary division between religion and secular tends to switch to its opposite, a pendulum movement of which there are many examples in modern thought. Here, I argue that even if we share the criticism of the concept of religion, it is possible to maintain a qualitative boundary between the study or teaching of religion (regardless of whether we think of science or activities in school) and the practice of a particular faith. In terms of content, it is about different categories, or 'conceptual territories'. On the other hand, the understanding of this boundary needs to be greatly revised. So far, Horii appears to be on the right track.

Some of the weaknesses that I identify in Horii's dealings with sociology also need to be addressed. For example, Horii's book contains no clear presentation of what the common similarities—the essential commonalities—are between religion and secular. Rather, the existence of such similarities seems more like some sort of postulate. The few examples of similarities, for example, that both religion and science rest on "metaphysical assumptions" (p. 38), are tentative and not theoretically elaborated on. The promised deconstruction of the binary division therefore appears to be incomplete. One of the tasks in this article is therefore to identify some clearer 'commonalities'.

It is also unclear in Horii's presentation how the meaning of binary or absolute opposites, or what Horii sometimes calls "generic meanings", can be better understood.

Therefore, an additional task is to discuss, albeit briefly, the concept of general (generality), a subject that strictly speaking belongs to the philosophy of logic.

Nor does Horii's book provide any clear presentation of the binary meaning of the word 'secular' (as opposed to other meanings of the same word). Here, as indicated in the introduction, I will try to identify such a meaning by using the example of non-confessional RE in Sweden.

Overall, the impression is that Horii's book does not "start thinking outside modernity's terms of conversation" (p. ix). On the other hand, it does pose pressing questions about all scientific activities in the humanities and social sciences.

3. A Binary Model of 'Secular' or Non-Confessional RE

How should the binary model of non-confessional RE be characterised? The design of non-confessional religious education in Sweden (see, e.g., Rothgangel et al. 2014) is used here as a point of departure—albeit in a simplified form to produce a useful model of comparison—because the Swedish case clearly illustrates a binary way of thinking. My assessment is that this Swedish model does not significantly differ ideologically from other designs with a strict non-confessional profile that occur in places like England, Wales or Norway (due to a common European intellectual heritage). The degree to which this assumption is correct cannot be determined here, as it has no major significance for the principal question of how an RE that transcends the binary division without turning into a general relativism can be shaped. It also needs to be noted that the model that is presented here is not explicitly stated in the school's governing documents, but is an interpretation that considers the philosophical currents that had an almost hegemonic role in Sweden when the documents were created.

A characteristic of the Swedish binary model is that it distances itself from the double framing that has been attributed to confessional religious education. This double framing has two elements: One is the existence of certain particular beliefs (e.g., "justification by faith alone"), which constitute the content of a historically determined denomination, the other a general metaphysics that is considered to be the basis for all conceivable denominations. The double framing also contains an internal order that consists in the general metaphysics being assigned a more fundamental role in the sense that the particular beliefs are considered to rest on it.

As far as Sweden is concerned, the first-mentioned element has often been associated with the Church of Sweden's understanding of the Christian faith, which in the past had a strong Lutheran character. Until the year 2000, the Church of Sweden was the state religion in Sweden, but has now lost much, although not all, of this special position. Being confessional in a Swedish context thus meant passing on a specific Lutheran interpretation of the Christian faith. In the Swedish free churches, there was another Lutheran interpretation, which, among other things, emphasised Luther's teaching on the general priesthood and played down the significance of some of the sacraments or reinterpreted them. Although confessional religious education was fairly neutral in its later phase in relation to various Lutheran interpretations, it was not uncommon for critics in the 1950s to regard it as the extended arm of the Church of Sweden (Hedenius 1964).

The second element of the dual framing is that every denomination or any practice related to them rests on a general metaphysics that includes notions that God exists and that reality is not limited to the material world. According to this approach, such beliefs are inherently unscientific in that they cannot be confirmed by scientific methods (but can, according to some, be contradicted by the findings of science). Whether this general metaphysics is something that is only taken for granted in confessional teaching or given a supposedly theological/philosophical rational basis has no significance when seen from the binary non-confessional perspective.

Against the background of this imagined framework, a non-confessional religious education in Sweden (which started in schools in the 1960s) meant an education that (i) was not biased in relation to a Lutheran interpretation of the Christian tradition and that was

no longer allowed to favour any Christian interpretation. This new, stricter impartiality was to be extended to anything that could be called 'religious'. Here, 'favour' meant to directly or indirectly 'propagate for'. A non-confessional RE would also not (ii) take for granted or presuppose the general metaphysics on which 'religion' was thought to rest. In other words, the teaching must not be unscientific. The metaphysical content was only allowed to be mentioned in the classroom.

How might this distancing from the ascribed dual framing be an example of binary thinking based on absolute opposites? The binary trait manifests itself in high generality. Distancing from general metaphysics and putting it in parentheses in the teaching includes *all* religion in the past, present and future designs of Abrahamic traditions. The boundary between confessional and non-confessional religious education in a Swedish context is thus assimilated into an intellectual framework where all historical differences are regarded as irrelevant.

A similar logic appears when it comes to the supposedly unscientific nature of religion. This unscientific nature was not only related to certain elements in a certain historical version of a wider tradition but was thought to apply to all religion in the same timeless sense as above. 'Scientific' and 'unscientific' are therefore also assigned a binary meaning in that they are treated as absolute opposites. Thereby a boundary is fabricated between an inherently unscientific object of study and a scientific (metaphysics-free) study, i.e., a study that does not presuppose the general metaphysics ascribed to religion.

If we look at Swedish non-confessional religious education retrospectively, the reference to existing science meant a double exaltation of RE. On the one hand, the teaching was based on theories, concepts and perspectives taken from various scientific practices of a primarily humanistic nature, which were still surrounded by the general prestige enjoyed by virtually all science during the 1960s. On the other hand, the teaching was based on a seemingly metaphysics-free platform, which meant that the observer (the researcher, teacher, student) was catapulted into an abstract realm of timeless categorisations. Put simply, this is the meaning that intellectual distance—being non-confessional—acquired in its first historical phase in Sweden.

The sense of sublimity is related to another aspect of the binary logic, namely, the notion of a radical discontinuity and the possibility of a total break with tradition. The same claim of being able to stand completely outside religion as a phenomenon is staged in the classroom when the ascribed metaphysical foundation is put in parentheses.

When the notion of the non-confessional religious education's sublimity is questioned, a lack of clarity arises as to the difference between the practice of a religion and the study of it and how this difference should be understood if the binary logic breaks down. The ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the social science and humanities disciplines are still coloured by the binary logic and that the cracks in the binary model of a non-confessional RE reach all the way down to what was considered as the scientific foundation of RE.

The word 'secular' has a multitude of meanings. First, we have the long historical process of the secular being moved from a Christian context to a contemporary one and thereby acquiring new meanings. Then there are the various meanings, difficult to overview, that appear in different scientific disciplines (not all of them need to be related to religion). When arguing that RE needs to transcend the binary division between religion and secular, it means something more definable, namely, the 'metaphysical packaging'—the maximum universality, total distance, radical discontinuity, the general opposition between religion and science, the hierarchical difference between the observer and the object of study and so on—that the word 'secular' is wrapped up in as part of a binary scheme. These characteristics might be considered a definition of the binary concept 'secular', but can occur in varying degrees.

A further element in this packaging arises when the binary scheme is projected onto the historical development. Then arises the familiar picture of a historical process where development goes from something lower to something higher, and a development scheme is created that seems to herald the disappearance of the historical religion (in enlightened

countries). According to Casanova (2015), this schema, or 'stadial consciousness', constitutes the very fibre of the secular consciousness of people in the West (apart from the USA). Against such a background, it is hardly surprising that the word 'secular' contains a positive evaluation of current Western societies.

4. Ways out of Binary Thinking

Two possible ways out of binary thinking are discussed in this section. One relates to a classical problem of knowledge in European thought from Descartes onwards about the overcoming of metaphysics or finding a secure foundation for knowledge. The other is about exposing the common ground on which the seemingly opposite alternatives 'religion' and 'secular' stand. How, then, should 'the common' be interpreted?

As already stated, there is an unresolved conflict in the binary model of non-confessional RE. The intention is to bracket what is regarded as the metaphysical foundation of confessional RE in the teaching of the subject, but because this intellectual manoeuvre takes place on an absolute level, at the same time an attachment to an inherited speculative tradition emerges—what we can be termed "European rationalism". If the binary model of RE is to be transcended, this built-in conflict needs to be removed.

A common way of overcoming metaphysics in modernity is to negate (explain as false or implausible) the general views of life that are considered metaphysical with reference to science or reason. However, this strategy suffers from the same problems that have already been identified in relation to the binary model of non-confessional RE. The negation has taken place on the same timeless plane as the notions it turned against. Another way of turning against metaphysics, which is common in the continental tradition, has been to conduct some form of deconstruction.

Here we use a form of deconstruction that is inspired by the philosophy of language, more particularly the strong Wittgensteinian tradition found in some of the Nordic countries, especially the variant developed at the Department of Philosophy in Uppsala, Sweden by Sören Stenlund (1943–2019) and some of his followers. This form of deconstruction consists of—instead of negating propositions with high generality—turning towards the universal (context-independent) meaning that is presupposed in such propositions. The focus shifts from questions of truth/falsity to questions of linguistic meaningfulness. What in European tradition is often called 'metaphysics'—ontological descriptions of reality as such—is reinterpreted here as an expression of when "when language goes on holiday" (Wittgenstein 2001, §38). As far as Sweden is concerned, this philosophical strategy, if transferred to RE, means a break with the development of the school subject of religious education in the direction of the study of worldviews.

What does the linguistic–philosophical critique of universal meanings look like? Take, for example, the use of the word 'exist' (Wilhelmi 1995), which has various meanings and appears in a variety of contexts, such as: 'unicorns don't exist' and 'the state post office in Sweden ceased to exist in 1994'. These are concrete meanings with a temporal reference that can, in principle, be determined. However, the phrase 'God exists' differs in that it sounds like an empirical question but is often given a universal meaning that is supposed to apply everywhere and always, that is, it is provided with an atemporal reference.

Linguistic statements that are characterised by the desire to combine an empirical content with a timeless one tend to be contextless in nature (Thalén 1997). In other words, they tend to hover above lived reality. Questions such as 'Does God exist?' can be addressed in two ways: either by trying to answer them in the same way as unproblematic statements relating to the existence of something, which can result in being led into an intellectual labyrinth, or by stepping back and questioning its linguistic meaningfulness.

In the binary division between religion and secular, the category 'religion' is included in the same abstract linguistic discourse as 'God exists/does not exist'. Overcoming binary thinking means abandoning this kind of discourse and instead taking a language-oriented critical approach to the existence of universal meanings, or what Horii calls 'generic categories' (Horii 2021, p. 6). Characteristic of such discourses is that they rest on the

assumption that it makes sense to talk about reality at an ontological level. Even this ambition needs to be abandoned. Universal meanings and ontological descriptions are two sides of the same useless coin.

Applied to non-confessional RE, it means that it is no longer sufficient to put metaphysics in parentheses in the teaching because it does not disturb the basic problem, namely, treating the existence of the abstract discourse with universal meanings as unproblematic. This is one of the reasons that the transformation of RE into some form of worldview study, which has been advocated in various quarters (see e.g., CoRE 2018), is doubtful. If highly general worldviews are treated as meaningful entities, which would present the pupil with some kind of choice, it means that the pupil, with the help of the teacher, would risk being led into the above-mentioned labyrinth.

An initial answer to the question of what is common to the binary opposites religion and secular is now within reach: the inner similarity consists in the faith in the meaningfulness of a linguistic discourse that is based on universal meanings of words and sentences. Such a discourse could be called a 'super-language'. Such languages can, when it comes to worldviews, captivate the intellect. They cannot be criticised from within because they constitute a perspective that encompasses the whole of reality—there is nothing 'outside', and therefore nothing that can speak against them.

In addition to the fact that the emergence of such super-languages has a philosophical–historical background that can be traced back to antiquity, they also rest on a common view of language that was strongly questioned during the second half of the 20th century. This questioning, in turn, has its roots in the linguistic turn that began in philosophy at the end of the 19th century (Rorty 1992).

The legacy from antiquity can be exemplified by Socrates, who, in Plato's dialogues, asked his philosophical disciples for the core meaning of words like 'courage', 'justice' and 'knowledge' (Segerdahl 1994). This type of philosophical question has a special 'depth': it is as if behind the common uses of such words something partially unknown of great importance is hidden, but that is waiting to be discovered. What one was unable to see was that the search for an absolute meaning, a context-independent content of words, only leads to conceptual construction, that is, to the creation of new, philosophical uses.

The Socratic dialogues exemplify the simplistic view of language, which in some places has retained its grip right up to the present day, namely, the notion that words and sentences would have an 'inherent' meaning in different contexts. That this view of language can be experienced as intuitively correct is because superficially, at the linguistic level, language has a certain uniformity that does not reflect the differences in the various uses of linguistic expression. If we focus only on the surface of language and ignore the circumstances in which linguistic expressions are used, we can be led to believe that the similarity of linguistic expressions also reflects a common, underlying similarity of meaning in the different occurrences of the same words or linguistic expressions.

To summarise, three internal similarities have been identified between the binary opposites 'religion' and 'secular': (i) a common belief in the meaningfulness of a certain type of abstract discourse with universal meanings, (ii) a common underlying view of language that helps to support this belief and (iii) a common historical intellectual heritage, the roots of which stretch back to antiquity. The discovery of these commonalities is a consequence of a strict application of a language–philosophical perspective described as above. They also provide an insight into the cultural matrix where religion and secular are often set against each other as opposites.

The possibility of another type of intellectual distance has also been indicated, i.e., to intellectually process the three features that constitute an inner similarity in the binary model. This latter form of distance is—in principle—not burdened by the metaphysical packaging that belongs to the binary model. However, the application of the new form of distance does not mean that its practitioners have somehow magically detached themselves from the past.

5. A Platform for Non-Binary Forms of Non-Confessional RE

What would a platform for non-binary forms of non-confessional RE where the three above features are transcended look like? Ten characteristics are presented below:

(i)   New meaning of 'broader focus'

With such a new platform, RE would have a broader focus. The focus would not only be religion, possibly expanded with secular alternatives to religion, but also the common cultural matrix, which leaves its mark on contemporary designs of various religious traditions and what is popularly perceived as secular alternatives. The strategy of bringing in secular worldviews to create a broader and more inclusive focus is flawed, because it perpetuates binary thinking—differences between different viewpoints tend to be brought up on an absolute plane. The non-binary platform, on the other hand, gives 'broader focus' a new, depolarised meaning, by highlighting the cultural matrix that unites seemingly opposing viewpoints.

(ii)   The impartiality is turned towards another object

From a non-binary platform, it is possible to fully endorse an impartial approach, although here impartiality is no longer related to different viewpoints, but to different historical expressions of people's meaning-making. The starting point is that there are cultural limits to impartiality that restrict the field of view of teachers and pupils, which means that distance from different historical expressions can only be a gradual process. That a teacher of religion cannot achieve impartiality in an ahistorical sense has long been accepted in a Swedish context, probably due to the influence of hermeneutical currents. However, from the binary platform, it has been difficult to fully incorporate such an approach due to the elements of ahistorical thinking that have existed in parallel and perhaps dominated.

(iii)   Another approach to metaphysics

As previously mentioned, metaphysics in the binary form of non-confessional RE has been handled by putting it in parentheses in the teaching. At the same time, at a hidden level, it has been able to survive due to the existence of an abstract discourse resting on universal meanings and a corresponding polarising logic. In a non-binary form of RE, the question of metaphysics becomes more complex. What constitutes 'metaphysics' no longer needs to only be associated with religion or philosophical worldviews. Popular science can also be the bearer of metaphysical ideas by magnifying the results of natural science into teachings that claim to reveal the true nature of reality. This depolarises the question of which human activities can be carriers of metaphysics. Any general opposition between religion and science, which we find in the binary model, can no longer be maintained.

(iv)   A new starting point for critical thinking

During modernity, a prominent focus of critical thinking has been questions relating to truth/falsity and rational/irrational. Critical thinking also includes other things, such as norm and source criticism. While addressing questions of truth/rationality need not cease in the non-binary model of RE, an important caveat is that they can be—and often are—premature, especially when it comes to statements with high generality. In the first place, we need to ask whether they are meaningful. This can help us to discern a lack of substance.

(v)   Dismantling hierarchies I

The binary platform is based on the assumption that religions are hierarchically structured and that they contain a set of specific beliefs that presuppose a general metaphysics. Although many religious movements in modernity may have incorporated this approach as part of their self-image, there are strong reasons to question whether general metaphysics captures anything of importance for the Abrahamic traditions as historical phenomena. Rather, it is an intellectual superimposition that has its origins in the philosophical tradition of antiquity, as pointed out long ago by German Protestant theologians. Seen from the

non-binary platform, such a hierarchical order cannot be part of religious studies as a school subject, but only a point of view that is subject to critical reflection and deconstruction *within* RE.

If we refer to the title of this article—"Learning about What?"—the object of study takes on widely different meanings depending on whether a binary or non-binary model forms the starting point for the conduct of a non-confessional RE. In the first model, religion is attributed to the previously mentioned hierarchy, which means that it is defined as something intellectually inferior. This hierarchy is problematised in the latter model and presented as a time-dependent component of a contemporary outlook on life in the West, which also influenced the actual religion (Smith [1977] 1985).

(vi)   The appreciation of the particular

The rejection of the premise that all denominations would rest on or presuppose a general metaphysics means that the attention is shifted to religion as a historical phenomenon, and especially the differences that exist within and between the different directions of one and the same religion. These differences again become interesting when the notion of an underlying unity of an abstract or philosophical nature can no longer be maintained. What it means to see religion as a historical phenomenon can be exemplified by teaching about the Church of Sweden in upper secondary school. If historicity is emphasised, it becomes important to ask questions about how the current design differs from that which that was prevalent before the Second World War. The process of change emerges again as something central, while high-flying comparisons between different eras risk becoming pointless.

(vii)   Dismantling hierarchies II

Dismantling hierarchies can also refer to the notion of a radical discontinuity, i.e., that religion belongs to a particular stage of development that the secular majority in the West has left behind. Hierarchy is thus about the difference between lower and higher forms of human civilization, a kind of cultural ranking with echoes of a colonial past. Based on the non-binary platform, the continuity between today's Western societies and older forms of life is emphasised, as well as the impossibility of making cross-cultural comparisons with the Western concept of religion as a point of departure. Continuity can be formulated in a variety of ways, as the discussion about post-secularity has shown (Franck and Thalén 2021). However, the similarity highlighted in this article is the belief in the meaningfulness of an abstract discourse (with an accompanying view of language), whether it is formulated in theological or secular terms. While the binary model of RE assumed the idea of a general cultural evolution, this idea is problematised when the non-binary model forms the platform.

(viii) Depolarised relationship to science

The opposition between religion and science that was built into the binary model was conditioned by the attribution of religion to a general metaphysics. When this assumption in the non-binary model ceases to have the role of an axiom, and is instead problematised, this polarisation diminishes or ceases. What remains is the possibility of asking on a case-by-case basis whether there is any contradiction between a specific religious direction and science. Christian fundamentalist groups claiming that the Earth has only existed for 6000 years are a clear example of a contradiction with science that is no longer about religion as such. Science thus ceases to function as an ideological weapon, but only becomes interesting in its role as science.

(ix)   The transformation of the secular into an object of study among others

A worldview does not have to refer to a doctrine about reality as such, which could be true or false, but could also be about historically inherited beliefs with a self-evident role in a way of life. In this latter sense, it is possible to teach the secular as a worldview in its own right—if we switch to a non-binary platform for RE—for example, the notions of a general cultural evolution mentioned earlier. However, when the secular is transformed into an object of study in teaching, it is not as an opposite to the religious as a binary entity, but as a cultural framework that influences all areas of life, including that which is designated as religion. Such teaching would have the character of cultivating a cultural self-awareness, with self-critical elements in which the existing religion would not be exempt.

(x)   From periphery to centre?

The non-confessional school subject of religious education has a weak position in some places, and can even be perceived as threatened (Castelli and Chater 2018). This marginalised role is hardly surprising, considering religion's increasingly weak presence in society at large. As the historically inherited religion continues to shrink, it becomes difficult to assert the role of the school subject. The weak position may also be because teaching about religion is incorporated into a wider school context that is strongly marked by binary secular thinking. If, moreover, the binary paradigm of non-confessional RE has the notion of the cognitive inferiority of religion built into its foundation, the situation becomes deadlocked.

The transition to a non-binary platform for non-confessional RE would change the game. On the one hand, the notion of a general inferiority would be rejected as a cultural prejudice. On the other hand, the object of study would not primarily be a shrinking sector of society, but rather a cultural framework where both religious and secular viewpoints exist side by side and are rhetorically set up against each other.

6. Conclusions: Powerful Knowledge in a Non-Binary RE Context

The boundary between confessional and non-confessional RE, characterised by binary thinking, has not only lost its philosophical legitimacy but also has an ideological layer that reinforces the belief in the general superiority of the West. So far, it is possible to say that Horii is right if one applies his criticism to the non-confessional school subject of religious studies, as it is designed today in a country like Sweden.

On the other hand, one need not, which seems to be a consequence of Horii's reasoning, conclude that it would not be possible to draw any qualitative boundary at all between teaching about religion and the study objects of such teaching. Analysing the culturally inherited matrix, which is common to religion and secular, is a different kind of intellectual activity, a kind of critical cultural self-reflection, from practicing a faith. This activity includes, among other things, striving for a linguistic and historical distance from the phenomena that are usually categorized as religion, a distance that gives rise to a special form of knowledge. But is such knowledge a 'powerful knowledge'?

Two versions of powerful knowledge that are applied to non-confessional RE appear in this article: a legitimate version and a more dubious one. Immersed in the binary logic, powerful knowledge runs the risk of automatically being assigned a universal applicability of the same kind that belongs to the abstract discourse, a discourse that tends to take on the role of a superstructure to certain long-cemented Western thought patterns. Placed in such an intellectual environment, it is difficult to see how 'powerful' knowledge could become powerful in any liberating sense.

However, in the non-binary logic, if we take the variant of non-confessional RE outlined in this article as our point of departure, generality is limited. By nature, historical distance is process-like, something growing, and without a clear end point, but can constitute a general yet changing knowledge that is constantly revised and deepened. Linguistic distance, to critically dismantle universal meanings by referring to how language is used in concrete situations, does not need to presuppose any other concept of generality than

that which characterises the context from which the linguistic examples are taken. Even attempts to develop the concept of powerful knowledge in RE by pointing to the possibility of so-called 'threshold concepts' (Franck 2021) can be inserted into a non-binary logic and seen as examples of a further form of legitimate intellectual distance.

Thus, it is possible to formulate a non-binary qualitative boundary between a confessional practice and non-confessional RE. This new boundary is not loaded with any hierarchical gradations between 'lower' and 'higher', but merely denotes a different type of intellectual activity. The metaphysical baggage is cleared away on a principal level (even if its actual removal is a slow cultural process).

Placed within a non-binary framework, it is not only possible to give the specific features that distinguish powerful knowledge—knowledge that is specialised, disciplinary and transcends everyday knowledge (Young 2013)—a reasonable meaning. The word 'powerful' is also charged with a new content, and here means knowledge that has the power to break, or at least effectively criticise, some of the inherited thought patterns that have been prominent in Western thought, and which tend to devalue religion in general.

When it comes to the social value or practical benefit of religious education at upper secondary school level in Sweden, a double message is conveyed. The explicit goal has been to teach respect for diversity, but the language in which this goal and the teaching have been embedded contains an underlying message about religion in general as a lower form of cognitive activity. The knowledge that is imparted in teaching therefore runs the risk of becoming powerless in relation to the subject's goals. Seen against this societal background, powerful knowledge can, if inserted into a non-binary scheme for RE, break this locked situation.

What does progress look like here? The language in which the teaching was previously embedded was coloured by universal meanings, but such language is inherently polarising or conflict-creating in that it gives the conflict between religion and reason a timeless frame. By critically dismantling this generalising language, teaching becomes depolarised. Although the conflicts are not removed, they are plucked down from the 'super-plane' above the lived reality where they were previously placed. Such depolarising knowledge has real power to teach students to live respectfully in a multicultural society.

Is such a non-binary form of non-confessional RE secular? Not in the mythological sense, where the secular is represented as a higher stage. On the other hand, 'secular' in the sense that the teaching offers something more than an insider's perspective on a particular faith, an opportunity to stand at a distance, gains a broadened perspective. In this still legitimate sense of 'secular', the pupil can enter another intellectual space in the teaching and even rise above the multiplicity of religions—although not in an absolute sense. At the same time, the word 'secular' is not needed to denote the intellectual space that a more intellectually modest teaching would create. When the presence of the binary logic diminishes or ceases altogether, the word 'secular' becomes redundant, and perhaps uninteresting.

Strictly speaking, the non-binary logic gives rise to a type of teaching that is neither religious nor secular in the inherited meanings we are used to. It is possible that such a shift in cultural identity is already underway in society at large in the West, which can be said to be a theme in the research based on the concept of post-secularity. In that case, if the binary logic is abandoned, RE can change from an activity that preserves a vanishing remnant in society to instead taking its place at the centre.

Notes

[1] The discussion in this article is limited to non-confessional (non-denominational) religious education. A schematic overview of the boundary between a 'denominational' and a 'religious studies' approach is provided by Peter Schreiner (Schreiner 2007). However, binary thinking might be a problem for any model of RE, but that is beyond the scope of the article.

[2] In this text, therefore, the word 'religion' is not used as an analytical category, but solely to refer to the uses of the word that already occur in, for example, school or in academic contexts and are made subject to investigation.

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