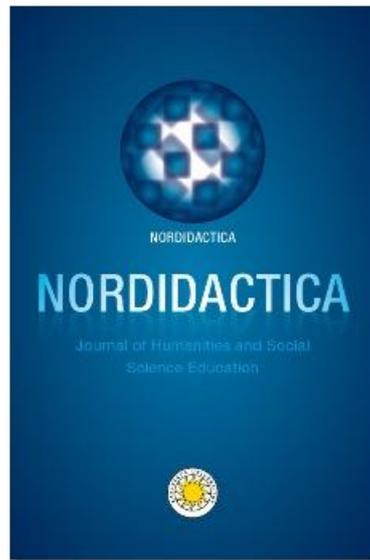


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On teaching what cannot be said: Reflections on the role of the unsayable in religious education

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Abstract: This paper discusses how religious education can address the aspects of religion that transcend the limits of verbal communication. It draws on empirical data from group interviews with young Norwegian members of the Catholic and Lutheran Churches. The young informants reflect on aspects of religion that seem to exceed the limits of language and suggest that how religious education deals with these elements needs to be improved if it is to promote respect and understanding for religion and believers. Excerpts from the material are discussed in the light of theological and philosophical perspectives on the unsayable. Finally, possible pedagogical approaches to facilitate the understanding of and dealing with the handling of non-verbal aspects of religious faith are explored, including the use of philosophical perspectives, experiences from art and music and empirical descriptions of religious experience.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, RELIGION, TRANSCENDENCE, EXPERIENCE, TEXTBOOKS

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Introduction

Recent research has paid attention to how religions are represented in religious education (Gundersen, Kristiansen, Samdal & Vestøl 2014, Jackson 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2008, Moulin 2011, Nesbitt 2004). Religious education has been criticised for stereotyping religion, and efforts have been made to strengthen the focus on individual and group-related variations in religious beliefs and practices. This change in focus could facilitate presentations of religions and religious issues that better enable pupils to recognise and understand the religious life they encounter in their local communities.

While research has shed light on pupils' experiences of inadequate presentations of religions in the classroom and textbooks, less attention has been paid to possible inherent conceptual limitations in the teaching of religion. This study presents selected excerpts from interviews with young Norwegian adherents of the Catholic and Lutheran faiths who address the limitations of religious education in communicating insiders' perspectives on religion. This paper reflects on these issues, focusing on *to what extent religious education mediates a limited understanding of religion and to what extent strategies can counter such limitations in teaching and learning about religion*.

The informants reflected on their experiences and textbook excerpts related to the secular multi-faith religious subject 'Religion and ethics', which is taught in the final year of Norwegian upper secondary school. The course syllabus states that the course objectives are to develop pupils' knowledge, awareness and attitudes in order to create tolerance and peaceful, multi-religious co-existence as well as to 'contribute to knowledge on and respect for various religious, views on life and ethical standpoints' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2006). Given this context the discussion is restricted to the implications for secular multi-faith education, remaining aware that religious education in religious schools is subject to other conditions.

Previous research and theoretical perspectives

As stated, research has tended to focus on misrepresentations of religion in schools, not on possible inherent conceptual limitations in the teaching of religion. The British religious education researcher Robert Jackson suggests that religious education should present religions as multi-layered entities (Jackson 1997, 2004b, Jackson & Nesbitt 1993) attending to 'the relationship between individuals in the context of their religio-cultural groups and the wider religious tradition to which they relate' (Jackson 2004b, p. 4).

Research has shown that religious education struggles to include the interaction between the historical and the individual and group levels of religion. British Hindu and Christian pupils have reported discrepancies between classroom presentations of religious traditions and their own experiences of religion (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993, Moulin 2011, Nesbitt 2004). Religious education researcher Daniel Moulin (2011) reports that Christian and Jewish informants (ages 12–19) typically perceived

religious education as stereotyping their faith and failing to account for diversity within the religious traditions. Similar findings have been reported in studies on Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist pupils in the Norwegian context (Gundersen, Kristiansen, Samdal & Vestøl 2014, Nicolaisen 2009, 2012, Østberg 2003). These studies focus on misrepresentations of religion that may be reduced by nuancing and enriching these presentations. In this way, the studies implicitly presuppose that religion can be mediated in a way that does justice to it as a phenomenon.

While considerable research has covered these misrepresentations, fewer studies have been devoted to the aspects of religious education and education in general that exceed or transcend the realm of language. A few studies have touched on transcendence in the intersection of religion and music and on silence in the intersection of poetics and religion (Bernard 2009, Meijer 2009, Palmer 2010). Other researchers have addressed silence as a similar issue in education (Stern 2014, Wiggen 2003). Professor at York St. John University, Julian Stern (2014) describes silence as a kind of ‘unpedagogy’ and draws on a distinction between ‘techniqued’ and ‘technique-less’ silence: Techniqued silence depends on culturally mediated forms of meditation, whereas technique-less silence leaves pupils in a state in which they individually explore existential and relational dimensions of life in less clearly mediated ways.

In a publication on silence in education, Norwegian Professor Geirr Wiggen (2003) points to a lack of emphasis on silence in contemporary Western and Norwegian pedagogy but finds that non-secular schools address silence, for instance, in morning meditations. Wiggen argues that individual cognitive approaches to learning seem to value silence as a way of fostering knowledge, insight, and wisdom, while sociocultural approaches to learning emphasise cultural mediation and social interaction so that silence appears irrelevant as an aspect of education.

Although Stern and Wiggen do not explicitly discuss the distinction between the mediated and unmediated aspects of religion, they seem to point toward aspects of education that might be processed in ways that transcend the realm of language as a means of mediating. They draw on perspectives from Western philosophers and theologians, such as the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and engage with a Western tradition that emphasises the limitations of language and the role of the unspoken or unsayable. This tradition was recently covered extensively in a two-volume work by William Franke, Professor at Vanderbilt University and the University of Macao (Franke 2007a, 2007b).

Franke presents and discusses contributions from philosophy, theology and the arts from antiquity through the present and shows how a discourse concerning the ineffable or unspeakable permeates European intellectual history. It is a discourse of the limits of language or *apophasis* – a Greek word literally meaning ‘away from speech’ or ‘saying *away*’ which implies ‘denial’ or ‘negation’ or indicates ‘what cannot be expressed/said’. According to Franke, ‘indeed, apophasis has become – and is still becoming – a major topic in all the disciplines of the humanities, with

philosophy, religion, literature, and criticism of various arts in the lead.’ (Franke 2007a, p. 3).

According to Franke, the discourse of the unsayable, or *apophasis*, originated in the reflections of Neo-Platonism on the absolute, unsayable principle: the One. It was continued by Christian theologians from Augustine through Scholastic philosophers into the Renaissance (Franke 2007a). In more modern times, the discourse has been perpetuated and reshaped by philosophers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, among others. It has influenced poets, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats, and artists and musicians such as Paul Klee and John Cage (Franke 2007b).

Strains of the discourse focus on the unsayable aspects of God, while others focus on the unsayable aspects of human existence and the innermost nature of language. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is important to mention that notable thinkers, both past and present, have included religious and spiritual aspects in their reflections. A classical expression is found in the juxtaposition between positive and negative sayings in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, emphasising that God is ultimately beyond the reach of language (Franke 2007a). This perspective influenced later thinkers, including Jacques Derrida (Franke 2007b).

While the theological aspects of the discourse of the unspoken might contribute to expanding the understanding of religion beyond the physical and conceptual, the more general philosophical discourse of the unsayable can contribute to a broader framework for dealing with the unspoken as a phenomenon. From among the philosophers who have explored the unspoken aspects of language and existence, the German philosopher Theodor Adorno touches upon the ‘unsayable’ aspects of music by describing music as a ‘demythologized prayer’, an attempt ‘to name the [divine] Name, not to communicate meanings’ (cited in Franke 2007b, p. 263); thus, Adorno characterises music as a language of the unsayable, of the unspoken depth of reality.

Similarly, Franke cites philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch’s reflections on the ‘musical message’ as coming not ‘from another world’ but from ‘conditions within us, and yet from nature exterior to us’ (cited in Franke 2007b, p. 287), pointing to a dialectic between immanence and transcendence. To some extent, the views of Jankelevitch, rooted in Jewish religious tradition, resemble the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (2002), who deals with language and transcendence in relation to ethics, particularly the absolute challenge of the face of the Other. According to Levinas, the challenge of the Other stands in a dubious, twofold relationship to language. On one hand, the challenge is dependent on language as a means of communication, but on the other hand, the challenge cannot penetrate the realm of language without being restricted, reduced and corrupted. Drawing on a distinction between *saying* and *said* Levinas states that *saying* is the challenge in its pure, living, moving form, while *said* is the static, verbally fixed form. The absolute presence of the Other, therefore, is essentially situated outside language and can be described as a preface preceding language (Levinas 2002, p. 5).

While Franke shows how aspects of religion or religious faith can transcend language, Levinas argues that personal relationships are also subject to transcendence.

Religious education relies heavily on verbal descriptions and explanations of non-transcendent aspects, raising the question of whether education runs the risk of missing important aspects of religious faith, both as a theological phenomenon and as a personally experienced phenomenon.

As mentioned, Wiggan (2003) argues that the sociocultural theory of learning emphasises socially and culturally mediated knowledge and neglects the individual non-verbalised experience. Although sociocultural theory has not paid much attention to the non-mediated aspects of human perception or experience, the American psychologist Michael Cole (1996), writing in the field of cultural psychology, explicitly points to aspects of sensed and intuitive experience that are at least partly culturally un-mediated, and contends that inter-personal communication includes aspects of both the mediated and the non-mediated: ‘the cultural (mediated) and natural (unmediated) routes operate synergistically’ (Cole 1996, p. 119). The question raised by these philosophical perspectives is whether there is another non-mediated aspect of knowledge that transcends both the culturally mediated and the externally sensed.

The short and focused review above naturally addresses only certain aspects of religion. This paper does not attempt to measure or evaluate the importance of the unsayable as an aspect of religion in general. Since the paper draws on data from group conversations, it emphasises intellectual reflections in ways that may underplay the role of the physical and emotional aspects of religion. During the interviews, the informants also described elements of ritual practice and emotional engagement that present a richer and more extensive picture of their religious faith and practice (Vestøl 2016, in print).

To explore the implications for religious education of the issues presented above, the paper now turns to data from interviews with young Norwegian pupils who have a personal relationship with the Christian faith and also personal experience with Norwegian secular multi-faith religious education.

Empirical data

The data reported and analysed in this paper were collected during a research project comparing presentations of religion in religious education textbooks and by young members of the Catholic and Lutheran Churches. Included in the study were religious education textbooks used in Norwegian upper secondary schools (Aronsen, Bomann-Larsen & Notaker 2008, Heiene, Myhre, Opsal, Skottene & Østnor 2008, Kvamme, Lindhardt & Steineger 2008) and data from two 90-minute group interviews with young members of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church of Norway from September to November 2012.

The informants were 17 or 18 years old, residents of a major Norwegian city and recruited through local leaders in the Norwegian Young Catholics group (‘Norges Unge Katolikker’) and a Christian evangelical student organisation (‘Laget’). All of the informants were participating in secular multi-faith religious education in their

final year of upper secondary school, except for one informant who had recently graduated.

Although gender balance was intended, the Lutheran group had five female informants, and the Catholic group had two male and three female informants. No particular gender-related differences were identified, so the data generated in these two group interviews were considered sufficient for the purpose of the study.

Group interviews were employed to gain access to the reflections of individual believers within communities of faith, a context that differs from the school context of textbook presentations. The interviews were conducted as roundtable conversations, and the researcher participated as an active moderator, asking questions and leaving space for informants to contribute comments and reflections. Throughout the conversations, informants acted in a constructive, supportive manner, supplementing and encouraging each other's points with short comments. The semi-structured interview guide had a main body focusing on various dimensions or aspects of faith as emphasised in the textbooks (e.g. rites, community and experience) and a final part focusing on textbook excerpts and religious education in schools.

The focus of this paper is the final part of the two interviews. Here, the informants commented on textbook excerpts and reflected on the premises for communicating their personal beliefs in the context of multi-faith religious education. Selected excerpts from other parts of the interviews have been added, as they shed further light on informants' experiences of communicating their faith.

Young Catholics on the spiritual dimension of faith and the limitations of the classroom context

During the interview, the young Catholic informants were invited to reflect on their relationship to the church and their participation in its religious life. When the moderator asked the informants about their impressions of religious education, Richard, a recent graduate of secondary school, shared his perspective:

(CA1) Richard: We had an in-depth study of three world religions where you had the option to choose, I think, yes we had the opportunity to choose [a topic]. So Christianity was my choice, and then there was – we had a presentation, I remember, of the sacraments. And it became sort of – when I had finished the presentation, there were a lot of questions because in the Catholic faith, there are a lot of things that, it is not written plainly, you know, there is a lot of spiritual behind a lot of text. So there were a lot of questions about how is the sacrament and things like that – how come Jesus is there at exactly that moment. A lot of strange questions that I was not really able to answer. So then, the impression is given that religion is sort of loosely constructed and inferior, seen from the outside. That's at least what I feel. Because there are quite a lot of questions you cannot answer if you do not experience it yourself. I remember that I experienced this.

(CA2) Moderator: If I get it right, then you felt that religion can be experienced both from the outside and from the inside ...

(CA3) Sunniva (spontaneously): Yes.

(CA4) *Richard: Yes, of course.*

(CA5) *Moderator: ... and that in a classroom situation, it is hard to establish an insider's view on the issue in question? It tends to be a somewhat superficial outsider's view? What about the rest of you? You have attended religious education in lower secondary school?*

(CA6) *Sunniva: We have just started our religious education lessons [in upper secondary school].*

(CA7) *Maria: We have just started.*

(CA8) *Sunniva: I did, however, visit the exhibition 'Our sacred spaces', and I visited it earlier also, and the Catholic Church is represented there and people are curious about things. And they are aware of certain facts, and most of them are open-minded and sort of try to understand it, actually, from the inside, even if they mostly do not succeed. For if you push it to extremes that one in a way holds the body of Jesus – his muscles in a way – then people don't understand that, naturally. So that can be a bit hard, but most people try, as far as I can see.*

(CA9) *Moderator: When you say that they don't understand it ...?*

(CA10) *Sunniva: No, they don't understand how I can believe in it.*

(CA11) *Moderator: Oh, I see, what it means?*

(CA12) *Sunniva: Yes. They do not understand, because they say: 'Well, in fact it is not that [the body of Christ]'. And then, they do not understand that perhaps there is something more than what you see.*

(CA13) *Maria: It becomes so extremely, sort of, that people think about things as, just what they see in a purely physical way.*

In this part of the interview, informants directed their attention toward the spiritual, unseen aspects of the sacrament and the challenge they experienced when they attempted to make these aspects understandable to their classmates. The informants distinguished between a physical dimension perceptible to both insiders and outsiders, and another dimension perceived only by believing insiders. Informants expressed this distinction in different ways. Richard (CA1) talked about 'things' that were not 'written plainly' and how 'there is a lot of spiritual behind a lot of text'. Sunniva (CA12) stated that 'there is something more than what you see', and Maria (CA13) reported that her classmates perceived the Eucharist 'in a purely physical way'.

Despite the different terminology, all three informants indicated that their classmates lacked a basis or framework for understanding the spiritual dimension and that the informants themselves lacked a framework or language capable of explaining this dimension. Richard (CA1) expressed an underlying concern and even frustration that the lack of framework and communicative tools led to an impression that 'religion is sort of loosely constructed and inferior'. Sunniva (CA10) pointed to a more personal concern that her classmates 'don't understand how I can believe in it', suggesting a possible cognitive or even relational split or distance created by the lack of communicative means.

During the interviews, the young Catholic informants were presented with a textbook excerpt on the Catholic Mass focusing on the structure and the ritual elements of the Eucharist and describing ‘the communion, which has its own ritual with the Consecration as its climax; in this act the bread and wine is transformed into the body and blood of Jesus’ (Heiene, Myhre, Opsal, Skottene & Østnor 2008, p. 210).

Commenting on the textbook excerpt, the Catholic informants reflected on the limitations of the perspective of the textbook:

(CB1) Marius: It focuses very much on what takes place in the Mass, but the Mass to me is more what I experience. But it is difficult to, in a way it is much easier to explain, this happens and then that happens, sort of. It is difficult to communicate what you experience.

(CB2) Sunniva: But it might be of importance, in a way, to emphasise that [during the Mass] you listen and you speak yourself and that you pray silently and that you pray together with the other [prayers] that have been made.

(CB3) Maria: That you participate actively, in a way.

The moderator asked if anything should be added to this description by the teacher or through supplementary information in the textbooks.

(CB4) Maria: It [the textbook] emphasises strongly, in a way, the practical aspects and what sort of the Catholic, or what the Church says and, kind of, rules and such stuff, in particular what you, sort of, is forbidden to do, at least the way I see it. But I do not know if I have any advice to give concerning what should have been added.

(CB5) Richard: I think it is very difficult to communicate this. Just look at the sort of atmosphere you have in the classroom during the day at school. I do not know how you can make it become hearable.

(CB6) Maria and Sunniva: Yes.

(CB7) Richard: You might, of course, mention it, but I do not know if it really matters. All religions have such a, a level where you sense something outside what is written. If you are supposed to learn about all this, then it will be – I do not know if it is possible.

(CB8) Carmen: We were introduced to, or the first weeks of, when we had lessons in religious education we were introduced to religion through, as you mentioned earlier, that there is both an insider’s and an outsider’s dimension. So maybe teachers should remind, constantly remind their students that this is the way it is; it is like how we observe it [physically], but you have to be aware that there is something inside also, so don’t look at this as something strange, do not disregard it. Because discussions will easily arise, and I have already experienced this in my classroom.

In this passage, the informants elaborated on their understanding of how important aspects of religion might be under-communicated in religious education. Marius (CB1) stated that the textbook presentation of the Mass failed to communicate its experiential aspects, which he found more important than the more procedural aspects on which the textbook focused. He also admitted that it was difficult to communicate

such experiential aspects. Sunniva and Maria (CB2, CB3) suggested that textbooks could at least emphasise the physical aspects of *participation* in the Mass as an indication of the informants' personal engagement.

Richard (CB5) then drew attention to the role of the classroom, particularly its atmosphere as a space for communication. He argued that the classroom atmosphere might be an unsuitable context for communicating the spiritual aspects of religion that might require personal experience to be understood. He reaffirmed (CB7) his previous distinction (see CA1) between textual and spiritual dimensions, stating that all religions contain 'a level where you sense something outside what is written', and he questioned whether religious education had the capacity to include 'all this'. Carmen (CB6) suggested a possible compromise that religious education might at least remind students of the existence of the spiritual dimension and that religion consists of more than what can be communicated in a classroom setting.

In these excerpts, the Catholic informants emphasised the difficulty or even the impossibility of communicating the unseen or spiritual aspects of faith to persons who did not have similar experiences. Informants expressed the impression that believers and religion were placed in fragile and vulnerable positions and that efforts to explain or defend religious faith might fail, leaving outsiders with the perception that religion is inferior and ill-defined. The informants seemed to describe their troublesome encounters with a discourse rooted exclusively in a rational, physically oriented approach to reality and they seemed to lack the verbal resources to adequately handle this discourse.

Although the informants described the Mass or the Eucharist as difficult to explain, their reflections on the sacrament of confession revealed somewhat different attitudes.

(CC1) Sunniva: Yes, everyone has to [confess], at least once a year. ...

(CC2) Sunniva: It feels, often it feels very good afterwards. It's sort of like visiting a therapist ... It is not necessarily what the priest says to you afterwards that matters. It is the fact that you in a way have talked to yourself and obviously the fact that God is present. You are sort of purified just by admitting to yourself what you have done, [it] is really a big achievement.

(CC3) Marius: And people tend to think that Catholics may do as much or sin as much as they want because they may just confess afterwards. And it is disappointing that people think like this about confession because confession in reality means that you have a Father, God, who loves you so unbelievably much that, despite what you do, when you do your best to be good and fail, then he still willingly stands with his arms open and receives you and gives you a new opportunity ...

(CC4) Maria: To feel the relief, the feeling you have afterwards, how you feel extremely relieved and ready to receive the world (laughter). ...

(CC5) Sunniva: You may go often.

(CC6) Maria: All the time (laughter).

(CC7) Richard: But that doesn't mean that you become more careless when you do mistakes. It is more like when you have been in the confession box

[sic 'skrifteboksen'] ... you do not think when you enter that you will do it [the wrong thing] again. You think that you have got a new chance, so you do not become more careless ... You become even more focused on doing what you think is right.

(CC8) Maria: I think that you become more conscious about yourself and what you do, get a strengthened attention, sort of. This does not mean that you get neurotic, just focusing on not doing anything wrong. It is just sort of okay to admit to yourself and to God ...

(CC9) Carmen: Yes, because when you actually have spoken it, physically, then it is really clear to you.

(CC10) Sunniva: Yes, precisely.

(CC11) Maria: Yes, to say it.

Although Marius referred to how non-Catholics might misinterpret even this sacrament (CC3), the conversation showed that the informants could express and communicate their experience of it. Sunniva used the analogy of going to a therapist (CC2) to describe the relief she felt after confession, and Maria expressed the relief as the feeling of being ready to 'receive the world' (CC4). Both Marius and Richard tried to counter the misinterpretation of non-believers that confession might serve as an excuse for committing more sins. Marius did so by describing how confession was situated within a personal relationship between him and God, while Richard emphasised that the experience of getting a 'new chance' made him focus more on doing what he thought was right. Several informants expressed how confession strengthened their personal conviction and even self-awareness. Informants heavily stressed the effect of pronouncing one's own misdeeds (CC2, CC9, CC11); in particular, Maria related it to an increase in self-consciousness (CC8).

Through their explanations of personal encounters with the sacrament of confession, the informants implicitly pointed toward possible ways of communicating personal religious experience, namely, analogy and descriptions of the physical and psychological effects of the ritual processes. It should also be noted that informants shared this experience as a group and thus had an understanding at a more generalised level of experience beyond the individual.

Young members of the Lutheran Church of Norway on the unsaid as an aspect of faith and personal experience

Like the young Catholics, the young members of the Lutheran Church were also invited to comment on an excerpt from a textbook. This excerpt described the main elements of a service in the Lutheran Church of Norway, which included infant baptism: 'After the creed the baptismal procession approaches the baptismal font ... The minister asks the parents and the godparents to confirm that the child is to be baptised in the name of the triune God and be raised in the Christian faith' (Kvamme, Lindhardt & Steineger 2008, p. 104).

Like the young Catholics, the young members of the Lutheran Church commented on the textbook's focus on the physical aspects of the service. Annicken stated that the textbook 'described [the service] extremely from the outside', and Ingrid found that 'it describes the physical aspects'.

Later in the interview, the moderator asked whether the informants found such a presentation of their religious service acceptable or perceived it to be misleading for students who lacked an insider's experience.

(LA1) Annicken: It seems really superficial. I felt kind of, or I, I see the point that Marte made; that I am made aware of what happens, but I really do not think that this was a really good description of what really takes place.

(LA2) Ingrid: It is more like a report, I would say.

(LA3) Marte: It was supposed to ...

(LA4) Ingrid: It is not a description of how Christians experience it. It is not.

(LA5) Iselin: It would be possible to explain eventually why the child is baptised, just like Marte said, rather than making it very, [describing] all that happens, to make us understand why it is done. Because if not it might seem a bit pointless.

(LA6) Marte: Yes, because we have religious education to learn to understand people who belong to another religion than we do. Isn't that the main reason why we have religious education? And if a non-Christian reads this, I do not think he or she will get a stronger reason to respect me.

During this portion of the interview, the informants emphasised that the textbook failed to present a real understanding of the acts taking place in the service. Annicken (LA1) described the textbook excerpt as 'superficial', and Ingrid (LA2, LA4) described it as a 'report' that did not inform the reader about 'how Christians experience it'. Iselin (LA5) added that the lack of explanation made the baptismal rite 'seem a bit pointless', while Marte (LA6) found that the absence of the experiential dimension threatened to undermine the purpose of religious education, which in her opinion was to 'learn to *understand* people who have another religion than we do'.

Eventually, the conversation focused on how textbooks might deal with aspects of the personal experience of religion:

(LA7) Marte: I remember I read about Islam, it is in the same textbook. Then it went like this: 'When Muslims do this, they feel like they hover in God's something'. The text presented the dancing, swirling dervishes or something, I do not remember exactly. In any case, I felt like they [were saying]: 'when they do this they feel that they experience the presence of God'. And it became sort of extremely, I feel it becomes a bit strange to read, because it was very much like they describe an emotion extremely from the outside. And I think it may also be strange to [say]: 'when Christians say their creed, they feel that they can ...'.

[...]

(LA8) Marte: ... the fact that they describe it like: 'Yes, this is a bit far out, and now we are trying to find words to describe it'.

(LA9) Mariel: I think feelings, how you experience things, might be very hard to describe. So you cannot write about everything, sort of, and get the impression: 'oh, that is really nice'. It is something, perhaps, that has to be experienced.

(LA10) Marte: It differs from person to person.

(LA11) Ingrid: Or you might emphasise that it actually is hard to understand.

(LA12) Marte: And that it is something that is shared.

(LA13) Ingrid: Write that instead.

(LA14) Marte: Because how it looks, that is obvious to everyone. But how Annicken experiences worship and how I experience singing a hymn and how we experience a prayer or we experience the presence of God – that may differ extremely. Some will feel chills; others will feel nothing. And it is sort of, it might also be misleading to emphasise: 'it is felt like this or that'. It is a challenging balance. It must be hard to write textbooks.

In this sequence of the interview, the informants raised questions about the verbal communication of personal relationships. Mariel (LA9) emphasised the difference between experience and description and the possibility that descriptions might fail to convey the reality of an experience. Ingrid (LA11 and LA13) suggested that textbooks could not attempt to describe religious experience but instead emphasise that it is not easily communicated or explained.

The most loquacious informant in this instance, Marte, reflected in lengthy sequences on the possible communicative effects of textbooks' efforts to describe religious experience. She argued that descriptions – found in a textbook – of the swirling dervishes might give the impression of religious experiences as odd or 'far out' (LA7, LA8). In the last part of the cited sequence (LA14), she argued that, while the physical aspects of religious practice are easily observed and described, the inner experience is highly individualised and that generalised descriptions of such experiences is misleading.

While Marte reflected on the challenge of making religious experience understandable, in an earlier part of the interview Iselin addressed the experience of personal belief as a vulnerable position:

(LB1) Iselin: Part of what I think [related to faith] is vulnerability, because you put yourself, ... or it is something of the most personal nature you have concerning faith, because you have that great confidence in something you do not see or cannot prove concretely, or you have sort of only yourself and this relationship. And you may of course share it with others but in a way you have your own unique faith. Everyone have their own relationship with God through daily life and the Bible and so on. So to discuss one's own faith with others I find, it becomes very like vulnerable because it is so personal. And also, they might ask very direct, tough questions about how you can believe in something you do not see, for example. And then it is very vulnerable when you realise how important that faith is to you but also how difficult it is to explain.

In this comment, Iselin emphasised that personal faith was ‘vulnerable’ because it was unique and hard to explain to others. Iselin and the other Lutheran informants thus partly confirmed the reflections of the young Catholics. Like the Catholics, the Lutheran informants found that the textbook presentation focused on the physical aspects of the service and under-communicated the experiential aspects. The Lutheran informants added to the reflection an emphasis on the individual uniqueness of personal experience. In particular, Marte stressed this point to the degree that she questioned whether a textbook presentation could properly deal with personal experience. She argued that experience is unique and cannot be representative of Muslims or Christians in general. Toward the end of the interview, Marte emphasised that this limitation constrained insight into and understanding of other religions: “we have just been presented one religion, Islam ... I am aware that I miss that part: how this is *experienced* by a Norwegian Muslim. I think in a way that I do not know. I know *a lot* about Islam. I can describe the five pillars and articles of faith and everything. But what is the value of all this when I encounter a Muslim?”

In Marte’s opinion, the purpose of religious education is to promote understanding, and she questioned whether verbal textbook presentations could contribute to such an understanding. Although Marte did not question the possibility of describing individual religious experience itself, she pointed to the possible loss of authenticity when experience is translated into language and how descriptions of religious experience might induce a sort of cognitive distortion or estrangement.

Reflections

The interview excerpts presented above problematise the premises for communicating religion in religious education in a twofold way. The Catholic informants questioned the ability of religious education to communicate the invisible or spiritual aspects of religion in a way that makes them accessible and understandable to non-religious pupils. The informants from the Lutheran Church of Norway questioned the ability of religious education, or at least textbooks, to communicate religious experience in a way that makes it recognisable to others. In sum, the informants raised the question of whether religious education could present religion as a phenomenon with spiritual and experiential dimensions.

Through reflections on the sacrament of confession, the Catholic informants demonstrated how religious experience, to some extent, can be addressed through the use of analogy and descriptions of the physical aspects and psychological effects of rituals. While some of the Lutheran informants stressed the individual uniqueness and fragility of personal faith, the Catholic informants showed how a shared experience might be communicated to give personal expressions a more aggregated group-level character. These differences in the accentuation of faith by the two groups are interesting as manifestations of historical tradition, but they should not be exaggerated, as this issue was not followed up and addressed during the interviews.

The informants' reflections provided glimpses into group conversations where thoughts under development were formulated and tested in a sphere of communication shared with a group of co-believers. Mediated through the moderator, the group conversations were of a tentative nature, and as reflections of informants, expressed in everyday language, they do not represent an academic, philosophical or theological level of reflection. Nevertheless, the informants' reflections contain elements of thought that seem sufficiently distinct to serve as the basis for further elaboration, applying the philosophical perspectives introduced earlier in this paper.

From one point of view, the informants did not address the theological and philosophical question of the unsayable as a principal question of ontology. The informants' reflections can be read as expressions of a lack of adequate means of communication; however, it can also be argued that the informants indirectly raised the question of whether discourses are available for the communication of the spiritual and personal aspects of faith and, if not, what possible reductionist effects this absence of language might have on the presentation of religion as a phenomenon in the classroom.

The philosophical perspectives introduced in this paper respond to the challenges of informants in different ways. The discourse of the apophatic demonstrates that the phenomenon of the unsayable is well known to thinkers in the fields of philosophy, theology and the arts (Franke 2007a, 2007b). Moreover, the perspectives presented show that philosophical and theological discourses of the unsayable are not denials of expression or communication; rather, the discourse of apophasis suggests that the unsayable can be communicated to an extent, albeit indirectly in a deconstructive manner, as the dialectics of positive and negative uses of language activates a realm of transcendence. Similarly, the philosophy of Levinas (2002) shows that language might imply a reduction of the uniqueness of human presence. Thus, the philosophical perspectives seem to confirm the legitimacy and relevance of the challenges raised by the informants.

Moreover, the empirical data and the philosophical perspectives implicitly point towards possible ways of dealing with the challenges. Drawing on these implications, there are three possible approaches for dealing with the aspect of the unsayable within religious education:

1. The use of philosophical perspectives as part of an educational framework
2. The use of analogies – from music
3. The use of empirical material on religious experience

While the reflections in the following sections address possible sources for expanding the classroom presentation of religion, they do not discuss through which means this should be done. It may be argued that traditional textbooks still play a dominant role in education, at least in the Norwegian context (Juuhl et al. 2010), and that textbooks should be extended to include additional sources of understanding. It may, however, also be argued that web resources related to textbooks tend to make additional resources available to an increasing extent, and that the issue at stake has more to do with the framing and purpose for using the resources than the possible access to the resources.

Use of philosophical perspectives as part of an educational framework

That existing philosophical and theological perspectives address some of the issues raised by the informants can serve as the first step in responding to the question of how to deal with the unsayable in religious education. The interview excerpts create the impression that the textbooks and religious education lessons do not make the informants aware of the philosophical and theological discourses of the unspeakable or of the possible reductionism of language. The first response to the challenges raised by informants, therefore, might be to incorporate these philosophical and theological discourses into the framework applied for religious education. The inclusion of such perspectives could facilitate more general reflections on the nature and possible limits of human understanding of reality and how language contributes to this understanding. There, admittedly, is an obvious challenge related to the level of philosophical abstraction found in the philosophical and theological perspectives discussed in this paper. The perspectives might require various adaptations to be comprehensible to the average pupil.

However, given the successful establishment of such a framework, the existence of the unsayable as an aspect of religion might become more explicit and accessible to pupils. Religiously devout pupils might find a firmer basis from which to encounter questions from classmates who hold secular or materialist positions, and secular pupils might gain the understanding that the non-visible and non-explainable are not attributed only to religion but are also found in other humanities such as language, music and the arts. Although one might argue that this alignment of religion with the humanities might produce another threat of reductionism, this alignment might ease the burden experienced by religious pupils of defending religion against a criticism that in reality indicts other humanities as well.

In a parallel way, Levinas's (2002) perspective might serve as a framework for dealing with the uniqueness and vulnerability of the personal religious experience as expressed, in particular, by the informants from the Lutheran Church of Norway. Levinas adds philosophical strength and credibility to this uniqueness by describing the distance between that which is mediated through language (the *said*) and the direct encounter (the *saying*) and by explaining how the direct encounter with the Other represents an absolute challenge of respect and concern. While the distinction between saying and said represents a relatively advanced level of philosophical abstraction, Levinas also offers more communicable metaphors, such as the direct encounter with the *face* of the Other as opposed to the trace of the Other found in verbal descriptions.

Use of analogies – from music

Although philosophical perspectives and reflections might be accessible to some pupils, others might need less abstract and formal approaches to the unsayable as a phenomenon. Earlier, the field of music was described as an area where aspects of the unspoken might also be found. Many pupils are already familiar with music, so this

field might serve as a source for possible analogies of religious experience. While Franke (2007a, 2007b) emphasises philosophical approaches to the unspeakable aspects of music, other researchers have presented more empirical descriptions of the musical experience (Bernard 2009, Herbert 2011).

Such studies indicate that both education and contextual circumstances influence the musical experience. Meyer (1994), for instance, describes the differences in the experiences of the educated versus the uneducated listener. Other studies describe experiences that are not interpreted through professional frameworks, focusing on how everyday music experience might be expressed (Herbert 2011) based on analyses of reports from music listeners.

Herbert (2011) found that informants described experiences of ‘absorption’ understood as ‘an effortless, non-volitional quality of deep involvement with the objects of consciousness’ and different than more goal directed, effortful engagement (Herbert 2011, p. 87). For instance, the informant Gary seemed to experience how listening narrows the awareness to a point of ‘non-thought’: ‘I think it’s quite hard to explain beyond the fact that it’s just somewhere quite comfortable I think’ (Herbert 2011, p. 65). Other informants compared absorption to a strong emotional experience in which music was the main focus of attention. David described the atmosphere as a kind of absorption where ‘you just don’t think about anything else other than what’s going on and what you’re listening to’ (Herbert 2011, p. 87). Sophie added that this absorption was a sort of holistic experience, as ‘the whole crowd and the music and the performers were one thing ... a particularly, almost spiritual experience’ (Herbert 2011, p. 87). Sophie also described how, on another occasion, she experienced the music, landscape, skyline and birds as merging into a united experience – ‘more like a moment of meditation’ as she could ‘filter out any unwanted thoughts and be absorbed in the landscape’ (Herbert 2011, p. 88).

As these examples show, musical experience can vary, ranging from thought-reduction to emotional absorption to the union of music and surroundings. While the informants seemed somewhat able to describe their experiences, the nature of these experiences remains non-communicable to an extent, as stated by psychologist John A. Sloboda who describes music listening as ‘a series of fleeting, largely uncommunicable mental images, feelings, memories, and anticipations’ (cited in Bundra 2006, p. 6). Such a musical experience takes place in a mental landscape that partly exceeds the realm of language and communicative means. To the extent that pupils are able to recognise the nature and individuality of such experiences, they can serve as a means of entry to reflection on the unspoken aspects of religion. Religious education may try to create a basis for reflection by stimulating pupils’ memories of musical experience by exposing them to the experiences of others, as demonstrated in the material cited above. Or, the education may engage pupils in reflection based on direct listening experiences.

Use of empirical material on religious experience

Although analogy might introduce pupils to the emotional dimension of religion, it approaches religion from the perspective of experience in general. To approach the believer's experience in a more substantial way, one might search for experiences that are specifically related to religion but address aspects of a less transcendent nature than the experience of God in the Eucharist or personal prayer or meditation.

The Warwick University project 'Bridges to Religion' has demonstrated that empirical material can challenge and extend traditional textbooks' emphasis on the normative theological essence and practice of religions. The Warwick textbooks present pupils with narratives and quotations displaying the religious practices and beliefs of boys and girls of the readers' own age and, through tasks, invite pupils to reflect on these practices and beliefs. Some examples from a textbook for ages 11-14 illustrate this approach (Robson 1995). Based on a presentation of Stacey, a member of the Orthodox Church whose mother states that 'God is a mystery', the pupils are asked to note and illustrate things they find 'mysterious' such as 'dreaming' and 'growing up' (Robson 1995, p. 11). Another task refers to Abigail and her participation in a Pentecostal service and asks pupils to list 'three feelings which this worship tries particularly to encourage' and discuss 'which activities mentioned in this unit would be most likely to help a worshipper feel this way' (Robson 1995, p. 29).

These tasks show how religious education textbooks can include empirical material as the basis for reflection on experiential aspects of religion. Admittedly, the tasks seem to presuppose that pupils possess some pre-understanding of these aspects of reality and religion and can meaningfully relate to the concepts and phenomena that are addressed in the tasks. If such pre-understanding is lacking, alternative approaches might be required.

The empirical material from the interviews presented in this paper shows that verbal descriptions of religious experience can vary. Based on interview statements, some classroom contexts might offer a safe space for reflection on the limits of communication related to religion. In other contexts, it might be more suitable to use such material as the young Catholics' descriptions of the psychological and almost physical aspects of the confession experience. If compared and related to more substance-oriented and practice-oriented textbook presentations, these excerpts may give pupils access to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between aspects of religious experience that can and cannot be communicated.

Concluding remarks

This paper discusses whether religious education mediates a limited understanding of religion and to what extent strategies might counter such limitations in teaching and learning about religion. The empirical data from the young informants show that religious pupils experience difficulties communicating the transcendent or experiential aspects of religion in the classroom context and question to what extent it is even possible to communicate such aspects in this context. Based on a literature review, the

paper shows that philosophical and theological perspectives add depth and validity to the informants' questions, and through the subsequent reflections, the paper points out how the literature and empirical data point toward possible strategies to meet the challenges raised by the informants.

By suggesting perspectives and approaches that might expand a limited understanding of religion this paper contributes to the efforts initiated by Jackson to overcome reductionism in religious education by emphasising the individual and group levels of religion (Jackson 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). The paper partly draws on Jackson's educational work, suggesting that empirical material might give the individual aspects of faith a more prominent place in religious education. However, the empirical data presented in this paper also reveal the potential fragility of individual positions, especially when dealing with the unsayable aspects of religion. In this respect, the interviews also demonstrate that group conversations can contribute to a shared mediation of religious faith, which can reduce this fragility by expressing an experience that exceeds the individual level.

Through the review of the literature and data, this paper points toward a possible boundary zone in religious education between what is verbally communicable and what transcends language. Educational work in this boundary zone encounters challenges that will demand further discussion and elaboration. One such challenge is simultaneously handling the tentative mediations of the un-mediated and the possible reductionism implicit in the use of verbal mediations. A second challenge is to develop premises for reflection on the un-mediated aspects of religion by pupils (and teachers) who hold essentially secular and materialistic positions and do not accept the reality of the transcendent aspects of religion and religious experience. Although the psychological aspects of analogies, such as the experience of music and psychotherapeutic relief, might be accessible from a secular perspective, the analogies themselves might mediate a construction of religion significantly different than the notion of religion experienced by religious pupils.

Educational work in the boundary zone between notions of religion as culturally mediated and un-mediated implies the development of boundary objects. Star and Griesemer (1989) define these as 'objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use' (Star & Griesemer 1989, p. 393).

To negotiate religion as a boundary object thus implies a view of religion as a relatively open and inclusive object in the boundary zone (weak structures) and as more definite and focused (precisely structured) objects in the zones defined by pupils' positions (secular or religious). Although the present study does not investigate how religion is perceived from the positions of secular pupils, the empirical data nevertheless point toward a boundary zone challenge. The Catholic informants and their secular classmates seem to agree that the Catholic sacrament of communion involves specific physical elements, such as the handling of bread and wine, but the more theological aspects of, for instance, transubstantiation are not shared perceptions.

Two separate objects seem to exist: a critical-factual notion of religion and an experiential-factual notion of religion. Although the two notions potentially share the basic factual aspects of religion, these facts are perceived from within frameworks shaped by different basic positions.

Reflections in the boundary zone could strengthen a more general awareness of how different aspects of what we call reality are perceived and communicated. The development of a boundary object also requires the inclusion of mutual exercises in taking emic perspectives from different positions. As the informant Marte states, developing mutual understanding and respect could be seen as a central motif of religious education. However, to make this motif visible to all pupils, it might be necessary to construct tasks, guidelines and evaluation criteria that emphasise such goals and point out how pupils can work toward them. As the primary contribution of the present study is to raise these challenges and to suggest possible ways to address them, research is still needed to establish well-founded strategies for including the unsayable aspects of religion in secular, multi-faith religious education.

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