

Student Conceptions of Religion: Ethics and Cosmology as Essential Elements

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Abstract: This abductively oriented empirical article investigates the use of ‘essences’ and ‘central themes’ in student-made ‘religions’ created as an optional written assignment among Norwegian upper secondary school students. The article aims to add to the discussions on how ‘religion’ is conceptualised and taught, with a particular focus on religious studies and religious didactics. It describes the coding and analysis process and showcases the data. The results are discussed, with an emphasis on the abductively produced categories of ethics and cosmology, chosen due to their prevalence and depth in the data. The religions are compared to Ninian Smart’s dimensional model of religion, used as a method to describe which parts of ‘religion’ have been included or omitted in the student-made religions. Lastly, I discuss how educators might go forward and suggest a didactics-based discussion on how to deal with religious experience and ritual in the classroom.

Keywords: religion, religious didactics, religious studies, religious education

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Introduction

As teachers in the classroom, and as spectators to the many public debates on ‘religion’ that play out in break rooms, on social media and in newspapers, we can observe many approaches to religion and different conceptions of what religion is and religions are. Some statements seem like variations on recurring themes: “You are X, so then you have to believe in Y”, “My family is from a Catholic country, so that’s why we are Catholics”, “I’m not religious, but spiritual”, or “All X pray Y times per day”.

Statements like these can be seen as indications of theories and suppositions about what religion is and how it operates in our shared culture. From such statements, we can induce and construct implicit theories of religion to further our understanding of the emic uses of concepts related to religion.

Investigating the content associated with the concept of ‘religion’ as it is understood and used by non-specialists is interesting for many reasons. Lawmakers and the voters that give them the power to shape and mould our societies and shared future rely on terms like these to navigate difficult terrain, such as human rights and culture. The students and pupils that those of us who teach and lecture on topics of religion meet in classrooms and lecture halls tend to associate religion with different things and have different ideas of what religion is and must be. Background knowledge and assumptions are vital areas to investigate if we want to adapt our teaching strategies and curriculum to address the students where they actually are, rather than where we think they should be by now.

Geir Skeie (2015) has suggested, reflecting on articles by Torsten Hylén (2012) and John I’Anson (2004), that religious didactics should explore the position of being a ‘third space’ between the academic study of religion and the classroom practice of teachers. The third space would allow us to mediate between post-essentialist conceptions of religion from the academic study and the more essentialist conceptions that student teachers find in curricula and pupils (I’Anson, 2004). To do this, Skeie reflects that we should ‘start where the students are.’

This project aims to add to this effort by investigating how Norwegian upper secondary school pupils conceptualise ‘religion’.

In order to address this issue, a research design was developed with the intention of producing information about the conceptualisation rather than the personal beliefs or views of the students regarding religion. These elements are not easy to separate, but I decided to establish some degree of reflective distance between the students’ personal views on religion and ‘religion’ as a concept, and to produce data that would make this possible to research. This was done in the following way: I gathered data from a single upper secondary school by asking teachers to present their students with the optional task of ‘creating and describing a new religion.’ The pilot project ran in the early months of 2019, while the actual data collection took place during August of the same year using students that had recently enrolled in religion and ethics courses during their final year of upper secondary school. We received 181 responses, meaning that we had 181 new ‘religions’ to look at and analyse, ranging in scope from a single sentence to a full page of text.

The data consisted of a random sample of 50 out of the 181 responses. The reason for reducing the sample from 181 was to have a manageable amount of data for the analysis. These qualitative data are not representative, but they are sufficient to discuss the issue of the students’ background ideas of religion. The focus of the analysis rests on proposed ‘cores’ and ‘essences’, which are based on identified signifiers that assert the significance of a conceptual element.

Based on a selection of these data, this empirically driven article presents and discusses codes produced abductively (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) from a content analysis of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Subsequently, this is situated within the academic discussion of ‘world religions’ and similar paradigms, which I take to be dominant conceptualisations of religion within this geographical and professional context (Anker, 2017). I also discuss the findings with reference to some recent empirical studies that have included material about young people’s understanding of religion.

Do religions have a point?

Many of the students use phrases like ‘the point of this religion is ...’, ‘this religion is about ...’, ‘the important part of this religion is ...’, and so on. This suggests that their religions have a point to them, a central trait, theme or characteristic, a *sine qua non*.

The prevalence of what I call ‘central themes’ in the narratives are shown to be so prominent in the initial analysis that they were therefore made a part of the early coding process. The relevance to my research interest in the conceptualisation of religion is that here the student texts can be seen as paralleling the scholarly discussions on ‘religion’. In religious studies, scholars have posited as many ‘cores’ of religion as there are stars in the sky (see, for instance, Gilhus, 2009), many of them seemingly mutually exclusive, such as William James’ insistence on personal, individualised mystical experiences (2003) and Émile Durkheim’s focus on religion as a social system that is reflective of the societies that constitute it (Durkheim & Cladis, 2008). Seeing the students weigh in on this topic is interesting in itself, as a potential start to a discussion between ‘religion’ as a contemporary, popular, Western concept and ‘religion’ as it is understood as a second order term by various scholars. This effort could also function as a potential aid to teachers and lecturers, so that we know which conceptualisations of religion we might be dealing with when we encounter our students and pupils in the classroom, knowledge which may allow us to adjust our teaching strategies and content accordingly.

Within the wider project of investigating the students’ background knowledge of religion, the present article investigates the following research questions:

1. Are the students proposing ‘essences’ and ‘cores’ when they ‘make and describe a new religion’?
2. If so, how are they proposing essences and attributing significance?
3. What conceptual elements are they proposing as essential?

The research questions reflect my working process after having immersed myself in the dataset and the abductively produced codes, which are based on the immersion process and knowledge of the academic field of the conceptualisation of religion. Research Question 1 describes the first novel discovery of the subject, formulated as a question. Question 2 goes on to ask how these essences are put forward by the respondents and identified by the researcher. Question 3 focuses on what interests me most and it is most relevant to both a religious study and a religious-didactic-oriented analysis and discussion: what are the conceptual elements? What kind of content do the respondents treat as essential in their constructed religions?

Signifying an essence

‘Cores’ and ‘essences’ in concepts of religion are interesting due to their prevalence in the academic debate on religion, as well as observing religious people describe different parts of their own religion as either essential or ‘just culture’ and thus discardable. Much of my personal interest in the subject has been sparked by Ann Taves’ ‘building block approach’ to religion and other complex cultural concepts, where she describes such entities as composed of various bits, pieces and elements that stick together in different ways (2009).

Having immersed myself in the entire dataset, I recognised the contours of a particular strategy or way of signifying such an essence in the student responses. For the purposes of this article, I have decided to focus on a specific signifier that I found to be prevalent in the material and of specific interest to my initial research interests:

‘This religion is about ...?’

The respondents use variants of the phrase ‘is about’ (*handler om* in Norwegian). Early in the coding process, I noted that many respondents wrote that the religion they were making and describing ‘was about’, ‘centred on’ or ‘focused on’ something. This was the terminology

employed by the respondents and, in so doing, they could be interpreted as proposing a central or essential element in their constructed religion.

Sentences that followed this format were coded in two parts, one ‘signifier’ to show how I understood them to propose an essential element, and a ‘content’ code to highlight the diverse conceptual elements that are taken to be essential. The rest of this article will focus on the ‘content’, to investigate further which pieces of the puzzle were described as essential.

Coding process

I started out by producing preliminary codes in an inductive manner. From this extensive process, I sharpened initial research questions, focusing on the trends I found interesting, such as the signified essences mentioned above. After having discovered the complexity of the sample, I decided to limit the analysis to a part of the data in order to achieve more depth in the analysis. A second coding process was initiated on a smaller, random sample of 50 student responses, following the coding schema of ‘signifier’ and ‘content’. The responses were coded verbatim in Nvivo.

The following stage of the analysis consisted of the development of themes or category groups developed on the basis of the first, basic codes, utilising language from the academic disciplines to put words to the content described by the students to be essential. Codes that were especially prevalent and rich were split into subcategories to make it possible to express the contents of the student responses. In an effort to use simple and easily understandable language, I have decided to refer to the developed codes as ‘categories’ and ‘subcategories’ respectively. While being developed, the categories were kept in a fluid state; sometimes I decided on merging those I found to overlap significantly, and sometimes I added in subcategories in an effort to properly express variant trends within a category.

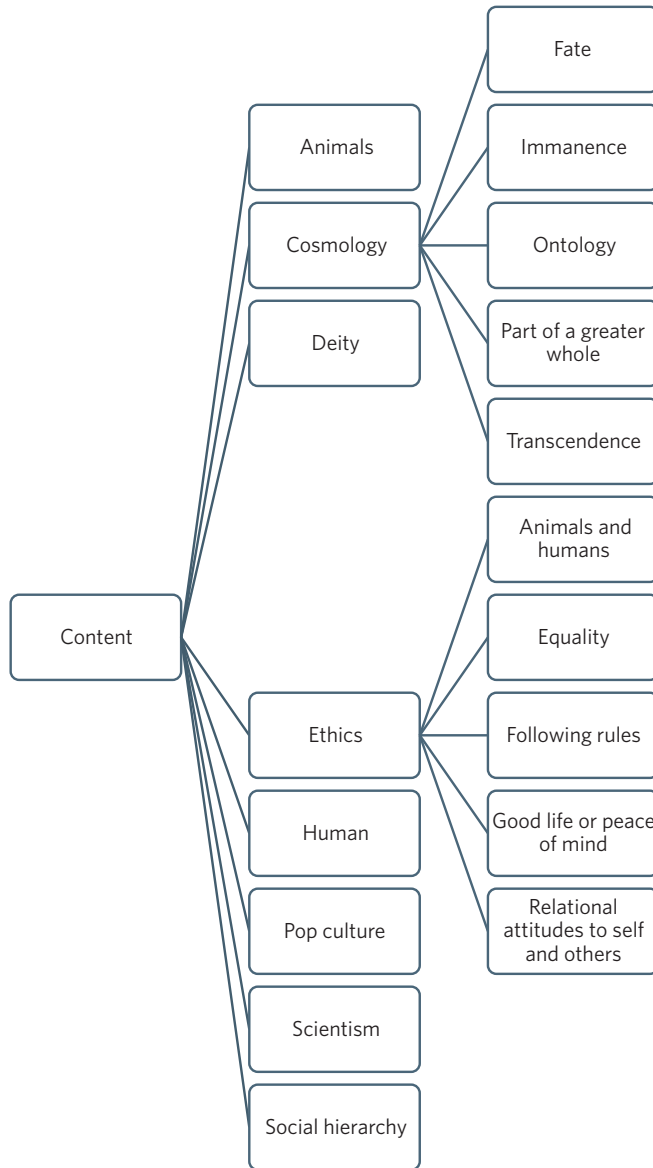
Qualitative coding is creative work, which calls upon the researcher to make difficult choices. I have, for example, included a reference to a karmic law under ‘ethics’, while others might think it could just as well belong under ‘cosmology’, which is a reductive choice I have made to try to keep true to my reading of intent and emphasis in the particular student response. Coding is a reductive process that will distil nuance and overlap into more manageable categories. I urge the reader to keep this in mind.

As can be seen in Table 1, subcategories such as ontology, transcendence and immanence are gathered under the category of cosmology. The two latter subcategories can be seen to overlap semantically with ontology, but they have been differentiated in order to retain the emphasis of the students’ responses. I also wished to preserve this nuance due to the prevalence of transcendence as a substantial element in defining ‘religion’ and ‘the sacred’ among scholars and transcendently committed religious people, and wanted to see how that conceptual element was used in the dataset (see, for instance, the definition of religion offered in Repstad, 2020, p. 13).

As a result of the coding process, ‘ethics’ has turned into the most prominent category, with an entire host of subcategories. These were judged to be necessary in order to do justice to the richness of the content covered by the overall category of ethics in the student responses. I have taken ‘ethics’ to signify both social ethics and a perhaps more Aristotelian sense of living ‘the good life’ as a human being. We live in an age where ideas of ‘self-realisation’ are prevalent, for instance in the form of ‘seekers’ or religious individualisation (Berger, 2014; Lundby, 2021; Repstad, 2020). Perhaps student responses focusing on ‘the good life’ could be interpreted as ways of communicating social capital rather than ethical ideas, but I take the emphasis and tone to be closer to peace of mind and living a worthwhile life, which are subjects I consider to be ethical in substance.

After dealing with several interpretive dilemmas like the ones mentioned above, it was possible to construct a map of conceptual categories that covered the analysed material:

Table 1. Content coded as categories and subcategories



Content and categories

In this section, I describe and comment on the various categories, with emphasis on what they tell us about the students' views. Note that the content map (Table 1) is arranged vertically in alphabetical order,

meaning that the position of each element is not intended to convey any meaning beyond the category to subcategory relationship, which can be read horizontally.

Animals is a comparatively small category concerned with the role of animals, where rules of behaviour towards them are not included; these are instead subsumed into the category of ethics. The two category members are simply variants on the phrase ‘a religion where the animals are in focus’.

As can be seen in Table 1, the category of ‘*Cosmology*’ includes 5 subcategories: fate, immanence, ontology, part of a greater whole and transcendence.

‘Fate’ refers to responses that presented conceptions of universal freedom of will or universal fatalism as essential elements in the constructed religion, or as something between these two binary positions. I decided to unite them in this common code rather than divide them up into smaller codes representing the various positions, because of the relatively low amount of code group members. This shows us that few students pictured religion as essentially preoccupied with universal freedom of will or universal fatalism. Such elements are included as a smaller piece in the larger construction of a religion, but seldom as an essential part of that construction in the sense of being marked by a signifier code.

Immanence and transcendence stand as opposites, indicating essential concepts that I take to be either the one or the other, such as placing importance on the physicality of ‘the atom, which created the universe’ or, inversely, positing that the universe is an elaborate simulation, with another, more ‘real’ reality somewhere beyond this. I found this divide particularly relevant to investigate, as both scholars and believers have tried to define religion and religiosity as intrinsically linked with ideas or experiences of transcendence. In this dataset, a small group of students have posited either transcendence or immanence as an essential conceptual element of their religion, and the split between the two is roughly equal. Note, however, that there is an overlap between the codes and the code groups. ‘Deity’, for instance, can be taken to signify transcendence if it is interpreted in a particular way, a choice I have decided against for reasons elaborated on in the commentary on that category.

Ontology as a subcategory has a significant overlap with immanence and transcendence, and acts as a third option for codes and sentiments that do not fit neatly into the latter two. Examples include positions and content such as ‘everything is relative’ or ‘an energy given to us long ago’.

‘Part of a greater whole’ contains ideas suggesting or insisting that you are a part of a greater whole. This connectedness can be expressed as a cosmic puzzle or as something benign that watches over you and delivers you from isolation and loneliness. I decided to group these under ‘cosmology,’ as they seem to say that the greater whole is an intrinsic part of the composition of the universe and the self.

Deity is a category that was used when students included a god or gods explicitly as an essential element of their new religion. I must admit that I was surprised to see so few instances of this, as ‘do you believe in God?’ is a question that many seem to ask as if it is synonymous with ‘are you religious?’ and many studies and books concerning religion tend to focus on gods (see, for instance, Norenzayan, 2013). Many students included deities in their descriptions, but few described them as essential to the religion. The three instances were: ‘one god for every country in the world’, described as a system of multiple national deities, with each nation being represented and watched over by their specific god; ‘The God Guddha’, a monotheism featuring a central god with a name based on a pun on ‘god’ (*gud* in Norwegian) and ‘Buddha’; and finally, the third instance is a system where there is a single god representing and watching over the population of every individual planet in the universe, perhaps carrying out the logic of ‘national deities’ to the space age and science-fiction inspired ideas of planetary colonisation. Because of the implicit or explicit immanence inherent in the descriptions of these deities, as in the worldliness of a ‘Guddha’ or the gods of the nation states, I have decided against subcategorising them under the category of ‘transcendence’.

Ethics is by far the largest categorical group in the data set, and various subcategories were instrumental in representing the variation of the contents more clearly.

‘Animals and humans’ simply relates to the relationship or behaviour between the two categories of creatures.

Equality is a large subcategory, which expresses attitudes such as ‘everyone is welcome, no matter who they are’, or explicitly defines their terms as in ‘no matter if you are man or woman, black or white, young or old, boy or girl’. The code group also includes expressions of universal human rights, forbidding discrimination of all kinds or insisting that the specific religion is ‘for everyone’ as an essentially important trait of the religion. In terms of specific discussions of equality as inclusion, gender equality was mentioned most often and was done so primarily in terms of equality or non-discrimination between men and women.

‘Following rules’ has some overlap with the previous subcategory. ‘Discrimination is not allowed’ can easily be understood as a rule, but I decided to group it under ‘equality’ due to my reading of the emphasis. Some specific rules are mentioned, such as the ‘golden rule’ and the ‘law of Cardamom’, from the popular Norwegian children’s book and play by Thorbjørn Egner (1955): ‘One shall not bother others, one shall be nice and kind, otherwise one may do as one pleases’. Others simply consider rule-following in itself to be essential to their religion, or emulation of an exemplary figure within the religion as a path to personal development to be significant. A majority of the rules seem to provide regulations on how to treat other human beings.

‘Good life or peace of mind’ might be seen as a controversial subcategory of ethics, or even as two different categories entirely. After much reflection, I decided on this particular arrangement, since it expresses some of the novel content in the data material as discussed here and in the later sections, where the data is presented and reflected on. One participant included, for instance, ‘to live well with yourself and the choices you make’ as an essential element. I take this statement to be both ethical in the sense of making value judgements on your own choices and to be related to peace of mind or inner peace. Other respondents focus explicitly on self-realisation, ‘meditation and nurturing your soul,’ ‘not stressing and overthinking’ or ‘loving yourself’. I take all of these to point towards a foundational question in philosophy and ethics – how do we, as human beings, live good and full lives? Aristotle and Plato certainly filled volumes commenting on the subject, and the students themselves seem preoccupied with the question.

‘Relational attitudes to self and others’ is another difficult code. Again, there is some overlap with the category above, but I take the emphasis to be closer to relationality. The code members place significance in ‘believing in yourself and others’, ‘respecting each other’, and ‘loving one another’.

Using the above as a reductive summary of the presented results, we can conclude that while the religions are varied, the respondents put a strong emphasis on exploring themes that have been categorised as cosmology and ethics. Therefore, these present themselves as prominent and essentially important elements of religion. Within these categories, the students seem to focus on matters pertaining to wanted or unwanted restrictions on human behaviour through complex and varied content, tropes and ideals such as fate, freedom, equality, inclusivism, acceptance of self and others, self-fulfilment and inner peace. If we consider the students to be collectively involved in a similar enterprise to scholars of religion, namely to capture important elements of what religion is about, what does this material tell us about their ideas and how do these ideas compare with those of the scholars?

Discussion

Protestant Christianity as the prototype?

Many conceptions of religion have been criticised for being too closely modelled on modern variations of the themes set up by Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular to function properly as a universal concept (Asad, 1993; Cotter & Robertson, 2016; Dubuisson, 2003; Masuzawa, 2005). Among the features is a personal, individual faith you can freely choose to belong to and an object of this theology in the form of a deity or a transcendent ideal. Since Norway belongs to Protestant, northern Europe and, until recently, had a strong Lutheran state church, it seems relevant to investigate the representation of Protestant ‘bias’ in the student texts. The findings seem to reflect some of these points and abandon others. The ideals are rarely explicitly transcendental, and when deities are mentioned, there is little focus on them compared to categories like ethics.

In their texts, the students seem to have few problems envisioning and imagining religions in which ethics, moral duty and the quest for personal fulfilment feature as essential and important elements. What seems harder for them to imagine is why and how ritual, religious experience, religious hierarchy and religious materials can be meaningful to religious people. If this interpretation is valid, there is a possible parallel to the comparatively recent move away from the phenomenological approach to religion in universities, also reflected in curricula (Antes, 2016; Hylén, 2012). Phenomenologists of religion have had their claims and methodology widely criticised for good reason (see, for instance, Andreassen, 2010), but perhaps there lies some opportunity there for a didactical project that aims at teaching the subjects at the heart of the phenomenological enterprise, such as experience, in a responsible manner that responds to the critique levelled at the phenomenologists.

Seen from a methodological perspective, the students responded creatively to a task asking them to ‘create and describe a new religion’. They were not asked direct questions, such as ‘what is religion’ or ‘what should religion be like’ and, reflecting on how to interpret their responses in light of this indirect method, I find it impossible to distinguish between descriptive and normative authorial intent in the data. Instead, I see them as responding actively to something in their surrounding culture. Their religions are not created in a vacuum, and the preoccupation with equality, freedom of choice, inclusivity and egalitarianism can be seen as a response to medialised depictions of religion as a source of conflict with those values. This points in the direction of interpreting the student responses as mainly focusing on what they think religion could or should be and not necessarily what it currently is.

Even so, I find that the responses are tinged with elements and flavour that is ‘religion-like’. If they respond to possibly contextual representations of restrictive religious ethics by creating a religion with a focus on non-restrictive ethics, they are still describing religion as something they perceive as having a salient ethical dimension.

While I had not originally intended to investigate the specific values that the students were propagating, nor did I design the study with this purpose in mind, I find myself reflecting on their ethical positions, given

that ethics is so prevalent in their religions. Strong values are: inclusivity, peace of mind, individual freedom, equality, belief in yourself and your fellows. These are combined with suspicion towards hierarchies and restrictive rules, and a kind of soft disinterest in transcendence or deities. While being varied in form and content, and full of contrasting positions, they seem to sketch out the contours of a larger picture, an intangible consensus. Is this, in a Durkheimian sense, their own society reflected in the form of a religion? Is this the kind of religion they adhere to in their heart of hearts, if they put aside our labels and construct it from the bottom up? These reflections are certainly speculative, but I find them to be interesting thought experiments.

It seems difficult to find a term that adequately describes the overarching 'direction' of the students' values. Individualism does not catch the strong egalitarian and equality-driven parts of the puzzle. Conversely, egalitarianism and equality are at odds with the individualistic bent in the data. They are certainly not hedonists in the vulgar sense of the term either, as values such as peace of mind and belief in others are a lot more prevalent than the infrequent references to purely material or sensory pleasures.

While pondering these issues, I found a fruitful perspective in Alec Ryrie's (2019) description of the period since the Second World War as one dominated by the values of 'humanistic anti-Nazism'. Drawing on Callum Brown's study of non-belief (2017), Ryrie sketches out a change in the values and religiosity of the inhabitants of Europe and North America. He describes how the Christian religion was considered a moral and ethical paragon until the post 1960s and, while people might not have paid much heed to complicated theology, they could easily have described themselves as dedicated to the Christian ethos. This has changed. Brown's study of non-believers indicates that they were generally dedicated to some version of the 'golden rule', and 'a linked set of principles about human equality and bodily and sexual autonomy'. A form of 'humanism', Brown calls it, referring to how the respondents described themselves as being convinced of this before they discovered the term or broke with religion. This foundational ethical stance may have come into conflict with their religion or simply made it redundant, if their primary interest

was ethical guidance. Applied to the students' texts, the idea of a foundational, ethically oriented humanism could be interpreted as a description of the students' preoccupation with ethics in general, and values such as tolerance, individualism and egalitarianism in particular.

In the Norwegian context, ideas of what religion is or a religious person is have also shifted in contact with Muslims, Islam and contemporary media portrayals of these, which have tended towards depicting a conflict between the values of the religion of Islam and the values of the Norwegian majority population, though not exclusively (Repstad, 2020). This can be traced indirectly in the present data material through the way the students distance themselves from 'strict' religion. It seems to be directed more towards general 'fundamentalism' across religions than towards local Protestant prayer-house pietism.

These students seem more likely to conjure up an image of a conservative and intolerant Muslim preacher rather than, say, a Læstadian minister with the same traits. This means that this image of 'religion' is part of what they were reacting to when they took part in this research project and constructed a new religion in response. Viewed from this angle, the students could be seen as asserting 'their' values in contrast to the spectre of intolerant religion, which is often portrayed in the media and popular discourse (Lundby, 2021). While it might be tempting to consider this to be a case of the majority population confronting a Muslim minority, this need not be the case, as most Norwegian Muslims share 'Norwegian values' (Ishraq, 2017).

'World religions'

What has been included in the students' texts when it comes to representations of the central traits of religion? What has been excluded? To answer these questions, I will draw on Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion (1997). The reason is methodological since this literature is already part of the context and therefore not completely external to the actors. Smart's scheme has been used for decades, both in higher education and in the secondary school setting. In Norway, Smart's dimensions appear in textbooks both as a theoretical framework for analysing and

comparing religions, and as a way to organise knowledge about religions. The seven dimensions model has been criticised for being too simplistic, too essentialist, and modelled on a contemporary Western conception of religion – Protestant Christianity in particular (Andreassen, 2010). In spite of scholarly critique, teachers tend to use this scheme, perhaps due to lack of time and resources. My experience as a teacher educator indicates that teachers often use this model to facilitate analysis, investigation and comparison in the classroom. One reason for this continued popularity is that while there are many other models out there, they also fall short of representing the entire spectrum of what religion has, is and can be, in a way that is both nuanced, easy to understand and devoid of traces of the ‘blueprint-religion’ it has been modelled on. It is therefore quite possible that Smart’s model has influenced the teaching and learning of the students taking part in this inquiry, and it seems appropriate as a mirror to hold up in discussing the results of the analysis.

Smart’s claim is that religions have recognisable elements that can be studied, and he groups these into the following seven dimensions: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material. Smart introduced other models with other categories, but the ‘seven dimensions’ model has seen the most widespread use (Andreassen, 2010). If we use this as a ‘top down’ approach to the analysis of the present data, they are represented to a certain degree.

The doctrinal elements of the religions represented in the data seem to flow into the ethical and mythological dimensions. A rule, like ‘everyone is welcome in this religion’ is both ethical and doctrinal, as the student presents this as the sole authority on what the religion allows or contains. Similarly, with doctrine and mythology, a narrative spun as ‘this religion believes that X ...’ has the air of a doctrine, while ‘some people believe that X ...’ does not. Therefore, the doctrinal dimension can be argued to be mainly present as a mode of telling or structuring a claim within the student response in a sense that makes it sound official and declarative.

Mythological elements are certainly present and seem prevalent in the category I have grouped into ‘cosmology’. Here, the students’ religions deal with both stories framing the tradition and its world view and/or theology.

The ethical dimension of religion has been substantially represented within the dataset, grouped under the category bearing the same name.

Rituals are only occasionally mentioned or described; they are rarely given pride of place as an essential element of the religions. This therefore seems to be considered more foreign or epiphenomenal than the previous dimensions.

Religious experience is similarly absent. While we have some examples like ‘feeling like part of a greater whole’, there is little here to satisfy a mystic, one of Eliade’s *homo religiosus*, or even a scholar like William James, who took these experiences to be the beating heart of religion.

Institutions are mentioned, but rarely in a sense which conveys explicit importance. However, some of the responses describe the religion as if it functions as a single institution, in a sense loosely comparable to the vague concept of ‘Christendom’. The religions described in such a manner have strong borders and little room for variation, since they are worded in declarative and totalising ways, such as ‘in this religion everyone is welcome’, ‘in this religion, everyone has to ...’ or ‘this religion believes that ...’ – which could be interpreted as similar to how you would describe the rules and values of an institution rather than how you would describe fluid cultural currents, religious or otherwise, comprised of different people with different views and behaviour.

The material dimension of religion is mentioned sometimes, but again it is rarely considered to be essential. The students sometimes include buildings, books, clothing or places, and this often seems to be encyclopaedic in tone. ‘The holy place of this religion is X; it was founded Y years ago. They wear this piece of clothing, and believe in Z’ – as if the student is mimicking the formulaic tone of a textbook or Wikipedia article.

In summary, by imposing the dimensions of Ninian Smart on the data, the students’ texts present themselves with a strong focus on the mythological, ethical and doctrinal dimensions of religion, while the material, experiential and ritual dimensions are largely considered to be epiphenomenal or skimmed over. I interpret the institutional elements to be incorporated into the religion itself, as they are often described in

a totalising and declarative manner, setting the religion up as a single institution, rather than as something which could include a multitude of differing institutions.

As we have seen in the discussion about Smart's dimensions, the image of 'world religions' as a possible paradigm for the students' constructions of religions is not entirely confirmed by the data. As can be inferred by the analysis above, the students emphasise their imagined religions as individualistic, egalitarian, tolerant and preoccupied with equality, and the world religions as possibly confronted by insistence on such values. If so, then we have a challenging, but interesting and potentially fruitful starting point as teachers and lecturers, contrasting this view of what religion is and has been with others, opening up the concept to the myriad dimensions, phenomena, behaviours and perspectives that are covered by the broad and unwieldy concept of religion.

This may justify considering a responsible didactical use of phenomenological perspectives on religion as a possible answer to some of the findings in this study. Andreassen (2010) points out that Smart and his focus on religious experience has been used in didactics textbooks to turn the teaching aims from learning *about* religion to learning *from* religion, and thus into a religio-theological or even semi-confessional religious education. This critique is warranted and I share his concerns. What I propose instead is built on the lack of 'cores' and 'essences' concerned with religious experience, ritual, hierarchy and materials in the data material presented by this article. My intention is not that teachers should return to experience of the numinous as the sole root and core, or the *primus inter pares* of all religious phenomena, but to supplement a background understanding which seems focused on religion as social norms and rules with other perspectives. If students see religion primarily as sets of restrictive social rules, then educators can open up the category of religion as understood by students to encompass a wider range of interpretations and multiplicity, reflecting the rich work of scholars and researchers of religion. To do so, we need to tackle and convey matters of religious experience, but to do so in a way that avoids calling on our students to 'empathise' and 'open up to' experience of the numinous or the sacred as a transcendent category.

While we do not have access to the direct experiences of others, we can access their accounts of those experiences, and how these accounts have influenced and been understood by others. Ann Taves (2009) has been investigating this avenue fruitfully from a religious studies perspective, reflecting on how to study religious experience from a wide array of interconnected disciplines. Her work explores how people describe, identify and produce these experiences, and how they are, through the march of history, connected to or disconnected from the larger cultural concept of a particular religion. Based on the results from the present article and the work done by scholars like Taves, there may be potential for dealing with religious experience in educational settings, given that didactical reasoning is able to address this in a balanced way. Here, we may take advantage of the opportunities granted to us by what Skeie (2015) describes as a 'third space' occupied by didactics, situated between the research at the academic level and the teaching situation in schools. We might also benefit greatly from more didactical discussion on how to teach subjects like religious experience and ritual in a balanced way, as well as more research on how these subjects are currently taught in schools and universities.

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