

# RE Teachers' Religious Literacy

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A qualitative analysis of RE teachers' interpretations of the biblical narrative  
*The Prodigal Son*

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# Acknowledgements

This dissertation focuses on teachers and their role as the key interpretive agents and conveyers of subject knowledge. More specifically, I look into how religious education teachers (RE teachers) reflect and respond to one of the central subject matters in the RE curriculum: religious narratives. What happens when RE teachers interpret the biblical narrative *The Prodigal Son*? What do they bring from their own background and experience into the interpretive event? What aspects of the text do they recognize and emphasize, and what aspects do they ignore?

With my background in theology, I have had an interest in religious narratives, and particularly biblical narratives, for a long time. In my thirteen years as a teacher educator, one of my main objectives has been to trigger RE students' interest in these narratives and to make them discover their great potential, beyond their value as a resource in enhancing understanding of different religions. As an essential part of the world's literary library, religious narratives address and invite readers to reflect on truth and meaning, across borders of faith and traditions. Therefore, to use Louise M. Rosenblatt's words in her book *Literature as exploration*, I argue that "the study of literature," where religious narratives have a central position, "can have a very real, and even central, relation to the points of growth in the social and cultural life of a democracy" (1938, p. v). Undoubtedly, RE teachers play a key role in opening up this world to future generations.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introducing the theme

In the beginning of the new millennium, the international education evaluation reports of the PISA consortium<sup>1</sup> sent shock-waves into the Norwegian political establishment. The realism in the view of Norway as being among the weaker countries in mathematics, reading, and science was now acknowledged by every political party and soon a consensus was reached about the to implement a new national education reform; *Kunnskapsløftet: Læreplan for grunnskolen og videregående opplæring* [The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion].<sup>2</sup>

Whenever the quality of education and school is being discussed, the teacher becomes a central topic. Symptomatically, and what became a new element in the current debate in Norway, was the development of reality concepts on TV. Within one year (2009-2010), three shows set focus on teacher impact: *Læreren* [The teacher], *Med blanke ark* [Starting out], and *10 B* [The Class in Junior High] – all sparking popular debates in national media. More importantly, in the same period the government presented its ambitions for the teacher in the White Paper *Læreren: Rollen og utdanningen* [The teacher: The role and the education]<sup>3</sup> and also by initiating the campaign *Har du det i deg?* [Do you have what it takes?]. The current Minister of Higher Education, Tora Aasland, underlined what it all came down to on the kick-off day for the campaign: “to enhance the quality in the Norwegian school ... cannot be done without even more excellent teachers” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2009a, own translation).

More influential for the academic discourse was the publication of international quantitative education research, and the most significant of them all the so called “Hattie-report,” which

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<sup>1</sup> OECDs Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has since 2000 administered five assessments in mathematics, reading and science among 15-year-olds, from 2012 also assessing problem-solving (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The reform was implemented in 2006 (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Kunnskapsdepartementet (2009b)

confirmed the widespread and common assumption: The quality of the teacher is the most important factor in order to achieve *Visible learning*<sup>4</sup> in school (Hattie, 2009, p. 44).<sup>5</sup>

The teacher is, and I assume all will agree, expected to be knowledgeable in the subjects they teach. An essential part of what constitutes teacher quality is therefore teacher's subject knowledge. Yet, researchers in education have shown remarkably little interest in this aspect of the teachers' professional knowledge, as research on teachers tend to fall into two categories: 1. On the basis of the academic disciplines draw normative guidelines for what teachers should know, and 2. On the basis of empirical research develop the pedagogical platform for sound and good practice.<sup>6</sup> This implies that we know a good deal about curricula and pedagogical matters, but much less about teachers' understanding and meaning-making of what they actually teach. So I join Lee S. Shulman, who for a long time has called for such a focus in teacher research. He asks: "Where did the subject matter go? What happened to the content?" (Shulman, 1986, p. 5).<sup>7</sup>

The title of the dissertation – *RE Teachers' Religious Literacy* – is chosen to highlight RE teachers as the key bearers and conveyors of subject knowledge in school. By using the term *literacy* it may appear as if this is an assessment study in the spirit of PISAs evaluation reports. But, and opposed to the current widespread quality management thinking in education, where literacy is applied as a technical and given standard of competence, my interest is to *understand* RE teachers' religious literacy, that is, to examine what is going on when RE teachers make meaning of religion. Literacy, therefore, is viewed as something appropriated and as something that comes into being within particular domains, in this case RE (Barton, 1994, p. 37). In this context, literacy can be characterized as a "practice" (Street, 1984, p. 1), or better, to underline the situative and the specific focus on the individual RE teacher in this study, as an "event," defined by Shirley B. Heath as "any occasion in which a

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<sup>4</sup> The title of John Hattie's book is *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*.

<sup>5</sup> See also the McKinsey&Company report *How the world's best performing school systems came out on top* (Barber & Mourshed, 2007), and its sequel *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> For the case of RE, see the introduction in *Researching RE teachers. RE teachers as researchers* (Bakker & Heimbrock, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Shulman developed the influential Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) theory, which has had the ambition to "merg[e] content knowledge and pedagogy" (Shulman & Sparks, 1992). In recent studies, PCK has been the theoretical foundation for a vast amount of education research, particularly within mathematics and science (e.g. J. Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Loewenberg Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008).

piece of writing or [talk]<sup>8</sup> is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (Heath, 1981, p. 93). I will argue that it is by understanding the influences and how these are negotiated<sup>9</sup> by RE teachers in particular "literacy events" about religion, that it is possible to say something meaningful and significant about RE teachers' religious literacy.

In pursuing this aim I will center in on a religious narrative as the example of a subject knowledge matter and explore and describe in depth how a selection of RE teachers respond. I ask:

*What happens when RE teachers interpret the biblical parable The Prodigal Son?*<sup>10</sup>

The dissertation represents an ambition to create a needed space in education research for a critical and in-depth discourse on teachers' understanding of subject knowledge matters. This ambition reflects what can be characterized as the program of this dissertation: The teacher represents a key for successful RE. Subject knowledge is one pillar on which this success rests. Hence, RE research should put a critical spotlight on *what happens* when teachers make meaning of specific RE subject matters.

Within the field of didactics, therefore, this study exclusively focuses on the what-question. This does not suggest that I believe there is a one-to-one-relation between teachers' subject knowledge and their teaching, that maximum knowledge gives maximum learning. However, the study will show that it is far from irrelevant how teachers – recognized as "the greatest source of variance that can make the difference" (Hattie, 2003, p. 7) – interpret and understand what they teach.

The study primarily addresses RE practitioners, that is, RE teachers in school and RE teacher educators. I hope to contribute to enhancing these practitioners' consciousness and knowledge about their role as key interpreters and conveyors of subject knowledge. In other words, and again with reference to John Hattie, I hope to contribute to "highlight the importance of

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<sup>8</sup> Literacy can refer to all lingual activity, also "literacy as thought" (Barton, 1994, p. 44). Heath refers to "oral literacy events" as situations "when talk revolves around a piece of writing" (Heath, 1983, p. 386).

<sup>9</sup> The term *negotiated* gives associations about critical theory more generally, and "critical literacy" more specifically (e.g. Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke, 2012). In this study the term is not used to specifically highlight the implications of power-structures, but to underline that literacy events are by nature negotiated events.

<sup>10</sup> See attachment 1 for full text of *The Prodigal Son*.

educators as evaluators of their impact” with regard to subject knowledge (Hattie, 2012, p. preface). This dissertation, therefore, also addresses the field of education research more broadly, calling for more empirical research on how teachers understand subject areas in school. This, I argue, will serve to provide a basis for a more appropriate use of the term literacy in education and hopefully also in education policy; that is as a term that is not only used as a fixed assessment standard but which refers to the complex nature of what is involved when teachers make meaning of subject knowledge matters.

## 1.2 RE in Norway

For readers not familiar to the Norwegian RE context, the following part is provided to give the necessary background information.

Since the first school law in 1739 and up until 1969, RE was formally linked to The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway. Throughout these years, though gradually losing its central position, RE was part of the Church’s Christian education program. With the school law of 1969, RE became a regular subject.<sup>11</sup> In general, however, Christianity and thereby also the Evangelical Lutheran Church kept a privileged position as it continued to give the premises for the school’s *Formålsparagraf* [The school law preamble] , which stated that the school should “give the students a Christian and moral upbringing” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008b).

With the reform of 1974, a two-subject model was developed to give students with full exemption from the subject *Kristendom* [Christianity] an equivalent program.<sup>12</sup> This was named *Livssyn* [World Views]. This lasted until 1997 when the two-subject model was replaced by *Kristendoms kunnskap med Religions- og Livsnyorientering* (KRL) [Knowledge of Christianity with Orientation about other Religions and World Views]. With KRL, a major shift was introduced: A multi-cultural and multi-faith RE for all with only partial right of exemption.

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<sup>11</sup> Prior to 1969, RE was part of the Christian education linked to baptism and thus, at times, taught by ministers, but mostly by teachers who were members of the Norwegian Church.

<sup>12</sup> Full exemption had been secured since the implementation of *Dissenterloven* [Law of Dissenters] in 1845, though barely practiced until 1960-70’s.

The implementation of KRL caused major debate, ending up in the Supreme Court in Norway and also in the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg. Consequently, within the next 16 years, three curriculum reforms were to see the light. First, in 2002 the name was changed to *Kristendoms, Religions- og Livssynskunnskap* (KRL) [Knowledge of Christianity, Religions and World Views], which should better signal the principle of equal teaching of the three areas of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Then, in 2005, despite a Supreme Court rule in its favor, the government complied with a critical statement by the Human Rights Committee from 2004 on the privileged position of Christianity in the curriculum and in the school law preamble.<sup>14</sup> Government guidelines were written to secure parents easier access to exemption. And to further accommodate the criticism from the Human Rights Committee, the government found it necessary to further emphasize the neutral and objective basis of KRL in the revised curriculum.

In 2008, based on a closing court rule in Strasbourg that went in favor of parents against the state of Norway (*The case of Folgerø vs. the state of Norway* of 2007), the government was asked to make further changes. Again, full exemption was denied. The name was changed to *Religion, Livssyn og Etikk* (RLE) [Religion, World Views and Ethics] and thus Christianity lost its explicit preferential status although it maintained its position as the dominant knowledge area in the curriculum. Most importantly, the Human Rights Court restated the criticism of the Committee from 2004 about the privileged position of Christianity in the school law preamble. And, finally, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 Christianity lost its preferential status, and the school law preamble now reads:

<p>Education shall be founded on fundamental values in the Christian and Humanistic heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, intellectual freedom, neighboring love, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values which</p>	<p>Opplæringa skal byggje på grunnleggjande verdier i kristen og humanistisk arv og tradisjon, slik som respekt for menneskeverdet og naturen, på åndsfridom, nestekjærleik, tilgjeving, likeverd og solidaritet, verdier som òg kjem til uttrykk i ulike</p>
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<sup>13</sup> The term “knowledge of” should be used for all the three areas, not only for Christianity. This reform also provided for more flexibility as it opened up for local variations.

<sup>14</sup> The Human Rights Committee stated that the arrangement for exemption in KRL violated article 18.4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: “Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; respect for the liberty of parents or legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions” (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2004). Though full exemption was not granted, the school leaders and the teachers were given the full responsibility for better practice. The parents were neither requested to know when exemption could be appropriate, nor to give any rationale for their decision.

are expressed in the different religions and life views and which are anchored in the Human Rights.<sup>15</sup>

religionar og livssyn og som er forankra i menneskerettane.

Now, everyone who has been occupied with teacher education, and particularly so with RE, will know that shifting political winds engender changes. In the aftermath of the 2013 parliament election held in September and the shift from a socialist-dominant and so called red-green government to a conservative and so called blue-blue government, RE once again has to prepare for changes, the fourth since 1997. Generally speaking, a conservative turn implies a stronger emphasis on conservative values and on the national heritage. Symptomatically, the government has decided to reinstate the K [C] for *Kristendom* [Christianity] and give RE the name KRLE, an abbreviation for *Kristendom, Religion, Livssyn og Etikk* [Christianity, Religion, Word Views and Ethics].

Certainly, none of these later reforms can be explained solely as manifestations of a society in transformation, that is as results of slow but steady processes of secularization, development of multi-cultural societies, and globalization. Clearly, and as research has shown, what we have seen particularly in the last 20 years is an increasingly politicized field (e.g. H. W. Afdal, 2012). RE, probably more than any other fields, has been exposed to this. And not surprisingly, this has had its impact on the RE teachers' work, which is noticeable also in this study.

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<sup>15</sup> From *Læreplanverket for Kunnskapsløftet* [Core Curriculum and the Quality Framework] (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013).

### **1.3 A research design for studying RE teacher responses**

A research design, as I understand it, is a concise “conceptual framework” which explains how I throughout the study argue for my case and how I ensure its validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18). In the following, therefore, I will sketch out by text and also graphically towards the end, how I compile my arguments and build up the study’s logical structure.

To move from the overall theme presented in the title to the research questions is about centring in on what is a key interest in this study. Further, one has to decide on the study’s unit of analysis, that is, “the smallest object of analysis in a study” (Matusov, 2007, p. 311). In concrete terms I need to ask: What object is it appropriate to analyze in order to answer the research questions?

As the focal point of the study, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the unit of analysis and how it is to be understood, that is, to position the study in a theoretical paradigm. From this ontological and epistemological basis I will turn to the research strategy of the study, that is the methodological and analytical considerations, and discuss how the unit of analysis will be found, investigated and also interpreted. This should provide valid and reliable data for the analyses. It should also provide the grounds for discussing the findings in the light of the main claim and the problems of actualization presented in the introduction, as well as more broadly in the light of the overall theme.

#### **1.3.1 Research questions, unit of analysis, and theoretical paradigm**

With the research question *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?* I realize that there needs to be genuine explorative mode of thinking in my approach to the field of research. The primary focus, however, is to describe and also explain what is going on when RE teachers seek for the meaning of the parable.

With this main research question I signal that the study does not have normative ambitions. If that had been the case, it would have been necessary to move the study closer to the area of exegesis and of announcing a certain normative platform within biblical hermeneutics, as what Cai Svensson in his studies on so-called “normalläsare” [normal readers] is doing, when

he evaluates the interpretations based on “acceptable theological interpretations” (Svensson, 1986, p. 49, own translation). Thus, by defining the study in this way, I underscore the fundamentally explorative and descriptive and also explanatory ambitions of the study; the aim is to understand the RE teachers processes of meaning-making. A normative approach could neither provide the empirical material nor the proper analytical tools for this specific purpose.

Further, to pursue an answer to the main research question, it is necessary to narrow in on an appropriate unit of analysis. At the outset I must acknowledge that the RE teachers’ interpretations of *The Prodigal Son* are not accessible ‘out there’ as objects to be observed in their ‘pure form.’ Leaning on “the linguistic turn” in the social sciences, I agree with Paul Ricoeur who says that “there is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts; in the final analysis self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 15). This implies that I need to settle for interpretations as mediated in oral or written form as the study’s unit of analysis, that is, the teachers’ “responsive statements” (Smidt, 1989, p. 22).<sup>16</sup> To decide more precisely what the “responsive statements” contain and how they are to be understood, bring me to the study’s theoretical paradigm.

To focus on particular readers and their responses naturally bring me to reader-centred hermeneutics. Although owing much to Hans-G Gadamer, who put the reader in the forefront along with the text, arguing that the process of making meaning is a matter of fusing the horizons of the text and the reader (Gadamer, 1975), the imagery of the reader is a rather passive one. To avoid, in the words of Terry Eagleton, “the opening of the floodgates to critical anarchy,” Gadamer gave preference to the authority and the safe guidance of “tradition” and “history” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 60). But this urge in modern hermeneutics to find a guiding principle and to make everything add up, was soon to be criticized by several ‘disturbing’ ideas. Within literary theory, Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism (Derrida, 1976), Roland Barthes’ notion of “the death of the author” (Barthes, 2008) and also more politically oriented literary theories such as feminist (e.g. Moi, 1988) and Marxist theories (e.g. Said, 1978), challenged the imagery of the confined and clear intentional text. Within philosophical hermeneutics, Michel Foucault had a similar influence, viewing interpretation

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<sup>16</sup> Jon Smidt refers to David Bleich’s term “responsive statements” (Bleich 1978:132). In his own research on teachers, Smidt uses the term “lærertekster” [teacher texts] (Smidt, 1989, p. 22).



as a discursive enterprise that is fundamentally affected by intrinsic power structures (Kelly, Foucault, & Habermas, 1994). And finally, in Gadamer and also Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion," we find a reader-oriented hermeneutics which asks the reader to be critically aware of what he or she brings to the interpretive event, and also to be attentive to what the text is conveying of potentially new and unexpected thoughts and ideas. This makes, in Ricoeur's words, hermeneutics a fundamentally moral enterprise that is "animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 27).<sup>17</sup> Thus, the ground was prepared by literary theory and the philosophy of hermeneutics so as to develop a more specific theory on the 'disturbing' but significant role of the reader. This brings me to what has become known as reception theory or reader-response theory.

Reader-response theory is a diverse literary field, in the broad picture ranging from giving primacy to the text or the reader, a distinction which largely follows the boundary between the German and the American branch that developed from the early and mid-1970's.<sup>18</sup>

Theoretically, this divide is a result of different conceptualizations of who the reader is, either identifying the reader as an "implied" and intentional structure "in the text," or as a "real" and "historically conditioned" reader (Iser, 2006, pp. 57-58). Despite contrasting conceptualizations, which also led to different research strategies, Wolfgang Iser concludes, and I believe most theorists will agree, that they are "related strands" and "together constitute reception theory" (Iser, 2006, p. 58). More precisely, then, how does this field understand the term *response*, the unit of analysis in this study?

In line with Ricoeur above, reader-response theorists will say that a response mediates the reader's interpretations. In their own words, a response represents "*indirect communication*" (Smidt, 1989, p. 34, own translation) or a "secondary text" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 151),

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton summarizes Ricoeur's notion of the reader's "double motivation" in the following way: "The first addresses the task of 'doing away with idols,' namely, becoming critically aware of when we project our own wishes and constructs into texts, so that they no longer address us from beyond ourselves as "other." The second concerns the need to listen in openness to symbol and to narrative and thereby to allow creative events to occur "in front of" the text, and to have their effect on us" (Thiselton, 1992, p. 26).

<sup>18</sup> The original thoughts of reader-response theory can be traced back to the late 1920's and 1930's and to the works of Ivor A. Richards (1929), Denys C. W. Harding (1937), and Louise M. Rosenblatt (1938). But the field became widely known and also established first in the 1970's due to the influential German Konstanz School of theory of reception and Wolfgang Iser's publications *The implied reader* (1974b) and *The act of reading* (1978), and also Hans R. Jauss' *Toward an aesthetic of reception* (1982). Equally influential, at least for the theoretical development on the American side, was Norman Holland's *5 readers reading* (1975) and Stanley Fish's many articles which were published in *Is there a text in this class?* (1980).

realizing that we are referred to interpretations as mediated in oral or written form. This, however, does not imply a sort of this-is-what-we-have-but-let's-make-the-best-out-of-it-attitude or approach towards the phenomenon. Rather, and in Louise M. Rosenblatt's words, the response represents "*the* object of reflection," because it contains "the work-as-evoked and [the reader's] interpretation of it" (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 144-145, italics added). The term "work-as-evoked" highlights the essence of this; that the response is mediating not the interpretation itself but what is going on in the *act* of interpretation or in the process of meaning-making. The response, therefore, should be "understood as to cover multiple activities" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 32).

In Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, I find the ontological basis for understanding RE teacher responses. At the roots of Rosenblatt's theory is the notion of reading as a creative process where a reader and a text *transact*, meaning that they are interdependent, "each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 17). And in the "dynamic, fluid process" of transaction (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 887), Rosenblatt will say, something unique is happening and something unique is evolving, what she refers to as the reader's "poem."<sup>19</sup> This is how Rosenblatt accentuates the aesthetic nature of reading and the aesthetic nature of evoking a response, "*the* object of reflection" of this study (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 144-145, italics added).

A key premise for Rosenblatt is that reading and response-giving are "socially generated" (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 890). Owing much to the socio-linguistics of Lev Vygotsky and Charles S. Peirce, and also the pragmatism of John Dewey, she states: "Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at *a particular time in a particular context*" (Rosenblatt, 2005, pp. 7, italics added). This should not, however, indicate an essentialist or deterministic understanding of context, as if it is a detached, static and also sovereign principle that ultimately explains the field of social research (H. W. Afdal & Afdal, 2010). For instance, I will argue that such a particular social setting as a school culture will not in a direct and 'pure form' determine a teacher's response to *The Prodigal Son*. But it may possibly prove its impact as a "participant construct," as Teun A. van Dijk puts it, "defined as mental constructs of relevant aspects of social situations" (Van Dijk, 2006, pp. 163-165). The same applies for the teachers' gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation etc. This, I find, coincides well with Rosenblatt who

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. title of Rosenblatt's book *The reader, the text, the poem* (1994).

underlines that, although “socially generated,” reading and interpretation are mental processes and thus “individually internalised” (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 890).

I will therefore argue that to apply Rosenblatt’s transactional theory brings this study within the socio-constructive paradigm of hermeneutics. In concrete terms, to better understand how RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*, is first about exploring and describing the constitutive role of *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text and the RE teacher as a particular reader in the responses, and second and most importantly, to recognize the mutual contingency of the two in the “dynamic, fluid process” of transaction (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 887). This leaves me with the following three more specific research questions:

1. What is the role of *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text in the responses?
2. What is the role of the RE teacher as a particular reader (incl. context) in the responses?
3. What characterizes the transaction between *The Prodigal Son* and the RE teacher in the responses?

And as we will see in the following, the socio-constructive hermeneutical paradigm gives premises for the study’s methodological and analytical considerations.

### **1.3.2 Methodological and analytical considerations**

To study the responses of RE teachers, their interpretations reflecting “mental constructs,” to use van Dijk’s term, undoubtedly demands a qualitative approach. Although a quantitative approach such as questionnaires could prove relevant in order to uncover generic traits of RE teachers’ interpretations, it would not provide the subjective and in-depth data needed for this inquiry. And more profoundly, it would not do justice to “[t]he qualitative character of the experience,” as Rosenblatt describes “the event” of reading and interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 135).

To collect the required data clearly demanded a situation which facilitated for reading and interpretation as reflective enterprises. Therefore, and first, to gather written response, I asked the RE teachers to write what I refer to as *texts of reflection*. As the term indicates, the intention was to give the teachers an opportunity to immerse themselves in the text and to

come up with thoughtful responses that were largely logical in their disposition and comprising arguments representing their specific views, their specific “mental constructs” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 165). Further, and second, the written responses were supported by oral responses. In order to better understand what is involved and what happens during the meaning-making process – and that from the interviewee’s perspective – I found interviewing suitable. The interview situation allows me as a researcher to reach into and observe new interviewee perspectives develop and come out, and therefore to better see what is going on during “[t]he qualitative character of the experience,” as Rosenblatt describes “the event” of reading and interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 135).

As we have seen, it is the fundamental ideas in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory which structure the research questions. That is also the case with the analysis. The first part of the analysis is about highlighting the role of *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text. The second part focuses on the role of the RE teacher as a particular reader. From viewing the text and the reader as separate entities, I then move over to the third and final part where I will analyse the “dynamic, fluid process” of *The Prodigal Son* and the RE teacher in transaction (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 887). It is these final analyses that will provide the grounds for the discussions and the final reflections, as it is the transactional analysis which highlights the nature of the interpretive event and thus gives us better insight into what happens when the RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*.

### **1.3.3 Summary**

To sum up I present the following graphic illustration of the study’s research design:

**Theme**

**RE TEACHERS' RELIGIOUS LITERACY**

**Research question**

What happens when  
RE teachers interpret  
*The Prodigal Son*?

**Unit of analysis  
and theory**

RE teacher responses  
  
Rosenblatt's reader-response  
theory:  
The reader and text in *transaction*

**Data**

- RE teacher responses:
1. RE teacher texts of reflection
  2. Semi-structured interviews

**Analyses  
and  
results**

The RE teacher as a particular reader	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> as a particular text
RE teacher and <i>The Prodigal Son</i> in transaction	

**Discussions and  
reflections**

1. Empirical discussion on the validity of  
the RE teachers' interpretations
2. Theoretical discussion on religious  
literacy in RE

## 1.4 Research overview

### 1.4.1 Research on religious literacy in RE

As referred to in the introduction, literacy is a widely used term in education, as it has come to be used as a designation for “understanding of an area of knowledge” (Barton, 1994, p. 13). And clearly, research on religious literacy in RE, like other subjects in school, is dominated by applying literacy as a given standard, as a normative and technical variable for what teachers should teach and what students should learn. This, I will claim, is the common use, in the range between Stephen Prothero’s historical approach to the issue (Prothero, 2007) and in Andrew Wright’s more philosophical and theologically based research (e.g. A. Wright, 2006), and furthermore, in what is being referred to as the more critical religious literacy studies by Diane Moore (2007), Peta Goldberg (2010), and Cornelia Roux (2010).<sup>20</sup>

This implies, therefore, that research on religious literacy, although not totally detached from the field of practice, has a rather weak empirical basis. The ambition of this study is to contribute to establishing such a basis, that is, to undertake analyses and discuss what characterizes the religious literacy of one of the key agents in the school, the RE teacher.

### 1.4.2 Research on RE teachers

In the introduction to ENRECA’s<sup>21</sup> publication *Researching RE teachers. RE teachers as researchers* (2007), Cok Bakker and Hans G. Heimbrock give a short outline of the research history on RE teachers. Generally, they mention that there has been a movement in the field from a predominantly theologically and philosophically based research towards empirically based research. This shift, they claim, represents a fundamental change in that “the ‘ought’ aspects of RE (the normative aspects) should be based on the ‘is’ (what processes are taking place)” (Bakker & Heimbrock, 2007, p. 9). And they argue that in “times of cultural change” it is imperative for RE researchers to leave the “[o]lder models to describe RE teachers in the

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<sup>20</sup> Kerstin von Brömssen’s article “Religious literacy: Är det ett användbart begrepp inom religionsdidaktisk/-pedagogisk forskning?” [Religious literacy: Is it an applicable concept in RE research?] gives an overview (2013).

<sup>21</sup> *The European Network for Religious Education in Europe through Contextual Approaches* (ENRECA) is one of two research groups publishing under the research program *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe*. The other is *Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries* (REDCo).

internal language of the faith-groups,” and move towards collecting “contextually based empirical data on what is actually going on at classroom level and in local communities” (Bakker & Heimbrock, 2007, p. 9). The research tradition on RE teachers, therefore, seems to have an equally strong link to “the normative aspects” as the research on religious literacy mentioned above.

Research on RE teachers in Norway, although limited in number, seems to confirm Bakker and Heimbrock’s general outline.<sup>22</sup> And clearly, relevant empirical research conducted in the aftermath of the implementation of RE as a mandatory subject for all in 1997 has put diversity on the agenda. One example is Eystein Gullbekk’s sociologically based ethnographic research on intercultural dialogue in the RE classroom (Gullbekk, 2000). Gullbekk finds that the RE teacher dominates the dialogue in the RE classroom. The reason for this, he argues, is the institutionalized and collective guidelines given in the general curricula, in the RE curricula, and also in the Official Norwegian Reports.<sup>23</sup> Thus, according to Gullbekk, what is really going on in the RE classroom is not dialogue but “assimilation,” claiming that RE is a tool in “the government’s system of socialization” (Gullbekk, 2004, p. 144, own translation).<sup>24</sup>

Another study of interest is Elisabet Haakedal’s dissertation, which centers the attention on “to what extent ... philosophies of life influence the forming process” of the RE teacher role (Haakedal, 2003, p. iv).<sup>25</sup> Based on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural and social reproduction she underlines the school context as formative for the RE teacher’s role. This instrumentalist impression, Haakedal remarks, has to be nuanced by emphasizing the possibilities for the

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<sup>22</sup> The reality is of course more nuanced, as also C. Bakker and H. G. Heimbrock emphasize. In Norway, “grunnforskning” [basic research] continues to be considered fundamental for further development of the conceptual and pedagogical foundation of RE. This implies that the so called research “traditions” represented by Ivar Asheim and Sverre D. Mogstad (1987), and Ole G. Winsnes (1984), are being continued, but is further developed particularly with regard to the issue of diversity (e.g. Gravem, 2004; G. Skeie, 1998). Although the empirically based research has become more dominant (e.g. Leganger-Krogstad, 2009; Lied, 2004a; Østberg, 1998), there appears to be a demand for a mixed approach to respond to present issues.

<sup>23</sup> Gullbekk refers to “Evaluering av faget Kristendomskunnskap med Religions- og Livssynsorientering” [Evaluation of the subject Knowledge of Christianity with Orientation about other Religions and World Views] (2001).

<sup>24</sup> Øystein L. Johannessen’s article “Sameness as norm and challenge: Norwegian teachers and researching biography and pedagogy” point to the same (Johannessen, 2009). Of relevance is also Thor A. Skrefsrud’s dissertation *Å være lærer i interkulturell kontekst: Om dialogens betydning for lærerkompetansen* [Being a teacher in an inter-cultural context: The significance of dialogue for the teacher’s competence] (Skrefsrud, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Haakedal places her study in what has been termed “livsfrågepedagogikk” [pedagogy of life interpretation] and contextual RE, giving emphasis to the latter (2003, pp. 12-13).

individual RE teacher to maneuver within the collective framework and form his or her own role and teaching (Haakedal, 2003, p. xiii).<sup>26</sup>

Similar issues are discussed in other RE contexts, for instance by Kimberly R. White, who in the article “Connecting religion and teacher identity” discusses what she refers to as the “unexplored relationship between teachers and religion in public schools” in the USA (K. R. White, 2009). In the European context, I find Pat Sikes and Judith Everington’s two studies on how RE teachers negotiate formal as well as informal role-expectations and their life histories, relevant (Sikes & Everington, 2003, 2004). Of particular interest is the cross-European study “European religious education teachers’ perceptions of and responses to classroom diversity and their relationship to personal and professional biographies” (Everington, ter Avest, Bakker, & van der Want, 2011). The article ends with the following recommendation:

[I]f teachers of religion are to extend the range of their responses to classroom diversity, they would benefit from opportunities to reflect on the relationship between their perceptions of and responses to religious and cultural diversity, their personal biographies, and national requirements and expectations related to their professional role” (Everington et al., 2011, p. 241).

On this background it will be interesting to see how the RE teachers of this study relate to, on the one hand, role-expectancy and collective and context-based influences, and on the other hand, to more personal and individual-based biases, when they reflect and respond to a concrete subject knowledge matter like *The Prodigal Son*.

Of more subject knowledge oriented studies on Norwegian RE teachers, I find Hege B. Beckman and Ingunn F. Breistein’s research report on the application of songs and music in school and in RE, relevant (Beckman & Breistein, 2007). As the title indicates, ‘*Tør du synge den sangen fortsatt?*’ [‘Do you still dare to sing that song?’], they document a growing fear and reluctance on the part of the RE teachers to sing religious songs after the implementation of the compulsory multicultural RE subject in 1997. They also point to the RE teachers’ lack of knowledge about these songs, particularly then songs from non-Christian traditions. An interesting question to ask, therefore, is if RE teachers express a similar reluctance to immerse themselves in *The Prodigal Son*?

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<sup>26</sup> The issue is further developed by Haakedal in the article “Situated practice among religious education teachers. A discussion of school rituals, cultural contexts and professional ethics” (Haakedal, 2007). Also of relevance is her article on cultural context “Religionslærer i grunnskolen – sørlandske rolletenkninger?” [RE teacher in primary school – Southern Norwegian role concepts?] (Haakedal, 2002).



The research group “Centrum för de Samhällsvetenskapliga ämnenas Didaktik” (CSD) [Swedish Educational Research Group] at Karlstad University has since 2006 in a similar but more extensive manner focused on teachers’ experiences with particular subjects, including RE subject matters. To make up for what they consider is a dominating “allmen” [general] approach in research on teachers, the intention is to give voice to and explore the subject specific experiences of the teacher. CSD is clearly influenced by the *Teachers’ Thinking* tradition, as the ambition is “to enhance the understanding of teachers’ didactic work concerning specific subjects” (Schüllerqvist & Osbeck, 2009, pp. 9-10, own translation).

Christina Osbeck’s RE research is, to my knowledge, the only work within RE with a *Teachers’ Thinking* approach. In her article “Religionskunskapslärare” [RE Teachers], she points at four identifiable aspects of RE teachers’ “didactical insight and intentions” that emerge as decisive for teaching, and where one of them reads: “to contribute to the religious literacy and continuing literacy development” (Osbeck, 2009, p. 200, own translation).<sup>27</sup> Osbeck gives valuable insight into the scope and impact of RE teachers’ didactical reflections with regard to the subject matter, and these are findings that I would expect to find as well in the RE teachers’ responses to *The Prodigal Son*. However, and as the general statement about religious literacy shows, it is not detailed knowledge about teachers’ subject knowledge that is Osbeck’s interest. Rather, and to phrase the leading figure of the *Teachers’ Thinking* tradition, Lee S. Shulman, the focus is to understand the particularity of “the knowledge base of teaching,” as this develops at the crossroads between subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge:

[T]he knowledge base of teaching lies at the intersection of content and pedagogy, in the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students (Shulman, 1987, p. 15).

To my knowledge, therefore, there are no empirical studies that center the attention exclusively on RE teachers’ subject knowledge. As we have seen above, when the issue is being raised in empirical research, the focus is quickly turned towards the how-question in didactics, that is, how subject knowledge is being applied or should be applied to fit the challenges in diverse classrooms. But within education research more broadly, there are

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<sup>27</sup> Of relevance is also Osbeck’s dissertation *Lärares uppfattning av religionskunskapsämnet* [Teachers’ perception of RE] (1997).

several studies that serve to shed light on RE teachers' understanding of subject knowledge matters. And of particular relevance for my study are studies within the literary field of reader-response theory.

### **1.4.3 Reader-response studies – primacy for the text or the reader, or both?**

Generally speaking, reader-response education research has two main concerns which reflect the continuum in reader-response theory: text-oriented and reader-oriented research. First, concerning text-oriented research, we find, generally speaking, studies that highlight the structural elements in literature that constrain readers' reading, a majority of them influenced by Wolfgang Iser and/or Umberto Eco's work. For instance, we find studies on the "literary canon" that dominate education curricula. One example is Aidan Chambers' study *Booktalk* (1985), where he among many discusses the role of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Likewise, in the Norwegian context, we find studies on the role of Henrik Ibsen's plays, for instance *A Doll's House* (e.g. Penne, 2006).<sup>28</sup>

As for religious texts, we find a number of text-oriented studies within theology and what is referred to as "Christian education." In the Norwegian context, one interesting and recent example is Astrid Ramsfjell's research on the construction of children and childhood in biblical stories designed for children (Ramsfjell, 2008). Applying the theoretical categories of Wolfgang Iser, Ramsfjell gives valuable insight into how structural elements activate the reader and influence meaning-making in certain directions. To my knowledge, however, there are no text-oriented studies of religious narratives within the context of RE.

Second, concerning reader-oriented research within education, most studies focus on how students read literature (e.g. Bjørnskau & Johnson, 2000; Smidt, 1989; Ulland, 2010). Jon Smidt, in his research on six high school students' responses to literary reading, applies the psychological theories of Norman Holland and in particular Thomas Ziehe, as well as Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" (Smidt, 1989, p. 22). In a more recent study on how children create meaning of picture books, Gro Ulland first applies Wolfgang Iser to analyze the textual constraints on children's reading. Then she moves on to examine more

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<sup>28</sup> Though bringing in the reader-response theories of Thomas Ziehe and Wolfgang Iser, Penne's dissertation is primarily based on the socio-constructive theory of Bourdieu and also Barthes.

extensively what the reader brings into the actual situation, with reference to Iser's notions of a reader's "dispositions" or "faculties" (Ulland, 2010, p. 22). And finally, for the purpose of finding more nuanced categories for analyzing children as particular readers, she brings in Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory together with Judith A. Langer's theory of readers' "envisagement" and J. P. Appleyard's descriptions of the roles of the reader (Appleyard, 1991; Langer, 1995). I find that Ulland's application of *both* text- *and* reader-oriented theories to me served as an example of theorizing that relates more pragmatically and also more realistically to the phenomenon of readers' reading.

Reader-oriented studies concerning religious narratives are rare. In the Swedish context we find Cai Svensson's studies, *Att skapa mening i Bibeltexter* [To create meaning in biblical texts] (1986) and *Text och tro* [Text and faith] (1989). These studies present interesting findings on how so called "normalläsare" [normal readers] read and make meaning of biblical narratives, among them the parables *The Mustard Seed* and *The Leaven* (Math. 13, 31-35). Svensson applies Stanley Fish's theory and identifies three main "strategies of interpretation": "a literal, a figuratively profane, and a figurative religious one" (Svensson, 1986, pp. 95, own translation). Svensson's study, though outside the field of RE and also essentially normative, has perspectives that in some respects correspond to the RE teachers' readings of *The Prodigal Son*, although I find his concept of the "normal reader" – whoever that is – to be a general designation that is rather problematic in empirical research.

Finally, in the Norwegian RE context I find Sidsel Lied's studies of student responses to religious narratives, interesting (Lied, 2003, 2004a, 2004b), and also Miriam R. Opsal's "Lillebror får det som han vil" [The little brother gets what he wants], the latter a master thesis on RE students' readings and perceptions of *The Prodigal Son* (Opsal, 2010). These are all studies that are based on Michail Bakhtin's socio-linguistic theory and thus presents many interesting aspects of student responses. Although there are interesting links that can be discussed between student responses and teacher responses in RE, it is apparent that RE teacher responses is a field in its own right as it contributes to highlight RE teachers' professional knowledge.

## **1.5 The structure of the study**

Following this chapter of introduction which is now to be concluded, the dissertation consists of four main chapters. First, in chapter 2, I establish the theoretical framework for studying RE teacher responses. Secondly, in chapter 3, I present the methodological basis with regard to the study's research paradigm and research strategy, and also the more specific issues concerning sampling and collection of the empirical material. In the final part of this chapter the decisions made will be discussed and evaluated with regard to the issues of validity, reliability, generalization and transferability, and also relevant ethical matters.

In chapter 4 I move towards the analytical part. The analyses themselves are divided in three chapters or parts. In the first two parts (Part I and II), I analyze the material on the basis of Wolfgang Iser's perspective of the "response-inviting structures" of literary texts and Stanley Fish's concept of the reader's "interpretive strategies." Then, in the last part (Part III), based on the summaries of the preceding chapters of analysis, I analyze the responses in a transactional perspective. In the fifth and final chapter of the study, I first discuss key findings with regard to the issue of validity in interpretation. Then, in the last part, I discuss the findings in relation to dominant contemporary conceptualizations of religious literacy in RE.

## 2. The theoretical perspective on RE teachers' responses

### 2.1 Introduction

Studies of readers' readings show that reading is a complex and multifaceted activity. From this follows that in order to explore and describe what happens when RE teachers' interpret *The Prodigal Son* it will be problematic to approach in an essentialist manner; that means, decide on a single factor playing the determinant role. Instead it is necessary to view the elements involved – the particular text, the particular reader and the particular context – as elements that will all be significant constituents in the RE teachers' responses. This study, therefore, calls for a theoretical basis that is genuinely pragmatic and also genuinely anti-mechanistic in its approach to readers' readings. Louise M. Rosenblatt's socio-constructive transactional theory provides such a theoretical point of departure.

Rosenblatt's theory first and foremost provides the ontological perspective on reading, but also the basic epistemological and methodological reasoning as to how to gain knowledge about RE teachers' responses to *The Prodigal Son*. Though to a lesser degree, as we will see at the end of the presentation, her theory does not provide the analytical tools for operating the RE teachers' responses in an adequately detailed manner.<sup>29</sup> Thus, to illuminate the activities involved with regard to the *The Prodigal Son*, I will move from Rosenblatt to Wolfgang Iser, whose ambition in the influential book *The act of reading* is to "bring to light the elementary operations which the text activates within the reader" (Iser, 1978, p. ix). What these "operations" are, and how they activate the RE teacher and constitute themselves in the responses, is of major interest in this study.

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenblatt's theory has been criticized for being "inadequate to describe meaning" because of its "categorizing and generalizing" character (Saks, 1995, p. 328). Rosenblatt responds to this criticism in the article "Continuing the conversation: A clarification" by contending that "my categories include further distinctions and analyses." And when elaborating on "efferent and aesthetic reading," she argues that these categories satisfies both "the need for *clearly-defined* categories and *valid* generalizations" (Rosenblatt, 1995a, p. 353, italics original).

Further, in a study which centers the attention on a specific sample of readers, it is necessary to bring in reader- and context-oriented perspectives. This is what I find in Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. Bringing in the concept of readers' "interpretive strategies" and "the authority of interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980), the spotlight is on the implications of readers' preferences and their communal nature. With the perspectives of Fish, the activities involved with regard to what the RE teacher as a particular reader brings to the reading event, will be highlighted. It is how the "interpretive strategies" of the RE teacher constitute themselves in the responses which is of major interest in this study.

## **2.2 Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory – the theoretical point of departure**

Transaction "designates," in Rosenblatt's words, "aspects of a total situation" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 17). That means that the term encapsulates the elements involved in the act of reading, but more importantly, the nature of their reciprocal relationship.

Rosenblatt's theoretical foundation becomes visible when she confronts a New Critical (e.g. C. Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt) and a Structuralist (e.g. F. de Saussure) view of reading and interpretation, both giving preference to the objective and inherent meaning of the text, and also E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s focus on authorial intent. They all represent, according to Rosenblatt, the "Cartesian dualistic paradigm" where the reader is being held separated from the perceived, claiming that there is a straight line between the "signifier" and the "signified," or from an author's intention to a text's meaning (Rosenblatt, 1993, pp. 380-381).

At the other end of the pendulum, Rosenblatt's criticism hits hard on the subjectivist stance, exemplified by the reader-response theory of Norman H. Holland, who privileges the reader's psychology and his or her "identity theme" (Holland, 1975). By narrowing it down to that "I cannot know anything at all ... except through my own identity" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 27), the reader has become the sole explanation of everything.

Although, in Rosenblatt's words, these "extremes" have contributed to shedding light on the indispensable role of both the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381), they fail to spot

their interrelatedness and also their mutual contingency in the process of meaning-making (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 17). In Rosenblatt's differentiation between interaction and transaction, the distinction becomes apparent. While the term "interaction" refers to the "impact of separate, already-defined entities acting on one another" and which places the researcher as an "objective 'onlooker'" whose role is to take out the meaning of the text, transaction designates that "meaning happens between reader and text" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 98).<sup>30</sup> Thus, Rosenblatt argues that "the transactional paradigm" as opposed to the "Cartesian" is consistent with the triadic formulation in the linguistic philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, William James, and also Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes the mutual contingency between the "sign, object, interpretant" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 99).

With the title *The reader, the text, the poem* (Rosenblatt, 1994), Rosenblatt seems to signal that her primary focus is on the reader. This impression, however, and as Rosenblatt explains herself, is due to the persistent history of neglecting the reader in literary theory, and that there was an urgent need to highlight the reader's role (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 23). Though meaning is a unique and complex and also mental creation made by an individual reader, the text plays the essential role of constraining the meaning-making process with its specific signs and form. Thus, the evoked meaning – the "poem" – depends on what the reader does and also what the text does, but most importantly, how they in the transactional process affect one another.

Further, based on the socio-linguistic tradition of Vygotsky, the strictly text- or reader-oriented approaches referred to above do not sufficiently take into account the fact that language in its essence is "socially generated" (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381), that the circumstances and contexts of reading are equally important as constitutive elements. In this study, which focuses on the RE teachers as particular readers, it is fundamental to bring situative and contextual aspects to the center of the analysis. But it is important to note that the social and contextual must be understood as a cognitive experience of the individual reader, as "always individually internalized" (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381).

From this follows, then, that to engage in empirical research on RE teachers' readings, I can only claim what appears to be of significance for one particular reader's reading of one particular text, at one particular place, in one particular moment of time. To emphasize the

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<sup>30</sup> Rosenblatt refers to Dewey and Bentley's use of the term "onlooker" for readers in the book *Knowing and the known* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949).

indispensability of the elements and their unique coming together in the event of reading, Rosenblatt claims: “change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event – a different poem” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 14). The primary task, therefore, should not be to decide what proves most important in RE teachers’ readings of *The Prodigal Son*, but to explore and describe the mutual contingency of the elements involved in the RE teacher’s dynamic process of meaning-making.

The claim that it is possible to identify and “distinguish the elements” involved in reading brings me to the socio-constructive basis of Rosenblatt’s theory (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 100). Being on the shoulders of Vygotsky and Peirce, Rosenblatt argues that in the act of reading the text, reader and context are mental or cognitive structures. It is when reading and interpretation are turned into oral or written responses that they appear as observable lingual phenomena and become available for research. This implies, then, that the text, the reader and the context are not observable in ‘pure’ form as reflections of how they really are. As an example, Rosenblatt refers to a reader’s “expectations” and also “experiences,” as “not something that is simply to be added on to ‘decoding’,” as “entities for interaction, but stances or states of the organism, as are linguistic activities” (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 101).

I find that Rosenblatt is in line with contemporary social science theory on this matter, for instance when it comes to understanding the implications of context. Context could be viewed as “something that is simply to be added on to ‘decoding’” (cf. Rosenblatt’s statement above), in other words, as an objective and detached element that acts mechanically and determines readers’ readings. In this study, the RE teachers’ gender, age, religious affiliations or school-culture could be perceived as such elements. Instead Rosenblatt view is like that of Teun A. van Dijk, who views context rather as something that is being negotiated in the process of constructing meaningful responses. Different contexts, then, appear not as pure entities but as “consequences,” as “participant constructs” constituting the structure of the responses (Van Dijk, 2006, pp. 163-164). Thus, to study the RE teachers’ responses is about dissecting the socio-constructive elements that constitute the responses, not viewed as essentials and separate entities, but as dynamic elements that will appear as “consequences” in each response. However, and as said above, we need to come beneath Rosenblatt’s perspective of “a total situation” and more general categories in order to find the operating tools to grasp more in depth what *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text and the RE teacher as a particular reader bring to the transactional event. For that we need to move towards the contributions of



Wolfgang Iser's text-centered theory, to which I find the genre-specific theory on parables complementary, and Stanley E. Fish's reader-centered theory.

Before I leave Rosenblatt, I will end by reflecting on the relevance of Rosenblatt's concept of the "reader continuum" for this study (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47). Rosenblatt is leaning on psycholinguistics to highlight the implications of "the *primary* direction and focus of the reader's attention" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 45, italics added). I find that Rosenblatt's general awareness of the individual reader's attention and degree of involvement, which the concept of the "reader continuum" represents, complements Fish's more social and community-based reader, and that without falling into the pitfall of essential thinking of the subjectivist kind (e.g. Holland, 1975).

The relevance of the "reader continuum" becomes noticeable when one takes into account the temporality of reading. From the very start, what is the reader up too? Where is the focus of attention? Rosenblatt says: "[T]he most important choice of all must be made early in the reading event – the overarching choice of what I term the reader's stance, his 'mental set', so to speak" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). But as an always present "mental set" in the act of reading, the reader's attention continues to play a role throughout the reading event. It is also dynamic and selective, meaning that attention can fluctuate between what Rosenblatt refers to as the "efferent," or the "nonaesthetic," and the "aesthetic stance" in the course of meaning-making.<sup>31</sup>

To illuminate further, Rosenblatt illustrates the contrast between an "extreme" efferent and an "extreme" aesthetic stance in the following way:

At the extreme efferent end of the spectrum, the reader disengages his attention as much as possible from the personal and qualitative elements in his response to the verbal symbols; he concentrates on what the symbols designate, what they may be contributing to the end result that he seeks – the information, the concepts, the guides to action, that will be left with him when the reading is over.

At the aesthetic end of the spectrum, in contrast, the reader's primary purpose is fulfilled *during* the reading event, as he fixes his attention on the actual experience he is living through. This permits the whole range of responses generated by the text to enter into the center of awareness, and out of these materials he selects and weaves what he sees as the literary work of art (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 27-28).

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<sup>31</sup> The term "efferent" is from the Latin word *effere* which means "to carry away." Rosenblatt chose the word "efferent" as opposed to instrumental or the antonym nonaesthetic, to give a less "tool-like" and more "neutral" designation of the opposite of the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269).

For this study, an “extreme” efferent stance could imply that an RE teacher is reading *The Prodigal Son* as a manual or a recipe, keeping the “mental set” entirely on the information or knowledge he or she needs. Or, and what one expects is probably more likely, the stance of the biblical exegete, who stereotypically centers attention on detailed semantics. With this information gathered, the RE teacher at the efferent end of the continuum would argue for the most probable and most valid interpretation of the parable. In both cases, Rosenblatt argues that the RE teacher’s aesthetic attention is minimal and close to zero. This does not mean that there is no transaction between text and reader but a transaction constrained merely by non-aesthetic means and purposes.

At the other end of the continuum, an aesthetic reading of *The Prodigal Son* is recognized if the teacher reflects and articulates what the parable does to him or her as a reader, in other words, if the teacher is open to the parable’s transforming potential. If that happens, Rosenblatt will say, the aesthetic nature of the parable and the aesthetic activity of the teacher transact, and a literary work of art – “the poem” – reaches its potential (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 6). This emphasis on the subjective potential of the text should, however, neither lead to an idealization of subjective readings, nor a favoring of the aesthetic above the efferent.

Rosenblatt writes:

The aesthetic stance ... should not be confused with a simple reverie or train of free associations. Perusal of a text merely leading to free fantasy would not be a reading at all in the transactional sense. The concept of transaction emphasizes the relationship with, *and continuing awareness of*, the text (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 29, italics original).<sup>32</sup>

Again we see that Rosenblatt’s anti-essentialist program “Against dualisms” functions as a corrective; that is, in order to understand the nature of the reading experience we must take into account the dynamic relation between the reader and the text and also, then, the dynamic relation between the efferent and the aesthetic. It is never either-or (Rosenblatt, 1993).

Rosenblatt’s concept of the efferent-aesthetic continuum provides, then, a theoretical perspective on the implications of RE teachers’ attention and direction when they respond to *The Prodigal Son*. It does not provide detailed analytical tools, as Rosenblatt herself was fully

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<sup>32</sup> Although it seems that Rosenblatt is favoring aesthetic reading, this should be read in the context of her critique of the dominating literary theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century permeating the field of education. Although starting her teaching-career in the late 1920s, she would claim up until the very end of her active years, that “many never learn to read aesthetically” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 40).

aware of, but a general framework of “what the [RE teacher] does” when he or she makes an account of *The Prodigal Son* (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 27).

### **2.3 *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text – applying the perspectives of Wolfgang Iser**

The title of Wolfgang Iser’s inaugural lecture at Constance in 1970, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte,”<sup>33</sup> points to the relevance of his work for this study. In this lecture Iser claims that in order to understand reading as an interpretive enterprise, it is imperative to centre attention on the text and analyse its deep “Appellstruktur,” what he also refers to as “the response-inviting structures of the text” (Iser, 1978, p. 34). In following Iser, this will mean that it is the structural elements of *The Prodigal Son* that activate the RE teachers’ pursuit of interpretation. Thus, for Iser, the theoretical objective is clear: “To break down a literary text into its constituent elements ... to know the method according to which it is constructed” (J. H. Miller, 1971, p. 21).

The fundamental reason why Iser gives preference to the triggering effect of the literary text is its distinct character of being indeterminate. The characteristic feature of *The Prodigal Son*, as opposed to a non-literary text such as a sign on the elevator that reads “KEEP RIGHT,” is that it presents no indisputable and finalized message. In other words, and as the history of the reading of the parable has shown, no reading and no interpretation can claim to have reached ultimate completion. Thus, the fundamental reason for the diversity of readings, Iser will argue, lies not in the diversity of readers but in the structured indeterminacies employed in the text that trigger and invite the reader to interact. A text’s indeterminacy, therefore,

represents the most important link between text and reader. It is the switch that activates the reader in using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text. This means that it is the basis of a textural structure in which the reader’s part is already incorporated (J. H. Miller, 1971, p. 43).

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<sup>33</sup> The English translation of Iser’s inaugural lecture, “Indeterminacy and the reader’s response in prose fiction,” is from J. H. Miller’s anthology *Aspects of narrative* (J. H. Miller, 1971). “Die Appellstruktur der Texte” was first published in *Konstanzer Universitätsreden* in 1970.

In following Iser, we must hold that the potential meanings are all employed in the structure of *The Prodigal Son*. The possible interpretations, however, are not objects or signs only to be pulled out by the reader. Contrary to traditional hermeneutics (biblical in origin), the New Critics and the Structuralists who all identify an objective truth in the text, truth or interpretations, according to Iser, become real and observable objects only when the text is being read and realized by an active reader. In other words, for meaning or interpretation to evolve, a reader must interact with the text.

Initially the meanings develop in the reader's head. Then, when meanings become oral or written, the imaginary is transformed into an observable lingual phenomenon. And the basic precondition for this meaning-making, according to Iser, is the indeterminacies of the text. The indeterminacies, however, are not visible objects in the text. The next step, therefore, in order to understand the activities involved when the RE teachers make meaning of *The Prodigal Son*, is to disclose the structures underlying the indeterminacies, that is, as Iser says, "break down ... its constituent elements" (J. H. Miller, 1971, p. 21). This leads me towards Iser's "two basic structures of indeterminacies in the text – *blanks*, and *negations*" (Iser, 1978, p. 182, italics added).

First, "blanks" refers to the empty spaces that evolve in between segments of the text. The segments, or "schematized views" (J. H. Miller, 1971, p. 10),<sup>34</sup> are for instance plots, characters, a narrator's voice, etc.; that is, the visible and distinct narrative features of a text. These segments Iser refers to as "*invariable* primary codes" that are placed in the text by the author to structure and guide the reader's interpretation (Iser, 1978, p. 93, italics added).

The "schematized views" also possess specific strategies or techniques that trigger reader participation, for instance "cutting techniques" (Iser, 1978, p. 190), which mark the ending of one segment and guide the reader to fill in the succeeding blank. Examples of this are a sudden or an open ending of a narrative, a question which is not answered, etc.

According to Iser, it is the reader that "deciphers the codes" of the text and "thus produc[es] the *variable* secondary code" (Iser, 1978, p. 93, italics added), in other words comes up with a unique interpretation. It is the reader that actively bridges the different segments of a text by

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<sup>34</sup> Iser is applying Roman Ingarden's term "schematized views" (Ingarden & Grabowicz, 1973). While Ingarden understood the blanks as representing a text's imperfection or lack of "completion," in other words a problem, Iser views the blanks as the indispensable link between the text and the reader, or as that which connects the text with the reader. Therefore Iser can say, contrasting his view of the blank with that of Ingarden, that "the need for completion is replaced by the need for combination" (Iser, 1978, p. 182).

filling in the in-between gaps to build the “consistency” of interpretation, what Iser refers to as “the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension” (Iser, 1978, p. 125). But in the concepts of “structured blanks” and “schematized views,” Iser’s ‘division of labor’ between text and reader becomes apparent, through clearly giving primacy to the power and the authority of the “invariable primary codes” in the interaction of reading. Thus, on this basis Iser will claim that “the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader *on terms set by the text*” (Iser, 1978, p. 169, italics added). As such, the blanks can be characterized as introvert structures in the sense that they invite or “induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text” (Iser, 1978, p. 169, italics original).

As for this study then, what are the “schematized views” or “invariable codes” in *The Prodigal Son* that guide and constitute themselves in the RE teachers’ responses? Is it the narrator’s voice, the plot or one of the three characters? And what possible effects do the different “cutting techniques” have on the RE teachers’ interpretations, for instance the open ending of the paragraph about the return of the oldest son (Luke 15, 32)? And furthermore, what segments of the text do the RE teachers pay particular attention to, and which ones do they ignore? And how does this “selective deciphering” of the text’s codes affect the RE teachers’ evocation of the text (Iser, 1978, p. 178)? These are some of the questions that will arise from the concept of the blank, the basic element that “induces and guides the reader’s constitutive activity” (Iser, 1978, p. 202).

Second, what role do the *negations* play in the interaction between the text and the reader? While the blanks “leave open the spaces between perspectives of the text,”

[t]he various types of negation invoke familiar or determinate elements only to cancel them out. What is cancelled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader’s attitude toward what is familiar or determinate – in other words, he is guided to adopt a position *in relation* to the text (Iser, 1978, p. 169).

As a “response-inviting structure,” the negation can be characterized as a more extrovert structure in the sense that it challenges the reader to bring the reality and experiences of his or her life to interact with the text. For instance, a literary work can build up certain expectations and invoke the reader to take a position with regard to for instance a key character or certain rules or norms. Then a break is introduced, an indeterminacy of negation, which forces the reader to adopt an *active* “position *in relation* to the text.” The negation, therefore, has the

potential to cause a new orientation, a new turn in the reader's realization of the text as well as view of reality. Thus, Iser can say that the reader makes a "discovery" about what potentially can appear to him or her as "the meaning of the text" (Iser, 1974b, p. xiii).

An obvious structure of negation in *The Prodigal Son* would be the last paragraph and the return of the oldest son, which follows the image of the happiest reconciliation and ends with the words: "And they began to celebrate" (Luke 15, 24). The entry of the "angry" son (Luke 15, 28) turns it all around when he disputes and challenges his father's decision. The negation is reinforced by the open ending of the dispute, a "cutting technique," which induces the reader "to adopt a position" (Iser, 1978, p. 169). In other words, the RE teachers are being challenged to bring up their own thoughts and react to what is taking place. This, then, might cause endorsements of prior understandings or nurture new orientations with regard to concepts such as justice and forgiveness, fatherhood and parenthood or family relations in general, and also new perceptions of deity. Thus, the activity of the RE teachers, how they "wander" towards a certain view of a certain concept or envision what is going to happen, which then is negated, and how that makes them restructure what is "theme" and what is "horizon," what is "background and foreground," for the purpose of attaining consistency, will be of key interest in this study (Iser, 1978, pp. 117-118).

Iser is clearly on the shoulders of Hans-G. Gadamer, and was a former student of his. This becomes apparent when Iser reflects on the concept of "the text's repertoire," which he describes in the following way:

The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged – in brief ... "extratextual" reality (Iser, 1978, p. 69).<sup>35</sup>

To emphasize the complexity of this matter, Iser quotes Roland Barthes:

"The literary work ... represents history and at the same time resists it. This basic paradox emerges ... clearly from our histories of literature: everyone feels that the work cannot be pinned down, and that it is something other than its own history, or the sum of its sources, its influences, its models. It forms a

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<sup>35</sup> The term "extratextual" Iser owes to the Prague structuralist Jan Mukarovsky (Iser, 1974a).

solid, irreducible nucleus in the unresolved tangle of events, conditions, and collective mentality (Iser, 1978, pp. 73-74).<sup>36</sup>

But what seems paradoxical and somewhat chaotic to Barthes, or at least “unresolved,” are, Iser argues, recognizable structures that disclose the text’s repertoire and its impact on reading. In becoming visible structures, Iser claims that the text’s repertoire has gone through a “transformation ... in some way reduced or modified, as they have been removed from their original context and function” (Iser, 1978, p. 69). The text, therefore, is not a copy of past reality, of for instance specific social and historical norms as they once were. Instead, and within the sphere of literature and the limitations of the written word, the text is always a modification of reality. This does not imply that the text is a simplification of reality. Instead it represents a complex structural entity that employs an author’s intentions and his or her reactions to and explanations of reality.

The historian Hayden White follows up Iser, and also elaborates further, describing literature, or “the historical work,” in the following way:

[T]he historical work ... is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories ... combine a certain amount of “data,” theoretical concepts of “explaining” these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, I maintain, they contain deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm for what a distinctively “historical” explanation should be (H. White, 1987, p. ix).

This brings me further into White’s thinking on the significant role of the author as the one who, and here Iser will agree, applies “linguistic tactics” or “strategies” to make the field “ready for interpretation as a domain of a particular kind” (H. White, 1987, p. 30). White emphasizes in particular the author’s role in arranging the objects and events in a causal relationship, and as the one who singles out what connects the incidents and thereby creates the plot. But even though these strategies constrain and guide readers’ readings, the reader is not left to copy an author’s arrangements. Instead, furthering the idea of reading as interaction and an aesthetic construction of meaning, the reader singles out and projects the text’s repertoire in his or her unique way. For this study, therefore, the center of attention is on what

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<sup>36</sup> Iser quotes from Barthes’ book *Literature oder Geschichte*. This complexity, however, brings Iser and Barthes to very different notions about hermeneutics; Barthes seeking the ideal of non-boundaries and non-conformity of interpretation, and Iser seeking internal consistency (Eagleton, 2008, pp. 71-72).

elements of the repertoire the RE teacher picks out and projects, and further, to see how these activities affect interpretation.

I will give two examples which illuminate the parable's repertoire of what Iser refers to as "the whole culture form which the text has emerged" (Iser, 1978, p. 69). The first example points to norms and customs for food and feasting which are actualized in the text when the youngest son, as it says, "would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating" (Luke 15, 16), and also in the words about the preparations for the homecoming and the feasting around "the fatted calf" (Luke 15, 23). Certainly, knowledge about the meal as an arena for practicing bonds and relations, and also more specific knowledge about the untouchable and impure pig and the role of "the fatted calf" in Jewish tradition and thinking, have the potential to guide and also deepen the RE teachers' meaning-makings.

Another illustrative example is the reference to a certain addressee in the parables in Luke 15: "the tax-collectors and sinners" and "the Pharisees and the scribes" (Luke 15, 1-3), a reference which brings in the social, religious and political hierarchy of the time. Part of my task, then, is to see if and how the RE teachers project Luke's modifications and explanations of the role of this specific sample of addressees, as well as the historical and religious view of pig-holding and "the fatted calf" in the example above. The historical context of *The Prodigal Son* will be further developed in the chapter on *Theory on parable* below (see p. 42).

The projecting role of the reader naturally brings another aspect to the foreground: the repertoire of the reader, what Iser refers to as a reader's "dispositions" or "faculties" (Iser, 1974b, p. 279). Following Gadamer, Iser sees the repertoire of the text and of the reader as partners in dialogue and as fusing elements in the act of reading:

[O]ne text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities (Iser, 1974b, p. 280).

And like Gadamer, Iser will emphasize that there is an "asymmetry" between the two, a "lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference" (Iser, 1978, p. 163). This, he continues, is what triggers reading, what "give[s] rise to communication in the reading



process” (Iser, 1978, p. 167). But this imbalance is also what the reader seeks to level out in the process of achieving consistent meaning, what Iser also refers to as “gestalt coherency.”<sup>37</sup>

This emphasis on consistency, and also on completeness in comprehension, points towards an impulse in Iser’s thinking to identify a stabilizing factor in the act of interpretation. But while Gadamer locates this in history and tradition, in the text’s “Wirkungsgeschichte,” Iser locates this in textual structures, as the matter which “induces structured acts in the reader” (Iser, 1978, p. 36). Although Iser and Gadamer are identifying this differently, we can observe that none of them involves the reader. So, this is as far Iser brings us concerning the role of historical readers. To go more into the matter of the RE teachers’ “dispositions” or “faculties,” therefore, we need to go elsewhere. Iser himself is well aware of this, leaving it to the field of “aesthetics of reception” to discuss “historically conditioned experiences of literature” (Iser, 2006, pp. 57-58).

This change of track is, of course, also a critique of Iser. First of all, it is important to recognize the real reader and position him or her as a more equal partner in the process of meaning-making. Secondly, this also implies a view of the reader as more autonomous, not only as “prestructured” by the text (Iser, 1978, p. 96), but as one who is likely to distance himself and also interrogate the guiding principles of the text (e.g. Ramsfjell, 2008, p. 19). And thirdly, and finally, this is also about questioning Iser’s idea of the “invariable” text, as a separate and static entity the reader encounters in the act of reading. Therefore, I will contest the view of the relation between text and reader as dyadic, favoring the text as the primary authority in acts of interpretation, and argue for the triadic principles of Charles S. Peirce and William James, which is the basis of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. For to undertake an explorative and descriptive study of readers’ process of meaning-making, the notion of delimiting the factors involved and deciding on any determinants is problematic. This critique, however, does not undermine the value of applying Iser’s insights to the quest for understanding the role of *The Prodigal Son* in transaction with the RE teacher.

But before leaving the text and the matter of textual structures, I will turn to literary theory on the parable. This will introduce other aspects of *The Prodigal Son* and will complement Iser’s more general reception-oriented theory and will thus serve to illuminate the material gathered in further detail. The following review, being aware of the magnitude of this theory in the

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<sup>37</sup> The influence from Gestalt-therapy is evident in both Gadamer and Iser’s thinking (Iser, 1978, pp. 120-130).

academic field, is delimited to what I find specifically relevant when analyzing and discussing the material.

### 2.3.1 Theory on parable

Genre is defined as a “literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.”<sup>38</sup> It is also extended to include language as “social action,” and to represent “typified rhetorical action” (C. R. Miller, 1984, p. 151). Thus, genre theory gives insight into how a specific text or speech is constructed and how this guides and constrains interpretive activity. That this also applies to the parable is apparent in the following description by Frank Kermode:

All [parables] require some interpretive action from the auditor; they call for completion; the parable-event isn't over until a satisfactory answer is given; the interpretation completes it (Kermode, 1979, p. 24).

A question to ask, then, is: What are the structures in parables, and more specifically in *The Prodigal Son*, that “call for completion”?

In dictionaries, Kermode notes, parable is defined as “a fictitious story which by the means of ordinary and earthly situations illustrates either a moral, existential, or a spiritual truth” (Kermode, 1979, p. 26).<sup>39</sup> This definition refers back to the Greek term *parabole*, which is normally translated with “*comparison, illustration or analogy*” (Kermode, 1979, p. 23, italics original). The comparative and illustrative aspects, a strategy which “draws a parallel between a fictional story and the actual” (Stern, 1996, p. 44), is apparent in Luke’s parables. In the three parables of Luke 15, the heavenly is illustrated and compared with earthly feasts and celebrations. As to *The Prodigal Son*, although Joachim Jeremias emphasizes that “the father is not God, but an earthly father,”<sup>40</sup> he goes on to say in the same sentence that “yet some of the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is an image of God” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 128).

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<sup>38</sup> Definition from Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012).

<sup>39</sup> Kermode refers to Webster’s dictionary (Grove, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Jeremias refers to Luke 15, 18. 21: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Also the Hebraic term for parable, *Mashal*, can give valuable insight.<sup>41</sup> *Mashal* means “riddle or dark saying” (Kermode, 1979, p. 23, italics original), and points to the short stories in the Hebrew tradition which possess, in addition to the aspects above, a more prominent allegorical side, even to the extent of employing “deliberately occluding and concealing mode of language” (Stern, 1996, p. 43). As *Mashal*, therefore, the parable engages the reader in mystery-solving. In the words of Jakob Lothe, the parable “demands interpretive activity” (Lothe, 2003, p. 155, own translation).

Both David Stern and Frank Kermode emphasize the more obscure and also the excluding aspect of biblical parables. And both point to the parable of *The Sower* in Mark 4, 13-20 as a key reference, where an intention of being obscure is put in the mouth of Jesus. Frank Kermode says that these “stories are obscure on purpose to damn the outsiders ... that they are not necessarily impenetrable, but ... the outsiders, being what they are, will misunderstand them anyway” (Kermode, 1979, p. 32). Then, in what sense and to what extent is this aspect of the *Mashal* prominent in *The Prodigal Son*? Throughout the Gospel of Luke and also in the three parables in chapter 15, Luke sets up a confrontation between Jesus and the political and religious establishment, oftentimes grouped as “the Pharisees and the scribes” (Luke 15, 2).<sup>42</sup> Although they hear the message, Luke portrays them as rejecting, angry, ignorant and also incapable of grasping the message of Jesus. This portrayal is contrasted with the image given of the other addressees, in this case “the tax-collectors and sinners” (Luke 15, 1). The parable, therefore, has a rhetorical dimension which is a well-known feature of the *Mashal*; it gives voice to the outcasts of the society as representing the true insiders and those who easily grasp the message (Stern, 1996, pp. 44-54).

The shift between the illustrative and comparative, and what can be generally referred to as the enigmatic character of the parable, has the potential to create a tension between the immediately transparent and the hidden and almost impenetrable, between the simple and trivial and to the more demanding. Then, regarding this study, it is of key interest to see how the illustrative, the analogous and eventually also the allegorical aspects constitute themselves in the RE teachers’ responses.

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<sup>41</sup> *Mashal* is translated with the Greek term *parabole* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Septuaginta*).

<sup>42</sup> See Luke 5, 21.30; 6, 7; 11, 53.

The term *Mashal* also points to the historical context of biblical parables. This implies, as particularly Joachim Jeremias has emphasized, that all interpretations need to take the specific situation of the parable into consideration, that they were preached and also written “in reply to its critics”(Jeremias, 1972, p. 131).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the NT parables also need to be understood primarily within a Jewish context, more specifically, as Brad H. Young underlines, as “rabbinic parables” (Young, 2012, p. 3). Though recognizing Greek and Hellenistic influences, Young stresses, with reference to David Stern, that the parables of Jesus first and foremost apply rabbinic and Jewish imagery to “communicate the divine nature” and “to comprehend God’s will by telling stories about daily living” (Young, 2012, p. 6).<sup>44</sup> According to Young, among Luke’s parables the rabbinic roots are particularly prominent in *The Prodigal Son* as the imagery reflects “first-century Jewish beliefs about God” for the purpose of going into dialogue with “the religious teachings of rabbinic-Pharisaic Judaism” (Young, 2012, pp. 132-133). A question that arises from this is therefore: In what way and to what extent do the teachers of this study bring up and reflect on this historical context of *The Prodigal Son*?

Finally, I also find it is relevant to comment on the specific role of the narrator in parables. Iser is, of course, aware of the narrator, describing it as an “independent character, clearly separated from the inventor of the story” (Iser, 1974b, p. 106). Iser connects the narrator to the concept of gaps, and gives the narrator the role of “conveying the impression that understanding can only be achieved through this medium” (Iser, 1974b, p. 104). As such, the narrator claims, according to Iser, a position of “overwhelming superiority” (Iser, 1974b, p. 110).<sup>45</sup>

The significance of the narrator in *The Prodigal Son*, presented in the introduction with the words “Jesus said” (Luke 15, 11), seems difficult to exaggerate. Certainly, in viewing Jesus as the narrator both narrowly in this specific parable and in light of the Gospel of Luke, and also more broadly in the light of “the Lord said”-sayings in the Old Testament, clearly positions

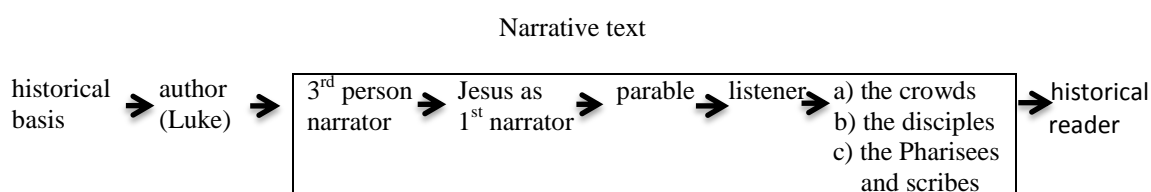
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<sup>43</sup> Jeremias underlines the “double historical setting” for the parables of Jesus; firstly, the “specific situation in the pattern of the activity of Jesus,” and secondly, the “missionary activities” of “the primitive Church” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 23). To unveil the second in order to come close to number one is Jeremias’ primary goal; to “recover,” as he puts it, “the original meaning of the parables of Jesus, to hear again his authentic voice” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 22). Many scholars have criticized Jeremias; the issue of authenticity was far from resolved, as we never can claim to study the utterances of Jesus himself. Yet, the relevance of historical reading has given Jeremias a central position in the field of research.

<sup>44</sup> Young refers to Stern’s book *Parables in midrash* (1991).

<sup>45</sup> Iser refers to the role of the narrator in William M. Thackeray’s *Vanity fair* (2001).

the narrator, with reference to Iser above, with “overwhelming superiority.”<sup>46</sup> However, we need to be more precise regarding the matter of the narrator. We need to ask: What narrator is the RE teacher actually recognizing? Is it, as presented above, only Jesus, the narrator in first person, or the narrator as the author of Luke, the historical author? Or does the RE teacher talk about the narrator in third person, the one that establishes the setting in Luke 15, 1-3? Jakob Lothe gives the following illustration to visualize the complexity of “the narrative communication” in which the narrator can take on different positions:<sup>47</sup>



In a pilot study<sup>48</sup> on four RE teacher students, the introduction “Jesus said” (v. 11) settled the matter quite quickly. None recognized the narrator in third person. But in some instances the historical author was brought to the surface, recognizing the narrator as the disciple Luke who had a specific social and ethical agenda. In these cases I saw that Luke as historical author went along and merged with Jesus as narrator and became one. Lothe describes this as a “fluid transition”:

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Genesis 1, 3 and Exodus 33, 1. The original Greek (koiné-greek) term which is used is “ἔειπεν δε,” which literally means “he said,” a past tense (aorist) of λέγω, “to say” (Aland, 1983, p. 277). These are common introductory words of parables in the NT, as they are found for instance in *The Lost Coin* (Luke 15, 3), *The Parable of the Great Banquet* (Luke 14, 16), and *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* (Luke 18, 9).

<sup>47</sup> The figure is slightly amended to fit *The Prodigal Son* rather than *The Sower* in Mark 4, 13-20. As Lothe, I refer to “the crowds” and “the disciples,” but, with reference to Luke 15,1-3, I also include “The Pharisees and scribes” (Lothe, 2003, p. 153, own translation).

<sup>48</sup> I conducted two pilot studies, the first with two RE teachers who teach RE at levels 1-7 at a school in the neighboring municipality of Hamar. The study was conducted in the spring of 2011. At this stage of the study the research design was rather loose and indefinite, and the main aim was therefore to test out potential theories and methods. It was oriented towards didactical and comparative issues, asking the teachers to reflect on various religious narratives both prior to teaching and after teaching. The second pilot study was conducted in the fall of 2011. The informants were four teacher education students at Hedmark University College, who had all completed RE (30 ECTS) prior to the study. This pilot study was based on the adjustments made after the first pilot study. The design of this study, centering the attention on one specific narrative – *The Prodigal Son* – and also emphasizing the literary perspective, largely coincides with the main study’s design.

[T]he transition between, on the one hand, historical facts and, on the other, organizational, narrative and structural questions, becomes unclear. This fluid transition actualizes interpretive and structural problems (Lothe, 2003, p. 154, own translation).

The question that arises, therefore, is not simply what narrator the RE teachers apply, but also whether they deal with “the fluid transition” between different concepts of narrator.

A structural perspective on the narrator and its implication for interpretive activity is essential to Iser. But as demonstrated in this chapter, theory on parables contributes significantly to bringing forth more specific codes and thus better analytical tools for describing and understanding in more detail the potential effect of the narrator as a “response-inviting structure” in the RE teachers’ responses to *The Prodigal Son*. And, as we have seen above, the same applies for the more detailed exegesis of the illustrative, analogous and allegorical aspects of parables.

## **2.4 The RE teacher as a particular reader – applying the perspectives of Stanley Fish**

Within reader-response theory, Stanley Fish goes furthest in liberating historical or contemporary readers from any authorial and textual constraints. A basic idea in Fish’s theory is that there is no such thing as an autonomous text that actively guides reading and meaning-making. Reading and interpretation are, in Fish’s view, solely human enterprises and must hence be perceived as such. On this basis he programmatically claims: “Literature is in the reader” (Fish, 1970).

The matter of chronology is fundamental in Fish’s thinking, saying that “[e]verything depends on the temporal dimension” (Fish, 1976, p. 474). The key, according to Fish, is to recognize that the initial process of meaning-making precedes the text and authorial intent. The chronology becomes apparent in the following statement: “I “saw” what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had “seen” to a text and an intention” (Fish, 1976, pp. 477-478). From this follows that the primary focus of literary critics as well as teachers engaged in literature education should be on what readers do to texts, not on what texts do to readers, or what the various stylistic

features mean independently of interpretive activity. In other words, attention should be on understanding the structure of readers' experiences of interpretation, what Fish refers to as the readers' "interpretive strategies": "[I]nterpretive strategies are ... the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them" (Fish, 1980, p. 13).

To draw a more nuanced picture, Fish's reader-centeredness does not imply that he rejects the power of the text, and that it employs no specific structures and no authorial intention. But he will argue that it is a mistake "to go directly from the description of formal features to a specification of their meaning" (Fish, 1980, p. 8). Instead, Fish continues, "the value of those features [can] only be determined by determining their *function* in the developing experience of the reader" (Fish, 1980, p. 8, italics added).<sup>49</sup> This does not seem too far from Iser's notion of the reader's "wandering viewpoint" and flexible building of consistency and comprehension through the reader's activities of selection and projection. But considering the order of things, Fish will contend that it is the reader, who is in the front seat, who has the power to determine the "*function*" and consequently the content of textual structures and authorial intention. And as such, all the formal features of the text, Fish will claim, "are not meant to be solved but to be experienced" (Fish, 1976, p. 476). In the following citation, Fish makes his point clear, a statement which he refers to as "the argumentative sequence":

[I]ntention is known when and only when it is recognized, it is recognized as soon as you decide about it, you decide about it as soon as you make a sense, and you make a sense ... as soon as you can" (Fish, 1976, p. 478).

After this introduction, identifying the activities of the historical reader as the focal point in the process of meaning-making, what then can be said more precisely about reader's "interpretive strategies"? In the following statement, Fish lists what he refers to as examples of "formal features" that may constitute reader's strategies (Fish, 1976, p. 478):

[T]hey include the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandonment of conclusions, the giving and withdrawal of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles (Fish, 1976, p. 474).

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<sup>49</sup> In two essays "What is stylistics and why are they saying such terrible things about it? – Part I and Part II," the distinction between description and interpretation is "the focus of discussion" (Fish, 1979, p. 129).

The list, of course, is not complete, and furthermore, none of the strategies mentioned has privilege, “because each is equally an event in his experience” (Fish, 1976, p. 474).

Certainly, all the strategies mentioned above are possible “interpretive strategies” for the RE teachers. For instance, the RE teachers can respond, referring to Fish’s statement above, by “the giving and withdrawal of approval” when they read about the father’s overwhelming reception (Luke 15, 20). Also the strategy of “specifying of causes” is possible with reference to the parable’s omission of being specific about why the youngest son wanted to leave (Luke 15, 12).

These strategies only seem to confirm Iser’s concept of the blank and the negation as the structuring and also triggering elements. But the relevance of Fish’s temporal dimension and readers’ “interpretive strategies” became apparent in the pilot study of four RE teacher students, for instance in their reading of the two words introducing the parable: “Jesus said” (Luke 15, 11).<sup>50</sup> This introduction clearly caught the students’ attention and subsequently made them to interpret the parable in a certain way. The following citations from two students’ texts of reflection illustrate this:

Since the first sentence in the text is “Jesus said,” it is natural for me to look for a moral (the first sentence in the informant’s text of reflection).

Siden den første setningen I teksten er “Jesus sa,” så er det naturlig for meg å se etter en moral (den første setningen i informantens refleksjonstekst).

In this parable, Jesus’ strong love for humans is highlighted. The parable shows what he was most concerned about, for instance love for others, compassion, forgiveness, the poor and the disadvantaged, the danger of wealth etc. (a summarizing sentence in the informant’s text of reflection).

I denne lignelsen er Jesu sterke kjærlighet for menneskene det viktigste. Lignelsen viser hva han var mest opptatt av, for eksempel nestekjærlighet, barmhjertighet, tilgivelse, de fattige og vanskeligstilte, rikdommens farer osv. (oppsummerende setning i informantens refleksjonstekst).

Fish will claim that it is not the narrator that initially guides the students to read the parable as containing a predominantly moral content, but what the name *Jesus*, independently of its role in the text, stirs up of associations and anticipations. The chronology or the “temporal dimension” shows that all the thoughts and ideas that come to mind function as a set of

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Fish’s elaboration on the name Bacchus in John Milton’s poem *Comus* (Fish, 1976, p. 474).



“interpretive principles” that run ahead of any formal textual constraints and also authorial intent (Fish, 1976, p. 477).

From what has been said so far about “interpretive strategies,” it seems that there is no other alternative here than that of describing the RE teachers’ strategies as unique sequences of interpretive acts and events. And taking into account the lack of more substantiality and further specific categorizations, Fish leaves us with the task to explore the variety and potential of “interpretive strategies.” This could, of course, serve to explain the great diversity of interpretations that are unfolding. But what about the apparent stability of interpretations which the example above illustrates? In contrast to Iser, the answer to this lies not in the formal structures of the text. To come to terms with this, Fish expands the scope of reader’s “interpretive strategies” to also containing a communal dimension, what he refers to as “the authority of interpretive communities.”<sup>51</sup>

In the introduction to *Is there a text in this class?* Fish refers to the American linguist Noam Chomsky to make his point. He adopts Chomsky’s notion of “generative grammar” and “linguistic competence,” “reason[ing] that if the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform” (Fish, 1980, p. 5).<sup>52</sup> But what creates stable interpretations, as opposed to the common ability to read, is not shared “linguistic competence,” but “uniform” conventions of interpretation. Fish explains this by referring to literature as a “conventional category,” arguing that “[w]hat will, at any time, be recognized as literature is a function of a communal decision as to what will count as literature” (Fish, 1980, p. 10). Seemingly, this brings me back to Gadamer’s notion of the “Wirkungsgeschichte” as the stabilizing principle. This, however, would turn the attention towards the notion of an independent and determinant factor that is not an incorporated and constitutive part of readers’ “interpretive strategies.” To illustrate Fish’s point in this matter, I believe we can replace the term “intention” with “Wirkungsgeschichte” in his “argumentative sequence” referred to earlier (see p. 47):

[Wirkungsgeschichte] is known when and only when it is recognized, it is recognized as soon as you decide about it, you decide about it as soon as you make a sense, and you make a sense ... as soon as you can (Fish, 1976, p. 478).

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<sup>51</sup> This is the subtitle of *Is there a text in this class?* (Fish, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> On Chomsky’s concept of “generative grammar,” see for instance Helge Lødrup’s article “Chomsky og den generative grammatikken” [Chomsky and generative grammar] (Lødrup, 1996).

What, then, gives an “authoritative interpretive community” its position and its power? And further, in what way does a “community” become observable as a constitutive element in readers’ acts of interpretation?

In biblical hermeneutics it is not difficult to come up with examples of powerful “interpretive communities,” some short-lived, others achieving canonical status. According to Fish, their position and power is founded on a “collective decision” and hence “will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it” (Fish, 1980, p. 11). A key point for Fish is to emphasize that all readers, although they do not find themselves to be strong “believers” who belong to an established and well-known community, are subject to powerful conventions. Conventions pop up as references to what we all perceive as ‘normal’ or ‘mainstream’ interpretations, to what we have always been told or taught.

I find that Fish’s concept of “the authority of interpretive communities” is particularly relevant in this study, since the informants are selected by virtue of being RE teachers and thus part of a defined profession. In the pilot study on two RE teachers the authority of one particular convention became obvious when one of them reflected extensively on the principles of RE teaching, pinpointing “the teachers’ obligation to refrain from preaching.”<sup>53</sup> This reference to what was perceived to be a ‘golden rule’ for all RE teachers clearly constrained the interpretations of the teacher.<sup>54</sup>

However, on looking more closely, we see that the RE teacher is not simply playing according to the rules of specific conventions. Although conventions can appear dominant, and particularly in a study where a reader sees him/herself as representing a specific profession, Fish’s approach proves too rigid and deterministic. Claiming that “it’s all social,” I will argue with Rosenblatt and many others, among them Kathleen McCormick, who in the article “Swimming upstreams with Stanley Fish” (1985) argues that reading and interpretation are fundamentally cognitive and therefore individual activities. Though the reader is never in isolation and independent of social conventions, he or she needs to be recognized as holding the power of negotiating and choosing his or her way among and across different and also contradictory communities. Thus, a community should be viewed as part of the individual

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<sup>53</sup> Notes from interview. Translated from “kravet til lærerne om å avstå fra å forkynne.”

<sup>54</sup> In this pilot study both RE teachers were asked to teach about the narratives, and also to reflect didactically on their teaching. This explains the overload of pedagogical reflections in this empirical material. Thus, in order to secure a more literary focus in the main study, pedagogical issues were downplayed and the question of teaching the narrative was dropped.

reader's "interpretive strategies," as something that finds its form and shape in the reader's mind and become visible as a construct in the responses.

Rosenblatt, in elaborating her opposition to Fish's rigid determinism, highlights the situative aspects with reference to reading as an "event," emphasizing that "the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader" profoundly affects reading and interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 20). In the pilot study that involved four RE teacher students, this negotiating activity between the individual and the collective became apparent. One of the students starts the written response by referring to "the classical home-away-home-structure of the narrative."<sup>55</sup> Then he brings in, as he wrote, "from the back of my head Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the philistine,"<sup>56</sup> and points to a shift in perspective where the prodigal becomes a characteristic feature of the oldest son. Thus, in this process of negotiating literary and philosophical conventions, the student comes up with a multifaceted response. And in the interview that followed, the response was developed even further so as to include negotiations with Christian theological conventions, referring to the "Christian principles of faith," and more specifically, the "dogmas of forgiveness and righteousness."<sup>57</sup>

I find that Fish's theory serves to illuminate what the RE teacher as a particular reader potentially brings to the event of meaning-making. But, and as shown in the latter part of this chapter, the concept of "interpretive strategies" needed adjustment to take in the individual aspect which is essential in the socio-constructive framework of Rosenblatt's transactional theory.

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance Northrop Frye's book *The great code* (1982).

<sup>56</sup> Translated from "fra bak i hodet Søren Kirkegaard's spissborgerbegrep."

<sup>57</sup> Translated from "kristne trosprinsipper," and "dogmene om tilgivelse og rettfærdiggjørelse."

## 2.5 The transactional perspective and operationalization of theory

I will start this chapter by reciting a statement by Louise Rosenblatt which points to the essence of transactional theory (see p. 32):

We still can distinguish the elements, but we have to think of them, not as separate entities, but as aspects of phases of a dynamic process, in which all elements take on their character as part of the organically-interrelated situation (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 100).

Despite their striking differences, the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish certainly serve to “distinguish the elements” involved – the text and the reader. And this marks also the essence of Iser and Fish’s contributions: to single out and make clear what the text and the reader bring to the interpretive event. The application of Iser and Fish, then, represent the first stage in the operationalization of theory (stage I).<sup>58</sup>

My main focus, however, is to look at the text and the reader, as Rosenblatt says above, as parts of the “organically-interrelated situation” of meaning-making. This implies that I move from looking at *The Prodigal Son* and the RE teacher as separate entities to describing the transactional encounter between them. The two stages and the concrete tools for the analysis can be illustrated in the following way:

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<sup>58</sup> I use the term *stage* to indicate that the move from Iser and Fish’s perspectives and over to Rosenblatt’s, does not imply a change in level of abstraction.

**STAGE I – THE PRODIGAL SON AND THE RE TEACHER AS DISTINGUISHED ELEMENTS**

**W. Iser: “the response inviting structures” of *The Prodigal Son***

Created by

- Parable as genre
  - Illustration
  - Analogy
  - Allegory (incl. *Mashal*)
- Literary contexts
  - Immediate context of Luke 15
  - Wider context of Luke, incl. the context of the Gospels and the Bible
- Narrators
- Characters
- Cutting techniques
- Negations

↓  
**ANALYSIS**

**S. Fish: “the interpretive strategies” of the RE teacher**

Concepts of Christianity

- The Bible (GT – NT)
- Image of Jesus
- Image of God and ‘man’
- Image of salvation, forgiveness
- Image of redemption, conversion

Teachers’ Background and experiences

- Past and present religious affiliation
- Personal experiences (childhood, parenthood, present experiences)
- The situative aspects (place and time for writing reflection text and the interview)

Concepts of RE

- Teaching experiences
- Formal issues (Curriculum, RE teacher role)

↓  
**ANALYSIS**

**STAGE II – THE PRODIGAL SON AND THE RE TEACHER IN TRANSACTION**

↓  
**ANALYSIS**

To illustrate the different stages of operationalization and also to highlight the relevance and the potential of looking at the RE responses in a transactional perspective, I will give a short analysis of two statements made by Terje and Karianne, two RE teachers from the main study.

Karianne: *Is there any other way to understand this parable?*

Karianne: *Er det noen andre måter å forstå denne teksten på?*

Terje: *It all depends on your point of view!*

Terje: *Det kommer an på ditt ståsted!*

At a first look, Karianne and Terje's statements seem unambiguous and to point in two completely opposite directions. Karianne's statement seems to reflect a dominant text-oriented approach and a focus on the one inherent meaning in *The Prodigal Son*, while Terje's seems to have a dominant reader-oriented approach, claiming that meaning has its source in each and every reader's point of view. As such, they appear as opposites and hence illustrating the Iser and Fish dichotomy. For Karianne, the parable as a genre seems to settle it all. More specifically, the apparent father-God analogy cannot be overlooked and must be the basis for any interpretation. Terje, on the other hand, seems to place all the emphasis on what a reader brings in of personal background and experiences, and particularly a reader's religious or non-religious affiliation.

To remain in the Iser and Fish dichotomy would imply the position of Terje and Karianne as being poles apart on the text- and reader continuum, which would leave me with the task of placing the other teachers somewhere on the line between these extremes. This would, however, not do justice to the material. As a matter of fact, it does not even do justice to the short statements of Karianne and Terje above. Clearly, something more complex is going on. Karianne's statement can certainly also be understood as an utterance that reflects a constraining "interpretive strategy" due to a dominant religious "interpretive community," seen in her case in recurrent references to a Catholic faith. It is therefore more likely that it is both the text and her background, and then these two in a negotiating activity of transaction, which constrain her interpretation and make it so unambiguous.

Likewise, Terje's statement can certainly be viewed as an utterance that reflects the constraining role of specific "response-inviting structures." In Terje's response it is especially the open ending of the parable, a "cutting technique," which triggers Terje to emphasize his particular point of view. Clearly, in his case, this represents an invitation to all readers to engage and read their own lives into the parable. So, what we see in these two seemingly

contrasting statements is that a negotiating activity of transaction between *The Prodigal Son* and a reader is taking place. Thus, I will argue with Rosenblatt that a transactional perspective takes into account what is involved in reading and meaning-making and thus can bring us closer to answering the main research question: *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?*





## 3. Method

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter the key question to ask is: On what grounds and by what means can I obtain an empirical material that fits the objective of understanding what happens when RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*?

I will start this chapter by centring the attention on the research paradigm and the research strategy of the study, the two overall perspectives which give the premises and anchor the methodological considerations. From this basis I will turn to the strategies of sampling and data collection to illuminate in more detail the process of acquiring the material. At the end of the chapter, the choices made will be evaluated with regard to the criteria of validity, reliability, generalization and transferability in qualitative research, and also be discussed in the light of relevant ethical issues.

### 3.2 Research paradigm

As the history of hermeneutics and also reader-response studies more specifically have shown, it is possible to approach the issue of RE teachers' interpretations in various ways due to different ontological, epistemological and also methodological reasoning. To elaborate on this, I find it helpful to apply Martin Hollis' book *Philosophy of social science* (2002) and also *Explaining society* edited by Berth Danermark (2002), for the purpose of asking basic questions which studies on the social world need to raise.

In the social sciences, one approach is to aim for *explanations*, driven by the quest for objective, scientific knowledge. Here the basic idea is that social phenomena share the traits of natural phenomena; that they are subject to objective and natural regularities. According to Martin Hollis, there are two "robust" philosophies that have moved the social sciences in this

direction, the first, the Marxian tradition which locates the regularities ‘from above,’ as social and economical ‘superstructures’ determining the social world of human beings, and the second, inspired by John S. Mill, which locates the regularities ‘from below,’ from the individual, as fixed and natural laws of the mind (Hollis, 2002, p. 9). Although looking in very different directions and therefore not applying the same methodology or epistemological reasoning, Marx and Mill share a basic causal and naturalistic ontology which results in a common aim: to *explain* social phenomena by identifying the laws and causal relations that govern the social world (Hollis, 2002, pp. 10-11). This aim of objectivity and generalization in the social sciences is also referred to as a “nomothetic approach” (Danermark, 2002, p. 3).

A “nomothetic approach” to the RE teachers’ responses would imply viewing them as destined to come out due to certain natural regularities. Consequently, not the responses but the regularities would be of the foremost interest, viewed then as employing the potential to *explain* the RE teachers’ responses. On these terms, the RE teacher would not be viewed as an autonomous actor of interpretation, but an *agent* steered by the laws of causality. And there are certainly examples of this in literary theory, for instance the Marxist theories of Terry Eagleton and Edward Said, Virginia Woolf’s feminism, and also, within reader-response theory; the essentialist psychological approach of Norman Holland.

A contrasting approach is to aim for *understanding*, arguing that the social world is much too complex and irregular to be explained and grasped on naturalistic and deterministic grounds. The essential distinguishing trait of the social world is not that of intrinsic regularities but of meaning and interpretation. Thus, this turn towards a hermeneutical positioning is first of all based on recognizing the role of the individual *actor* in the social world, in my study the RE teacher, as a bearer of meaning and by that as key maker of the social world in which he or she engages. Like John S. Mill, the focus is on the individual, but not for the purpose of objectively “seeking the causes of behaviour,” but in a hermeneutical way, “seek the meaning of action” (Hollis, 2002, p. 12), or more concretely as Robert Stake puts it, to understand the “mental atmosphere, the thoughts and feelings and motivations” (Stake, 1978, p. 6).<sup>59</sup> To do research on the social world, therefore, one must apply a methodology which brings to light

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<sup>59</sup> Stake is here quoting from Georg H. von Wright’s book *Explanation and understanding* (G. H. v. Wright, 1971).

the actors' own perspectives and role as key constructors of social reality. This is also referred to as an "idiographic approach" (Danermark, 2002, p. 3).<sup>60</sup>

The research questions raised in this study indicate that to understand the RE teachers' process of meaning-making is of core interest. The lower-right box in Hollis' overview of four possible positions in the social sciences seems therefore most fitting.

	<b>Explaining</b>	<b>Understanding</b>
<b>Holism</b>	Systems	'Game'
<b>Individualism</b>	Agents	Actors

(Hollis, 2002, p. 19)

This illustration, and also what has been said above, could give the impression that there are solid walls between the different positions and that a hermeneutical approach has no link to the natural sciences. But, and as Hollis points out, the social world reveals that the boundaries are not absolute and that there are positions "that straddle the dividing line" (Hollis, 2002, p. 19). For Danermark it is imperative to contest "[s]ome unhappy dualisms," and among them, the "polarization between positivism and hermeneutics" (Danermark, 2002, pp. 2-4). Also Matthew B. Miles and Michael Huberman contend that "there is no clear or clean boundary between describing and explaining," arguing that "the researcher typically moves through a series of analysis episodes that condense more and more data into a more and more coherent understanding of what, how, and why" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). They concretize this movement towards the "why" by pointing out that as a researcher

you begin with a text, trying out conding categories on it, then moving to identify themes and trends, and then to testing hunches and findings, aiming first to delineate the "deep structure" and then to integrate the data into an explanatory framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91).

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<sup>60</sup> Recognizing the individual and collective nature of the reality of humans, the issue of nomothetic and/or an idiographic approach is well known in the social sciences but was first applied in psychology (see Diener, 1995).

This movement “from describing to explaining” is noticeable in the three sub-research questions which disclose the two stages in the analytical part of this study. The first stage isolates the role of *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text and the RE teacher as a particular reader. Then, to understand what is going on in the process of meaning-making, I move towards the second stage and the transactional analysis. This implies that it is by, first, seeking to “delineate the ‘deep structure’,” as Miles and Huberman put it, that I can move to the next stage and “integrate the data into an explanatory framework,” that is, the transactional framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). This shows that a causal reasoning is not absent in a hermeneutical inquiry. But the built-in logic is not based on naturalistic laws and objective regularities, or on “brute data,” as Charles Taylor puts it, but on “data of interpretation” (Taylor, 1985, p. 123).<sup>61</sup>

Further, the need to “straddle the dividing line” between individualism and holism, becomes apparent when the individual RE teacher is recognized as holding a position or role as an RE teacher within the larger collective system ‘school.’ Thus, I need to take into account situative and contextual aspects as constitutive and as fundamentally influencing the RE teachers’ mental processes of meaning-making. Within the paradigm of socio-constructive hermeneutics, to which this study belongs, there are different approaches that pinpoint this aspect.

The “game”-metaphor of Ludwig Wittgenstein, based on identified rules of language, is one way to understand the relation between the individual and dominant social and collective structures (Hollis, 2002, p. 152). This has been developed further by for instance role theory (e.g. Goffman, 1959) and also theory of positioning (e.g. Harré & Langenhove, 1999), the latter putting more emphasis on the potential of the individual to play the active and structuring part in social “games.” For this study, I see that positioning theory in particular could have contributed to giving a balanced picture of the individual and the collective aspects of the RE teacher’s interpretations. This would, however, have moved the study more towards an emphasis on form and less on content, that means away from and an in-depth understanding of the RE teacher’s meaning-making. If the object of study and the unit of analysis had been for instance patterns of articulation or different applications of natural talk

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor defines “brute data” as follows: “data whose validity cannot be questioned by offering another interpretation or reading, data whose credibility cannot be founded or undermined by further reasoning” (Taylor, 1971, p. 8).

taking place in RE classrooms, a form analysis, for instance a discursive approach, would be applicable.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, I find it necessary to place this study in the literary sphere, but then attached to theory that emphasizes socio-constructive perspectives. This is what I find in Mikhail Bachtin. Bachtin's "dialogism" recognizes the essential role of an *active* reader or listener in all lingual activities, including literary texts (Bachtin & Emerson, 1984; Holquist, 2002). And furthermore, he views "speech acts" or "utterances" as fundamentally social phenomena situated in specific socio-cultural contexts (Bachtin, Emerson, & Holquist, 1986). A socio-cultural view of language is also then where Rosenblatt's transactional theory fits in, owing, as she says, her philosophical foundation to William James, John Dewey and Charles S. Peirce, the latter, who, like Bachtin, brought forth the triadic concept of language – the mutual contingent relationship between "sign, object, interpretant" – and thus laid the foundation for highlighting the decisive role of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 99). The literary and linguistic oriented socio-constructive hermeneutic of Peirce and Bachtin, therefore, seems to be the most precise designation of this study's research paradigm.

From here I move over to implement the research paradigm in a more concrete research strategy, and after that, in the specific methodological practices of sampling and data collection.

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<sup>62</sup> My understanding of the term discourse is taken from Boréus & Bergström's book *Tekstens mening och makt* [The meaning and power of a text] (Boréus & Bergström, 2005, p. 17).

### 3.3 Research strategy

The objective of this study is to understand the RE teachers' process of meaning-making. Therefore, the research strategy and the methods applied need to secure rich and detailed descriptions of the quality and the process of interpretation, and this from the RE teachers' point of view. And based on what was emphasized above, the matter demands a strategy which can illuminate the social reality of RE teachers and make the "situational constraints that shape [the] inquiry" accessible for examination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Hence, I need to solve methodologically what was a key issue above; balancing the RE teacher as an individual and as an actor of interpretation situated in a particular social context.

All these qualitative aspects, and in particular emphasizing the implications of context, point towards a case study strategy for this inquiry (Yin, 2003, p. 4). In Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (Grove, 2008), case study is defined as follows: "*Case Study. An intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment.*"<sup>63</sup>

More precisely, the issue at stake requires a "multiple case study or collective case study" approach (Stake, 2005, p. 445). This has to do with the matter discussed above regarding the collective aspects of the RE teacher's role and recognizing each individual as part of the school as a larger "bounded system" (Stake, 1978, p. 7).<sup>64</sup> This implies that the teachers will be studied one by one so that the uniqueness of each individual case can be highlighted to give a nuanced and multifaceted picture. Although the point of departure is an intrinsic interest in the individual case, each one of them plays an instrumental role for understanding the larger picture, the multiple cases in sum (Stake, 1995, pp. 3-4). This way of managing the particular and the general is also reflected in how the findings are topically organized in the latter part of the chapter *Analyzing RE teacher responses* (see p. 186).

This raises the issue of generalization. Obviously, the ambition is not to give a general picture of all RE teachers. If that had been the intention, a case study strategy would prove a bad choice. Acknowledging that a different sample would give a different outcome, the generalizations made are limited only to what is typical of the cases studied and representative

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<sup>63</sup> Citation from Bent Flyvbjerg's article "Case study" (2011, p. 301).

<sup>64</sup> Stake refers to Louis Smith's use of the term (Smith, 1974).

to them only. The material, therefore, is not valid for statistical generalizations. But, and as Robert Stake points out, a “target case ... properly described” which shares “essential similarities to cases of interest ... establish the basis for naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1978, p. 7).<sup>65</sup> But, and important to note, such generalizations will not be subject to scientific analyses due to the lack of systematic coherence with regard to the specific cases of this study. To describe the target cases properly, therefore, is first and foremost a question of strengthening the reliability of the study so that we can “maximize what we can learn” about the specific cases selected (Stake, 1995, p. 4). This will be addressed in more detail in the chapter on *Sampling* below, where I will elaborate on the sampling strategy of intensity (see p. 67).

Having, then, settled for a multiple case study strategy, how can I make sure that the informants respond as RE teachers and not just as any “normal readers” (e.g. Svensson, 1986, own translation)? In short, what makes this a case study of RE teachers? This question raises the issue of locating the phenomenon of interest.

With the research questions asked, the study indicates that it is not the teaching of *The Prodigal Son* or the actual teacher responses given in class that are of interest. That means that I need a strategy which can bring about RE teacher reflections rather than RE teacher practices. A natural setting for this to occur is not the classroom, but a place where the teachers can find time to reflect on and respond to *The Prodigal Son* as a specific subject matter.

This does not indicate that the field of practice will be avoided for the benefit of seeking ‘pure’ literary responses. A key issue will be to address in what way and to what extent didactical reflections prove important constructs in the RE teachers’ responses (Van Dijk, 2006). And furthermore, I need to acknowledge that as a researcher I play a key role in constructing the empirical situations. This needs to be highlighted throughout the study, for instance when deciding on specific methods and also in the analytical part, as an issue which influences the RE teachers’ responses. To be transparent and reflective about possible methodological shortcomings or flaws of this kind will decisively strengthen and not weaken the reliability of the study.

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<sup>65</sup> See also Stake’s article “Qualitative case studies” (Stake, 2005, p. 454).

A key methodological objective is to construct situations which minimize the effect of ‘disturbing’ factors, and then in particular improbable situations and researcher bias. For this study, this implies constructing situations which the RE teachers perceive as teacher situations, in other words, contexts to which they naturally bring and “wear” their teacher identity and also have reasonable time and space to complete the tasks they are given. To accomplish this, I will point to four concrete factors:

1. To meet the RE teachers’ at their schools, on their own ‘home turf,’ where it is natural for them to think and act as teachers.
2. To establish a mutual understanding that the chosen text is highly relevant for their teaching.
3. To avoid a situation where the RE teachers feel that they are being tested. It is important to emphasize the genuinely explorative and descriptive intentions of this study of how they make meaning of *The Prodigal Son*; it is not an assessment study.
4. To agree about practical terms with the principals so that the RE teachers can get the opportunity to immerse themselves in the text and complete what I ask them to do.

These points show that the study employs some of the features that characterize participatory or critical action research (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, pp. 559-603). However, the objective of this study is not to change or to improve the RE teachers’ teaching skills (e.g. Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Pine, 2009). Involving the RE teachers, and also the principals, in order to outline the frame for the cases to be studied is all about establishing a durable methodological basis that serves to bring to the surface what can be regarded as *real* RE teacher responses.

This issue of securing a material of real RE teacher responses actualizes a discussion on how I, on a deeper level, understand the relation between material and theory. In this discussion, I largely lean on the philosophical hermeneutics of Charles Taylor.

Taylor is in strong opposition to the tendency of adopting the premises of positivist thinking in the humanities. Taylor argues that this sort of hermeneutics is based on “computer-inspired theories,” which holds “two requirements: brute input data, and a set of subsequent operations which are specified univocally enough so that they can be run as a program on a machine”



(Taylor, 1985, p. 120). On such premises “personal discernment or interpretation on the part of the observer” must be ruled out (Taylor, 1985, p. 118).

I will argue that it is fundamental to acknowledge that the interpretations acquired by me as a researcher decisively exceed a mere adoption of the RE teachers’ point of view. Put differently, I have not simply pulled out what could be considered pure RE teacher responses. Neither have I, at the other end of the pendulum, solely pushed theory and my researcher perspective on the material. Instead, my role as a researcher is to make transparent the relation between the data and the researcher community in hermeneutics and view them not as detached elements but as intrinsically interwoven, what Anthony Giddens denoted “double hermeneutics” (Giddens, 1987). For instance, this implies that as a researcher I go beyond merely making sense of the informants and the data, and instead explain on scientific and theoretical premises what the RE teachers themselves are not able to understand and/or express. For as Taylor puts it, a “successful interpretation is one which makes clear the meaning originally present in a confused, fragmentary, cloudy form” (Taylor, 1971, p. 5).

The theoretical backdrop of this study, the socio-constructive hermeneutical paradigm, centres the attention on meaning-making as a situative and contextually bounded act. This means that the material will be coded on the basis of theoretical concepts on how meanings are being constructed. I have found it relevant to code the material with tools acquired by reader-response criticism. More specifically, I find the transactional approach of Louise M. Rosenblatt applicable, a theory which provides a constructivist approach to the material, pinpointing the mutual contingency of the three constitutive elements involved in the act of reading: the particular reader, the particular text, and the particular context (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1978). I find that Rosenblatt’s envisioning of what is involved in the act of reading, what has been labelled a pragmatic approach in reader-response criticism, applies well to the double hermeneutics referred to above.

All this, then, seems to point towards an emphasis on theorizing the empirical material. The obvious benefit of this is its delimiting and structuring effect; it makes the study focused and also the empirical world of RE teachers as interpretive actors available and also more comprehensible. The obvious drawback is that by bringing predefined theoretical perspectives to the empirical scene, I will most certainly not grasp the fullness of the material and by that possibly lose vital aspects (G. Afdal, 2005, p. 35). But acknowledging the impossibility of

reaching both material and analytical completeness, I decided to settle for a strategy which gave me a set of ideas and tools to explore and describe the empirical field of interest: *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?* This is what I find in the theoretical concepts of Rosenblatt's transactional reader-response theory. A more grounded or "informal approach" would not provide the same focus of attention (Peräkylä, 2005, p. 870).

Thus, I approached the empirical field with a set of theoretical ideas and tools. This has not only guided me towards a certain theoretical language and an interpretive stance, but also decisively determined the content of the material gathered. That means that I have been looking for something particular in the empirical field, what represents the unit of analysis of this study: RE teacher responses. But this does not bring this study to the other end of the pendulum, that is towards hypothesis testing and a deductive design. Instead, theory is applied to bring me as a researcher in a position where I can better explore and describe, and ultimately also better explain what happens when the RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*. In other words, to obtain knowledge about the empirical field "requires concepts and theories" (Danermark, 2002, p. 88).

Where, then, does this leave me in the inductive-deductive continuum? From what has been said, it would seem right to place the study on the deductive side. But as an empirical study with the ambition of exploring and describing the phenomenon of RE teachers as interpreters, the study clearly has an inductive orientation. This inductive orientation, then, held together with my distancing myself from theory testing, indicates that the relation between material and theory is more balanced, or better, more mutually contingent. On the one hand, the empirical material gathered – the RE teacher responses – is at the centre of attention. But on the other hand, the gathering of material has from the outset been delimited and guided by a specific interest. The fundamental theoretical impact as to the matter of collecting data is apparent. It is the transactional theory of Rosenblatt, offering the ontological and also the epistemological perspectives of reading, which guides the methodological reasoning. The intention is not simply to explore and describe the individual RE teacher's responses as purely observable events, but as constructs based on the coming together of the RE teacher as a particular reader and *The Prodigal Son* as a particular text. Hence, it would be more precise to view this study as one evoked by abductive reasoning; that is, grounded in an empirical phenomenon guided by the ontological and also the epistemological perspectives of Rosenblatt's transactional theory.

The preliminary and theoretical concepts, then, should serve for selecting the concrete methods that can best bring RE teacher responses of *The Prodigal Son* into the open. Up to this point, the ambition has been to show how the socio-constructive hermeneutical paradigm has influenced the methodological reasoning, both when the issue was to argue for a case study strategy and the more principled question of the relation between material and theory. In the following we will see how the paradigm influences the more concrete aspects of methodology, namely the search for a sampling strategy and methods for data collection.

### **3.4 Sampling**

The issue of sampling in a qualitative study is, of course, a critical one, and particularly so in case study inquiries (Yin, 2003, p. 3). For what is the case really about, or more concretely, who are the very RE teachers to be studied? And also, what are the arguments for choosing the biblical narrative *The Prodigal Son*?

#### **3.4.1 The RE teachers**

To answer the first question is about defining the case or the unit of analysis in detail, according to Robert Yin, “to identify the criteria for selecting and screening potential candidates for the cases to be studied, and to suggest the relevant variables of interest and therefore data to be collected as part of the case study” (Yin, 2003, p. 3). And obviously, to be explicit about the details of the sampling process is about being transparent, to bring into the open the implications of the decisions made for the analyses (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000, p. 1002).

To sample for RE teachers points immediately to two delimitations; first, to the informants’ *role* as RE teachers; and secondly, through the plural *s*, to the fact that the individual RE teachers involved represent *a group* (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 26). In the pilot study on two RE teachers in elementary school, I had the following criterion which also ended up to be the first criterion for the main study:

1. The RE teachers must teach RE on a regular basis (weekly).<sup>66</sup>

This should secure a sample of informants that first and foremost could fill the *role* as RE teachers. It could be argued that I ought to include a second criterion: to sample for qualified RE teachers.<sup>67</sup> But if we look to statistics, RE is among the subjects in school that employ the least qualified personnel (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008a). Thus, a pool of only qualified RE teachers would in many instances not mirror the reality ‘out there’ in the field. To sample for regularity was therefore considered more relevant in the pursuit of collecting RE teacher responses.

In order to develop a more focused case design, two more criteria were added. The second criterion is related to what is the most likely level for teaching *The Prodigal Son*, and the third to the selection of specific schools and RE teachers. These two criteria would serve, then, to focus in on a particular *group* of RE teachers:

2. The RE teachers should teach RE on levels 1-7.
3. The RE teachers should teach at a school in the rural area of *Innlandet* [The Inland] in Norway.<sup>68</sup>

I settled for levels 1-7 for three reasons. First of all, the number of hours teaching RE is higher on levels 1-7 than 8-10, which makes it easier to collect weekly practicing RE teachers (criterion 1 above).<sup>69</sup> Second, and more importantly, although the national curriculum for levels 8-10 lists religious narratives a main topic, it does not have the same dominant position

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<sup>66</sup> The norm of teaching RE in elementary public schools from level 1 through 7 is 427 hrs. No further constraints are given, which implies that every school can decide the amount of hours on each level as long as the hours sum up to the total of 427. The average on a weekly basis is 2 hours. Numbers from *Læreplanverket for Kunnskapsløftet i grunnskolen* [National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion] (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013).

<sup>67</sup> To teach RE in levels 1 to 10, 30 ECTS are required.

<sup>68</sup> *The Inland* is a common designation of the two counties Hedmark and Oppland. The area is predominantly rural with an economy traditionally based on agriculture and forestry. The two city centers of Hedmark and Oppland, Hamar and Lillehammer, are with the city of Gjøvik the three main cities in the region with populations of 20-30.000.

<sup>69</sup> Levels 1-7: 427 hours, levels 8-10: 157 hours (Saabye, 2011).

in the RE textbooks as for levels 1-7.<sup>70</sup> Third and finally, an RE teacher referred to what seemed to be common practice on levels 8-10:

*I have not taught religious narratives for many years, not since I was a teacher in elementary school. When we teach religion on this level (i.e. junior high) the focus is on comparing different religions and on religious criticism.*<sup>71</sup>

*Jeg har ikke undervist i religiøse fortellinger i mange år, ikke siden jeg jobbet i barneskolen. Når vi underviser i religion på dette nivået (les: ungdomsskolen) fokuseres det på å sammenligne ulike religioner og også dette om religionskritikk.*

The teacher education at Hedmark University College is located in the city of Hamar, the county centre of Hedmark. For many years the teacher education at Hedmark University College has had local development and research projects with the purpose of highlighting specific rural issues.<sup>72</sup> Due to my professional interests and also because my present work location is Hamar, I decided to contribute to the field. I then contacted some of the 21 public elementary *partnerskoler* [partner schools] Hedmark University College cooperates with.<sup>73</sup>

One strategy was to sample for maximum variation. And from the outset, it seemed relevant, in order to bring forth the breadth of RE teacher responses with regard to age, gender, religious background etc. But as previous empirical research on particular readers have shown, where Norman Holland's *5 readers reading* (1975) is among the best known, problems arise when one tries to exclusively highlight one aspect in the quest for understanding the multi-faceted act of reading.<sup>74</sup> Just like Holland, who argues for the readers' psyche and "identity theme" as key determinants, I see, concerning the issue of diversity, that for instance the RE teachers' religious background and religious affiliation, may easily be blown up so as to become *the* explanatory factor, at the expense of other

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<sup>70</sup> Compare for instance the *Under samme himmel* [Under the same sky] (Wiik & Waale, 2006) and *Vi i verden* [We in the world] (Berg, Børresen, Larsen, & Nustad, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Notice that the RE teacher uses the pronoun *we* in the second sentence. Although talking about personal experiences, the statement reflects a collective understanding among the RE teachers at the informant's school (notes taken during and after the interview).

<sup>72</sup> See for instance the current research project *Den flerkulturelle barnehagen i rurale strøk* [The multicultural kindergarten in rural areas] (C. E. Andersen et al., 2011).

<sup>73</sup> The *partner schools* are schools in the region which provide practice-places for the students at Hedmark University College. These schools are also committed to being involved in development programs and research projects. Most of these schools are in Hamar but schools from the bordering municipalities of Stange, Ringsaker, Gjøvik, Elverum, and Lillehammer are also represented. The numbers are from 2012 (Høgskolen i Hedmark, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> On critics of Holland, see for instance Terry Eagleton's *Literary theory* (2008, pp. 158-159).

aspects, which also includes the impact of the “response-inviting structures of the text” (Iser, 1978, p. 34).

The socio-constructive hermeneutical paradigm is all about avoiding an essentialist approach and to view all aspects, also the matter of diversity, as something that has the potential to prove itself as a possible construct in the responses. In this study, therefore, the issue of RE teacher diversity is a matter of analysis and not of sampling, meaning that I will be able to say something about the implications of different backgrounds, different religious affiliations etc., if they appear as constructs in the RE teacher responses. On this basis, therefore, I need to apply a sampling strategy that is genuinely open and pragmatic about the reality of the cases which are to be studied. This moved me towards the typical sampling strategy, a strategy which highlights “what is normal or average” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). This meant focusing on a small number of rural schools, and to gather a collection of RE teachers presumably representative as “typical” in their schools.

I then decided to search for RE teachers on levels 5-7 in four different schools. The ambition was to sample all the “typical” RE teachers in those four schools, estimated to be about 9-12 informants.<sup>75</sup> I naively thought that this would proceed rather smoothly, only to discover that far from all the principals found my project relevant or interesting. More decisively, the principals questioned the legitimacy of “typical” as a criterion, saying that it was impossible to pick out three or four “typical” RE teachers from a larger pool of qualified RE teachers. And in addition to this, the principals were reluctant to command their RE teachers to participate, rightly pointing out that the participation would have to be voluntary. Thus revealing my new arrival in this empirical field, and experiencing this ‘practice-shock,’ which altered the foundation of the typical research design, I was led towards settling for another sampling strategy, which also proved, in fact, to better fit the study’s unit of analysis. With a primary focus on the individual RE teacher, and an ambition to study his or her response to *The Prodigal Son* in-depth, the categories “typical,” “normal,” and “average” proved irrelevant. To stay firmly qualitative with an intrinsic interest in each individual case and finally accepting that the RE teachers involved were recruited simply by virtue of being RE teachers, I settled for a sampling strategy of intensity, referred to as “[i]nformation-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). The theoretical

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<sup>75</sup> The number was based on the estimation that one of three “kontaktlærere” [contact teachers] in two classes teach RE regularly (a normally sized school in the region has two parallel classes on each level).

basis of the study and also the methods chosen to collect RE teacher response, which I will come to in the next chapter, made this change of sampling strategy seem a happy choice.

I ended up with nine informants from five schools (2+2+2+2+1). The number of nine does not reflect a process of selection; rather, this was what I got. Considering the time I spent on recruiting, it came to a point where I had to stop doing that and concentrate on the ones I had. But after conducting two pilot studies, I realized that the nine responses provided a material that fitted quite well the purpose of this study. First of all, with nine I had a manageable number to secure “information-rich cases,” and thus make “penetrating analyses” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113). The question one can ask is whether the group was large enough, both to disclose diversity and to trace some typical trends in the material. From the outset, I must admit that the aim was a few more, up to 12-15 informants. However, when doing the analyses, I experienced that each response represented a unique interpretation. A few more informants would most likely just add to that individual pool of responses. At the same time I found that the nine informants also secured a material which was large enough to trace characteristics and develop typologies. Surely, a few more informants might possibly have added something to the picture, but most probably each additional case would find a place in what eventually developed into four typologies. The sample of nine teachers, therefore, balanced quite well the double purpose of providing both in-depth analyses of a diverse material, and also of tracing out characteristic and representative features.

To gather two RE teachers from each school was preferred to make it possible to identify and highlight the implications of various school cultures. But based on the analyses of the pilot studies, which downplayed the role of various school cultures, I chose not to be rigid about this, as this would have had the effect of losing one informant.

The number of five schools have the potential of providing a material that would make it possible to conclude also in more general terms about what characterizes the RE teachers' responses in different rural schools in *The Inland* region of Norway. The homogeneity of the public schools in the region, as I find them to share “essential similarities to [the nine] cases of interest ... [and] establish the basis for naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1978, p. 7), could provide the grounds for such generalizations, although not scientifically reliable generalizations due to the qualitative design of the study.

How, then, did I proceed to sample the nine RE teachers and who are these teachers? As indicated above, volunteering was a premise for participation. Thus, to initiate the process I was dependant on cooperating with the principals and specifically on their initiative to encourage their RE teachers to volunteer.<sup>76</sup> I found that all the principals who eventually decided to be part of the project had responded positively to my first approach (letter of invitation, see attachment 2). On subsequent contact (telephone) they agreed to play an active role so as to initiate the recruitment process and also to facilitate the teachers' participation.<sup>77</sup> Of course, I did not have full insight into the principals' initiatives, but all the informants could confirm that they participated on a voluntary basis.

The informants are all teachers in the Hedmark region of Norway. All the schools are considered as relatively large public schools in the region, though medium-sized or small compared to schools in the bigger city-centers in Norway, and particularly so Oslo. Demographically, the Hedmark region is considered rather homogenous. However, the proximity to Oslo and also the increased immigration the last 20 years have resulted in more multifaceted populations. Consequently, the informants of this study have experiences from teaching RE in more diverse classrooms.

All the informants teach RE on a weekly basis and they are all, except one, experienced RE teachers and fulfill the formal requirements of teaching RE (30 ECTS). While two teachers have the required 30 ECTS, seven have expanded their RE qualifications to include specialization in Christianity, in RE or in more specific courses such as the aesthetics of religion and story-telling. Seven of the nine teachers completed their teacher education degree prior to the implementation of the multi-faith RE curriculum in 1997. But the ones with add-on courses in RE have completed the course-work after 1997. The following table provides the details about the RE teachers, the applied material (textbooks) and the sizes of the schools where the teachers teach:

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<sup>76</sup> Geir Afdal, in his doctoral thesis *Tolerance and curriculum*, outlines a similar way of collecting teachers as informants (G. Afdal, 2005, p. 26). Also helpful was the doctorate thesis *Teacher development in action* by Magdalena Kubanyiova, who elaborates extensively on the issue of recruiting research participants (Kubanyiova, 2007, p. 167-189). See also the article by V. Hobbs and M. Kubanyiova, *The challenges of researching language teachers: What research manuals don't tell us* (2008).

<sup>77</sup> Of particular importance was the principals' decision to give the teachers leave from their daily workload in order to participate.



Teacher	Education	Current teaching* & RE teaching experience	School size**	Textbook ***
<b>Terje</b> (age 54)	Bachelor degree (with Christianity, 90 ECTS, '95-'96, '00)	5 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> level Several years of experience, primarily level 5-7	275 stud	<i>Reiser i tid og tro</i> (E. Skeie, Omland, & Gjefsen, 1997)
<b>Peter</b> (37)	General teacher education (KRL, 30 ECTS, '97) KRL (30 ECTS, '02)	7 <sup>th</sup> level 15 years of experience, primarily level 5-7.	250 stud	<i>Vivo</i> (Egeland, 2009)
<b>Marie</b> (38)	Cand.Mag. (with Livssyn og etikk [World Views and Ethics], 30 ECTS)	3 <sup>rd</sup> level Several years of experience, primarily level 1-4.	500 stud	<i>Vi i verden</i> (Berg et al., 2006)
<b>Elise</b> (65)	Christianity (60 ECTS, '70-'71)	5 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> level Several years of experience on all levels	500 stud	<i>Broene</i> (Bakken, Bakken, & Haug, 1997) <i>Reiser i tid og tro</i>
<b>Rita</b> (59)	Christianity (30 ECTS, '75) RLE (15 ECTS, '02)	3 <sup>rd</sup> level, normally 5-7 <sup>th</sup> . Several years of experience on all levels	300 stud	<i>Vivo</i>
<b>Hanne</b> (53)	General teacher education (Christianity, 7½ ECTS)	5 <sup>th</sup> level New to the field	300 stud	<i>Vivo</i>
<b>Karianne</b> (63)	General teacher education ('75) Kristendoms-kunnskap med Livssyns-orientering [Christianity and World Views] (60 ECTS, '88-89) Religion og estetikk [Religion and aesthetics] (30 ECTS, '04) Muntlig fortelling [Story-telling] (30 ECTS, '07)	3 <sup>rd</sup> level Several years of experience on all levels	425 stud	<i>Vi i verden</i>
<b>Elin</b> (36)	General teacher education (KRL, 30 ECTS, '02)	6 <sup>th</sup> level 10 years of experience on all levels	250 stud	<i>Vivo</i> <i>Vi i verden</i>
<b>Anne</b> (47)	General teacher education (Christianity and World Views, 30 ECTS, '83-'86) Religion- og livssynskunnskap [Religion and World Views] (30 ECTS, '92)	6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> level (sub-teacher) Several years of experience on all levels	425 stud	<i>Vivo</i> <i>Fortell meg mer</i> (Alfsen et al., 1997)

\* School year of 2011-12.

\*\* Approximate number taken from the schools' web-sites (downloaded February 2013).

\*\*\* The textbooks are in series that cover the elementary level.

### 3.4.2 The Prodigal Son

Why this focus on religious narratives, and why singling out the specific biblical narrative *The Prodigal Son*? Although the exclusive and dominant position of biblical narratives in Norwegian education is long gone, we find that the narrative approach and religious narratives are given a dominant position within the objective, multi-cultural and multi-faith RE framework of today. In central policy documents and in national curricula religious narratives are described more extensively than other subject areas and also presented as particularly suitable in a pedagogical context; as a means to convey religious traditions from within and to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue (Kirke- utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 1996, pp. 89-93). Its position in RE research is reflected in the numerous publications on narrative didactics (H. Breidlid & Nicolaisen, 2000; Danielsen, 2004; Mogstad, 1996)<sup>78</sup> and in research on different aspects of the narrative approach (e.g. Lied, 2004b; Mogstad, 2001). Consequently, the prominent position of narrative didactics also became an issue of debate (Breidlid & Nicolaisen, 2001; Breidlid & Nicolaisen, 2002; Hovdelien, 2002; Kvalvaag, 2002; Lied, 2002), which also reflected a longer and larger international discourse, particularly within the Nordic countries (e.g. K. M. Andersen, 2006; Bjerg, 1981).<sup>79</sup>

It could, of course, have been interesting to extend the study and include a variety of genres to give a more holistic picture of RE teachers' religious literacy, for instance, to compare their readings and interpretations of *The Prodigal Son* with, say, for instance Muslim or Hindu narratives. A comparative approach, however, is outside the scope of this study, since the aim is to undertake in-depth analyses and to elaborate more substantially on RE teachers' religious literacy. To focus on one tradition and pick a single narrative seems natural in such an inquiry.

To legitimate the choice of *The Prodigal Son* is not difficult, despite the fact that the current curriculum is of little help. In contrast to the 1997 curriculum, which explicitly places "the parables of Jesus," and among them *The Prodigal Son*, in grade six (Kirke- utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 1996, p. 100), the term parable is excluded all together in the

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<sup>78</sup> These publications have been the main contributors to the development of narrative didactics in RE in Norway. In the first years after the establishment of KRL, narrative didactics was among the most debated issues.

<sup>79</sup> In the article "Narrativ undervisning" [Narrative teaching], Kirsten M. Andersen refers to "the narrative wave" in theology and in literary studies in Denmark, starting in the early 80's, which had a great impact on religious didactics (K. M. Andersen, 2006, pp. 107-108).

current plan.<sup>80</sup> But despite the nonspecific formulations, the current plan sends out a rather clear message:

- give an account of key stories in the New Testament from Jesus to Paul<sup>81</sup>

Few would contest that, among many others, the following narratives should be included as “key stories”: *The Birth of Jesus*, *The Passion*, *The Resurrection*, and certainly also *The Prodigal Son*, regarded as one of the key parables of the New Testament. In RE textbooks, the dominance of these texts in the presentation of Christianity is clear.<sup>82</sup> It was not a surprise, therefore, that none of the informants of this study questioned my choice of text.

It is, however, more fruitful to look outside the curriculum to bring in the good arguments for selecting *The Prodigal Son*. In the book *The great code*, the well-known literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye highlights the structural and cultural influence of the Bible (Frye, 1982). From a structural viewpoint, he points at the “U-shaped” mythical pattern of the Bible, where “man ... loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation” (Frye, 1982, p. 169). And, Frye argues, this overall “U-shape” is what structures and defines the historical books of the Bible, down to the short parables of Jesus:

In between [Genesis and Revelation], the story of Israel is told as a series of declines into the power of heathen kingdoms, Egypt, Philistia, Babylon, Syria, Rome, each followed by a rise into a brief moment of relative independence. The same U-narrative is found outside the historical sections also, in the account of the disasters and restoration of Job and in Jesus’ parable of *the prodigal son*” (Frye, 1982, p. 169, italics added).<sup>83</sup>

Thus, according to Frye, *The Prodigal Son* represents a story that encapsulates the essence of the Bible and the Christian faith: man’s rise and fall and God’s redeeming salvation.

Moreover, it represents “the *only* version in which the redemption takes place as the result of a voluntary decision on the part of the protagonist” (Frye, 1982, p. 170, italics added).

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<sup>80</sup> The RE curriculum of 1997 is very detailed on content. The current goal-oriented curriculum leaves it much more to the teacher to decide and to make qualified selections (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> Translated from “gjøre rede for sentrale fortellinger fra Det nye testamente fra Jesus til Paulus.” The example is from “kunnskapsmål” [aims of competence] after 7th grade (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013, p. 5).

<sup>82</sup> See for instance *Vivo* (Egeland, 2009), *Fortell meg mer* [Tell me more] (Alfsen et al., 1997), *Vi i verden* [We in the world] (Berg et al., 2006).

<sup>83</sup> Frye has influenced the narrative approach to the Bible as well as narrative didactics in RE. In the Norwegian RE context, see for instance Kvalvaag’s *Fra Moses to Marley* [From Moses to Marley] (2003) and Kjørven and Lindboe’s *Det nye testamentet* [The New Testament] (2005). For a more extensive and thorough account of the biblical narrative, see Stordalen and Hvalvik’s *Den store fortellingen* [The great narrative] (1999) and Helge Kvanvig’s *Historisk bibel og bibelsk historie* [Historical bible and biblical history] (1999).

Without opening up for a broad account of the *The Prodigal Son*, these references to Frye illustrate that this particular narrative has the potential to trigger in-depth reflections about the essence of biblical narratives and the Christian faith. And clearly, this was also reflected in the RE teachers' responses.

Further, the cultural heritage of the *The Prodigal Son* is evident in literature, art and in music throughout the centuries. Frye exemplifies this by referring to stories of “falls and rises,” among them Dante's “U-shaped” *Inferno* (Frye, 1982, pp. 170-174). The enduring influence of *The Prodigal Son* is reflected in its recurrent appearance as a frequently used metaphor in popular culture and in the media.<sup>84</sup> To choose *The Prodigal Son*, therefore, brings the RE teachers not only to an encounter with a key story of the Bible and key aspects of the Christian faith, but also, to refer to the general introduction of the national curriculum, to an encounter with an essential part of a tradition which “constitutes a profound power in our history – a heritage that unites us as people across faiths” (Kirke- utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 1996, p. 17).<sup>85</sup> *The Prodigal Son*, therefore, has the potential to trigger a great variety of responses, something that was also reflected in the RE teacher responses of this study.

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<sup>84</sup> See for instance the song “Prodigal Son” on Rolling Stones' album *Beggars Banquet* from 1968 and U2s “I will follow” on the album *Boy* (1980) and “The first time” on the album *Zooropa* (1993). With regard to the latter example, see *U2 by U2* (N. McCormick, Bono, Edge, Clayton, & Mullen, 2006, p. 249). For more about this, see “Religion er Guds fiende: Egentlig og uegentlig eksistens i U2s tekst-musikalske univers” [Religion is God's enemy: Existence and non-existence in U2's text musical universe] (Kvalvaag, 2011). The news media frequently publish what can be characterized as “Prodigal Son”-stories from reality. See for instance *A-magasinet* in *Aftenposten* from 04.14.11.

<sup>85</sup> Translated from “utgjør en dyp strøm i vår historie – en arv som forenes oss som folk på tvers av trosretninger.”

## 3.5 Collecting RE teacher responses

As referred to earlier, the unit of analysis in this study – the RE teacher responses – can be expressed in oral or in written form (see p. 16). For this specific case study inquiry I will apply both. This is due to “the richness of the context” involved, which implies, according to Robert Yin, “that the study cannot rely on a single data collection method but will likely need to use multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 4). I will elaborate more on how I see the relation between the two methods in the final part of this chapter. First, then, to the RE teachers’ written responses, the RE teachers’ texts of reflection.

### 3.5.1 Texts of reflection – written responses

I asked the RE teachers to write what I refer to as *individual texts of reflection*. The *individual* approach, which applies for both the written and the oral method, reflects what was said above about multiple case studies, where each case centers the attention on the single RE teacher and his or her response to *The Prodigal Son*. From the outset, therefore, collective methods such as for instance focus group interviews were ruled out. This, however, does not imply that the collective dimensions in the RE teacher responses will be ignored. Again, this matter is primarily of analytical concern, as something that becomes visible in the RE teachers’ constructs of meaning-making.

Texts of reflection are not equivalent to reading logs. That means that I am not trying to extract how RE teachers read *The Prodigal Son* like for instance David Bleich, who asked his informants to write down their emotional responses during and after reading a given text (Bleich, 1978). Neither am I following Louise Rosenblatt in her quest for documenting students’ immediate acts of reading, asking them to “start writing as soon as possible after beginning to read ... to jot down whatever came to them” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 6). Instead, as texts of *reflection*, the focus is on the end-result and what the RE teachers have more or less logically built up as expressions of meaning-making and that after (hopefully) repeated readings.

Does this imply that I was seeking narratives about the RE teachers’ encounters with the *The Prodigal Son*? By applying Roland Barthes’ elucidation of narrative, it can certainly appear so: “There are countless forms of narrative in the world ... a prodigious variety of genres ...

infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies” (Roland Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237). Although some of the teacher texts employ segments of story-telling, for instance retellings of *The Prodigal Son*, and also short stories about the RE teachers’ own personal background and experiences, these segments are placed within a larger discursive structure rather than a narrative structure.<sup>86</sup> This was due to the ambition of obtaining texts that were more argumentative rather than narrative in structure, as texts that should bring forth the teachers’ subjective meanings. This intention was also made explicit when I asked the RE teachers to write texts of reflection based on the following question: *How do you understand The Prodigal Son?*

But I did not seek argumentative texts in the rhetorical sense. This would, as I saw it, create an atmosphere of testing and assessment and hence bring me as a researcher to the center of attention, as the one the RE teachers should respond to and try to convince. To avoid researcher bias of this kind, I did not ask them to reflect on the question *why*, that is, to write down why they interpret *The Prodigal Son* the way they do. To trigger more reflective texts, I approached them more openly, highlighting their role as the key literary actors by asking them to communicate their ideas and meanings about *The Prodigal Son*. As such, I was seeking RE teacher argumentation as reflecting

an activity of *reason*, which indicates that the arguer has given some thought to the subject. Putting forward an argument means that the arguer attempts to show that a rational account can be given of his or her position on the matter (Eemeren, Henkemans, & Grootendorst, 1996, p. 2).

Although definitions of argumentation are emphasizing the elements of controversy, persuasion and the key role of a diverging listener or reader,<sup>87</sup> I find the phrase above by van Eemeren on the phenomenon of argumentation as “an activity of *reason*” a fitting description of the RE teacher texts of reflection. More precisely, the RE teacher stands out as the “arguer,” the one who gives “a rational account” on how he/she understands “the matter”, *The Prodigal Son* (Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 2). I find this to apply well to the purpose of this study: it is not a rhetorical response with a diverging reader (i.e. me as a researcher) which is at the

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<sup>86</sup> The basic understanding of narrative is taken from Gubrium and Holstein’s book *Analyzing narrative reality* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Van Eemeren presents the following definition: “*Argumentation is a verbal and social activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader, by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge*” (Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 5, italics original).

center of attention, but a reader-response, in other words, response reflecting the subjective arguments of interpretation.

For the purpose of triggering what could truly be regarded as RE teacher texts of reflection, no further constraints were given; no questions to guide their reading and interpretations from beginning to end were asked. More specific questions about the content of the parable, for instance *How do you understand the role of the father?* could easily have led to reflections more in line with what I as a researcher would want or expect, rather than texts that were reflecting the RE teachers' own ideas. In my encounters with the RE teachers, therefore, I found it critical to create a mutual understanding about the purpose of the main question asked, and also to have their consent on my role as a researcher and their role as informants, placing the RE teacher as the obvious literary actor and creator of meaning, and placing me as researcher as the analyst and as much as possible at the fringe horizon of the RE teacher's act of interpretation. From the outset, therefore, I found it crucial to pinpoint that I was not assessing their skills or knowledge, but exclusively geared towards a greater understanding of their responses to *The Prodigal Son*. This exclusively hermeneutical ambition was also conveyed to the principals before the selection of possible RE teachers was made so that we approached the informants on common ground.

That no further constraints were given also applies for the site, on where the RE teachers should immerse themselves in the parable and write the texts of reflection. The actual context for producing the texts was therefore largely controlled by the informants. An alternative could be to create teacher-like settings and ask the RE teachers to write the texts at a certain time and place. But, acknowledging the uniqueness of each informant, to create realistic sites for all would prove impossible. Hence, being clear about the main issue at stake – to bring about RE teacher texts of reflection – I decided to pull out and leave it to the informants to decide. Realizing that this left me without insight into the matter, I still find that this approach seemed to create probably the most realistic sites. But this does not imply that situative and contextual issues were ignored. Instead it was left for analyses, and thus as possible constructs in the RE teachers' responses (Van Dijk, 2006).

The same applies for deciding on whether the RE teachers should read *The Prodigal Son* from the Bible, from a RE textbook, from a web-site,<sup>88</sup> or simply from a copied sheet of paper.

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<sup>88</sup> See for instance [www.bibel.no](http://www.bibel.no).

Obviously, to read the parable from the Bible gives the RE teachers the possibility to read it within the literary context to which the text belongs, to read it within the context of the Jesus narratives in the New Testament, and more specifically, as a key parable among several surrounding parables at the centre of the Gospel of Luke.<sup>89</sup> All this would entail, then, that I would encourage the RE teachers to read it from the Bible. But in the meeting with the volunteers, for the purpose of informing about the project and its relevance, I brought the national curriculum for RE and a RE textbook. I also found it natural to have a copy of the text as a hand-out, so that they could easily be acquainted with the text (see attachment 1).<sup>90</sup> In this particular setting, a Bible would not serve a similar informative purpose. However, I informed the RE teachers that they could choose to read the parable from different sources, also from the Bible, but without hinting on its obvious benefits. Again, to collect what could be regarded as RE teacher responses, all practical details were as much as possible left for the RE teachers to decide.

Now, having elaborated on the intention and the nature of the texts of reflection, and on how they were facilitated, it is now time to move further to the next method: RE teacher interviews.

### **3.5.2 Interviews – oral responses**

I follow Steinar Kvale's basic conception of the interview, as "an *inter view*, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2). This means that the interviewer is directly involved and not only a passive facilitator. Thus, to justify that I was collecting RE teacher responses, the situative aspects and also the epistemological character of the interview needs to be highlighted and be in accordance with the main purpose of the study.

In this study, I have applied the semi-structured interview, defined by Kvale as "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to

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<sup>89</sup> For a presentation of *The Prodigal Son* in the Gospel of Luke facilitated for RE teacher students, see for instance Kjørven & Lindboe *Det Nye Testamente: En innføring i utvalgte tekster* [The New testament: An introduction to selected texts] (2005, pp. 116-127).

<sup>90</sup> The hand-out version is from the Norwegian translation from 1978 (*Bibelen: Det Gamle og Det Nye testamente*, 1978). This version, which has the title *Den bortkomne sønnen* [The Prodigal Son], is the version people know best.



interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). I find that this fits the socio-constructive hermeneutical paradigm of the study; that is, as an interview method that centres the attention on the phenomenon of meaning and on how the RE teachers as subjects construct meaning (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 705).

The semi-structured interviews had a format that could serve to bring to light the RE teachers’ response to *The Prodigal Son*. For this to occur, and based on the experiences from the two pilot studies, I found it essential to stay as literary-focused as possible to avoid losing the grip on the essence of the study. The interviews were structured for that particular purpose. In practical terms this meant preparing questions that were strictly oriented towards disclosing the RE teachers’ in-depth and multifaceted understandings of the parable. This can be illustrated by two prepared follow-up questions that were used a number of times:

- When you say x (for instance that the parable is an allegory)
  - Can you elaborate more on that?
  - What in the text makes you think this way?
- In my understanding of what you are saying, you will say that the parable is primarily about x (for instance family relations).
  - Have I got it right?
  - Will you add something more?
  - What other issues could be important?

This does not imply that I imposed a structure that left out the opportunity for reflections and accounts of different experiences from the ‘life world’ of the RE teachers, but I did not ask them directly to reflect on such issues. Instead, it was left to the RE teachers themselves to take up situative and contextual aspects. Thus, when they were taken up, they were viewed as elements in *their* construction of meaning.

The unstructured quality of the interview refers primarily to its open-endedness. The questions above are not designed to evoke specific and conclusive answers but to seek the breadth and width of RE teacher reflections concerning *The Prodigal Son*.

All this, then, implies that I took an active role in directing the interviews, as opposed to what is the case in an instrumental or mechanical approach where the interviewer and also the interviewee take on more passive roles for the purpose of collecting, in Charles Taylor's terminology, "brute data ... beyond dispute" (Taylor, 1985, p. 120). With the intention of highlighting a specific issue, I had to seek ways to elicit particular responses. For this to occur, the interviewee had to stand out as the undisputable midpoint, as the subjective meaning-maker. But for these subjective meanings to come out in all their breadth and depth, the interviewees had to face an active interview partner. Epistemologically, then, the interview in this inquiry can best be characterized as conversational in form, designed to bring forward joint constructions of meaning as to how the RE teacher understands *The Prodigal Son* (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 698).

To bring about these conversations, specifically recognizing the different roles and the fundamental asymmetry of power between me as an interviewer and the interviewees, I find the concept of "emphatic interviewing" presented by Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey to be a guiding principle (Fontana & Frey, 2005, pp. 696-698).<sup>91</sup> The emphatic interviewer is not only reflective and transparent about his or her impact, but recognizes also what needs to be identified as a matter of morality in the act of interviewing. Applied to this study, to bring out RE teachers' meanings is about putting myself in the position of the RE teacher, and then, to the best of my ability and by the means of well-prepared questions and the ability to pose relevant follow-up questions on impulse, come to a point where I can say the following out loud in the interview situation: "Now I *understand* your arguments!" This coming together of understanding must be provided by a joint effort by two partners in conversation, although acknowledging their two distinctly different roles in the interview situation.

The interviews were all conducted in the spring of 2012, all of them scheduled to last approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and soon afterwards transcribed. They were all performed at the schools in group-rooms during their working hours to give the interview a natural setting. The time and place were chosen also to meet the practical needs of the RE teachers so that they could participate without too much strain. Obviously, asking the RE teachers to respond and reflect on *The Prodigal Son* required

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<sup>91</sup> Fontana and Frey is here referring to Holstein and Gubrium's book *The active interview* (1995). Also of interest is Stephen Dobson's article "Etisk sociologi ved en skillevej" [Ethical sociology at the crossroads] (2008).

sufficient time and also a well-functioning setting. Normally, if not in cooperation with the principals, both the time and the place were decided by the teachers themselves.

Finally, how do I see the relation between the texts of reflection and the interviews? Due to the arrangement, asking the teachers first to write texts and then be interviewed, the texts of reflection seem to provide the basic and most important material, leaving the interviews as supplementary, as primarily providing an opportunity to clarify, nuance, rephrase and withdraw the statements made in the texts of reflection. And to some extent, this proved to be the case. The interviews were based on what I had found were the key findings in the texts of reflection. In concrete terms, I prepared questions which could bring me as an interviewer deeper into the understanding of the interviewee's interpretations, being aware of avoiding manipulative questions to promote and corroborate certain desired opinions (Seidman, 2006, p. 76). The semi-structured interviews, therefore, were designed so as to fit the interpretive activity of each RE teacher and thus were based on what had come out of the unique text of reflection.

And also from the start, I reasoned that the interviews were secondary to the texts of reflection, which also implied that I ranked the texts of reflection to fit particularly well the issue at stake, presuming that they had a greater potential to initiate and facilitate further reflective responses. However, when I discovered the vital contribution and the autonomous role of the interviews in the two pilot studies, I had to rethink the matter. First of all, I discovered that the RE teachers are diverse, meaning that some prefer an oral form, others a written form. In the pilot studies, personal references of this kind proved very important. For instance, one RE teacher gave only half-page written text of reflection, which to me at first felt as disappointing. But in the interview we ended up way beyond the scheduled time-limit. In this example, therefore, the oral form proved to give the most valuable material. One informant was from the outset straightforward about that he could not and would not take the time to write a text but was "more than willing," as he put it, "to sit down and talk about it for an hour."<sup>92</sup> For the sake of collecting RE teacher responses I decided that it was more important to listen to the teachers' preferences rather than forcing everyone through a certain methodological framework.

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<sup>92</sup> Notes from information meeting. Translated from "Jeg kan gjerne sitte ned og prate om den en times tid."

The second argument is a more principled one and emphasizes the equality of the methods. The two methods make up a mixed method approach, that is, an approach where both are viewed as equally important in the joint effort to bring forth a rich and valid material. This includes also, as Robert Yin underlines, to bring into the open the “richness of the context” (Yin, 2003, p. 4). The example referred to above shows that the interview situation represents a whole new setting and hence a new opportunity to interpret *The Prodigal Son*. With the words of Rosenblatt, the interview represents a new interpretive “event,” a transaction “involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 7). Principally, therefore, the texts of reflection in this study should not be viewed as providing the primary material which constrains the interviews. Instead, and due to the order of the methods, the texts of reflection represent an essential part of the context of the interview and thus as a visible and essential construct in these responses.

### **3.5.3 Transcription of interviews**

The texts of reflection are cited as they were written by the RE teachers.<sup>93</sup> They were all written on computers and sent to me by e-mail. The interviews were all based on audio recordings transcribed by me. In the dissertation the interviews are always cited in italics to distinguish them from the texts of reflection. In addition to the transcriptions, I made notes on the interview guide during the interviews to highlight particular moments and also to mark inaudible situations, for instance to distinguish between pauses caused by thoughtfulness, reluctance to speak or emotional involvement. After each interview I also sat all by myself 20-30 minutes to write down what I found particularly interesting. All these additional notes are, of course, part of the analysis. And clearly, as Steinar Kvale puts it, they function “as a selective filter” and can thus reflect researcher bias, but “potentially also to retain those very meanings that are essential for the topic and the purpose of the interview” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 179). As I frequently returned to these notes during the analytical work, I experienced that they truly reflected my instant notions and perceptions, many of them biased by nature,<sup>94</sup> but also hands-on references which helped me to tune back to the interview

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<sup>93</sup> I made only orthographic corrections. This was done to center the attention on the RE teachers’ interpretations and not, as would have to be another study, on linguistic errors (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 187).

<sup>94</sup> In some instances I wrote normative comments such as “no associations” and “lacks knowledge.”

situation and focus on the actual purpose of the interview, that is, to better understand what happens when the RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*. Still, it is the transcriptions that make up the important material from the interviews. This process from audio-files to written files is also part of the analysis, as Elliot G. Mishler points out: “Different transcripts are constructions of different worlds, each designed to fit our particular theoretical assumptions and to allow us to explore their implications” (Mishler, 1991, p. 271).

In comparing my own study with other qualitative studies, I had for my part quite a manageable amount of audio-files to transcribe (see next chapter). Although I must confess that this was a job I did not look forward to, expecting it to be wearisome and also boring, it actually turned out to be a worth-while experience. With good technical support,<sup>95</sup> I made steady progress. And as the time went by, I experienced the satisfaction of discovering more and more interesting details the more I listened to it. In other words, in the process I developed a fascination and genuine interest in the material. Not only a good sign for an inexperienced qualitative researcher, but a necessary one.

The form of the transcripts, realizing that “there is no universal form or code,” is guided by what is the “intended use of the transcripts” for this particular study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 181). When asking the question *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?* this seems to demand a verbatim approach, including sighs, “hm’s” and the like, and also a variety of possible digressions made on the way, in order to transcribe with accuracy everything that happened. However, the transcripts should not provide for a conversation analysis but for a meaning analysis. In this respect, accuracy, viewed as “a cardinal principle in social science” (Christians, 2005, p. 145), is a matter of providing accurate transcripts of meaning, that is, to “highlight nuances of statement and facilitate communication of the meaning of the subject’s stories to readers” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 186). To do so, I therefore decided on a more written and literary style. This implies that I was selective, that I omitted details and even whole passages when they appeared unimportant.<sup>96</sup> I also restructured sentences to make them more instantly meaningful and readable. In order to preserve the oral touch in the transcriptions, I noted expressivity, sudden breaks or pauses that, as I felt, had meaning to them.

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<sup>95</sup> I used a so called PC Transcription Kit from Olympus (AS-2300).

<sup>96</sup> Longer passages that were excluded were mainly digressions that developed either in the initial phase, the period from when I turned on the recorder and the start of the interview, or at the very end of the interview, in the minutes before I decided to turn the recorder off.

### 3.6 A short presentation of the empirical material

The material consists of approximately 120 pages. Texts of reflection make up nearly 1/6 (18 pp) and the interviews a little more than 5/6 (102 pp). With one exception, the nine teachers are represented with both a written and an oral response (see p. 83).

The interviews varied in length, with the average of 28 minutes. The shortest lasted 18 minutes (6 transcribed pp) while the longest 41 minutes (13 transcribed pp).<sup>97</sup> The texts of reflection also vary. The average is 2 pages, while the longest are 3-4 and the shortest only half a page. These variations largely reflect what I above referred to as the RE teachers' preferences (see p. 83). The material varies also in form and structure, and of course also in content. Some interviews, and one in particular, consist of long interviewee monologues. Most interviews, however, can be characterized as more dialogical, although the voice of the interviewee, with one exception in particular,<sup>98</sup> is the most dominant. Among the texts of reflection, I find that two consist of long paraphrases and reviews of *The Prodigal Son*, making up almost half of the texts, while the others go straight to the task of interpretation.

In terms of content, I find that the material varies considerably with regard to what extent pedagogical aspects are brought in. In two texts of reflection this is totally left out. In three texts this is put in the very last paragraph, and thus represents a pedagogical actualization of the parable. In two texts nearly everything is about reflections on teaching. These variations could certainly have something to do with my presentations of the study, although I repeatedly underlined that the teachers should keep their focus on how they understand and interpret *The Prodigal Son*. More likely, therefore, the variations reflect the teachers' shifting focus of attention. Peter illustrates this when he at the end of the text of reflection was reminded about the intention of the study:

Out of this I see that my thoughts easily move	Ser ut fra dette at tankene mine faller lett inn mot
towards the pedagogical. It was not quite what you	det pedagogiske. Det var vel ikke helt det du var
were looking for. But I think that this is also	ute etter. Men jeg tenker at dette også for meg i

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<sup>97</sup> The relation between interviewing time and amount of transcribed pages is not constant due to the nature of the interview. The longest interview (41 min) counts only 10 pp. This informant had long monologues while other interviews reflect rapid shifts between interviewer and interviewee and therefore less printing on each page.

<sup>98</sup> This is the shortest interview (18 min, 6 pp) and I found myself the more dominant dialogue partner.

important for me in the profession I work in. I hope you can use some of the thoughts I have about this text.

den profesjonen jeg arbeider i er viktig. Håper du kan bruke noen av de tankene jeg har rundt denne teksten.

Considering these variations and reflecting upon the many reasons behind them, I will argue that the material as a whole appears purposeful and relevant for this study's aim. I can say this because I find that the empirical material represents the RE teachers' *own* meanings. More precisely, the responses stand out as "argumentative texts" and as the RE teacher's own "activity of reason" (Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 2). Even the paraphrasing and the reviews that have a more narrative and impersonal form do not alter this impression. In fact, also these parts of the texts of reflection appear as RE teacher interpretations in the sense that they have been specifically selected and thus are parts of the teacher's argumentative reasoning. This is being illustrated in the following example where the teacher shifts from a paraphrasing style to an argumentative style:

The father sees the son at a far distance, runs happily towards him put his arms around him and kisses him. Tells his servants to slaughter the fatted calf, the best they have I think, and dress the son with the finest clothes. Let us eat and celebrate – for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. When the oldest son hears about this he is filled with anger. He has probably seen himself as responsible, loyal and faithful to his father, but now feels taken for granted. I think he is expressing values such as *do your best, contribute, reap what you deserve and earn what you deserve* (italics original).

Faren ser sønnen på lang avstand, løper han glad i møte kaster seg om halsen på han og kysser han. Ber tjenerne slakte gjøkalven, det beste de har tror jeg, og kle sønnen med de fineste klær. Så vil vi spise og glede oss – for han var kommet bort og er funnet igjen. Da eldste sønnen får høre dette blir han fylt av sinne. Han har nok opplevd seg som ansvarsfull, lojal og trofast mot faren, men føler seg nå tatt for gitt. Jeg tenker han gir uttrykk for verdier som *yte, bidra og høste som fortjent, gjøre seg fortjent til* (opprinnelig i kursiv).

### 3.6.1 Strengths and weaknesses in the empirical material

The strengths in the empirical material are, as I evaluate it, connected to what I find to be powerful individual footprints in each response. Undoubtedly, and with reference to Rosenblatt, the responses give the impression of representing nine unique “poems,” bringing out the coming together of a unique reader in transaction with *The Prodigal Son*. The responses, therefore, do not appear as a priori constructs in the sense that they are results of what the textbooks say, intense memorization, or what others have told them to write or say. In other words, they are “participant constructs,” to refer to van Dijk (2006), mediating the teachers’ own life-worlds and activities of reasoning. When I describe the material in the chapter *Analyzing RE teacher responses*, I hope the reader will recognize and see the individuality unfold.

The second consideration of the data’s strength relates to the benefit of the mixed approach. The texts of reflection were written without my supervision, and they appear with strong individual qualities. This was confirmed during the interview sessions. The nearness between me as an interviewer and the RE teachers as interviewees made it possible to pursue and dig further into the matter and end up with a common understanding of how each one of them interpreted *The Prodigal Son*. Although the teachers uttered that the parable opens up for longer texts and also long conversations about important issues, none of them felt the need to supplement beyond what they had written and what we had talked about. In other words, they appeared satisfied, and that not due to fatigue or time-shortage, but because they had had sufficient time to express themselves.

What, then, speaks against the strengths? The strong individuality in the responses may also reflect a methodological problem. The material seems to demonstrate that the teachers perceived the written task I gave them differently. In particular, the variations concerning to what degree the teachers included pedagogical issues indicate this. And indeed, even the teachers themselves expressed diverging views, as for instance Hanne, who became truly surprised when I at the end of the interview turned towards this issue. In her particular case, the conversation about pedagogy appeared spontaneous and also incomplete and thus not representative of Hanne’s overall well-thought-out response. I therefore decided not to include this part of Hanne’s response in the analysis.



Realizing, of course, that as a facilitator and also a partner in the “inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2), I must admit that in parts of some interviews I find myself clearly too dominant. There are two obvious reasons for this: one is that I was too impatient and did not give sufficient time for the teachers to reflect. Several times when I listened to the interviews I said to myself: Why didn’t you wait? Why didn’t you let the teacher finish? You need to calm down and not make the situation more stressful! These situations were so apparent and therefore easy to set aside, or problematize, in the analyses.

The second reason was that I in some situations became too focused on certain issues and pushed the teachers to respond to things they themselves had never thought of. The outcome of my effort, however, was meager, which only confirmed the impressions I already had, such as for instance some of the teachers’ neglect or lack of interest in the oldest son. Thus, as I see it, my at times too prominent and active role did not cause a disproportionate change of content in the material.

### **3.6.2 Analyzing the empirical material**

As RE teacher responses, both the texts of reflection and the interviews stand out as “responsive statements”; the interviews, then, as oral utterances transcribed (Smidt, 1989, p. 22). Hence, the interviews and the texts of reflection will be analysed as representing one unit.

Although the data makes up a unit, I had to be aware of the methods as being essentially dissimilar in form, and also that they provided for different content. For instance with regard to form I find it important to emphasize the value of listening to the voices of the RE teachers. By listening to the real voices and keeping the images of what happened during the interview in mind, it is possible to catch and recognize the details, for instance when the interviewee goes from being vigorously engaged to being indifferent. To recognize this is about taking advantage of the particularities brought forward by interviewing as a method, as a method that moves close to “the life world of the interviewee,” as Steinar Kvale puts it (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). Thus, in order to identify the various contents that came out of the two methods, I decided to code the interviews and the texts of reflections separately.

The coding was done manually. In practice, I rolled out a scroll of paper and plotted in the statements of the teachers where I found them to belong, either on the text-side or on the reader-side. As I experienced it, the main benefit of doing it manually is visibility; that everything I plotted down for each teacher was there on the 4.5 m long scroll of paper. In my world, a computer screen cannot offer the same overview. Neither, though this certainly reflects my personal preferences, can computer-based coding provide the same feeling of folding out the material, as a process that visualizes the step by step development of the analyses.

The downside of manual coding, I was told, is the time factor, that I had to expect to make drafts over and over again. And, yes, to some extent that was the case, but I experienced this to be an essential part of the process of really getting to know the material. Each draft – on the average three for each teacher – represented a leap towards better precision and more clarity. A more appropriate objection to manual coding concerns the ability to handle and also visualize the complexity in the material. Of course, a computer program like Atlas.ti<sup>99</sup> could probably more easily manage to code for multiple combinations. However, due to the manageable amount of material in this study, I found it prudent to proceed manually. To visualize complexities, I decided for instance to plot important but unclear statements on both sides of the text-reader continuum. I also made notes on the side where I elaborated on complicating factors. And where one statement clearly had an impact on another statement, this was marked by lines and arrows. And as I proceeded and went deeper and deeper into the material, the developing complexity of the scrolls became a visual image of what was the essence of the study's interest; the nature of the RE teachers' complex transactions with *The Prodigal Son*. The rigid coding-system of separating the text and the reader functioned as a framework for the first stage of the analysis, to illustrate what is involved in the transactional process, while the lines and arrows and the comments on the side – everything that made it all look messy – became the key assets for stage two and the transactional analysis.

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<sup>99</sup> ATLAS.ti is qualitative analysis software program.

## 3.7 Evaluating the study

### 3.7.1 Validity

The issue of validity has been widely discussed and problematized both outside and inside the field of qualitative research. Some will say the issue is irrelevant all together, as the premises are derived from the field of quantitative research, which highlights experimental and positivist purposes. Some of these, as for instance Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, would prefer to develop a genuine qualitative term; “authenticity” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). And further, when in-depth understanding of a phenomenon is at the center of attention, the researcher should, as David Brinberg and Joseph E. McGrath argue, focus on concepts that are to be “assessed relative to purposes and circumstances,” and that implies concepts such as “integrity” and “character” (Brinberg & McGrath, 1985, p. 13). However, the terms “authenticity,” “integrity,” and “character,” as I see it, leaves the matter too much in the hands of the researcher and also with too much focus on the end-result. For the credibility of qualitative research, I find it essential to accept or “adopt,” as Joseph Maxwell puts it, “a realist conception of validity,” which implies seeing “the validity of an account as inherent” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 281). In other words, there needs to be a well-founded and logical build-up all throughout the study. But a key difference needs to be underlined: internal validity lies “not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to those things that it is intended to be an account *of*” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 281, italics original). Therefore, I do not try to argue for the study’s validity by using experimental terms, for example by arguing that one step in the process logically leads to the next based on the application of valid methods. Rather, I have tried to achieve validity by demonstrating consistency; that there is a valid relationship between the phenomenon of interest, empirical material, unit of analysis, and the study’s research paradigm.

The study’s research design gives the overview, but it is my task as researcher to continuously argue for consistency whenever that is needed. In this study, as is relevant in all research, I find that Eugene Matusov’s emphasis on the pervasive importance of the study’s unit of analysis is a guiding principle. Am I as researcher, as Matusov simply puts it, “interested in one thing while ... in actuality, studying another thing” (Matusov, 2007, p. 314)?

Throughout the study I refer to the study's unit of analysis – the RE teachers' responses – and argue theoretically, methodologically and also analytically for its appropriateness and suitability. Response is, I will argue, sufficiently small and also precise enough to capture the data unfolded in the analyses. The theoretical perspective of Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, that it is essentially the teacher's response to the evoked interpretation, not the interpretation itself, which is applicable and also of interest (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 144-145), further supports its relevance. Consequently, the quest to collect oral and written responses – and that from the RE teachers' perspective – were considered appropriate. And finally, in adopting Rosenblatt's tripartite analysis of the RE teachers' responses – highlighting the role of the particular text and the particular reader and then their coming together in transaction – contributed to disclosing the complex transactional nature of the RE teachers' responses. All throughout the study, therefore, response is the focal point – starting in its ontology and ending in its methodology.

### **3.7.2 Reliability**

The basis of a study's reliability lies, as has been said above, in its validity. More precisely, reliability is a consequence of the built-up logic of validity. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba put it like this: "Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

The issue of reliability highlights especially methodological aspects. An obvious critical factor in qualitative research is researcher bias. Of course, this is a matter that needs to be lifted up throughout the study, but it is particularly important when my role as a researcher is critically prominent; that is, in the process of collecting the data and in the analyses. Generally, my ability to control or limit researcher bias, realizing that I do not believe it is possible to eliminate it, and also the ability to be transparent about the implications of potential and factual flaws, will serve to enhance the study's reliability.

First of all, I applied a mixed-method approach to give me the opportunity to argue for consistency on a broader basis (triangulation). I also decided to have peer-examination of one informant's response to check if I was on the right track. And further, in the exposition of the analyses, I have tried to unfold the material and describe the nature of the responses, but also

to be reflective and transparent about difficulties and potential misinterpretations. It is my goal that the mix of citations from the material and the analytical descriptions will make readers familiar with the RE teachers and their responses and thus enable them to follow and also evaluate my argumentation.

Finally, being new in the field of qualitative research, the two pilot studies played a significant role concerning aspects of reliability. They helped me practically, for instance in the process of recruiting informants and to refine the interview questionnaire. But they also served to foreshadow more fundamental issues, among them researcher bias. For instance, the pilot studies exposed my recurrent pull towards normativity and also more critically, a tendency to seek analyses and conclusions that cohered with my own experiences as an RE teacher educator. Gradually, they helped me to see what had to be the core interest of the main study: a genuine interest in exploring and describing the RE teachers' responses. Thus, in my own process of becoming a reliable qualitative researcher, the pilot studies contain important reference points, to which I will return several times throughout the study.<sup>100</sup>

### **3.7.3 Generalization and transferability**

The criterion of generalization has its origin in quantitative research. In the chapter on *Sampling*, I referred to Robert Stake's concept of "naturalistic generalization" to show that a specific case, though unique, is an example within a larger group and therefore is of relevance to a larger population (Stake, 1978, p. 7).<sup>101</sup> In this study, each one of the nine RE teachers is a specific case, but a case within the larger group of RE teachers in the rural area of *The Inland* in Norway. Although, and as also Stake points out, it is impossible to argue with scientific certainty due to the situative nature of qualitative research, I will argue that the study is of relevance for teachers in this particular area and also in other rural regions in Norway that share "essential similarities to [the] cases of interest" (Stake, 1978, p. 7).

To elaborate further on the issue of relevance, I agree with Egon G. Guba that it is necessary to evaluate qualitative studies on qualitative premises. Guba suggests that we in naturalistic inquiries should talk about "transferability" and not only generalization and discuss the

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<sup>100</sup> On the role of pilot studies in qualitative research, I found Helen Sampson's article "Navigating the waves; the usefulness of a pilot in qualitative research," relevant (Sampson, 2004).

<sup>101</sup> See p. 63.

question: “How can one determine the degree to which the findings of a particular inquiry may have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects?” (Guba, 1981, pp. 79-80). Realizing that the RE teacher’s writing of the text of reflection and the interview are “intimately tied to the times and the contexts in which they are found” (Guba, 1981, p. 80), Guba argues that the situative and contextual must either be found irrelevant to the findings or, based on “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 2000), found predominantly similar to other contexts.

I will argue that this study of nine RE teachers’ interpretations of *The Prodigal Son*, though clearly not representative of all RE teachers, is transferable to “other contexts” and also to “other subjects” (Guba, 1981, p. 80). But it is necessary to base this on other arguments than Guba above. All the nine teachers’ interpretations represent nine cases or examples of how various factors, and where context is a central part, influence the RE teachers’ meaning-making. Context, therefore, is viewed as a “participants’ construct,” as something that proves its impact and becomes manifest in the RE teachers oral or written responses (Van Dijk, 2006). This implies that other RE teachers reading the analyses should not – and I assume they will not either – assess the transferability of the study based on the criterion of similarity or by devaluing the situative and contextual as irrelevant, but on recognition, that means, to become aware of and relate the various potential influences to their own meaning-making processes. This implies, then, that the applicability and the transferability of the meaning analyses of this particular study lie in the details, that is, whether the uncovered characteristic traits and features can be recognized as a source of reference for a broader discussion on RE teachers’ religious literacy.

But of course, the wider we go, say for instance attempting to relate the findings of this rural study to the context of the inner city center of Oslo schools with more than 90 % immigrant students who have been asked to respond on, say, a Buddhist narrative, the potential of transferability will weaken dramatically. Most probably, a shift of context and also subject will decisively inflict upon the meaning-making processes. Undoubtedly, additional studies are required to bring about further details and complement the larger picture of RE teachers’ religious literacy.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> In the pilot study of two RE teachers they were asked to choose also a text from the Buddhist or the Muslim tradition. The analyses of these texts of reflection and interviews show that a change of content strongly influenced the responses.

### 3.8 Ethical issues

Before the process of collecting the data, and that both with regard to the two pilot studies and the main study, I applied to *Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste* (NSD) [Norwegian Social Science Data Services] for approval (see attachment 4). Following the guidelines of NSD for qualitative research, I needed the informants' consent (see attachment 5). The consent concerns the use of all information of personal character that appeared throughout all phases of the study and is limited to academic use only.

The teachers' consent rests on anonymization and professional secrecy. I have given the teachers fictitious names and I do not refer to the names of the schools to protect the teachers' identities. For the purpose of later use, I have kept the anonymized texts of reflection and also the anonymized transcribed interviews. All audio recordings, however, were deleted.

To situate the study, I place the schools in the rural *Inland* region of Norway. The number of anonymous informants in relation to the potential number of RE teachers should secure the confidentiality necessary. I do not know, of course, if or to what extent the RE teachers themselves have talked about their participation to colleagues or others. It is therefore possible, although not very probable, that people on the outside who are well-informed about any of the participants, can trace an informant. The steps taken under my control, however, should not make this possible.

Obviously, qualitative research about people's interpretations of a religious text will expose "sensitive personal data," and most probably "religious beliefs."<sup>103</sup> Although I did not ask directly for "religious beliefs," I had to realize that in my quest for in-depth knowledge about the matter I indirectly asked the teachers to expose themselves. In these situations I found the principles of Emanuel Lévinas' *Humanism of the other* (2003) and also Knud Løgstrup's concept of *The ethical demand* (1997) highly relevant. Several times during the interviews the teachers exposed themselves emotionally and also privately and put their personal self 'in my hands,' to quote a famous line from Lévinas. This is in line with Stephen Dobson who in the article "Etisk sociologi ved en skillevej" [Ethical sociology at the crossroads] argues for the vital contribution of Lévinas' existential philosophy to the field of sociology in general and to

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<sup>103</sup> From Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) (2013).

the method of interviewing more specifically (Dobson, 2008).<sup>104</sup> Ethics, as I thoroughly experienced it in the interview situation, is not only a cognitive enterprise that can be done prior to and separated from the actual face-to-face encounters. Rather, it is a practice which demands a high degree of presence and use of all senses during the interview events, and that not only for the purpose of acquiring as much knowledge as possible about *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son*, but also to be attentive to the study's impact on the informants and also the impact of my presence as an interviewer and a researcher.

I will end this chapter by reflecting on my role as a researcher and at the same time an RE teacher educator. In some of my first encounters with the teachers, and that prior to my first introduction about the study, I could sense that some of the teachers questioned my intentions. Despite the fact that I in the first e-mail correspondence with the principals, and also in the letters sent to the principals and potential informants (see attachments 2 and 3), underscored the explorative and descriptive purposes, some of the teachers clearly assumed that I was about to conduct an assessment study. I believe my role as a teacher educator further strengthened this bias, picturing me as coming from 'the tower of knowledge' to check on 'the workers in the field.' I was not just an emissary working on behalf of a research institution but considered as one who possessed the specific subject knowledge of interest. Thus, I spent considerable time in the first meeting to explain the purpose of the study and to convince them about my intentions. What proved fruitful was a short introduction to reader-response theory, and then in particular Rosenblatt's transactional approach. Her genuine interest in readers' responses – regarding them in fact as "poems" – was helpful in this concern.

In retrospect, I find that this first round of clarification was necessary for two reasons. First, it was essential for the process of recruiting participants with "informed consent," that is, as Clifford G. Christians refers to it, consent "based on full and open information" and knowledge about "the nature and consequences" of being involved (Christians, 2005, p. 145). Secondly, it proved also important with regard to collecting the needed data. I do not find that their well-founded initial skepticism is prominent in the texts of reflection. Also the meanings expressed and exposed in the interviews give the same impression. Thus, the first round of

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<sup>104</sup> In addition to Lévinas, Dobson mentions the relevance of Les Back and his book *The art of listening to* highlight the importance of adopting all senses in sociological research (Back, 2007).



clarification secured that I could collect what could be considered *real* RE teacher “responsive statements” (Smidt, 1989, p. 22).



## 4. Analyzing RE teacher responses

### 4.1 Introduction

With this chapter I have come to the part where I will describe the material and seek answers to the main research question of this study: *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?*

The aspiration is to make the RE teachers' responses readable and accessible for analysis and also discussion. I will do so by giving a rich description of the data, which implies, first, to broadly define the general character of the responses, and second, to specify what stands out in the material and make the reader aware of the diversity and the wide range of responses. I find that this dual approach will serve to give a nuanced and balanced picture of the RE teachers' responses.

In order to provide for a transactional analysis, I need to bring forth and describe in detail how the "response-inviting structures" of *The Prodigal Son* and the "interpretive strategies" of the RE teachers constitute themselves in the RE teachers' responses. This provides the material for the transactional analysis, and to describe what Rosenblatt refers to as "a dynamic process, in which all elements take on their character as part of the organically-interrelated situation (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 100). Thus, the analytical part is structured in three main parts. Part I: The role of the "response-inviting structures" of *The Prodigal Son* in the RE teacher responses, Part II: The role of the RE teachers' "interpretive strategies" in the responses, and Part III: The RE teacher responses in a transactional perspective.

## 4.2 Part I: The role of the “response-inviting structures” of *The Prodigal Son* in the RE teacher responses

The table below shows the “response-inviting structures” I will elaborate on in this chapter:

Analogy/ Illustration/ Allegory	Literary contexts	Titles	Narrators	Characters	Cutting techniques and negations
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This particular collection of categories is made on the basis of what categories I find stand out in the material. This implies that I have not simply adopted Wolfgang Iser’s categories. Due to the particularity of both the text and the reader and what I found to be the characteristic features of this material, I have come up with a certain selection. I have for instance chosen not to focus on some of Iser’s main “response-inviting structures,” most obviously so plot and theme. More than that, I have incorporated a category not highlighted by Iser: *Titles*. Thus, the table of categories should be regarded as findings and as the first presentation of findings in this study.

Further, four general remarks need to be made which also are relevant for the categories in Part II. First, the categories are not present in all the responses. In fact, this is where I find a major difference among the teachers and also between the methods applied. While the texts of reflection are much shorter and also focused on one or two key topics, the interviews, as planned by me, touched upon a larger number of issues. To give an example, the negations, which in this material in particular refer to the last paragraph and the return of the oldest son, are found to be a key category in five of the texts of reflection but play a minor role in two and is entirely left out in one. But as it became natural for me to also talk about the oldest son in the interviews, the matter of negation was highlighted in some way or another in all of them.

Second, the plural *s* implies that each category appears in multiple ways. In other words, there are many contexts, cutting techniques, titles, etc. appearing as constructs in the RE teachers’ responses. Thus, in the course of the analyses there will appear more detailed codes beneath the more overall and theoretically generated categories shown in the table. This is particularly evident in the more inductively driven categories in Part II of the analysis (see p. 151).

Third, and as emphasized in the chapter on *The theoretical perspective on RE teachers' responses*, the categories do not emerge as solid and isolated entities in the material. In fact, and as we can see in the last column, I found it convenient to incorporate cutting techniques and negations into one unit. I will also comment on the interrelatedness or the negotiation taking place whenever I find this necessary, to emphasize, as Iser does, that the reader engages in a “constant reshuffling of perspectives,” that he or she has a “wandering viewpoint” and constantly makes changes of what is “background and foreground,” “theme and horizon” (Iser, 1978, pp. 117-118). But in order to pinpoint the role and implications of each “response-inviting structure,” it is helpful to organize the analysis in this way.

Fourth and finally, I could certainly have included more categories in the outlines. But the categories are selected not for the purpose of giving the complete and full picture but to give insight into what I find to be the main characteristics in the teachers' responses. With reference to Iser, some may suggest that I should include plot and theme as major “response-inviting structures.” The way I have chosen to deal with this is not to ignore them, but instead incorporate them in the categories selected. This is the case in the first category of *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory*, where plot or theme contribute to give weight and also more substantiality to what is recognized as an analogous, illustrative or allegorical reading of the parable. The same applies for another potential category: quotations. In some responses quotations from *The Prodigal Son* are frequently used and prove rather important, but in this study I find them to largely fill the role of giving further content and depth to the categories selected. For instance, and as I will come to, I find them often quoting the words uttered to underscore the role, position, or intent of the father and the two brothers (see for instance p. 133).

#### **4.2.1 Analogy/Illustration/Allegory**

This category centers the attention on parable as a genre. And as we can learn from theory, a parable can have analogous, illustrative, and also allegorical structures, the latter also in the Jewish *Mashal* meaning of it (see p. 43). I got an early indication of how these structures constituted the responses which were based on the observation that all the nine teachers found the parable plain and easy. I have picked out four statements to illustrate this:

Karianne: *The God-man or man-God relationship. Here it is so obvious (laughs a little). Yes, this is what it is all about.*

Karianne: *Forholdet Gud-menneske og menneske-Gud. Her synes jeg det er så opplagt (ler litt). Ja. Det er det det dreier seg om.*

Elise: This parable is easy to understand. Even today it should be easy to identify with it or see that it is relevant.

Elise: Denne liknelsen er lett å forstå, selv i dag skulle det være enkelt å kjenne seg igjen i den, eller se at den har aktualitet.

Anne: *I find that this is all about forgiveness, God and the father. That is obvious in a way.*

Anne: *Jeg tenker at dette er om tilgivelse, Gud og far. Det er på en måte litt sånn opplagt.*

Peter: For me personally the content is very clear. I think that equality, view of man, generosity and forgiveness are the important elements.

Peter: For meg personlig er innholdet i teksten veldig klart. Jeg tenker at likeverd, menneskesyn, raushet og tilgivelse er viktige elementer her.

I find that what is “easy,” “obvious,” and “apparent,” are related to three distinct ways of reading the parable. First, as visible in Karianne and Anne’s statements, the parable is read as an analogy, more precisely an instructional analogy. The instructional aspect is identifiable when they comment on the parable’s purpose of conveying or teaching a specific lesson, which often is linked to the instructional intention of Jesus. Then, to further define the content of what is being conveyed or taught, requires grasping the analogy, the obvious “God-man or man-God relationship,” as Karianne puts it.

Clearly, in many of the responses, to grasp the analogy is a matter of spotting the more specific imageries in the text, in other words, the allegorical structures. For instance, and as Elise puts it,

*what Jesus says here has very much to do with Jesus' own life, that it was he who opened up for this forgiveness.*

*det Jesus forteller her det har i veldig stor grad noe med Jesu eget liv å gjøre, at det var han som åpnet opp for denne tilgivelsen.*

In addition to Christological allegories there are several examples of what I will refer to as references to Christian allegories. Most prominent in the responses is the father’s home-Church allegory and then also the portrayal of the two brothers as contrasting the homebound Christian and the prodigal non-Christian.

Second, and as clearly expressed by Peter, I also find that the RE teachers read *The Prodigal Son* as an instructional illustration. The father of the story is a father and the essence of it all is to illustrate the ideals of fatherhood and ways of restoring interpersonal relations. With this interpersonal and ethical focus, the parable is not only “easy to understand,” but also, as Elise puts it, “easy to identify with” and “easy to actualize.”<sup>105</sup> This indicates what I find to be a strong link between reading the parable as an illustration and pedagogical reasoning, which I will turn to later (see p. 154).

The RE teachers seem to have little trouble combining these two ways of reading *The Prodigal Son*. In some instances the analogous and the illustrative are being referred to as two equally important and indispensable aspects of the parable, and that they are, as Hanne puts it, “parallels.” However, when I asked more specifically about this, most of them clearly gave preference to an analogous reading, claiming that this would do justice to its true depth. In fact, as three of them stated, to neglect the God-father analogy and hence the religious content, would reduce the parable to a “flat” story, or, as Marie expressively put it, to “da-bada-bada-bada.” In other words, the very essence of the parable would be lost. Still, their perceptions of what the essence is all about, vary considerably, as we will see next and also in the categories that follow.

Three responses stand out with regard to this category. First that of Peter, who reads the parable purely as an instructional illustration. Well, almost so. In the summary of his text of reflection he sums up what we can learn from the parable, what he refers to as the “the most important values in Christianity.”<sup>106</sup> And these values are: “forgiveness, neighboring love, generosity and refraining from judging.”<sup>107</sup> Then he ends it all with the following: “I would also ... emphasize that there is always room in the Christian community.”<sup>108</sup>

In the interview I asked Peter about this last sentence, implying that he brought in a religious terminology, which indicates another way of reading the parable. He then quickly replied: “You certainly help me to see this.”<sup>109</sup> And this discovery triggered him to reflect further and he came to the conclusion that the home of the father now appeared “all too clearly” as an image of the Church and the Christian fellowship, or more precisely as what the Church as a

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<sup>105</sup> Phrases translated from “lett å forstå,” “lett å identifisere seg med,” and “enkel å aktualisere.”

<sup>106</sup> Translated from “viktigste verdiene kristendommen har.”

<sup>107</sup> Translated from “tilgivelse, nestekjærlighet, romslighet, forstå fra å dømme.”

<sup>108</sup> Translated from “Jeg vil også ... legge vekt på at det alltid er plass i det kristne fellesskapet.”

<sup>109</sup> Translated from “Det hjelper du meg til å se nå, ser jeg.”

fellowship always should do and always should be. This indicates that the analogy between the father's home and the Church is kept within an ethical framework, that the Church should represent the all-embracing community and reflect, in the words of Peter, that

*there is always a place under the wings of Jesus  
and God when you are ready for it.*

*det er alltid plass innunder Jesus og Guds vinger  
når du selv på en måte er klar til det.*

Even in this short glimpse of an analogous reading in Peter's response, ethics remains at the center of attention. His discovery, therefore, implies only that the core values of the parable are brought to the churchly arena.

In Peter's statements we can clearly see that his perception of the father's home is not limited to the analogous structures of the text, but probably more so to his own concept of Christianity. This becomes evident when he underscores his point by referring to recent incidents in The Norwegian Church that he finds quite disturbing.<sup>110</sup> It could therefore be argued that this aspect belongs on the other side of the outline, which centers the attention on the "interpretive strategies" of the teachers. And I will certainly come back to this issue also in Part II of the analysis, but I will argue that even for Peter and the way he suddenly gets triggered by the analogous structures of the parable, illustrate the relevance of viewing it also from a textual perspective.

Karianne, the second teacher I will draw attention to, focuses almost entirely on the God-man analogy and thus positions herself at the other end of the pendulum of Peter. This is our conversation about whether she sees any interpersonal content in the parable at all:

Your main focus is obviously on the God-man relation.

*Mmm. (Yes)*

Right. Others, though they emphasize different things, will center the attention on the interpersonal.

*Mmm*

The father as a father

*Mmm*

Du har hovedfokuset helt åpenbart på Gud-menneske relasjonen.

*Mmm.*

Ikke sant. Andre, det er ulik vektlegging her da, men andre vil legge veldig vekt på det mellommenneskelige.

*Mmm*

Far som far.

*Mmm*

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<sup>110</sup> Peter names and contrasts one "conservative" and one "liberal" bishop. The "liberal" bishop, as he views him, lives up to the principles of the father in the parable, as never demanding and always reaching out to people. The "conservative" bishop is like the Pharisees; one that shuts people out and appears moralistic.



You don't mention that.

No.

As a dimension in the text.

No, if so, it must have been between the two brothers.

Yes, right.

Yes. It was very clear to me, that this was about God. I have always thought this way about it.

Det nevner ikke du.

Nei.

Som en dimensjon i teksten.

Nei, det måtte i tilfelle vært mellom de to brødrene.

Ja, ikke sant.

Ja. Så jeg tenkte så helt tydelig med en gang at det var Gud, eller jeg har alltid tenkt det.

In this sequence we see that Karianne delimits the interpersonal to only count for the relationship between the two brothers. In fact, she asks if the interpersonal is an issue to consider at all. Thus, Karianne, and clearly in contrast to Peter but also diverging from the other teachers, draws a sharp distinction between a religious and an interpersonal reading, claiming that the powerful and obvious father-God analogy leaves little if any room for reading the parable as an illustration with a predominantly ethical content.

Although Karianne comments on the social and ethical aspects of Luke's Gospel, she claims that *The Prodigal Son*, as well as *The Lost Coin* and *The Lost Sheep* in chapter 15, should be read otherwise. And likewise, when we talked about the relevance of forgiveness, a concept she finds to be essential in Luke's Gospel, she underlined that the father's love and forgiveness in *The Prodigal Son* by far surpasses any possible human responses. Hence, the parable should not be reduced to anything human-like, as if humans could be or act like the father. Instead the image of the father as uniquely different; it is God-like and should be held up high. This indicates, therefore, that Karianne reads *The Prodigal Son* as a revelation story, as a parable where the father reveals God's being. In the text of reflection she makes her point clear in a fervent and nearly poetic way:

It is a text about a human's encounter with God.

But first of all about God's encounter with us humans.

God is infinite love, infinite patience, God waits on us, he does not force his way in.

Det er en tekst om menneskets møte med Gud.

Men først og fremst om Guds møte med oss mennesker.

Gud er uendelig kjærlighet, uendelig tålmodighet, Gud venter på oss, han tvinger seg ikke på.

All the other teachers, except Terje who I will turn to next, position themselves somewhere on the range between Peter and Karianne. This means that they all center their attention on the analogous and illustrative structures in *The Prodigal Son* but vary when it comes to what they

find to be most important, and also, as we saw in Karianne and Peter's case, whether they find them to be parallels or counterparts.

Third and finally I turn to Terje. Like Karianne, Terje is well aware of the analogous structures of the parable. But instead of focusing on what he finds obvious, he is drawn towards "what is so fascinating with this story," and that is "that it says so little."<sup>111</sup> Thus, Terje seems to recognize the allegorical structures of the parable, even in the *Mashal* sense of it, which highlights contradictory and also occluding features.

Terje focuses on the relational conflicts enacted between the characters. And it is the more hidden emotive aspects that catch his interest. In particular he questions what must lie behind the youngest son's decision to return home. He asks: "What did it cost?"<sup>112</sup> This, Terje argues, we can only imagine since it is not spelled out in the text. Moreover, and in sharp contrast to all the other teachers, Terje examines the motives of the father for putting up such a remarkable homecoming party. He asks:

*What is the motive for this party? Is it unconditional? Or is this the father's affirmation of his position in the society? Is it his need to reveal his prominence by showing that he is of such greatness that he brings back his loser of a son into the fellowship with him?*

*Hva er motivet for denne festen? Er den betingelsesløs? Eller er det fars oppreisning for sitt eget samfunn? Er det far sitt behov for å få vise sin storhet ved å vise frem denne taperen som han er stor nok til å ta tilbake igjen?*

And finally, he questions the long term consequences for the family:

*What happened to them? What happened to these two boys? How did their lives turn out?*

*Hva skjedde med dem? Hva skjedde med de to brødrene? Hvordan ble livet dems?*

Terje claims that all these questions point to issues that are, as he says, "in the text but not spoken about."<sup>113</sup>

This indicates that Terje does not read the parable primarily as an instructional illustration that promotes ethical ideals of fatherly love and unconditional forgiveness. Certainly, he too finds these ideals to be essential aspects of the text, representing values all humans should strive

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<sup>111</sup> Translated from "Det som er fascinerende ved fortellingen" and "at den sier så lite."

<sup>112</sup> Translated from "Hva kostet det?"

<sup>113</sup> Translated from "i teksten, men ikke snakket om."

for. But, and again, what he finds more interesting, and what he puts all his emphasis on and expresses forcefully, is the untold drama that is being played out behind the scenes, and the struggle that lies ahead. He says:

*Yes, unconditional love, grace and forgiveness and all that is shown. But there is, when the party is over, there is a broken person who lives on .... How far-reaching is the grace? We never get to know that, but if we start pondering about different scenarios, this scenario is important to think about. Because grace is not about what you do today. Grace is what you do every day. This ability to leave things behind and shut the door. To give people a real chance to come back again. But if you encounter "You were out there" and "that was the time you were gone." Right? In other words, they will never let you go. You will always be reminded about your mistakes. You will never be released. He was never released. And then you can say: Who came out best? Well – the father, right?*

*Ja, det vises uforbeholden kjærlighet og nåde og tilgivelse og alt som er. Men det ligger, altså i forlengelsen av det, når festen er over, så er det en knekt person som lever videre .... Hvor langt strekker denne nåden seg? Altså, det fortelles jo ikke, men skal man først drodle over tenkte scenarioer så er det et svært viktig scenario å ta med seg. For nåde er ikke det du gjør i dag. Nåde er det du gjør hver dag. Å ha evnen til å legge bak seg og stenge døra. Å gi folk en reell sjanse til å komme tilbake igjen. Men hvis du møter "Jammen du var vel der inne, du." "Nei det var da du var der, ja." Ikke sant? Altså, altså din feil blir hele tiden holdt pur levende. Du slipper aldri fri. Han slapp aldri fri. Også kan du si, hvem solte seg i glansen da? Jo – faren, ikke sant.*

At the point I was about to end the interview, I could sense that Terje wanted to make one last comment, which finally was articulated and which further underscores his key point:

*What I find to be most interesting is that if you in research – and I must admit that I have never quite understood what you are doing research on, but that is ok. It is not important to me – but if you want to do research on this, you cannot think of this from God's perspective. You have to do research from the perspective of Cain and Abel, in the moment the youngest son returns. We have seen way too many of these one-way or one-dimensional things. It seems that we never can get past that. You have to look at this also from the perspective of developmental psychology. That is really important. What happened to them? What happened to these two brothers? How did their*

*Det som jeg kanskje syns er det mest interessante er at hvis man i en forskningsoppgave – nå har ikke jeg forstått hva du forsker på – men det er nå greit. Det er ikke så viktig for meg. Men skal man forske på dette, så kan man ikke lenger sette seg ned og forske på dette i et gudsperspektiv. Man må også forske på det i Kains perspektiv og i Abels perspektiv i det øyeblikket han kommer tilbake. Fordi vi har sett endelig nok av disse her, disse her enveiskommunikative greiene som på en måte, altså man kommer ikke videre. Du må se på denne også i et utviklingspsykologisk perspektiv som er ganske viktig. Hva skjedde med dem? Hva skjedde med de to guttene? Hvordan ble livet dems? Det*

*lives turn out? I find this quite interesting.*

*syns jeg er ganske interessant.*

Earlier in the interview Terje comments on the failure of the Church and its preachers, and also of the academic field as he experienced it during his own studies of religion, claiming that they all fail to address the issues that are truly interesting. It is in this perspective we should read his final comment where he also questions the relevance of my project, when he appeals for research that take the true conditions of human reality as a point of departure, as opposed to the glorified and unreachable ideals that lie far beyond the premises of the human experience.

A timely question to raise at the end, then, is if Terje reads *The Prodigal Son* allegorically after all. Does he focus on structures that are, as he claims, “in the text but not spoken of”? Or does he read it more as a drama about family intrigues? By bringing in the term “developmental psychology” at the end, I find this sense of drama most likely; it is the characteristic features of the drama that structure Terje’s reading, and in particular, then, the interpersonal conflicts played out by the characters. When the older brother as the antagonist enters the scene with the confrontational reply to his father, it is as if the drama leaves the harmony behind and moves into the final realistic climax of the play.<sup>114</sup> A fundamental question I will return to can therefore be asked: Is Terje, in the way he finds the parable interesting, reading *The Prodigal Son* as a parable?

#### **4.2.2 Literary contexts**

With parables as noticeably part of the New Testament (NT) and also the Bible, it did not come as a surprise that all the RE teachers, in some way or another, make a reference to a broader literary context. For some, and particularly so for Rita, to position *The Prodigal Son* in a literary context, is a key point. She starts off the text of reflection in the following way:

Context: In Luke chapter 15 we find 3 narratives (parables) that show how much the single human being means to God. “The one” is therefore also in this last narrative of the chapter the keyword here.

Kontekst: I Lukas kap 15 finner vi 3 fortellinger (lignelser) som viser hvor mye det ene mennesket betyr for Gud. Derfor er ”den ene ” også i denne siste fortellingen i kapitlet stikkordet her.

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<sup>114</sup> The following short definition of drama seems to fit Terje’s reading of *The Prodigal Son*: “A story in dramatic form, typically emphasizing conflict in key characters and written to be performed by actors” (T. L. Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 63).

As we can see, the location of *The Prodigal Son* in Luke 15 gives Rita the point of reference and hence the argument for her focus on “the one” as the main theme.

The literary contexts that appear in the material stretch from seeing the parable in its more immediate context, as in Rita’s case, as part of the three parables in Luke chapter 15, and then more broadly; as part of the Gospel of Luke, the parables of Jesus and the message of Jesus in the Gospels, the entire NT, and finally as part of the Bible. And the teachers do not pick one of these contexts but are likely to include two or more in their argumentation.

For a majority of the teachers, the parables of Luke chapter 15, first *The Lost Sheep* (v. 3-7), then *The Lost Coin* (v. 8-10), and finally *The Prodigal Son* (v. 11-32), seem to play a particularly important role. Referring to the three parables as “parallel stories,” as Terje puts it, they are perceived to share a common theme, what he narrows down to “no one can be lost,”<sup>115</sup> and Rita, to “how much the single human being means to God,” and “the one” as “the keyword.” Another common designation is “God’s love” or “God’s forgiveness,” and also, with reference to the concluding verses in the two previous parables, the “joy in heaven“ (v. 7), and “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10).

When the teachers widen the perspective and make references to a broader context, it is to primarily underscore that the theme of *The Prodigal Son* represents a read thread in Jesus’ parables and in his teachings, and ultimately a read thread in the Bible. As Elin puts it with reference to the Bible as literary context; “It is self-evident that we are at the very core now.”<sup>116</sup>

There are two aspects that I find important to go more deeply into concerning this category. The first concerns something that struck me by surprise as *not* appearing as central in the responses, and that is what Iser refers to as “the repertoire of the text” or “extratextual reality” (Iser, 1978, p. 69). The second concerns how the Bible as literary context constitutes itself in the teachers’ responses.

As to the first I find three but only barely recognizable instances where the teachers bring in the historical context of the parable and reflect historical-critically on that. In two of the instances, two teachers comment briefly on the addressees introduced in the immediate

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<sup>115</sup> Translated from “det er ingen som kan bli borte.”

<sup>116</sup> Translated from “Det er soleklart at vi er ved kjernen nå.”

context of *The Prodigal Son*: “the Pharisees and the scribes” (Luke 15, 2). Elise is one of the two who confirms that

*this parable was according to Luke told to the Pharisees and the scribes.*

*denne liknelsen ble i følge Lukas fortalt til fariseerne og de skriftlærde.*

The other teacher, Karianne, develops it a bit further by indicating Jesus’ rhetorical objective:

I looked up in the Bible to see what came before and right after this text, to see the context .... “The Son that Came Home” is one of many parables Jesus told to the Pharisees and the scribes for them to better understand who God is and God’s joy when people return and repent, – by heart.

Jeg slo også opp i Bibelen for å se hva som kom før og etter, i hvilken kontekst den sto .... “Sønnen som vendte hjem” er en av flere liknelser Jesus fortalte for at fariseerne og de skriftlærde skulle få litt større forstand på hvem Gud er og Guds glede over de som vender om, – med hjertet.

In the interview with Elise, the role of “the Pharisees and the scribes” was brought up. And as the reader can see, as an interviewer I became rather eager to dig into the matter. But in admitting this, my point is not being undermined but rather strengthened when we look at what came out of the conversation:

Ok. You write in your introduction that this is a message for all, and that the parables were told so that all people would understand. And then you write that this parable, “however,” was “addressed to the Pharisees and the scribes.” Then you have the introductory words of Luke 15 in mind, right? *Yes. I looked at what was prior to the text.*

Yes, and you also refer to “parallel parables,” as you put it.

*Yes.*

What does that imply, that this text is written for those addressees? Do you think that makes a difference?

*I don’t know (laughs a little). The text is very fine for all people, but I cannot remember the discussion Jesus had with the Pharisees and the scribes prior to this. I think that there was some conversation there but I cannot recall it now. I think that conversation was the starting point for*

Ok. Du skriver innledningsvis at dette er et budskap for vanlige mennesker. Altså lignelser, lignelser for at vanlige mennesker skal forstå. Og så skriver du at denne lignelsen “imidlertid” blir “fortalt til fariseerne og de skriftlærde.” Og da tenker du tilbake til Lukas 15 helt innledningsvis, ikke sant?

*Ja. Jeg så på det som sto foran*

Ja, og det viser du også tilbake til på slutten, “parallelle lignelser,” som du sier

*Ja*

Hva gjør det, tenker du, at denne fortellingen er skrevet med dem som tilhørere? Tenker du at det gjør en forskjell?

*Jeg vet ikke jeg (ler litt). Den er jo veldig fin for alle da, men nå husker jeg ikke hva slags diskusjon Jesus hadde med fariseerne og de skriftlærde i forkant. Det var vel en eller annen samtale der. Og den sitter ikke akkurat i hodet mitt*

*the parable, that Jesus wanted to explain something. I would have to go back and look at the text.*

If this has not been of any importance for the reflection, I don't think we should pursue this any further.

*No. I registered that this was how it was, because they (i.e. Pharisees and the scribes) needed to hear a new version of man's relation to God and the encounter with God.*

Yes, right. Because the Pharisees and the scribes had a (teacher interrupts)

*They were Jews.*

And they had a certain position.

*Mmm (Yes)*

They had a certain perception of the Law.

*Yes, yes, yes. So in this parable grace is much more prominent. This was probably what Jesus wanted to convey to the Pharisees. Here is something new. But I would have to go back and study the text to elaborate on this.*

*nå. Som var utgangspunktet for at han ville forklare noe. Da måtte jeg gå og finne den teksten igjen, altså.*

Hvis ikke dette har vært noe spesielt viktige refleksjoner rundt dette så går vi ikke inn på det.

*Nei. Jeg registrerte at det var sånn det var, for de tenkte vel å høre en ny versjon av kanskje forholdet til Gud og møtet med Gud.*

Ja, ikke sant. Fordi de skriftlærde og fariseerne hadde en (lærer avbryter)

*De var jøder*

Og de hadde en bestemt posisjon.

*Mmm*

De hadde en klar oppfatning av loven.

*Ja, ja, ja. Så her kommer jo nåden mye sterkere inn. Det var kanskje noe av det Jesus ville formidle til fariseerne. Her er det noe nytt. Jeg måtte jo gått tilbake og studert dette nærmere for å si noe mer om det.*

I sensed some insecurity in Elise's remarks, which I believe was related to a reluctance to discuss an issue that she felt she could not fully master in the interview situation. The one historical link she makes, however, and which comes out abruptly, is the perception of "the Pharisees and the scribes" as "Jews." And her image of this is clear: "the Pharisees and the scribes" as "Jews" proclaim and represent "the Law," while Jesus and *The Prodigal Son* stand for something "new," namely "grace." Although there is a glimpse of historical reasoning in this, that Jesus challenges the socio-, religious and political situation of the time, I will argue that her understanding of the Bible and the relation between the OT and the NT seem to be a far more powerful incitement in her argumentation. This example, therefore, points more strongly to the second issue to which I will turn shortly.

Karianne is the one who also brings in the third and last historical element. In the text of reflection, when she refers to "the fatted calf" (Luke, 15, 23), she puts the following question in parentheses: "Is that an image of the last supper?" In the interview, I asked her to pursue her own question:

You mention, you ask a question here about the fattened calf.

*Mmm (Yes)*

Could you elaborate on that?

(pause)

*Yes, ok. Should slay the best calf. The father prepares the best meal which he had not done for his other son.*

No.

*And I think that the best meal God gives us, that is the last supper, the union with God, so to speak, so that God in a way dwells in us, you know, that he gives himself for us. So I think that the meal really is a clause in the text, right? Well, it is more than that. "Take this calf." So I think that there is a declaration of love from God in this, from God to man, that Jesus gave himself, right, for our sins. The youngest son had sinned. He had not behaved very properly, I must say. I think that this is also a part of the relation between God and man. So the link between God and man, then, is the last supper. And this is much more emphasized in the Catholic Church than in the Protestant Church. This has something to do with the last supper, the bread, and the transfiguration .... The last supper is the focal point. That is why I think that the meal here too is about God giving himself.*

Mmm. It can be viewed in light of the God's salvation?

*Mmm*

Du nevner, du stiller et spørsmål her, dette med gjøkalven.

*Mmm*

Kan du utdype hva slags bilde det gir deg?

(pause)

*Ja, jo da. Skulle slakte den beste kalven. Faren gjør i stand det beste måltidet, som jo han da ikke hadde gjort for den andre sønnen sin.*

Nei.

*Og jeg tenker det beste måltidet Gud gir oss, det er jo nattverden hvor du på en måte, den foreningen med Gud da, altså Gud på en måte blir i oss, ikke sant, han gir seg selv til oss. Så jeg tenker at det måltidet er, altså det er jo bare en bisetning her, ikke sant? Nei det er vel litt mer da. Slakt dette dyret. Så jeg tenker det ligger i den kjærlighetserklæringen fra Gud og til mennesket at Gud, altså at Jesus ga seg selv, ikke sant, for våre synder da. Han hadde jo syndet han her. Han hadde jo ikke oppført seg så pent, da. Nei jeg tenker at det også er en del av relasjonen Gud – menneske. Så det som på en måte er bindeleddet mellom Gud og menneske, da, er jo nattverden. Og den er vel mye sterkere i kanskje katolsk kirke enn i den protestantiske egentlig. Det har jo noe med nattverden, og brødet, altså forvandlingen å gjøre .... Nattverden er det sentrale. Derfor så tenker jeg at dette måltidet her også, at det er på en måte Gud som gir seg selv.*

Mmm. Det kan ses i lys av hele frelsesverket?

*Mmm*

In making the link to the last supper, it can be argued that Karianne reads the parable in light of the historical role of the last supper as a sacrament in the early years of the first Church. However, Karianne never mentions the first Church and never refers to the time of the writing of Luke's Gospel. Instead she sees an allegorization in the Catholic image of the last supper. This makes me conclude that also in this example historical context and historical-critical



reasoning is barely recognizable. Thus, based on the material, there were no grounds for adding Historical Contexts to the title of this chapter.

Concerning the second point and the issue of giving a more detailed description of how the Bible as literary context constitutes itself in the responses, I stated briefly above that all the teachers relate *The Prodigal Son* to the Bible and all seem to agree that it represents a key text within the biblical scripture. I ended by saying that the perception of the Bible as a larger literary context varies significantly (see p. 108). In the following I will point to two understandings that are specifically prominent in the responses.

First, I find that two teachers, Karianne and Terje, communicate that there is first and foremost a continuation in the stories of the Bible. An underlying premise in Karianne's response is that the image of God in the parable is in line with the overall image that permeates the Bible; that "God is infinite love, infinite patience, God waits on us, he does not force his way in." Terje highlights the continuation by referring to the stories of *Cain and Abel* and *Abraham* and also *The Law*. He speaks of the oldest son as another Cain, as one who is the loyal but dissatisfied worker who struggles with issues concerning parent and brotherhood and the emotions of jealousy, and he speaks of the father as part of Abraham's heritage, as the one who "upholds The Law."<sup>117</sup>

Seven of the nine RE teachers, however, refer to the Bible as a literary context in a way which emphasizes that there is a sharp contrast between the OT and the NT. And in their reasoning *The Prodigal Son* is clearly given the role of illustrating the fundamental schism. I find that this is the underlying notion in Elise's comment above, where she contrasts the message of Jesus as representing "something new," and "the Pharisees and the scribes" as representing "the Jews" and "the Law." Marie and Hanne, as we can see in the following statements, refer even more explicitly to the schism between the OT and the NT:

Marie: Jesus wanted to show people the way to God and to heaven. He wanted to show that God is forgiving and compassionate. He wanted to show the people a different God than the one they met in the old scriptures, where God often appears as judgmental and punishing .... In this way Jesus wanted to show the people that God loves us. This

Marie: Jesus ville vise menneskene veien til Gud og Himmelriket. Han ville vise at Gud er tilgivende og barmhjertig. Han ville vise folket en annen Gud enn den de møtte i de gamle skriftene, der han ofte var dømmende og straffende .... Slik ville Jesus vise menneskene at Gud elsker oss og det er dette de kristne tror på – en snill og

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<sup>117</sup> Translated from "opprettholder Loven."

is what the Christians believe in – a kind and compassionate God.

Hanne: Or maybe this is the most powerful element in the story? – how do we see God? As strict and punishing, or as the loving father who loves his sons and is generous and forgiving when the humble repents?

barmhjertig Gud.

Hanne: Eller er kanskje dette det sterkeste i historien? – hvordan ser vi Gud? Som den strenge, straffende? Eller som den kjærlige far som elsker sine sønner og er raus og tilgivende når de ydmyke vender om?

And in the interview, when unconditional forgiveness or unconditional love was the matter of concern, Hanne makes her point unmistakably clear:

*I think that this is an image of God, how one sees God. Is God a punishing and strict God, like the one we find in the OT? What God is that? How much repentance, how many Ave Marias do you need to pray, or how much do you have to pay to make everything ok? This story tells us, on the other hand, that it all comes down to the moment you turn around, is humble and acknowledge that you have been wrong and ask for forgiveness. Then you will be accepted. Then God is there. Yes.*

*Jeg tenker jo at dette her er et bilde på Gud, hvordan man ser Gud, da. Er Gud en straffende, streng som er i mot stor del av gammeltestamentlig måte å fremstille Gud på? Hva slags gudsrolle er det, hvor mye bot, hvor mye syndsforlatelse, hvor mange Ave Mariar skal man be, eller hvor mye skal man betale? For på en måte at det er greit nok. Mens det denne historien her sier noe om, det er at i det øyeblikket man vender om, er ydmyk og ser at man har trådt feil, og ber om tilgivelse, så blir man tatt inn igjen. Så er Gud der. Ja.*

As a final illustration I have listed the characteristics that appear of God when the RE teachers make explicit references to the OT and the NT:

OT	NT
a harsh God	a compassionate God
a punishing God	God as forgiving
a judgmental God	a kind God
a distant God	a near God
demanding God	

What becomes evident here is that the literary context of *The Prodigal Son* affects strongly the RE teachers' responses. This is the case whether the attention is on the immediate context of Luke 15 or on the broader context of the Bible. But what is equally evident is that the literary context as a "response-inviting structure" should not be viewed as an isolated matter.

Rather, and as clearly visible in Hanne’s comment above, her dualistic view of the OT and the NT is strongly affected by her concept of the Bible as well as her concept of Christianity. Thus, to get a fuller and more accurate picture of Hanne and also the other teachers’ responses with regard to this specific issue, it is necessary to focus on these concepts as making up the RE teachers’ “interpretive strategies,” and, finally, to see the whole matter in a transactional perspective.

### 4.2.3 Titles

For a text known as *The Prodigal Son*, even to the extent of becoming a widely used metaphor, it is not surprising that the title can nurture a certain reading and understanding. I find the same to be true for many well-known stories in the Bible, and just to mention two, *The Fall* (Gen 3) and *The Good Samaritan* (Luke 10, 29-37). An additional factor which points to the relevance of this category is the shift of title to *The Son That Came Home* in the New Norwegian translation of the Bible.<sup>118</sup> An important aspect of the analyses, therefore, is to see what title or titles the teachers refer to, and in what way and to what extent this influences the responses.

In the material I find that three teachers comment specifically on the title of the parable, all three demonstrating that they are well aware of the three versions; the first, *The Lost Son*, the second, *The Prodigal Son*, and now *The Son That Came Home*. Elise, one of these three, introduces her text of reflection in this way:

<p>Earlier: The Lost Son. In the new translation: The Son that Came Home. I see that there is a “growing optimism” in these titles.</p>	<p>Tidligere: Den fortapte sønn. I den nyeste oversettelsen: Sønnen som kom hjem. Jeg ser at i disse tre titlene er det en “stigende optimisme.”</p>
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When I asked Elise to explain what she meant by “growing optimism,” we had the following dialogue:

<p><i>There might be a tendency in our time that we don't focus on what is difficult for people, but instead focus on the positive aspects. In addition,</i></p>	<p><i>Det er kanskje en tendens i tiden i dag og i utleggelsen av tekster også at man velger å ikke fokusere på det som er vanskelig, å gjøre det</i></p>
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<sup>118</sup> The most recent version entitles the parable *Sønnen som kom hjem* [*The Son that Came Home*]. The one previous to that, from 1978, entitled it *Den bortkomne sønnen* [*The Prodigal Son*]. The 1930-version actually has no title in the text but refers to the parable as *Den fortapte sønn* [*The Lost Son*] in the chapter summary.

*the term “lost” is also very definitely.*

Yes, right.

*Mmm. He was not really lost. Only for a while.*

*(laughs a little)*

Which title do you find most appropriate? Have you thought about that?

*No, but the last one is at least better than the first one. The Son that Came Home. Yes. I think that one is ok.*

*vanskelig for folk, men å fokusere på det positive.*

*“Fortapt” er jo så definitivt også det da.*

Ja, ikke sant.

*Mmm. Han var jo ikke fortapt egentlig. Han var det en stund (ler litt).*

Hvilken tittel syns du er mest dekkende for fortellingen? Har du tenkt noe på det?

*Nei, den er vel egentlig bedre den siste enn den første, i hvert fall, syns jeg. Sønnen som kom tilbake. Ja. Den er jo allright den, egentlig, tenker jeg.*

Rita comments just briefly that she used the new translation and that she, like Elise, preferred the title *The Son That Came Home*. Karianne, the third teacher, is the one that articulates what I find to be Elise and Rita’s underlying notion, that both *The Lost Son* and *The Prodigal Son* give the association of a too permanent situation away from home. This, Karianne argues, is not consistent with the central message of the parable:

I prefer the new translation: *The Son that Came Home*. I find that the term “home” is most important. Home is with God, in God. That is where we are going, that is where we return, and that is where we are expected. The central point is that the son comes home, not that he was lost. We all have our ways, but we will all return home.

Jeg liker godt overskriften i den nye bibeloversettelsen: *Sønnen som kom hjem*. Her tenker jeg at ordet “hjem” er det viktige, hjem er hos Gud, i Gud. Det er dit vi skal, det er dit vi vender tilbake, det er der vi er ventet. Det sentrale er at sønnen kom hjem, ikke at han var bortkommen. Vi har alle våre veier, men vi kommer hjem.

What Karianne writes here is in line with her emphasis on the father-God analogy referred to earlier (see p. 101). But I got the sense that Karianne would prefer an even stronger emphasis on the role of the father in the parable. She said: “I don’t think the father gets enough recognition.”<sup>119</sup> And as I understood her, although she was pleased with the new title, this also meant that she would have favored a title that focused even more on the essence, that “It is a text about a human’s encounter with God. But first of all about God’s encounter with us humans.”

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<sup>119</sup> Translated from “Jeg syns ikke faren fikk nok plass egentlig.”

Although the other teachers do not refer directly to the title, I find that the title stands out as a powerful underlying “response-inviting structure” in the sense that it seems to legitimize a certain focus. This is to some extent observable in Karianne’s comment above and her liking the term “home.” But I find this more visible, and in a strikingly different way, in Marie and Elin’s responses.

Marie and Elin stand out as the ones who write exclusively about the youngest son and the father in their texts of reflection. And when I in the interview asked them about the oldest son, both clearly preferred to maintain this focus. The following sequence of my interview with Marie illustrates this.

What do you think about the oldest son? What do you think he is an image of, the one that stays home?

*I have not thought so much about that. But I guess he is one who has remained with God, or remained with his father. No, I have not thought so much about that. I have to say that. I believe he represents more the human attitudes, that it is not just that he will receive as much since he has been here all the time.*

Yes, right, the jealousy.

*Yes.*

Do you think that, since he is home, home with his father, do you think of him as an insider and that he never rebelled? That he is with God, in a sense. Do you think that way? Or do you think of him as also a lost one? Do you think that there is one prodigal or more?

*I have not thought about that, actually. My attention was on the one who left and returned. Mmm.*

Hva tenker du om den eldste sønnen? Hva tenker du at han er et bilde på, altså han som blir hjemme?

*Det har jeg ikke tenkt så mye på. Men det blir jo mere en som har blitt hos Gud, da, eller blitt hos far, ja. Nei, det har jeg faktisk ikke tenkt så mye på, altså. Det må jeg si. Det blir jo mer sånn menneskelige holdninger, at det er jo ikke rettferdig at han skal få når jeg har vært her hele tiden.*

Ja, ikke sant. Sjalusien.

*Ja*

Tenker du på en måte at han, siden han er hjemme, er hos far, da, tenker du at han på en måte er innenfor, altså han har ikke gjort dette store opprøret. Han er på en måte hos Gud, da. Tenker du det? Eller tenker du at han på samme måte som den yngste også på en måte er bortkommen? Er det en bortkommen, eller er det flere, tenker du?

*Det har jeg faktisk ikke tenkt så mye på. Jeg festet meg mer ved han som dro ut og kom tilbake. Mmm.*

I could sense that in asking about the oldest son Marie became somewhat uneasy, signaling that she was caught by surprise by my questions. And I can remember that I sat there sensing that she was just about to ask: Why don’t we talk about the prodigal son?

The element of surprise was not so evident in Elin's case, but I find that she too signaled that the oldest son only has a peripheral role in the parable, clearly indicating that his entry at the end does not represent an indispensable part of the parable. And as I understood both Marie and Elin, *The Prodigal Son* as a title supported such a focus.

This leads me to another observation that relates to the title as a "response-inviting structure." The use of the title *The Prodigal Son* seems to mirror a stronger focus on the youngest son and his prodigality, that means on the nature of his life spent abroad and the way he confronts and turns away from that life, while *The Son That Came Home* seems to reflect a stronger emphasis on what happened later, upon the youngest son's homecoming. And as indicated in Karianne's response, *The Son that Came Home* also seems to open up for a reading which includes a stronger emphasis on the older brother's state at home. The implications of this will be further elaborated in the categories that follow, and particularly so in the category of *Characters*.

#### 4.2.4 Narrators

It did not come as a surprise, as this is consistent with one of the key findings in the pilot studies, that eight out of nine teachers refer to Jesus as the narrator of the parable. Anne is the exception, but also in her case I find this to be the basic notion. It is, as I read her, so apparent that it is simply not worth mentioning. The introductory words "Jesus said" (v. 11) obviously settles it all.

This common understanding remains even though some of the RE teachers refer to Luke as author and also sees a certain intention in him, as for instance Elin: "Luke is concerned that sinners can return to God if they repent."<sup>120</sup> Luke's intention as historical author, however, goes hand in hand with Jesus as first-person narrator, with, as Elin states, "what Jesus wanted to teach his listeners."<sup>121</sup> In other words, intentions merge, or are "fluid," as Jakob Lothe remarks (Lothe, 2003, p. 154). The absence of further historical-critical reasoning, as emphasized earlier, logically gives such an outcome (see p. 109).

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<sup>120</sup> Translated from "Lukas er opptatt av at syndere kan vende tilbake til Gud ved å omvende seg."

<sup>121</sup> Translated from "hva Jesus ønsket å lære tilhørerne sine."

Despite this consensus, I find that the understanding of Jesus as narrator varies. What I find more or less in all the responses is the emphasis on Jesus as teacher, and as one who conveyed his message largely by telling parables. Elin underlines strongly the position of the parables in Jesus' teachings by confirming that "Jesus means this, and that it is in these stories that you learn the most about Jesus."<sup>122</sup> And I find that Terje sums up well what seems to be a common notion of the content of Jesus' teaching, that of unconditional love and forgiveness, in one word, "grace":

*This is being told for a reason, namely that Jesus will show that God will give the same grace to every human being that has been lost and returns.*

*Dette fortelles for en grunn, nemlig at Jesus da vil vise at dette er den samme nåden som Gud vil gi et hvert menneske som har vært på avveie og som kommer tilbake.*

Peter refers to Jesus as a teacher but relates him specifically to the Greek philosophical tradition, portraying Jesus as "a counselor of his time" and one who triggered ethical "self-reflection" just like Socrates:

*I see that Jesus was more focused on demonstrating through actions and being a role model, as to he wanted people to behave. I think that it is okay to bring this aspect into one's teaching.*

So when it says "Jesus said," it shows that the narrative guides people, right?

Yes, yes.

A contrast to this, as I understand you, would be a moralistic (interrupted)

*Yes, yes, that's exactly it! This should be a starting point for self-reflection ... to start processes of thinking in relation to what is right, what is wrong .... And this is about the good role models or not so good role models. So I think this is very essential in this text and then also essential to use. I have then drawn some conclusions in the use of text.*

*Jeg ser at Jesus var vel mer opptatt av å vise gjennom handlinger og forbilde eller handling da, hvordan han ville at folk skulle oppføre seg. Og da tenker jeg at det er veldig greit å ta med seg denne tråden inn i undervisningen.*

Så når det står at "Jesus sa," så er det en form, da, at fortellingen veileder mennesker, ikke sant.

Ja, ja.

En motsetning, slik jeg forstår deg, ville være en sånn moralistisk (avbrytes)

*Ja, ja, det er akkurat det! At det skal være et utgangspunkt til selvrefleksjon da ... du skal få satt i gang tankeprosesser i forhold til hva er det som er riktig, hva er det som er galt her .... Og dette har med de gode forbildene eventuelt ikke gode forbilder å gjøre. Så det syns jeg er veldig essensielt i denne teksten her da, å bruke, og da har jeg trukket noen konklusjoner i selve bruken av teksten.*

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<sup>122</sup> Translated from "dette mener Jesus og det er de fortellingene du lærer mest om Jesus."

Peter then moved on to elaborate on the key ethical principles of Jesus' teaching; on "forgiveness, neighboring love, generosity and refraining from judging."

As became evident in the category of *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory*, Karianne is the one who most markedly is the contrast to Peter's reading of the parable (see p. 101). Clearly, by focusing entirely on the analogy, Jesus is far more than an ethical counselor. Moreover, he is also far more than a teacher who talked *about* God. Karianne says with reference to the words "Jesus said": "This is God's own word."<sup>123</sup> And what is more, Jesus becomes *the* medium of God's word. This means that as narrator Jesus reveals himself as the incarnated word of God. It must be true to say that, by bringing in the Christological perspective, the narrator reaches its fullest potential, what Iser refers to as "overwhelming superiority" (Iser, 1974b, p. 110).

Clearly, and as we also saw in *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory*, Karianne is not the only one who makes a connection to the life and the salvation work of Jesus. Anne makes this point in her text of reflection:

Christian teaching: People get forgiveness for their sins, if they ask for forgiveness and repent – reject the wrong action they have done and starts to live the way God has said we should live. People can get this forgiveness because Jesus has taken on all the sins of men. He could do that because he had lived a life without sin.

Kristendommens lære: Menneskene får tilgivelse for sine synder, hvis de ber om tilgivelse og vender om – tar avstand fra de gale handlingen de har gjort og starter opp å leve slik Gud har sagt vi skal leve. Denne tilgivelsen kan menneskene få fordi Jesus har tatt på seg alle menneskenes synder, og det kunne han gjøre siden han hadde levd et syndfritt liv.

But I will argue that Anne brings up this Christological allegory based on what she understands is the essence of "Christian teaching" and the Christian dogma of salvation, and not through the narrator as a textual structure. She confirms this when she says further:

*So it is not really about this story, but ... God can forgive all humans what they have done .... To forgive is in a way a kind of gift. But you can't do it on behalf of others. But God can do that, in a way, because he had a son who has in a way taken on all humans' sins.*

*Altså det går egentlig ikke på historien, men ... Gud kan tilgi alle mennesker det de har gjort .... Det å tilgi er på en måte en slags gave. Men du kan på en måte ikke gjøre det på vegne av andre. Men det kan Gud, på et vis, fordi at han hadde en sønn som har på et vis tatt på seg alle menneskers synder.*

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<sup>123</sup> Translated from "Dette er Guds egne ord."



By saying “it is not really about this story,” Anne claims that these Christological reflections have nothing to do with the parable per se, but an overall perspective she brings into the reading of biblical narratives. Anne’s reference to the salvation work of Jesus is a matter which then should be placed in Part II, that is, a Christological allegorization which represents a powerful “interpretive strategy” she brings to the reading event. This, therefore, will be further described in Part II of the analysis.

This does not imply that I find Karianne’s response in this particular case to be purely driven by an awareness of the narrator as a textual structure. Indeed, and as we have seen also earlier, the points she makes are clearly colored by her Catholic image of Christianity (see p. 112). This, therefore, only confirms my overall argument that in order to get a fuller picture it is necessary to view the matter in a transactional perspective. But I will argue that Karianne, and in contrast to Anne, recognizes the narrator as a textual structure and uses that particular knowledge to develop her argument.

#### **4.2.5 Characters**

The characters of the parable represent a powerful “response-inviting structure.” It is the relations between the father and the two sons, and also the relation between the brothers, which largely provide the content and also the structure of the responses. Hanne illustrates the dominant role of the characters in the way she starts her summary of the text of reflection: “This is a story that can be seen from each of the three characters' point of view.”<sup>124</sup> In observing this, it became natural for me to take this into consideration when I planned the interviews, to let the teachers expand further on their images of the three characters and their interrelations.

In the following I will describe in depth the way the characters come forward and constitute the responses. I will center the attention on the following aspects:

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<sup>124</sup> Translated from “Dette er jo en historie som kan sees fra hver av de tre personenes synsvinkel.”

<b>The father</b>	<b>The youngest son</b>	<b>The oldest son</b>
Representing home	Leaving home	Staying home
	Life spent away	Why angry?
	The turnaround	

Obviously, these issues do not cover everything that is being said about the characters in the responses. But I will argue that they point to a major common theme: the characters' relation to home. This is particularly apparent in the way the teachers draw extensively on the younger brother's journey away from home, his life spent away, and his turnaround and homecoming. This indicates that the teachers, though not expressing it directly, have structured their responses largely in relation to the "home-away-home" pattern or the "u-shape" of *The Prodigal Son*, as elaborated by Northrop Frye (see p. 75).

But home as a theme is also present in the way the teachers reflect more specifically on the father's home and what that represents, and furthermore on their image of the oldest son as the one who stays home. Although the older brother plays a somewhat secondary role in this chapter compared to that of his younger brother, he will be extensively elaborated on when I turn to the categories of cutting techniques and negations in the next chapter.

### *The father*

The father stands out as the pillar of the parable, as the one who manifests and carries its main theme. This comes evident already in the first category of *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory*, where the father represents the image of a God that "is infinite love, infinite patience," as Karianne puts it, and/or a father who in the words of Peter represents the ideals we all should strive for, that of "forgiveness, neighboring love, generosity, and refraining from judging."

It is only Terje who challenges this unparalleled position of the father. What to him makes an interesting reading is when the father is perceived as a genuine human being and not a glorified and ideal symbol detached from the real experiences of man's everyday life. From this viewpoint, the father stands out as a rather dispassionate and calculating figure, one who "is basking in the glory,"<sup>125</sup> as Terje puts it, as he has regained control over the family.

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<sup>125</sup> Translated from "soler seg i glansen."

Clearly, Terje's image of the father's home is not that of the perfect place, inquiring instead into what is hidden behind its façade.

### Representing home

To continue with Terje, the obvious exception in this connection, a realistic reading implies that no one can escape from his or her wrongdoings. Faults and blunders will always be a part of one's life, even within the safe and loving boundaries of a father's home. Whether it is being uttered by words or signaled by an eye's movement or a tiny shrug, the father's "What did I tell you?" will haunt the youngest son for the rest of his life:

<i>What did I tell you? But it is ok for me to party, and I am certainly happy that you returned, but you return as a loser because you didn't listen to me. Your mistakes will always be remembered. You will never be released. He was never released.</i>	<i>Hva var det jeg sa? Men jeg kan godt feste, og jeg kan godt være glad for at du kom tilbake, men du kommer tilbake som taper fordi du ikke hørte på meg. Dine feil blir hele tiden holdt pur levende. Du slipper aldri fri. Han slapp aldri fri.</i>
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Terje therefore questions what would be the best option for the youngest son. And as we can see, the answer is for him far from self-evident:

<i>Was it worth it to go back home? Or should I have died where I was? Where could my integrity live on? Would it be where I was, as the one I was, or by returning home and live for another 40 years and then perish for what I had done? This is quite interesting.</i>	<i>Var det verdt å reise hjem? Eller burde jeg ha dødd der jeg var? Hvor hadde min, hvor hadde min integritet fått lov til å leve ut? Var det der jeg var å gå til grunne der, som den jeg var, eller å reise hjem og leve i 40 år til og gå til grunne der for det jeg har gjort. Det er ganske interessant.</i>
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As previously pointed out, all the other teachers center their attention on the home of the father as a place where God or an ideal father is dwelling. And its one hallmark, which seems to be shared by all the teachers, is that it is all-embracing. As Peter, Elise and Elin put it, the father's home is the place "where there is room for all ... no matter what," "where all really belong," and "where all should be."<sup>126</sup>

At a closer look, however, these short statements reveal different notions about belongingness. To Peter the phrase "no matter what" signals that in order to enter the father's home there are no conditions to fulfill whatsoever. He says:

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<sup>126</sup> Phrases translated from "det er rom for alle ... uansett," "der alle egentlig hører hjemme," and "der alle bør være."

*It is not the receiving part who decides if there is room for you.*

*Det er ikke den som skal ta deg i mot som skal sette noen føringer for om det er plass til deg.*

And as we can remember from the *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* category, Peter transfers this illustrative and primarily ethical perception of the father's home to his image of the Church; the Church should reflect the ideal that "there is always a place under the wings of Jesus and God when you are ready for it." The Church should even embrace

*all religions. All ways of thinking have a place under this religious umbrella. You can see the differences between them, but there is room for everyone in that fellowship .... This is what the father's home symbolizes.*

*alle religioner. Alle tankeretninger har en plass i en overbærende religiøs paraply. Og så kommer du da inn i de forskjellige retningene som vil skille seg litt ut, men inn i det fellesskapet er det plass til alle .... Farens hjem er et symbol på det.*

A different way of expressing the unbounded nature of the father's home is done by Karianne when she talks about the home as something forthcoming:

*I do not like hell, but (laughs a little)  
God is love and we will come home. And as a Catholic we also have time after death to make it possible to arrive. So I think that God created us, created the world. I am certain, although it may sound very silly and a little pious, but I think that nevertheless it is not our job as humans to judge others and think that one ends here and another there. I think that we all come home.*

*Jeg liker ikke helvete, men (ler litt)  
Gud er liksom kjærlighet og vi kommer hjem. Og som katolikk da så har vi også tid etter døden, ikke sant, hvor det fremdeles er mulighet for å komme fram. Så jeg tenker det at Gud har jo skapt oss, skapt verden. Det er sikkert, jeg tror at det høres veldig enfoldig og litt sånn fromt ut, men jeg tenker også at det uansett så er det ikke vår oppgave som mennesker å dømme andre og tenke at den havner her og den havner der, jeg tenker at vi kommer hjem.*

But, and as we will see soon, this eschatological perspective, to use a theological term, is not Karianne's only notion of what the father's home represents.

In Elin's statement, by saying that the home is "where all really belong," I sense that the father's home represents a more bounded community. This becomes apparent when she talks about the home as an allegory of the Church. Clearly, the Church is a bounded community of faith. In short, you are either an insider or an outsider, "a Christian" or "an apostate," as Anne puts it when she contrasts the status of the two brothers:

*Yes, yes, yes. I picture him as one who stayed with his father, or stayed with God. A Christian. And the one who returns, he was a Christian but became an apostate, but who now asks his father to be allowed to enter and become a Christian again.*

*Ja, ja, ja. Jeg forestiller meg at han da er den som på et vis har holdt seg til faren sin, eller holdt seg til Gud. En kristen, da. Og så er han som kommer hjem, en som da enten har vært kristen og falt fra, eller at han nå er tatt inn i varmen eller ber om å få bli kristen igjen.*

And in the following statements it is apparent that the father's home is a community that is constituted by some distinct markers; by the churchly practices of baptism and of Christian education. This is, then, clearly a place where the older brother belongs, a certain place bounded by a specific system of faith:

*Rita: You don't have to be born into a Christian family, but the oldest son is baptized and has been trained to believe throughout his childhood years and remains in his faith.*

*Rita: Du trenger ikke være oppvokst i en kristen familie, men han er en som er døpt og som på en måte har blitt opplært til en tro opp gjennom barneårene og som får den troen, og som blir i sin tro.*

*Elin: Yes, yes, he belongs to God.*

*Elin: Ja, ja, han tilhører jo Gud.*

*Marie: one that has remained with God, or with the father.*

*Marie: en som har blitt hos Gud, da, eller blitt hos far.*

*Karianne: He is a believer. Yes. He is in a way born and raised in a Christian context and in a way never doubts, never rebels, but who maybe deep down is uncertain because he has never received a special calling.*

*Karianne: Er troende. Ja. Og er på en måte, ja kanskje både den som er født og oppvokst innen en kristen sammenheng og på en måte aldri tviler, aldri gjør noe opprør, men som kanskje i bunnen da kan være litt usikker fordi han ikke har fått et spesielt kall.*

I find an exception to this inside-outside image of the father's home in Hanne and also in Karianne's response. Although neither of them is a stranger to the idea of the father's home as analogous to the Church, which Karianne's statement illustrates, I find them reluctant to pursue solely in that direction, at least in the dichotomy sense, as if there are clear-cut boundaries between who is on the inside and who is on the outside. In fact, Hanne appears uncomfortable about the idea of father's home as the Church. Instead she finds it more

reasonable to think of it as a designation of “a state of being, an existence,”<sup>127</sup> that means not a physical place, but a mental state of being. I find this to be in line with what she perceives is the essence of the parable and which is encapsulated in the term “home”:

<i>Ultimately it's about how we get home, how we are at home, how we relate to the fact of being home.</i>	Til syvende og sist handler det om hvordan vi kommer hjem, hvordan vi er hjemme, hvordan vi forholder oss til det å være hjemme.
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Thus, what constitutes a person's relation to the father's home and God, according to Hanne, and here Karianne will agree, has little to do with formal affiliation, whether you find yourself on the outside or on the inside a formal system of faith safeguarded by the Church. This implies, therefore, that the message of the parable concerns just as much the older brother who stays home and how he, to use Hanne's words, “relate to the fact of being home.” If the older brother's relation to the father's home is viewed as settled and fine simply because he is on the inside, the core message of the parable, both Hanne and Karianne will contend, has not been captured.

### *The youngest son*

If I sum up the characteristics of the youngest son, we could easily get the impression that he manifests all of man's weaknesses. But, and as we will see in the following, he is not only associated with negative qualities.

#### Leaving home

About why the youngest son left, the parable says very little. All we get to know is his request to his father: “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me” (v. 12), and that he leaves after having sold everything. But in spite of this, what lies behind this request and his motivation for leaving seems to appear rather obvious to the teachers. The strong characteristic features they give the younger son illustrates further: He is “egoistic,” “selfish,” “immoral,” “immature,” “greedy,” “spoiled,” “following his lusts,” “a traitor and deserter.”<sup>128</sup> In interpersonal terms the youngest son represents, as Rita puts it, the one who “discarded the values his father had emphasized.”<sup>129</sup> And in a more religious terminology, he is the man who

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<sup>127</sup> Translated from “en tilstand, en tilværelse.”

<sup>128</sup> Translated from “egoistisk,” “umoralsk,” “umoden,” “grådig,” “bortskjemt,” “følger sine lyster,” “en forræder og desertør.”

<sup>129</sup> Translated from “kastet vrak på de verdien faren har vektlagt.”

abandons God and rejects everything he represents. In short, and as Elin puts it, he is “the sinner,” and that in the singular, and thus emphasize that the youngest son is *the* one who demonstrates the essence of man’s sinfulness.

But for some, the youngest son’s decision to leave home does not necessarily reflect only bad qualities. Elise indicates this when she says: “I like him!” And she likes him because

<i>He is a little more adventurous and tries out things. So I have an appreciation for the youngest (laughs), the one who liked to go his own way and not only on the beaten paths.</i>	<i>Han er litt mer utforskende og kaster seg utpå og prøver ut. Så jeg har en forståelse for den yngste (ler), den som ville gå sine egne veier og ikke bare langs opptråkkede stier.</i>
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Karianne pays attention to the youngest son, but then not only as a figure that it is easy to identify with, which I find to be Elise’s main point. Although commenting that the youngest son is “the funnier of the two and makes something out of life,”<sup>130</sup> and then laughing at it, and thus implying that this should not be taken too seriously, it actually points to a key element in Karianne’s understanding. In fact, the youngest son’s decision to leave home turns out to represent the very essence of it all. She writes:

<i>The youngest son risked his life, dared to burn all the bridges, he was strong enough to go for it all and lose it all, just because he has a fundamental understanding – unconsciously perhaps – of being loved. And when everything seems to fall apart, he becomes aware of this love.</i>	<i>Yngstesønnen våget livet, våget å brenne alle broer, han var sterk nok til å satse alt og tape alt, nettopp fordi han har en grunnleggende visshet om – ubevisst kanskje – av å være elsket. Og når alt tilsynelatende rakner, blir han bevisst denne kjærligheten.</i>
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She can therefore conclude:

<i>The youngest son is the most faithful, you might say, even though we would think that the oldest is the most faithful one if you talk about faithful/unfaithful here. But the youngest son demonstrates a basic trust. Otherwise he would not have thought that he could return. I feel that he did not doubt at all when he became aware of where he came from.</i>	<i>Den yngste er den mest troende, kan du si, selv om han utenfra sett ville nok tenkt at den eldste var den mest troende da, hvis man tenker på tro/ikke-troende her, så har han den grunnleggende tilliten. Ellers så hadde han ikke tenkt at han kunne vende tilbake. Jeg føler at han ikke tvilte i det hele tatt når han kom til å huske på hvor han kom fra.</i>
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<sup>130</sup> Translated from “den morsomste og som gjør noe ut av livet.”

This implies further that for Karianne, and as we saw in the category *Titles*, the parable is not so much about the prodigality of the youngest son but centers more on the qualities that made him leave and also return (see p. 115). And as a consequence of that, the parable is not limited to being merely about the youngest son, but just as much about the older brother and his relation to the father and his understanding of staying at home. Karianne, therefore, as we saw in Hanne's response regarding the father's home (see p. 125), expands the view considerably when trust and faith are being thematized as the main issues.

#### Life spent abroad

Verse 13 in the parable leaves little doubt about the character of the youngest son away from home: "there he squandered his property in dissolute living." In the oldest son's dispute with his father, the "dissolute living" is associated with buying sex: "who has devoured your property with prostitutes" (v. 30). And apparently, the teachers do not find it necessary to go into further details. Their images of what his life must have been like is being illuminated by terms and phrases such as "sex, drugs and rock'n roll," "glamor," "partying" and "promiscuity."<sup>131</sup> But I find a noticeable variation in the responses with regard to what role the youngest son's prodigality plays in the parable. More precisely, what are the implications of his spent life for the outcome of the story?

For some of the teachers, as for instance Elin and Rita, the character of his life spent abroad seems to be a key point. Clearly, it is a way of living that is in opposition to "God's will."<sup>132</sup> I find that Anne points to the same when she refers to the youngest son's prodigality as "a long and sinful life," which is characterized by "his having stuck to what God has said you should not do."<sup>133</sup> For others, and particularly so for Karianne and Hanne, the way the youngest son spent his life does not seem to be that important. Of course, they too will agree that the life abroad was immoral and destructive, and that it could eventually lead to his death. But the central issue is not that the youngest son was prodigal and that he lived a decadent and destructive life. This became apparent in the interview with Karianne:

*The youngest son may have done little or a lot of wrong things but that is not so important in this context and as to what it means to be prodigal. I'm*      *Den yngste kan ha gjort lite eller mye galt, det er ikke så viktig i denne sammenheng i det å være bortkommen. Jeg er så enkel at jeg tenker at Gud*

<sup>131</sup> Translated from "piker, vin og sang," "sus og dus," "festing" and "løssluppenhet."

<sup>132</sup> Translated from "Guds vilje."

<sup>133</sup> Translated from "et langt og syndefullt liv," "at du har holdt deg til det som Gud har på en måte sagt at du ikke skal gjøre."



*so simple that I think that God has a purpose for our lives, and he has sort of lost his way. He may well have lived a good life even though he has not lived very exemplary maybe, so you don't need to be so very sinful .... I am sure there are many who live a seemingly good life but who are on a completely different path than the one God wants us to go. That you in one way or another have lost that path. But that is not the essence, right. The main thing is that you return.*

*har en mening med livet vårt, og han har på en måte kommet bort i fra den. Han kan godt ha levd et godt liv han selv om han ikke har levd så veldig prektig kanskje, så du trenger ikke være så veldig syndefull .... Det er sikkert mange som lever et tilsynelatende godt liv som kan være på en helt annen vei enn den Gud vil vi skal gå, da. At du på en eller annen måte har kommet ut fra den veien. Og da er det ikke det som er det sentrale, ikke sant, men at du kommer tilbake igjen.*

Also Hanne makes the point of downgrading the immoral aspects of the life spent abroad, to the extent that they seem to have little or no relevance. When she compares the life of the two brothers, she remarks that “the one life is of no more value than the other.”<sup>134</sup>

This lack of attention as to the youngest son's prodigality, which I find in both Karianne and Hanne's responses, results in a lesser emphasis on ethical and moral issues than what I find is the case in Elin, Rita and Anne's responses. This will be further thematized when I now turn to the turnaround of the youngest son.

#### The turnaround

The turnaround of the youngest son is by the teachers perceived to be the turning point of the parable. The home-away-home structure of the parable, although this is not specifically referred to by any of the teachers, seems to bring their attention to this sequence of the parable (cf. Frye, 1982).

But what makes the youngest son turn around? I find that the teachers approach this in mainly two ways. First, the youngest son's turnaround is seen to spring from his examination of how he has spent his life. This indicates that the reason behind his turnaround is a growing awareness of his many wrongdoings. The physical strains he experiences as a pig-holder and the coming of the famine, though not representing the very reasons for his turnaround, is what finally leads him to this acknowledgement. The primary attention, therefore, is on his life spent abroad as being in discordance with the life he had at home with his father or with God. What is needed, therefore, is a conversion, that means first to repent the wrongdoings and then start a new life in accordance with “God's will” and the life as “godly,” which

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<sup>134</sup> Translated from “Gud's vilje,” “gudfryktig,” and “det ene livet er ikke mer verdsatt enn det andre.”

comprises, as Anne puts it, “to live by the rules God has given us to live a good life.”<sup>135</sup> In this perspective, therefore, the turnaround represents a turn-away from sinful conduct, from what Elin narrows down to the sin of “egoism.”

The second approach understands the turnaround and the repenting words in a different way. And again I find that Karianne and Hanne have common notions. Although both find the repenting words also to concern the way the youngest son lived his life away from home, as a way, as Hanne puts it, “of admitting everything,”<sup>136</sup> these words are more oriented towards his losing track of who he was and where he belonged. The way Karianne expresses her understanding of the words “But then he came to himself” (v. 17), illustrates in a good way what is at stake and what the repenting words of the youngest son entail: “I think he realized who he was, where he should go and where he was supposed to have lived his life.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, conversion and repentance is not so much a matter of right and wrong conduct, but a matter of relation, of faith and trust, what Hanne, as we have seen earlier, refers to as “a state of being” or “an existence” (see p. 126).

As one can see, the understanding of the turnaround follows the path laid out by the teachers’ understanding of the youngest son’s departure from home and his life spent abroad. This implies, therefore, that I recognize a rather strong consistency in the teachers’ arguments. As we will see, this consistency is largely being maintained also when we turn the attention towards the oldest son.

### *The oldest son*

The older brother seems to represent everything the youngest son is not. He is “loyal” and “hard-working” and personifies, in the words of Hanne, values such as “do your best, contribute, reap what you deserve and earn what you deserve.”<sup>138</sup> As we will see, these characteristics of the older brother largely explain his frustration and anger when his brother returns home. Most importantly, however, and in the words of Elise, the oldest son “stayed

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<sup>135</sup> Translated from “å leve etter de reglene Gud har gitt oss for å leve et godt liv.”

<sup>136</sup> Translated from “å legge seg helt flat.”

<sup>137</sup> Translated from “Jeg tenker han skjønte hvem han var, hvor han skulle, hvor han egentlig skulle ha levd livet sitt.”

<sup>138</sup> Translated from “lojal,” “hardtarbeidende,” and “yte, bidra og høste som fortjent, gjøre seg fortjent til.”

where he was supposed to be,<sup>139</sup> which means always in close proximity to “The Father’s House.”<sup>140</sup> But, and as we will see next, the image of staying home is not necessarily one of harmony and concord.

### Staying home

The image of home changes rather dramatically when the perspective shifts from the father to the older brother. Only three teachers; Elise, Anne, and Rita, will say that the older brother enjoys staying home with his father. Elise says that “he has been satisfied,” and Anne that “he has lived a safe life,”<sup>141</sup> while Rita puts the pleasantness in a religious context:

*He stays with his father.... It seems like he doesn't have any big religious conflicts or problems. It's okay.*      *Han blir hos far .... Det virker som om han ikke har noen store religiøse konflikter eller problemer. Det er liksom greit.*

The oldest brother’s image of the safe and pleasant life at home is altered only when his brother returns. Elise says:

*He has been happy about the situation until now .... He may have been a kind of servant, but at the same time he has had a safe and good life.*      *Han har vel vært fornøyd med situasjonen helt til nå .... Han har kanskje vært en tjenerskikkelse da, samtidig hatt det trygt og godt.*

But the phrase “safe life,” that things are “okay,” and his role is that of a “servant” all indicate that being home is not that attractive after all, that it is both dull and strenuous. Not surprisingly, it is Terje that goes furthest in labeling the home in negative terms. One thing is that he emphasizes the dullness in the oldest son’s life by saying that “we all have a dream to do something else. But some of us are like that when we just stay put.”<sup>142</sup> But when he goes on to describe the home from the older son’s perspective, he goes much further. In fact, home is a place where he is not recognized and valued at all, a place where he is “enslaved.” Terje explains:

*The oldest son is not acknowledged by his father. Because his father is never giving him any attention. He is only there, he is only inventory, he*      *Den eldste sønnen møter veldig liten forståelse hos sin far. Fordi hans far har ikke den eldste sønnen i fokus noen gang. Han er bare der, han er*

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<sup>139</sup> Translated from “ble der han var tenkt å være.”

<sup>140</sup> Translated from “Farshuset.”

<sup>141</sup> Translated from “han har vært fornøyd” and “han har levd et trygt og hverdagslig liv.”

<sup>142</sup> Translated from “alle har vi en drøm i oss om å gjøre noe annet. Men noen av oss er da sånn at vi blir ståendes i det.”

*is part of the household and has no saying in the running of the place.*

*inventar, han hører til husholdet, han har ingenting han skulle ha sagt.*

An interesting trait is that these negative images in many instances are combined with the perception of the father's home as an allegory of the Church. Rita talks about the oldest son as a man of faith and one who does the will of God. She writes clearly with reference to the allegory: "Some keep their childhood faith throughout life. Others do not live their lives according to God's will."<sup>143</sup> When I asked her to explain the term "childhood faith," she said: "he is baptized, he stays there with God, all his life. It's okay, in a way. That's what I called childhood faith."<sup>144</sup>

Anne articulates similar notions when I asked her to explain the term "godly," a designation she gives the oldest son:

*I imagine that he is the one who has stayed with his father, and clung to God .... You have been faithful to what God has said you should not do. And if you have understood that correctly, that should be a good life.*

*Jeg forestiller meg at han da er den som på et vis har holdt seg til faren sin, eller holdt seg til Gud .... Du har holdt deg til det som Gud har på en måte sagt at du ikke skal gjøre. Og har du forstått det riktig, så skal det være et godt liv.*

What becomes particularly noticeable in Anne's statement is that home in the older brother's perspective is associated with norms, rules, and duties, a place where "you have been faithful to what God has said you should not do." Rita indicates the same when she refers to home as a place of following or doing "God's will." And furthermore, in Elin's description of the two sons, I find that moral attitude becomes a key indicator of their dissimilarities:

*Yes, yes, the oldest son belongs to God. But he is perhaps the one that is slightly better than his brother who went on his trip. That there is a kind of essential difference, a class difference between the two; that he is a little better, because he has done it better. He did what his father said and did all his duties. He looks upon himself as better and more proper than the one who was far away*

*Ja, ja, den eldste sønnen tilhører jo Gud. Men han er jo kanskje den som er litt bedre enn den som dro på tur. At det er en slags vesensforskjell, klasseforskjell på de to, at han er da litt bedre, for han har gjort det bedre. Han gjorde jo det som faren sa og ble der han skulle og gjorde sine plikter. Jeg tenker mer sånn at han ser seg selv som noe bedre og mer ordentlig enn den som var*

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<sup>143</sup> Translated from "Noen blir i sin barnetro hele livet. Andre mennesker lever ikke sine liv etter Guds vilje."

<sup>144</sup> Translated from "at han er døpt, at han blir der, hos Gud, hele sitt liv. Det er greit, på en måte. Det kalte jeg 'barnetro'."

*somewhere and came home.*

*'ute på laust her' og kom hjem.*

Elin's statements bring me back to an issue which I commented on briefly in the category *Titles*. At the end of that chapter I pointed out that in some of the responses there seemed to be a correlation between, on the one hand, highlighting *The Prodigal Son* as a title and a strong emphasis on the youngest son's prodigality, and on the other hand, highlighting *The Son that Came Home* and its emphasis on his return and of being home (see p. 118). Now, in Anne, Rita, and Elin's understanding of the implications of staying home, illustrates what this correlation can have of moral implications. And contrariwise, that a focus on the homecoming downgrades, as in Hanne and Karianne's case, the issue of morality.

### Why angry?

Why does the older brother become angry when his younger brother returns? I find three ways of reasoning about this in the teachers' responses.

The first is related to what the brother says in the dispute with his father in v. 29-30:

"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

"Her har jeg tjent deg i alle år, og aldri har jeg gjort imot det du sa; men meg har du ikke gitt så mye som et kje så jeg kunne holde fest sammen med vennene mine. Men straks denne sønnen din kommer hjem, han som har brukt opp pengene dine sammen med skjøger, da slakter du gjøkalven for ham!"

This citation or extracts of it represent some of the most cited verses in the teachers' responses, which indicate that these words of the oldest brother explain it all. In other words, it is this particular situation with his father's decision to welcome his youngest son and to prepare the best feast which causes the deepest anger. As Terje expresses it, the reception and the celebration "contradicts with what is good ethical and moral conduct in the 'Gemeinschaft', the fact that we all are important to make a good living."<sup>145</sup> In this

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<sup>145</sup> Translated from "bryter med det som er god etisk og moralsk vandel i gemeinschaftsamfunnet, altså dette her at alle er viktige for at alle skal ha det bra." The term "gemeinschaftsamfunnet" is from the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who with the dichotomy "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft" tried to conceptualize the main difference between traditional and modern (late 1800) societies. "Gemeinschaft" refers to traditional societies where tight and emotional family relations are the building-blocks of the society, while "Gesellschaft" refers to the emergence and dominance of impersonal relations built on economic calculations in modern societies (Tönnies, 2012).

perspective, Terje continues, “I really understand his anger. Everyone would be mad.”<sup>146</sup> The older brother, then, becomes an advocate for the basic and most principal laws and norms in “the ‘Gemeinschaft’”; justice and equality.

The second reasoning relates to the imagery used about staying home as not all that pleasant and attractive after all. In this perspective, the return of the younger brother does not represent the cause but rather what eventually made the older brother speak up to his father and confront him with what he had felt all his life: that the father loved his brother more than him. Although using different means, now words and not the fists, Terje sees that the older brother echoes Cain’s reaction to his father’s greater love for Abel (Gen 4).

As the one who emphasizes the interpersonal relations and the family drama unfolded behind the scenes, it does not come as a surprise that Terje pinpoints the older brother’s long felt jealousy as the very cause of the anger. And neither does it come as a surprise that Karianne is the one that also on this question thinks otherwise, representing, then, the third way of understanding the older brother’s anger. Although she too points to the brother’s “jealousy” and “the father’s betrayal,”<sup>147</sup> her point of reference as to the God-man analogy, and to the fundamental ingredients of trust and faith in the relation between God and man, makes her think differently. She asks:

*Is there a fundamental distrust? Am I loved? Right? Am I, or do I live the way God wants me to live? There is a doubt because God has never said it straight to you: I see you, I love you, right, like he does to the other one. And then we become a little uncertain.*

*Er det litt sånn mistillit helt i bunnen? Er jeg elsket? Ikke sant. Er jeg, lever jeg slik Gud vil jeg skal leve? Altså den derre tvilen. Fordi Gud aldri har sagt tydelig til deg: Jeg ser deg, jeg elsker deg, ikke sant, som han gjør overfor den andre. Og at vi da på en måte blir litt usikre da.*

And I find that Hanne expresses similar notions when she moves away from man’s perspectives on justice, equality and jealousy, in order to say that “he is really only being challenged to trust the father.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Translated from “skjønner jeg godt at han er sint. For det ville alle ha vært.”

<sup>147</sup> Translated from “sjalusi” and “farens svik.”

<sup>148</sup> Translated from “han blir egentlig bare utfordret på å ... stole på far.”

When I now turn to the “response-inviting structures” of cutting techniques and negations, these differences in reasoning about the older brother’s entry on the scene will be further elaborated.

#### **4.2.6 Cutting techniques and negations**

The “response-inviting structure” of cutting techniques is a matter which I have touched upon several times already, and particularly so in the last chapter on *Characters*. As we saw a number of times, the transitions and quick shifts between staying home, leaving home, living abroad and the turnaround of the youngest son all created gaps that the teachers filled with pertinent explanations.

In this chapter, I will focus on two cutting techniques that I find play a major role in the teachers’ responses. The first refers to verse 24 and the words “And they began to celebrate,” which leads the reader to expect a happy ending. The second concerns the open ending of the parable, which leaves it up to the reader to wonder whether the oldest son will join the party or not. These two cutting techniques frame the last paragraph.

Furthermore, I will focus on how the teachers respond to the last paragraph. The entry of the older brother, his anger and the confrontation between him and the father outside the homecoming celebration all point out that a break is introduced, what Iser refers to as the “response-inviting structure” of negation. So what becomes apparent in many of the responses is that the framing of the last paragraph – the seemingly happy ending in verse 24 and the open ending in verse 32 – makes the negation stand out even more. In other words, the framing empowers the negation. Thus, in finding the role of the cutting techniques and the negation so closely linked, I found it convenient to treat them as one unit.

To illustrate this I will refer to Anne, who is the one who is most explicit about the particular role of the last paragraph. Up to this point in the parable, Anne will say that everything has been rather “plain and simple,” all culminating with the great homecoming celebration in verse 24. But with verse 25 and with the entry of the angry brother she says that “there is the

challenge in the text.”<sup>149</sup> And due to the open ending, “the challenge” addresses all readers. And as one of those readers, Anne answers it in her own way:

<i>I think many would have liked to see that this story was a bit longer, so we would get to hear more about how it all turned out. It would have been easier to deal with what the father did. But I think it is an important point that we don't get to know more, because forgiveness and justice cannot be measured. Forgiveness is given to someone who really does not deserve it, and it is not something you can claim.</i>	<i>Jeg tror mange hadde ønsket at denne historien var litt lengre, slik at vi fikk høre mer om hvordan det gikk. Da ville det vært lettere å forholde seg til om det virkelig kunne være riktig det faren gjorde, men jeg tror det er et viktig poeng at vi ikke får vite mer, for tilgivelse og rettferdighet kan ikke måles. Tilgivelsen gis uten at den som får den egentlig fortjener den eller kan gjøre krav på den.</i>
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I find that Anne’s reflection represents one of four ways the teachers grapple with the cutting techniques and the negation of the last paragraph. The basic feature in her approach is that the oldest son displays, as she writes, “a very human reaction.”<sup>150</sup> She explains:

<i>It does not seem fair that the brother who first lived a life in clover and who was not able to take care of the heritage, should be the cause of such a fuss, while the older son who has struggled and worked on the farm never got such attention. This may not be fair, one might think, because fairness is about equal treatment and equal share.</i>	<i>Det oppleves ikke rettferdig at broren som først har levd et liv i sus og dus og så ikke har klart å ta vare på arven sin, skal bli gjort slik stas på, når den eldste sønnen som har slitt og strevd på gården aldri har fått slik oppmerksomhet. Dette kan ikke være rettferdig, vil man kanskje tenke, for det er ofte slik at man tenker, at skal det være rettferdig, så skal det være likt og alle skal få like mye.</i>
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So what the older brother needs, according to Anne, is to be enlightened with another meaning of justice, which also incorporates the element of forgiveness. Anne writes:

<i>In many cases, however, it would be completely wrong and unfair if everyone got the same. In this case wrong because his father would have had to send away his beloved son, and unfair because all people are different and have different abilities and needs. This last part challenges us, therefore,</i>	<i>Det vil i mange tilfeller likevel bli helt galt og urettferdig hvis alle fikk likt eller like mye. I dette tilfelle galt fordi faren måtte ha sendt fra seg sin kjære sønn, og urettferdig fordi vi mennesker er forskjellige og har forskjellige forutsetninger og behov. Denne siste delen utfordrer oss på begrepet</i>
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<sup>149</sup> Translated from “kommer utfordringen i teksten.”

<sup>150</sup> Translated from “en helt menneskelig og naturlig reaksjon.”



both regarding the concept of justice and being overbearing. rettferdighet og det å klare å være storsinnet.

Thus, the nature of the challenge given, as I read Anne, is primarily ethical. I find this to be consistent with her overall reading of the parable.

To describe the second approach, I will turn to the responses of Rita, Marie and Elin. We can get a first sense of how they deal with the cutting techniques and the negation in the way they speak of the older brother in a rather unflattering way. Rita, by commenting that “he should understand,”<sup>151</sup> sees ignorance in the anger, while Marie sees him as misbehaving and confronts him by saying that “it is natural to be happy when he returns.”<sup>152</sup> The following extract of my dialogue with Elin reflects a similar antipathy for the older brother:

What do you think of the oldest son? What image do you have of him?	Hva tenker du om den eldste? Hva slags bilde har du av han?
<i>He is not very happy about his brother's homecoming. He shows no ability to take part in the delight. For me personally, I think someone should have told him to be happy.</i>	<i>Han er jo veldig lite glad når broren kommer hjem, da. Han har ingen evne til å glede seg over det. For meg personlig, så tenker jeg at noen burde fortalt han at han også burde vært glad.</i>
(both laughing)	(begge ler)
<i>And if there is someone you should be mad at, I think it is the oldest one.</i>	<i>At hvis det er noen du skal være sur på der, så tenker jeg at det er han eldste.</i>

And why should the older brother understand, be happy and act better? Because he is “a Christian,” “a baptized,” “a believer.” So the bottom line here is that the older brother’s reaction does not fit the Christian allegory. Rita expresses this very explicitly in the following statement:

<i>Because we (i.e. Christians) do not envy or become jealous of those who have lived a dissolute life and then become Christians. We do not become jealous of them ... we're glad for those who are coming back to The Father's House from whatever former life they have lived, alive.</i>	<i>For vi (les: kristne) misunner jo ikke eller blir ikke sjalu på de som har levd et utsvevende liv og blir kristne, vi blir jo ikke sjalu på dem ... vi er jo glad for de som kommer tilbake til Farshuset uansett, i livet, og uansett hvilket tidligere liv de har levd.</i>
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<sup>151</sup> Translated from “han bør forstå.”

<sup>152</sup> Translated from “når han kom tilbake så er det naturlig å være glad.”

How, then, does Rita, Marie and Elin deal with the improper reaction of the older brother? Rita admits that the older brother represents a major problem. In her attempt to maintain the image of the older brother as “baptized, that he stays there, with God throughout his life” and thus should be “happy for those who are coming back to The Father’s House,” she acknowledges: “But I realize that the image cracks a little when he gets so angry at the one that is forgiven.”<sup>153</sup> But she does not dwell any further on “that the image cracks.” The Christian allegory stands too firmly rooted for that to occur.

I find that Marie and Elin have a different approach. Recollecting from the category *Title*, none of them found the final paragraph to be of any significance. When I challenged Marie to reflect on the older brother, a character she does not mention at all in the text of reflection, she admits: “I have not thought so much about that.” Thus for Marie, by focusing entirely on the younger brother, the parable practically ends in verse 24 with the words “And they began to celebrate.” The last paragraph does not alter anything – the party goes on. Consequently there is neither a negation nor an open ending to discuss. This becomes even more apparent when she dismantles the whole conflict between the father and the older brother by saying: “I don’t think there is any major conflict between the father and the older brother. No, I don’t think that.”<sup>154</sup>

I find that Elin reasons in a similar way when she reflects on the open ending of the parable:

<p><i>I reckon he will do what the father says, though it doesn't say so. There is, after all, a party and there is joy, so I reason that if there had been any more troubles the story would have told about it.</i></p>	<p><i>Han retter seg jo etter faren, regner jeg med, selv om det kanskje ikke står det. Det blir jo fest og det blir glede, så da regner jeg med at hadde det vært noe mer krøll så hadde det stått noe mer om den eldste sønnen.</i></p>
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Nor for Elin is there really any open ending.

Thus, what we see in Rita, Marie and in Elin’s responses is that the negation and the open ending, though they are recognized to some extent, do not have any decisive effect on their responses. In fact, and most definitely so in Marie’s case, if the radical step of erasing the whole paragraph had been taken, this would not have had any effect on the response at all.

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<sup>153</sup> Translated from “døpt, at han blir der, hos Gud, hele sitt liv,” “glad for de som kommer tilbake til Farshuset uansett,” and “Men jeg ser jo kanskje at bildet sprekker når han blir så sint på han andre som blir tilgitt.”

<sup>154</sup> Translated from “Jeg synes ikke det er noen stor konflikt mellom faren og den eldste. Nei, det synes jeg ikke.”

The third approach is represented by Karianne and Hanne, which is characterized by their not viewing the last paragraph primarily in a believer – non-believer perspective and thus not as a Christian allegory. Instead of regarding the two brothers as counterparts, they represent two stories of faith and doubt. Karianne writes that they can be viewed as “two different types of people,” or as “two different traits in each of us.”<sup>155</sup> Concerning the latter, she explains:

<p>The one part is the trusting part in us, the one who knows he is being loved – no matter what – and the other is the part in us which doubts in ourselves, and if we are truly loved as those we are; are we good enough?</p>	<p>Den ene er den tillitsfulle delen av oss, den som vet seg elsket – uansett – og den andre er den delen av oss som tviler på oss selv og på det å være virkelig elsket som den vi er; er vi gode nok?</p>
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Though Karianne brings in the Christian allegory, it is this more general characteristic residing in all human beings which constitutes her understanding. That implies, unlike Rita above, that Karianne has no trouble identifying the older brother as “Christian.” This can be seen in the questions she raises in the text of reflection:

<p>I am left with a question: Is it easier to believe for one who comes to a sudden and distinct conversion than for the one who always wanders near God? Is this why holy people in periods have such so strong temptations and feel so full of sin and god-forsakenness?</p>	<p>Jeg sitter igjen med et spørsmål: Er det lettere å tro for den som kommer til en brå og tydelig omvendelse enn for den som alltid vandrer nær Gud? Er det derfor hellige mennesker i perioder har så store anfektelser og kan føle seg så fulle av synd og gudsforlatthet?</p>
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This implies further that the challenge given in the last paragraph is not ethical. It is rather a challenge to seek the truth about who we are, and to have faith in that we are “truly loved for who we are,”<sup>156</sup> as Karianne phrases it.

Karianne’s understanding corresponds to Hanne’s understanding, who emphasizes that it is not what the two brothers have done that has set them apart, but more profoundly, how they “relate to the fact of being home.” So the key word Hanne draws from the negation is also “trust,” that the older brother is being challenged to

<p><i>have faith, dare to trust that he is a big part of the community and that he has his position there.</i></p>	<p><i>å ha tillit, tørre å stole på at han er en stor del av det fellesskapet og at han har sin posisjon der</i></p>
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<sup>155</sup> Translated from “to ulike mennesketyper,” “to ulike trekk ved hver av oss.”

<sup>156</sup> Translated from “virkelig elsket som den vi er.”

*(pause)*

*He is really only being challenged to trust the father.*

*(pause).*

*Han blir egentlig bare utfordret på å stole på far.*

The fourth and final approach is represented by Terje, and him alone. In recalling Terje's reading of the parable from the chapter on *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* (see p. 101), he finds that true human emotions are finally being expressed when the angry older brother enters the scene. The otherworldly and glorified scenes that culminate in the homecoming feast, though important enough, are put aside. Instead focus is put on what actually happens in real life when, as Terje puts it, "the one who has lived Lord's happy days" and "lost everything"<sup>157</sup> comes home and meets his opposite, his "loyal" but also "enslaved" older brother. And further, what happens "when the party is over" and we can ask: "What happened to them? What happened to these two brothers? How did their lives turn out?" Thus, the negation and the open ending of the parable trigger the questions Terje finds particularly interesting. And from the questions asked we can see that they are not only concerned with the immediate moment of choice when the older brother has to decide whether he will join the party or not. Rather, Terje looks way further beyond to a tale about a family where the future does not look too bright for the youngest son whose fate is sealed, according to Terje, by his father's "What did I tell you?" and by his older brother's supremacy. He foresees: "The youngest son will become the oldest son's slave because he does not have his brother's respect."<sup>158</sup> This, as I have commented earlier, raises some important questions concerning Terje's reading of a parable (p. xx).

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<sup>157</sup> Translated from "den som har levd Herrens glade dager" and "svidd av alt."

<sup>158</sup> Translated from "Den yngste sønnen vil nå bli den eldste sønnens slave for han har ingen respekt for sin egen bror lenger."

### 4.2.7 Summary

To make the data more manageable for further analysis and discussions, I will present a table of the main findings and on that basis come up with certain classifications, what I will refer to as typologies. To generate typologies can be a matter of “describing groups of respondents displaying different clusters.”<sup>159</sup> Clustering, however, is not necessarily a criterion. For instance, and in this particular material, one typology is the one teacher who stands out in the material, the one who often is referred to as an exception. Terje is the obvious exception in the material, but I also find that Peter needs a typology in his own right. The other typologies consist of two or more teachers who I find to respond in similar ways and share essential traits. These clustering responses reflect, then, on the “level of the typology,” both “internal homogeneity” and also “external heterogeneity,” that is, essential attributes and characteristics that essentially unite and also essentially separates them from the other typologies (Kluge, 2000).

Of course, to typify is to simplify. Clearly, it is impossible to draw a clear-cut picture and it is necessary, both, to point to the diversity within the clustering typologies due to the uniqueness of each RE teacher, and also to the inconsistent elements in the single-informant typologies. For instance, take the responses of Karianne and Hanne, which I find to be remarkably dissimilar both in form and ways of expression. Despite this, and what was most decisive concerning the criteria of “internal” and “external homogeneity”; the two responses resemble each other considerably in the way the different categories constitute meaning. This illustrates, and what fits a “meaning analysis” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 182), that it is content that constitutes the typologies, not formative features of discourse.

That it is possible to classify and suggest typologies implies that there is a prominent consistency in the RE teachers’ responses. Of course, I can come up with several examples that contradict this finding and say with Rosenblatt that “we have to agree that [nine] different poems have indeed been developed from the same text” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 114). And so I will, but the overall picture of consistency and “internal” and “external homogeneity” remains (Kluge, 2000), that the way one category constitutes itself in one typology naturally leads to the next, appearing then as patterns and themes that run throughout the material and thus make up a typology.

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<sup>159</sup> Definition from the *The Association for Qualitative Research: The hub of qualitative thinking* (2012).

In the material gathered from the nine RE teachers, I have come up with four typologies. Only two or three would mean that we then would leave out main findings and thus come out with an oversimplified analysis. On the other hand I could have applied several more to describe more fully the richness and the nuances of the material. However, the four typologies are based on a level of classification which suits the ambition to disclose the characteristic structures I find in the nine RE teacher responses by means of Iser's theory and the specific "response-inviting" categories selected.

The table on the next page shows what I find is the extract of the nine RE teachers' responses with regard to *The Prodigal Son*'s "response-inviting structure" (same color, same typology):

Table: The “response-inviting structures” of *The Prodigal Son*

Category/ Teacher	Analogy/Illustration/ Allegory	Literary contexts	Titles	Narrators	Characters Father, Youngest, Oldest	Cutting techniques and negations
<b>Rita</b>	Analogy the essence	Luke 15: Stands out vs. socio-ethic of Luk. Bible: GT vs. NT Key text of the Bible	<i>The Son that Came Home</i> Did not remain prodigal	Jesus as narrator Luke as author merges with Jesus as narrator	F: God/father/Church Y: apostate/sinner, immorality O: Christian, godly	Improper reaction of Christians, “image cracks” God’s love for both. The older brother must learn
<b>Hanne</b>	Analogy the essence Only illustr: “flat”	Bible: GT vs. NT Key text of the Bible (not further developed)	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> (not further developed)	Jesus as narrator Purpose: analogy	F: God, home as “a condition,” Church Y: sinner O: Christian, sinner, doubt	Another story about God-man, faith and trust
<b>Karianne</b>	Analogy vs. Illustr. Illustr. only between the two brothers	Luke 15: Stands out vs socio-ethic of Luk. Pharisees and scribes, the fatted calf, GT = NT	Prefers <i>The Son that Came Home</i> : Did not remain prodigal. Open for new translations	Jesus: God’s word, a revelation of God Luk as author merges with Jesus as narr.	F: God, home, Church Y: daring, sinner but faithful O: Christian, never revolts but sinner with doubt	Another story about God-man, faith and trust
<b>Anne</b>	Analogy the essence	Key text in the Bible (not further developed)	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> (not further developed)	Jesus as narrator (not further developed)	F: God/father/Church Y: apostate/sinner, immoral O: Christian, a good life	“the real challenge”: justice and forgiveness, what the oldest needs to learn
<b>Elise</b>	Analogy the essence	Bible: GT vs. NT Key text of the Bible Luke 15: Pharisees as addressees (“Jews”)	<i>The Son that Came Home</i> Did not remain prodigal	Jesus: “explain who God is and God’s kingdom” Luk as author merges with Jesus as narrator	F: God/father/Church Y: apostate/sinner, adventurer (“like him”) O: Christian, hard but good life, where he should be.	“human reaction” God’s love for both, must learn and understand
<b>Marie</b>	Analogy the essence Illustr: “da-ba-da”	Bible: GT vs. NT Key text of the Bible	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> makes it all unmistakably clear	Jesus: “explain God and God’s kingdom”	F: God/father Y: apostate/sinner O: Christian	“human reaction,” “should be happy,” “no conflict”
<b>Peter</b>	Illustration only	General references to the message and life of Jesus	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> (not further developed)	Jesus: counselor and ethical ideal	F: home, Church for all Y: done wrong, sets the premises for his return O: learn from the father	“human reaction” Ethical challenge for all: forgive like the father
<b>Elin</b>	Analogy the essence	Luke 15	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> makes it all unmistakably clear	Jesus: “what Jesus means,” merges with Luke as author	F: God/Church Y: apostate/sinner Oldest: Christian	“human reaction” “should know better”: needs to learn the father’s way
<b>Terje</b>	Aware of anal/illust More “interesting”: the “psychological drama”	Luke 15: “no one can be lost.” Bible: <i>Kain and Abel, Abraham, The Law</i>	<i>The Prodigal Son</i> (not further developed)	“This is being told for a reason”: to show God’s grace (not further developed)	F: God, exceptionally good vs. reality (motives) Y: “what did it cost?” O: true emotions	Triggers and gives direction True emotions vs. ideals Continuation: “what happened to these two boys?”

### *Typology 1 (Terje)*

Throughout the analysis, Terje's utterances have been presented as distinctly different from those of the others. It is the following categories which illuminate the unique features of his response: 1) *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* 2) *Literary contexts* 3) *Characters* and 4) *Cutting techniques and negations*.

First, though Terje is clearly aware of the analogous and illustrative structures of *The Prodigal Son*, neither of them plays a dominant role in his response. Indeed, whenever the notions of God and the transcendent come up, it is placed in "the inhuman sphere"<sup>160</sup> and viewed as something incomprehensible for those outside a community of faith, while the ethical ideals are viewed as unattainable. Instead Terje's attention is drawn towards the underlying conflicts and intrigues in "what is not being told," "what we don't get to know," and in "what is being concealed."<sup>161</sup> Though this could indicate that Terje is triggered by the allegorical structures in the *Mashal* sense, the exclusive focus on the interpersonal conflicts and intrigues rather points in another direction. In fact, I find Terje to read the parable as a family drama, raising questions of psychological character that would equally fit, say, a response to Henrik Ibsen's dramas.

Second, Terje refers to the parallel stories in Luke 15 and pins it all down to that "no one can be lost." This common theme in the immediate context of *The Prodigal Son* is by Terje mainly viewed in a relational human perspective. This is also the case when he broadens the perspective and brings in the story of *Cain and Abel* and *Abraham*, to underline that jealousy, fatherly love, and "faith in ... neighboring love" are major themes that run throughout the Bible. Thus, also the literary context viewed both narrowly and widely, guides Terje's interpretation in a strictly immanent direction.

Third, Terje unfolds the family drama when he reflects on the relations between the characters of the parable. And clearly, it is the way he sees the characters play out the underlying conflicts and intrigues of the drama which largely define and structure the response.

Illustratively, what Terje finds "quite interesting," is to question the motives of the father's unconditional forgiveness. He asks: "Is it unconditional?" According to Terje, ideally and as it also appears, the answer to the question is yes, but in reality, the answer must be no. Though

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<sup>160</sup> Translated from "den umenneskelige sfære."

<sup>161</sup> Translated from "det som ikke blir fortalt," "det vi ikke får vite noe om," and "det som er skjult."



the father is “exceptionally good” and represents ideals we should all strive for, Terje will contend that in real life the father stands out as the ultimate “winner,” the one “basking in the sun” at the homecoming party.

Fourth, the cutting techniques and the negations obviously trigger and give direction to Terje’s approach. Finally, the glorified façade cracks and credible human emotions erupt. It is the negation in the confrontational words of the oldest son that gives Terje the obvious reasons to question the father’s motives. And further, the open ending leaves him free to see way beyond the parable and ask: “What happened to them? What happened to these two brothers? How did their lives turn out?” With regard to the youngest son’s fate, he concludes: “He was never released,” neither from the father’s “What did I tell you?” nor from his older brother’s supremacy and “enslavement.” As all good drama which interrupts with negations and cutting techniques, *The Prodigal Son* leaves us pondering existential questions and invites the reader to create probable continuations.

Finally, a comment on what Terje leaves out. In addition to dismissing the analogous structures referred to above, I will mention two other omissions. The first one is what he shares with all the teachers: the omission of historical context and thereby historical-critical reasoning. The second is the omission of narrator. Despite identifying a specific reason for Jesus as the historical narrator to tell the parable; “to show God’s grace,”<sup>162</sup> this is not further developed. These two omissions, both with historical implications, are, as I see it, natural consequences of his bent toward a psychological and immanent reading.

### *Typology 2 (Peter)*

Peter is the other teacher who represents his own typology, but this for quite other reasons than those of Terje. I will sum up the specific features of Peter’s response with reference to the categories 1) *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* 2) *Narrators* and 3) *Characters*.

First, Peter response is driven by an exclusively illustrative reading of the parable. Reading it as such, the message too appears “very clear,” summed up as “forgiveness, neighboring love, generosity and refraining from judging.” And although Peter during the interview discovers the father’s house-Church analogy, the illustrative and the ethical message remains in focus, as he considers the Church’s mission to be the keeper and practitioner of the Christian values.

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<sup>162</sup> Translated from “å vise Guds nåde.”

Second, the purpose of telling parables is rather obvious given an illustrative reading: to trigger “self-reflection” and “thinking-processes in relation to what is right, what is wrong.” This particular intention of having Jesus as the historical narrator, which then represents the only glimpse of historical reasoning in Peter’s response, contributes to further underpinning the value-oriented perception of the parable.

Third, the youngest son and the father stand out as the key characters of the parable in Peter’s response. It is the way their relation goes from brokenness to healing which is highlighted. The key lesson to be learnt from these characters is, as Peter puts it, that “there is room for all ... no matter what,” and most significantly, it is the prodigal and the lost who generally sets the premises; you can return “when you are ready for it.” In other words, “It is not the receiving part who decides if there is room for you.” This is, according to Peter, the core essence of the unconditional forgiveness demonstrated in the father’s overwhelming reception.

Finally, in addition to omitting the analogy and the historical context of the parable, Peter pays little attention to the older brother. His entrance is regarded by Peter to underscore the essential message of the parable; that he too should forgive unconditionally, be happy and join the party. This implies that everything of importance has been said prior to the final paragraph and the entry of the older brother. Consequently, neither cutting techniques nor negations as “response-inviting structures” play a central role in his response.

### *Typology 3 (Hanne and Karianne)*

As expressed in the introduction to the summary, Karianne and Hanne look quite dissimilar and diverge considerably with regard to certain categories. For instance, in the category of *Literary contexts* I find that Karianne primarily sees a continuation between the OT and the NT, while Hanne sees all but a schism between the “harsh” and “punishing” God of the OT and the “generous” and “forgiving” God of the NT. Despite this, I will argue that there are fundamental and pervasive similarities between them when I look into how 1) *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* 2) *Characters* and 3) *Cutting techniques and negations* constitute themselves in their responses.

First, both Hanne and Karianne are very clear about that the parable is an analogy, a story about God and man. While Karianne doubts whether there is any other relevant reading by

polemically asking: “Is there any other way to understand this parable?”, Hanne labels a mainly illustrative reading as “flat,” and as not coming to grips with the essence of things.

Second, the feature which makes this typology stand out is the way Karianne and Hanne put equal emphasis on the two brothers. This is based on the perception that both have a common point of reference: the father and the father’s home. Karianne expands considerably on this by also reflecting on the title *The Son that Came Home*, which according to her highlights that “‘home’ is most important. Home is with God, in God. That is where we are going, that is where we return, and that is where we are expected.” Hanne does not refer to the different titles but she undoubtedly shares Karianne’s notion when she says: “Ultimately it’s about how we get home, how we are at home, how we relate to the fact of being home.” How “we,” then, “relate to the fact of being home,” is relevant for both the brothers because things may not be as they seem. The one who lives closest to the father may be furthest away, while the one appearing to be lost and gone may be closest to the state “of being home.” Hence, the relation to God is not based on visible markers of affiliation, on where you physically live your life. Nor is it based on conduct. Rather, as Hanne expresses it, to be home is “a state of being, an existence,” a matter of “trusting the father.” Thus, the third category, the negation and the cutting techniques of the last paragraph, serves to highlight the essence of the story and to make the God-man analogy relevant for all readers, that is, to challenge all readers to respond and place themselves somewhere on the continuum between the two brothers; with faith or disbelief, trust or mistrust.

#### *Typology 4 (Marie, Elin, Rita, Elise and Anne)*

To gather five teachers in one typology obviously is a most challenging task. And it is certainly necessary to nuance the picture and unveil the individual features of the five teachers who make up this typology. This, however, does not overshadow what I find to be the bearing ideas that constitute this typology, which I will illuminate with the following categories: 1) *Analogy/Illustration/Allegory* 2) *Title* 3) *Characters* 4) *Cutting techniques and negations*.

First, all these five teachers emphasize the father-God analogy. Though they all recognize the value of an illustrative reading, they all underline that the analogy represents the essence of the story. To ignore that as the guideline and then only focus on interpersonal relations and

ethics would reduce the parable to a “flat” narrative, even dull and futile, as “da-ba-da-ba-da,” as Marie expressively puts it.

More central, however, are the allegorical structures of the parable, that is, the father’s home as an allegory of the Church and the portrayal of the dichotomy between the homebound Christian and the prodigal non-Christian. These allegorical structures, which they all argue are present in the text, make up a powerful interpretive framework in this typology.

Second, some of the teachers in this typology, such as Rita and Elise, reflect on the different titles of the parable and conclude that they prefer the newly translated Norwegian version, *The Son that Came Home*. They point to the term “home” as essential in order to underscore that the youngest son returned home and had a limited time as lost and prodigal. This does not seem to suggest, however, as became noticeable in Karianne’s reflection on different titles in typology 3, a lesser emphasis on the importance of prodigality as a major theme and a greater emphasis on both brothers’ relation to the father and his home. Rather, in Rita and Elise’s responses the youngest son remains at the center of attention, and so do the implications of his prodigality. And this they share with Anne and most apparently with Elin and Marie, the latter two indicating that *The Prodigal Son* as a title logically leads to such a focus. Thus, although title as a “response-inviting structure” obviously is conceived in very dissimilar ways in this typology, I find that the teachers fundamentally share what the title *The Prodigal Son* encapsulates and also guides towards: an emphasis on the one son and his prodigality.

Third, the role of the characters follows logically from what has so far been said. Clearly it is the fate of the youngest son which attracts their attention. The analogy is clear: Man leaves God and by that demonstrates his and her sinfulness, what Elise and Elin pin down as “egoism” and “pleasure.” Although Elise states that “I like him!” and characterizing the youngest son as “adventurous” and “the one who liked to go his own way and not only on the beaten paths,” I find this to be subordinate. The prevailing image of the youngest son in this typology is that he is lost, as he is being singled out as the “sinner,” and thus he is the one who is need of a turnaround. With this image the older brother becomes his younger brother’s counterpart, more precisely, as an ethical and moral opposite.

By applying the father’s house-Church allegory, the dichotomy view between the two brothers is developed further, now within the context of the faith community. The young “apostate” outsider is being contrasted with the older “Christian” and “baptized” insider.

Regarded as the one who has maintained his “childhood faith,” the older brother is, as Rita perceives him, the one who “stays with his father... It seems like he doesn’t have any big religious conflicts or problems. It’s okay.” This implies further that the older brother has lived a life according to “the will of God,” or a “godly life,” as Anne puts it, which means that you have “stuck to what God has said you should not do.” Although the older brother reveals, as they all remark, “man’s natural reaction” of anger and jealousy, he is by and large regarded as the one who is “living a pure life,”<sup>163</sup> as Marie puts it. To live with the father and to be with God and also within the Church has therefore strong ethical and moral implications. Clearly, in this typology, the way one lives one’s life is understood to be a key marker for distinguishing between people outside and inside the father’s house as a community of faith.

Fourth, the range of how the cutting techniques and the negation affect the responses of this typology seems quite large. It spans from Marie who does not write about the oldest son and the final paragraph, admitting that “I have not thought so much about that,” and to Anne, who writes that with the entry of the older brother, “there is the challenge in the text.” However, I will argue that in both cases it is the young brother and the theme that emerges from his turnaround and encounter with his father which determines the course of interpretation. To clarify, “the challenge” that is given to the older brother and ultimately all readers, as Anne perceives it, is to learn from the example of the father’s all-embracing reception, and thus to acquire an understanding of justice which incorporates the element of unconditional forgiveness.

This implies, then, that the role of the last paragraph in the parable is to underscore what has already been said, as was the case in the ethical approach of typology 2. Thus, nor in this typology is the last paragraph indispensable. This is clearly the case in Marie’s response, who in addition to not taking notice of the paragraph, ends up dismantling the conflict between the older brother and the father by saying that “I don’t think there is any major conflict between the father and the older brother.” Although Rita admits that “the image cracks a little,” and that it is a puzzle that the older brother, perceived as a “Christian,” reacts the way he does, this does not for her pull to pieces the bearing and the all too obvious allegory. He “should,” as Rita, Elin and Marie phrase it, “know better,” “understand,” and also, “be happy.” In other words, the older brother should do what is expected from him as a “Christian”: embrace his brother and join the party. But whether the older brother joined or not is really not that

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<sup>163</sup> Translated from “holde sin sti ren.”

important for the teachers of this typology. As they all agree, this is after all not a story about him. It is therefore a lack of interest in the last paragraph and an omission of the cutting techniques and the negation which characterize this typology.

### 4.3 Part II: The role of the RE teachers' "interpretive strategies" in the responses

The table below shows the categories that I find make up the "interpretive strategies" of the RE teachers, and which affect and constitute their responses in decisive ways:

Concepts of Christianity	Background and experiences	Concepts of RE
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In addition to the general remarks presented in the beginning of Part I (see p. 100), I will comment briefly on two issues that relate specifically to readers' strategies and the three categories selected.

First, the plural form in "interpretive strategies" implies that each teacher applies multiple strategies. In one respect this is true, and the three categories above also indicate that the teachers have a multifaceted approach to *The Prodigal Son*. But it is also true, as will be shown in the following descriptions, that the strategies are interwoven to the extent that they make up a coherent approach, in other words one consistent "interpretive strategy." Although there certainly are examples of inconsistencies, and hence what can be characterized as diverging strategies, what I find most prominent is that *Concepts of Christianity*, the teachers' *Background and experiences*, and *Concepts of RE* together make for a consistent and logic argumentation.

Secondly, I could have chosen more finely meshed categories, for instance divided *Concepts of Christianity* into sub-categories such as *Concepts of God*, *Concepts of Jesus*, *Concepts of the Bible*, *Concepts of forgiveness*, *Concepts of salvation*, etc. And in the course of the analysis I will refer to several of these to describe in more detail how different aspects of Christianity constitute itself in the responses. Yet, I decided on an overall term to underscore what I find is a powerful unified concept of Christianity in the responses. The same applies for the last category, *Concepts of RE*, a category with sub-categories such as the teachers' references to their own teaching and also more formal discussions concerning for instance the RE teacher role and the national curriculum.

### 4.3.1 Concepts of Christianity

As I pointed out in the chapter on *Literary contexts* in Part I, *The Prodigal Son* is by all the teachers perceived to be a key text in the Bible (see p. 108). Logically, it is also understood to be a key narrative in Christianity. Peter articulates this when he utters that *The Prodigal Son* encapsulates “the essence of Christianity,”<sup>164</sup> and Elise when she underlines that it conveys “the trademark of Christianity.”<sup>165</sup> These statements seem to point in one direction and on one authoritative understanding of Christianity, and that all the teachers, to use Fish’s term, belong to a powerful Christian “interpretive community.” And to some extent, a broad consensus is reflected in the material. But after a more detailed look, the teachers, as will be apparent throughout this chapter, bring forth rather contrasted concepts of Christianity in their responses.

There seems to be a broad consensus that the father and the youngest son in the parable encapsulate the basic images of God and the God-man relation. More precisely, the parable illustrates man’s sinfulness and need of repentance and conversion, and God’s love and unconditional forgiveness. Perceived as such, *The Prodigal Son* is the classical story of Christian conversion, as the following statements of Elin and Elise illustrate:

Elin: I want to focus on the concepts of **sins**, **forgiveness** and **the love of God** in connection with this text. Tell that Luke is concerned about the fact that sinners can return to God by repenting (bold in original).

Elin: Jeg ønsker å fokusere på begrepene **synder**, **tilgivelse** og **Guds kjærlighet** i forbindelse med denne teksten. Fortelle at Lukas er opptatt av at syndere kan vende tilbake til Gud ved å omvende seg (fet skrift i original).

Elise: This is how God is according to a Christian understanding, a good father, and in this way he welcomes those who come back. God is love, and he forgives the one who “repents.”

Elise: Slik er Gud i kristen forståelse, som en god far, og slik tar han imot de som kommer tilbake. Gud er kjærlighet, og han tilgir den som “vender om.”

It is the father’s reception of the youngest son which leaves no doubt about the unconditional nature of God’s love and forgiveness. This is clearly articulated by Hanne and Terje:

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<sup>164</sup> Translated from “det essensielle i kristendommen.”

<sup>165</sup> Translated from “selve varemerket til kristendommen.”



Hanne: *There are no conditions here. He is not checking out anything or trying to find out what he has done (...) the forgiveness is truly unconditional.*

Hanne: *Det er jo ikke noe forbehold her. Han skal jo ikke sjekke ut noe, eller finne ut hva han har gjort først (...) det er egentlig en uforbeholden tilgivelse i det.*

Terje: *Yes, unconditional love and grace and forgiveness and all that is shown.*

Terje: *Ja, det vises uforbeholden kjærighet og nåde og tilgivelse og alt som er.*

And to make this unmistakably clear, the teachers confirm that the humbleness of the youngest son in the encounter with his father represents no precondition for the overwhelming reception. As Hanne says, “He is not checking out anything.” Although Marie says that “the meeting wouldn’t be so good”<sup>166</sup> if there had been no remorse or regret, this would not have affected the father’s attitude. Karianne says the same in the following sequence:

*The father is standing there and welcomes his son and makes no demands, no questions, no sign of rejection. Yes. So I think that it shows God's amazing overbearing love for us.*

*That is the key, not the way the son came home? No, I do not think that is so important, but the fact that he came home is important. But the most important thing is that God welcomes. And I think that his son had understood that, although he did not express it, but unconsciously he has always thought that he could go home.*

*So that he comes home humble, that is not a precondition for the welcome?*

*No.*

*Far står der og tar i mot sønnen og stiller ikke noen krav, noen spørsmål, ikke noen antydning til avvising. Ja. Så jeg tenker at det viser Guds utrolige overbærende kjærighet til oss.*

*Det er det sentrale, og ikke måten sønnen kom hjem på?*

*Nei, jeg tenker ikke at det er så viktig, men at han kom hjem er viktig. Men det viktigste er jo at Gud tar i mot. Og jeg tror at sønnen hadde skjønt det, selv om han ikke har formulert det, men sånn helt ubevisst så tenker han at han alltid kunne gå hjem.*

*Så at han kommer hjem ydmyk, det er ikke noe forutsetning for at han blir tatt i mot?*

*Nei.*

For some of the teachers, and particularly so for Elise, Anne and Karianne, it is important to underline that God’s love and unconditional forgiveness is based on the sacrificial role of Jesus. Elise writes that it was “Jesus who opened the way for this forgiveness.” Anne elaborates on this a little further:

*Christian teaching: People get forgiveness for their sins, if they ask for forgiveness and repent –*

*Kristendommens lære: Menneskene får tilgivelse for sine synder, hvis de ber om tilgivelse og*

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<sup>166</sup> Translated from “møtet hadde ikke blitt så bra.”

reject the wrong actions they have done and start to live the way God has said we should live. People can get this forgiveness because Jesus has taken on all the sins of men. He could do that because he had lived a life without sin.

vender om – tar avstand fra de gale handlingene de har gjort og starter opp å leve slik Gud har sagt vi skal leve. Denne tilgivelsen kan menneskene få fordi Jesus har tatt på seg alle menneskenes synder, og det kunne han gjøre siden han hadde levd et syndefritt liv.

Karianne expresses similar notions when she links “the fatted calf” to the last supper:

*And I think that the best meal God gives us, that is the last supper ... the union with God, so to speak, that God in a way dwells in us, you know, that he gives himself for us. So I think that the meal, which really is only a clause in the text, right. Well, it is more than that. ‘Take this calf.’ So I think that there is a declaration of love from God in this, from God to man, that Jesus gave himself, right, for our sins .... The last supper is the focal point. That is why I think that the meal here too is about God giving himself.*

*Og jeg tenker det beste måltidet Gud gir oss, det er jo nattverden hvor du på en måte ... den foreningen med Gud da, altså Gud på en måte blir i oss, ikke sant, han gir seg selv til oss. Så jeg tenker at ... altså det måltidet er, altså det er jo bare en bisetning her, ikke sant. Nei det er vel litt mer da. ‘Slakt dette dyret.’ Så jeg tenker det ligger i den kjærlighetserklæringen fra Gud til mennesket at Gud, altså at Jesus ga seg selv, ikke sant, for våre synder da .... Nattverden er det sentrale. Derfor så tenker jeg at dette måltidet her også, at det er på en måte Gud som gir seg selv.*

Although nothing here refers directly to any specific doctrine, I find that they are largely influenced by the satisfaction theory of atonement, which highlights the vicarious role of Jesus.

I find that Peter’s understanding of Christianity represents the opposite of a doctrinal or dogmatic approach. Though he too, but only barely, touches upon the basic Christian images of God and man as described above, his attention is primarily elsewhere. When he speaks about *The Prodigal Son* as presenting “the essence of Christianity,” he centers exclusively on “the most important values in Christianity”; on “forgiveness, neighboring love, generosity and refraining from judging.” This fixation on Christian values is also reflected in his perception of Jesus:

*The Bible says little about Jesus giving the disciples specific guidelines about how to behave or act as a human being, but instead he tried to guide his disciples and the people around whom*

*I Bibelen står det lite om at Jesus ga disiplene bestemte føringer på hvordan man skulle oppføre seg eller være som menneske, men at han derimot prøvde å veilede disiplene og folk rundt som han*

*he met by being a clear model and by asking questions, having dialogue and by telling stories .... Jesus wanted the people themselves to find the right answers and live by them.*

*møtte gjennom og selv være et tydelig forbilde og ved å stille spørsmål, samtale og ved å fortelle fortellinger .... Jesus ville at folk selv skulle finne de rette svarene og leve etter dem.*

Thus, Peter seems to be the only teacher who conveys a predominantly ethical concept of Christianity. But, and as I will turn to next, ethics, or more precisely, morality, constitutes itself in another significant way in the responses. And, as is important to note, this reveals itself despite the teachers' agreement about the image of the father as one who manifests God's unconditional love and forgiveness. This comes to expression in how the teachers, with reference to the youngest son's turnaround, bring in the notion of Christian repentance and conversion.

For Anne it is a key point to underline that the youngest son's turnaround is about confronting sinful conduct. In her concept of "Christian teaching," referred to above, it is "the wrong actions" which appear as essential.

I find an equally strong emphasis on moral conduct in Elin's approach, for instance when she talks about the genre parable:

*The parables give advice about life in general. And we have a lot about ethics in RE, so in a way, they gain insight into and knowledge about the ethics of Christianity through Jesus, and in such a way that they can relate this to their own lives; what is wise to do? And then we talk about what they normally do at home or what you are allowed to do at home .... Jesus and the parables often become very abstract, so we need hooks to hang it on.*

*So it is a story that explains something about an ethical message?*

*Yes, and try to teach the audience what God wants from them or what is available to them.*

*Lignelsene gir jo råd om livet generelt og vi har jo mye om etikk i RLE, så de får innblikk i og kjennskap til kristendommens etikk via Jesus på en slik måte at de kan relatere det til egne liv, hva som er lurt å gjøre, og så snakker vi om hva de for eksempel pleier å gjøre hjemme eller hva du har lov til hjemme .... Ofte så blir både Jesus og lignelser veldig sånn abstrakt, så vi må på en måte ha noen knagger å henge det på.*

*Så det er en fortelling som forklarer noe om et etisk budskap?*

*Ja, og prøve å lære tilhørere hva Gud vil med dem eller hva som er tilgjengelig for dem.*

Although this is expressed within a context of pedagogical reasoning, conduct is a fundamental aspect in Elin's understanding of Christianity. When I asked her to comment further on the youngest son's problem or "sin," she pins it down to the following:

*The sin, I think, is the egoism, that I wanted something and I got what I wanted and so I just squandered it away without thinking of my father or my brother or anyone else. And when you had satisfied the urge to do so, then it was all empty.*

*Synden er vel egoismen, at jeg ville noe og da fikk jeg det jeg ville og så bare ødslet jeg det vekk uten tanke på min far eller min bror eller noen andre. Og når du hadde tilfredsstilt den trangten til å gjøre det, så var det tomt.*

Elise, Marie and Rita express similar notions. Elise echoes Elin when she narrows down the youngest son's sin to "pleasure." And Marie clearly has conduct in mind when she reflects on the youngest son as one who "is doing wrong things" and who "is finding it difficult to be just and kind all the time." And finally to Rita, who sees the turnaround of the youngest son to be a matter of converting from a "promiscuous life," a life where he "discarded the values his father had emphasized." With the words "But when he came to himself" (v. 17), in that very moment, Rita writes, the youngest son "became aware of his sinful life" and realized "that his life had to take a new direction."<sup>167</sup>

The red thread in this is that Christian conversion is a matter of repenting immoral conduct and to turn away from an immoral life. This is highlighted despite upholding the father's love and forgiveness as unconditional, and despite claiming that the youngest son's humbleness is not a precondition for the overwhelming reception. How, then, are Elise, Marie, Rita, Elin and Anne holding these two seemingly contrasting thoughts together? One powerful constraining factor, as I read them, is the contrasting image of the two brothers: a life on the outside or on the inside of the father's home. And the key indicator which separates and contrasts the two is ethical character and moral conduct. And their perception of the father's home-Church analogy contributes to further underlining this point. Clearly, the Church as a community of faith is associated with a moral way of living. More than that, morality is incorporated in the Church's system of faith.

Karianne and Hanne have quite another view of repentance and conversion, and also, what it means to be within a community of faith. This does not imply that they find ethics and moral conduct unimportant, but none of them, as I read them, holds this to be the essence of it. In fact, it seems to be rather irrelevant, as shown in the following interview sequence with Karianne:

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<sup>167</sup> Translated from "ble klar over sitt syndige liv" and "at livet hans måtte ta en ny vending."

Do you think, that to be prodigal is about doing wrong morally and ethically? Is this the way you think?

*No, I do not think I thought that way. I thought simply that he has strayed away from God, or from the father and his home. And the youngest may have done little or a lot of wrong things but that is not so important in this context and as to what it means to be prodigal. I'm so simple that I think that God has a purpose for our lives, and he has sort of lost his way. He may well have lived a good life even though he has not lived very exemplary maybe, so you don't need to be so very sinful.*

Tenker du noe sånn, altså det å være bortkommen, det å gjøre mye galt moralsk og etisk sett. Tenker du det?

*Nei, jeg tror ikke jeg tenkte sånn. Jeg tenkte rett og slett at han har kommet bort i fra Gud, eller fra far da, hjemme, og den yngste kan ha gjort lite eller mye galt, det er ikke så viktig i denne sammenheng i det å være bortkommen. Jeg er så enkel at jeg tenker at vi alle på en måte ... Gud har en mening med livet vårt, og han har på en måte kommet bort i fra den. Han kan godt ha levd et godt liv han selv om han ikke har levd så veldig prektig kanskje, så du trenger ikke være så veldig syndefull.*

The way Karianne understands the turning point of the parable and the words “But when he came to himself” (v. 17), explains why she can say that “he may have done little or a lot of wrong things but that is not so important in this context.” She writes:

[W]hen life really turns the wrong wing, when he is starving and suffering, then he “he came to himself” – that is, he remembered who he was, where he came from – and he acknowledges that he has been a bad son – and that he no longer deserves his father's love. At the same time he knows that he has the father's love. The youngest son ventured life, dared to burn all bridges, he was strong enough to go for it all and lose everything, and that because he had a basic knowledge – perhaps unconsciously – of being loved. And when everything seemingly falls apart, he becomes aware of that love. But it was the “crisis” that led him to understand – and to return home (to “convert”). And trusting and believing that his father would accept him – albeit not as a son, at least one of the workers, he starts on his way back home, humble. He has acknowledged that he has sinned, done what is wrong.

[N]år livet virkelig snur vrangside til, han sulter og lider nød, da “kom han til seg selv” – dvs. han husket hvem han var, hvor han kom fra – og han erkjenner at han har vært en dårlig sønn – og ikke lenger fortjener farens kjærlighet, samtidig som han vet at han har den. Yngstesønnen våget livet, våget å brenne alle broer, han var sterk nok til å satse alt og tape alt, nettopp fordi han har en grunnleggende visshet om – ubevisst kanskje – av å være elsket. Og når alt tilsynelatende rakner, blir han bevisst denne kjærligheten. Men det var “krisen” som fikk ham til å skjønne – og til å vende hjemover (“omvende” seg). Og i tillit til og tro på at faren vil ta i mot ham – om enn ikke som en sønn, så i hvert fall som en av arbeidsfolkene, drar han hjemover igjen, ydmyk. Han har erkjent at han har syndet, gjort det som er galt.

As I read Karianne, it is that “he remembered who he was, where he came from” which is the key. It is the rediscovery of his own true identity, “of being loved” and “trusting and believing that his father would accept him,” which drive him towards repentance and to start the journey homeward.

Also Hanne, in the way she talks about the youngest son’s turnaround, pins it all down to that of rediscovering one’s true identity. The quintessence of the words “he came to himself,” is that “he is forced to in one way or another to face himself,” which entails “an encounter with faith.”<sup>168</sup> The key issue, therefore, is not so much to confront immoral conduct but to acknowledge and repent that “we have gone astray, lived without faith.”<sup>169</sup> Faith, then, and also trust, represents the central core in the youngest son’s repentance and conversion. For Hanne, this also points to the task that needs to be taken on by the older brother. He too, but for different reasons, “have gone astray, lived without faith,” a perception she clearly shares with Karianne. This becomes apparent when they reflect on the older brother’s confrontation with the father:

Hanne: *He is really only challenged to trust his father, because that is not what has been given much attention, how to deal with that, only that they have different roles, that they have chosen to live different lives. But that does not mean that one life is of more value than the other.*

Hanne: *Han blir egentlig bare utfordret på å stole på far, fordi at det er ikke det som er blitt gitt mye oppmerksomhet, hvordan han skal forholde seg til det, annet enn at de har forskjellige roller, de har, de velger å leve forskjellige liv, men det betyr ikke at det ene livet er mere verdsatt enn det andre.*

Karianne: *Am I loved? Right? Am I, or do I live the way God wants me to live?*

Karianne: *Er jeg elsket? Ikke sant. Er jeg, lever jeg slik Gud vil jeg skal leve?*

As a result of this, the older brother is perceived to be an equally important figure in *The Prodigal Son*. This, I will argue, illuminates what I find is the main difference in perceptions of Christianity, between Hanne and Karianne on the one hand, and Elin, Anne, Elise, Marie and Rita, on the other. It all boils down to whether they focus on ethics and morality, or on faith and trust.

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<sup>168</sup> Translated from “han blir tvunget til ett eller annet møte med seg selv” and “et møte med tro”

<sup>169</sup> Translated from “vi har gått oss vill, levd uten tro.”

Finally I turn to Terje, who, like Peter, stands out from the others but for quite different reasons. As stated early in this chapter (see p. 153), Terje too recognizes *The Prodigal Son* as a parable which displays the basics of Christianity. He says:

*God accepts the sinner, the apostate. This is certainly in the text And the invitation to the feast when the apostate returns ... this is God's grace in practice.*      *Gud tar i mot synderen, den frafalne. Det ligger jo det her. Og ber til gjestebud når den frafalne da kommer tilbake ... dette er jo Guds nåde i praksis.*

And the parable's central position within Christian thought and faith can be further illustrated by the following statement, which has a touch of sarcasm to it:

*This is a text the Pentecostals would love, they would have resorted to this on the day of baptism, right? Finally, now we can party! You are back into the fold! Right? Now you are with us!*      *Dette er jo en tekst som pinsevevnerne ville ha elsket, ville ha kjørt denne ut i ja på dåpsdagen, ikke sant. Endelig, nå fester vi! Nå er du tilbake i folden! Ikke sant. Nå har vi deg der!*

This brings me to what I find is Terje's basic notion of Christianity, which also, as I read him, applies to his view of religion in general. Christian thought, according to Terje, necessarily incorporates the idea of God, and thus comprises reasoning based on doctrines of faith and the transcendent. As a consequence of this, Terje will say, the doctrines of Christianity are solely addressing insiders, the people of faith, for instance the Pentecostals referred to above. Modern thought, however, which he exemplifies by referring to "developmental psychology," is concerned with strictly immanent issues and hence relevant for all humans. Thus, for Christianity to reach beyond its communities of faith, it needs to turn from transcendental to immanent reasoning, from what Terje refers to as a movement from "the inhuman sphere" to "the human sphere."<sup>170</sup> This indicates, then, that Terje advocates for a kind of an existentialist understanding of Christianity, but then, important to notice, the sort of existentialist thinking which dismisses the transcendent, in short, a concept of Christianity without God.

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<sup>170</sup> Translated from "den umenneskelige sfære" and "den menneskelige sfære."

### 4.3.2 Background and experiences

The responses vary considerably in terms of how and also to what extent the teachers bring their own background and past and present experiences to the surface. A minority of the teachers approaches this in an objective way and seems to be somewhat reluctant to talk about this, while most of them are more than willing to bring in their own life-stories. Despite these differences, I find that the responses at large show that background and experiences matter and contribute significantly to the teachers' "interpretive strategy."

It is my supposition that the teachers' openness towards self, is operative because they find *The Prodigal Son* to bring up timeless existential issues. They all say that the parable is "interesting" and "relevant," even "highly topical,"<sup>171</sup> as Terje puts it. Moreover, referring to childhood, faith, and also that of being a parent, a sister and a brother, the parable obviously touches emotional strings. Elise, who appeared as one you would not expect would use the big words, uttered twice when she talked about the father's reception of the youngest son that "of course, it is quite powerful."<sup>172</sup> Hanne was moved to tears. Towards the end of the interview, after first having stated that "The Jesus-figure hits me right in the stomach,"<sup>173</sup> we agreed to close it all up and end the session after this emotional episode:

*I feel that it is a story that – huh! (emotional reaction) I am very touched by it (tears and pause). But that is about me and my life (laughs a little, tears and snot).*

But then I turn this off (audio recorder).

Yes!

*Jeg kjenner jo at det blir en historie som – hæ! (følelsesmessig reaksjon) jeg blir veldig berørt av den (tårer og pause) Men det handler om meg og mitt liv (ler litt, tårer og snørr)*

Men da skrur jeg av den (lydopptaker).

Ja!

These examples of openness and personal involvement, then, are good indicators of that the teachers respond, as Holland would put it, according to their "identity themes" (Holland, 1975).

Terje stands out as the teacher who seems to be in line with Holland when he pins it all down to "It all depends on your point of view!" Terje points to what would be very different interpretations of *The Prodigal Son* if you read it as a "Christian" and "wearing a collar," as

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<sup>171</sup> Translated from "interessant," "relevant," and "hyperaktuell."

<sup>172</sup> Translated from "det er klart at det er litt sterkt."

<sup>173</sup> Translated from "Jesus-personen treffer meg midt i magen."



opposed to reading it as a “non-Christian.”<sup>174</sup> For Terje it is so self-evident that this is the point of reference for all readers and that it is futile to discuss the implications of any other matters.<sup>175</sup>

Terje is not explicit about his own position. But he brings up two experiences which give some hints. The first concerns his academic studies of religion where he highlights a negative experience: the lack of an immanent approach to religion. He said, with some resignation and frustration in his voice: ”This was never an issue in my studies of religion.”<sup>176</sup> Though this may not represent a pivotal moment in his life, it seems to have contributed to shaping and refining his point of view.

Secondly, to support his argument for bringing *The Prodigal Son* down to the “the human sphere,” Terje draws from his experience of being a father:

<i>Based on my own experiences, I try to teach my children that to be good is not necessarily just to do good, but it's actually about being good, to constantly stick to what is good.</i>	<i>Basert på egne erfaringer, så prøver jeg å lære barna mine at det å være god er ikke nødvendigvis bare å gjøre gode handlinger, men det er faktisk å være god. Å hele tiden ville holde fast i det gode.</i>
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Yet, holding up this ideal, his experience tells him to be realistic; it is impossible to “constantly stick to what is good” and to act in a way similar to the unconditional father in the parable. And to take it all down to earth, Terje brings in the notion of “ulterior motive” and “reward” as the chief motive in all human conduct:

<i>No one manages to live like this. This form of purity is an ideal, it is not an existential presence in any human being. At least, I have never encountered it. This is an ideal without any form of expressed ulterior motive. And I mean that 100 %, that there is no human being that does anything for anyone unless they get something in return for it .... Not even Mother Teresa acted without that there being a reward for what she</i>	<i>Det er ingen som klarer å leve ut dette her. Denne formen for renhet er et ideal, den er ikke en eksistensiell tilstedeværelse i et hvert menneske. Jeg har aldri møtt det i hvert fall. For dette er jo et ideal uten noe uttalt form for baktanke. Og det mener jeg helt 100 %, det er ikke et menneske som gjør noe for noen med mindre de får noe tilbake for det .... Ikke en gang Moder Teresa handlet uten at det lå en belønning i det hun gjorde. Ingen</i>
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<sup>174</sup> Translated from “kristen,” “ha på seg prestekrage,” and “ikke-kristen.”

<sup>175</sup> From the first time I met Terje, he signaled very clearly that he did not understand the purpose of my study. Despite this, as commented on earlier, he decided that he was “more than willing to sit down and talk about it (i.e. the parable) for an hour” (see p. 83).

<sup>176</sup> Translated from “Det var ikke noe tema i mine religionsstudier.”

*did. No one does that.*

*som gjør det.*

Clearly, this recognition of man's selfish inclinations, also from the perspective of being a loving father, serves to demonstrate his immanent approach to *The Prodigal Son*. Because Terje himself is not explicit about his own position, I will not conclude from this that he has an atheistic position. By saying that "the Church needs a new Ten-Sing movement,"<sup>177</sup> implying, as I understand him, that the Church has to find a way to reach out and be relevant for all, he certainly does not sound like an atheist. I will, however, claim that his argument for solely concentrating on "the human sphere" and delimiting that to immanence only, resembles, if not the atheist's position, at least the atheist's argument.

The teachers' past and present affiliation to Christianity and the Church is being more explicitly expressed in the other responses. I will start with Peter who says: "I am not a devoted Christian, but I like to bring with me the Christian values."<sup>178</sup> Despite making this distinction, he allows himself to have rather strong opinions about what Christianity and the Church should be all about, saying: "there is always a place under the wings of Jesus and God when you are ready for it."

To support the relevance of Christian values, Peter draws on his own experiences, that he himself has committed "major mistakes,"<sup>179</sup> as he puts it, and that he has been in need of the sort of forgiveness that makes it possible "be done with things and start over again."<sup>180</sup> I could sense that the way Peter talked about the youngest son's homecoming was colored by his own challenging experiences:

*From my own experience I know that it is not certain that the concession or the conversation ahead of an eventual forgiveness is real. Perhaps I don't think I believe in it. I do believe, though, in the action if you say, OK, now, we must leave some things behind, we must now look forward. I forgive you and you are welcome to my house. I think in some situations this is the easiest and perhaps also the only right way to proceed,*

*Av egen opplevelse har jeg skjønt det at det er ikke sikkert at den innrømmelsen eller den samtalen som ligger i forkant av en eventuell tilgivelse er reell. Jeg tror kanskje ikke på den, altså jeg tror på handlingen fra du sier at du på en måte sier, ok, nå, noe må vi legge bak oss, nå må vi se forover, jeg tilgir deg og du er velkommen hos meg. Det tror jeg i noen situasjoner vil være det enkleste og kanskje den eneste rette veien å gå, for*

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<sup>177</sup> Translated from "Kirken trenger en ny Ten-Sing bevegelse."

<sup>178</sup> Translated from "Jeg er ikke personlig kristen, men liker å ha med meg disse kristne verdiene."

<sup>179</sup> Translated from "brølere."

<sup>180</sup> Translated from "slå en strek over ting og starte på nytt igjen."

*because it is not certain that you can make up for everything that has been done.*      *det er ikke sikkert at du kan få rettet opp alt som er gjort.*

To leave some things unsaid and instead act is the essential link he makes between the father's encounter with his youngest son and his own experience.

When I now turn to the other teachers, I find that they all have a rather strong personal relationship to Christianity and the Church. Some of them write and speak frankly about this, as for instance Karianne, who several times refers to her Catholic faith. This is not to say that her Catholic background gives her all the answers. Though clearly providing direction, her Catholic mindset also creates moments of wonder and opportunities to go deeper and raise new questions. This can be exemplified in the following reflection about the older brother's confrontation with his father:

*Well, ok, I am a Catholic, so I am very much involved with the saints (laughs a little). Not very much though. I wonder why they have so much doubt, and then I have been thinking that it might be that they have always been wandering there, so close, and then there is that doubt.*      *Altså jeg er katolikk, da, så jeg er midt inni helgenene (ler litt). Ikke så veldig mye men. Det undrer meg at de kan komme til så mye tvil, og da har jeg tenkt det er kanskje at de har alltid vandret der og er så nære, og så er den tvilen der.*

The Catholic view of saints, which was further actualized by her current reading of *Hildegard* by Marstrand-Jørgensen (2009), a Danish bestseller, contributed to these reflections.

Elin, Rita and Elise are the other teachers who talk relatively openly about their Christian background and faith. Elin articulates this when she in a moment of frustration seems to speak more favorably of Christianity than the other religions she has to cover in RE. With reference to her students and what they enjoy the most, she remarked: "So often it is so exciting with Buddhism and Shiva, and all these arms."<sup>181</sup>

Elise and Rita, both being close to retirement, were more concerned with their "childhood faith" and their Christian upbringing, on "how I was brought up" and "how I always have been thinking about these things." In Rita's case, this resulted in incidents where I brought up issues which to her seemed rather self-evident, making comments such as this: "I think it

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<sup>181</sup> Translated from "For ofte så er det veldig spennende med buddhismen og alle disse, Shiva, og alle disse armene."

seems very natural.”<sup>182</sup> I sensed a similar thinking in my interview with Elise when she seemed reluctant to go beyond the known and reflect more freely, saying: “Now I have started to get into much more than what the text says.”<sup>183</sup> To go further would imply, as I read her, to go beyond her theological comfort zone.

Marie and Anne’s approach was more discreet but nevertheless it reveals their personal standing when they talk about Christians as “us” and “we.” My interview with Anne is illustrative. Though clearly striving to discuss in an objective manner, her personal view and what she referred to as her “private interpretation”<sup>184</sup> came to the surface many times, as for instance when she talked about the oldest son:

<i>He represents what the Christians must have felt, those who have lived a life and done the best they could and all that. * But that is when I think that this is where people have put more on themselves than what I think God would put on us. Because I think that God is concerned that we are fine, and that the rules that are laid on us, that they are there to support and help and guide us.</i>	<i>Han representerer da hva de måtte føle, de kristne, som da har levd et liv og gjort så godt de kunne og alt det der. *Men det er da jeg tenker at der har nok menneskene lagt på seg selv en del mer enn det jeg tror Gud ville legge på oss. For jeg tror at Gud da er opptatt av at vi skal ha det bra og at de reglene som er lagt på oss, de er for å støtte og hjelpe og veilede.</i>
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I marked this utterance in my interview-guide as an event where Anne suddenly switched from an objective style to an insider’s style, even adopting a preacher’s voice (beginning from the star in the citation). While the other teachers above could talk passionately and fervently about *The Prodigal Son*, Anne took this a step further.

Hanne stands out as the one teacher who appears to have an ambivalent relationship to Christianity and the Church. She refers to two milestones in her life, the first her decision to cancel her membership in the Norwegian Church due to the pastor Helge Hognestad’s resignation from the pulpit in 1985, the so called “Hognestad case.”<sup>185</sup> The second milestone is related to a more recent encounter with the Norwegian Church due to her children’s decision to be confirmed in the Church. As I understand Hanne, though still frustrated about

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<sup>182</sup> Translated from “Jeg synes det virker veldig naturlig jeg.”

<sup>183</sup> Translated from “Nå begynner jeg vel å tolke mye mer enn det som står der da.”

<sup>184</sup> Translated from “privat tolkning.”

<sup>185</sup> The “Hognestad-case” refers to Helge Hognestad and his ministry in the Lutheran church at Høvik in Oslo in the early 1980s. The discussions erupted due to his positive references to New Age and the Eastern religious traditions, which also resulted in his changing the liturgy of the Church as specifically regards the central Christian doctrine of man born a sinner.

the orthodoxy of the Church, she has remained passionate about what Christianity in its essence is all about, something that is coming to expression in the way she identifies strongly with the characters of *The Prodigal Son*.

With Terje as the exception, I have not touched upon the teachers' education in this description of the teachers' *Background and experiences*. Though I asked the teachers to write that down (see attachment 6), I do not find this to be of significance in any of the responses. Nor have I written about their experiences from working with RE at their local schools. And the simple reason is that this is practically absent in the material. Surely, this can be explained in the light of the nature of this study, as I asked the teachers to concentrate on subject matter and to write down their individual interpretations of *The Prodigal Son*. But even in the most methodologically oriented responses, which I will come to in the next chapter, references to local school contexts remain absent. There is only one exception, and that is the following comment made by Anne at the end of the interview, where she appears surprised and also frustrated about the status of RE at her local school:

*There is no structure. There is no plan for RE teaching at the school. The teachers are left to themselves, even at this school which is so-called multicultural.*

*Det fins ingen struktur. Det er ingen plan for RLE-undervisningen på skolen. Lærerne er overgitt til seg selv, selv denne skolen som er såkalt flerkulturell.*

Recognizing this blank spot in the material, and also taking into account Anne's comment, I find that there may be grounds to assume that teaching RE is largely a private matter, meaning that it rarely involves other colleagues or attracts the principal's attention. This impression of interpretation as a privatized matter is strengthened when I now turn to present experiences comprising the situative aspect; that means the particular situation and the teachers' "present state" of being involved in this study as informants (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 20).

I find that situative aspects appear in mainly two ways in the responses. The first concerns the situation of being involved in RE research. This was a new experience for all of them. New was also the experience of immersing oneself in a religious narrative. Rita said that this was something she did as a student, not a teacher, becoming somewhat nostalgic about the times she "had the opportunity to go deep into things."<sup>186</sup> The time factor was a recurrent issue, a matter which clearly put limits on their contribution. Despite this, none of the teachers said

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<sup>186</sup> Translated from "hadde muligheten til å fordype seg i ting."

that they missed any essential aspects in their texts of reflection, when I started the interviews by asking: “Are there things you've thought about afterwards – like ‘I forgot that or I should have written that differently?’”<sup>187</sup>

Considering that interpretation, from the teachers’ perspective, has no part in their everyday work, it was somewhat of a surprise that they all, again with Terje as an exception, spoke rather enthusiastically about being involved in the study. Elin expressed even much appreciation and thanked me personally for getting the opportunity to discuss this particular subject matter in depth. In her case, the situation of being involved turned out to be a wakeup call which resulted in a fundamental change in both pedagogical reasoning and practice. This will be further described next under the category *Concepts of RE*.

Second, in some of the responses more specific remarks about the time and place of writing and thinking about *The Prodigal Son* were expressed. Although I met the teachers at the schools for information and the interviews, issues concerning local school contexts, as referred to above, were not brought up. When commented on, the situative aspect had a more private character, like sitting by the “kitchen table a Sunday morning,”<sup>188</sup> as Rita did, or as Karianne, reflecting while bike-riding the 4 miles back home from school. For Rita, as she admits, this resulted in a text written in “parent modus.”<sup>189</sup> For instance, the father’s differentiated expression of love mirrors her own experience, saying that “I love Hans in the Hans-way, and I love Greta the Greta-way, and Lisa the Lisa-way.”<sup>190</sup> These private accounts do not imply, however, that their present state of being RE teachers was ignored. Quite the opposite, as will be shown next.

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<sup>187</sup> Translated from “Er det ting du har tenkt på i etterkant – og ‘det glemte jeg eller det skulle jeg ha skrevet annerledes?’”

<sup>188</sup> Translated from “kjøkkenbordet en søndag morgen.”

<sup>189</sup> Translated from “foreldremodus.”

<sup>190</sup> Translated from “jeg er glad i Hans på Hans-måten, så er jeg glad i Greta på Greta-måten, og i Lisa på Lisa-måten” (anonymous names).

### 4.3.3 Concepts of RE

All except two teachers comment rather extensively on matters concerning RE in their texts of reflection.<sup>191</sup> Based on the experiences from the pilot studies, this did not come as a surprise despite the fact that I asked the teachers to stay focused on interpreting *The Prodigal Son* to avoid predominantly methodological texts (see footnote 48). Particularly in two texts of reflection in the main study methodological aspects proved dominant. One is Elin's text, which in fact resembles what we in teacher education refer to as *didaktisk refleksjonsnotat* [didactical reflection report].<sup>192</sup> The second is Peter's, who introduces his text by referring to the national curriculum and continues from there to argue for the appropriateness of *filosofisk samtale* [the philosophical approach] in RE in general, and for the teaching of parables in particular. This, however, does not suggest that I consider Peter and Elin's texts worthless. Quite the opposite, as have been demonstrated several times. Compared to what I found in the pilot study, Peter and Elin's texts are not merely about methodology but refer to a much wider specter of didactical issues, and where interpretation is a central part.

The teachers bring in issues concerning RE in mainly two ways: one, by reflecting on and referring to their own personal experiences as RE teachers, and two, by bringing in more formal and principle matters, for instance the RE teacher's role and the requirements in the national curriculum. And as I will show in the following, references to own practice and the more formal and principal issues become closely linked in the teachers' arguments.

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<sup>191</sup> Hanne and Anne are the ones who have no references to RE in their texts of reflection. But when I turned to this issue in the interview they responded quite differently. While Anne was prepared and said that "I thought that you might ask about that" (translated from "det har jeg faktisk tenkt litt på at du kanskje kom til å spørre om"), Hanne was totally caught by surprise and said: "You don't ask about that. You only ask how I read the text" (translated from "Nei for det spør du jo ikke om. Du spør kun om hva jeg leser i det"). As a result, Hanne's spontaneous response in this matter turned out rather random and also incoherent, and is for that reason not highlighted any further in this chapter.

<sup>192</sup> A didactical reflection report is a common assignment in Norwegian teacher training, where the students are expected to reflect critically on choices made prior to teaching and also on their actual teaching experience.

### *“We are not supposed to preach” – how to deal with the religious content of *The Prodigal Son**

I will start the descriptions by pointing to the one principle all the teachers agree on, and which is spelled out in the following statements:

Marie: *We are not supposed to preach.*

Marie: *Vi skal jo ikke preke.*

Terje: *I do not preach in the school context.*

Terje: *Jeg driver ikke forkynnelse i skolens sammenheng.*

Elise: *We are not supposed to be involved in preaching.*

Elise: *Vi skal heller ikke drive forkynnelse.*

Though they all seem to agree, I find that the principle of objectivity or neutrality is followed up in many different ways. This, of course, indicates that they disagree considerably as to what preaching is and what it is not. To elaborate and illuminate this further, I ask: How do the RE teachers deal with the religious content of *The Prodigal Son*?

I find that Terje, Marie and Peter represent three different positions with regard to this question. They all seem to have a definite opinion on this and thus none of them seems to struggle with the issue. This is obviously the case with Terje:

*I would use compassion, social affiliation, the love for siblings and, you know, ultimately the most profound of it all, namely the love that is unconditional. That is the path I would follow.*

*For anything else would be totally unfair, I think.*

(pause)

*If you go into that other field, then you enter the inhuman spheres. Then you are on a different level than I work. That would imply abstract thinking. Then you cannot be in primary school. It would be unfair to them, because they have no abstract thinking.*

*Jeg ville bruke medmenneskelighet, sosial tilhørighet, søskenkjærlighet og, ikke sant, til slutt det mest dype ved det hele, nemlig den*

*betingelsesløse kjærligheten. Det er den veien jeg ville ha gått. For noe annet ville være helt urimelig synes jeg.*

(pause)

*Hvis du går inn den andre gaten der, da går inn på de umenneskelige sfærer. Da ligger du på et annet plan enn der jeg arbeider også. Det er så abstrakt tenkning. Da kan du ikke gå på barneskolen. Det ville være urimelig overfor dem, for dem har ikke noen abstrakt tenkning.*

He uses the term “unreasonable” twice. One time when he expresses the irrationality of expanding on the religious content of the parable, on what he refers to as “inhuman spheres” and “abstract reasoning.” To follow that path, Terje contends, will by necessity involve



preaching. He would only allow himself, as he says, “to mention this just briefly at the end,”<sup>193</sup> that is, to just briefly inform the students that there is a link to a religious reading.

Furthermore, Terje finds it “unreasonable” to dwell on religious issues also because it does not address any meaningful content, and that not only to immature students in elementary school but also, as we can see in the statement below, to you and me as part of a general public. To give meaning, Terje argues, God needs to come down from “the inhuman spheres” and be addressed by means of common references, or “knobs,” to which we all can relate:

<i>What is God, for example? Well, what is God? You would probably struggle with that yourself? We all do that. We have no images of this. We have no knobs to hang it on, but we can hang it on our own father, our own mother, our own siblings and ourselves.</i>	<i>Hva er Gud, for eksempel? Altså hva er Gud for noe? Det sliter jo antageligvis du med også? Det gjør vi jo alle. Altså, vi har ikke noe bilde av dette. Vi har ingen knagger å henge det på, men vi kan henge det på vår egen far, vår egen mor, våre egne søsken og oss selv.</i>
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Hence, God has a marginal role in Terje’s classroom. Moreover, God has a marginal role in any meaningful philosophical discussion outside communities of faith. Hence, Terje’s consistent immanent reasoning promotes a godless worldview. Although claiming that “I don’t preach in the school context,” it is a relevant question to ask: Does Terje violate his own principle?

Marie is at the other end of the pendulum. She does underscore that “we are not supposed to preach,” and that the religious content needs to be taught “cautiously,” which implies frequently adding sayings such as “this is what the Christians believe, others believe in other things”<sup>194</sup> in the course of her teaching. Her primary objective, however, is to convey the essence of the religious content in the classroom. She states briefly: “it must be included!”<sup>195</sup> a conviction which is, as I understand her, based on her reading of the requirements in the national curriculum.

Marie supports her argument by referring to her teaching experience, which is quite different from that of Terje. She says: “The kids like to wonder, to talk about God. So we should not be so afraid to do that.”<sup>196</sup> This means that Marie finds her students sufficiently receptive and

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<sup>193</sup> Translated from “å komme med sånne stikk til slutt.”

<sup>194</sup> Translated from “forsiktig” and “sånn tror de kristne, andre tror på andre ting.”

<sup>195</sup> Translated from “det må med!”

<sup>196</sup> Translated from “Ungene liker å undre seg, å prate om Gud. Så vi skal ikke være redd for det.”

mature to face up to the religious content of *The Prodigal Son*, and that on all levels in elementary school. This may for instance imply teaching that the father of the parable shows “what the Christians believe in – a kind and compassionate God.” Though she adds “this is what the Christians believe” for the sake of objectification, her insider “God loves us”-position comes through. She too, therefore, seems to have more trouble with the principle of not preaching than she is willing to acknowledge.

Turning to Peter, a natural consequence of his ethical approach to the parable is that he omits the issue of preaching religious content. But this does not solve the whole issue of preaching. As Peter perceives it, teaching ethics can certainly appear moralistic. His solution to this is “the philosophical approach,” a method where “the students themselves shall find the answers.”<sup>197</sup> This, however, does not keep Peter from expressing rather strong opinions in the classroom:

*Kvarme*<sup>198</sup> has made it go in the wrong direction, simply because he demands too much and sets the premises for who can find one’s place in the Norwegian Church. And I think it should not be like this .... If this conversation had ended here, I don’t think I would have been afraid to refer to examples or name my examples.

*Kvarme har på en måte gjort at det har gått et skritt i feil retning, rett og slett, for han stiller for mye krav, synes jeg, setter for mye premisser for at det skal være plass i Den norske kirke, og det tenker jeg at sånn kan det ikke være .... Hvis denne samtalen hadde endt der den gjorde nå, så tror jeg ikke jeg ville vært redd for å sette eksempler eller navn på eksemplene mine, altså.*

Thus, I will claim that there are traces of inconsistency in Peter’s reasoning, spanning from the ideal of letting “the students themselves ... find the answers” to being categorical and straightforward about what the position of The Norwegian Church should be. In his eagerness he ends up instructing his students to adopt a certain position, which is not just an ethical position, but a position that is based on a specific understanding of Christianity and the Church. Also Peter, therefore, seems to be inconsistent as to the principle of not preaching.

If we then turn to the other teachers, I find a reasoning that reflects a less categorical or hard-lined position with regard to the question raised. Some, and particularly so Elin, appears uncertain, which obviously also is a source of frustration. Elin sets up a clear goal: “to let the

<sup>197</sup> Translated from “den filosofiske samtalen” and “elevene selv skal finne svarene.”

<sup>198</sup> In the public opinion, Bishop Ole Chr. Kvarme of Oslo is often seen as belonging to the conservative wing of the Norwegian Church. It is in particular the conservative position concerning gay rights in the Church Peter has in mind.

students gain specific knowledge about the religious message of the authentic text,<sup>199</sup> but she ends up this way:

We often end up talking about the text's theme, or use biblical texts in story books to make it more exciting for the students.	Det blir ofte til at vi prater om teksters tema, eller benytter omskrivninger av bibeltekster fra fortellingsbøker for at det skal bli mer spennende for elevene.
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This happens, according to Elin, because she finds herself forced into the position of “putting a lid on what I think and believe”<sup>200</sup> to avoid the pitfall of preaching. As a result, she steers away from her main goal, and so

my own approach to the religious texts of Christianity turns out to be far too vague, without any focus on the religious content.	at min egen tilnærming til kristendommens religiøse tekster blir altfor ‘rund,’ uten fokus på det religiøse innholdet.
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It is easy to understand that such recurrent experiences of missing the main target can cause great frustration.

Elin may blame her own insufficient teaching, but she also finds that there are more external and structural explanations. She blames the current dominating comparative methodology in RE. This is, as I understand Elin, presented as the golden solution for RE teachers to stay out of trouble, with the consequence that the teachers pull away from focusing on one religion at a time. She also blames the ongoing reforms after the implementation of the multi-faith RE curriculum in 1997, which, in her view, has caused much uncertainty and frustration among RE teachers.

After setting this diagnosis, Elin goes on to question and confront what she perceives is a widespread practice and reasoning among RE teachers. She asks:

Is this the way it should be? Have we become too scared so that we refuse us to use religious texts in school? What about texts that preach? Are teachers afraid of being perceived as preachers?	Er dette riktig? Er vi blitt for redde, at vi vegrer oss for å bruke religiøse tekster i skolen? Hva med forkynnende tekst? Er læreren redd for å bli oppfattet som forkynnende selv?
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<sup>199</sup> Translated from “å la elevene få konkret kunnskap om det religiøse budskapet i den autentiske teksten.”

<sup>200</sup> Translated from “legge lokk på det som jeg mener og tror.”

Apparently, in Elin's case, to be an informant in this study and work with *The Prodigal Son* became an opportunity to speak up and also to find a way out of the frustration. She said:

<i>With this assignment I feel that the way has been cleared for further work with religious texts for me and my students.</i>	<i>Med denne oppgaven føler jeg at veien har åpnet seg for videre arbeid med religiøse tekster for meg og mine elever.</i>
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In concrete terms, and as one can see in the interview sequence below, the narrative approach became liberating:

<i>You steer away from that which is very religious because you are afraid that it comes from yourself. But it does not do that if you look at it from a literary perspective. Then you have your alibi, understand me correctly. Then you can tell about this, what Jesus means, and not what the Christians believe, as someone other than us, "the Christians" .... So, yes, you should not be so careful, because it is about the text itself, it is there and you should take it for what it is. And you can present what it narrates without you standing there preaching.</i>	<i>Du styrer unna det der som er veldig religiøst fordi du er redd for at det kommer fra deg selv. Men så gjør det jo ikke det når du tar utgangspunkt i litteraturen. Da har du alibiet ditt, forstå meg riktig. At da kan du fortelle om dette, det som Jesus mener, og ikke som de kristne tror, som noen andre enn oss, "de kristne," de, ja .... Så, ja, du skal ikke være så forsiktig, for det er teksten i seg selv, den er der og den skal du ta for det den er. Og du kan presentere den for det den forteller uten at det er du som står og, ja, [forkynner].</i>
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Thus to recognize and acknowledge 'the preaching nature' of the religious text became the key for Elin. With that as a basis, she found her "alibi," the opening so as to immerse oneself undisturbed and confidently, as she put it, into "what Jesus means."

Elise is the other teacher who expresses uncertainty and frustration. Like Elin, she too is frustrated about the current dominant comparative approach in RE, which restricts her freedom to concentrate on one religion at a time. But, and unlike Elin, Elise appears to pursue a steadfast route in her teaching. This is her plan for teaching *The Prodigal Son*:

<i>In primary school I would have told the parable to the students as much as possible in the way it is written. I have always liked the oral narrative, and I have good experiences with it. The kids are more than capable of making images in their own heads, but I would after a while also introduce</i>	<i>I småskolen ville jeg fortalt liknelsen for elevene mest mulig slik den er skrevet. Jeg har alltid likt den muntlige fortellingen, og jeg har gode erfaringer med det. Bilder klarer barna fint å lage i sitt eget hode, men jeg ville vel likevel etter hvert presentere noe av det som er laget av kunstnere.</i>
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some art. I would focus on God as a good father, as the one who never stops thinking about what he has created.

At the intermediate stage I would try more to get into a conversation with students about some of the elements of the story; choices we make, about asking for forgiveness when you have done something wrong, about jealousy, maybe that Jesus atoned for the sin of humans so that grace and forgiveness became “the trademark of Christianity.” (Here I am a little uncertain about how much I could say. It would really depend on the student group).

Jeg ville fokusere på Gud som en god far som ikke slutter å tenke på det han har skapt.

På mellomtrinnet ville jeg i større grad prøve å få til en samtale med elevene om noen av elementene i fortellingen; valg vi tar, om å be om tilgivelse når man har feilet, om sjalusien, kanskje om at Jesus selv sonet for menneskenes synd slik at nåde og tilgivelse ble “varemerket til kristendommen.” (Her er jeg litt i tvil om hvor mye jeg kunne si, det kom veldig an på hvordan elevgruppa var).

It was the parenthesis at the end that caught my interest. And when I asked Elise to expand on this glimpse of uncertainty, we had the following dialogue:

And then you put in the parenthesis, and that parenthesis really caught my attention.

(both laughing)

“(Here I am a little uncertain about how much I could say).” About that part.

(both laughing)

What is on your mind?

(long pause)

This is something you have encountered several times in your teaching.

*Well, the classes are so different. They are so different. I've had groups where, in a way we could convey almost anything and received feedback and we could have positive conversations about things. And then there are some groups where things have gone wrong and where there is no environment to talk about just anything. There is not a maturity either.*

Are you then thinking about the religious part of the text?

*Yes, I must pass that on.*

Også skriver du i parentes, og den parentesen ble jeg veldig nysgjerrig på.

(begge ler)

“(Her er jeg litt i tvil om hvor mye jeg kunne si.)”

Om akkurat den biten.

(begge ler)

Hva tenker du da?

(lengre pause)

For dette er sikkert noe du har møtt i undervisningen ofte.

*Altså klassene er så forskjellige. De er så forskjellige. Jeg har hatt grupper som jeg har, vi har på en måte kunne formidle litt av hvert og fått tilbakemeldinger og positive samtaler rundt ting, og så er det enkelte grupper som er litt sånn helt på tvers og der ting har gått galt og det er ikke et miljø for å snakke om hva som helst. Det er ikke en modenhet heller.*

Tenker du da på den religiøse delen av teksten?

*Jeg må jo få formidlet det da, ja*

Men tenker du da det som er vanskelig i møte med

But when you think about what is difficult in encounters with various groups of students, is it to talk about the interpersonal or the religious?

(Pause)

*That “Jesus atoned for the sins of humans so that grace and forgiveness became ‘the trademark of Christianity’.” Yes. I think I would have to try to convey that, but I do not know to what extent we could manage to get a somehow, to attain such a good dialogue that I would feel that I had been able to pass it on. I do not know. I have had very different experiences with classes, and it has been easy and difficult. But I think it is very important to slip in that what Jesus says here has very much to do with Jesus' own life. That it was he who opened up for that forgiveness, then. How detailed it could or how deep into it I could go ... there are, as said earlier, variations.*

Are you thinking about variations with regard to students' knowledge or attitudes? Or both?

*Especially the latter.*

Especially the latter.

*Yes, especially the latter.*

That there in a way is no room to talk about such things?

*Sometimes you have these conscious kids that in a way resist a lot. We are not supposed to be involved in preaching. One should not do that, but in this subject it is important to bring out the essence of Christianity, and that without comparing with other religions, but what Christianity is all about.*

And then you think that this story (interrupted)

*Says a lot about that.*

ulike elevgrupper er det å snakke om det mellommenneskelige eller det religiøse?

(Pause)

*Det at “Jesus selv sonet for menneskenes synd slik at nåde og tilgivelse ble ‘varemerket til kristendommen’.” Ja. Jeg syns jeg ville prøvd å formidle det, men jeg vet ikke i hvor stor grad vi kunne klare å få på en måte en, oppnå en så bra dialog at jeg ville føle at jeg nådde frem med det. Jeg vet ikke. Jeg har hatt veldig forskjellige opplevelser med klasser, hvor lett og vanskelig det har vært. Men jeg syns samtidig at det er veldig viktig å få smettet inn akkurat det der at det Jesus forteller her det har i veldig stor grad noe med Jesu eget liv å gjøre. At det var han som åpnet opp for denne tilgivelsen, da. Hvor utdypende det kunne være eller hvor dypt inn i det jeg kunne gå ... det er som sagt forskjeller der.*

Tenker du på elevenes kunnskapsnivå eller holdninger? Eller begge deler?

*Spesielt det siste.*

Spesielt det siste.

*Spesielt det siste, altså.*

At det er på en måte ikke rom for å snakke om sånt?

*Det er av og til liksom bevisste unger som på en måte stritter imot, mye da. Vi skal heller ikke drive forkynnelse. En skal jo ikke det, i det faget så er det jo viktig å få frem hva er kristendom, uten å sammenligne med andre, men hva er kristendom. Og da tenker du at denne fortellingen (avbrytes) Sier veldig mye om det.*

Clearly, whether Elise succeeds or not is not due to her losing sight of aims or an uncertain RE teacher role. Her uncertainty and also her frustration are primarily caused and triggered by her students' “attitudes,” whether you have “these conscious kids who ... resist a lot” against

the religious content or not, and particularly, then, with regard to the Christological understanding of the parable.

In Rita, Anne and Karianne's responses I do not see traces of uncertainty or frustration. Instead I find a noticeable tendency to downplay the father-God analogy which represents, as they all agree, the essence of the parable. To repeat, Rita and Karianne claim that *The Prodigal Son* stands out in the Gospel of Luke as a text that does not primarily have a socio-ethical focus. This is evident in the way Rita sums up the essence of the parable in the text of reflection:

The father in the text is an image of God who always welcomes his children though they have been astray away from the Father's house. The sons represent people who live their lives in various ways. Some remain in their childhood faith throughout their lives. Other people do not live their lives according to God's will, but are equally forgiven by God if they one day return to the Father's house. This way God embraces all people. In the same way God's forgiveness reaches out to all.

Far i teksten er et bilde på Gud som alltid tar i mot barna sine om de enn har vært på vidvanke borte fra Fars hus. Sønnene er bilde på menneskene som lever sine liv på forskjellig vis. Noen blir i sin barnetro hele livet. Andre mennesker lever ikke sine liv etter Guds vilje, men er like mye tilgitt av Gud om de en dag vender tilbake til Farshuset. Slik omslutter Guds kjærlighet alle mennesker. På samme måte som Guds tilgivelse rekker til alle.

But when Rita right after this sets up how she would teach the parable, she writes:

Actualization:

- Students will explain the main New Testament narratives. In that context, this is a relevant story (It shows what Christianity really is about).
- Luke has a social perspective in his writings. This can be used with students on the intermediate level (level 4-6) who learn about biblical texts
- What does it mean to forgive? Forgiveness is important in Christianity.
- The love of parents for their children.
- Jealousy – envy. Does my mother/father love my siblings more than me?
- Human dignity – all people have equal worth.

Aktualisering:

- Elevene skal gjøre rede for sentrale nytestamentlige fortellinger. Dette er i denne sammenhengen en aktuell fortelling (Viser hva kr.dommen egentlig går ut på).
- Lukas har et sosialt perspektiv i sine skrifter. Kan brukes når elevene på mellomtrinnet skal lære om bibelens skrifter.
- Hva betyr det å tilgi? Tilgivelse viktig i kristendommen.
- Foreldrenes kjærlighet til barna sine.
- Sjalousi – misunnelse. Er mor/far mer glad i søsknene mine enn meg?
- Menneskeverd – alle mennesker er like mye verd.

In these points there are no direct references to the father-God analogy, though I see that it most probably will be covered in the first one and what she puts in parenthesis: “(It shows what Christianity really is about).” In the following interview sequence I tried to hint what I identified as a change of focus:

In your actualization you emphasize the social perspective. Do you think that is most prominent in this story?

*No! (clearly not)*

Or do you not think that way?

*(laughs a little) No, you know, I sat and discussed that with myself.*

Yes

*He is not sick, he is not poor, he is not (pause) although he became poor .... I thought that this is not the typical story to Luke.*

It stands out a little?

*It stands out a little.*

I din aktualisering så legger du vekt på det sosiale perspektivet. Tenker du at det er mest fremtredende i denne fortellingen?

*Nei! (opplagt nei)*

Eller tenker du ikke det?

*(små latter) Nei, vet du at det satt jeg og diskuterte med meg selv*

Ja

*For han er ikke syk, han er ikke fattig, han er ikke (pause) han ble jo fattig da .... Det er ikke typisk fortelling for Lukas, tenkte jeg.*

Den skiller seg litt ut?

*Den skiller seg litt ut.*

Though confirming that *The Prodigal Son* “stands out a little” in Luke’s Gospel, as a text that is primarily about man’s relation to God, an interpersonal and ethical reading of the parable takes over and largely leaves out the analogy when the parable is brought into a pedagogical context. This change of focus, however, does not happen without Rita’s awareness and cognizance:

*If you are to succeed in RE as an RE teacher, it is not so much about being the most thoughtful theologian, to put it that way, because I know I am not that. But the most important thing is to do it in a way which catches the students’ interest.*

*Hvis du skal lykkes i RLE som RLE-lærer, så er det kanskje ikke det å være denne her mest dype teologen, for å si det slik, for det vet jeg at det er ikke jeg. Men det å gjøre det slik at elevene fatter interesse for det, det tror jeg er det viktigste.*

For Rita, then, this change is based on what she assumes will keep the students’ interest. This overrules, as I read Rita, to convey “what Christianity really is about.” I find a similar process of adjustment in Anne’s thinking when she says that “I would concentrate on what they (i.e.



the students) find most interesting,” although she more than Rita will make sure that “even with her youngest students”<sup>201</sup> she would touch upon the more religious aspects of the parable.

Karianne is the teacher, as we can recollect from Part I, who more than any other teacher underlines the father-God analogy. She even questions the relevance of an illustrative reading all together, leaving it to be relevant only in the relationship between the two brothers (see p. 105). Yet, when the issue of teaching came up, even in her case interpersonal relations and ethical values were brought to the center of attention. And most prominently so forgiveness, an element she does not mention in the text of reflection, in order to avoid, as I understand her, the perception that there is an equivalence between God’s forgiveness and man’s forgiveness.

Having said this, Karianne represents, however, one of the teachers who, like Marie, Elin and Elise, maintain a focus on the father-God analogy in her pedagogical reasoning. By taking Rembrandt’s painting *The Prodigal Son* as a point of departure, and that on all levels in primary school, she sees an opportunity to immerse oneself in what the parable “really is all about.”<sup>202</sup> This is, Karianne claims, even possible on the first levels in primary school:

So what you are thinking is that you would most obviously focus on the father-son relationship, the father as God.	Så du tenker her da at du helt klart ville fokusert på far-sønn relasjonen, far som Gud.
Yes.	Ja.
More than the interpersonal aspects?	Mer enn dette mellommenneskelige?
Yes, well in elementary school I would probably have focused more on the interpersonal, but I also believe that children would sense that the father is God, in this story.	Ja, altså i småskolen så ville jeg nok tatt mer det mellommenneskelige, men jeg tror også at barn ville fornemme at far her er Gud, i denne historien.

Even though I find Karianne to more equate the illustrative and the analogous in her approach, she appears, if I compare her to Rita and to some extent also Anne, not willing to abandon what she considers is the essence of the parable. The crucial point for Karianne is not what “catches the students’ interest,” as Rita puts it, but to adjust the teaching to a level where the students can “sense” the essence of the parable, “that the father is God.”

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<sup>201</sup> Translated from “jeg ville vel tatt mest tak i det de synes var interessant” and “selv med de minste elevene.”

<sup>202</sup> Translated from “egentlig dreier seg om.”

#### 4.3.4 Summary

The typologies from Part I are continued in Part II. Thus it may look as if I make it too easy for myself, and that I am pushing the responses into a framework that does not correspond to or bring forth the true complexity of the material. Obviously, the teachers cannot have identical *Concepts of Christianity* and *Concepts of RE*, or not to speak of identical *Background and experiences*. And I must admit that in some instances it is challenging to uphold this structure in the analysis, something I will illuminate with several examples. Still, I will argue that the continuation of the typologies is what best brings forth the characteristic features of the material, now described from the perspective of the teachers' "interpretive strategies." Certainly, a continuation of typologies was not planned from the beginning. It is rather a result of what I find to be a powerful general feature in the material: consistency. Again I find that Terje and Peter stand out as exceptions, Hanne and Karianne can be grouped together, and that Marie, Elise, Rita, Elin and Anne continue to cluster. The table on the next page shows what I find to be the extract of the nine RE teachers' responses with regard to their "interpretive strategies" (same color, same typology):

Table: The “interpretive strategies” of the RE teachers

Category/ Teacher	Concepts of Christianity	Background and experiences	Concepts of RE
<b>Rita</b>	God as love, unconditional forgiveness Repentance and conversion: moral focus	Christian; childhood faith, devoted Situative: “parent mode,” “teacher mode”	Tendency: from analogy to illustrative focus Focus: “what catches the students’ interest”
<b>Hanne</b>	God-man relation Faith, trust: “a condition,” “a matter of being home” (cf. Church)	Ambivalent to the Church Personal relation: “The Jesus figure hits me right in the stomach,” tears	Not mentioned in text of reflection Surprised when asked – incoherent response
<b>Karianne</b>	God-man relation Faith, trust – matter of being home (cf. Church) Dogmatic: atonement (objective)	Catholic, devoted; concept of the last supper, saints, passionate	Tendency: to balance the analogous and illustrative, but emphasis on analogy
<b>Anne</b>	God as love, unconditional forgiveness Repentance and conversion: moral focus Dogmatic: atonement (objective)	Objective approach vs her own “personal interpretation”. Yet “us,” “we,” and preacher’s voice	Not mentioned in text of reflection Analogy, with ethical and moral content “prepare a collection of parables the kids can take along”
<b>Elise</b>	God as love, unconditional forgiveness Repentance and conversion: moral focus Dogmatic: atonement (objective)	Christian background, devoted: “what I have always thought” Emotional: “powerful text”	Analogy in focus (explicit goals) Frustration: comparative approach Uncertainty: students’ attitudes: “resist a lot”
<b>Marie</b>	God as love, unconditional forgiveness Repentance and conversion: moral focus	Christian background inside outside “us” and “we,” passionate	Analogy in focus: “it must be included!” “The kids like to wonder, to talk about God.” Focus: “that God loves us”
<b>Peter</b>	Christian values: forgiveness, neighboring love Jesus: ethical ideal and counselor Church: keeper and provider of ethical ideals	“I am not a devoted Christian” Own life experiences: attachment and devotion to the Christian values Situative: teaching <i>The Prodigal Son</i>	Philosophical approach: “let the students find the answers” If challenged on the ethical content: “I don’t think I would have been afraid to refer to examples or name my examples”
<b>Elin</b>	God as love, unconditional forgiveness Repentance and conversion: moral focus	Christian, devoted. Reads her Bible Situative: reflecting on her teaching <i>The Prodigal Son</i>	Didactical reflection report Analogy in focus (explicit goals) Frustration: own teaching, comparative approach Uncertain RE role: recurrent reforms in RE Narrative approach as liberating
<b>Terje</b>	Transcendent: relevant only for people of faith. Immanent: interesting and relevant for all	Own religious studies: lack of immanent focus Fatherhood: ideals to strive for vs reality to discuss	Transcendent content: “too abstract” and “devotional” Immanent content: will maintain the core message

### *Typology 1 (Terje)*

Terje's 1) *Concept of Christianity*, 2) *Background and experiences*, and 3) *Concept of RE* all point in the same direction and thus reflect that he has built up a consistent "interpretive strategy." According to Terje himself, "It all depends on your point of view!" Although he is not explicit about his personal standing concerning faith, a distinct point of view comes to expression in a powerful way.

First, Christianity and the narratives of the Bible are only interesting, Terje claims, when they speak into the immanent world of man. Whereas God or the traditional Christian doctrines of faith as sole expressions of the transcendent have no relevance to the general public. Thus, Christianity, as it appears from Terje's point of view, is caught up within its communities of faith, solely concerned with "the divine sphere" and also "the inhuman sphere." To be relevant, Christianity needs to step out and also down from faith in the otherworldly and its ideals, and speak into the reality of man and discuss how the "highly topical" message of *The Prodigal Son* – "the love that is unconditional" and "grace" – looks from below, from man's perspective.

Second, Terje's academic studies of religion and role as father, and also what he sees in all human conduct, contribute to bolster his immanent viewpoint. It is the impossibility of picturing anyone without selfish inclinations "to constantly stick to what is good," and to escape the basic motivation of "reward," which leads him to ask what truly must lie beneath the father's "unconditional love" and "grace." Although Terje emphasizes that these latter ideals are worth striving for, they surely do not reflect what is happening in real life. And it is reality, Terje strongly contends, that studies of religion and also the Church should be concerned about.

Third, Terje claims that to focus on the transcendent is not only irrelevant but also "unreasonable" because it would imply "abstract reasoning" that is way beyond the reach of his students. More critically and principally, he argues that a transcendental focus would inevitably involve preaching. But, as Terje perceives it, to rule out talk about God and the transcendent will not result in an omission or neglect of the core message of the parable. He says: "You don't need to use anything else than the human dimension of this story to get your

message across.”<sup>203</sup> An immanent viewpoint, therefore, perfectly fits in with his didactical reasoning.

This exclusive and consistent thinking and argumentation throughout Terje’s response reveals a powerful “interpretive strategy,” more than that, an agenda. This agenda did not have to be dug or teased out in the interview, but came to full expression in Terje’s proclamation of how studies of religion, the Church and also teachers of RE, should translate the transcendental aspects of not only *The Prodigal Son* but religion per se into intelligible psychological drama.

### *Typology 2 (Peter)*

As in typology 1, I find that Peter’s 1) *Concept of Christianity*, his 2) *Background and experiences*, and 3) *Concept of RE*, represent a consistent “interpretive strategy.”

First, to Peter, Christianity is primarily about ethics. When its key values are challenged, which he exemplifies by referring to the current discussion in the Norwegian Church concerning gay rights, the very basis of Christianity is threatened, and thereby also the basis of the Church. This firm conviction about what Christianity and the Church are and should be about is underpinned by his perception of Jesus as an ethical model and “the counselor of his time,” the one who embraced all “no matter what” in words and in deeds.

Second, ethics is also what Peter brings up from his background and his present experiences, more specifically through being exposed to or not exposed to the forgiveness and neighboring love which are fundamentally unconditional and all-embracing. This indicates that, although he positions himself outside the Church as a community of faith by underlining that “I am not a devoted Christian,” he appears strongly connected to Jesus as an ethical ideal, and also attached to the Church as the provider and keeper of Christian values.

Third, to convey the essence of Christian values naturally lies at the center of Peter’s didactical thinking. He therefore omits, though without being consciously aware of it, the whole discussion of how to deal with the religious content of *The Prodigal Son*. But acknowledging that teaching ethics can slip into the form of moralism, he brings up the issue in another way. He finds the solution to the problem in the “philosophical approach” and also in the example of Jesus’ teaching, which both follow the principle that “the students

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<sup>203</sup> Translated from “Du behøver ikke bruke noe annet enn den menneskelige dimensjonen i denne fortellingen og allikevel få frem budskapet.”

themselves shall find the answers.” This methodology and principle seem to work, however, only as long as no one brings up contesting ideas. If that happens, Peter says, “I don’t think I would have been afraid to refer to examples or name my examples.” His personal conviction in certain situations therefore seems to make him lose sight of his principle. This indicates that also in Peter’s response, there emerges a powerful argument. Although not as articulated as in Terje’s response, it is apparent that Peter too reveals an agenda that permeates his “interpretive strategy.”

### *Typology 3 (Hanne and Karianne)*

With reference to all three categories of Part II, Karianne and Hanne’s responses again look very dissimilar. To illustrate, Karianne applies in part a dogmatic approach, referring to the atonement and the sacrificial role of Jesus in order to illuminate the deeper meaning of “the fatted calf.” And to develop this further, she brings in her Catholic faith and the concept of the last supper. For her it is also meaningful to consider the Catholic notion of saints in order to better understand the role of the older brother in the parable.

Hanne, by contrast, never brings in dogmatic aspects. And what is more, her personal experiences have resulted in a rather ambivalent relationship to the Church. Despite these apparent differences, there are strong corresponding links that I find more pervasive.

First, in their concepts of Christianity, both Hanne and Karianne center their attention on the God-man relation. And clearly, the essence of this relation is illuminated in *The Prodigal Son*. Though living contrasted lives and struggling with different issues, the two brothers share the same challenge: to relate to God with trust and faith. Karianne illustrates this by comparing the older brother with the life of the saints; even those you presume live in accordance with the will of God and also in a most intimate relationship to God, face this challenge. And what puzzles Karianne is that they face this challenge more than any others, even more than the ones who break every possible rule. Thus, the essence of Christianity, as Hanne and Karianne comprehend it, cuts across visible markers and borders such as moral conduct and formal religious affiliation. This indicates, as I read them, that both distinguish between faith as a subjective and mental state of being, “a state of being, an existence,” as Hanne puts it, and belief as bound to a certain place and a community which incorporate norms and rules into its system of faith.

Second, also in Hanne and Karianne's diverging backgrounds and experiences, I find a strong unifying thread. Both express what they find is the essence of the parable, and particularly so Hanne, who is moved to tears and says that "The Jesus-figure hits me right in the stomach." Karianne does not become emotional in the same way, but she expressed herself with passion and with forceful emphasis: "God is infinite love, infinite patience, God waits on us, he does not force his way in." Though Karianne, as opposed to Hanne, does not talk about her faith, she reads and practices within a Catholic context that is articulate and open about such experiences (cf. the saints). Certainly, Hanne does not have the same experiences, but she has been pondering on "the Jesus-figure" and the Christian faith throughout her life. And being exposed to recurrent glimpses of what that is all about, she continues to ask questions, to be puzzled and also emotionally involved.

Third, when it comes to concepts of RE, things become complicated. Due to the fact that I decided to leave out Hanne's response (see footnote 191), I have to base this part on Karianne alone. This does not, however, pull the typology to pieces. The reason for this is that I find their shared notions described above to be too strong for such a conclusion. In addition, though I must admit that I rather assume this on a hunch, I believe that Hanne would not be too far from Karianne's reflections on this matter. Nothing in her comments indicates otherwise. This conclusion is also based on what I have previously referred to as the overall consistency in the material (see p. 141).

Karianne's concept of RE is characterized by two features. First, within the context of teaching, Karianne considerably upgrades the relevance of the interpersonal and ethical aspects of the parable. From viewing interpersonal matters as something peripheral, as only relevant "between the two brothers," this has now become a key issue, at least as important as the God-man analogy. However, and second, she never loses sight of what she perceives is the essence of the parable. And, as I read Karianne, it is her students' ability in abstract reasoning which is the decisive factor. Though claiming that even her youngest students "would sense that the father is God in this story," she would primarily refer to the interpersonal and illustrative aspects of the parable in the early stages in primary school. Further up, she would focus on the analogy and the religious content.

#### *Typology 4 (Marie, Elin, Rita, Elise and Anne)*

The unifying elements in this typology are found in the teachers' 1) *Concepts of Christianity* and 2) *Background and experiences*. As in typology 3, it is *Concepts of RE* that causes the main challenges.

First, the teachers in this typology all take *The Prodigal Son* to represent the ultimate Christian conversion story, which is encapsulated in Elise's words: "God is love, and he forgives the one who 'repents'." Certainly, similar statements are present in all the responses, but I find that the teachers in this typology both stress and understand the last part of this – "the one who 'repents'" – in a distinct way. Viewed exclusively from the perspective of the prodigal son, to repent is about abstaining and withdrawing from the immoral life of the outside world and to start living like the older "Christian" brother, a "godly life" in accordance with the "will of God" within the bounded community of Christian faith – the Church. So what I find makes up a powerful and influential "interpretive strategy" in this typology is a concept of conversion and also an image of the Church that are strongly associated with moral traits and markers.

Second, as I read the teachers in this typology, they signal positive and also personal relations to Christianity and the Church. They all appear to have a Christian upbringing which they have more or less incorporated throughout adulthood. Some speak frankly about this while others are more discreet but still reveal their personal affiliation by using 'insider' terms such as "us" and "we," even adopting a preacher's voice, as I found in Anne's case. Though there certainly are differences, I find that this common 'inside' position has a profound impact on their "interpretive strategies."

Third, although the teachers agree on the essence of *The Prodigal Son*, the variations are considerable when it comes to applying the parable in a pedagogical context. And I must admit it is impossible to find a unifying pattern. But for the same reasons as in typology 3, this does not undermine the typology. In the following I will therefore describe the variations in concepts of RE I find in this typology.

One variant is Marie, who emphasizes strongly that the religious content is most important, and "it must be included!", and also Elise, who appears steadfast despite having students who "resist a lot." I find a different variant in Rita and Anne's responses. Both of them seem to have a more pragmatic approach, which entails, in Rita's words, downplaying "what



Christianity really is about,” for the sake of doing it “in a way which catches the students’ interest.” What lies implicit in this is the assumption that it is the interpersonal and ethical aspects that first catch the students’ interest, not the religious content.

Elin stands out as the one who deals most extensively with the issue. She draws the picture of an uncertain and often frustrated group of RE teachers, a situation which she blames on two things: first, the many reforms in RE, which has resulted in a continuing unresolved situation, and second, the overall dominance of the comparative approach. As Elin perceives it, together these two have made it difficult for RE teachers to immerse themselves confidently in one religion at a time. But the way out of this, as she happily discovers while working with *The Prodigal Son*, is the narrative approach. Founding the teaching on the premises of the narrative itself will give the RE teachers the “alibi” to plunge deep into the true essence of Christianity, into “what Jesus means,” as Elin puts it.

#### **4.4 Part III: The RE teacher responses in a transactional perspective**

The point of departure for stage three of the analysis is the generated typologies of Part I and Part II. With these extracts of key findings I will describe what I find are the most characteristic transactions within each typology.

As the titles of the following chapters show, I have now given each typology a name: the immanent, the ethical, the dialogical, and the Christian approach. The names designate what I find to be the dominant feature, or the “unifying principle” as Rosenblatt refers to it (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 90), when the typologies of Part I and Part II come together in the process of transaction. Being now in the phase of moving closer to the chapter *Discussion*, this contributes to lift the latter part of the analysis from a personal to a thematic and general level. But still, due to the qualitative design of the study, it is the distinct voice of every teacher that expresses the “unifying principles” or main themes in the transactions.

##### **4.4.1 Transactions in Typologi 1 – the immanent approach**

In Part II I described how Terje’s background in studies of religion, past and present experiences and also his concept of Christianity, in other words, everything from his own “reservoir” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 90), tell him that an immanent approach is the only way the parable can speak with sense and credibility into the world of human beings. And additionally, in Terje’s basic RE thinking, an immanent approach is the only way to address the parable in the classroom. In his response, therefore, Terje advocates strongly and consistently for a specific reading and a pedagogical application of *The Prodigal Son*. More than that, I will say that Terje emerges with a specific agenda which can be traced throughout his argumentation. This is most vividly expressed when he points to the common failure of studies of religion and the Church to address immanent issues. All this, then, tells me that this typology has an utterly strong “interpretive strategy” which in a profound way constrains the transactional process. This, however, does not rule out the role of *The Prodigal Son’s* textual structures. On the contrary, a transactional analysis will show that a particular application and selection of verbal cues actively and decisively support and build up the immanent argument.

The point of departure in Terje's transaction with *The Prodigal Son* is this: the parable should be read as a family drama. This allows Terje to center the attention on the intrigues and conflicts between the three characters and lead to an understanding that is rather far from that of the other teachers. Most illustrative is the way he pulls the father down from the throne of godliness and ethical perfection by questioning his motives and character: "How far-reaching is the grace?"

This question leads the attention towards everything between the lines which triggers the reader to go deep into what are the evident interpersonal intrigues and conflicts. These are the structures, according to Terje, that bring out the psychological potential of the parable and make the reader not only pursue the predictable path of the prodigal son's happy homecoming, but to stop up and ask: "What did it cost?" and even question his rationale: "Was it worth it to go back home?"

Terje's approach to the final paragraph underlines the relevance of raising more questions similar to those above. And clearly, the structures of cutting techniques and negation contribute significantly to moving the scene shift from the transcendental and idealistic and towards the underlying intrigues and conflicts. If not spotted earlier, the parable is most definitely now "in the human sphere." And there it stays, thanks to the open ending which indicates for Terje that this is not a story with a happy ending. Indeed, colored by his insistence on that full redemption and unconditional forgiveness is unattainable, Terje foresees that when the dust settles after the turmoil and upheaval, the future will show that nothing of fundamental transformative significance has occurred. Although finally home, the family and also the surroundings will make sure that the youngest son be remembered as the one time prodigal wrongdoer of a son. Neither will the oldest get full relief of his pent-up frustration and anger because of the father's lack of empathy. The change worth noting for Terje is the position of the father, as the one who regained control over the family and who now "is basking in the glory" and emerges as "the winner." Thus, as a drama, *The Prodigal Son* is basically driven by the quest for personal gain and the reestablishment of psychological and social stability, not redemption and renewal.

An exclusively immanent approach to *The Prodigal Son* seems to necessitate not only a dramaturgical application but also a specific selection of textual structures that fit this approach. This happens with Terje being fully conscious, as he several times demonstrates

knowledge of more common or traditional readings and interpretations of *The Prodigal Son*. In his comments about what he finds “quite interesting,” he reveals a disregard and also little interest in the analogous and illustrative aspects of the parable. The same applies for the text’s historical context and the role of Jesus as historical narrator. As I read Terje, to elaborate any further on transcendental or any historical aspects – although he gives the impression of being more than capable of doing it – would undermine his immanent project.

Thus, Terje’s transaction with *The Prodigal Son* is not characterized by “readjustment of meaning,” “revision of framework” or “rereading” based on new discoveries or addressing conflicting aspects (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). Instead I find a tight structure which fits and builds up a certain argument. So what from the outset may look like an innovative and highly aesthetic response through raising questions of a psychological character that are far from the other teachers’ mind, and thus seemingly a lively dialogue between the reader and the text, appears instead rather selective, rigidly constrained and also closed. This, I will argue, brings the immanent approach far over to the “efferent” side of Rosenblatt’s “reader continuum” (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47).

#### **4.4.2 Transactions in Typologi 2 – the ethical approach**

Also in typology 2 I find that background, past and present experiences, and concept of Christianity all guide the response in one direction. This indicates that an ethical approach, as represented by Peter, is similarly affected by a strong and visible reader position that profoundly constrains the transactional process. But compared to Terje, I find Peter less oriented about other potential readings and interpretations. In other words, ethics is all he sees, it is not consciously selected from a variety of options. The ethical approach, therefore, does not mirror a parallel thought out agenda. However, I will argue that the ethical mindset of Peter, as this also runs throughout and dominates his didactical reasoning and erupts in a strong argument when he discusses gay rights in the Church, has a comparable all-pervasive effect. In the way he distinguishes between his not being “a devoted Christian” but favoring the Christian ethical ideals, he puts a strong personal mark on his “interpretive strategy.” A transactional analysis will show that a particular selection and application of verbal cues actively and decisively contribute to strengthening and build up the ethical argument.

To Peter, everything in *The Prodigal Son*, in fact, everything in all the parables of the NT, points in the direction of ethics. Thus, to Peter, the most decisive verbal cue is the illustrative, that *The Prodigal Son* is to be read as an example story. The second prominent verbal cue is the identification of Jesus as historical narrator. Clearly, this concurrence of limiting the historical reasoning to the matter of Jesus as ethical ideal and “the counselor of his time,” and Jesus as the historical narrator, further strengthens the exclusively ethical approach. The third and final central verbal cue is the role of the characters – the two sons and the father – and the way these three play out and illustrate the struggle of all humans to live according to ethical ideals.

There is nothing in the parable that challenges Peter’s illustrative and ethical approach. Not even the sudden discovery of what he comes to acknowledge as the “all too obvious” father’s home-Church allegory makes him consider a “readjustment of meaning” or “revision of framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). But unlike the immanent approach of typology 1, the allegory is not disturbing the ethical mindset so that it has to be pushed out on the fringes of the interpretive framework. To illustrate, when Peter rereads the parable based on the allegory, it is the Church as the all-embracing ideal community he envisions. In his own words: “to be under the wings of Jesus and God” is a place where “there is room for all ... all religions [and] all ways of thinking.” As one can see, an exclusively ethical approach imposes a consistent illustrative application on all of *The Prodigal Son*’s verbal cues.

The example above illustrates that Peter does not seem to consciously select and omit textual structures. Instead, the verbal cues become – reflexively it seems – adapted to fit his ethical mindset. The result is as equally one-theme oriented as is the immanent approach. Thus, also the ethical approach, what may also look like a predominantly “aesthetic” transaction, eagerly raising ethical questions about present actuality and also of great personal concern, appears rather rigidly constrained and closed. The authority of the ethical “interpretive strategy,” which also emerges powerfully in Peter’s didactical reasoning, creates therefore an impression of a transactional process that is primarily of the “efferent” kind (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47).

#### 4.4.3 Transactions in Typologi 3 – the dialogical approach

With the term *dialogical*, I signal that this typology stands out from the other typologies. The main feature of this approach is not a powerful and constraining “interpretive strategy,” but a more visibly shifting emphasis on the reader and the text, and also a more collaborative and equal relationship between the two. In other words, I find that there is a constant dialogue between textual elements and reader elements.<sup>204</sup>

With the statement “Is there any other way to understand this text?” Karianne expresses a strong and basic text-centeredness. From the outset this may seem just as dominant as the reader-centered approaches of the other typologies. But text-centeredness does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the text guides towards complete and finalized readings. And what is more, neither does it necessarily rule out the role of the reader. A transactional analysis will show that this typology is characterized by a reader who draws upon a broad range of textual structures that guide and invite a reader who is more than willing to bring his or her life-stories into the interpretive event.

The point of departure of the dialogical approach is the analogous structures of *The Prodigal Son*, and the notion that the father reveals the true nature of God and the God-man relation. If this is omitted or neglected, Hanne comments, you are left with a “flat” story, clearly indicating that an interpersonal reading of the ethical or the immanent kind will miss the essential meaning of the parable. More than that, potential readings will be left undiscovered because, as the dialogical responses illustrate, it is the analogous structures which create space for multiple readings.

The two brothers and their relation to the father play an essential role in triggering multiple readings. The two sons enact the basic human experience that we all drift in “a condition,” as Hanne puts it, between faith, doubt and disbelief, or between trust and mistrust. And similarly to the immanent approach, it is the negation and the open ending of the last paragraph that most obviously challenges and invites all readers to bring their own self into dialogue with the parable and place themselves somewhere on the continuum between the prodigal and the homebound son. And this is also what Karianne and Hanne are doing, as they express strong

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<sup>204</sup> The term *dialogical* is chosen to emphasize the conversational feature of Hanne and Karianne’s responses to *The Prodigal Son*.

emotional involvement, even to the point of bursting into tears, when they write and speak about the challenge of relating to God with faith and what it means to be truly home.

This personal and emotional aspect points to a prominent subjective feature in the dialogical approach. The subjectivity, however, does not determine the outcome of the dialogue but serves instead to open it up and thus is an essential asset that triggers the dialogue. To illustrate this, I will describe how their backgrounds, concepts of Christianity, and then more specifically, their concepts of Church, are brought in and affect the transactional process.

Though neither Karianne nor Hanne are strangers to thinking of the father's home as an allegory of the Christian community and the Church, it is not an inside-outside dichotomy which dominates the imageries. In Karianne's case, and then opposed to what one might expect, I find that her Catholic background and faith contribute to the opposite. For instance, her reflections about the saints bring out the idea that to be a prodigal and lost is not necessarily an opposite situation to that of staying home as presumably a well-established insider. Rather, a precondition for the younger brother's decision to leave as well as to return home was, as Karianne perceives it, that "he demonstrates a basic trust." And this makes Karianne wonder: "Is it easier to believe for one who comes to a sudden and distinct conversion than for the one who always wanders near God?" As one can see, Karianne's background and experiences lead to searching questions that furnish a multi-faceted image of the two brothers and thus opens up for new ways of interpreting the parable.

Turning to Hanne and her opposition to the institutionalized Church (The Norwegian Church), I find that she too develops an image running counter to a rigid inside-outside dichotomy. Her own journey in the landscape of faith and disbelief has given her the thought that there are various ways of identifying with the father and the father's home. In Hanne's argumentation, "to be home" is not about being at a specific location, having a formal affiliation, or acting according to a set of norms, but a matter of personal relation and faith.

Again, this emphasis on personal relation and faith points toward a strong subjectivity in the dialogical approach. And as I see it, the omission of historical context and the absence of historical-critical reasoning that is noticeable also in this typology serve to highlight this even more, as history can have an objectifying and distancing effect. This, however, does not undermine what has been said above about the typology's text-centeredness, as this guides the reading and thus sets limits for the subjective aspect. This balancing between, on the one

hand, the personal and subjective, and on the other hand, key textual structures, opens up for a dialogue where a reader continuously asks questions and engages in “rereading” and “readjustment of meaning,” and also, then, within certain boundaries, a dialogue which can lead to a “revision of framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). In the dialogical approach, therefore, and that in contrast to the other typologies, there appears to be no finalized or complete readings. The main characteristic of the dialogical approach is a continuous and dynamic relation between various elements of the text and various aspects of the subjective reader, and thus a transaction of both the “efferent” and the “aesthetic” kind (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47).

#### **4.4.4 Transactions in Typology 4 – the Christian approach**

The term *Christian* indicates that it is the teachers’ background and past and present affiliation with Christianity and the Church which largely influence the transactions in this typology. Although all the teachers of this typology utter personal affection for the content and the message of the parable, the subjectivity and the aesthetic aspects appear limited to the associations provided by, using Fish’s terms, the “authority” of the Christian “interpretive community.” References to “how I was brought up” and “how I always have been thinking about these things,” give the impression that the teachers primarily carry out what a larger community guides and allows them to see. A transactional analysis will show, similarly to the immanent and the ethical approach, that a particular selection and application of verbal cues actively and decisively contribute to strengthen and build up the Christian argument. I will refer to this transactional process as Christian allegorization. However, it is interesting to note that the teachers of the Christian approach do not end up with a clear and unambiguous didactical argument, as was the case in the immanent and the ethical approach. The span of didactical reflections, and also the uncertainty and frustration expressed by some of these teachers, indicate that these teachers are particularly concerned and sensitive about the challenges of teaching religious content in RE classrooms.

At a first look it seems that the Christian approach has most in common with the dialogical approach. This is based on the fact that both center the attention on the father-God analogy and the God-man relation. Unquestionably, for all these teachers the father reveals the nature of God, his love and unconditional forgiveness, and the notion that God “forgives the one who



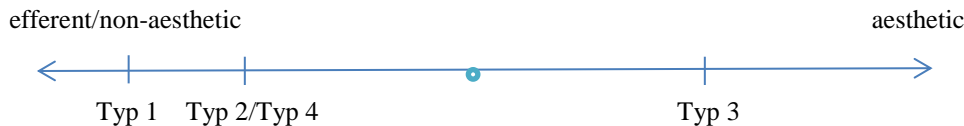
‘repents’.” But in these same words it is possible to glimpse the major divergence between the two typologies. What characterizes the Christian approach is the focus on the “one who ‘repents’,” that is, the youngest son. Clearly, promoted as the key character, the youngest son is being portrayed within the classic image of Christian redemption and conversion, as the archetype of the one who leaves God, ruins his life and returns home as a regretful sinner. Within this imagery the homebound older brother is given a minor and static role, though the role of being his brother’s counterpart. The consequence of this is that the Christian approach, and that in contrast to the dialogical approach, establishes a dichotomy that is based on the different life-stories and also the different life-styles of the two brothers. A Christian allegorization of this kind, therefore, centers the attention on ethical character and moral conduct.

The dichotomy is further supported by what all the teachers of this typology view as the all too obvious father’s home-Church allegory. According to the teachers, the two brothers of the story clearly fit the imagery of the insider and the outsider, contrasting the “sinner” who commits the sin of “egoism” and “pleasure,” with the “baptized” and “Christian” older brother who is regarded as living a “godly” or “pure life.” Obviously, to be inside the Church is a matter of demonstrating ethical character and right moral conduct.

The impact of Christian allegorization imposes, then, a specific application of the parable’s textual structures. But as opposed to the immanent approach and more in line with the ethical approach, Christian allegorization does not lead to a conscious omission of textual structures but rather a reflexive adaption of structures that fits this framework. Most illustrative is the way the last paragraph is adapted into the framework. Perceiving the text to be all about the prodigal son’s journey back to the Christian community of faith, the older brother’s angry reaction is either downplayed, made irrelevant, or regarded as inappropriate. Rita gives words to the power of Christian allegorization when she says that she is puzzled by the older brother’s jealousy, as this certainly does not fit what is expected of people inside a Christian community. Though puzzled, this does not cause “readjustment of meaning” or “revision of framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). The power of the Christian “interpretive community” and the practice of Christian allegorization prevent that from happening. And the result, therefore, is a transaction primarily of the “efferent” kind (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47).

#### 4.4.5 Summary

I ended the descriptions of the four typologies by placing them between the “efferent”/“non-aesthetic” and the “aesthetic” pole on Rosenblatt’s “reader continuum” (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 22-47). I find that this sums up well the general characteristics of the typologies, that is, what the RE teachers are doing when they interpret *The Prodigal Son*. The figure below illustrates their positions.



Typology 1 – the immanent approach – is placed closest to the efferent pole. The reason for this is the strong immanent agenda which I find runs throughout the approach, also throughout the didactical reasoning. Clearly, an exclusive and consistent immanent interpretive framework profoundly guides and constrains the application and also the selection of the textual structures of *The Prodigal Son*. The aesthetic aspects operate only within the boundaries of reading the parable as an immanent drama. Certainly, this opens up for interesting and challenging questions, but not for “rereading” and “readjustment of meaning” which could end in “revision of framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). The immanent agenda is too dominant and all-pervasive for that to happen.

Typology 2 and 4 – the ethical and the Christian approach – are placed on the same spot, both on the efferent side of the continuum. I find that the primary attention and the direction of these two typologies reflect powerful “interpretive strategies” although not as articulated as in typology 1, the immanent approach. In the ethical approach, ethics is all that is being seen, while what the teachers of the Christian approach see is limited to the framework of Christian allegorization. Thus, in both these typologies textual structures are not strategically selected or omitted. Instead everything they bring in is reflexively adapted to fit what the frameworks allow them to see. Still, the space for aesthetic reading seems to be equally limited in these typologies, as “rereading” and “readjustment of meaning” can be made only within the boundaries of a rigid ethical and a rigid Christian interpretive framework. Consequently, a “revision of framework” is also in these two typologies highly unlikely (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54).

Typology 3 – the dialogical approach – is placed rather far out on the aesthetic side of the continuum. This to emphasize the prominent role of the subjective reader and also how the structures of the text, in particular the analogy, the characters, the negation, and the cutting techniques, trigger a personal involvement. Although the theme is delimited to the issue of faith and the God-man relation, the textual structures open up for a range of identifications and position-making; between that of being lost and homebound. I find that this concentration on the God-man analogy and the text’s guidance towards involvement of the reader is the basis of the dialogue. But it is only when a subjective and open reader becomes involved, a reader who challenges the text with his or her own background and experiences, that an aesthetic text-reader dialogue is evolving, a dialogue that “constantly vibrates between the pole of the text and the pole of his own responses to it” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). Clearly, readers applying a dialogical approach are willing, though within the boundaries of what the analogous structures allow, to open up for “rereading” and “readjustment of meaning” and consequently also, then, to challenge their own “interpretive framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54).

From these empirical findings based on transactional reader-response analyses, I will now move to the chapter *Discussion* and seek to give reasons for the claim presented in the introduction: It is by studying the influences in the “interpretive processes” and how they are negotiated by RE teachers in particular “literacy events” (Heath, 1981, p. 93), that it is possible to say something meaningful and significant about RE teachers’ religious literacy.



# 5. Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is in two parts. In the first part I will discuss the findings in the light of Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Louise Rosenblatt's theories, with emphasis on the latter, and their criteria of validity in interpretation. This may seem to bring the study to a normative discussion and then also towards normative assessments. The objective, however, is to use the criteria as a means to highlight the RE teachers as literary agents and discuss more profoundly the relation between *The Prodigal Son* and the RE teacher in the immanent, the ethical, the Christian, and the dialogical approach. Of course, this will lead me to ask critical questions and to reflect critically on the findings, but not to pursue and present conclusive assessments.

From a discussion on validity in interpretation and a more profound understanding of how the influences are negotiated in the RE teachers' "literacy events" (Heath, 1981, p. 93), I will then move to the theoretical discussion and see how the empirical findings of this study relate to and also challenge the dominant contemporary understanding of religious literacy in RE research.

## 5.2 The RE teachers' responses and the criteria of validity in interpretation

The criteria for valid interpretations will vary greatly depending on who you ask. This is certainly the case when Rosenblatt, Fish and Iser are referred to. Based on the chapter on *The theoretical perspective on RE teachers' responses* (see p. 29), one will generally and somewhat stereotypically expect that Iser brings in only textual criteria, Fish only reader criteria, and that Rosenblatt is somewhere in between. However, we need to look at this in more detail in order to create a basis for a balanced and thorough discussion.

Iser argues for the validating function of the text. Due to the fixed structure of the text and its inherent “*invariable codes*,” as opposed to the fluid and subjective nature of the reader’s “*variable codes*” (Iser, 1978, p. 93, italics added), Iser will say that the criteria of validity has to be decided on terms set by the text. Although Iser recognizes the field of “aesthetics of reception,” he finds it difficult to establish solid criteria on something that is essentially subjective and historically conditioned (Iser, 2006, p. 57).

As a guideline, Iser says that an interpretation needs to be “genre-bound” (Iser, 2000, p. 7). In concrete terms that means that a novel should not be read as a biography, and a parable not as a drama. In addition to all the specific “codes” with their origin in literary theory of stylistics and semantics, a valid interpretation also, Iser underlines, needs to take into account and cohere with “social and historical norms” and “the whole culture from which the text has emerged,” in short “extratextual reality” (Iser, 1978, p. 69). To omit this would result in ahistorical and detached interpretations.

This indicates, then, that when it comes to the issue of validity in interpretation, Iser stands on the shoulders of modern literary theory, which he extends from Schleiermacher’s biblical hermeneutics to the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur:

As long as it is a text that is to be understood ... the hermeneutic circle in all its variations from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur appears to be an adequate method of dealing with the liminal space (Iser, 2000, p. 7).

Turning to Fish, who claims that meaning-making is solely a human enterprise, he opposes the notion that validity can be based on textual structures and what a text inherently means.

Although Fish in his reader-centeredness contends that interpretations in principle are unlimited, he will not give the matter of validity over to the hands of every individual reader. In the article “What makes an interpretation acceptable?” he makes his point clear:

[W]hile there is no core of agreement *in* the text, there is a core of agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* the text. Nowhere is this set of acceptable ways written down, but it is a part of everyone’s knowledge of what it means to be operating within the literary institution as it is now constituted (Fish, 1980, pp. 342-343, italics original).

Fish’s main point is that since interpretation itself is based on socially acquired “interpretive strategies,” interpretation should be critically evaluated on social premises. This, of course, makes validity everything but fixed. Fish says: “What will, at any time, be recognized as literature is a function for a communal decision as to what will count as literature” (Fish, 1980, p. 10). Though impermanent by nature, validity proves itself as significant due to its presence as an integral part of the ongoing communal practice of interpretation.

Not surprisingly, Rosenblatt balances a text-centered and a reader-centered view also when it comes to the issue of validity. With regard to text-centeredness, she brings up “two prime criteria of validity”: one, “that the reader’s interpretation not to be contradicted by any element of the text,” and two, “that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 115). These criteria reflect a basic notion in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, that “the text itself” both “regulate[s]” and “leads the reader toward [a] self-corrective process” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11). Rosenblatt, therefore, does not object to the traditional approach in literary theory. She underlines, like Iser, that a valid interpretation is founded on recognizing and “preserving the importance of the text” and thus on textual “discipline” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 130). But Rosenblatt quickly adds that validity cannot be reduced to only a matter of acquiring the “fixed standard” of historical and literary knowledge (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). If that was the case, Rosenblatt claims that to read and interpret literary texts will be reduced to only carrying away a “literary history” or an “author’s biography” and thus be a response with low aesthetic value (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125). Viewing reading and interpretation as something essentially experienced, the role of textual structures or historical context has to be evaluated on aesthetic terms. Rosenblatt says: “Whatever knowledge or insight we might gain by nonaesthetic means will be valued *if it enhances the work-as-experienced*” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125, italics added).

Rosenblatt claims further that in a transactional perspective, the role of the reader, that is, the “personal factor in valid interpretation,” needs to be highlighted (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 144). A reader’s “stance,” for instance “personal acceptance or rejection ... personal pleasures or indifference,” will undoubtedly affect an interpretation and thus also its value and quality (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 158). Also the socio-cultural aspect of the “personal factor” must be taken into consideration, that all readers are “members of a particular culture,” viewed as widely as “the common western culture” or more narrowly as “subcultures ... groups with very different yardsticks of literary value” (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 152-153). However, and as Rosenblatt keeps coming back to, and which separates her from Fish, reading and interpretation are essentially individualistic activities, not communal. Thus, it is “the uniqueness that derives from the individual’s particular selecting-out from the cultural milieu” that needs to be valued, not cultures or subcultures per se (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 153).

Although Rosenblatt admits that the “personal factor” makes the criteria of validity “vague, amorphous, inconsistent” and also “implicit,” it should be regarded as essential (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 152). Like the textual constraints which “present limits or controls” on interpretation, Rosenblatt claims that “the personality and culture brought by the reader constitute another type of limitation” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). And as I read Rosenblatt, the validity of a “personal factor” rests on three criteria: first, Rosenblatt brings in, like Fish, communal criteria, saying that whatever the reader brings in is valued by a “cultural community with shared assumptions and criteria” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 144). Second, Rosenblatt focuses on the individual reader and his or her ability to be critical and “responsibly self-aware” of “the personality and culture brought by the reader” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). Rosenblatt underlines: “The more self-aware the reader, the more he will feel it necessary to critically scrutinize his own evocation of ‘the poem’ as a transaction between himself and the text” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). And third and finally, also the “personal factor” “will be valued *if it enhances the work-as-experienced*” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125, italics added). In other words, it must contribute to the literary experience.

A transactional view on validity balances, then, criteria of text-discipline on the one hand, and criteria of communal support, degree of personal involvement and critical self-awareness on the other. Thus, Rosenblatt brings the perspectives of Iser and Fish together, stressing the mutual contingency of text and reader. This brings about a concept of validity which, according to Rosenblatt,



liberates us from absolutist rejection of the reader, preserves the importance of the text, and permits a dynamic view of the text as an opportunity for ever new individual readings, yet readings that can be responsibly self-aware and disciplined (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 129-130).

I will now go over to discuss the four typologies based on these accounts of Iser, Fish and Rosenblatt's perspectives on validity. But before I discuss them separately, I will focus on a common feature which has been commented on several times in the chapter *Analyzing RE teacher responses*; the absence of historical context and historical-critical reasoning in the teachers' responses. As I read Iser and Rosenblatt, this has implications for validity.

### **5.2.1 The absence of historical context and historical-critical reasoning**

Some may ask: Why make such a big deal of something that is absent in the material? Some may also get the impression that I point to a weakness in the RE teachers' responses and make a normative judgment. As a general response to this, I will say that it is the nature of empirical studies to highlight surprises, which, of course, also springs from things *not* appearing.

However, this particular surprise, as I will come to below, may tell just as much about me as a researcher as about the material itself, and thus needs to be critically discussed on a broad basis.

Further, considering the influence of historical-critical reasoning in RE, as well as in theology and literary theory, I believe most readers familiar with the field will understand why this caught my attention. In fact, I believe I would have done a bad job if I had not recognized it and neglected it in the descriptions of the teachers' responses. And the proper place to elaborate on it is in the chapter *Discussion*, where theory will help to give a balanced and substantial view on the matter.

Whether I am making a normative judgment, brings my personal bias to the foreground. As RE educator and co-author of a New Testament textbook for RE teacher students (Kjørven & Lindboe, 2005), this blank spot in the teachers' responses caught my attention at a very early stage. And at first I must admit that I quickly and somewhat happily jumped to the conclusion that I had found solid proof of lack of religious literacy in the responses. But then, after immersing myself more in reader-response theory, and particularly in Rosenblatt's transactional theory, I had to change my normative and historically trained mindset. For to

study readers' responses, demands a genuine interest in the reader and a genuine interest in understanding the nature of the responses. Thus, I had to "be liberated," as Rosenblatt says about her own experience, from "strict training in the historical and critical disciplines of literary scholarship" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. x). A reader-response perspective on the absence of historical context triggered, therefore, a critical reflection regarding my own RE thinking and RE practice in teacher education. But more importantly concerning this particular study, it turned my focus towards what this study is essentially all about; it is an explorative and descriptive analysis of the RE teachers' responses to *The Prodigal Son* and a critical discussion of the findings.

So, then, what can a reader-response perspective on validity in interpretation tell me about the implications of the absence of historical context in the RE teachers' responses? First to Iser who talks about "historical thought systems" (Iser, 1978, p. 81). These "systems," Iser explains, help to "reshape familiar schemata to form a background for the process of communication," and also "provide a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized" (Iser, 1978, p. 81). Therefore, in Iser's view the historical context has a restricting function, as it provides a "framework" for interpretation. But it also has an aesthetic function which Iser bases on Gadamer's notion of "asymmetry" or "lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference" between a text and its readers (Iser, 1978, p. 163). It is the "asymmetry" which triggers communication, because a reader will always seek symmetry, in other words, seek meaning and build consistency.

With these two functions of the historical context absent, the responses appear essentially subjective and detached from the parable's history of origin. The teachers seem to reason this way: What's in it for me now, and what's in it for readers of our time, among them my RE students? Rather than the "asymmetry" between the history of the text and the history of the reader, it is the immediate associations of current relevance which trigger communication. This is apparent in the immanent approach, where any references to history, as I read Terje, would distance the reader from seeking the current relevance of *The Prodigal Son*. I find a similar thinking in the ethical approach where the primary idea is to connect the ideals of Jesus to present-day ethical discussions. The dialogical approach of Karianne and Hanne is also fundamentally geared towards the subjective and the present, as their focus is on how readers of today can identify with the two brothers' battles with faith. And finally, the Christian approach's application of Christian allegorization has the Church and Christianity of

today as points of reference, not the original Church at the time of the writing of Luke's Gospel.

Rosenblatt underlines that a reader needs to take the historical context into account, and that, she underlines, "[e]specially if it is a text of the past" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 124). Rosenblatt echoes Iser when she says that

[a]ll of the approaches of the literary historian become potentially relevant – textual study, semantic history, literary, biographical, and other types of history. All of these may aid the reader to limit himself to the horizon of the author and his time (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 124-125).

To ignore, then, for instance the role of the historical addressees of the parable and the socio-religious and cultural norms of the time will make a response look less disciplined. This does not imply, however, that the RE teachers lose *the* essential meaning of *The Prodigal Son*, as if this was identical with and restricted to a specific historical reading. Meaning, according to Rosenblatt, always has to be acquired by ever new streams of readers. Equally important to underline, therefore, is the aesthetic role of the historical context, as it increases the potential of more in-depth associations and interpretations. Thus, in Rosenblatt's understanding, there is no dichotomy between historical knowledge and an aesthetic approach, as both are essential to deepen the literary experience.

So, with reference to Rosenblatt and Iser, to omit the historical context of *The Prodigal Son* and not engage in historical-critical reasoning, clearly has negative consequence for validity. Not only is a major disciplining and structuring mechanism lacking, but also a major verbal source that has the potential to trigger communication and deepen the literary experience. But an important reminder at least for a historically trained reader like me, the absence of this does not imply that the responses lose all value and credibility. Other criteria, as I will come to next, appear to be at least as important.

### 5.2.2 The immanent approach on validity

I will argue that in the way Terje evokes dramaturgical structures by consciously omitting structures of the parable or downplaying them to be of little or no relevance, he ends up interpreting a different text: a drama instead of a parable. This change of genre certainly also affects meaning, based on the notion that “form and matter cannot be separated” and “that to change the form is to change the ‘meaning’” (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 90-91). Although Rosenblatt and also Iser will say that reading and interpretation involve selection, that “the selective process operates in weighting responses to the multiple possibilities,” this activity is limited to the “possibilities offered *by the text*” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 43, italics added). I find that the immanent approach goes beyond these limitations in the way it leaves out key structures of the parable and also actively implements structures of the psychological drama. Thus, I will argue that the “verbal basis” of the immanent approach appears weak.

Certainly, it is not unusual to refer to *The Prodigal Son* as a drama. In the book *The parables*, Brad H. Young uses the term frequently, and particularly so about *The Prodigal Son*. He talks about “the family drama” and “the action of the drama” (Young, 2012, pp. 130-131).

However, as I read Young, the term is not used in a genre-related way, but rather to highlight, first, the narrative features and scope of *The Prodigal Son* as a parable, and second, the intensity in the actions and in the interpersonal relations. In short, dramatic situations are unfolding and thus a dramatic story is being told. This does not overshadow the essential feature of the parable in the Jewish tradition, which Young describes in the following way: “The rabbinic parable illustrates its point by redescribing, in drama, the nature of God and human responses to his love” (Young, 2012, p. 3).

Thus, the way Terje leaves out everything that can draw the reader’s attention towards godliness and the transcendent is particularly problematic. In that way he pulls the parable out of its genre and also its historical and religious context, away from what Young refers to as a fundamental “God-consciousness” (Young, 2012, p. 5). Illustratively, it is from the perspective of the older brother, Terje argues that truth and realism comes into the story: there is no unconditional forgiveness or full redemption for the sins committed.

The questions which arise from the open ending are also telling for Terje’s dramaturgical turn. Terje does not primarily reflect on whether the older brother joined the party or not. Neither does he bring in the last and potentially redemptive words of the father; “all that is mine is

yours” (v. 31). Instead he asks: “What happened to them? What happened to these two brothers? How did their lives turn out?” In other words, the attention is drawn towards a family’s never-ending pursuit of psychological and social stability. In this way *The Prodigal Son* loses the genre-specific feature of being a defined whole that is not to be continued. As Joachim Jeremias puts it, stressing the situative aspects of the parables: “Every one of them (i.e. Jesus’ parables) calls for an answer on the spot” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 21).

The immanent approach scores low also with regard to Rosenblatt’s “personal factor” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 144). I find that the immanent agenda, in the way Terje exclusively projects what he finds “particularly interesting,” is an example of an ideology-based interpretation which Rosenblatt and also Iser warn against. I find Iser’s characterization of “[m]onopolies of interpretation” to be spot on:

Monopolies of interpretation ... present themselves as transcendental grandstand views, and although they see themselves as frameworks for the reality to be grasped, they actually seek to shape that reality according to their presuppositions (Iser, 2000, p. 2).

And with reference to Rosenblatt, I do not see that Terje, viewed among “[t]hose who bring a particular systematic ideology to the text” does not take the necessary steps “to weigh the effect on their criteria of validity” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 128).<sup>205</sup> In other words, he is not sufficiently critical and self-aware of the consequences. As an a priori “framework” and a “transcendental grandstand view,” as Iser terms ideology-based interpretations, the immanent approach is beyond critical reach.

The immanent approach also finds little support in any “cultural community with shared assumptions and criteria” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 144). As Terje straightforwardly puts it; “[t]his was never an issue in my studies of religion.” Also the Church has yet to grasp it, according to Terje. Although it is possible to find readers and milieus that will support and embrace an immanent reading, it is difficult to see that they make up “interpretive

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<sup>205</sup> Rosenblatt refers to Marxist ideology and also Freudian and “the early Christian exegetes” of the Bible, describing the latter as applying “the underlying assumption that the only acceptable interpretations were the ones that made every part of the Old Testament a prefiguring of the New Testament” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 128).

communities” with authority.<sup>206</sup> Appearing highly ideological and fueled by a strong personal agenda, neither Fish, therefore, can come to Terje’s rescue.

Does this, then, imply that the immanent approach has no value and is of no interest? Certainly, Terje profoundly challenges individual readers and groups – both students of religion, theology and the Church – and thus sparks aesthetic engagement. Could it be that the immanent approach represents a potential paradigm shift, a “new interpretive strategy,” as Fish talks about, which “always makes its way in some relationship of opposition to the old ... from which it can emerge into respectability,” and thus “claim to tell the truth about the work” and also “claim to make the work better” (Fish, 1980, pp. 349-351)? But in the way the all-pervasive immanent agenda blocks out key genre-specific features, Terje represents a critical voice even Fish warns against, as it prevents the reader from experiencing the potential of the text, not in terms of what it means, but what it potentially can “signify” of transcendental issues (Fish, 1980, p. 149). Thus, it is unlikely that the immanent approach represents something qualitatively new in the literary field. It is more probable that Terje, in what looks to be a lonely battle, is facing what Fish refers to as the “mechanisms for ruling out readings,” that is, the dominant power of “the presently recognized interpretive strategies” (Fish, 1980, p. 347).

So, to conclude, the immanent approach appears, first, undisciplined with regard to the textual constraints in *The Prodigal Son*. Second, although the immanent approach undoubtedly has the potential to “enhanc[e] the work-as-experienced” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125), it lacks support from “interpretive communities” with authority (Fish, 1980). And third and finally, it lacks critical self-awareness with regard to the overwhelming effect of the powerful agenda or ideology that is brought to the interpretive event. Thus, in every aspect of Iser, Fish, and Rosenblatt’s criteria, the immanent approach scores low on validity.

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<sup>206</sup> In theology, we can find thinkers with similar ideas influenced by the psychological heritage of Freud and also Jung, as well as the Nietzsche and Hegel inspired “God is dead”-theology and aspects of Bultmann’s demythologization program.

### 5.2.3 The ethical approach and the Christian approach on validity

The ethical and the Christian approach were placed together on Rosenblatt's "reader-continuum." I also find them to correspond with regard to the issue of validity. Both are based on what is considered to be potentially key structures of parables, namely the illustrative and the analogous structures. Thus, it seems to be fair to say that the teachers of these typologies do not go beyond the parable as a genre and "change the form" and hence "change the 'meaning'" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 90). In short, they read the parable as a parable.

Comparing the two, the Christian approach appears from the outset with a stronger "verbal basis" because it recognizes both the analogous and the illustrative and also weighs them. Privilege is given to the father-God analogy and the God-man relation, referred to as "the essence," while the illustrative is labeled "flat" and thus considered to have less significant value. The ethical approach, by contrast, is limited to the illustrative and that alone. So what is considered "flat" in the Christian approach is recognized as the very core in the ethical approach. Despite this striking difference, I find that the ethical and the Christian approach share features which bring them close together, and that even content-wise, as the practice of Christian allegorization turns the analogy in an ethical, or more precisely, moral direction.

To read all parables as illustrations of ethical ideals makes the ethical approach appear particularly one-dimensional. Most apparent in this concern, based on theory on parables, is the unawareness of parables meaning more than they appear to say, and that the meaning is not to be found primarily in the concrete storyline but in the imagery it creates. Therefore, and to refer to Rosenblatt, an ethical reading is not attentive to the key "possibilities offered *by the text*" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 43, italics added).

The rigid one-dimensionality is best illustrated when Peter is made aware of the father-God analogy. Even then the parable remains an example-story, underlining that we all, and particularly so the Church, should follow the example of the all-embracing father and make communities "where there is room for all ... no matter what." The fundamental "God-consciousness," which Brad H. Young talks about, is not totally absent but kept strictly within an ethical interpretive framework (Young, 2012, p. 5).

To examine the "verbal basis" of the Christian approach is to raise questions concerning the practice of Christian allegorization: Does *The Prodigal Son* possess allegories of this kind, or

are the teachers understanding it allegorically in other words *making* the parable into a Christian allegory?

The phenomenon of allegorization is well-known in hermeneutics and particularly so in biblical hermeneutics. Christian allegorization goes back to the time of the establishment of the early Church, but has roots to earlier Jewish and also Greek interpretive practices (Jeremias, 1972, p. 13).<sup>207</sup> Christian allegorization refers mainly to the practice of reading the OT, and also to the early writings of the NT; that is, it interprets texts in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and of the situation and the faith of the early and also the later established Church (Jeremias, 1972, p. 66ff). And as we have seen in the chapter *Analyzing RE teacher responses* (see p. 193), both types of allegorization are richly represented in this typology, a main reason why I refer to it as the Christian approach.

Joachim Jeremias, one of the foremost authorities on biblical parables, starts his exegesis on *The Prodigal Son* by stating: “The parable is not an allegory” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 128).<sup>208</sup> Instead he refers to it as an “apologetic parable,” underlining that “the parable was addressed to men who were like the elder brother, men who were offended at the gospel. An appeal must be addressed to their conscience” (Jeremias, 1972, pp. 131-132). Jeremias’ main point is that the parable should be read with the actual situation of Jesus’ ministry as a backdrop, that it is a polemical utterance “in reply to its critics” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 131). Though some of the teachers, like Elise, states that “the Pharisees and scribes” as “Jews” were in opposition to Jesus, this is not further developed and thus represent no major theme in the response. The same can be said about Brad H. Young’s emphasis on the common Jewish religious imagery in “rabbinic parables” and in the parables of Jesus in the NT (Young, 2012, p. 6). Clearly, the point of reference is the established Christian Church. And important to recognize, it is not the “primitive Church” which is Jeremias’ concern (Jeremias, 1972, p. 23), but the Church as they perceive it, and to which they belong and personally relate to. Christian allegorization of this kind is therefore thoroughly detached from the text’s historical context.

I also find that the practice of Christian allegorization slowly but steadily pushes the father-God analogy into the background. Instead of keeping the attention on “God-consciousness”

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<sup>207</sup> Of more modern examples of Christological allegorization, see for instance Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and peasant* (1983) and also the theological tradition of Karl Barth (cf. 1956).

<sup>208</sup> In the book *The parables of Jesus* Jeremias has a chapter on “Allegorization” where a main argument is that the practice of allegorization in the early Church is “not original” and represents “secondary interpretations,” and thus should not be associated with “the authentic parable” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 89).



and the issue of faith (Young, 2012, p. 5), the emphasis is turned towards Christianity viewed from the perspective of the Church as a morally bounded community. The best illustration for this shift is the way the youngest son's prodigality is brought to the center as the parable's main problem. It is the immoral life abroad, the sins of "egoism" and "pleasure," that are the root cause of his troubles and what he has to convert from. This, I will argue, largely overshadows, with reference to Jeremias, the parable's focus on "what God is like, his goodness, his grace, his boundless mercy, his abounding love" (Jeremias, 1972, p. 131), or as Brad H. Young phrases it, "the nature of God and human responses to his love" (Young, 2012, p. 3). In Jeremias and Young's understandings, the father is the key character and the subject of the changes taking place, and to whom the youngest son is to respond and relate with faith. Therefore, based on these accounts of Jeremias and Young, I find that the practice of Christian allegorization in many ways encounters the same critique that is put in the mouth of Jesus when he polemically addresses "the Pharisees and the scribes" in Luke 15 and exposes the illegitimacy of a self-righteous and morally oriented community.

The similarities between the Christian and the ethical approach become particularly noticeable in the way the teachers view the last paragraph and the entry of the older brother. Clearly, in both typologies this paragraph plays a subordinate role, by some even explicitly referred to as superfluous, and thus implying that *The Prodigal Son* is all about the youngest son's conversion and redemption. That everything of importance has been said prior to verse 24 – "And they began to celebrate" – corresponds well with the title *The Prodigal Son* and also the new Norwegian translation, *The Son that Came Home*, as some of the teachers explicitly point out. However, considering the absence of title in the earliest transcripts of the parable, it is difficult to see the legitimacy of giving a title the position as a central verbal cue. Instead, and as Jeremias and also Young point out, a reader should critically discuss the grounds and relevance of conventional titles and openly suggest adjustments and improvements (Jeremias, 1972, p. 128; Young, 2012, p. 130).

When the teachers of these typologies do reflect on the older brother, they agree that all he needs is a correction; he needs to learn, as Anne puts it, that "forgiveness is given to someone who really does not deserve it, and it is not something you can claim," or as Peter expresses it: "It is not the receiving part who decides if there is room for you." Clearly, the correction is solely of an ethical character. Otherwise the older brother is where he is supposed to be – a "Christian" and a "baptized," one who lives a "godly life" in accordance with "God's will"

safely within the boundaries of the ideal Christian community, one who, as Rita illustratively phrases it, “stays with his father... It seems like he doesn’t have any big religious conflicts or problems. It’s okay.”

I will argue that the strong dichotomy of the two brothers in the Christian approach leaves little room for discussing the negation and the open ending of the parable. This is in line with what Young has recognized as the tendency in “Christian interpretation ... to emphasize the return of the prodigal rather than the entire family situation” (Young, 2012, p. 131). The consequence, according to Young, is that the “second mini-drama” is left out (Young, 2012, p. 25). More than that, because the last paragraph so clearly represents an extension of “the classic form,” that is, two plots and not one, “the primary focus of the parable teller” is left out (Young, 2012, p. 25).<sup>209</sup> This, Young continues, complies also with the “introduction of the cast” in the first verse: “A man had *two* sons” (v. 11, italics added), and the fact that “the parable has prepared the stage for a surprise already in the introduction of the cast” (Young, 2012, p. 25). On the basis of these arguments Young would like to see the title of the parable changed to “The Father of Two Lost Sons” (Young, 2012, p. 130).

Also Jeremias comes to the conclusion that “the emphasis falls on the second half” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 131). Thus, not only form but also the specific historical setting of the parable indicate that the essence of the parable is found in the negation and the open ending of the last paragraph. With this paragraph, Jeremias argues, the challenge is not of a general kind, not primarily “Good News to the poor,” but situated and historically conditioned, “a vindication of the Good News in reply to its critics” (Jeremias, 1972, p. 131). This is also the reason why Jeremias finds the title *The Prodigal Son* unfitting and would rather, to underscore that “[t]he father, not the returning son, is the central figure,” prefer “*the parable of the Father’s Love*” as the best title (Jeremias, 1972, p. 128, italics original).

Both the Christian and the ethical approach leave me, then, with the impression that the teachers apply a limited number of the text’s “invariable codes” (Iser, 1978, p. 93). The result is interpretations that appear constricted. Clearly, to “enhanc[e] the work-as-experienced” is possible only within these limited understandings of parable as a genre (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125). In addition, and to refer to a basic notion in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, I find that “the text itself” is not given the opportunity to “regulate” and “lead the reader toward [a] self-

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<sup>209</sup> The term “classic form” refers to the understanding of parables as displaying a simple imagery and also a sharp economy with regard to a small sample of characters and one single plot.

corrective process” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11). Instead, and as I will turn to next, I find that the dominance of an ethical and a Christian mindset comes in and simplifies the text. That is, it *makes* the parable into an example story and a Christian allegory, and thus comes in conflict with both of Rosenblatt’s textual criteria; one, “that the reader’s interpretation not to be contradicted by any element of the text,” and two, “that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 115).

Turning then to the reader and the “personal factor,” it is not difficult to find a “cultural community with shared assumptions and criteria” that adopt the Christian and the ethical approach (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 144). By that I mean that there are many out there who will respond accordingly. And clearly and particularly so the teachers of the Christian approach are aware of belonging to a certain interpretive tradition with authority. As I read these responses, this is also what most profoundly guides the teachers’ interpretations, as they all draw the connection between what they refer to as “the essence of Christianity” and the “obvious” message of *The Prodigal Son*. But, and as shown in the discussion above, the literary grounds for this authority appears weak. Is that the case also for how these teachers apply and bring the “personal factor” to the interpretive event?

In contrast to the immanent approach the Christian and the ethical approach do not appear ideological. Their responses are instead results of more unconscious processes where everything is reflexively adapted to a Christian and ethical framework. In other words, ethical ideals and Christian allegories are all they see. Aware of it or not, what the teachers themselves bring into the interpretive event appears to have an all-pervasive effect on the responses. And with reference to Rosenblatt, the reason for this is that they all lack critical self-awareness and do not take necessary steps “to weigh the effect on their criteria of validity” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 128). I find that Peter reveals this when he ends up advocating vigorously for the boundless community where there is room for, as he phrases it, “all religions [and] all ways of thinking.” This overall perspective largely determines the direction and also the content of the ethical approach. The teachers of the Christian approach demonstrate a similar unawareness when their own perceptions of the Christian faith and the Church uncritically become the dominant point of reference.

So, to conclude, based on the criteria of validity, both the ethical and the Christian approach appear with a limited “verbal basis.” Though I find that the teachers operate within parable as

a genre, the illustrative and the allegorical are given a position which overshadows key textual features, most prominently so the father-God analogy and the negation and the cutting techniques of the last paragraph. The question which Young raises concerning “Christian interpretations,” and which is transferable to the ethical approach, seems appropriate: “Have Christian [and ethical] interpretations stressed the Christological [and ethical] implications of the parable to the point that they have distorted the original message?” (Young, 2012, p. 135)

Most influential for the outcome of the responses, however, is the effect of the teachers’ “personal factor.” As I see it, their notions of what is the obvious essence of Christianity overwhelm and constrict the parable, that is, *makes The Prodigal Son* solely into a Christian allegory and a text about ethical ideals. Their strong conviction hinders the teachers from taking a critical look at their own strategies of interpretation and thus from discussing other potential angles of approach which could challenge and also deepen their understandings. Also the way the “personal factor” guides the responses, therefore, appears to lower their validity.

#### **5.2.4 The dialogical approach on validity**

Placed far out on the aesthetic side of the “reader-continuum,” the dialogical approach appears to be of Rosenblatt’s liking. And undoubtedly, I find that the prominent features of this typology correspond well with Rosenblatt’s criteria of validity.

The dialogical approach is fundamentally text-centered in the sense that it appears genre-bound and also disciplined with regard to what literary theory in general considers being key structures of biblical parables. Most importantly when it comes to *The Prodigal Son*, and here the teachers are in line with Jeremias and Young, is that the teachers place the father-God analogy and the God-man relation and thus the issue of faith in the center. This is the point of reference, as I read the dialogical approach, in other words, what “regulate“ and “lead the reader toward [a] self-corrective process” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11). Karianne illustrates this when she rules out other readings by polemically asking: “Is there any other way to understand this text?”

But what seems to be a rigid text-centeredness does not result in a reluctance to discuss a variety of interpretations. Rather the opposite. To illustrate, with the God-man relation and the issue of faith as the point of reference, the reader can understand and identify with the text in

different ways, all within the setting of the lives played out by the prodigal brother and the homebound brother. This creates reflections which challenge and go beyond the interpretations of the Christian approach in the previous chapter (see p. 207). Here is an example from Karianne's response:

*The youngest son is the most faithful, you might say, even though we would think that the oldest is the most faithful one. But the youngest son demonstrates a basic trust. Otherwise he would not have thought that he could return. I feel that he did not doubt at all when he became aware of where he came from.*

*Den yngste sønnen er den mest troende, kan du si, selv om han utenfra sett ville nok tenkt at den eldste var den mest troende da, hvis man tenker på tro ikke-troende her, så har han den grunnleggende tilliten. Ellers så hadde han ikke tenkt at han kunne vende tilbake. Jeg føler at han ikke tvilte i det hele tatt når han kom til å huske på hvor han kom fra.*

The image of the youngest son as the sole prodigal, apostate and unambiguous sinner is, as one can see, turned up-side down.

The text-centeredness of the dialogical approach also comes to expression in the way a broad specter of textual structures is brought into the interpretive event. This implies that I do not find, as opposed to the typologies above, that key textual structures are being either consciously or unconsciously omitted. Rather, the analogy, the narrator, the characters and also the negation and the cutting techniques, are brought into the discussion on a broad basis and collectively contribute to "enhanc[e] the work-as-experienced" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125). There is no constrictive framework of the immanent, the ethical, or the Christian kind which prevents this broad discussion from developing.

Another aspect of being text-centered that is being demonstrated is the ability to critically assess what is important and what is not important. Like Jeremias and Young above, Karianne discusses the relevance of the different titles and by that demonstrates the ability to distinguish between what is a verbal cue and what is a result of historical readings and conventions. She ends up matching Jeremias' suggestion above when she makes the following remark: "It is a text about a human's encounter with God. But first of all about God's encounter with us humans." Again we see how the father-God analogy and the God-man relation as the key points of reference "regulate" and "lead the reader toward [a] self-corrective process" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11), in this particular case, how it overrules conventions.

What, then, about the “personal factor”? I find both Hanne and Karianne open in the sense that they write and speak freely and personally about their affiliations to Christianity and the Church. But I do not see, as in the case of the other typologies, that they promote or stick to a certain argument that is rooted in specific *Concepts of Christianity* or in their *Background and experiences*. Instead I find that the “personal factor” is brought into the interpretive event on terms set by the text. The way Karianne brings in her Catholic background to further expand on the imagery of the older brother is illustrative of what is occurring:

*Is there a fundamental distrust? .... This doubt because God has never said it straight to you: I see you, I love you, right, like he does to the other one. And then we become a little uncertain. Well, ok, I am a Catholic, so I am very much involved with saints (laughs a little). Not very much but, but I think, somehow I wonder why they have so much doubt, and then I have been thinking that it might be that they have always been wandering there, so close, and then there is that doubt.*

*Er det en litt sånn mistillit helt i bunnen? .... Altså den der tvilen fordi Gud aldri har sagt tydelig til deg: Jeg ser deg, jeg elsker deg, ikke sant, som han gjør overfor den andre. Og at vi da på en måte blir litt usikre da. Nei for jeg, altså jeg er katolikk, da, så jeg er midt inni helgenene (ler litt). Ikke så veldig mye men, men jeg tenker liksom, det undrer meg at de kan komme til så mye tvil, og da har jeg har tenkt det er kanskje at de har alltid vandret der og er så nære, og så er den tvilen der.*

As one can see, the Catholic references are viewed within the boundaries of the father-God analogy and the issue of faith. Although Karianne in some cases allegorizes on the basis of Catholic thought and principles (the fatted calf and the atonement, see p. 111), it is not dogmatic Catholicism or the Catholic Church as a fixed “interpretive community” that guide the response (Fish, 1980). Rather, the Catholic perspectives are brought in under the guidance of the text, as a stimulus to deepen the reflections about the text.

I find a similar transaction between the text and the “personal factor” when Hanne reflects on the last paragraph:

*The father says at some point here (pause) I feel that he tries to calm him down and say: “[Yes, but come on!] All that is mine is yours. My son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” He did not say that to the other one. So in a way he calms him by saying that “All that is mine is yours.” He says right here that “you have never*

*Faren sier på et eller annet tidspunkt her (pause) jeg opplever at han prøver å berolige han og sier at – ja, men, hallo – ”alt mitt er ditt.” “Min sønn, du er alltid hos meg,” og “alt mitt er ditt.” Det så han ikke til han andre. Så på en måte så trygger han ham ved å si at ”alt mitt er ditt.” Han sier jo her at ”meg har du ikke gitt så mye som et kje så*

*given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” And the father says: “[But it was not needed. There were no reasons for giving you anything because] all that I have is [already] yours, [you have a position here with me which is safe. This does not alter your position].”<sup>210</sup>*

*jeg kunne holde fest sammen med vennene mine.” Og faren sier: “[Jammen det var ikke behov. Det er ikke behov for meg å gi noe til deg for]alt mitt er [allerede] ditt, [du har en posisjon hos meg som er trygg. Det rokker ikke ved din posisjon].”*

This was the part of the interview which triggered most engagement and also emotions. This is indicated in the way she cites from the text and repeats the line “[a]ll that I have is yours” all together four times, and in the way she joins in and expands the text with her own words. The tears come when she a little later ends it all with the remark: “But that is about me and my life.” I find Rosenblatt’s description of the “aesthetic orientation of the reader” to spot what is going on in Hanne but also in Karianne’s response: “The reader’s attention constantly vibrates between the pole of the text and the pole of his own responses to it” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129).

As one can see, it is not an affiliation to a collective community that stimulates Hanne’s reflections but a rather strong and personal confrontation with the establishment, in her case, The Norwegian Church. And important to note, this does not result in agenda-like subjectivity similar to what I found in Terje’s immanent approach. The reason for that is, as I see it, that her personal engagement is under the guidance of the text and thus functions as a stimulus to deepen the reflections about the text.

So, to conclude, the dialogical approach is genre-bound and also disciplined with regard to that it brings up and discusses a broad specter of the parable’s key textual structures. Although the historical context of the parable is left out, the “verbal basis” appears solid and largely in accordance with Rosenblatt’s two criteria: one, “that the reader’s interpretation not to be contradicted by any element of the text,” and two, “that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 115).

Neither Karianne nor Hanne directly expresses self-awareness or critically discusses the implications of their personal involvement. Although a “self-critical” approach would

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<sup>210</sup> To illustrate the transaction, the citations from the parable are in quotes and Hanne’s expansions are in brackets.

enhance the validity of the “personal factor” considerably also here (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 918), its absence does not imply that the teachers’ subjectivity is without restrictions. As illustrated above, the text-centeredness leads towards text-based reflections. Also the “personal factor,” therefore, appears with high validity.

### 5.2.5 Summary

Rosenblatt says this about the main difference between adequate and inadequate readings: “The adequacy or inadequacy of a reading can be demonstrated by indicating the parts of the text which have been ignored, or which have not been woven into the rest of the semantic structure built on the text” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). In this chapter, based on theory on parables, the God-father analogy, the God-man relation and also the negation of the last paragraph, have been highlighted as key textual structures. And it has been illustrated that to ignore this has its consequences. First of all, other textual structures come in and take the place. More than that, we have seen how the illustrative, the allegories, and the immanent displace the key structures and become all-pervasive. The result is a limited “verbal basis” that in some instances, most prominently so in the immanent approach, comes in conflict with parable itself as a genre.

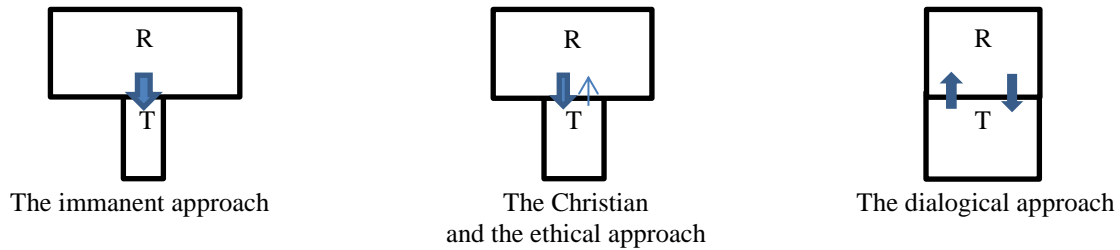
Secondly, responses with a limited or weak “verbal basis” develop a correspondingly powerful “personal factor.” In other words, when the power of the text fades, a powerful reader comes in and fills the power gap. This implies that the argumentations are primarily formed by the teachers’ own *Concepts of Christianity*, their *Background and experiences*, and *Concepts of RE*. When the responses on top of this do not appear “responsibly self-aware” of “the personality and culture brought by the reader” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129), they lack the tools to critically weigh the effect of the “personal factor” on interpretation. Consequently, there is little in the immanent, the ethical and the Christian approach that can trigger “rereading,” “readjustment of meaning” and eventually also challenge their overall “interpretive framework” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). In short, these approaches appear predetermined and closed.

The dialogical approach, as the exception among the typologies, appears to be the one which best balances Rosenblatt’s two concerns; a broad but focused text-centeredness that guides and also stimulates an open and engaged reader. Even if the dialogical reader does not



articulate “self-aware[ness]” (Rosenblatt, 1998, p. 918), the text-centeredness appears to delimit the potential risks of uncritical subjectivity.

The relation between the text (T) and the reader (R) in the typologies can be illustrated with the following three figures:



The movements in the transaction between the text and the reader are illustrated by the arrows, and the power-relation between them is shown by the variation in size of the arrows and the boxes.<sup>211</sup>

The immanent approach – the one that scores the lowest on validity – is illustrated by the most unstable figure, which is at risk of collapsing due to a weak “verbal basis” and an oversized “personal factor.” The figure of the Christian and the ethical approach is clearly also unbalanced, though not at risk of collapsing. The dialogical approach – the one that scores the highest on validity – is illustrated with an equal relationship between the text and the reader, a mutual contingent relationship where the reader’s “aesthetic orientation,” to use Rosenblatt’s words, “constantly vibrates between the pole of the text and the pole of his own responses to it” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129).

This discussion has exposed in further detail the empirical findings of what happens when the RE teachers interpret *The Prodigal Son*. By bringing in Rosenblatt and also Fish and Iser’s criteria of validity, the implications and also the consequences of the varying relations between the text and the reader in the immanent approach, the ethical, the Christian, and the dialogical approach have been illuminated. It is now time to relate the findings and also the discussion above to contemporary and dominant conceptualizations of religious literacy.

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<sup>211</sup> The text-box (T) is placed on the bottom and the reader-box (R) on top to illustrate that in Rosenblatt’s theory the text triggers reading and fundamentally constrains and guides the transactional process in a disciplined direction (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 130). The text as the foundation for reading and interpretation is also indicated by Rosenblatt’s two criteria of validity in interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 115).



## 5.3 The RE teachers' responses and theory on religious literacy

As the research overview in the introductory chapter showed, the research on religious literacy within the context of education is mainly theoretical and normative in its approach, that is, largely oriented towards discussing what religious literacy should entail in order to enhance students' knowledge of religion. And clearly, the empirical findings of this study indicate that there is a mismatch between the theoretically and normatively based concepts of religious literacy and what religious literacy looks like out there from the perspective of the one's *doing* it, in this case the RE teachers. In the following I will discuss in detail how and to what extent an empirically based perspective challenges the overriding theoretical and normative conceptualization of religious literacy as we see it today.

I will first and in a more concise form discuss the findings in relation to the work of Stephen Prothero, as his book *Religious literacy: What every American needs to know – and doesn't* (2007) sparked a popular debate and also became a reference point in RE research concerning this particular issue. Then, due to their more extensive works and also their prominent position in RE research, I will apply my empirical findings in a more comprehensive discussion of Diane L. Moore and Andrew Wright's conceptualizations of religious literacy.<sup>212</sup>

### 5.3.1 Stephen Prothero – overcoming religious illiteracy with the basic tenets of religion

Stephen Prothero defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use ... the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” (Prothero, 2007, p. 15). This definition, which he also more precisely narrows down to “various functional capacities” of for instance “ritual literacy,” “confessional literacy” and “denominational literacy,” is of course useful when the

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<sup>212</sup> Kerstin von Brömssen's article “Religious literacy: Är det ett användbart begrepp inom religionsdidaktisk/-pedagogisk forskning?” [Religious literacy: Is it an applicable concept in RE research?] was particularly useful as it gave an overview of relevant works on religious literacy in RE (Brömssen, 2013). She starts with Stephen Prothero before she goes over to Andrew Wright, Diane L. Moore and finally Peta Goldburg. In my discussion I do not go into the works of Goldburg as I find the critical perspectives in her thinking largely to be covered by Moore.

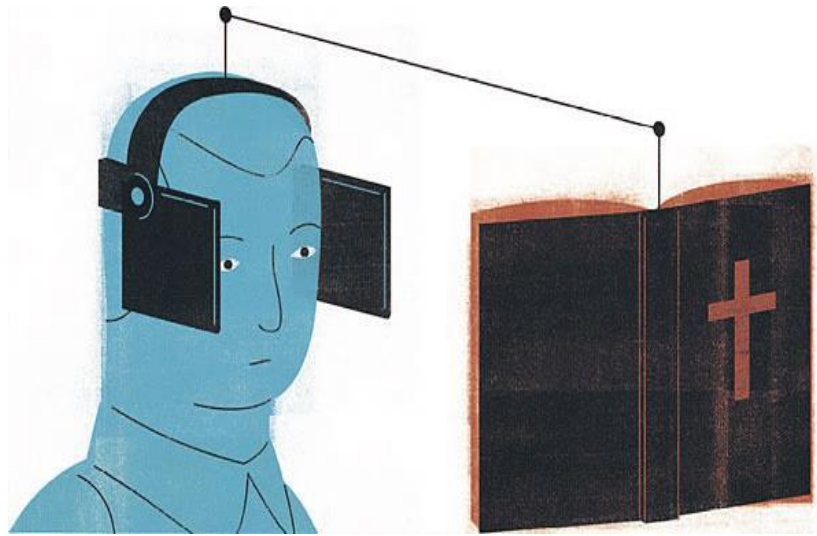
aim is to sketch out a general course in the basics of religion in order to remedy Americans' religious illiteracy (Prothero, 2007, p. 15).

When Prothero comes to what people do, whether it is through his references to politicians' many faults and blunders or to students' embarrassing answers on quizzes about religion, it is to demonstrate *What every American needs to know – and doesn't*, to refer to the subtitle of his book, and build up support for the argument that the public schools need to educate for basic religious literacy (Prothero, 2007, pp. 27-70). As to Prothero's methods, on which he grounds his generalizations, what people actually *do* when they read or talk about religion is neither within reach, nor in his interest to find out.

Following Prothero, it is the RE teacher with most knowledge who will be regarded as the most religiously literate reader. In my study that is the immanent reader. Certainly, the immanent reader would score high on Prothero's quizzes, also a quiz about *The Prodigal Son*. But the analysis of the literacy event of the immanent reader has shown that the level of knowledge is far from the single most decisive factor. This is a reader that shifts focus away from validated and recognized academic knowledge and towards a personal agenda. In other words, the formally best educated reader chooses not to use "the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives" (Prothero, 2007, p. 15). This clearly shows – as do also the other typologies of this study – that what truly matters is far more than what can be uncovered in quizzes and assessment studies on who was Noah, who was Abraham, what is Ramadan, etc. (Prothero, 2007, pp. 35-36). Therefore, our understanding of Americans' and also RE teachers' religious literacy cannot rest on normative assumptions about what they should know, but must derive from critical empirical research on the role of the actor of interpretation and studies on what is going on in real religious literacy events.

The illustration below and a slightly amended citation from Mark Oppenheimer in his review of Prothero's book sums up my main criticism of Prothero's instrumental and normative conceptualization of religious literacy. Referring to Prothero as a "raised Episcopal" who "loves doctrine and scripture," Oppenheimer questions, as I do, if basic and drilled knowledge of religion is all that there is to it: "[R]eligious knowledge is not necessary to be a good

[teacher]. It's just necessary if one wants to be an educated [teacher]" (Oppenheimer, 2007, p. 17).<sup>213</sup>



Finally, with Prothero's instrumental and narrow definition of religious literacy, it is no wonder why he is so distressed. Although I do not question that Prothero has a point, particularly in his historical review of religious education in America, I question if his quizzes and assessment studies give the most reliable picture of the current state of being. The empirical findings of this study can indicate that the alarming image of the uniform religiously illiterate American population rests on a weak basis. Further empirical studies will most probably show, as my study shows, that there is much more to religious literacy than the ability to demonstrate basic religious knowledge. Such studies will most probably also challenge and problematize what is about to establish itself as the myth of the religiously illiterate American. Thus, although Prothero has contributed with a historical perspective and to spark a popular debate on religious literacy, I do not see that he has contributed significantly with any theoretical or empirical insight into the field.

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<sup>213</sup> Original text: "religious knowledge is not necessary to be a good citizen. It's just necessary if one wants to be an educated person." The illustration in Oppenheimer's review is made by Keith Negley.

### 5.3.2 Diane L. Moore – overcoming religious illiteracy with basic knowledge and cultural competence

In the book *Overcoming religious illiteracy: A cultural studies approach to the study of religion in secondary education* (2007), Diane L. Moore discusses various ways of how teacher education can promote and foster religious literacy. She starts off, like Prothero, by uncovering Americans religious illiteracy, more specifically, “our lack of understanding about the ways that religion itself is an integral dimension of social/historical/political experience” and also “our ignorance about the specific tenets of the world’s religious traditions” (Moore, 2007, pp. 3-4). This illiteracy, Moore underlines, is not limited to Americans alone but “spans the globe” (Moore, 2006).

In Moore’s words above we can see that she does not only adopt Prothero’s basic knowledge approach to religious literacy. Clearly, she expands the view and underlines that it is necessary to acquire a broader foundation than the mere basics of religion to fight illiteracy. This is evident in her definition of religious literacy: “Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore, 2007, p. 56). And to be more specific, she lists the following necessary areas:

- 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and
- 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place (Moore, 2007, pp. 56-57).

Others within RE have emphasized similar areas, among them Eugene V. Gallagher, who criticizes Prothero for focusing “exclusively on the *what* of religion and not enough on the *how*,” claiming that

religious literacy must involve not only a degree of mastery of basic information ... but also some insight into *how* people use that basic information to orient themselves in the world, express their individual and communal self-understanding, and give their lives direction and meaning (Gallagher, 2009, p. 208, italics original).

And Gallagher continues, in line with Moore, that it is only by incorporating the “*how*”-aspect that it is possible to grasp “the *why* of religion,” that is, “why human beings have persisted in this mode of behavior, even as it has imposed extraordinary demands on them and as

frequently brought them to tears as to joy” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 208, italics original). To teach religious literacy, then, as I read Gallagher and Moore, is essentially about equipping students so that they can better understand the world and also better maneuver in the world, as religion and “religious influences,” as Moore states, “have always been and continue to be intimately woven into the fabric of human cultures” (Moore, 2007, p. 29). To achieve this, a broad “Cultural studies approach” in RE is needed in all public schools, a program, according to Moore, which “provides citizens with the tools to better understand religion as a complex and sophisticated social/cultural phenomenon and individual religious traditions themselves as internally diverse and constantly evolving” (Moore, 2006).<sup>214</sup>

As a teacher educator and thus the more practice-oriented among the contributors, I find that Moore also has eyes for what happens when teachers and also her teacher students appear as actors or subjects of interpretation. A key premise in Moore’s “Cultural studies approach” is that “all knowledge claims are ‘situated’ claims,” that is, “that they arise out of certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts” (Moore, 2007, p. 79). What follows from this is a second premise; that “the lens of the *interpreter* is also one that is situated and therefore partial, biased, and particular” (Moore, 2007, pp. 81-82, italics added). On this basis Moore argues that “the aim is to become as conscious as possible regarding the assumptions that inform and define one’s perspective.” Such “awareness,” she continues, will help “the *interpreter* negotiate the terrain of inquiry from a more informed and transparent understanding” (Moore, 2007, p. 82, italics added).

In these statements we see that Moore applies ideas from critical theory and critical literacy theory more specifically. A basic principle within critical literacy is to set the focus on the actor in situated literacy events, the one who articulates and also embodies, to refer to Moore above, the “social/historical/cultural/personal contexts” (Moore, 2007, p. 79).<sup>215</sup> And furthermore, with references to Paolo Freire (1970) and also Amy Gutmann (1999), Moore highlights the principle of the actor as an agent for change. Undoubtedly, in the way Moore

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<sup>214</sup> Moore criticizes various methods of teaching RE, among them “The Historical Approach” and “The Phenomenological Approach” (also referred to as “The Traditions-Based Approach”). The tendency is, Moore claims, that teachers tend to present religion as something pre-modern (“The Historical Approach”), and further, as something fixed, isolated and uniform, with reference to the Ninian Smart’s phenomenology (e.g. Smart, 1973). The contrast, “The Cultural Studies Approach,” focuses on how religion and religious phenomena, and that both in a historical and contemporary perspective, are constantly changing and fundamentally “embedded in human political, social and cultural life” (Moore, 2006).

<sup>215</sup> Moore refers to Donna Haraway’s work on “Situated knowledge” (1988).

ends her book, she sees a great potential in the teachers as agents for democratic citizenry: “There is much at stake, and our nation’s teachers are our best resources for helping us to revitalize this central tenet (i.e. democracy) of our identity” (Moore, 2007, p. 178).

Albeit centering in on the teacher as key interpreter, this is founded, as I read Moore, on basic theoretical principles of hermeneutics, and most apparently so on Gadamer and also Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.”<sup>216</sup> Additionally, and what is recognizable in the citation above and in what Moore shares with critical religious literacy thought in RE, among them Peta Goldberg (2010) and Cornelia Roux (2010), is that the teacher is first and foremost viewed as an *instrument* for change. This indicates, therefore, that Moore’s concept of religious literacy is not primarily derived from what is happening in concrete literacy events, but is an essentially theoretical and goal-driven concept. The aim is to pursue the “ideals of democracy,” that is, “to foster the skills, values, interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form” and by that fulfill, as Moore concludes, “the purpose of education in our multicultural/multireligious democracy” (Moore, 2007, p. 24). But I will argue that this fundamentally goal-driven and normative understanding of democracy point to a major limitation in Moore’s approach to religious literacy. As I will elaborate on in the following, the empirical material of this study has the potential to uncover the essential properties of literacy events as well as what can be referred to as critical or democratic practices.

Rosenblatt’s reader and practice-oriented concept of democracy serves to shed light on this.

In the final paragraph of *The reader, the text, the poem*, Rosenblatt quotes a famous line from John Dewey: “Democracy will have its consummation when free social inquiry is [indissolubly] wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 188).<sup>217</sup> Although Rosenblatt also has said that her theoretical thoughts “have been fueled by the belief that it serves the purposes of education for democracy” (Karolides, 1999, p. 169), her primary attention is to uncover the key principles of democracy as these manifest themselves in concrete literary experiences. In short, a literary experience at its best is a democratic practice. This is evident in the way she expressed her main aim in the preface of

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<sup>216</sup> Moore does not have any references to Gadamer or Ricoeur, but I find that her focus on the interpreter’s “personal biases,” “critical awareness,” and on interpretation as “moral agency” indicate such influences (Moore, 2007, p. 16; 82).

<sup>217</sup> Rosenblatt cites from *The public and its problems* (Dewey, 1984, p. 350). Rosenblatt left out the word “indissoluble” from the original text.



the first edition of *Literature as exploration*: “My aim in this book is to demonstrate that the study of literature can have a very real, and even central, relation to the points of growth in the social and cultural life of a democracy” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. v). This is also John Clifford’s main point when he in the introduction to the book *The experience of reading: Louise Rosenblatt and reader-response theory* defines the major contribution of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory to be to uncover “the inextricable link between reading and democracy” (Clifford, 1991, p. 1). And as I read Rosenblatt, this “inextricable link” is founded on three basic ideas in reading as transaction:

1. A democratic reader consciously or unconsciously draws from and also selects from both the private sphere and the social sphere.
2. A democratic reader acknowledges that a text can have multiple valid interpretations.
3. To gain knowledge of and to understand a text is “a literary work of art,” that is, something that evolves and comes into being (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 83).

As to the first idea: *A democratic reader consciously or unconsciously draws from and also selects from both the private sphere and the social sphere*. Rosenblatt says, influenced by socio-linguistic theory, that language and reading is “socially generated” but “always individually internalised” (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381). She explains:

Always there is an individual human being choosing, selectively constructing meaning, and consciously or unconsciously transacting with the factors, contextual and human, entering into that particular situation. We can recognize the shaping power of the environment, the society and the culture. Yet we should understand the possibilities of choice or aspiration within the parameters of our complex culture (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 187).

The question, then, to illustrate with undemocratic practices, is if the reader ignores the independent self in favour of “the shaping power of the environment, the society and the culture.” But also vice versa, if the reader ignores “the shaping power of the environment, the society and the culture,” or more precisely with reference to Stanley Fish, if the reader is unaware of the modifying and also verifying authority of democratically developed “interpretive communities.” As opposed to this unbalanced practice, you have the democratic practice where the reader acknowledges his or her position as the one responsible constructor of meaning, and who at the same time is fully aware of contextual influences. I will argue that

in this regard it is the dialogical reader that appears most democratic among the typologies, as the one who possesses the following properties:

- A reader who is aware of and transparent about the potential implications of personal bias and the power and influence of “interpretive communities” in meaning-making.
- A reader who is willing to question both personal convictions and established collective truths in the process of meaning-making.
- A reader who positively utilizes personal and social aspects to enhance meaning.

The immanent, the Christian and the ethical reader, as I have analyzed them, all tend to consciously or unconsciously favour a strong personal position (ethical and immanent) or a strong collective position (Christian). This implies that the personal and the collective spheres barely communicate in these typologies, as the one favoured position is built up to represent the obvious ‘truth’ and thereby overrules or strongly constrains the other. To illustrate with two examples: The Christian reader applies the well-known tradition of Christian allegorization in biblical hermeneutics. It is mainly the personal aspects which reflect or suit this influence that are expressed in the responses. Illustratively, when a question in the interview session initiates thoughts that obviously challenge this framework they are either instantly rejected or not pursued. Thus, the dominance of the collective Christian framework appears to limit and hinder personal engagement.

The second example refers to how the immanent reader consciously rules out the entire collective academic tradition in favour of what is personally intriguing and interesting. In both examples, then, either the personal voice or the collective voice is silenced. The consequence of this is that the personal-social dynamic that is essential in reading as a democratic practice is lost.

As a contrast to this, I find the dialogical reader who utilizes the social sphere but who at the same time clearly stands out as a personal reader. For instance, for one of them, a powerful Catholic interpretive community provides direction but not complete and finalized answers. Instead this particular collective influence creates moments of wonder and new questions and therefore contributes to trigger deeper and more personal reflections about the parable. Thus we can see in the dialogical reader how the transaction between the personal and the social spheres helps to open up the parable and enhance the meaning-making process.

Then to the second idea, which explains “the inextricable link between reading and democracy”: *A democratic reader acknowledges that a text can have multiple valid interpretations*. Rosenblatt refers in many instances to the forces behind mainstreaming of meaning; to totalitarian ideas,<sup>218</sup> dualistic literary theory (“the formalists and their postmodern adversaries”)<sup>219</sup> and also to the current test-regime in education exemplified by the education bill *No Child Left Behind*.<sup>220</sup> By contrast, a genuine democratic approach is essentially open and will always welcome meanings that can trigger discussions and evoke new insight. This openness is based on text-centeredness, that literary texts by nature spark and open up for multiple readings. Again I find that it is the dialogical approach that demonstrates the essential properties of a democratic practice that function as a bulwark against finalized readings. More specifically, these properties are:

- Text-centeredness; acknowledging that it is the text that triggers and guides towards multiple readings.
- A willingness to engage in “rereading” when new aspects and ideas evolve or are introduced.
- A willingness to make a “readjustment of meaning” when other ideas prove persuasive and more substantial.
- A willingness to make a “revision of framework” when established ‘truths’ are invalidated (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54).

Clearly, the findings of the study show that the development towards finalized meanings can have different origins and also look very different in their articulated form. Still, I find that the commonalities between the immanent, the Christian, and the ethical reader are apparent: weak text-centeredness and a correspondingly strong predetermined personal or collective framework into which the interpretation of the text is programmed. The consequence of this is a rigid and closed reading which does not leave room for cultivating the democratic practices of “rereading,” “readjustment of meaning,” and certainly not “revision of framework”

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<sup>218</sup> Rosenblatt refers numerous times to dictatorial states, and then in particular to fascist Europe and Stalin’s terror (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1995b, p. 296).

<sup>219</sup> In the epilogue of *The reader, the text, the poem*, which has the title “Against dualisms,” Rosenblatt refers to the dualism of “the formalists and the postmodernists” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 188).

<sup>220</sup> Rosenblatt strongly opposed the *No Child Left Behind Act* implemented by the George Bush Jr.’s administration in 2001, where testing became a key element as a means to teach and assess linguistic and literary competence. See for instance *Louise Rosenblatt: A life in literacy* (Roen & Karolides, 2005).

(Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54). In all these three typologies, I find that emerging conflicting views are effectively silenced by a dominant framework that certainly is not up for revision. This is evident in the way the immanent reader rules out the God-father analogy and hence all talk about transcendental content in the classroom. It is also evident in the way the ethical reader's all-embracing ethical ideals and concept of the all-embracing Church rule out all alternative readings and also all potential disagreements that may emerge in the classroom. And, finally, it is evident in the way the strategy of Christian allegorization and the strong inside-outside dichotomy played out by the two brothers of the parable prevent challenging reflections from evolving.

As opposed to this practice, I find that the dialogical reader constantly engages in "rereading." This comes to expression in the way this reader constantly goes back to the text – citing the text, wondering about the text and also posing questions regarding the text – and brings this into dialogue with the current understanding. Consequently, this is a reader that is open to making "readjustment[s] of meaning" and also, and more profoundly, "revision[s] of framework." Thus, in the practice of the dialogical reader there appears to be no pre-defined meaning or framework that delimits the potential of new and multiple interpretations. A firm text-centeredness, acknowledging that it is the text that triggers and guides towards multiple readings, is the foundation for such explorative practice.

Finally, a comment on the third but also the most fundamental idea about the "inextricable link between reading and democracy" (Clifford, 1991, p. 1): *To gain knowledge of and to understand a text is "a literary work of art," that is, something that evolves and comes into being* (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 83). Rosenblatt underlines several times that the practice of giving priority to predefined knowledge and fixed understandings does not take into account that "the text itself – what the work 'says' – automatically imposes an aesthetic response" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 83). This rests on the fundamental idea that knowledge and understanding does not exist independently of an interpretive agent. In short, knowledge of and understanding a text claims its reader.

Rosenblatt's term "poem" encapsulates the essence of what this is all about; that in meaning-making and in the aesthetics of gaining knowledge, the reader and the text are mutually contingent elements that evolve and constantly change. This does not indicate that Rosenblatt downgrades the role and value of basic linguistic and literary knowledge in education. But the

acquisition of this knowledge must be regarded as the “nonaesthetic means” in order to achieve something more: “Whatever knowledge or insight we might gain by nonaesthetic means will be valued *if it enhances the work-as-experienced*” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125, italics added). In other words, basic linguistic and literary knowledge is not meaningful knowledge before it is appropriated by a reader. This, I find, is fundamentally in opposition to Moore’s normative and instrumental perception of knowledge.

Now, when focusing on knowledge and understanding as concepts that evolve and which claim an interpretive actor, I find again that it is the dialogical reader that demonstrates the essential properties. More specifically, these properties are:

- Acknowledging that “the text itself” and linguistic and literary aspects do not contain meaning per se, but trigger and guide the meaning-making process.
- A balanced and mutual contingent relationship between the basic structures of the text and the reader create unique responses or “poems.”

The dialogical reader, as text-centered, highlights from the start the basic literary structures of the parable; the father-God analogy, the three characters, the narrator, the negation and open ending. These structures, however, are not presented as if they possess fixed meanings. Instead they are being used as interpretive keys to initiate and guide the meaning-making process towards multiple “poems.” The most illustrative aspect is how the dialogical reader at first seems to delimit the text by claiming that the God-father analogy settles it all. But then, by bringing in the characters and also the open ending of the parable, what at first appeared highly delimiting is instead what triggers the evocation of unlimited but still text-centered “poems.” This implies, therefore, that knowledge or understanding is not found in the text, but evolves and comes into being in the text-reader transaction.

The immanent reader has been described as one who is primarily triggered by a subjective agenda. Although basic literary aspects are thematized through the father-God analogy, the negation and the cutting techniques, these structures are overridden and constrained by a fixed and predefined understanding. The best illustration is the way the immanent reader, and in contrast to the dialogical reader above, finds the father-God analogy only relevant for believers and thus rules out existential reflections of transcendent content. This reflects an imbalance between the text and the reader, which, I will claim, allows the reader to go beyond

the boundaries of the parable itself and present – and Rosenblatt would say on undemocratic premises – another text; a drama.

I also find the ethical and the Christian reader to be guided by an over-dimensional reader. Again it is a certain predefined position and an interpretive framework that dominates the reading and puts the parable's verbal cues in the background. When textual aspects are discussed, as for instance the negation of the last paragraph, it is either adapted to fit the overall ethical and Christian framework or downplayed and considered insignificant. It is also interesting to observe that what seems to be an example of text-centeredness; the role of *The Prodigal Son* as title, what at best is an unsettled verbal cue, is accentuated to legitimate the ethical and Christian frameworks.

Certainly, due to a weak text-centeredness, the responses of the immanent, the ethical, and the Christian reader are not characterized by meaning being triggered by the text, and nor can it be claimed that they instrumentally elicit meaning directly from the text. Rather, the common feature in these typologies is that *The Prodigal Son's* verbal cues are subject to predefined and all-pervasive interpretive frameworks. This imbalance between the text and the reader has the consequence that the potential of the text's verbal cues in developing and enhancing these readers' knowledge and understanding is strongly reduced.

So, to what extent and in what way do the findings of this study challenge Moore's concept of religious literacy? It is not sufficient, what I find is the essence of Moore's thinking, to gain knowledge about the basic tenets of religion, and general hermeneutical principles, and to obtain "the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses" (Moore, 2007, p. 56). Though all this undeniably is important, the findings of this study clearly illustrate that a certain level of knowledge and cultural awareness do not automatically pave the way towards democratic readings or democratic education. The key issue, I will claim, is not so much what the RE teacher brings to the interpretive events, but the decisions made when this is played out in the transaction with the text. And to restate the key properties of a democratic reading, the characteristics of these decisions are: willingness to be transparent about, discuss the relevance of and see the potential in personal and collective biases; willingness to engage in "rereading," "adjustment of meaning," and also, when that is imperative, to carry out

“revision of framework.” And finally but most fundamentally, recognize that knowledge and understanding evolve and come into being in the text-reader transaction.

Although Moore well highlights democracy as the ultimate goal of education, this study shows that achieving this aim depends on practice; the actual decisions made in literacy events. Gordon M. Pradl, in the article “Reading and democracy: The enduring influence of Louise Rosenblatt,” points to the essence of this: “[H]ow readers finally come to understand and enact democratic values depends very much on the *way* ‘poems’ are evoked ... not on what is actually in the text itself” (Pradl, 1996, p. 10, italics original). Obviously, in order to achieve this, there needs to be a fundamental shift from Moore’s normative and instrumental concept of knowledge and understanding towards a transactional perspective. And furthermore, there needs to be a shift from a goal-driven and idealistic approach to religious literacy towards an empirically-based approach. Because it is through studying and analyzing real literacy events that it is possible to discuss the essential properties of critical or democratic literacy practices. This study demonstrates, therefore, that our understanding of religious literacy in RE cannot rest on theory and normative ideals or on weak-founded generalizations – the assumption that religious illiteracy “spans the globe” (Moore, 2006) – but must evolve and develop on the basis of critical empirical research.

### **5.3.3 Andrew Wright – providing a theoretical basis for religious literacy**

Andrew Wright is the scholar in RE who has most extensively dealt with the concept of religious literacy. In his book *Religious education in the secondary school: Prospects for religious literacy* from 1993, Wright defines religious literacy as “the ability ... to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion” (A. Wright, 1993, p. 47). From then on and up to the present, Wright has worked to establish a philosophical and theological basis for religious literacy through what he refers to as the “Critical Religious Education” program (A. Wright, 2000, p. 172).

Wright centers in on two pillars on which religious literacy rests. The first pillar is “linguistic literacy” (A. Wright, 2004, p. 45). This, of course, is not narrowed down to the basic activity of decoding print, but to the ability of using language as a way to encounter the world as we see it, “the real world out there,” as Wright puts it (A. Wright, 2004, p. 45). This also implies,

and here is Wright's main concern, that linguistic literacy needs to go beyond what is immediately available to our senses, so as to encompass the skills to communicate "the ultimate meaning and purpose inherent in the order-of-things" (A. Wright, 2004, p. 45). This is based on the notion that human language through its nature seeks truth claims that transcend the immanent world. Wright, therefore, rejects the modern and positivist idea that objective truths are something given and uncontaminated by subjectivity and context. And further, he also rejects the radical postmodern and liberal idea that humans cannot make any truth claims.<sup>221</sup>

This transcendental perspective on language brings me over to the second pillar of religious literacy: "spiritual literacy" (e.g. A. Wright, 2000). The notion that language communicates, as referred to above, "the ultimate meaning and purpose inherent in the order-of-things" (A. Wright, 2004, p. 45), clearly fits Wright's notion of religion and more specifically also the role of theology. With reference to the theologian Paul Tillich, Wright underlines that "religious questions *begin as human questions*, since at the heart of the human condition lies a concern for our ultimate destiny, for that which determines our being or non-being" (A. Wright, 2004, p. 72, italics added).<sup>222</sup> Thus, the proper objective of theology and also the aim of "spiritual literacy," is "to bring us in relationship with the question of being, with the question of ultimate mystery of the universe, by correlating our thoughts and experiences with transcendent reality" (A. Wright, 2004, p. 72).

And what "bring[s] us in relationship with ... transcendent reality," according to Wright, is first and foremost the religious narrative. He claims that transcendental reality is not found in rigid religious doctrines, as these are embedded in and limited to human thought and language (A. Wright, 2006, p. 177). Neither is transcendental reality reflected in individual spiritual experiences. Wright says, clearly in opposition to postmodern influence in theology: "The

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<sup>221</sup> Wright grounds linguistic literacy in socio-linguistic theory, critical realism and in the philosophy of hermeneutics. He refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein and the concept of language-game, emphasizing that language has a practical and a social side. And most importantly in this concern, though humans have to acknowledge that "[t]he true nature of the universe and of our place within it is essentially mysterious, always one step beyond the ability of human reason to comprehend it" (A. Wright, 1993, p. 11), we do engage in language-games about meaning and truth. Equally important are the influences of critical realism of, among others, Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1993, 1997), and the hermeneutics of Hans-G. Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur, as he points to the intrinsic complexity of truth claims caused by personal bias, power structures and also contextual and situative aspects. Thus, linguistic literacy must entail the skills and the abilities to critically discuss the realism in partial and contextually contingent truth claims.

<sup>222</sup> Wright refers to Tillich's *Systematic theology* (1978, pp. 12-14).



Christian God does not manifest himself through noumenal spiritual experiences” (A. Wright, 2004, p. 115).<sup>223</sup> The nature of the Christian narrative, as opposed to rigid dogmatism and spiritual subjectivity, “invites rather than demands our response,” and further, as texts of revelation, the Christian narrative “recounts the story of God’s initiative in seeking the salvation of his fallen creation” (A. Wright, 2004, pp. 114-115).

Thus, “*to do justice to religion*” in general and the Christian narrative more specifically, “a *qualitative* pluralism is necessary,” a pluralism which both recognizes the inviting nature of narratives and at the same time “accepts the ambiguous, controversial, and conflicting nature of theological truth claims” (A. Wright, 2000, p. 177, italics original). This implies that readers, according to Wright, need to acknowledge that neither the narratives nor their responses or truth claims are conclusive. Still, readers need to see that transcendental truths are out there, revealed and accessible in the proclaimed narratives. And as “spiritual beings,” by means of thought and language, we should constantly seek to comprehend them (A. Wright, 2000, p. 174).

Wright’s vision for RE, therefore, with the means of educating for “spiritual literacy” and “linguistic literacy,” is to “*enable a critical dialogue between the horizon of the child and the horizon of religion*” (A. Wright, 2000, p. 179, italics original). His “pointers” to what “a practical hermeneutical framework” for RE could possess, reflect this:

1. To recognize, articulate and acknowledge a “pupil’s pre-understanding.”
2. To recognize “the sources of this pre-understanding.”
3. To move from “recognition of the nature and the source of their pre-understanding towards a dialogue with ... religious traditions.”
4. To practice “a critical hermeneutic through which an understanding of the dialectic of truth and [religious] ambiguity will develop” (A. Wright, 1996, pp. 175-176).

How, then, does Wright’s approach to religious literacy relate to the empirical findings of this study? In the article “Research in religious education: Philosophical and theological perspectives,” Wright introduces himself as follows: “My particular interest in research in

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<sup>223</sup> Wright refers to Paul Ricoeur and also Charles Taylor in his discussion on religion and theology in the modern age. Wright’s emphasis on the religious narrative is inspired by Ricoeur’s book *Figuring the sacred: Religion, narrative, and imagination* (Ricoeur & Wallace, 1995, p. 48ff).

religious education is theoretical, focusing on the twin disciplines of philosophy and theology” (A. Wright, 2006, p. 175). This is based on the conviction that for RE teachers to be successful, they must be “informed by the very best philosophical and theological thinking” (A. Wright, 2006, p. 175). Wright admits that this can lead to distanced theorizing and intellectualism, but insists that his intention is to build a foundation for “[t]he coming together of the horizons of pupil and religion” (A. Wright, 2000, p. 179). To elaborate on this, Wright brings in Michael Polanyi’s concept of “personal knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958) and Emanuel Lévinas’ concept of “the Other” (Lévinas, 2003); Polanyi to stress the role and responsibility of the subjective to “secur[e] an engaged-yet-reflective relationship with the world” (A. Wright, 2004, p. 61), and Lévinas, to widen the perspective and “challeng[e] me to look beyond myself towards a wealth of new horizons” in the search for truth claims (A. Wright, 2004, p. 50). Clearly, for Wright, it is the most theoretically informed RE teachers and RE students who will have “the ability ... to” not only “reflect” and “communicate,” but also “*act* in an informed and intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion” (A. Wright, 1993, p. 47, italics added).

As we can see, and compared to Prothero and Moore, Wright does not lessen the burden of what RE teachers and RE students need to know. It is rather the opposite. Thus, all that have been said about Prothero and Moore’s theoretical and normative concepts of religious literacy could now be repeated. But, in having said this, I find that it is Wright – surprising as that may sound – who best matches the empirical findings of this study. And the reason for this is that his concept of religious literacy is grounded in a philosophical and theological theory on the nature of religion that includes the nature of religious narratives, and furthermore, a theory on the ontology of language and truth claims. Unlike Moore, who theorizes on how religion manifests itself in the modern world and from that deduces how to educate for cultural awareness, Wright focuses on socio-linguistic and philosophical and theological thought to establish the basic criteria for the best possible encounter. And interestingly, it is here, in Wright’s theoretical criteria for “*the critical dialogue between the horizon of the child and the horizon of religion*” (A. Wright, 2000, p. 179, italics original), that I find points of reference to the religious literacy events as I have analyzed them;

- that knowledge and understanding develop in a “*critical dialogue*” between “*the horizon*” of the reader and “*the horizon*” of the text
- that religious narratives do not contain fixed meanings but, as Wright puts it, “invites rather than demands our response” (A. Wright, 2004, pp. 114-115)
- an awareness of the implications of experienced-based and also collective truth claims

These corresponding links show, then, that there is a potential in combining basic theoretical research and empirical research in order to further develop the concept of religious literacy in RE. Certainly, and as we have seen, Moore’s cultural studies approach is valuable and important, but I will argue it is limited to the particular purpose of highlighting manifestations of religion in historical and contemporary cultural expressions. Thus, I regard Moore to be more of a supplement to Wright. Clearly, it is Wright’s ontology on language and focus on the actor of interpretation, and further, his concentration on the nature of religion and elaboration on religious narratives as a particular subject matter, which are in harmony with the empirical findings of this study.

But, and this is important to emphasize as a final point, Wright’s theorizing obviously falls short when the issue is to *understand* religious literacy events. Though one can argue, based on Wright’s reference to Gadamer, that there is a merging of horizons between reader and text in literacy events, the empirical findings of this study show that there is no smooth merging taking place and that the reason for this is much more complex than simply saying that it all depends on whether the RE teacher is “informed by the very best philosophical and theological thinking” or not (A. Wright, 2006, p. 175). This illustrates again, echoing the final words in the chapter on Moore, that the concept of religious literacy cannot rest on theory alone but must evolve and develop on the basis of critical empirical research.

### 5.3.4 Summary

This discussion on contemporary conceptualizations of religious literacy in RE illustrates that the field is dominated by one-sided theoretical and normative thinking. But, and as a compilation of Stephen Prothero, Diane L. Moore and Andrew Wright's definitions of religious literacy illustrates, this has not lead towards a theoretical and normative consensus:

<b>Stephen Prothero</b>	<b>Diane L. Moore</b>	<b>Andrew Wright</b>
“[T]he ability to understand and use ... the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” (Prothero, 2007, p. 15).	“Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore, 2007, p. 56).	“[T]he ability ... to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion” (A. Wright, 1993, p. 47).

Although all three share the idea that religious literacy is about building a firm basis of knowledge, Prothero focuses on the basic tenets of religion; “the basic building blocks of religion,” while Moore broadens the scope and centers the attention on the many manifestations of religion in contemporary “social/political/cultural life,” and finally Wright, who argues that we need to go to the basics of socio-linguistics and philosophical and theological thought to be knowledgeable about “the phenomenon of religion.” My claim is that these variations are based on diverging normative ambitions. Prothero and Moore, although dissimilar in many respects, share the ambition of informing Americans and also the world about the scope of religious illiteracy and to argue for the most effective ways to overcome it. As a result, religious literacy becomes a concept for change, more precisely, as a matter of coming up with the best arguments and means to heal an urgent situation. This implies, I will argue, that Prothero and Moore's approaches to religious literacy are rather strongly associated with situational analyses, that is, analyses that are not based on well-founded empirical research on what happens in literacy events, but on general assumptions that a majority of Americans are religiously illiterate, even making the universal claim that religious illiteracy “spans the globe” (Moore, 2006).

Wright, in contrast to this, is not pulling the alarm-bell but is instead concentrating on establishing a firm theoretical basis that is independent of contexts and analyses of current trends in society. This has been illustrated by showing how his understanding of the “*critical dialogue*” coincides with some of the key findings in this empirical study (A. Wright, 2000, p. 179, italics original). This, I will argue and as I have shown above, makes Wright more applicable and relevant.

However, and more importantly, a theoretical and normative approach to religious literacy reflects an instrumental understanding of the agents of literacy. The empirical findings of my study are unequivocal about one thing: The reader plays a major role in literacy events. This is true for all four typologies. In three of the four typologies (the immanent, the ethical, and the Christian reader), that is, in seven out of nine responses, the reader plays the dominant role. Also in the dialogical approach the reader clearly represents one of two pillars on which the process of meaning-making rests. Thus, independently of the variations among the typologies, the findings show that RE teachers’ religious literacy cannot be grasped without acknowledging and understanding the constitutive role of the reader. Certainly, this should have implications for theory-building on religious literacy.

Further, the findings also show that the RE teacher is much more than a code-breaker who is given the role to instrumentally carry out the most probable interpretation. Certainly, a normative and instrumental understanding of literacy finds support in Wolfgang Iser’s theory, as he focuses on basic linguistic and literary competence as prerequisites to get access to the world of literature. This competency, Iser claims, with which Wright certainly will agree, provides “generic control of the aesthetic response” (Iser, 1974b, pp. 57-80). However, as Rosenblatt is well aware of, and as the findings of this study confirm, the “personal factor constitute another type of limitation” with characteristic observable features (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129), and thus needs to be included as an essential part of theory-building.

As the discussions in this dissertation have illuminated, the RE teachers’ “personal factor” vary considerably; from the highly personal agenda of the immanent approach to the collectivist Christian approach. What brings the immanent, the ethical, and the Christian reader together, is that the “personal factor” largely guides the meaning-making process and thereby also determines the outcome. The contrast to this I find in the dialogical reader, who shows that you can be a devoted follower and belong to a powerful religious “interpretive

community,” or an agnostic with strong objections against religious authorities, but without letting these influences fully determine the course. The defining moment, therefore, is when the immanent, the ethical, and also the Christian reader – intentionally or unintentionally – leave room for the persuasive argument for a certain interpretation. And likewise, but contrastingly, the defining moment is when the dialogical reader brings in an equally strong “personal factor” as a stimulus to deepen and “enhanc[e] the work-as-experienced” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 125).

I also find this to be true for the role of readers’ linguistic and literary knowledge. Clearly, what appears decisive is not linguistic and literary competence per se but how the RE teacher applies this knowledge in concrete literacy events. As the study shows, you can draw from years of academic studies, but again, the essential question is if this constrains the meaning-making process or serves to broaden and enhance it. Interestingly, the one with the highest and the one with the lowest formal competence in RE ended up on each pole on Rosenblatt’s reader continuum; the best qualified farthest out on the non-aesthetic side and the least qualified and also least experienced farthest out on the aesthetic side (see p. 73). On this basis, therefore, there should be good reasons for the following claim:

Though important, the key issue is not so much what the RE teacher brings to the interpretive event of prior knowledge or bias, but the actual decisions made when this is played out in the transaction with the text.

I will end this summary, therefore, by listing the characteristic properties of the decisions, and which in the discussion have been referred to as critical/uncritical and democratic/undemocratic properties:

1. Reading is “socially generated” but “always individually internalised” (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381):

**Critical or democratic reading**

- A reader who is aware of and transparent about the potential implications of personal bias and the power and influence of “interpretive communities” in meaning-making.

**Uncritical or undemocratic reading**

- A reader who is not aware of or neglects the power and influence of personal bias and “interpretive communities” in meaning-making.

- A reader who is willing to question both personal convictions and established collective truths in the process of meaning-making.
- A reader who positively utilizes personal and social aspects to enhance meaning.
- A reader who consciously or unconsciously favors a strong personal position or a strong collective position in the process of meaning-making.
- A reader who delimits meaning-making by promoting the personal at the expense of the social or vice versa.

2. A text can have multiple valid interpretations:

**Critical or democratic reading**

- Text-centeredness; acknowledging that it is the text that triggers and guides towards multiple readings.
- A willingness to engage in “rereading” when new aspects and ideas evolve or are introduced.
- A willingness to make a “readjustment of meaning” when other ideas prove persuasive and more substantial.
- A willingness to make a “revision of framework” when established ‘truths’ are invalidated (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11; 54).

**Uncritical or undemocratic reading**

- A reader who dominates the text and who guides the text towards rigid and closed readings.
- A reader who rejects new aspects or adapts them to fit a predefined interpretive framework.
- A reader whose meanings are not up for adjustments.
- A reader whose predefined and rigid interpretive framework is not up for revision.

3. To gain knowledge of and to understand a text is “a literary work of art,” that is, something that evolves and comes into being (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 83):

**Critical or democratic reading**

- Acknowledging that the text and its linguistic and literary aspects do not contain meaning per se, but trigger and guide the meaning-making process.
- A balanced and mutual contingent relationship between the basic structures of the text and the reader creates unique responses or “poems.”

**Uncritical or undemocratic reading**

- A reader who either extracts all meanings from the text, or, at the opposite end, ignores or rejects key textual aspects in order to highlight a predefined interpretive framework.
- A dominant reader or a dominant text which creates an unbalanced relationship and hence a predetermined and a nonaesthetic response.

With the main claim above and with this final overview, I have ended the dissertation by highlighting the relevance of asking the research question *What happens when RE teachers interpret The Prodigal Son?* It is only by exploring the nature of the decisions made in real religious literacy events that it is possible to say something meaningful and significant about religious literacy. This study, therefore, hopes to provide a needed empirical basis in order to further develop the conceptualization of literacy in RE and also in education more generally.

And with regard to the main addressees of this study – the RE teachers and RE teacher educators – this study underpins what John Hattie refers to as “the importance of educators as evaluators of their impact” (Hattie, 2012, p. preface). For RE teachers to be “evaluators of their impact,” they must understand that it is not a single factor that plays the determinant role when they make meaning of subject knowledge matters, that it is not only about your background and experiences (e.g. religious affiliation), contextual matters (e.g. certain school contexts), formal restrictions (e.g. curriculum-guidelines), or level of formal competence. This qualitative analysis shows that the potential impact of these and other factors is determined by the actual decisions made when they are played out in the transaction with a particular subject knowledge matter. It is imperative, therefore, that RE teachers, RE teacher educators and also RE students develop an awareness of and knowledge about the complexity of what is involved, and what happens when they create meaning of content knowledge matters. A literacy of this kind will promote critical and democratic skills and thinking in RE.



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# Attachments

## Attachment 1: Den bortkomne sønnen

(Lukasevangeliet kapittel 15, vers 11-32)

[11](#) Jesus sa: En mann hadde to sønner. [12](#) Den yngste sa til ham: “Far, gi meg den delen av formuen som faller på meg.” Han skiftet da sin eiendom mellom dem. [13](#) Ikke mange dager etter solgte den yngste sønnen alt sitt og drog til et land langt borte. Der sløste han bort alle pengene i et vilt liv. [14](#) Men da han hadde satt alt over styr, kom en svær hungersnød over landet, og han begynte å lide nød. [15](#) Han gikk da og tok arbeid hos en mann der i landet, og mannen sendte ham ut på markene for å gjete svin. [16](#) Han ønsket bare å få mette seg med de belgene som grisene åt, for ingen gav ham noe.

[17](#) Da kom han til seg selv og sa: “Alle arbeidsfolkene hjemme hos min far har mat i overflod, mens jeg går her og sulter i hjel! [18](#) Jeg vil bryte opp og gå til min far og si: Far, jeg har syndet mot Himmelen og mot deg. [19](#) Jeg fortjener ikke lenger å være din sønn. Men la meg få være som en av leiekarene dine.”

[20](#) Dermed brøt han opp og drog hjemover til sin far. Da han ennå var langt borte, fikk faren se ham, og han syntes inderlig synd på ham. Han løp sønnen i møte, kastet seg om halsen på ham og kysset ham. [21](#) Sønnen sa: “Far, jeg har syndet mot Himmelen og mot deg. Jeg fortjener ikke lenger å være din sønn.” [22](#) Men faren sa til tjenerne: “Skynd dere! Finn fram de fineste klærne og ta dem på ham, gi ham ring på fingeren og sko på føttene. [23](#) Og hent gjøkalven og slakt den, så vil vi spise og glede oss. [24](#) For denne sønnen min var død og er blitt levende, han var kommet bort og er funnet igjen.” Og så begynte festen og gleden.

[25](#) Imens var den eldste sønnen ute på marken. Da han gikk hjemover og nærmet seg gården, hørte han musikk og dans. [26](#) Han ropte på en av tjenerne og spurte hva som var på ferde. [27](#) “Din bror er kommet hjem,” svarte han, “og din far har slaktet gjøkalven fordi han har fått ham frisk hjem igjen.” [28](#) Da ble han sint og ville ikke gå inn. Faren kom ut og prøvde å overtale ham. [29](#) Men han svarte: “Her har jeg tjent deg i alle år, og aldri har jeg gjort imot det du sa; men meg har du ikke gitt så mye som et kje så jeg kunne holde fest sammen med vennene mine. [30](#) Men straks denne sønnen din kommer hjem, han som har brukt opp pengene dine sammen med skjøger, da slakter du gjøkalven for ham!” [31](#) Faren sa til ham: “Min sønn! Du er alltid hos meg, og alt mitt er ditt. [32](#) Men nå skal vi holde fest og være glade. For han, din bror, var død og er blitt levende, han var kommet bort og er funnet igjen.”

(Bibelen: Det Gamle og Det Nye testamente, 1978)

## The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

(The Gospel of Luke chapter 15, verses 11-32)

[11](#) Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. [12](#) The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. [13](#) A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. [14](#) When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. [15](#) So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. [16](#) He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. [17](#) But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! [18](#) I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; [19](#) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’” [20](#) So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. [21](#) Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ [22](#) But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. [23](#) And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; [24](#) for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

[25](#) “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. [26](#) He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. [27](#) He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ [28](#) Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. [29](#) But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. [30](#) But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ [31](#) Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32](#) But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

*(Holy Bible: New revised standard version containing the Old and New Testaments, 1989)*

## Attachment 2: Letter of invitation to school principals



Høgskolen i Hedmark

Ole K. Kjørven

62517739/92418038

ole.kjorven@hihm.no

Til: xx

Rektor ved x skole

### **Forskningsprosjekt – RLE-læreres arbeid med religiøse fortellinger**

#### **Bakgrunnen for henvendelsen**

Høsten 2009 startet jeg et skoleforskningsprosjekt som har til hensikt å belyse RLE-læreres møte med og arbeid med religiøse tekster. Jeg er nå i en fase hvor jeg har behov for å hente inn materiale fra feltet.

#### **Temaet**

Erfaring fra undervisning i grunnskolen og fra å undervise studenter på allmennlærerstudiet, har gjort meg oppmerksom på lærerrollens betydning for formidling av fagstoff. Mye kan tyde på at læreren som aktør er av spesiell betydning i RLE-faget. Jeg ønsker med prosjektet å belyse på mer vitenskapelige premisser hvilke faktorer som former og preger RLE-lærerens faglige og didaktiske tenkning i møte med dette undervisningsmaterialet.

Siden innføringen av L97 har det vært et sterkt fokus på religiøse fortellinger. Innholdskomponentene i KRL-faget var sterkt knyttet opp mot religionenes fortellingstradisjoner. Med kunnskapsløftet ble innholdskomponentene erstattet med målformuleringer, men lite tyder på at fortelling har mistet sin status i faget. I tillegg vil jeg hevde at det å belyse hvordan RLE-lærere forholder seg til fortellinger fra ulike religioner og livssyn, også vil kunne antyde noe om hvordan RLE-lærere forholder seg til annet religiøst materiale og også fenomenet religion mer generelt.

#### **Hensikten**

Det er viktig å understreke at formålet med prosjektet ikke er å vurdere RLE-lærernes prestasjoner. Hensikten er i stedet å beskrive hva som skjer i RLE-lærernes møte med og

arbeid med religiøse tekster. I mine analyser og konklusjoner vil jeg altså ikke være interessert i om RLE-lærerne tolker tekster ”riktig” eller ”galt” og anvender tekstene ”godt eller dårlig” ut i fra bestemte kriterier, men forsøke å få frem hvilke faktorer som former og preger deres fagdidaktiske tenkning.

Ambisjonen er at jeg skal inngå et forskningssamarbeid med RLE-lærerne. Det innebærer helt konkret at vi sammen velger ut aktuelle tekster og at jeg informerer om hvordan deres arbeid med tekstene vil bli analysert. Jeg går altså ikke inn i dette prosjektet ut i fra en forståelse av forskeren som ”utenfor” og informantene som ”innenfor”. Et viktig poeng for meg er å understreke at skoleforskning bør dreie seg om samarbeid og deltakelse, altså at forsker og informant skaper en arena for gjensidig kunnskapsutvikling. På den måten blir forskningen mer aktuell for praksisfeltet og praksisfeltet mer synliggjort som et sted der det foregår viktig kunnskapsutvikling.

### **Proessen videre**

Jeg ønsker informanter ut i fra følgende kriterier:

1. Kvalifiserte RLE-lærere
2. RLE-lærere som underviser regelmessig i RLE
3. RLE-lærere som vil delta som frivillige i forskningsprosjektet

Jeg håper at det vil kunne være RLE-lærere som vil synes at det vil være interessant å delta i dette forskningsprosjektet. I forkant av materialinnhenting, som vil skje gjennom intervjuer og refleksjonstekster, ønsker jeg et kort informasjonsmøte med de frivillige RLE-lærerne.

Jeg håper at skolen og også RLE-lærerne vil synes at prosjektet er interessant og at dere kan komme med en første respons på denne henvendelsen innen slutten av uke xx.

Ta kontakt ved eventuelle spørsmål.

Vennlig hilsen

Ole K. Kjørven

Stipendiat i religionspedagogikk, Høgskolen i Hedmark



## Attachment 3: Letter of invitation to potential informants



Høgskolen i Hedmark  
Campus Hamar

Ole K. Kjørven

62517739/92418038

ole.kjorven@hihm.no

### TIL:

RLE-lærere som deltar i forskningsprosjektet

## Forskningsprosjekt: RLE-læreres arbeid med fortellinger

### Bakgrunnen for henvendelsen

Høsten 2009 startet jeg et forskningsprosjekt som har til hensikt å belyse RLE-læreres møte med og arbeid med religiøse tekster. Jeg er nå i en fase der jeg skal hente inn materiale fra feltet. Dette betyr at jeg nå trenger informanter, dvs. RLE-lærere fra det som kan sies å være tre typiske offentlige barneskoler i Hamar-området. Helt konkret er jeg ute etter de lærerne på en skole som underviser regelmessig i RLE på mellomtrinnet og som anses som sentrale lærere i faget.

### Temaet

Erfaring fra undervisning i grunnskolen og fra å undervise studenter på allmennlærerstudiet, har gjort meg spesielt oppmerksom på lærerens betydning for formidling av fagstoff. Mye kan tyde på at læreren spiller en helt spesielt fremtredende rolle i RLE-faget. Med dette prosjektet ønsker jeg derfor å få belyst hvilke faktorer som former og preger RLE-lærerens møte og arbeid med ett konkret kunnskapsområde: religiøse fortellinger.

Hvorfor fortelling? Religionsfaget har alltid hatt fokus på fortelling. Med innføringen av KRL-faget (L97) ble fortelling presentert som spesielt viktig, og da som en metode som skulle skape forståelse og gi grunnlag for dialog. Med Kunnskapsløftet ble de detaljerte innholdsbeskrivelsene fra L97 erstattet med mer generelle målformuleringer, men lite tyder på at fortelling har mistet sin sentrale posisjon i faget. Dette ser vi bl.a. i lærebøkene som brukes på barne- og mellomtrinnet.

### Hensikten

Det er viktig for meg å understreke at formålet med prosjektet ikke er å vurdere deres kunnskaper eller prestasjoner. Hensikten er i stedet å *beskrive* hva som skjer i deres arbeid med religiøse tekster. I mine analyser og konklusjoner vil jeg altså ikke være interessert i om dere tolker tekster ”riktig” eller ”galt” og bruker tekstene ”godt” eller ”dårlig,” men å *forstå* hva som ligger til grunn for deres ulike tilnærminger og tolkninger.

Selv om prosjektet fokuserer snevert på fortelling, vil det også kunne antyde noe om hvordan dere som RLE-lærere forholder dere til annet religiøst materiale som brukes i faget, for eksempel kunstbilder. Muligens vil det også kunne gi et grunnlag for å si noe om hvordan dere forholder dere til fenomenet religion mer generelt.

### **Om forholdet mellom dere som informanter og meg som forsker**

Jeg har som ambisjon å skape et gjensidig forskningssamarbeid med dere som informanter. Det er viktig for meg er å understreke at skoleforskning bør dreie seg om samarbeid og deltakelse, altså at forsker og informant skaper en arena for gjensidig kunnskapsutvikling. På den måten blir forskningen mer aktuell for praksisfeltet og praksisfeltet mer synliggjort som et sted der det foregår viktig kunnskapsutvikling. Mitt ønske er at dette prosjektet kan føre til et mer fruktbart samarbeid mellom skoler i regionen og høgskolens lærerutdanning i RLE-faget. For at vi skal få til det, vil det være helt avgjørende å få til et godt samarbeid med dere RLE-lærere.

### **Det jeg ber dere om å gjøre**

- Skrive en tekst, det jeg kaller en refleksjonstekst, om *hvordan du forstår teksten*. Din tekst sender du til meg på e-post (se adresse øverst). Lengden på teksten vil variere fra person til person. Jeg vil anslå at du vil kunne bruke ca. 1 time på teksten, men her er det ingen bestemte krav.
- Være tilgjengelig for et intervju på skolen (ca. 40 min) i etterkant av innsendt tekst.
- Være tilgjengelig på e-post utover våren hvis det skulle være behov for avklaringer.

I tid vil dette utgjøre ca. 2 timer.

Hvis du skulle lure på noe underveis, så er det bare å ta kontakt!

Vennlig hilsen

Ole K. Kjørven  
Stipendiat i religionspedagogikk

## Attachment 4: Letter of approval from Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD)

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS  
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



Harald Hårfagres gate 29  
N-5007 Bergen  
Norway  
Tel: +47-55 58 21 17  
Fax: +47-55 58 96 50  
nsd@nsd.uib.no  
www.nsd.uib.no  
Org.nr. 985 321 884

Ole Kolbjørn Kjørven  
Avdeling for lærerutdanning og naturvitenskap  
Høgskolen i Hedmark  
Lærerskolealléen 1  
2418 ELVERUM

Vår dato: 04.05.2010

Vår ref:24147 / 2 / KH

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

### TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 26.03.2010. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

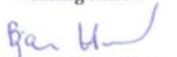
24147	<i>Religious Literacy and RE Teachers: What characterizes RE Teachers as Interpreters of religious Narratives? A qualitative empirical Study of RE Teachers in secondary Schools in Norway</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	Høgskolen i Hedmark, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Ole Kolbjørn Kjørven

Etter gjennomgang av opplysninger gitt i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon, finner vi at prosjektet ikke medfører meldeplikt eller konsesjonsplikt etter personopplysningslovens §§ 31 og 33.

Dersom prosjektopplegget endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for vår vurdering, skal prosjektet meldes på nytt. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, [http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk\\_stud/skjema.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk_stud/skjema.html).

Vedlagt følger vår begrunnelse for hvorfor prosjektet ikke er meldepliktig.

Vennlig hilsen

  
Bjørn Henrichsen

  
Kjersti Håvardstun

Kontaktperson:Kjersti Håvardstun tlf: 55 58 29 53  
Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Avdelingskontorer / District Offices:

OSLO: NSD, Universitetet i Oslo, Postboks 1055 Blindern, 0316 Oslo. Tel: +47-22 85 52 11. nsd@uio.no  
TRONDHEIM: NSD, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 7491 Trondheim. Tel: +47-73 59 19 07. kyrr.swarva@sit.ntnu.no  
TROMSØ: NSD, SVF, Universitetet i Tromsø, 9017 Tromsø. Tel: +47-77 64 43 36. nsdmaa@sy.uit.no



## Attachment 5: Letter of consent



Høgskolen i **Hedmark**  
Campus Hamar

Ole K. Kjørven

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ole.kjorven@hihm.no

### Samtykke

Jeg gir med dette stipendiat i religionspedagogikk ved Høgskolen i Hedmark, Ole K. Kjørven, samtykke til å anvende informasjon om meg innhentet ved intervju og skriftlig refleksjonsnotat til en undersøkelse om RLE-læreres arbeid med religiøse fortellinger i skolen. Intervjuet og notatet utføres i løpet av våren 2012 og skal brukes som grunnlag for det videre forskningsarbeidet. Materialet vil bli referert til i avhandlingen og også i senere artikler om temaet.

Samtykke gis under forutsetning at lærerinformanten og datamaterialet anonymiseres. Ved bruk av datamaterialet utover dette, kreves det at det hentes inn utvidet samtykke.

Hamar, 27. februar 2012

Signatur:



## Attachment 6: Form for personal information



Høgskolen i **Hedmark**  
Campus Hamar

Ole K. Kjørven

62517739/92418038

ole.kjorven@hihm.no

Til: xx

RLE-lærere som deltar i forskningsprosjektet

### **Informasjon om informanter**

Navn:

Alder:

E-post:

Skole:

Underviser i RLE på følgende trinn:

Bruker følgende læreverker i RLE:

Utdanningsbakgrunn (når tok du utdanning og hvilken utdanning? Vær presis i forhold til utdanning i RLE):

Merk: Alt materiale som kan tilbakeføres til konkrete personer vil bli anonymisert.

Vennlig hilsen

Ole K. Kjørven

Stipendiat i religionspedagogikk