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# Critique of religion and critical thinking in religious education

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the critique of religion and critical thinking in religious education. The contribution reports on research into religious education in upper secondary schools in Norway based on interviews with teachers, student focus groups, and observations of planned teaching. I claim that teaching about the critique of religion can facilitate more accurate understandings of religious diversity (*descriptive facticity*), scholarly differentiation based on scientific terms (*scientific accuracy*), reflections on religious legitimation, reproduction of power and the social and psychological effects of religious beliefs and practices (*correlative judgement*), as well as active thinking about whether religious practices or beliefs are warranted or sustainable for modern democracies (*normative judgement*). The implication is that teaching about the critique of religion foster critical thinking about what *is* and about what is *right* but not about what is religiously *true*.

## KEYWORDS

Religious education; Critique of religion; Critical thinking

## Introduction

The critique of religion is one of the most important parts of religious education because it is connected to critical thinking. I cannot think of tools that are more important [...] [than tools which help students to be] able to separate chalk from cheese and interact in a democracy as citizens. [...] The most meaningful thing I can offer is to help students think.

The quote above from Sara, an experienced teacher of religious education (RE) in Norway, illustrates a relationship that I explore in this article – that is, the link between the critique of religion and critical thinking. According to Sara and many other teachers, critical thinking is one of the most important things that the school can offer students (Huang et al. 2017; Sætra and Stray 2019). In an age of ‘information overload’, fake news and misinformation (Jackson and Farzaneh 2012), critical thinking about the facticity and truthfulness of claims is increasingly important (Ferrer et al. 2019, 11–12). According to the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, developed by the Council of Europe, critical thinking about the ‘internal diversity of beliefs and practices which exists within individual religions’ is paramount to facilitate appreciation of different ways of living in multicultural democracies (Barrett et al. 2018, 50). Critical thinking is also imperative for the moral development of citizens in democratic, multicultural and multireligious societies, as negotiations of different epistemic and normative assumptions requires citizens to ‘listen to each other and to build up reflective civic and inclusive civil discourse’ (Saada 2015, 97).

Based on empirical material (observations, student focus groups, and individual interviews with teachers) collected from upper secondary schools in Norway, I discuss the ways in which teaching

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and learning about the critique of religion in RE can be facilitated to foster critical thinking. My analysis addresses the following question: In what ways can teaching and learning about the critique of religion contribute to critical thinking in RE? I understand critical thinking as *active thinking* focused on what to believe or do (Ennis 1987, 4), as opposed to uncritical thinking, in which knowledge is merely reproduced or accepted passively (Dewey 1910). Critical thinking requires active evaluation of whether a claim, argument, or interpretation is warranted. Thus, it is related to a *quality* of thinking and, by extension, active differentiation between good and bad judgements, valid and invalid inferences, and reliable and unreliable interpretations (see Moore 2013, 510–511). This meaning of the term can be traced back to the etymology of ‘critique’ from the Greek verb *krinein*, meaning ‘to separate, decide, and judge’ (Asad 2013, 42). The ability to differentiate, evaluate, and take a stand is at the core of critical thinking.

Norwegian RE gathers pupils from all backgrounds in a multifaith and non-confessional subject. Teaching is supposed to be ‘objective, neutral and critical’, meaning it should neither promote or denigrate religions or worldviews (see also Moore 2010, 7). That is not to say that RE cannot be affirmative or critical. It is considered an overall goal for Norwegian RE to approach religion from a wide range of scholarly perspectives, ranging from emphatic insider’s perspectives to critical outsider’s perspectives (Brekke 2023, 30; Eidhamar 2019, 33–34). According to Bråten and Skeie (2020, 14) another goal for RE is to develop critical understandings of religion as a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon and to ‘develop cultural competence that enables pupils to become competent citizens in a pluralistic society with a functional democracy’.

## Situating the study

Although empirical research on the critique of religion in schools is limited, there have been important contributions from Sweden and Norway. Two studies by Hammer and Schanke (2018a, 2018b) show that Norwegian teachers understand the teaching of critique of religion in multifaceted ways. Some teachers are ‘critical of authoritarian forms of religion and the perceived potential elements of conflict and violence in various religion’ (Hammer and Schanke 2018b, 157), while others emphasise ‘asking questions, developing independent opinions and nuanced descriptions’ (Hammer and Schanke 2018a, 190). The goal of teaching critique of religion is the development of deep understanding, creative questioning, independence, and self-reflexivity, and to a lesser degree, with questioning received and dominant knowledge (Hammer and Schanke 2018a, 194–196). A seminal part of the teaching is also connected to nuancing spontaneous (and often unfounded) criticism of religion from the students, which seem to be prevalent in the classroom (Hammer and Schanke 2018a, 158–160).

Nuancing spontaneous criticism of religion is also described as a goal for Swedish RE-teachers in their teaching about the critique of religion (Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2020, 140–146). To overcome simplistic and stereotypical understandings of religion, the Swedish teachers argue for the importance of ‘nuancing secularist attitudes in the classroom’. They also understand teaching about the critique of religion as ‘bringing up the problematic sides of religion’, meaning that they thematise the ways in which religion can be intertwined with anti-social practices and beliefs. Such teaching might contribute to ‘critical religious literacy’ that ‘enable communication across lines of religious difference’ (Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2020, 139). Teaching and learning about the critique of religion seems to facilitate discussions about ‘alternative ways of interpreting and “living” different religions’, essentially making students able to ‘discover new perspectives and reconsider their own presuppositions’ (Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2020, 146). Other studies have also emphasised the importance of religious literacy in the Nordic regions and beyond (Enstedt, Karin, and Wilhelm 2024, 10–11; Saada 2015, 97), facing raising forms of religious illiteracy (Moore 2007).

This article examine the complex interconnections between the teaching and learning about the critique of religion and critical thinking further. I aim to contribute to the conversation by showing

the specific *modes* of critical thinking that are facilitated in the classroom through teaching and learning about the critique of religion.

The critique of religion is variously defined in the didactics of religion (Jarmer 2022, 3). The term is, however, often associated with Wright's (2008) critical RE (see Matemba 2023, 309). Wright's programme is based on critical realist assumptions and is meant to train students in deliberating over the truth of religious beliefs and to foster reflexive justification. Wright's approach has gained traction in the Norwegian research community and has been used by researchers such as Domaas (2012), Kjørven (2018), and Søvik (2018). In this article, I take a different analytical avenue. I argue that learning and teaching about the critique of religion, seen from the perspective of critical thinking, is not about ontological discussions of claims about religious truth but rather about:

*descriptive facticity* (accurate understanding of religious plurality);

*scientific accuracy* (scholarly informed differentiations based on scientific terms);

*correlative judgement* (reflection about the social and psychological effects potentiated by religious beliefs and practices);

*normative judgement* (reflection about whether a religious practice or belief is wanted, warranted or sustainable for modern functioning democracies).

## Materials and methods

The central aim of this study was to explore teaching and learning about the critique of religion in Norwegian RE. The study can be described as a case study, aimed towards gaining a deeper understanding of teaching and learning about the critique of religion through idiographic analyses and triangulations of 'descriptions and interpretations, not just in a single step but continuously throughout the period of study' (Stake 2005, 443–444). The study triangulated three methods: interviews, focus groups and observations of teaching, which were all conducted between 2021–2023. To get a fuller picture of the experiences, reflections and descriptions about the topic, I considered it important to achieve *double descriptions* of the interactional relationship of teaching and learning (Sætra 2021, 4), meaning that I talked to both students and teachers. Former studies have to a greater extent focused on teachers' perspectives on the critique of religion (Löfstedt and Sjöborg, 2020; Hammer and Schanke 2018a). Including both students and teachers' perspectives contributed to more comprehensive and multivocal understanding of the phenomenon. Observations of teaching also offered the potential of increased analytic complexity as I could both scrutinise what the teachers and students said, as well as what they did.

### Semi-structured interviews

My analysis was based on 13 one-on-one interviews with upper secondary school teachers. An average interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.<sup>1</sup> The teachers were initially recruited through social media. I put out information about the project on a RE-teacher webpage, after which interested teachers contacted me privately. Afterwards, a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling was employed. I sought teachers from different parts of Norway and with different backgrounds. The final sample was heterogeneous (see Robinson 2014). Six of the teachers were women, while seven were men. They had different levels of teaching experience and worked in various parts of Norway. They also varied in terms of experience with student compositions (homogeneous/heterogeneous classrooms) and age. The teachers defined themselves as agnostic, atheist, Christian and humanist.

The interviews with the teachers were based on a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed for focused conversations around core themes, as well as flexibility to explore new analytical avenues

<sup>1</sup>One interview was for practical reasons not recorded. Notes were taken by hand.

(Kvale and Brinkmann 2015, 48). The teachers were asked both factual questions (e.g. 'How do you usually teach about the critique of religion?') and questions of opinion (e.g. 'Do you think that the critique of religion is important in RE?') (see Kvale and Brinkmann 2015, 46–47). Interviews were conducted at the teachers' schools, but also online, due to the ongoing pandemic at the time.

### *Focus group interviews*

To get insights into the students' perspectives, I also conducted four focus groups with pupils of RE ( $n = 16$ ). The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All pupils were interviewed at their schools. The focus groups consisted of a moderate number of pupils (three to five) to ensure that everyone could share their opinions. Students were between 18–19 years of age. They resided in both the Eastern and Western parts of Norway. The teachers helped facilitate socially well-functioning groups that would offer a wide range of perspectives. In the focus group interviews, the students discussed their previous experiences with the critique of religion in the classroom and broader reflections on the topic. Questions included: Do you think critique of religion is important for RE? What has teaching about the critique of religion previously looked like in RE? The focus groups offered valuable insights into the individual students' perspectives on the critique of religion, negotiations between the students, and opinions on which the students in the groups agreed on (see Jarmer 2024).

### *Observations*

To scrutinise how the critique of religion was taught in authentic contexts, I also observed and analysed four planned RE lessons on the critique of religion. Each lesson lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The lessons thematised Islamic feminist critique of religion, Nietzsche's criticism of religion as well as conceptual discussions of 'critique of religion'. I considered observations important to the study's overall design because previous studies have shown that there is limited knowledge of what actually goes on in Norwegian RE classrooms (Toft 2019). Building on Flick's (2017) conceptualisation, my approach can be called a strong programme of triangulation because I used additional methods (such as focus groups and observations) not merely to confirm or disprove the findings obtained from the initial data set (the interviews with the teachers), but rather to gain additional knowledge.

Both teachers and students are anonymised and referred to by pseudonyms. All participants provided written or verbal consent to participate in the project. This research was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research in 2021.

### *Abductive analysis*

My analysis can be described as abductive, meaning that I make 'sense of empirical phenomena' through an 'ongoing pragmatic process of "puzzling out" and problem solving that draws on existing ways of understanding what the phenomenon "is a case of"' (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 167). Through a close reading of the empirical material, I followed what the teachers and students stated and then started 'reading theoretically based on these insights' (Timmermans and Tavory 2022, 73). I examined, compared, and synthesised the material to determine what kind of theoretical claims the analysis could support (Timmermans and Tavory 2022, 21). I concluded that the critique of religion could be facilitated to foster four modes of critical thinking. Critical thinking is a large cross-disciplinary field with different emphases (Marsh 2013, 14–15). Obviously, not all iterations of critical thinking served to illuminate the material – for instance, I deemed meta-cognition (Magno 2010), formal logic (Rosenqvist and Ekecrantz 2023), and aesthetic forms of critical thinking (Andersen and Lenz 2023) less relevant for my purposes. The forms of critical thinking which helped to illuminate the empirical materials were selected through broad readings of the critical thinking literature, drawing from both empirical and theoretical research (Moore 2013; Andersen and Lenz 2023).

I had to adjust the concept of critical thinking in an iterative process between reading relevant literature and analysing the empirical material. In other words, I understood the relationship between the critique of religion and critical thinking not as a mere descriptive retelling of the teachers' and students' points of view but rather as an abstraction and theoretical preposition based on iterative readings and abductive inferences.

### Findings: different modes of critical thinking

The findings in this article uncovers that teachers do not see critical thinking as a matter of (religious) ontological reflection (Wright 2008). Rather, critical thinking facilitates more scientifically precise or more informed understandings of religious phenomena (see Bugge and Dessingué 2022, 35; Moore 2013, 8; Røthing 2020, 25). Critical thinking is therefore related to what I call *descriptive facticity* and *scientific accuracy*. Descriptive facticity takes the form of more developed and differentiated understandings of the religious diversity in the classroom. Scientific accuracy refers to the use of scientific concepts which facilitate accurate scientific differentiation of religious diversity.

Recent contributions to the field of critical thinking have shown that it is not only about evaluating the accuracy of a claim but also about reflecting on power and ethics (Andersen and Lenz 2023, 53–54; Ferrer et al. 2019, 17; Røthing 2020, 26). This is also reflected in the materials, as teaching and learning go beyond descriptions and venture into discussions of religious legitimation and reproduction of power. Critical thinking now also concerns what social and psychological effects religion can produce and what religion 'does' (see Martin 2017). I label critical thinking about what religion 'does' *correlative judgement*, meaning that students are encouraged to see reflect on the potential correlations between religious beliefs and practices and social and psychological effects. In other contexts, critical thinking was also connected to reflections of whether the effects of religious beliefs and practices are *good or bad* (see Andersen and Lenz 2023, 53), which I refer to as *normative judgement*. Normative judgement is a form of evaluation that is based on certain epistemic norms, such as notions of human rights (Grimen 2004, 325–328).

To summarise, critical thinking is not only about accurate descriptions and comprehensive understandings (Moore 2013) but also about reflections on whether something hampers or enhances a good life (Andersen and Lenz 2023). As I will show, critical thinking is thus connected to what *is* and to what is *right* but not to what is religiously *true*.

### Developing descriptive facticity through pluralistic portrayals of religion

One key strategy that the teachers employed to facilitate the 'mode' of critical thinking I call descriptive facticity, was accentuating multiple forms of critique of religion which accurately represented diachronic developments and contemporaneous negotiations of religious ideals. This was important for the teachers, as incomplete understandings of religious phenomenon could lead to religious intolerance and prejudiced attitudes. By representing manifold portrayals, the teachers sought to disrupt faulty conceptions of religious plurality by suggesting 'better alternatives' (Andersen and Lenz 2023, 41) that corresponded to reality more accurately.

For instance, the teachers highlighted critiques of religion in different historical contexts or more contemporary critiques to demonstrate the diversity of religious interpretations. A typical example is the approach of the teacher Jesper, who aimed to facilitate critical thinking through discussions of Islamic feminism. Jesper showed how feminist Muslims have long criticised patriarchal interpretations of Islam, destabilising predominant notions of the religion as male centred. The scholar of religion Marianne Bøe (2020, 14) has recently argued that this can be an effective strategy in RE since 'Muslim feminist discourse offers an alternative gateway into a contentious issue [...] [which] can serve to counter existing "grand narratives" on gender that are privileged in representations of the religion'. This is exactly what Jesper wanted to accomplish. In a classroom discussion that I observed, Islamic feminism was portrayed as a type of feminism 'often focused on the right to be different'. This

form of feminism was contrasted with some forms of Western feminism that have often focused on 'equality'. After this comparison, the discussion turned to how Western feminists have been critical of Islamic feminists due to fear of legitimising (perceived) patriarchal practices, such as wearing the hijab. A further contrast was between Western feminism, described as mostly partaking in a societal critique grounded in a normative-ethical framework, such as human rights, and Islamic feminism, which draws its main inspiration from textual hermeneutics aimed at Islamic reformation. Finally, the class discussed examples of cases in which the two forms of feminism might converge, exemplified by Islamic feminist movements that seek to challenge discriminatory practices, such as stoning or forced marriages. One student remarked, 'It is interesting that there is so much disagreement between these groups'. Another stated, 'I've never thought about all this diversity there'. Feminist criticism of religion seemed to facilitate critical thinking about the descriptive facticity of religious diversity within Islam.

### Promoting descriptive facticity through responses to the critique of religion

Another way to promote descriptive facticity was facilitated by nuancing the claim that contentious matters regarding religion have already been 'settled'. It seems to be a common attitude in Norwegian classrooms that religion is archaic and unmodern, and that religious people are backward and unreflective (Hammer and Schanke 2018b; Hauan and Anker 2021). To challenge this stereotype, the teachers explored the reflective ways that religious actors have responded to various criticisms of religion. For instance, many teachers discussed the 'problem of evil' to highlight religious responses to complex philosophical matters. Showing the responses to the problem of evil promoted descriptive facticity, because religious actors became represented as active agents with reflexive and diverse interpretations of religious phenomena. Similarly, the teacher Martin wanted to show how religious communities use scientific explanations to counter criticism of religion – for instance, by discussing the so-called *fine-tuning argument*. He discussed the slim chance that the physics (which he called 'natural constants') of the universe 'add up' without collapsing. For instance, gravitational forces and electron charges seem to be so 'fine-tuned' that arbitrariness seems unlikely, according to Martin. His goal was to 'at least show that it is not unintelligent [...] [to think] that there *might* be an intelligent creator behind the inherent orderliness of the universe'.

Many teachers also emphasised religious reasoning through explorations of how religion is lived in authentic contexts. Through a 'lived religion' approach, they sought to highlight how people 'embedded in the practices of everyday life' respond to the critique of religion (Ammerman 2016, 83). According to Anne-Lise, 'lived religion' perspectives in the classroom are particularly important because they allow pupils to learn about 'what actually happens out there' and engage with perspectives 'in which they can recognize themselves'. According to the teachers, religious people are not passive but have reflexive attitudes towards their own religious practices. For instance, Mattias presented media reports on Muslim women's justifications for wearing the hijab to his students. He wanted to show his students that women do not necessarily wear the hijab because 'it says so in the hadith' or because they 'must'. Similarly, Raket interrogated various texts about individual Muslim women's arguments for wearing the hijab. Muslim women are thus represented as a diverse group with different interpretations of religious practices and multifaceted reasoning for wearing the hijab. The 'lived religion' aspect was also highlighted through school trips to mosques, churches, and synagogues, where religious patrons could answer (often critical) questions prepared by students. On one such trip, a priest was asked a question about Christianity's views on homosexuality, to which he answered, 'Although there are examples of anti-gay sentiments in the Bible, love is never wrong'. In such instances, religious people were represented not as passive recipients of criticism against religion but as agents with reflexive attitudes, thus effectively disrupting the notion that religious matters have been settled and attributing agency to religious individuals (Andersen and Lenz 2023, 39).

## Positive portrayals facilitating correlative judgement and descriptive facticity

The teachers described some pupils as overly critical of religion. The criticality often seemed to be unfounded and based on poor understandings of religion. Similar to findings in previous research (Löfstedt and Sjöborg 2020, 140–146; Hammer and Schanke 2018a, 158–160), the teachers in this study considered it imperative to offer more coherent views and challenge unnuanced critical attitudes. Another core finding, then, is that the teachers discussed *positive* portrayals in their teaching about the critique of religion. In terms of critical thinking, the goal was twofold: firstly, to facilitate correlative judgement about the possible positive connections between religion, society and individual, and secondly, to instigate a greater understanding of the descriptive facticity of the possible positive functions of religion.

An example of showcasing the positive function of religion is exemplified in the teaching practices of the teacher Therese, who wanted to introduce critical perspectives on ‘the function and role of religion’ by showing ‘how religion can be useful to society. [...] There is a reason why it has been here – and still is’. Therese wanted to discuss the symbolic resources in religion that might still be relevant for meaning-making processes in modern democracies. Similarly, the teacher Christer tried to take a holistic and nuanced approach to the critique of religion through a discussion of the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who provides a positive functionalist view on religion. Durkheim posits that religion can act as a form of social glue that structures the societal order. The teachers thus discuss different positive portrayals of religion in the RE classroom, trying to show that there can be positive connections between religion, individuals, and society, and simultaneously creating more awareness about the diverse setting in which religion can become visible. By avoiding monotonous representations of religion and challenging overly critical attitudes through alternative positive portrayals, the teachers disrupted secularist constructions of religion that seem to be prevalent in some Norwegian classrooms (Hauan and Anker 2021; Schjetne 2014).

## Negative portrayals facilitating correlative judgement and descriptive facticity

Although emphasising positive portrayals of religion in the classroom, the teachers also found it important to facilitate descriptive facticity by highlighting different ways in which religion could be entangled in anti-social practices and beliefs, through so-called negative critiques of religion (Jarmer 2023, 2024). The goal was to nuance simplistic and idealistic notions of religion as ‘essentially good’. Negative critique of religion was also intimately connected with the facilitation of correlative judgement, meaning that the students should not only understand that religion has historically and contemporaneously been associated with social ills, but also be able to understand the possible relationships between religion and anti-social practices and beliefs.

Some teachers deemed it particularly important to show how religion plays a role in conflicts (see Andreassen 2009). By focusing on conflicts, they aimed to avoid a ‘harmonising’ view of religion, which still seems to be dominant in some RE classrooms (Hammer and Schanke 2018a, 188; Kleive 2013, 22). As Jesper explained, ‘Islamic terrorism [...] doesn’t *only* happen as a result of poverty and oppression or old resentments against imperialism’. Jesper addressed how and why religion plays a role in violence through discussions of the American sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer’s theories on terrorism and religion. Juergensmeyer (2017) describes the ways that ‘religious terrorism’ is justified with reference to religious rhetoric, symbols and practices, which according to him legitimise violence towards ‘outsiders’ in a so called ‘cosmic war’. By discussing such theories, Jesper wanted to facilitate critical thinking by discouraging the ‘ready-made explanation that all terrorism that happens in the world is because of oppression. Some students actually react to that. It is a novelty’. Jesper thus offered novel interpretative frames through the critique of religion, such as sociological perspectives, which highlighted the potential religious influence on violent actions.

The teachers wanted to focus negative critique of religion on religions of which students were usually not critical. For the teacher Oscar, this applied to religion ‘here’ in Norway, exemplified by



some forms of conservative Christianity. Oscar sought to show that some forms of ‘mainstream’ Christianity in Norway, which he thinks sometimes escapes the public’s critical gaze, should also be opened to critical scrutiny, for instance by discussing their ‘controversial’ views on gender and sexuality. For the teacher Rakel, it is important not only to discuss the negative critique of religion in a Norwegian context but also to extend the critical gaze to religions ‘out there’, such as Buddhism (which is often associated with non-violence; Winje 2018, 182) in Sri Lanka. Rakel, for instance, showed how references to Buddhist scriptures are used to justify violent action. The teacher Gunni said that the pupils seemed to appreciate the fact that she thematised the negative aspects of religion – for instance, by showing how radical interpretations of Islam can be totalising. She narrated an encounter with a Muslim student after a lesson on extremism and Islamism, who expressed gratitude for having been provided with the vocabulary to explain to others what ‘according to both me [the teacher] and her has gone wrong [...] in the religion she adheres to’. In other words, greater differentiation made interpretations of the religious landscape more comprehensible but also enabled an interpretation of the negative effects of holding certain religious ideas.

In sum, the teachers tried to facilitate critical thinking by providing a more accurate and nuanced picture of religious plurality, as well as laying the grounds for discussions about the possible positive and negative effects of religious practices and beliefs. As Mattias noted, this seemed to be an effective teaching strategy, as students quickly realised ‘what an alternative can be. They get better throughout the course. [...] They understand that the critique of religion [...] isn’t so black and white’. By accentuating a host of perspectives which reflected the diversity in the real world, the teachers sought to facilitate critical thinking about both the plurality and social effects of the ‘best and worst of religious expression – and all of the shades of the spectrum in-between’ (Smith, Nixon, and Pearce 2018, 17).

### Developing scientific accuracy through the facilitation of scientific concepts

Many teachers felt that students had limited basic knowledge of religion and lacked religious literacy (Moore 2007). This lack of knowledge seemed to make much of their criticism of religion unfounded, unscholarly, and a matter of ‘everyday reflections’. According to Mattias, it was therefore difficult ‘to raise the level of objectivity’. To raise the level of objectivity in classroom discourses, the teachers considered scientific concepts useful. They used such concepts to activate students’ critical thinking, as they offered ways of thinking about the world that differed from spontaneous concepts originating from immediate contact with the world (such as ‘car’, ‘tree’, etc.; Ferreira 2014). Scientific concepts can help delineate what students experience in the world by ‘restructuring and raising spontaneous concepts to a higher level’ (Vygotsky 1987, 220). Through what I have called scientific accuracy, the teachers facilitated critical thinking through the systematic implementation of scientific concepts.

The teachers introduced scientific concepts relevant to the critique of religion in two ways, which I call *fine demarcation* and *conceptual grouping*.

In fine demarcation, the teachers explained scientific concepts explicitly related to the critique of religion. They introduced an array of concepts that could help students talk and think about a phenomenon in new ways. Examples of such concepts are:

- *internal* and *external* critique (critique from ‘inside’ religious traditions, e.g. Martin Luther, or ‘outside’ religion, e.g. Richard Dawkins);
- *radical atheist critique* (fierce atheistic criticism of religion, exemplified by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens);
- *existential critique* (critique of the psychological function of religion);
- *moral critique* (critique of the moral foundations of religion);
- *intellectual critique* (critique of a religion’s reasoning);

- *philosophical/substantive critique* (critique of a religion's content); and
- *practical/functional critique* (critique of a religion's functions in society and its practical effects).

These scientific concepts originate from both religious education textbooks as well as didactic and philosophical literature (such as Andreassen 2016; Leirvik 2022). The teachers found the scientific concepts useful because they could be used across cases. Thus, the fine demarcation of concepts did not end in specific lessons about the critique of religion but was 'brought forth' throughout RE, as the teachers Kari and Anne-Lise put it. Just like the traditional 'insider/outsider' (or emic/etic) distinction, concepts such as 'internal' and 'external' critique were used to analyse a wide range of religious phenomena. The introduction of scientific concepts was also appreciated by the students, who seemed to be able to use them in new contexts:

You are exposed to it [the criticism of religion], for example, through other subjects, but also on the internet, as I said, so I feel that when we talk about it at school, we also learn to categorise the various types of criticism of religion – to not paint with a broad brush, so that is also nice. I think it makes it manageable. (Karl [student])

For Karl, the scientific concepts introduced in RE make discourses 'outside' of the school 'manageable', demonstrating how pupils can creatively apply scientific knowledge to new contexts. Scientific concepts are utilised critically to differentiate between kinds of information in everyday affairs, essentially creating new connections between spontaneous concepts and facilitating more nuanced understandings of critique of religion based on scientific knowledge in RE.

In conceptual grouping, the critique of religion is interlinked with other scientific concepts that are discussed in RE more broadly. These concepts can apply to sections of religions (such as 'fundamentalism', 'extremism', 'terrorism', and 'radicalism') but are also related to specific religions (such as 'Islamism' and 'Christian Creationism'). Importantly, the practice of conceptual grouping also makes students discern interconnections between concepts (for instance, potential interlinks and overlaps between fundamentalism and Islamism), essentially forming a battery of related concepts that can be applied to various contexts (see Aukland 2021). These concepts help make sense of why religion is criticised and what forms of religion are criticised. For instance, the concept of 'extremism' can illustrate 'maximalist' forms of religion where interpretations of key religious ideas are understood in a way that clash with modern democratic ideals (see Lincoln 2010). The students seemed to use the scientific concepts introduced in RE in their own differentiations, as witnessed in an interaction in one of the focus groups:

Saga: A lot of prejudices and such come from the practice of religion, but that is not necessarily how religion fundamentally is; it is how one chooses to live according to these scriptures – and their interpretations – that varies greatly, and it is important to understand that. . . the difference between, for example, being an Islamist and. . .

Ludwig: A Muslim?

Saga: A Muslim or being extreme – an extremist . . .

Ludwig: Or a fundamentalist within Christianity.

This exchange shows how the scientific concepts introduced in RE were used to combat generalisations. Not all Christians or Muslims are 'extremists' or 'fundamentalists', and these concepts were used to parse these nuances. The students thought critically by differentiating – or actively analysing – using the concepts introduced by the teachers through conceptual grouping in their teaching about the critique of religion. Being able to utilise scientific concepts to understand the nuances of religious diversity might be paramount for civic discourses about religion in the public sphere, which is often characterised by sweeping generalisations (Saada 2022, 5).

## Scientific accuracy, descriptive facticity and source criticism

Scientific accuracy and descriptive facticity were also developed through critical thinking about a multiplicity of sources in the classroom. It was important for the teachers to actively reflect on whether a source represented reality accurately. To this end, they also actively drew on scientific concepts which made fine-grained analyses possible.

Like many other teachers (Aashamar, Bakken, and Brevik 2021; Lorentzen and Røthing 2017), the teachers in this study considered RE textbooks important, as they gave students a common informed, scholarly reference point. Nevertheless, the teachers saw textbooks as limited when it came to teaching about the critique of religion. As the teacher Oscar said, the textbooks have only 'a couple of pages on the critique of religion' and 'absolutely nothing about, for instance, Nietzsche'. Sara explained that the critique of religion 'is not handled with the necessary care' and was critical of merely 'repeating the explanations in the textbooks'. Therefore, the teachers utilised multiple sources to approach the critique of religion in a just manner.

Some teachers had students engage with the critique of religion through longer primary sources. Oscar's class read and interpreted parts of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist* to discuss dense scientific concepts (which are not discussed in the textbooks), such as 'slave morality' and the 'Übermensch'. The discussion of primary sources in the RE classroom allowed for an in-depth and contextualised discussion of Nietzsche's critique of religion and its related scientific concepts, which offered new interpretative frames to analyse religious phenomena. In the same vein, many teachers, such as Gunni, spent time on with other primary sources, such as Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, which were used as a springboard for discussing whether 'the critique of religion has gone too far'. Gunni also presented responses to Dawkins's criticism – for instance, those of the professor of anthropology Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who has addressed Dawkins's criticism of religion in both book form (Eriksen 2008) and video format (NRK 2008). Eriksen argues, 'You cannot say that God does not exist without saying that you know everything about the universe. That is what Dawkins does' (NRK 2008). By critically discussing both Dawkins's arguments and counterarguments to his reasoning through various sources, Gunni hoped to encourage a 'nuanced debate' about (radical) new-atheistic criticism of religion.

The teachers selected primary sources that could provide greater richness and specificity than the textbooks offered alone. The discussions of primary sources were facilitated by strategic discussions of scientific concepts, such as new-atheistic criticism of religion, which helped to further differentiate the analysis. By highlighting the limitations of the textbooks through alternative sources, the teachers aimed to challenge the primacy of the textbooks, which are often taken for granted and go unquestioned (Andreassen and Lewis 2014, 4; Hatlebrekke 2018; Lewis, Andreassen, and Thobro 2017). Through longer primary texts and academic contributions, the teachers intended to show that, though not necessarily wrong, textbooks do not adequately cover important themes, such as the critique of religion.

The teachers also used news articles to discuss contemporary events related to the criticism of religion. The sources used in the classroom covered themes such as far-right groups (e.g. SIAN, or Stop the Islamisation of Norway) and their harsh criticism of Islam, critical news reports on 'cults' in Norway, and the '(mis)use' of religion in political speeches. For Sara, an important part of teaching about the critique of religion was to train students not to get 'duped by fake news'. Sara mentioned Donald Trump as an example, who, in her view, co-opted religious authority through strategic rhetorical references to Christian symbols, such as the Christian Bible, for his own gain. Sara discussed how Trump famously referred to the 'Two Corinthians' rather than the customary 'Second Corinthians' in a speech at Liberty University in 2016 (see Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018, 151). She thus encouraged her students to consider whether what they read was an accurate depiction of reality (e.g. descriptive facticity), asking the essential question, 'Is it really so?' (see Rosenqvist and Ekecrantz 2022). This might be a particularly important aspect of critical thinking in RE, as students are continuously exposed to a wide diversity of (mediatised) sources and (sometimes

false or inaccurate) information throughout their everyday affairs, often with a passivising effect, with echo chambers and filter bubbles reinforcing established perspectives (Ferrer et al. 2019, 11). Therefore, the ability to actively evaluate information and take a stand in relation to multiple sources might be of great significance, and the critique of religion seems to be a topic that can highlight different perspectives from various sources. The importance of source criticism seemed to be echoed by the students in this study. According to one focus group, students were exposed to one-sided representations of religion in the media based on economic incentives and 'clickbait' logic.<sup>1</sup> Being aware of potential biases and having the means to critically assess the sources that they encountered throughout their lives were described as rewarding by the students.

### Normative judgement through discussions based on evaluative epistemologies

The teachers also stressed the importance of normative judgements of religious beliefs and practices. This was deemed imperative as students should be able to deliberate about whether a social practice or belief hindered or enhanced the living of 'a good life' in modern democratic societies. To facilitate normative judgements, the teachers found it important to deliberate about critique of religion through stable epistemic criteria. Such epistemic criteria can be called 'evaluative epistemologies' (Bugge and Dessingué 2022), meaning an epistemic benchmark from which a phenomenon is reviewed. Often, the teachers anchored their evaluative epistemologies from the perspective of human rights. For instance, multiple teachers discussed whether the criticism of religion expressed through the burning of the Quran was a violation of free speech laws (qualifying as hate speech) or should be allowed as a criticism of Islam. In such deliberations, the pupils had a range of perspectives – some critical of unrestricted free speech, others sceptical about the intentions of extremist criticisms of religion. On other occasions, human rights were used as a benchmark to discuss discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, unequal hierarchisation of religious institutions, abortion, and female genital mutilation. Previous studies have shown that discussions of such 'authentic problems' are conducive to promoting critical thinking (Abrami et al. 2015). Such teaching practices often seemed to reinforce active resistance to and moral condemnation of practices such as female genital mutilation and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, highlighting that, besides being a cognitive process, critical thinking can also promote action against antisocial practices (Ennis 1987).

However, such discussions could also lead to perspectives that are not part of the dominant liberal discourse. One pupil, Ola, recalled a discussion about abortion which had made him change his mind: 'I thought a bit about the abortion case. We looked at what a foetus looks like after 18 weeks compared to 12 weeks'. Then I changed a bit – like, 'Oh shit!' Maybe we should just stop at 12 [weeks]. In other words, the answers in the discussions were not already established vis-à-vis a (dominant) liberal discourse but were open to negotiation in the classroom. Thus, the critique of religion can be tied to normative judgement based on evaluative epistemologies, but the outcomes of the discussions are not set in stone but actively negotiated (see also Ferrer et al. 2019, 17).

### Discussion

In this article, I have discussed the ways in which the critique of religion can be used to promote critical thinking. I have shown how subject-specific content, exemplified by the critique of religion, can be used to teach generic critical thinking skills with potentially context-transcending applicability, such as the ability to understand religious diversity, evaluate sources, question grand narratives, and utilise scientific concepts. Both Norwegian and international discourses of RE stress the importance of facilitating critical thinking about religious phenomena to incentivise nuanced, civic and democratic engagements (Brekke 2023; Hammer and Schanke 2018b; Saada 2022; Shaw 2019), and I have displayed the ways in which teaching about the critique of religion may help to this end. I have discussed four modes of critical thinking: descriptive facticity, scientific accuracy, and correlative and normative judgement. These modes of critical thinking are quite different from

Wright's (2008) programme for critical RE, in which *ontic* questions such as 'Is there a transcendent reality beyond the world bounded by space and time?' are to be discussed (see Barnes and Wright 2006, 74). The modes of critical thinking emerging from my analysis is not connected to a critical scrutiny of students' own religious worldviews or the viability of the belief in God. Ontological matters are not discussed at all. The teachers *are* interested in the negotiation of 'truths' understood as more accurate understandings and representations which correspond more closely to reality, and in this regard, they agree with Wright (2008) that RE should be about fostering as many true (and as few false) beliefs as possible. However, the beliefs that should be subjected to critical thinking are not about 'the truth about ultimate reality' or the 'ontological (and existential) question of our relation to the way things actually are' (Easton et al. 2019, 2–3).

First, teaching about the critique of religion is related to descriptive facticity and scientific accuracy. For instance, teachers seek to facilitate descriptive facticity by displacing faulty notions of religion in the classroom. Teaching is structured to show how religions can feature in both positive and negative contexts or illustrate that concrete religions are more diverse than students might expect. Furthermore, showing how religious adherents have responded to criticisms of religion offers a comprehensive and diverse picture of religious discourses and complex negotiations between different worldviews, disrupting the notion that critiques of religion have dismissed religious argumentation. The discussions and facilitation of multiple sources seems to help students consider whether a representation is accurate and to think about religion more holistically through multiple informing perspectives. Scientific concepts facilitate what I call scientific accuracy and are used to enable more differentiated and scientifically informed analyses that can be creatively used to categorise spontaneous concepts in more sophisticated ways. Scientific concepts are mainly taught through two teaching strategies, which I call fine demarcation and conceptual groupings. These strategies facilitate an in-depth understanding of scientific concepts directly related to the critique of religion and potentiate a holistic understanding of the relationships *between* scientific concepts. Highlighting 'better alternatives' (Andersen and Lenz 2023, 41), be it alternative sources, concepts, or representations, may better reflect the diversity of religion as it is lived, practised, and negotiated in the world (Andreassen 2016, 93). Thus, my findings support the argument that the RE classroom can be a constructive space where pupils can think critically about the multiplicity of religious phenomena as they are experienced and practised in the real world (Shaw 2020), laying the foundations for a more informed, civic and accurate discussion about and engagement with religion in the public sphere (Saada 2015).

Second, correlative and normative judgement are brought to the RE classroom by thematising the critique of religion. Correlative judgement is exemplified in the teachers' discussions social and psychological effects of specific religious ideas and practices. Teachers do not seek to critically assess whether it is plausible to hold certain religiously founded ideas (see Wright 2008) – for instance, regarding the viability of violence within various theologies – but rather to encourage students to critically reflect on the *relationships* between holding such ideas and social practices, such as violent action. As one of the teachers in this study insisted, terrorism is not only the result of oppression but can also be influenced by interpretations of religious ideas. Meanwhile, normative judgement is more explicitly related to deliberations about the sustainability and contestability of religious beliefs and practices in modern democracies, such as the relationships between religion and social cohesion, female circumcision, abortion, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. These deliberations seem to sometimes reinforce a dominant liberal order and other times displace it, as exemplified in the 'abortion' example.<sup>2</sup>

The descriptive and scientific aspects of critical thinking are akin to an uncontroversial practice in RE, namely preparing students to be able to 'go out into the public and critique religious and secular people because their description of a religious phenomenon is misleading or plainly false' (Stenmark 2023, 76). When thematised in a reflexive way, the critique of religion can be successfully used to promote pupils' understanding and inferences. As my analysis shows, this aspect of critical thinking is not based on learning or accumulating 'facts' but on deliberative reflections about the processes,

social factors, and contextual dynamics that influence the plurality of religious expressions and the ways in which these expressions match the lived religious diversity both locally and globally (Aukland 2021, 84–85). The correlative and normative aspects of the critique of religion are perhaps more controversial in the case of RE, as they introduce a moral element. These aspects of teaching practices are more akin to the aims of critical scholars of religion, such as Martin (2017), who is interested in deconstructive and destabilising analyses that highlight how religion can be a part of the (re)production and legitimation of power. Such analyses go beyond descriptions and towards mechanisms and correlations. To use the vocabulary of the philosopher of religion Stenmark (2023, 106), teachers are generally not interested in an ‘evidential critique of religion aimed at questioning the truth claims of a religious faith’ but rather focus on ‘hermeneutics of suspicion critique aimed at highlighting motives, unconscious drives and hidden power structures that are actualised by religious faith and practice’. Although potentially risky and challenging, this part of critical thinking may be a paramount aspect of contemporary RE, in which the negotiations about the core values of a healthy democracy should be critically discussed. Students can thus be prepared to discuss not only *what is* but also *what could be* and *what should be* and participate in negotiations for a better future (Andersen and Lenz 2023, 59; Jarmer 2024).

## Notes

1. ‘Clickbait’ usually refers to online discourses with sensational and/or misleading titles, aimed at fostering online engagement and discussion.
2. See section on “Normative judgement through discussions based on evaluative epistemologies.”

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## Notes on contributor

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