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Searching for a Renewal of Religious Education Identity – A Swedish Perspective

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Abstract

In Sweden and in other parts of Europe, the nature of religious education (RE) and its place in schools is the subject of ongoing discussions. Concepts used in the RE classroom can either open or close classroom conversations. A growing consensus can be observed among researchers that the concept of 'religion' is not sufficient to describe – and give space to – the meaning-making of the diversity of individuals in society. As a result, discussions about worldviews have gained momentum. But not even the worldview concept – and the choice to frame the subject of RE with this addition – can solve the real problem, which is how young people can relate to the content of the subject in the first place. In this article the view is presented that the concept of *existential configurations* is equipped to adequately capture a complex and personal understanding of life that, not least, can be observed among young people today. Furthermore, it is argued that this concept of *existential configurations* gives access to a theoretical language that enables individuals to understand their own existential meaning-making, and to see how it relates to the plurality of religions and worldviews that can be encountered in society – even when they do not describe themselves as religious or as having a specific worldview.

Key words: existential configurations, religious education, meaning making, life question, worldview

Introduction

This article will focus on one out of four topics that were addressed at the Nordic Conference on Religious education and Values (NCRE) in Riga 2022: Searching for a renewal of religious education identity. Different European countries have different models for religious education (RE) in public education, related to various degrees of confessionalism. Sweden and the way one approaches the subject of RE in public schools will be the starting point for the "search".

Right from the start, it should be made clear that it is not an aim of this article to discuss how to name the subject in question. It is not intended to question whether there are religions and worldviews to be seen. On the contrary – there is no doubt about it. The aim, though, is to add to the discussion on how to talk about the content of the

subject, and on how the content can be presented in a way that relates to young people nowadays. How can one provide enough space in the classroom for everyone to recognise themselves? How can one contribute to a subject in which the relevance of religions and worldviews can be seen among young adults – even if they do not consider themselves as religious or as having a worldview?

The kinds of concepts we use can either open or close classroom conversations, and enable or disable the capacity of people to recognise themselves. Today, a growing consensus can be observed among researchers not only in Sweden, that the concept of 'religion' is not sufficient to describe – and give space to – the meaning-making of the diversity of individuals in society. As a result, discussions about worldviews have gained momentum. But in this article, I argue that not even the worldview concept – and the choice to frame the subject of RE with this addition – can solve the real problem, which is how young people can relate to the content of the subject in the first place. In this article the view will be presented that the concept of *existential configurations* is equipped to adequately capture a complex and personal understanding of life that, not least, can be observed among young people today. Furthermore, it is argued that this concept of *existential configurations* gives access to a theoretical language that enables individuals to understand their own existential meaning-making, and to see how it relates to the plurality of religions and worldviews that can be encountered in society – even when they do not describe themselves as religious or as having a specific worldview.

The assumption is that the subject of RE should help young people develop a language for their own meaning-making, and help them understand that religions and worldviews are *shared configurations* that are important to learn about if one wants to understand oneself and others. RE then becomes an important part of young people's democratic education, and a factor of importance in preparing them for life in a society characterised by diversity (Dinham & Shaw, 2017).

The theme of NCRE in Riga 2022 makes it clear that the discussion about, and the search for, a renewal of religious education identity does not merely characterise the Swedish context. Recent educational policy documents in Europe highlight the need to re-evaluate education about religion and religious and non-religious worldviews in public education (Jackson, 2014; OSCE, 2007), and the importance of re-conceptualising powerful knowledge and 21st century skills in the RE classroom relevant to our time (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Conroy et al., 2013; Dede, 2009; Geisinger, 2016; Soland, Hamilton, & Stecher, 2013).

In June 2020 Stephen G. Parker wrote the editorial in the *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. With the perspective of an historian, he noticed that 'for a very long time RE has been on a treadmill of dissatisfaction with itself' (Parker, 2020, pp. 253–254). He continues: 'Persistent calls for reform go far and above normal levels of critical self-reflection and desires to improve in other areas of the curriculum. It strikes one that RE in England and Wales seems to be in an almost endless cycle of introspection and internal identity wars' (Parker, 2020, pp. 253–254).

In other words, there is a risk that my 'Search for a renewal of religious education identity' will add to this 'endless cycle of introspection and internal identity wars'. But the intention for writing this article is not to contribute to any wars, but to deepen the existing reflection.

RE in Sweden: A Historical Perspective

Sweden is characterised by a history in which the development of the state, of religion (in terms of Christianity and the Church of Sweden), and of education were closely interlinked. History tells that King Gustav Vasa (1496–1560) saw the possibilities of using the church for consolidating the nation state, and subsequently he pushed through the Reformation. Following this, in 1593, the 'pure evangelical Lutheran doctrine' was adopted as the only permitted religion, and Luther's catechism became a unifying ideology. In other words, the growing power of the church went hand in hand with the building of the Swedish nation. In the Protestant churches, the Bible occupied a prominent position, and already early on the Swedish clergy drew attention to the importance of a literate population.

General elementary school was established in 1842. And the roots of what we now call RE constituted the very reason for the creation of a public educational system, since RE was the early school's main assignment. During this period, pupils were very much educated *in* religion.

The great social transformations taking place in the second half of the 19th century, related to industrialisation and urbanisation, led to changed demands about the kind of knowledge schools had to provide – mathematics and science were given a more prominent place in the curriculum. However, freedom of religion – in the sense that Swedish citizens were allowed to leave the Swedish church without entering another denomination – was only introduced in the 1950s. Once this freedom was in place, citizens could effectively leave the Swedish church without joining other congregations or so-called 'free churches', like the Baptist Church or Jehovah's Witnesses.

During the 19th century, RE never was at risk of disappearing from the curriculum, but with the reform of 1905 the subject was allotted less class hours, except for those who chose the classical program in upper secondary school. During this period, the subject focused on learning *from*, and more and more, shifted to learning *about* religion.

In the 1960s, the alliance between church, state and school was still going strong. But Swedish society was coloured by a strong political movement and people began to question the church, as well as other institutions in society. Strong voices in society had already been arguing for a division between 'belief' and 'knowledge'; and being 'religious' also became questioned in political terms during this period. At the same time, the pluralisation of Swedish society became more pronounced, not least because of labour immigration.

All of this resulted in a stronger focus on learning *about* religion, rather than on learning *from*. Christianity was given a different position in the subject of RE during this time.

RE in Sweden Today

This historical perspective brings one to the situation of Swedish RE today. Nowadays, unlike the RE given in many other countries, the Swedish subject is non-confessional and students are taught together regardless of their own backgrounds. Students with different relationships to, and perceptions about, the subject content meet in the classroom, leading to a subject that is characterised by a diversity of views and experiences hailing from students and teachers alike (Kittelman Flensner, 2015). RE in the school is

supposed to both teach students *about* religions and promote a continuous learning *from* religions (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 17).

Today, the curriculum states that the objective in Sweden when teaching RE is to help pupils 'develop knowledge about religions and other outlooks on life in their own society and in other parts of the world'. Here, the term 'outlook on life' (Skolverket 2011) is used to translate the Swedish term *'livsåskådning'*. It is a possible translation, but not an obvious one. A British translation of *livsåskådning* might be 'life view' or 'life stance', while in the United States it would probably be translated as worldview (Bråkenhielm et al., 2013, p. 25). Here, the term 'outlook on life' and 'worldview' is used as valid equivalent translations of *livsåskådning*.

Putting aside translation problems, there is a question that remains the subject of ongoing discussions: does the curriculum provide enough space for everyone to recognise themselves by providing two positions: those of religions and worldviews? As indicated earlier, a growing consensus can be observed among researchers – and not only in Sweden – that the concept of 'religion' is not sufficient to describe – and give space to – the meaning-making of the diversity of individuals in society. And the result of this is that discussions about worldviews have gained momentum. But the point this article will make is that not even the worldview concept – and the choice to frame the subject of RE with this addition – can solve the real problem, which is how young people can relate to the content of this subject in the first place. In other words, making use of the worldview concept cannot bring us salvation alone (See for example Bråten & Everington, 2019; Everington, 2019; Åhsa et al., 2019; Gustavsson, 2018c; Miedema, 2014).

In the search for a renewal of RE identity, it is important to evaluate the kinds of concepts one uses to discuss people's meaning-making. I have already touched upon this matter by pointing out that the kinds of concepts we use can either open or close classroom conversations – our choice of concepts is important if we care about the ability of students to recognise themselves in the content of the subject.

The important question is how the meaning-making of individuals in society can be discussed, both in teacher training programmes and in school contexts where RE is taught, in a way that resonates with the students in the classroom – one that does not just lead to a discourse about 'the other' (Risenfors, 2011; Kittelman Flensner, 2015; Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Miedema, 2007; Sagberg, 2015; Jackson, 2015, 2016). Nowadays, we require concepts that enable us to adequately capture a broader sense of meaning-making, as many traditions and formerly approved ways of acting are being questioned. Notably, we can see today that individuals do not necessarily lean on just *one* religion or worldview, but draw words and symbols from multiple religions and traditions when creating meaning in their own lives.

Searching for a renewal of RE identity, this article will present the concept of *existential configurations*. If we want students to participate as active partners in the creation of a new multicultural or intercultural European landscape, we need to give them access to a language, to concepts that enable them to relate their own meaning-making to other people's understanding of life. The RE classroom can be a space of importance in that regard. Students need to learn that how we interpret life is not about 'us' and 'them', not about the division between those who are religious and those who are not, or those who have a specific worldview and those who do not. Speaking in terms of *existential configurations* creates opportunities for teachers' professional capacity to grow, and provides all students with a space 'to develop a personal attitude to life and an under-

standing of how they and others are thinking and living' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). These are concepts that create the opportunity to conceptualise individuals' meaning-making processes, and clarify how the way we view life is linked to *shared configurations*.

An Ongoing Discussion

I will now offer some examples lifted from a discussion on how to describe and discuss people's understanding of life. The discussion from which these examples are taken, itself relates to a further ongoing discussion in Swedish religious studies since the 1960s (Bergström, 1976, 1996; Jeffner, 1976b; Philipson, 1984; Hartman, 1985; Kallenberg, 1987; Selander, 1994; Bråkenhielm, 2001; Westerlund, 2002; Lindfeldt, 2003; Osbeck, 2006; Martinsson, 2010; Risenfors, 2011; Gustavsson, 2013). The question of how people's meaning-making can be adequately captured can also be framed in a broader Nordic and European context (Kurtén, 1997; Lindfelt, 2003, 2013; Heimbrock, 2004; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2008, 2009; Tirri & Quinn, 2010; van der Kooij et al., 2013; Wallis 2014; Sagberg, 2015).

In a broad sense, one might say that different traditions within religious studies and education have chosen to emphasise different aspects of an individual's life-centred meaning-making. Meaning-making can be regarded as either a *process* or a *content*, two different or converging foci, where *life-questions* will have a slightly different meaning.

When regarded primarily as content, life-questions like 'the meaning of life' and 'death' are supposed to be answered by the individual in the form of a religion or worldview. When regarded primarily as a process, the questions are given more focus than the answers themselves, and it is the questions that are supposed to drive the process of interpretation. One example of this process can be seen among young adults I interviewed. For these youth, neither 'death' nor 'the meaning of life' indicated any key-questions. But questions like 'who am I' and 'where am I headed' drove their meaning-making processes, and they expressed a wish to answer those questions in the context that surrounded them at the time we met.

Different traditions within religious studies and education have also chosen to emphasise either the individual *experiences* or the *cognitive* elements in people's meaning-making. When comparing the different concepts used to describe how people interpret and understand life, the space and significance given to the *context* – or shared meaning-making in the context that surrounds an individual – compared to the impact of the *individual* herself, can also be seen as another example of differences.

One of the concepts chosen to describe and discuss people's understanding of life is that of the 'worldview' – what we in Sweden capture in the terms of *'livsåskådning'*.

In Sweden, the concept of *'livsåskådning'* was introduced in the 1970s by Anders Jeffner. His goal was to offer a new way to discuss people's life-centred meaning-making. In launching this concept, he wanted to include a link with everyday terminology in Sweden, but at the same time introduce a theoretical tool suitable for studying individuals' understanding of life (Jeffner, 1973, p. 18; Jeffner, 1976a, p. 18, translation made by the author). The term is still used in the Swedish RE curriculum today. Jeffner translates the term *'livsåskådning'* as 'life-view', and states:

> *By a person's life-view is meant the person's central value system and basic attitude, and the part of what the person considers to know about him- or herself and the surrounding world, which affects this central value system or basic attitude in a way that the person is prepared to accept.*

Jeffner's definition stresses that the individual has a kind of conviction and theoretical standpoint, which also determines the importance she/he attaches to life-questions.[1] Considered from Jeffner's perspective, then, a life-question is a type of question that an individual answers within the framework of a *'livsåskådning'* or worldview (Jeffner, 1988, p. 7).

Scholars like Carl-Reinhold Bråkenhielm and Katarina Westerlund use this concept in their research, but have criticised Jeffner's particular use of the concept. Specifically, they emphasise that more attention should be given to the impact of people's lived lives, and the practical consequences of having a *'livsåskådning'* (See for example Bråkenhielm, 2001a; Kallenberg et al., 1996; Philipson, 1984; Westerlund, 2002). But despite these criticisms, other researchers like Mikael Lindfeldt argue that no real reformulation of the concept can be seen since it was first defined by Jeffner in Sweden (Lindfeldt, 2003).

Not only in Sweden today, but also in other European countries, the worldview concept has been chosen to supplement the concept of religion. One example is the work presented by Siebren Miedema and his colleagues Jacomijn C. van der Kooij and Doret J. de Ruyter in the Netherlands. In defining the worldview concept, these scholars make a distinction between 'personal' and 'organised' worldviews. In an article in *Religious Education*, these three scholars analysed what they describe as the necessary characteristics of an organised worldview, and they concluded that an 'organized worldview is a view on life, the world and humanity that prescribes answers to existential questions. This way, organized worldviews aim to influence the thinking and acting of people. Organized worldviews contain moral values and aim to provide meaning in people's lives' (van der Kooij et al., 2013).

Further, when talking about 'personal' worldviews, these researchers state that a 'personal worldview can be more eclectic and idiosyncratic than an organised worldview' and that 'a personal worldview is a view on life, the world and humanity that consists of norms, values, ideals that can be but are not necessarily moral and out of answers to existential questions' (van der Kooij et al., 2013, p. 213, 222).

Incomplete translation is a problem when the worldview concept is used to capture the meaning of the Swedish concept *'livsåskådning'* or the Dutch concept *'levensbeschouwing'*. The question in focus then is: can we sensibly translate the word 'life' with 'world' here? Moreover, Dutch researchers like Edwin van der Zande have raised the question whether the English worldview concept is sufficient altogether (van der Zande, 2018, p. 60). The idea of Miedema, van der Kooij and de Ruyter to make a distinction between personal and organised worldviews is interesting. But in the discussion about what kinds of concepts we should use to open classroom conversations, we should pay attention to van der Zande when he interprets the concept of personal worldviews as discussed by primarily van der Kooij. He notes that:

> *Although precise articulation is not a requirement for having a personal worldview* (p. 35)*, it seems that Van der Kooij's conceptualisations prescribes that a person should at least have some type of answers, however vague or tentative* (p. 72).

In a Nordic perspective, our distinguished colleague Oddrun Bråten argues in a similar way to our Dutch colleagues by making a distinction between personal and organised worldviews (Bråten, 2021). Saying that:

> *an organised worldview has developed over time as a more or less coherent system with sources, traditions, values and ideals and a group of adherents. It prescribes answers to existential questions, includes moral values and aims to influence thinking and action and provide meaning in life.*

And further: 'A personal worldview is a view of life, identity, the world and existential questions that includes values and ideals.' When interpreting the worldview concept as presented here by Dutch scholars and our Norwegian colleague Oddrun Bråten, it seems it has characteristics similar to the Swedish concept *'livsåskådning'* as formerly defined by Anders Jeffner. And this is said in spite of translation problems regarding the concepts of 'life' and 'world'.

In spite of this good and important contribution of being able to talk in terms of a 'personal worldview', I find that this particular concept cannot do justice to the character of the on-going reflection and flow of thoughts that seems to characterise young people today. There seems to be a gap between the current theoretical language used in RE, and young people's life worlds.

My main critique of the proposal to use the term 'personal worldview' to capture people's life-centred meaning-making, is that conceptually it relates to the notion of organised worldviews. When the term 'personal worldview' is used, emphasis is placed on *content*. Individuals are supposed to have a kind of conviction and theoretical standpoint, which also determines the importance they attach to life-questions (Bråkenhielm et al., 2013, p. 16). Viewed from this theoretical perspective, a life-question is a type of question that an individual will answer within the framework of a 'worldview' (Jeffner, 1988, p. 7). Examples of life-questions in this regard are 'what is the meaning of life?' and 'how can we endure suffering and death?', as Anders Jeffner once put it (Jeffner, 1988, p. 7, translation by the author). Attention is given to answers to life-questions rather than to people's authentic everyday dealing with life-questions. The worldview concept also emphasises *reflected elements* more than people's experiences, and in the same vein more attention is paid here to *individuals,* while insufficient consideration is given to the impact of the contexts in which people interpret their lives.

The worldview concept has been shaped in a rationalistic discourse in which human beings are regarded more as observers than as participants. This is an understanding of 'becoming human' that I think needs to be thoroughly challenged (Thalén, 2006, p. 57). Consequently, a mere widening – or transformation – of our *understanding* of existing concepts is not the answer, I think that the way forward is to develop *new* concepts.

The worldview concept has been challenged in Sweden by researchers like Christina Osbeck, Gunnar Gunnarsson and the author of this article (Osbeck, 2006; Gunnarsson, 2008; Gustavsson, 2013). Christina Osbeck, for her part, was inspired by Løgstrup and Bachtin and decided to apply the concept 'understanding of life' (Osbeck, 2006, p. 389). Gunnarsson, an Icelandic scholar who conducted his PhD research in Sweden, was in turn inspired by Hartman and by Gadamer and Geertz, and opted for the concept 'life interpretation' (Gunnarsson, 2008, p. 88). As for me, being inspired by Paul Ricoeur, the concept of 'existential configuration' seemed to be an even better option. Some similarities can be observed between the three of us and still other researchers who have

been criticising, or at least challenging, the worldview concept. One point all of us have been trying to make is that the focus should be shifted from an emphasis on *content* and a relatively substantial *cognitive* philosophical concept, to a more dynamic concept with room for *processes* as part of people's meaning-making (Gunnarsson, 2009, p. 37).

An Empirical Example

I would now like to give an example of young people's dynamic life-questions and the use of the concept of *existential configurations*, taken from my own empirical research. While conducting my PhD research I interviewed 21 young adults between the ages of 19 and 29, of which eight described themselves as Christian believers and the remaining thirteen spoke of themselves as non-believers, positioned in relation to the Christian tradition. I was curious to discover how these young people related to life-questions and interpreted their lives. To begin, I conducted three pilot interviews. An interesting observation during the interviews was that answering life-questions related to defined issues, like the meaning of life and death, seemed to be difficult for my interviewees. I soon discovered that they did have a lot of things to say in that regard, but the answers I received seemed to reflect some very complex meaning-making processes, which circulated around questions rather than answers (Gustavsson, 2013). Inspired by narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1993, 1984; Widdershoven, 1993; Giddens, 1997; Bauman, 2001), these interview experiences led me to decide to give my interviewees the necessary space during interviews to describe their existential meaning-making without having to relate these meanings to pre-formulated categories like 'what is the meaning of life?' or 'how can we endure suffering and death?'. Inspired by Paul Ricoeur, I drew particularly upon a hermeneutic perspective (Ricoeur, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1993). I then conducted my interviews with the intention to create opportunities for adapting my questions to the specific features of the interview situation, and with the goal to capture the respondents' personal thoughts and experiences (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366). The interviews I conducted can be described as deep and semi-structured (Bryman, 2002, p. 127), and the interview focus became 'important events' in the young adults' lives (Gustavsson, 2018a).

Reading the article, you might object that what I am saying just concerns the differences between what is found at the data level on the one hand and found at the more theoretical level – based on analysis – on the other. However, the point I want to make is that it is easy to lose important characteristics found in the data when trying to make the findings understandable for an academic audience, attempting to make them comparable with the categories we already know. In fact, this is one of the main points I want to make: our existing concepts and theories of people's life-centred meaning-making seem unable to capture some of the basic characteristics of complexity and plurality inherent in ordinary people's approaches to existential matters. These particular characteristics seem, unfortunately, to get lost in translation. Therefore, in order to reach my goal to interpret how contemporary young adults describe and understand their lives, I discovered that I had to try to develop a new kind of theoretical concept that can help us to truly understand and talk about individuals' meaning-making. This concept of mine, *existential configurations* – and concepts that are related to it, like *shared configurations* – are a work in progress to try to outline – and further explore – a theoretical language that allows us to do exactly this, and to investigate how people's

meaning-making relates to different social and cultural contexts (Gustavsson, 2018a, p. 213; 2018b, p. 4).

When telling me about their lives, the interviewees' statements seemed quite spontaneous and not organised by conscious reflection. Their meaning-making turned out to be far more complex, fragmentary and situational than allowed for by the concept 'worldview' (Gustavsson, 2013, p. 145). The concept of *existential configurations* reflects this complexity, not only in everyday life but also theoretically. It is a concept that provides space for both questions and answers – the existential configuration is not the forever given answer. In this sense, the concept of *existential configurations* provides space for both process and content – signalling significantly, that it is possible to refigure your *existential configurations*. And, as a concept, it builds on the idea that the way individuals understand their own lives is dependent on the surrounding context and the configurations we share. How people create meaning, how they explore and develop their understanding of life, is viewed as an individual process and simultaneously as something that is socially shared.

I will try to illustrate some aspects of this complexity, by using a short excerpt from one of my interviews with Elin, a 22-year-old. This interview fragment illustrates how difficult it is to understand these young adults' statements in terms of a specific worldview:

> Elin: *So I'm baptised and I've had my confirmation, but I'm not a believer at all. Or I believe in something, but it's like... I can't say that I belong to a religion or something. But I'm a Christian but I'm not a believer.*

This quote was part of Elin's answer to the question whether she was baptised (Gustavsson, 2013, p. 123). Looking at her answer, the question can be asked whether Elin has a Christian or a secular 'worldview'. For Elin there is no traditional connection between baptism – confirmation – faith or between religion – faith – being a Christian. The complexity of her statement relates to concepts like 'faith' and 'religion', but her statement also illustrates the difficulty inherent in using the concept 'worldview', if a 'worldview' is understood as something that involves an individual's reflected decision. Regardless of whether or not Elin professes a Christian faith, this interview excerpt illustrates how Elin, like the other young adults I met, cannot be said to adhere to a specific 'worldview' in a straightforward sense, meaning: in terms of a set of predefined categories. Elin had not made a reflected choice in relation to a given set of 'worldviews', but – perhaps more importantly – in the course of her interview she expressed a personal interpretation and understanding of life. And, based on what I sketched as an historical background earlier, one can see how Elin's statements are influenced by secular Swedish society and the particular context in which she grew up.

Existential Configurations

Based on an analysis of my empirical material, I argue that the concept of *existential configurations* adequately captures these interestingly complex and personal understandings of life, that are not necessarily thought through or stable. To put it differently: these are understandings of life that may (still) change over time (Gustavsson, 2018b). More to the point, the definition of the concept of existential configurations reads that it summarises the individual's self-understanding in a given context, both in terms of process and con-

tent, and in terms of a social and a personal dimension. Put in yet another way: when speaking in terms of existential configurations, the meaning-making process can only be interpreted and understood when it is situated in a social context, even though it is expressed by an individual.

The motivation for using the concept 'existential configurations' has also been based on my observation that, while the interviewees did not talk about their understanding of life in terms of given traditions, they nevertheless had distinct interpretations of important events in their lives, interpretations that might best be described as different meaningful *figures* in Paul Ricoeur's sense – like figures of thought – small narratives about different events in their lives, not necessarily consciously thought through. During my analysis of the interview material, I could see how the interviewees shaped their interpretations of individual events, and how they simultaneously saw their experiences as part of a larger whole. Their statements could not be understood without understanding the larger context that surrounded them. The way they seemed to combine different figures into a whole suggested to me the use of *configurations* – where the prefix *con-* is used to refer to the phenomenon that different figures have been joined together.

Specifically, in the analysis, I could see that the interviewees expressed personal views on individual events and existential themes out of a desire to make their lives understandable, and this in relation to the people around them and the contexts they shared with these significant others. This was more important to them than answering traditional life questions like 'what is the meaning of life?'. In conclusion, my interviewees seemed to be engaged in the effort to combine their experiences into a meaningful whole, in the light of ideas that were shared in a community which included significant others. They shared a *plausibility structure* in the meaning of Berger and Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) – significant others in whose company they could feel *ontological security*, in the sense of Giddens' terminology (Giddens, 1991).

Conclusion

In conclusion: in this search for a renewal of RE identity, the author would intend to underline the importance of using concepts that make it possible for students to relate their own lives and individual meaning-making to the content of the subject. Following that perspective, the concepts of 'religion' and 'worldview' are insufficient when discussing new approaches to RE. I do not even think that the proposal to speak in terms of 'personal worldviews' will be enough, since it leaves us with the main problem unsolved. The chief problem is how young people can relate their own life-questions and meaning-making to the content of the subject in the first place.

The concept of a 'personal worldview' does not provide sufficient space for the kinds of life-questions that really occupy young people today: who am I, what would I like to choose, where am I headed? I think that using the concept of 'worldview', even when further qualified by using the term 'personal', only adds to the idea that individuals must have answers ready in order to be able to talk in terms of a worldview. I can see how the word 'personal' captures the individual side, but I believe the risk here is that we focus too much on the individual and static personality, and downplay the importance of the surrounding context for the individual's meaning-making process, in which also a *re-figuration* can take place. The term 'personal' also tends to be used in an everyday sense that loses sight of life-experienced complexity – a complexity that, I think, can

best be captured and described by using a theoretical and well-developed concept. When I observed how young adults narrated their lives in my interviews, the theoretical work of Ricœur seemed to be the best resource in that regard.

At the research level, my hope is that, in spite of different theoretical starting points, the current conceptual deliberations will lead to greater clarity and to an intensification of the research into the meaning-making processes of, not least, young people. At the educational level, my hope is that the use of a varied range of concepts will provide a linguistic opportunity and an invitation for talking about the context, culture and traditions that have influenced students' understanding of themselves, and their lives. Such conversations can subsequently make students better equipped to understand – and communicate with – the 'other'.

The ability of students to become active partners in the creation of a new multicultural or intercultural European landscape, I believe, will grow if teachers give them access to a language and to concepts that enable them to relate their own meaning-making to other people's understanding of life. By using the terminology of *existential configurations* and *shared configurations*, opportunities can be created to help pupils realise that their own understanding of life is linked to that of the various religions and 'worldviews' currently being practised in Europe and in the wider world, whether they personally regard themselves as religious/having a worldview or not. By drawing on the terminology of *existential – shared configurations*, one acknowledges that a person's understanding of life is an ongoing process, in which questions can be more significant than the answers themselves.

Note:

(1) The expressed theoretical orientation of this concept can also be found among later scholars who conducted research in the Jeffner tradition (Bråkenhielm et al., 2013, p. 16).

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