Living Simultaneity

On religion among semi-secular Swedes

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Abstract

This thesis aims at contributing to a critical discussion on the supposedly far-reaching secularity of Sweden on the one hand, and on the incongruence and inconsistency of lived religion on the other. At the center are people referred to as *semi-secular Swedes* – a group that is often neglected in the study of religion. These people do not go to church or get involved in any other alternative organized spiritual activities, neither are they actively opposed to religion or entirely indifferent to it. Most of them describe the ways they are – or are not – religious as in line with the majority patterns in Swedish society.

The study is qualitative in method and the material has been gathered through interviews and a questionnaire. It offers a close reading of 28 semi-secular Swedes' ways of talking about and relating to religion, particularly in reference to their everyday lives and their own experiences, and it analyzes the material with a focus on incongruences.

By exploring *how* the term religion is employed vernacularly by the respondents, the study pinpoints one particular feature in the material, namely *simultaneity*. The concept of simultaneity is descriptive and puts emphasis on a '*both and*' approach in (1) the way the respondents ascribe meaning to the term religion, (2) how they talk about themselves in relation to different religious designations, and (3) how they interpret experiences that they single out as 'out-of-the-ordinary'. These simultaneities are explained and theorized through analyses focusing on inter-subjective and discursive processes.

In relation to theorizing on religion and religious people this study offers empirical material that nuance a dichotomous understanding of 'the religious' and 'the secular'. In relation to methodology it is argued that the salience of simultaneity in the material shows that when patterns of religiosity among semi-secular Swedes are studied there is a need to be attentive to expressions of complexity, contradiction and incongruity.

Keywords: simultaneity, semi-secular, liminal, secularity, religious incongruence, fuzzy fidelity, the subjective turn, lived religion, the inadequacy approach, religious and secular, Stockholm, Sweden

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Prologue

Stockholm 2010. It was a cold afternoon in December. The air was crisp and the view clear. I stood on the landing waiting to see if there was anybody at home in the apartment where I had just rung the bell. Meanwhile, I looked out over the block of red brick apartment buildings that I was working my way through, knocking on every door. Built in the early 1980s it consisted of almost 400 apartments surrounding an inner courtyard, complete with kindergarten and health center. Since this winter was a white one, the boule court at the center of the complex was covered in snow. Raising my view I could see the different landmarks of southern Stockholm in the distance. On the streets, cars flashed their indicators as people turned corners, like they do in cities all over the world. Both the red and blue buses struggled to get to the stops where frostbitten people were waiting impatiently in the Swedish way, that is, in line. On the other side of Skanstull bridge, which connects the island of Södermalm with the southern districts, the world's largest spherical building, built in 1989 – the 'the Globe' concert hall – was illuminated in purple, resembling a gigantic plum. In another direction, at the highest point of the 'Vita Bergen' (lit. The White Mountain) park, towered Sofia Church, built at the beginning of the 1900s – reminding me of more traditional sites of research in the study of religion. In this part of Stockholm manifestations of religion can be found, almost literally, on every corner. Nonetheless, the people in focus in this thesis seem to live their lives in a perceived secular space, metaphorically more like the Globe than Sofia Church. At least this is one way of understanding why many of them say things like, 'we live in a completely secularized society', or 'I was raised in a secular society'.

Possibly this expressed understanding of Sweden as secular reflects the fact that the people in this neighborhood live in a country that in an international comparison appears to be rather extreme when it comes to religion. The sociologist of religion Thorleif Petterson has shown that it is

only the Czech people that pray less, identify themselves as religious to a lesser degree, and go to religious services less frequently than they do in Sweden. (Pettersson 2008) Hence, if believing in God and going to church are central features of religiosity, Sweden could arguably be seen as a secularized country, perhaps one of the most secularized in the world, as several scholars have suggested (Inglehart & Baker 2000; Therborn 2012; Zuckerman 2008).

But, on the other hand, as for example the scholar of religion Liselott Frisk has argued (2001), perhaps measuring church-oriented religious expressions, such as going to church or believing in God, is not the best way of taking the pulse of people's religiosity in contemporary Sweden. This position has to do with a critique of the theoretical logics of secularization. This criticism points to the risk of deflecting the circulation and reproduction of religious meanings, interpretations, and imaginations in spaces and/or people thought of as secular. (Bender 2010: 182) Navigating by such a logic, it is reasoned, might obscure relevant expressions, leave them unexplored.

In the recent study *Den mediterande dalahästen [The meditating dalecarian horse]*, Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck (2013) use material collected in the province Dalarna (a region located in mid-Sweden) to argue that new religious arenas are coming forth as a result of the converging processes of globalization, secularization, and individualization. Furthermore, they show that boundaries that have previously been taken for granted, such as the one between the religious and the secular, are increasingly difficult to construct and justify. In Dalarna they see evidence of what has been observed in other parts of the world, namely that people cross borders between denominations with apparent ease, that ideology is downplayed in favor of inner experiences, that secular and religious activities are staged side by side, and that defining practices, ideas or people as either religious or secular seems irrelevant to many people today.

One reason why I was standing on that landing in December 2010 is linked to findings of this kind. I was curious to find out more about people's messy everyday religiosity as it is expressed outside the confines of organized religion. However, if I were to turn to the most obvious places where scholars of religion seek material, such as Sofia Church, for example, or the mosque that lies a few blocks from this neighborhood, there was a risk of shifting the focus away from insights that speak of religion without leaning on misrepresentative categories and a clear-cut division between the secular and the religious. Hence, my point of

departure was that I needed to find alternative ways to study religion, ways that avoid the risk of imputing certain beliefs, affiliations and loyalties to people's everyday experiences of religion. Knocking on doors in this neighborhood was the method I chose to look for respondents in a place not defined by affiliation to any religious denomination.

Now, I am not the first to have come up with the idea of choosing a geographical delimitation. In Scandinavia a number of studies that focus on religious pluralism have departed from specific geographical localities, such as towns or regions.[1] However, knocking on doors has not been the method of choice in these projects. The reason why I chose to seek people in their homes was related to another determinative factor of this study, namely that I was interested in reaching people who do not go to church or get involved in any alternative spiritual activities, or are actively opposed to religion. Hence, I set out to do what they had done in the Kendal study in the United Kingdom, where mapping all religious activity in the town of Kendal had involved a street survey aimed at reaching people who do not go to church or get involved in any alternative spiritual activities.[2] In Sweden, a comparative study was undertaken in the town of Enköping in 2004. There, however, no door-to-door street survey was made. (Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008)

Certainly, one may ask what people that do *not* go to church and who are *not* involved in any alternative spiritual activities have to do with the study of religion. Well, quantitative studies have shown that in a majority of the European countries about half of the population is neither active in religious organizations, nor outright hostile or indifferent to religion. (Voas 2009) Instead they constitute an intermediate group that cannot easily be categorized as either religious or secular. In Sweden this group constitutes the majority of the population (Willander 2014). I was interested in finding and talking to people living in this borderland.

Hence, at the outset of this study there were two delimiting factors. Firstly, the geographical restriction to one neighborhood in central Stockholm, and secondly, the focus on people who can be defined as what

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[1] For a few examples in the Nordic context see Fibinger 2004; Borup 2005; Mortensen 2005; Dybdal Pedersen et al. 2005 (on the religious pluralism project in Aarhus, Denmark); Mikaelsson 2000 (with Bergen, Norway, as point of departure); Martikainen 2004 (a locality study in Åbo, Finland); Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008; Willander 2013 (with Enköping, Sweden, as point of departure); Frisk & Åkerbäck 2013 (a locality study in Dalarna, Sweden).
[2] The Kendal project formed the basis of Heelas' & Woodhead's hypothesis of a spiritual revolution, see Heelas & Woodhead 2005.

in this thesis I call *semi-secular*. In 2010, I interviewed 67 people in the neighborhood.[3] At that first stage of the project I made open-ended interviews about the significance of religion in their lives and supplemented these with a questionnaire. Of these 67, 28 interviewees were identified as being semi-secular. Twelve of them were followed up in a second wave of in-depth interviews carried out in 2012.

Let me return to that afternoon in 2010 to give an image of who a semi-secular Swede might be. The door eventually opened and a man in his mid-forties looked at me with an inquisitive expression on his face. 'Sure', he said when I had explained my errand, 'you can come in'. Victor, which is the name he is given in this thesis, invited me into the kitchen and put on some coffee. When we had settled down by the kitchen table I asked Victor the question I asked everybody in this first wave of interviews, namely: 'What is the significance of religion, for you, in your life?'[4]

This question reflects a fundamental hesitation on my part regarding the meaning of the term religion. The question was formulated in order to collect material on the interviewees' vernacular usages and understandings of religion, particularly when discussed in relation to their own lives and personal experiences in the private sphere.[5]

'Well', Victor answered having listened to the question, 'I am not one of those who go to church. And I don't speak about it much, but I do see myself as religious in a way. I guess a little like Göran Persson[6] who believes in "something"'. Victor has had a few experiences that make him doubt that what we can see is all that there is, but on the other hand he does not really know what to think. When his children asked him what happened to their guinea pig after it died, he had told them that it went to heaven, even though he thought that that was probably not the case. Victor described himself as both Christian and Buddhist, and said that he sometimes tries to meditate but that he always gives up after five minutes or so. Further, he told me that he celebrates Christmas and Easter, but without involving God or Jesus.

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[3] Together with my project colleague, David Thurfjell.
[4] In Swedish: 'Vad betyder religion för dig, i ditt liv?'
[5] My decision to write the term religion without quotation marks reflects a view of language as ever changing and under negotiation. Hence, the absence of quotation marks should not be read as an essentializing of religion, but on the contrary, as a constructionist positioning.
[6] A former leader of the Social Democratic party in Sweden. Prime Minister between 1996 and 2006.

In all of this, Victor is fairly representative of the semi-secular people at the center of this thesis. They are selected rather by what they *are not* than by what they are. They are distinguished from people who 'do' religion in an organized fashion within the confines of a religious denomination. But they are also different from people who are indifferent or hostile towards religion. This means that this thesis is not about Victor's neighbor Lena, a practicing Sikh who participates in ceremonies every Saturday in the gurdwara, or about Åke, who lives on another floor and is studying to become a deacon in the Swedish Church. Neither is it about people such as Alexander, who is completely indifferent towards what he perceives as religion, or Eva, who is outright hostile. Instead, it is about the people who fall in between narrow and clear-cut conceptual categories of the religious and the secular.

The respondents in this study are not people that engage in similar practices to each other. Neither do they necessarily believe in the same things, think in the same ways, interpret reality in the same manner or, for that matter, identify with religious traditions in the same way as each other. Indeed, most of them do not even think of themselves as belonging to the same category. They come from different backgrounds, both in terms of where they have grown up and under what economic circumstances. There is admittedly a predominance of women but on the whole the respondents come from all walks of life.

However, regardless of this, they may still be defined as a group in some senses. Obviously, they all live in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, and none of them are actively involved in a religious organization. Most of them are not active seekers in the sense that they are looking for ideas, or milieus, or investing in practices that they consider religious or spiritual.[7] Hence, in this way this group is not identical to a group that they might be mistaken for, namely one that scholars have talked about as 'spiritual but not religious'.[8] For most, but not all, of the respondents the aspects of religion present in their lives may be characterized as passive and peripheral.

At the center here are people who do not perceive themselves as exceptional. On the contrary, they regard themselves as normal, at least where their religiosity is concerned. Hence, most of these people would identify themselves as belonging to the majority rather than a minority in

[7] Compare Roof (1993) where he describes a segment of the baby boom generation as Roof's 'highly active seekers'.
[8] See for example Fuller 2001.

Swedish society. This is revealed for example by expressions such as: 'this must be very common', 'I believe most people think like this', 'I am not unique, I think this is very Swedish', or references to their own practices, beliefs, customs, and traditions as 'Swedish religion'. Whether or not such assessments are true, the fact that the interviewees make them, does say something about their own perception of their position in Swedish society. To put it simply, many view themselves and the way they are or are not religious as the norm.

Even though the semi-secular Swedes that I have talked to during the course of this project are not necessarily representative of a heterogeneous group of semi-seculars in contemporary Sweden, this thesis is a contribution to such burgeoning scholarship within the study of religion. One the one hand by providing empirical material, and on the other by operationalizing theoretical critiques in order to provide an analytical description that amplifies and extends our understanding of semi-secular Swedes.

This thesis will not engage in mapping and categorizing semi-seculars as a group however. Rather, it offers a close reading of the respondents' ways of talking about and relating to religion in their lives. As it turned out, this is not a story that is straightforward in the sense that it is *either* this (Sofia Church) or that (the Globe Arena). Nor is it *neither* here nor there. This is a story of *both at the same time*, a story that focuses on multiplicities and simultaneities. As such, this thesis may also be regarded as a contribution to the discussion about religious (in)congruence as I highlight and analyze aspects of the material that complicate schematic and simplifying biases that presuppose consistency and rationality. In a world in which people are polemically depicted as each other's opposites, (either moral or immoral, in favor or against, us or them), there is a dire need for such nuances.

Setting the stage by outlining the concerns of this study

In many studies within the study of religion, definitional questions may rest undisturbed in the background. Often scholars apply what the historian of religion Jan Snoek calls 'a pragmatic, essential-intuitive approach' (Snoek 1987: 8–9 quoted in Hanegraaff 1999). This means that researchers may concentrate on any chosen aspect of phenomena that we recognize as religious without having to deal with the question of how they actually define 'religion'. Naturally, if we study, for example, Italian-American Catholics, Vaishnava Hindus, or Protestant Pentecostals, there is no pressing concern to specify exactly what we mean when we speak of our subject matter as 'religious'. In this study, however, where the central material is of a more ambiguous kind, definitional issues have been taken into account from the very start.

People like the ones at the center of this study, who are not unambiguously or intuitively recognized as either religious or secular, often fall outside the domain of what is 'normally' thought of as an object of inquiry for students of religion. This is regrettable since they constitute a group that is of utmost concern for our field. Among semi-seculars we can expect to find ideas, practices and expressions that are located in the borderland between what we often refer to as the secular and religious spheres. Hence, a close reading of the ways these people speak of and relate to religion, raises pivotal conceptual questions about the concept of religion, about what it means for the respondents and about what it could mean to us who study it academically.

This thesis stands in between what may be regarded as two parallel discussions. On the one hand it connects to a discussion within the study of religion that focuses on social reality by highlighting empirical material. On the other hand it relates to a critique of the concepts of religion and the secular. One contribution made by this thesis is to synthesize these discussions by taking such theoretical criticism seriously and letting it affect the ways the empirical material is collected, analyzed and presented.

What lies ahead in this chapter is, to begin with, a clarification of my research objectives, purpose, and research questions. This section is then followed by a discussion that aims to situate the thesis in relation to previous research, both in terms of empirical data and in terms of the particular theoretical discussions that it builds on and is a contribution to. I end the chapter with a section in which I outline the theoretical imagination that informs my investigations.

Research objectives

This thesis is motivated by two parallel concerns. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the growing field of study of semi-seculars. It does so both by making a close reading of the qualitative empirical material, and by operationalizing theoretical critiques, in order to provide an analysis that amplifies and extends our understanding of people in between conceptual extremes.

Secondly, this thesis aims to contribute to the discussion about religious (in)congruence by giving prominence to aspects of the material that complicate schematic and simplifying biases that presuppose coherence and rationality.

Research purpose

The two-fold purpose of this thesis is hence (a) to make a close reading of these particular semi-secular Swedes' ways of talking about and relating to religion, and (b) to analyze the material with a focus on incongruences.

Main research questions

As I carried out the interviews and in the interactions with the respondents, I was interested in discerning (1) how the term religion was employed vernacularly by the respondents, particularly with reference to their everyday lives and their own experiences.

In the analytical phase, I set out to theorize and analyze (2) how the respondents ascribed a multiplicity of meanings to the concept of religion, (3) how the respondents described themselves in terms of religious designations, and (4) how they interpreted events and experiences that they talked about as out of the ordinary.

These *how*-questions may be understood as pointing in both a descriptive and an analytical direction. Indeed, what is aimed for here is an explanatory narrative with both theoretical and empirical components.

On simultaneity

Many studies show that people combine ideas, practices and identities in ways that defy conventional logic.[1] Following the historian of religion Robert A. Orsi, who argues that scholars must 'surrender dreams of religious order and singleness', I strive to be attentive to what he calls 'religious messiness' (Orsi 2005: 167). This means giving up the pervasive idea that order and singleness is something all people search for all the time. There are indeed people who do so, but, as I will show in the following chapters, singleness is far from descriptive of this material. On the contrary, the most salient aspect in the material is multiplicity.

In Chapters 4, 5 & 6, which comprise the analytical core of this thesis, I focus on three areas in which multiplicity is found in the material: Firstly, when the respondents talked about religion in the interview setting they ascribed a multiplicity of meanings to the concept of religion. Secondly, when the respondents were asked to describe themselves in relation to a number of religious designations they did so by identifying with several of these at the same time. Thirdly, when the respondents described experiences that they singled out as 'out of the ordinary', they offered, on the same occasion, different (sometimes contradictory) interpretations of those experiences.

In relation to these three areas I set out to investigate a recurrent feature that I have labeled *simultaneity*. I use this term to highlight not only that there are a number of meanings, designations and interpretations to choose from (which multiplicity indicates), but that several of those are at play as the respondents talk about religion in their lives in the interview situation.

I am not challenging theories of perception, nor the obvious limits of language in which words always come one after the other. The term simultaneity is descriptive and places emphasis on what I see as a 'both and'– approach in the way the respondents ascribe meaning to the term religion, talk about themselves in relation to different religious designations, and when interpreting experiences.

[1] See for example Frisk & Åkerbäck 2013; Luhrman 2012; Taves & Bender 2012.

Previous research:
Studying fuzzy fidelity

The people at the center of this study may be analyzed in relation to a field of study that in the last decade has received increasing academic focus, namely the sociological debate concerning the group identified by the sociologist David Voas (2009) as 'fuzzy fidelity'. Voas uses this term to describe the section of the European population that in sociological literature is described as 'neither religious nor completely unreligious' according to standard quantitative measures of religiosity. This is a group that, according to Voas, is characterized by a rather uncommitted loyalty towards religious tradition, and that consists of people who,

> remain interested in church weddings and funerals, Christmas services, and local festivals. They believe in "something out there", pay at least lip service to Christian values, and may be willing to identify with a denomination. They are neither regular church-goers [...] nor self-consciously non-religious. (Voas 2009: 9)

This description is quite fitting for the respondents in this study even though the characteristics listed have not been the criteria for the selection of the target group. In his analysis of the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) based on data from 2002/2003, Voas concludes that in the majority of European countries this group accounts for about half of the population.[2] The 'fuzziness' in question refers to the fact that this group does not answer the survey questions in a way that lends easily to church-oriented categorizations of the religious and the secular.[3]

In her thesis *What counts as religion in sociology: The problem of religiosity in sociological methodology* (2014) the sociologist Erika Willander points out that a denomination-centered way of studying religion, and analyzing survey questions that aims to categorize people as either religious or not religious, is particularly problematic where Sweden

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[2] This data was collected in 22 European countries and covering mainly the areas of affiliation, practice, and belief. ESS data are archived in Norway. Accessible at http://ess.nsd.uib.no

[3] This is an issue that I will have reason to return to when discussing 'the inadequacy approach' on page 37.

is concerned.[4] In Sweden the majority of answers – 70 per cent of the population – fit into the sliding scale that Voas calls fuzzy fidelity.[5] (Willander 2014: 22)

Hence, in Europe in general and in Sweden in particular, if measured by denominational standards, there is a borderland in which a large proportion of the European population reside. This borderland encompasses a wide range of patterns of religiosity. For example, it includes people who are not affiliated to any religious tradition but who believe in a supernatural reality, or who practice methods that have their origin within a religious tradition – such as mindfulness or yoga – or who have experiences that they do not solely explain in terms of the natural sciences. Also, in this borderland we find people who are members of a religious denomination, but who rarely engage in practices or profess to the beliefs common within, associated to, or sanctioned by the elite of that organization.

The intermediate group has been discussed for years in the sociology of religion. Willander (2014: 94–95) distinguishes four such discussions in sociological literature. Drawing on terminology coined by the sociologist Grace Davie, Willander calls these: 'believing without belonging', 'believing in belonging', 'belonging but believing something else', and 'neither believing nor belonging'.

Davie, whose work has focused on people who are neither involved in organized religion nor consciously opposed to it, initially popularized the phrase 'believing without belonging'. With this she referred to a disjunction between the religious values British people expressed and the extent to which they were members or belonged to religious denominations (Davie 1994).

In the Swedish context, where a large part of the population are still members of the Church of Sweden, however, the opposite situation has been shown. In order to describe the seemingly passive group of Swedish people who 'belong without believing' Grace Davie's term 'vicarious

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[4] This approach is linked to the insight that standard ways of analyzing religion are not helpful if we wish to understand religion outside Christian (and American) denominations. Compare Bender et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2013.

[5] For a criticism of the underlying assumptions of a correlation between affiliation, practices and beliefs in Voas's reasoning see Willander 2014: 56–58. One problem that Willander sees lies in ascribing a universality to the multidimensional approach to religion. Another has to do with the assumption that there is explanatory value to summing up the different dimensions considered, that is, to presume that the more religious a person is, the higher the 'score' in terms of all the dimensions measured.

religion' is more fitting. Vicarious religion refers to 'religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing' (Davie 2007: 22). In *Religion in modern Europe* Davie argues that

> On a superficial level the Scandinavians appear to reverse the British idea: they belong without believing. (To be more precise, almost all Scandinavians continue to pay tax to their state churches, but relatively few either attend their churches with any regularity or subscribe to conventional statements of belief.) On closer inspection, however, they behave like their fellow continentals; in other words they maintain nominal rather than active allegiance to their churches and what they represent, but in a way provided for by their particular ecclesiastical history. Or, as one Swedish observer succinctly put it: what the Scandinavians believe in is, in fact, belonging. Membership of their respective national churches forms an important part of Nordic identity. (Davie 2000: 3)

What is identified here is a category indicating those who are affiliated with a religious organization in name only and in which religious belonging is intimately connected to social identity.[6] Developing this idea, the sociologist of religion Abby Day argues that belief need not be an expression of adherence to doctrine, instead people may 'believe in belonging' and choose religious identifications to complement other social and emotional experiences of 'belongings'. (Day 2009a, 2011).[7]

With reference to a Swedish context, research that focuses on 'belonging without believing' emphasizes for example that membership of the Church of Sweden is often equated with national citizenship. Membership is thus interpreted as an expression of national and social identity rather than a statement of belief.[8] (Davie 2000; Gustavsson 2000; Sundback 2000, 2007)

When Willander speaks of 'belonging but believing in something else', she is pointing towards the bulk of research that focuses a perceived

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[6] Compare Bäckström 1993.

[7] Day subdivides the nominal group into ethnic, natal, and aspirational varieties. Compare Hervieu-Léger (2000) who explores ethnic religious identity in terms of a chain of memory, and Demerath III (2000) who employs the term cultural Christianity.

[8] For an overview of the debate in Scandinavian sociology of religion see Willander 2014: 67–110.

change in belief-content. For instance the international research project *Religious and Moral Pluralism* (RAMP) carried out in 1998–1999 (see Gustavsson & Petterson 2000). In 1998, 36 % of the Swedish population described their beliefs as 'God within each person, rather than out there', which was among the largest in Europe in the RAMP that year (Heelas & Houtman 2009: 85). Now, these results have been interpreted, for example by Heelas (2007), as signs of a changing religious landscape in the direction of 'a spiritual revolution' in Sweden. This, of course, as Willander also makes clear, relies on the assumption that only a belief statement such as 'belief in a personal God' is consistent with Christian doctrine, an interpretation that risks obscuring the fact that within the framework of what is recognized as Christianity there are is a wide spectrum of understandings of God.

The last of the four discussions Willander identifies in the sociological debate may be represented by David Voas. He argues that 'fuzzy fidelity' is best described as 'neither believing nor belonging' (Voas & Crocett 2005). This perspective is central for his interpretation of the material. For Voas, a question of pivotal concern is how much religion matters to people, because, in his view, indifference is as damaging to religion (understood in a narrow sense) as skepticism. For this reason Voas interprets the fact that people in this group score low on the question of the importance of religion in their lives as an indication that 'fuzzy fidelity' is but 'a staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony' (Voas 2009: 167).

The sociologist Ingrid Storm in her turn, explores 'fuzzy fidelity' through a 'cluster analysis'. Using data from the RAMP survey for 10 European countries she identifies four clusters of religious positions among the fuzzy fidelity group: Firstly, the 'moderately religious', who are characterized by a strong sense of belonging to a religious community as well as relatively high rates of practice and belief. According to Storm they 'appear to belong to more traditional forms of religiosity, rather than the new forms of "spiritual" religiosity described by Lynch (2007) and others' (Storm 2009: 707). Secondly, she finds the 'passively religious', who describe themselves as spiritual, somewhat religious and believing in God, but who have particularly low rates of both individual and collective religious practice. These are people that may adhere to 'New-Age' or 'post-Christian spirituality', according to Storm. Thirdly, she finds a cluster of people who are almost solely nominally religious, the group

'belonging without believing'. They score relatively low on every dimension of religion measured except one, namely that they feel close to the church and think that church services are important at life events such as birth, marriage, and death. Finally, the fourth and smallest cluster comprises those 'believing without belonging' – people who practice and believe privately but who do not belong to a group or attend church regularly.

Storm sees both qualitative and quantitative differences between different European countries when it comes to religiosity measured in this way. She shows that the Scandinavian countries have higher proportions of 'fuzzies' in general, but also that those belonging without believing are more salient compared to the other countries in her sample (Storm 2009: 713).

Storm concludes that since religion is multidimensional, and since religious identity is tied to other social identities – such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class – variations in religiosity are often differences of pattern rather than degree. This finding resonates with the sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman's (1997) discussion of what she calls 'Golden rule Christianity' in the United States. Here Ammerman's starting point is a discussion about 'lay liberals' (Hoge et al. 1994) or 'free riders' (Iannaccone 1994) that are connected to churches. She suggests that they form a category that should be defined by their practices rather than by their ideology, that is, on the basis of what they do rather than what they believe. She sees them not as a tepid version of more fervent religious people but a different kind altogether, a 'pervasive religious type that deserves to be understood on its own terms' (Ammerman 1997: 196).

Now, Ammerman and Storm's position indicates an inclusive stance when it comes to the category of religion. This is a position that is rather distinct from, for example, Voas and Day (2010). In their attempt to map the intermediate group they describe this field as the 'temperate regions between the poles of observant orthodoxy and overt irreligion'. They are reluctant to describe many of their findings in the field as religion (the conceptual extreme with a specific, narrowly defined, content) since they interpret for example belief in afterlife as a 'secular or social' idea, rather than a religious one. With data on practice, beliefs, and affiliation as their focal points Day and Voas suggest that a significant part of this middle group may be defined as secular Christians, a group that includes the passively religious, social or instrumental Christians, and nominal Christians. Other categories included in the group of fuzzy Christians are

the moderately religious Christians (who identify themselves as such, believe in God, and occasionally attend religious ceremonies), and those with unusual or idiosyncratic combinations of characteristics (a group which Day and Voas describe as made up of 'the unaffiliated, attending believers, the privately religious, and non-religious attendees').

In the context of the United States the intermediate group in question is discussed in relation to Americans who choose 'no religion' when asked about religious preference on national surveys. These, the 'Nones', constitute the fastest growing religious category in America (Lim et al. 2010: 613). Questions of identity have become central in academic discussion on Nones. Attempting to refine the understanding of this diverse group, scholars have various takes on why people claim no religious preference, what characterizes them, and how their religious identities may be understood. Different typologies have been developed for different purposes. For example, Baker and Smith (2009) argue for a sub-categorization between (1) those who identify as having no religion while still maintaining super-empirical beliefs, (2) atheists, and (3) agnostics. This distinction is made since the question of what religion a person has leads to answers that help determine whether an individual claims to be part of an established group or not, whereas a question on whether someone is atheist or agnostic, is more a question of belief (Baker & Smith 2009). Also in this academic discussion interpretations differ when it comes to what this group indicates for the future of religion. Scholars such as Cimino and Lattin (1998), Greer and Roof (1992), Hout and Fisher (2002), and Roof (1993; 1999) interpret the rise of Nones as a sign of a transformed religiosity, yet others, such as Bruce (2002) and Marwell and Demerath III (2003), see it as a sign of increasing secularization.

The sociologists Chaeyoon Lim and Carol Ann MacGregor and the political scientist Robert D. Putnam (2010), in their turn, spot two different kinds of Nones: stable Nones, who may be referred to as seculars, and unstable Nones, who they refer to as liminal – the latter are significantly more religious than the stable Nones but significantly less religious than people who consistently identify with a religious group. Lininars, in their view, 'are individuals betwixt and between the religious and the secular but they are not necessarily on the path of being one or the other.' They point to the unstable character of religious identity in general and to the transient and dynamic character of the liminal Nones in particular. As I will show in Chapter 5, in terms of short-term stability

of religious preference the pattern found among liminal Nones cor-responds with what is found among the respondents of this study.

One study of the Nordic context lies particularly close to my own work in a number of ways, namely the sociologist of religion Ina Rosen's thesis *I'm a believer – but I'll be damned if I'm religious* (2009). In this case study Rosen discusses how residents in the Greater Copenhagen area talk about what it means to be a 'believer' in contemporary Denmark, and whether it is possible to be more or less 'religious'.[9] Starting from data created in focus groups, as well as other sociological survey findings, Rosen discusses everyday conceptualizations of belief and religion among Danes. Hence, similarly to my own approach, Rosen aims to talk to people about religion in a space not linked to any specific religious tradition or denomination, and to put those stories at the center of her investigation.

Furthermore, Rosen's empirical findings resonate with the material on which this thesis is based, particularly in the sense that the participants in her focus group, just like the respondents in focus here, relate to the concept of religion as a term with a multiplicity of meanings. In Rosen's analysis of the ways these Danes talk about religion and belief, religion is shown to be a concept that pertains to what she regards as five distinct aspects: belief, routinized religion, religion-as-heritage, practice, and tradition. These are aspects that do not share a common core for the participants in the study: instead they are actualized ad hoc with regard to context. What Rosen concludes is that people do not necessarily link the different aspects or understandings of religion into a coherent whole. Drawing on this result she argues that sociologist of religion need to realize that studying religion in the expectation of finding an encompassing system of belief at the center, what she calls 'packaged religion' is invalid. Instead, Rosen suggests, in order to properly understand the Danish religious landscape in particular there is a need to focus on 'unpacked religion', that is, religion understood as a number of aspects that perform different functions in respect to the individual and to society. According to Rosen, changing conditions in society make this is a more accurate way of explaining the ways contem-

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[9] Even though Sweden and Denmark do have different historical backgrounds and cannot be said to be identical cultural contexts, they are indeed similar for example in terms of dominant values, which political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel show in their analysis of the World Value Survey. For a brief overview of their analysis see http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp, for a more comprehensive overview see Welzel 2013. For an exposé of the historical unity and diversity of the Nordic countries see Thorkildsen 2014.

porary Danes relate to religion. I share Rosen's criticism of a one-dimensional perspective on religion and will explore similar material, however from another analytical angle and with a distinct theoretical approach. The present study may thus be seen as a complement to and a continuation of Rosen's work.

The groups identified as 'fuzzy fidelity' and religious Nones, are based on crude categorizations. These conglomerations of people are not likely to be homogenous, instead it is safe to presume that an in-between space encompasses a variety of phenomena. Such internal diversity is amply illustrated in the volume *Social identities between the sacred and the secular* (2014) (edited by Day, Vincett & Cotter) in which authors from a number of disciplines – sociology of religion, anthropology, religious studies, political studies – attempt to explore and theorize the space(s) between the conceptual extremes of the secular and the religious. This field of research provides an opportunity for methodological reflection in terms of studying religion in modern society. Furthermore, recognizing nuances has ramifications for how scholars paint the religious landscape.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this thesis is not an attempt categorize the field or to locate these semi-secular Swedes in any particular place within a borderland between conceptual extremes. In terms of the contribution of this thesis to this discussion what is offered is an explanatory narrative with both descriptive and analytical elements based on qualitative material. Let me now turn to another field of research to which this study connects, namely one that critically assesses the religious/secular dichotomy specifically.

<div style="text-align:center">

Previous research:
Theorizing the secular/religious dichotomy

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Postcolonial scholars, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), Talal Asad (1993, 2003), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), and N.S. Balagangadhara (2005), have long called for scholars to 'provincialize Europe' and critically assess the assumption that the concept of religion may work as a universally applicable analytical category. For example, Tomoko Masuzawa argues that there is no religious sphere that can be separated from other societal spheres such as aesthetics, ethics, politics, or academia. The distinction between these spheres, she argues, is made for practical and analytical reasons and is always related to power. Masuzawa,

who concentrates in her deconstructive endeavors on the term *world religions*, shows that this concept has its origins in a theological project that was part and parcel of Protestant European modernity and which is still present in the definitions used today. Religion is therefore a concept intimately connected to problematic issues of dominance. In addition, there is a link between the concept of religion and identity in western culture – a link that is tied to the dynamics of Christianity.

The anthropologist Talal Asad criticizes the idea of an anthropological definition of religion by describing, in his renowned work *The genealogies of religion*, the transmutations of Christianity from the Middle Ages until today. What is central here is the idea that the secular runs parallel to the notion of religion and that the idea of the religious makes no sense without its dichotomous counterpart, the secular. Such a position is also recognizable in the scholarship of Russell T. McCutcheon (see for example 1997 and 2007).

Asad argues that a fundamental imperialism lies behind the presumption that the religious and the secular are neutral categories. Instead, he claims, they stand in relation to each other – as interdependent and fluctuating notions that constitute an important domain of power and governance throughout the history of western societies. Asad points to the ways in which 'authorizing discourses' have systematically redefined religious spaces. In the medieval Church, for example, this happened through the rejection or acceptance of pre-Christian practices in the church. Later attempts among philosophers, missionaries, theologians, and anthropologists to create a universal definition of religion are expressions of similar realignments. In all these instances certain ideas – such as the idea of religion as a natural component of every society and a universal category of human experience – developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a specific historical juncture. (Asad 1993: 42) Such a redefinition of religious space, Asad argues, may be seen as a process of negotiating the borders between a religious and a secular sphere – an ongoing project within different discourses throughout history. Asad's examples range from the regulative processes within the medieval church to the judicial apparatuses in modern states.

Asad's point is not merely that the religious and the secular are linked – both in our present day thoughts and in the way they emerged historically – but also that they are constituted by a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities. This means that the secular as well as the

religious are categories with a multilayered history and many meanings.[10] An underlying presumption for Asad's exploration into how boundaries are established is that any boundary dividing the secular and the religious is unstable: that boundaries change through the course of history and depend on the context in which they are constructed and upheld. (Compare for example Fitzgerald 2000, W.C. Smith 1991/1962, J.Z. Smith 1982, 1998). Hence categories such as religion, the secular and the sacred are not regarded as referents to actual qualities, but, as McCutcheon puts it, as 'codependent, portable discursive markers whose relationship we can date to a specific period in early modern Europe, and whose utility continues to this day' (McCutcheon 2007: 197).

That said, discursively determined boundaries are operationalized for example within religious organizations, in academia, jurisprudence, media, politics, and in the private sphere. These affect legislation and trials, the flow of media, economic standing of organizations, et cetera. In addition, what has been normalized as religion within different discourses has had and continues to have an impact on how people conceptualize religion in their everyday affairs and thus the way they interpret their experiences, and construct their identities. However, these boundaries are porous in the sense that they can be adapted to the situation.

Avoiding moralizing dichotomies

The theoretical discussions regarding the genealogy of the concepts of religion and secular raise serious questions about their applicability as descriptive and/or analytical tools. My own position in this debate is that even though what is determined as religious and secular varies and even though the terminology is loaded down with dubious luggage, this does not mean that this problem is solved by simply abandoning the concepts. The conceptual pairing of the secular and the religious is part of our social and intellectual habitat. This is so for scholars of religion and non-experts alike. It is, in Asad's words, where 'modern living is required to take place' (Asad 2003: 14). However, awareness of the history and political embeddedness of these concepts may be seen both as a call for self-reflexivity and hesitancy about their meaning in a particular situation and context. There are good reasons to be wary of these concepts and to highlight their contested nature. Navigating naively by concepts such as the religious and the secular, as if they were neutral, without critical examination may skew

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[10] Discussed further in *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity* 2003.

the analysis. For example, it may uphold a certain view of religion that obscures relevant expressions, experiences, and practices, and create an impression that there are clear-cut borders between these two fields and that people, actions, or experiences necessarily fall into one or the other.

That being said, I need to point out that I have not navigated the field untrammeled by definitions during the course of this project. The methodological reasons for my choices in formulating the research project and in choosing methods for data collection and analysis will be further discussed in Chapter 2. It will suffice for now to say that since the struggle for the interpretative prerogative about where the ends and beginnings of religion lie is ongoing, how one chooses to define religion must depend on which discussion one wants to participate in, and what one wants to contribute with. A vital part of the research process is choosing the object of study, and when this is done one also determines what goes in and what is left out of the investigation.

Embarking on empirical studies with these insights into the religious and secular dichotomy in mind calls for a discussion of how religion might be studied without getting caught up in dichotomous thinking. Because, one problem with navigating in a binary mindset is, according to the scholar of religion Meredith McGuire (for example 2003, 2008), that such categories have questionable validity when it comes to exploring religious beliefs and practices at the level of the individual. Building on Asad's critical exploration of the conceptual assumptions that govern knowledge production regarding religion and the secular within anthropology, McGuire is critical of the religious/secular dichotomy and its implications for the study of religion within sociology. In her book *Lived religion* (2008), McGuire demonstrates how a certain (albeit contested) understanding (and thus a definition) of religion is embedded in scholarly conceptual tools such as 'religion', 'religiosity', 'religious traditions', 'religious commitment', and 'religious identity'. In line with Asad, she traces the bias that religion and religiosity can be measured and understood through a focus on belief to the early phases of European modernity. Furthermore, she questions uncritical use of 'the secular' and 'the religious' as strictly binary oppositions, because, she argues, 'the sacred' and 'the profane' interpenetrate in ways that make a dichotomous separation misleading.[11] McGuire is skeptical of what she perceives as the

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[11] A similar argument is made by Taves & Bender (2012: 4–7), who propose 'spirituality' as a category that complicate a straightforward religious/secular binary.

uncritical way in which scholars have used dichotomies that impute different values to different expressions.

This point of view is shared by Robert Orsi (for example 1997, 2005), who argues that modern academic theorizing about religion has long sanctioned dubious distinctions between 'good' religious expressions and 'bad' religious expressions. He does not make use of a clear-cut demarcation between religion and 'secular' worldviews and systems of practice, but departs from an elastic definition of religion in which he focuses on symbolic and psychosocial aspects. Orsi focuses specifically on the American context, but in my view the point could be made generally. He traces the moral distinction between good and bad religion to '[t]he mother of all religious dichotomies – us/them' (Orsi 2005: 183). Both Orsi and McGuire view this modus operandi as an obstacle to seeing people's everyday religious expressions as 'religion'.

The philosopher S.N. Balagangadhara (2014), also discusses the moralizing aspects of this process. Drawing on the work of the historian Robert Markus on early Christianity he argues that questions of truth and falsity are central in making the religious/secular distinction.

> When Christianity made the distinction between the religious and the secular, we need to realize that it was not a binary but a triad instead: true religion, false religions and the secular; or, the religious, the idolatrous (or the profane) and the secular. (Balagangadhara 2014: 37)

In Christian theology, Balagangadhara argues, a moralizing dichotomy was applied to specific actions. Hence, the act of worshipping God was considered true religion and the worship of the Devil was false religion. In this logic the secular became what was left over, that which belonged neither to true religion nor to false religion.

According to Balagangadhara, the problem lies not in distinguishing between 'the religious' and 'the secular' but in insisting that it is a binary. The exclusion of 'false religion' from the domain of 'the religious' does not automatically make expressions that previously belonged to that category self-evidently parts of the secular domain, he argues. Instead, it creates an opposition between the religious and the secular *within the secular sphere itself*. The secular is on the one hand distinct from the religious, but on the other, it encompasses the 'potentially religious' as

well. This means, according to Balagangadhara, that 'despite the distinc-tion between the religious and the secular, the *modern* domain of the secular is both "religious" and "secular"'. (Balagangadhara 2014: 45)

Now, if using a rigid dichotomous categorization obscures the ambi-guity of the field, as suggested by these scholars, another problem related to this dichotomy is how phenomena located between conceptual extremes should be interpreted and described. For Abby Day (for example 2009a, 2011) this is an important issue. She describes her findings from probing beliefs among people in northern England in terms of sociality. This emphasis is also seen in the work of Orsi, for whose discussions the point of departure is material on twentieth century Catholic America. But where Orsi sees a network of relationship between 'heaven and earth', Day places emphasis on this-worldly relationships between humans, both alive and dead.

> In my research, particularly with adolescents, I found belief not absent but relocated to a social realm where it is polyvocal, interdependent, emotionally charged and illustrative of the experiences of belonging. The young people I interviewed appeared grounded in their family and friendship relationships and networks, illustrating a Durkheimian turn to the social. The people in whom many young people believe, and with whom they belong to, are their intimates: friends and relatives, alive or dead. (Day 2009a: 276)

Day is thus critical of the scholars who interpret experiences of a deceased relative or of seeing a ghost as 'religious' since, according to her, it overly 'religiosizes' these experiences. Instead she prefers the concept *sensuous social supernatural* when describing these sorts of experiences. (Day 2011: 98–114) Both Day and Orsi, while basing their arguments on widely disparate material, try to avoid overusing the divisive dichotomies and so maintain the characteristic fluidity of the field.

In my view, the terms are not the main problem, but the thought patterns are. If what Day is saying is that by using the word religion people's beliefs are encumbered with connotations that skew the analysis – for example in the direction of church-oriented religiosity – then the conceptual language should perhaps reflect this. But there are other ways of dealing with such misleading biases. Material that complicates simplifying ways of discussing the religious and the secular has the potential to dislocate these concepts from dichotomous and moralizing

thinking. Highlighting material that is 'fuzzy' in the sense that it is not easily categorized as either or, for example about semi-secular Swedes, challenges common notions of what it means to be secular or religious. Bearing the discussion above in mind let me comment upon the choice of the term semi-secular Swedes.

On the term semi-secular

When I refer to the people at the center of this study as semi-secular I am drawing attention to the complexity of a 'both and, neither nor'-situation. One problem with the first part of this term – *semi* – is that using a terminology that describe people as 'half-something' may be criticized for being indebted to the idea of boundaries separating one domain from another. Understood in this way, this term could be read as suggesting a dichotomy between a secular person and a religious person that is certainly not what is intended here. But of course, in a zero-sum logic there is no place for semi-somethings, for in-betweens or simultaneities.[12] Hence, by calling the respondents of this study semi-secular Swedes, rather than affirming thinking in black and white terms, I am trying to disrupt the idea of a *sui generis* secular or religious sphere unrelated to situation and context, and the idea that people 'are' either one thing or another.

By choosing to call the respondents 'semi' rather than using a term such as for example 'hybrid', I wish to stress that this position is not necessarily the result of a conflict. Hybridity, in my reading, signals an active stance, a pressing need to carve out a space distinct from given positions. Hybridity in this sense is a result of negotiation.[13] In this material such a concept would be misleading since the respondents typically neither strive nor struggle but rather navigate the expected.

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[12] For a discussion on the zero-sum logic in academic discourse on religious pluralism see Ammerman 2013.
[13] Speaking primarily about the cultural spheres of art and literature, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (2004, 2002) has discussed the process of migration from one cultural continuum to another in terms of the concept of *hybridity*. By this he wishes to denote an identity that exists in what he calls a *third space*. The third space is different from the cultural arenas that it combines. It is an identity in its own right and need not necessarily be seen as the result or cause of conflict. Another important aspect of Bhabha's work is the way it ascribes agency to individuals. By describing hybrid identities as independent results of negotiations on an individual level, he also emphasises their solidity.

The interviewees regard themselves for all intents and purposes as secular people, living in a secular country. What secular means to them is naturally an issue worth consideration even though this is not an exploration undertaken here. This thesis does, however, highlight the problems with a logic of binary oppositions that depict reality as a zero-sum game in which the stakes are either in or out, all or nothing. The ways the respondents in this study enact their secularity challenge a 'standard picture of the secular' (as the absence, the opposite, the overcoming of religion).[14] By using the term semi-secular I therefore highlight that what is done in this thesis is a juxtaposition of empirical findings and a simplifying picture of not only religion but of its Siamese twin the secular as well.

Avoiding the inadequacy approach

Discussing something apparently fuzzy is no new endeavor in the study of religion, as the debate about spirituality may serve to exemplify. In 'Real religion and fuzzy spirituality? Taking sides in the sociology of religion', the sociologist of religion Linda Woodhead (2010) argues against what she calls the 'inadequacy approach' to spirituality. What she has in mind here seems not to be the term spirituality as an analytical category, but rather her criticism is aimed at norms that decide what scholars deem worthy as object of study. According to Woodhead, and in this she is not alone as I have already shown, a common position about what 'real religion' ought to be is 'shaped around an implicit commitment to historically influential forms of church Christianity'. As such, this position reflects and builds on moralizing dichotomies, which are allowed to come to the fore within the (particularly sociological) study of religion at the expense of 'generous and attentive accounts' of how different forms of religion are constructed.

Arguably, measuring fuzzy fidelity, liminal Nones, or semi-seculars by standards developed on the basis of similarly biased scales, that is, through applying an 'inadequacy approach', could lead to a normative stance that here I wish to avoid. One practical implication that may result from such

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[14] The ambiguity of terms such as secular, secularity and secularism are increasingly emphasized in the academic debate. See for example Agrama 2010; Bullivant & Lee 2012; Cady & Shakman Hurd 2010; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & Van Antwerpen 2011; Cannell 2010; Knott 2005, 2010; Lee 2012; Starrett 2010; Quack 2014.

normative or moralizing dichotomies – us versus them, religious versus secular, real versus bogus et cetera – is that it may hide or obscure ambiguous expressions relevant to the academic discourse of religion. Hence, my own hesitation about restricting the analytical term religion to an extreme position at one end of the religious /secular spectrum is followed by an attempt to broaden the investigation by being sensitive to different relevant expressions. Furthermore, I strive to augment and extend this account in relation to the concrete particulars of this study by being attentive to expressions that might be interpreted both as secular and as religious, either by different academic standards or by the respondents.

On (in)congruence

Even though I share Woodhead's analysis as far as 'the inadequacy approach' is concerned, I would like to approach the problem from a slightly different point of view. In her article, Woodhead argues against criticism that describes 'spirituality' as being 'diffuse, confused, amorphous, lacking in salience and significance, transitory, and insubstantial'. I would argue that not all of these adjectives are necessarily value laden per se. For example, that something lacks in salience and significance does not mean that it is of less value. Confusion signals that there is a problem, lack of salience or significance, however, has negative connotations only if what is inconspicuous or peripheral is considered less important. Similarly, being transitory or amorphous is deprecated only if what is valued is that which is stable and consistent.

The sociologist of religion, Mark Chaves, in his presidential address to the Society of Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) in 2009 argued that 'people's religious ideas and practices are fragmented, compartmentalized, loosely connected, unexamined, and context dependent. This is not a controversial claim; it's established knowledge.' (Chaves 2010: 2)

Chaves's statement serves to show that in certain theorizing on religion established knowledge points towards a fragmented and situational subject. Whether or not this view is embraced by every scholar in the study of religion or not, it indeed accurately pinpoints my own understanding of my respondents' ideas and practices where religion is concerned, and serves as an important foundation for my discussions in Chapters 4, 5 & 6.

However, Chaves continues, this knowledge does not inform research and thinking as centrally and deeply as it ought to – even among those who in fact agree that incongruence is common in the field. Instead, scholars fall into what he calls the 'religious congruence fallacy'. What this means is that scholars presuppose a congruence that we know is generally not there. Chaves uses the term 'religious congruence' in three related senses: firstly, it refers to consistency in an individual's religious beliefs and attitudes, in the sense that these constitute an integrated, logically connected network, secondly, it refers to consistency between religious ideas and behavior, that is, the understanding that practices necessarily stem from beliefs and values, and thirdly, it refers to the idea that religious ideas, identities, or schemas are chronically salient and accessible to individuals across contexts and situations. (Chaves 2010: 2)

Hence, religious incongruence is not the same as religious confusion. On the contrary, it is common and normal, if the situationality of practices and beliefs is considered. In my view, describing empirical material as fuzzy does not to diminish its status as a valid object of study. Rather it is an incentive to investigate if, why, and how that is the case. In this sense, then, this thesis may be regarded as a contribution to this discussion. Arguably, if the aim is to abandon moralizing dichotomizing biases consistently, leaning on modernistic ideals of rationality and coherence may favorably be put aside as well. That is not to say that our analytical concepts should be undistinguishable or fuzzy, that is quite another matter. What it says is that material that is transitory in character should not be defined by tools that presuppose stability. We should not distort material to make the theories or categories we currently use to fit, instead either the tools need to be realigned or new ones developed in order to explore the material through more fitting perspectives. This is one of the reasons why the theoretical imagination applied in this thesis needed to be creatively constructed – an issue I will return to shortly.

This is also the basis of Lim, Putnam and MacGregor's (2010) critique of labels like unchurched believers, religious privatists, spiritual but not religious, believing without belonging, religious seekers, tinkerers, fuzzy fidelity et cetera. There is the implicit bias that presupposes inherent stability in these categories and Lim et al. aim to destabilize this with their own concept of 'liminal Nones'. In contrast to notions that presuppose stability, they argue that liminal religious identity should be understood as situational, indeterminate and porous in kind. Thus, they are not only, like Storm for example, pointing to the fact that religious identity may be

ambiguous since religion is multidimensional, but in particular they stress its situationality.

Thus, in line with Woodhead, I would argue against descriptions of this field as fuzzy in any derogatory sense of the word, but nevertheless agree with a description of it as incoherent, inconsistent, and palimpsestic. My position is therefore in line with Lim, Putnam and MacGregor, who stress the need for a situational approach. However, I want to further stress Chaves's second point, namely that not only are ideas and practices situational, but they are also often fragmented rather than congruent and integral. Hence, like Chaves I do not believe the field needs to be consistent to be worth studying. I believe it is important not to be blind to possible fragmentations at the level of the subject, as an openness to such aspects may add another perspective and add nuance to the scholarly discussion.

The religious congruence fallacy, as Chaves describes it, is a conceptual problem. Hence, it is present in both quantitative and qualitative research of the kind that presuppose that expressions of religiosity indicate 'stable, pan-situational, dispositions with logically clear causal connections to other beliefs or to actions'. Scholars still shape projects and base research questions on the supposition that forms of behavior connect to religious affiliation, practices or beliefs, or on the idea that what people say in one setting is applicable in other situations as well – or draw the conclusion that it reveals a certain disposition. Scholars may take a correlation between religious identification, beliefs, and different kinds of social actions, et cetera for granted. My analysis of the material will show that also in the present study incongruence is a theme worthwhile exploring. My take is to describe and analyze incongruences with focus on three themes in which they are particularly salient in the material: the way the respondents talked about the concept religion, the way they talked about themselves in relation to different religious designations, and the way they talked about experiences and events. This analysis will serve to supplement research on religious practice by for example scholars within the scholarly field of lived religion.

The material in this study could provide a basis for discussions in the framework of differing scholarly disciplines such as the sociology, philosophy, phenomenology, anthropology, history, and psychology of religion. In the analytical chapters in this thesis I will draw on thinkers who come from these different traditions. Furthermore, my material could be analyzed within the frameworks of a number of scholarly debates

within the study of religion, such as, for example, those on invisible, private, implicit, popular, or vernacular religion; on religion in 'post-secular' society, or scholarly discussions related to the concept of non-religion. In this thesis however, I choose to discuss the material with mainly the two particular theoretical discussions in my discipline mentioned above in mind: one concerning the religious/ secular dichotomy and the other a discursive expectance of religious congruence.

Theoretical approach

As made clear in the literature review above, previous research shows that studying religion on the basis on expectations of clear-cut binaries and coherence is problematic. In order to steer away from this fallacy I use a flexible theoretical configuration as I analyze the simultaneities found in the material. As I perceive it, material of the kind this thesis centers on demands a creative approach to theory. Hence, rather than regarding theories as monoliths that need to be applied in every detail, I use theories as tools that point the study in a certain direction. This approach results in an explanatory narrative that brings together different theoretical and empirical elements.

I have chosen to investigate how respondents speak of events and experiences, and to analyze how they ascribe semantic meaning to concepts and designations and use them when describing themselves and their lives. This means that this thesis is inescapably concerned with language. Naturally, an analysis of language cannot bypass the importance of the legacy of the linguistic turn. As discourse theorist Aletta Norval (2000: 313–314) writes, this analytical trajectory in the social sciences and humanities not only implied a renewed interest in language as such, but it also led to the analysis of language as, at least in part, constitutive of the world.[15] In this statement lies the seeds of two general

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[15] A note on terminology: In this thesis, the terms 'constructed' and 'constituted' are used as synonyms. I use the term *constructed* in affinity with the analytical trajectory of constructionism, as defined by the philosopher Ian Hacking (1999). When discussing the difference between constructivism, constructionalism and constructionism, Hacking points to a common heritage in the construct-ist theoretical standpoints, and traces their origins to Kant, whom he sees as the great predecessor when it comes to constructions, at least within the enlightenment's 'realm of reason' (Hacking 1999: 41, 45–46). Nonetheless, he argues that we should be clear about which construct- ism we are discussing. Constructionism refers, according to Hacking to 'various sociological, historical, and philosophical projects that aim at displaying or analyzing actual,

areas of relevance for my theoretical re-imagination, namely the analysis of language through a discursive approach,[16] and theorizing that focuses on the ways the world we live in is constituted. The two major theoretical influences on my thinking in these matters are on the one hand discourse theory, emerging from the work of the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Glynos et al. 2009; Torfing 1999, 2005: 3, 12), and, on the other, the thinking of the sociologist and phenomenologist Alfred Schütz.

On discourse theory

Analyzing 'discourse' has come to include not only analyses of texts but also of wider cultural and sociopolitical processes (Egan Sjölander 2011: 13). In this latter sense, the analyses of what the respondents say in relation to religion in their lives may be understood as a study of discourse. Discursive approaches are established within a wide range of disciplines and in the study of religion they have been considered since the 1980s (Kippenberg 1983; Lincoln 1989) although to a limited extent. Recently, however, an increasing number of scholars have argued for the

historically situated, social interactions or causal routes that led to, or were involved in, the coming into being or establishing of some present entity or fact' (Hacking 1999: 48). Constructionalism, on the other hand, is the project of Russell, Carnap, Goodman, Quines and their followers, whose goal is to show that different concepts are made of something other than what we believe. He locates the constructivist standpoint, however, within the field of mathematics (Hacking 1999: 48).

I am aware of the fact that 'construction' and 'constitution' have been used with distinction by philosophically oriented phenomenologists who, following Husserl, claim that *constructions* are conducted in the mundane world of real objects (things) – as when a carpenter constructs a cradle – whereas ideal, irreal phenomena such as experiences, meanings, *noemas*, et cetera are being *constituted*. Within sociology, most phenomenologically oriented writers do not make this distinction but choose to talk about experience as being constructed, as in, for example, 'the social construction of reality'. In spite of this variation, however, both these traditions share a fundamental critique of essentialism. This is a critique that I want to connect to in this thesis, and my use of both the terms *constituted* and *constructed* is a way of clarifying that I do not regard the process of construction as limited to objects, instead social reality includes any entity or fact present to us. At the same time, the use of both of these terms in the text signals my connection to these theoretical traditions.

[16] The discursive approach is used here as an umbrella term for a variety of forms of theorizing within the scholarly field of discourse analysis. For an overview of the field, with particular focus on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, critical discourse analysis, and discourse psychology, see Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000.

benefits of discourse analysis in relation to religion.[17] As a rule discursive approaches rely ontologically and epistemologically on a constructionist grounding.

The term discourse has taken on a multiplicity of meanings so let me therefore define how I understand and use this term. I understand the scholarly idea of discourse as an analytical construct. This means that discourses do not exist in the reified sense, that is, as something that is 'out there' and needs explaining. Instead, the notion of discourse is a tool employed to describe and explain processes in society. That said, in this thesis the term discourse is employed in the common sense manner: carrying the idea that language in a broad sense is structured according to certain patterns to which our statements adhere as we act in different social domains. More specifically, discourse is used, in line with the discourse theorist Jacob Torfing's definition, to mark 'a relational totality of signifying sequences that determine the identity of the social element, but never succeed in totalizing and exhausting the play of meaning' (Torfing 1999: 87).

What is central to my understanding of discourses, and crucial for my reading of the material, is that no discourse is completely enclosed. In the field of discourse theory the idea that there are a multiplicity of discourses at play simultaneously is fundamental. Discourses, in this view, relate to each other in the sense that they struggle for interpretative prerogative when it comes to establishing semantic meaning. From my point of departure this structural feature fits in well with Orsi's call for attention to messiness on the individual level. As fluidity is part of the workings of discourse, interplay between multiple discourses is in fact a way of framing such messiness.

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[17] The scholar of religion Marcus Moberg (2013) classifies these attempts in terms of first, second, and third level discourse analytic approaches, ranging from the first level – where critically assessing scholarly constructions of the category of religion and stressing scholarly self-reflexivity is central – to more hands-on studies at the second and third level that contextualize such meta-reflections in relation to theorizing within particular subfields, for example Granholm 2013; Horsfield 2008; Spickard 2006a, 2006b; von Stuckrad 2010, and practical analyses of discourses in relation to different kinds of empirical and ethnographic material, for example Granholm 2005; Moberg 2009; Tessman 2012.

On social phenomenology

In terms of discussing how this world is constituted I find inspiration in the theorizing of Alfred Schütz (1945, 1967, 1970a, 1970b, 1973, 1976).[18] In Schütz's theorizing the notion of *intersubjectivity* is central for understanding the way people live in the world as social beings. By this he means that an individual is born 'into a world that existed before his birth, and this world is from the outset not merely a physical but also a sociocultural one' (1976: 229). Crucial for this theoretical approach is that people create social reality in the dynamic process that Schütz calls a *life-world*.[19]

In a life-world there is a common stock of knowledge shared with others in the past, present and future – a shared language is perhaps the clearest example – that is both explicit and tacit. It is such socially constructed forms of approved and objectified knowledge of the world, which we take for granted, that shape our conceptualizations of the world.[20] In other words, intersubjective meanings formed in such a life-world are not reducible to subjective meanings, instead they provide the raw material of opinions and beliefs, and for how any phenomena may be expressed and understood by the individual.[21] For Schütz it is 'the meaning of our experience, and not the ontological structure of the object, which constitutes reality' (1973: 341). This means that the only reality available to us is one that is experienced, and since meanings and reality are formed in, around, and through relations between people the contents of concepts are neither random nor merely personal. Social reality and meanings are intrinsically intersubjective.[22]

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[18] For an investigation of the links between Alfred Schütz and the larger hermeneutic tradition in continental thought see Staudigl & Berguno 2014.

[19] The concept life-world goes back to phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, but has since been further developed by a number of thinkers, such as for example Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jan Patočka, Jürgen Habermas and, as is evident here, Alfred Schütz.

[20] For an example of how taken-for-granted ways of talking of religion shape conceptual worlds, see Aisha Khan (2004) who pays attention to how people talk of religion, religious differences et cetera. She uses speech to draw conclusions about conceptual worlds.

[21] Here meaning is used to refer to a 'sense-making' premise, that is, the experience of something *as* something, rather than as an indication of deeper symbolic content.

[22] The notion of intersubjectivity implies, of course, that an interest in vernacular interpretations does not end up in 'Sara studies' or 'Jonas studies', that is, the result of a particularized individual and her or his subjective knowledge. What the 28 people at the center of this study say is connected to premises that they share. Their associations to religion are determined by their particular setting in terms of referential frames that

Central to the idea of a life-world, therefore, is the notion that reality is formed in a dialectical process. A life-world is not a static point of reference. This means that even though different individuals and groups can share a life-world, they do not necessarily do so. Even though the phenomena that we experience are made intelligible through 'patterns of interpretation' that we share with other people, we are still required to master those patterns as individuals.[23] A similar process is the way we appropriate a language and use it in our own specific ways through practice.

Hence, on one level the semi-secular Swedes at the center here can be said to share 'the same' life-world since they have been brought up and socialized in Sweden in this particular period of time. On another level, however, as no two individuals are brought up in and formed by exactly the same macro, meso and micro contexts, that is, have exactly the same socialization, each respondent may be said to constitute and live in his or her own life-world. Whether the respondents 'share' life-worlds or not can, therefore, be said to be a matter of degree. The variations in how individuals perceive reality, and what they perceive it as, depend on which pattern of interpretation is actualized and on what part of it is fore-grounded in a certain situation. [24]

Theoretical imagination

Now, both discourse theory and social phenomenology make claims that are universalistic in the sense that they aim to explain how all people create and perceive social reality. My own theoretical approach is, contrary to such aspirations, tied to specific empirical material. Hence,

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they have access to as part of their life-worlds. As they talk about religion in their lives they draw from their personal life histories as well as a repertoire of meanings available to them.

[23] The idea that people do not experience the world 'as it is', but rather through a conceptual system (here "conceptual" is used in the wide sense of an element of a mental code) is not a controversial claim in the social sciences or in the humanities. In the literature, these structures are theorized and expressed in a multitude of ways, for example in terms of world view, definition of reality, preconception, belief/ disbelief system, pattern of interpretation, habitus, frame of reference, discourse, et cetera. Inspired by the religious studies scholar Åke Sander (1988) I am using the term 'pattern of interpretation' to refer to the basic idea that there are structures through which we constitute our specific understanding of ourselves, the world and our place and role in it, and that all people are enmeshed in contexts of this kind. The way I use the terms discourse, 'finite provinces of meaning', and – later in the text – 'referential frames', is in line with this understanding.

[24] Compare Sander 1988: 293.

theoretical elements are chosen for their explanatory value in relation to the simultaneities described. Before I go into what these explanatory values are more specifically, let me say something about the ways in which the different theoretical elements used are connected.

To begin with, my theoretical imagination is grounded in an understanding of humans existing in the world as interpretative beings in a hermeneutical sense. Let me make clear that I do not regard meanings and interpretations as synonyms. Instead, interpretation is a general term that encompasses processes of meaning making but that is not limited to it. This means that interpretation may be about meaning making but it may also be about other things, such as understanding or describing. Furthermore it may connect to more or less explicit beliefs. The way I read both Alfred Schütz and Ernesto Laclau's theorizing falls in with an idea that expressed interpretations are intrinsically intersubjective.

So what is important for my theoretical approach is that I do not presuppose stability in the ways the respondents ascribe semantic meaning to concepts and designations, or in their vernacular interpretations of experiences. The processual character of how the world is constituted, emphasized both in discourse theory and Schützian social phenomenology, is drawn upon when analyzing the material. As I theorize the material, I take into account the fluidity in Ernesto Laclau's theorizing on the workings of discourse, and the element of flow between perceptions of reality ('finite provinces of meaning') in Alfred Schütz's. In this sense, hence, the phenomenological emphasis on the intersubjective character of the individual's ways of being in the social world, and the discourse theoretical understanding of discourse as central for the construction of social life and subjectivity, work in tandem.

Furthermore, I share the basic understanding that people live in a world that is pre-existing, but that social realities are constantly under construction. The way different theoretical elements are used in this thesis are in line with this basic position.

Apart from the direction these general points of departure have given the investigations made in this thesis, elements of Schütz and Laclau's theorizing have been used in a complementary way in the close reading of the material. In Chapters 4, 5 & 6, in connection with the descriptions and analyses of the material I will flesh out the theoretical tools employed. Nonetheless, in order to give an overview I will now briefly discuss the theoretical configurations used in relation to the different simultaneities dealt with.

Operationalizing theory

The section where I most explicitly make use of elements of discourse theory is in Chapter 4, in which I attempt to describe and explain the interviewees' vernacular uses of the term religion. In this chapter Laclau's concept 'empty signifier' is used to highlight and provide a frame for the simultaneity of meanings found in the material.

Furthermore, in Chapter 4, to supplement to Laclau's reasoning on empty signifiers, I explore the relations between the many meanings of the concept of religion that are raised by the respondents. I analyze these relations as part of what I call the interviewees' vernacular theories of religion. In my reading of the material I draw on findings within lay theory studies, and the social psychologist Adrian Furnham's (1988) descriptions of the characteristics of vernacular theorizing in particular. Coincidently, I add detail and nuance to the discursive processes described by Laclau by exploring the microlevel that is the respondents' different ways of talking about religion in their lives.

In Chapter 5, the analyses made in Chapter 4 are used as stepping-stones in the attempt to make sense of the fact that, when asked, the respondents described themselves in terms of several religious designations simultaneously and the fact that they described themselves differently from one occasion to the next. Here the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the concept of religion, analyzed in Chapter 4, is connected to the respondents' religious self-descriptions. What is important for my interpretation of the material here is the understanding of meanings as intersubjective and the respondents' life-worlds as worlds of relationships. In my analysis and description of the respondents' self-descriptions I argue that in order to discern what the discursively constructed religious identities mean as they are articulated by the respondents in the interview situation, the process of religious identification is key. By connecting to literature on identity and identification that stress both the situational and the relational character of identity formation the semi-secular Swedes' religious self-descriptions are placed in a context that allows for such formations.

The section in which I most explicitly make use of Schütz's theorizing is Chapter 6. In order to describe and explain the ways in which the respondents speak of and ascribe meaning to experiences that they talk about as out of the ordinary, I single out one aspect of particular explanatory value in relation to the subject under scrutiny, namely Schütz's

theorizing on multiple realities (Schütz 1945, 1970b, 1973). Here Schütz describes how realities are constituted within different 'finite provinces of meaning' that give rise to distinctive interpretations of the world. I take up his theorizing on how these different realities are constituted and how people switch between different patterns of interpretation. Furthermore, by drawing on one of the aspects that Schütz points out as part of the constitution of reality, namely *epoché*, suspension of certain beliefs or disbeliefs about reality, I describe simultaneity of interpretations as a play between different kinds of epoché. The benefit of using Schütz's theorizing here is that it allows me to anchor the analyses affirmatively in a particular context, without flattening out individual variations.

The theoretical imagination that I use in this thesis is of course of greatest relevance in the analyses that will follow in Chapters 4, 5 & 6. Nonetheless, as theorizing is inevitably linked to epistemology, and, in extension, to methodology, I will therefore have reason to look back on the theoretical position outlined above in the next chapter, in which I discuss methodology, the methods used, and material gathered.

Questioning simultaneity

As a final note on theory, let me now briefly highlight a philosophical conundrum. This is a question that I will not dwell on in this study but which is connected to the empirical finding of simultaneities discussed in this thesis and that it would be interesting to explore further. Does the fact that the interviewees are enmeshed in several discourses on religion simultaneously, mean that they 'live' them simultaneously as well? Conversely, is it possible to perceive reality through several finite provinces of meaning at the same time?

As a parallel, consider the duck-rabbit illusion, which Ludwig Wittgenstein used in his *Philosophical investigations* to illustrate a gestalt shift – a shift of perception.[25] (Wittgenstein (1953: 193–196) The duck-rabbit illusion is a drawing that can be seen either as the face of a duck or a rabbit depending on how one focuses on the pattern. Read through Schützian theorizing on our perception of reality (through the concept of 'finite provinces of meaning') in order to see the image as a duck and as a rabbit (two figures) we necessarily need to shift our perspective back and forth between them. Since the mind is unable to constitute the image as a duck and a rabbit at the same time, we always see either the duck or the

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[25] Wittgenstein derives the image from the psychologist Joseph Jastrow (1899).

rabbit. In this line of reasoning, to have access to a multitude of patterns of interpretation (such as discourses and 'finite provinces of meaning') does not equal 'living' (actualizing) them at the same time. Consequently, it is important to emphasize that the simultaneities described in this thesis are not understood as happening at the level of perception.

However, there is still a discursive possibility of *describing* a duck-rabbit as both a duck and a rabbit at the same time. What I mean by this is that even though the material this thesis is based on does not tell whether or not simultaneity happens at the level of perception, it is indeed reasonable to use simultaneity as a metaphor when describing a salient feature in the respondents' ways of *talking* about religion. As Aletta Norval points out:

> Aspect change allows one to notice that one is now seeing something, not only in terms of this or that picture but also as a picture. Where aspect change occurs, what becomes visible is not just the presence of a different understanding of things, but an awareness of the multiplicity of aspects under which something can be seen. (Norval 2007: 126)

Hence, as I have already stated, in this thesis simultaneity is used as a descriptive term that highlights what I see in the material as a multiplicity of interpretations at play in the respondents' vernacular ways of talking about religion in their lives in the interview situation. As I focus on the processes that generate such simultaneity at the level of discourse I am analyzing how the respondents describe both the duck and the rabbit without presupposing a simultaneity of perception.

Methodology, methods, and material

 This study is qualitative in method. In view of its scope I have aimed for depth rather than generalizability. However, even though my focus lies on these particular people's ways of talking about religion, the constructionist assumption that what the respondents give expression to are not merely individual concerns but part of the context, does give room for certain generalizability. Case-studies are always immersed in broader theoretical contexts, where they are informed by more general concepts. The analyses of the empirical material on which this study is based therefore contribute to the discussion on what we know about how people talk about religion.

The material for this thesis has, as hinted at in the prologue, been collected within a particular neighborhood in Stockholm. In this chapter, I will firstly discuss the methodological considerations that lie behind the decision to seek respondents within a geographical location, and the decision to focus on the ways people talk about religion in everyday life. Secondly, I will describe and discuss the methods I have used: namely qualitative interviews and a questionnaire. Thirdly, I will present the group of semi-secular Swedes identified with particular focus on the twelve interviewees at the center of this thesis.

Methodology

First of all, throughout the history of the study of religion, methodological and theoretical discussions have been interrelated. Epistemological critiques have incited and accompanied for example ethnographic, practice-oriented, spatial, and non-reductively materialist turns within the discipline. This is largely due to the fact that scholarship in the study of religion has increasingly moved away from universal definitions of religion. Depending on how researchers have understood and defined religion, they have, in practice, approached the subject area in different ways. For instance, those that have put human relations with suprahuman forces at the center of their definition of religion, have concentrated in

their studies on phenomena that show signs of such relations and developed techniques to understand them. Researchers who have focused on practices or social dimensions have, on the other hand, developed different methods. Methodological reflections are by necessity bound up with epistemological considerations. Because, on the one hand, they are related to reflections on the premises for obtaining knowledge, and on the other, with what kinds of knowledge are deemed relevant for a particular field of research.

Lived religion

As briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, the methods employed in this thesis are inspired by methodological discussions taking place within the theoretical branch of the study of religion called 'lived religion'.[1] This is a set of approaches and methods that according to Robert Orsi share a methodology that is 'radically or phenomenologically empiricist'. (Orsi 1997: 7) By empiricist Orsi does not mean 'objective' or 'realistic' in a positivistic way, instead he is referring to a concern with what people *do* in religious practice, as well as with what they make of themselves and their worlds.[2]

In the choice of methods employed within this approach, those privileged are ones that focus on the experience of the individual and the social realities of everyday religious life. With a similar focus in mind, building on her critique of the religious/secular dichotomy, Meredith McGuire exhorts scholars of religion, especially sociologists, to

> re-examine their assumptions about individuals' religious lives. What might we discover if, instead of looking at affiliation or organizational participation, we focused first on individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression? What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an

[1] A term that originates in French tradition of sociology of religion and the study of 'la religion veçue'.
[2] See also note 3 in '"Have you ever prayed to Saint Jude?" Reflections on fieldwork in Catholic Chicago', included in *Between heaven and earth. The religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them* (2005: 146–176). Here Orsi explains that when he uses the term 'empirical' he does so inspired by radical critique of the notion mounted by a number of modern and postmodern philosophical traditions. Hence, by empirical he refers to 'an encounter with human beings in the everyday circumstances of their lives, of which religious practices constitute one part (not discrete)' (2005: 234).

> ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important (McGuire 2008: 4)

What scholars have done when studying lived religion is to focus on human everyday life without shying away from messiness and ambiguities, and without trying to abridge or censure the play of meaning that is present in it.[3]

For most scholars within the study of lived religion, and I share this position, a focus on people's everyday religious lives does not mean that religious institutions are irrelevant. On the contrary, institutions are an important part of the puzzle – not however as the framework, but as one of the pieces. Accordingly, as Robert Orsi puts it, attention is paid to 'institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas' (Orsi 2002: 172), as these are interrelated. This means that the lived religion approach, in fact, focuses theoretically on an in-between space in which people are suspended in webs of meaning against which their agency, at micro level, is being played out.

In this study, there is a similar focus on such liminal space. In the analyses made in the different chapters the respondents' ways of talking about the concept of religion, of themselves and their experiences, are understood as situated. This meant that one challenge in analyzing the interview material involved figuring out places where normative patterns of religiosity in Sweden were being reenacted, reinterpreted, or even disrupted.

Under the heading of 'lived religion' scholars have sought for ways to study religion that are less concerned with distinctions between popular and official, public and private, institutional and individual religion, and been more interested in the interplay between these different levels. In

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[3] This approach is paralleled within the theoretical field in folkloristic studies known as *vernacular religion*. The term vernacular religion was coined in 1995 by the religious studies scholar Leonard Norman Primiano as a response to folklorist Don Yoder who, in 1974, defined 'folk religion' as existing alongside but apart from institutional religion. In contrast to Yoder, who make a clear distinction between institutional and elitist forms of religion and folk expressions', Primiano argues that all forms of religiosity – outside as well as inside organized religion – are vernacular in nature. Hence, in order to do justice to the variety of manifestations and perspectives found within past and present human religiosity, scholars should focus on the individual in all its complexity (1995: 41–42). This line of argument is further developed by, for instance, Bowman & Valk 2012. Orsi (2002: xxxii) makes a similar argument in relation to the term popular religion.

one way, scholarship in this field is a response to works that lean on uncritical distinctions between the secular and the religious. By directing attention to the way such categories overlap and are embedded in different settings in real life, the religious/secular binary is re-conceptualized, nuanced and destabilized in what can be seen as a call for new ways of framing our field of study. In this thesis such a challenge is taken seriously and is reflected both in the methods employed and in the analyses presented.

Methods

The neighborhood

In a number of other projects and for different purposes, direct, street-based recruitment of informants has been favored over the use, for example, of snowballing or a gatekeeper, (Crow, Allan, & Summers (2002); Davies (2011); Miller (2001); Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst (2005). In this project direct recruitment was used mainly in order to find respondents who matched the criteria I had specified. In other words, I set out to find people who were neither active participants in a religious denomination, nor outrightly hostile or indifferent towards religion, by talking to residents in a particular neighborhood.

The neighborhood chosen consisted of apartment buildings built in the early 1980s. All in all, the block consists of around 400 apartments, built around an inner courtyard. It is located in a central part of Stockholm, in an area that is becoming increasingly gentrified.[4] Although

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[4] In chapter 3, I will contextualize the material in relation to contemporary patterns of religiosity in Sweden. For now, let me briefly say something about Stockholm: Stockholm is the capital of Sweden and in the Bourdieuan sense the main arena for the national field of power that shapes and reproduces the social structure in Sweden. The central position of Stockholm within different fields of influence, such as government, cultural institutions, and trade and industry is indisputable. Stockholm is an all-encompassing name with different possible meanings. In administrative terms it is both the name of one of Sweden's 25 counties (län) with 2,192,433 inhabitants (July–Sept 2014) (www.scb.se) and of one of the municipalities (kommun) within that county, the City of Stockholm (Stockholms Stad), with 909,976 citizens (July–Sept 2014) www.scb.se. Stockholm is the largest municipality in Sweden and one that is growing in numbers. Stockholm is also used to denote the metropolitan area often called greater Stockholm, within which larger parts of the county are included. The urban area that comprises the city of Stockholm also reaches into other municipalities. Lastly, it is also concept that points to the city centre with its different

finding a neighborhood that would be demographically representative of Stockholm or Sweden is difficult, and not my aim here, this neighborhood does have a certain demographic spread, particularly since it consist of both owner-occupied and rental apartments.[5] It is a neighborhood were people from all walks of life dwell, old, young and in-between, affluent and not so wealthy. Some have lived in Stockholm all their lives: others have at some point, and for different reasons, moved there.

Into the field

The first step necessary to get into the field was to construct a website linked to Södertörn University that contained information about the project and about its members, that is, David Thurfjell and myself. Information was subsequently posted on several notice boards in the neighborhood. These posters presented the project in general terms and explained my presence in the area and my colleague's. They also contained information about the website and how to contact us. Leaflets were also inserted into the residents' letterboxes. As a result 21 people contacted us spontaneously.

The next step was to return to the neighborhood to knock on doors. The idea was that if people were approached directly, those who would not respond to a poster on a notice board could also be recruited. This would mean that a broader spectrum of people could be included.

During the first session of knocking on doors, which my colleague David Thurfjell and I did together, I was uncertain what reactions we would receive, as I was not sure whether people would feel intimidated or frustrated by the appearance of two people on their doorstep. In addition, I was unsure as to whether it would be perceived as intrusive, particularly as Swedish people are anecdotally notoriously reluctant to invite people into their homes.

geographical regions such as Kungsholmen, Norrmalm, Östermalm, Gamla Stan and Södermalm.

[5] In 2007, a process began that gave the residents an opportunity to turn municipally owned apartments into housing cooperatives. Those that opted to, and/or could afford to buy their share in the divided co-property now live therefore in owner-occupied apartments. Those that either chose not to or could not afford to buy the property, still rent their apartments. According to SABO more than 3 of the 9.5 million Swedes live in rental housing. Over half of those live in public housing, that is to say municipally owned rental accommodation. http://www.sabo.se/om_sabo/english/Sidor/Publichousing.aspx

However, as I and my colleague proceeded to knock on the doors in the neighborhood we soon learned that the residents were less hesitant about inviting us in than I had anticipated. Working as a pair turned out to be a successful method of recruitment and for every third door that was opened we got to make an open-ended interview with one member of the household, a total of 46 people. Each interview was also supplemented by a questionnaire. Overall we spoke to 67 people in the neighborhood.[6]

Despite research indicating that men are less likely to participate in research dealing with 'soft' topics (Butera 2006: 1263) there was no major difference between the men and the women that we talked to in this neighborhood when it came to willingness to participate. However, there was a small predominance of women recruits, as 35 women agreed to be interviewed in comparison to 32 men.

Ethical considerations

The most pressing ethical concern in relation to this material is related to confidentiality.[7] The anonymity of the respondents has been secured both in order to establish a trustful setting suitable for talking about personal experiences, and in order to adhere to standard research ethics.

While conducting the interviews, I have tried to create a space that was non-judgmental, supportive and encouraging while at the same time taking responsibility for the framing of the situation. An interview is not like a normal conversation – even though an unstructured or semi-struc-tured interview may resemble just that – because it is not on equal terms. Rather it is what the psychologists Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann calls 'a professional conversation' (Kvale 2009: 33). This means that the spontaneity of an unstructured or semi-structured interview is partly

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[6] Even though most of these initial interviews were conducted together with David Thurfjell, from now on I will use the personal pronoun *I* instead of *we* when I discuss both the initial and the follow-up interviews. This is partly in order not to confuse the reader, but also to stress that they are all part of my own research process.

[7] As this project encompasses research involving living persons an application was sent to the Regional Ethical Review Board. The board did not consider the project to need their review, however. This project lives up to the ethical criteria set up by the Swedish Research Council in terms of informed consent, confidentiality and storage and ownership of the research material. (http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf) In all of the publications and presentations of the material the respondents have been anonymized so that they cannot be recognized by a reader. This has been done through changes in names and of minor personal details. Moreover, the neighborhood that the respondents live in is not mentioned by name in the thesis.

created by the interviewer's use of a professional technique in which framing the interview, posing relevant questions, being an attentive listener, and explaining the terms and conditions of the interview are fundamental. One advantage of the interview situation is that it 'maximizes mutual ethical consent for the conversational frame' (Davidsson Bremborg 2011: 311). The psychologist Colin Robson (1993: 228), and others before him, have argued that it is indeed important to frame the interview. This was done by making it clear to the interviewee that the interview is a 'special' conversation, that her or his stories are in focus for a reason, and that it therefore is 'a conversation with a purpose'. Naturally, the recording device, which was used during the interviews in this study, also served as a reminder of this, even though, for most people, it tended to be forgotten after a while.

On the qualitative research interview

The anthropologist of religion Martin Stringer notes that the most widely used method for exploring the understanding of religion among people who are not obviously religious is the qualitative research interview (sometimes called an unstructured or nonstandardized interview) or some form of narrative analysis (Stringer 2013: 165).

Kvale and Brinkmann describe the qualitative research interview as an attempt to 'understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations' (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 1). It is argued that qualitative research can lead to valid descriptions of the qualitative human world, and that interviewing can provide us with valid knowledge about our conversational reality (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 300).

Nonetheless, as the social anthropologist Jenny Hockey notes in her discussion on the challenges of undertaking ethnography in modern western societies, anthropological literature often places the research interview in second place for participant observation. Within anthropology the method has been criticized for being divorced and disembodied from real life and for focusing on a 'punctuation point' (Hockey 2002: 214) in an interviewee's life, without the potential for probing sensory experiences. Contrary to such a position, Hockey argues that interviews may be regarded as the most appropriate method for anthropology in Britain and other western settings. This is so not only because (and this is indeed applicable to a Swedish setting) 'research sites

are heterogeneous and scattered, the weather is dire and everything interesting seems to be going on behind closed doors' (Hockey 2002: 209), but also because of the nature of many contemporary societies. For Hockey, what characterizes these societies is the way people use conversation, thoughts and reflections to establish identities in ways that are structurally similar to the research interview. People talk to each other under limited, framed and non-continuous circumstances in what has been called the 'interview society'.[8] Hence, when researchers opt for single, timetabled interviews, they engage in an activity that resemble many of the social interactions the interviewees have in their everyday lives. Consequently, Hockey suggests that interviewing is, in certain cultural contexts, in fact an 'experience-near method' rather than 'experience-far' and as such, '[i]n a world of consultants and confessional chat shows, interviewing begins to resemble a form of participant observation. As a practice it conforms closely to western categories of experience' (Hockey 2002: 220).

Whether or not the interview is a form of participant observation,[9] I find the idea of the interview as a site of participation in the life of an individual tantalizing, and close to my own experience of being in the interview situation. That said, the fact that interviewees disclosed things in the interviews that they allegedly did not tell their friends (see chapter 6) tells me that at least some boundary exists between me as an interviewer and them as interviewees. Hence, depicting the interview as a professional conversation, perhaps even more noticeably 'special' due to the topic, is still appropriate even though the interview as a practice may be said to be experience-near in the way Hockey suggests.

In the different chapters that follow, there are sections where I relate situations in a way that not only aims to underline my own role in the knowledge production, but also to provide an image of the material as it developed in a particular situation at a particular location. This thesis is not dedicated to exploring the sensory experiences or material objects available in those moments of engagement with an interviewee. I have, nevertheless, tried to give at least a few hints about the different settings and situations in which the interviews took place. I have also chosen to write about the interviews in the past tense in order to stress the situatedness of these encounters.

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[8] On the 'interview society' see Atkinson & Silverman 1997; Gubrium & Holstein 2002.
[9] Further explored by Hockey & Forsey 2012.

One problem with the research interview that Martin Stringer points out, particularly in relation to researching individuals' understanding of religion, is that in asking an individual about different ways of understanding religion, and thereby actualizing a number of discourses on religion, the interviewer runs the risk of encouraging a level of coherence in the way people talk and think about religion that may not exist in other contexts.[10] If this is the case, Stringer argues, we must search for a method that does not force individuals to think too carefully about what they are saying. (Stringer 2013: 169)

At the beginning of this project I shared Stringer's concern that the interview situation would generate material that did not do justice to the ambiguities and incongruences earlier research had pointed out. This, it turned out, was not a problem. The interview situation did indeed place the respondents in a position where they were 'forced' to formulate vague ideas and to articulate thought on subjects not normally spoken of all that often. Nonetheless, as I will explore in Chapter 4, the interviewees had no problem in combining different discourses on religion, nor, it seems, in uttering incongruent statements.

I used various techniques to help the respondents to disclose their views and interpretations. For example, I used different kinds of mirroring, such as observing and describing, as well as summarizing. These served two main purposes, on the one hand they communicated my interest and curiosity to the interviewees, and, on the other, provided an opportunity for clarification and scope for nuanced descriptions. A recurrent situation in my interviews was when a respondent shared a story that s/he found strange in some way, and out of the ordinary, and would have preferred to leave it at that. In such a situation I would ask them what they thought this experience was about. If – as was often the case – I was provided with a range of possible, sometimes contrary, explanations, I pointed this out in order to give them a chance to expand on their thoughts.

As I tried to encourage people to reveal their stories and ideas in their own ways, through their own conceptual frameworks and vocabulary, I

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[10] Such a demand for coherence on the part of the interviewer is also a subject dealt with by Jeffrey Stout (1989: 194–197) in his criticism of the interview technique used by the authors in *Habits of the heart* (Bellah et al. 1985). Here he points to the problem of creating a context of articulation in which coherence is demanded and the subsequent weakness of allowing lack of coherence to reflect negatively on the interviewees.

used open-ended questions in order to let their stories emerge organically. However, for reasons of clarification I would at times pick up on a detail that related to a theme not previously touched upon by the respondent, and pose direct questions when the respondent seemed more comfortable when allowed to be vague. For the same reason I would also occasionally steer the conversation in a specific direction in order to confront the respondents with areas that they might not be so familiar with.

Furthermore, communication is not only verbal and information may also be read out from bodily signals, which we send out, receive, and act on all the time. This works both ways, as much as I am able to sense that something is important to a respondent by looking at their posture while discussing it, and can thus ask about that, a respondent will notice if something lies close to my field of interest by noticing, for example, a subtly intensified gaze or that I am leaning in towards them.

The first meeting

The first round of interviews in combination with the questionnaire had two specific purposes, (1) firstly to identify the target group, and (2) secondly to indicate what direction to take from there, that is, to find relevant themes for further analysis. But before I get to these points, let me say something about the set-up of the interview and the design of the questionnaire.

The first interview

In the first probing interviews I tried to gain some understanding of how the term religion was employed vernacularly by the respondents. I also tried to get a sense of their attitude towards religion in general and their relation to any aspect of religion that they identified. The question I took as my point of departure was 'What is the significance of religion, for you, in your life?'.[11]

The idea was that an open question was preferable at the initial stage since a more specific focus on, for example, meaning making, belonging, or practice would presuppose that a particular aspect would come up as something important for all those interviewed. The phrasing 'the significance of religion' is purposely ambiguous (also in Swedish): on the one hand it points in the direction of a *definition* of religion but on the other hand it may refer to the *importance* of religion. The idea was that

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[11] In Swedish: 'Vad betyder religion för dig, i ditt liv?'

the lack of specificity of the term religion would allow the interviewees' own associations to steer the conversation. Often the respondents talked about both of these aspects as the interview developed.

The addendum, 'for you, in your life', was added after a small pilot study in which different formulations of the question were tried and assessed. The benefit of anchoring the concept to the everyday experiences of the individual was that it opened up for personalized stories in a way that a question formulated for example as 'What is the significance of religion?' did not. As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, the view of religion as something for the Other is a motif in Swedish discourse on religion that is of historical significance. Adding 'for you, in your life' was a way of getting at sensibilities and memories that are not necessarily a prominent aspect of the public discussion on religion in Sweden but are certainly included in the ways that modern people think about religion in Sweden.

As it turned out in the interview situation, the respondents still navigated from a contextual understanding of what the term religion means, often with explicit reference to religious education in schools, but the addendum 'in your life' incited them to reflect on their own relation to those meanings.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was modeled on the one distributed in the Enköping project in which religion, religiosity and spirituality among inhabitants in the town of Enköping was probed (Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008). Similarly to the questionnaire used in Enköping, it built on a dimensional approach to religion, containing questions about meaning and beliefs, moral, experiences, self-description, and practice. It also aimed at gathering basic demographic data (such as age, educational level, income, gender, family relations, employment status). For the purpose of brevity the questionnaire used in Enköping was shortened substantially.[12]

To better capture contemporary ways of relating to religion, I chose multiple-choice questions whenever possible. In addition, when possible, I opted for a non-dichotomous ordinal scale to which the respondent could agree to various degrees ranging from *completely* to *not at all*. Let me give two examples of questions that have been significant in the analysis of the material.

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[12] For an English translation of the questionnaire see Appendix 2.

To begin with, among the multiple-choice questions with a yes-and-no option, those about beliefs and experiences have been particularly useful in the analysis. Here the respondents had the possibility of choosing several statements even though the different options would seem to be mutually exclusive. Next, among the multiple-choice questions with an ordinal scale, the question targeting self-description is the one that I have used most in my analysis, particularly in Chapter 5.

Early in the research process I realized that if I sat with them while the respondents filled in the questionnaire, rather than leaving it behind for them to answer by themselves, the chances of them actually completing it improved. It also gave the respondents a chance to discuss the questions aloud, which in turn gave me an indication of whether a question or option was problematic or left scope for different interpretations, and in that case, in what way. Adopting this approach meant that everybody who agreed to an interview also filled in the questionnaire.

Opting to sit with them while the respondents filled in the question-naire had another, unforeseen, consequence. Its effect was that the questionnaire became, in a sense, part of the interview. What I mean by this is that as the respondents were able to pose questions to me, and also conversely, I was able to ask them about the reasoning behind why they answered a question in a certain way, what emerged from these question-naires depended on the intersubjective situation we found ourselves in. In my analysis of self-descriptions in particular, I have tried to take this into consideration by firstly relating the answers to the questionnaire to the interview material, and secondly by discussing how the questionnaire prompted the respondents to describe themselves in relation to religious designations that they did not necessarily voice in the preceding part of the interview.

The second meeting

In what follows I will describe the process of identifying the group of respondents focused on in this thesis. Furthermore, I will discuss the preparations that preceded the second round of interviews, as well as the set-up of those interviews.

Identifying the group

I based my selection of which of the 67 people matched the criteria that I had set up partly on the responses to the questionnaires and partly on

information drawn from the personal interviews. In this process being able to use both the responses to the questionnaire and the material from the interviews facilitated the task. One advantage of starting from a tentative open-ended interview *in combination* with a questionnaire was that the results could be cross checked so that individuals who might qualify according to the questionnaire could be confirmed or discarded through a complementary analysis of the interview. In other words, those who might be excluded from my study by their questionnaire responses could be included if they were considered suitable on the basis of their interview, and vice versa.

Two clusters of people were excluded. On the one hand these were people who firmly described themselves as part of an organized religion and that were active within its community, and, on the other, those who were either completely indifferent to or strongly against all aspects of religion, and were in no sense active within the framework of any organized religion. When these two groups had been removed 28 people remained.

Formal affiliation membership of the Church of Sweden was not used as an excluding factor in this selection since this is judged to be too inclusive as to be significant. The Church of Sweden is an institution with an exceptional position in Swedish society (before April 1995 all children automatically became members unless both parents were non-members) and the fact that a person is a member does not actually say anything about their relationship to this denomination. Instead, it was determined case by case if this membership excluded a respondent from the group of semi-secular Swedes. In the target group 16 people were found to be members of the Church of Sweden while twelve were not members of any religious denomination. It should be mentioned that the borderline between the groups is not clear-cut, this is especially true when it comes to identifying those who are indifferent.

Preparations

Having identified the group, the time had come to revisit the material generated in the first meeting with those individuals in order to make an initial interpretation of the material. In this stage of interpretation I tried to gain some overall understanding of the material, the stories, expressions and statements that the respondents shared, or chose not to share with me.

As I transcribed and compiled the material from the first round of interviews – and from the questionnaire – different themes stood out as especially interesting to explore further. The relation between experiences, practices, meaning making, and multiple religious self-descriptions was one such theme: the belief in, feeling and/or experiences of there being dead ancestors, spirits or invisible creatures or powers around us was another. This interim evaluation served as a steppingstone for the second round of interviews.

Interview guide

In the follow-up interviews a semi-structured interview guide was used. This was designed to test and deepen the relevant themes that sprang from my tentative analysis of the material gathered in the initial round of interviews and through the questionnaire. Three sets of questions were developed, namely those that focus on (1) religious biographies, (2) questions of meaning and transcendence, and (3) self-descriptions and experiences.

The interview guide actually served more as a means of preparation for the interviews than as a recipe that I felt obliged to follow strictly. My main objective was to stay true to the respondents' own stories, and follow them in the directions they wanted to lead me. However, framing questions beforehand gave me the opportunity to think different directions through in order to be able to pose questions in a way that gave room for different interpretations.

The work of Abby Day was an inspiration as I sat down to construct an interview guide for round two of the interviews. In her article *Researching belief without asking religious questions* (Day 2009b), Day explains how she probed the beliefs of apparently non-religious people in north and west Yorkshire, Britain, by using an inductive approach and posing open-ended questions devoid of overtly religious wording. Day argues that this method allows the respondents to discuss their beliefs outside a religious framework if they so choose. Since I too was wary of the risk of overly religiosizing the respondents' statements I tried to phrase the follow-up questions in a way that opened up to their own conceptual frameworks and vocabularies. In relation to questions of meaning and transcendence I used several of Day's suggestions.

To open up the frames of what is regarded as religious or secular, the questions were constructed in a way that did not specifically call any religious tradition to mind. For example, in order to allow for all kinds of

transcendent experiences or beliefs to surface, the question on this subject was worded, 'is there something or someone beyond what we see?' rather than probing specifically about god(s), angels, ghosts, cosmic energy, nature spirits etc. However, sometimes more explanatory and direct questions regarding those categories were used to follow up the more explorative initial question.

In addition, besides avoiding leading questions in order to allow scope for the respondents' own conceptualizations and priorities, I tried to avoid steering their answers in terms of underlying presuppositions. For example, when curious about a respondent's ontological understanding, the phrasing would be: why do you think we, nature, the world, exist? Rather than: what is your view on the beginning of the universe (which implies a linear cosmology and incites answers in line with explanations within the natural sciences)? A question like this would also be followed by one concerning what was important or paramount in life such as: is this important to you, in your life?.[13]

As Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) have shown that liminal Nones, people described as 'betwixt and between the religious and the secular' (Lim et al. 2010: 598), are volatile in terms of self-description, I repeated the question about this from the questionnaire. Also, as experience stood out as a prominent theme in the first interviews, the question probing religious experiences was repeated as well. In the interview guide, I also included follow-up questions on those issues.[14]

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[13] Here one needs to be attentive to the fact that what a person expresses as salient is not necessarily that which predominates in their life, or the opposite, that which is predominant is not always what is perceived as most important. For example, even though many are involved in procuring economic stability, relationship to a god or family may be perceived as more important when faced with the question. In the same way a person whose life is full of everyday religious practices may say that family is of utmost importance to them.

[14] For a Swedish version see Appendix 1.

Interview guide (second wave)

1. Questions about religious biography

- What is the situation in your family, are/were your grandparents/parents/partner(s)/children active in any religious context? Does that differ from how you live your life?
- If you have children, what do you want to transmit to them in terms of ways of life and view on things?

2. Questions about meaning and transcendence (probing content, resources and practice)

Inspiration

- Are there any books, movies, TV programs which have significance for you and influenced you?
- Has there ever been an inspirational figure to you, real or fictional?

Meaning, relevance

- When are you most satisfied? Is it something that you strive to be?
- When are you most unhappy, unsatisfied?
- What frightens you? What do you do to comfort yourself during those times?
- What happens to you after you die?
- How much influence or control do you think you have over your life?
- Do you ever think about the purpose or meaning in life? If so, how have you reasoned?
- No one can say for certain how it all began, but I wonder what your thoughts might be on why we exist? Why does nature, the world exist? Is this a question that is important to you?
- Is there someone or something beyond what we can see?
- What do you think happens after we die? Is this a question that is important to you?
- If you were in a life-threatening situation, a plane crash for example. What would you think of?
- What is most important to you in your life?
- For many people priorities, what is important, change through life, how do you work in this way if you would look back over your history?

  (If the respondent expresses any statement of belief)
- Is this something that finds expression in everyday life? In what ways? Concrete episodes?

3. Follow-up questions on the questionnaire

Last time you were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Can you repeat the question regarding religious self-description and regarding experiences? Do you remember what you said then?

Religious self-description

Go through the question regarding self-description

- What do you associate to 'Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, A believer, Spiritual, Religious, A seeker, Atheist, doubter, Agnostic'?
- What does it mean to you to be (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist et cetera)?
- What makes you describe yourself as (the alternatives the respondent choose)?

Experiences

- Can you remember any episode in particular that has been particularly important to you?
- Go through the question regarding experiences. If yes, do you want to tell me about it? How did you feel? What do you think happened?

The follow-up interview

I conducted follow-up interviews with twelve of the 28 people identified as the group of respondent that matched the selected criteria. These interviews may be regarded as semi-structured in the sense that they were analytically grounded in the themes found in the interim evaluation. The individuals asked to undergo a follow-up interview were chosen on the grounds that they had touched upon themes that were salient in the material as a whole in the initial interview or/and when answering the questionnaire. Two other respondents were also contacted but were prevented from participating for logistical reasons. Three additional individuals were not selected for reasons of anonymity.

The time span between the first and the second interview was approximately two years. An interview will necessarily reflect the respondents' understanding of his/her life and experiences at that particular point in time. Separating the interviews by a timespan of two years let me see changes over time in a respondent's way of talking and thinking about religion, and in the way they talked of their own experiences. Nonetheless, if I had interviewed for example the informants' partners, children, parents, or friends it is possible that other aspects or versions would have risen to the surface. Doing further interviews at other times or more

extensive ones, or/and participant observation, could also have added to the picture. In this study, however, the focus is on interview material from these two occasions.

Epistemological concerns

The choices made in terms of formulation of the initial interview question, as well as the content of the interview guide, reveal consider ations of how far can we go in creating a neutral position in which we can understand what people are saying when they talk about religion.

The feminist theorist and philosopher of science and technology Donna Haraway has launched the strategy of 'situated knowledges' in her attempt to find a reliable academic position. She argues that the rational, objective study lies in the partial perspective (Haraway 1991: 111). Haraway refutes the idea of an 'eye from nowhere' arguing that the fact that we have presuppositions is not good or bad in itself – the issue is more about becoming aware of those presuppositions than judging them. In Haraway's reasoning, realizing one's situatedness is in fact a process of becoming aware of one's limitations, as well as taking responsibility for drawing the line between what one may say with certainty or not. She argues that there is always a political agenda in all production of knowledge 'facts are theory-laden; theories are value laden; values are history-laden'. (Haraway 1991: 77)

The material collected here is framed, both in terms of the cultural context that the respondents, and I, find ourselves in, and in terms of the intersubjective situation that is the interview itself.[15] Furthermore, the focus and direction of the question 'What is the significance of religion for you, in your life?' is indeed tied to particular epistemological concerns. Hence, the knowledge created in this discursive site should be recognized as a partial perspective, as situated as any knowledge ever is.

Let me consider the limits of the knowledge produced in this study. For example, even though the initial question was open for interpretation as far as the meaning of the term religion was concerned, it did in fact steer the respondents in a certain direction, because of the ways that the respondents register this question. As was intended, the respondents, at least to some extent, answered the question by stepping away from a public discourse that talks of religion in terms of conflict and problems or

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[15] On the interview as an intersubjective situation where researcher and respondent meet and produce knowledge see Dalen 2004:13; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 47–56.

as an issue for the religious 'Other'. Even though criticism of religion was a salient feature in the interview material, this was not elaborated on in relation to personal experiences. Hence, the addendum 'in your life' did not register as for example targeting religion in the workplace or in other public spaces. On the contrary, the sets of memories actualized were more related to religion as a private matter, which is certainly a salient way to think about religion among people in Sweden today.[16]

The fact that this question targeted the individual's life and personal experiences, and that it registered as targeting the private sphere was indeed important for how the follow-up interviews were prepared in terms of the content of the interview guide. Questions about family history, questions formulated in a language of inspiration, or questions of meaning making do indeed key into an understanding of religion as belonging to the intimate sphere and centered on the interiority of a person.

Of course, the impact on what the respondents decided to talk about in the interview situation made by the initial impetus towards narratives of individual experiences does not make this focus or the material it generated invalid. On the contrary, in terms of investigating the ways people are incongruent or inconsistent when it comes to relating to and 'living' religion it is useful. In fact this focus allowed me to hear things that perhaps would not have been expressed had I asked a different set of questions. The knowledge produced in the analytical chapters of this thesis are the concrete outcome of the choices made early on in the project.

Interpretational approach

In interpreting the material this study aims for a bottom-up approach. This said, there has been an interplay between inductive and deductive elements during the course of the project. This has been particularly obvious when it comes to deciding what aspects or themes in the material are relevant for the study of religion. What is and is not included in my discussion has in the end been a result of balancing my own conceptions of what is relevant in the material, and the respondents' own inclusions and exclusions. For example, in the initial interview the term religion is indeed at the center, however, I did not define it for the respondents, and I chose not to steer the interviews in any direction other than the ones

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[16] In the next chapter I will return to the idea of religion being something for the 'Other', and religion as a private matter within different discourses on religion in Sweden.

indicated by the respondents themselves. Here, a vernacular usage of the term was pursued in an inductive, open-ended way.

It is important to note that this way of using everyday conceptualizations as a starting point is not necessarily the same thing as making an analysis based on a vernacular *definition* of religion. What I mean by this is that there is a difference between using a bottom-up approach and navigating by insider categorizations. For example, if a respondent describes having participated in a ritual such as the baptism of a child, or claims to like lighting candles in a church, or to talk occasionally to dead relatives, these are statements that in my view are relevant for the study of religion regardless of whether these act are described explicitly, or consistently, by the respondent as 'religious'.

Identifying the field of study by family resemblance

The use of deductive elements in the methodology of this thesis is not mainly to define religion. However, in the interim interpretation of the material I was influenced by the way the anthropologist Benson Saler defines religion, and I applied his ideas to discern the field of study. (Saler 1993, 2008) What he suggests is to view religion as an unbound and graded category in which there are no clear borders between 'religious' and other cultural phenomena. Departing from a Wittgensteinian point of view, he talks instead about 'family resemblances'. Religion, according to Saler, then

> consists of all the features that our cumulative scholarship induces us to attribute to religion. Some of these features have a much wider distribution among the many religions of the world than do others. Features with the widest distributions are likely to be regarded by scholars as the most typical components of what we mean by religion. But less typical features must also be taken into account, and should be predicated of our model, since we strive to conceptualize and appreciate religion in its great complexity. Not all religions will manifest all features of our general model. Different religions relate to the model differently. No single feature or small conjunction of features is necessary to admit candidates to the group comprehended by the category religion. The many religions of the world relate to one another by family resemblances, by similarities that differentially overlap and crisscross (Wittgenstein, 1958, I.67), not by sharing some essence. (Saler 2008: 222)

Hence, what has counted as relevant material in relation to the study of religion in this project, comprises all the phenomena that have some – but not necessarily all – characteristics usually associated with 'the religious family', and that have been discussed in the cumulative scholarship on religion.

Identifying religion by family resemblance runs the risk of being so inclusive that the definition is of no analytical use. This is why Saler's model is accompanied by the stipulation of central, prototypical examples which may function as 'orienting models'. (Saler 2008: 220) What is important in this way of reasoning are conceptualizations of centrality, and the idea of 'more or less'. However, the aspect regarding dressing ambiguous phenomena in solely religiously colored clothes remains.[17] This risk is not a problem here, however, since I do not use Saler's theory to define religion but to identify a relevant field of study.

The material at hand here emerged from an initial point in which the interviewees related to the concept of religion, and, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, their associations to the concept developed in a processual way. In accordance with Saler's ideas, I have adopted an inclusive stance to what material has been considered part of the field. For example, when a respondent brings up the idea of 'little folk', perhaps as a spin-off association to experiences of, or beliefs in, paranormal phenomena, these have been considered part of the field of research. Such associations are part of the field by way of family resemblance, even though the phenomena in question need not be *defined* as religious or non-religious.

Even though in the analysis and research design my ambition has been to take the material inductively as my point of departure, I have made choices in line with my own epistemological concerns that affect what material is included in the discussion. As I say at the beginning of this chapter, I think this is an inevitable aspect of doing research. However, throughout the research process I have tried to be attentive to my own preconceived understandings and alert to the fact that what is found in the field is not always, or even often, what was expected at the outset. The risk of religiosizing the interviewees' stories or experiences, or of creating connections or even themes through leading questions, has been a major concern that I have considered, and tried to avoid, at every stage of the project.

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[17] Furthermore, as Willem B. Drees (2008) points out, there is a risk that peculiarities of the exemplars may skew the analysis in a certain direction.

Material

As this thesis proceeds, I will introduce the respondents in more depth on the first occasion they appear in the text. I will, however, keep all introductions brief and only discuss personal biographies if they are considered important for the analysis.

Since I have more material from the respondents who were interviewed twice, those individuals tend to stand out in the text. Furthermore, two other factors have had an impact on the degree to which the interviewees are present in the text. Firstly, the direction and content of the interviews have been allowed to differ. Consequently, some interviews have been more useful than others in relation to the central themes of this thesis. Secondly, some people are concise in the way they articulate their thoughts, feelings, and intuitions, whereas others are more tentative and explorative. In part, differences in the way respondents formulate themselves matter when it comes the process of 'writing out' an analysis or a particularly salient aspect. In the final product of this research process, therefore, for various reasons, certain respondents stand out more in the text than others. This does not mean that the respondents that are not so prominent have been less important in the analysis of salient themes. On the contrary, all of the respondents' stories have been taken into consideration in the process of interpreting the material.

This is a case study and is not concerned with statistics or generalizability, so I will not speculate on how many people in Sweden belong to the intermediate group of semi-secular Swedes, although others have indicated that it might comprise as many as half (Voas 2009) or even 70 % (Willander 2014) of the population (if measured by church-oriented standards). Neither will I draw any conclusion as to whether this particular selection of individuals is representative of the group as a whole. Instead, in this section I will simply describe the composition of the group of respondents.

Below, I give an overview of the group of respondents in terms of age, gender, education, profession, number of people in the household, and date(s) of interview(s).

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Gender	Household	Education	Profession	Interview 1	Interview 2
Jonas	1970	M	3	High school	Restaurant business	Feb 2010	Nov 2011
Petra	1963	F	5	Higher ed.	Teacher	Dec 2009	Nov 2011
Lily	1931	F	1	Higher ed.	Retired Secretary	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Elisabeth	1967	F	3	Higher ed.	Communications officer	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Johanna	1986	F	2	Higher ed.	Law school student	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Ingvar	1932	M	2	Higher ed.	Retired journalist	Feb 2010	Nov 2011
Barbara	1957	F	2	Higher ed.	Teacher/ Unemployed	Feb 2010	Nov 2011
Ava	1968	F	6	Higher ed.	Nurse	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Göran	1953	M	3	Higher ed.	Unknown	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Sara	1990	F	4	High school	Unemployed	Feb 2010	Nov 2011
Victor	1965	M	3	Higher ed.	Journalist	Dec 2009	Nov 2011
Anna	1973	F	3	Higher ed.	Bank	Jan 2010	Nov 2011
Ellinor	1962	F	1	Higher ed.	Communicator/ Coach	Feb 2010	
Mona	1945	F	1	High school	Retired project leader	Dec 2009	
Leelo	1955	F	2	Higher ed.	Salesperson	Jan 2010	
Ingrid	1938	F	1	Higher ed.	Retired headmaster	Feb 2010	
Lina	1990	F	4	High school	Unemployed	Feb 2010	
Marianne	1949	F	2	Higher ed.	Secretary	Dec 2009	
Frank	1933	M	2	Higher ed.	Retired journalist	Dec 2009	
Marcus	1988	M	4	High school	Musician	Nov 2010	
Erika	1972	F	4	Higher ed.	Communications officer	Jan 2010	
Lee	1948	M	2	Higher ed.	Photographer	Jan 2010	
Rebecka	1984	F	4	High school	Waitress	Jan 2010	
Bo	1955	M	1	High school	Temporary jobs	Dec 2009	
Daniel	1989	M	3	Higher ed.	Caregiver	Feb 2010	
Rolf	1947	M	1	Higher ed.	Seafarer	Jan 2010	
Linda	1955	F	1	Higher ed.	Pre-school teacher	Feb 2010	
Annika	1968	F	4	High school	Salesperson	Jan 2010	

A few general observations

There is a strong predominance of women, 18 out of the 28, among these individuals. The age span is between 18 and 78. They work in different sectors of society, but many in health, media, and education. All of the respondents have completed upper secondary school/high school, and two thirds are either studying or have completed higher education of two or more years. Some were retired, unemployed, students, or on parental or sick leave at the time of the first and/or second interview. Seven people lived in single households, while 21 lived in households of two or more people.

Twelve faces:
Presentation of the main respondents

The twelve people that I decided to meet for a second interview were Sara, Johanna, Elisabeth, Jonas, Petra, Ava, Victor, Anna, Barbara, Göran, Lily, and Ingvar. Below I present them one by one.

Sara

Sara was 20 years old at the time of our first interview. She was unemployed but was considering going to university in the near future. She just had to figure out what subject she wanted to choose.

Sara has lived in this neighborhood her entire life together with her parents and her younger brother. She told me that she loves relaxing in her favorite chair to listen to music or watch television. Her favorite shows were 'Veronica Mars' and 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer', but she also told me that she is fascinated by any program that talks about religion and religious people, particularly sects. Both her parents were born in Sweden and so was she. She is a member of the Church of Sweden and was baptized as a child, despite the fact that her father has a negative attitude towards religion in general and religious institutions in particular. She very rarely attends church activities, however, and she does not adhere to any religiously sanctioned rules in her everyday life or engage in any practice that she defined as religious. She said that she does not believe in God but that she is open to the possibility of there being sprits, creatures or invisible beings around us.

Johanna

Johanna was 24 when I first met her. She was studying law. She was born and raised in Stockholm by parents who are now divorced. Her mother was born in Chile and her father in Sweden. She is not a member of any religious denomination but (most often) considers herself Jewish since her family on her mother's side are Jews. She very seldom attends religious activities in any communal setting, nor does she adhere to religiously sanctioned rules in her everyday life. She expressed skepticism towards religious authorities in general and to people who live religion by unquestioningly adhering to doctrine or religious regulations.

Johanna told me that she enjoys thinking about 'the meaning of life' and pondering on what happens after death, but that she has no stable position in these matters. Rather, she described her opinions and beliefs as changing with circumstances. Johanna loves travelling and feels inspired by meeting people from different parts of the world and who have different experiences and ideas. She is a person who wants to make a change in the world, making it more just and equal.

Anna

At the time of my first interview with Anna she was 37 years old. She was on part-time maternity leave from her job at a bank, while tending to her two-year-old son. Religion in Anna's reasoning is connected to a sense of security (mainly for people other than herself), but also to conflicts and problems.

Anna grew up in the north of Sweden and she told me that she sometimes feels sad that she has ended up in a town, disconnected from the forests which have meant so much to her in the past. She is a member of the Church of Sweden – an organization that she regards as comparable to any other in secular society. For example, she told me that she browsed through their flyer for the same purposes and with the same open attitude as she browsed the flyer for the local dance studio when looking for a weekend activity for her son.

She goes to church a few times a year for one reason or another but most of the time she does not believe in God, she said. She is however open to the possibility of there being something else, particularly since she has the feeling that her deceased grandmother keeps an eye on her and protects her.

Jonas

Jonas had just turned forty when I first met him. He is married to a woman from Serbia and they were expecting their second child at the time. He grew up in a quiet suburb of Stockholm with his mother and siblings. Jonas told me that as part of a Romani family he often felt alienated from his ethnically Swedish neighbors. He has spent most of his adult life abroad, working in the restaurant business.

Jonas is a member of the Church of Sweden, because, as he put it, 'it is the most apolitical and atheist church in the world'. He is both baptized and confirmed, and his son was also baptized in the Church of Sweden. Since he was a teenager he has been curious about religion, he said, but he objected to any authoritative claims that religion might have on people's lives. His own supranormal experiences, and his experience of his connection to Sathya Sai Baba have been of importance to him during the course of his life. At the time of the interviews, however, he was mostly preoccupied with his work and building a secure economic foundation for his family.

Ava

Ava was 42 when I first met her, and at that time she was expecting her fourth child. She was in the last trimester of her pregnancy. She worked as a nursing assistant and was studying in her spare time to be a nurse. She grew up in the countryside a few hours north of Stockholm but has lived her adult life in the capital. She told me that she treasures her family and values social relations greatly. She sees value in adhering to tradition, since it implies doing things with the family. She has baptized her children in the Church of Sweden, of which she is a member, and has read 'the Children's Bible' to them, 'but as a fairy tale', she explained.

Ava does not really think about the meaning of life and what happens after death and does not believe in God. However, she told me that she does believe in 'Goodness' ('godhet'), which she thinks exist in every being. She thinks that religion is something that everybody has, so she does see an opportunity to share experiences with people, regardless of religious affiliation. Even so, she explained, her aesthetic preference is for old Protestant churches which give her a sense of awe and peace.

Elisabeth

Elisabeth was 43 at the time of the first interview. She is divorced and lives with one of her two teenage children and two cats. Elisabeth said that she is not religious 'in that Christian way', referring to belief in God and attendance to church activities, but that she does believe in 'something'.

Elisabeth associated religion on the one hand with war and power struggles, and on the other, in relation to herself, as being about 'nature, animals and people'. She described how religion has not been of importance to her in her life, but over the last few years it has come up more due to her falling ill with multiple sclerosis. As she is trying to come to terms with this disease, issues of meaning have become more pressing, as well as the importance of nature as a way of connecting to 'something else'. 'For the fun of it', Elisabeth sometimes participates in some activities that she described as spiritual, such as reading the tarot and horoscopes.

Victor

Victor was 45 years old when we met. Victor works as a cultural journalist with a specific interest in literature. He moved to this neighborhood quite recently, when he got divorced. Every second week his three children come to live there with him. He was brought up in the south of Sweden, in the countryside.

Victor is a member of the Church of Sweden but very rarely attends any church activities there. He did, however, describe himself as religious in 'a fundamental way'. He explained that in order to connect to something else he sometimes tries to meditate or pray. What he practices with most regularity and success, however, is running.

Petra

Petra was a 47-year-old mother of three when we first met. She grew up in the south of Sweden but moved to Stockholm when she was in her twenties. She worked part-time as a primary school teacher and studied part-time. She said that where she lived as a child and adolescent there were no other activities for young people than those arranged by the Church of Sweden, so she did go to Sunday school and choir as a child. When she was in her twenties she left the Church of Sweden in reaction to what she perceived as a misogynic attitude. She does however enjoy going to church on special occasions, she said, such as Christmas or the end-of-term celebrations in

her school. She does not believe in God but sometimes she believes in a higher power. At least she wants to, she told me.

Petra is married to a Muslim man who she described as secular, and sometimes she gets in discussions with people that hold prejudices against Islam and Muslims. Petra emphasized that there is something good in every person and that respecting and knowing about religion is an important part of our shared cultural heritage.

Barbara

Barbara was 53 when we first met. She was unemployed at the time but was looking for employment as a teacher, which she had previously worked as. She is a single mother and takes care of at least five cats. She has a strong commitment to issues of solidarity, and work in the trade union has been an important part of her life.

She is a member of the Church of Sweden even though she said that she feels no sense of belonging there. She does not believe in God or any higher power or force, even though at times she would like to. On occasions she does, however, attend the service in a nearby church.

North American Indians fascinate her, she told me, because of what she perceives as their close relation to nature. But she feels utterly uninterested in, and perhaps a bit adverse to, what she described as a 'new-age' approach to North American Indians. Barbara needs scientific proof in order to accept any supranormal phenomena as real.

Göran

At the time of the first interview Göran was 57 years old. He was brought up in an anti-religious home in which religious people where looked down upon. In spite of this he was both baptized and confirmed, but he is not a member of any denomination now. Göran is a single father and has dedicated much of his time to taking care of his three children. All of them were baptized in the Church of Sweden.

Göran told me that he believes in a God that it is possible to have a personal relation to, but feels alienated from what he understands as Christian interpretations of God. He very seldom attends any activities in any denominational setting. Instead, the space that he talks of as connecting him to 'something else' is nature. His religious practice consist of walking and running in the vicinity, he said. The religious narrative that

he feels most strongly for is the biblical story about Jesus expressing doubt when hanging on the cross.

Lily

Lily was 79 when I first met her. She has lived in this part of the town her entire life. She lives alone in her apartment now but occasionally her two daughters, or her grandchildren and their children come to see her. Lily is a member of the Church of Sweden but has no belief in God, she said. She very seldom attends any activities in church. If somebody insists she does go to funerals but she would rather light a candle and commemorate the deceased at home.

As a child Lily had an abusive father who made her life difficult and unsafe. Her mother, however, who shared this misery, has been very important to her throughout her life, and Lily described her mother as the beacon in her life.

Lily has several objects in her apartment to which she ascribed particular value, and treats with particular care and respect. For example, she showed me a cross, an angel, and a small box with a Qur'anic verse written on it, a picture of her mother, and a painting made by her great-grandchild.

Ingvar

Ingvar was 78 when we met. He used to work in the publishing business but nowadays he and his wife enjoy retirement by attending all sorts of lectures, going to the theatre or to concerts, and walking outdoors together with friends. Ingvar's parents were active in the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, but Ingvar, like many other young people at that time in Sweden, chose to reject that religious heritage. He does, however, appreciate what he sees as valuable cultural expressions that he associates with Christianity, such as church music and the church buildings in themselves.

Ingvar said that he does not want to call himself an atheist but he does not have any certain belief in anything supranormal. He regards reason as the most reliable source of information. Ingvar talked about religious rituals and public expressions of religiosity as superstition and exaggerations. In general, he said, he does not ponder much about the meaning of life even though he does feel that with age issues concerning death are becoming more pressing.

In these sketches of the interviewees I have tried to give a hint of the context in terms of patterns of religiosity and secularity in Sweden – a backdrop that I will proceed to discuss in the following chapter.

Backdrop

As I made clear in the section on theoretical imagination, the ways in which people interpret events and experiences and ascribe meaning to terms must, like all social phenomena, be understood in context. To provide a backdrop to the analytical chapters, in what follows I will describe and discuss what I identify as particularly relevant aspects of the cultural context that the semi-secular Swedes at the center of this thesis are part of. In relation to the discussions ahead two aspects are particularly important for the ways in which the respondents of this study relate to and talk about religion, especially since they have an impact on *how* they do so. Firstly, I find it necessary to discuss the specifics of Swedish secularity,[1] and secondly it is important to discuss the roles that relativization and individualization play for the ways in which Swedes relate to religion. In addition, a third aspect, which concerns content, that is, *what* they speak of when they talk about religion, will be addressed by drawing on the work of the historian of religion David Thurfjell (2015), who has explored the historical origins of motifs in contemporary Swedish discourses on religion in the other section of the project this thesis forms part of.

This backdrop will have its shortcomings in terms of nuance due to the brevity necessary here, however, my intention is to give enough for the

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[1] In the wake of the dismantling of the classic narrative on secularization there has been an increasing interest in pluralizing terms such as the secular and secularism as general categories, and to debate the multiple meanings of these terms. In this thesis I follow Casanova (2011) who makes a distinction between the term 'secularization', which refers to a historical and sociological process of functional differentiation, 'secularism' which is discussed as a normative, political doctrine about state-church relations or 'worldviews', and the 'secular' which is understood as a modern epistemic category. When I talk about Swedish secularity I follow van der Breemer et al. (2014) who refer to Scandinavian secularities as, 'different collective and public self-understandings of a country in regard to religion or religious diversity (for example the way a government proclaims an official position in regard to religion in the public sphere) or to the position of a set of actors (such as activists, human rights workers, or religious representatives) in these countries in regard to the role of religion in the public sphere or the understanding of secular law' (van der Breemer et al. 2014: 14).

reader to get a sense of the cultural setting that the respondents are situated in.

On secularization in Sweden

I will begin this discussion by briefly commenting on processes of modernization in Sweden as this is key for understanding the changing role of religion in the Swedish public sphere. A number of scholars have pointed out how modernizing processes such as industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and technologization are, in different ways and with different outcomes, challenging traditional ways of life throughout the world (for example Beck 1992; Berger 1999, 2002; Giddens 2000; Eisenstadt 2002). In most of western Europe these processes were initiated both relatively early and progressed relatively slowly, but there are huge differences across the continent, ranging from early 18th century Britain to the rapid changes in Spain and Portugal that followed the collapse of the dictatorships (Davie 2002: 141).

In Sweden, modernization was connected to a nation-based enlightenment project in which a number of actors were involved in the shaping of what was considered the common goal of developing a more modern, progressive Sweden. In the 19th century various popular movements, such as the free churches, the labor movement and the Temperance movement, although with different ideals in mind, all strove to transform society by transforming its population. This 'new' nation was therefore to be the home of modern individuals, people that had severed their ties to 'traditional' ways of life and were ready to embrace new societal responsibilities. (Berggren & Greiff 2000: 224–229)

By the beginning of the 20th century, the predominant ideals and values were those of the labor movement, which, in turn, was guided by the Social Democratic Party and its vision of a society characterized by democracy, equality and citizenship. Throughout the 20th century, Sweden's modernization was entwined with the foundational Social Democratic idea of *Folkhemmet* (which literally means 'the People's Home'), characterized by a strong belief in nation building as collective progress, faith in the future, and the State as an active agent in educating

the Swedish population for modern citizenship.[2] (Löfgren 1993:53–56) As part of that project, argues the sociologist Richard F. Tomasson (2002), politicians, public intellectuals and researchers were an important influence when they proudly promoted the description of Sweden as the most modern (and secular) country of all.

The sociologist of religion Grace Davie shows that one effect of modernizing processes in Europe was that the historical churches lost their social control over the populations they were part of. In Sweden this applies to the Evangelical-Lutheran state church (the Church of Sweden), which had played an important role in the modernization project right from the start.[3] In place of church teachings alternative ideologies emerged throughout Europe which were associated both directly and indirectly with European enlightenment. In Scandinavia, the particular brand of modernity that emerged in the process was a model in which the State church remained prominent and influential amidst a population that neither affirms belief in church doctrine nor participates in church activities. (Davie 2002: 142) I will now turn to give a brief overview of that process and Swedish secularity today.

The juridical deregulation of the state church

In Sweden modernization involved a challenge to the Church of Sweden – not only by the pietistic revivals but also by the emergence of the popular movements that arranged study circle activities, correspondence courses, and folk high school courses on a wide range of topics. Many of these movements rejected a monoculture which they described as making religion part of national politics. They reacted against the continuing importance of issues concerning the Church of Sweden in national politics and public debate. For example, the Church of Sweden exerted substantial influence on religious education in schools (even though also the integration the Church of Sweden and the education system was beginning to loosen up). (Skogar 1993: 34–36) Part of this process was the

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[2] As a parenthesis, Davie (2002: 142) argues that the social welfare economy in many respects actually reflect habits characteristic of Lutheranism, which were transferred to the secular sphere.

[3] Sweden as we know it today was born in the historical processes of the late middle ages, with the coronation of Gustav Vasa in 1528. See Martling (2008: 95) for specifics on how in this period acknowledgement of the Catholic Church is replaced by a connection between the State church and the nation.

gradual separation between the Evangelical-Lutheran Church and the state.

In legal terms, the starting point came around the 1860s. Until this time subscribing to the teachings of the Lutheran church was a requirement for Swedish citizenship, but now extensive reform of the laws on religion was initiated. In 1858, the law that forbade religious prayer meetings being held in the home without the presence of a priest from the state church was replaced by a less restrictive law forbidding prayer meetings at the same time as a service in the state church. Later, in 1868, this law was also abolished. Around this time mandatory baptism and the obligation to attend at least one communion a year were abolished as well. The 'dissenter laws' enacted in 1863 and 1873, enabled Swedes to leave the state church without being punished by expatriation. However, leaving the state church was only accepted provided that the individual joined another (state approved) denomination.

The most radical change, however, came in 1951, with the Religious Freedom Act.[4] From this point on, Swedish citizens could exit the state church unconditionally, that is without joining another denomination. Furthermore, the church's influence on religious education in schools (which at that point was confessional Christian education) diminished, as state school teachers no longer had to be members of the Church of Sweden to practice their profession.[5] (Skogar 1993: 34–35) This then, in the legal sense, is when the bonds between the Church of Sweden as a denomination and the nation of Sweden was broken. The official disestablishment of the state church in 2000 may be seen as a symbolic completion of this process.

This notwithstanding, the theologians Girmalm and Rosenius argue that it is more correct to talk about a changed relationship rather than disestablishment of the Church of Sweden, since there is still legislation regulating the Church of Sweden both in terms of beliefs content and organizational structure (Girmalm & Rosenius 2013: 49).[6] Part of the findings presented in 'The Church of Sweden as an Agent of Welfare –

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[4] Religionsfrihetslag 1951: 680.
[5] In the 1960s confessional schooling was changed into non-confessional. This was not necessarily in accordance with the will of the people, however, argues the historian Ann-Katrin Hatje (forthcoming). She shows that a petition against non-confessional schooling was signed by more than two million Swedes, at that time 40 % of the adult population. This shows that despite this political decision there was widespread support for confessional schooling in Sweden in the 1960s.
[6] Church of Sweden Act 1998: 1591.

the case of Gävle', is that one effect of disestablishment is a rise in cooperation between the Church of Sweden and the public authorities. Thus, paradoxically, the church's influence on the public sphere can be said to be increasing as a result of the church-state separation process. (Edgardh Beckman et al. 2006: 67–68) Despite the declaration of separation between state and church the juridical bond between the political 'Sweden project' and Church of Sweden gives this particular denomination an exceptional position compared to other religious denominations in the country. (Bäckström et al. 2004: 20)

Similarly, van der Breemer, Casanova and Wyller (2014) argue that the distinctive Lutheran brand of Protestantism found in Scandinavian countries such as Norway, Denmark, and Sweden poses a challenge to prevailing theories about secularization and conceptions of secularity. They suggest that Scandinavian secularization is characterized by ambiguity and an 'intertwinement' between the religious and the secular in terms of the law. (van der Breemer, Casanova & Wyller 2014: 9)

What we see in Sweden, the sociologist José Casanova (2014) suggests, is part of a particularly Nordic, Protestant pattern of secularization, distinct from a southern, Catholic pattern as well as an American Protestant pattern.[7] The Catholic trajectory is characterized by antagonism between a once dominant Church and a secular state, whereas in America it has been centered on the religious neutrality of the state. The Nordic pattern of secularization, in turn, is marked by a high degree of integration between Church and State as well as a comparatively low presence of explicitly religious ideas in public discourse. These different main dynamics of secularization, Casanova argues, have responded in distinct ways to the religious/secular binary. While the southern, Catholic as well as the American version have tried to maintain the boundary by privatizing religion and aimed for a neutral public sphere, the Nordic response has been to transcend the binary by blurring the boundaries between the two. (Casanova 2014: 24) Therefore, it is debatable whether or not the perception of Sweden as secularized in terms of functional differentiation is accurate, or how deeply rooted such secularization is.

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[7] For discussions on distinctions between different kinds of secularities, such as Lutheran Protestant contexts as in the Scandinavian countries and Calvinist and/or American Protestant contexts see for example van der Breemer et al. 2014; Kahl 2009. For discussion on distinct forms of secularities and secularisms globally see for example Bangstad 2012; Levey & Modood 2008.

The symbolism of the separation between the Church of Sweden as a denomination and Sweden as a nation should nevertheless not be underestimated. It betokens a collective and public self-understanding with regard to religion and religious diversity. The separation signals that Sweden is a country where religious concerns and what are perceived a secular institutions (such as the judicial or educational systems) are separated from each other. Several of the respondents in the neighborhood gave explicit voice to such an image of Swedish majority culture in statements such as, 'we live in a completely secularized society', or 'I was raised in a secular society'.

Such a perception of Sweden as a secular society is linked to another aspect of the changes in the laws on religion in Sweden, namely the change that came with the abolition of the law against religious crimes, enacted in 1949.[8] Previously blasphemy had been punishable by imprisonment but this law was now replaced by an act on freedom of belief that applied not only for Christians but for people belonging to other religions as well. This change marks a shift in focus in the way religion is approached in Swedish law. From 1949 it is the religious people rather than their articles of faith that are protected by the legal system. According to the historian of religion David Thurfjell (2015) this change could be an indication that in the societal climate at this time there was a lack of support for the belief that certain abstractions – such as God, Christ, or the sacraments – are holy and irrefutable. In 1970 this law was also abolished and since then there have been no laws banning disparagement of religious beliefs or practices. The possibility of prosecuting such violations lay instead with the laws prohibiting incitement to hatred on the grounds of group belonging.[9]

How the Swedes are (not) church oriented

The changing position of the Church of Sweden is but one aspect of Swedish secularity. Another aspect is related to the Swedish people's engagement with that and other religious institutions. Judged by church-oriented standards, such as belief in God and church attendance, Sweden may indeed be described as an exceptionally secular context (see for example Inglehart & Baker 2000; Martin 2005; Norris & Inglehart 2004;

[8] Lag om religionsbrott 1864: 1951.
[9] http://www.bra.se/download/18.cba82f7130f475a2f180008914/2007_17_hatbrott_2006.pdf, accessed 2014-05-16.

Therborn 1995, 2012). For example, in 2005 the European Commission undertook a survey on values and beliefs in Europe. In reply to the question 'do you believe that there is a God' only 23 % of the Swedish participants answered affirmatively, which in comparison to the European average of 52 % is exceptionally low. Only in Estonia and the Czech Republic do fewer people believe in God, according to this survey.[10] A similar result comes from the European Value Survey (EVS) in 2010, in which only 15 % agreed to the statement 'I believe in a personal God'. In addition, the figures for church attendance in Sweden are extremely low in an international comparison. In a nationwide survey made in 2000, attendance at organized religious gatherings was as low as 6 % during a weekend. (Skog 2001: 23)

In the European Social Survey (2004) 80 % of the Swedish respondents neither participated in an organized religious practice at least once a week *nor* prayed regularly *nor* considered themselves very religious. Only 20 % of the Swedes fulfilled all of these criteria. In countries such as Greece, Poland and Ireland the numbers are reversed, there only 20 % of the participants had an equally uninvolved relation to church-oriented religiosity, and in countries such as Portugal and Slovenia the corresponding figure was 40 %. From a comparative European perspective, Sweden is therefore exceptional in terms of these measures of religiosity. (Pettersson 2008: 34)

Secularity contested

Even though Swedes may as a group be said to be highly secularized in terms of church-oriented self-descriptions, practices, and beliefs, the image of a secular Sweden can be contested in a number of ways.

To begin with, despite its disestablishment, membership rates in the Church of Sweden remain high. Even though the Church of Sweden is seeing a rapid decrease in the number of members (during the last couple of years approximately 1 % of its members have left the church (2012-2013)), a majority of the Swedish population (2013, 65,9 %) are members and pay approximately one per cent of their income in church taxes every year.[11]

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[10]http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf, accessed 2014-05-22.
[11] http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik, accessed 2015-01-08.

The high level of membership in the Church of Sweden is frequently explained by sociologists as being linked to national identity in the Nordic countries. Göran Gustavsson, for one, argues that there is a connection between membership in (what used to be) the state church and the Swedish national identity, and that this membership is regarded by many as one aspect of their citizenship. (Gustavsson 2000: 91) The sociologist Susan Sundback, in turn, seem to agree when she argues that the loyalty generally shown by Nordic populations to their state churches, is linked to the fact that the Lutheran church is one of the most important societal institutions they invoke in their construction of a national and social identity. Finns, Norwegians, and Swedes, Sundback argues, view the church in the same way as they relate to the state and the political institutions, but also as a link to history, culture, and tradition. (Sundback 2000: 34–73)

Sundback's argument relies on the understanding that membership in the Church of Sweden, however passive it might be, is not just a result of lethargy but that individuals actually have their reasons for staying in or joining the church. Her interpretation, which is based on the theoretical concept of 'civil religion', is that 'most members see their membership as an expression of a Christian identification or of an identity colored by Christianity, even though this identification is increasingly interpreted within the frame of the subjectively experienced'.[12] (Sundback 2000: 69, 2007)

When considering Swedish membership rates in different religious denominations, where 66 % of the population are members of the Church of Sweden and an additional 8 % belong to either one of the free churches, the Catholic Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, or a Muslim or Jewish congregation, Sweden does not appear to be the highly secularized country other indicators of religiosity used in sociology suggest.[13]

In addition, in terms of participation in religious rites reference is sometimes made to a 'Swedish paradox' reflecting a situation where the

[12] The concept of civil religion was hotly debated among Scandinavian sociologists of religion in the 1980s and the early 1990s. In these discussions it was often the integrative role of the National Lutheran churches that stood at the center, see for example Gustafsson 1981, 2000/1991; Furseth 1990; Repstad 1995; Riis 1985; Sundback 1984. More recently, civil religion has been sought for outside the majority churches, for examples see Botvar & Sjöborg 2014; Hvithamar, Annika, Warburg, Margit & Arly Jacobsen, Brian 2009; Porsdam 2012.
[13] See Commission for government support to religious denominations (Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund, SST) www.sst.se, accessed 2014-05-22.

majority population has weak Church-associated beliefs (such as in God or resurrection), but still continues to make use of the rites of the Church in important situations in life. (Bäckström et al. 2004: 139) Even though the numbers are declining steadily, according to statistics provided by the Church of Sweden, more than 34 % of all marriages celebrated in Sweden in 2013 were still solemnized within the Church of Sweden, and 48.5 % of all children born in 2013 were baptized. Furthermore, 78 % of those who died were buried according to the rites of the Church of Sweden.[14] In Swedish sociological literature the term used for this pattern has been 'life-rite-religiosity' (*förättningsreligiositet*) (see for example Gustafsson 1965, 1966, 1967, 1970; Hamberg 1989: 6). Hence, these figures suggest that even though Swedish people do not regularly participate in organized religious practices or rites, many do connect to the Church of Sweden at least at certain moments in life.[15]

Another aspect that contests the image of Sweden as thoroughly secular is related to belief. Even though few Swedes participating in quantitative surveys answer that they believe in God, other statements of belief are nonetheless endorsed. For example, 36 per cent of the Swedish population participating in the RAMP carried out in 1998 chose to describe their beliefs as 'God within each person, rather than out there' (Houtman, Auspers & Heelas 2009: 85). Furthermore, in 2005 53 % of the Swedes answered that they believe in 'some sort of spirit or life force'.[16] In the EVS collected in Sweden 2010, 46 % of the respondents agreed to such a belief statement, while 19 % said that they were unsure of what to believe. Only 20 % refute belief in any sort of supranormal reality.[17]

Further, according to the sociologist of religion Ulf Sjödin there has been a rise in beliefs in the paranormal in Sweden. He argues that 'even if beliefs in the paranormal are not new, it may still be said that such beliefs are much more tolerated and accepted today than 20 or 30 years ago. The *Zeitgeist* seems to have changed'. Further, even though the salience and

[14] http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik, accessed 2014-05-22.
[15] See also Grace Davie's (2007, 2010) discussion on 'vicarious religion'. Building on Peter Berger ideas of religious institutions in Europe as 'weak', Davie argues that the role of the churches is more important than appears at first glance. She describes vicariousness as a specific European trademark. The central point in Davie's argument is that people (at least in some sense) approve of what the church is doing although they choose not to be active participants themselves.
[16] For a discussion on the ambiguous connotations of these questions see Willander 2013.
[17] For graphical overviews for all European countries see http://www.europeanvalues study.eu/evs/research/themes/religion/.

centrality of these beliefs are low, Sjödin argues that 'the paranormal is no longer paranormal, but rather normal'. [18] (Sjödin 2003: 203)

Support is provided by the sociologist Curt Dahlgren, who discusses Swedish secularization with particular focus on discrepancies between practices and beliefs, arguing that the survey statistics indicate change rather than decline. He shows that from the 1970s onward Swedish people have indeed become less and less interested in participating in religious rituals within the Church of Sweden. However, this does not necessarily mean that what we see is an indication of increased secularization in the sense that Swedes 'believe' less, he argues. On the contrary, Dahlgren concludes, even though statistics show that people have lost interest in the kind of religiosity offered by institutional religion, other forms of religiosity, such as religious beliefs in the broader sense (individual belief in a God, spirit or life force for example), are on the rise. (Dahlgren 2010: 73–76)

In the report *Scandinavian values: Religion and morality in the Nordic countries*, the sociologist of religion Ole Riis describes the typical Scandinavian attitude towards religious matters as 'lukewarm', which resonates with the attitudes of the respondents in this thesis. Riis shows that the average Scandinavian is not an outright atheist but that some kind of religious interest is very common, though not a high degree of religious commitment. With regard to traditional beliefs, most people seem to accept a belief in God and a soul, but little more. Furthermore, many avoid precise answers questions about religious beliefs (Riis 1994: 106). Swedes also express a skeptical attitude towards religion in general, and a mildly critical position towards religion is frequent in the public debate (Riis 1994: 99–128). In another publication Riis has characterized mainstream Swedes in terms of 'Protestant humanism', a position characterized by post-materialism, secular rationalism, relativism and individualism. (Riis 1989: 137)

What the results from quantitative surveys actually tell us about religious change is a conundrum that sociologist of religion in particular are trying to figure out. Two main lines of interpretation may be discerned: On the one hand, scholars interpret the statistics as disclosing increasing marginalization of religion (see for example Norris & Inglehart

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[18] For a related discussion on how discourses that have been described as 'occult', 'esoteric', 'oppositional' or 'countercultural', have become part of a shared re-enchanted mainstream in the so called 'Occulture' see Christopher Partridge 2004-2005, 2013.

2004; Pettersson 1988; Therborn 2012), and on the other, scholars interpret them as signs of an increase in new-age inspired holistic spirituality with strong connections to contemporary values (Hammer 2004; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Heelas 2007).

In relation to the Swedish context, the sociologist Erika Willander argues that neither of these interpretations fully explains the high level of membership in religious organizations in combination with the frequency of affirmation of the belief in 'something' or 'some sort of spirit or life force' (Willander 2013: 125). In a later work she shows that among the majority, what she calls 'the religious mainstream' in Sweden, the pattern of affiliation, belief, and practice has been surprisingly stable during the last 130 years. (Willander 2014: 112–115) This despite quite dramatic societal changes in terms of for example the legislation on religion, religious education in compulsory schools, or the opinions on religion expressed in the cultural mainstream.

To talk about a significant change in behavior among the religious mainstream in Sweden during this period, Willander argues, is therefore misleading. What can be said affirmatively about developments during the last 100 years in Sweden is that the ways the majority of people are and are not religious in Sweden defy understandings of religion that rely on specific connections between affiliation, practices and embracing church dogma. Here too, therefore, Sweden poses a challenge to prevailing theories on secularization and conceptions of what it means to be secular.

To supplement this picture let me now draw on two scholars in the study of religion, Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck (2013). As mentioned in the prologue in their study on 'popular religion'[19] in Dalarna (a region located in mid-Sweden) they have argued that new religious arenas are emerging as a result of the converging processes of globalization, secularization, and individualization. In their study they show that distinctions between 'the religious' and 'the secular' are in abeyance in the venues in which popular religion is played out in contemporary Dalarna. They show that such categorizations are superfluous in spaces such as the beauty salon where you can both have your hair cut and your aura read. Hence, not only is the blurring of distinctions between religious and secular an important part of the Scandinavian pattern of secularity with regard to the public sphere, but blurring, or perhaps I should say

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[19] A concept inspired by Steven Sutcliffe (2006).

disregard for, boundaries is arguably also characteristic of how at least some people live religion in Sweden today.

The secular age and the 'choice' culture

In the sociologist Peter Berger's concise theoretical update 'Further thoughts on religion and modernity' (2012) he builds on his previously developed theory of pluralization.[20] In this article he uses an image from the Swedish context to illustrate his point:

> There is a Swedish professor of sociology, who is calmly convinced that all religion is an illusion, to the point where he can afford to be patronizingly tolerant of the few religious people who may cross his path. A few streets away from the professor's office there is a Pentecostal congregation of African asylum seekers, whose preacher performs miracles of healing every week. On closer investigation we may find that the professor regularly practices Tantric meditation, while the preacher operates with very secular rationality in his dealings with the Scandinavian welfare state. (Berger 2012: 314)

Berger uses this anecdote to underline that there is indeed a robust secular discourse (in Sweden and elsewhere) resulting from modernity in terms of the success of the discourse on science and technology. However, even though such a discourse has been given a taken-for-granted status (and is implemented as a default setting in education, the media and the law), it nonetheless coexists with a plurality of religious discourses. This plurality, he argues, is not only manifested in society but also in consciousness. Drawing on Schütz, Berger points out that an individual maybe *both* religious *and* secular. Hence, according to Berger, modernity is not a matter of replacement but of relative displacement, 'modernity does not so much change the *what* of religious faith but the *how*' (Berger 2012: 316).

In *A Secular Age* (2007) the philosopher Charles Taylor reaches a similar conclusion in his focus on the change in the conditions of belief in the modern West. The question that he seeks to answer is, 'Why is it so hard to believe in God in (many milieux of) the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?' (2007: 539). Taylor argues that

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[20] In the introduction to the book *De-secularization resurgent religion and world politics* (1999) Berger refutes his earlier ideas on secularization. Here he writes about his realization that the correlation lies not between modernity and decline of religion but between modernity and deepened pluralization. See also Berger 2014.

the most prominent characteristic of our time is that religious belief is regarded as one option among others. This is true not only for those who regard religion as a peripheral aspect of their lives, but also for those who are deeply committed to their religious community. Not in the sense that they would necessarily be influenced to consider ceasing to be religious, however, but in the sense that for them as well their way of being religious appears to be a choice in life. Hence, Taylor describes 'the secular age' not as characterized by the absence of religion, but rather by pluralization of alternatives and the continuing multiplication of new options.

Along these lines, in their discussion of the general trend of individualization in contemporary (western) culture the sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe individuals as increasingly characterized by choice and reflexivity. In their theorizing it is stressed that individualization is not the result of individual desires or choices for more liberty, but on the contrary, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman points out in his foreword to their book *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*, 'individualization is a fate, not a choice' (Bauman in Beck 2002: xvi). This means that to escape individualization and to refuse to participate in the individualizing game is not an option.[21] Members of contemporary society (a context which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim call reflexive modernity alternatively second modernity) are part of a culture in which the individual not only *may* make choices, but is in fact *expected to* in order to become an intelligible human being (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 6).

Contemporary western culture may, hence, be described as characterized by an unprecedented plurality. However, this is not to say that access to a multiplicity of interpretational frames is something entirely new, as the historian of ideas Kristiina Savin (2011) shows in her exploration of how the concept of fortune was applied in Swedish society between late 16th and early 18th centuries. Focusing on how people dealt with risk before the scientific revolution, Savin highlights a multitude of ways to explain variations in luck and fortune. Savin's focus lies on ideas

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[21] For another influential example on the importance of choice for individual identity formation in late-modern 'risk-society', see the sociologist Anthony Giddens (for example 1991, 1994) who sees the process of individualization as positive in the sense that as individuals are given new opportunities they acquire more depth because they are forced to act reflexively. See also the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann (for example 2001) who has a more pessimistic view of individualization. In his view people and identities are victims of impulses and happenstances, since in these 'liquid' times the preconditions of the choices made are unstable and unpredictable.

that she argues were widely disseminated and analyzes for example documents dealing with calamities such as shipwrecks, lightning strikes, and drowning, but also biographies, sermons, ballads, travel narratives et cetera. Even though consensus during this period was that collective disasters were punishments from God, Savin shows that this was not always the preferred interpretation among people. Instead there were a number of interpretations available to the wider population. Drawing on the anthropologist Åsa Boholm (2011), Savin stresses the usefulness of the dichotomy between vernacular and formalized thinking for understanding such distinctions, a subject that in relation to the material at hand here will be further explored in Chapter 4.

> Shipwrecks could be viewed as divine punishments, warnings, secret plans, trials, miraculous deliverances, omens of coming events, or quite simply human errors. All these explicatory possibilities were common during the early modern period. The concrete rhetorical situation determined which one of them was put to use. (Savin 2011: 388)

Like Taylor and Berger, Savin points to a presence of a multitude of discourses, however, and rather than regarding it as a contemporary phenomenon she points to the plurality present in a Swedish context historically.[22] The significant change between 17th century and contemporary society, argues Savin, lies not in plurality but in the interpretations of events predominant in the public discourse. What in the 17th century was served to the public in a religious guise, became for the 20th century's public arena issues for an expert elite to solve. To use Berger's term, the 'default discourse' has shifted.

A perspectival approach

If Swedish modernity was characterized by a homogenizing vision (for example in the idea of the 'People's Home'), arguably this has changed. According to the scholar of religion Jessica Moberg, a shift in left-to-right sensibilities and the gradual dismantling of the welfare state, in combination with increased global mobility, in the form of both tourism and migration, are primary features of the late modern phase in Sweden. In

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[22] I will in this dissertation have reason to come back to what I see as similar situational (and even ostensibly simultaneous) interpretational frames.

public opinion, therefore, plurality and individual choice are widely shared ideas. (Moberg 2013: 20) Since the 1960s there has been a shift in the societal climate. On the one hand the number of people that come from contexts dominated by other cultural and religious traditions, Muslim in particular, has increased steadily. One the other hand increasing attention in media and public debate is paid to 'religion' and its place and role in society. (Anderson & Sander 2009: 27–34)

A glance at the comprehensive volume *Religion in Sweden* (*Religion i Sverige*), edited by the scholars of religion Ingvar Svanberg and David Westerlund (2008), in which a large number of religious groups are presented, reveals the great multiplicity of expressions that exist in contemporary Sweden, ranging from different religious traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism et cetera in their many shapes, to folk beliefs and practices, new pagan groups, and esoteric traditions. In the larger material of this study – that is, the 67 interviews performed within the scope of the project – the picture that Svanberg and Westerlund paint of the Swedish religious landscape is well represented in all its miscellaneousness.

Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that the average Swede comes in contact, is interested, or knows much about different religious and cultural expressions. This has become evident to me in the course of this project. At the outset I assumed that – since the interviewees live in an urban context, in a neighborhood where there are, almost literally, manifestations of religion at every street corner – they would be, at least partly, influenced by the religiously plural situation that characterizes their physical surroundings. However, surprisingly often this did not seem to be the case. I remember sitting in a local café interviewing Sara, who was trying to figure out what she actually thought about ghosts when the chimes of the bells of a neighboring church stole through the door. Sara stopped mid-sentence, looked at me and asked in an alarmed tone of voice 'ding! What's that bell?' I was a little surprised at the question so I tentatively replied that 'it sounds like a church?'. She laughed at that, and jokingly said, 'I know, I was about to say hallelujah'.

Now, this particular church, which is located within a stone's throw of Sara's home, rings its bells every day, but Sara still seemed surprised by the sound. Presumably the reason why she noticed it on that occasion had to do with the fact that we were talking about religion. Like many of the other interviewees, Sara seemed uninterested in the religious smorgasbord around her, and seemed to live quite unconcerned by its existence.

However, even though religious pluralism in the physical environment does not stand out as important for the respondents, increased immigration, internationalization, and globalization, do provide opportunities for experiencing, meeting, and/or integrating, for example, new things to eat or wear, new ways to think or to do things. In Swedish institutions and workplaces people are faced with previously unexplored situations and questions. (Anderson and Sander 2009: 27–34; Sundback 2000) As contemporary communication increases, all kinds of beliefs and religious elements from all over the world may co-exist locally in a historically unprecedented way. (Frisk 2011)

It is in the midst of this context, as Ole Riis shows drawing on the 1998 Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) survey, many of the citizens of the Nordic countries find it possible that individuals should be able to appreciate and appropriate religious aspects from a variety of religious contexts. In addition, many consider several religions as bearers of truth.[23] (Riis 2000: 252) This attitude represents what I call a perspectival approach, characterized by openness towards different perspectives and a reluctance to articulate a definitive strong stance. For example, in the large quantitative study known as 'World Value Survey' (WVS) through which scholars have measured what people consider important values for decades, every second Swedish respondent to the 2010 survey said that they were 'not religious' (an arguably vague statement), whereas only 18 % chose the stronger, more definitive position of 'atheist'.[24]

The perhaps most obvious structural concretization of such a perspectival approach is Swedish religious education (RE) in compulsory schools. Swedish RE is unique in the sense that it is compulsory, integrative, with no opt-out possibility. It includes teaching about different religions and 'non-religious worldviews', and is officially non-denominational.[25] According to the scholar in the study of religion Wanda Alberts, the purposes of Swedish RE

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[23] It should be noted that increasing privatization and relativism as far as religion goes, does not necessarily mean that Swedish people accept and tolerate religious minorities or actions or people that break the norm of the majority culture, for further discussion see Riis 2000: 267.

[24] http://www.pol.gu.se/digitalAssets/1378/1378845_tabellrapport.pdf, accessed 2014-05-23.

[25] In 'Swedish religion education: Objective but marinated in Lutheran Protestantism?' the scholar of religion Jenny Berglund (2013) questions descriptions of Swedish RE as neutral and non-denominational. She analyzes the present syllabus for religious education, and points to the historical linkage between liberal theology and cultural Protestantism and the Swedish educational system in general and Swedish religious

are firmly based on the general philosophy of the school and reflect the secular approach to religions: knowledge and understanding of various religions, worldviews and views of life are seen as a pre-requisite for forming one's own worldview, be it religious or non-religious. (Alberts 2007: 294)

Hence, the idea that learning about different ideas about life is positive for the forming of an individual's own perspective is fundamental to this form of religious education.

The subjective turn and individualization

One way of understanding this perspectival approach is in relation to the broader tendencies in not only Swedish but more broadly the western history of ideas. In the *Ethics of authenticity* (1991) Charles Taylor has written about a 'massive subjective turn of modern culture' (Taylor 1991: 26), a term since then widely used and referred to. What he describes here is a culture in which there is a focus on life lived by reference to one's own experiences rather than a life dictated by external authorities. In this culture roles, duties, obligations, as well as affiliations, meanings, and identities are defined on the basis of personal subjectivities.[26]

Perceiving contemporary western culture, characterized by a transition of religious identities, beliefs, and practices, as something *ascribed* to something understood as *chosen*, is for individualization – or subject-ivization – theorists crucial to understanding the western contemporary religious landscape.[27]

In an international comparison Sweden is extreme in a number of ways that resonate with such a subjective turn. In the WVS, Swedes, to an exceptionally high degree, set non-materialistic values – such as quality of

education in particular. Berglund argues that despite the aspiration for objectivity and neutrality, RE in Sweden is 'marinated' in Lutheran Protestantism. For a general discussion on the multiplicity of factors that determine a country's religious education see Schreiner 2002: 87.

[26] Peter Beyer (1994), among others, has pointed towards two main patterns of religious change. On the one hand there is one which corresponds to 'the subjective turn' in which detraditionalization is of essence, and another that tells of further traditionalization, termed 'the fundamentalist turn'. For an illustration of how an interplay between processes of detraditionalization and traditionalization may be expressed see Sorgenfrei 2013.

[27] Example of such scholars include for example Davie 1994, 2002, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Hervieu- Léger 2000; Roof 1993, 1995; Wuthnow 1998.

life and self-realization – over security and material comfort. In addition, Swedes are exceptional when it comes to what in the WVS is called traditional versus secular-rational values. (Pettersson & Yilmaz 2005) This means that the people in the neighborhood – if they are representative of the Swedish population at large – could be expected to agree with statements that affirm the individual's right to shape his or her own life. It also means that they probably raise their children without teaching them that they must obey authorities or believe in God. (Inglehart 2006: 118; Inglehart & Baker 2000) Hence, when answering the WVS Swedes deny that there are any 'absolute' values that the individual need to adjust to. Notwithstanding, they do agree upon the individual's right to decide over and define his or her own life. Perhaps one conclusion that may be drawn from this is that individual lives are not as individualistic as presumed.[28]

This is the direction taken by Erika Willander (2013) in her analysis of the unprompted associations to belief expressed in the interviews conducted within the framework of the Enköping project,[29] when she shows that individualized expressions of belief were regarded as more legitimate by her respondents than collective expressions. However, Willander argues, this does not mean that they are particular or atomized beliefs. On the contrary, these individualized expressions have collective dimensions, both in the sense that they rely on collectively defined abstractions (such as for example 'the higher good/Goodness' [det högsta goda/godhet]), and in the shared idea that the individual has the interpretative prerogative in matters of belief. Hence, in order to be interpreted as legitimate, belief needs to be anchored in an individual decision and not rely on passive reception of traditional narratives. (Willander 2013: 133)

The creativity of the subject
and religion as a pool of resources

What is important in relation to the discussion ahead is that in a narrative that emphasizes privatization and individualization, people may, and are expected to, relate to the many meanings of the concept of religion selectively. Hence, in the cultural framework that contemporary Sweden

[28] For a discussion on individualism in 'post-secular societies' see Pessi & Jeldtoft 2012.
[29] A follow up study to the Kendal project, for more details see Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008.

offers one, perhaps the most acceptable, way of relating to religion is to do so piecemeal. When, and if, relating to religion, people are expected to choose religious items from various traditions to match their commitment or interest eclectically. (Frohm 2002) Furthermore, people are expected to look for answers to their dilemmas on the basis of what they personally feel meaningful rather than adapting to the conventions of any particular religious organization – an attitude that the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger calls 'religion à la carte', a bricolage. (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 196)

That said, in line with the theoretical approach of this thesis, even though the creativity of the individual is important in such a process of choice, it does have limits. According to Schütz

> man finds himself from the outset in surroundings already 'mapped out' for him by Others, *i.e.*, 'premarked', 'preindicated', 'presignified', and even 'presymbolized' [. . .] Hence, only a small fraction of man's stock of knowledge at hand originates in his own individual experience. The greater portion of his knowledge is *socially derived*, handed down to him by his parents and teachers as his social heritage. It consists of a set of systems of relevant typifications, of typical solutions for typical practical and theo-retical problems, of typical precepts for typical behavior, including the pertinent systems of appresentational references. All this knowledge is taken for granted beyond question by the respective social group and is thus '*socially approved* knowledge'. (Schütz 1973: 347–348)

This means of course that both the different meanings available to choose from, and the pressure to choose, are part of the social habitat. That we adopt large parts of our culture quite uncritically does not mean that we are *cultural dopes*,[30] that is, marionettes that cannot reflect over, choose, affirm, reject and/or relate to different elements in our culture.[31] (Giddens 1994) The individual may indeed be able to do all that, but the range that the individual may choose from is limited.

In 1962 the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith launched the idea that religions are created through vast, complex, and ever-developing

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[30] A term launched by Harold Garfinkel (1967: 66–75) as an ironic reference to rule-following actors.
[31] This discussion is linked to the structure/agency debate – a conundrum that I regard as unsolvable but nevertheless try to address through the 'lived religion' approach, see chapter 2.

historical processes, what are called cumulative traditions. These traditions, Smith argues, consist of

> the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that the historian can observe. (Smith 1962: 156–57)

This idea of viewing religion and particular religious traditions as cumulative has been widely influential, arguably more so than Smith's distinction between tradition and faith.[32]

One example can be found in the description by the anthropologists Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, of how an 'Islamic tradition' is constructed through a selective use and interpretation of elements within the Islamic 'pool of resources' (Eickelman & Piscatori 2004: 29). The individual has varying degrees of access to these resources and may choose elements from the pool in the pursuit of personal life goals. The historian of religion Jan Hjärpe (1997), in turn, uses the term 'a religious basket' to denote this availability of different elements in a cumulative tradition.

The basic premise in the following discussion of the respondents' associations to religion is that they do not grasp these out of thin air. Instead, their ideas about religion are considered part of the discourses through which they relate and through which they create their worlds. It is this discursively pre-existing repertoire of notions that influences how they relate to and understand the given subject and how they speak of religion, even when it relates to their own personal lives.

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[32] For criticism of Smith's separation between faith – understood as a universal subjective and un-observable propensity in humans – and tradition, as well as his perception of faith as an ahistorical cultural universal see Asad 2001.

The historical origins of motifs
in contemporary Swedish discourses on religion

When the respondents talk about religion in the interview situation, they seem to have access to a wide array of available discursive elements, expressed in statements such as:

- I once had an aura photograph taken – just for the fun of it
- Jesus was a historical figure but not the son of God
- I wish 'little people' existed
- I like going into churches and temples
- I was married in a church
- Religion is about power and war
- Pouring butter on statues – that is superstition
- It is so nice to decorate the home for Christmas
- Nature is a place where I can relax and connect to something 'on the side'
- It cannot be a coincidence that I met my ex-boyfriend on the subway at that particular time.

Indeed, in this thesis I am mainly preoccupied with questions concerning the ways in which the respondents speak about religion. Consequently, the focus of the contextualization offered in this chapter lies on contemporary patterns of relating to religion rather than on historical accounts of the content of respondents' associations to religion. The historical dimension is nonetheless helpful for situating the material in a local context. In the other section of this project, the historian of religion David Thurfjell (2015) has discussed the question of what it is that mainstream secular Swedes talk about when they talk of religion, and why. His work is of direct relevance for the material here as it offers a detailed and nuanced historical contextualization of the content of the associations to religion that secular Swedes in the religious mainstream give voice to.

In *Det gudlösa folket? Om de sekulära svenskarna och religionen [A godless people? On secular Swedes and religion]* (2015) – a book based partly on the same material as this dissertation – Thurfjell traces the most common ideas about religion in Swedish mainstream culture. Here he argues that as urban, secular Swedes relate to religion they follow well-trodden trajectories in the Swedish history of religion. Thurfjell identifies three discourses on religion as particularly salient among what he calls post-Christian Swedes. The terms he uses are (1) *Christianity*, which

results from the heritage from Protestant Christianity, (2) *secular criticism of religion*, which is connected to the heritage from European enlightenment, and (3) *esotericism*, which is connected to the heritage from western esotericism and to the rise of new spirituality. (Thurfjell 2015: Introduction)

Of course, all of these three main trajectories contain a number of (often contradictory) positions and their historical background is far from unilinear. Moreover, there are no sharp dividing borders between them as for example criticism of religion is frequently expressed within both esoteric and Christian contexts, and several expressions that characterize esotericism are shared with conventional Christian strands. They are nonetheless distinct, argues Thurfjell, and this is particularly visible in their epistemological concerns. Where Christianity in its many forms takes as its point of departure, or at least relates to, the biblical revelation as a source of knowledge, the secular criticism of religion relies on the worldview of the natural sciences in which there is a focus on rationality and empirical evidence. Esotericism, in turn, is concerned with neither revelation nor empirical evidence: instead the ultimate source of knowledge within this discourse is intuition and direct experience. (Thurfjell 2015: Introduction)

In discussing the first of these discourses, *Christianity*, Thurfjell set out to explain how secularized Swedes come to regard themselves and their culture as secularized to such a large extent and the fact that many are reluctant to call themselves Christian even though they practice Christian life-rites, celebrate Christian holidays, and are paying members of a Christian denomination. Thurfjell uses a historical and semantic analysis to show that the meanings and connotations of the word *Christian* have changed in Swedish public discourse during the last century. From being an including category linked to identity, Swedishness and the Church, as well as more general notions of goodness, honesty, cleanliness, and reason, this word has come to signify a more narrow category based on theistic dogma, strong self-identification and a strong ritual engagement. Thurfjell shows how the public discourse on Christianity in Sweden is deeply affected by, on the one hand, distinctions between Protestants denominations in Sweden, and secular critique of religion on the other. Hence, in a period where the idea of secularization is an important part of many Swedes self-understanding, and the dominant definition of being

Christian emphasizes both belief and an active sociality within institutional frames, it becomes an unlikely option for self-description. (Thurfjell 2015: Chapter 2)

The second discourse on religion that Thurfjell identifies as salient among secular, mainstream Swedes, *secular criticism of religion*, is traced from the Renaissance via the French and Russian revolutions into modern times with increasing influence in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thurfjell shows how this criticism develops along two main ideological lines – the Marxist left, and the liberal or politically independent. In Sweden one aspect of importance for the discourse on secular criticism of religion to which Thurfjell gives prominence is a feminist concern for women's rights and issues of equality. (Thurfjell 2015: Chapter 3)

Furthermore, Thurfjell considers one more component as crucial within this discourse on religion, namely the grand narrative that speaks of Swedish progress and modernity. Here he refers to the story about how Europe woke up from the darkness of the Middle Ages during the Renaissance, started to think critically and independently during the Enlightenment, developed technically during the Industrial Revolution, invented the idea of human rights expressed in the Geneva convention in 1949, and thereafter developed functioning welfare states with Sweden as the ultimate example. This story presents one of the many histories that may be extracted from the complicated and contradictory European past, and, Thurfjell argues, just like any history, it flatters the storyteller since it places him or her at the point of fulfillment. In this narrative secular Swedes are the world's most modern people who live in the best country in the world – best at democracy, best at equality and best at environmental thinking. It is within the frames of this story that the self-understanding of Sweden as utterly secularized fits. Religion in this context becomes a general category based on the kind of Christianity that mainstream Swedes have moved beyond. Religion, in this discourse on religion, is something for the Other. (Thurfjell 2015: Chapter 3)

Where the third of the discourses on religion that Thurfjell identifies, *esotericism*, is concerned he discusses, for example, the influence of theosophy, the new-age movement, and Jungian deep psychology on contemporary culture. Here he draws on the scholar of religion Christopher Partridge, whose main point is that discourses that have been described as occult, esoteric, oppositional or countercultural have in fact become part of a shared re-enchanted mainstream, which he calls 'occulture'. Swedish occulture, argues Thurfjell, is a natural part of the

respondents' worlds since they all watch movies and television, read books and magazines, surf the internet or simply move in the public sphere and encounter a constant flow of references to non-Christian spiritualties, supranormal phenomena, and mystical or 'disturbing' experiences, such as curious coincidences, supranormal connections, premonitions, telepathy and ghosts. Practices such as mindfulness, acupuncture, yoga, aikido and meditation are not only accessible to specialists but easily available elements of mainstream culture. Furthermore, in Swedish popular culture, spanning from children's literature and culture to works of art and media that target adult audiences there are esoteric and occult motifs, but also motives we recognize from folklore, such as trolls, fairies, witches, monsters, mermaids, vampires et cetera. Thurfjell shows that even though these clusters of motifs, esthetic expressions, ways of thinking and expressing are purveyed, and also often perceived, as entertainment, they nonetheless carry a sense of mystery when they are related to and used to interpret life. (Thurfjell 2015: Chapter 4)

Thurfjell mainly traces the origins of this last discourse to the history of western esotericism. However, I would like to further emphasize, in agreement with the scholar of cultural science Torunn Selberg (2011), that we should also take folkloric motifs seriously in discussions regarding occulture. In her book *Folkelig religiositet: Et kulturvitenskapelig perspektiv [Folk religiosity: From the perspective of cultural science]* Selberg explores the field of 'folk religiosity' as an aspect of folk culture (building on Burke (1978)) and makes a distinction between 'new religiosity' on the one hand and 'folk beliefs' on the other. Using examples from a Norwegian context Selberg stresses that the expressions of what she labels folk religiosity are unorganized and historically unrecognized aspects of our religious history. She also emphasizes their relation to 'official religion'. In her understanding, the content of the category is decided contextually through the struggle for the interpretative prerogative between different interested parties.

> folk religiosity today is not restricted to any particular tradition. It is therefore difficult to localize. It is not situated in any decided-upon sacred place, or in a set of scriptures. Rather, folk religiosity is part of many traditions, of many different places and exists, articulated or unarticulated, as part of what we choose – or do not choose – to see, listen to, or read. Contemporary religious pluralism is a significant cultural impulse that influences many aspects of today's cultural situation. (Selberg 2011: 22, my translation)

In Selberg's understanding, representations and beliefs connected to 'traditional folk beliefs' are not things of the past, but rather exist in our society in new forms. (Selberg 2011: 18) This concurs with the material in this study where folkloric motifs, such as trolls, 'little folk', destiny, et cetera are discussed in association with the category of religion. However, needless to say, the interpretations of the motifs vary both historically and among the respondents, and furthermore, belief is not necessarily central when these associations are concerned. Instead of being declarations of what the respondents hold to be true, they express thoughts and ideas that can be considered. This means that it is not important for the respondents to discern or evaluate whether these phenomena are true or false, thinkable or unthinkable. Instead, what is important here is that it is possible to think or talk about them at all, that is, they must be discursively available. This is in line with the ideas of the folklorist Ebbe Schön (2009) who compares folk beliefs to language, as 'a vast reservoir of opportunities that only to a limited extent is claimed by the individual' (Schön 2009: 18).

A final comment is that when talking about the Swedish context it is necessary to mention, at least briefly, the relation of Swedes to nature. One result of the Enköping study, for example, was that nature stood out as a particularly important arena for religious experiences and thoughts. One-fifth approved having had a strong spiritual experience in nature, while, in contrast, only 11 per cent professed to having had one in a church, mosque, synagogue et cetera. In that study, therefore, spiritual experiences in nature were singled out as the experiences of a religious kind that most inhabitants of Enköping had had. (Bromander 2008: 78–80) Also among the respondents on which this study is based nature is a theme that come up as they speak of the significance of religion in their lives.

Religion as an empty signifier

Talking about religion

When Lee, a man in his late fifties, spoke of his mother, he said: 'My mother was very religious. She hated religion!' In that situation I did not get the impression that he was trying to tease me, nor did I understand his statement as a purposeful play with words. Instead, he was trying to communicate something about his mother and, by extension, about himself. At first glance, statements like Lee's might appear contradictory, however, as Lee uses the terms religion and religiosity as categories whose content can be distinguished from each other. During the interview it turned out that he has a whole set of associations to both these terms. Sometimes these associations were intertwined, but at other times, as in the quote above, they diverged and were contrasted to each other. A salient feature in this material is that the vernacular use of the term religion encompasses multiple, overlapping, and contradictory meanings simultaneously. In the interviewees' answers there are a multitude of meanings and associations: religion may be used as a synonym for a number of phenomena, such as for example faith, certain practices, particular institutions, or anything that has to do with a supranormal reality, such as ghosts or 'little folk'. In the following discussion I will analyze the interview material generated by the question 'What is the significance of religion, for you, in your life?'. The focus is therefore on the interviewees' usage of the term *religion*. This interview question targets a subject that many of them, prior to the interview, had not articulated any thoughts on, at least not in any systematic way. In accordance with the purpose of this thesis, that is, (a) to make a close reading of these particular semi-secular Swedes' ways of talking about and relating to religion, and (b) to analyze the material with a focus on incongruences, in this chapter I will explore *how* the interviewees talked about religion in the interviews. In doing so I pay close attention to how the respondents managed the concept's many meanings, and analyze how the different associations that they express are connected.

In the backdrop, leaning on Thurfjell (2015), I described that certain motifs are salient in the discourses on religion available to the respondents and hence may be used as raw material in the interviewees' vernacular speech about religion. Such a contextualization arguably concerns the content of the respondents' associations to religion, that is, an analysis of *what* the respondents were saying. In this chapter I will not explore this trajectory specifically but of course, my point of departure is that the respondents' associations to religion are part of a discursively available stock of knowledge.[1]

When in the following discussion I focus on how the respondents talk about religion, I make use of Laclau's theory of empty and floating signifiers. Singling out this aspect of Laclau's reasoning is largely an expedient in the sense that it helps me to make some general points about how the respondents relate to the concept of religion. I then continue to discuss the respondents' everyday ways of talking about religion in relation to vernacular theorizing in general. To begin with, however, I will give an example of how the respondent's related to the concept of religion in the interviews.

Lily

I was sitting in Lily's tidy kitchen. We were sipping coffee and I was nibbling on the crunchy ginger cookie she had offered me, a last remnant from the past Christmas. Lily is retired and lives on her own. She is talkative and warm in her manner and her accent indicates her local origin. She grew up a few blocks away when this area was still home mainly for people with limited economic resources.

Lily started her reflections on what religion means to her, in her life, by discussing her membership of the Church of Sweden. She explained that her membership is restricted to participating in the funerals of friends or family that have passed away, and to the occasional confirmation. But, 'religion as such', she said,

> what should I say about that? It is not as if I pray ... I don't. No more than anybody else does. You know, I pray to God that this

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[1] Compare Ann Swidler (2001) who explores how middle class Americans talk about love. She shows that they draw from a variety of understandings of love available in their cultural repertoire, choosing useful elements or strategies when they fit particular needs or circumstances.

will turn out well. [laughs] But I think a lot about life, but that really hasn't anything to do with religion. Everybody does that.

In my interpretation of this situation Lily was combing her mind for associations. It was obvious to me that she was trying to be helpful. She really wanted to have something to say about religion that I would find interesting. However, since her relation to the Church of Sweden was peripheral and she rarely engaged in practices or ponderings that she thought of as connected to a Christian framework, she quickly ran out of words. 'Religion...' she sighed.

I picked up on what she had said about 'thinking of life' and asked her to develop that. She explained that she has thoughts that have to do with age and her approaching death,

> or of those that have passed away. Like my mother. I talk to her every day. Just for fun. When there is a program about nature on the TV or when I am going to air out the bedroom. I have her photo there you see. I touch it for a moment and it is just as if she… I know she is dead but… I am not like that… but still in some strange way she is there. I think, I feel. And so is my [dead] dog.

I could hear by the tone of her voice that we were talking of something close to her heart, but from her way of looking at me hesitantly I also got the impression that she did not want to be viewed as 'some crazy person' who talks to the dead. When I encouraged her to tell me more about this aspect of her life, she started to tell me about two objects that she keeps in her home and that stand together as a sort of installation on a table in her bedroom. As she spoke of them, her manner became enthusiastic and after a while she went off to fetch them.

When Lily came back she was carrying a fairly large, rustic, ceramic sculpture of a buffalo and a small leopard in plastic. She stroked the buffalo lovingly over its ceramic mane and carefully placed the toy underneath it. She then explained that she strongly feels that they belong together: she inherited the sculpture from her mother and her grand-children forgot to tidy away the little leopard after a visit. 'It is a symbol of mine', she said, 'where I got that idea I do not know. It just arose one time'. The buffalo symbolizes her strong mother who has protected her through her difficult childhood and the leopard is Lily herself 'a little helpless creature that looks to her'. 'I just found it under the sofa and I thought "oh my God this is where I need to be". They have been standing

like this for years. Isn't that strange?' Lily exclaimed. 'But if it has some-thing to do with religion?' she continued, and made a brief contemplative pause as if to make up her mind on this matter, 'it has in a way', she then exclaimed merrily, 'isn't that fun?'. Then, as if to correct herself, she hurriedly added 'no, now we have to talk about something else or we will get stuck here', insinuating that the things she believed I would be interested in hearing had not yet been properly addressed.

Religion as a chain of equivalent associations

In the interviews the respondents give expression to a wide variety of associations in their discussion of what religion signifies to them, in their lives. But how are these disparate associations organized into the concept of religion? I will now answer that question by interpreting Lily's state-ments with the help of Laclau.

When Laclau and Moffe (1985) use the term signifier, they do it to denote a discursive center, a nodal point. Signifiers, they say, bind a wide range of elements together into a discursive formation.[2] The terms signifier and signified derive from Saussurian theory in which the signifier is understood as a form or expression, and the signified the concept or notion that it represents. In Saussurian theory primacy is given to relationships rather than things and it indicates that a sign has no intrinsic or positive value but that it may have many meanings. This relational aspect is important in Laclau and Mouffe's theorizing as well, although they depart from Saussure in order to place greater emphasis on the play of meanings and the struggle for the interpretative prerogative between different discourses.[3] Laclau gives prominence to the fact that certain signifiers are *ambiguous* in the sense that they may have either a multitude of meanings or a lack of specified meanings, and *equivocal* in the sense that they have different meanings in different contexts. These characteristics are indeed

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[2] By *element* Laclau and Mouffe refers to a sign whose meaning has not yet been fixed (1985: 110).

[3] Laclau and Mouffe are not adopting the structuralism of Saussure but rather use post-structural concepts. Post-structural critique argues against the study of language as a fundamentally non-historical (synchronic) entity. Laclau and Mouffe follow in rejecting the notion of language as a totality, as a fixed system of signs, since (in terms of the metaphor) signs cannot be fixed definitely into position – an issue that de Saussure also saw as a problem, see de Saussure 1974: 73–74. For further reading see Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 15–18, 32–37.

salient in the material on which this discussion is based where religion is sometimes used in a narrow sense but at other times understood and used in a more inclusive way. What follows from this is a concept that could be described as an enigma in the sense that it has no stable meaning that is unambiguously communicated when the term is used.

That certain signifiers are ambiguous and/or equivocal, however, is not the main issue for Laclau. Instead, he points to the 'emptiness' of certain concepts. The term *empty signifier* signals that, as far as the content of the signifier is concerned, there is a cancellation of difference between the various elements in the chain. What he means by this is that the term has been disengaged from a particular signified and has come to represent a chain of equivalent signifieds. Hence, the empty signifier no longer represents various meanings but *the chain as such*. An empty signifier is in this line of reasoning a conglomeration of many different particular links, meanings, joined together as in a chain.

Considering Lily's way of talking about religion in the light of Laclau's theory of empty signifiers puts focus on the cancellation of difference between different particulars that Lily links to the concept of religion. On the one hand, Lily expressed an understanding of religion as basically synonymous to the Church of Sweden, but on the other, she said that her relation to her deceased mother and dog also have something to do with religion. She did not, however, assert that these two aspects build on each other, nor did she explicitly connect them to each other in any other way than by association to the overarching signifier.

According to Laclau an empty signifier contains a surplus of meaning, which means that it may be both ambiguous and equivocal as the signifier has no *fixed* signified. (Laclau 1996: 36–38) There is of course a paradox in the description of an empty signifier as having a surplus of meaning. I interpret the emptiness that is referred to not as an emptiness of content but as a lack of fixation, or to put it differently – of essence. In this sense the emptiness of a signifier does not mean that it signifies nothing. Instead, it means that through the multitude of meanings it signifies nothing *in particular*. This means that since the empty signifier, in this case religion, has no fixed signified, the concept has no *specific* position within an existing system of meaning. Hence, rather than signifying something in particular, it binds the different elements together into a discursive formation. This characteristic of the empty signifier, Laclau argues, is what makes its universality fundamentally absent. The empty

signifier is 'present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence'. (Laclau 1996: 44)

What I wish to highlight here, and what becomes important later in the thesis when I aim to understand the respondents' religious self-descriptions, is the idea that religion, or other related signifiers such as Buddhism and Christianity for example, function as surfaces on which a number of different equivalent notions can be inscribed that are not necessarily compatible or have anything in common. Furthermore, just as in empty signifiers like 'freedom' or 'sisterhood' there is in many senses a promise in the signifier 'religion', like for example a promise of unity, or of salvation, of mystery and meaning.[4] These different 'promises' have their own distinct allure. They are, despite their differences, subsumed into a totality, and defined in relation to what they are not.[5]

I have described above how different meanings are linked in a chain of equivalents and as such form a totality. That said, at the same time that Lily included associations to her 'altar' and her way of living with transcendence in her everyday life into the category of religion, she seemed to doubt that this was 'correct'. After having voiced that association, she wanted to return to a subject that was more in line with her idea of what a scholar of religion might be interested in – 'proper', formal religion, that is.[6]

Thus, it seems as if the term religion (also) on a vernacular level has several meanings that are actualized depending on the situation, but perhaps more importantly that some of these meanings are thought of as being 'appropriate'. Religion is represented by an element that comes to stand for a universality (in Lily's case Lutheran Christianity and the Church of Sweden) but also, and this is where Laclau's theory is par-ticularly enlightening, that same universality is always contested by other particularities (for example the sensuous social supernatural to use Day's term, in this case speaking to dead loved ones) situated within the frame

[4] For a discussion of sisterhood as an empty signifier see Gunnarsson Payne 2006.
[5] In Laclauan theory that which is considered the counterpart or the radically 'other' at a given moment is termed the 'Constitutive outside', a term appropriated from Derrida. The content of this particular 'other' is determined in relation to the empty signifier (Laclau 1990: 17–26). As described in chapter 1, tightly interwoven with conceptualizations of religion is its discursive antagonist – the secular. Both religion and the secular are terms that are 'full', of meanings and associations, as well as 'empty', of determined and constant content.
[6] In view of the discussion on moralizing dichotomies and the inadequacy approach in the study of religion, as described (and criticized) in chapter 1, this is an anxiety that is not that far off mark.

of the empty signifier. Hence, one set of associations in particular, one link in the chain, takes on the function of representing the chain as a whole, even though at the same time there are other contradictory or inconsistent associations present. In Laclau's view no single one of the different positions in the chain of equivalence is predetermined to fulfill the role of representing the chain. However, for differing reasons, one does take on this universal function at particular times and in particular contexts, rather than another.

The internal contest that Lily's way of talking about religion illustrates ties in with another aspect of Laclau's theory, namely the workings of discourse. In Laclau's reasoning, the function of empty signifiers is connected to how ideology works within the field of collective representation. What we see is a simplification of the social field that establishes a relation of equivalence between differences (particularities) through two central operations; 'floating' and 'emptying'. Processes that, according to Laclau, must be regarded as intertwined,

> for the floating to be possible the relationship between signifier and signified has already to be a loose one – if the signifier was strictly attached to one and only one signified no floating could take place. So, the floating requires a tendential emptiness. But, in the second place, the pattern of the floating requires: 1) that the floating term is differently articulated to opposed discursive chains (otherwise there would be no floating at all); 2) that within these discursive chains the floating term functions not only as a differential component but as an equivalential one vis-à-vis all the other components of the chain. [...] So, floating a term and emptying it are two sides of the same discursive operation. (Laclau 1997: 306)

Describing a concept as an empty signifier places focus on how a plurality of meanings or identities for instance becomes unified in a collective in relation to a relatively stable border. The floating element, on the other hand, highlights the ways in which such a border is destabilized. (Laclau 2005: 133)

Floating elements

A floating signifier does not have a fixed meaning. Instead, floating signifiers are characterized by ambiguity in the sense that they may mean different things to different people, as well as to the same person at different

times and in different contexts. Moreover, they are ambiguous since they may stand for various signifieds. A floating signifier results from 'the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses interrupting each other' (Laclau 2000: 305). In the introduction I discussed, from the point of view of theorizing within the study of religion, how the borders between the religious and the secular are contested, situational and discursive.[7] I will now turn to my interview material and show how one element might 'float' between inclusion and exclusion into the empty signifier. In practice, this means that what in a particular situation and context may be included in the concept of religion, may under different circumstances or with a different focus be included in the category of secular.

Frank

Frank is a retired journalist with a keen interest in astronomy and hard science fiction. When I met him he was outgoing and jovial, enthusiastic over our shared taste in literature. When replying to the question on what religion signifies to him, in his life, Frank's initial exclamation was 'nothing at all!'[8]. Nonetheless, he immediately added that this was true 'with reservations', explaining that he himself has been both baptized and confirmed in the Church of Sweden and that his children, in turn, have continued that tradition,

> my daughter and her husband also live in this neighborhood, they are not religious either, but they baptize their children and got married in church. My wife and I were married by a priest, not in church but at his home by the altar so to speak. We are both part of the state church […]. But apart from that the church has no importance. I am completely irreligious.

Like Lily, Frank started his discussion by associating to the Church of Sweden, which in a number of ways had been part of his life. On the one hand, he described religion as completely irrelevant to him, but on the other he described having participated in a number of practices which he associated with religion. In my view, Frank was answering two questions

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[7] An insistence on pluralizing the *formations* of the secular is found in Asad 2003 for example. Also Charles Taylor stresses this point and in *The secular age* (2007) he paints the history of Christian secularism through a focus on the making of a secular subject and its unique experience in the world. Through this focus Taylor departs from any simplistic view of the secular.

[8] Inte ett smack!

and not one. The first concerned individual belief and active commitment to a religious community, and the second one concerned practices connected to a tradition that is part of a social, familial setting.[9]

Let me concentrate on the question of belief in Frank's story in order to illustrate how one element within the chain of associations may float between different discourses on religion. Frank's first reaction, where he said that religion does not mean anything for him in his life is, in my interpretation, a self-description of his (lack of) belief in something *in particular*, namely a God with which you may have a personal relationship. 'I don't have faith' he said, 'I don't have a personal God or think that God can see me. I do not think that if I were to pray to God he would hear me'. This standpoint was also echoed at the end of the quote above where he described himself as 'completely irreligious'. However, directly after having made that comment he added, in a humorous, but also puzzled tone of voice, 'I think'.

Now, this statement, 'I think', may be understood in terms of either indecisiveness or indeterminacy, which is a perspective that I explore in Chapter 6. Here, however, I will take Frank's way of discussing belief as an illustrative example of an element that transgresses and destabilizes the border between what a respondent considers to be religious views and what are secular.

Frank explained that something happened in him when he read a book by Richard Dawkins, a couple of years ago. 'I started to think that he had missed the target' Frank explained, 'I thought that religion is good, since there are so many people that are religious even though they are just as intelligent as I am.' This notwithstanding, when Frank expressed critique towards Christian beliefs, as well as 'the Church' (of Sweden) in general, he seemed almost provoked by the thought that clever people 'have faith' in what he associates with Protestant dogma. 'I despise religion' he said and explained,

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[9] As I am writing this, I am struggling not to make Frank's argument neater than it is expressed in the interview. When I look through the transcript of Frank's interview, it is full of sentences in which he first expresses a distance from belief (and/or religion), often worded strong strongly, and then ends the phrase by questioning the position he just expressed. For example he said that 'maybe there is something after death, which I ABSOLUTELY do not believe, but still' he hesitated for a moment but then added 'I am not even open to the possibility that there is something, but on the other hand this is also a belief!'

> I think it is extremely… it is the opposite of being intellectual I think. That the Church is really stupid. Even the brightest bishops, how can they have faith at all? Or say that they believe?

Hence, in the interview, Frank distanced himself both from Dawkins's new atheist position, and from faith in a personal God. All the same, as he did so, he referred to religion with reference to a specific element of the empty signifier, namely articles of faith associated with monotheistic doctrines. In the same sense, when Frank later in the interview described himself as 'atheist as hell' it is a statement uttered with reference to (lack of) faith in a particular God.

However, that is not the only meaning to the word belief that he uses. When at the beginning of the interview he described himself as 'not completely atheistic' he did so with something else in mind,

> I mean that I don't think that there is a God that takes care of us. But on the other hand, if you look at the universe maybe we were born in the big bang 15.7 billion years ago. The universe was born then and maybe we have, in our bodies, traces of this birth. An atom or something that came into being a fraction of a second after the big bang. That might be God. We are all part of the universe.

Again Frank uses the term god, but the imagery here is taken from theories within astronomy and physics, which are understood by Frank as secular scientific endeavors. 'I believe in the big bang', he said,

> I have no in-depth understanding or ability to understand the reasoning of the scientists. […] Even so, I believe it. It is like Christianity or any other religion. I believe in the universe!

Implicitly Frank's reasoning is in consonance with a broader definition of religion. When Frank considers belief as having faith in something beyond our intellectual reach, believing in the big bang is regarded as equivalent to any other belief and thus included in the category religion.

Now, what does this example tell me about the ways religion is employed as a signifier by the respondents? In the Laclauan logic of empty signifiers the different links are constituted (as religion) in relation to each other. This means that if the meaning of an element shifts, other parts of the chain will be affected. It is in this sense that 'floaters', such as belief in

the example highlighted here, destabilize the borders between the religious and the secular.

Empty and floating

So, even though the empty signifier functions (1) as a stabilizer of floating signifiers through a totalizing and uniting of the incomplete, inconsistent multiple, it also (2) detotalizes that universality through its absent fullness. This means that if a composition of a chain of equivalence contains contradiction it is contested from within. This destabilization opens up for inclusions and exclusions (Laclau 2005: 129).

In political theory the most obvious examples of an empty and floating signifier would be concepts like 'democracy', 'freedom', or 'justice'. In the study of religion we may consider for example 'Islam', Buddhism' or 'religion' as being such surfaces for the inscription of diverse meanings that may or may not have something in common. For example, Buddhism may for the same respondent signify a number of different things, such as criticism of societal narcissism and a call for altruism *and* patriarchal injustice; for another it may signify the act of meditation, *and* beliefs in karma. These disparate meanings share the same denominator even though they may be mutually contradictory. Further, they may (but do not have to) be called religion.[10] This means, in practice, that when an individual refers to the empty signifier 'Buddhism' further investigation is needed for its meaning to become clear. This, as I will show in Chapter 5, has consequences for how the respondents describe themselves in relation to different religious categories.

That said, according to Laclau and Mouffe the basis on which equivalences are established is historical, and thus contingent, articulation. This implies, at the very least, that the contextual availability of elements limits what elements may be articulated together. (Norval 2007: 81) In relation to the material, this means of course that the meanings these people ascribe to the concept of religion must exist in their repertoire as part of the discursively available stock of knowledge.

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[10] This is not to be read as a as a commitment to either side in the 'objectivism vs nominalism' debate for example. I am referring to articulations at the level of discourse.

Constructing religion by adding links to the chain

Laclau's theory has been criticized for being overly formalistic and for missing out on the messiness of what goes on at the level of the individual. One example is that Laclau does not go into detail on what happens in between the different elements in the chain or how it is created.[11] As Norval (2007: 80) points out, the creation of equivalences occurs through processes of articulation. These processes draw together elements that do not necessarily belong together and make it possible to define the resulting totality against that which it is not. I will now proceed to direct attention to the process of creating equivalences in order to describe and analyze the relation between the different meanings associated with the concept of religion. I do this through a focus on the process that I here call *vernacular theorizing*.

Below I will discuss the ways in which the respondents ascribed meanings to the concept of religion. Building on the findings of scholars in the field of lay theory studies (the social psychologist Adrian Furnham (1988) in particular), I show that they do this (1) inconsistently and/or by combining incommensurable meanings; (2) by generalizing different elements of the signifier in a way that opens up for inclusions, but that does not serve to systematize the particulars into a coherent whole; and (3) by ascribing meaning pragmatically with regard to what is at stake.

Vernacular theories on religion

In our everyday conversations we are, more often than not, amateurs in the fields we are discussing: we discuss politics without deeper knowledge of political science, cars without technological skills, weather without meteorological training and so on. These unsorted associations and experiences are, when they are articulated, what I will here call *vernacular theories*. A vernacular theory, then, is an informal, everyday, or lay explanation and understanding of a specific subject. For example, when I, no expert in the field of economy, need to decide where and how to invest my savings and explain the reasons for my choice, I am governed by different (sometimes vague) ideas about how global and personal economies work. This vernacular theory of economics will then either influence me or help me to explain my choice between different available

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[11] See for example Norval 2007: 83–84.

options: to buy funds or stocks, to use interest free banks, or to keep my money under my mattress.

The term *theory* has a number of related meanings. When I speak of *vernacular theories on religion* it is the totality of the interviewees' associations – as these are disclosed in the interviews – that is meant. It is the ways that they speak of and relate the different particulars of the empty signifier to each other. Hence, it is not the particularities within that theory, the different links in the chain: instead, it is the implicit or explicit theorizing on how the different associations to religion are linked. This means that even though a person might express a thought through explanation of, for example, how religious authority is maintained it is not such theories that are discussed here.

The connections between vernacular and academic theories are complex in the sense that they may overlap, run parallel, or influence each other. They may even compete for interpretative prerogative. In his book *Crossing and dwelling,* the scholar of religion Thomas Tweed describes theory as itinerary. He argues that 'theories are simultaneously proposals for a journey, representations of a journey, and the journey itself'. (Tweed 2006: 9) Central to his argument is that neither the theorist nor the theorized are static. Tweed's approach, and mine, is locative and per-spectival. It builds on the assumption that,

> […] all theories are situated and all theories emerge from within categorical schemes and social contexts. It only make sense to talk about reality-for-us, and questions about what's real or true make sense only within a socially constructed cluster of categories and an always-contested set of criteria for assessment. (Tweed 2006: 16)

Accepting this constructionist position means firstly that we are all influenced by, and influence, our surrounding discourses, and, secondly, that we are engulfed by the paradigm that we are part of creating. Thus, what all theories (both academic and vernacular) have in common is that they are situated in intellectual, institutional, ideological, and political contexts.

Arguably, the situational characteristic of academic theories of religion is true also for the interviewees' vernacular theorizing. Vernacular theories, in the sense that I use the word here, do not wait readily on the brink of our consciousness to be brought forth in a moment of need. Instead, vernacular theory is often something that happens – it is constructed as we speak and

reflect upon a subject matter, with a hotchpotch of influences as its source. These types of previously unarticulated vernacular theories are therefore processual. Consider Lily's story as described above as one example. Lily is actively articulating her own vernacular theory of religion in our meeting. It is creatively constructed by her when she is confronted with the question that I am posing. Lily's initial response was to link religion to the Protestant tradition in general and to the Church of Sweden in particular. However, after developing her thoughts on her own everyday practices, she included also her relation to her (deceased) mother and dog, an aspect that she did not link to a Christian tradition, into her theory of which expressions are relevant in relation to the term religion.

Vernacular theories on religion of this kind arise when we are asked, or when we ask ourselves, to articulate our thoughts on a subject. In everyday life, our being and acting in the world does not usually require us to articulate or have a systematically organized understanding of a subject. Instead, vernacular theories on a particular subject are often constructed when needed. It is in the process of articulation that theorizing happens. This means that when I am asked to make a decision, a comment, or a reflection in a field in which I am not an expert, and in which I have not previously articulated an understanding, I navigate by a vernacular theory that is created at the moment. Now, by this I do not mean to suggest that the interviewees' ideas are taken out of thin air. Rather, what I mean to say is that people systematize their understandings and experiences in the situated moment. Hence, their vernacular theories are formed situationally in a way that I understand here as connecting different associative threads together – like links in a chain.

The insight that vernacular theories in this sense are formed in a responsive way is crucial when it comes to understanding the process of articulation that happens as the interviewees talk about religion. The interview situation incites the construction of vernacular theory by providing the space, and the incentive – understood as a combination of pressure and opportunity – for vernacular theory making.

In addition, neither scientific nor vernacular theories are monolithic categories. Even though all people navigate by (most often vernacular) theories, their shape, content, level of articulation, frequency of application, range of applicability, degree of universality, and level of endorsement may vary across population and contexts. (Levy et al. 2006: 12; Shils 1957; Stausberg 2009: 18) It is in the midst of this manifold range of

theories within different societal arenas that the empty signifiers are constituted in practice.

Vernacular theorizing as ambiguous, incoherent, and inconsistent

Even though to certain extent vernacular and academic theories work the same way and may resemble each other in structure, function, and content, there are, according to Furnham (1988), significant differences.[12] When people who have not formally studied, read extensively about, or come into contact with the topic in question, their 'common sense' theories differ significantly from 'scientific' explanations and theories (Furnham 1988: 6). In this material this difference is particularly striking when it comes to consistency and ambition to achieve coherence. Furnham argues that in academic theorizing scholars try to make pro-positions that 'fit together' and that are not mutually contradictory. Vernacular theories, in contrast to such an ideal, are often ambiguous, incoherent, and inconsistent. This means that in vernacular theory 'antonymous presuppositions are simultaneously held by people who may be unaware of, or simply not concerned by, contradiction.'(Furnham 1988: 208)

One example of when different associations ascribed to religion are regarded as antonyms can be found in discussions on what 'true' religion is. That is, in normative discussions of what religion *should* and *should not* be. Such normative claims are frequent in the material, particularly when other peoples' religiosity is concerned. Consider Ingvar, for example, who used to work as an editor before he retired. He does not mind 'Islam', which a couple of other respondents said that they did, but in the interview he objected to customs that he described seeing in a Hindu temple in India: 'I thought, "help"', he said, 'all these rituals and poking and throwing butter on some image of god […] it feels super-stitious'. Ingvar here gave voice to a criticism of religion that targets a specific form of religiosity, namely public displays of religion and ritualistic elements that he views as devoid of meaning. 'Rituals and doctrines are supposed to be comprehended intellectually', he added. Superstition, therefore, is contrasted to reason. Hindu rituals are in this

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[12] In *Lay theories: Everyday understanding of problems in the social sciences* (1988) Furnham discusses vernacular theories in a number of areas, such as common sense and worldview, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, economics, statistics, law, and education.

line of reasoning 'bad' religious expressions to use Orsi's terminology. Nevertheless, by association Ingvar includes them into the empty signifier religion, even though it is a form of religion that does not fit his idea of what religion ought to be.

Another example is the normative position of giving prerogative to feeling rather than doctrine as central to religion. This is a recurring theme in the material in the sense that many respondents are critical of definitions of religion that are based on beliefs associated with organized religious institutions. In contrast to such definitions, 'feeling' is often proposed as a better way of telling what 'true' religion is.

In the narrative of Ava, a nurse in her late 30s who in our first meeting was almost nine months pregnant, and of Johanna a medical student in her mid-twenties, for example, religious expressions that focus on doctrine are discarded as irrelevant, and there is a polemical edge to their statements about the importance of feelings. In the material as a whole the link between feeling and religion is often, but not consistently, accompanied by criticism of a perceived focus on official dogmas and theology.

Ava & Johanna

Ava (sometimes) considers herself Christian by tradition. She explained that she thinks that belief or faith might be beneficial to people. 'I think many people would be lost if they didn't have anything to believe in', she said, 'that's the feeling I get, and I also think that many who are alone may find companionship there'. Ava herself, however, neither believes (in Christian doctrine) nor is actively involved in a religious community that she feels part of or has friends in. But there are other aspects of Christianity she finds attractive. 'I like churches', she said, and continued:

> I like to go into churches and I think there is a quiet and nice atmosphere there. I don't mind going to a service and I have nothing against… I mean I have nothing AGAINST the Church [read: the Church of Sweden]. But I don't believe. I baptized the children for example. I read 'The Children's Bible' to them when they were small, and they went to activities for children in church (kyrkans barntimmar). I thought they should be a little more informed about it so to speak. Now they've grown up and have different opinions about it. But, I think it is a good alternative. You know, overall, religions and such.

Apart from the understanding that religion involves beliefs communicated through texts – a very Lutheran notion that is also emphasized in Swedish religious education – the understanding that religion is something that may give you a sense of community and belonging also emerges in Ava's story. In this sense a Christian identity is part of the heritage that she herself was given as a child and that she, in her turn, wants to communicate to her children.

Ava rejected the existence of any kind of god, however. Instead she raised another aspect as central to religion in her life, namely a 'feeling' of, for example, connectedness and love. For Ava this feeling is related to celebrations of holidays and 'life-rites' (such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals) in the sense that they carry meaning, regardless of whether that is articulated or not. 'If you were to take away all the traditions and everything, it would feel very empty' she said.

> Religion is important. Nobody can say that it doesn't mean anything [...] In some sense, even though you don't believe, it isn't just traditions. You'd be fooling yourself if you say that you are anti-everything and then you celebrate Christmas. [...]There is something there, isn't there? That makes people happy.

But to say that there is 'something else' is, in Ava's view, not the same as saying that there is something suprahuman, rather, she argued, that 'something' is in oneself. She continued by conflating belief with feeling and singling out feeling as the central concern of religion. 'What you have and what you...believe, that is a feeling, and that feeling is bigger than', here she paused looking for words, then she put her hands together and looked up to the sky as if in prayer before continuing, 'I think it is strange to have a god that you look to like that, but I think that many need something – a feeling – to cope with the society we live in'.

Now, Ava did not talk of this 'feeling' as something completely distinct from institutionalized religion. For example she said that in her own life she gets this 'religious feeling' by going into churches and feeling a sense of peace and quiet there. Even though she only very rarely actually enters a church, when she does it feels as if she leaves 'the rest outside'. Thus, the 'feeling' that Ava spoke of may be invoked in church buildings (and also in mosques or temples that she has visited during vacations). It is, however, not confined to these sites but also, Ava explained, present in everyday life, both in little details – like picking blueberries in the forest

– or the life-changing events – like giving birth. Ava pointed towards the Advent Star hanging in her living room window (this interview took place at Christmas time) and explained that 'sitting in the dark together, looking at the star in the window, it gives a feeling'. And it is this feeing, deeply entangled with a sense of connectedness and love for her family, which she identified as central to religion.

The notion that feeling, rather than doctrine or theology, is the core of religion came up explicitly also in the interview with Johanna. Johanna was reluctant to call herself a believer in the sense of believing in certain dogma or scripture that govern your way of being in the world; instead she argued that religion is actually about something else. When I asked her to develop that idea she said,

> For me it is more like you sometimes feel that something else takes over. Like, now something is different; now something is more important. When somebody dies for example, then it is not… it has nothing to do with something that is written somewhere, but it is just a feeling.

Having said this, she turned around and pointed towards the refrigerator while saying 'that feeling is much stronger than when you open the refrigerator and see that… oh look… I can have a glass of milk'. By this, I take it, Johanna wanted to say that the feeling she speaks of is something out of the ordinary. This is an association that Ava also expressed. The feelings they want to pinpoint may be about connectedness and love, as in the case of Ava, or of heightened importance, as in the case of Johanna. The point here is not, however, what the feelings are about, but rather, to show that for some respondents personal experiences that are not consistently or explicitly connected to any religious dogma or ritual are important for their understanding of what the concept of religion means.

In the academic tradition in which I am situated, the skill of separating the insider's perspective from the outsider's is valued. (McCutcheon 2005/1999) Typically, normative claims of how people within a certain tradition should go about their business, or whether somebody is more Muslim, Hindu, or Christian than another are considered irrelevant. In the respondents' vernacular theorizing, however, maintaining distinctions between insiders' and outsiders' perspectives seems to be of less concern. The idea of framing religion on the basis of a moralizing dichotomy seems quite unquestioned and used as a framing criterion in the

same sense as more descriptive components that draw on content or function.

In Ava's and Johanna's stories I mentioned a polemical edge in order to show how different associations ascribed to the concept of religion may be at odds in an individual's theorizing. However, for many respondents, a discrepancy between different expressions of what they understand as religion is not necessarily something they describe as a problem or a conflict in their own lives. One concrete example that connects to the discussion above would be that not everybody, describes 'religion as feeling' as conflicting with 'religion as dogma'. Often, associations that fall outside an understanding of religion that is church oriented do not form part of a narrative that is explicitly negative or opposed to organized (church-oriented) religion. They are, nonetheless, often referred to as something distinct from it, even though there might be no perceived tension at the individual level. Let me give an example:

Marianne

Marianne is in her late 40s and works as an administrator at a small counseling center, together with her husband Olle. Marianne's husband, of whom she speaks with great love and respect, is a practicing, confessed Christian, and Marianne too identifies with many aspects of Christian tradition and belief; however, in contrast to her husband she is open to other views of life as well. 'I think it is all the same' she said and continued

> I think that this feeling, that some people call spiritual – the feeling that there is something beyond me and you and our consciousness – people have different words for it. From the little that I have read about anthropology, those rocks and sacred trees that grow in strange ways or the sun god that people venerated thousands of years ago, [I conclude that] people have a need for something more than just 'us', and we try to understand it in different ways.

The reasoning Marianne gave expression to here fits in with an idea of a religious essence that religionists in the tradition of Schleiermacher – both within and outside religious traditions – have advocated since the 19th century. With this idea as her point of departure, Marianne does not want to exclude practices or ideas only on the grounds that they are not Christian.

Through her family Marianne has heard stories about, for example, how her grandmother's deceased husband had the habit of coming back to give his wife advice in the evenings, or how the old farmhand who helped build the family cottage years ago communicated with his mother from 'the other side'. Even though Marianne expresses skepticism about these stories through comments like 'whether this is imagination or not can be discussed', she still seems open to the possibility that supranormal things like these may happen. She is also open to the idea that these 'things' may be interpreted in ways that she does not understand as 'Christian'.

However, as Marianne tells her story, she expresses awareness of a distinction between what she perceives as a way of doing religion that is sanctioned by Christianity and another broader, and more inclusive religious stance. As an example she tells me about some books on Spiritualism, which she had acquired through her grandmother's involvement in the movement in the 1940s. When her husband saw these books he rejected them as 'occult' and as something that they should not keep in their home, since he did not see them as compatible with his Christian commitment. Marianne got rid of the books, but she is not as sure as her husband that these books talk of 'bad' spiritual forces – 'that', she said, 'depends on whether they do humanity good or bad'.

Marianne explained that she thinks that 'it does us all good to feel that there is something more than us. Something that is not blind chance but that there is a force, you could call it energy or love or something, that intervenes sometimes'. She described how in the course of her life she has had many experiences that tell her of such an active force.

> Like when I get the feeling that I ought to do something, but then do not act on it, then it goes very wrong. But when I follow this helping hand in Christianity and listen to it, then I have a more pleasant and even life than if I put my own will and needs [in the center].

Marianne knows, of course, that her experiences contradict both secular explanations that rest on the rationale of the natural sciences, and the Christian perspective that her husband represents for her. However, the experiences she has had in her life seem to confirm what she learned from the stories of her mother and grandmother – that there is indeed something more than that which meets the eye. Marianne's example illustrates

a kind of vernacular theorizing that is not particularly concerned with the issue of what links in the chain are combinable in the view of others.

Generalizations in vernacular theorizing

Another aspect of vernacular theories that Furnham points out and that is relevant in relation to the material here is that there seems to be a tendency for people not to generalize on the basis of vernacular theories. The practical consequence of this lack of generalization, Furnham argues, is the possibility of using different opposing theories pragmatically at the same time, or, for that matter, one theory in opposite ways. (Furnham 1988: 1–7)

On the one hand, Furnham's point seems to be corroborated by the fact that positive connotations to religion that the interviewees express when talking of their own personal experiences (for instance, the idea that religion is 'a feeling, a sense of peace and quiet') are not necessarily understood as applicable to other people's religiosity. On the contrary, other people's religiosity – or religion in a more general sense – is often associated with dogmatic beliefs, 'power' or 'war'.[13]

On the other hand, even though the interviewees in this study did not generalize their experiences to include a perceived 'other', they *do* generalize in other ways. I discussed above how Frank generalized belief understood as having faith in something perceived as not empirically verifiable. This type of generalization happens in the interview material when religion is vernacularly understood in the following three ways:

(1) if religion is understood to encompass systems of belief that cannot be verified by the individual as empirically true, any such beliefs may be included in the category; belief in the big bang, belief in oneself, or belief 'in something else'.

(2) if religion is understood in terms of culture and continuity, celebrating Christmas and/or Eid becomes a 'religious' celebration even though there is no strong affiliation to either of the religious traditions in question.

(3) if religion is an emotional state related to a feeling of connectedness, being in love, sitting in the sofa with your family looking at an

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[13] Of course, this taps into the grand narrative that I pointed out in the backdrop, namely one that speaks of Swedish progress and modernity. Religion in this discourse is depicted as something for the Other.

Advent Star, or talking to your dead mother are understood as religious activities or states of mind.

This does not mean, however, that such an understanding – for example that belief is a central feature of religion – is present in all their associations to religion. On the contrary, it is common, for example, in the material to talk about religion both as belief *and* as social belonging without references to belief. This means that generalizations serve as an including mechanism, but not as a means of systematizing the respondent's associations into a coherent whole.

Drawing comfortably from different analytical levels at the same time is recurrent in the respondents' way of theorizing religion. They often talked of religion at an individual, group or societal level simultaneously. Their associations were also often leveled in the sense that a particular statement was connected to a particular circumstance, and not generalized beyond that.

Furthermore, the respondents described religion with reference to different descriptive aspects, for example by drawing both on content and function. Associations that referred to content were for instance beliefs, tradition or relationships to deceased persons. But these aspects of religion were also spoken of as purposes of religion.

This was particularly salient in Anna's way of talking about religion. Anna was in her mid-thirties and on parental leave from her work in a bank when I met her. In her vernacular theorizing the functional aspect of religion(s) emerged. She said that when she thinks of religion she immediately associates to the Church of Sweden. 'That kind or religiosity', she said, 'has a lot to do with a sense of belonging with other people'. Here religion, as thought of in relation to the Church of Sweden, gave her a sense of social security and comfort in times of need, 'But', she continued, 'religion for me also has to do with war and such things. If you look at the Middle East I think that religious aspects have an influence'. In this last sense, religion, as a general term, (or possibly Islam in particular), works as an impetus for war and disagreement. 'Religion' therefore has both a constructive and a destructive functionality in Anna's vernacular theorizing of religion.

The practical aspect of vernacular theorizing

Furnham argues that where many scientific theories strive to be explicit and formal, lay theories rarely give expression to such an endeavor. On

the contrary, they rely on tacit, non-specified assumptions. He argues that most often people are not aware in their lay theorizing of the sociopolitical, economic, and philosophical traditions or paradigms that constitute the origin of their explanations. (Furnham 1988: 3) With focus on the material in this study it is true that the respondents do not typically reflect on the origin of their associations, in terms of 'sociopolitical, economic, and philosophical traditions or paradigms'. However, several did mention immediate sources of influence or producers of knowledge, such as family, media, or religious education in school. Marcus, for one, told me how religious education in school has influenced his idea of religion in one particular sense:

> You're raised in a secular society where religion is a subject in school where crazy old men, thousands of years ago, said strange things. I have a really strange impression of the Church [of Sweden]. And the Church is what most clearly stands for religion in Sweden.

In this quote Marcus expressed an impression that religion, as it is taught in Swedish religious education, stands for institutional religion, specifically the Church of Sweden, and that it is something that modern people have outgrown, something outdated and strange. This is but one of the many meanings of the term that Marcus raised, but in relation to this particular aspect of the signifier he connected it to what he saw as a secular critique of religion relayed through Swedish religious education.

A central point here is that the purpose of giving the sources of one's statements is different in vernacular and academic theorizing. In vernacular theorizing it has nothing to do with formal meticulousness, instead it has to do with verification and validation. This means that people do not look for interpretations or references that contradict their position or statement but for reasons that strengthen the position they have currently taken.[14] Let me give an example from the material.

Jonas

Jonas expressed many and strong opinions on religion. His first comment on what religion means was that it is 'crowd control in order to control people's thinking'. In his view this has to do with his belief that 'everything in life is energy'. He explained that learning to master that energy is vital

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[14] Compare Jonathan Haidt 2012.

because, as he put it, 'if you can steer and control that energy, you can do anything. People only use 10 per cent of their brain capacity, and if you can learn to use 20 per cent and in that way steer energy, you can control people in either positive or negative ways'.

When Jonas spoke of his own experiences at one of Sathya Sai Baba's ashrams in India, he used his belief in 'energy' to explain what he felt when the guru walked by him, 'it was like an energy field', he explained, 'and that is when I got this idea that if you have 20 000 people focusing on you, then all their power of thought is on you. That is really energy! If you can soak it up you must get stronger by it'. Thus, Jonas's explanation arose as a result of an immediate need to understand something of importance in his life. Jonas connected religion, as an overarching concept, to religious groups, with particular reference to Sai Baba's ashram, and later in the interview, the Church of Sweden. Religion, in this sense, came to stand for belonging, power, charisma, and 'crowd control'.

Throughout the two interviews, Jonas returned to his idea that energy exists as an underlying force between people. However, this belief comes back in different variations depending on the subject matter at hand. When he spoke of experiencing the presence of deceased persons in moments of need, it was not the idea of energy as a source of control that stood at the center. Instead, his belief in energy explained an experience of problem solving, 'if I find the solution myself or if someone else is there, I don't know', Jonas said. 'But, all the same, my body gets warm and I get a sensation of wellbeing'. He fell silent to illustrate the calm he would feel at such moments. 'Then', he continued, 'it just comes', snapping his fingers, 'you get it. You go out there and you make it. My colleagues were like, wow, that is great'. Here he added, in an enthusiastic voice, 'Energy again! […] Presence of energy. Reincarnation'. One way of understanding the exclamation 'energy again!' is that Jonas's belief in energy was validated through interpretations of a range of experiences and sensations.

The social psychologists Shery R. Levy, Chi-Yue Chiu and Ying-Yi Hong (2006), point out that verification as a characteristic of vernacular theory is linked to its purpose:

> Whereas formal [scientific] theories are important epistemic tools scientists use to approximate the truth, lay [vernacular] theories are phenomenological constructs used for everyday sense making. Accordingly, lay theories need not be true or even easily testable;

their role in providing a perception of truth seems most important. (Levy et al. 2006: 7)

Levy et al. emphasize a self-serving nature of vernacular theories, whose purpose is to improve self-esteem, provide a framework to understand new facts, and ensure group solidarity. They also claim that vernacular theories do not necessarily rely on conventional logic: rather, they have psychological functions with a focus on the individual who expresses them.

Now, it is not the purpose of this thesis, or this chapter for that matter, to investigate the psychological functions of vernacular theorizing, hence, I will not speculate on this issue. Instead, let me point out that the respondents relate to religion in a particular situation. When they were asked to discuss different phenomena that they associate to the concept of religion they did so based on their own life experiences. Consider, for example, when Anna talked about the trouble she had had when renovating her apartment. In the quote below she was referring to a conversation she had recently had with a friend:

> She is from Egypt and we were talking about the evil eye and such things, because we have had some bad luck while renovating this apartment. Then I said that, "I wonder if we have the evil eye". So she asked, because she was going down to Egypt, if she should bring home one of those symbols against the evil eye. I said that "that would be good". So even though I do not really believe it, I can still consider some of it. I mean, it might exist. Maybe there are spirits and such. Then it is good to keep in with them in case they exist. But it is not as if I sit down to think about it, or pray to something, but I am open to it – so to speak.

Anna's approach to this aspect of religion was pragmatic and closely tied to practical matters in her own life.

A note of concern

Before I conclude what I have said in this chapter, let me express a concern that I have been grappling with throughout the process of thinking about how the respondents relate and talk about the concept of religion. This is linked to the way I think of the respondents' associations as related to the concept of religion even though the respondents themselves have not consistently interpreted those associations as 'religious'.

The question is whether the move to place the multitude of associations articulated by the respondents under the same conceptual roof is in fact religiosizing them, or making the connection to the concept of religion stronger than intended by the respondents. Eagerness to be of assistance among the respondents, as I intimated when discussing Lily's way of talking in relation to the question posed to her, may have prompted the respondents to reach beyond the boundaries of what they may themselves, in other circumstances or in the privacy or their own reflections, think of as religion.

Of course, the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the concept in the situated moment that the interview is are in part the outcome of choices made with regard to method, such as using an unstructured interview, the particular phrasing of the question. 'What is the significance of religion, for you, in your life? – and of considering all the material generated by that initial question as relevant and part of the field of study. Furthermore, the fact that there has been scope for complexity and multiplicity has certainly had an impact on what material was generated.

In response to the concern that I might be religiosizing the respondents associations, my answer is that saying that a phenomenon or a particular association to religion falls under the same conceptual roof is not the same thing as saying that it *is* religion in all circumstances. In Laclau's theorizing nothing *is* in essence anything. The focus in the analysis offered in this chapter lies not on discerning what religion really is, but on how the different associations voiced by the respondents are connected in terms of discourse.

Concluding discussion

I have described the ways the respondents talked about religion in the light of Laclau's theory of 'empty' and 'floating' signifiers. Inspired by his ideas I view the concept of religion at the vernacular level as a signifier representing a chain of associations, which is one of many ways of explaining the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to this concept. Laclau theorizes not only about the borders of a concept but also the relations between the many meanings ascribed to it. In his view they must be regarded as equivalent particulars that all are part of the discursive struggle for the interpretative prerogative. This way of theorizing opens

up for both inclusions and exclusions and hence avoids any static view of the concept.

Furthermore, in this chapter I have explored the relations between the links in the chain of equivalence by means of analyzing these relations as part of what I have called the interviewees' vernacular theories of religion, meaning the process by which they relate the different associations to each other. I attempted to show how the different particulars were (not) connected to each other, and why they need not be.

Using findings within lay theory studies as a stepping stone I investigated the respondents' vernacular theories on religion, keeping in mind that they were not produced to be presented formally, but were articulated in a particular situation, prompted by my questioning. In the respondents' vernacular theorizing on religion particularities were rarely generalized but were only talked about pragmatically in reference to particular situations. Generalizations were however made to broaden the scope of the term by including phenomena through association. The respondents' vernacular theorizing on religion contained flexibility in terms of different contradictory statements, explanations, and under-standings of religion. When relating to religion the respondents pick and choose between many different associations.

I understand the respondents' use of the term religion as processual in the interview situation. However, even though they do not have a prepared script to answer my particular question they do have access to ready-made answers to questions about religion available to them discursively. For example, the motif of Sweden and Swedish people as secular and distinct from the religious Other (despite membership in the Church of Sweden, engagement in life-rite religiosity, or belief in 'something else'), as described in the backdrop. I have not explicitly analyzed the content of their associations here but, as is clear in the examples I have cited, the respond-ents' articulations are indeed connected to content available in their stock of knowledge. They talked about religion, for example, in terms of power, comfort, belief, practice, institutions, the personal, feelings, paranormal realities, communality, love, family, and war.

What is emphasized in this chapter is that in the respondents' use of it, the term religion was highly elastic. In my interpretation, it is in the process of vernacular theorizing on religion that the respondents add different aspects to the chain of associations, and thereby to the concept of religion in the vernacular sense. They do this without regard for systematization, generalizations, or logical coherence. Instead, in this

articulation of an associative chain the respondents link analytical levels, different descriptive characteristics, and normative statements under the same conceptual roof, without necessarily accentuating a difference between them in relation to what pertains in the category of religion. They are not bothered by inconsistencies since their theories are primarily pragmatic constructions. This chain of equivalence is defined as a totality by that which it is not – that is, in relation to the equally contested concept of 'the secular'.

This way of understanding how the term religion is employed vernacularly lays the ground for the analysis of both religious self-descriptions and of interpretations of experiences, issues that I will turn to in the two following chapters.

The wheel of religious identification

> When we rethink what is religion, we need also to reconsider our conceptions of religious identity and commitment. Perhaps the borders of religious identity and commitment are as contested, shifting, and malleable as the definitional boundaries of religions. (McGuire 2008: 187)

In the quote above McGuire argues that as part of the approach to the study of religion that focuses on the social realities of everyday religious life, scholars of religion need to direct attention towards religious identity and commitment. Identity is, of course, a hotly debated topic within a variety of fields – for example philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and sociology – and discussions take place on various levels of analysis, with different purposes and ends. The material described and analyzed in this thesis does not provide a basis on which it is possible to discuss for example questions of ontology 'who we are', perception, 'how we see ourselves', or performance, 'what we do in order to convey who we are'. Instead, what this chapter offers is a way of thinking about religious identity within the context of discourse.

My focus in this chapter is how the respondents talk about themselves in relation to different religious designations. As I analyze how they describe themselves I will discuss their vernacular discourse on religious identity, building on the discursive framework used so far, and on the dynamic process of constructing discursive identities. Drawing on discourse theory I use the term identity to refer to the discursive position that the respondents actualize when describing themselves as Christian, Buddhist, Witch, religious et cetera. Identification, in turn, refers to the intersubjective process of identity formation.

As I stated at the beginning of this thesis, people may combine ideas, practices and identities in ways that seem to defy conventional logic. In this chapter, I analyze two findings in the material that are of this kind: Firstly, the fact that when the respondents were asked to describe themselves in relation to different religious categories, they often identified with several simultaneously – although to varying extents – and

secondly the fact that these self-descriptions were unstable in the sense that in the majority of cases they had changed from the first interview to the second.

The discussion here relies on material gathered in the first and second round of interviews in combination with the results of the survey question targeting religious self-descriptions posed at the end of each interview – 'To what degree do you regard yourself as…Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, a believer, spiritual, religious, a seeker, atheist, doubter, agnostic, other.'

This question is a conflated version of questions targeting traditional affiliation ('belonging to') and religious self-description ('see myself as'). The sociologist of religion Anders Sjöborg (2013) discusses the phrasing of such questions in relation to two surveys of young people and religion carried out in Sweden. The first is the 'Religion as resource?' project [1] led by Mia Lövheim and Jonas Bromander and the second is Sjöborg's own study within the framework of the project called 'Silence, conflict or exoticism? Views of religion and religious education among senior high school students and teachers in multicultural Sweden'. In these two surveys the respondents were asked both the question 'To what extent do you regard yourself as belonging to…?' (with the alternatives Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Other – which?)[2], and 'To what extent do you regard yourself as…?' (with the alternatives Religious, Seeker, Believer, Spiritual, Atheist). Here the respondents were asked to give their answer on a scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'completely'. Sjöborg invokes two arguments for using a graded scale, as in these questions. The first is that 'an ordinal or interval variable rather than a binary either/or-position can better capture the positions young people (and people in general) today have towards religion.'(Sjöborg 2013: 194) The second is that questions of this kind enable other types of analysis. In the present study, as was the case in the Enköping study, these two questions were conflated into one concerning self-description. Hence, the categories 'Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Other – which?' were also included in that question.[3]

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[1] Reported in Lövheim & Bromander 2012.

[2] In Sjöborg's study 'Buddhism or Hinduism' was a mixed item, which was not the case in 'Religion as a resource?', the Enköping study, or the questionnaire used in this study.

[3] For a discussion on how to make sense of surveys and censuses regarding religious self-identification see Day & Lee 2014.

The fact that my thesis is based on longitudinal data collection offers an opportunity to investigate not only how the respondents relate to different signifiers at a particular point in time, but also to compare the answers given on one occasion with those given on another. In this way it provides an opportunity to spot changes in how people speak of themselves in relation to certain signifiers that scholars of religion often talk about as part of our field of research. Furthermore, as the survey was preceded by an interview it is also possible to discuss the answers to the questionnaire in relation to the material generated in the interview.

Changing multiplicities

When the respondents were asked the question: 'To what degree do you regard yourself as…Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, other?' they frequently stated that they regarded themselves, to various degrees, as belonging to one or more of these categories. Moreover, they also described themselves to varying degrees as 'spiritual, religious', a 'believer, seeker, atheist, doubter, and/or, agnostic'.

Among the key respondents eight out of twelve identified to some degree with more than one religious designation. In most of these cases they described themselves as Buddhist and Christian, but Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Tao and Sai Baba devotee, witch and 'other' are also religious self-descriptions that were claimed by the respondents. Most often it was a mild statement in that they described themselves as 'somewhat' or 'moderately' Christian, Buddhist, Hindu et cetera, but there were also some respondents who described themselves as 'considerably' or 'completely' Christian, Jewish, other, witch, Sai Baba devotee. In order to illustrate how this multiplicity of self-descriptions, and their palimpsestic character, is expressed in the material, I will begin by showing how one of the respondents, Johanna, spoke of herself in terms of the different religious designations she was asked to relate to.

Johanna

When I first met Johanna she had recently returned from a holiday in Thailand. She looked relaxed and tanned. The apartment she was staying in used to be her grandmother's. Her grandmother, a survivor of the holocaust, had recently passed away so Johanna and her boyfriend had a brief respite from the demanding task of finding sublets in Stockholm,

while the estate was settled. Johanna was a law student at the time with just about a year of her studies remaining. She gave the impression of being confident and calm. In response to the question about what religion signifies for her, in her life, she started by saying that she was born into a Jewish family on her mother's side – which, she said, makes her Jewish. She associated this identity with her grandmother who, according to Johanna, was the one who observed the religious rules with most regularity in her family. 'My grandmother' she said, 'didn't believe excessively but was still faithful to her religion, so to speak. She did what you were supposed to do. We celebrated the important holidays and so forth'.

Johanna then went on to speak of her understanding of religion (read Judaism) and of religious belief.

> So, for me it is more cultural that it is a belief [*tro*] – religion [that is]. It feels rather important, since it is a small group, in some ways to remember a little of what one is obliged to do. But I do not believe in any scripture, not the Jewish nor any other. However, I think it is hard to live a life completely devoid of any belief in something other than the completely mundane. What it is – that I am more uncertain of.

Thus, when speaking of religion in terms of Judaism, Johanna referred to cultural and social aspects, and to practices such as celebrating religious holidays. In this reasoning 'believing', as believing in a certain scripture, is not a necessary requisite for being 'faithful' to a religion. That said, Johanna did talk about belief as a personal concern of hers. I interpret Johanna's use of the term belief as carrying two meanings. On the one hand there is the notion of surrendering to a religiously ordained set of rules and dogma, and on the other, there is the belief in 'something that lies there over or under or around us, or whatever it might be'.

When Johanna spoke of belief in this second sense, and applied the term to her own experience of belief in 'something else', she focused on her feelings rather than on her intellect. These feelings were, as she put it, actualized when 'something bigger happens in your life, like when somebody dies or is born. When the feelings get larger than the mundane'. Belief, in this sense, is thus tied to something she has lived through and felt, rather than read somewhere.

When Johanna has 'the energy and time to grapple with the big questions – To drink wine all night and talk about life' then she does, she

said. However, as far as religious systems of belief are concerned, she has not found any correspondence to what she believes in any single religious tradition. Instead, she explained, she tries to make sense of her feelings by seeking inspiration in different religions based on what she has read about them at school and met while travelling. At the time of the first interview, she was full of her positive impressions from her recent visit to Thailand, and this prompted her to elaborate on Buddhism. She stressed the sense of kindness and warmth towards others that she had experienced in Thai culture and linked that to the idea of reincarnation. 'I think that's positive', she said and continued:

> and I think I am perhaps more drawn in that direction. But perhaps also because one becomes more free. If you were religious within the religion you were born into, for example Judaism in my case, it would feel as if it was important to do everything completely right. But if you go somewhere else, you can just take some influences - which make you freer. Then you can think that 'oh, these bits of this religion are great'. So those you can relate to.

At this our first meeting, Johanna answered the questionnaire query concerning religious self-descriptions with the words 'completely Jewish, somewhat Buddhist, considerably agnostic, considerably atheist and somewhat of a seeker'. These answers seemed to correspond well to what she had told me in the interview. She described herself as Jewish in terms of cultural and social belonging, as Buddhist on basis of feeling inspired by the idea of reincarnation and karma, and what she had perceived as an emphasis on compassion and selflessness.

When the time came for our second interview, a year and a half later, circumstances had changed for Johanna. She had finished her studies, decided to change her career, spent four and a half months working in Sudan, moved from her grandmother's apartment, broken up with the boyfriend, and met somebody new, who, much to Johanna's surprise, is a woman. 'It sounds crazy when one puts it like that', Johanna commented, 'but', she added with emphasis, 'religiously nothing much has happened, so we are cool'. Thus, Johanna did not seem to think that she had changed positions when it came to her relation to religion, or that the importance of religion in her life had changed.

Nonetheless, if I were to depart solely from her answers to the questionnaire query a rather different picture would arise. This second time around she described herself as 'somewhat Christian, moderately

Jewish, somewhat of a believer, moderately spiritual, completely a seeker, somewhat atheist, and considerably agnostic'. The only constant between those answers and the ones she gave the first time is of her being quite agnostic. All other answers have changed from one degree to another, for example from somewhat to moderately, from completely to not at all.

She still described herself in terms of to two different religious traditions simultaneously, however: in the second interview it is Christianity that is placed next to Judaism and not Buddhism as before. The description of herself as considerably atheist and her lukewarm interest in finding answers (identifying as 'somewhat of a seeker') had been replaced by a stronger emphasis on seeking and spirituality.

Possibly, her newfound love had something to do with these answers. Johanna's emphasis on love marked a striking difference from the previous interview. She was full of awe in the face of what had happened to her. 'I have become semi-religious almost', she said, 'since this happened in my life. When everything was just turned upside down. Of course'. She was referring to all the carefully staked out plans that suddenly would never be, but also to the fact that she had discovered that love was something other than she had thought. When I asked her what she meant by semi-religious she leaned forward and said 'It is something spiritual (*spirituellt*). It really is! It is that emotional side of the religious. That good things happen that you couldn't dream of'. She leaned back in the chair again and added, 'if one were to pray, I'd say that this is the kind of thing that one should pray for. But I haven't, because I don't have that religious side'.

Again Johanna makes a division between 'religion' as expressed in her own life, and religious expressions that are connected to texts and sets of rules. Thus, she did not pray to any certain god that this would happen to her, but her interpretation of 'belief in something else', as experienced through feelings, is now applied to her experience of a loving relationship with another woman.

Furthermore, in this second interview Johanna made a distinction between 'spiritual' and 'religious' that she did not make in the first one. She now connected 'the emotional side of the religious' (which comes close to that which she spoke of as 'belief as feeling' in the last interview) with being spiritual. This is one possible interpretation as to why she this time described herself as 'considerably' spiritual in the research query when she chose 'somewhat' the first time.

The first time we met, Johanna was living in her grandmother's apartment and in that interview she accentuated her Jewish cultural and social belonging. At the time of the second interview, however, this aspect did not come up, perhaps as a result of the temporal and geographic distance to the reminder of her Jewish ancestry that her grandmother's apartment had represented. Instead she introduced Christianity as a point of reference when it came to social and cultural belonging. This time she associated Christianity to nationality and to celebrating holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. She now described herself both as Jewish and Christian on the basis of tradition. One possible reason for this is her stay in Sudan where she assumed a Christian identity rather than a Jewish one, 'since I don't identify as Jewish in that sense it felt like an unnecessary point to bring up […] it shouldn't be a problem but you never know. They always ask and you cannot *not* be anything. So then I was Christian. But I do not feel at all Muslim'. In Sudan, the threat of anti-Semitism made her choose a Christian instead of a Jewish identity, since the option of having 'no religious affiliation' was unavailable there. Nevertheless, it was not a random choice; it did feel right at that moment in a way that describing herself as Muslim would not have done.

In the first interview, positive images of Buddhism were actualized, images that resonated with her own ideal. But, at the time of the second interview her most recent meeting with Buddhism did not evoke the same associations. She explained that she had recently watched a television program,[4] where a Norwegian sceptic called Are went to the home of a Buddhist family. This family presented their own ideas and practices of Buddhism and according to Johanna they were 'deeply committed Buddhists. They did everything, they prayed and sacrificed and so on'. Johanna was intrigued by this program as it gave her a different view of Buddhism.

> What he [Are] showed was this aspect of equality that you never see. That women are worth less because they are reborn lower in the hierarchy. Men are at the top of this chain. That was a punch in the face of all us 'politically correct' Swedes that think Buddhism is so great. And I like that.

Buddhism as presented in that television program did not offer the 'inspiration' that Johanna expressed in the previous interview. Instead,

[4] 'På tro og Are', http://tv.nrk.no/serie/paa-tro-og-are, accessed 2014-12-20.

she saw a practical consequence of a certain interpretation of the concept of reincarnation that did not fit with her own previous understanding nor with her own feminist sensibilities. Hence, there is a change in what Johanna expresses about Buddhism. This time there is more focus on the social and institutional aspects, and so this time a 'Buddhist' is someone involved in religion in an organized fashion, a person who follows certain prescribed rules, and belongs to a certain group. Accordingly, she now did not describe herself as Buddhist 'at all'.

I began this chapter by relating the story of Johanna's changing self-descriptions, since it illustrates two recurring features when it comes to religious self-descriptions among the respondents: Firstly, many of them described themselves in terms of several religious designations at the same time, and secondly, they answered the query concerning religious self-descriptions differently from one time to the next.

Furthermore, like Johanna, they did so even though they themselves did not describe a change in their outlook on religion or of the significance of religion in their lives. A number of them actually told me, after having filled in the survey (differently) the second time, that they had answered in exactly the same way as the first. None of the inter-viewees expressed any perceived change in religious outlook or practices in the interview that preceded the survey questions.

Simultaneity of religious self-descriptions

Hence, what I have found in this material is that when given the option these semi-secular Swedes chose to describe themselves in terms of several religious categories. Now, such simultaneity is something that has recently been identified in the sociology of religion and several studies conducted in a Swedish context have found similar tendencies.[5] The scholar of religion Kajsa Ahlstrand (2007, 2008) discusses the data from the Enköping study with a focus on the group of people that identified themselves in that survey as 'somewhat' or 'moderately' Buddhist, which although small was still the second largest group that emerged from her data. She found that most of these people also claimed a Christian identity

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[5] For discussions on related subjects in other contexts see for example Gellner & Hausner (2013) who analyze multiple religious identifications among Nepali families both in Nepal and in diaspora, and Vincett (2008) who shows how feminist women in the UK combine religious practices connected to Christianity and Paganism.

to some degree. In addition, the scholar of religion Jenny Berglund's (2012) results from analyzing the Muslim respondents in the 'religion as resource' project mentioned above show that 10 per cent of those young people describe themselves as both Christian and Muslim when given a multi-choice option.

In Chapter 4, I have shown that the respondents' vernacular uses of the concept of religion tell of a multifaceted concept abundant with meanings connected into a chain of associations. The different links in this chain need not be compatible with each other, but may be applied at different times or at the same time but for different purposes. This finding resonates well with Voss Roberts's ambition to recognize the ways vernacular definitions of religion influence people's relations to different religious identities. She argues that:

> We should be aware that persons and communities who claim to belong to multiple religions might themselves use multiple definitions of religion. They might 'belong' to different aspects of different religious cultures, such as the healing rituals or meditative practices of one and the metaphysics or cultural attitudes of another. (Voss Roberts 2010: 54)

This kind of separation of different aspects is apparent in many of the interviews. For example, when Anna filled in the questionnaire at the time of the first interview, she described herself as 'somewhat' Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu. The way Anna answered the survey query regarding religious self-descriptions surprised me. In the interview, she had often associated to and spoken of religion in general and of religious traditions specifically in terms of other people's religiosity. Her own sporadic contacts with the Church of Sweden were excluded.

> I don't think about war so much when I think about religion. I think the word religion is positive even though I am not religious myself. I think it is interesting to meet Buddhism and Hinduism while travelling, and such parts of religion.

As illustrated in the quote above, even though Anna described religion as something positive, something she attributed to the 'Other', and not as a central concern in her life or for her as a person. Of course, 'somewhat' is a mild statement, but is still more than 'not at all'.

Now, Anna's attitude towards religion and her way of relating to these religious categories resonate with the description of Swedish patterns of religiosity described in the backdrop. In her everyday life no religious tradition is particularly important or has an interpretative prerogative: instead she gives expression to a perspectival approach and a passive openness towards a variety of truth claims. It is true that some religious categories resonated more with her than others, since she rejected the categories Muslim and Other completely, while she did describe herself as somewhat Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Jewish. As she ticked the boxes in the survey she explained that she sees herself as somewhat Christian since she had got married in the Church of Sweden, baptized her son and sent him to Sunday school, celebrated holidays that she in some sense associated with Christianity, such as Christmas and Easter. That is, she described herself as Christian on the basis of her participation in certain practices linked to the Church of Sweden. In addition, she described herself as somewhat Jewish as a belief statement – she explained that she sometimes believes in the God of the Bible – and she ticked the box for somewhat Buddhist explaining that she feels closer to 'a Buddhist way of life', and somewhat Hindu since she is attracted to the idea of reincarnation, which she associated with both Buddhism and Hinduism.

As can be inferred from the examples of Johanna and Anna, the respondents in this study do not measure all religious traditions by the same standards or on the same grounds. That is, they do not necessarily relate to Hinduism in the same manner as they relate to Paganism. However, as I showed in the example of Johanna, even when they refer to the same religious tradition, it is not necessarily considered in a consistent manner. For example, at one time the respondent might consider the social dimensions of Christianity when answering the question and at another the narrative dimension. Hence, Christianity, and Christian identity, are conglomerations of many meanings from which the respondents may choose. In Laclauan language these categories are 'empty and floating' signifiers. There is of course reason to suspect that for historical and political reasons certain features are more strongly linked to certain religious traditions. Considering the work of David Thurfjell (2015), certain trajectories and associations are more likely to surface than others when different religious traditions are discussed in Sweden. For example, Buddhism is often regarded by mainstream Swedes as peaceful and apolitical, and as compatible with liberal values and a modern scientific way of relating to the world; Christianity is connected to theistic dogma, strong

self-identification and a strong ritual engagement; and associations to Islam often involve conflict and oppression.

That being said, in this material the respondents often vary their focus from one occasion to another. The interviewees are not preoccupied by being consistent and logically coherent in the sense that they identify solely with one religious tradition as a belief statement, and another as a statement of social belonging, even if that is common. In this material the respondents were able to identify with several traditions on the same grounds, as Johanna did in the second interview when she identified herself as both Jewish and Christian on the basis of tradition. Another example is Petra, a primary school teacher married to a man from Turkey that she described as 'a secular Muslim'. The first time I met Petra she described herself as both Muslim and Christian on the grounds that she celebrated holidays that she connected to those religions. Simultaneity in this sense does not stand out as a problem for the interviewees. This is also apparent if we were to consider (sometimes contradictory) belief statements which the respondents unhesitatingly give expression to – an issue I will return to later in this chapter.

I will give one more example of the multiplicity of the material before I turn to possible explanations for it: In our first meeting Lily described herself as 'moderately' Christian and Hindu, and 'completely' as 'a kind witch'.[6] Christian traditions have been a norm that she has related to as something you inevitably participate in, as a member of the Swedish culture, but that has not been of much importance to her in her life. That being said, it was on the basis of cultural belonging that she described herself as Christian on that first occasion. She also explained that she appreciates Christian aesthetics and described a sense of peace and tranquility when entering a church, since, as she put it, 'it gives a sense of serenity'.

As far as her self-description as Hindu is concerned, her motivation was less straightforward. When asked, she did not find any other answer than 'it feels that way'. If I rely on interpreting cues during the interview, my conclusion is that it was the idea of reincarnation that came to mind when Lily chose to describe herself as Hindu, as this was something she referred to when thinking about death.

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[6] The second time around she described herself as moderately Christian, a somewhat Muslim, somewhat of a believer, a doubter and an agnostic, moderately spiritual and somewhat religious, as well as a kind witch to a moderate degree.

> I think that you can resurrect (*återuppstå*), maybe in India or Africa and live a terrible life. Or anywhere. You could become an animal as well, I mean, we are after all animals. But I think… I do not think… no, I do not know.

But another influencing factor might have been the book 'Life of Pi' by Yann Martel, which I noticed lying on her bedside table. The main character in this book is a Hindu Indian boy from Pondicherry, who ponders about the meanings of different religions. I would not rule out the possibility that her appreciation of this character might have given Lily a sense of closeness to Hinduism or to India in general.

Her self-description as 'witch' comes from what she described as 'an ability to sense if something is not the way it should be'.

> I think it's fun. It is nothing that bothers me. I have never had anybody that I feel threatened by. But I KNOW if something isn't right. If somebody lies to me. The little things I don't care about, but if it is something serious, that has happened to me. You cannot lie to me. It is not possible. It is a gift. My children are convinced too. I simply have it.

Just a few days before our first interview, she told me, she had had a feeling of being followed by someone who she perceived did not wish her well. But thanks to her abilities, or as she put it, thanks to being 'a witch of sorts', she was able to avoid that person. Thus, her self-description as a witch rests on her own experiences and an idea that certain people, witches, have abilities that are out of the ordinary.

Discourse and identity

With these different examples as a background, I will now set out to explain the multiplicity and changes in religious self-descriptions salient in the material. I do so by analyzing *how* the respondents describe themselves in terms of religious designations. Drawing on the results from the questionnaire as well as the interview material, I explore not only what the respondents are referring to when claiming a religious identity, but also what aspects are at play in the process that leads up to that identification. In my attempt to understand this aspect of the material, I use literature on identity that emphasizes its multidimensional, relational, and processual characteristics.

To begin with, in keeping with a discourse theoretical point of departure, I do not use the term identity in the context of this chapter to denote a 'core identity' that is stable over time and exists outside context. Laclau and Mouffe talk of identity as a product of discursive and political processes and as constructed through a process of identification with certain subject positions. Since meanings (including identities) are regarded as discursive constructions that are never totally fixed, identity is contingent and changeable. This contingency of identity suggests an in-principle openness that could be articulated in any (political) direction. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 114–22)

According to Laclau and Mouffe, although a discourse may obtain partial fixation, the identity of an individual is never settled, since people constantly move from one subject position to another. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 115) This suggests that identity can be seen as a confluence of many facets (profession, nationality, social class, familial status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, et cetera) with varying salience depending on the situation. It also means that I may shift between, for example, identifying as a mother when playing with my children, a professional when participating in business meetings, a consumer when buying groceries in the supermarket, or religious when participating in a ritual in a church or temple. Identity in this sense is multidimensional rather than multiple.

The social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen takes this approach when he describes the building blocks of identity as experiences of being in different situations. These experiences are shaped by personal history since, in his words, 'every individual has a plethora of experiences inscribed in her body and her consciousness, and this constitutes the necessary raw material for an individual's identity' (Eriksen 1996: 54, my translation).

The movement between different subject positions that Laclau and Mouffe speak of also suggests that as with people's religious ideas and practices, which Mark Chaves talked about in his presidential address for the SSSR (discussed in the introductory chapter), discursive religious *identities* are fragmented and compartmentalized.

This view of identity coincides with Vivien Burr's understanding of personality, a term used for the purposes of this chapter as a synonym to identity. In *An introduction to social constructionism*, Burr (1997) criticizes what she claims is a normative understanding of personality (which she argues lies at the basis of much of the scholarly work in psychology). This understanding, according to Burr, encompasses (1) an

idea about individual differences (that all people have their own unique combination of personal characteristics); (2) an idea about stability (that our personality does not change radically from day to day, or even from year to year); (3) an idea of coherence (that our personalities are consistent, comprising different characteristics that are presumed to 'fit together' into an integral, coherent, and consistent self); (4) an idea of a relationship between our personality and our behavior (what we do is the result of who we are). From a social constructionist position, Burr strongly refutes these ideas about personality as de facto existing. (Burr 1997: 17)

Hence, from the point of view that discursive identities are fragmented and compartmentalized, statements like Johanna's when, after having discussed belief in 'karma', she said 'I suppose I am somewhat Buddhist in that way', are not interpreted as a description of an essence of sorts. Quite the opposite, her self-descriptions are regarded as constructions spurred by the situation in which the identity is formed. I do not mean by this, however, to say that such self-descriptions are not perceived as stable by the respondents. As I mentioned before, most of the respondents were not aware of the fact that they had changed their answers from one occasion to the next.

Discursive identities as 'screen dumps'

In her work on difference and diversity, *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*, the social anthropologist Avtar Brah (1996) describes identity as a process marked by ever-changing multiplicities, although 'during the course of this flux identities do assume specific patterns, as in a kaleidoscope, against particular sets of personal, social and historical circumstances' (Brah 1996: 123). According to Brah, identities must be seen as

> that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction, and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core – a continually changing core but the sense of core nonetheless – that at any given moment is enunciated as the 'I'. (Brah 1996: 123–124)

I interpret this as meaning that even though identities at an analytical level are inherently processual, this does not mean that we cannot, and do not, in our everyday life, speak about ourselves as if they were not. The

reflexive experiences that people have of their own continuities, of a sense of self, offer scope to reflect on oneself *as if* identities are stable and uniform.

Thus, when I talk about the discursive identities that are formed in relation to the question targeting self-description I am referring to them as part of a changing multiplicity. The moment of articulation, that is, the act of describing oneself in relation to religious categories such as Christian, Buddhist, Hindu et cetera may be likened to pressing the pause button and freezing a processual flow at a given moment – making a 'screen dump', a metaphor I will return to later in this text.

Identification as an intersubjective process

For Laclau the crucial question is *how* social identity is constructed. He argues that since there is nothing at the root of identity (no core or essence), the key for understanding this process is through the psycho-analytical category of *identification*. (Laclau 1994: 2–3, Laclau 1996: 92) Fundamental to this process is its relational character – 'one needs to identify with something because I do not have a full identity in the first place' (Laclau 1996: 92).

The relational aspect of identity has been discussed by many thinkers,[7] Hylland Eriksen, for example, points to the *intersubjective* character of identification. He argues that there are two preconditions of particular relevance for a process of identity formation (identification). Identification, he says, 'goes on *relationally*, that is, due to and in contrast to the Other, and *situationally*, that is, our sense of collective belonging changes from situation to situation' (Eriksen 1996: 53, my translation). As an example, to paraphrase Hylland Eriksen, in the company of men I become a woman, in the company of a child I become an adult, in Sudan I become Swedish, in a conference for physicists I become a scholar of religion.

In my view, the Other that Hylland Eriksen speaks of need not to be a particularly exotic, alien Other. It may well be the neighbor next door who is an active member of the Church of Sweden, or a sibling who does things differently. The Other may also be something or somebody that at that particular moment comes to stand as a representative of a whole that we

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[7] For discussion on the divergences in argument with respect to Tully, Cavell, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Laclau, and Mouffe's emphasis on the relational aspect of identity see Aletta Norval 2007: 184–185.

may meet in any fora. In this way the Other is the signifier in an articulated question like the one posed in the questionnaire, or an unarticulated question, as when we walk down the street and encounter any religious phenomenon or symbol.

To speak about identification, therefore, is to emphasize the relational and situational character of identities, and to reject the idea that there is in fact something at the root of identity that remains constant over time and that may be unambiguously shared.

What then is the consequence of this approach to identity with regard to the self-descriptions at stake? Well, firstly it is necessary to explore it in relation to what Other identity is articulated at that particular moment. As I have tried to show in Chapter 4, when the respondents talk about religion they have an abundance of meanings to choose from. Of course, 'religion' is not synonymous to Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam for example, nor is 'religious' synonymous to Christian, Sai Baba devotee, Hindu, or Sikh. However, the ways the respondents fill these terms with content is similar. They draw from collective meanings embedded in the discourses available to them, but they set these meanings to work as they speak without any ambition to be coherent or systematic. Hence, it is crucial to investigate which of the many meanings ascribed to the religious designation in question is being actualized by the respondent in the articulation of a discursive identity.

Figuring out the question

Distinguishing between identity and identification, along the lines, for example, of Hylland Eriksen (1996: 53), Brah (1996: 124), and Laclau (Laclau 1994: 2–3, 1996: 92), just to mention the theorists that I have used so far, has the advantage of releasing identity from a presumed set of stable properties or content.

In their clarification of the difference between identity and identification, the discourse theorists Jason Glynos and David Howarth draw on Laclau to argue that '*identification* is linked to the *enigmatic* dimension of the signifier, the dimension that functions as a raw question mark that troubles the subject, and defies his or her attempts to discern its meaning' (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 130–131). Here they lean on Laclau's understanding of empty signifiers (and also Lacan's discussion of master signifiers) as overflowing with meanings but void of constant content. Even though their discussion mainly concerns the political implications

of signifiers that simultaneously promise and withhold meanings, I find that this statement also offers clarification when it comes to the religious identities found here, as well as the process that leads up to them.

Identity is understood by Glynos and Howarth as meaning attributed to the signifier, in this case Buddhism/Buddhist, Christianity/Christian, Wicca/Wiccan et cetera. This means that identity is the statement 'I am a Buddhist since (for example, I believe in karma; or I feel close to a Buddhist culture; or I practice Buddhist meditation)'. Identification, on the other hand, according to Glynos and Howarth, represents the question 'what does the signifier mean?'. In this case this translates into, 'What is Buddhism? (For example, a system of beliefs; or a culture; or a set of practices) Who is a Buddhist?'(For example, a person who believes something in particular; or who belongs in a certain context; or who engages in a certain practice).

As with the theoretical imagination applied in this thesis, the way these questions are answered is dependent not only on the raw material available in the socially shared 'stock of knowledge', but also on the individual's ways of choosing between, and interpreting, those discursive elements.

Glynos and Howart's way of pinpointing the questions that identity and identification represents, highlights the importance of focusing on the process of religious identification. Consideration of this process is crucial if the meaning of a discursively constructed religious identity is to become clear. In relation to my material this point of departure suggests that a close reading of the interview material with a focus on the different aspects considered by the respondents in their articulations of self-descriptions is a step towards explicating the multiplicity and change investigated.

Considering the aspects involved
in the respondents' process of identification

Below I attempt to show that the material reveals that two aspects are salient as the respondents describe themselves in relation to different religious categories: on the one hand they refer to different aspects of themselves, and on the other they refer to different aspects of the religious designation in question. This finding leads up to an explanatory model that aims to show how the respondents' discursive identities are

constructed. To begin with, let me give another example of the way a respondent spoke of different religious categories in relation to his life.

Victor

Victor is a cultural worker in his forties. His manner is intense and he speaks and thinks fast. During the interviews he gave the impression of being restless and I had the feeling that I needed to stay alert in order to keep pace with him. Perhaps I caught him in a week when his two children were living with their mother. 'I feel so much calmer when they are here,' he said when mentioning them, 'like for instance the way I sleep much better when they are here. When I have them with me these questions concerning the meaning of existence fade away'. Those questions of meaning that keep him up at night brooding were something that he kept returning to in both interviews. He spoke of an uncomfortable tension between different aspects of himself. In the following quote he discussed an acute concern for him, that of existential meaning.

> I mean, one would have no problem describing the world in a scientific manner. That the world only exists by coincidence and that humans are merely a biological species that has arisen by itself: but that we are made in a way that makes us need some meaning and that is why we invent it. It fits together rationally but emotionally it makes me extremely depressed to think about things in that way. But, I have an inner conflict there you might say.

Here he makes a distinction, and talks about a conflict, between his rational thinking, which he connects to an interpretation of reality that fits a 'scientific' logic, and his emotional life, in which he is looking for another kind of meaning. However, as he went on to describe himself in relation to Buddhism and Christianity, he did not restrict this discussion merely to his emotional needs. Hence, the different aspects of himself that he brings up and the filters of interpretation referred to do not overlap in a straightforward manner, in the sense that scientific reasoning would appeal to his intellect and religions to his feelings. Instead, as he spoke of himself as Buddhist and Christian he did so by referring to both intellect and feeling.[8]

[8] When answering the questionnaire he described himself as moderately Buddhist and moderately Christian.

Emotionally he described being drawn to Christian imagery and communities, but that this attraction is always outweighed by a sense of alienation. This description echoes the first interview were he said,

> I think that I am that kind of person that has a religious need that I cannot seem to completely combine with the rest of my life. I love country music. I can watch a film like 'The Apostle' with Robert Duvall and think that "I want to stand in that church!". But if I had, I probably would have thought it pretty wacky. I can feel some attraction to such incredibly strong… like when I was in the USA where there is a completely different certainty (*självklarhet*) regarding how to use religion and it is present in life if another way. That I can feel some kind of hunger or thirst to be a part of, but at the same time, I am not and if I had been I would probably have thought that damn I don't belong here.

Thus, Victor expressed a longing to be part of an emotionally charged environment in an unproblematic everyday sense, but he also described such an experience as inaccessible to him.

Victor's relation to Buddhism is quite different. Here he described an intellectual appeal in what he perceives as 'a kind of religion without such an enormous theological superstructure'.

> I feel closer to that. I don't believe in the Trinity, or that Jesus necessarily is the son of God and all that. It's not clear to me exactly what I believe… but at the same time, if you're raised in a particular religion, that's the one you've got. I saw that the Dalai Lama had said that if you wanted to change religion then you just hadn't grasped your own. Emotionally, I am closest to Christianity; intellectually, I can more make sense of Buddhism.

Thus, the meaning he ascribed to Buddhism here is not one that he perceived as appealing to his emotions, whereas the meaning he ascribed to Christianity is. Instead it is his thinking that seem better matched by Buddhism as understood in this situation. That his argument for being Christian builds in part on the words of the Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama is but another illustration of how these two representations work together in his own struggle to make sense of his experiences.

This is not to say, however, that his descriptions of Christianity and Buddhism are limited to the above-mentioned aspects during the interviews. For example, he also mentions being born into a Protestant church

and being a part of that tradition in terms of shared traditions and language, in terms of cultural belonging, and the intellectual attitude free from dogma that he associates with Buddhism is accompanied by ideas about religious practice.

> Buddhism is connected to the practice of meditation and that I just cannot do. I am far too restless for that. In theory it sounds so good, that your thoughts are not your personality, they should just float by. I would like to do that, regularly.

Now, when I asked him if he had ever tried meditation he replied that 'yes, I have tried several times. I have probably tried to meditate like 30 times but given it up after a day. I run instead'. Of course, when you have tried something 30 times it may almost be considered as a habit, a habit of trying, but what Victor is aspiring to is a regularity of practice.

What I mean to illustrate by this example is that not only is it important to discern which meaning is ascribed to the signifier at the moment of identity formation, but that there is another aspect that is salient in the vernacular discourse on religious identity in the material. Namely, one that concerns different aspects of the individual.

As the respondent's speak of themselves in relation to the different religious categories in question they point to specific aspects of themselves. Like Victor they do not necessarily describe these consistently in the sense that the 'fit together' into an integral, coherent, and consistent whole, or that they necessarily influence each other. In noting this I do not mean to enter the ongoing discussion on how people deal with having conflicting feelings or conflicting thoughts, or how people cope psychologically with contradictory feelings, aspirations and actions.[9] Instead, I simply note that in the interview material this fragmentation is salient as the respondents describe themselves.

One consequence of this finding is that it stresses the need to look closely at what it is that the respondents are referring to at a particular moment: both in terms of the Other, and of themselves.

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[9] This is theorized for example by Leon Festinger (1976) in his thinking about cognitive dissonance and by Fritz Heider (1958) in his balance theory.

The wheel of religious identification

I will now attempt to present an approach to understanding the self-descriptions in focus here in a way that takes the theoretical insights and the empirical findings described above into consideration. I am able to see in the material that there are two factors of importance for the formation of the discursive identities in question. In the following section I will discuss the process of religious identification using a visual image and present a model that I call *the wheel of religious identification*.

Let me make it clear that this model is not a theory about cognition, nor is it any kind of intersubjective model of the social self. The data that I am analyzing does not allow me to theorize the self or personality, it does however let me analyze the interviewees' speech. Hence, this model is not to be read as an indication of a core vs periphery view of the self. Instead, it is a model that explains something about discourse, about the ways the respondents speak of themselves in relation to certain religious categories. What I am trying to communicate is that as the respondents describe themselves in relation to suggested religious designations they are communicating something rather specific. With the interview material as my point of departure, I argue that these religious self-descriptions depend on two factors. Firstly, (1) they depend on which aspect of him or herself the respondent chooses to describe at that moment, and secondly, (2) they depend on what association to religion is actualized at the moment of articulation. In the wheel of religious identification these two aspects are represented by two rings with different compartments.

1ˢᵗ ring: Describing different aspects of oneself

The first ring in the wheel of religious identification represents the aspect of themselves self that the respondents choose to describe. For example, in Victor's discussion of what religion means to him and of his religious self-descriptions, he mentions quite a few different aspects of himself as points of references. He speaks of 'a religious need' both in terms of emotions and of intellect. He speaks of his practices and of his aspirations. Thus, he presents an image of himself that consists of many facets that resonate with different aspects of religious designations to various degrees.

Victor is not unique in this regard, and it is with this in mind that I suggest that we look at these self-descriptions as reflections that disclose

different aspects of the respondent's self-image, as a person who acts, thinks and speaks a certain way, a person who wishes and aspires for certain things, or a person who 'belongs' in a certain social context. The fact that the respondents in this study describe themselves in terms of 'considerably', 'moderately', or 'somewhat', rather than identifying 'completely' with some of the suggested categories (although there are some who do) serve to indicate such partial identification. These discursive religious identities may consequently be seen as descriptions of who the respondents consider themselves to be, but also they could reflect who they would like to be, what they do, or what they believe or have faith in. Their identification is based, therefore, on resonance as in recognition but also on longings connected to individual aspirations.

What this first ring stands for, then, is different aspects of oneself, like for example the way we feel, the way we think, what we do, and what we *want* to do, feel, or think. Notwithstanding, this is not an exclusive list, but some suggestions.

2nd ring: Describing different aspects of the signifier

The second ring in the wheel of religious identification represents the second aspect that determines what the discursive religious identity will mean and it has to do with the vernacular understandings of the different religious designations at play. When the respondents speak of different religious traditions, for example, they differentiate between different aspects of religion. They talk about institutions and power, religion as cultural or national identity, as doctrines and norms, as feelings and experiences et cetera. In Chapter 4, I discuss these findings with Laclau's discussion on empty and floating signifiers as my sounding board, arguing that as a vernacular category religion must be understood as a chain of equivalent signifieds that carry many different meanings simultaneously, and that as a signifier it is empty in the sense that it does not represent various meanings but the chain as such. This idea is also applicable to concepts such as Buddhism, Wicca, Candomblé, Christianity, et cetera. Thus, building on this result, the other set of compartments in the model represent different associations to religion in general (or to a specific religion) present in the respondent's vernacular discourse on religion. In the model on page 156 there are examples such as beliefs, traditions, culture, rituals, and ethics. But, again, these categories depend on which are present in the individual's life-world.

Screen dumping

Now, imagine the wheel of religious identification as a wheel in motion where the two sections of the wheel spin independently from each other. As the question, 'to what degree do you see yourself as…?' is posed, the spinning slows down and a religious identity is about to be constructed. This is the moment of articulation, which earlier in the text I likened to pressing the pause button and freezing a processual flow, to make a 'screen dump'. The answer to the question will depend on which of the different fields is actualized, that is, on the one hand what aspect of themselves the respondents will consider at that moment, and on the other what aspect of the empty signifier that is referred to. A scenario like the one described above would open up for a wide range of possible answers to the same question. Any identification with a religious tradition is therefore a partial view. It also means that these self-descriptions are sometimes belief statements, but at other times role statements, or statements expressing aspirations. The respondents simply give one of several possible, reasonable, answers available to them. Thus, there is no apparent center; instead there are numerous kaleidoscopic multiplicities.

Of course, metaphors such as 'pressing the pause button' or 'to make a screen dump' suggest an acting subject. Whether or not there is such a subject, which actively and consciously chooses between different available options, is a debated issue. In fact, the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) describes the dialectic between structure and agency as one of the most fundamental dilemmas in sociology.[10] In congruence with the lived religion approach, the position from which I discuss this material must be regarded as an in-between space in which the dynamic between the individual and social structures is highlighted. What is at stake here, however, is not 'who' or 'what' actually freezes the processual flow. Instead, identity formation is regarded as part of the workings of discourse and it is in this context that the discursive religious identities in focus here are discussed.

[10] The different positions in this debate will not discussed here. For an overview see for example Archer 1996, 2003; Berger & Luckman 1967; Parekh 2000; Rothstein 2003 (Ch 2). For Laclau's view on the agency/structure binary see for example Laclau 1990: 44, 60.

The wheel of religious identification

Discerning the question—deciphering the statement

A discursive religious identity of Christian, Buddhist, Taoist et cetera articulated in the interview situation therefore depends not only on which aspect of themselves the respondents refer to but also on which meaning of the empty signifier is actualized. If, for example, the wheel stops in the position shown in the model above, the question answered could be for example 'To what degree do I *want* to follow (for example) Christian ethics?' or 'To what degree do I want to adhere to religiously sanctioned regulations?' – A question reflected for example in Ingrid's description of herself as 'moderately Christian since I want to follow the golden rule'.

Returning to Johanna's answers to the survey question. What are the questions she was answering? Well, on the basis of the interviews made at

the same occasions, I am arguing that she answered different questions from one occasion to the next. In terms of the wheel of religious identification this means that how the wheel was positioned differed with each self-description she expressed, due to the fact that as soon as one question was answered the wheels continued to spin.

Let me give a couple of concrete examples. The first time I met Johanna she stressed her Jewish cultural and social belonging, while emphasizing that she did not celebrate Jewish holidays or found any relevance in Jewish scripture. Since she described herself as 'completely Jewish' the question that she was answering, thus, could be: 'To what degree is your social belonging reflected in Jewish culture?', or 'To what extent do you feel that you belong to a Jewish community?'.

At the time of the second interview, however, she did not stress her Jewish cultural and social belonging. Perhaps she now answered a question like: 'To what degree do you practice Jewish traditions?' or, 'To what degree do you think that you participate in Jewish culture?'. This time she described herself as 'moderately Jewish'. In our first meeting she did not describe herself as Christian, possibly referring to belief in Christian dogma or affinity with a Christian society (contrasted to Thailand as a Buddhist context). On the second occasion, on the other hand, she described herself as 'somewhat Christian', possibly answering questions such as: 'To what degree do you think of yourself as part of a Christian culture?' or 'To what degree do you celebrate Christian holidays?'.

With regard to Johanna's identifications with Buddhism, in turn, in the first interview she discussed her positive impressions of Buddhism and talked about expressions that resonated with her own ideals of a compassionate society. The question she was answering thus, was something like: 'To what degree are your aspirations reflected in what you perceive to be Buddhist culture?'.

At the time of the second interview, however, the meaning she ascribed to a Buddhist identity was different. This time she referred to issues of gender inequality explained through the concept of karma. Thus, the question here could be framed in lines of: 'To what degree do you agree intellectually with a certain interpretation of Buddhist doctrine on reincarnation and karma?', or, possibly, 'To what extent do you agree intellectually with how you understand power is exercised within and/or through Buddhism?'. Here, the answer to that question was 'not at all'.

What I mean to say, of course, is that as the respondents described themselves in relation to the designations suggested in the questionnaire

query, they were in fact answering very specific questions. Hence, the religious self-descriptions that respondents give expression to may be regarded as *situational* as the respondents do not always fill a category with the same content from time to time. For example, on one occasion being Christian might equal being Swedish, but on another it might be a category that describes a person who believes Jesus to be the son of a god. This means that if we wish to understand what the respondents are actually communicating when asked, for example, to fill in a question-naire we need to ask them (or at least ourselves) the question.

Certainly, the main issue here is not to give detailed accounts of the content of every wheel, as it will differ, but rather, in congruence with the theoretical approach outlined above, to focus directly on the process involved as people describe themselves in relation to different religious categories. It is not a model that is only about atomized individuals, even though it needs to be personalized. The wheel is a reflection of an individual's conceptualizations at a particular moment. On the one hand, this means that the components, and the extent to which they are considered important, may vary from person to person. On the other hand, it means that for every religious category we query (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, et cetera), the content of at least the second circle, that is associations to a particular religion, must be reconsidered. Further-more, these wheels are also subject to change, they alter with new experiences. For example, new dimensions of religion may be added, the image of the Other reconsidered, or different aspects of oneself may be focused.

Simultaneity of belief statements

In order to stress the need to consider both aspects described in the wheel of religious identification I will make a brief detour into the issue of belief statements as they are expressed in the interviews. My point here is to say that even though a respondent may consistently refer to belief when relating to a suggested signifier, this does not necessarily mean that we may presume that it is the same belief statement referred to, or that the respondent will have the same response to it.

I will to begin by focusing on Elisabeth, a single mother in her mid-forties who has been struggling with a sickness on and off for a few years and who was on sick leave at the time of our interview. Thereafter, I go on

to highlight the simultaneity of multiple propositions that the respondents gave expression to in relation to the questionnaire question regarding belief statements.

Elisabeth

Elisabeth told me that she does not consider herself as a person of faith 'in that Christian way', but that she is open to the existence of a higher power. 'It is more like fate or something', she said, 'that there is something that sort of steers around us'. Then she added 'maybe it is more New Age-like in my case?' But she is not sure,

> it is really difficult to know, because I don't know what I think. That said, I think there is meaning in some way. That makes things happen even though you do not want them to. Also, I just cannot believe that life is final. In some sense I think that the old and the near and dear exist around us, watching over us. I think my old grandmother sees me.

She continued to explain that her view is more of a 'ground to stand on in life' that it is about the animals, nature and mankind. She looked at one of her cats, a furry ginger female sleeping on the newspaper lying on the kitchen table where we sat, and then said, 'Like cats for example. They have some sort of feeling for how we humans feel. I mean how can they have that?' she asked rhetorically and continued '[because] we are all connected to the same spiritual being in a sense, and I think that they [the cats] know when they need to comfort me'. For Elisabeth, being with cats, or buying some flowers in the local flower shop to look at, or working in the garden at her country cottage are all activities that she finds 'healing for the soul'. These activities, however, are not described as transcendent experiences. Rather they are 'here and now' as she put it. Nevertheless, they are also connected to an experience of something else in the sense that Elisabeth feels that they make her 'sink into herself'. 'They help me soak in what is', she explained, 'because it is good for my deepest inner self. In your everyday life you rush about and work and there are so many "musts"'.

To help her recover from her health issues she seeks contact with nature, Elisabeth explained. She owns a cottage in the countryside that she tries to go to as much as her sickness allows her. 'The old house and its surroundings – the garden. It's my oasis and the place where I gather strength', she explained and continued, 'I need to sit in the garden on a

stool and dig into the earth so to speak. Then I feel better and I can heal from all the bad things that have happened'. Being in the countryside is soothing in the same way as thinking that her old grandmother watches over her in the form of some 'spirit being' is, she said. Later in the interview, Elisabeth told me of an incident that happened when she and her son were in their cottage in the countryside:

> We were working, replacing a window, and he went down to the shed to find a tool. The shed had been closed and locked for a while because we hadn't been there recently. When he came in he saw something small sitting under a wall. His first thought was – It is a troll! There are trolls! Yes, it is true! It is a... He didn't know what it was that he saw. He just saw something small with two big eyes and he thought that it looked one of the little creatures in the children's books about Pettson and Findus.[11]

By the tone of his voice calling her from the distance, Elisabeth had immediately heard that something had happened, she said, but when she came down to the shed he had calmed down realizing that it was a little owl that had been trapped in the shed. 'But', she finished the story, 'that could have been me. I could have thought the same way that – There are trolls! Only this time there weren't. Unfortunately, most often there are natural explanations to things'.

Elisabeth used the word 'unfortunately' because she likes the idea of paranormal beings. 'I think it is fun with little folk', she said and added, 'one time, I even thought I saw a ghost'. Here she launched into a story from a time in her life when she and a group of friends were staying on a farm together over the summer. They repeatedly tried to contact what she described as 'the world that is outside' during that summer. They did this through playing with a 'talking board', games led by one of the older youths in the group, who, according to Elisabeth, 'was perhaps a medium. At least there was something about him', she said. Close to the farm where they were staying there was a place where, according to legend, the ghost of Ebba Brahe sometimes appears.[12] Curious as to whether they would see

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[11]A well-known series of children's books in Sweden, by Sven Nordquist. For a review of these books in English see Laura A. Wideburg 2005.

[12] The countess Ebba Brahe (16 March 1596–5 January 1674) was a lady-in-waiting in the Swedish court, mainly known for her illicit love-affair with King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden.

her, the group went there one night, held hands around a candle, and tried to make her appear.

> The most exciting thing was that the flame of the candle fluttered and went out. The ambience was so thick that you could touch it. Then we heard a splash in the water and we stood up to look out over the water through the window. There was some mist so it really couldn't have been better. And there was this person walking.

To Elisabeth's great disappointment the person striding through the water dressed in white was not Ebba Brahe. Instead it was a friend playing them a practical joke. 'But I still think that Ebba Brahe is there, in that place', Elisabeth added. Referring to the local legend (*sägen*) – according to which Ebba Brahe only appears to those who are on the wrong path in life – Elisabeth tentatively suggested that 'maybe we were too nice for her to want to reveal herself'.

In these stories Elisabeth, at least in my interpretation, drawing on an esoteric discourse on religion, gives expression to an attitude of openness towards the idea of 'something else' set apart from what is perceived as the God of monotheistic religions. Nonetheless, when I asked Elisabeth whether her interest in the supranormal is something that affects her everyday view of the world she answered that 'it is rather disconnected. Something more would need to happen for me to believe it'. Elisabeth explained that she is interested in and thrilled by such matters, but that she is not sure that she actually thinks any of it exists. 'I am curious', she said, and told me that once she even went to a fortune teller and on another occasion had an aura photograph taken, just because she finds it exciting.

In my interpretation Elisabeth expressed both that she believed in the existence of other dimensions and an enchanted nature, *and* that she found that such ideas do not hold up to rational scrutiny. Elisabeth related to different ways of reasoning as if they were separate from each other. She was not that concerned with whether they were commensurable or not.

Multiple belief statements

The second example of the respondents giving voice to multiple propositions is found in the answers to the questionnaire query regarding religious belief statements. Here several of the respondents who agreed with the statement 'I believe in an impersonal higher power or force', also

agreed to other (sometimes contradictory) statements of belief. Let me give a few examples: Elisabeth wrote in the survey that (1) she believes in an impersonal higher power or force, (2) that God is something within every person rather than outside, and (3) (with the addition of a 'maybe') that people who have passed away still exist and can help us. Marianne, the woman in her late 40s who works as an administrator at a small counseling center and who was introduced in Chapter 4, ticked the boxes saying (1) 'I believe in a God that you may have a personal relation to', as well as (2) 'I believe that God is something within every person rather than outside'. Neither Elisabeth nor Marianne conceded to there being 'spirits ghosts or other invisible beings around us' in the survey – nonetheless, both of them spoke of such phenomena in their interviews. Johanna, in turn, wrote in the survey that she (1) believes in an impersonal higher power or force, (2) that God is something within every person rather than outside, and (3) that she does not believe in any god, supernatural power or force.

As the sociologist Erika Willander (2013) points out in her discussion of similar results, when people agree to several of these belief statements it might be due to the fact that the options actually overlap and are not therefore necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, where a statement like 'I believe that God is something within every person rather than outside' is referring to space and location, the statement 'I believe in a God that you may have a personal relation to, for example, does not.

Hence, agreeing to several belief statements does not necessarily indicate a simultaneity of contradictory beliefs, even though instances of such simultaneity are indeed present in the material as illustrated by Johanna's way of answering the question above. Furthermore, judging from the many different combinations of responses to the survey question on beliefs, many of the respondents relate to these statements of belief as if they were ambiguous. This is also true for the respondents who only chose one of the available options. To take one example, Göran, a man in his late 50s who lives in the neighborhood with two of his three teenage children, chose to interpret the belief statement 'I believe in a God that you may have a personal relation to', not as a statement of belief in for example Christian, Muslim or Jewish doctrine, but in terms of a personal relation to 'something else'.

The fact that survey questions (and answers) are ambiguous is not new to scholars of religion working with surveys in Sweden. In Willander's (2014) overview on previous research about religiosity in Sweden, she

shows that already in the first study that focused on religious beliefs, namely Emilia Fogelklou's (1934) *Vad man tror och tänker i svenska folkrörelser [The thoughts and beliefs of Swedish Popular Movements]*, questions were raised regarding how the answers may be interpreted. Fogelklou concluded that the theologically conceptualized question 'Do you believe in a personal God?' generated answers that built on very different understandings of the meaning of the word 'personal'. Hence, she stressed that the same formulation may carry different meanings for different people.

> It is very important to point out how the same word can have very different meanings for different people. For example, placing the word personal before God is understood by some as an anthropomorphic qualification, by others as expressing the highest possible degree of life's abundance and spiritual reality. (Fougelklou & Cederblad 1934: 12, my translation).

Moreover, throughout her study, Fogelklou underlined that a substantial proportion of the people in her study believed in a transcendent, divine principle or a higher being without necessarily seeing this as a personal God. (Willander 2014: 76)

However, even among people who consider they have given these matters careful consideration, there are many instances in the material which show that they may feel comfortable despite apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in the way they describe and relate to the concept of religion. This is an issue that has been dealt with frequently in the study of religion, for example in discussions about contradictory belief statements.[13] In the study of different groups or theological traditions, we often find that there is an element of faith that serves as an acceptable premise for insiders, but which from an outsider's perspective tends to be illogical. This is shown for example in the historian of religion Mattias Gardell's work on the Nation of Islam in the United States. Gardell argues that the existence of such contradictions usually is not a problem for the believer, but that outsiders may feel disturbed by it. (Gardell 1995: 139)

In the book *På spaning efter helheten: New Age – en ny folktro? [On the search for totality: New Age – a new folklore?]* the scholar of religion Olav Hammer (2004) in his exposé of 'New Age', also mentions, however

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[13] See for example af Burén 2011; Rudiak-Gould 2010.

briefly, the fact that people hold different models of what reality looks like simultaneously, concluding that:

> Obviously humans change perspectives easily and may believe in several incommensurable things at the same time. Centuries of systematic science and centuries of attempts on the part of theologians to make a coherent whole of their beliefs hide a basic fact: most of us contradict ourselves in thought and action and it does not bother us at all. (Hammer 2004: 334, my translation)

The lack of inner consistency is an issue that has been explored by the anthropologist of religion Martin Stringer (1996, 2011) as well. Stringer launched a 'situational theory of belief', on the basis of his fieldwork in Christian congregations in Manchester. He argues that people in general draw on any belief statements available to them and that has worked in the past, without worrying too much about their source and without making a distinction between 'official beliefs' and non-official beliefs, which he calls 'superstitions'. He also finds that they reject belief statements that are irrelevant or that have been harmful in the past, and more importantly, that they do not put their statements into an over-arching framework, but use them in relation to specific situations. Thus, belief statements are understood as 'used only in specific situations, as and when they are needed, and are otherwise forgotten or dismissed' (Stringer 1996: 229).

Now, this excursion into the simultaneity of multiple belief statements served to show that even though a respondent may refer to an aspect of belief when identifying with a certain religious category, this does not necessarily mean that we may predict the answer they will give. We still need to investigate both which question they are answering, since their response will depend on which particular belief they are referring to, and, in order not to censure or underestimate the possibility of simultaneity of contradictory beliefs, we also need to examine which aspect of the individual is being actualized.

On the situationality of religious self-descriptions

In congruence with the theoretical framework of this thesis a discursive identity must be understood in context, as an intersubjective category. The subject position must exist as a discursive possibility in order for the

subject to be able to articulate and claim it. Here Brah stresses the dependence on access to different narratives, and subject positions. She argues that discourses, matrices of meaning, and historical memories form a basis of identification, (Brah 1996: 124) which means that the identity proclaimed at a given moment is a context-specific construction that relies on a social setting.

For example, since the salience of different associations to religious categories varies depending on the historical origins of motifs in contemporary Swedish discourses on religion, it is likely that some aspects will be more predominant for a respondent than others. It is for example more likely that the respondents will associate Buddhism with compassion and Islam with power than the other way around. This means that the odds that a particular association of the signifier will be actualized are not therefore the same for every compartment, which I have intimated in the model by giving them, varying sizes.

As socio-phenomenological theorizing suggests, it is not only the raw material present in the stock of knowledge available to the respondent that is important for how they talk about themselves. The constitution of reality depends both on which pattern of interpretation is actualized and on the state and situation that the individual find her or himself in.[14] It is in light of this idea that I want to point out the relevance of the interview situation in prompting the simultaneity of self-descriptions discussed in this chapter. Because, the respondents' answers are in a direct way *responses* to questions posed in the questionnaire. The multiple-choice and graded questionnaire question prompted them to consider religious categories that they did not necessarily bring up in the interviews that preceded the questionnaire.[15] One such example is Lily's descriptions of herself as somewhat Hindu and somewhat Muslim, even though she did not describe herself explicitly as such in the interviews. Furthermore, the situation in itself, the discursive site that constitutes the interview,

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[14] The process of constituting reality will be further discussed in chapter 6.

[15] The importance of prompting is also stressed by the demographer Conrad Hackett (2014). He writes that 'In a July 2012 Pew Research Center survey, 11 percent of respondents said their present religion was 'nothing in particular' in response to Pew Research's standard religious-identity question. [...] Pew Research asked respondents who said they were 'nothing in particular' a follow-up question –'Do you think of yourself as a Christian or not?' About half (48 percent) said yes, they do think of themselves as Christians. While these respondents did not identify themselves as Christians initially, when prompted with a direct question about Christian identity, a large proportion said they were Christian' (Hackett 2014: 407).

influences their behavior (as in acting, speaking, thinking, feeling) in certain directions. Consider for example how Johanna accentuated her Jewish belonging in her grandmother's apartment in a way that she did not when the interview took place in another location.

Jonas's story, and the way the interviews with him evolved, is an illustrative example of how the interview situation influenced how the discursive religious identities in question were constructed in a situational way.

Jonas

It was in the early 1990s that Jonas went to India the first time, 'because the cannabis was cheap' he told me with a smile. Since then he has been there for several extended periods, but it was during that first stay that he came in contact with Sathya Sai Baba. He has subsequently travelled and worked in the restaurant business in different parts of the world. In 2010, after over 15 years abroad, Jonas decided to move back to his hometown Stockholm, and to become a more active member of Swedish society. His life is now centered on his little son and his focus lay on providing for his family.

Jonas described his childhood and adolescence as marked by alienation.

> I always had to take shit for being an immigrant. Especially in the 70s and 80s when there weren't so many. I was in the first… the riots in Kungsan… I was there when it happened in '84. I am the first generation of these young people that were a little outside.[16]

He did not feel at home in society or in the Church of Sweden, where he was baptized, confirmed, and even active during a brief period in his adolescence. Nor did he find any option that satisfied him in his search for answers. Until he went to India, that is.

> Religion was never there in my family, not at that level. You needed to look for answers to all the questions you had on your own. And as I said there was no internet. I tried reading the Bible but after 30 pages I thought 'damn this is boring!' It just wasn't possible. Then you got older and could discuss more. I met a guy from Pakistan who was a Muslim. I think that was when I read Malcolm X. I was a little into Islam but it was so fanatical. I always

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[16] He is referring here to conflicts and violence between different groups of adolescents from the suburbs and the police which took place in the park called 'Kungsträdgården' in central Stockholm, in the 1980s.

let Jehovah's Witnesses in, made a cup of tea and we talked. I even went to their church but that was also too fanatical. No, I thought, I cannot live my life like this. God isn't so damn important that I will give up everything and not live. Like, 'now, you are going to stand and give away *The Watchtower* in the subway'. Everything was too fanatical. So, when I came to the ashram then it was like 'hey, ok. Now I found my thing. Baba works'.

Jonas described his life, up to his return to Sweden, as intense and full of experiences that proved to him over and over again that things happen for a reason, and that Sai Baba, and people who are not alive, have looked out for him. In the first interview, Jonas spoke a lot about his experiences at an ashram and of how his devotion to Sai Baba had helped him in times of need. At that time, he described himself as 'completely' Sai Baba devotee and 'somewhat' Buddhist. He also described himself as 'completely' a seeker and a person of faith.

The second time around, he still described himself as 'somewhat' Buddhist, but now he also spoke of himself as 'moderately' Hindu, as 'somewhat' religious and spiritual (*andlig*). He no longer identified with the category of seeker but described himself as 'considerably a person of faith. As far as his self-description as a Sai Baba devotee was concerned, Jonas had mixed feelings. Laughingly he said that, 'well, right now it is considerably but when I opened the door to you it wasn't much'. He continued, 'you know… I take out Baba when I need Baba'.

He explained that he thinks that it is 'because of the rat race' that he does not think of Sai Baba as much as he did before. The rat race is Jonas's term for the system he finds himself in while in Sweden.

> If you disappear like I have done for six months to India then you are completely out of the rat race. Then you come back to the west and gradually you start following the flow again. If you are there – you try to be first. I am there now, that's it. Money, money, money. I have to think of the future. I have to build a future. I have to save as much as I can. I have to have a bigger apartment, et cetera […] At work they said 'Jonas, you have reached the ceiling for overtime'. Then I patted my chest and said to myself 'you're the fucking best'. Then you are really first in the rat race.

So, as Jonas now felt himself part of 'the rat race', his relation to Sai Baba had become more distanced, except for when he needs help, he explained.

'Or when I ask you these questions' I added half-jokingly. 'Exactly' he replied,

> it is like I haven't thought in these ways… when you called… that is, a few days after his death and up until when you called, I hadn't given him a thought. Then you called and that makes it come back. Then I pick it out. It is there in the subconscious. Work with it a little. Think a little. Then it fades when I go to work again.

What Jonas is suggesting is that the importance of Sai Baba in his life varies, and that this part of him is more or less salient depending on the situation. The fact that I had called him, and was then sitting in his sofa, had prompted him to think about Sai Baba in a way that he did not at work or when playing with his child. Jonas finally ticked the box 'some-what' when it came to the degree of identification as a Sai Baba devotee, but what may serve as a visual reminder of this situationality is that he also added, and ticked, another box that read 'when needed' under the 'completely' column.

On the discursive possibility of simultaneity of self-descriptions

In the backdrop I described the respondents' cultural context as deeply affected by 'the subjective turn' – a context in which individualism and relativism is highly valued, and in which the discursive possibility of choice is not only offered but expected.

In the article 'Betwixt and Between: A Canadian Perspective on the Challenges of the Spiritual but Not Religious' a similar background is highlighted by the sociologists Lori G. Beaman and Peter Beyer (2013). In this article they discuss data on second-generation young immigrants in Canada who identified across boundaries ('spiritual but not religious', 'a little bit Buddhist', 'I'm not religious, but I'm not a complete atheist', and so forth) as well as research on the Canadian Supreme Court ruling in the 2004 case of *Syndicat Northcrest v. Amselem*. They conclude that both their youth interviewees and the Supreme Court of Canada imagine a religious practitioner as freely choosing to construct his or her own religious identity. They argue that

> the notion of the autonomous individual, freely making decisions without constraint or influence, is a social and legal fiction that pervades legal and popular as well as social scientific discourse. (Beaman & Beyer 2013: 141–142)

Now, by this reference I do not mean to say that 'a subjective turn' necessarily takes on the same form of expression everywhere. However, when describing the discursive religious identities discussed here individualism and relativism do have an explanatory value as part of the Swedish context.

I do not regard the respondents' self-descriptions as measurements of an externally defined religious identity. The issue here is not to get outward recognition as part of a community. Rather, the self-descriptions in focus here are the result of individual interpretations at a particular moment. Victor does not describe himself as 'considerably' Christian with regard to another person's definition of what that means. His answer is based on his own understanding of what it means to be a Christian at that particular moment. In a similar manner, Lily considers herself as 'moderately' (and later as 'somewhat') Hindu on the basis of what she associates to being Hindu at that moment – not what I or anybody else put into that category. That said, that it is an identity that is not necessarily dependent on outward recognition does not mean that the discursive religious identities that result from the process are to be regarded as subjective. On the contrary, they must be regarded as intersubjective, dependent on the discourses the individual is enmeshed in.

Indeed, a number of potential subject positions are available to the respondents in their life-world. According to the social anthropologist Gerd Baumann (1999) such multicultural situations provide an opportunity for identifications that do not necessarily fit into rigid or stereotyped conceptions of how people that belong to different groups in society 'ought to' be. This is perhaps one reason why it is wholly possible, as frequently occurs in the material, to identify with certain aspects of a religious tradition while at the same time refusing for example objective measures of religious affiliation (membership of a denomination for instance) or active involvement. Religious identity, expressed in this way, is not dependent on active participation, official membership, or agreement (or even acquaintance) with basic doctrine. Certainly, belonging to and being recognized as a member of a religious group is something that the people in focus here are less concerned with. For them it is not a

question of getting outward recognition as being a part of a community, on the contrary, it is considered a private matter.

Naturally, saying that there is a discursive possibility of simultaneity of religious self-descriptions is not the same as saying 'anything goes'. Indeed, these religious self-descriptions have boundaries that need to be considered as related to the local discourses on religion available to the respondents. When Johanna identified as Buddhist in the first interview she ascribed a particular meaning to that identity in her mind, something that she found appealing – namely a compassionate society. When she related to another meaning of the signifier, the idea of male superiority, this meaning went against her feminist sensibilities (which as Thurfjell (2015) describes is an important aspect of a discourse of secular criticism of religion in Sweden). In consequence she did not describe herself as Buddhist on that occasion. Similarly, when she was in Sudan she did not feel comfortable about describing herself as Jewish. She chose therefore to describe herself as Christian in that situation, not on basis of affiliation, faith or practice, however, but in recognition of the history of religion in Sweden and the fact that most Swedes, including her, celebrate Christmas and Easter in one form or another.

The strength of identification with a particular construct (religious group or concept, nation, culture, et cetera) varies, as does the emotional significance of that identification. For example, a person may identify as Swedish without feeling strongly patriotic or believing nationality to be fundamental to one's sense of self. Similarly, when for example Victor, Anna and Jonas described themselves as Buddhist and Christian there seems to be no immediate sense of urgency in these discursive identities. Hence, these identifications are distinct from hyphenated religious identities, such as a strongly held position as Buddhist-Christian, or Sufi-Jew, for example. Here I refer to identities that express an active stance that signal a reconciliation of multiple identities and an identification with others who share such an ambition. When Johanna described herself as Jewish and Buddhist, and Christian and Jewish, in my interpretation she did not do so with any ambition of reconciling them. In her explanation the fact that she is Jewish by birth and knows quite a bit about this tradition would make her feel obliged to live it properly if she chose to become more active. In my interpretation, however, she did describe herself as Jewish with a particular meaning of that signifier in mind, namely cultural affiliation (rather than for example religious practice). In relation to other traditions about which we may presume she knows less,

she explained that she feels freer to choose the elements that inspire her. In my interpretation, therefore, this means that both when she related to Judaism and when she related to Christianity and Buddhism, she, implicitly or explicitly, did so by using one meaning of the signifier (rather than another) at the moment of articulation.

On change

I have, during the course of this chapter, argued that when the wheel of religious identification stops turning, we are provided with a description that represent a snapshot, a 'screen dump' of identity. The material has revealed that what at first glance seems to be a combination of incommensurable identities is in fact part of a complex combination that makes sense from the point of view of the interviewees. The answers that the respondents in this study have given concerning religious identification are direct responses from the everyday world of people who are not interested in affiliating themselves with organized religious institutions. Here religious identity is not anchored or sustained by doctrinal practice, nor engendered by theological arguments.

Let me finally comment more explicitly on the issue of the changes in self-descriptions from one occasion to the next. Such changes are consistent with the findings of Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor and Robert D. Putnam (2010), who show that people fluctuate between identifying as religious Nones and affiliating with a religious group. In their study, which is based on quantitative data from two waves of three panel data sets – the Faith Matters Study, the General Social Survey, and the American National Election Study – they focus on short-term stability of religious self-identification among religious Nones in the United States. They found two distinct subgroups in the category of Nones: Stable and unstable Nones.[17] The unstable group identified as religious Nones in one of the waves of the survey, but claimed an affiliation with a religious group in the other. Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam term this group *liminal Nones* (or *liminars*) as it consists of individuals who are betwixt and between the religious and the secular, but who are not necessarily on course to being one or the other. What Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam found was that this

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[17] For a connected discussion on the affirmative, and often firm, religious identification among people identifying as 'not religious' see Lee 2014.

group is characterized by short-term instability in terms of religious self-identification.

> It is possible, in our conception, that liminars have willfully chosen their particular combination of beliefs and practices and are content to remain in what we call a liminal status throughout their lives. Because of the liminal nature of their religious identity, they may identify with a certain religious group at one point, but claim no religious preference at another, although their overall religious involvements change little. Liminars differ from apostates or switchers, who actually experience changes in their religious beliefs and behaviors, not just in their expressed religious identity. (Lim et al. 2010: 598)

These characteristics resonate with the findings in the material on which this chapter is based, both when it comes to the changeability of religious self-descriptions and the conclusion that these changes are not necessarily linked to an actual move in the religious landscape. As analyzed in this chapter the discursive religious identities in question are fluctuating and palimpsestic, but it is more a question of volatility in terms self-description than a change of attitude, beliefs, behaviors, aspirations, and affiliations. It is a fluidity that is discursively permitted within the framework of a culture that offers a multiplicity of subject positions in terms of religious identities. It is also a context in which the boundaries between the secular and the religious are, in practice, fuzzy and permeable, allowing for signifiers and subject positions to float between the different discourses on religion in which the respondents are enmeshed. The respondents' discursive religious identities are changeable since they are contextual constructs prompted in a certain situation.

When researching how the large group of people that are neither active in religious organizations, nor outright hostile or indifferent to religion, describe themselves in relation to different religious designations there is a need to be clear about which question the respondents are actually answering if we are to understand what they are communicating. Furthermore, there is a need to actively resist the incongruence fallacy, (Chaves 2010) since, in fact, an expectance of consistency in religious self-descriptions disregards the discursive possibility of crisscrossing between different subject positions. Such an expectance demands of respondents a commitment to, and an investment in, religious identities that people like those discussed here lack.

Now, this conclusion has in itself methodological implications when it comes to measuring religious identities among semi-secular people. For example, as Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam point out, since liminal Nones have a limited attachment to religion, they 'may or may not identify with a religious group depending on how the question is framed'. (Lim et al. 2010: 615) Changing multiplicities in terms of religious self-descriptions stand out as salient in the material on which this study is based, which indicates that for this group longitudinal studies are particular valuable. However, as the demographer Conrad Hackett argues, measuring religious identity in waves may also be important in research on religious identity more generally. Hackett argues that instead of treating religious identity as a stable trait, panel studies must routinely ask about religious identity in waves. Without such data, he argues, it is difficult to understand how religious self-identity changes over time (Hackett 2014: 407).

Hackett also points to the fact that in surveys people change their answers concerning other things too. As an example he mentions discrepancies in the answers regarding born-again experiences among the participants in the United States General Social Surveys (GSS) 2006. Here he notes that 18 per cent of the people who answered that they had had a born-again experience in the first wave responded two years later that they had *never* had such an experience. Hence, Hackett suggests that 'people even vary in their reports of experiences that would not seem to change over time.' (Hackett 2014: 407) In the following chapter, multiplicity of interpretations of experiences will be discussed. However, I will not focus on longitudinal change of the kind suggested by Hackett, but rather on the fact that even in the interview situation the respondents often gave several, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of episodes or experiences.

Interpreting secrets

In the previous chapter I discussed the respondents' descriptions of themselves in relation to different religious designations. In this chapter I am going to focus on how the interviewees talked about experiences that they singled out as 'particular' or 'out of the ordinary'. In the interview situation they often gave several, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of episodes or experiences. I analyze this simultaneity of interpretations of experiences through a focus on the flow between different kinds of *epoché*, namely between the suspension of judgment, the suspension of disbelief, and the suspension of existential doubt. Suspension (from the latin verb *suspendo* 'hang up') is for the purposes of this thesis used to denote a cognitive process of setting aside certain beliefs or disbeliefs about reality.

The secrets

Tourists have crowded into the half-dark of the enormous Romanesque church.
Vault opening behind vault and no perspective.
A few candle flames flickered.

An angel whose face I couldn't see embraced me
and his whisper went all through my body:
Don't be ashamed to be a human being—be proud!
Inside you one vault after another opens endlessly.
You'll never be complete, and that's as it should be.

Tears blinded me
as we were herded out into the fiercely sunlit piazza,
together with Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Herr Tanaka and Signora Sabatini—
within each of them vault after vault opened endlessly.

I am starting this discussion by quoting Tomas Tranströmer's poem 'Romanesque arches'[1] for two reasons. Firstly, Tranströmer's work was mentioned by the respondents in several of the interviews and his poetry was mentioned in relation to particular experiences.[2] I also quote this particular poem because in my view it eloquently illustrates a situation that disturbs the logic of everyday life.

In different kitchens, from different people, but on a number of occasions, I have, during the course of this project, heard the phrase 'I have never told anybody about this before'. The respondents have, sometimes in whispers, in 'the privacy' of the interview, confided in me stories that they had hitherto kept secret. These 'secrets' have frequently been about experiences that they single out as particular or out-of-the-ordinary, experiences that in some way have 'disturbed' them in the way they go about things in their everyday life and the way that they think about their world. Experiences that they are reluctant, or in some cases, find it arduous to put in words.

Victor, for one, spoke quite explicitly of the linguistic challenge that talking about these experiences entailed. In our second interview, he said, while reasoning about his longing for 'religion that would feel accessible to him', that

> articulation becomes a question of approximation (*närmevärden*) [...] A poet like Tranströmer, he deals with that all the time. He is, to me, a poet that continuously tries to grasp the type of experience that I would like to call religious.

In my interpretation, what Victor wanted to say here was that our everyday language is quite inadequate when it comes to describing certain experiences in any precise way. He continued his discussion by dividing and juxtaposing language into 'scientific language' on the one hand, and 'poetic and religious language' on the other.

> Poetry is an attempt to describe things without defining them. If you know what I mean. Scientific language tries to define, to lock things in their places. That is in the nature of science – you have to try to explain what is and what is not. Poetry, poetic language

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[1] In Robert Bly's translation.
[2] This is probably connected to the fact that at the time of the second round of interviews Tranströmer had just received the Nobel Prize in literature.

or religious language tries to formulate something that does not allow for formulation.

The focus in this chapter lies on accounts of experiences that the interviewees single out as extraordinary, and on the way these experiences are interpreted by them.[3] I do not categorize these experiences (as for example religious), instead I describe and discuss the ways the respondents interpret and articulate them. Let me begin by giving you an example from one of the interviews.

Göran

There is an air of mystery around Göran. Already in the hallway, where I would usually start to launch the interview by introducing the terms informally, making small talk, Göran immediately said that he was surprised that he agreed to do the interview. 'I never do things like this', he said in his introvert way.

But this time he had agreed and since they were renovating the apartment next door, Göran suggested that we go downstairs to the lower level of his two-level apartment, where the noise might disturb us less. Walking down the stairs I passed through the intense scent that came from the pink lilies placed on a small table in the downstairs hallway and in a vase that stood on the coffee table by the small sofa in the room we entered. I sat down and looked out through the large windows facing the twilight sky.

I asked Göran if I could switch on my audio recorder, but instead of answering Göran wanted to know more about the project. I sensed that this was a question of establishing trust so, apart from telling him the usual bit about ethical premises for the interview and the project, I also decided to tell him a little more about myself and my view of the academic study of religion. Thus, in order to create a trustful interview climate I was from the beginning more personal with Göran than I usually needed to be. Göran seemed to relax and launched into a discussion of how people always carry a story about their lives with them. But since his consent had been unclear earlier I felt that I had to I ask him again if I could switch on

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[3] Because of this particular focus there is no need here to enter into a discussion on the nature of mystic or so-called 'non-conceptual experiences or moments'. For different perennialist positions in the debate see Proudfoot 1985; Stace 1960; Forman 1999, for different constructionist stances see Sundén 1959, 1964; Katz 1978, 1992; Neitz & Spickard 1990; Yamane 2000.

the audio recorder. This time he said yes, but he was noticeably disturbed so after a while I put it out of sight behind the vase. He looked at me doing that and asked hesitantly, 'you are not going to laugh at what I am saying, when you listen to this later, are you?'

For Göran secrecy is a bit of a personality trait. He generally wants to keep things private (for example he said that he never talks on the phone in public and he refused to tell me more about his job than that he works at night). Still, his hesitation may be linked to what the historian of ideas Karin Johannisson writes about in her essay 'Hemligheters lådor, lönnfack och slöjor' ['Boxes, compartments and veils of secrecy'] (2011). In this text Johannisson reflects upon the different forms of secrecy and how the content and creation of secrets differ depending on their context.

Johannisson argues that there is a difference between something that is private, as in protected from unwanted notice, and that which is made secret, as through an act of voluntary concealment. (Johannisson 2011: 44) Göran is private in so far as he does not want unwanted notice, but he is actually also secretive. I see two reasons for secrecy in Göran's behavior. On the one hand there is shame: Johannisson points out that in every period what is made secret is what is deemed shameful by the prevailing ideology and culture. (Johannisson 2011: 43) With few exceptions the respondents seem to express that certain interpretations of life and of episodes are less accepted in Swedish society as a whole, that is, those interpretations that seem to be grounded in a non-scientific view of the world. On several occasions respondents have said that they understand their surroundings as potentially hostile or prone to ridicule certain episodes or interpretations of experiences, if they were to be spoken about openly. Göran, for example, said that these were stories that he could tell me but that if he told others they might start to regard him as 'a little strange. I think so. A bit highly-strung, airy-fairy (*flummig*), otherwise, unreliable'.[4]

On the other hand, Göran also seem to want to keep things to himself for another reason that connects to Johannisson's analysis of secrets, namely that secrets are not solely about withholding information, but they

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[4] In 'The spirituality of Non-churchgoers' Kate Hunt describes a similar fear of being ridiculed or shamed by 'the dominant rational culture' among the people in her study, see Hunt 2003: 166–168. Compare also Thurfjell (2011) where he discusses the reasons why an active affiliation with the Church of Sweden often generates a feeling of embarrassment among post-Christian Swedes. Thurfjell argues here that this feeling is partly due to transgression of certain social norms among a majority culture to which the respondents considers they belong.

are also about a revaluation of that information. To make something a secret (*att förhemliga*) is to exercise power, and secrecy must be seen as a technique to achieve certain goals. Göran spoke of moments that he sets apart from the everyday, moments of timelessness 'when the seconds feel spacious' as he put it, moments that he cherishes and that help him through the dark patches in life. He said that he seldom, if ever, speaks about those moments to anyone. Such a voluntary act of making something secret, understood as setting something apart and by doing that valuing it, is something that I will return to in this chapter.

So, after I had assured him that I am not in the business of debunking or ridiculing peoples' stories, Göran continued speaking. He spoke of a changing focus in his life that had come with aging.

> I feel old. Now it is more about thinking back. The memories weigh heavier, and partly also the present perhaps. I can find a greater calm. It is less forward and less social. […] The relation with other people is not so important, the need for it. You become more populated by your memories.

By less social he meant less involved in relations with the living, his relations to the dead, however, seem to have increased. Like many other respondents Göran too has a story about the 'sensuous social supernatural' (Day 2011), in this case a sociality tied to his memories. 'I think I have a better contact with… I can spend time with people who I have left and that are dead' he said at one point and continued 'I can think that in certain moments, it can be a smell or something…'. Here Göran left the sentence unfinished and got up from his armchair and walked over the room to the window where there was a plant. He rubbed his fingers on one of its leaves, smelled his hand and said:

> When I stand here in the evening then it is my grandmother. She used to have one of these and when I was a child she would let me feel it and tell me the story about the doctor from Enköping who named it. […] It is that sort of contact through things that just surge spontaneously. And they have been more frequent now. It feels very good. You could think that there is something after death but I don't make that conclusion. They exist in me. They live in me.

Göran thus ascribed a greater importance to memories, but also to nature, and in the interview he often returned to his experience of having contact with 'the timeless things; the existential, God, nature, memories', which he understands as a longing triggered by a perceived 'discrepancy between what we experience at times and that which is. There is like an idea or a fragrance of something else that in the everyday feels very remote.'

Some respondents have had many such experiences, others just a few. When I asked Göran to share an episode where he had 'sensed something else' he tentatively started to tell me about his first such experience.

As a child he had never been interested in religious matters, he started by saying, and he had learned no words for what happened to him. He was part of an environment that rejected and even showed aversion towards religious matters. Religious people was thought of as having less worth and frowned upon, also by him. This, he explained, made him unprepared for what would happen to him.

Göran said that he often has these kinds of experiences when he feels 'pressured psychologically' – when life feels dark. And it was during one such difficult time in his early teens when he fell very sick in meningitis, that he had his first experience of this kind. He had felt confused due to altering perceptions in the course of that sickness and its aftermath, he explained, but he had had no one to talk to about it. He described that the outcome was that he became lonely and angry and scared of going crazy. Here he stopped himself saying that 'this really lessens the credibility of this story but….'. He looked at me closely; seemingly watching my reactions, and then hesitantly continued by telling me about an episode that he is too embarrassed to let me relate here. Suffice it to say that when he was fourteen he had an intense experience that made him feel as if 'something burst' in him, as he put it.

At this point in the interview they had started to remove tiles next-door, which is quite a noisy business. This forced Göran and me to lean in towards each other as he finished his story, but when Göran was through relating his story of that first 'out of the ordinary' experience we relaxed into our seats and listened to the noise for a moment or two. Then Göran leaned in towards me again and began to tell me of another experience that he is not as embarrassed about. He now started to tell me of a time when he was involved in an accident a few blocks away, riding his motorcycle on his way home. 'There was a container', he said, 'a car drove out and I crashed straight into it. It just said "clonk" and then my

motorcycle was completely destroyed'. He pressed his palms against each other to show me how flat it had become.

> That is when it happened. It was as if time slowed down and I knew exactly what to do. It was like in a movie. Frame by frame passed and I pressed the handlebars, felt the force coming up and flew over the car, seven or eight meters, and landed on my feet. A couple of girls standing by a solarium described it to me later also. I knew exactly what to do. Afterwards I took off my helmet and bowed. I knew exactly what to do and it is hard to explain. I thank myself for that, myself or somebody else. That is how it was. There was no time, the car came and I drove. I heard that noise and everything became still. Years after that the girl on the sidewalk said to me "I often think about how you came flying through the air".

In a way, I believe that the reason that this episode was easier to talk about for Göran was that the external course of events had been confirmed for him by the girls on the sidewalk. He did fly over that car and he did land on his feet. Experiences or episodes that were more difficult for him to relate and that he did not let me write about here, however, were not shared with anybody else in that sense.

The experiences that the respondents told me about and spoke of as 'out of the ordinary' and/or to keep secret are not necessarily described as transformative or spectacular, rather they are often more discrete and unobtrusive in kind. Often the respondents did not describe such coincidences as life altering experiences but rather as 'little things', hence, their significance seems to lie in the details. Johanna explained that one example could be that she senses that her brother is unwell, 'nothing serious' she said and continued,

> sometimes it happens that I want to hear a particular song and when I turn on the radio it's playing. That kind of thing. That, I cannot even be bothered analyzing. It's OK that things are a little weird.

The impact these experiences have on people's lives is that they (at most and sometimes) inspire a quiet sort of awe and mystery, an indication that there is 'something more'. However, for some these moments are – as in the case of Göran – cherished as they help the respondents to get through feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Below I will focus on how the respondents talked about and explained these secrets, theorize the multiplicity of interpretations offered, and analyze the apparent reluctance to choose between them.

Simultaneity of interpretations

Sensing the presence of a deceased loved one or having intense feelings of connectedness in nature are recurrent experiences in the respondents' stories and I have been presented with a multitude of different explanations and interpretations. Sometimes – like Göran in an earlier quote – they spoke of a contact with 'something else' that nevertheless resides within them, but they also spoke of the same or similar experiences as for example being hormonally induced, the result of fatigue, or in terms of supranormal agents or dimensions.

For example, as Göran set out to explain why he had had the experiences he singled out as out of the ordinary, and what they meant to him he offered me two parallel interpretations of his experiences without taking a stand on which of the two he considered to be 'true'. In doing so, he gave voice to a recurrent pattern in the material. In relation to the motorcycle accident he said:

> I think that on the one hand it could be survival instincts. Like a cat that you throw up in the air. In such extreme moments there is that possibility. OR, that there is some guardian angel. That evening I did thank possible guardian angels. If it was that, just to be on the safe side.

When I asked him if I understood it correctly if I said that he was offering me two interpretations of what had happened during the accident he confirmed that and said, 'yes, it is about that question of whether it is all about me or if there is something "outside"'.

This passage illustrates a characteristic of Göran's way of reasoning about his experiences, namely his way of expressing two interpretations of an experience seemingly simultaneously without choosing one over the other.

Now, such simultaneity was just starting to seriously attract my attention at this point of the project. But I was curious as to whether the respondents always reasoned like that or if the particular dynamics of the interview were what made them want to avoid taking a stand. For this

reason I asked Göran how he would explain it to his children, but as a response he just said that he does not talk of these things, to anyone. He said that I would have to choose for myself, but that he preferred to have two version of the story, and explained:

> It is a bit schizophrenic really. There is something divided in me. But I think that the brain works that way. As soon as you say something, the opposite is also there. In discussions, when categorizing. So we experiment with these positions. And the people that stand in the middle, more nuanced, are well aware of the extremes.[…] We do not say one thing without also saying the other, implicitly.

I am not sure that I understand his reasoning exactly here, however, the main point is quite explicit: saying two things, in Göran's terms, is giving 'expression to an inner state that all humans have', or to put it simply, Göran prefers to be 'nuanced' and he considers that position as the natural working of the mind. Whether he always speaks this openly about his point of view, or if this understanding or the way he expresses himself depends on the situation remains unknown. What is clear is that in this particular situation simultaneity of interpretations was his choice when dealing with different potential interpretations of his experiences.

On a general note, the people in this study have access to several discourses which they may draw upon when making interpretations. This means that when they choose how to regard an experience in retrospect and how to express it intersubjectively they navigate and make sense of it through a variety of patterns of interpretation. In many situations it would appear as if people choose one interpretation over another, in compliance with the social and cultural setting or as a way of solving cognitive dissonance,[5] but the material on which this thesis is based also suggests that the pressure to make such a choice is not always present in all situations.

The scholar of religion Sven-Eric Morhed (2000) discusses attitudes among Swedish people towards science and the 'paranormal' or 'inexplicable', terms that he uses interchangeably, in a way that illustrates such simultaneity. Morhed builds on a SIFO (Swedish Institute for Opinion Surveys) survey from 1998 as well as unstructured interviews. On the basis of this material he shows that even though the average Swede values

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[5] A term coined by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1976.

science highly, this does not necessarily mean that s/he refutes beliefs in the paranormal. Instead, the respondents of his study who state belief in the paranormal (such as phenomena related to what Morhed terms parapsychology, Spiritism, magic, folk-traditional beliefs, and astrology) may express the same appreciation of science as those who do not make such belief statements. Furthermore, in their attempts to explain 'inexplicable' experiences they make references to both scientific explanations and the paranormal.

Multiple patterns of interpretation

As I have already discussed earlier in this thesis, the respondents have access to multiple discourses on religion. In Chapter 4 I stressed that one aspect of the workings of discourse is fluidity, and that a multiplicity of discourses on religion are actualized as the interviewees talk about religion in their lives. In extension this means that the interviewees may, more or less consciously, switch between different patterns of interpretation available to them – a finding that Morhed's results also may serve to illustrate. In what follows next I will focus on how the respondents navigate the multiplicity of interpretations available to them. I will here set out on an analytical trajectory that complements the discourse theoretical insistence on multiple discourses with theorizing that investigates human perception of reality.

In order to analyze the ways the respondents interpret events and experiences that they talk about as out of the ordinary I begin by drawing on the psychologist of religion Hjalmar Sundén and Alfred Schütz theorizing about how different ways of interpreting experiences and events may interrelate and intersect. In the discussion on indeterminacy and ambiguity that follows, I focus on epoché, that is, the bracketing of certain beliefs or disbeliefs about reality, in order to analyze how simultaneity of interpretations is sustained.

Söderin's fall

In his work *Religionen och rollerna: Ett psykologiskt studium av fromheten [Religion and its roles: A psychological study of piety]* Hjalmar Sundén (1959) outlines his constructionist theory of religious experience. Central to his thesis is that every experience is interpreted through contextual resources, and that we have access to a number of 'frames of reference', that is different patterns that give meaning to perception. In the Sweden

of the 1950s he recognizes the existence of two dominant referential frames, one 'religious' and one 'profane' (meaning technical or scientific). He asserts that how you speak of an experience depends mainly on who you tell the story to and to what frame of reference you expect that person to have. As he sets out to explain how different frames of reference may exist side by side, Sundén describes an article published in a Swedish daily newspaper (Aftonbladet) in August 1953. This example caught my attention. The story is about Henry Söderin – a construction worker who miraculously survived a fall from the top of a 17-meter high pile driver. Sundén quotes the newspaper in which Söderin tells his story:

> "'I still cannot grasp that I am alive', he told Aftonbladet's reporter a few hours after the accident. 'But I must have had an enormous luck, or higher powers were involved. I was ready to die when I clung on and saw the ground rush towards me with incredible speed. Luckily, I kept my head clear. I was on the side that was about to strike the ground. That meant that I would be crushed under the machine. But at the same moment that I felt it fall, I pushed myself up to the upper side of the pile driver. I fought for my life. It all happened fantastically quickly. When the pile driver was a few meters above the ground I jumped. That saved my life. I landed on my hands and feet in soft sand. It felt just as if an invisible hand softened my fall". (Sundén 1959: 118, my translation)

This account, narrated in 1953, bears striking similarities to the stories that Göran and others related to me almost 60 years later. I interpret this quote from Aftonbladet as meaning that Söderin gives several explanations for his survival: firstly he suggests luck; secondly he highlights his own ability to keep a clear head and take control of the situation; and, thirdly, he refers to an 'invisible hand' and 'higher powers'. Söderin is perhaps not as self-reflexive as Göran in this recollection of his experience, but their stories are nonetheless parallel in the sense that they offer several interpretations simultaneously.

Sundén uses the example of Söderin to criticize the idea that a believer always understands the world in a 'religious' way or that a non-believer always understands the world in a 'non-religious way'. This, he argues, is not the case. Instead there is always a 'natural shift of phases between religious and profane experience'. (Sundén 1959: 120) Sundén holds that a 'religious' and a 'profane' understanding of experience cannot co-exist simultaneously. This, however, does not mean that they are incompatible.

Instead they complement each other in the sense that the religious explanation runs parallel to the causal. The religious understanding, then, 'does not cancel the known, law determined course of events, but, rather, reinforces it, or gives it a particular accent, a meaning and a value that it does not have in itself'(Sundén 1959: 129, my translation). And, as we saw in the article about Söderin, the phase shifts may occur extremely quickly.[6]

Multiple realities

Sundén's notion of different phases connected to referential frames (which for the purposes of this thesis I talk about as patterns of interpretation) resonates with the work of Alfred Schütz, who also addresses the question of changes in the way the world is perceived. Schütz's claims are universalistic in the sense that they are intended to explain how all people navigate in the world, while my claims are tied to specific empirical material that is unsuitable for use as a basis for general claims of that kind. Nonetheless, I find Schütz's ideas on multiple realities offer a useful way of discussing the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations present in the material. Hence, it is this particular aspect of his work that I will explore in order to set the scene for a discussion on how the respondents sustain different ostensibly simultaneous interpretations of their experience.

When Schütz speaks of reality he is building on the work of William James and his discussion of the subjective grounding of our perception of reality. What is real to us, along this line of reasoning, is that which is the focus of our attention. With James's theory on various reality orders as his point of departure, Schütz develops the idea of *finite provinces of meaning*. A province of meaning is the context in which that which we focus on, an experienced phenomenon for example, is related to other phenomena and hence given its meaning, its particular status as real and as part of an order. These provinces may be understood as different realms of experience, in which a set of experiences shares the same 'cognitive style' and hence

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[6] As a side note, even though Sundén sees such phase shifting as generally applicable, he proposes a categorization of three groups of people that deal with 'religious' referential systems quite differently. Firstly, he identifies a category that are negative towards religious traditions and religious individuals, secondly, he describes a category of people who view religion and religious people positively but do not interpret experiences through a religious framework (and if they do it has little impact on their personality) and, thirdly, those whose experiences deepen their commitment to a religious tradition. (Sundén 1959: 121) Using Sundén's scheme, the second group is more frequently represented in this material.

imparts a particular 'accent to reality'. (Schütz 1973: 230; Schütz & Luckmann 1973: 22–25) According to Schütz these cognitive styles are determined by a number of factors, namely, the kind of attention of consciousness, of *epoché*, of spontaneity, of self-experience, of sociality, and also the time perspective that prevails. (Schütz 1973: 232) We perceive reality differently depending on the province of meaning actualized. This means, for example, that somebody who enters a psychotic state of mind or is under the influence of narcotics is in another realm of experience than, let's say, if they had been sane or sober. Likewise, sitting in an office thinking about religion is a different experience in terms of 'cognitive style' from having a nightmare, and having a nightmare is a different experience from contemplating a work of art.

Schütz argues that provinces of meaning are 'finite' in two ways. (1) Firstly, they are finite in the sense that experiences within them are perceived as inter-consistent and compatible with the particular accent of that province of meaning. One consequence of this is that experiences and interpretations that belong to a certain province may look contra intuitive or even absurd from the viewpoint of another. (2) Secondly, they are finite because there is no smooth way to transgress the borders of one province of meaning into another. Rather, Schütz argues, transitions between provinces must happen through what he describes as a 'leap' (in Kierkegaard's sense) or a 'shock' that disrupts the meaning-structure in play at that moment. In other words a change that is drastic enough to disturb the logic of the particular province of meaning actualized. In real life, however, transgressions such as the 'shock' of falling asleep, a child's turning towards a toy or succumbing to laughter while listening to a joke illustrating the foolish aspect of daily life, which are a few of Schütz's examples, often pass unnoticed.[7]

In Schütz's theorizing on multiple realities he stresses that 'it is the *meaning* of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality' (Schütz 1973: 230).[8] Hence, in Schütz's view there

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[7] Differences between different kinds of shock will not be discussed here. In brief, Schütz points out that shocks may be of different kinds and that they may be experienced differently and with distinct intensity. He also says that they may have varying consequences in terms of their impact on the experiencer. However, Schütz does not explicitly discuss differences between different kinds of shock. For a discussion on differences between strong and mild shocks see Sander 1988: 272–277.

[8] This idea resonates with a hermeneutical understanding of the connection between interpretation and reality which depicts interpretation of reality as *constitutive* of reality, not merely an outlook *on* reality that can be 'bracketed', for a discussion see

is no absolute independent reality or truth.[9] Instead, there are multiple realities constituted through different finite provinces of meaning. Since each province has its own separate cognitive style, a person's perception of reality, of what is real, is given different accents depending on the province of meaning actualized at a particular moment. This means that a person's total reality must be described as a multiplicity.[10]

However, in Schütz's view, not all realities are equally persistent. All individuals, groups, societies or cultures grade their different realities and ascribe importance to them in relation to each other. Furthermore, most societies give prominence to one level of reality, which then becomes a standard reality that is generally accepted in that particular group. (Sander 1988: 263) One specific province of meaning may thus be considered a person's 'home province'. This is the province that is perceived by that person as *most real* (in a normative and ontological sense of the word) *most of the time*. Schütz calls it the *paramount reality*, and argues that, for most of us, this is the reality that we share with others. It is the world of common sense and daily life. Schütz also calls it *the reality of*

for example Glynos and Howarth 2007: 55. For discussions on the connections between Schützian phenomenology and hermeneutic traditions see Staudigl & Berguno 2014.

[9] This position is shared by discourse theorists. In Laclau and Moffe's theorizing the notion of discourse signals the centrality of meaning to practices – all actions, practices and social formations are regarded as discursive in nature. That said, this does not mean that 'everything is discourse' – a criticism often voiced of discourse theory – instead, as they put it 'a stone exists independently of any system of social relations, but it is, for instance, either a projectile or an object of aesthetic contemplation only within a specific discursive configuration' (Laclau 1990: 101). In more or less the same way as described by Schütz therefore from a discourse theoretical position there is no way of making sense of the world and of phenomena in it without an interpretative pattern. As the historian Achim Landwehr puts it 'at the bottom [*Grund*] of realities and discourses there is no other fundament than their own historicity. Hence, the shortest possible definition of the function of discourses must be: discourses generate realities' (Landwehr 2009: 92 quoted in von Stuckrad 2013).

[10] The idea of sharp borders between provinces of meaning, borders that may only be transgressed through 'shock', does not in Schütz's theorizing mean that they are necessarily chronological in the sense that one always follows another. On the contrary, in his theorizing on the interplay of relevance structures Schütz argues that we live and act in many provinces of meaning *simultaneously*. What he is referring to here is that through a multidimensional approach to personality we engage various levels of our personality at the same time. Even though Schütz speaks as if there is 'core personality' to be found, he talks of this personality as split in the sense that is has no Archimedean point. Hence, he does not see this split as a pathological condition, instead it is the ability of people to distinguish between different aspects of themselves that is referred to. For further reading see Schütz 1970a: 8–13. This will not be discussed further here however.

everyday life. The characteristics of this reality of everyday life, then, are a wide-awakeness and a suspension of doubt about the things that we perceive through our senses. As we engage in work, we assume the intersubjective realities that are taken for granted in a common world of communication and social action. In this reality we navigate with a 'natural attitude' that makes us use categories, typifications, roles, social recipes, and skills without thinking about them. We do so until we experience something that creates a problem in our routine. Actually, argues Schütz, people

> are not interested in finding out whether this world really does exist or whether it is merely a coherent system of consistent appearances. We have no reason to cast any doubt upon our warranted experiences which, so we believe, give us things as they really are. It needs a special motivation, such as the upshooting of a "strange" experience not subsumable under the stock of knowledge at hand or inconsistent with it to make us revise our former beliefs. (Schütz 1945: 550)

That said, part of this everyday reality comprises experiences of 'shock' which brings attention to other available interpretational patterns that, despite the dominance of the paramount reality, are accessible to us and exist side by side with the dominant, and perhaps normative interpretation of the world. Schütz gives the following examples of other provinces: 'the world of dreams, of imageries and phantasms, especially the world of art, the world of religious experience, the world of scientific contemplation, the play world of the child, and the world of the insane'. (Schütz 1973: 232)

There are numerous examples in my material which show that among the patterns of interpretation the respondents have access to, one is of paramount importance. One clear example comes through in the example of Sara – a young woman who at the time of the interviews was still living in her parents' home. Unlike Göran, who was in a more reminiscent stage of his life, Sara was facing all those major questions about who she is and who she wants to be. She expressed a longing for a place of her own, and for adult life with its combination of independence and responsibilities.

When filling out the survey question concerning religious self-descriptions, Sara gave quite explicit expression to the reality she perceived to be paramount. As she pondered the category 'doubter' she said the following:

> It feels like if you belong to a religion then you doubt that you are
> like a Christian. Or, you may doubt that there really is some-
> thing… there are days that I go around thinking that perhaps there
> is something more than this, but it is more like if you start to think
> about stuff that you start to doubt. Perhaps Jesus exists?

Thus, what Sara held to be most real – that which may be subject to doubt
– was a world in which religious truths are fiction and where Jesus does
not exist. For her, doubts about the premises for that reality came only in
connection to posing the question ('when you start to think about stuff').
Later in this chapter I will elaborate further on Sara's 'doubt' and the
simultaneity that comes out of it.

Access to several realities

Even though most people have the reality of everyday as their paramount
reality, this does not prevent some people, for longer or shorter periods of
time, from having other provinces of meaning as their central reference
(Sander 1988: 235). Schütz argues, from a seemingly non-foundationalist
position, that there is no absolute starting point from which we interpret
reality. Instead, which one we choose (actively or passively) changes
constantly. (Schütz 1970a: 11)

Regardless of which province of meaning a person considers his or her
'home-base', one consequence of holding one reality as paramount is that
other realities are of necessity reduced to modifications or 'quasi-
realities', from the standpoint of that dominant reality. This, in turn,
makes it difficult to communicate (or translate) experiences and inter-
pretations that originate in one province of meaning to another. If we
wish to communicate an experience in the reality of the everyday, it must
happen through language and language, according to Schütz, 'obstinately
resists serving as a vehicle for meanings which transcend its own presup-
positions'. (Schütz 1973: 233)

In my reading the theorizing of Sundén and Schütz point in the same
direction here. They both speak of the existence of several patterns of
interpretation, and they both emphasize that there are different provinces
of meaning (or phases as Sundén calls them) which are separated from
each other in terms of cognitive style. Also, even though Sundén claims
more definitely that they may cross-fertilize each other, they both seem to
suggest that these systems of meaning are activated one at a time. As these
patterns of interpretations are actually forming the perception of the

world, and hence the constitution of reality, they cannot all be given prominence at once. Nevertheless, both Sundén and Schütz agree that we are able to shift rapidly between different patterns of interpretation, which means that in everyday life different ways of relating to the world are not as hard to combine as they would appear to be in theory.

Let me now proceed by giving an example of how this reality shift finds expression in another interview, namely that with Barbara.

Haunted by a bird

Barbara is in her 50s. She sometimes works as a teacher and has been active in the trade union for many years. In the interviews she came through as an inquisitive person, eager to learn. She described herself as having no belief in god(s) but plenty in nature. Not, however, as she put it 'in anything strange that you cannot touch'. All in all, Barbara considered herself to be 'quite unspiritual really'. At the time of the interviews she was in-between jobs and lived together with her child and a number of cats in one of the rental apartments in the neighborhood. Before she had her child Barbara used to go quite often to a nearby church that is known for giving services that do not place a great deal of emphasis on Christian doctrine.[11] 'It was exciting', she explained, 'I don't think that I have the right to go to church since I don't believe, even though I am a member of the Church of Sweden. But when they talked I felt that, well, that they are like me – people who don't believe particularly much'.

During the interviews she frequently returned to this difference that she perceived between her and 'people of faith'. She emphasized that even though she *does* 'believe' in certain things – such as life, love, relations – these are immanent things; they are not 'supernatural'. However, Barbara's strong stance in these matters did not exclude a little simultaneity when it came to interpreting particular experiences that she had had. On the contrary, this became apparent when Barbara started to talk about the cats that were casually rubbing against our legs as we sat by the kitchen table. Barbara looked down at them and said:

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[11] The church she is referring to is called Allhelgonakyrkan. Here a priest called Olle Carlsson initiated the mass called 'Allhelgonamässan'. This mass attracted large crowds which in light of the low church attendance in Sweden in general was depicted as somewhat of a phenomenon in Swedish media. For an example of medial coverage from this period see: http://www.svd.se/nyheter/idagsidan/existentiellt/kyrkan-som-vaxer-sa-att-det-knakar_231921.svd?utm_source=sharing&utm_medium=clipboard &utm_campaign=20130225. In his book *Kristendom för ateister [Christianity for atheists]* Carlsson (2007) describes his experiences from Allhelgonamässan.

> I can think that for example cats or other animals can sense if there
> is something special. If you see a cat becoming anxious it is a good
> idea to check out what it is, maybe there is something. I can think
> about that sort of thing... perhaps there is a troll out there that they
> can sense.

She laughed dismissively, but then picked up the thread again and said:

> No, I don't know, but I can think that way sometimes. I can think
> that my dad comes to me as I little bird and sits down right next to
> me. But that is just my homemade fantasy that I don't connect to
> religion or faith or anything like that.

Again she laughed, hesitantly this time, a little embarrassed it seemed to
me. When I asked her if she thought that the bird continued to be her dad
even after it had flown away she first responded with a distinct no but
then softened it by saying: 'when I think about the bird "look how brave
it is, does it want something?"' By this I take it that she meant that the idea
of the bird being her father was actually something that she found sensible
since it did not seem logical to her that the bird would come so close to
her for no reason. 'But I think that is a more Indian [as in Native
American] way of thinking', she continued, only to hesitantly add: 'But
they believe in sprits and I don't. No. It is not the same then'. She was
trying to find some anchor in some vaguely familiar frame of reference
but gave up in the end, a little downcast. I encouraged her to continue her
line of thought and she said again that it could have been her dad. 'Isn't
that strange? It is a bit contradictory… I see that. But that is how we are,
isn't it? We are both at the same time.'

    This conversation and Barbara's conclusion serve as an example of
how different realities, even though they are incommensurable, not only
may co-exist without problem, but may be referred to at what appears to
be the same time, even when one of them is the normative one – at least
when you leave them unarticulated and hidden from plain sight. But, even
so, it is quite apparent that for Barbara some interpretations feel more real
to her in the sense that they belong to a reality that has a paramount
position in her life, at least at the time of that interview. This came
through even more clearly when Barbara and I went through the ques-
tionnaire together and I asked her about different supranormal experi-
ences. She wanted to write that she had had no such experiences, except
for a dream that came true. When I asked her if she did not think that the

story about the bird could fit here she said 'No! That isn't supernatural. It is perfectly natural'. Again, she gave that hesitant laugh and a rational explanation: 'It is my imagination and I am aware of the fact that it is a construction. But ok, if you want it there write – Haunted by bird!' It somehow felt 'natural' to Barbara for her father to come to her as a bird, but whether she considered this 'real' or not depended (expressed in Schützian terms) on which finite province of meaning that was actualized.

Now, even though I am simplifying Schütz's theory on multiple realities, I believe the main idea here becomes quite clear.[12] I have tried to put words to the notion that most people navigate in a total reality, a life-world, which is compartmentalized. In other words, our lives contain a whole set of different, sometimes incommensurable, realms of existence that despite their incongruence sometimes co-exist in the 'now' quite amicably.

Focusing on epoché

So far I have tried to theorize the simultaneity of interpretations of certain experiences, as articulated by the respondents. By drawing on Sundén's theory on phase shifts and Schütz's theories on multiple realities, I have suggested that the respondents' interpretations belong to different realities where they fit into the overarching logic of that particular realm. This basic finding, that people often have different parallel interpretations to choose from and that people live different realities that are governed by their own logic, has been noted by many scholars within the study of religion. Schütz's theorizing on the nature of social reality and its impact on perception has influenced, for example, the work of Thomas Luckmann, Peter Berger, and Meredith McGuire. It has prompted pertinent studies of questions such as how these different worlds are sustained, how people negotiate and navigate between the many options available, and how these options influence the ways people relate to their worlds.

In the analysis of the interview material focus will be placed on one aspect in particular that Schütz points out as distinct in different realities, namely *epoché*. In 'On multiple realities' published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 1945 he exemplifies his argument by pointing to the difference between phenomenological epoché as a metho-dological apparatus (following Husserl) and epoché as it is used in the

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[12] For instance, I have disregarded Schütz's ideas of 'enclaves' in this discussion.

reality of everyday life. In phenomenological inquiry the methodological device called bracketing, or epoché, denotes the deliberate effort to suspend one's beliefs in ontological characteristics of experienced objects. This means neither refusing reality nor accepting it, but is considered a way of suspending judgment in order to be able to focus on the experience of reality rather than something beyond that experience.

> Phenomenology has taught us the concept of phenomenological epoché, the suspension of our belief in the reality of the world as a device to overcome the natural attitude by radicalizing the Cartesian method of philosophical doubt. The suggestion may be ventured that man with the natural attitude also uses a specific epoché, of course quite another one, than the phenomenologist. He does not suspend belief in the outer world and its objects but on the contrary: he suspends doubt in its existence. What he puts in brackets is the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears to him. We propose to call this epoché the epoché of the natural attitude. (Schütz 1945: 550–551)

What Schütz indicates in the quote above is that in different conditions and positions there is a suspension of certain mental actions. In Schütz's work, as previously mentioned, every province of meaning is characterized by its own kind of epoché. This means that *what* is put in brackets differs. In relation to my material, two kinds of epoché that Schütz talks about are of interest, firstly, the suspension of judgment, as described above, and secondly the suspension of existential doubt. The second of these stands for the bracketing of the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears. This means taking this reality at face value. In this way it is quite the opposite of the suspension of judgment that finds resonance in the example of Göran. The idea of suspending every doubt in the existence of the outer everyday world as it is perceived by the senses is echoed in the notion of a normative position that the respondents claim to find in Swedish society. Göran, for example is careful to state that he could tell me about his experiences but that if he told others they might start to regard him with skepticism. Hence, in the material there is evidence of both suspension of judgment and suspension of existential doubt.

In the scientific study of religion, themes of suspension have often been used as a methodological tool for understanding phenomena related to the area of interest; however, the cognitive process of suspension in its

own right has not received the same focus. A notable exception is the work of the historian of religion Peter Jackson (2012). In his article 'Apparitions and apparatuses: On the framing and staging of religious events', Jackson attempts to move beyond dichotomous sets such as belief/disbelief, rationality/irrationality, and obligation/freedom by focusing on the premises for religious participation. In terms of my interest in different kinds of epoché, Jackson's article is particularly useful because of the insights into recurring patterns of suspension that it provides, demonstrated through two case-studies drawn from Roman-Hellenistic antiquity and one from 18th-century Paris.

Jackson takes the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's (2009) investigations of the Foucaultian concept *dispositive*, or, in one of the many English translations of the concept, apparatus, as his point of departure.[13] What he stresses is that even though there are (what in this thesis I call) discourses that restrict and determine our choices, and even though instability of meaning is part of the workings of discourse, personal agency should not be underestimated in relation to specific situations and behaviors.

Even though Jackson uses neither Schützian nor Laclauan terminology, I see his argument as compatible with the aspects of their theorizing that I have raised in this thesis. I read his article as bridging Schütz's ideas on multiple realities and Laclau's emphasis on the discursive struggle for interpretative prerogative when it comes to establishing meaning. By focusing on instances and situations Jackson directs attention to how people perceive such situations within and through certain discursively available patterns of interpretation, which is an approach that is similar to the one employed in this thesis.

What Jackson highlights, in my reading, is a struggle for meaning between discourses which implies that alongside fixation of meaning there is an incessant instability that challenges it. To denote such 'instability of meaning and knowledge' (Jackson 2012: 292) Jackson uses the term indeterminacy. Although the term indeterminacy is used by

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[13] In *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977,* Foucault writes that dispositive refers to the relations among elements in a 'decidedly heterogeneous ensemble which is comprised of discourse, institutions, architectural establishments, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philanthropic dogmas – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.' (Foucault 1980: 194). Hence, in this sense dispositive is a network that contains virtually everything.

Jackson in a descriptive sense, as more or less a synonym to uncertainty and indecision, in the context of my own discussion it is beneficial to nuance that term slightly. Hence, I make a distinction between ambiguity, here understood as the presence of multiple interpretations, and indeterminacy, understood as a principle of uncertainty, that is, as an active denial of any final and determinate meaning or interpretation. Indeterminacy, then, does not only stand for a state of uncertainty, but it is a more directed term that points towards volition, that is, the process of making and acting on decisions, and individual agency.[14]

What Jackson stresses is that even though the way we perceive a situation must fit into an available pattern of interpretation, this does not mean that these are deceptive or that they distort reality. In Schütz's terminology it just means that how we perceive reality depends on which finite province of meaning constitutes the reality we live at a particular moment.

Central to Jackson's argument is that there is an element of will involved in the process of reality formation. For this reason, he argues, it is important to stress that human agents in certain situations are prepared and willing to hold back on certain taken-for-granted premises, that is – to engage in the cognitive process of suspension.

Jackson highlights two different kinds of bracketing present in human culture in general and religious participation in particular: the willing suspension of disbelief, and, the suspension of judgment.[15] (Jackson 2012: 293) By the latter, suspension of judgment, Jackson is referring to the withholding of prejudices, preconceived notions and opinions. Hence, like the phenomenological epoché described above, this is related to a preparedness and effort not to choose on basis of the taken-for-granted.

By disbelief, Jackson means 'the refusal to share certain beliefs and opinions'. This kind of epoché is closely tied to the preparedness of human agents to overlook circumstances that go against the logic of the

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[14] I am not going to go into the discussion on whether will and volition is restricted or limited. I am using the term here in a 'simple' descriptive sense.
[15] The term 'suspension of disbelief' or 'willing suspension of disbelief,' which denotes a withholding of skepticism, was actually coined in an essay by the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817, in the context of a discussion on reading and writing poetry. However, since then the term has been widely disseminated in aesthetic theory (particularly film theory) and broadened from its focus on how a writer/producer of popular media may create the premises for such experience towards an increased focus on the willingness of the reader/consumer of popular media to achieve it.

particular realm of experience of choice.[16] For example, in order to immerse oneself into the universe depicted in Star Trek, it helps to disregard the shortcomings of certain props or costumes. Or, to take an example from the interview material, when Elisabeth played with the talking board with her friends, she could successfully apply a logic and an interpretational pattern that relied on a willing suspension of disbelief. Similarly, when her flour-covered friend strode in the water as the ghost of Ebba Brahe she had no doubt that her experience was real. (Of course, in the end when the experience turned out to be a practical joke this 'shock' disrupted the suspension of disbelief, at least there and then.)

According to Jackson, both in order to suspend disbelief and judgment we need, at least momentarily, to accept premises that are not immediately apparent to us. In other words, we need to surrender to a logic that allows for the empirically unknown, which in relation to Göran's story is expressed in the explicit example of his acceptance of something that lies outside the reality of the senses, to which he may connect.

Furthermore, these forms of suspension share an acceptance and perhaps even an embracing of indeterminacy and ambiguity that I recognize in the stories of my respondents. Characteristic of both these attitudes is a reluctance to make preconceived judgments, that is to make a definite choice.

Victor again

Let me return to Victor to give an example of how the above- mentioned kinds of suspension (of disbelief, of judgment, and of existential doubt) may play out in the life of an individual. If you recall, Victor described himself as a person who wants things to fit together. He is not at all comfortable with the tension he perceives between different interpretative frameworks that he has access to. He therefore wants things to be coherent in a way his world refuses to be. As he is standing in one reality, there is always that nagging doubt that the logic of that realm is not enough to explain (yes, Victor is indeed searching for meaning) everything on its own. 'I have a tendency to question everything' he said in our second interview, and continued,

[16] Compare also Gustavo Benavides's (2010) discussion on the crucial importance of acting 'as if' in the production of religion.

when I have those typical moments when it feels like there is some meaning to it after all, I immediately start to think to myself that "you should not confuse this with the idea that there is an omnipotent power behind it".

Likewise, he cannot help himself from also questioning the reality of everyday life as to Victor 'something feels wrong with it'. He cannot completely succumb to 'a rational' understanding of the world.

> I see people that obviously manage to be atheists and to think that when you are dead, you are dead. They are able to live carefree and happy lives all the same. I have to confess that I just cannot do that. I need to believe in a greater meaning, and also, as a matter of fact, in a life after this, in order to feel completely at ease. But often it is just this a sad limitation that I have. Intellectually I can understand that, "how the hell would that make sense?" I can see all the arguments for this being something people have made up in order to endure something that is difficult. So, intellectually I could understand that probably it is not… it is better to face the facts. But emotionally I can't do that. I really want to believe in a life after this so I cling on to the things I have heard that might just suggest that.

I do not wish to focus on the discrepancy between intellect and feeling that Victor describes here. Such discrepancies do not in themselves indicate different patterns of interpretation and in extension perceptions of the world. What I mean to exemplify with the case of Victor is that as he describes this dissonance he also expresses the awareness of and accessibility to different realms of experience, to different realities. Hence, even though Victor would like to be able to completely suspend his existential doubt in order to make things work together as a whole, simultaneity is sought for. The existence of another reality in which the interpretational pattern suggests that there is indeed meaning to life, which the reality of the everyday denies, satisfies an emotional need. Hence, an attitude of indeterminacy balances the interpretative prerogative that the reality of the everyday life has in his life. Victor needs to 'cling on' to certain experiences that he feels contradict that reality in order to keep a door open for other interpretations, for other realities. But, as the story below will illustrate, that does not happen on a whim but happens instead by choice.

In answer to my question about whether he could tell me of any episode that to him suggested an afterlife, Victor launched into a story

about something that happened in early adulthood and which he often thinks about. The story was about him and three other people, of whom one committed suicide. Through a medium, the dead person then communicated great regret for having taken his life. Finishing the story Victor said that, 'at the time I remember that I thought "OK, I cannot combine this with my understanding of the world but... I'll go along with it"'. The experience did not fit in with Victor's everyday understanding of the world but he chose to accept it anyway.

However, deciding to do so was not a final and conclusive decision. Instead it was a decision that Victor makes over and over again. Right there in the interview I was able to intuit the act of volition involved in that process as Victor started to analyze the event he had just described in the story: 'I have had this at the back of my mind and many times I have thought about it, trying to figure out what really happened. I do not know how this medium asked the questions, but I can imagine…', here Victor stopped talking, as if stopping a trail of thought, and after a moment's pause he added, 'this is a kind of thing that I have thought about with regularity, concluding that I do not want to scrutinize it too much'. I interpret what happened here as an example of a willing suspense of disbelief, and a disciplining of the mind telling it not to ask questions that would disrupt a certain reality.

Victor returned to this dilemma of wanting certain experiences to be left in peace by his rationality when he spoke of another important experience for him – a sense of belonging in the particular neighborhood that he lives in.

> I had just moved here when I had this enormously distinct – so distinct that it frightened me – feeling that there is an incredibly strong meaning with me being here. "I have been here before". It was some kind of déjà vu experience. I have never had anything like it before. I remember that *as I was having it* I thought that in a week's time I will have explained this away.

This experience, said Victor, is precious to him and he said that it had been a struggle to keep it out of reach of his rationality.

In the example of Victor there are several kinds of epoché at play. On the one hand, there seems to be a willing suspension of disbelief in relation to certain experiences, applied as a strategy both for coping with a stressful simultaneity of interpretations and as a way to maintain simultaneity in order to satisfy an emotional need. But on the other, there is

also the suspension of existential doubt that Victor described as a facet of his interpretational patterns. Thus, what we see is an interplay between those two temporal states – an interplay that in turn results in and maintains a suspension of judgment and that prevents him from taking a definite stand in terms of either or.

Sara on truth and coincidence

In Sara's case as well simultaneity is connected to the suspension of existential doubt and of experiences that challenge such suspension. However, here ambiguity has a different flavor to it. In the course of the second interview, Sara repeatedly returned to her doubt concerning what is true and not. Even though it seemed as if the reality of the everyday, with the suspension of existential doubt as one of its defining characteristics, was unquestionably Sara's paramount reality, there were in fact experiences in her life that seemed to disturb that prevailing perception. For example, this is her talking about her grandmother who recently died. I have just asked her what she thinks happens when we die:

> I really don't know. It is so difficult. It would be nice if there was something, but at the same time I am thinking about how everybody used to bury people with lots of stuff that they would have in a life after this. I think that feels… I can't really believe it. I can think that perhaps she [her grandmother] might see me, but I am not a 100 per cent. I mean, considering how many religions there are, I can't understand how… I mean somebody has to be right! Is anybody right?

To that I simply echoed 'there are many religions'. 'Yes!' she then filled in with emphasis,

> and that makes you confused. Then you are supposed to find your thing. Like when you try out different sports to see which one you like. Like testing "no this wasn't for me" until you suddenly find something and just "wow, this is everything I thought about".

This idea that religions are ready-made packages that you either embrace or reject and that they stand for their own particular truth in many ways determined the way Sara talked about religion in her own life.

When Sara talked of religion she associated the concept with 'weirdness' and it was a subject that came through as little bit scary but at the

same time fascinating to her. One of the first things she brought up in our initial meeting, was the influence of her father's opinions on religion and religious people. Sara said that like her father she thinks that religion is for 'weak' people when they have problems in life. Sara explained that if (against her expectations) she would ever have to 'come out' as religious this would be particularly embarrassing in relation to her father, since he considers religion to be something generally negative.

Still, that is one side of the story, the other is that she is looking for answers and seemed to think 'Who knows who is right?' She certainly did not think that she had a satisfactory answer and actually uttered the phrase 'I don't know', with more or less frustration no less than 30 times during the second interview.

'I am so divided', she said at one point. 'Couldn't somebody just tell me what the truth is? Like, "this is how it is!"' I asked her if she used to think about that, about what is true and not. To this she replied that,

> Yes. Is it true that you are supposed to pray all the time and have certain clothes on just out of respect for what you believe in? Like there was this woman from Cuba. Her gods were vases, like! Vases that stood in her room! "This is this god" and then she drank wine because then the god could drink wine. It was like as if *she* wanted to drink wine.[17]

In this quote, Sara gave expression to a mix of feelings of fascination and ridicule, but also, there was a genuinely bemused tone here. She found the idea of having gods in the shape of vases strange, but at the same time she just did not know what to think. She returned to this example later in the interview saying, 'maybe I am supposed to drink wine!'

She had several stories to tell me that had actualized that kind of doubt. As an example she told me of one time when she was on her way to meet a person who she was interested in. On the subway there she ran into her ex-boyfriend, which felt to her like a strange coincidence.

> It feels completely crazy that he was on the same subway. It was as if I was meant to have a last chance of seeing him so that I wouldn't

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[17] Sara is here referring to a recently aired series on the theme of 'religion in Sweden', in which the journalist Anna Lindman Barsk meets people from different religious communities. The show is called 'Från Sverige till Himlen [From Sweden to Heaven]'. There are three seasons each comprising eight programmes (screened by Swedish Television 2011–2012).

doubt that I should move on. It is in these situations that it feels…
I mean; how can you run into someone like that?

Later in the interview she returned to the episode on the subway saying, 'sometimes I just feel that it is too weird. [Like] when you run into someone you've thought about. There is a saying – "speak of the devil". It is crazy how that fits!' Here she became hesitant, it seemed to me as if she was trying out different interpretations and explanations for these episodes in her mind: 'It is like…'. She stopped. 'I mean I don't think it is completely…' she stopped again. 'I mean, there must be an explanation for why things happen. But I don't know what that explanation would be though', she finally concluded.

What we can see here is that Sara struggles to make sense of the different possible explanations available to her. Simultaneity of interpretation confuses her, and she *wants* to choose, she wants to *be able* to choose. Hence, ambiguity in this case is a result of not necessarily willing but rather of reluctant indecision.

Why simultaneity of interpretations?

If a flow between different kinds of epoché is a way of navigating in a landscape characterized by multiplicity, the material contains evidence of different reasons for doing so.

I discern three main reasons for living such simultaneity in the material. The first reason has to do with indeterminacy in the sense that the respondents will not choose one interpretation over another either because they do not feel the need (Göran), or because for different reasons they do not want to (Victor). The second reason is exemplified through Sara, who simply cannot choose.

I will now juxtapose parts of Göran's, Victor's and Sara's stories in order to show that the motivations for choosing simultaneity may differ, however, let me again emphasize that they are in different stages of their lives and have different focuses.

In terms of seeing indeterminacy as a reflexive choice let me begin by looking at the difference between Göran, who elects not to choose rather consciously, and Sara who just does not choose. They both express that they are aware of different interpretations and relate to them. However, where Göran gave expression to an approach in which truth is relative, I interpret Sara's narrative as if she thinks something to be true, she just

doesn't know what. 'Somebody has to be right', she said, a little desperately. Göran on the other hand did not seem to conclude that there is a truth that can withstand scrutiny, and he is content not to know. It is a modus vivendi for him – a point of departure, a way of perceiving reality and interpreting experiences. Despite this difference, both Göran and Sara do, however, fit the Swedish pattern of openness to different perspectives and a reluctance to articulate a definitive firm position – which in the backdrop I described as a perspectival approach.

As outlined in the backdrop, the interviewees at the center here are situated in a context in which relativism and individualism are normative. That said, it is not self-evident how the respondents will deal with the fact that there are many possible ways of relating to the world available to them. Victor's, Sara's and Göran's reactions to the choice of culture and the cultural situation of relativization are distinct from each other. All three of them share the trait of individualism, but they respond to the call for mandatory individualism and personal choice in their own ways.

Like Göran, Victor is reflexive in the way he lives simultaneity. He tries to make everything fit together but at the same time he described that same tendency as a threat to the hope of greater meaning. He too relates to a multitude of patterns of interpretations but while Sara finds the situation solely stressful he both wants and is bothered by simultaneity. One way of putting it could be that Göran's and Victor's choices not to choose are active, while Sara's choice not to choose is passive in character.

Göran refuses to choose since he prefers to leave that kind of judgment aside: hence a will to be nuanced stands out. He is the respondent that is least perturbed by simultaneity, he even expresses a different ideal from Victor and Sara. Victor, who like Sara strives towards coherence and integrity, chooses to suspend disbelief in order to satisfy an emotional need, which means that simultaneity is spurred by that incentive. Sara on her part cannot choose since she feels unsure as to which of the potential truths is 'truly true'. Thus her simultaneity may be understood as a way of handling indecisiveness. Simultaneity, then, is a strategy invoked for a variety of purposes.

This finding is relevant in relation to Jackson's analysis, as discussed previously. Jackson argues that,

> In order to overcome the still dominant view that religious actions
> and dispositions are primarily informed by preconceived beliefs,
> it is crucial to appreciate the extent to which both disbeliefs and

preconceived notions are momentarily being suspended by human subjects of their own free will. Such cognitive processes do not only foster temporary astonishment and in-group sympathies, they also evoke attentiveness and creativity. (Jackson 2012: 299)

I read Jackson's article in part as an appeal to appreciate the multiplicity of motivations that may result in 'religious' behavior, and as criticism of the idea that people are motivated and navigate in the world by coherent belief systems. I would say that there are indeed different motivations for choosing indeterminacy or ambiguity among my respondents as well, and volition plays an important part in that. However, not all decisions are reflexive and deliberate in the way that Jackson suggests. What I have seen in the material on which this thesis is based is that will certainly is an important feature when it comes to different kinds of suspension but it does not explain all reactions to ambiguity, as Sara's attitude shows.

The making of secrets

To return to the discussion on secrets that started this chapter, what can be seen is that what these 'secrets' are actually shielded from is the logic of the reality of everyday life. The framework of 'secrecy' illustrates how the respondents relate to a perceived norm of scientific rationality as they navigate the multiplicity of discursive possibilities of interpretation available to them.

This norm is perceived by Göran as represented by 'others' or by a hegemonic society, but in the case of Victor it is identified as dominant in his own life-world and as such perceived as an internal threat. Regardless of this difference, though, what is pursued is a suspension of judgment to embrace ambiguity. The making of a secret becomes a method of enchanting one's life and giving value and power to interpretations that contradict simple answers.

Since language, according to Schütz, will inevitably fail to communicate meanings that transcend the presuppositions and logic of the world of common sense and daily life, by talking about experiences made in 'alternative' finite provinces of meaning those experiences are integrated into the logic of the paramount reality. When Victor says 'I do not wish to get to the bottom of this. I do not speak of it often, but now that you ask, it has meant a lot to me, but it is not immune to my critical, intellectual thinking', he seems to imply that the transition between one

realm of experience to another is perceived as a risk. When formulated and laid open for scrutiny by, for instance, scientific reasoning, an experience might not withstand the weight that the expectance of commensurability puts on it. In other words, certain interpretations might not fit into the logic and structure of the particular province of meaning in which that articulation occurs. Not talking – or for some not even thinking – about certain experiences allows room to 'live' interpretations that collide with the logic of the everyday as well. So a reluctance to articulate something may be interpreted as a strategy of creating secrets for the purpose of maintaining or – like Sara – enduring simultaneity.

Even though Sundén and Schütz in their explanations speak of perceptions of reality and the ways that these are shaped by context and situation, I have used their ideas, not in order to extract universal truths about how individuals relate to the world, but as constituents of an analysis of the interpretations of experiences that I find in the material on which this thesis is based. Hence, building on the insight that we interpret our world through patterns of interpretations of which we have a multitude to choose from, I have given a suggestion as to how we may understand the simultaneity of interpretations found in the material. My analysis revealed to me that the respondents live simultaneity through a flow between different kinds of epoche´. This finding contradicts the notion that people act from a single position characterized by coherence, which, for example, is often expected of people who are considered 'religious'.

On breaking one norm while complying with another

I have shown that even though the respondents discern a secular norm based on scientific rationality, this is not the only way that they themselves relate to the world. It might be the dominant, perhaps even hegemonic, way of interpreting the world, but it is not all-encompassing, not even in Sweden. I have, through Schütz, argued that there is always a paramount reality, with its own particular accent. However, part of that reality is an awareness of other interpretations.

In the interview situation the respondents do not express that they feel a need to choose between different possible interpretations available to them. In fact, simultaneity of interpretations is salient in a way that suggests that among these people the taken-for-granted position on how

experiences are to be interpreted is to *not choose* between different options.

Possibly, this position is so frequent in the material due to the selection criteria of the target group. People who consistently choose one interpretation over another or who negotiate and merge different interpretations into a consistent theory that they apply in every situation were not common among these respondents. Furthermore, the salience of this position might also be linked to the premises of the interview situation. The interviewees were in a situation in which they were unsure as to which interpretation they could or should report. This might have made them try out different and to them plausible interpretations, unable to learn from my reactions which one to choose.

These methodological concerns notwithstanding, it is also possible to understand the salience of this position in the light of the backdrop provided in Chapter 3. There, Sweden was described as a context characterized not only by a multiplicity of choices but also as idealizing a perspectival and individualistic approach to different truth claims. Seen through this lens, the respondents' reluctance to choose does indeed depict them as very Swedish and very modern, and in line with a dominant ideal.

However, it is also possible detect in the interview material that the respondents are relating to a norm that they do not conform to. When the respondents explicitly reflected on their incongruity, explaining it for example as 'the natural way of the mind' (Göran), or as 'that is how we are, is it not? We are both at the same time.' (Barbara), they might in fact have been answering a question that I did not ask, namely 'Why aren't you more consistent?' Of course, such a question implies that they have broken a norm, a societal expectance of consistency. In this sense, therefore, their (often) unprompted descriptions of their reasoning for not choosing among different options may be seen as a form of folk-apologetic. It is offered in response to a perceived potential criticism, as well as to an inner antagonism. Interpreted in this way, the interview material in fact both highlights and disrupts a norm of congruence.

Summary and concluding discussion

This thesis connects mainly to two discussions within the study of religion. Firstly, it ties into a critical discussion of Sweden as one of the most secularized countries in the world. Secondly, it connects to a discussion that emphasizes that lived religion is more often characterized by (in)congruence than by consistency.

The respondents discussed here are people who do not go to church or get involved in alternative spiritual activities, who are not actively opposed to religion nor entirely indifferent to it – people referred to in this thesis as *semi-secular Swedes*. Quantitative research has shown that in contemporary Europe a large proportion of the population may be described as 'neither religious nor completely unreligious' according to standard quantitative measures of religiosity. In Sweden – if a denomination-centered way of studying religion and analysis of survey questions aiming categorize people as either religious or not religious are used – the majority of respondents (70 %) in large-scale surveys do not fit the conceptual extremes and end up in this kind of 'fuzzy' borderland.

Results like this show that in order to describe and explain the Swedish religious landscape with more specificity we need a shift of perspective. Without it there is a risk that we fail to see the religious meanings, interpretations, and imaginations of the people whom we think of as secular. This study is qualitative in method and the material has been collected within a particular neighborhood in Stockholm. In total 28 semi-secular Swedes participated in a tentative open-ended interview in combination with a questionnaire. Twelve of them were contacted after a time span of approximately two years and agreed to another in-depth interview. In these follow-up interviews a semi-structured interview guide was used and two questions from the questionnaire were repeated (one concerning religious self-description and one probing religious experiences). By taking the theoretical criticism of the dichotomization of the religious and the secular seriously when collecting, analyzing, and presenting this material, this study aims to contribute an alternative perspective based on qualitative material.

It should be noted that this research explicitly focuses on individuals' lives and the personal experiences of the respondents. Indeed they often reacted to the interview questions as targeting their private sphere. The advantage of this approach is that it provides a rich material that moves away from a public discourse in Sweden in which talk of religion often concerns conflict and problems, or is seen as an issue that only is about other people. However, sidestepping certain culturally ready-made conceptualizations of religion also limits the results of this study as it narrows it down to the intimate sphere and individual interiority.

In the words of the sociologist of religion Mark Chaves, religious (in)congruence basically means that 'people's religious ideas and practices are fragmented, compartmentalized, loosely connected, unexamined, and context dependent' (Chaves 2010: 2). Focusing on three themes, this thesis highlights aspects of the respondents' discourse on religion that complicate schematic and simplifying biases that presuppose coherence and integrity. The three themes are: (1) the way the respondents talked about the concept of religion; (2) the way they talked about themselves in relation to different religious designations; and (3) the way they talked about experiences and events that they singled out as out of the ordinary.

Summary

The two-fold purpose of this thesis was (a) to make a close reading of these particular semi-secular Swedes' ways of talking about religion, and (b) to analyze the material with a focus on incongruences. In order to realize these purposes I formulated four research questions. Below I briefly summarize the discussions resulting from these.

To begin with, at the early stages of the project the concern was to discern (1) *how* the term religion was employed vernacularly by the respondents, particularly with reference to their everyday lives and their own experiences. This question connects to the theoretical and methodological considerations that led up to the choice of methods employed – issues discussed thoroughly in relation to previous research and in terms of theory in Chapter 1, and in relation to methodology and method in Chapter 2. For this reason it was of crucial importance when it came to the production of data.

As the interviewees talked about religion they ascribed a multitude of both overlapping and contradictory meanings to the concept of religion

and to religious designations. In view of the theoretical point of departure and previous research on religion in contemporary western societies this multiplicity was expected. As pointed out when discussing the theoretical elements used in this thesis, the respondents live in and through multiple discourses and realities and, as outlined in the backdrop in Chapter 3, plurality and relativism is a central feature of the cultural context that they belong to. Multiplicity is in fact an inescapable aspect of modern life in Sweden. As the respondents talked about different religious designations and categories, for example, in the interview situation they did so knowing that those exist as subject positions that it is possible to claim. In terms of cultural context, therefore, there is the discursive possibility of multiplicity. Recognition of this feature is fundamental to the arguments offered in this thesis.

The focus of the thesis lies not on highlighting that there are a number of meanings to choose from, however, which multiplicity signals. Instead the concern is to describe and analyze the ways the respondents deal with this fact. In this respect, the most salient characteristic of this material is a reluctance to choose only one single alternative, and a strong tendency to *not choose* between different options. Hence, the focus lies on showing how several of the meanings the respondents ascribed to religion were at play simultaneously in the interview situation. In this thesis this characteristic is described in terms of *simultaneity*. The term is descriptive and places emphasis on what I see as a 'both and'– approach in the way the respondents ascribe meaning to the term religion, talk about themselves in relation to different religious designations, and when interpreting experiences.

In the analytical phase of this research, the processes involved in maintaining the three aspects of simultaneity (of meanings, of self-descriptions, and of interpretations of experiences) found in the material were analyzed and discussed using theoretical elements from both discourse theory and social phenomenology. Chapter 4 – Religion as an empty signifier – deals with simultaneity of meanings ascribed to the concept of religion; Chapter 5 – The wheel of religious identification – deals with simultaneity of religious self-descriptions; and Chapter 6 – Interpreting secrets – deals with interpretations of events and experiences. These three chapters comprise the analytical core of this thesis and answer the second, third, and fourth research question respectively.

In response to the second research question – (2) *how* the respondents ascribed a multiplicity of meanings to the concept religion – the workings

of discourse with regard to the concept of religion were considered. In Chapter 4, the concept of religion at a vernacular level is shown to work as an empty signifier, in which meanings 'float' between inclusion and exclusion as part of the workings of discourse. Furthermore, what was shown was that there is a pragmatic and situational use of the term religion in the respondents' vernacular discourse and that meanings are inferred intersubjectively. In the respondents' vernacular theorizing on religion, different meanings of the term religion are connected without concern for systematization, generalizations, or coherence.

The third research question – (3) *how* the respondents described themselves in terms of religious designations – is answered in Chapter 5. Here the focus was on the second simultaneity found in the material, namely that when the respondents were asked to describe themselves in relation to different religious categories, they often identified with several of those simultaneously – although to varying extents. These multiplicities were further complicated by the fact that in the majority of cases there was a shift in the answers between the first interview and the second. In my analysis it is suggested that a process of religious identification is crucial for understanding what the respondents are actually communicating with these religious self-descriptions. From this perspective, *how* the respondents described themselves in terms of religious designations is understood as dependent on a process described through the explanatory model I called *the wheel of religious identification*. What is argued here is that not only must the situation be taken into consideration, but also which meaning of the religious category an interviewee is referring to and which aspect of him or herself is described. The discursive religious identities expressed in the interviews and in response to the questionnaire are in this way understood as situational constructs laden with intersubjective content.

Chapter 6 consists of an attempt to answer the fourth research question – (4) *how* the respondents interpreted events and experiences that they talked about as out of the ordinary. What was found was that when the respondents described experiences singled out as 'out of the ordinary', they offered, at one and the same time, different (sometimes contradictory) interpretations of those experiences. This simultaneity was explained in three steps: First I described the experiences in focus as 'secrets' because the respondents hide them from a perceived norm of scientific rationality. Second, I pointed to an availability of different referential frames each with their own patterns of interpretation through

which reality is interpreted. This analytical trajectory led me to answer the question as to how the simultaneity of interpretations is maintained in a third step, namely through highlighting a play of different forms of *epoché* (that is suspension of existential doubt, of disbelief, and of judgment), each connected to a particular way of experiencing the world. The term suspension is for the purposes of this thesis used to denote a cognitive process of setting aside certain beliefs or disbeliefs about reality. Hence, the simultaneity of interpretations of events and experiences singled out as out of the ordinary is understood and explained in this thesis in terms of a multitude of ways of perceiving the world.

What has been shown is that the simultaneities discussed are not necessarily the opposites of consistency or coherence. For example, a simultaneity of religious self-descriptions is connected to implicit or explicit questions of the sameness or difference between people, and simultaneity of interpretations is connected to particular situations in which willing suspension (of disbelief, of existential doubt, and of judgment) are key processes. Consequently, these simultaneities are antagonisms located within certain frames whose borders are demarcated with regard to specific situations and contexts.

Concluding discussion

In this thesis I have demonstrated in what ways simultaneities are expressed by the respondents as they talk about religion in their lives. Although I have not dwelt extensively on why the respondents talk about religion the way they do, this is, however, a question that deserves future consideration. But I do think that the answer may be sought in the processes of pluralization and individualization, as well as in the wide-spread perspectival approach to religion that can be found in Sweden. These are aspects described in Chapter 3 of this thesis as key in the cultural milieu in which these semi-secular Swedes live their lives. Having said that, even though there are norms in the Swedish society in which the respondents find themselves, people are not puppets. They may make sense of differing phenomena through 'patterns of interpretation' that they share with other people, but they still do so as individuals and as part of multiple contexts, as discussed in the theoretical approach outlined in Chapter 1. Typically, these semi-secular Swedes do not actively seek out religious milieus or ideas, nor do they attempt to consciously patch

together different religious elements into a personal 'religion'. In this thesis it is concluded that they do share an individualistic trait but that they respond to the cultural demand for individualism and personal choice in their own ways.

The simultaneities described in this thesis do indeed fit in with the cultural expectation of being able to relate to the many meanings of the concept of religion selectively and being able to appreciate and appropriate religious aspects from a variety of contexts. That, however, is not to say that there are no boundaries. As I have shown, most explicitly in Chapters 5 and 6, the local discourses on religion available to the respondents are of crucial importance when it comes to establishing which 'elements' of religion they consider interesting and of value, and what they perceive they are 'allowed' to disclose in different settings and what not.

One way of situating these findings in context would be to take the respondents at face value when they describe the ways they are or are not religious. This would mean viewing them as conforming completely to the majority patterns in Swedish society. Regardless of whether this is accurate or not, it can be concluded that they perceive themselves as the norm and as part of a secular society. I cannot, on basis of my material, tell whether or not this is perceived as the ideal position as well – that is, not only as the 'normal' but also as the 'correct' way. Were we to play with that thought and to consider the consequences of explicitly or implicitly understanding the semi-secular position as the paramount example of the generally promoted way of relating to religion in Sweden, the societal effects would be quite staggering. If, in the discursive struggle for interpretative prerogative, this is in fact seen as the normative, morally positive, more nuanced, and 'truer' version of reality, other positions that, for example, lay claim to a single truth or challenge the individual's central role in shaping reality will be debarred. In a discourse in which the ideal is to covertly keep options open and not surrender completely to anything in particular, 'the religious Other' – depicted as a person who goes 'all out' – may become incomprehensible or even threatening. To know this with certainty requires more research. Since the issue of religion in Sweden is a vexed one, a site of conflict and boundaries, this is a subject worth exploring.

The fact that simultaneity was such a salient feature in the material is surprising only if there is an expectation that people will be consistent in terms of motivating forces, choice of pattern of interpretation, practices, beliefs, ethics et cetera. For a great deal of scholarly work in the study of religion, when designing for example research projects or educational

materials, this is indeed the default setting. It is also an idea that is incredibly influential in public discourse about religion. However, this is a model of reality that is based on an ideal of what thinking should be like – it is not a mirror of reality.

One way of countering simplifying narratives on religious people is to highlight nuances. This thesis uncovers material that challenges any simplified view of the religious and the secular, both in terms of the meaning of these concepts and of people as either secular or religious subjects. An in-depth analysis of these 28 semi-secular Swedes ways of talking about religion in their lives has provided one piece in the puzzle that is Swedish secularity, one that indeed contradicts descriptions of Sweden as utterly secularized in any straightforward sense of the term. This research stresses that as we are living worlds characterized by multiplicity there is a need to begin with another understanding of 'the religious' and 'the secular', for example when discussing religion and politics or when talking about a 'religious' or a 'secular' Other. That is, an understanding that appreciates expressions of complexity, contradiction and (in)congruity within our field of study.

Future challenges

This thesis may be considered groundwork that prompts further questions about the place of religion in Sweden. In this research I have aimed at going one step further than to figure out where the academic conceptualizations of religion have gone wrong. Aware of the fact that my material cannot properly serve as a basis for generalizations, I will say on a speculative note that I do think that in terms of the processes described in the different chapters the respondents are representative of how semi-secular Swedes relate to and talk about religion and related signifiers. Many of them are indeed flexible in the way they talk about beliefs, subject positions, and experiences in a way that at first glance may appear almost arbitrary. The argument in this thesis is, however, that such instability is predictable as it is part and parcel of a shared context. Hence, instead of being taken by surprise when plumbing different aspects of semi-secular people's religious lives, or censuring incongruences in the material, the 'both and' approach here described as simultaneity should be taken into consideration at the outset of any project concerning people categorized as in-between conceptual extremes in terms of the religious and the

secular. In this sense, therefore, this thesis complements the knowledge produced through quantitative research on religiosity in contemporary northern Europe.

There are of course a multitude of ways of living in modern society, also in Sweden. The expressions that processes of pluralization and individualization take among these particular people are not necessarily the same as for other people living in their neighborhoods, for example those who are heavily committed to religious denominations and those who are explicitly against or completely indifferent to religion. In future studies it would be interesting to consider to what extent the simultaneities described here are specific to semi-secular Swedes.

This research lays the groundwork both for an exploration of how semi-secularity is performed outside the interview situation, in public and social settings, and for a study of social and discursive effects of the multiplicities and simultaneities pinpointed. Indeed, attention to the ways the imaginations, motifs, and sensibilities sometimes interpreted as religious by semi-secular people are translated into public discourse could give valuable insights into what it means to live Swedish secularity at this moment in time.

Epilogue

Nowadays, when I happen to be in the neighborhood in which the respondents in this thesis live, I cannot help reflecting on my own 'semi-secularity'. Like them I sometimes choose the position of 'both at the same time' when I think about to the concept of religion, about different subject positions, and about different possible interpretations of an experience. This is not something that I feel that I could or should change. However, I would view this ambiguous habit as a problem if it made me expect everybody to reason or feel the same way as I do.

Just as so many other researchers have testified in relation to the research process, I feel changed by my work. When I walk those streets nowadays, I do not focus the many different expressions of public religion present at every corner, like I used to. Instead, I am sensitive to other landmarks. I notice the flower shop in which Elisabeth buys her flowers in order to find a moment of peace. I notice the little toys in the toyshop window that remind me of Lily and her relation to her mother. I notice the people that cross my path and I wonder what I share with them and

what I do not. As I sit in the café in which I interviewed Sara the second time we met, idly looking out of the large windows and watching people going in and out of nearby shops and restaurants, I remember the surprise in Sara's face as the sound of church bells stole through the door. Drinking my coffee, I cannot resist eavesdropping on the conversations taking place at the tables around me, wondering about the 'secrets' and the worlds of my fellow humans, and wondering if they too live simultaneity.

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning
Levd samtidighet: Religion bland semisekulära svenskar

Sverige beskrivs ofta som ett exceptionellt sekulariserat samhälle. Socio-
logen Thorleif Petterson har visat att endast tjeckerna ber, deltar i någon
organiserad religiös praktik eller beskriver sig själva som religiösa i
mindre utsträckning än svenskarna gör. Under 2000-talet utkom en rad
omfattande kvantitativa studier där Sverige beskrivs som ett av världens
mest sekulariserade länder. Här tar man exempelvis fasta på resultat som
visade att om man med religiös menar en person som deltar i någon
organiserad religiös praktik åtminstone en gång i veckan, *eller* ber regel-
bundet *eller* betraktar sig själv som mycket religiös kunde endast 20 % av
svenskarna placeras i det facket. Detta stod i direkt motsatsförhållande till
länder som Grekland, Polen eller Irland där 80 % av befolkningen ham-
nade inom ramen för en sådan beskrivning (EVS 2004).

Om vi däremot mäter svenskars religiositet med fokus på medlemskap
i religiösa samfund träder en annan bild av det Sverige fram. År 2013 var
66 % av den svenska befolkningen fortfarande betalande medlemmar av
Svenska Kyrkan. Utöver dessa var ytterligare 8 % medlemmar i antingen
någon av frikyrkorna, katolska kyrkan, syrisk-ortodoxa kyrkan eller
någon judisk eller muslimsk församling. Hela 74 % av den svenska befolk-
ningen var alltså medlemmar av något religiöst samfund. I tillägg bekände
sig många svenskar till en vag, icke-dogmatisk tro i en utsträckning som
inte korresponderar med bilden av svenskar som ett icke-troende folk.
Exempelvis svarade 53 % år 2005 att de tror på 'någon slags ande eller
livskraft', vilket då var den näst högsta siffran i Europa. Om vi tar dessa
mätningar till utgångspunkt kan Sverige alltså lika gärna beskrivas som
ett av Europas mest religiösa länder.

Beroende på hur religion och religiositet mäts och på var betoningen
läggs framträder följaktligen olika bilder av det svenska religiösa land-
skapet. Denna situation har ibland benämnts som 'den svenska para-
doxen'.

Idag visar studier att så många som 70 % faller mellan stolarna på så
sätt att de varken kan klassificeras som 'religiösa' eller som 'sekulära' i

någon entydig bemärkelse. Deras religiositet alternativt sekularitet är 'suddig' i konturerna. Detta faktum tyder på att de mätinstrument som använts misslyckats i att nyanserat fånga upp människors sätt att vara (och inte vara) religiösa i Sverige. Denna avhandling knyter an till forskning som försöker komma bort från gängse sätt att studera religiositet och som visar på det problematiska i att beskriva verkligheten utifrån kriterier som inte anpassats efter rådande förhållanden. I denna studie ligger fokus på människor som befinner sig i ett gränsland mellan konceptuella extremer, det vill säga som nyanserar begränsande sätt att tänka på religiösa och sekulära människor som helt och hållet det ena eller det andra. Dessa personer beskrivs här som *semisekulära*.

Denna avhandling syftar inte till att ta ett allomfattande grepp om den stora och brokiga grupp människor som är potentiellt semisekulära. Istället är detta en kvalitativ studie som avser att bidra med nyansering och detalj. Genom en närläsning av intervju- och enkätmaterial med 28 personer som varken är aktiva inom någon religiöst samfund eller likgiltiga, alternativt avogt inställda till religion, bidrar denna avhandling till diskussionen om sekularitet i Sverige.

Materialet är inhämtat utanför de miljöer där religiösa människor traditionellt studerats. Intervjupersonerna har kontaktats genom dörrknackning i ett avgränsat område på Södermalm i Stockholm. Bortsett från att majoriteten är kvinnor och att ett flertal har eftergymnasial utbildning är intervjupersonerna på många sätt olika varandra, exempelvis med avseende på inkomst, ålder, intressen, och familjebakgrund. De delar dock upplevelsen av att betrakta sig som 'vanliga' eller 'som folk är mest' i sitt sätt att relatera till religion. I denna bemärkelse betraktar intervjupersonerna sina egna sätt att vara (och inte vara) religiös som i linje med majoritetsbefolkningens beteendemönster i Sverige. Oavsett om detta stämmer eller inte talar deras upplevda position om något för oss, nämligen att de inte upplever sig själva som normbrytare i denna bemärkelse.

Det utmärkande draget i materialet beskrivs genom begreppet *samtidighet*. Här avses det som kan beskrivas som en 'både och' position inom vilken intervjupersonerna väljer i den mångfald som står dem till buds genom att *inte* definitivt välja mellan det ena och det andra. Avhandlingen lyfter fram att intervjupersonerna (1) laborerar med flera betydelser av termen religion samtidigt, (2) beskriver sig själva som till viss del buddist, kristen, ateist eller något annat samtidigt, och (3) tolkar händelser – som de lyfter fram som 'ovanliga'– på olika sätt samtidigt, det

vill säga både som händelser med naturvetenskapliga metoder förklarbara orsaker *och* som ögonblick av kontakt med något utöver det begripliga.

Utifrån ett perspektiv som förutsätter att människor är (och bör vara) logiskt sammansatta enheter kan dessa olika samtidigheter vid första anblick som te sig som oförenliga. Samtidigheten som återfinns i intervjupersonernas tal om religion är dock i linje med forskning som visar att religiösa uttryck i vardagen oftare karaktäriseras av brist på överensstämmelse än av likformighet, integration och konsekvens.

Avhandlingens tre första kapitel ämnar placera avhandlingen och det undersökta materialet i dess olika sammanhang. I kapitel ett beskrivs tidigare forskning kring semisekulära européer och de amerikaner som i kvantitativa undersökningar beskriver att de inte tillhör någon religiös gruppering, de så kallade 'religious Nones'. Vidare beskrivs forskning som dekonstruerar och kritiserar begreppsparet religion och det sekulära. Båda dessa forskningsfält aktualiserar en kritisk diskussion kring presumtivt 'neutrala' beskrivningar av material som utmanar befintliga kategorier. I kapitel ett beskrivs dessutom de teoretiska redskap som använts vid analysen av materialet. Dessa har framför allt hämtats från Alfred Schütz teori om den sociala världens fenomenologi och Ernesto Laclaus diskursteori.

I fråga om vilken typ av kunskap som genereras spelar teori och metod en avgörande roll. I kapitel två beskrivs metodologiska överväganden, de konkreta metoder som använts och materialet som resulterar från dem. Här är det forskningsfält som fokuserar 'levd religion' av stor betydelse som inspirationskälla. I synnerhet målet att undersöka praktiker, tal och föreställningar såsom de uttrycks på individnivå inom ramen för kulturella och diskursiva sammanhang. I kapitel tre diskuteras den kontext intervjupersonerna befinner sig i. Av specifik relevans är olika aspekter av religiös förändring i Sverige, samt en generell process av individualisering i en värld som karaktäriseras av en mångfald av valmöjligheter.

I avhandlingens tre empiriska kapitel analyseras de samtidigheter som finns i materialet. I kapitel fyra beskrivs och analyseras hur intervjupersonerna använder termen religion och vilka betydelser de tillskriver det. Här illustreras för det första hur olika betydelser av termen religion kopplas ihop trots stora skillnader i mening. På detta sätt kan talet om religion inbegripa exempelvis krig och maktspel, spöken och meningsfulla samband, liksom känslor av samhörighet och närvaro. För det andra påvisas hur olika betydelser kan flyta in och ut ur termen religion i vardagligt tal. Att sätta sin tillit till att universum skapades genom 'the Big

Bang' kan samtidigt betraktas som en religiös utsaga och talas om som särskiljt från religiös tro. Då intervjupersonerna talar om religion gör de det på ett pragmatiskt och situationsbundet sätt. Följaktligen lägger de inte vikt vid att systematisera sitt tal om religion eller att de olika betydelser som de tillskriver ordet religion ska kunna generaliseras.

I kapitel fem beskrivs och analyseras hur intervjupersonerna talar om sig själva i relation till olika benämningar (såsom kristen, judisk, hindu, muslim, buddist, religiös, sökare, ateist et cetera). Här betonas hur intervjupersonerna i en specifik situation beskriver dels en aspekt av dem själva, snarare än en helhetsbild, och dels en särskild betydelse av den kategori de relaterar till. Detta innebär att då en person beskriver sig som 'lite buddhist' och 'måttligt kristen' är det fragmenterade delaspekter som beskrivs, snarare än en integrerad totalitet. Med avstamp i intervjumaterialet förklaras en sådan samtidighet och rörlighet genom att visa hur en och samma intervjuperson kan besvara enkätfrågan mycket olika beroende på vad som avses. Vid ett tillfälle kan en person beskriva sig som 'ganska kristen' eftersom hen firar jul och påsk, men vid ett annat tillfälle som 'inte alls kristen' eftersom hen inte betraktar Jesus som Guds son. Samtidigt kan samma person beskriva sig som 'lite buddist' eftersom hen skulle vilja meditera, och som 'helt och hållet en häxa' eftersom hen ibland kan känna på sig vad som ska ske. Denna avhandling visar att beskrivningar av denna typ bör betraktas som delar av en mångfald och att samtidigheten är ett uttryck för de kombinatoriska möjligheter som står intervjupersonerna till buds.

I kapitel sex diskuteras de sätt som intervjupersonerna pratar om erfarenheter som de skiljer ut som 'ovanliga'. Exempelvis kan en känsla av djup samhörighet tolkas både som ett resultat av att ha druckit alkohol dagen innan och som ett ögonblick av att erfara ett underliggande men obeskrivligt samband. Utifrån förståelsen att intervjupersonerna har tillgång till ett flertal olika tolkningsmönster genom vilka de erfar världen förklaras hur en samtidighet av ett flertal ibland motstridiga tolkningar av händelser och upplevelser kan artikuleras utan problem. Utifrån teorier om olika övergående tillstånd av kognitivt upphävande (jämför här engelskans *suspension*) lyfter analysen fram hur intervjupersonerna växlar mellan att åsidosätta olika föreställningar om verkligheten: det vill säga växlar exempelvis mellan att inte kritiskt granska en upplevelse för att slippa se den upplöst av ett rationellt förnuftstänk, och ett upphävande av allt tvivel om att verkligheten skulle vara något annat än såsom den förefaller. I avhandlingen betonas att det ofta är ett medvetet val att inte

välja endast en av de olika tolkningsmöjligheter som står till buds. Samtidigheten är dock inte alltid ett bekvämt val utan motiveras på olika sätt av intervjupersonerna.

Närläsningen av dessa 28 semisekulära svenskars tal om religion syftar till att nyansera bilden av Sverige som ett sekulärt land i en entydig bemärkelse. Dessutom ifrågasätts föreställningen att människor som får stå som representanter för 'den religiösa Andra' är så radikalt annorlunda än människor som (oftast) betraktar sig som sekulära, som icke-religiösa. Denna forskning visar att för att beskriva och förklara en värld som i mångt och mycket karaktäriseras av mångfald behöver vi börja med en förståelse av det religiösa och det sekulära som tar hänsyn till samtidighet på olika nivåer. På det sättet kan vi ta hänsyn till komplexa och motsägelsefulla uttryck och fenomen i studiet av religion.

Appendix 1:

Intervjuguide (intervjuomgång 2)

1. Frågor angående religiös biografi

- Hur ser det ut i din familj, är/var dina mor/farföräldrar/föräldrar/partner/barn aktiva i något religiöst sammanhang? Skiljer det sig från hur du lever ditt liv?
- Om du har barn, vad vill du föra över till dem i fråga om livsstil och syn på tillvaron?

2. Frågor angående mening och transcendens (innehåll, resurser, praktiker)

Inspiration

- Finns det några böcker, filmer, händelser, konst, musik som har varit viktiga för dig och inspirerat dig?
- Har du inspirerats av någon person någon gång, verklig eller fiktiv?

Mening, relevans

- När är du som mest tillfreds? Är det något du strävar efter att vara?
- När är du mest olycklig, otillfreds?
- Vad är du rädd för? Vad tröstar dig i de situationerna?
- Hur mycket kontroll tror du att du har över ditt liv?
- Har du någon gång tänkt över meningen med livet? Om ja, hur har du resonerat? Är det en fråga som är viktig för dig?
- Ingen vet väl säkert men varför tror du att vi finns? Varför finns naturen, världen? Är det en fråga som är viktig för dig?
- Finns det något eller någon bortom det vi ser?
- Vad tror du händer när du dör? Är det en fråga som är viktig för dig?
- Om du skulle stå inför en livshotande situation, en flygkrasch till exempel. Vad tror du att dina tankar rör sig mot?
- Vad är viktigast för dig i livet?
- För många människor ändras en prioriteter, vad som är viktigt för en, genom livet. Hur fungerar du om du ser tillbaka på ditt liv?
- (Om respondenten uttrycker någon trosuppfattning)
- Är det här något som tar sig uttryck i vardagssituationer? På vilka sätt? Exempel?

3. Uppföljningsfrågor kring enkätsvaren

Förra gången vi sågs fyllde du i en enkät. Har du möjlighet att upprepa två av de frågor som ställdes, den angående religiösa självbeskrivningar och den som rör upplevelser? Kommer du ihåg vad du svarade på dessa frågor vid det tillfället?

Religiös självbeskrivning

Gå igenom enkätfrågan kring religiös kategorisering
- Vad associerar du till 'Kristen, Muslim, Jude, Buddist, Hindu, Troende, Andlig, Religiös, Sökare, Ateist, Tvivlare, Agnostiker)?
- Vad innebär det för dig att vara (de svarsalternativ respondenten ger)?
- Vad får dig att beskriva dig som (de svarsalternativ respondenten ger)?

Upplevelser
- Kan du dra dig till minnes någon händelse som varit extra viktig för dig?
- Gå igenom frågan enkätfrågan kring upplevelser
Har du upplevt… vill du berätta om det? Hur kände du? Vad tror du det handlar om?

Appendix 2:
Project questionnaire

Ref.nr:

Project Questionnaire

Religious Ambiguities on the Urban Scene

1. General questions about your situation

1. What year were you born in?
_____

2. Do you have any children? How many?
_____

3. How many people live in your home?
_____

4. Do you live in a

      ☐ rental housing

      ☐ owner-occupied apartment

5. How long have you live in Stockholm?

      ☐ My entire life

      ☐ Longer than 5 years but not always

      ☐ Recently moved here, less than 5 years

6. In what country were you born?

      ☐ Sweden

      ☐ Other, please specify _____

7. In what country were your parents born?

      Mother   ☐ Sweden

                  ☐ Other, please specify_____

      Father   ☐ Sweden

                  ☐ Other, please specify _____

8. Education: Which of the following alternatives fits you the best?

☐ I left school after completing primary education

☐ I finished 2 years of post-primary education or equivalent vocational training

☐ I finished 3 or 4 years of post-primary education or a corresponding vocational programme

☐ I have completed (or attend) higher education studies of less than 3 years

☐ I have completed (or attend) higher education studies of at least 3 years

☐ Other

9. Employment: Which of the alternatives below best describes your current situation.
I am…

☐ Unemployed

☐ On   parental leave

☐ A Housewife/househusband

☐ Part-time employed

☐ Full-time employed

☐ Studying

☐ On long-term sick leave

☐ Retired (disability-, early-, old-age pension)

☐ Self-employed

10. What is your job or the most recent job you held?
_____
_____

2. A few question about what you think and believe in

11. Which of the five claims below do you think are the most important? Put 1 in front of the one you think is most important, 2 in front of the second most important etc.

To live a good life one needs (a) good...

_____ Spiritual development	_____ Relation to god/higher power
_____ Work	_____ Health
_____ Financial situation	_____ Social relations
_____ Family relations	_____ Education
_____ Leisure time	

12. Beliefs

A. Which of the claims below fits with your beliefs?

☐ I believe in a God that you can have a personal relation to

☐ I believe in an impersonal higher power or force

☐ I believe in several gods

☐ I believe that God is something inside every person rather than outside

☐ I think there are spirits, beings or other invisible creatures around us

☐ I think that people who have passed away still exist and can help us

☐ I do not believe in any god, supernatural power or force

☐ I do not know what to believe

B. How often do you change your mind about this?

☐ Never

☐ Used to but not any more

☐ Often, depending on the situation

☐ It happens

13. After death

A. what do you think happens to us humans after death? (Choose one alternative)

☐ There is something after death but I do not know what

☐ We either go to heaven or hell

☐ We all go to heaven

☐ After death we are reborn again and again into this world

☐ We are immersed in an eternal condition of enlightenment/light/happiness

☐ We live through what we have created and in memories but not in any supernatural way

☐ Nothing, death is final

☐ I have no opinion on what happens to us after death

☐ Other, please specify
_____
_____

B. How often do you change your mind about what happens after death?

☐ Never

☐ Used to but not any more

☐ Every few years

☐ Several times a year

☐ Almost daily

☐ It depends

14. Is there any religious story or narrative that you feel particularly strongly about? Which?

_____
_____

15. Meaning with what happens

Which of the claims below fits with your understanding?
☐ What happens has no higher meaning
☐ We ourselves give meaning to what happens
☐ There is a higher meaning to everything that happens
☐ What happens is predetermined by a god/higher power
☐ What happens is predetermined by an impersonal destiny
☐ What happens depends on what we have done in previous lives
☐ Other, please specify _____

16. What do you consider when deciding right from wrong?

	Very Important	Quite important	Neither important nor irrelevant	Quite irrelevant	Very irrelevant
If it is legal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is beneficial for me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is beneficial for future generations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is depicted as right in in newspapers and television	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If my friends think it is right	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is good for my family and relatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is supported by scientific research	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is beneficial to the People who are worst off in the world	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is right according to my religious conviction	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If it is right according to my political conviction	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. In terms of right and wrong all people have a responsibility…

	Agree completely	Agree considerably	No opinion	Disagree considerably	Disagree completely
… to themselves	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their partner	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their parents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their relatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their own people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to their country	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to humanity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
… to God/a higher power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

18. Did you experience anything of the following?

☐ That you received the help you needed as a direct answer to prayer

☐ That you felt the presence of God

☐ That you felt the presence of some sort of spirit/force

☐ That you were filled by a boundless serenity

☐ A strong spiritual experience in nature

☐ A strong spiritual experience in connection to the birth of a child

☐ A strong spiritual experience in a church/mosque/synagogue or the like

☐ A strong spiritual experience in connection to the death of someone

☐ That you have had contact with a deceased person

☐ That you left your own body

☐ A near-death experience of some kind

☐ That you have had telepathic contact with someone

☐ That you have in a supernatural way been able to predict the future

☐ That what happened to you seems predetermined

☐ Other supernatural experience, please specify

_____

19. To what degree do you regard yourself as (you may choose several alternatives)

	Completely	Considerably	Moderately	Somewhat	Not at all
Christian	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Muslim	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Jewish	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Buddhist	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hindu	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A believer	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spiritual	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Religious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A seeker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Atheist	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Doubter	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Agnostic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

20. Do you consider your religion/conception of life …

	Completely	Considerably	Moderately	Somewhat	Not at all
To be unique and individual?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To be representative of a particular group or tradition?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Questions about your religious life

21. During **the last year**, how often have you visited a place of worship (church/mosque/synagogue or the like). Tick one box for each section of the question.

	Every day	Every week	Every month	At least once	Less frequently
To participate in communal prayer or service	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
For another reason	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

22. During **the last year**, how regularly have you practiced the following religious rules or habits in your life? Tick one box for each section of the question.

	Every day	Every week	Every month	At least once	Less frequently
Private prayer	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Prayer at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worship in particular space At school/work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Read religious texts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fasted	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Eaten specific food	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worn specific garments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worn a religious symbol (except clothes)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Service or worship on radio or television	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other philosphical on radio or television	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Internetsites on spirituality or other aspects of philosophy of life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other, please specify:

_____ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

23. Are you a member of any religious denomination/s?

_____
_____

24. Tick the options that fits you and state the denomination.

☐ I am baptized
In what denomination

_____
☐ I am confirmed or have gone through another rite in connection with coming of age
In what denomination

_____

☐ I was married
In what denomination

_____

☐ I had a civil marriage

☐ I have gone through other religious life-rites or the like, please specify

_____
_____
_____
_____

25. If you have children, tick the claims that fit and state the religious denomination.

☐ My child/ren is/are baptized or have gone through other rite for small children

In what denomination

_____

☐ My child/ren is/are confirmed or have gone through another rite in connection with comiong of age

In what denomination

_____

☐ My child/ren has/have gone through other religious life-rites or the like, please specify

_____
_____

26. Do you have any particular tasks in any religious organization/congregation?

☐ Yes, as a volunteer

☐ Yes, as an employee

☐ Yes, in an elected position (board, representative assembly, parish council etc.)

☐ Yes, as   -
_____

☐ No

27. Have you encountered any problems due to your religious affiliation or commitment while living in Stockholm? Tick a box for each section of the question.

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
In my family	☐	☐	☐	☐
Among friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
At school	☐	☐	☐	☐
In working life	☐	☐	☐	☐
In my leisure time	☐	☐	☐	☐

Give examples of the kinds of problems you have encountered
_____
_____
_____

28. Do you know of anybody living in this neighborhood that might be interested in participating in this study and that we could contact?
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your assistance!

Ann af Burén & David Thurfjell

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