

Ingela Visuri

Dalarna University

Andreas Rimondini

Stockholm University

Joel Gruneau Brulin

Stockholm University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.9228>

©2023 Author(s). This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Supernatural post-mortem beliefs among the Some and the Nones: Ambiguity as a tool for rethinking the ‘secular’ pupil in Swedish religion education

Abstract

Sweden is often described as a highly secularised country, but we know little of the actual worldviews among youths in Swedish classrooms. The current article has two aims: to examine ambiguous positions concerning supernatural phenomena among young Swedes, and to initiate a discussion about how teachers in religion education (RE) can use such ambiguity to bridge between pupils with secular and religious identities. In a sample of 302 young, urban Swedes (16–25 years old), we examined (1) self-reported (non-)belief in supernatural beings, (2) what they believe happens after death, and (3) if they report any supernatural experiences. The results illustrate that the majority held some kind of belief in the supernatural (the “Some”). Among the Nones who rejected such beliefs, a fifth yet described experiences which involved supernatural beings (e.g., spirits). To understand this contradiction, we employ cognitive theories on the tendency to attribute agency to supernatural powers that explain people’s intuitive conceptualisation of the supernatural. We argue that such ambiguity provides an interesting space where pupils can use their personal experiences to better understand peers with other worldviews, while also exploring their own worldviews. To highlight the importance of describing secularity as an equally complex phenomenon as religiosity, we also introduce the term *secular literacy*. The ultimate purpose is to bridge the problematic gap between Us (who are secular) and Them (who are religious), which is also an explicit goal in the RE syllabus.

Keywords: secularity, didactics of religion, religion, spirituality, supernatural experience, youths, Sweden

Vad händer efter döden? En religionsdidaktisk omförhandling utifrån unga 'sekulära' svenskars ambivalens kring det övernaturliga

Sammanfattning

Sverige beskrivs ibland som världens mest sekulariserade land, men det saknas forskning om de trosföreställningar som eleverna faktiskt bär med sig in i religionskunskapsundervisningen. Syftet med denna artikel är att undersöka ambivalens kring övernaturliga föreställningar hos unga svenskar, och att inleda ett samtal om hur religionskunskapslärare kan överbrygga klyftan mellan elever som identifierar sig som religiösa respektive sekulära. Vi undersökte självrapporterade trosföreställningar i ett urval av 302 unga, urbana svenskar (16–25 år gamla), samt vad de tror händer efter döden och om de haft någon upplevelse som de tolkar i övernaturliga termer. Resultaten visar att en majoritet av dessa har någon slags tro på det övernaturliga. En femtedel av dem som avfärdade översinnliga krafter beskrev dock upplevelser som involverade just sådana. Denna ambivalens diskuteras utifrån kognitiv teori om den mänskliga benägenheten att attribuera agens till de avlidna, illustrerad genom experimentella studier om vad människor säger kontra vad de intuitivt föreställer sig. Vi menar att sådan ambivalens kring det övernaturliga skapar utrymme för existentiella samtal mellan elever, där de både kan utforska sina personliga livsåskådningar och ges möjlighet att samtala över identitetsgränser. För att belysa vikten av att beskriva sekularitet som ett lika komplext fenomen som religiositet introducerar vi begreppet *sekulär litteracitet*. Syftet med en sådan omförhandling är att överbrygga den problematiska klyftan mellan Vi (som är sekulära) och De andra (som är religiösa), vilket också uttalas som mål i kursplanen för religionskunskapsämnet.

Nyckelord: sekularitet, religionsdidaktik, religion, andlighet, övernaturlig upplevelse, ungdomar, Sverige

Introduction

For at least 78,000 years, humans have interacted with the dead as if the deceased had retained their cognitive capacities.¹ We now know that the brain is part of the biological body, which should mean that cognitive activity ends when the body shuts down. Yet, individuals with both religious and secular identities tend to treat dead people as if they were still mentally present, and belief in gods, ghosts, spirits, and other forms of invisible, post-mortem beings are found in all cultures (Bering, 2002).

In this article, we argue that the ancient psychological mechanisms that underpin supernatural beliefs could provide part of the solution to a dilemma in contemporary Swedish religion education (RE): while the syllabus emphasises

¹ Researchers found the remains of a young child buried about 78,000 years ago. The arrangement of the body reveals that, for a long time, humans have interacted with the dead (Martín-Torres et al., 2021), pointing to an early tendency to display emotional attachment to the dead (Nakkazi, 2021).

coexistence between people, research indicates that the subject appears to cause a divide between pupils who define themselves as secular or religious (see Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). Although pupils in secularised societies may describe themselves as secular, they are still affected by the fact that human minds have a natural tendency towards anthropomorphism (see Barrett, 2004). We use cognitive theory to argue that people's reasoning about the supernatural is characterised by *ambiguity* and *simultaneity*, aiming to illustrate a) how this, based on a survey study, plays out in a sample of Swedish youths, and b) what opportunities this brings about for creating constructive spaces in RE teaching, where pupils with secular and religious identities meet.

Compared with how the school subject is arranged in other countries, Swedish RE represents a unique and interesting case because it is compulsory, inclusive, and non-confessional like other school subjects (Berglund, 2013). The syllabus for elementary school urges RE teachers to support coexistence in a multicultural society by guiding the pupils towards an increased understanding of each other: "In today's society, which is characterised by plurality, knowledge of religions and other views of life are important to create mutual understanding between people" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, our translation). A similar formulation is found in the upper secondary school syllabus:

Teaching should take its departure in a societal view characterised by openness towards life styles, attitudes to life, and people's differences, and give the pupils opportunities to develop readiness to understand and live in a society characterised by plurality. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, our translation)

Previous research from Swedish RE teaching in middle school, however, pointed to a tendency to treat the secular position as "neutral" (Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). This, in turn, assigns the problematic role of "the Other" to pupils defining themselves as religious (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016). This is why religious denominations have criticised the Swedish RE model: "non-denominational religion education is not education about religion and religions from a neutral point of view, but rather education into atheism or secularism" (Berglund, 2013, p. 173).

The problem, as we see it, is that a binary approach to "religion" and "secularity" undermines the appeal to develop a genuine acceptance of others. Therefore, this article initiates a discussion on how RE teachers can disintegrate the dichotomy between the "secular" and "religious" in lower and upper secondary school by elucidating the human tendency to oscillate between secular and supernatural positions. Because both religiosity and secularity are complex phenomena, we argue that *ambiguities* can be used to bridge pupils with strong secular and religious claims. Beyond strengthening their respect for each other, this approach potentially reinforces the view that pupils are also subjects with unique life views.

Mirroring Robert Jackson's argument, we call for a RE where *both* religious and secular ideas are presented in a "vibrant, flexible and organic way", rather

than portraying “discrete belief systems, and ‘cultures’ (when they are discussed at all) as separate, bounded entities” (Jackson, 1997, p. 47). Centring the lived experiences—which to some extent differ from epistemological claims—of the pupils, the RE teacher can support the development of a *secular literacy* that complements the often-discussed call for *religious literacy*. We argue that this is a constructive way forward in bridging pupils with varied views of life, in line with the curricular call for increased understanding of both oneself and others in and through Swedish RE.

The journey towards our didactical argument starts off in a quantitative study on reported supernatural beliefs among 302 young urban Swedes (16–25 years old). The aim is to empirically examine secular and supernatural *simultaneity* (Burén, 2015) in a young sample where we explore how reported religious/spiritual worldviews stand when compared with 1) beliefs in an existence after death, and 2) experiences that are understood in supernatural terms. Young Swedes living in cities are expected to be particularly secularised², but previous studies showed that people tend to slip between secular reasoning and supernatural intuitions (Burén, 2015; Heywood, 2010), so we are interested in how such ambiguities may play out.

Theoretically, the present article draws on empirical research in the cognitive science of religion (CSR), which has suggested that supernatural notions are underpinned by an intuitive tendency to a) attend to invisible agency, and b) imagine that those who have died continue thinking. This perspective highlights the fact that people continuously switch between fast/intuitive and slow/reflective reasoning while being unaware of contradictions that arise between these (Kahneman, 2011). For clarity, the term *supernatural* refers to “perceptions embedded in a religious or spiritual framework” (Andersen et al., 2014, p. 224). In a pragmatic sense, the current study seeks to capture notions related to super-empirical agents, such as gods, ghosts and deceased relatives, whose existence cannot be empirically proven.

The findings are intertwined with a didactic discussion on how insights from cognitive science can support RE teachers in rethinking how “religion” and “secularity” play out in RE teaching. Our aim is to use cognitive theory to highlight a space where pupils with secular and religious self-images can use their personal experiences to better understand their own thinking, as well as that of their peers. To establish a common language for the fact that secular individuals are ambiguous and complex, the term *secular literacy* is introduced.³ Drawing on Diane L. Moore’s (2014) definition of religious literacy, we have defined secular

² See data in Willander and Stockman (2020).

³ The term secular literacy has been used before, but not to denote understanding of secular complexity. For instance, Allison Skerrett (2014) used the term *secular literacy classroom* to describe the linguistic and cultural process for academic learning. Ryan Gardner (2019) used *religious and secular worldview literacy* to describe the teaching on various types of worldviews. Bryan Maddox (2007) used the term *secular literacy* to signify the interconnection between secular and Quranic literacy, as exemplified by the discourse on women’s autonomy.

literacy as the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of secularity and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses.

To summarise, the aim of the current article is (a) to examine secular/supernatural ambiguities in a sample of young Swedes, and (b) to use the empirical results as a concretisation for a discussion on didactic implications in RE. The present article begins with an introduction to secularity and RE in Sweden and an overview of what attitudes Swedish youths hold towards supernatural matters. This introduction is followed by a theoretical section before the results of the empirical study are presented. The subsequent discussion focuses on why and how bridging between pupils with secular and religious positions can be made in RE teaching.

Although the study primarily involves a sample of youths who have already graduated from school, we maintain that the didactic suggestions are applicable to RE pupils at both the lower and upper secondary levels. We have not found any studies indicating radical changes in worldview between adolescence and early adulthood.⁴ Ultimately, we argue that the concept of simultaneity offers an experience-based foundation for understanding and accepting others. The basis for this understanding is grounded in the realisation that subjective worldviews—whether religious or secular—tend to be complex and inconsistent.

Secularity and religion education in Sweden

Is Sweden really one of the most secular countries in the world? Although this statement makes sense from a societal and organisational perspective, it becomes less evident at the individual level (Thurfjell, 2015). In the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2014), 72.8% of Swedish participants responded that religion is of no or little importance in their lives. Yet, close to half the population reported that they believed in God (40.9%). Similarly, 44% confirmed a personal belief in some kind of spirit or life force in the European Values Study (EVS, 2022), where the question was more broadly formulated. Then, what do we mean by “secularisation”?

Dobbelaere’s (2002) multidimensional model described secularisation on three levels. To exemplify *societal secularisation*, Swedish schools and hospitals are no longer run by religious institutions and must be kept strictly non-confessional and based on scientific grounds.⁵ On the *organisational level*, religious organisations have gradually adapted to the secular conditions of the

⁴ In her longitudinal study (1999–2012), Birgit Lindgren Ödén (2015) noted that the worldviews and values of her respondents have been relatively stable from late teenage to adulthood. Thus, we expect that the results can be used to give an idea of how also younger pupils reason.

⁵ David Thurfjell (2015) illustrated that cultural Christianity is a vital aspect of Swedish culture, and Jenny Berglund (2013) argued that, although Swedish RE is non-confessional, it is still deeply impacted by Lutheran Christianity.

society to persist, such as the decree in 1959 to allow female priests in the Church of Sweden, despite extensive resistance among the leadership (Hildal, 2008). The *individual level* of secularisation can be defined as a process in which individuals become less involved in confessional institutions. However, this does not rule out individualised beliefs. Dobbelaere instead illustrated a parallel process of *religious change* in which individuals construct their own worldviews from disparate religious, spiritual and secular ideas:

Research data confirm that religious authorities are increasingly losing their ability to control what people believe and how they practice their religion. People no longer uncritically rely on the beliefs, norms and practices that are magisterially imposed, they actively construct their own faith. By introducing the term ‘bricolage’ into the sociology of religion, Luckmann (1979, pp. 134–136) drew attention both to this process of combining, supposedly arbitrarily, heterogeneous religious beliefs and practices, as well as the fact that choices were broadened, *e.g.* selections were made from ‘secular’ ideologies (Luckmann, 1967, p. 113). (Dobbelaere, 2002, p. 176)

As shown in the next section, Swedes indeed tend to craft their personal worldviews. Although Sweden is secularised on the societal and organisational levels, it is simultaneously a highly multireligious society. Sorgenfrei and Thurffjell (2021) argued that this may seem like a paradox, but secularity can be understood as a prerequisite for cultural plurality; parallel with the emergent secular state, Sweden developed into a solid democracy that has been able to harbour a variety of religious traditions. Nevertheless, diversity also triggers societal friction, for instance, when the staff members in socially important occupations have inadequate knowledge about religion. Religious conflicts also take place in schools where pupils from various backgrounds meet (Kittelman Flensner, 2015).

The Swedish syllabi for RE⁶ in lower and upper secondary school—which involve (so-called) world religions, non-religious worldviews and ethics—call for pupils to develop an increased understanding of themselves and of others with varied worldviews (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, 2022). In educational terms, Swedish pupils should be guided towards *religious literacy*, a term that “entails the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore, 2014; see also von Brömssen et al., 2020).

We, however, argue that education that solely focuses on religious diversity runs the risk of reinforcing a dichotomous “Us and Them”. To truly support an understanding of diversity, we maintain that RE teachers also need to help pupils problematise the secular narrative: Are “secular” individuals coherent and predictable, or are they—like those who are religious—different and complex? Are there aspects in which people can recognise each other despite having varying identity labels? If so, in what ways can this be achieved? Reflecting on Robert Jackson’s (1997) argument on the need for a dynamic approach to religiosity, RE

⁶ The formulation in the new syllabus (2022) for younger pupils differs insignificantly from the previous syllabus (2011a).

teaching also requires a flexible approach towards secular worldviews to enable various pupils to identify with each other.

Previous research on young Swedes and religious beliefs

In a recent survey with approximately 6,000 respondents, Willander and Stockman (2020) found that Swedes aged 16–29 were less often engaged in a religious congregation and more often reported having “no religion”—what secularity researchers have called “the Nones” (Lee, 2014). Here, 65% of the Swedish Nones resided in or just outside a larger city,⁷ and urban youths in particular seemed particularly prone to report disinterest in, or even dislike towards, religion. In terms of belonging, this category was the second largest (31.2%), next to the Church of Sweden (60.5%). The high rate of members in the Church of Sweden found can be explained by the fact that Swedes have a tendency to “belong without believing” (Davie, 2007), which is understood as cultural approval of the church as an institution (Klingenberg, 2019).

However, in a questionnaire study including 1,488 Swedish youths (16–19 years old), Ulf Sjödin (2002) found that paranormal beliefs were rather widespread. About 20% of the respondents confirmed belief in superstitions, psychokinesis, reincarnation and astrology; approximately 30% believed in ghosts, spiritualism, telepathy and UFOs; and more than half of the sample reported belief in methods for foreseeing the future and in extra-terrestrial life. It is especially interesting to note that 24% of the non-believing youths simultaneously reported belief in “some kind of spirit or life force”. In line with Dobbelaere’s (2002) model, Sjödin commented on this paradox:

The results of our survey show a low interest in institutionalised religion among Swedes, but they still continue to uphold essentially religious values, like belief in an afterlife and belief in a supernatural power, but these beliefs are not considered to be associated with inherited religious dogmas and they are combined with a belief in the paranormal. (Sjödin, 2002, p. 84)

In a more recent exploratory study, Maria Klingenberg (2019) studied orientations towards religion among a sample of 1,019 Swedish youths (16–24 years old). The study did not focus on the *content* of belief but aimed to break down the large category of non-believers (67%) in Lövheim and Bromander’s study (2012). These youths reported being atheists and did not engage in any religious activities. Klingenberg instead identified four main orientations towards organised religion: a) the *Unconcerned* (36%) rejecting statements on religiosity, b) the *Believers* (20%) largely agreeing with such statements, c) the *Belongers* (26%) sympathising with one or more religious traditions but reporting little impact on

⁷ An urban exception where Swedes were somewhat more active compared to the general population, was congregations with large, immigrated populations, such as Islamic mosques and Catholic churches.

their personal worldviews, and d) the *Neutrals* (18%) appearing to consider religion irrelevant in their lives. In line with Furseth's research (2018), Klingenberg highlighted that these young Swedes have grown up in a highly secularised society and yet encountered a broad range of religious diversity. Rather than engaging in traditional religiosity, they appeared to embrace both religious and non-religious ideas in an individualistic manner, in line with Luckmann's *bricolage* described by Dobbelaere (2002).

Klingenberg also found that these youths most commonly encountered religion through TV and over the internet. Christopher Partridge (2004–2005) argued that occult popular culture, which he termed *occulture*, has become an ordinary aspect of Western culture. The consumption of magical pop culture, in turn, forms plausibility structures that impact people's views on life. Movies, computer games and TV programmes often depict spirits, ghosts and demons that intervene in people's lives, and a number of studies have found that younger generations are influenced by such occult themes in popular culture (e.g., Dahlin, 2015; Schofield Clark, 2003; Visuri, 2019).

Few quantitative studies have examined what young Swedes believe happens after death. Sjödin included such items and found that these responses correlated with paranormal beliefs, but the author did not report how afterlife beliefs play out on a group level (e.g., believers vs. non-believers). However, he found that approximately 30% of the youths believed in ghosts and spiritualism (as well as telepathy and UFOs), pointing to beliefs in a post-mortem existence. Similarly, David Carlsson (2015) found that 28% of the upper secondary pupils in his mixed methods study identified as atheists or non-religious, but several of these yet reported belief—or a wish to believe—in ghosts and/or spirits. Thus, there have been indications of ambiguity towards secular and supernatural ideas among Swedish youths.

Speaking with Diana Eck (2001), supernatural beliefs seem to be *changing* rather than declining. Considering the tendency to think that religious and supernatural beliefs are embarrassing (Thurfjell, 2015), it is likely that Swedish pupils would be reluctant to share such ideas. This challenges RE teachers in the way they stage discussions in a safe space where the pupils dare to explore and express their ideas and worldviews without feeling exposed. In the next section, we detail a theoretical foundation for why death makes up a constructive arena for such conversations in RE teaching.

A cognitive explanation of supernatural notions

Theoretically, the present article takes off in the CSR and “naturalness hypothesis of religion”. In short, mentalisation (or so-called “mind reading”) was an essential skill for early humans because it allowed them to separate between friend and foe and underpinned social collaboration, which was crucial for survival. Thus, more

people with good mentalising skills survived, and this cognitive trait was consequently passed on to their offspring. Modern human cognition is a result of this selection process. Justin Barrett (2004) described how intuitive and hyper-sensitive mentalisation allows us to detect agency, even when there is none, such as jump scares at a sudden sound when walking in the forest. Stewart Guthrie (1993) similarly exemplified how a person waking up to a loud bang would instantly wonder *who*—rather than *what*—caused the sound. From an evolutionary point of view, it is better to mistake a possible threat than to ignore it.

Because humans can think of people's mental content at a distance (i.e., speculation about what someone far away might be thinking), mentalisation can also be extended to invisible agents. The loud bang in the middle of the night might as well be caused by someone who died, an option that becomes more likely in a culture where there are narratives about ghosts, or ancestor spirits. This explains why Peter Berger's (1968) prediction that religion would be a phenomenon in the margin by the turn of the millennium failed: belief in the supernatural continues to be a vital feature among humans because we are naturally inclined to detect both visible and invisible agency.

Along this line, Jesse Bering (2008) argued that atheism is "unnatural" because the dismissal of invisible agency requires much cognitive effort. Bering further maintained that humans struggle to imagine how minds cease to exist after death because we have no experience of what it is like to stop thinking. Claire White described this as the inability to simulate what it is like to be dead: "This imaginative obstacle means that it is easier to represent your dead self, and correspondingly, dead others, as continuing to exist" (2017, p. 423). As a result, White argued that phenomena such as belief in reincarnation are cross-culturally widespread. People may also feel guilt when not visiting the graves of loved ones (as the dead might feel disappointed), and some tend to talk to people who have died.

In an experimental study on supernatural beliefs, Bethany Heywood (2010)⁸ asked participants to dare either God (supernatural agent) or Santa (fantasy-based agent) to make terrible things happen to themselves or their families. Self-reported atheists stated less distress than theists and agnostics for statements daring God and Santa, and both agnostics and atheists refused to say the statements out loud less often than the believers. Interestingly, however, atheists refused to say more God statements than Santa statements, and 39% of the atheists described in text responses that the task had been challenging. One participant commented regarding this surprising resistance:

... though I don't believe in God or Santa, it was troubling to say some of those things, particularly when they involved other people ... It was more unsettling than I thought

⁸ The study involved three types of statements: (1) offensive statements ("It's okay to kill ugly children"), (2) God statements ("I dare God to make me/my parents die of cancer"), and (3) Santa statements ("I dare Santa to turn all my/my parents' friends against me/them"). At the end of the study, the participants were offered to take their statements back.

it would be, though. I'm surprised at how unwilling I was to say some of those things. I guess I can be pretty superstitious despite my best efforts. (Heywood, 2010, p. 130)

In another experiment, Fredrik Björklund (2004) inquired if the participants were willing to sign a (non-binding) contract to turn over their souls after their death to the experimenter. Most refused, and many described that it was difficult to explain why because they knew it was a phony contract. Heywood concluded that “research on tempting fate indicates that people are hesitant to do anything that might subject them to a karmic slap-down” (2010, p. 252). Put differently, we cannot equate self-reported levels of unbelief in the supernatural with how people intuitively think, feel and act. In light of these studies, Partridge's (2014) definition of *rationality* as that which is most significant at a certain point of time, makes sense: if there is the slightest risk of being mistaken, it seems wise not to sell one's soul to a researcher.

As illustrated in the literature, Swedish youths also hold simultaneous and often contradictory ideas about supernatural beliefs that they seem unaware of. Although the current syllabus (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022) has called for RE teachers to encourage pupils' self-reflection and understanding of others, we know from previous studies that this is not a straightforward task since some pupils and teachers recognise religious beliefs as irrational, and are therefore reluctant towards discussing these matters (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). However, what about post-mortem beliefs among youth? These appear to provide a less normative option regarding “religious” beliefs, and because death concerns all humans, the topic is touched upon by both religious and secular philosophies in a more allowing way than supernatural beliefs in general. We return to what educational possibilities this may entail.

Aims and research questions

The overarching aim of this article is to present how the insights from the CSR can benefit RE teachers aiming to bridge pupils with various worldviews in subject teaching. To provide an example that concretises the cognitive perspective on secular/supernatural simultaneity, we conducted an empirical study that aimed to examine possible inconsistencies among young urban Swedes (16–25 years old). The study was guided by the following question:

- How do self-identified orientations towards the supernatural stand in relation to post-mortem beliefs and experiences of supernatural events among the youths studied?

In light of previous research on supernatural beliefs, we expected that the participants in our study (and, by extension, pupils in Swedish classrooms) simultaneously held secular/supernatural beliefs, a contradiction that they may not be aware of themselves.

Guided by the results from this study and cognitive theory, we consider the educational implications for RE teachers: How are these results useful in relation to RE and the curricular call for increased acceptance of others? We have approached this question through the classical didactic questions: *Why* is a renegotiation of secularity useful? *How* can secularity and simultaneity be used as tools to support pupils in understanding themselves and others? *For whom* are such discussions useful? This examination is guided by the following question:

- How can cognitive theory, as exemplified by our study, support RE teachers in stimulating pupils in lower and upper secondary school to self-reflection and the increased acceptance of others?

To the best of our knowledge, secular/supernatural simultaneity has not been studied before in relation to RE, and although cognitive perspectives are often used in educational studies, these appear to be scarce in RE research. Thus, this article contributes with a cognitive perspective relevant to RE, as well as empirical data on how young Swedes relate to the supernatural and a discussion of how RE teachers can make use of such insights.

Empirical study

Participants

In total, 302 youths participated in the study: 152 in the first round and 150 in the second. The survey was aimed at youths and young adults between 16 and 25 years old because they were allowed to give their own informed consent to participate. We also made a strategic selection of youths residing in or in close connection to larger cities (e.g., Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö and Uppsala) because previous research has illustrated how these cities are particularly prone to respond negatively when asked about supernatural beliefs.

A majority of the respondents identified as female (201 compared with 98 male and three defining themselves as other). Of the participants, 51% were studying at the university level, 32% attended upper secondary school, and 16% were employees. The vast majority of the participants were born in Sweden (93%). In terms of religious engagement, most were members of the Church of Sweden (55%), and many had participated in religious rituals or gatherings at least on specific occasions (89%), while few were engaged in religious environments (15%). This composition reflects rather typical, Swedish patterns, as described above.

Method and material

Data were collected through an anonymised, internet-based survey, and the participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Facebook and studentkaninen.se. The questionnaire was modelled from the well-validated

Swedish Enköping study (Ahlstrand & Gunner, 2008), which is based on the British Kendal project⁹. In total, the participants were asked 18 questions regarding demographic items, religious beliefs and engagement, experiences of religious rites of passages, membership in the Church of Sweden, participation in religious activities, religious beliefs, meaning in life, supernatural experiences and—in addition to the original scale—questions about post-mortem beliefs, fear of death and to what extent this affects one's life. The participants were allowed to indicate agreement with more than one option to allow for different, possibly contradictory, beliefs. The alternative "Other" was also added, allowing the participants to respond by marking this response in the survey text (see Figures 1–3 for the full list of statements).

Results

To compare those who reported no religious or spiritual beliefs with those who reported some kind of religious or spiritual belief, the participants were split into two groups. The participants were regarded as non-believers—called the *Nones* henceforth—if they rejected belief in god/gods, supernatural powers or forces and the existence of god/gods, spirits and people who had passed away (see Figure 1 for specific items). The participants who embraced some (or all) of these beliefs, are henceforth referred to as the *Some*. The presentation of the results includes a) participants in total, b) the Nones, and c) the Some.

Overall religious/spiritual beliefs

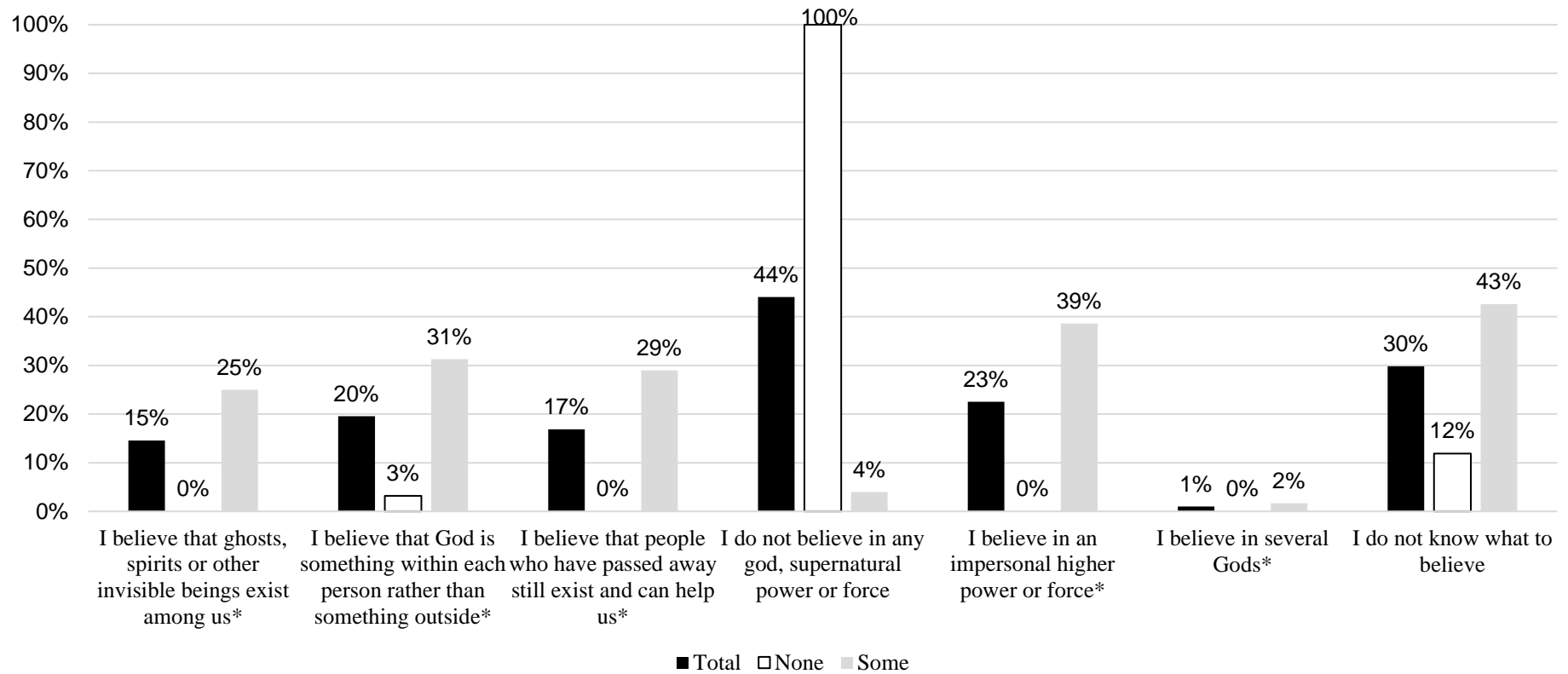
In total, 126 participants (42%) were coded as Nones, leaving 176 participants (58%) in the Some group (see Figure 1 for results regarding religious beliefs)¹⁰. Among the Some, the most commonly held belief was that God is a personal/impersonal¹¹ force or power (23%) and that God is something within each person (20%). 30% of the total sample also expressed an agnostic stance (*I do not know what to believe*), comprising 12% of the Nones group. In total, these results speak in favour of the idea that supernatural beliefs were rather widespread among Swedish youths and young adults.

⁹ The aim of the Kendal project was to map and describe congregational, church and chapel-based religiosity among people living in Kendal, UK (Heelas & Woodhead, 2003).

¹⁰ In total, 52% of the Nones were members of the Swedish church, compared with 57% of the Some. The small difference between the two groups highlights that membership in the Swedish church is not necessarily an indication of religiosity. However, the groups did differ in how much they engaged in religious contexts, where 24% of the participants in the Some group indicated engagement, while only 2% in the Nones group did so.

¹¹ The item "I believe that God is a personal force" unfortunately fell out of the online questionnaire, leaving belief in an impersonal force as the next best option. This did not affect the results because both fall under the category of "Some belief".

Figure 1. Percentage of participants agreeing with each statement of the question *Which of the following statements fit your belief?*

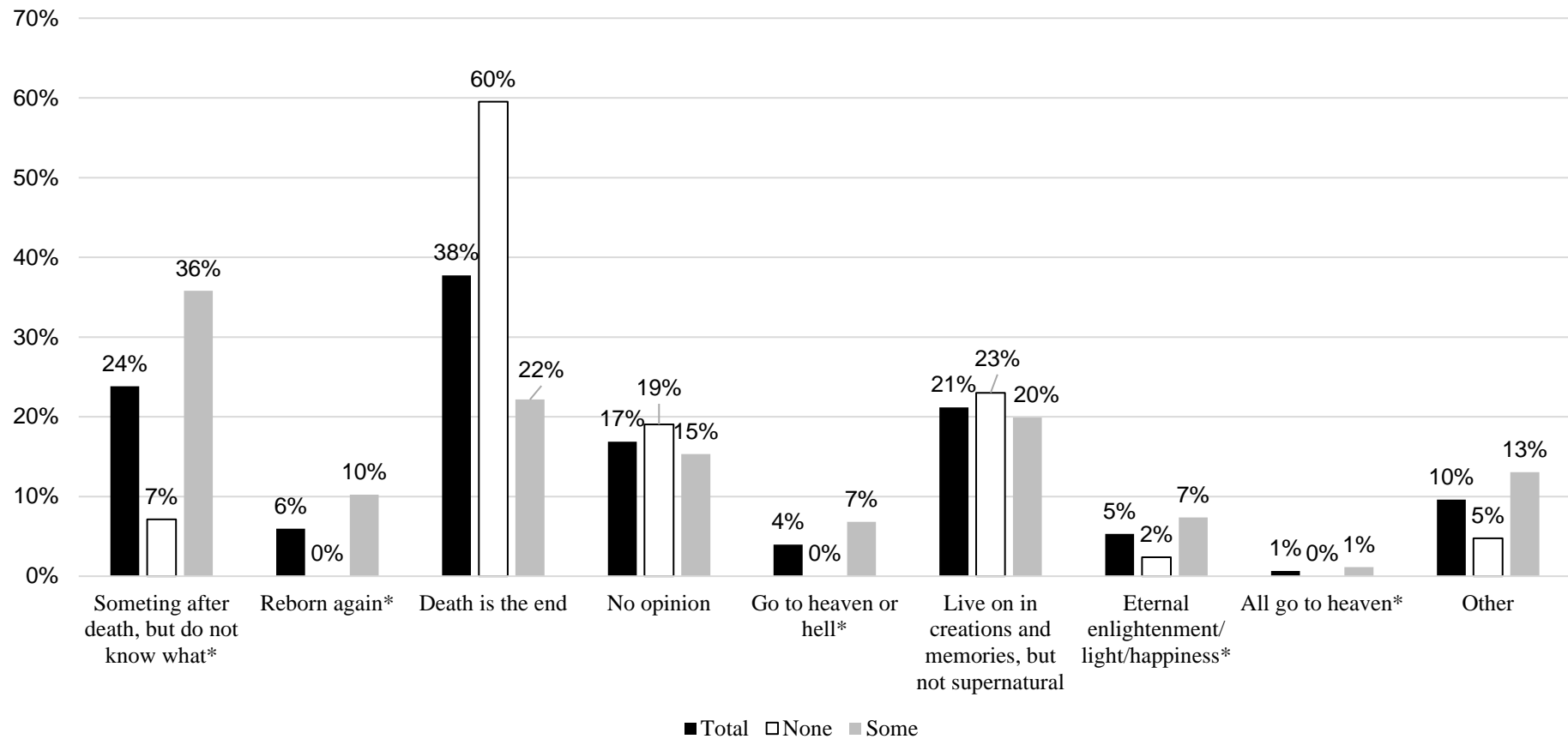


Note. * indicates supernatural beliefs. More than one belief could be chosen.

Beliefs in an afterlife

Beliefs in an afterlife were studied through the question, *What do you believe happens to us humans after death?* The participants were presented with a number of statements regarding such beliefs and could agree with more than one statement (see Figure 2). In the sample, 83% of the participants reported non-supernatural approaches. The most commonly held belief was that death is the end (38%), followed by the belief that “something happens but I do not know what” (24%) and the belief that one lives on through what one has created in life (21%). Here, 6% believed in reincarnation, and 5% reported belief that one is absorbed in an everlasting state of enlightenment.

The difference between the two groups was striking regarding afterlife beliefs. Although 60% in the Nones group agreed with the statement that death is the end, only 22% of the participants in the Some group agreed. Among the Some, the most common answer was the belief that “something” happens but not being sure what (36%), whereas only 7% in the Nones group stated this belief. Only 10% of the Some group responded with a traditionally religious option, such as heaven, hell or reincarnation. In conclusion, a minority of the participants reported concrete supernatural beliefs about what happens after death, yet 32% of the total population (44% of the Some and 10% of the Nones) expressed beliefs in some kind of continuation.

Figure 2. Percentage of participants agreeing with each statement to the question *What do you believe happens to us humans after death?*

Note. * indicates supernatural beliefs. More than one belief could be marked.

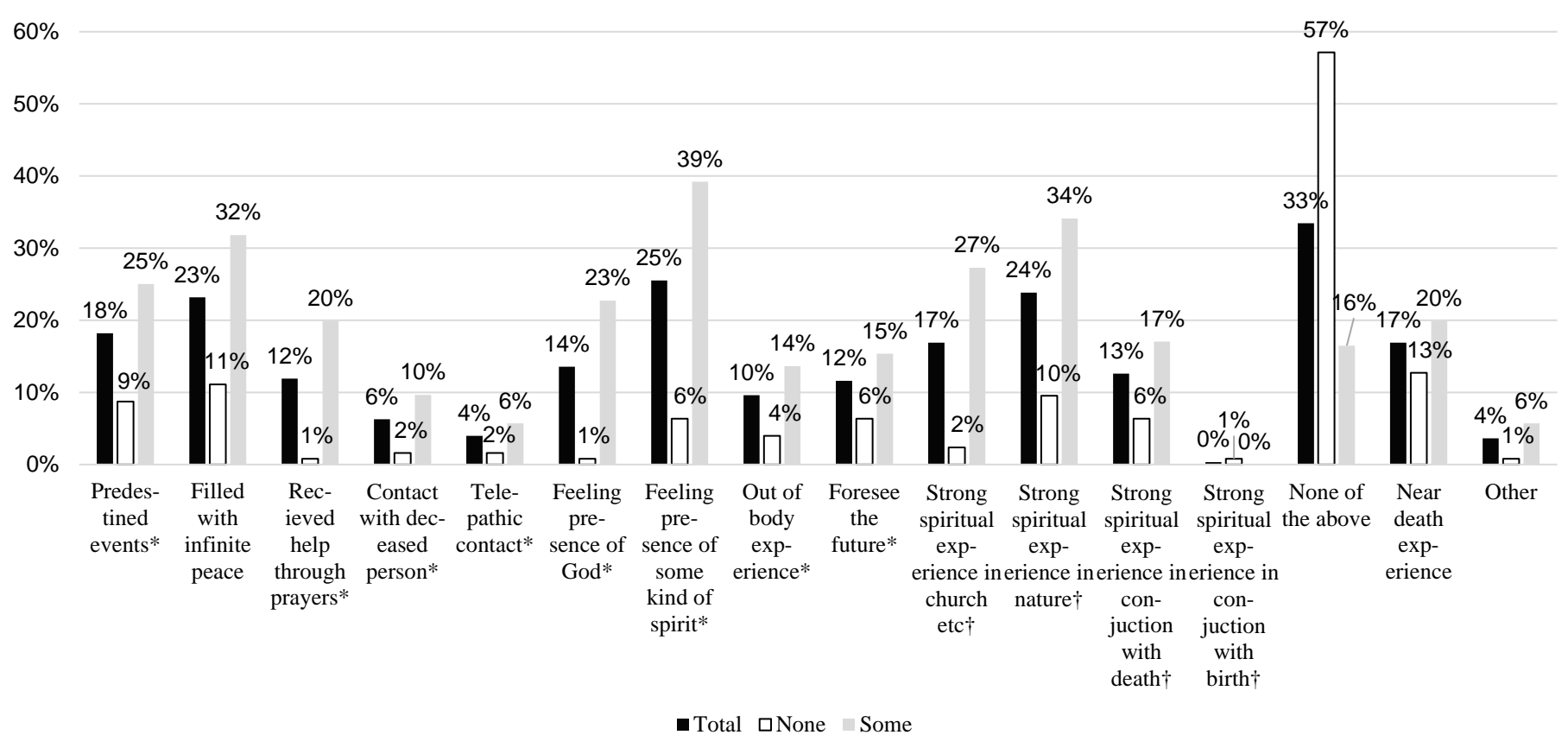
Supernatural experiences

Finally, we investigated whether these young participants had experienced events that they interpreted in supernatural terms. Because some items in the questionnaire were less obviously related to the supernatural, we separated between items that could be understood as *spiritual* but not necessarily supernatural (e.g., *a strong spiritual experience in nature*; marked by a dagger in Figure 3) and items apparently *supernatural* (e.g., *feeling the presence of God*; marked by an asterisk in Figure 3). This latter category is of primary interest here.

Although a minority (32%) of the youths in the total sample reported belief in a post-mortem existence, almost half of the population (49%) confirmed some kind of supernatural experience (see Figure 4). The most common was feeling the presence of some kind of spirit (25%) and experiencing that life seemed to be predestined (18%) (see Figure 3 for a full presentation of the experiences). More youths in the Some group (69%) reported supernatural experiences, but 20% of the Nones—who stated no belief in supernatural agency—reported having had at least one supernatural experience. Among the Nones, the most commonly reported experience was that life seemed predestined (9%) and that they felt the presence of some kind of spirit (6%). Regarding spiritual events, which were not explicitly supernatural, 21% of the Nones and 56% of the Some reported such experiences.

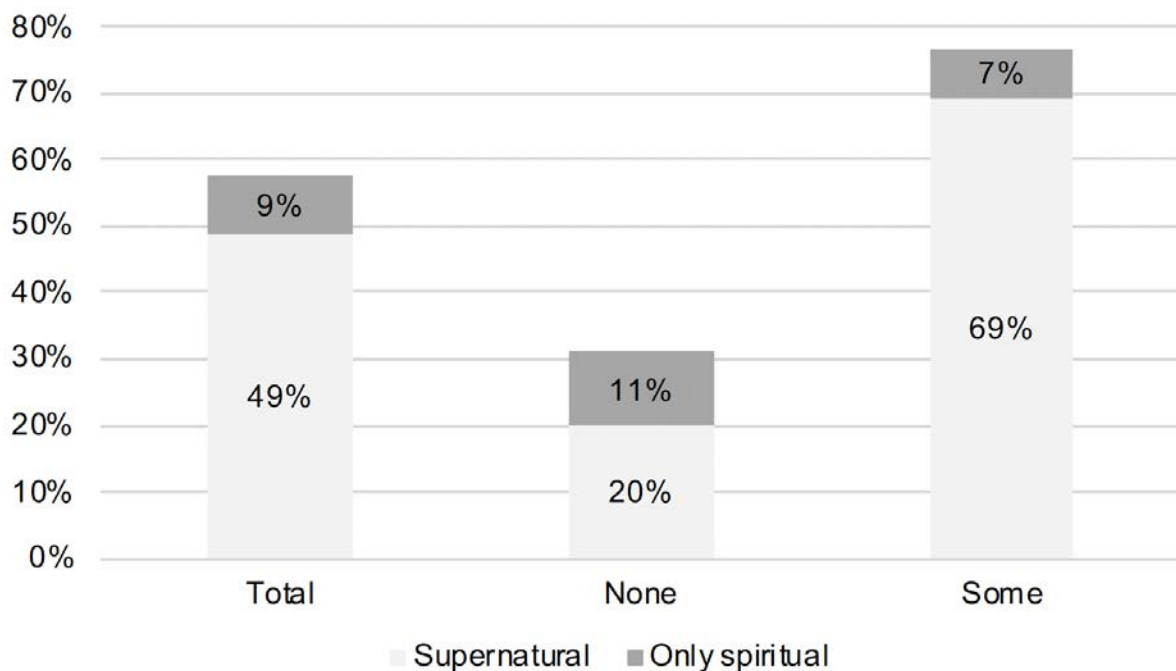
In conclusion, almost half of the participants (49%) reported supernatural experiences, a number that increased to 58% when spiritual items that less obviously relate to the supernatural were added. However, there was a great difference between the two groups: 76% in the Some group had experienced at least one supernatural or spiritual event compared with 31% in the Nones group. It is, however, noteworthy that about half the sample reported some kind of supernatural experience, and a fifth of the Nones reported some supernatural experience, despite their initial rejection of supernatural beliefs.

Figure 3. Percentages of participants who experienced supernatural and spiritual events.



Note. * indicates supernatural events. † indicates spiritual, but not necessarily supernatural, events. More than one event can be marked.

Figure 4. Percentage of participants who reported supernatural experiences, adding separately participants who only experienced *spiritual* but not *supernatural* events.



Discussion

The current study has illustrated that there are indeed inconsistencies in how the Nones described their relation to the supernatural. We now move on to an interpretation of these results and a discussion of how these results can inform RE teaching. The focus here is mainly directed at older pupils, but as argued above, we expect younger pupils to display similar patterns of ambiguity.

The Some and the Nones

Although few young Swedes engaged in organised religion (15% in the present study), the majority (58%) reported a belief in some kind of supernatural power. In a sample that we expected to be especially prone to dismiss such beliefs, this finding is rather surprising, indicating that there may be quite a few pupils who acknowledge the existence of non-empirical dimensions of reality.

So how is this relevant to RE teaching when it comes to providing for pupils' tolerance towards others? To begin with, teachers likely expect pupils to be rather disinterested in RE. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate described that RE teachers who have fewer engaged pupils appear to reduce the content and complexity of the subject, noting that such an approach might become counterproductive: "The pupils experience that the course is interesting when it provides, besides knowledge about religions and other worldviews, opportunities to develop as individuals." (2012, p. 25; our translation). To reiterate Lovisa Bergdahl's (2015) argument: RE teachers who mainly focus on traditional, religious dogma risk

losing the interest of the pupils who feel that the subject does not concern them. Rethinking the concepts of “religion” and “worldviews” to include individualised ideas about the supernatural means that the RE teacher also can engage those who harbour beliefs outside the traditional definitions of religion and religiosity.

This approach is moreover supported by the commentary material attached to the RE syllabus:

The use of the term belief in the syllabus does not intend to solely capture a religious belief, i.e., a belief in for instance one or several gods or an immortal soul. Accordingly, the term belief also includes such issues that are not characterized in religious terms. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b)

Put differently, this broader definition of ‘belief’ provides the RE teacher with opportunities to include dimensions of the supernatural in the teaching that make the subject relevant to more pupils.

Ambiguity among the Nones

Beyond the majority of the young participants made up by the Some, we also examined post-mortem beliefs and supernatural experiences among the Nones. As discussed in the theoretical section, people typically alternate between claims of non-belief and behaviours that move in the opposite direction. Here, we have focused on an intuitive tendency to imagine that the dead still have intentions and opinions because we have never experienced an absence of thoughts.

To begin with, the reported absence of supernatural beliefs among the Nones seemed relatively coherent regarding their views of what happens after death. A majority responded that death is the end (60%) and/or that we live on through the memories we have created (23%), while 19% had no opinion on the matter and 7% believed that there is “something” after death but did not know what. Others reported belief in “another kind of end” (5%), and a few believed that we would end up in a state of enlightenment, eternal light or happiness (2%). There were no reported beliefs in karma, heaven or hell. A few of the Some reported explicit post-mortem beliefs.

If the default mode is to perceive mental activity after death, why did so few report post-mortem beliefs? An important clue is found among the Nones who outlined their stance in free-text responses, namely the impact of secular norms. Several of these young Swedes described a wish to think of themselves as rational and scientifically oriented. For instance, a couple of participants described that they hoped that there would be something after death, but that “the only rational option” is that nothing happens, or that one is “too logical, rational and sceptical”. Others suggested that a substance is released after death and that we enter a new dimension; our energy is recycled; physical material will always regenerate; energy will remould into something new and we leave footprints in the universe; temporal notions will change in the brain, which makes it all feel like an endless

dream; or that we will dissolve but cannot imagine how since we are limited to our physical body and how our brains are able to think.

We interpret this as a struggle between the socially desirable and intuitively attractive (see Barrett, 1999). As one participant admitted, “While I think that death is the end, I also believe in ghosts.” Such reasoning brings cognitive dissonance to mind. Van Tongeren et al. (2021) argued that existentially threatening situations may challenge religious beliefs (e.g., disasters contradicting faith in a benevolent God). Conversely, existential questions—such as thinking about existence after death—may challenge secular beliefs. Seibaek et al., (2013) described such ruminations in terms of *hope*. Returning to the report described above (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2012), pupils explicitly wish to ventilate such questions in the classroom.

Supernatural experiences

The final comparison between the Some and the Nones concerns the relation between supernatural *beliefs* and *experiences*. We argue that there is a qualitative difference between these: while beliefs are similar to thoughts and opinions, experiences provide subjective and bodily grounded “evidence” for that which is experienced. Hence, it is interesting to compare reported beliefs and experiences, and this is where inconsistencies are found.

Nearly half of the total sample (49%) reported at least one such experience. Removing spiritual items that do not necessarily relate to the supernatural (e.g., a strong spiritual experience in nature), 20% of the Nones remained in this category. For instance, six persons reported the presence of a spirit, and 2% had experienced contact with someone who had passed away. In addition, 1% of the Nones even reported feeling the presence of God, and another 1% had experienced help as a direct response to their prayers.

From a sociological point of view, this can be explained by a negation of traditional categories; indeed, the results confirm Dobbelaere’s (2002) argument that secularity involves individualised beliefs. From a cognitive perspective, these youths appear to have negated the existence of anything supernatural on a *reflected* level but *intuitively* seemed to interpret events out of the ordinary in terms of post-mortem activity. The experiences reported were also interesting in relation to post-mortem beliefs, such as the notion of making contact with a spirit or family member who had died, hence pointing to an actual belief that there is an existence beyond death. As argued below, we can use this incongruity to open up a space where pupils with differing backgrounds can meet to investigate their own and others’ ways of thinking about non-empirical dimensions.

RE and secular literacy

From a didactic perspective, the ambiguity between socially desirable responses and intuitive notions can provide an interesting opportunity for RE teaching. We argue that this is where the RE teacher can make the space for secular literacy by

deepening the pupils' understanding that people—regardless of identity labels—are incoherent and complex. This can, for example, be illuminated through classroom discussions on how the concept of “religion” is interpreted among the pupils and what kinds of experiences are treated as “religious” or “non-religious” among them. Can they identify unexpected ambiguities among themselves when guided by the teacher?

Those who define themselves as secular may, for instance, identify with superstitious behaviours (e.g., knocking on wood), in turn disclosing the intuitive tendency to imagine invisible powers operating in the world (Visuri, 2021). A discussion on how the experience of sacrality in nature or while listening to emotional music differs from a similar experience in a church or synagogue, could concretise the fact that experiences labelled as secular may share qualities with that which is understood as religion. Pupils who compare talking to a loved one they have lost may, in fact, understand those who pray to God better. By departing from the pupils' own experiences, the RE teacher could bring about stimulating and eye-opening classroom discussions on how secular and religious worldviews are constructed and construed. Put differently, by making the familiar strange to the pupils, that which seems strange may come through as more familiar.

In our study, 26% of the Nones either thought there would be “something” after death or did not know what to believe. We value such uncertainty because this makes space for curiosity and consideration of issues raised in the classroom, here maintaining that such discussions are worthwhile for pupils of all ages, regardless of their worldview. Jari Ristiniemi (2020) illustrated that even very young children are happy to engage in discussions on what happens after death, and Lilja et al. (2020) demonstrated that 11-year-olds have multifaceted questions about life. The fact that existential matters cannot be determined empirically makes it an optimal platform for joint classroom discussions on life dimensions and experiences that concern all pupils, which has been specifically pronounced in the syllabus for grades 1–9: “Teaching should stimulate pupils to reflect on different questions about life” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022).

It is important to emphasise that the Swedish RE subject is non-confessional, and no pupil should be converted to either belief or non-belief in the supernatural. In the present article, we are instead searching for a common ground where the Nones and the Some can meet to discuss such questions together without falling into dichotomies, to discuss it in terms of possibilities in RE teaching.

Why secular literacy?

Finally, we return to the tendency to treat the “secular” as a neutral and normative position in RE teaching (Kittelman Flensner, 2015). Humans generally tend to treat their own perspectives as unbiased, and Swedes are no exception. This bias, however, becomes problematic when pupils with religious worldviews feel othered and excluded in Swedish RE (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Kittelman Flensner, 2020), a subject that aims to increase understanding among individuals.

As Sorgenfrei (2019) argued, multireligiosity is likely here to stay, and for democratic reasons, we need tools to support coexistence.

Peder Thalén and David Carlsson (2020) maintained that Swedish RE teachers need to treat secular positions as worldviews with specific histories and assumptions that are taken for granted. We argue that this is a constructive step towards *secular literacy*. As mentioned previously, we define secular literacy as the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of secularity and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses (see Moore, 2014). As Scheer et al. (2019) pointed out, such conversations should also entail what secularity *does* in terms of normativity and actions. Similarly, Kittelmann Flensner (2020) argued that unawareness of the secular discourse complicates a multifaceted understanding of religion and religiosity. By destabilising the secular position, we argue that the religious position can be made less unfamiliar for pupils with secular identities within RE teaching.

The findings provide RE teachers with an exciting starting point for joint discussions that also concern those who officially reject the supernatural. We do note an inner struggle in some of the Nones who described in free text that they would like to come through as rational and scientific-minded. This mirrors the theoretical outlook used here: Wanting to be socially desirable, people are prone to suppress and hide their intuitive notions.

RE teachers, however, need to tread such existential landscapes gently together with their pupils, creating a safe space where they can share their personal views of life. One way of orchestrating such conversations is to leave the classroom. In social media groups for Swedish RE teachers, we have found examples of teachers who brought their pupils to graveyards and even crematoriums, with some arranging discussion walks in nature. It is also possible to visit memorial sites online where belief in heaven, contact with the deceased, meetings with angels and divine beings and angelic transformation are expressed (see Gustavsson, 2014). Others have been found to take their pupils on literary journeys through short stories and movies, where they can “hide” behind the characters discussed (see Visuri, 2021).

To summarise, the aim of developing religious and secular literacy is to guide pupils towards more complex reasoning of religion, belief and secularity that involves both themselves and others. In line with this purpose, the RE teachers’ decisive goal in subject teaching is to provide room for and support the pupils in developing a mutual understanding of themselves and others when it comes to these concepts and phenomena and to mitigate friction in a teaching situation marked by a multi-religiosity that mirrors the Swedish society of today.

Conclusion

Previous research illustrates that secularity is often treated as a neutral position among teachers and pupils involved in Swedish RE, in turn assigning the problematic role of “the Other” to pupils with religious identities. To examine what attitudes young Swedes actually hold towards the supernatural, we examined the supernatural beliefs and experiences among 302 young, urban Swedes, a population that appears to be especially prone to identify as secular.

In the study, a majority (58%) of the participants reported some kind of belief in supernatural beings (e.g., God, ghosts, spirits, and/or impersonal higher powers). The most common perception of what happens after death was found to be rather vague: *something* happens, but they did not know what (expressed by 24% of the total population). Only 10% presented a religiously tinted option, such as heaven, hell or reincarnation. Examining the experience of supernatural events, 49% of these young Swedes reported at least one such experience (58% when adding items that are less obviously supernatural, such as a spiritual experience in nature or when a baby is born). Notably, 10% of the participants who stated that they had no religious or spiritual beliefs still expressed some kind of belief in an afterlife, and 20% had experiences of events that were interpreted in supernatural terms.

These ambiguities invite Swedish RE teachers to renegotiate any possible expectations of which worldviews pupils bring into the classroom. Our argument draws on cognitive theories explaining the human inclination to perceive invisible agency and the intuitive tendency to think that those who are dead still have thoughts and opinions. It is, however, likely that many Swedish pupils will conceal any supernatural belief to others—and perhaps also to themselves—because of secular normativity described in the research (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Kittelmann Flensner, 2015). Several participants indeed displayed such hesitation in the free-text reports: they would *like* to believe that there is something beyond this life, but it seems irrational to do so. By staging safe and inclusive conversations on the simultaneity of secular/supernatural ideas and worldviews beyond traditional religiosity, RE teachers can stimulate reflection on existential topics shared by pupils with both secular and religious identities. Such reflection upon personal worldviews aids in the achievement of the goal stated in the syllabi: to develop both an understanding of oneself *and* others.

In conclusion, we encourage RE teachers to promote *secular literacy* among pupils to bring about a more dynamic approach to both secularity and religiosity. We argue that exclusive attention to diversity among religious believers risks preserving the idea of a coherent, secular “We”, so RE teachers need to apply the same approach to secularity. In this way, we can destabilise the dichotomy between the secular and the religious. As illustrated by the results of the empirical study conducted here, secularity is neither neutral nor uniform, and pupils need support in disentangling the norms that they (as many others) have taken for

granted. The ultimate aim is to achieve the clearly pursued goal in the syllabus: to see themselves and others beyond the fuzzy divide between the “religious” and the “secular”.

About the authors

Ingela Visuri is assistant professor in the Study of Religions at Dalarna University, and is currently a postdoc fellow at the Interacting Minds Centre at Aarhus University. Her research primarily concerns cognitive perspectives on religious experiences and experiential learning among autistic pupils.

Institutional affiliation: School of Culture and Society, Dalarna university, SE-791 88 Falun, Sweden.

Email: ivi@du.se

Andreas Rimondini carried out his bachelor thesis at Stockholm University, which became the starting point for the current article. He is now a certified teacher in religion education at the upper secondary school Södra Latin in Stockholm.

Institutional affiliation: Department of Psychology, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: rimondiniandreas@gmail.com

Joel Gruneau Brulin holds a PhD from Stockholm University. His PhD thesis examined relationships with God in the Swedish welfare state, and he is currently involved in research concerning psychedelic science of religion and spirituality. Next to psychodynamic counselling, he also serves as associate lecturer at Stockholm University.

Institutional affiliation: Department of Psychology, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: joel.gruneau.brulin@psychology.su.se

References

- Ahlstrand, K., & Gunner, G. (Eds.) (2008). *Guds närmaste stad? En studie om religionernas betydelse i ett svenskt samhälle i början av 2000-talet* [God's nearest City? A study on the significance of religions in a Swedish Society in the beginning of the 21st Century]. Verbum.
- Andersen, M., Schjoedt, U., Nielbo, K. L., & Sørensen, J. (2014). Mystical Experience in the Lab. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26(3), 217–245. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341323>
- Barrett, J. L. (1999). Theological correctness: Cognitive constraint and the study of religion. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 11(4), 325–339. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006899X00078>
- Barrett, J. L. (2004). *Why would anyone believe in God?* AltaMira Press.
- Bergdahl, L. (2015). Vems religion? Vilken religionsundervisning? [Whose religion? What religion education?]. *Religion och livsfrågor*, 3, 12–16.
- Berger, P. (1968). A bleak outlook is seen for religion. *New York Times*, Feb. 25, p. 3. <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/02/25/archives/a-bleak-outlook-is-seen-for-religion.html>
- Berglund, J. (2013). Swedish religion education: Objective but marinated in Lutheran Protestantism? *Temenos*, 49(2), 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.9545>
- Bering, J. (2002). Intuitive conceptions of dead agents' minds: The natural foundations of afterlife beliefs as phenomenological boundary. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 2(4), 263–308. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685370260441008>
- Bering, J. (2008). The End? Why so many of us think our minds continue on after we die. *Scientific American Mind*, 19(5), 34–41. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24939974>
- Björklund, F. (2004). Intuition and ex-post facto reasoning in moral judgment. In W. Rabinowicz & T. Rønnow-Rasmussen (Eds.), *Patterns of values – Essays on formal axiology and value analysis* (Vol. 2, pp. 36–50). Universitetsstryckeriet.
- Burén, A. (2015). *Living simultaneity: On religion among semi-secular Swedes*. Doctoral dissertation, Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-26801>
- Carlsson, D. (2015). Förändring i samtiden? Elevers livsåskådningsbeskrivningar och religionskunskap [Contemporary changes? Pupils' descriptions of worldviews and religion education]. In D. Carlsson & P. Thalén (Eds.), *Det postsekulära klassrummet: mot ett vidgat religionskunskapsbegrepp* [engelsk] (pp. 55–70). Högskolan i Gävle.
- Dahlin, O. (2015). Andar, karma och Nangijala. Tro och föreställningar bland ett urval gymnasieelever i Gävle [Spirits, karma and Nangijala. Beliefs and conceptions among a sample of upper secondary pupils in Gävle]. In D. Carlsson & P. Thalén (Eds.), *Det postsekulära klassrummet: mot ett vidgat religionskunskapsbegrepp* [The post secular classroom: Towards a wider concept of religious education] (pp. 71–85). Högskolan i Gävle.
- Davie, G. (2007). Vicarious religion: A methodological challenge. In N. T. Ammerman (Ed.), *Everyday religion: Observing modern religious lives* (pp. 21–36). Oxford University Press.
- Dobbelaere, K. (2002). *Secularization: An analysis at three levels*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang.
- Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America: how a "Christian country" has now become the world's most religiously diverse nation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- EVS (2022). *European Values Study 2017: Integrated dataset (EVS 2017)*. GESIS data archive, Cologne. ZA7500 Data file version 5.0.0. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13897>

- Furseth, I. (2018). Secularization, deprivatization, or religious complexity? In I. Furseth (Ed.), *Religious complexity in the public sphere* (pp. 291–312). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gardner, R. S. (2019). A Student-Faculty Collaborative Journey toward Transformative Religious and Secular Worldview Literacy. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 5(1), Art. 6. <https://doi.org/10.32865/fire201951134>
- Gustavsson, A. (2014). Swedish belief narratives on afterlife earlier and today. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(11). <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2014.211026>
- Guthrie, S. (1993). *Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Heelas, P. L. F., & Woodhead, L. J. P. (2003). The Kendal project: Testing the ‘spiritual revolution’ thesis. *Sociology Review*, 132, 18–21.
- Heywood, B. T. (2010). “*Meant to be*”: *How religious beliefs, cultural religiosity, and impaired theory of mind affect the implicit bias to think teleologically*. Doctoral dissertation, Queen University of Belfast, UK.
- Hildal, S. (2008). När Svenska kyrkan fick kvinnliga präster [When the Church of Sweden got female priests], *Signum*, 5. <https://signum.se/artikelarkiv/nar-svenska-kyrkan-fick-kvinnliga-praster/>
- Holmqvist Lidh, C. (2016). *Representera och bli representerad. Elever med religiös positionering talar om skolans religionskunskapsundervisning* [To represent and to be represented: Students with religious positioning speak about the school’s religious education]. Licentiate thesis, Karlstads Universitet. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-46886>
- Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., Puranen, B., et al. (Eds.) (2014). World Values Survey: Round Six – Country-Pooled Datafile Version. Madrid: JD Systems Institute. www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp
- Jackson, R. (1997). *Religious education: An interpretive approach*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kittelmann Flensner, K. (2015). *Religious education in contemporary pluralistic Sweden*. Doctoral dissertation, Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, Gothenburg University. https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/41110/gupea_2077_41110_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Kittelmann Flensner, K. (2020). Mångfald och sekularitet i religionskunskapsundervisning [Plurality and secularity in religion education]. *Prismet*, 71(4), 391–404. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1510008>
- Klingenberg, M. (2019). Youth and religion in Sweden: Orientations to religion amongst ‘believers,’ ‘atheists’ and ‘the uninterested’. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 32(02), 148–167. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2019-02-04>
- Lee, L. (2014). Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic ‘not religious’ categories and populations. *Religion*, 44(3), 466–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.904035>
- Lilja, A., Buchardt, M., Kärnebro, K., Osbeck, C., & Sporre, K. (2020). Barns existentiella frågor i dag – och för 50 år sedan [Childrens’ existential questions today – and 50 years ago]. In E. Hall & B. Liljefors Persson (Eds.), *Existentiella frågor i barns och ungas liv* [Existential questions in the lives of children and youths] (pp. 29–39). Årsboken för Föreningen lärare i religionskunskap.

- Lindgren Ödén, B. (2015). *Från ung till vuxen i omställningens tid: en longitudinell studie av värderingar med utgångspunkt i Ingleharts teori om den tysta revolutionen* [From young to adult in a time of readjustment: a longitudinal study about values based on Inglehart's theory on the silent revolution]. Doctoral dissertation, Åbo Akademis Förlag.
<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hig:diva-20168>
- Lövheim, M., & Bromander, J. (2012). *Religion som resurs? Existentiella frågor och värderingar i unga svenskars liv* [Religion as a resource? Existential questions and values in the lives of young Swedes]. Artos & Norma bokförlag.
- Maddox, B. (2007). Secular and Koranic literacies in South Asia: From colonisation to contemporary practice. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(6), 661–668. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.08.005>
- Martinón-Torres, M., d'Errico, F., Santos, E., Gallo, A. A., Amano, N., Archer, W., Armitage, S. J., Arsuaga, J. L., Bermúdez de Castro, J. M., Blinkhorn, J., Crowther, A., Douka, K., Dubernet, S., Faulkner, P., Fernández-Colón, P., Kourampas, N., González García, J., Larreina, D., Le Bourdonnec, F.-X., ... & Petraglia, M. D. (2021). Earliest known human burial in Africa. *Nature*, 593(7852), 95–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03457-8>
- Moore, D. L. (2014). Overcoming religious illiteracy: Expanding the boundaries of religious education. *Religious Education*, 109(4), 379–389.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2014.924765>
- Nakkazi, E. (2021). Africa's oldest modern human burial found in Kenyan grave: Sheds light on evolution of death rituals. *Nature Africa*, June 27, 2021.
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d44148-021-00049-6>
- Partridge, C. H. (2004–2005). *The re-enchantment of the West: Alternative spiritualities, sacralization, popular culture, and occulture* (Vols. 1–2). T. & T. Clark.
<https://doi.org/10.5840/asrr20101221>
- Ristiniemi, J. (2020). Själens, pengar och livet efter detta: Om tankevärldar hos barn [On worlds of thoughts among children]. In E. Hall & B. Liljefors Persson (Eds.), *Existentiella frågor i barns och ungas liv* [Existential questions in the lives of children and youths] (pp. 20–28). Årsboken för Föreningen lärare i religionskunskap.
- Scheer, M., Nadia, F., & Scheperen Johansen, B. (2019). *Secular bodies, affects, and emotions: European configurations*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Schofield Clark, L. (2003). *From angels to aliens: Teenagers, media and the supernatural*. Oxford University Press.
- Seibaek, L., Hounsgaard, L., & Hvidt, N. C. (2013). Secular, spiritual, and religious existential concerns of women with ovarian cancer during final diagnostics and start of treatment. *Evidence-based complementary and alternative medicine*, Art. 765419.
<https://doi.org/10.1155/2013/765419>
- Sjödin, U. (2002). The Swedes and the paranormal. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 17(1), 75–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900120098174>
- Skerrett, A. (2014). Religious literacies in a secular literacy classroom. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 49(2), 233–250. [10.1002/rrq.65](https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.65)
- Sorgenfrei, S. (2019). Vi måste prata om Sverige som mångreligiöst land [We need to talk about Sweden as a multi-religious country]. *Dagens Arena*, January 17, 2019.
<https://www.dagensarena.se/essa/vi-maste-prata-om-sverige-som-mangreligiost-land/>
- Sorgenfrei, S., & Thurfjell, D. (2021). Det krävs mer forskning om det mångreligiösa Sverige [More research is needed about the multi-religious Sweden]. *Universitetsläraren*, February 26, 2021. <https://universitetslararen.se/2021/02/26/det-kravs-mer-forskning-om-det-mangreligiosa-sverige/>

- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011a) *Ämnesplan religionskunskap gymnasieskolan* [Curriculum for religion studies in upper secondary school]. Skolverket.
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b). *Kommentarmaterial till ämnesplanen i religionskunskap i gymnasieskolan* [Commentary material to curriculum in religion studies in upper secondary school]. Skolverket.
https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.6011fe501629fd150a2894b/1530187666619/Kommentarmaterial_gymnasieskolan_religionskunskap.pdf
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2022). *Jämför kursplanerna – Religionskunskap Lgr22–Lgr11* [Compare syllabus – Religion studies]. Skolverket.
https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.3770ea921807432e6c72f3d/1660203381542/jamforesedok_Religionskunskap.pdf
- Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012). *Mer än vad du kan tro. Religionskunskap i gymnasieskolan* [More than you can believe. Religion education upper secondary school]. Skolinspektionens rapport 2012:3. <https://www.skolinspektionen.se/globalassets/02-beslut-rapporter-stat/granskningsrapporter/tkg/2012/religion/slutrapport---religionskunskap-i-gymnasieskolan-2012.pdf>
- Thalén, P., & Carlsson, D. (2020). Teaching secular worldviews in a post-secular age. *Religion & Education*, 47(3), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2020.1785811>
- Thurfjell, D. (2015). *Det gudlösa folket. De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* [The godless people. The post-Christian Swedes and religion]. Molin & Sorgenfrei.
- Van Tongeren, D. R., DeWall, C. N., Chen, Z., Sibley, C. G., & Bulbulia, J. (2021). Religious residue: Cross-cultural evidence that religious psychology and behavior persist following deidentification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120(2), 484–503.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000288>
- Visuri, I. (2019). *Varieties of supernatural experience: The case of high-functioning autism*. Doctoral dissertation, Department for the study of religion, Södertörn University.
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1314310/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Visuri, I. (2021). Vad händer efter döden? [What happens after death?]. In T. Axelson & T. Hylén (Eds.), *Den nya människan: om mänsklighetens ständiga strävan att omskapa sig själv* [The new human: About mankind's constant strive to recreate itself] (pp. 175–190) Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag.
- von Brömssen, K., Ivkovits, H., & Nixon, G. (2020). Religious literacy in the curriculum in compulsory education in Austria, Scotland and Sweden – A three-country policy comparison. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 41(2), 132–149.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1737909>
- White, C. (2017). Who wants to live forever? Explaining the cross-cultural recurrence of reincarnation beliefs. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 17(5), 419–436.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685373-12340016>
- Willander, E., & Stockman, M. (2020). *Ett mångreligiöst Sverige i förändring* [A multi-religious Sweden in transition]. Rapport. Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund.
<https://www.myndighetensst.se/om-oss/nyheter/nyhetsarkiv-aktuellt/2020-09-28-ett-mangreligiost-sverige-i-forandring.html>