



# 12

## Facing Religious Ethical Claims in Post-secular Ethics Education: Challenges and Contributions

Olof Franck

### Introduction

We live in a time that has often been described as post-secular. What is more specifically meant by this is, however, unclear. There are plenty of possible meanings that are highlighted by writers and debaters. Does it mean that a “post-secular era” is an era where religion, having played an obscure role in society, has become increasingly visible in public discussion and in social and political processes? Although the secularization theorist Peter Berger once predicted the death of religion (Berger 1979), might it be that religion has been breathing more intensely in silence, and has thereby been formed and reformed in ways that support what many want to see in the present time, namely not the return of traditional religious expression but rather a growth of different religious traditions and expressions (Taylor 2007)? Are the more visible roles of religion in the public arena, which Berger also acknowledges (Berger 1999), parallel to a

---

O. Franck (✉)  
University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden  
e-mail: [Olof.Franck@gu.se](mailto:Olof.Franck@gu.se)

deconstruction of traditional religious concepts and a construction of new forms of human needs and the desire to provide a metaphysical or spiritual basis for opinions?

When Jürgen Habermas focuses on the concept of post-secularity, he raises the idea that religious voices must be heard in a democratic society, but that, when speaking from constitutionally influential positions, they need to adapt to the language use of secular society (Habermas 2006). The Swedish religious sociologist Anders Bäckström has argued that one can ask whether Habermas really believes that religious voices have an intrinsic value (Bäckström 2012). In the work mentioned, Habermas discusses John Rawls' concept of an impartial position with reference to which disagreement should be analyzed and assessed, and this position is certainly a secularly defined position. Habermas emphasizes that religious people's voices have something to add to the social dialogue about values, but at the same time argues that a religiously defined basis for constitutionally anchoring democratic values is not possible, because it would be exclusive in relation to the diversity of voices entitled to be heard in the public conversation.

At the end of his "Notes on Post-Secular Society", Habermas claims that:

[T]he state's neutrality does not preclude the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere, as long as the institutionalized decision-making process at the parliamentary, court, governmental and administrative levels remains clearly separated from the informal flows of political communication and opinion formation among the broader public of citizens. (Habermas 2008, 28)

This means that religious voices are welcome to take part in the "informal flows" mentioned, even when they prefer to use a religious language. This constitutes, according to Habermas, a challenge to secularists, namely in form of an "expectation that secular citizens in civil society and the political public sphere must be able to meet their religious fellow citizens as equals" (ibid., 29). And he announces that "Secular citizens are expected not to exclude *a fortiori* that they may discover, even in religious

utterances, semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse” (ibid., 29).

It is from this particular point that the discussion in this article starts. In a time when many researchers find signs of the return of religion, and of how the distinction between “secular” and “religious” views of life appears to breakdown, not least as a result of a greater freedom to make choices about ethical and existential matters, beyond what are perceived as formally designed and too strictly defined alternatives, it is important to investigate how ethics teaching that provides space for diversity at the same time protects fundamental democratic values.

Fundamentalist ethical attitudes are found in and outside of religion, but what may make religiously motivated ethical positions difficult to handle is, above all, that it does not seem to be possible to examine arguments about right and wrong, good and evil, referring to divine and transcendental authorities, by means of ordinary epistemological criteria. This constitutes a well-known and classic challenge, but when the epistemological and ontological borders between secular and spiritual dimensions in life, in a post-secular era, seem to be threatened, the way may seem wide open for a demand according to which religious claims, in principle, have to be accepted as no less complicated to justify than any alternatives. Such a demand is especially interesting and acute in the arenas of ethics, be it issues regarding gay rights, abortion, euthanasia—or more broadly defined ones regarding social, economic and environmental sustainability.

The question I want to examine is the way in which post-secular religious education allows for religious ethical claims, without giving them an exclusive position in which they can escape criticism. I think that Anders Bäckström’s reservation that Habermas’s claim that religious people should formulate arguments and positions in secular terms may be interpreted as an argument that their contribution to such discussions would not have any intrinsic value. Due to the quoted text sequences above, this interpretation seems to be too drastic. On the other hand, I share Habermas’s attitude that respect for religious contributions to discussions about values cannot be cultivated at the expense of a democratic principle that does not confer any claim to absolute legitimacy (Habermas 2006, 2008).

## Religious Ethical Claims as Situated Democratic Iterations in Post-secular Contexts

In the following, I use the concept of post-secularity as a reference to a social relationship where religious beliefs and expressions are relatively visible in people's linguistic and social relationships, and where the boundaries between what is perceived as "religious" and "secular" are not clearly defined (Carlsson and Thalén 2015). This is a categorization that would need to be clarified in a more fully developed analysis, but for the reasoning given in this chapter it is sufficient.

I will also assume that in order to investigate the roles that religious ethical claims can and should be assigned in post-secular religious education, it is essential not to stay at a general level. *Someone* is making such claims and *someone* agrees with or rejects them. Advocates' and critics' own voices express more than theoretical beliefs that can be investigated separately from the voices that formulate them.

I agree with the philosopher Seyla Benhabib in her criticism that Habermas is too abstract in his analysis of how social discussions about values and democracy are being, and should be, conducted (Benhabib 1992). We need to anchor the analysis of such discussions in the everyday conversation that brings people together and try to see how our beliefs and the linguistic costumes we give them are born and characterized in concrete everyday life where there is a more or less transparent desire for meaning, and perhaps also truth, that drives us to ask fundamental existential issues relevant to ethics and religion, politics and democracy.

With reference to a concept derived from Benhabib's philosophical thinking, I have, in a former publication, argued that religious ethical claims can be perceived as *democratic iterations* (Franck 2017), that is to say "complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society" (Benhabib 2011, 129). I will, in this chapter, keep and develop some aspects of such an interpretation, although leaving Benhabib's conceptual approach aside.

In the present context I will assume that at least many religious ethical claims may be understood in line with a use of concepts, or the carrying out of actions, which are seen as challenging the values, the structure or the borders that are apprehended as being essential in order for a community to be democratic. Religious adherents may put forth a variety of ethical claims—as everyone knows, religion is a complex concept which covers a huge range of beliefs, convictions, standpoints and opinions. Religious ethical claims may, according to an interpretation adopted in the present context, be characterized by being defended with reference to a supposed metaphysical and/or divine authority. Such a reference may be shaped in lots of different ways. What seems to unite them all is, however, that this authority is assumed to be absolute in the sense that it constitutes the last step in a sanctioning process beyond which it is not possible for human reasoning to reach.

This certainly does not mean that all religious ethical claims by believers are thought to be infallibly right or true. When such claims are put forth by specific individuals or groups as absolutely true and non-negotiable, this could lead to a misinterpretation of religious claims in certain secular contexts, according to which all religious claims are, and perhaps must be, thought infallible in the eyes of those who propose them. This seems, however, to be a more or less unsupported interpretation of what is generally going on when believers engage in ethical debates and discussions.

Two things have to be emphasized here, however, especially with reference to a context where ethics education is performed. First, such an education has to involve strategies for handling absolute religious ethical claims *if* and *when* they are expressed. Here Habermas's standpoint, according to which religious positionings and arguments have to respect basic democratic principles, can offer guidelines that may prevent various kinds of exclusivist approaches. Second, such strategies also have to hold for cases where non-religious—secular—exclusivist claims are presented in the discussions going on regarding, for example, ethical issues.

It is a mistake to presume that it is only religious ethical positions and arguments that attempt to establish claims that are infallible and non-negotiable. In secular contexts, several candidates for the establishment of an absolute authority may play a role in and outside classroom

discussions on ethical subjects. *Science* seems to be a candidate that often comes to mind in such discussions.

Two recent studies by Swedish researchers have shown how a secularist-atheist positioning may play an exclusivist role in classrooms where students discuss existential and ethical matters. Here students with a religious faith may be excluded from a fair and democratically justified position as being one valuable voice among others, exercising the right to partake in the discussions on the same, universal conditions (Kittelmann-Flensner 2015; Holmqvist-Lidh 2016). There is no guarantee that non-religious ethical claims are vaccinated against exclusivism. In this sense, one could say that there is a symmetry between religious and secular ethical claims: usually their proponents are open to considering arguments for and against them, but both run the risk of being used for exclusivist purposes.

Thus, when religious ethical claims are categorized as challenging the values, or the borders, apprehended as being essential in order for a community to be democratic, this is not simply because of their latent risk of exploitation for exclusive purposes. In a religious or post-secular context, the same applies to secular ethical claims, which could also be considered to challenge the boundaries of democracy.

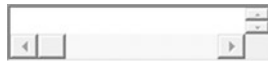
What seems to be specific for religious ethical claims is their sometimes more, sometimes less, transparent reference to a metaphysical religious authority that appears to be beyond ordinary epistemological identificatory methods. I have pointed out that such reference should not mean that religious representatives perceive their ethical requirements as non-negotiable or even infallible. Religious people who believe in a divine or spiritual authority may also find themselves unsure of what might be a response that shows what is right or good to do in relation to a particular question.

In post-secular classrooms, interesting challenges can present themselves. There it is not only religious but also secular, ethical claims that may serve as challenging democratic values. In the following, however, it is the former type of claim that interests us. Although religious sociologists sometimes point out that the strong secularization in the West, especially in the Nordic countries, may have been exaggerated or at least unilaterally depicted in literature (Davie 2002), this does not mean that religion necessarily plays a crucial, or even big, role in public social life. Rather, it seems that many people in the West do not let religion and

religious beliefs, at least in the traditional sense, govern their lives and actions. It is therefore interesting to consider how religious ethical claims should be dealt with in the post-secular classroom—which may, but does not have to, be permeated by a fully fledged barrier between what is perceived as “religious” and “secular”.

## Religious Versus Secular Ethical Authorities— In Symmetry or Asymmetry?

I would like to emphasize that important lessons may be learned by all participants in discussions about values by listening to and trying to understand what it means to claim values that are not relativized. Understanding what it may mean to rely on moral norms and values that are not merely instrumental but which are anchored in an absolute authority for what may be good and right, can show how an absolute and non-negotiable human worth can be justified and maintained in a society where relativization and instrumental values seem to have taken power.



Such an insight is less about supposed positions on concrete moral questions, than about an absolute and non-negotiable basis for the value of moral subjects. Here there is a challenge with regard to what can be perceived as the core and boundaries of democracy. In what way can religious ethical claims based on faith in an absolute divine moral authority be incorporated into a democratic conversation about social values?

In one sense, one might perhaps talk about a symmetry between religious and secular ethical claims regarding epistemological conditions in order to legitimize trusted authorities as the basis for these claims. One can think of a line of reasoning according to which it can be difficult to see how religious people try to justify ethical arguments and positions with reference to a spiritual or divine authority, but that in this regard, things do not differ greatly from the demands made with reference to secular authorities.

For example, take an authority that many seem to want to fall back on as a kind of ultimate foundation for moral positions, namely the UN Declaration of Human Rights. No one can prove that these rights have an authority that makes it impossible to question either those or the interpretations made in accordance with what they are deemed to prescribe. It can be argued that they are entirely human-designed constructions—just as the divine powers of religious faith are human creations, in order to establish a reliable moral compass that can show ways to act properly and do good in a world which in many ways seems uncertain and full of difficult ethical challenges. (cf. Harari 2015)

Here, however, it is important to point out that such a symmetry can be questioned. Nobody can doubt that the UN Declaration of Human Rights has come about through human interaction in order to create a document that can provide a common basis for how human dignity and good human relations are to be supported and maintained. In interaction with each other, with society and with the interpretations of the concepts of ethics and morals that are thought to create and shape the moral authorities regarded as legitimate, people establish the values and norms that act as a moral compass at both a social and an individual level.

From a secular point of view, of course, such interplay can be perceived to create and also form religious authorities. But this is hardly how religious believers think about the matter. Most people can probably see that in the moral arena, as in other contexts, they are involved in interpreting processes: few may wish to claim that they have full insight into the will and ordinances of their divine authorities. But from there to claiming that these authorities would also be created and shaped by people's imaginations is a long way to go. To the extent that religious people can be said to have conceptions of divine authorities that they perceive support the ethical claims they propose, it is probably about gods or spiritual beings that are thought to have an independent existence and which they perceive to have created and invoked values that serve as the basis for human ethical reflection and moral action (Franck 2016).

Thus, we are dealing with an asymmetry between religious and secular ethical claims, namely with regard to the perception of the authorities claimed.<sup>1</sup> Let's see what such an asymmetry can mean for the design and pursuit of ethics education!



## Secular Ethics Education

I stated earlier that it is worthwhile for secular ethics teaching to pay attention to religious ethical claims, so that students have the opportunity to meet beliefs and reasoning that are thought to be founded in an absolute moral authority. I do not want to take too much time and space to argue against the voices that in an erroneous and misleading way claim that trust in such an authority would mean that religious people also, more or less without exception, believe that their ethical claims would be infallible. Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that when this does occur—not least in fundamentalist circles—it may apply to conservative values regarding family structure or sexuality, or the like, but it may also concern what could be perceived as progressive values concerning, for example, equality or social justice.

The point here is that secular ethics, which may not usually be associated with the sanctioning of absolute moral authority, has a lot to gain from showing that it is possible to argue that there is a fixed and non-negotiable fundament for what good morals, good judgment and good relationships between people are.

It should be noted here that Danish theologian Knud E. Løgstrup's reasoning about social norms, which plays an important role in keeping the social machinery together, and the absolute ethical requirement directed in relation to fellow human beings, the one for which a liability cannot be renounced at the same time as this person's freedom to act according to the way he or she finds the best, cannot be questioned. Such a responsibility, and such a freedom, is in Løgstrup's thought theologically anchored. (Løgstrup 1979) And similarly, religious beliefs in an absolute divine or spiritual moral authority are rooted in the notion that the responsibility and freedom cannot be withdrawn or made invisible.

Secular ethics can go a long way by focusing on socially rooted morals, the norms that exist or do not exist in society, and a critical analysis of why values and norms are produced and reproduced in the way they are. But an important step is missed, a step that gives the opportunity to express a dimension where what we call "morality" involves something more and deeper than just a negotiating position according to which

moral opinions, arguments and positions are weighed against each other in accordance with argumentative, logical and rational considerations.

The philosopher of religion Paul Tillich once highlighted the concept of “the Ground of Being” (Tillich 1951), referring to what is most important to people. This does not have to be religiously formulated—there are many ways for people to express what most closely concerns them. But in the moral field, this is close to thinking about what is behind concrete moral positions, what creates a basic meaning and contributes to the growth and development of the good in people’s relationships and societies. Here, a religious foundation for ethics and morals has a powerful role to play. And it is important that it is given a place in the context of, in particular, secular ethics teaching, not with the purpose of first and foremost producing an existentially competing alternative to secular moral authorities, but rather to show a context in which the reason for morality is perceived and expressed in terms of a spiritual or divine dimension and will.

## Post-secular Ethics Education

With regard to post-secular ethics education, it is important to emphasize that even if religious ethical claims may have a role in inspiring children and young people to reflect on what it would mean that human morality has an ultimate spiritual anchorage, this, of course, does not mean that these claims are given ethical or epistemological precedence over other claims. At a time when traditional boundaries between faith and knowledge, and between religion and science seem to be questioned in different arenas (Berger 1979, 1999; Bäckström 2012), it is important to maintain a critical philosophical discussion about how claims about what is good and right and true can be justified.

Religious people cannot, on good grounds, promote the idea that religious ethical claims have a precedence by referring to a presumably absolute divine or spiritual authority. If they argue in such a way, they do not maintain the distinction that most religious people seem to accept, namely that the reference to absolute moral authority does not mean that concrete ethical claims can be made about what is absolutely right or

true. As previously pointed out, Habermas has, in his way of developing the conditions for democratic conversations about values, pointed to the importance of religious people participating in such talks on an equal basis (cf Habermas and Taylor 2011). However, I previously pointed out that this does not have to mean that religious claims generally must be translated into secular terms.

This does not, however, on the other hand, mean that religious people can hide behind religious justifications for their ethical positions and arguments. It is not enough to refer to what is written in a sacred text or conveyed in a revelation or experience interpreted in religious terms in order to support a general moral claim. A critical reflection and critical analysis must exist, and the reflection and analysis need to be subject to conditions that govern conversations about values, ethics and morals in a democratic community.

There are many examples of issues that can illustrate this relationship—but it is not easy to find ways in which religious ethical claims and secular claims are equally respected. Take, for example, the question of whether female students in secular schools should be allowed to wear veils. In Sweden, for example, debaters, both in and outside of a Muslim context, have demanded a ban on young girls wearing veils, with the justification that the ability to make independent decisions on existentially, ethically, culturally and religiously relevant issues requires a maturity that younger children do not yet have. Reference is made to conditions in France, pointing to the importance of secular norms, norms that of course for older children may appear to support personal decisions not to wear as well as to wear veils.

The requirement for young girls to be allowed to wear veils in school may not be one that can easily be accepted in a secular, democratic society. It is important to bear in mind, however, that, in a society where many are unfamiliar with traditional religions, it is likely that people will misinterpret what different religions actually prohibit or invite—insofar as it is possible at all to find a collective ethical attitude in a particular religious tradition. More knowledge is then needed about divergent perceptions of right and wrong, good and evil within one and the same religious context (cf. Roos and Berglund 2009). In part, two questions must be raised regarding the agenda of a democratic ethical conversation:

(1) Is such a requirement in line with fundamental values, such as freedom, equality and personal integrity? (2) Whether or not a claim of this sort is considered to harmonize with such fundamental values, can it be shown that it doesn't clash with reasonable epistemological criteria?

I would like to emphasize, in line with what has been said in this article, that both of these criteria are not only relevant but also necessary when putting forward ethical claims, regardless of whether they are more traditional conservative moral perceptions or progressive arguments and positions where current arrangements are questioned from a religious position.

Let us take this line of reasoning further.

## Epistemological and Moral Justification

I would like to refer back to what was stated earlier, namely that religious believers in the present context are thought to be justified in using a religious, and even theological, language when proposing and arguing for religious ethical claims. Habermas's demand for the translation of religious language is not generally accepted. At the same time, it must be emphasized that this certainly does not mean that a "linguistic spirituality", lacking a form and a content that relates to people's experiential and linguistic frames of references, will neither succeed in, nor be relevant to, a discussion about whether this or that religious ethical claim could be judged to be justified or not. If arguments for a certain position rest upon references to a divine prescription or a spiritual will or a supposedly transcendent law, the proponent in question has to be able to present semantically understandable and epistemologically explicable clues, which establish a dialogical platform with reference to which a meaningful discussion regarding reasons for and against specific claims could take place and be developed.

On the other hand, it does not seem evident that we would all understand why it is important for religious persons to try to show that specific claims, ethical or of other kinds, could be justified with reference to a divine or spiritual authority, or what such a reference in effect means. Neither does it seem uncontroversial to include apparently metaphysical

references in a dialogue, if the authorities to which they refer are thought to be absolute, serving as a kind of final justificatory step.

As was stated at the beginning of this article, most religious people do not seem to propose that specific ethical claims are absolutely right or true, even if they are arguing that a certain interpretation of their righteousness or truth is supported by a reference to a divine or spiritual absolute authority. There is still room for human misinterpretation due to limited knowledge and, perhaps, a limited moral ability.

Here, however, it is important that religious ethical claims, precisely as must be done regarding secular ones, are scrutinized and critically examined partly with a focus on the content of the claims, and partly by highlighting how this content is thought to be justified. Taking the challenges of climate change as an example, there are several examples of religious voices asking for acute action according to an ethical responsibility for the earth and its living creatures. Pope Francis is one of them, remembering his gift to President Trump on his visit to the Vatican in May 2017: a 192-page letter where the devastating environmental, social, economic and political consequences of a negligence of the climate challenges were seriously highlighted (Samphatkumar 2017). Supposing that the Pope, like other religious supporters of sustainability, in some way anchors his engagement in a religious view of the earth as the result of divine creation, two issues seem to require examination: (1) Is the content of the ethical claim epistemologically and morally justified?; (2) Is the reason given for the claim in question epistemologically and morally justified?

Regarding the first question, it could be said that much relevant research is being carried out regarding the environmental threats of our time, focusing not least on climate change, its mechanisms, possible ways to meet these challenges in successful ways and so on. “Climate deniers” have questioned scientific theories, hypotheses and conclusions—and here it is reasonable to talk about a clash between two opposed approaches. On the other hand, one may also emphasize that people engaged in sustainability issues do not constitute a wholly harmonious group: discussions involving a huge variety of positions and interests are continuously going on. This is, I believe, a preferable approach to ethical issues: in a democratic society communication must not fade away or stop. It has to be kept alive. That is what we can do in order to shoulder our

responsibility, whether this is thought to be anchored in a divine authority or not, a responsibility for contributing to making the world and people's relations better, deeper and more profound.

Regarding the second question, the same could be said to hold, but here it is important to add that when reasons for certain ethical claims are given, references to religious and secular authorities may both be given a justified role to play. It may, particularly in a time and a Western context when many people are not familiar with, nor knowledgeable about, religious belief in theory and practice, seem hard to argue for this or that claim by saying that "it is the will of God" or that "it can be read in the Bible or the Quran". If anyone wants to argue in this way, she has the right to do so—but of course, a reference to a divine being or a supposed support in a text thought to be divinely inspired does not in itself lay a ground for an acceptance of the claim in question. It has to be shown that this claim is morally justified, that is to say, that it satisfies fundamental democratic values. Claims which are opposed to such values by neglecting or denying men's and women's personal freedom and integrity, their right to develop personal life-views and positions on different issues, cannot be accepted.

Religious ethical claims must also, regarding their references to divine or spiritual authorities, be shown to be epistemologically justified. This does not, according to the approach accepted in the present context, mean that they have to be proved in a more or less conclusive sense. Such a demand would itself be unjustified. Since the days of logical positivism and verificationist strategies for excluding all metaphysical claims from the arena of what may be thought to be epistemologically acceptable, no one would seem to be prepared to take the "conclusivist position" in epistemological matters.

In a post-secular time, it is, however, fundamental that reasonable epistemological demands and criteria are allowed to play an active role when we are searching for truth and knowledge. When it comes to religious claims—and also many secular ones—the task will be, not to ask for evidence which make the claims appear as certain, but rather to examine whether there may be what could be called "non-ordinary" ways of obtaining knowledge about the world. One way to go might be to investigate "a widened concept of experience", where non-sensory experience

is analyzed with reference to reasonable criteria for truth and knowledge. Another one is a parallel investigation of a widened concept of knowledge, which broadens the scope of what it might be possible to know about the world and about ourselves (cf. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011). A third one, perhaps the most common, would be to look at possible similarities between justifications of ethical claims with reference to religious and secular authorities (Franck 2017).

## The Labor of Criticizing Religious Ethical Claims

A point of departure for the discussion in this article is that there are religious ethical claims that can be interpreted as potentially challenging democratic values, by the divine or spiritual references that are considered as justifications in ethical issues. Criteria for what may be judged “right” or “good”, which usually provide an accepted basis for ethical discussions in secular democratic contexts, are questioned or neglected.

It should be noted that by challenging common criteriological prerequisites, these claims can inspire a recurring, hermeneutically critical analysis—both regarding the perception in secular debates of what can be regarded as a justified ethical claim, but also as regards interpretation and reconsideration of the claims themselves. When a democratically challenging statement is presented, something happens to it (cf. Benhabib 1992). In the critical process implemented, the reflection on this statement can offer new perspectives and previously unknown dimensions of understanding.

I have emphasized that religious ethical claims, although they can play a constructive and healthy developmental role for a critical discussion of ethics and morals, do not provide a secure path for a justification. A critical process is initiated for all parties involved when democratic iterations are on the agenda. Neither their defenders nor those who doubt the reasonableness of defending such challenging claims may consider themselves, without further explanation, to be able to formulate a final decision regarding the claims in question.

In a post-secular ethical arena, it is important, in particular in educational contexts, that emphasis is placed on the process that precedes the taking up of a position rather than on the standpoints themselves. It is of course important, not least in acute ethical issues, to formulate a stance that can lead to a vigorous internship that can help people in their moral life. But it is always worth the effort to take time to reflect on and analyze the basis, both ethical and epistemological, for different positions and options for action. In many ethical matters, religious and secular debates will be united with regard to reasons considered as ethical and epistemological justification. A religious believer who lives in a secular democratic community usually does just as others do: she trusts general everyday experiences, scientific achievements and tries to have a moral stance characterized by fundamental democratic values.

However, when she tries to find a way to take a position on certain questions, she can, unlike a person who lacks religious belief, refer to a divine or spiritual authority. It may often mean that, in practice, she comes to the same conclusion as people who also strive to practice democratically founded ethics, sometimes implying that she finds an alternative position defensible—perhaps with reference to a divine will or regulation conveyed by some text or some experience. In that situation, she has a job to do. She needs to develop an epistemologically based defense for her position and why this should be accepted by other people in the democratic community. As pointed out above, this does not mean that she gives conclusive evidence but that she can elaborate on the epistemological prerequisites for her position in a way that is seen as reasonable in this context. In other words, she cannot relax, either ethically or epistemologically, when she makes ethical claims for religious reasons.

It is important to emphasize here that someone who feels doubtful or unfamiliar with ethical claims made on religious grounds cannot relax either, if that the person wishes to participate in a conversation on the subject. It is a hard work to justify religious ethical claims—and it is hard work to formulate a vigorous criticism of them. I mentioned earlier a couple of Swedish studies that show how a secular and, in some cases, subtly anti-religious attitude can show up in classroom discussions about religion, and the cases reported there are more about expressing disapproval than going into an ethically and epistemologically relevant analysis



and argumentation. Such an attitude is not only disrespectful and therefore questionable in relation to the democratic principles that should apply to ethical discussions: it is also an attitude that collapses under its own weight because it neither examines the ethical claims made on religious grounds, nor examines the ethical and epistemological conditions for an analysis of its own position.

Bearing in mind, in particular, that religious literacy that includes knowledge of basic beliefs and religious ethical positions seems to be absent in many contemporary contexts (Prothero 2008; Moore 2007), it should be recalled how important it is that all participants in democratic discussions about ethics do what they can to intellectually and morally, epistemological and ethically, seriously contribute to a careful examination of the claims that are in focus.

## Conclusion

I have argued that an interpretation of religious ethical claims as being potentially challenging democratic values helps to show the inspiration they can give by questioning present democratic moral and epistemological beliefs, norms and ideals. I have also shown why a treatment of such claims requires work, both ethically and epistemologically, by their advocates as well as their critics.

Habermas's position that religious people, in democratic talks about values, need to adapt the forms of their claims to a secular context seems to be acceptable in the sense that they must try to relate these claims (and the religiously formulated support for them) to the linguistic, epistemological and moral prerequisites that are sanctioned within the framework of the democratic community in which they are produced. But Habermas does not, according to the argument in this article, take the responsibility far enough when he lays the task of making religious claims comprehensible exclusively on their advocates. There is a significant responsibility here for those who do not want to accept or understand such claims. It is about striving to embrace what is claimed, and it is about critically examining the ethical and epistemological conditions for them—as well as

investigating and expressing the corresponding conditions for their own claims.

A post-secular ethics education requires something of both religious and secular-based debates. Ethical claims are, regardless of how they are supported, worth a careful, reflective and critical review. It is true for those who appear at least on the surface to agree with hegemonic social beliefs about how “right” and “good” and “true” can be understood, and it is also true for those who challenge such hegemonic apprehensions.

## Note

1. I here ignore the question of how different forms of secular ethical objectivism relate to an ethical objectivism on religious grounds. It is important to implement a discussion of this issue, but only at a time when the survey in focus here has reached a result. There are several such forms that, at least initially, may seem to threaten the epistemological asymmetry believed to prevail between religious and secular ethical claims. On the other hand, there is reason to suspect that the arguments in support of how secular ethical objectivism anchors the intended entitlements of specific claims, may look different from those that are similarly believed to establish religious ethical claims. The question is complex and requires a separate space for treatment in a cautious manner.

## References

- Bäckström, A. (2012). Att leva i en postsekulär tid—vad menas med det? [Living in a Post-Secular Age—What Does This Mean?] *Svensk kyrkotidning*, 23, 434. Retrieved November 2, 2012.
- Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Benhabib, S. (2011). *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Berger, P. L. (1979). *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1st ed.). Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.

- Berger, P. L. (1999). The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview. In P. L. Berger (Ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (pp. 1–19). Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center.
- Carlsson, D., & Thalén, P. (2015). Inledning [Introduction]. In D. Carlsson & P. Thalén (Eds.), *Det postsekulära klassrummet: Mot ett vidgat religionskunskapsbegrepp* [*The Post-Secular Classroom: Towards a Widened Concept of Religious Education*] (pp. 7–16). Gävle: Högskolan i Gävle and Swedish Science Press.
- Davie, G. (2002). *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd.
- Franck, O. (2016) Critical Religious Education: Highlighting Religious Truth-Claims in Non-confessional Educational Contexts. In J. Arthur & L. P. Barnes (Eds.), *Education and Religion. Major Themes in Education, Vol. III, Religion, Diversity and Education*. London and New York: Routledge. Reprinted from *British Journal of Religious Education*, 2015, 37(3), 225–239. London and New York: Routledge.
- Franck, O. (2017). Challenging the Teaching of Global Ethical Unity: Religious Ethical Claims as Democratic Iterations Within Sustainability Didactics. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 11(1), 11–18.
- Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the Public Sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1), 1–25. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x> (Retrieved 25 August 2019).
- Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on Post-Secular Society. *New Perspective Quarterly*, 25(4), 17–29, Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x> (Retrieved 25 August 2019).
- Habermas, J., & Taylor, C. (2011). Dialogue: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor. In E. Mendieta & J. Vanantwerpen (Eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (pp. 60–69). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Vintage.
- Holmqvist Lidh, C. (2016) *Representera och bli representerad. Elever med religiös positionering talar om skolans religionskunskapsundervisning* [*Representing and Being Represented. Students with Religious Positioning Speak about RE in School*] (p. 41). Karlstad University Studies.
- Kittelmann-Flensner, K. (2015). *Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden*. Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg.
- Løgstrup, K. E. (1979). *The Ethical Demand* (H. Fink, Ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.

- Moore, D. L. (2007). *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy. A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prothero, S. (2008). *Religious Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Roos, L., & Berglund, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Your Heritage and Mine: Teaching in a Multi-religious Classroom*. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Samphatkumar, M. (2017). The Pope Gave Donald Trump a 192-Page Letter He Wrote on Climate Change. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-pope-letter-climate-change-gift-encyclical-vatican-visit-present-a7754496.html>.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2011). Religious Experience. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience/>.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic Theology* (Vol. 1). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.