# Chapter 3
# 'Playful Searching Truth': An Exploration of the Role of 'Life Orientation' in a Plural World

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**Abstract** In these days of secularisation, and of loosely dropped 'alternative facts', a pivotal quality in the process of authentic life orientation development is the capacity of critical reading and an attitude of not letting oneself be taken for a ride by firmly stated opinions or truth claims. In this contribution, we show how teachers in different (cultural and religious) educational contexts facilitate and stimulate their students' critical and contextual reading of sacred scriptures—both from their own and others' tradition(s)—through their pedagogical objectives and didactical strategies. After presenting our interpretation of secularisation, three examples of 'good practice' are introduced: originating from South Korea, the Netherlands, and Scotland. Teachers exhibit different rationales in their development of lessons and core activities that facilitate and stimulate students' religious identity development. More research is needed on the development of RE teachers' rationales in the context of the society they prepare their students for, aiming at their critical contribution and participation as responsible citizens with their own authentic life orientation.

**Keywords** Identity development · Authenticity · Critical reading · Teacher rationales · RE classes

## 3.1 Introduction

In her publication *'Het best verkochte boek ooit (met deze titel)'* ('The Best-Selling Book Ever (With This Title)'), the Dutch journalist Blauw (2019) gives a few hints and tips on what to do and what not to do in a world dominated by news that casts doubts on the news itself (Blauw, 2019). The subtitle of her book—'how figures lead, seduce and mislead us'—betrays her profession: Blauw is an econometrist, in love with figures and even more so with the world behind figures. Do not trust them these figures, this fake news! In a sweeping argumentation, she convinces her readers to, instead of focusing on figures, practice the competence of critical thinking and focus

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on their own positionality regarding the topics at stake. Do not trust them, these figures, and distrust them in a systematic way, is her advice, which she presents in six hints. To begin with, always check who vouches for the figures—if no account is given, forget the article, do not read it at all, let alone put any faith in what is written (in case you could not resist reading it!). Imagine a politician quoting statistics that so and so many people witnessed the historic moment of his inauguration, and thereby signalled their agreement with his policy: then promptly look for additional information about this 'historic' moment, the number of people in the crowd, and the interpretation of their presence as a sign of agreement with the politician's policy. Explore your own feelings when reading these figures—do they make you happy, angry, or sad? Notice your emotions, and search for news about the issue at stake that takes different perspectives. What sort of moral choices did the researchers make by measuring 'agreement'? Look for articles that measure 'agreement' in a different way. How were the data underlying the statistics constructed in the first place? Were there any leading questions in the questionnaire? Or any questions that pressed for socially acceptable answers? In case the group of respondents was sampled from a very specific group of people (college students, members of the Republican Party, members of an orthodox Christian community), then be aware that the research findings are only valid for the population segment that participated. In case the figures show a causal relationship, check whether other factors might be influencing the result, for instance, whether it is not simply a matter of chance, and last but not least, check whether the causality might also run the other way around. In conclusion, Blauw's advice is: do not allow yourself to be taken for a ride by a make-belief sense of certainty created by figures!

While all these hints play an important role in teaching and learning 'critical thinking', especially those related to critically weighing statistics in the (fake) news, one of the hints Blauw gives refers to the exploration of one's feelings, especially gut feelings; gut feelings, which sneakily may be(come) an essential but subconscious part of one's positioning in life, one's life orientation.

The subject of this contribution is authentic autonomous (religious or secular) life orientation development in an era that Taylor (2007) coined 'a secular age', and Bauman (2000) characterised as 'liquid times'. An era that, in the future, might also be referred to as an age in which the concept of ultimate truth is under fire and contested (see also Astley et al., 2011).

In our first paragraph, we start with a description of the secularisation process, a process that involves the growth of a plurality of (sub-)cultures—and subsequently a diversity of religious and non-religious life orientations—as well as the phenomenon that truth claims become unsettled, 'in the air'. Then, in our second paragraph, we sketch different pedagogical strategies for teaching and learning 'life orientation', in a world, in schools and classrooms characterised by plurality. The classroom as a safe space is preconditional for these education processes.

This is followed by a third paragraph in which three examples of 'good practice' are introduced: in these, the need for a dialogue with theology, the perspective of orthodox Christian schools, and the perspective of students in a plural context are outlined. These examples represent different ways in which scholars in (religious)

worldview/life orientation education are searching for innovative teaching methods, to respond to a situation of secularisation and plurality in an era in which all ultimate truth claims are under fire. These examples are reflected in a fourth paragraph, in which we draw on the hints provided by Blauw. We ask the question: how does RE in the given examples contribute to students' critical thinking and, by doing so, prevents them from being led astray by figures quoted in (fake) news—in this era when everything is put into perspective? We conclude our contribution in a fifth paragraph, which contains recommendations for the improvement of teaching and learning in diversity—for 'a playful searching for truth'.

## 3.2 Secularisation

Secularisation, in the history of religions, is very often interpreted as an ongoing process of decline in active participation in religious communities, and in church/mosque/temple attendance (Paul, 2017; Taylor, 2007, p. 505 ff). Scholars in sociology of religion refer in particular to the decline of the influence of institutionalised religion in the public domain. However, secularisation does not only refer to the decrease in people that attend the church/mosque/temple—which is the focus of quantitative research in sociology of religion—nor does it merely mean that religious symbols—as an expression of the strong relationship between institutionalised religion and the public domain—disappear (cf. Berger, 1967).

Since the publication of Berger (1967) 'The Sacred Canopy', 'secularisation' has become an evaluative concept. For some people, secularisation has become associated with a highly valued liberation of modern men and women from the paternalistic power of religion in regard to a person's positioning in the world. In Berger's view, secularisation is related to all aspects of a culture—and to all cultures, not just western cultures. In 1967, Berger was of the firm opinion that religions all over the world would become shaped by processes of secularisation, polarisation and subjectification, and by which religious institutions would (have to) respond to these processes (ibid., p. 189; see also Taylor, 2003a, 2003b).

In 2007, forty years after Berger published his sociological perspective on the development of the Christian religious tradition in Western countries, Charles Taylor presented his own view in 'A Secular Age'. Taylor's focus is not on institutionalised religion and its decline—as in Berger's 'The Sacred Canopy'—but on religious experiences in modern people's lives. In a previously published booklet of only about a hundred pages, *'Wat betekent religie vandaag?'* ('What Is the Meaning of Religion Today?'), he acknowledges that the language people use to express their religious experience is necessarily one that is embedded in a linguistic (religious) community (Taylor, 2003a, 2003b, p. 11). At the same time, it is the individual's own way of thinking that is the starting point for religious experience (ibid., p. 12). Taylor points to the 'phenomenon of a collective religious life, which is not only the result of (individual) religious relations, but to a certain extent is constitutive for individual religious experience' (ibid., p. 37) and subsequently for a shared language.

The development of individual religiosity cannot take place without a minimum of accepted and verbally and non-verbally expressed forms of religiosity in a faith community, and in society (cf. Wright, 2006). After all, 'There is *something* people have faith in, there is *something* people pin their hopes on' (Taylor, 2003a, 2003b, p. 39). Religious communities provide narratives, symbols, rituals and ceremonies for the expression of such profound and moving experiences. According to Taylor, the decline of religion in its institutionalised form as a guaranteed order of the truth in the public domain—Taylor even speaks of religion as 'the soul of society' (Taylor, 2003a, 2003b, p. 15; see also Vroom, 1996)—is accompanied by the risk that the antipole in the dichotomy of 'good and evil' will disappear, which opens a clear field for evil. The rise of moralism, in his view, can be seen as a defence mechanism against the omnipresence of evil in modern times (Taylor, 2003a, 2003b, p. 49). The same holds for the rise of radical populism, as a way out of the inconvenient plurality of beliefs in a secularised world.

These days, religion is not a given anymore, but a choice; a development called 'the subjective turn' (Heelas et al., 2005). People have to find their way in a plurality of truth claims, instead of walking the beaten track as provided by a religious community or a religious or political authority. People finding their own way results in new forms of religiosity, balancing between solitude and solidarity, between believing in an institutionalised context and believing unrelated to religious practices. 'Bricolage' (Levi-Straus, 1962), 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994) and 'multiple religious belonging' (Kalsky & Pruim, 2014) are but a few of the concepts describing people's innovative ways to fulfill their need for belonging (Taylor, 2003a, 2003b, pp. 86, 90). Prayer—and in their adapted forms meditation and mindfulness—can be seen as new expressions of spiritual discipline.

Encounters in a plural society between people who adhere to different 'strong evaluations', or organise their lives according to different truth claims, may result in disruptive moments (Ter Avest & McDougall, 2014) that put a finger on the problem of the fragility of a person's self-constructed worldview identity and their personal vulnerability. Taylor points to different strategies people employ in responding to the vulnerability of the new 'post-truth' situation. Some people try to create an alternative safe space—or: alternatives in plural—to the once 'one and only' 'sacred canopy'; 'paradise lost'. Pop festivals, football matches and sports activities seem to be a satisfactory substitute for what religion offered in earlier days.

Underneath the varieties of religious experiences, is the demanding requirement today to be authentic, to be self-directed. That is, to be the architect of your own life and to concretise your humanness in your own way, to make your own moral choices regarding the dilemmas that come with the realisation of a good life. Bauman (2000) coins our era as an age of liquid modernity; an age that moves away from the solid certainties of centuries past. The safe space of the communities people were born in, changed in what Bauman coins as the metaphor of the 'cloak room' communities. This appealing metaphor refers to the cloak room of a theatre: people attend a play, dress accordingly, they enjoy the play, laugh together, join in communal applause. Crucially, at the end of the evening, they leave the theatre, collect their coats from the

cloak room, and the community of theatre-goers disperses (cf Huijer, in: Bauman & Leoncini, 2018, p. 19).

The 'subjective turn' with its focus on self-fulfilment and self-realisation, is high on the agenda in the western world. Self-directedness and the urge to be authentic are often confused with being independent of any authority whatsoever. Becoming, and being yourself, is then interpreted as developing yourself in defiance of all rules and moralities, which are regarded as given from the outside, not responding to one's inner voice. Never, Bauman states, have young people had so little to hold on to in regard to identity and moral development. While in earlier days, positionality in line with the pronouncements of religious communities and the duties of traditional values regarding others dominated a person's identity development; nowadays, tradition is no longer a building block that can be relied on for identity construction. Young people must build their own identity, and develop their own ideas about 'the good life'. Bauman speaks of the 'turistification' of life, a metaphor that ties in with his earlier mentioned metaphor of the 'cloak room' community: people can join in, enjoy, and leave again without any obligations. This entails a severe neglect of the importance of the presence of the other, as the philosopher Beate Rössler points out. In her view, the concept of autonomy must be preceded by the adjective 'relational'—she speaks precisely of relational autonomy in her essay on autonomy (Rössler, 2017).

According to the psychiatrist De Wachter, we live in a 'wow-culture' (2014, p. 22). Every day, we have to live 'in paradise', because we only live once. But, De Wachter argues, in doing so we become estranged from our deepest inner self, our desire for belonging. In his opinion, 'enjoying yourself' has almost become a sacred duty these days. By responding to this societal obligation, we move further and further away from our hearts and run away from our souls (ibid., p. 22). By fulfilling the duty 'to enjoy themselves', people neglect *'la jouissance'*, their ability to have a good time with something small, something invisible, something that goes without saying (De Wachter, 2014, p. 100). To engage in *'jouissance'*, according to De Wachter, an interruption in the stream of everyday commotion is required: silence. A silence that is more than the absence of noise. Such silence, according to De Wachter, is a way to experience and embrace the good life (ibid., p. 86). Silence as a part of religious literacy.

Where Taylor describes secularisation as an inevitable and ongoing process, a surprisingly different perspective is taken by the Dutch historian Herman Paul. Paul (2017) is of the opinion that secularisation is not an inescapable process, but an interpretive framework. In his publication *'Secularisatie, een kleine geschiedenis van een groot verhaal'* ('Secularisation, a Brief History of a Grand Narrative'), he points to the fact that we should make a clear distinction between 'secularisation' and 'secularism'—with the latter understood by Paul as a closed, unconscious conviction that is in conflict with religious traditions. Whereas in Berger's and Taylor's view, secularisation is a process in itself, involving people while leaving them unable to resist, in Paul's view, it is the other way around. Things happen to happen in history and people—in need of a frame of reference—constructed the discourse of secularisation in response. According to Paul, people 'invented' the secularisation thesis for their own relief, in need 'of a script' (Paul, 2017, p. 18). 'Secularisation is

not a fact but a frame of interpretation', he states (ibid., p. 23). Secularisation is not the fact of a decline in visitors to church ceremonies, but a narrative people tell each other to make this fact understandable and acceptable. Paul is of the opinion that fact and narrative are closely related here. Looking back, (grand) narratives serve as justification; thinking ahead they serve as an inspiration and motivation. In the following paragraphs, we explore how narratives from religious traditions motivate people to face the newest technological developments, and the resulting ethical and moral dilemmas in plural societies, in a post-truth era. But first, we describe how (re)presentation of religious traditions takes place in different ways in RE.

## 3.3 Teaching and Learning Life Orientation in the Plural Classroom

In the 1980s, Grimmit (1987) presented his views on RE in the publication *'Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship Between Studying Religions and Personal, Social and Moral Education'*. In this publication, he introduced the concepts of 'teaching and learning in', 'about' and 'from' religion. In the following years, 'teaching and learning in' was understood by religious educators as the educational process of socialisation in a religious tradition. 'Teaching and learning about' has become a concept referring to the transmission of knowledge/facts about religion(s). In referring to 'teaching and learning from', Grimmitt points to a transformation process, a process that facilitates students to compare traditions, to come to a better understanding of their own and others' religions, and possibly enables them to incorporate aspects of other religion(s) into their own religious understanding. While these concepts were initially interpreted as separated from each other, in later years scholars became convinced of their interrelatedness. In the socialisation process, in the family and at home, a certain degree of (experiential) knowledge about the respective tradition is of vital importance. The same holds for the concept of 'teaching and learning from', a process that is impossible without knowing about facts and phenomena of different traditions. In *'Godsdienstpedagogiek'* (Alii, 2009), a handbook for religious educators in the Netherlands, the concept of 'teaching and learning for' religion has been introduced. With this concept, the authors point to the precondition of opening up for 'the other', for 'wonder', for 'being surprised' by something new (Alii, 2009; Ter Avest & McDougal, 2014). This aspect of 'opening up' to the symbolic power of language, is also mentioned as part of the rationale of RE teachers in Dutch secondary education (Den Ouden, 2020, pp. 271–272; see also Den Ouden & Jansen, 2016).

Recently, Roebben (2012), a German theologian, added to these concepts the concept of 'teaching and learning in the presence of the other'. With this concept, he articulates the need for a dialogue with the other, who adheres to a different kind of life orientation. Referring to the plural classroom population, this concept is also called 'inclusive education' (Bartz & Bartz, 2019). Preconditional here is

the classroom as a safe space for all the participants—pupils/students as well as the teacher—to speak out, and to be listened to. A space in which what is called ‘deep democracy’ can be practiced (Lewis, 2018).

Below we present three RE practices, which take different approaches towards the ‘good life’—and the truth claims that go with it—into account.

## 3.4 Examples of ‘Good Practice’

### *3.4.1 Medical Truths in Dialogue with Theology*

The overwhelming technical possibilities developed in the medical sciences to cure and even prevent illnesses altogether, are the starting point for the South Korean theologians Soo-Young Kwon, Nam Hoon Cho and Moon Son to develop what they call ‘convergence education of medicine and theology’ (CEMT). In a highly interesting article, they discuss a recently developed new type of gene-driven system and the social and ethical problems that come with these kinds of innovative developments (Kwon et al., 2019, pp. 102–118). Their plea is for a moratorium, to create time to reflect on the consequences of this gene-driven technique—and other life-changing developments—from an ethical and religious perspective; a time for reflection created in CEMT.

The approach of Soo-Young Kwon and his colleagues is rooted in the work of the natural sciences and theology scholar Alister E. McGrath, who reflects on the finely tuned nature of the universe from a natural theology perspective (McGrath, 2009, p. ix). As an illustration of his line of thought, McGrath states that the ‘existence of stars rests on several delicate balances between the different forces in nature’ and so serves as evidence of the fine-tuning of the universe (ibid., p. 103). Although, according to McGrath, there is a close relationship between processes in the universe and the beginning of human life, he does not regard the universe as evidence for the Christian belief in God. In his opinion ‘human beings long to make sense of things,’ meaning that they desire to understand the structure of nature, find the causes of what happens around them, and ‘reflect on the meaning of their lives’ (ibid., p. 103). The exploration of nature in the natural sciences can be understood from a theological perspective as a human quest for meaning.

Bearing in mind all the diversity in nature, the physicist Freeman Dyson follows a similar line of thought when he states that apparently ‘God loves diversity’ (Dyson, 2004, p. xiii, in: Kwon et al., 2019, p. 104). For Dyson, God’s work is manifest in the Bible and in nature, albeit in a different way. He not only acknowledges the different perspectives of natural science and theology, but also states that these sciences, although working from a different perspective, explore and describe aspects of the same universe. The Dutch psychologist of religion Hans Alma refers to this as a dynamic process characterised by a multiplicity of agencies beyond our reach (Alma, 2018, p. 69). Dyson, on his side, is of the opinion that God can be known

from the study of nature, whereby he seeks to bridge the gap between the different scientific approaches of the natural sciences and theology by means of analogies and metaphors. Alma, for his part, proceeds with caution regarding the possibility of knowing God. It is her view that narratives open up for 'something' named as 'God'—the orientation of our longing to experience one-ness with all of creation, and the basis for a relationship with the world—animate and inanimate—anchored in trust (ibid., p. 89). Following Alma's line of thought, employing contrasting perspectives (from theology and the natural sciences) might be a very useful and stimulating instrument in the search for meaning; with meaningfulness being given, constructed and experienced as the essence of the quest for meaning. The unruliness of nature, according to Alma, can be a source of surprise and joy for us.

In their innovative approach, Soo-Young Kwon et al. elaborate on the possibility of a dialogue in the study of 'the unruliness of nature', with a focus on studying the complexities of the human physical condition/molecular medicine, and theology. At the heart of CEMT are two perspectives on human growth. On the one hand, there is a Christian theological perspective, according to which human beings have a 'divine image and likeness' (Gen. 1:26), and human growth is seen as the perfection or realisation of the wholeness of the human character. The latter process is understood in the first place as socially directed and achieved by 'loving thy neighbour', by acting on the maxim 'what you do to a less valued person, you do for me', and as culminating in the individual's 'deification'—that is, by the transformation which occurs through God's 'will' and 'energy', in the participatory unity of the individual with God (Meyendorff, 1983, pp. 67, 71, 77, in: Kwon et al., 2019, p. 106). On the other hand, there is a medical sciences perspective, in which human growth is seen as a decrease in contracted illnesses, resulting in the everlasting improvement of an individual's physical wellbeing. In CEMT, the task of educators is perceived as facilitating students' reflection on their worldview-in-development—i.e., their beliefs, feelings and attitudes in regard to life as practiced every day—in a context of near endless medical-technical possibilities; leading to conflicting disruptive perspectives. According to the educational perspective of CEMT, the Christian tradition offers a range of narrative resources that enable us to respond to dilemmas that arise as disruptive moments out of the achievements of medical sciences, their financial consequences and their accompanying ethical and moral questions. This approach shows similarities with the pedagogy of 'Moral and Christian Education' as shaped in Namibia (Isaak, 2019, pp. 205–218).

CEMT is characterised by a hermeneutical dialogue between medicine and theology. Topics dialogically elaborated upon are 'life and birth', 'disease and suffering' and 'death and resurrection'. These aspects of life are approached as possible new symbols and invitations to acquire new images of God. In CEMT, an awareness is created that in responding to ethical and moral dilemmas, there is no single truth to be found, neither in medicine nor in theology. In dialogue with narratives from religious tradition, surprising new positions may be discovered, which enable the development of a (more) just answer in an unjust world. Preconditional for CEMT dialogue is a certain level of religious literacy—an aspect that is central to the confessional rationale of RE teachers and their pedagogical strategies, characterised

by a thorough hermeneutic reading of religious texts (den Ouden, 2020, pp. 270–271). This aspect of religious literacy is further explored in the next paragraph.

### *3.4.2 Orthodox Christian Truth in Dialogue with Society*

The primacy of theology in the dialogue with a secular context, and in the ongoing discussion about RE in a highly secularised era—where secularisation affects both the religiosity of individuals and institutionalised religion—is researched by Exalto & Bertram-Troost (2019). Exalto and Bertram-Troost describe the position of orthodox religious schools in Dutch society and argue for their need in the education process of Dutch pupils and students. Education is understood in two ways. In the first interpretation, education refers to the whole of actions, or the refraining therefrom, to reach the goal of education—becoming an adult, as this is understood in the culture the pupil/student lives in. This is education in its broad sense (close to the concept of 'upbringing' in English). In the second interpretation, the focus in education is on rules and regulations regarding expected adequate and sustainable behaviour, with an emphasis on knowing the rules and regulations, being able to follow them, and the preparedness to behave accordingly. This is education in a restricted understanding (close to the concept of 'disciplining') (Steutel & De Ruyter, 2019, pp. 53–77). In the ethos of orthodox Christian schools, these two distinguished aspects of education merge.

The Dutch pillarised education system is based on Article 23 of the Dutch constitution, stipulating the freedom of education. This freedom is concretised in the freedom of foundation, orientation and organisation of schools. Schools can be founded by individuals or private organisations, if the expected population reaches at least 200 students. In addition, a school's orientation must be founded on one of the recognised religions in the Netherlands. Last but not least, schools are free to organise themselves in line with their life orientation (Menken et al. n.d.). If these requirements are met, schools will be fully financed by the government. But what if some of the school's ideas are at odds with those in the surrounding context? This is, for example, the case with orthodox Christian schools regarding beliefs about the position of women and homosexuality. Exalto and Bertram-Troost follow McMullen in arguing that 'it is better if a 'provisional identity' within a particular primary culture is nurtured in the early years of life' (MacMullan in: Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019, p. 55). Such a 'provisional identity'—or in other words 'religious literacy'—as the objective of education in its broad and restricted understanding, empowers pupils at a primary age to enter into a dialogue with 'the other' in later years. According to MacMullen, it is particularly in the early years of primary school that a close connection between religious socialisation in the family and RE in the school is beneficial for the development of an autonomous religious identity. Exalto and Bertram-Troost refer to Strike when they articulate the necessary aspects of orthodox Christian schools in the sense that—in line with the family's expectations—they teach their pupils according to a broad understanding of education. In the first place, schools should be aware of

the need for pupils to 'achieve competencies in a primary moral language and in the public moral language'. In order to enable pupils to enter into dialogue with others, it is 'of foremost importance that children become cognisant of their own life conceptions'. (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019, p. 61) They must become literate in their own tradition and acquire the ability to have conversations with people who hold various conceptions of the good life. In a dialogue, pupils become (more) aware of their own position in the plurality of religious and secular worldviews, and they learn to understand the life orientations of others by putting themselves in other people's shoes. Possibly, they will come to include aspects of the religion of others in their own religious positioning (cf. heterodox beliefs; cf. Wright, 2008, p. 7). Learning to listen to the other—including the criticisms of the other—and keeping an open mind might be preconditional for the embedding of orthodox Christian RE in a plural society like the Netherlands. The aspects listed above as characteristics of orthodox Christian schools (aspects holding for other orthodox religious schools as well, like Islamic schools for example) strengthen their pupils' resilience regarding opposing, conflicting and fake statements.

Exalto and Bertram-Troost recommend to Dutch orthodox Christian schools to clearly express their life orientation as founded in their understanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition, and to stipulate how it relates to their ideas about living together in a context of diverse life orientations. As such, these schools represent a confessional-theological rationale in combination with a pedagogical socialisation strategy in a diverse context, practicing respect towards adherents of other faith traditions (Den Ouden, 2020, pp. 271–272). For the appreciation of orthodox Christian schools, and the legitimisation thereof, being financially supported by the state, such schools need to provide insight into the way their education efforts—understood in the broad and restricted sense—contribute to their students' development as future citizens of the Dutch society.

However, not all pupils and students attend orthodox religious schools. In the next paragraph, we pay attention to the all-encompassing 'subjective turn', and how one might respond to this aspect of the contemporary cultural climate.

### 3.4.3 *Narratives Bridging the Truth of 'I' and 'You' into a 'We'*

The so-called 'subjective turn' (Heelas et al., 2005), with its focus on 'I', is described by Yusuf Öğretici, a Turkish Ph.D. student in Glasgow. He explores the consequences for morality when an individual's community-related beliefs disappear, change or evolve into an individual spiritual experience. Öğretici follows Thomas in the statement that it follows from the increasing focus of western societies on the importance of individual subjective experience, and the quality of that experience, 'that spiritualities focused on 'the truth within' are more likely to thrive than those premised on moral codes emanating from a higher being' (Thomas, 2011, p. 559, in: Öğretici,

2019, p. 170). The culture of subjective religious/spiritual experiences is strongly related to processes of 'individualisation', and a large number of young people have rejected values and regulations as prescribed by religious institutions. This is recognisable in the spiritually oriented rationales of RE teachers, accompanied by pedagogical strategies which aim at personal wellbeing and happiness (den Ouden, 2020, pp. 272–273). Churches in western societies have suffered because many people are simply no longer willing to submit to churches' presentation of religious roles, duties and expectations (Heelas et al., 2005, p. 112; Hoge & Roozen, 1979; Öğretici, 2019, p. 170). It seems as if self-directed spirituality and externally validated religion are opposing positions—'and never the twain shall meet'.

In regard to moral dilemmas, the Church in earlier days had clear answers for moving from evil to good/God. People adhering to 'belief without belonging' (Davie, 1994), who draw their faith from different belief systems, who feel touched by new spiritualities, have to find their own orientation in ethical and moral dilemmas. According to Öğretici, traditional RE—teaching 'in' and 'about' religion—cannot respond to this challenge in an adequate way. Consequently, he is of the opinion that students end up 'lost in translation', without a solid foundation for their morality. As a possible way out for the students' individual 'I' to meet a 'you', resulting in a new 'we' (Wright, 2008), the Flemish pedagogue Agten (2019) describes what he calls 'biblio-drama'.

The word 'biblio-drama', Agten explains, refers to the Greek *biblio*, which means 'book'. For Agten, the word 'book' includes all the books in which religious and secular traditions are laid down—like the holy scriptures of Christianity and Islam, but also myths and fairy tales for example. *Drama* literally means 'action' or 'what happens'. The word 'drama' brings to mind theatre and other theatrical forms of expression, like play-acting. In bibliodrama, Agten brings together a biblical, Qur'anic or mythical narrative with narratives told by the participants, together with the participants' biography-related contributions. The participants proceed to act as 'actors' in a play. This approach is based on psychodrama as developed by Moreno (1987).

Bibliodrama is not about literal role-playing of biblical or Qur'anic narratives according to a given interpretation of that story. Nor is bibliodrama about performing a well-designed script, like in a theatre play. The participants' 'performance' is not evaluated in terms of 'good' or 'bad' staging, but is reflected upon and explored in terms of its contribution to a better understanding of the participants' own positionality with respect to existential questions and ethical and moral dilemmas, and its possible connection with religion. Religion(s) are seen as a social fact in the surrounding culture a person is socialised in. Bibliodrama takes it as a given that each and every person's (religious or secular) positioning is derived from, and dependent upon, collective life orientation images. Bibliodrama could very well be included in the pedagogical strategies of RE teachers' multi-confessional rationale (Den Ouden, 2020, pp. 274–275).

Bibliodrama opens a space for natural improvisation, a spontaneous exchange between a traditional narrative and the participants' own interpretations and associations with the story's character(s). The staging of participants may include parts of

the narrative, but may just as well at the same time—unconsciously and intuitively—incorporate aspects of their own biography. Bibliodrama aims at exploring existential issues in a creative and playful way, by incorporating contextual information from the participants' own lives—and the societal context in which they are embedded—into their performance of the story (De Laat, 2005). In course of a Bibliodrama session, participants role-play a character from a selected narrative and 'stage' this character according to the way this character's position has become/is becoming a 'voice' in their 'society of mind' (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2003). Through their staging, the participants 'walk in the shoes of the other' and open themselves up to that other's experiences, experiences of transcendency. Bibliodrama connects contemporary real-world experiences of 'realistic transcendence' (Alma, 2018) with age-old stories, and through such a process, contemporary youth no longer find themselves 'lost in translation', but meet and connect with other young people's need to 'believe' and 'belong'. Engaging in Bibliodrama stimulates the participants' own autonomous connection with traditional wisdom that offers human beings an orientation in ethical and moral dilemmas.

## 3.5 Reflection on the Examples—In Search of Truth in a Plural World

Above we described three examples of scholarly research that explore innovative and playful ways of responding to the diversity of truth claims in a plural world. In this paragraph, we reflect on these examples from the perspective of the concepts provided by Blauw regarding 'critical thinking', and the perspective of teaching and learning as developed by Grimmit and scholars inspired by his concepts.

In the Korean CEMT module, 'teaching and learning *about*' seems pivotal and preconditional for a dialogue. Only through knowledge of the other's position can 'teaching and learning *from*' take place. The overall aim seems to be to enable students to substantiate their point of view as rooted in the Christian religious tradition. This didactic method can form a part of what Den Ouden (2020) coins as the confessional rationale.

In the Dutch plea for the need filled by orthodox Christian schools, 'teaching and learning *about'* is important, aiming at the integration of this knowledge into a personal religious identity. The overall aim seems to be to strengthen pupils' and young people's religious identity development in order to empower them and enable them to stand up for their beliefs in the encounter with people who adhere to other (Christian, Islamic, secular) traditions. This corresponds with the confessional-theological rationale of Den Ouden (2020).

In the Flemish Bibliodrama description, 'teaching and learning' takes place through active physical and psychological participation in the 'staging' of narratives. The overall aim is to stimulate the development of the participants' (religious or secular) authentic and autonomous life orientation, in close relationship with

others. This playful pedagogical strategy corresponds with the multi-confessional rationale of Den Ouden (2020).

In each of these examples, biblical, Qur'anic or mythical stories seem to function as counter-narratives. These narratives act as a bridge between the advancing medical sciences and the complexities of a plural society and open up a safe space for further exploration. Their overall aim may be expressed as 'teaching and learning through disruptive moments'— disruptive moments intentionally created in CEMT, in orthodox Christian schools and in Bibliodrama. These disruptive moments prompt 'second thoughts', which induce 'critical thinking' in plural societies.

## 3.6 RE in an Era of Plurality of Truth Claims

In order to develop an authentic autonomous (religious or secular) life orientation in what Taylor (2007) coined as 'a secular age', and Bauman (2007) called 'liquid times', the psychologist of religion Hans Alma offers a playful model. She defines the teaching and learning of life orientation (in Dutch: *levensbeschouwen*, life-orienting (as an active verb!) as 'a practice of existential and identity-constructing re-orientation' in a plural world, which includes 'an active, dialogical exploration for reaching understanding beyond the boundaries of difference' (Alma, 2018, pp. 96–97). This practice aims at a meaningful life, nourished and imbued by social/cultural/religious imaginaries of ultimate truth and the good life (ibid., p. 64).

Based on the characterisation of the 'secular age' and 'liquid times' we live in, given above, and drawing on the examples of practices that respond to the variety of truth claims in plural societies, we recommend further research on life orientation teaching and learning processes. For such an exploration, Alma's playful model—which she presents as a 'cycle of imagination' in a 'democratic play'—is a promising start, beginning with close observation and paying attention to the issue(s) at stake. This is followed by time for reflection and the development of associative and counter-thoughts that feed critical thinking. The next steps are of considerable importance: the exploration of innovative experiments through imagination and anticipation, and the expressing and sharing of these ideas with others. Reflection completes the process and creates space for consideration of new topics that emerge in course of the entire process (ibid., pp. 166–175). This then forms the start for a new playful 'cycle of imagination' and so on and so further. In her Ph.D. thesis, Den Ouden arrives at a similar recommendation for RE teachers and the (further) development of their respective rationales. In her recommendations, she offers a three-step strategy for individual RE teachers: gaining awareness of the issues at stake in the so-called 'disruptive moments' in class, acquisition of new knowledge and experiences, and implementation in classroom practices (Den Ouden, 2020, pp. 226–229). In addition to an individual approach, Den Ouden describes a 5-step strategy for teams of RE teachers: shared reflection on individual rationales, mutual observation in classroom practices, description of core didactical actions, a Delphi-lead reflection on the core didactical actions, and implementation in their own classes (Den Ouden,

2020, pp. 230–232). This contributes to teachers' own 'active, dialogical exploration for reaching understanding beyond the boundaries of difference' (ibid., pp. 96–97). However, more research is needed on the development of RE teachers' rationales—not only in the context of their schools, but even more so in the context of the society, they prepare their students for, aiming at their critical contribution and participation as responsible citizens with their own authentic life orientation.

Both Alma and Den Ouden are of the opinion that teachers themselves—as well as all educators—must be prepared to walk the path they offer to young people/students on their journey through life. A pivotal process, a never-ending story in education at the turning point of plural societies.

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