

Interreligious dialogue in schools: Beyond asymmetry and categorisation?

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Word count: Abstract=159, Body=5289, Total=6652.

Abstract

Interreligious dialogue is a central objective in policy and research documents, in which educational institutions are seen as central places for dialogue. In this article we discuss the conditions of this type of dialogue under the conditions of asymmetry and categorisation in two Finnish schools. Finnish education has often been lauded by the thousands of “pedagogical tourists” who visit the country’s schools to witness the so-called ‘miracle of Finnish education’, for its successful implementation of equity and equality. Through theoretically informed reading of ethnographic data we examine how Self and the Other are constructed in everyday encounters in school and how religions and religious groups and individuals become regarded as Others. We also ask whether the aims of interreligious dialogue in schools represent a viable way to learn about each other and to increase mutual understanding. The theoretical and methodological approaches derive from postcolonial, poststructural and feminist theories as well as from recent research on intercultural education and communication.

Keywords

Interreligious dialogue, interculturality, Finnish education, Otherness, understanding

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is a central objective of European and UNESCO educational and policy documents (Council of Europe 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011; UNESCO 2006; Jackson 2009; Rec. 12; Rec 1920; Rec 1804). While researchers of religious education have written extensively about the links between intercultural and interreligious education (see e.g. Jackson 2004; Jackson, Miedema, Weiße & Williame 2007) the fields of multicultural/intercultural education/communication have been hesitant to tackle the theme (exceptions: Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010; Wolf 2012). Both in policy and scholarly texts educational institutions are considered to be central places for such dialogue, whose main goal is to foster a sense of togetherness and discussions between people or groups representing “different” faiths, religions and even “cultures” – the overarching goals being to learn about diversity and to increase understanding, respect and tolerance. The controversial notion of citizenship is also often used in that regard.

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In this article we discuss the conditions of interreligious dialogue in a school context, taking Finland as an illustration. Finland, a country ‘new’ to mass immigration represents an interesting case, especially as the Finnish system of education has been the centre of world attention due to its excellent results in the OCDE PISA studies. Our interest lays in how self and the other are constructed in everyday encounters in schools (Dervin, 2012). What modes of identification are available for different groups of students and staff in the school space? What and who seems to enable and disable the ‘possibilities of becoming’ (Butler 1993, p. 10; Youdell 2003), that is to say the possibilities to identify in a way one hopes to be identified and seen and heard as a subject and not as an object in interreligious encounters? Finally, we also examine how the ideas of ‘religions,’ religious groups and people are constructed through discourses and practices of schooling.

We address these issues using excerpts from ethnographic interviews and observation data from two primary schools (age 7 to 13) collected in Helsinki in 2008 and 2009 (Riitaoja, 2013). One of the schools is considered more “diverse” in terms of race, religion and more working class school than the other (white, middle class, Lutheran-oriented school). The data consist of interviews of the school staff (n=27, interviewed individually, in small groups or both) as well as field notes about lessons and other school activities. Our reading of these excerpts derives from postcolonial, poststructural and feminist theoretisations as well as from recent research on intercultural education and communication aiming to deconstruct the solid and fixed notions of culture and identity (see Dervin 2010, 2011; Holliday 2011; Gillespie, Howarth & Cornish 2012). We intentionally discuss interreligious dialogue in relation to interculturality. Although these notions are not the same they are very much related. For example, problems related to the solid and static social category of “culture” (often considered as national culture) but also gender or social class (Holliday 2011; Gillespie et al. 2012) are also applicable to the discussions of religion and cannot be separated. For this article we have selected excerpts that best illustrate the idea of interreligious dialogue in the schools under scrutiny.

“Negotiating” with the Other in a school context

Let us start by problematizing the position of the Other. The everyday life in a school with students from different religious backgrounds requires accepting “exceptions” to the general rules but also structural changes to the secular Lutheran school culture typical of Finnish institutions. In our data, structural changes in the school were usually discussed by staff members as initiatives to take “different” cultures and religions into account. They were, however, more difficult to execute than

individual exceptions. We consider these situations to be “negotiations” with the Other. Such situations were considered by staff members to include a risk of renunciation of the “Finnish” traditions in favour of the Other’s. Because such acts of tolerance and flexibility were not always desirable, the precondition of the negotiation was that the Other would also give up some of her traditions. This appears clearly in the following excerpt:

Yes, I think that, we can’t think this as a one-way process that we, have to be flexible, but then... I think this is both a challenge and an opportunity that we, learn to live together respecting each other. And this is why, it’s not just from our side, but it depends on all the oth[ers], different cultures, too. And one needs to make some kind of compromise in that. But what is not a solution is a kind of flexibility that the Finnish school- or cult[ure], that we start to change our habits a lot, but it depends also about everybody else to [move on] to such direction. So we will go towards them but they should come towards us and then we will find together... (“Lisa” in 2009)²

What is considered as flexible and negotiable in general appears to be defined by the ‘locals’, i.e. Finns in our context (see also Lappalainen 2006). Here the preconditions, options and positions of the negotiators seem to be already prescribed and evaluated and the seats for negotiators already arranged in the negotiation room. The Other who is seated at the negotiation table is, however, the *representation* of an Other constructed by the school actors. The figure of the Other is their own reflection. The Other cannot speak because her voice is not heard (Spivak 1988). She can “speak” and make her “choice” only within the logic and under the conditions predetermined by the ‘locals’. If the Other chooses “right” she will have a temporary position in the school. Denial or “wrong” choice can be interpreted as unwillingness to be flexible.

Otherring the Other: When interreligious negotiation fails

Who wears the trousers?

In the school contexts under scrutiny certain bodily characters become the marks of religiosity, resulting in othering. This can apply to both students and staff members. In this process the intersection of religion, race, nationality and gender is an essential tool for analysing what is happening:

² Translated from Finnish.

It's recess, I am in the teachers' room. A young Somalian-born girl enters the room. Her clothes are wet because of playing outside. Her teacher goes to another room to find dry clothes for her. At the same time two other members of the staff are talking with the girl.

Staff member 2: Can you use trousers?

Girl: No.

Staff members 2 and 3 are watching each other for a moment in a specific way.

Staff member 3: Well, should you go home, how long is your school day today?

Girl: Until 12.

Staff member 2: Well, you will survive then as you are.

(Field notes, February 27th 2008)

The exchange of glances between the two staff members is interesting as it connotes potential frustration or/and compassion towards the girl. The girl's religion and "culture" (Somali) seem to be seen to prevent her from acting in a "reasonable" way, in other words to change into dry clothes. In this situation the normative "right" and "reasonable" way of acting would be to dress "according to the given situation", where "practical clothing" and dry clothes would be prioritised over other principles.

The trousers are an insignificant side issue but at the same time a meaningful symbol representing equality. They are also used in a way to categorise people. On one hand, trousers are ordinary pieces of clothing. The "Finnish" gendered way of dressing and the notion of "situation-specific dressing" become normal and unproblematised. The girl's refusal to wear trousers seems to read as an over-reaction: it becomes an insurmountable issue for the girl who is seen as a victim of the gendered practices of her religion and culture. On the other hand, the act of wearing trousers significantly symbolises equality between men and women. It symbolises the fact that a woman is free and equal; she is *like a man*.

From the staff members' perspective the problem is not the lack of proper extra clothes but the gendered, religion- or culture-related clothing of the girl that represents a sign of inequality. One could ask what if the child with wet clothes had been a white Finnish boy and the only extra piece of clothing available had been a skirt? Would the staff have offered him a skirt or would they have just been sorry for not having proper clothes for the boy? And, if the boy had refused the skirt, would he have been considered as a victim of the gendered practices of his "Finnish" culture and religion? The woman is expected to become man-like, which would prove her equality. Such logic does not seem to work in reverse.

The notion of equality is closely linked to the idea of free will and choice. A white European liberal secular educated male person is considered to be free and independent (Spivak 1999). A subject making choices is considered as a free subject. Only certain types of choices, however, are seen as “right” choices that “prove” the freedom of the individual. A “wrong” choice, like refusing to wear trousers, indicates that there is no freedom of choice or that this choice is not an autonomous act. (Laws & Davies 2000; Youdell 2003).

From the ‘real’ other to the ‘same-other’

The superiority of the so-called secular subject is also evident in the following excerpt taken from the interview of a white Finnish-born teacher who converted to Islam and wears a veil. Finnishness and Muslim identity are in tension with each other:

A-L (relates to a wider discussion on the experiences of being different): Well, are there moments or situations that have caused you to think about life differently?

“Sara” [teacher]: Well, I think that changing my religion and... what it means is surprising. When you become part of a minority, Muslim in Finland, you find out that while legally you can practice any religion, according to the law, in practice the Finnish culture is not very tolerant.

A-L: In what kind of situations do you see this?

Sara: Mm, what I said before, indirect discrimination, there is not so much direct discrimination... sometimes of course... (...) when somebody... talks to me like I was an inferior there is an assumption that you cannot be logical or grown up, no matter how old you are if you are, a Muslim. You feel you are like someone to be watched after. I think they would never talk to me in this way if I did not have a scarf, because they would not see that I am a Muslim without the scarf.

A-L: Is there any difference between the two, being an immigrant and a native Muslim?

Sara: Yes, mm, there are prejudices really towards, especially towards Somalian people, because of their ethnic background. But, on the other hand, when they come from elsewhere it is more easily accepted that you are a Muslim compared to if a Finn is a Muslim. Ok, there are also situations that being a Muslim is an advantage, that people [non-Muslim majority] will listen to you much better in some issues, what I say about religion as a Finnish Muslim. For example, let’s take a simple example that the circumcision does not belong to Islam. And sometimes you can build bridges but occasionally it is the most terrible thing that there can be, not from my perspective but meaning how the people around me are thinking about me. So, in such situations you do feel different. (“Sara” in Islamic studies in 2009)

Here the teacher describes how her position as a reasonable, grown-up person, who used to be part of the white Finnish majority, was altered due to her conversion. As such she became a ‘same’ who is an ‘other’, in other words, a ‘same-other’. Her scarf becomes a bodily mark that signals her being a Muslim but also a ‘subordinate Other’. This is because wearing a veil is not always perceived as a sign of free choice in Finland and in many other ‘Western’ countries (see Bilge 2010; also Yang 2009). Her conversion to Islam is seen as an unreasonable and deplorable choice that also “shows”

her to be an unreasonable person. She does not belong to the group of free, independent, autonomous, reasonable, intelligent and rational adults anymore. According to Mignolo (2009) on the continuum of the temporal development of people, nations and ideas, the liberal secular individual represents “progress” while Muslims represent temporal “backwardness”:

In “modern space,” epistemology was first Christian and the White. In “enchanted places,” “wisdom” (and *not* epistemology) was, to begin with, non-Christian (one of the reasons why Christianity remained complicit with secular philosophical critics) and also, later on, “colored”. Islam, for instance, became a colored religion. Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, became whiter after the reformation. (...) (Mignolo 2009, p. 278.)

The position of the veiled Finnish teacher as a white European Muslim is, however, different from the position of the ‘real’ Other who is profoundly “lacking” the virtues of the liberal secular individual. This Other is seen to be without free will and freedom of choice. Her choices are not considered as “proofs” of autonomy. Instead they are seen to be the result of “socialization” caused by her “cultural” or religious background: she was born in an “inferior” religion or “culture”. The ‘real’ Other is not considered to have capacity to distance herself from her traditions nor to take an “objective” position. She is not expected to make reasonable choices. It is thus more “excusable” for her to be a Muslim than for a white Finn.

Interreligious dialogue, educational space and power

In research discussions on religious education the space of dialogue is often considered as neutral and equal for all participants (see Riitaoja et al. 2010). Besides the people participating in interreligious dialogue are often considered as pre-existing essentialist entities and not intersubjectively and discursively constructed (Dervin 2010). The space of dialogue is not a fixed room where dialogue is going to take place. Instead, the space and the subjects are socially constructed in relation to each other: we construct the space but it also constructs us (e.g. Massey 2005). The following excerpt shows how the space of dialogue in a lesson of Islamic studies changes along with the bodies present in the classroom:

It is a lesson in Islamic studies (pupils’ age 7–8). The teacher is going through the most important things in the curriculum, right before the exam.

Teacher: What does Islam mean? What does Muslim mean? If your Finnish friend, a Christian, asks this from you, what would you say?

The teacher writes on the board: “Islam is a religion”.

Teacher: A Muslim believes in Allah. And then, who is our prophet?

(...)

After the lesson the teacher comes to me and asks: “Are you a Christian? I am sorry, please do not feel offended. The law of Islam is very strict sometimes.” (Field notes, March 7th 2008)

The presence of one of us in the class changes something: from the minority’s point of view it is not a lesson “among us” anymore. The teacher, a non-European immigrant and Muslim herself, has to take into consideration the white, European and presumably Christian researcher in her classroom and probably adapt her teaching accordingly.

Postcolonial and feminist researchers have paid attention to the meanings of the Other in different spaces. In New Zealand, Jones (1999) analyses the limits of cross-cultural dialogue by making visible how e.g. Maori students preferred to study among themselves and without white Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) students to be able to talk about their issues without being dominated by the Pākehā framework. For Pākehās the separated lessons meant a missed opportunity for learning about the other and to access their knowledge. Fraser (1995) talks about the relevance of alternative spaces for sexual minorities. Ahmed (2012) analyses the meaning of queer and black spaces outside of straight and white spaces. All of these scholars point out that the presence of the majority in the space excludes other ways of being. In this sense the common space and dialogue can actually be harmful for those who are constructed as Others. Furthermore dialogue does not offer extra knowledge for the Others about the normative or numeric majority: in order to survive in the unfamiliar spaces the Others have yet to learn the majority “culture”. For the majority instead, the experience of being an Other and a stranger, who is not heard and whose knowledge is ignored, might be in many ways unfamiliar.

The uneven positions of a teacher and a student is obvious in the following excerpt where the teacher aims to include her students’ knowledge in her class:

It is a history lesson for 6th graders. The teacher is going to show a video on Bysant and Islam.

Teacher (says to me): Of course the students having experience [on the issue] may tell their opinion. (Field notes March 10th 2009)

This can result in uneven positions between the teacher and the students. In the white middle class European-centred epistemology of schooling there is also asymmetry between the white, middle class secular or Lutheran individuals and the black working class Muslim students. The knowledge of the majority teacher forms the ‘official’ knowledge while the minority students’ knowledge remains “personal opinions” [footnote 3]. Students may offer extra information and their

experiences can be used as an example in teaching but their knowledge cannot become equivalent, alternative knowledge with the knowledge of the teacher. As such the knowledge of non-European Muslim immigrant students can be only heard as an additive information, experience or opinion. The wider Finnish school curricular aims to include the immigrant and minority students' and their families' knowledge in schools. But because of the asymmetry described above these students and their families tend to be inferior and maintain their positions as Others (see Riitaoja 2013).

Pause: Are religious staff and students the Other par excellence?

In the dichotomy religion / secularism, religion is considered monolithic with authoritative ideology essentially controlling individuals, while secularism, a state “without religion”, is considered to be neutral and equal, offering freedom for people. The following excerpt with a Finnish teacher illustrates this logic:

One thing I've recently realised is that all religions, ideologies, such a fundamentalism, if we take them literally... they may lead to terrible things. When we interpret the Old Testament there are really awful events there and probably we would find out, I am not sure, from the New Testament too. We don't realise the basic connections among people because we focus on differences. These differences are, after all, related to different interpretations. Obviously there are different interpretations in different parts of the world. But I don't know whether people will ever be able to [find a connection], because religion and culture are used as tools of power... it's possible that a person is good even if s/he had killed someone. I don't know if this means we must take our distance or that one must look from the outside in. (teacher “Lisa” in 2009)

In this excerpt religious people are constructed as victims with limited opportunities to think and act independently. Opposed to this victimised Other is the free and independent, enlightened secular or secular Christian subject who is able to “step outside” of his own framework and to think objectively. Adopting such an “objective” standpoint means to become an autonomous subject and to break away from the authoritarian power (Hoskins & Sallah 2011; Andreotti et al. 2012)

In the context of schooling one of the main goals is to help students to become autonomous. According to Popkewitz (2001, p. 180) “the object of pedagogical reflection and action in modernity is an individuality that is systematically calculated and rationalized in the name of freedom”. The values and beliefs that direct the Other are considered as restrictive:

I've also had a student from a very strict Pentecostal family, and there were very strict orders [by the family] that s/he cannot do this or that. Then you just tried, you had to accept that there are things that you could not do within the curriculum. ("Karen", 2009)

The normalising discourses and practices of schooling are often considered as emancipatory. Yet the fact that one disregards the fact that such discourses and practices are related to power differentials is problematic (Popkewitz 2001).

Religions at school: Explaining categories or the categories as explanations?

Problematizing categories

In the previous sections, we have seen how the religious other is othered in the Finnish school contexts where we collected data. We saw that both students and staff members can be othered depending on what they represent through certain bodily markers (veil, skirts instead of trousers) amongst others. In this section we explore the role of teachers in interreligious dialogue. School leadership and teachers play an important (powerful) role in deciding of discourses and practices in schools. We start with an excerpt from ethnographic field notes:

...It was very interesting when we studied and discussed practices of Islam in the lessons. The [Muslim] students mentioned how funerals and weddings are celebrated. The teacher whispered to me: "It is a surprise how diverse the traditions are because of different Imams. I expected Muslim traditions to be the same." (Field notes March 25th 2008)

In this excerpt the teacher tells us how she assumed that all the Muslim (Somali) students in her class would have similar wedding or funeral traditions. Religion (Islam) and ethnicity (Somali) are markers that have made the teacher assume consistency among the students. Islam is considered as a monolithic tradition and the Somalian-born Muslims as a homogenous group who share similar celebrations. Similar assumptions also appeared elsewhere in the data: another staff member told us how he assumed that all "multicultural students" (meaning Muslim immigrants in his case) would share a similar worldview. He was also very surprised by the disagreements among Muslim students in his class.

Social categories are increasingly considered as problematic in research (Gillespie et al., 2012). Yet in the school context, discourses and practices are based on categories and categorization. One aim of (national) education is to order unclassified differences to provide information on how they could

be used in the labour market (Foucault 1995; Popkewitz 1998). From this approach categories and categorisation processes could be considered as a crucial and inherent part of schooling and the making of nation, workers and labour force.

It is important to keep in mind the contextual nature of categories. As Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 392) write “the process of categorization always stems from a social position, a historical way of seeing and particular interests”. Moreover, “the social categories we use to conceptualize groups are also changing” and “all human groups are historical and changing” (Gillespie et al. 2012, 393). This is obvious if examining the historical and geographical context where the term religion emerged. The term religion derives from the ways Christianity has become an issue in sociological and theological terms. Therefore, the term religion has its roots in Christian theology and the secular sociology of religion in Christian Europe. (e.g. King 2009; Mignolo 2009.) Using ‘religion’ for non-Christian-secular worldviews implicitly (or explicitly) assumes that similar kinds of structures, epistemologies and meanings exist outside of the West [footnote 1]. (King 2009; Andreotti et al. 2012).

The concept of religion also has a very particular connection to the modern nation state that is closely linked to Christian-secular epistemology (about modern nation state, Christianity and secularity and the citizen-subject see Spivak 1999; Popkewitz 2008; Mignolo 2009, modernity and the modern nation state as colonial projects see Santos 2007; Mignolo 2009). Nandy (2002, 62) differentiates religion as a plural tradition (religion-as-faith) from religion as monolithic political tool (religion-as-ideology). His differentiation associates faith with “a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural”, while religion-as-ideology is defined as

a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socioeconomic, interests. Such religion-as-ideologies usually get identified with one or more texts, which, rather than the ways of life of believers, then become the final identifiers of the pure forms of religions. The texts help anchor the ideologies in something seemingly concrete and delimited and, in effect, provide a set of manageable operational definitions. (Nandy 2002, p. 62.)

Religion, therefore, takes the modern notion of the institutional faith system and the nation-state as its basis and tries to explain the rest of the world through its own framework. This framework denies the particularity of the Other and the existence of different epistemologies that are not reconcilable with modern ‘Western’ thinking. One could also ask, to what extent is the religion-as-national-political-ideology adequate to explain the variety of faiths or worldviews even within the

modern Western context? Can we assume that everything that may or may have existed in this context is the religion-nation-state -combination? The goal here is to use the answers to these questions to explain how some histories and notions of the self, are denied within the modern Western context. We question whether social categories can be used to explain people and their behaviour or if the categories themselves should be explained in the school context. As Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 399) write “[n]ot to problematize social categories, especially when they are used to explain behaviour, is to undermine human agency.”

Confusing categories

In the schools we visited religious categories were used to organise different activities for different groups of students. Students were divided into groups depending on the religion of their families, i.e., during religious education and so-called secular ethics lessons. “Exceptions” to the general order of schooling were made for those students who did not represent the secular Lutheran norm (Riitaoja et al. 2010). Such exceptions meant opportunities of dropping out from the Christian-based events or from specific gym or craft activities and to opt for alternative programs during the events or alternative ways of passing the course.

The perceptions of inner-group diversity among the assumed homogenous religious minorities generated confusion and irritation among school staff. Such irritation stems from the realisation that previous categories and practices of the “main rule” and “exceptions” did not work anymore. Instead, the staff had to rethink categories and practices regarding the minority groups and their values. A teacher described how she familiarises herself with every group of 1st graders in order to determine her role with “immigrant students” (meaning black Muslim students):

... one thing that is challenging-- a few years ago with the immigrant first-graders, parents were different than the immigrant parents of first-graders this year. (Sigh) Every time you start from scratch with a new group of students you must carefully familiarize yourself with the [immigrant] families and their principles. And when you find these things out during the first year... the second grade is much easier... Although they have the same religion, when they come from different countries, they have very different practices and levels of tolerance... (“Sharon”, 2009)

Starting over with a new group of students and with new categories was challenging for Sharon. The teacher could not consider her students as part of previously identified groups. Instead, she had to create new rules and practices for every new student and family “different” (deviant) from the

norm. The instability of categories also meant that staff faced unanticipated changes to the school activities. The following excerpt from the field notes serves as an illustration:

It's recess; I am in the teachers' room. A teacher says the Muslim students in a class will not participate in dancing (refers to school disco before May day). "So you have to keep figuring out something else." A school assistant adds that another [Muslim] student in another class could not participate in craft activities related to Eastern. The assistant says students coming from Iran, instead, can participate. There is variation among the [Muslim] families. "That [Iranian] student participates in everything and is the best [the most skilful student]", she says.

Teacher: Is it so that if you are a true believer you cannot participate?

The teacher tells about a Jehovah's Witness student that was in her class. "S/he did not participate in birthday party [in the class] but the candies were ok."

The staff discusses Christmas biscuits, whether you can bake them in the school or not. (Field notes, March 20th 2009)

This episode is representative of a situation where the school staff tried to grasp different convictions and rules of behaving from the viewpoint of students and their families. They tried to create some kind of logic of categorisation that would make the differences among families of the "same" group understandable and the "illogical" rules of the families reasonable. The situation is confusing for the staff: on one hand, the convictions appear not to be negotiable, but on the other they may be flexible in certain (unexpected) situations. The aforementioned staff member considers active participation and skills of the Iranian [Muslim] student confusing in relation to the image of a reluctant and unskilled non-European Muslim student. In the case of the Jehovah's Witness student, her/his decision not to participate in birthday celebrations but her/his willingness to eat the birthday candies seems illogical from the teacher's point of view. The (ir)rationality of the student's behaviour is justified by the logic of the teacher and not by the logic of the student's family and their value system. Such logic draws clear-cut line between participating and not participating.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed the conditions of interreligious dialogue in the Finnish context. Based on our results, one can ask whether the aims to foster interreligious (but also at the same time intercultural) dialogue in the school context are credible. The following questions become then essential: Who is going to learn about whom and whose knowledge is to be learnt? Does the Other have an opportunity to be seen and heard as a subject or relegated to a subaltern position? Are knowledge and understanding about her constructed *with* her and in her own terms? Will a religious 'subaltern' ever be equal to the majority in our schools?

Arthur (2011: 76) remarks that the “religious dimension of dialogue for the Council (of Europe) is effectively a political mechanism and response to any perceived Islamic threats to Western democratic laws and European stability”. Even more “[t]he Council believes that the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue can only be approached from the standpoint of shared values of democratic humanism” that are “largely secular constructions”. Therefore, “the European Council’s aim of intercultural dialogue can be seen as the neutralization of difference that means erosion of the particularity that distinguishes one religion from other”. (Arthur 2011, p. 76, see also Riitaoja et al. 2010; Poulter 2013; Riitaoja 2013.)

The aims of togetherness, common lessons (e.g. comparative religion), dialogue, and understanding may thus become tools for domesticating and mainstreaming the minority students as secular liberal citizens. Togetherness and dialogue could be, first of all, seen as ways to nurture the common secular public space that is a key structure of the modern liberal secular state (Fraser 1995). The aim of such space is to keep the citizens under surveillance, maintain cohesion and prevent fragmentation and open confrontations (Foucault 1991, 1995; Fraser 1995; Hogdson 2011; Hoskins and Sallah 2011; Ahmed 2012).

Without careful deconstruction the discussion on religions and religious groups in schools could maintain an asymmetry between individuals. Turning from the idea of ‘religion’ to that of ‘worldview’ (in its ontological, epistemological and ethical meaning) enables positionality, particularity and partiality. These elements are related to every worldview. With such a starting point different discursive and social spaces are enabled and other (alternative) positions can be constructed. Better than ‘religion’ ‘worldview’ would stress the fact that every person positions herself, not just the Other... and at the same time the interrelatedness of self and other.

Footnotes

[1] The West here refers to an epistemological and geographical space of Modernity (see Santos 2007).

[2] King (2009) talks about “border control” on the edge of secular public space. If the Other wants to be heard as a subject in this space she needs to give away her particularity on the border and become a secular subject. If she wants to keep her particularity she may enter only as an Other.

[3] Santos (2007) talks about modern abyssal thinking that distinguishes the knowledge “on this side of line”, in the space of modernity, from the other side of the line where there is “no real knowledge; there are beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings, which, at the most, may become objects or raw materials for scientific enquiry” (p. 2).

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