Seeing Otherwise
Renegotiating Religion and Democracy as Questions for Education

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Hägersten in May 2010
Foreshadowing

In religion’s perpetual agony lies its philosophical and theoretical relevance. As it dies an ever more secure and serial death, it is increasingly certain to come back to life, in its present guise or in another.

Hent de Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (1999, 3)

The New Visibility of Religion: Introducing the Argument

The overall purpose of this thesis is to renegotiate the relationship between education, democracy, and religion. As de Vries puts it, religion did not ‘die away’ as it was predicted in the advent of modernity but has ‘come back to life’ in many different guises. This comeback has not been without posing conflict to a society that defines itself as secular, and tensions around religious beliefs and practices seem to touch upon the very heart of liberal democracy, challenging many of its boundaries and core values. Education is both the context and the main focus of this dissertation, but it draws its energy from the fact that religion seems to be on the agenda on almost all levels of society. More precisely, education is placed in the larger context of how religious beliefs and practices are responded to in contemporary cultural and political debates.

In his recent book The Century (2007), the French philosopher Alain Badiou diagnose the twentieth century as a time of a ‘joint disappearance of Man and God’. This is a time, he writes, when

we hear of nothing save for human rights and the return of the religious, or the deadly clash between a West upholding human rights (or freedoms, or democracy, or the emancipation of women…) and religious ‘fundamentalists’, generally Islamic and bearded, partisans of a barbarous return to traditions originating in the Middle Ages (cloistered women, obligatory beliefs, corporal punishments…). (Badiou 2007, 165)

For Badiou, this situation results from the void that has appeared when humanism, both in its affirmative and anti-humanist position, has failed to take God’s place as a guarantor for Man’s existence (172-173). Emanating from this, he argues, is an “animal humanism” where men are traded for objects
and are of “no more interest than ants or pigs” (175). As a consequence we “are no longer offered anything more than the restoration of classical humanism, but without the vitality of the God … that sustained its exercise” (174).

As an image of our time, Badiou’s analysis shows a development where polarized debates between non-rational, violent, and misanthropic religion has come to stand against an enlightened, peaceful, and people-centred democracy. It offers a backdrop against which it becomes possible to argue that we live in a point in time when the conditions for understanding religion have failed and that it is urgent to renegotiate the relationship between religion and democracy. What Badiou calls for is a philosophy that rethinks the relationship between ‘the question of God’ and ‘the question of Man’. The present situation, he writes, demands a philosophical response that starts thinking about human existence “in the void” (173), that is, between previously given positions. To offer such rethinking, beyond the categorizations that are being produced between militant defenders of religion and militant critics, is what the present dissertation seeks to do.

If we invert Badiou’s argument that we are witnessing a joint disappearance of God and Man, it could be argued that we are witnessing their ‘joint return’, both in education and in society more broadly. It is in fact in education that many of the tensions and conflicts about the place and role of religion in democratic societies have begun – I am thinking here of debates about Muslim women’s and girls’ dress (which began in a school in France already in 1989), about the debates about exemptions from sex education and physical education, about the wearing or the displaying of religious symbols in public schools, about government funding of religious schools, and about the role of schools in the increasing political radicalization emerging in many European societies. What becomes clear in these debates is that religion is not only returning in an ideological and philosophical sense but making varied appearances in the form of concrete human subjects. It is also clear that this causes tension in democratic, secular, societies.

More precisely, then, the overall purpose of this dissertation is to renegotiate the relationship between education, religion, and democracy by making the concrete religious subject its main focus. The thesis is that a renegotiation of all three parties is necessary if new conditions for democratic coexistence are to be created. The argument is that education can play an important role in democratic societies and in creating new conditions for democratic coexistence if the ‘return’ of religious subjects is given centre stage.

According to Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (2008) the ‘return of religion’ is an inadequate term because what has changed since the end of the Cold War are the ways in which religion appears, something that challenges

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1 The term ‘radicalization’ is a term recently employed by The Council of Europe to describe an increase of violent extremism with religious connotations in many European societies. This will be taken up again in chapter two.
older liberal dichotomies of sacred and secular, public and private (1). In their view, we can think about this in two models: a re-emergence model and a new visibility model. If the former suggests that religion has been in decline and is now returning in traditional forms, the latter suggests that religious believing might always have been present but that it has not been visible in the ways we see it today (2). The re-emergence model operates with well-defined criteria of what religion ‘is’, whereas the visibility model prefers to ask questions such as: where does religion become visible? Who is making it seen? What counts as religion in a certain context, who is doing the counting, and how is it evaluated? (3, 5)

The renegotiation this dissertation elaborates suggests thinking beyond essentialized categories trying instead to see what might become of education if predefined ideas of what democracy and religion ‘are’ are questioned. As Jacques Derrida (2000) reminds us with his term iterability, no return is simply a repetition or a re-turn of an original situation. Instead, every return creates a rupture in the present order of things and its unforeseeable quality has the double potential to both disturb and transform.

Endorsing the new visibility model, the thesis tries to resist essentialized definitions of both religion and democracy. The reason for this is simply that what counts as democratic – just as what counts as religious – is a result of a certain political negotiation. This does not mean that it is irrelevant to try to define ‘religion’ or ‘democracy’ but it suggests that all definitions produced are contingent and that no definition is ever politically innocent. This thesis, then, is not a defence of religion against the voices of ‘bad or ‘distorted’ religion; neither is it a defence of democracy against religion. Instead, it sees renegotiation between them as having the potential to both disturb and transform their meanings in particular contexts. Before I explain the aims and purposes of this dissertation in more detail, let me say something about its background and how the present relationship between education, democracy, and religion has been formed. I begin with two personal experiences. I then look in particular at: the political visions that have emerged within the Council of Europe on how to handle ‘the religious dimension’ in European education; how the process of secularization has affected the relationship between democracy and religion; and how the theoretical relationship between democracy and education has been articulated, both in the past and in some current developments.

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Political Visions, Secularization, and Democratic Education:  
Background to the Argument

Two experiences from my years of teaching at upper secondary school have informed my interest in reflecting on the relationship between education, democracy, and religion. The first one relates to the position I took up as a teacher in a pilot project on student democracy\(^3\) that had as its purpose to launch a local board of education with a student majority. The project was a result of a political initiative and its guiding principle was that if students took a more active part in the concerns of their school on all levels (this included a wide range of things from influencing the school curriculum to recruitment of new staff) they would not only become more interested in their studies, but would also learn what democracy is and how democratic processes work. I took up the position as a devoted advocate of democracy, especially deliberative communication, but what came to grow on me was a feeling of pretence. The students were engaged and the teacher’s intentions were well-meant but as things heated up it became increasingly clear that it was us teachers and the politicians of the municipality that had the last say in important decisions. At the end of the day, and despite the fact that students were in the majority, they were ruled out. What came to trouble me the most was the instrumentality that governed the initiative. The political purpose was clear: to increase influence and participation and to learn about democracy. But given that the students’ factual ability to influence their situation was very limited, we ended up pretending – in the name of democracy – that the students had a voice and that this voice made a difference. Since the project was launched as a way of educating students in and through democracy, the growing gap between the factual and the ideal became increasingly unsatisfying.

The second experience comes from my years of teaching Religious Education. For me, the dilemma was to do justice to religion when the starting point for our discussions was a consensual adherence to liberal democratic values. I found it troubling that the main questions to be asked vis-à-vis religious beliefs and practices were to what extent they were compatible with liberal ideas about individual choice, autonomy, and freedom from authorities. Even more troubling was that these values were inscribed in the national curriculum as characteristics of democracy, so how could those students who were religious be seen as anything but embodying not only illiberal but undemocratic ways of life? As if this label was not enough, how could, for

\(^3\)‘Student democracy’ [Sw. ‘elevdemokrati’] is a political term with a long history in Swedish education. It was initiated already in 1946 and its purpose is mainly to increase student participation in education. Although the underlying ideas behind student democracy have shifted depending on which government is in power, it emphasizes that education is a key pillar in building a democratic society having the main purposes of: serving critical thinking, questioning authorities; supporting individual choice; bridging gaps between the well-to-do and people less well off; and stimulating self-organization.
example, loyalty to a collective will appear as anything but strange (at best) and immature and infantile (at worst)? Given the obligation to be inclusive of all students and at the same time give priority to and even educate for liberal values, how was one not to contribute to the stigmatization of religious students? I ended up thinking that teaching religious education was the most undemocratic thing one could do as a teacher since one ended up having to choose between being loyal to the curriculum or the religious students.

If the above was difficult at the end of the nineties it did not become any easier after September 2001. Almost automatically, religion became anathema to democracy and the hostile rhetoric that emerged between ‘the West’ (democracy) and ‘Islam’ (religion) made it almost impossible to initiate nuanced discussions. In response to the polarizations it was tempting to argue that the kind of religion that emerged was a ‘distorted variant’ and that we would find its ‘originally good version’ if we just tried hard enough. Since I neither was nor am of the opinion that religion is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ I ended up, quite simply, not knowing what to do.

I went into doctoral studies four years after the events of September 11 and the same year as the London bombings and the publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Samuel Huntington’s thesis about the ‘clash of civilizations’ seemed to come true. Driven by a felt need to find other political responses to these tensions, I began looking at how education policy was being formulated, particularly at The Council of Europe.

Political Visions in Educational Policy

It soon became clear that September 2001 had served as a catalyst for making religious diversity a high priority among The Council of Europe member states. If religion had earlier been placed under the realm of ‘culture’ together with ethnicity, gender, and race it became an issue in itself in 2001. Two projects were launched dealing directly with religion: one was the project *Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention* organized by the Cultural Policy and Action Department and another was *Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe* (2002-2005) organized by the Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education initiated by the Steering Committee for Education (DGIV/EDU/DIAL (2003) 1; MED21-7, 2003). It was within the framework of the latter project that the response to religious diversity from the Council’s member states was articulated, this with the purpose to suggest methods for integrating the study of religion into intercultural education (Jackson 2007, 13). In 2004, this project held a conference in Oslo under the name ‘The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education’. Its purpose was to call “attention to the religious dimension of intercultural education” and “to foster a dialogue of common identities, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution” (DGIV/EDU/DIAL (2004) 7). This was organized along the lines of the two themes of intercul-
tural education: “inclusion and participation” and “learning to live together” (ibid.). Two reference books for schools were published within these projects trying to offer concrete guidelines on how to handle ‘the religious dimension’ in European education. The first book, Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book For Schools, (Council of Europe 2007), was designed “to help teachers, teacher trainers, administrators, policy makers and others deal with the important issues of religious diversity in Europe’s schools” (back cover). The second book, The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education (Council of Europe 2004), was a direct outcome of the conference and deals particularly with “the way in which schools can contribute to the process of integration and promote inter-religious dialogue” (back cover).

But it is not only the Steering Committee for Education that has been publishing manuals on how to deal with religious pluralism. The Steering Committee for Human Rights has published a Manual on Hate Speech that seeks to reconcile the right of freedom of expression with the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Weber 2009). It has also published a Manual on the Wearing of Religious Symbols in Public Areas seeking to offer some guidelines for how the freedom of religion and belief is to be enjoyed in public spaces in Europe today, not least in education (Evans 2009). From the Council of Europe’s point of view, religious pluralism is one of the main sites of tension in European societies. The main solution suggested is to incorporate the religious dimension in such a way that it can serve the democratic purposes of society. “Religious differences”, it is said, “continue all too often to be a source of tension, conflict and discrimination” but the “underlying idea is to approach religion, a social, cultural and political phenomenon, as a means of fostering democratic citizenship” (Council of Europe 2007, 19).

Seeing religion as a vehicle for democracy is motivated by the idea that ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ are not as far apart as they seem to be in today’s conflicts. Rather, the tensions emerge from confusing religion and politics. “Politics and religion should be kept apart,” they write, but “democracy and religion should not be incompatible. In fact they should be valid partners in efforts for the common good” (COE Recommendation 1720 [2005], § 5).

The two reference books are only a fraction of the material produced by The Council of Europe about how religious diversity is to be handled by its member states. Universal declarations are followed by recommendations (adopted texts) and are preceded by extensive commentaries and working texts. All these documents can be found on The Council’s website: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/ (accessed 2009-12-07. Go to ‘Co-operation Programme’, ‘Intercultural Education’ followed by ‘Documents’ and ‘Main Activities’). In the adopted text Recommendation 1720 [2005] Education and Religion the importance of the above reference material is emphasized through the following statement: “The Committee of Ministers draws attention to the outcome of the work carried out under this project and the publications and teaching materials produced for use by teachers, particularly the ‘Compendium of successful activities related to the religious dimension of intercultural education in schools’” (CM/AS(2006)Rec1720 final).
What we see appearing today, according to The Council, is a distorted kind of religion, a religion “abused to stir up mistrust and hate, which in turn can provide a breeding ground for conflict and war” (Council of Europe 2004, 22). The key political task is to work against such developments and to enhance our efforts to promote understanding between people (ibid.). “Education”, they write, “is the key to success in this work” (ibid.).

The task assigned to education in the above material is to educate democratic citizens and to promote common values (Council of Europe 2004, 22). “The Council of Europe”, it is argued, “assigns a key role to education in the construction of a democratic society” (COE Recommendation 1720 [2005], § 6). This implies fostering “informed and peace-loving citizens who are open to intercultural dialogue” (Council of Europe 2007, 19) because it is through dialogue that differences can be negotiated and conflicts tamed. The hope is that education can become meeting-places for communication where we can ‘learn to live together’ across differences. What is needed for this is that educational institutions and governments make joint efforts in serving democracy. “Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions”, it is argued, but “[g]overnments should also do more [and] encourage dialogue with and between religions” (COE Recommendation 1720 [2005], § 5). In other words, if religion is a ‘breeding ground for conflict and war’ education can be seen as the breeding ground for peace and democracy.

Given that religious strife is nothing new on the European scene, the above use of the terms ‘distorted’ and ‘abused’ religion begs the question as to whether an ‘undistorted’ religion can really be defended. As many scholars of religion have pointed out, ‘true religion’ has never existed in any essential sense but what religion has been said to ‘be’ has always been a result of a certain cultural and political negotiation (Asad 1993; Caputo 2001; Cavanaugh 2009; Ward 2003;). Hence, if there is no ‘true religion’, the task ahead is rather to look for what the idea of religion produces, that is, how ‘religion’ makes its appearance in a certain context at a particular time and how it is itself part of a cultural production (Ward 2003, 3). As a consequence of such an approach it is far from self-evident, it seems to me, that religion is a ‘valid partner to democracy’ or that religion must be kept apart from politics. Following the scholars above, the question is not whether religion, democracy, and politics are compatible or not but how they are to relate to one another, an approach that calls for an active engagement about how the relationship between them is to be constituted. If we also follow thinkers like Ward and Hoelzl (2008), the new visibility of religion challenges classical liberal dichotomies between private and public, religion and politics, Church and State. Therefore, the answer to why religion is causing tension in liberal democracies begs a more complex response than simply suggesting that ‘bad versions’ of religion need to be twisted from the hands of the heretics.
Much is being written today about the place and role of religion in contemporary liberal societies, societies that are by and large defined as secular. Before we return to education, let me therefore give a background to the present relationship between religion and democracy through the notion of secularization.

**Religion and (Post) Secularization**

Even if much light has been put on religion since 2001, the interest in religion cannot be reduced to being the consequence of September 11. To understand its place and role in contemporary liberal democratic societies one has to approach it from some idea of secularization and according to the most conventional way of looking at this, religion loses its influence and authority on people’s lives along with the modernization and rationalization of society (Kearney 2010; Taylor 2007). In other words, the more modern we become the less religious we become too. Such a view can be derived from the sociologist Max Weber who believed that after the rise of capitalism, industrialization, and a scientific worldview religion would no longer be needed. Weber called this a ‘disenchantment process’ implying that ‘after religion’ the world would be fully knowable, fully calculable, and fully open to exploration by a scientific mind of reason. In modernity, he predicted, there would be no need for mysterious incalculable forces and religion would have to retreat to the realm of the irrational (Weber 1948/1991, 139). It would become a private matter, irrelevant to public concerns.

A more dynamic approach to secularization than Weber’s is offered in José Casanova’s now classical work *Public Religions in the Modern World*, in which three distinct moments in the thesis of secularization are distinguished; the differentiation of society, the decline of religion, and the privatization of religion (1994, 19-39). According to Casanova, it is only if we separate these three moments that we can begin to see how the contemporary understanding of religion has emerged and its present place and role in society been shaped.\(^5\)

The first moment builds on the *thesis of differentiation* and it serves to show that if medieval society was built upon a dichotomous separation of only two realms – the religious and the secular – modern society became characterized by a plurality of spheres separated and differentiated from one another (Casanova 1994, 20). The medieval dichotomy was to a large extent dictated by the church but through the process of modernity, the *saeculum* (meaning ‘age’ or ‘world’) became divided into a variety of spheres. Each of these spheres – for example, the economic, the political, the juridical, the scientific, the religious – developed their own autonomous logics and inter-

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5 I am thankful to Sigurdson (2009) for pointing out the relevance of Casanova’s argument in this context.
nal rationalities and, as a consequence, the religious sphere became thoroughly distinct and different from other spheres. This means, as Ola Sigurðsson points out, that if a medieval person related to society as an organic whole (consisting merely of two interrelated spheres, the religious and the secular), it is for a modern person seen as a categorical mistake to mix the language of ‘faith’ with that of ‘knowledge’ or ‘religion’ with that of ‘politics’ (2009, 31). The development of differentiated, internal rationalities has made cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding more complex, something which has led some current theorists to emphasize the need for cultural translation (Bhabha 1994; Butler 2002).

The second moment and the decline of religion thesis is something that Casanova discusses as an ambivalent phase. What we can see after World War II, he argues, is not a uniform sign of religious decline but rather that most religious traditions across the world have either experienced growth or (at least) maintained their vitality (1994, 26-27). In countries where established Christendom (Catholicism and Protestantism) has dominated, the decline has been particularly palpable. The exception to this is the United States where the State was separated from the Church already in the constitution of 1776 (Casanova 1994, 27-29). This development, Casanova argues, has led to a less privatized approach to religion in the US and, hence, to less secularization (ibid.). In Europe, by contrast, the attempt to preserve Christendom within the nation-state and resist the moment of differentiation nearly destroyed the Churches (29). Hence, when the Enlightenment critique of religion finally blazed up in Europe, it became a more radicalized process than in the United States. Religion (Protestant Christianity) was forced underground into Masonic lodges but also, along with Luther and the Reformation, it moved to the inner sphere of the person so that the freedom of religion was assured as an inner freedom (33). In short, the decline of religion as a consequence of modernization seems more characteristic for Europe than other continents, and it could be seen as a result of a more radical replacement of religious world-views with a scientific one. This explains why the sociologist Grace Davie (2002) talks about “the European exception”, meaning that Europe is the part of the world where people’s interest for religious institutions is low in comparison to the rest of the world. But this does not necessarily mean that religious belief has declined and Davie describes people in Western Europe as “believing without belonging”, in contrast to many other parts of the world where believing is also a kind of belonging (1994, 93-116). The decline of religion in the West, in other words, is better described as a privatized religion based on holding certain beliefs instead of a visible religion that is practiced and embodied.

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6 The exception to this development is indigenous religions in many parts of the world and religions in Western Europe (ibid).
The third moment of secularization builds on the privatization thesis and this is perhaps where the new visibility of religion becomes the most challenging to Western societies. According to Casanova, this thesis contains two different phases: that religious belief has become subjective and that institutional religion has become de-politicized (1993, 35). The quest for subjective meaning in phase one is a characteristic feature of modernity that suggests that religion is a strictly personal affair (37). In most European societies this has led to the separation of Church and State, implying that the state takes a neutral stance regarding religion and that the church does not interfere in politics. Hence, the second phase implies that if citizens want to concern themselves with religious quests they need to patch this together on a private basis and whether they succeed or not is of no relevance to the dominant economic and political institutions, unless, of course, their religious interests do not affect their civic functioning in society as a whole (ibid.).

What Casanova makes visible, for the purposes of this dissertation, is that the idea of secularization is more complex than simply suggesting a decline of religion in modernity as Weber predicted. By exploring this idea as a three-fold movement he casts light on the processes that have shaped liberal societies’ understanding of religion and how these, in turn, have affected the self-understanding of religious traditions. Since the Enlightenment, religions in the West have tended to see themselves as non-political and private phenomena but, at present, other faces of religion are revealed (Asad 1993, Sigurdson 2009). These faces cannot be understood simply along the lines of a protestant/liberal divide between the private and public spheres. In a differentiated society the spheres and dividing lines are multifaceted and plural, and the religious sphere cannot be clearly separated from other spheres.

What is emerging today are the many different faces of political religion. In political and cultural debates, the greatest attention is given to political Islam, but there are also growing theo-political movements within the Christian religion such as the ‘emergent church movement’ and the ‘neo monastic movement’. What characterizes them is an interest in alternative lifestyles and collective forms of living. Here, ‘politics’ is understood as resistance against a modernist, bourgeois lifestyle and simplicity, fair trade, and social aid are important features of this. For some groups, social activism is coupled with evangelization and an apologetic approach to faith whereas others

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7 What the neutrality of the state means has been and continues to be a debated issue in many countries in Europe. In France, for example, the notion of laïcité implies a very strict separation between the secular State and religion. In Sweden, the Church was not separated from the State until the year 2000 which may be seen to be surprising given the strong aversion against institutionalized religion that has dominated Sweden historically.

8 The latter has little to do with an interest in traditional monastic life but with a felt need to model an alternative way of living through small, transformative communities.
see their task as primarily ideological and theological, that is, to deconstruct Christian dogma and emphasize dialogue instead of proclamation.\(^9\)

In recent years, a number of books have been published in political theology, a field at the intersection of philosophy and theology exploring the ethical and political implications of religion’s reassessed place in the public domain (de Vries & Sullivan 2006).\(^10\) This movement draws on the ‘turn to religion’ in continental philosophy initiated primarily by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida and it approaches philosophy and theology from post-metaphysical or post-secular perspectives (de Vries 1999; Blond 1998; Caputo 2001). The term post-secular here is taken to mean that Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death has boomeranged, suggesting that the questioning of absolute, metaphysical positions has also put into question ‘absolute secularity’ or ‘absolute rationality’. Or, as John Caputo puts it when he explains how the secular world became post-secular: “a surprising thing happened on the way to the death of God: Enlightenment secularism also got crucified on the same Cross, and that spelled the death of the death of God” (2001, 59). What has taken place then through the recent resurrection of religious beliefs and practices is a transition from secularism to post-secularism, something that has given rise to a new philosophical interest in religion. As will be outlined in the sections that discuss the framing of this thesis, it is this ‘turn to religion’ (de Vries) in post-secular and post-structural philosophy that the present thesis draws upon.

What the scholars in political theology and post-secular philosophy aim to show is that the conditions for understanding religion and its place and role in democratic societies are more complex than what the policy texts above have depicted. What needs to be done, it seems to me, is to renegotiate the relationship between religion and democracy for education by turning to thinkers that address ‘the void’ that is opened up when old maps no longer

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9 The latter position draws on thinkers such as Brian McLaren and John D Caputo. See McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christianity. Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (2010) and Caputo’s *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (2007b). The movements are global movements. See [www.thesimpleway.org/shane](http://www.thesimpleway.org/shane); [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org); [www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net); (accessed 2010-01-05).

10 Engaged in this debate are theologians from the school of *radical orthodoxy*, such as John Milbank, Graham Ward, James K. A. Smith, Catherine Pickstock, William T. Cavanaugh, and Stanley Hauerwas but involved are also radical democratic thinkers like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou – of which the latter two have entered the debate drawing primarily on the Christian legacy as a resource for their own philosophical work. See for example Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003), Stanford University Press and Milbank’s and Žižek’s *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (2009), Cambridge: MIT Press. Several anthologies and books have been published in political theology in recent years. See for example the extensive *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (2006) edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, New York: Fordham University Press; *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (2005), edited by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, Durham: Duke University Press; *Religion and Political Thought* (2006), edited by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, London: Continuum.
match new and complex realities. Given the thesis of differentiation above, the rationalities and logics that have developed (the political, the religious, the economic, the juridical etc.) are difficult to understand from the outside just as it is difficult to enter them, that is to understand them from the inside. The way forward seems to be to approach them by acknowledging the difference that separates them. Even if religion is defined in a certain way from a certain ‘outside perspective’ it is by no means self-evident what religion means for the particular practitioner. Neither is it self-evident that religion can have no part to play in society other than as an issue of private concern. What part it can play, and how this is to be articulated in relation to democracy, is the question that needs further exploration.

How the terms ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ are used in contemporary debates automatically categorize certain ways of life as ‘religious’ or ‘democratic’ and others as ‘secular’ or ‘undemocratic’. Even if it is impossible to communicate without categorizations, the problem with them is that they tend to create polarizations and hierarchies. As a consequence, both the language of democracy and the language of religion become static and lose their potential to respond to the complexities of human life. The stereotypes created do not do justice to the lived lives of concrete, unique individuals who do not live their lives according to categories. People might, for example, see themselves as both political and religious and as holding both secular views and religious ones. It is such concrete individuals that teachers and educators meet in schools.

Democracy and Education

Few thinkers have been as influential in designing the relationship between education and democracy as the American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). In *Democracy and Education* from 1916 he lays the foundation for what can be called a communicative and social function of education. “Education, in its broadest sense,” he writes, is the “social continuity of life” (1916/2004, 2). Dewey emphasizes the importance of schools for a well-functioning democracy but he is not merely after an education that serves the interests of the politicians. For him, education is primarily about human growth and has its own purposes and ends. In fact, he writes, “education is all one with growing, it has no end beyond itself” (53). It is as a possibility for human growth that education can inspire new participation in democracy, according to Dewey, because for him democracy is a way of life. He writes: “Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (87). Dewey’s approach has influenced progressive, reconstructionist, and neo-pragmatist movements in education and his ideas still constitute key elements in much democratic theory (Englund 2005).
Two key features that have emanated from Dewey and that remain predominant in democratic education are the social notion of the subject and the socializing function of schools. The first suggests that we become human subjects in interaction with others and, the second, that since democracy is a certain mode of living, the political role of education is to socialize students into this (democratic) mode. Although, as Wilfred Carr and Anthony Hartnett point out, Dewey’s purpose was not as much to demonstrate the superiority of the democratic way of life as to explain the philosophical foundations of education (1996, 65).

In more recent years, the place and role of education in democratic societies finds one of its main sources of inspiration in Amy Gutmann’s (1987) Democratic Education. As she points out by beginning in Plato and Aristotle, the relationship between democracy and education is as old as the history of philosophy and in a certain sense, education has always been political. What is characteristic of a democratic theory of education, which is what she develops, is that it consciously reproduces a democratic society by socializing students into a certain notion of the common good (14-15, 287). This feature – cultivating a certain character (conscious social reproduction) guided by an ethical idea about a common good – is the main feature of a democratic education, according to Gutmann (41-47, 287-291). Hence, unlike the family state and the state of individuals, “a democratic state recognizes the value of professional authority in enabling children to appreciate and value ways of life other than those favoured by their families [and] to accept those ways of life that are consistent with sharing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society” (42).

What is at stake for Gutmann is the authority over education (1987, 16) and a democratic education, in her view, seeks to influence and socialize students into those values that it finds compatible with a democratic politics. This includes cultivating values such as “respect for racial, religious, intellectual and sexual differences” (287). In general, however, Gutmann does not specify in any precise manner the values that a democratic education should cultivate. Most important is that students are given the opportunity to shape and to participate in their own society and in their own future, something that is made possible by agreeing upon common values in a process of democratic deliberation (39). For Gutmann, the process itself is value-laden. “Take away the processes,” she writes, “and the educational institutions that remain cannot properly be called democratic. Take away the educational institutions, and the processes that remain cannot function democratically” (287). The democratic virtue par excellence in education is the ability to deliberate by participating in the ‘conscious social reproduction’ that the process suggests (46). Hence, what is primary to an education guided by the authority of a democratic theory is that children participate in shaping their society and cultivate an independent way of thinking.
It is not uncontroversial, Gutmann admits, to leave this much space to the citizens themselves to form the education in their society (39). Some parents might object to a deliberative approach on the grounds that the content of this kind of education conflicts with their moral values, but a guiding principle for this model of democratic education is that the values taught and cultivated through the deliberative procedure are agreed upon by the majority population (39).

As David Held (2006) points out, all models of democracy hold a certain idea of the democratic person and liberal democracy, which is the model adopted by Western societies, builds on the idea of an autonomous, rational self. This view might be compatible with, for example, Protestant Christianity but stands in stark contrast to other religious traditions. This does not suggest that these traditions necessarily reject autonomy and rationality but that a rational and autonomous approach to life might not be their primary identification. When debates about, for example, dress codes, sexuality, and eating habits come to the surface in education it becomes clear that certain ‘religious ways of life’ are rooted in ethical views other than those defined in liberal democratic terms. As a consequence, the formative and reproductive role of democratic education sometimes conflicts with the formative role of religious parents and communities, something which Gutmann also acknowledges above. Since democracy is a kind of ‘associated living’ (Dewey) guided by a certain idea about a good life, a “democratic theory of education”, as Carr & Hartnett point out, “is simply to acknowledge that democracy is an ethical ideal” (1996, 188). What seems to be causing tension in contemporary education then, given this focus on social reproduction guided by a certain idea about a good life, is that it creates an idea about a ‘democratic way of life’ that sometimes comes into conflict with other (e.g. religious) ways of life.

The above focus on social reproduction and collectively agreed upon values is still characteristic of democratic education in liberal democracies. However, concurrently with the increasing differentiation of society, an increasing amount of attention is given to the issue of pluralism in education. Social reproduction and the establishment of a common good have proven to be difficult in differentiated and pluralistic societies and multicultural, intercultural, and radical pedagogies can all be seen as responses to this.

Two of the most recent and most influential trends dealing with issues around pluralism in political education is cosmopolitan education and deliberative democratic education. The former is inspired by political and moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Anthony Appiah Kwame, and Ulrich Beck, seeking inspiration in neo-Stoic ethical theories and Immanuel Kant’s idea of world citizenship. The latter finds its inspiration in the virtue of deliberation advocated in Gutmann’s theory of democratic education above and draws on thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Marion Young. Both these pedagogies have emerged as responses to
how the effects of globalization intervene in shaping young people’s lives, both on a structural and personal level. They are a result of the increasing demand for recognition (cultural, ethnic, and religious) that have emerged on all levels of society but also of the increasing alertness to global threats such as the rise of fundamentalism.

For cosmopolitan education it is seen as essential that education becomes more responsive both to particularity and to the universal concerns that affect human co-existence beyond the schools walls. This is coupled with an on-going discussion within citizenship education concerning to what extent it is possible to educate for common values and at the same time avoid confrontations with particular demands seeking recognition. At the centre of attention are, for example, the conflicts that arise when national, ethnic, religious affiliations compete and the question raised is what problems and promises this holds for education in liberal democratic societies. The response is to advocate an idea of world citizenship guided by cosmopolitan values such as an attentiveness to and a responsibility for larger global concerns. What is explored is whether or not it is reasonable to advocate cosmopolitan values as an overarching ideal beyond local and particular concerns (Appiah 2003; Burbules & Roth 2007; Roth & Gur-Ze’ev 2007).

Educating for cosmopolitan values suggests being sensitive to particular claims but, most importantly, to maximize individual responsibility and autonomy. What is crucial for this group is that education influences the socialization process of all children in such a way that they grow up to become cosmopolitan citizens capable of prioritizing among global responsibilities and of cultivating a concern for the world that goes beyond particular loyalties and group affiliations.

Similar concerns can be found within the second of the pedagogical trends in which theorists of education have found a way of democratizing education through the deliberative model of democracy. The democratic model founded by Habermas has here been implemented into education through thinkers like Gutmann (mentioned above), and the focus is on creating an open conversation where different views and ways of life can be examined, explored and evaluated. The guiding idea behind this model of democratic education is, simply speaking, that if the deliberative process is inclusive and open to difference conflicts can be solved and common values established. In a time of plurality and disagreement, the discourse ethics that the deliberative procedure is based on can be seen as a way of founding an ethics without metaphysics. It is seen as important that students participate in shaping their future and education is considered to be one of the main arenas where this can be realized. The goal is to create future democratic citizens by making schools as dialogue-friendly and inclusive as possible (Carlehed 2006; Englund 2002, 2005, 2006; Roth 2009).

Both cosmopolitan education and deliberative democratic education have arisen as responses to the need for mediation between particular demands
and liberal democratic values. Given that religious pluralism is currently one of the most pressing issues on the liberal educational agenda, the first chapter of this thesis will explore the status of religion within these two pedagogical trends. With this said, it is now time to root the argument of this dissertation in a particular context.

**Religion and Democracy as Questions for Education:**

**Rooting the Argument**

**Philosophy of Education and Previous Research**

This study is firmly rooted in philosophy of education. Within this field, religion, religious pluralism, and religious education has most frequently been addressed from a liberal framework. The discussion has centred on certain clusters of questions and an overview of these are presented below, focusing on their main underlying assumptions.

One of the major debates within liberal education centres on how permissive or restrictive liberal societies ought to be towards religion. Whereas one group is mainly concerned about the oppression of traditional religious groups by the liberal state (a communitarian position), another is concerned about the oppression of individuals (a classical liberal position). What is discussed by both these positions, as a general concern, are different attempts to include religious values and ways of life without jeopardizing the liberal values and the democratic foundation of schools (Feinberg & McDonough 2003; Feinberg 2006). The main question asked, in other words, is to what extent education in liberal democracies can accommodate particular identities (such as religious identities) and to what extent it must focus instead on inculcating a set of shared values (Williams 2003, 208). Within the position that is in support of a more regulatory approach to cultural and religious affiliations, the constraints are often motivated by a concern for the individual. In relation to religion it is especially the rights of women and girls that is a main concern and it is argued that unless a certain control over group rights is issued, there is a risk that women and girls are oppressed by their traditional communities (Macedo 2003; Okin 2003).

One debate this question affects is the complexities involved in common schooling in pluralist societies (Pring 2007). Some scholars argue in support of religious schooling arguing that a commitment to plurality most reasonably leads to a support of diverse forms of education, including the right of parents to choose education for their children according to their religious

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11 For a thorough discussion about the idea of the common school extending far beyond the debate about religious schooling, see the special issue of *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (volume 41, issue 4, 2007), edited by Mark Halstead and Graham Haydon and dedicated to the memory or Terence McLaughlin.
preferences (McLaughlin 1999, 2000, 2003). Others argue that this approach must be accompanied by a close examination of the extent to which religious schools are in support of liberal values (Feinberg 2006). This voice suggests that even if the moral motivation religious schools manage to create is something that could inspire public schools, it is essential that they live up to the reflective skills and the attitudes of respect for differences that democracy requires (ibid.). Building on the possibilities for finding inspiration in religion, another voice in this debate suggests that the religious narratives should not be confined to religious schools but taught also in a wider educational context (Carr 2007). Hence, the issue of debate between these two positions, even if both are in support of pluralism, is what sorts of restraints a liberal state can impose on ‘religious minorities’ schooling’ and what sorts of responsibilities it must assume in order to safeguard the public against sectarianism and undue religious influences (Feinberg 2006, xiii). The underlying assumption is that the liberal state ought to show as much acceptance as possible to religious minorities but without sacrificing the commitment of liberal democracy to critical thinking and autonomy. Parents and congregations have the right to influence children but they need to respect the liberal requirements of individual autonomy, public participation, political stability and intellectual development (Feinberg 2006, xxiv).

It is not the case, however, that liberal democracy is left uncritiqued within the liberal framework. Critical voices accuse liberal education of being too detached from and insensitive to particular demands, such as religious affiliation. There is a call for a more ‘attached liberalism’ and a more difference-sensitive education that sees it as its purpose to honour the self-definitions of traditional cultures and cultural differences (Halstead 1995, 2003, 2007). Instead of suggesting a general solution to the tensions created between disadvantaged minorities and public educational institutions (such as the regulatory approach), the focus here is on particular responses. At issue, for example, are the dilemmas it may cause for a Muslim student in liberal schools to accommodate both to a liberal acceptance of homosexuality and a Muslim restriction of the same (Halstead 2004, 2005). As a way of offering a more nuanced answer to such issues it is suggested that it must be possible, within a liberal framework, to hold divergent opinions on homosexuality without being labelled homophobic just as it needs to be possible to be critical of Islam without being accused of Islamophobia (ibid.).

This position is critical of classical liberalism’s tendency to over emphasize autonomy and individual choice which pays inadequate attention, it is argued, to the collective and emotional attachments of children (Halstead 1995).

12 See the debate between Michael Merry and Mark Halstead on this issue (Halstead 2005; Merry 2005).
In order to begin from a position other than permissiveness or regulation, another group of scholars advocate the need for an increased ‘religious literacy’ in education (Barnes 2009; Conroy 2004, 2008; Conroy & Davis 2008; Davis 2006; Wright 2004, 2007). Here, the main focus is on religious education and what unites them is that they all see a need for altering the framework through which religion and religious plurality is understood. What is of interest is the ‘return of religion’ in education, and drawing on a wide range of perspectives their main focus is to explore the problems and possibilities post-modernity raises for religious education. Some advocate a critical realist position where the main issue of concern is how competing truth claims can be addressed within religious education given a postmodern, multicultural context (Wright 2004, 2007). Another approach seeks to develop another language for religious literacy by exploring the relationship between education and religion as a space of liminality (Conroy 2004). The alternative language this space makes possible offers a critical response to the language of economics and management that has come to dominate in education (Conroy 2008). It can also be seen as offering a site of resistance to a notion of citizenship education that has come to be defined in too narrow registers (Conroy & Davis 2008). The research conducted here finds inspiration in literary examples, poetry, and metaphor and argues that the language of religion holds resources for developing another language for education.

A more policy-centred approach to the advancement of religious literacy illuminates how a focus on neutrality towards religion in secular schools actually comes to dismiss religion (Barnes 2009). One reason for this is that religious education has ended-up teaching religion from a sameness-oriented instead of from a difference-oriented perspective (Barnes 2009, Wright 2004). When differences between particular religious traditions are toned down, it is argued, religious literacy is reduced and a privatized and depoliticized religion advocated. This, despite the fact that few religions (other than Protestant Christianity) ascribe to such views (Wright 2004). Paradoxically, then, this works against the moral and social aims of education and, according to, for example, Philip Barnes, the focus on belief as different from practice in British religious education has led to the neglect of the religious person (Barnes 2009, 43-44).

It is precisely this neglect of the ‘person’ in the liberal framework that this thesis responds to. Drawing on French post-structuralist philosophy, another group of scholars in philosophy of education critique the liberal notion of democracy and its underlying idea of the democratic subject (Biesta 2004, 2006, 2007; Masschelein & Quaghebeur 2005; Masschelein & Simons 2002; Ruitenberg 2009; Säfström 2005, 2006; Todd, 2003, 2009a). Within this research, democracy is seen not simply as a problem for education to ‘solve’ but is fundamentally an educational issue (Biesta 2004, 93). Democracy is an open-ended concept and the task of education is not about implementing a certain democratic program by subordinating education to democracy, but
about reformulating democracy in educational terms, or, as Sharon Todd puts it, seeing democracy as a question for education (2009a).

This position is different from the liberal position in the sense that it does not perceive democracy in essentialistic terms – as something that is to be instilled in students. Rather, as Gert Biesta points out, “Democracy is the situation in which all human beings can be subjects” (2004, 94 emphasis in original). Seeing democracy along these lines can be viewed as a way to resist the modernist view that democracy ‘is’ something already given. In line with a post-structural critique of certainty, the stable, and the unified (including having certain knowledge about things in the world), this kind of research has at its heart an openness towards the uncertain, the divergent and the incomplete. In contrast to the liberal position where ‘democratic education’ is a unified concept, this position emphasizes that education must have its own purposes and goals independent of the dominant (and historically contingent) view of democracy. To put it differently, education is not primarily about democracy but about human subjectivity and the key question for education in this body of research, is how education can serve the human subject as a ground for thinking democracy.

Two inter-related ideas within this realm of research are key to point out: a radical notion of difference and an ambivalent notion of the human subject. If the liberal project sees differences (in the plural) as social categories, that is, as consequences of upbringing and social influences, the position here is to regard difference as an ontological category, that is, as a foreign element of otherness that permeates both subjectivity and the world in which we live (Todd 2003, 2009a). Radical difference cannot be reduced to social difference, as in Dewey’s notion of the subject, but plurality and difference condition the ways we make sense of ourselves in the world beyond traditional social and societal categories. Since difference cannot be reduced to a product of education (or culture) the entire direction of how one as a researcher can approach education is altered. Instead of seeing education as something teachers and educators can master, we are invited to see it as a complex and unforeseeable endeavour which one cannot fully control. Instead of being a place for cultivating certain values or implementing a certain model of democracy, education becomes a place for the unexpected, the difficult, and the ambivalent. If, as Zygmunt Bauman illustratively puts it, ‘difference’ is different from differences and diversity (1995, 202), an education that emphasizes diversity sees itself as the place where (social) differences can be reshaped. However, if difference and plurality are ontological categories they cannot be educated away but constitute the very condition for human coexistence.

Some scholars within this group deal directly with difference (understood as different from diversity) in relation to democracy (Biesta, Masschelein, Ruitenberg, Säfström, Todd). Drawing on agonistic or radical political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, they see agonism and af-
fect, conflict and plurality, as constitutive of democracy and not as anathema to it. This does not mean that they necessarily reject liberal democracy altogether, but they seriously challenge the relationship between liberalism and democracy in education and its underlying idea of an autonomous and rational subject. By contrast, they seek to envision an education that – within a democratic framework – allows the human subject to appear in education in all its strange guises. Moreover, they move away from the view that a more democratic education can be created if the right balance is found between rights and duties towards an education more attentive to otherness. The question that needs to be asked if one considers democracy as a question for education, according to these scholars, is not how education is to become more democratic but if democratic subjectivity is at all possible in contemporary education (Biesta 2006). The question, in other words, is whether education today makes it possible for persons to ‘come into presence’ (Biesta 2006) as unique subjects. Biesta’s point here is radical, perhaps even drastic, but he highlights a primary focus within this kind of research which is to explore what kinds of subjectivities different models of democracy make possible.

An ambivalent notion of the human subject suggests that there is always more to the other person, a remainder, than what can be contained within human language (even though it is simultaneously linguistically constituted). Based on a post-structural critique of a ‘Humanism’ which claimed it would liberate the human being but came instead to reduce and oppress what it means to be human (Marshall 2004, xvii), scholars in this field have sought to reformulate the aims and goals of education following thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida – thinkers for whom the turn to difference is also a turn to what is deferred, left out, and rejected by the common societal rationality (Biesta 2006; Biesta & Egéa-Kuehne 2001; Marshall 2004; Smeyers, Smith & Standish 2007; Todd, 2003, 2009a). Through an ontological (as opposed to an epistemological) notion of difference they shift the focus from the conscious and autonomous self to a subject whose existence is always subjected to others and who is not only an actor but acted upon by things beyond its control. Following post-structural theorists who question the belief in rationality and knowledge as a ground for subjectivity, researchers in this area complicate the liberal focus on the autonomous, rational individual arguing that who someone ‘is’ can never be fully comprehended.

However, attention to religious pluralism is largely lacking in this area of post-structurally inspired scholarship. The focus on plurality has led to an exploration of certain cultural practices that have points of connection to religion such as the debate about Muslim girls’ dress in schools (Todd 2008; 2009a). But apart from Todd’s work there has been little or no attention given to religious plurality in the post-structural understanding of democracy. The ‘turn to religion’ within post-structural theory initiated by philosophers like Levinas and Derrida has remained unnoticed in relation to the contem-
porary debate about the place and role of religion in education. Although the profound religious influences on these philosophers’ work have been used to rethink other aspects of education, it has never been put in relation to conflicts related to religion and democracy.

The gap this dissertation aims to fill within philosophy of education is that scholars that address religious pluralism do this mainly through a liberal democratic framework, that is, without questioning the predominant understanding of democracy whilst scholars that complicate the liberal idea of democracy do this without addressing religious pluralism. Hence, the contribution of the present study is to read the tensions religious pluralism seems to be causing in contemporary education through a post-structural approach to democracy. Building on the call for increased religious literacy in education (Conroy, Davis, Wright), the present study takes radical difference and the ambivalence of human subjectivity as its point of departure for seeing democracy and religion in open terms, that is, as questions for education.

**The Present Study: Thesis and Purposes**

Taking its point of departure in the gap described above, this dissertation brings the issue of religious pluralism recognized by liberal philosophers of education to the centre of its post-structural renegotiation of democracy in education. It is therefore the precise purpose of this thesis to renegotiate the relationship between education, democracy, and religion by placing the religious subject – post-structurally understood – at the centre of this renegotiation.

The purpose is accomplished in three movements. *The first* aims to show why the renegotiation is needed by examining how the relationship between education, democracy, and religion is currently being considered. For this, I turn to the two most influential pedagogical trends dealing with religious pluralism mentioned above: cosmopolitan education and deliberative democratic education. *The second* movement aims to prepare the ground for the renegotiation by introducing a model of democracy, radical democracy, that sees the whole process of defining the subject as a political process. It is argued that this model offers possibilities for seeing religion and the religious subject as part of the struggle for democracy. *The third* and last movement aims to develop how the relationship between education, democracy, and religion might change if we bring them together in a conversation whose conditions are not ‘owned’ by any one of them. I do this by turning to thinkers who all, in different ways and for different reasons, speak in defence of the singular subject in situations that have tended to obscure her appearance. By bringing Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Søren Kierkegaard, and Emmanuel Levinas into a conversation, I am hoping to create a more lively understanding of ‘religion’ and also inspire a more liveable understanding of ‘democracy’ for education.
A task as large-scaled as this can hardly be carried out without strict limitations. For this reason, three focal points are identified already in the first chapter drawing on how cosmopolitan and deliberative democratic education articulate their responses to religious pluralism. Emanating from a cosmopolitan ‘love of humanity’, the emancipatory goal in deliberative democracy, and the focus on dialogue in both of these pedagogies, the study creates three focal points for renegotiation: love, freedom, and dialogue. These focal points are referred to as ‘windows’ as a way of reframing our attention to them. Before I give a more detailed overview of the thesis, let me say something about how the metaphor of the ‘window’ is used to create both a methodological and theoretical focus.

Seeing Otherwise: Framing the Argument

In certain religious contexts, windows are icons or ‘windows to eternity’ suggesting that by studying the icon, a different reality is revealed to us. There are two significant features of the icon to which I would like to draw attention. The first is its relationality and the second its ethicality. Typically, the icon presents people and it does so by relating them to other people. Therefore, we cannot understand one person, say Mary, without the other, say Christ, and one gives significance and meaning to the other. Secondly, the icon issues an invitation. For those who study iconology, however, it eventually becomes clear that there is no singular message inherent to the icon. Instead, the icon invites the viewer to follow a line, a kind of journey, and eyes, vectors, and hands point out the direction. This is not done with dramatic brush-strokes but with small gestures. It is sometimes argued that the icon is merely a pedagogical device that will facilitate prayer or contemplation. However, what is characteristic of the icon is that it issues an invitation, that is, it is not I who am the addressee, but it is I who am addressed and invited to respond.¹³

Iconic Windows as Methodological Device

A thinker who has made the icon the main focus of his entire philosophical and theological work is the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion. His journey begins in the question, following Husserl, whether there are phenomena that are not only characterized by lack of intentionality and meaning, but which can appear to us in such a way that we are ‘saturated’ and our intention interrupted.¹⁴ In his book In Excess (2002) Marion distinguishes

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¹³ I am aware of the Christian connotations to the icon and the prohibition of images in Judaism and Islam. The use of the icon here, however, does not primarily have religious meaning but is meant to methodologically capture the shift of perspective suggested in the windows.

¹⁴ I will focus on a very limited aspect of Marion’s theory which is his use of the idol and the icon. For this I draw primarily in the third and the fifth essays of In Excess (2002) as well as the introduction and the final chapter of The Idol and Distance. Five Studies (2001). I am
four ‘saturated phenomena’ but it is only two of these – the icon and the idol – that are relevant to the present study. According to Marion, both the idol and the icon generate an overflow of meaning but there are profound differences between them. The first is the different attitudes to the visible and the act of seeing they give rise to and the second is how they generate two different relationships to the subject.

The icon is characterized by excess but what appears in the encounter with the icon is the invisible. As Jayne Svenungsson points out in her reading of Marion, the icon appears to us by virtue of allowing the invisible to appear in the visible (2004). One ‘sees’, in other words, the invisible in the visible. The icon presents a person and creates a relationship in which I meet the eyes of another person who looks back at me and who addresses me. Marion is deeply influenced by Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the face which he sees as the saturated phenomenon par excellence (2002) and what is encountered in the icon is the face of my neighbour, a person who calls me to respond and who interrupts my intentions. If the idol can be compared to a mirror that reflects our own intentions back to us – Marion compares the relationship to an idol with that of a painting onto which I project my own wishes and desires (2002, 61) – the icon reverses the act of seeing so that it does not begin with me but comes to me from the other. My look is submerged, Marion writes, “in a counter-intentional manner” (2002, 113). “Then I am no longer the transcendental I but rather the witness” (ibid.). In this sense, the icon invites us to participate in an inverted intentionality where a certain passivity precedes me as an active subject. This means that the subject is not only an acting agent but someone who is acted upon, addressed by the iconic face of the other. The icon is not a re/presentation but it reveals a presence to which I can make myself responsive. What the icon demands of the viewer – its necessary condition – is that one’s own expectations are set aside so that something new or other can come into view.

In order to make the counter-intuitive perspective of the icon as clear as possible, it is best contrasted to the idol. The idol also produces excess but in contrast to the icon it is characterized by its radiance. Marion uses the painting as his example and what takes place in our encounter with a piece of art, he argues, is absorbing and captivating. The painting overwhelms us, it fascinates us and makes an impression on us, and Marion goes so far as to say


Marion’s idea of ‘saturated phenomena’ derives from Husserl’s distinction between intention and intuition, that is, the distinction between the appearance of a certain phenomenon (the intention or meaning) and that which appears (the intuition or its fulfilment). When intention and intuition coincided for Husserl, truth was established, but these moments of truth were rare. More often than not, more intention was assigned to a phenomenon that what was returned which led Marion to look for phenomena that are not characterized by lack but by excess (Svenungsson 2004, 160-162).
that it obsesses us and lays siege on us (2002, 54). Hence, what attracts and fascinates is the idol’s visibility and our eyes are captivated in admiration of the motive (2002, 60-61). In Idol and Distance Marion translates the idol into political contexts and “the cult of personality” which, he argues, always gives rise to idols (2001, 6). One does not need to think further back than a couple of decades in order to find some of the most worshipped political idols in the history of mankind.

The point of the idol for our purposes here is that it lacks relationality and reduces the act of seeing to the visible. Neither the painting nor the political figure places the viewing subject in relation to anything or anyone beyond itself, and neither do they demand anything of the viewer other than her/his full attention or adoration. The eyes are drawn to what is visible and in the function of laying siege on the viewer, the idol has the tendency to reduce the otherness of the other to what ‘my eyes’ can see and comprehend. Just as the painting re/presents a given order of things and just as the painter fills the frame with visible elements, the idol leaves no space for the non-presentable and invisible to appear (66-68). “All is there to see, nothing is kept in absence” (66).

If we recapitulate what has been argued thus far, the icon has the three following functions: it invites participation (i.e., it remains closed to those who look at it simply from their own expectations and desires); it invites seeing the invisible in the visible (i.e., it reveals something that is already there but is foreclosed) and; it invites an encounter with the other where I am addressed. If one does not push this imagery as far as Marion does, who compares the idol to a mirror where we see only ourselves, one can compare the idol and the icon with an ordinary window and a stained-glass window. The difference, in my view, is a matter of colour and transparency. When looking through an ordinary window one (often) sees an already known reality in a limited number of colours. Looking out my living-room window, for example, one sees mainly the ochre colour of the house across the street. Even if one changes one’s angle, what one sees is only altered to a very limited extent (one may see some blue sky and an additional yellow house). How clearly one sees depends on the brightness of the light outside and if one looks out the window at three o’clock in the afternoon in January, one sees only one’s own reflection. A stained-glass window, by contrast, lacks full transparency but this limitation makes visible something other than the immediate reality. It consists of a palette of colours and when the light breaks through the glass we may be able to perceive of a ‘reality’ that is not one-dimensional but multi-dimensional. That the light breaks when it hits the glass is necessary for the image and the colours to appear and the semi-opaqueness of the glass creates a certain distance between me and what I see. If one comes too close to a stained-glass window one cannot discern any definite image. An ordinary window, by contrast, offers the impression that we can have a direct and unmediated relationship to the world.
What, then, does the methodological device of the icon ‘do’, used as a way to reframe the conversation about love, freedom, and dialogue? The iconic ‘windows’ are meant to ‘do’ two things. The first is to offer three examples in which religious subjectivity is made manifest in relation to other subjectivities. The second is to create a shift of perspective that invites other ways of seeing the tensions between religion and democracy. The different modes of existence that come into view through these windows are meant to speak to one another about alternative ways to live in the world: ways that are different from those we perhaps have come to see in one-dimensional and colourless terms. Alternative ways of seeing affect all parties involved (religion, democracy, education), demanding of all participants to enter a conversation whose conditions none of them fully owns.

**Theoretical Focus: Themes, Terms, Thinkers**

A post-structural notion of the subject, which the renegotiation attempted here centres around, can hardly be defined in any simple way. Post-structuralism itself is not a unified ‘ism’ and consists of a widely differing and multi-faceted group of thinkers/philosophers who all offer different notions of the subject. One position post-structuralists do share, however, is a critique of humanism drawing on thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (Marshall 2004, xvi-xvii). Humanism claimed it would liberate human beings from oppressive religious or political systems but its universal ideal only created another oppressive structure. In other words, after those theories of secularization that predicted that religion would no longer be needed in a modern society – a development that in philosophy is sometimes referred to as ‘the death of God’ or the end of metaphysics – the conscious, autonomous subject was to take God’s place as the centre of the universe. Hence, what post-structuralists share is a critique of any stable, unified subject, arguing that this would simply create another illusory ‘meta narrative’ (Lyotard 1984). The anti-humanist position of post-structural philosophers is sometime referred to as ‘the death of the subject’. What should be pointed out, however, is that this is not a critique of the subject as such but a ‘death’ of universal and absolute definitions of human existence. Or, as Emmanuel Levinas famously puts it, “[h]umanism has to denounced only because it is not sufficiently human” (1981, 128).

As we observed with Badiou on the first pages of this thesis, the universal subject of humanism with a capital ‘S’ did not replace religion (God) and we are witnessing a ‘joint return’ of both. Religion is becoming increasingly visible but it is not a unified and stable ‘religious’ subject that is emerging but an affected, de-centred and ambivalent subject that is not easily defined. This uncertainty around how to define and understand the religious subject is precisely, it seems to me, the source of tension in contemporary political and social debates.
To begin in a post-structural notion of the subject implies acknowledging the ambivalence of human subjectivity and that the very process of defining the subject is itself a political process. The anti-humanist critique of subjectivity abandons the primacy of the rationally autonomous, independent subject and clears a space for a subject that is subjected to prior structures outside of its control (Critchley 1999, 67). A post-structural approach is thereby attentive to the concrete, the particular, and the historically produced subject. More specifically, it suggests shifting the focus from seeing the subject in terms of a conscious and self-sufficient subject that has an identity (as in the modern notion of the individual) to seeing the subject as a profoundly relational subject that is always in the process of becoming. Hence, the subject that is brought into the centre of this renegotiation is not an essentialist category that acts out of self-directed purposes (as in having a religious identity and acting on behalf of this) but a subject whose possibilities to act and to become a self are always lined with difficulty since one is also acted upon by others (Butler 2005).

The methodology of the icon is meant to signify this shift from the individual to the subject not only by inverting the gaze from the self to the other (suggesting that it is not I who look at the other but the other who looks at me), but also by shifting the direction of the light. Hence, a profound difference offered by a post-structural notion of subjectivity, metaphorically speaking, is that the light that reaches us through the iconic window comes from the outside – from the other – and not from inside myself, as in the Enlightenment view of the autonomous individual. Hence, the post-structural shift in perspective from the individual to the subject suggests that the possibilities for becoming a human subject cannot be contained within me but is created through a profound relationality to the other. If the individual in the modern notion of subjectivity is replaceable and depersonalized (even animals can be seen as individuals) the post-structural subject emerges in its particularity and uniqueness. After ‘the death of the subject’, Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) argues, the question of the subject is not a matter of essence (7). Instead of asking what someone ‘is’ (answering this in terms of ‘religious’, ‘Swedish’, ‘black’, ‘female’), a post-structural notion of the subject (post the anti-humanist position) is concerned about uniqueness and irreplaceability (ibid.). This means that the subject cannot be contained within the categories we use but always exceeds our comprehension. ‘Who comes?’ or ‘Who emerges?’ at the centre of the iconic windows is therefore an open question, suggesting that we cannot know beforehand who the other is.

In their critique of the modern subject, post-structural theories take a radical notion of difference as their point of departure. As Derrida’s notion of différence suggests (1986) difference or ‘being different’ is not on the level of diversity or of social differences. What it suggests, for my purposes here, is that there is a fundamental otherness or estrangement at the centre of human existence that cuts across categorizations such as ‘religious’, ‘political’
or ‘democratic’. Following a radical or ontological notion of difference (dif-
férance), the possibilities for the ‘religious’ subject to become a ‘who’ (in contrast to a ‘what’) lie not in establishing a consensual view about what a religious subject ‘is’ or in a normative idea about how the relationship between education, religion, and democracy should be defined, but in a fundamental orientation to difference and plurality. These two themes – a post-structural understanding of difference and subjectivity – constitute the theoretical focus of this study. It is these themes that have provided the search-light when choosing the thinkers that have been invited into the renegotiation that proceeds here, but before I introduce them more closely, something needs to be said about how the dissertation uses the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ subjectivity. Hoping it is clear by now that avoiding definitions is part of very purpose of the thesis, using the terms nonetheless risks drawing on precisely the kind of social categories that the dissertation is attempting to avoid.

As William T. Cavanaugh (2009) points out in his recent book The Myth of Religious Violence, the issue is not that religion cannot be defined. On the contrary, he argues, religion can be defined in a multitude ways. Cavanaugh’s purpose is to discuss religious violence and the problem with creating too strict and clear-cut definitions of religion, in his case, is that they tend to make us blind to the ‘other ways’ in which ‘religious’ violence appears. His point is that it is precisely when we think that we know what ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ violence is, that we risk becoming blind to it.

Defining religion has been an ongoing task in many fields of research and one of the most well known comes from the anthropologist Talal Asad (1993). Asad approaches religion genealogically, arguing that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993, 29). Hence, religion is too diverse a phenomenon to be addressed in the singular. Following Asad, we can acknowledge that any definition of ‘religion’ is historically situated and that very little can be said about religion in general. This implies that when we speak about ‘religion’, every definition we use is historically produced. It is a definition created by a particular society in a particular time and is a result of a certain political negotiation. Taking this a step further, it could be argued that ‘religion’ in the singular as an empirical ‘thing’ is nowhere to be found (Caputo 2001, 1). Where any analysis of ‘religion’ must begin, therefore, is in the social production of religion, that is, where it makes its appearance within certain particular cultural matrices (Ward 2003, 1, 3). Religion or religions only ‘exist’ by virtue of embodied (religious) subjects who orient themselves – through beliefs and practices – to matrices that in a certain time and place are defined as religious.

With the term ‘religious’, this dissertation refers to the increasing social visibility of religion whereas the notion of subjectivity refers to the post-
structural approach to the subject described above. Keeping together a social and an ontological category – such as ‘religious’ subjectivity – should here be seen as a way to resist fixation and yet address certain particular empirical realities that cannot be addressed without categorizations.

If we now turn to the thinkers that the renegotiation draws upon – Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Søren Kierkegaard, and Emanuel Levinas – they can all, in different ways, be seen as speaking in defence of the particular subject in situations when political, religious, or philosophical systems have tended to foreclose this view of her. Two criteria, in particular, have guided my choice. The first is an attention to singularity and difference and the second is an existential approach to human existence. The first can be seen as a response to the idea that humanism is not sufficiently human and each of the theorists here argue, albeit in different ways, that a more humane world requires an attentiveness to the singular subject despite the fact (or, rather because of the fact) that her existence is always conditioned by forces beyond her control. The existential approach is a criteria that enables me to renegotiate both the language of ‘religion’ and the language of ‘democracy’. At a time when much debate asks for simple definitions and clear separations between these domains, the thinkers in this conversation speak to both simultaneously.

What has foreclosed difference and subjectivity, according to the thinkers drawn upon here, is either a certain kind of philosophical, political, or religious crises. For Derrida and Levinas, it is a philosophical crisis that has prevented the subject from emerging in its uniqueness and singularity. What they both critique is the kind of philosophy that, in its striving for stability and unity, has come to see its primary task as clearly identifying what it means to be human. The increasing attention given to religion and theology in continental philosophy (mentioned earlier as the turn to post-secular philosophy), can be seen largely as a response to their work and in recent years, Derrida has written extensively on both religion and democracy. His thinking on religion (as well as his emphasis on paradox and aporia) is much indebted to Søren Kierkegaard who, like Derrida, explores the religious as something partly separated from concrete religious traditions. For the purposes of this thesis, Derrida’s much commented notion of ‘religion without religion’ as well as his messianic notion of a ‘democracy to come’ has created possibilities for allowing the language of religion and the language of democracy to speak to one another.16

Derrida’s turn to radical difference through the notion of différance has already been mentioned above just as Levinas’s notion of the Other’s face –

16 Through the notion of ‘religion without religion’, Derrida is sometimes referred to as advocating a ‘religionless faith’ and that religious institutions are unimportant to the religious practitioner. For a critique of how the notion of ‘religion without religion’ fails to do justice both to the concrete human subject and to particular religious traditions, see Bruce Ellis Benson (2009) and Richard Kearney (2010).
two notions that radically break with a sameness-oriented philosophy. Levinas breaks with the kind of thinking that claims that what is meaningful, real or possible coincides with the self-conscious activity of the subject. For him, ethics begins in the encounter with an absolute Other that is forever beyond my comprehension and whose otherness needs to be preserved in its irreducible strangeness (1969/2007). The subject that emerges in Levinas’s thinking is a subject who is profoundly indebted to the other for her existence. Before any action from the subject’s part, indeed, even before I can become a subject, I am a responding ‘being’. For Levinas and Derrida, ontological difference runs deeper than epistemology and a ‘leap’ is required to bridge this gap. For them, this leap is ethico/political whereas for Kierkegaard it is a leap of faith.

According to the Danish philosopher and existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, the foreclosure of the subject is caused by a certain kind of religious situation. His critique is directed against a bourgeois religiosity that has let moralism and a correct theological/political system overshadow its concerns for the singular religious subject. The Hegelian teleological dialectic of the time had replaced two of the most central themes in Kierkegaard’s thinking – faith as passion and paradox – with reasonableness and common sense. This complacent and ‘all too human religion’ of bourgeois Copenhagen fell heavily under the blow of Kierkegaard’s hammer and in this sense, Kierkegaard is Protestant Christianity’s own Nietzsche.

For a long time, Kierkegaard was considered to be a Christian thinker and therefore not taken seriously as a philosopher (Westphal & Matuštík 1995, vii). He was critiqued for being irrationalist and for being an anti-social apolitical individualist. But in a time when contemporary philosophy finds itself engaged in a similar critique of foundationalism, there has been a renewed interest in Kierkegaard’s work (ibid.). What Kierkegaard emphasizes, in contrast to Hegel’s totalizing interpretation of human thought, is the singular subject alone before God in ‘fear and trembling’. It is only in such a relationship to God, he argues, that the subject can become a responsible subject. Kierkegaard himself never considered himself to be a Christian but he spent his entire writing life trying to become one, elaborating back and forth what its price would be (Caputo 2007a). As a critic of how the established religion of his age was neglecting the religious person, his philosophy can be seen as a direct elaboration of what ‘religious’ subjectivity might mean. His emphasis, as he himself puts it, is therefore on ‘the singular individual standing alone before God’.

Fear and Trembling is perhaps Kierkegaard’s most controversial text and the story about Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac returns in all three windows. It is used to illuminate how an act that from one perspective is attempted murder from another can be seen an act of love and freedom. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham is someone who we ‘cannot understand’ but he nonetheless argues that Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac can be seen as a
way of acting in the service of humanity. Kierkegaard’s reading of Abraham is here used to give the idea of ‘religious’ subjectivity its most poignant formulations. Levinas and Kierkegaard are arguably the two greatest religious philosophers of the last two centuries (Caputo 2002; Westphal 2008) but in contrast to Kierkegaard, Levinas separated his religious writing from his philosophical work throughout his life. They are what can be seen as a Jewish and a Christian counterpart to one another and they have much in common such as, for example the incomprehensibility of ‘the wholly other’ and the category of ‘singularity’. Levinas, however, is deeply troubled by what he sees as an over-emphasis on violence in Kierkegaard’s writings and naturally he is highly suspicious of anyone who wants to ‘suspend ethics’ (Levinas 1996, 66-74). For the purposes of diffusing any clear categorizations between the different subjectivities that emerge in the windows, I will also bring out the Jewish influences in Levinas’s work as an attempt to make the conversation between them more complex.

For Hannah Arendt, the crisis is a political crisis and few thinkers have as adamantly fought against the forces of totalitarianism and the limitations on the human condition such systems impose. The political situation caused by her Jewishness, as well as the Christian philosophy and theology that influenced her age, are two ever-present themes in Arendt’s writing. She is perhaps best known for her thinking on political freedom which she defines as the force involved in acting and speaking together in public space. Writing her dissertation on the notion of love in Saint Augustine, however, ‘love of the world’ (Arendt) is said to underlie and motivate her political work (Young-Bruehl 1982). In this sense, Arendt’s writing deals directly with the three themes in the windows in part two and she is also the thinker who most directly addresses education. The focus on human plurality as the human condition per se offers us an approach to politics and political subjectivity that is attentive to both difference and existence, as well as, I will argue, religious subjectivity.

**Thesis Overview**

The study is divided into three parts. The first part – *the visible* – alludes to the new visibility of religion in debates about democracy and it explores the role of education. In three subsequent chapters, the second part – *windows* – seeks to renegotiate the relationship between education, democracy, and religion through three themes identified already in chapter one: love, freedom, dialogue. Education is not given direct attention in the windows but at the end of each of chapter the key issues for education will be drawn out. These will be given a more fulsome treatment in part three – *visions*.

Chapter one explores the status of religion within two of the dominating trends in liberal education. Cosmopolitan education and deliberative democratic education can be seen as two of the most demanded responses to
struggles over multiculturalism and diversity in contemporary educational research, both focusing on solving these struggles through dialogic forms of democracy. The purpose of the chapter is to explore how the relationship between education, democracy, and religion is articulated in contemporary liberal education and how this is brought to bear on the religious subject. Nussbaum’s idea of cultivating, through cosmopolitan education, a ‘love of humanity’ is at the centre of the discussion, as well as Habermas’s recent ‘turn’ to the question of religion through which he suggests a process of translation between religious and secular languages. The chapter argues that cosmopolitan and deliberative models of education tend to lose sight of the concrete religious subject in their emphasis on autonomous rationality and certain models of democracy.

To bring the religious subject into the centre of the renegotiation, chapter two turns to theorists of democracy for whom the very process of defining the subject is itself a political process. By acknowledging antagonism and passion as constitutive of political engagement, it is argued that radical democratic theory offers possibilities for rethinking religious pluralism within a democratic framework. The main purpose of this chapter is to sketch the contours of radical democracy as an alternative to dialogic models of democracy. Its aim is to explore how this model can alter the relationship between religion and democracy as well as the aims and goals of education. The chapter ends by complicating the three themes from chapter one (love, freedom, dialogue), rearticulating them through the attention radical democracy gives to transforming antagonism to agonism, a constitutive dependency, and a conflictual consensus.

The overall purpose of part two – windows – is to offer other ways of seeing love, freedom, and dialogue building on the elements acknowledged in chapter two (antagonism, dependency, conflict). Chapter three makes ‘love of the world’ and ‘love of the neighbour’ its response to the cosmopolitan ‘love of humanity’. For Hannah Arendt ‘the world’ is what comes ‘between’ us, both separating and bringing us together. Kierkegaard gives the in-between space a religious reading, showing that the sacrifice of Isaac can only be seen an act of love if God is ‘the middle term’. Derrida translates the name of God into the name of the ‘wholly other’ suggesting that to love the neighbour is to love the impossible, an idea brought to bear on democracy as well as what it might mean to love the particular neighbour. Following Arendt, Kierkegaard, and Derrida, the chapter argues that a love’s difference is needed if the religious subject is to be able to love religiously in public spaces and if a love of the neighbour is to become possible. The chapter ends by pointing towards what the main challenge for education might become if students are viewed as passionate lovers and not simply seen as autonomous, rational individuals.

Chapter four offers three different ways of looking at freedom. It begins in the idea that subjectivity is relationally constituted and in three different
movements it explores what a notion of freedom that begins in a heteronomous relation to the other would mean for renegotiating the tensions between religion and democracy. Levinas’s argument – ‘to welcome the other puts my freedom in question’ – suggests that heteronomy and not autonomy is the basis of both responsibility and ethics. What Kierkegaard exposes is a religiously motivated loss of freedom and one can only become free and responsible, he argues, if one subjects to an absolute duty to God. For both Levinas and Kierkegaard, autonomy is a flight from freedom and from the inevitable vulnerability that the subjection to the other as freedom demands. In the third movement Arendt warns us for a political loss of freedom motivated by totalitarian political ideologies and her concern is to create conditions where political freedom – freedom in action – can become possible. Freedom seen as subjected freedom, it is argued, places the religious subject at the centre of democracy and the chapter ends by reflecting on what such a relational notion of freedom might mean for education.

Taking the idea of a dialogic model of democracy in education a step further, chapter five explores three different aspects of what dialogue might mean as a conflicted and ambivalent encounter with others. When the subject who enters dialogue is not a unified self but conflicted already from the start, there are limits to what one can know about oneself just as there are limits to what one can know about others. Kierkegaard’s reading of Abraham’s speechlessness opens the chapter, something which is explained as irony – Abraham can speak but he cannot make himself understood (Kierkegaard). For Derrida, Abraham’s speechlessness points to a ‘secret’ that turns communication into an ethical process of translation that is both necessary and impossible. The third aspect of conflicted dialogue comes from Arendt who argues that even if speech and action are inevitable for becoming a human subject, the ‘irony of narratability’ is that none of us is the author of our own lives. We are dependent, from the moment of birth, upon other people’s stories about us to make sense of our lives. The chapter ends by drawing out some educational considerations of the limits and possibilities of dialogue.

The third part – visions – is comprised of one single chapter, chapter six. The chapter focuses on the educational questions derived from the windows and its purpose is to discuss what happens to education when religion and democracy become questions through the ways of seeing love, freedom, and dialogue developed in the windows. It is argued that if we look at love, freedom, and dialogue otherwise we also come to see education otherwise. Given the conditions that religious students face in contemporary education these altered perspectives have particular consequences for them but they also have implications for teacher and student encounters more generally. What it can mean to see religion and democracy as questions for education is articulated within the framework of what I have chosen call “an education of small gestures”. In such education, the act of seeing and the questions themselves have a key role to play.
Part I
The Visible
1
Democracy and Religion
in Liberal Education

Introduction
This chapter explores the status of religion within two of the dominating
trends in liberal education – cosmopolitanism and deliberation – trends that
can be seen as some of the most demanded responses to struggles over mul-
ticulturalism and diversity in contemporary educational research. The chap-
ter turns to how the most influential philosopher in each field – Martha
Nussbaum and Jürgen Habermas, respectively – respond to the new visibility
of religion and the implications of this for their educational models. The
purpose of the chapter is to explore how the relationship between education,
democracy, and religion is articulated in contemporary liberal education and
what comes to the fore when this is brought to bear on the concrete religious
subject.

Nussbaum’s overall cosmopolitan aim is to cultivate a ‘love of humanity’
as a sense of compassion for concerns beyond national boundaries. More
precisely, I explore how ‘love of humanity’ supports her idea of cosmo-
politan education and how this renders particular attachments (such as reli-
gion) secondary to the greater cosmopolitan good. Special attention is given
to how she understands religious love in relation to politics in Upheavals of
Thought (2001). In recent years, Habermas has shown an increasing interest
in how religion can contribute to liberal democracy. This ‘turn’ to the ques-
tion of religion is the focus here and the chapter explores how his proposal
of ‘mutual translation’ ostensibly increases the freedom of religious speech
in public spaces. Some of Habermas’s ideas have been taken up by adva-
cates of deliberative democracy in education, and the limitations and possi-
bilities this has for religious pluralism are discussed. The chapter ends with a
reflection on the implications these positions have for the religious subject,
that is, when the starting point for articulating the relationship between edu-
cation, democracy, and religion is taken to be the rational, autonomous sub-
ject. It centres this reflection around three themes drawn out of the response
to religion in liberal education: love, freedom, and dialogue.
Cosmopolitanism and Education

In a time of pressing global concerns, cosmopolitanism has been reactivated as a way of envisioning anew what cross-cultural understanding, peaceful coexistence, and responsibility for others can mean (Appiah 2006; Beck 2006; Benhabib 2006; Kymlicka 2006). Cosmopolitanism is or constitutes no single world-view but it can be seen as centring around two main questions: How can we live peacefully together? and What do we share, collectively, as human beings (Vertovec & Cohen 2002, 1)?

Cosmopolitanism is currently also being given increasing attention among philosophers of education (Enslin & Tjiattas 2009; Hansen 2008; Papasteph-anou 2002; Todd 2007a; 2007b; 2009a). These scholars’ work build on or are direct responses to Martha Nussbaum’s (1997) now classic treatise on cosmopolitan education in Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education, which is one of the few concrete models of cosmopolitan education on offer. However, despite the fact that religion has taken centre stage in many cultural and social debates, religion is hardly given any systematic attention in recent discussions of the concept of cosmopolitanism (Van der Veer 2002, 170). This is especially remarkable since religious traditions often transcend national boundaries and could, in this regard, be seen as ‘alternative cosmopolitanisms’ (ibid.). Nussbaum’s proposal is an exception to this neglect. Even if she does not give religion undivided attention, discussing it as one ‘attachment’ among many (nation, family, ethnicity), she nonetheless draws extensively on both Christian and Jewish thinkers in her own philosophical texts about emotions, philosophy, and literature. For these two reasons – the concrete model for cosmopolitan education she offers and the discussion of religious thinkers – Nussbaum is a natural choice when exploring the status of religion in cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan education.

The context in which Nussbaum makes her most recent appeal to a ‘love of humanity’ and a cosmopolitan education is the United States after September 2001. In For Love of Country? (2002) she describes the paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, love and compassion were spread across

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17 Peter Van der Veer, Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Amsterdam and Steven Vertovec, Director of the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at the University of Oxford are the main exceptions to this, together with the Reader in Sociology, Sami Zubaida, at Birkbeck College. See Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice (2002) (eds.) Steven Vertovec & Robin Cohen, Oxford: Oxford University Press. For a recent and thorough discussion on cosmopolitanism that omits religion see Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation (1998) (eds.) Pheng Cheah & Bruce Robbins, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

18 By limiting my exposition to Nussbaum’s work I do not claim to do justice to the variety of work being published on cosmopolitanism in general. However, given that religious difference is not discussed as a particular concern in cosmopolitan literature and that Nussbaum’s work has enjoyed influence in educational research, she is the most representative choice for my purposes here.
the United States after the attacks on World Trade Center and, on the other hand, where this also came to a halt at the national border (ix). Moral concerns were directed towards American lives but, as Nussbaum notes, non-American lives affected by the attacks were largely ignored. Is it the case then, she asks, that love for the homeland limits moral responsibility to concern only the immediate context of friends and family, creating an excluding sense of pride in ‘us’ and a demonization of ‘them’ (2002, x)?

Nussbaum’s idea of cosmopolitanism derives from the Stoic idea that every human being is surrounded by circles of expanding moral concern. The innermost circle is represented by friends and family and the outermost by humanity as a whole (2002, 9). From birth we love our parents and attach to the local but as we grow older, she argues, we should learn to extend our compassion for the world around us. Our task – as citizens of the world – is to draw the outermost circle closer so that our moral concerns come to include humanity in its entirety (ibid.). A reoccurring dilemma for Nussbaum is how to mediate between the universal ‘love of humanity’ and our particular, local attachments. Following the Stoics, the larger moral community of humanity must be made the first priority and even if the local community of birth is where a cosmopolitan responsibility begins, it is not where it ought to end. The local needs to be transcended and include the lives of people beyond one’s immediate context (2002, xiii). Nussbaum admits that cosmopolitan universalism may seem less exciting than the particular ways in which we live our local lives but in her view this is where love of humanity as a cosmopolitan ideal becomes the most heroic. She writes:

Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business. It is … a kind of exile – from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own … Cosmopolitanism offers no such refuge; it offers only reason and the love of humanity, which may seem at times less colorful than other sources of belonging. (Nussbaum 2002, 15)

In extending this idea to education, she writes:

In educational terms, this means that students … may continue to regard themselves as defined partly by their particular loves – their families, their religious, ethnic, or racial communities, or even their country. But they must also, and centrally, learn to recognize humanity wherever they encounter it, undeterred by traits that are strange to them, and be eager to understand humanity in all its strange guises. (Nussbaum 2002, 9)

Nussbaum makes it very clear that ‘love of humanity’ is the primary goal of cosmopolitanism and that this collides with smaller ‘loves’ like religion and family. Religions, families, and countries may define who we are but in a time when ‘humanity’ needs our concern and attention, children need to look beyond the local and particular for the benefit of the universal.
In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001) Nussbaum argues that love is the foundational emotion without which no compassionate politics would be possible. Compassion is essential to political life and a certain kind of love is the basis for this. *Upheavals* was initially offered as a series of theological lectures, the Gifford Lectures, delivered in May 1993 and consequently, this is one of the texts where Nussbaum’s view of religion is most clearly addressed. What she seeks to develop in these lectures, especially in their first part, is a neo-Stoic theory of the emotions building on the idea that emotions are context-bound value judgments that are essential to every individual’s own flourishing (2001, 4). Two emotions are particularly pertinent for exploring the connections between emotions and morality: compassion and love. What she seeks is a love that can liberate us from our narrow concerns and cultivate a love of humanity. The main hindrances for this, in her view, are Platonic transcendence and the kind of religious love that Saint Augustine exemplifies.

**Love of Humanity and Religious Love**

Nussbaum’s main critique of religious love is that aspirations for otherworldliness in certain theological and philosophical thinking have had severe negative influences on societal life in the West. It has tempted people to devalue everyday life and nurture longings for ‘the otherworldly’ in a way that has been counterproductive to creating a better world here and now. Her critique is best summarised as a critique of how certain kinds of Christianity have rejected the body, the worldly, and the human and it is the underlying ideas of this that shape her view of religion in liberal democracies.

Nussbaum’s overall argument in *Upheavals* is that since emotions shape our perception of the world and help us discern what is valuable and important in life, there can be no adequate ethical theory without an adequate theory of the emotions (Nussbaum 2001). *Upheavals* focuses solely on the link between compassion and liberal institutions and its purpose is to argue that compassion is an essential feature of good citizenship (ibid. 403, 414).

Nussbaum is initially ambivalent about love as a political emotion since love is selective (love chooses) and concerns itself with particularity (2001, 19). Henceforth referred to as *Upheavals*.

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19 Henceforth referred to as *Upheavals*.
21 Since emotions made the self too preoccupied with external things, the Stoics wanted to eliminate emotions altogether (Nussbaum 2001, 461). In support of the emphasis on agency in Stoic thought, Nussbaum’s neo-Stoic position aims at combining agency with emotions as a basis for evaluative thinking. Their purpose is thus to ‘do moral work’ (2001, 15-16).
This has led some philosophers to discredit emotions as dangerous to both philosophy and politics altogether on the basis that love calls people away from general concerns about the world. It is this “disease” that Nussbaum wants to cure: she wants to “tame” the dangers of love and use its force for political purposes (459-479). We cannot have a compassionate politics, she argues, if we do not also include love as a motivational factor (2001, 459, 461).

The question for Nussbaum is how love can be kept alive and at the same time purified from the ambivalence and excess that has made it unfriendly and inapplicable to political and social aims. Since some kinds of love will be more likely to create tensions within a liberal democratic society than others, there needs to be normative criteria through which love can be evaluated in relation to politics. Nussbaum develops three such criteria: compassion, reciprocity and individuality (478-481).

1. **Compassion:** love should make room for a compassion built on reasonable accounts of the variations of human predicaments.

2. **Reciprocity:** love should make room for mutual concern where people treat each other as agents and ends in themselves.

3. **Individuality:** love should keep as central the idea that human beings are individuals and as such are both separated from and qualitatively distinct from one another.

Reformulated, the three criteria give rise to asking the following: is the notion of love reasonable in taking account of human difference (cognitive notion of compassion)?; does it support human agency (in reciprocal terms)?; and does it support one living one’s own life (autonomy)?

**The Worldly, The Bodily, The Human**

In response to these questions, Nussbaum detects two ‘ascent patterns’ in the history of philosophy or, rather, one movement of ascent and one of descent. She exemplifies both patterns through literature – ancient and modern: Plato and Augustine belong to the tradition of contemplative ascent whilst James Joyce’s *Ulysses* represents the movement of descent whereby human desire ‘climbs down’ to the imperfect world and embraces it with love (2001, 469).

For Nussbaum, and this is key, neither of these patterns are merely thought patterns. As she is eager to point out, they represent two different ways of life where striving for transcendence in the contemplative tradition stands against the immanent movement of descent (2001, 471).

The idea of self-transcendence in Plato, that is, the possibility to refine the soul by contemplating what is ultimately beautiful and good, is Nussbaum’s
main target of critique. In her view, it turns the lover away from this world or, rather, from ‘the worldliness of the world’ nurturing a longing for the otherworldly. Nussbaum’s main problem with the Platonic lover, therefore, is that he tries to move beyond the bondage of earthly love and as a consequence he treats earthly needs as “‘mortal rubbish’” (2001, 496 quoting Plato). A lover who in this way renounces dependency and seeks refuge in contemplation can hardly be seen as meeting the needs of ordinary people. Turning away from ordinary life he or she is of little use to a compassionate politics:

A lover who repudiates bondage to human need is ill-placed to assess properly the needs of other humans, or to see the importance of coming to their aid; thus it is no surprise that all three Platonic thinkers [Plato, Spinoza and Proust] repudiate compassion as something contaminated by bondage to worldly objects. (Nussbaum 2001, 527)

On Nussbaum’s account, contemplation is a waste of time in a world afflicted by human need. In her view, the Platonic lover rejects his bonds to the particular and therefore he also loses contact with the imperfections of humanity. The contemplative tradition creates what she calls “an illiberal perfectionist politics, a politics that respects the choices of citizens only insofar as they come up to an externally imposed moral mark” (2001, 499). It is clear that the Platonic lover does not live up to Nussbaum’s criteria of compassion: but what becomes of him or her in relation to reciprocity and individuality? Since the Platonic lover tends to leave out of account what is not good and fine in a person (i.e., their faults and flaws) he fails to acknowledge the difference and distinctness of every human being (ibid., 499). He “refuses to embrace the very fact of difference”, Nussbaum writes, and therefore he does not live up to the criteria of individuality either. Reciprocity fails too, since the Platonic lover’s focus on the ultimate properties in the other person fails to give account of that person’s own agency and choice (498). What a compassionate politics demands, Nussbaum writes, is not so much “other citizens’ contemplation as their cooperation” (ibid., 499). On Nussbaum’s account, a longing for self-transcendence seems automatically to lead to a repudiation of agency, choice and difference. But given all these problematic aspects in Plato, Nussbaum asks, why is this ‘way of life’ still so attractive to so many in contemporary society? Why has a life in beatitude of the good and beautiful had such an appeal throughout history? Instead of accepting that we live in an imperfect world as finite and mortal beings, why do we continue to strive for immortality and infinity (2001, 525)? The answer, for Nussbaum, is rooted in shame and need: we are ashamed of our neediness and our bodily desires and we try to take control of our ambivalent situation by aspiring for transcendence and becoming godlike (ibid., 525).
Dissatisfied with Plato’s ascent Nussbaum turns to two Christian thinkers, Augustine and Dante, who articulate the contemplative tradition in slightly different ways. In Augustine, she finds inspiration for both ascent and descent in the fact that he acknowledges both the need to purify the heart and the danger of moving beyond imperfection (528). Although, in *The City of God* in which contemplation is made a goal for the Christian life, the Platonic tradition still dominates, according to Nussbaum, because it contrasts the perfect love of God in the heavenly city to the imperfect love in the earthly and Augustine urges us to cultivate the latter and denounce the former (2001, 528-529). A perfected love of God, on Nussbaum’s reading, leads to a life “emptied of erotic longing and tension” and therefore the early texts of Augustine are of little use to her political vision (531). The later text, *Confessions*, is where Augustine battles with his own sexual longings and desires and therefore this text holds a more positive position in Nussbaum’s thinking (531). Here Augustine critiques Platonism and he argues, to Nussbaum’s liking, that a perfected life is never attainable in this life, nor is it an appropriate Christian goal (535).

What is appreciated, from Nussbaum’s point of view, in Augustine’s notion of love is the move away from self-sufficiency toward dependency (2001, 537). If the Platonist cuts away all those aspects of life that are central to growth and knowledge (read: trials and imperfections), the most profound contribution of Augustine’s thinking, for Nussbaum, is that he creates a story of human imperfection. His attentiveness to attachments, emotions and desires is something which a compassionate politics must acknowledge and in her view he recaptures much of the humanity that the Platonists have cast aside. Augustine, she writes, “situates ascent within humanity and renounces the wish to depart from our human condition” (2001, 547 my emphasis). Hence, in comparison with Plato we find in Augustine a much stronger emphasis on worldliness and human, bodily desire:

Instead of exaltation, we find poverty and lowness, dust and ashes … instead of the fullness of the Platonist soul, emptiness and barrenness … instead of the ease with which that soul, once purified, turns to contemplation, we find toil and labor … instead of safety, danger … instead of light, darkness and obscurity, fog and mist … Instead of purity and health, we find sickness, hunger, and thirst; God is invoked as ‘my intimate doctor’. (Nussbaum 2001, 544)

If Nussbaum is so positive about Augustine’s notion of love, why does he still fall short of living up to her three criteria? First, because the primacy of the love of God over love of man makes it questionable whether his order of love will lead to increased love of the neighbour. When what is loved in the neighbour is merely the presence of God (and the hope for the neighbour’s salvation), “[t]here is some question as to how this confessing lover can be said to have a neighbor at all” (550). Giving the love of God first priority,
she argues, will degrade the love of neighbour (ibid.). Second, as long as love of God suggests a retreat from the world, it will not enhance reciprocal relationships to others. By contrast, it will most likely lead to negative attitudes toward them. Loving God puts both individuality and reciprocity in question and draws people’s attention away from societal injustice. They will be tempted, Nussbaum thinks, to deny “the importance of the worldly losses and injustices to which my neighbor may attach importance” (2001, 552).

Despite the attention given to ‘poverty and lowness’, ‘emptiness and barrenness’, ‘sickness, hunger, and thirst’, the problem with Augustine’s notion of love, for Nussbaum, is that bodily and sexual desire only plays a minor role (583). Although the erotic element is there, sexual desire is seen as lack of control and cannot be a part of an adequate love. Hence, the key feature of Nussbaum’s critique of religion originates from the bodily renunciation she sees dominating many religious traditions (583-584). Throughout her writing, she returns to this renunciation of the body and it leads her to argue that religious belief, by and large, is a flight from reality, hampers human fulfilment, rejects bodily and sexual desire, and directs our attention towards the otherworldly.

There are two ideas in Augustine’s thinking – the idea that the world we live in is temporal and his allusions to asceticism – that are the most disturbing for Nussbaum, since they distract people from political action and degrade bodily desire. The politics that come out of this Christian love is a politics of shame and this is deeply at odds, she sarcastically sums up, with a liberal compassionate politics:

The politics of Eden is this: be ashamed of your longing for objects, your curiosity to know them, and your very wish to originate independent actions. Be so ashamed that you see this as radical evil, and yield your will before the authority of the church. But also: be consoled, for this is merely a provisional world, and the actions you would like to undertake here do not matter greatly; all of your suffering will ultimately be made up of the transcendent beauty of coming into the presence of God. (Nussbaum 2001, 555)

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22 It is when she discusses Augustine that Nussbaum becomes clear about her own position on religious matters. She writes: “To put my cards on the table, then, what I shall say henceforth is said from the point of view of someone who has converted from Christianity to Judaism, and whose understanding of Judaism gives the moral sphere considerable autonomy and centrality, seeing the concern of God for man as essentially moral and political, focused on this-worldly concerns and actions, and intelligible from the point of view of a this-worldly use of intelligence” (549). She continues, with reference to St Augustine and sin, “In the Jewish conception … the human being is perfectly capable of being good … Augustine makes us a community of abject and rather helpless beings, victims of our inheritance” (551). In this context she also refers to Hannah Arendt’s dissertation on Augustine, which she is supportive of in its critical remarks on contemplation and Augustine’s love of neighbour. Her main critique is related to Arendt’s support of Augustine’s notion of sinfulness as a ‘condition of equality’, a Christian idea that from a Jewish point of view should be rejected, according to Nussbaum (550-554).
The main character of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, represents the view that best summarizes Nussbaum’s own position because he combines scientific rationalism with a passionate defence of sexual liberty (2001, 708). In him, she finds a strong dislike for religious narrow-mindedness and militant nationalism in combination with a passion for the cosmopolitan idea that Nussbaum herself advocates:

In Bloom’s view, ethnic, religious, and national chauvinisms are a prime source of ‘the insult and hatred’ that oppose love and therefore life. … Against this politics of division, violence and hatred, Bloom sets up his own program for non-violence, of scientific and technological progress, of education, and of compassion for material need, in accordance with a cosmopolitan conception of a common humanity. (Nussbaum 2001, 708)

All aspirations for transcendence, Nussbaum finally sums up, deprive us of our ‘humanity’. The ideas of love articulated by Plato and Augustine are both insufficient to a compassionate politics and should be rejected for the following reason:

All repudiate daily life. All … wish to rise above that ordinariness, departing not only from what we might call the idolatrous aspects of the ordinary social world, its excessive preoccupation with money, fame, and revenge, but also from the everyday functions of life and everyday objects, from mud, hair and dirt … all of these ascents in a real sense repudiate us. Nobody has a menstrual period in Plato. Nobody excretes in Spinoza. Nobody masturbates in Proust … Augustine and Dante record such moments, but leave them behind in hell. (Nussbaum 2001, 681)

At the end of the day, it is Bloom that is Nussbaum’s hero. It is he that comes to represent the cultivated, cosmopolitan citizen whose love of humanity makes him choose non-violence, education, and progress over hatred and insult. Bloom does not wish to renounce the bodily, the worldly, and the human like Plato and Augustine. Instead, he rejects ethnicity, religion, and nationalism to embrace our common humanity.

What makes Nussbaum’s critique of bodily renunciation so forceful as a critique of religion, according to Charles Taylor (2007), is that it illustrates how permeated our culture is by the idea of unrestricted human flourishing – an idea that turns most forms of asceticism into a hindrance of human fulfilment. In his most recent opus, *A Secular Age*, he puts Nussbaum’s critique of religion (of Christianity) into the larger perspective of a polemical debate between religion and the secular humanism of the Enlightenment. According to Taylor, the idea that religion mutilates us and prevents us from flourishing must be seen in the context of a society that is becoming increasingly therapeutic (618-656). In such a context, it is not surprising that the idea of asceticism, for example, is seen as inimical to human fulfilment and a loss of love.
and life. But in most religious traditions, ascetic rules or practices are seen from a different perspective and are used as a means to favour solidarity with other people. They are meant to ‘expand the heart’ so that a greater love for God and neighbour can become possible: not far, in other words, from Nussbaum’s own aspirations for compassion. The therapeutic turn through which Nussbaum reads bodily renunciation does not see this, Taylor claims (ibid.).

What underlies Nussbaum’s rejection of asceticism, according to Taylor, is the idea that the ills of society can be cured if human fulfilment is made first priority (2007, 625-634). This builds on the idea that an innate human goodness and innocence have been lost and can be rehabilitated, and the cure she suggests is a “talking cure”, something that today is offered, he argues, either through therapy or education (633). Taylor’s critique of this secular humanist position is that it underestimates human depravity (641) and the price for this is a moral engineering that tends to label deviant behaviour as either ills that need cure or ills that need education (633). The outcome, he argues, is a “humanism frequently dismissive of, and sometimes cruel to deviants, classing them as misfits or people actuated by ill-will” (632). Even if Taylor is partly sympathetic to the need for a cure of human depravity, he illuminates how context dependant Nussbaum’s notion of love is and how it collides with other ways of ‘loving’.

What Nussbaum advocates, it could be argued, is a purpose driven love of humanity where the political goal to create a compassionate, cosmopolitan politics is given first priority. For this she needs citizens that adopt a notion of love that is attentive to the bodily, the worldly, and the human but by giving primacy to the political vision, she renders problematic those ‘loves’ that aspire for transcendence (Plato) or a love of God (Augustine). With Taylor’s remark about education as a cure in the back of our minds, let us turn to explore what becomes of religious love in Nussbaum’s model of cosmopolitan education.

**Religion and Cosmopolitan Education**

In her now classical defence of reform in liberal education in *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum suggests that the idea of the cosmopolitan citizen can be understood in two ways (1997, 9). Either in the “sterner, more exigent version” where a person’s primary loyalty is to humanity as a whole and for whom personal loyalties like nation, family, and religion are secondary, or, in the milder version, where a cosmopolitan citizen is someone who “recognizes the worth of human life wherever it occurs” (ibid.). This milder version is the one Nussbaum herself prefers and she makes cultivating humanity the main focus of her reform.

To ‘cultivate humanity’, she argues, means to cultivate the capacity for *critical self-examination* and the capacity for *narrative imagination*, that is, to imagine what it might be like to be in another person’s shoes (Nussbaum
1997, 9-11 my emphasis). If one lives a self-examined life one does not accept any beliefs as authoritative just because they have been handed down by tradition. Because, what democracy needs are “citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority” (10). Essential here is moving beyond group loyalties, to try instead to understand the world from the viewpoint of the other (a thought she connects to Immanuel Kant’s ideas on autonomous rational thinking) (10-11). Hence, the idea of self-examination resonates not only with the theme of cultivation but also with how she defines the main task of liberal education, which is “to liberate the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the world” (8).

The second aspect – narrative imagination – is central for developing an enlarged moral capacity and it is in and through this capacity that the sensitivity to difference in Nussbaum’s proposal becomes the most explicit. What is needed to cultivate humanity is recognition of the fact that the life of the other could have been mine and an “understanding of the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances” (10). Narrative imagination can in this sense be seen as a way of enlarging the circles of concern that a cosmopolitan citizen must develop.

If we return to For Love of Country? (2002) which is where religion is most explicitly mentioned, she nonetheless seems to have adopted the ‘sterner version’ arguing that all “particular loves” must be made secondary to ‘love of humanity’ and that our primary focus should be on “[w]hat we share” (5, 9). “[S]tudents may continue to regard themselves as defined partly by their particular loves [such as their religion]”, she writes, “but they must also, and centrally, learn to recognize humanity wherever they encounter it, undeterred by traits that are strange to them” (9). In cases of tension and conflict, in other words, religion must yield to the benefit of what we hold in common: our humanity.

Cultivating humanity as a program for cosmopolitan education means that we should look beyond what is strange and learn to love one another despite our differences. Differences should not stand in the way of living peacefully together because, as Nussbaum writes,

[t]he accident of where one is born is just that, an accident; any human being might have been born in any nation. Recognizing this, the Stoic successors held, we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and fellow human beings. (Nussbaum 2002, 7)

The approach to difference in cosmopolitan education is rooted in the idea that differences are ‘accidents’ that should not be assigned too much value. To avoid having these differences come between us, a cosmopolitan education seeks to enhance knowledge, that is, self-knowledge, knowledge about
other people, knowledge about shared global problems, and knowledge about the world (2002, 12-15). The liberal idea of self-examination is persistent also in Nussbaum’s idea of cosmopolitan education and it builds on the logic that by living an examined life, students will develop a better understanding of others (ibid. 14-15). Education is essential as an arena for implementing this because it is in and through encounters with other students’ customs, languages, traditions, and habits, that an enlarged moral capacity and a more tolerant society can take shape.

Given the above, religion and religious difference is placed in a somewhat disadvantageous position in Nussbaum’s view of cosmopolitan education. Religion becomes a secondary attachment that is of less importance than the ‘greater love of humanity’; it is an accident of birth that we should not allow to erect barriers between us or to play a too important role in students’ lives. But if religion is a love of primary importance to some students and if this love is neither ‘secondary’ nor an ‘accident’ – in short, if the map looks different than the dichotomous splits Nussbaum makes between ascent and decent, transcendence and immanence, body and mind, rejection and embrace – how does cosmopolitan education respond to this complexity? Moreover, how does it motivate students to prioritize a ‘love of humanity’ before a ‘love of God’? Nussbaum does not answer these questions but she strongly advocates a cosmopolitan love as primary for the purpose of coming to terms with the pressing tensions and the lack of compassion she sees around her. Rendering particular attachments secondary seems to be the price students have to pay for a more peaceful and compassionate future.

However, have we not come up against an inconsistency in Nussbaum’s thinking on religion? On the one the one hand, she argues that religious love must be rejected for its failure to acknowledge the bodily, the worldly, and the human. On the other hand, she rejects religion (in her texts on cosmopolitan education) for being too dependent upon traditions and loyalties. According to Nussbaum, it seems, religious love needs to be transcended for the sake of cosmopolitan love. This being so, her critique of transcendence in religious traditions can be directed also at her own idea of cosmopolitanism. That is, if the argument is that religious love is inimical to bodily desire and worldliness, then this seems to be true also for the idea of cosmopolitanism which can be seen as a way to live up to another universal and disembodied ideal. By thinking about a ‘another world’ (Nussbaum’s reading) and by holding onto inherited traditions and authorities, religious people will not ‘think for themselves’, pay attention to this world or cultivate a cosmopolitan ethic. But there is a risk that Nussbaum’s notion of cosmopolitanism nurtures precisely the other-worldliness and the blindness to particularity that she accuses religious traditions of instantiating. What Nussbaum points out as being particularly problematic with religion vis-à-vis cosmopolitanism, is the nurturing of ‘transcendent longings’. At the same time, cosmopolitan education asks of religious students to transcend their particular attach-
ments. It seems as though this leaves religious students in a situation where they cannot become ‘citizens of the world’ unless they subordinate their religious attachments to cosmopolitan ones. This is a situation of competing loyalties and attachments, it seems to me.

If one views Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan model of education as a call away from introverted, small-scale questions to envisioning an education concerned about ‘the real world’ – concerned, for example, about the environmental crisis, about global inequality, exploitation and oppression, and transnational injustices – it is easy to agree with her proposal. As a critique of an education that is so preoccupied with technicalities and micromanagement that it forgets that there is a ‘real world out there’, her argument is convincing. According to Carl-Anders Säfström (2006), however, the desire for ‘reality’ is a recurring theme in teacher education and the question that needs to be asked, he thinks, is what is meant by this. If it simply comes to mean an observance of what ‘is’, there is a risk that education becomes merely a re/presentation and a re/production of what is already possible: it becomes a means to socialize students into an already existing system (13). For Säfström, by contrast, the grandeur of being a human subject lies in her ability for self-transcendence, that is, in the ability to transcend necessity, and to pause, reflect, and choose another direction (ibid.).

This approach emanates from Säfström’s view of education which is not merely a formative but also a transformative encounter which potentiality lies in imagining things otherwise. This may sound as if it comes close to the cultivation Nussbaum already suggest. Yet, there is a radical difference at work here since the point of departure for Säfström, following thinkers like Bauman and Derrida, is radical plurality (and not common humanity) as the very condition of possibility for human existence. For imagining things otherwise this means living with the fact that each imagination is unique, not a re/production of the same (cosmopolitan) vision.

Nussbaum wants to liberate us from thinking in ‘group terms’ and to enlarge our concern for others but, to my mind, she too easily rejects as insignificant all those differences – historic backgrounds, ethnic, national, and religious belongings – that make a difference to how we, as human beings, relate to the world. In Nussbaum’s thinking, differences are transcendable and in a certain sense differences are not differences at all but rather social variants of the same humanity. As is pointed out by Charles Taylor (2007), she ends up advancing a type of moral engineering that builds on a dialectical relationship between the innate goodness of humanity and the innate depravity of religion. According to Hilary Putman, who is one of the invited respondents to the essay For Love of Country?, Nussbaum’s view on religion builds on the common idea that religion “always leads to fundamentalism and intolerance” (2002, 92). What her argument does in either its “militant atheistic form or the militant cosmopolitan form” Putnam argues, is to “confuse a pre text for human aggression and cruelty with human aggression.
and cruelty themselves” as if saying: “‘Remove this or that pretext, and we will have a less cruel and aggressive world’” (ibid.). According to Putnam, however, “there is not the slightest reason to believe this” (ibid.) and he uses the former Soviet Union as an example:

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, while it existed, was supposed to be completely ‘internationalist’ (i.e., cosmopolitan). Indeed, in principle, it was hoped that one day all countries would be ‘Soviet Socialist Republics.’ It was also, of course, militantly atheist. … ‘But,’ it might be argued, ‘the Soviet Union wasn’t a democracy.’ Presumably, the point of saying that would be that when one does have a democracy, one doesn’t get aggression unless nationalist or religious fervor have been whipped up. But that isn’t true, either. (Putnam 2002, 93)

If we return to the idea of ‘cultivating humanity’ the purpose of this idea, as we have seen, is to socialize new citizens into the goodness of being human. The risk involved in talking about ‘humanity’ in this way, Mariana Papastephanou points out, is that the cosmopolitan identification of ‘the human’ becomes a yardstick for what is counted as “properly human” (2002, 74). When this happens, we are only a small step away from evaluating and judging how close other cultures and religions come to what is ‘originally human’ on that basis (ibid.). A similar point is argued by Sharon Todd and according to her, there is a risk that Nussbaum’s account of difference is filtered out through an appeal to a universalism that only sees particularism as a means to an end (2009a, 39). It is thus a purposive love that Nussbaum advocates in her appeal to a cosmopolitan ‘love of humanity’. The acknowledgement of the other’s difference is mainly used as a means to make ourselves morally cultivated. Hence, the responsibility to ‘cultivate humanity’ becomes instrumental and rests with the other – you exist as a means to make me a better person. Todd writes:

It appears as though the whole point of developing cultural awareness … is merely a means for recognizing what we share with others … rather than being a means for facing cultural differences as they appear in encounters with actual people. … Exposure to cultures other than our own is put in the service here of making ‘us’ better people on ‘our’ own terms. (Todd 2009a, 30)

What Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan education becomes despite its focus on ‘self-examination’ and ‘narrative imagination’ is an instrumental approach to difference. As Todd points out, the concreteness of ‘actual people’ is transcended for the purpose of liberal education.

A similar point is made by Paul Standish (1992) when he argues that attachments are involuntary aspects of our lives that constitute the very condition of who we are. “We normally grow up”, he writes, “attached to our parents and to our homes, and these are not choices we have made. The bonds of community are always a background to the way we are” (242). It is a fea-
ture of a modern view of identity, Standish points out, to fail to recognize these attachments (243). As we have seen, cosmopolitan education continues to omit these attachments when it asks of students that they should assume responsibility for the world despite the backgrounds that have shaped who they have become.

Cosmopolitan education seeks to enlarge the students’ place in the world and widen the horizon that has restricted education to classrooms. On this view, our world is larger, our ethical concerns more urgent, humanity more important than any of our local attachments. This is an agreeable vision in many respects but it tends to idealize humanity and hide that which is difficult to love behind an idea(l) of an inherent goodness and optimism. When Drucilla Cornell (2003) comments on this she argues that even though humanity is and always will be an ideal, its ideality must always be retained; “it can never be figured once and for all.” (172). Since September 11, 2001, our commitment to this ideal has been seriously challenged, she admits, but humanity is nothing we can deserve or lose even if our dignity is violated (172). Instead, she writes, we must all “face our humanity”, something which involves realizing that also those who committed the terrorist acts “are still within the reach of the ideal of humanity” (174).

What possibilities a model of democracy that begins in a more ‘imperfect’ notion of the human subject might hold for the renegotiations in this dissertation will be explored in the next chapter. Before we turn to this, however, let us examine how a deliberative model of education represented by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has addressed religion and how he sees religious traditions as having the potential to speak back to liberal democracy about some of its lost essentials.

The Political Relevance of Religious Freedom

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is one of the most influential political thinkers of the twentieth century. He is traditionally not known as a thinker on religion but as the father of deliberative democracy – founded in his two volume opus The Theory of Communicative Action (1987) – and for developing a discourse theory of ethics in Between Facts and Norms (1996). In recent years, however, religion has been at the centre of Habermas’s political theorizing and he has been giving the public and political role of religion a considerable amount of attention. It should be mentioned that even if Habermas’s view on religion has changed over time it has played a role in his political thinking since the late 1970s.

What I focus on here is Habermas’s shifting views on religion. He has gone from seeing religion as a relic of the past that will disappear in modern societies (1976/1997; 1987) to seeing it as providing motivational resources that liberal states cannot themselves produce (2008). The latter view comes to the fore for example in the dialogue with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in
Munich, 2004 (now Pope Benedict XVI) published as *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (2006), in the recently published *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (2008) and in the speech “Faith and Knowledge” delivered on October 14, 2001, on receiving the Peace Price of the German Book Trade published in *The Future of Human Nature* (2003a). Habermas’s recent interest in religion has caused mixed reactions. Some have applauded him for defending the Judeo-Christian legacy as a basis for European culture and democracy vis-à-vis what is perceived to be the increasing influences coming from Islam. Among others it has come as a surprise that one of the most forceful defenders of a liberal and secular society is paying an interest in religion and there have been speculations as to whether Habermas himself has become religious. As a direct response to this he has firmly and clearly replied: “I have become old, but not pious” (Jonsson 2009, 23).

My aim in this part of the chapter is to explore the implications of Habermas’s ‘turn’ regarding religion for religious subjects. This implies asking the following question: what is the relevance of religion for Habermas’s dialogic model of democracy, then and now? As I make clear below, this is a particularly relevant question for those educational projects that take Habermas’s view of deliberative democracy as their model.

**Religion as Relic and the Linguistification of the Sacred**

In *Legitimation Crisis* (1976/1997), Habermas sees religious traditions as an irretrievable part of past stages in history (120). He is concerned with the lost ability among democratic liberal societies to legitimate political authority and in this process he acknowledges the connecting and articulating role

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23 In an interview with Eduardo Mendieta (2002), “A Conversation About God and the World” there is a much-quoted passage that has been applauded by some (mostly conservative Christian circles) and criticized by others. He writes: “For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappraisal and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk” (Habermas 2002 in Mendieta, 148-149). The critics have argued that this privileges the Judeo-Christian legacy and excludes Islam from the ‘postnational constellation’ (Europe and the EU).

24 The translation from Swedish here is mine and I quote Ulf Jonsson’s recently published book, *Habermas, påven och tron – Jürgen Habermas och Joseph Ratzinger om religion och sanning i ett postmodernt samhälle [Habermas, the Pope and Faith – Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger on Religion and Truth in a Postmodern Society]* (2009). Skellefteå: Artos. Jonsson’s focus is on Habermas’s and Ratzinger’s understandings of truth and metaphysics. Even if this is not the focus here, I am indebted to Jonsson for pointing out some of the key movements in Habermas interest in the question of religion.
that religious traditions previously have played. Throughout history, he argues, religions have linked the individual to both the tribe and the cosmos and they have helped people articulate and motivate a common morality (118). In contemporary society, however, we are witnessing a ship-wrecking of world-views, and morality can no longer be founded on collective metaphysical or transcendental assumptions. As a consequence, the secular state needs to invent its own morality and its own ideas about the good life (120).

The question for Habermas in this time of ‘crisis’ is how to create a new basis for legitimation from which societal institutions can operate. If the secular state can no longer depend on religious legitimation as a foundation for its morality, on what can it then be founded? Or, in Habermas’s own words: “[I]f world-maintaining interpretative systems today belong irretrievably to the past, then what fulfils the moral-practical task of constituting ego- and group-identity?” (120). The crisis Habermas describes in the 70s is a double crisis not only because the legitimating power of religious traditions has faded away in the Enlightenment but also because the legitimizing authority of societal institutions is thoroughly questioned in democratic states.

The legitimation crisis leads Habermas to write what can be considered one of the most influential social theories in the second half of the twentieth century, The Theory of Communicative Action (1987). In the first part of the second of its two volumes, Habermas founds his theory of communicative action in two late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century figures: Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). In Durkheim, he is attracted to how the social cohesion of religion functions as a resource for the establishment of societies and the linguistic turn in Habermas’s thinking has its roots in Durkheim’s emphasis on the bridging function of the religious rite.25 What seems to interest Habermas with religion, at this point in his writing, is how the non-linguistic function of religion can be transported into his linguistic model of communicative action, recreating a binding force in society. In the religious rite Habermas sees a prelinguistic model of how the theory of communicative action can function.26

More precisely, the roots of societal morality legitimized through the establishment of consensus are founded on what Habermas calls “the linguification of the sacred” (1987, 77-111). What can “inherit the mantle of religion” and “replace the authority of the sacred”, he writes, is “neither science nor art [but] only a morality, set communicatively aflow and developed into a discourse ethics” (92). In other words, the integrating function that reli-

25 Durkheim is known especially for theorizing about how ritual practices hold a mediating function between the sacred and the profane and link the individual to a collective consciousness. I will not go into Durkheim’s theory of religion since my focus is on Habermas’s writing on religion, but my brief and indirect reference to Durkheim here is from The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, (1915/1965) translated by Carol Cosman, New York: Free Press.
gions have provided must be replaced by linguistic communication. To achieve this and to replace the sacred foundation of morality, Habermas formulates a theory of discourse ethics based on the idea of consensus. His idea is that consensus can replace the authority of the sacred or, more precisely, that a linguistically based ethics can replace religion as a morally binding force. What is demanded of citizens if this is to work – and this is key – is that they show respect for the binding force of consensus and are loyal to the norms and moral maxims that are collectively decided upon:

The authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of the achieved consensus … The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement; going along with this is the release of the rationality potential in communicative action. The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the spellbinding power of the holy, is sublimated into the binding/bonding force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence. (Habermas 1987, 77)

The ‘binding and bonding’ are key terms here and, as we shall see in the next part of the thesis, it is these kinds of social conventions and agreements that Søren Kierkegaard so forcefully critiques. The early Habermas seems to believe, however, that social institutions can imitate the binding force of the sacred through the notion of consensus and even if religion has disappeared through the process of disenchantment, its force can be re instituted through a morality that is communicatively produced and collectively agreed upon. The legitimizing force of political authorities can be recreated but only by virtue of the ‘re- enchantment and empowerment’ he assigns to the binding force of collective agreements and not, as in pre-modern times, on the basis of transcendent metaphysical ideas.

The term ‘communicative action’ refers to the cooperative act of mutual communication that individuals partake in based on their inherent capacity for rationality. The invention of this concept has its roots in the critique of modernity he develops (in Vol. II), namely that modern society has become increasingly individuated and differentiated, meaning that different spheres of society are cut off from each other and are left to develop internal rationalities with little or no connections between one another. The conflicts that arise when the system (i.e., the market economy and its experts and administrators) is uncoupled from the lifeworld can only be solved by increasing communication between people where ideologies and world-views can be articulated (1987, 153-197). But the modern notion of the individual who

27 How Habermas discusses rationality could be explored at length but it suffices to say, for the purpose of this thesis, that The Theory of Communicative Action is a critique of functionalist and instrumental reason and seeks to develop an intersubjective notion of identity as well as a practical notion of rationality.

28 The term ‘differentiation’ is discussed in the introduction of this thesis.
engages in this conversation from an autonomous and self-conscious position is insufficient for Habermas and his turn to communicative action demands another notion of the subject. This is when Mead’s social psychology becomes important. With the help of Mead’s notion of inter-subjectivity he develops a pragmatic idea of rationality (rationality as cooperative deliberation and argumentation) and a notion of the subject in which linguistic interaction is seen as crucial for identity formation (3-42). Habermas notion of intersubjectivity builds on the idea that the subject is constituted in and through its cooperative use of language and, as we shall see in the next section, this is a key feature of Habermas’s deliberative model of democracy.29

Post-secular Society and the Motivating Force of Religion

According to Eduardo Mendieta, it has been frequently argued that Habermas puts religion to rest through the notion of the ‘linguistification of the sacred’ (Mendieta 2002, 28).30 It therefore came as a surprise when the speech Habermas delivered in Frankfurt when receiving the Peace Price of the German Book Trade on October 14, 2001, was about religion (Jonsson, 2009). Only a month earlier, the World Trade Center in New York had been attacked, so the surprise was not so much the choice of topic. What was surprising, coming from someone who has regarded himself as “‘tone deaf’” to religion (Habermas 2006, 11) was the demand that secular society needs to acquire a new understanding of religious convictions since these are more and other than simply ‘relics of the past’.

What is ‘new’ in this speech compared to earlier writings is the term ‘post-secular’. Habermas calls attention to the fact that religion has not gone away as he predicted in the 1980s but that “religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization” (2003a, 104).31 In other

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29 I am not doing justice to Habermas’s complex theorizing on the notions of communicative action and intersubjectivity but, for my purposes here, I have simply wanted to point out that his early texts hold the view that religion will be replaced by other sources of legitimation.
30 Eduardo Mendieta is the editor of Religion and Rationality. Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity (Habermas 2002). In its foreword, Mendieta suggests that the secularization suggested in Habermas’s philosophy acts not to the detriment of religion but instead has helped religion ‘survive’ by transforming it into secular language. He writes: “[W]ithout the secularization and transformation which are enacted by philosophy’s translation from religious to secular concepts, the religious itself would remain mute and even threaten to petrify and remain historically ineffective. Without philosophy, what lives in religion might perish, or remain inaccessible to us children of the Enlightenment” (Mendieta 2002, 28).
31 In Habermas’s dialogue with Ratzinger the term ‘post-secular’ suggests that we are now beyond secularization but not beyond religion. Religion did not disappear in modernity and the term ‘post-secular’ “does more than give public recognition to religious fellowships [and] the functional contribution they make to the reproduction of motivations and attitudes” (2006, 46). A ‘post-secular’ society also implies a process of transformation where “both sides agree to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process” (47).
words, religions will (and should, according to Habermas) continue to exist even if society as a whole will (and should) become increasingly secularized.

Habermas begins his speech by declaring that September 11th should not be seen as a clash between religion and democracy. Even if both Muhammed Atta and Usama Bin Laden were motivated by religious beliefs, their actions should rather be seen as a clash between fundamentalism – as an aggressive and distorted kind of religion – and a secularism that is equally aggressive and distorted (Habermas 2003a, 101-103). Secularism has tended to render religion invisible by either taming it (the view Habermas himself had earlier endorsed), or by discrediting it as an illegitimate way of life (104). Both these approaches need to be abandoned, he now argues, since they are inconsistent with a liberal ideology of equality, pluralism, and tolerance (ibid.).

What needs to happen in a post-secular society is for both religious and non-religious citizens to become self-reflective. For religious citizens this means that they must; first accept the “cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations or religions;” second, “adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge” and; third, “agree to the premises of a constitutional state grounded in a profane morality” (2003a, 104). In this speech Habermas tries to reconcile religion with secular society by acknowledging both sides. “Religious consciousness” (ibid.) must submit itself to the authority of scientific knowledge and profane morality, while secularism must refrain from becoming too offensive and rigid. He writes:

[O]nly if the secular side too remains sensitive to the force of articulation inherent in religious languages will the search for reasons that aim at universal acceptability not lead to an unfair exclusion of religions from the public sphere, nor sever secular society from important resources of meaning. (Habermas 2003a, 109)

Through the “cooperative task which requires that both sides take on the perspective of the other one” violence can be avoided (109). What we see emerging in the Frankfurt speech is a willingness to find a third position between distorted religions and a distorted secularism. In this process the unique role of religious language is to become one of the main incitements for the political proposal on mutual translation and learning that he introduces in 2005.

For Habermas, the escalation of conflicts between different kinds of fundamentalists (religious or secular) can be explained as a result of both a failure of communication and loss of a normative kernel in Western societies. That we are back in a certain kind of legitimation crisis becomes clear in his interview with Giovanna Borradori (Habermas 2003b) in which he argues that a contributing factor to the escalation of fundamentalism, conflict, and violence is that something has been lost in the materialistic mind-set of the
West. “Let’s admit it”, he says, “the West presents itself in a form deprived of any normative kernel as long as its concern for human rights only concerns the attempt at opening new free markets and as long as, at home, it allows free reign to the neoconservative division of labor” (33). True to his leftist political ideals, Habermas explains the ‘clash of civilizations’ as a clash between material interests. But it does not lead him to become self-critical about his own belief in conversation and dialogue. Instead he re-emphasizes the need for a common language and he expresses optimism about the possibilities of understanding across conflicts (34-38). Habermas admits in the interview that he has often been asked whether the whole conception of ‘communicative action’ has been brought into dispute by September 11 (35). For Habermas, however, the spiral of violence that is escalating is precisely this: a communicative problem. He writes, “conflicts arise from distortion in communication, from misunderstanding and incomprehension, from insincerity and deception” (35). Habermas acknowledges that deconstructionists are suspicious of this (an indirect reply to Derrida who is the other respondent in Borradori’s interview) but he asks, “why should the hermeneutic model of understanding, which functions in everyday conversations … suddenly break down”? (36). What is needed, he concludes, is a “mutual perspective-taking” under symmetrical conditions (37, emphasis in original).

The loss of political motivation in liberal societies seems to be Habermas’s main concern when he meets with Ratzinger in Munich, 2004. This is where Habermas’s attention to the question religion becomes the most self-reflexive and his re-evaluation of religion the most explicit.

He opens the conversation with quoting the German philosopher Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde’s question: “Does the free, secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself cannot guarantee? This question expresses a doubt about whether the democratic constitutional state can renew from its own resources the normative presuppositions of its existence” (2006, 21). Habermas’s own answer is an ambivalent one, both a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’. It is a ‘no’ in the sense that he believes that the liberal state is capable of legitimizing itself in a self-sufficient manner through discourse ethics and consensus (29), but it is a ‘yes’ in the sense that he suggests that religions can inspire and motivate people for action in a way that a secularized society cannot itself imitate (ibid.). The liberal state has the procedural capacity to legitimize itself without religious or metaphysical traditions, he argues, but it lacks a motivating force.

The question Habermas grapples with, in other words, is why citizens should engage in deliberative processes and not simply see themselves as representatives of competing interests (as in the aggregative model of de-
mocracy). In other words, how does liberal society create the sense of belonging that religious traditions seem to provide? Is consensus sufficient as a collectively binding force or, he asks, do we need to turn to a “transcendent point of reference” (2006, 37)? “I myself”, he answers, “think it better not to push too far the question whether an ambivalent modern age will stabilize itself exclusively on the basis of the secular forces of a communicative reason. Rather, let us treat it undramatically, as an open, empirical question” (38). If for Böckenförde the constitutional state requires religion, Habermas lets this remains an open question. What is required, he writes, is to give religion more than respect and public recognition (42, 46). Philosophy, he argues, must take religion seriously as a “cognitive challenge” and what is needed for this is a complementary learning process where both religious and secular citizens responsibly participate (38, 43-47).

Public Reason and Its Unreasonable Burden

It is in the speech in Bergen, 2005, that Habermas sketches what can be seen as one of the most concrete political proposals that has surfaced in recent years, as a way to rethink the relationship between liberal democracy and religion.33 His point of departure is the uneven burden liberal society places on its religious citizens when it argues that only secular reason counts in the public sphere. His proposal serves to increase the possibilities for religious arguments to enter public debate and what is needed for this, he argues, is that both secular and religious citizens cooperate in a process of mutual learning and translation (2008, 119).

He begins his argument in John Rawls’s definition of the ‘public use of reason’ according to which there are two duties that citizenship in the liberal state demands if democratic procedures are to function properly. The first is that all citizens must participate in the shared practicing of democracy (despite ongoing dissent). The second is that all citizens owe one another rationally motivated agreements (good reasons) for his or her ways of life (2008, 121). This involves a willingness to listen to others and to be mindful of when accommodations to others’ points of view should be made (121-122).34 For the question of religious pluralism, the Rawlsian definition of

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33 The speech was delivered on receiving the Holberg-Prize in Bergen, in December, 2005. See http://www.holbergprize.no/juergen-habermas/holbergprisens-symposium-2005-juergen-habermas.html (accessed 100104). The speech was given much attention and response (see website) and was first published in German as Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion in 2005 and not in English until 2008 as ‘Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the Public Use of Reason by Religious and Secular Citizens’, in Between Naturalism and Religion. Philosophical Essays. Cambridge: Polity Press.

34 Habermas quotes John Rawls who in Political Liberalism (1993) writes: “the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty – the duty of civility – to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a
liberalism guarantees freedom of religion only if religious citizens accept the following three premises: 1. the neutrality of the state and its public institutions; 2. the separation of church and state; and 3. that only public reason counts as source of legitimation which means, as pointed out above, that all citizens in the public sphere owe one another rational arguments for their decisions and actions (2008, 123).

What this Rawlsian version of liberalism misses, according to Habermas, is that that religious association is “a source of energy” that nurtures a religious person’s whole life (2008, 127). Consequently, religious conviction is not only about belief but “an existence guided by faith” (129). Habermas follows Nicholas Wolterstorff here who argues that religion is not an optional aspect of life that can be chosen or rejected according to a logic of individual choice, and that liberal societies should make it possible for every citizen to strive for wholeness, integrity and integration in their lives (128).35

Habermas’s main concern in the Bergen speech is that liberalism, defined in the Rawlsian way, has led to a situation where people of religious faith are obligated to translate their religious arguments into secular language if they want to participate in public debates. This is a demand that secular citizens never have to shoulder and the main critique Habermas raises against Rawls is how he can insist on ‘the public use of reason’ even though he realizes that this is a constitutional regime under which religious citizens do not prosper (2008, 123-124). This being so, political liberalism produces inequality, Habermas argues, when it claims to protect freedom of religion but at the same time expects of religious citizens to justify their political statements independently of these convictions (ibid.) As a consequence, liberal society demands something impossible and unreasonable of them that it does not demand of other citizens. Habermas writes:

Irrespective of how the interests are balanced in the relationship between the state and religious organizations, a state cannot encumber its citizens, to whom it guarantees freedom of religion, with duties that are incompatible with pursuing a devout life – it cannot expect something impossible of them. (Habermas 2008, 125-126).

It is this inconsistency within liberal society that fuels Habermas’s own contribution and he points out a paradox: that liberal equality has led to an imposed inequality for religious citizens. When the liberal state asks of these citizens to articulate their religious reasons in a generally accessible (secular) language it asks of them to make an artificial split between themselves as public persons and persons of faith:

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35 See the discussion between Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff in Religion in the Public Sphere (1997).
We cannot infer from the secular character of the state a direct personal obligation on all citizens to supplement their publicly expressed religious convictions by equivalents in a generally accessible language. And certainly the normative expectation that all religious citizens when casting their vote should ultimately let themselves be guided by secular considerations is to ignore the realities of a devout life, and existence guided by faith. (Habermas 2008, 129)

In other words, it is one thing to see secularization as a separation between the Church and the State (as in Rawls’s definition of liberalism), but quite another to turn the demand for legitimation into the (unreasonable) demand that religious citizens make a split between their religious and public selves. The secular state, he writes, must “not transform the necessary institutional separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable mental and psychological burden for its religious citizens” (Habermas 2008, 130).

As a solution, Habermas introduces what he calls the “institutional translation proviso” (2008, 130):

Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold separating the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations … Religious citizens can certainly acknowledge this ‘institutional translation proviso’ without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. They should therefore also be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular ‘translations’ for them. (Habermas 2008, 130)

As long as religious citizens recognize the proviso that only secular reasons count within societal institutions, they are free to use religious arguments in public.\(^\text{36}\) What Habermas wants to avoid is the estrangement of religious beliefs and the exclusion of religious citizens from political processes. Participation and motivation are key terms here, it being in the interest of the liberal state that religious persons and communities partake in public reasoning. If not, the “secular society would otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity” (Habermas 2008, 131).

There is nonetheless the problem of a specific content in religious language. Even if religious traditions have the function of being a meaning-making and binding force, their contents needs to be universally understood if they are to inspire the democratic conversation. He writes:

Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and

\(^{36}\) This does not apply to a political official working beyond the institutional sphere where secular reasons are the only ones that count.
personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization
have caused utter devastation. (Habermas 2008, 6)

Hence, the reason for taking religious arguments seriously is to keep the
motivating function of religion alive. But the question remains, how can
religious thought content be acknowledged without jeopardizing the institu-
tional preconditions of the liberal state?

Faithful to his notion of intersubjectivity, the process of translation is a
cooperative learning process in which both religious and secular citizens
must cooperate. In fact, the use of religious language in public spaces cannot
be realized unless all citizens participate and the purpose is both to increase
the mutual learning between religious and non-religious citizens, and to cre-
ate conditions for a more generous attitude to religion in general so that reli-
gious citizens do not need to suffer because of their beliefs. He writes:

This requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task in
which the non-religious citizens must likewise participate if their religious
fellow citizens, who are ready and willing to participate, are not to be bur-
dened in an asymmetrical way. Whereas citizens of faith may make public
contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation
proviso, by way of compensation secular citizens must open their minds to
the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from
which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of gener-
ally accessible arguments. (Habermas 2008, 132)

What must happen for translation to succeed is for the religious con-
sciousness to become reflective and for the secular consciousness to tran-
cend its limitations – a change of mentality that Habermas describes as a
complementary learning process (2008, 143-144). The “epistemic attitude”
that needs to be acquired from both sides, and this is important, is the “recip-
rocal obligation” to learn from one another (136). For religious citizens, this
suggests an ability “to consider one’s own religious convictions reflexively
from the outside and to connect them with secular views” (130) and for sec-
ular citizens to ‘open their minds to the possible truth content’ of religious
perspectives (above).

The key to Habermas’s notion of translation is a dialogue in which reli-
gious and secular citizens alike must remain open to the other and listen and
learn from the other’s arguments – something which has a clear educative
purpose as we shall see below.

At the end of the Bergen speech, Habermas makes it explicit that a post-
secular society must be prepared to learn from religion but he also makes it
very clear that the demand for another epistemic stance falls more heavily on
religious citizens despite his talk about reciprocity and mutuality. However,
as the dialogue with Ratzinger already has made clear, the learning process
is primarily a process of secularization and in order for ‘religious conscious-
ness’ to be recognized, heard and learned from it will inevitably become less religious. It is religious citizens who “must develop an epistemic stance toward other religions”; “toward the internal logic of secular knowledge” and “develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena” (2008, 137). But secular citizens, he adds, must not regard religious traditions as archaic relics from the past (138-139). Neither must they think that religious views will dissolve in the wake of the resurging naturalist worldviews and scientific explanations of life (ibid.). Citizens who adopt such a position do not take religious contributions to political life seriously and they reject the moral duty of cooperation and participation underlying liberal democracy (ibid.).

Habermas’s appeal to cooperation as a possibility for translation, on the one hand, and mutual learning as an outcome of this process, on the other, is built on the assumption that translation is possible if all citizens practice openness and enter into dialogue. This relies on the premise that there is a pre-understanding shared by human beings even in the midst of the worst misunderstandings, and that differences can be overcome without the interference of cultural and linguistic incommensurabilities. What he does not answer, however, is how religious ways of life can be translated without losing their particular (religious) character. What needs further attention, in my view, is what happens to those aspects of our conversations that do not lend themselves to translation and therefore continue to be sites of conflict and tension. This issue is given full attention in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

I think it is fair to say, by way of conclusion, that Habermas’s interest in religion is functionalistic. He clearly recognizes the urgency and significance of giving the question of religion a thorough response, but his solution remains a pragmatic one. Including religion in public conversations is in the interest of a liberal state which would otherwise cut itself off from key motivational resources. Nonetheless, Habermas goes far in modifying Rawls’s definition of citizenship, suggesting both that religious reasons are valid as ‘public reasons’ and that secular citizens must cooperate in seeking understanding. This could mean, for example in the debate about veiling laws, that secular citizens cannot dismiss a Muslim woman as unreasonable or incomprehensible but that they need to assume their responsibility as fellow citizens to try and understand her point of view even if – and this is crucial – she can only explain herself in religious terms. What this demands of her, it seems to me, is that she tries to give an account of herself in a way that comes as close as possible to the common language of society (i.e., makes her reasons ‘as secular as possible’). What it demands of the secular citizen, then, is that she keeps open to the possibility that some ‘truth’ may come out of the process.

The relevance of religion for democratic society, on Habermas’s account, is to inspire and motivate citizens to participate in democratic deliberation.
But this does not mean that he is willing to accept an unlimited use of religious arguments. As we have seen, he is still allowing only public reason to be the source of legitimation beyond the institutional proviso. Habermas asserts that religious reasons are translatable and that the secular and religious consciousnesses will eventually reach mutual understanding. In addition, his appeal to cooperation seems to presuppose that a sense of solidarity already exists between citizens even though, in his later texts, he lets a certain scepticism about this shine through.

There is no mention of power relations in Habermas’s plea for translation. At the same time, the requirement for its success is that both parties are willing to learn about the other and enter the learning process with an open (epistemic) attitude. Given this, it is difficult to see how the translation proviso will ease the burden on religious citizens who, in a secular society, are in minority. To my mind, it is more likely that religious arguments (as minority arguments) are assimilated into the language of the majority, that is, into the secular view of the majority. As Habermas also asserts, the learning process is itself a process of secularization.

In contrast to Nussbaum, Habermas does not write directly on education. Nonetheless, his political theory has provided the starting-point for deliberative democracy: a model of democracy that has become one of the most influential – if not the most influential – model of democracy in education. Let us therefore turn to how his thinking has been imported into educational research and what this implies for religious citizens.

Religion and Deliberative Democracy in Education

The term ‘deliberative democracy’ is a term that, since the 1980s, has come to distinguish “a political approach focused on improving the quality of democracy” (Held 2006, 232). Its general ambition is to enhance informed, public, rational debate and, broadly defined, it is “any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision making and self-government” (Bohman quoted in Held 2006, 237). Simply speaking, deliberative democracy seeks to emphasize that political legitimacy is not primarily created around a ballot box but through “the giving of defensible reasons, explanations and accounts for public decisions” (237). Improving the quality of de-

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37 There are many ways to define deliberative democracy. According to Gutmann & Thompson’s early work, deliberative democracy depends on three principles: reciprocity, accountability and publicity (1996). In their more recent work, however, there are four principles, suggesting that deliberative democracy is: reason-giving, accessible, binding, and dynamic (2004, 3-7). Compare this to Nussbaum’s thee criteria for a compassionate politics: compassion, reciprocity, individuality (above). Reciprocity seems to permeate all models.
Democracy is mainly done through an emphasis on participation and reason (Held 2006, 232-243). The purpose of deliberative democracy is to move us away from top-down structures with a focus on macro politics to a more participatory approach to democracy where social contexts matter (Held 2006, 234; Bohman 1997). Its advocates often see themselves as open to argumentation and they bid farewell to any fixed preferences and abstract notions of rationality. Fundamental to their view of democracy is an open-ended learning process in and through which all participants can come to terms with what they need to understand in order to make reasonable judgements (Held 2006, 233). Equality is an important feature and the focus on intersubjective communication is meant to ensure that all citizens are able to participate on equal terms despite, for example, unequal access to power, material wealth, or education.

Public reasoning is in focus, and its key objective is “the transformation of private preferences via a process of deliberation into positions that can withstand public scrutiny and test” (Held 2006, 237). This means that the rational arguments employed must be able to survive public examination and that only those arguments that count as reasonable can be publicly justified. Or, as Habermas puts it, “no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (1976/1997, 108). Even if it is recognized that we all enter the deliberative conversation affected by our differences, a successful process of deliberation is one where citizens examine their own as well as others’ arguments and views are adjusted by means of argumentation.

According to Joshua Cohen, the ideal deliberative procedure has four features (1997). It is; free, which means that the participants are bound only to the results and the procedure and not by “the authority of prior norms and requirements”; it is reasoned in the sense that all parties owe one another public reasons for their decisions and actions (this is motivated by Habermas’s argument that ‘no force except that of the better argument is exercised’). Even if both are focused on participation, deliberative democrats specifically accentuate the character of the deliberative process.

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38 These ideas can be traced back to the Enlightenment but a more contemporary contextualization would be to see them as responses to the elitist (aggregative) theory of democracy and the economic theory of democracy that emerged in the twentieth century (Bohman & Regh 1997, x-xi). The former built on Joseph Schumpeter’s idea that citizens were manipulable, apathetic, and uniformed. Therefore, the aggregative model thought that democracy was best left in the hands of a leadership elite (ibid). The latter, economic theory, by contrast, saw citizens as passive consumers and the political process as a struggle between competing private interests according to a neo-liberal logic of bargaining (ibid., xi). In neither of these theories was the search for a collective good given any priority, something which came to be important for the development of deliberative democracy. In opposition to the cynical view of the citizen in both the private and elitist models, deliberative democracy came to represent a belief in human rationality, a collective striving for a common good, and a communicative relationship between the citizens and their representatives. This, as a way of saving the public sphere from the loss of politics and meaning that seemed to threaten it.

39 But deliberative democracy is not simply the same as participatory democracy. For an account of participatory democracy see Models of Democracy chapter 7 (i.e., Held, 2006, 185-216). Even if both are focused on participation, deliberative democrats specifically accentuate the character of the deliberative process.
cised’); it is equal, meaning that “[e]veryone with deliberative capacities [read: openness of argumentation] has equal standing [and] an equal voice”, and; it “aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus” where all participants are persuaded and committed to act on the results (74-75). In order to meet these standards of the deliberative procedure, a number of tests can be pursued (Held 2006, 240). Such as whether all points of view have been taken into consideration or whether all participants would be prepared to accept the outcome as fair and reasonable (ibid.). There is an ongoing debate, however, whether deliberative democracy is merely procedural or if it is both procedural and substantial (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 23-26).

Two substantial commitments stand out in deliberative democracy: a commitment to the common good reached by a process of consensus and a commitment to individual autonomy (Cohen 1997, 75). Hence, even if political institutions should be neutral vis-à-vis particular ideologies, they should nonetheless support the implementation of these virtues. “And so”, Cohen writes,

in seeking to embody the ideal deliberative procedure in institutions, we seek, inter alia, to design institutions that focus political debate on the common good, that shape the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to an attachment to the common good, and that provide the favorable conditions for the exercise of deliberative powers that are required for autonomy.

(Cohen 1997, 79)

If Cohen and Habermas lean toward defining deliberative democracy in procedural terms suggesting that politics should not be used to advocate a shared form of life or to prioritize a certain set of values, another group – a position common among philosophers of education – prefer to accentuate the character of the process. In this latter position, “deliberative democracy is an educational process” and, hence, it is how we participate in democracy that is the primary focus (Englund 2005, 139-141). Epistemic openness to argumentation is a key deliberative attitude, even a demand, (Englund 2005, 2006; Gutmann & Thompson 1996; 2004), so let us therefore turn to explore what deliberative democracy implies as an educational procedure and which role and place it assigns to religion.

Inspired by Habermas, deliberative democracy has been frequently taken up by philosophers of education (e.g. Boman 2006; Carlehed 2006; Englund, 2002, 2005, 2006; Enslin, Pendlebury, Tjiattas 2001; Løvlie 2007; Martin 2009; Roth 2009). Among these scholars, Englund (2005) notes that Habermas transforms the binding source of the sacred into a consensual process (139) but, for him, this has no implications for discussing religion. When Carlehed 2006) explores Habermas’s influences on the democratic foundations of education, he begins by stating as a fact that the authority of

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40 As we have seen above, Habermas also understands democracy as a learning process.
religion is “replaced in a modern society by the rule of law and democracy” (522). Hence, despite the turbulence concerning religion in contemporary democratic societies, there is little or no discussion about religion in deliberative democratic theory, neither in texts on deliberative education nor in texts on deliberative democracy more generally. So, if cosmopolitan theory has paid little systematic attention to religion but deals with it in education (through Nussbaum), the opposite is true here: despite Habermas’s attention to religion, little is said about it in deliberative education. In Why Deliberative Democracy? Gutmann and Thomson point to deliberative democracy as a model that makes it more difficult to justify certain religious views and that the deliberative principle of reciprocity has positively nuanced debates where Christian fundamentalist parents have sought exemptions from the standard reading curriculum in public schools (2004, 51, 58-59). In Democracy and Disagreement (1996) the same authors discuss religion under the headline ‘reciprocity and its rivals’ (55) and because “religious appeals are … less accessible than other claims,” they argue, they fail to live up to the deliberative criterion of reciprocity (55-57).

As has already been pointed out, deliberative democracy is in itself an educational process. As a way to implement this model, schools and other educational institutions are crucial. Gutmann & Thompson write:

[T]he single most important institution outside government is the educational system. To prepare their students for citizenship, schools must go beyond teaching literacy and numeracy [and] aim to develop their students’ capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. (Gutmann & Thompson 1996, 359)

The task for education then, according to deliberative democracy, is to become a place of mediation where different views are brought to the table and where different arguments can be examined, judged, and, if necessary, adjusted and changed (Englund 2006, 511). The underlying assumption is that if all students are brought into encounters with all kinds of differences and disagreements, conflicts and violence can be minimized. The goal is to reach consensus through open, dialogic procedures and the main message, in case of irresolvable conflict is this: “In the face of disagreement, deliberative democracy tells citizens and their representatives to continue to reason together … deliberation is more likely than aggregation to produce agreement” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 20).

It is not difficult to see why deliberative democracy has gained so much influence in education, not least if one considers the present tensions around

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religion. In a situation of great uncertainty – a time of terrorism, schoolshootings, debates about veiling in schools – schools are strained by the po
titical demands to ‘handle’ manifold and complex situations. The presuppo
sition that students will bring difficult opinions and views into the conversa
tions in schools sounds very accurate. As a procedure that seeks to detect fundamentalist, Islamophobic, or anti-Semitic opinions by bringing them to the discussion-table, deliberative communication seems to create a promis
ing way forward. Following Habermas, it is important that all students parti
ticipate in the dialogic procedures remembering, however, that the conversa
tion needs to be based on reasonable arguments and strive for achieving con
sensus.

According to Lars Løvlie (2007), deliberative democracy both seeks rec
ciliation (of an ethos) and consensus (a rational legitimation of actions and norms) (125-127). Taken together, the demand made on the democratic sub
ject is that she commits both to certain attitudes (like openness to argumenta
tion) and to a certain value based legitimation of these values (free, rea
soned, equal). He writes:

Deliberation in the strict sense is committed to reason, to the courage to use one’s understanding without the direction from another, as Kant intoned it [whereas] the moderate version tends towards the Aristotelian idea of delib
eration as the ability to judge well [which] chimes well with Hegel’s insist
ence that rationality is enmeshed in and actualised in social institutions. (Løvlie 2007, 125-126)

When content and procedure are so clearly defined, it looks as if students can only be acknowledged as democratic if they interpret autonomy, free
dom, and openness according to what is consensually agreed upon. If auton
omy, for example, is the only definition of freedom it is not difficult to see why submitting to ‘the will of Allah’ or the ‘teachings of the Bible’ collides with the deliberative procedure. As Held points out, “deliberation is free if it is ‘not constrained’ by the authority of prior norms or requirements” (2006, 238), something which seems to suggests that loyalty to, for example, a collective religious will is difficult to endorse as long as it builds on such prior requirements.

This ‘illiberal’ tendency is acknowledged by Habermas, as we have seen, but it does not make him question his fundamental belief in undistorted ra
tional communication. Even if his proposal of mutual translation makes democratic participation a little more feasible, it is nevertheless difficult for religious arguments to enter the debate, given the coupling of (deliberative democratic) procedures and (liberal) values. An advocate of deliberative education would perhaps argue that this is precisely why religious students need to come to a public school and a deliberative discussion-table. But the power dimension at play here, as well as the incommensurability between
languages (that Habermas also acknowledges), is difficult to ignore. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is precisely this coupling of procedures and values that radical democratic theorists explore as the ‘paradox of liberal democracy’.

The dangers of making rationality the requirement for participation, as Todd points out (2009a), is that deliberative democracy tends to exclude citizens that do not understand their ways of life primarily in rational terms (101-102). “[T]here may be no way”, she writes, “of providing rational justification for a truth claim (in the Habermasian sense) if that claim is grounded, for instance, in faith, as opposed to reason” (102). The risk of this is that religious citizens are either seen as irrational, as ‘uncivil’ and not open to participation and argumentation, or, simply, as opposed to democracy. Thus, the focus on rational dialogue tends to delimit already beforehand who can take part in the deliberative process and who cannot. This is particularly contradictory given the emphasis on participation in order to be considered a ‘democratic’ citizen.

However, it is not only religion and religious arguments that have difficulties being heard through the rationalistic filter of deliberative democracy. As Løvlie observes, there are existential topics that cannot be addressed either such as “love and friendship, death and mourning” (2007, 126). The deliberative procedure does not only make it difficult for religious reasons to enter deliberative conversations, it also risks excluding themes that cannot primarily be addressed in a rational and argumentative register. This, then, is to the detriment not only of religious students but to all students who relate to life otherwise than what deliberative procedures make possible.

The problem with striving for consensus, as Todd points out, is that “everything diverse and unique risks being contained within the same normative frame of reference: differences between us become less important than the goal to create a unified ‘we’ that is already enclosed and defined by the discursive rules of deliberative democracy itself” (2009a, 102). Even if deliberative democracy recognizes disagreement, a successful process is one where commonality trumps differences for the purpose of reaching a certain political goal. One conclusion of this is that the focus on rationality and consensus makes it questionable whether deliberative democratic education can handle radical incommensurability without closing itself off to conversations that demand another linguistic register such as conversations about religion, love, death, and life. This is not to say that deliberative dialogue is unimportant but it means that it cannot be the only way to create possibilities for democratic coexistence in and through education.
Conclusion: Love, Freedom, and Dialogue
- Three Responses to Religion in Liberal Education

The purpose of the chapter has been to explore how the relationship between education, democracy, and religion is articulated in contemporary liberal education and what this implies for the religious subject. As we have seen, both Nussbaum and Habermas discuss religion at length but the models of democracy they advocate are given first priority. In Nussbaum’s model the difficulty of incorporating religion is increased by the fact that there is also, in addition to democracy and education, a cosmopolitan ideal that religion needs to be filtered through. For Habermas, the relationship between religion and democracy is the main concern and this enables him to become more concrete in ‘taking religion seriously’ in a post-secular society, as he himself puts it.

In neither the cosmopolitan nor the deliberative model of education is religion given much attention despite the fact that both Nussbaum and Habermas discuss religion at length, albeit in different ways and for different purposes. Seeing education mainly as an arena for implementing democracy and the democratic process as based on rational autonomy, we have ended up in a situation where schools are ill equipped to respond to religion and particular religious subjects.

That religious love is consequently rendered less significant than cosmopolitan love in Nussbaum’s model of education is a result of the fact that she perceives of it as a flight from the world. An ‘otherworldly love’, as she sees it, is counter-productive to a compassionate politics. Turning to Augustine she tries to show that religious love has little to say to the troubles of our time and it is only if we transcend religious longings that a more embodied, humane, and compassionate world can be created. Rooting her cosmopolitan ideal in the Stoic, non-religious world view she does not give any account of the cosmopolitan ideas of citizenship embedded in religious traditions themselves, that is, that one can be a citizen of the world and of ‘The Heavenly City’ (Augustine) or the Islamic Umma, at the same time.

Even if Nussbaum is critical of religion, she nonetheless locates a crucial tension between religion and liberal education which she sees as a question of love. She introduces a discussion about the place and role of love in a democratic politics and, following her lead in this regard, love is made one of the main themes of this dissertation. Given that religious love is rendered incompatible with her model of education, a shift in perspective on love is needed if the religious subject is to become part of the struggle for democracy. To shift the perspective on love so that ‘religious lovers’ can become part of a democratic politics is the main purpose of the third chapter of this thesis.

Deliberative conversations between free and equal citizens are at the heart of Habermas’s democratic model, and he sees it as one of his main tasks to increase the freedom of religious speech in the public sphere. He is well
aware that the kind of democracy he advocates builds on an ideal speech situation and that this has created unequal conditions for religious citizens. He is aware, in other words, that the freedom liberal societies advocate has led to a loss of freedom for religious citizens. This concern has helped us localize the second of our three themes as the question of freedom.

One of the purposes of deliberative education is to liberate students from binding loyalties and authorities and to help them find their own autonomous voice. The notion of freedom that underlies this approach is based on an idea of a rational, autonomous individual who, as a result of deliberative procedures, makes a ‘free choice’. What education is meant to produce, in other words, are citizens who choose their lives unhindered by external loyalties. Since deliberative democracy has had such a profound influence on education in recent years, the notion of freedom as a rational, individual choice has come to dominate how freedom is perceived also in the educational sphere. Increasing religious freedom in education and in public spaces is consequently a more complex issue, it seems to me, than simply a mutual learning process or a mutual process of translation. If religious beliefs and practices are not simply to be seen as a loss of freedom, we might need to take a new look on how freedom can be perceived otherwise.

One of the main reasons for why Habermas has gained an interest in religion is the collectively binding force that religious traditions manage to create. Religious traditions are able to motivate and inspire its followers in a way that the liberal society cannot imitate and he therefore seeks to transform this force into the binding force of a rational consensus. This approach relies on citizens’ willingness to participate in public conversation. The third theme that is developed in this dissertation centres around the question of dialogue. For both Nussbaum and Habermas, the most important place for implementing their models of democracy is education, and the most important tool is dialogue. The idea is that by participating in dialogic procedures, students will share their opinions and motives with other students and let them be explored, examined, and judged. The demand to participate in dialogue is crucial to both cosmopolitan and deliberative models of education. However, the dialogic procedure is guided by virtues and values based on predefinitions of what is ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’. Therefore, what therefore needs renegotiation, if the conversation between ‘democracy’ and ‘religion’ is to be given new life, are the conditions upon which the demand for dialogue is constituted. When education becomes a tool for implementing the present view of democracy, education risks passing on the polemics of what it means to be ‘religious’ and ‘democratic’ that the contemporary political and social debates produce.

In order to shift these liberal perspectives on love, freedom, and dialogue, we need to begin from another starting-point than the idea of the rational autonomous subject. Although Habermas has tried to accomplish this by emphasizing mutuality, cooperation, and an intersubjective notion of the
subject, he nonetheless claims that it is a unified and primarily rational subject that partakes in the deliberative procedure. If new conditions for democratic coexistence are to be created in and through education, other perspectives on the themes above need to be elaborated. To achieve this, the thesis argues, we need to begin both in another notion of the subject and another notion of democracy. Hence, the next chapter explores a model of democracy for which the whole process of defining the subject is seen as a political process.
Radical Democracy in a Post-Secular and Post-Political Situation

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how two of the most common pedagogical trends handle religious pluralism by advocating a politics of consensus based on the notion of the individual. This chapter turns to democratic theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Lasse Thomassen, and Lars Tønder, who see affective and collective forces as constitutive of a democratic politics. Through what can be called an ‘ontology of lack’ such radical democratic theorists place the ongoing negotiation of subjectivities at the centre of political struggle. As such, these theorists have something to offer my study in its focus on the religious subject.

It should be mentioned at the outset that neither religion nor education is given much attention in radical democratic theory. However, an educational response to its theory is currently emerging among some philosophers of education as a way to shed new light on cross-cultural conflicts and pluralism. This chapter brings radical democratic theory to bear on the question of religion and religious subjectivity. In contrast to liberal democratic theories that have tended to subordinate religion to democracy, radical democratic theory opens possibilities for seeing religion as part of the struggle for democracy.

The main purpose of this chapter is to sketch the contours of radical democracy as an alternative to dialogic models of democracy. In particular, I explore how this model can alter the relationship between religion and democracy as well as the task of education. This is done in four sections. The first offers some brief examples of current conflicts where religion is seen as the main impediment to the realization of a democratic society. The second extensive section explores the main features of radical democracy focusing especially on the paradox of liberal democracy and on how two concepts – antagonism and hegemony – distinguish radical democracy from the post-political situation that the current notions of liberalism and communitarianism are said to create. It is argued that radical democracy challenges a con-
sensus oriented politics by making a relational and ambivalent subject its core feature. The third section brings this to bear on religious pluralism, discussing ways in which radical democracy offers other democratic possibilities for religion in a post-secular society. Following from this argument, I suggest that subjects are not simply rational and autonomous, but are conflicted, affected, and relational. Thus the fourth and last section discusses what this might mean for education.

**Deficits, Voids, Tensions**

It think it might be claimed that there is a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life, where citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as externally binding but not internally compelling. … If secular liberal democracy doesn’t motivate subjects sufficiently, then … what seems to motivate subjects are frameworks of belief that call the secular project into question. Whatever one may think about it, one has to recognize that there is something powerfully motivating about the Islamist or Jihadist worldview, or indeed its Christian fundamentalist obverse. (Critchley 2007, 7)

According to Lasse Thomassen and Lars Tønder (2005), radical democracy can be conceived of in terms of a “non-symbolizable lack operating at the heart of any subject or system of signification” (5). This ‘lack’ (or what is also referred to as radical difference) is made the starting-point for the political analysis in this model, something that has consequences for how society and the subject are perceived. That a ‘motivational deficit’ is at the heart of liberal democracy has already been acknowledged by Habermas but radical democratic theorists, by contrast, do not try to fill this lack with an ‘ersatz religion’ like that of a rational consensus. Instead, they see the very lack itself as the driving force of a democratic politics.

The meaning of this will become clearer as the chapter develops but before we begin, let me offer three snap-shots that capture what is at stake in current political debates. All three are examples of the tensions that currently exist between religion (particularly Islam) and contemporary society where religion is seen to be the main threat to state security and as the main impediment to the realization of democracy.

**Picture one:** In the autumn 2005 a Danish daily, Jyllands-Posten, publishes caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. After some delay, there are many angry reactions among Muslims in different parts of the world, even violent ones, and human rights and freedoms are debated intensely in the public media. The debate about blasphemy initiated in 1989 around the *Satanic Verses* is given new fuel. Many Muslims feel that the caricatures are disrespectful of Islam whereas the supporters argue that the right of expression is crucial to democracy. The publication comes four years after the at-
tack on World Trade Center in 2001 and the same year as the London bombings and it fuels the rhetoric of a ‘war against terror’: a conflict framed primarily as a profound hostility between Islam (a non-democratic ‘they’) and Europe (a democratic ‘we’). The images that are cabled out across the globe are of raging Muslim crowds, an example of religion ‘gone wrong’, a horror religiousus threatening to terminate the democratic forces in Western societies. Samuel Huntington’s thesis about a ‘clash of civilizations’ seems to be reaching its fulfilment. The conflict, it is said, is about conflicting freedoms; the freedom of speech and expression versus the freedom of religion.

**Picture two:** In 2009 a report, published by the Swedish Ministry of Defence, entitled *Hot mot demokrati och värdegrund – en lägesbild från Malmö* [Threats Against Democracy and Foundational Values – A Report from Malmö], is handed over to the Swedish Minister of Immigration and Integration (Dos Santos & Ranstorp 2009). Its purpose is to analyse the development of “anti-democratic forces in society … to describe and define what characterizes violence-affirmative extremism and radicalization [and] to define the tools that can be used to prevent violent extremism” (3, my translation). The background to the report are the riots in the suburb Rosengård outside Malmö in 2008 but a similar development, the document claims, can be found in both Denmark and the Netherlands (23-37). The term ‘violence-affirmative radicalization’ is a term also used within the European Union in order to describe the current increase of extremism within EU member states and how countries like Sweden are now developing preventive strategies for handling this (3).

According to the report, religion is one of the driving forces behind the increased radicalization. Signs that support this coupling of religion and radicalization are drastic changes of behaviour among young Muslim boys such as: an increased participation in religious activities (10); a change of physical appearance among young boys such as growing beards and wearing religious clothing (ibid.); an increasing number of mosques that teach violence-affirming messages (14); and an establishment of several private Muslim schools (15-17). Mosques and schools are described as sites where violence-affirmative teaching takes place and the report claims as especially problematic the ‘fact’ that these schools violate liberal democratic values by segregating girls and boys. In addition, the advocating of strict ethical rules of conduct where girls are not allowed to participate in physical education are motivated by religious arguments, something which goes against the democratic values proposed by The Swedish National Agency for Education (17).

Three months later the Swedish Liberal Party, to which the above report is handed over, issues a proposition for education. It suggests that the possibility for students to be excused from sex education and physical education is to be withdrawn in all Swedish schools and this is motivated by every
student’s right to a good, equal and comprehensive education. Too many immigrant children are having their freedom suspended, the proposition argues, due to their parents’ right to decide about participation in swimming-classes and sex education.

**Picture three:** In the US, the UK, and Sweden, the atheist Humanist movement is actively campaigning against religion. Their adverts on buses and streets – ‘God probably does not exist’ – have been followed by intense media debates about how ‘the delusions of religion’ affect people and societies. Religion, we are told, lead people astray from knowledge, science, truth, and reason by unsound means such as strong emotional bonds, superstitious myths, and untrue assertions about reality. The image of ‘dangerous religion’ is fuelled by books such as Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. This is countered by an apologetic defence of religion coming from voices like Keith Ward’s in *Is Religion Dangerous?* and *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins.*

Some of the above examples can be seen as consequences of an increasing Islamophobia in Europe. Andreas Malm’s (2009) recently published book *Hatet mot muslimer* [*Hatred Against Muslims*] provides an extensive overview of this. One of Malm’s main points is that current debates in liberal Western democracies lack the ability to discern between collective groups and single individuals. As a consequence, it ends up confusing, for example, individual Muslim practitioners with Islamic extremists. Just as one distinguishes the individual from the collective and religions from states, Malm argues, it must be possible to critique Islamist regimes without being labelled Islamophobic just as it must be possible to label assaults against individual Muslims as Islamophobic. It is not clear whether or not Malm sees these ‘labels’ as essentialistic categories but what he points out is the need for a politics that manages to hold the individual in tension with the collective in a more complex way than modern politics has been able to do.

The crucial question for radical democratic theorists is how tensions such as the above can be addressed without immediately turning to rationalization

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42 The proposition is today (2009-06-22) under consideration. For the Swedish texts, see [http://www.folkpartiet.se/FPTemplates/ListPage____92433.aspx](http://www.folkpartiet.se/FPTemplates/ListPage____92433.aspx) [accessed 2009-06-22].

43 It lies beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse these tensions in any depth and they are brought in mainly to illustrate the depth and range of the current debates and the polarization that exists between religion and democracy.

44 See the report *Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU. Developments since September 11* (IHF, 2005). The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) is a non-governmental organisation that seeks to promote compliance with the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act and its follow-up documents. In addition to supporting and enabling liaisons among 44 Helsinki committees and cooperative organisations, the IHF has direct links with human rights activists in countries where no Helsinki committee exists. It has consultative status with the United Nations and the Council of Europe.
or reconciliation. In other words, instead of filling the void created by the removal of religion from the core depictions of liberal democracy with a cosmopolitan ‘love of humanity’ or deliberative attitudes, it is the void within the notion of democracy itself that needs exploration. What radical democratic theorists seek to do in this vein is to focus on what they refer to as a democratization of democracy.

Democratizing Democracy

The Paradox of Liberal / Democracy

Radical democracy distinguishes itself from liberalism and communitarianism in the following way: it rejects a liberal founding of democracy on pre-established universals – such as Human Rights or cosmopolitan values – and it questions the communitarian view that we belong to only one community and that this community can be empirically defined by a unified idea of the common good.

In relation to the discussion between liberals and communitarians, radical democratic theory offers a third position where the differentiation of society\(^{45}\) is taken as a point of departure. Radical democracy reveals the limitations of liberalism and communitarianism, but it does not reject liberalism or communitarianism \(\textit{per se}\) and it does not seek to replace liberal state governance with a radical democratic one. Its main argument is rather that liberal democracy has foreclosed \textit{the political}, and it sees it as its main task to work for its ‘return’. Instead of rejecting liberal values, radical democracy suggests that “we must deepen and radicalize these values [instead of] turning them into abstract rights beyond dispute” (Thomassen & Tønder 2005, 4). This task hinges on the term ‘dispute’ and the simultaneous recognition of antagonism as characteristic of the political.

Radical democracy takes its starting-point in a paradox embedded within the notion of liberal democracy itself. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) points out, liberal democracy rests on a combination of two inassimilable traditions, liberal individualism and democracy. The former is essentially \textit{moral} and rests on certain (liberal) values whereas the latter is essentially \textit{political} and aims at creating a sense of belonging to a ‘demos’, a people (36-59). Modern liberal democracy is consequently a contradictory regime that combines two opposing ideas, where the collective identity of the democratic tradition negates the primacy of the individual in the liberal.

A liberal value such as absolute equality, which seeks to include everyone, is a meaningless abstraction, according to Mouffe (2000, 41). Including everyone, it requires no political work and is, as such, a non-political value.

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\(^{45}\) The term differentiation suggests that there is no unified society but only differentiated spheres and that each develop their own logics and rationalities. See the introduction to this thesis.
For the democratic tradition, by contrast, a value such as equality can only exist if it attains specific and different meanings in different spheres (‘religious equality’, ‘economic equality’ etc.). The political work this requires is that social institutions strive to inhabit different understandings of equality and allow for contestation between them. What the liberal tradition has tried to do in its striving for homogeneity, Mouffe argues, is to create consensus around one specific meaning of a value like equality. What the democratic tradition advocates is instead a heterogeneous approach to different meanings of equality, something that allows a simultaneous in/equality.

The tension between liberalism and democracy becomes perhaps the most distinct when related to ‘the people’ and to ‘humanity’. The point, for radical democracy, is that if democracy is to ‘exist’ at all, it must belong to – and be embodied by – concrete people or subjects. This stands in contrast, then to a liberal focus on an abstract and homogeneous ‘humanity’. Mouffe writes:

"It is through their belonging to the demos that democratic citizens are granted equal rights, not because they participate in an abstract idea of humanity. This is why … the central concept of democracy is not ‘humanity’ but the concept of the ‘people’ … there can never be a democracy of mankind. Democracy can exist only for a people." (Mouffe 2000, 40-41)

That democracy ‘exists only for a people’ can mean two things. First, there ‘is’ no democracy other than as an enactment or an embodiment and, second, the force [cratos] the idea of democracy generates, is not to serve the system but the demos. Hence, what we find in radical democracy is a model of democracy that exists for the people – it is not the people that exist for democracy.

What Mouffe points to is that there is a political danger in the liberal conception of democracy insofar as homogeneity and abstraction are given precedence over plurality and the people. When this is the case, Mouffe argues, we risk losing sight of what it means to work politically, which implies focusing on public negotiations instead of moral values. There is a risk also (and Mouffe sees these risks as combined) that ‘democracy’ becomes detached from the ‘people’ and turned into something that has its own internal goals and aims. What this means is that democracy and subjectivity are inextricably intertwined: there is no democracy in an abstract sense (as a love of humanity) but only as a force generated in and through the lives of concrete human subjects. The idea of democracy in this model is hence one that only survives as long as people live it and it is not something that pre-exists the people [demos]. In Mouffe’s proposal, therefore, the question is not how well the people ‘live up to’ democracy but how well the idea of democracy can serve the people.

What is important to point out, is that radical democracy does not try to solve the tension within liberal democracy but sees the paradox itself as the
site that makes political negotiations both possible and necessary. Tensions between ‘humanity’ and ‘the people’, ‘the individual’ and ‘the collective’, ‘the universal’ and ‘the particular’ and, one could add, ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’, are essential if a democratic politics is to stay alive. It is the negotiation itself that keeps democracy democratic, not the establishment of a common good.

The critique that follows from this is that so-called ‘third way politicians’ that seek to create a conflict-free society, have created a post-political situation⁴⁶ which, according to Mouffe, puts democracy at risk. Its optimistic (but illusory) striving for societal reconciliation has made us blind to the ways in which inequalities and injustices are sustained in the name of democratic deliberation, consensus, inalienable rights, or ‘humanity’. Nothing can be more mistaken, Mouffe argues, than the message sent out by sociologists like Beck and Giddens who argue that thanks to globalization and the ‘new economic world order’ we have moved into a cosmopolitan society where peace, prosperity and human rights can be brought to all people in all places (2005, 48). They claim that partisan politics has played out its role but what has happened, Mouffe argues, is that democratic politics has been replaced by intersubjective and depoliticized dialogue (1). She writes:

>The democratic debate is envisaged as a dialogue between individuals whose aim is to create new solidarities and extend the bases of active trust. Conflicts can be pacified thanks to the ‘opening up’ of a variety of public spheres where, through dialogue, people with very different interests will make decisions about the variety of issues which affect them and develop a relation of mutual tolerance allowing them to live together. Disagreement will of course exist but they should not take adversarial form. (Mouffe 2005, 48)

The problem with using dialogue as a flight from conflict is that it tends to cover over the injustices and atrocities that are conducted ‘in the name of democracy’ instead of dealing with them in democratic terms.

Although Laclau and Mouffe concede some similarities with liberal democracy, it is the differences they wish to accentuate:

>Politics, we argue, does not consist simply in registering already existing interests, but plays a crucial role in shaping political subjects. On these topics, we are at one with the Habermasians.

>There are, however, important points of divergence between our view and theirs … The central role that the notion of antagonism plays in our work forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive ‘we’. For us, a non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument is a conceptual impossibility. (1985, xvii)

Hence, as a way of summarizing the main differences between radical democracy and liberal democracy, two critical points are crucial. The first is liberal democracy’s attempt to eliminate conflict through consensus and, the second, is its autonomous and rationalistic focus. The latter suggests a repression of affect and collective forms of belonging and the former a repression of dissenting arguments. “By privileging rationality,” Mouffe writes, “both the deliberative and the aggregative perspectives leave aside a central element which is the crucial role played by passions and affects in securing allegiance to democratic values. This cannot be ignored, and it entails envisaging the question of democratic citizenship in a very different way”. (2000, 95)

To understand what is meant by Mouffe’s argument against the post-political view of third way politics (see above), one has to acknowledge the differentiation she makes between politics and the political. If ‘politics’ refers to what she calls, via Heidegger, the level of the ‘ontic’, ‘the political’ raises questions about the ways in which society ‘is’ constituted and is therefore at the level of the ‘ontological’ (8-9). Politics is what political scientists commonly talk about as the practices of conventional politics whereas the political, for Mouffe, must “be conceived as a dimension that determines our very ontological condition” (1993, 3). In my view, the absence of an ontological perspective in contemporary debates makes it difficult to understand society in other than sociological terms and from understanding politics in other than cultural terms. It points to what Slavoj Žižek discusses as the “culturalisation of politics” (2009, 119). By this he means that difference is neutralized into social differences (or ‘ways of life’) and that conflicts that are political by nature are transformed into cultural wars (and thereby reduced of their political potential). In short, difference is reduced to ‘social differences’ (diversity) and politics to questions of culture. For Mouffe, however, the political cannot be restricted to institutions or levels of society but refers primarily to the antagonistic dimension as constitutive of human sociability (2005, 9). When she discusses the loss of ‘the political’ as a post-political situation, it is this inability to acknowledge antagonism in politics to which she is referring. Hence her concern is to make possible a ‘return of the political’ by acknowledging antagonism, conflict, and pluralism as the condition of democracy (1993, 2001).

47 Mouffe argues here that her own view of the political as a space of power, conflict and antagonism is different from Hannah Arendt’s which is a space of freedom and public deliberation (2005, 9). What will become clear in the next chapter is that my reading of Arendt does not lack the conflictual element that Mouffe seems to assert. In my view, Mouffe and Arendt complement one another on precisely the issues of conflict and pluralism and if Mouffe primarily uses the antagonistic element of the political to critique dialogic models of democracy, Arendt places her incitements for change – as well as her critique of liberal society – in the always already conditioned life of the human subject.
At the centre of this ‘repoliticization’, Jacques Derrida’s notion of diffé-
rance is essential since it highlights that the establishment of one identity (an
inside) always implies the simultaneous establishment of another (an out-
side) (Mouffe 2005, 15). These do not relate to one another as separate and
unified identities (as in Habermas’s view) but makes any stable notion of
democracy – as well as any unified subject – an impossibility. As a way of
envisaging democratic citizenship differently, Mouffe, Laclau, and others
bring (ontological) différance to bear on democracy and subjectivity. They
do this by turning to two central concepts, antagonism and hegemony. The
former acknowledges passions and antagonism as constitutive of the political
itself, whereas the latter establishes the relations of power inherent to demo-
cratic processes.

Antagonism and Passionate Politics

Conflict and division, in our view, are neither disturbances that unfortunately
cannot be eliminated nor empirical impediments that render impossible the
full realization of a harmony that we cannot attain because we will never be
able to leave our particularities completely aside in order to act in accordance
with our rational self. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, xvii)

In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of
imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism.
(Mouffe 2000, 34)

Radical democratic theorists are not very optimistic about the idea that ra-
tional individuals can reach agreement unhindered by collective loyalties. A
democracy that demands this, they argue, has little to say to people’s motiva-
tional desires if it asks of them to act independently of the sources that sus-
tain their lives. Affective dimensions mobilized by collective identifications
play a central part in a radical democratic politics and the task is to channel
these dimensions into democratic designs (Mouffe 2005, 6). Antagonism is
the key term here and it signifies that a distinction between we/they, us/them
is an ever present political reality. Following the German political philos-
opher and law theorist Carl Schmitt, Mouffe uses the friend/enemy distinction
to rethink democracy (2005, 13).

According to Mouffe’s reading of Schmitt, every construction of a friend
or a ‘we’ suggests a necessary and simultaneous construction of an enemy or
a ‘they’ and, therefore, a wholly inclusive society is an impossibility (2000,
14).\footnote{Carl Schmitt writes: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and mo-
tives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (1932/1996, 26). At the basis for
Schmitt’s thinking lies a separation between the political and the state and it is “an unsatisfac-
tory circle”, he writes, that the state appears to be political and that the political appears to}
rection taking what she finds useful in Schmitt – “the relational nature of political identities” – as her point of departure (ibid.). Since all identities are constituted in and through a web of other identities (and are not autonomous and unitary) there is always the possibility that these constructions become a locus of antagonism (16). In other words, the ever present distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ imply a simultaneous and ever present contestation between these groups.

For Mouffe, contestation is the characteristic feature of a democratic politics and if a democratic politics is to be possible, antagonism can never be eliminated. Even if it cannot be guaranteed that acknowledging friends and enemies will not generate conflict, it is only if we have come to believe that the contemporary liberal society is safe radical democratic theorists argue, that such worries are legitimate. Since no society is free from danger, the greater danger lies in suppressing antagonism behind a ‘veil of consensus’. In fact we risk democracy when the only political answer to conflict is to strive for dialogue.

Sigmund Freud is the inspiration here and, for Mouffe, he has known all along what modern democracy has forgotten, namely that suppressed emotions and affects can erupt with unexpected and uncontrollable force (2005, 25-29). This implies that people’s affects and passions need to find outlets if they are not to erupt in an uncontrolled manner beyond democratic frameworks. A well-functioning democracy involves clashes and confrontations between different political positions, and the danger with consensus is that it risks pushing people or groups into extremist positions in order to create viable ‘alternatives’ to the consensual view. Mouffe writes,

In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neo-liberal form of globalization … it is not surprising that a growing number of people are listening to those who proclaim that alternatives do exist and that they will give back to the people the power to decide. When democratic politics has lost its capacity to mobilize people around distinct political projects and when it limits itself to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth working of the market, the conditions are ripe for political demagogues to articulate popular frustration. (Mouffe 2005, 70)

When a democratic society is content with establishing commonality and consensus, democracy is jeopardized. Why is this so? Because it fails to create democratic alternatives where people’s desires, passions and affect can be articulated. This failure opens up a space in which non-democratic groups can offer the only alternatives for change. Mouffe takes the example of the increasing support for political parties with xenophobic sentiments in Europe: when democratic contestation is eliminated through a consensual

belong to the state (20). In his view, the equation between the state and the political is erroneous because it turns affairs of the state into social matters and vice versa (22).
politics, it is left to these non-democratic groups alone to offer the only political alternatives (2005, 66-72).

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the emergence of antagonism between competing subject positions is not a signifier for essentialistic identities, such as we find in expressions like ‘the West against Islam’. For them, antagonism is not an indicator of essence but of contestation and it does not reveal any objective truth about society and human sociability. Instead, it exposes the limits of objectivity and shows what and where things are put at stake:

Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown – in the sense in which Wittgenstein used to say that what cannot be said can be shown. But if, as we have demonstrated, the social only exists as a partial effort for constructing society … antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social. Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not internal but external to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter’s impossibility of fully constituting itself. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 125)

In sum, what a ‘politics of contestation’ seeks to do in opposition to a ‘politics of consensus’ is to remove illusory veils of neutrality and objectivity. It makes political contestation visible and important, be this grounded in religious, secular, moral, or rational viewpoints. In this sense, antagonism exposes a society to its own limits showing where its borders are presently drawn between, for example, what is considered ‘normal’, ‘good’, ‘tolerable’, and ‘deviant’, ‘evil’ and ‘intolerable’.

Seeing the political sphere as an antagonistic sphere means shifting the focus from a politics of identity to a politics of negotiation, and the vocabulary from a moral language to a political one. The distinction between the moral and the political is crucial because what we are witnessing today, Mouffe argues, is that politics has become moralized (2005, 75). Both in the emergence of religious and political fundamentalisms, the friend/enemy distinction is played out in a ‘moral register’ and she especially mentions how political intervention is motivated in moral terms such as ‘the axis of evil’ (ibid.). Hence, instead of being constructed in political terms, the ‘we/they opposition’ is constructed in moral categories of ‘good’ (we) versus ‘evil’ (they). Such a “‘moralization’ of politics” (ibid.) is unhelpful for understanding the tension between religion and democracy and what radical democratic theorists offer is a vocabulary where tensions can be addressed in political terms, without being confused with moral or psychological ones.

Placing antagonism at the heart of political negotiations has consequences for how particular subjectivities are created, both singularly and collectively. If the notion of antagonism questions the primacy of the rational self by seeing affect and passion as political resources, the notion of hegemony complicates any simplified notion of an autonomous individual.
Hegemony and Ambivalent Subjectivities

The failure of current democratic theory to tackle the question of citizenship is the consequence of their operating with a conception of the subject which sees individuals as prior to society, bearers of natural rights, and either utility maximizing agents or rational subjects. In all cases they are abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make agency possible. What is precluded in these rationalistic approaches is the very question of what are the conditions of the democratic subject. (Mouffe 2000, 95-96)

What runs as a theme through radical democratic theory is the idea of a split subject whose subjectivity is always relationally constituted and always affected by the many different articulations that she is part of. The critique radical democracy raises against liberal ideas of the subject is that they build on an optimistic belief in the “inner goodness and original innocence of human beings” (Mouffe 2005, 2). They fail to acknowledge, for example, that human interaction is not only characterized by a willingness to communicate (which is at the basis of contemporary political thinking as well as cosmopolitan and deliberative education) but also by egoism, greed, and the very refusal to participate in collective concerns.

That the human subject is not unified and self-directed, has implications for how ‘society’ is perceived in radical democratic theory, suggesting that there is a limitation within society itself that prevents it from establishing itself as a wholly objective reality. An ontological notion of difference is both the condition of possibility for a pluralist democracy and the factor that prevents its full realization. This means that on both the level of the subject and on the level of society there is an element of instability at play, despite the seeming objectivity of the established hegemony. In this sense, every society and subjectivity contains within itself a condition of impossibility which, at the same time, constitutes its possibility (since it makes political work necessary). This has two implications: that negotiations about the constitution of the subject are inescapable, and that democracy is never complete but open-ended. One underlying idea of radical democracy is therefore to articulate a democratic politics that takes the ambivalence of human subjectivity into account on both individual and collective level. Or, as Mouffe puts it: “to elaborate the democratic project on an anthropology which acknowledges the ambivalent character of human sociability” (2005, 3).

To explore how these levels interact, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) develop a theory of hegemony which implies, in short, that every construction of a subject – be this a ‘religious’ subject or a ‘political’ one – refers to different ‘subject positions’ within a certain discursive or hegemonic structure (1985, 49). The split, relational, subject signals here a difference from the liberal notion where the subject might be relational but is unified.
111-114). When they discuss collective and singular identifications\(^ {50} \) they refer to articulations within a certain hegemonic matrix, and not to essential ‘existing’ categories. They write:

Renunciation of the category of the subject as a unitary, transparent and sutured entity opens the way to the recognition of the specificity of the antagonisms constituted on the basis of different subject positions, and, hence, the possibility of the deepening of a pluralist and democratic conception. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 166)

The combination of the theory of hegemony and the renunciation of a unified subject implies that even though the subject positions available are (theoretically) endless, there is a limit to which positions within a certain hegemonic order particular subjects can inhabit. In a classroom, for example, there are the given positions of ‘student’ and ‘teacher’ and different expectations of behaviour are attached to each position. But a social order is never totally fixed and the student, when he or she comes home for dinner, is not only ‘student’ but also ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, ‘Christian’, ‘friend’, and ‘child’ just as the teacher might be ‘wife’ or ‘husband’, ‘Muslim’, ‘mother’, and ‘neighbour’. Both ‘student’ and ‘teacher’ continuously move between different subject positions, both individually and collectively. Different subject positions or collective identifications do not have to develop into conflict, but antagonism occurs when one identification hinders the establishment of another. The question then is to what extent the teacher’s ‘religious’ subject position can be available to her in the classroom or to what extent it will conflict with her subject position as teacher.

What Laclau and Mouffe seek to explain with the term hegemony is how ‘laws of necessity’ operate to give rise to seemingly objective (op)positions between, for example, freedom and dependency, the individual and the collective, or the universal and the particular (1985, 154). Their ambition is to depict how social and ideological relationships take on objective and unchangeable status (although they are not) as the result of a convergence between objectivity and power: a convergence that creates a hegemonic belief in the possible establishment of a ‘full’ society (1985, 127). We speak, for example, about religion, nation, democracy, or culture as if they ‘exist’ – we assign to them objective status – and we create hierarchies where one is subordinated to the other (for example, religion to democracy in liberal democracy). Hence, what the term hegemony seeks to illuminate is both that relationships between different subjectivities are contingent and non-essential (and therefore open to change) and that change is a difficult and slow pro-

\(^ {50} \) To emphasize the articulatory aspect of their politics and avoid essentialization, radical democratic theorists prefer to use the terms identifications and subject positions instead of identities or subjectivities.
cess because of the power structures that define them.\footnote{This should not be taken to mean that subjectivities are reduced to merely a question of language. There is no opposition between language and reality in the theory of hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 108). When for example ‘religion’ is defined as a specific collective identification or subject position, this is not only created linguistically (as an articulation) but materially as in the ‘materialization’ of synagogues, churches and mosques.} Even if the theory of hegemony is a non-essentialistic theory, it does not suggest that subject positions are easily changed. Change is possible, but because subjectivities are relationally constructed, they cannot be altered without altering the entire web of subject positions they are entangled in.

In contrast to liberal democracy, the theory of hegemony replaces rationally constituted subjectivities with relational ones. Mouffe writes,

> When we accept that every identity is relational and that the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an ‘other’ that is going to play the role of a ‘constitutive outside’, it is possible to understand how antagonisms arise. (Mouffe 1993, 2)

Another aspect of Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction is consequently that ‘the political is relational’, that is, that subjectivity is given objective status in relationship to other subjectivities. This implies not only that the self participates in many different communities at the same time but inhabits several subjectivities simultaneously: the subject alters between ‘being’ a ‘religious’, a ‘political or an ‘ethnic’ subject depending on the relationships it participates in. If we return to the example of the caricatures, this theory suggests that it is difficult to say whether or not the affected ‘Muslim’ reacting to the publication as a ‘religious’ or ‘political’ subject. What comes into focus in a radical democratic analysis is the relationality that creates these subject positions and for which purposes.

The relational character of the political implies that every subject position is constituted by its ‘outside’, that is, by what it is not. This has significant implications for the radical democratic view of politics, and drawing on Derrida’s notion of ‘the contaminated outside’ it is argued that the subject is not only defined by its outside but also that the outside already inhabits and contaminates the inside. This is a radically different view than the inter-subjective position of Habermas which builds on the idea that two stable and self-directed selves can engage in dialogue without either one being contaminated by the other. If liberals see the individual as existing prior to society and abstracted from concrete practices, radical democracy instead shows how different subject positions are constituted as consequences of certain hegemonic articulations. All articulation is contingent and an essential task for a radical democratic politics is to make visible which subjectivities a certain order produces and which it excludes.
Democracy, then, is more than a form of government. It creates a symbolic ordering of social relations which privileges some and subordinates others. Liberal democracy privileges the individual at the expense of collective forms of identification and offers no horizon against which ‘the people’ can be imagined other than as a multiplication of individuals. Since citizenship is not an individual concept but always entails a collective element, according to Mouffe, there can be no real understanding of citizenship in liberal democratic societies (2006, 322). Therefore citizenship, collectively understood, needs to be reintroduced into liberal discourse and it needs to be shown that politics plays a crucial role in shaping democratic subjectivities (or in preventing them from being shaped) (ibid.).

With this said, the critical point for radical democracy is to make visible how, and in relation to what, ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘extremists’ are produced. This is important because just as radical democracy calls for a distinction between morality and politics, it also calls for a need to reflect on how these subjectivities are constituted in relational and ‘contaminated’ terms, rather than in essentialistic and ‘pure’ ones. Given this, any clear-cut distinctions between ‘religious’, ‘democratic’, ‘secular’, or ‘political’ subjects are made difficult. This does not mean that they should be dissolved, only that there can be no single formula that solves the tensions between them and that they are never completely independent of one another.

A consequence of the contingent play between different subject positions is that society has no essence, no underlying principle. This is what Laclau and Mouffe refer to in their now famous assertion that “society does not exist” (1985, 111). There is no space that is society, there are only different social formations and hegemonic stabilizations of these. In the article ‘On the Names of God’ Laclau pursues the argument that there is a parallel between mystical discourse and the theory of hegemony in the sense that both try to create an illusory stability in a ‘society’ where this is impossible (2006, 137-147). If hegemony is defined, Laclau writes, as “a relationship through which a particular content assumes, in a certain context, the function of incarnating an absent fullness” (145), it can also be seen as a “deification’ of the concrete” whose ground is not fixed but contingent (147). Modern politics can in this sense be seen as idolatrous of stability and objectivity and instead of admitting the profound instability and contingency of society, it asks its citizens to put their trust in the idea of a nation, a cosmopolitan ideal, or a religion as if these ideas were absolutes. What this kind of politics forecloses, Laclau points out, is what the mystical tradition taught us long ago, namely that the absolute is an utterly empty place (147). Like the mystical that speaks of thirst and lack, “political fullness needs to be named in terms deprived, as much as possible, of any positive content” (Laclau 2008, 146). Hence, instead of seeking to define what democracy and religion ‘are’, as something already given, radical democracy is more concerned about creating possibilities for a democratic politics. A precondition for this is that
categories like ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ are seen as open articulations of a contingent hegemonic relationship.

**Religion and Radical Democracy**

Even if religion is not given much particular attention in radical democracy, its theory has significant contributions to make for renegotiating the relationship between religion and democracy. If religion in the previous chapter was subjected to democracy through appeals to rationality and consensus the focus on antagonism, articulation, and political negotiation makes the power-dimension at play in such subordination visible and suggests that religion is not necessarily anathema to democracy but constitutive of it. Hence, instead of asking to what extent religion can be included in the democratic, radical democracy sees the tension between them as signs of a political negotiation. Religious citizens cannot simply be rejected for not living up to a certain idea(l) of democracy but must be seen as taking part in the political struggle itself when they, for example, challenge liberal notions of freedom and where the border is to be drawn between the private and the public. As Sigurdson puts is, radical democracy gives religion a public voice legitimate for political action and argumentation (2009, 107). In my view, radical democracy also gives religion a public space.

Needless to say, Mouffe’s proposal does not suggest Hobbesian chaos or that any kind of relationship between religion and democracy is acceptable. In her essay “Religion, Democracy, and Citizenship” (2006) it becomes very clear that she supports the liberal “constitutional limits” such as the separation between church and state, religion and politics, the public and the private (325). Her point is simply – but this nonetheless offers a more differentiated distinction than liberal democracy – that all these relationships need to be seen as contingent and as results of political negotiations. A problem with modern politics, as she sees it, is that all these relationships are equated and presented as requiring one another. For Mouffe, all these distinctions need to be understood differently as well as being placed under constant scrutiny (ibid.). The separation of church and state, for example, implies a “separation between religion and state power” but it does not imply “the tendency to identify politics with the state and the state with the public” (ibid.). Faithful to her emphasis on a politics of negotiation, the separation of the church and the state cannot be used to defend a relegation of religion to the private sphere or that religious symbols should be excluded from the public sphere (ibid.).

By not seeing the subject as prior to but as constitutive of the political process, radical democracy has made it possible to place the process of defining the religious subject at the very centre of democracy. It is now time to focus more concretely on how radical democracy can respond to the themes introduced in chapter one (love, freedom, and dialogue). As a way of creat-
ing a bridge to the windows in part two, the following section focuses on three movements through which the renegotiation of religion and democracy can take place with the religious subject at its centre. These are discussed as transforming ‘enemies to adversaries’, ‘recognizing constitutive dependency’, and ‘welcoming a conflictual consensus’.

From Enemies to Adversaries

If a democratized democracy is characterized by a public sphere where people are not deprived of their passions it nonetheless still requires a certain social order. The reply to this, from radical democratic theorists, does not lie in a liberal balancing-act between state intervention and individual rights and freedoms but in answering the following question: what does it mean to establish the friend/enemy distinction between conflicting parties in a democratic way? The idea is to create societies where we can legitimately disagree and for this to become possible, enemies need to be transformed into legitimate adversaries. If antagonism cannot be overcome by transcending the we/they relation, Mouffe asks, “what would constitute a ‘tamed’ relation of antagonism, what form of we/they would it imply?” (2005, 19).

One characteristic of such a relationship would be to distinguish the moral from the political and, thereby, to discuss ‘the enemy’ in political rather than moral terms (2005, 72-76). A democratic politics, in other words, must help create an understanding of ‘them’ so that the enemy is no longer perceived as someone to destroy but as an ‘adversary’, as “somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (Mouffe 2000, 102-103). Adversaries are “persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way” (Mouffe 2000, 13). The ‘taming’ of antagonistic relations attempted here seeks to create another type of relationship – the agonistic relation – where both parties recognize that even if there are no rational solutions to their conflicts, they need to recognize the legitimate existence of their opponents (Mouffe 2005, 20).

A key feature of a radical democratic politics is that particular problems are given particular attention. This resistance against universalization is also a resistance against essentialization, and if it is key to separate the moral from the political it is also key to separate the religious from the political (as well as from the moral). Even if Mouffe does not explicitly mention this distinction herself, her emphasis on politics as negotiation paves the way for this. Hence, transforming enemies into adversaries demands a thorough attentiveness to difference where different kinds of registers and subject positions need to be analysed separately and in relation to one another.

What the liberal state seems to fear, Mouffe argues, is that an increasing number of people will be searching for collective forms of identification that
will jeopardize their loyalty to the democratic state (2000, 96). The liberal privatization of people’s passions is precisely where liberal democracy has gone wrong, according to Mouffe. Hence, religious fundamentalism is partially a result of the gap the liberal state creates by failing to offer alternative democratic identifications (ibid.). This is an important point, because it illuminates the risks involved in offering no alternative ways to embody democratic citizenship other than the ones articulated by the dominant hegemonic order. This way of controlling ‘the masses’ risks erupting into violence and terrorism, Mouffe argues, and is a consequence of a “unipolar world” (2005, 76-83).

Transforming enemies into adversaries requires detailed, local, and practical work, something which at first might seem less efficient and more complicated than relying on a unipolar world. A multipolar world, by contrast, never allows for comfortable and stable definitions.

Recognizing Constitutive Dependency

The notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ mentioned above serves to illuminate that every construction of a ‘we’ or an ‘I’ is made possible only through the simultaneous construction of a ‘they’ and a ‘you’ and through the establishment of a violent hierarchy between them (Mouffe 1993, 141). The relationship between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ is a precarious relationship, because antagonism appears when the inside and the outside threaten to eradicate one another. However, the ‘constitutive outside’ is not merely a dialectical negation of the ‘inside’: it is outside in the sense of being incommensurable to the inside and it is constitutive in the sense of being the condition of emergence of the inside (Mouffe 2000, 12).

The ‘constitutive outside’ is a symbolic concept signifying that in every particular identification there is a trace or contamination which makes any simplistic polarizations between, for example, ‘Muslims’ and ‘Europeans’ difficult. What the symbolic notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ helps us understand is that the development of any concrete ‘we’ depends on the ‘they’ from which it is differentiated (Mouffe 2005, 19). Given that the ‘constitutive outside’ is a symbol of the impossible constitution of any unified and pure ‘us’, ‘religious subjectivity’ is constituted as opposed to ‘democratic subjectivity’ in a discourse that ‘needs’ these to be defined in oppositional

52 Commenting on the complexities of terrorism in the interview with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida discusses the ‘constitutive outside’ as also a contaminated relationship between those ‘inside’ (democracy) and those ‘outside’. This suggests that ‘the terrorist’ is not simply one of ‘them’ but one of ‘us’. He writes: “Those called ‘terrorists’ are not, in this context, ‘others,’ absolute others whom we, as ‘Westerners,’ can no longer understand. We must not forget that they are often recruited, trained, and even armed, and for a long time, in various Western ways by a Western world that itself, in the course of its ancient as well as very recent history, invented the word, the techniques, and the ‘politics’ of ‘terrorism’” (Derrida 2003, 115).
terms in order to maintain its hegemony. What the constitutive outside reveals is that these subjectivities are mutually interdependent.

Nonetheless, the world we live in is a world of categories and in order to be able to talk about things at all, we need to speak about ‘religious’ subjects just as we speak about ‘democratic’ subjects even if there is always something that escapes these categories. The crux of this situation is that we simultaneously affirm the hegemony we seek to problematize. Laclau captures the heart of this dilemma when he writes the following:

I cannot assert a differential identity without distinguishing it from a context, and, in the process of making the distinction, I am asserting the context at the same time. And the opposite is also true: I cannot destroy a context without destroying at the same time the identity of the particular subject who carries out the destruction. (Laclau 1996, 27)

The corollary of this is that it is difficult to change an unjust power-relation in a hegemonic system without also changing the suppressed category, in this case ‘religious’ subjectivity. In other words, we cannot ‘destroy’ a relationship between two subject positions without altering both these positions. If change is to be made, it cannot avoid drawing already ‘othered’ subjectivities into the process. Following Laclau, the current relationship between democracy and religion cannot be changed without altering both ‘religious’ subjectivity and ‘democratic’ subjectivity. This openness to change and negotiation is one reason why religion and democracy can be seen as questions for education. Before I expand on this further, however, let us look at the implications of ontological difference for the notion of consensus.

**Welcoming a ‘Conflictual Consensus’**

Even if Mouffe is critical of consensus, she does not discard it altogether since we need to share – even with the enemy – some ethico-political ground. So, even though she finds deliberative democracy’s striving for rational consensus counterproductive (since it precludes the plurality it says it supports) she admits that some kind of consensus is needed for societal institutions to function. What she welcomes, unlike the deliberative democrats, is the interruption of understanding and meaning; her point is that every establishment of consensus entails some form of exclusion. Consensus must therefore be accompanied by the possibility of dissent (2005, 31).

To emphasize the welcoming of conflicting and multiple interpretations, Mouffe coins the term “conflictual consensus” (2000, 103-105). What she seeks to capture is a space where clashes that may emerge from different understandings of ‘democratic (liberal) values’ are given democratic outlets. What she critiques liberal democracy of neglecting is the need for multiple kinds of bonds, and the notion of a conflictual consensus is a way to legitimate other bonds than the rational and the argumentative. Hence, the main
differences between Mouffe’s and Habermas’s views of ‘consensus’ are related to where they begin their argumentation and where they wish to end it. Habermas’s aim, as we have seen, is to reconcile difference through a model of the ideal speech situation whereas for Mouffe, by contrast, disagreement is constitutive of a ‘living democracy’. Her goal is not to settle conflict but to keep them open and democratic. Habermas and Mouffe also begin in different positions, and if Mouffe starts in a radically pluralistic society that cannot be reconciled because it contains an ontological difference (an affective pluri-verse), Habermas operates with an epistemological difference that seeks to settle conflicts through a dialogue free from dominance and power (a communicative uni-verse). The refusal to admit the exclusions he thereby creates and the embedded power-structure of his discourse ethics are some of Mouffe’s main points of critique.

To live with ‘conflictual consensus’ means giving up the idea about a reconciled society. The implication of the radical democratic view is that this is the challenge of a pluralist democracy: to have the courage and the energy to live with the conflicts that are produced within it. To ‘live’ a pluralist democracy is thus to work against the inclinations to create ‘peace and quiet’ and instead engage in making different subject positions possible. If an increasing number of citizens are discontent with rational individualism and are seeking collective identifications, a democratic society that seeks to avoid conformism needs to offer multiple ways through which democratic citizenship, and democratic rules, can be articulated and interpreted. Welcoming this process of contestation, seeking to channel it into democratic designs, is what radical democratic theorists render as a democratizing of democracy.

53 Giving up the idea of reconciliation has given rise to a critique of radical democracy coming from theological/political voices. Although they find radical democracy helpful in creating a conversation about how we might live together in a pluralist political society, they nonetheless believe that Mouffe and others are “ontologizing and naturalizing conflict” (Johnson 2007, 138). This creates a new foundationalism where the agon is inescapable and epistemological uncertainty implies endless conflict (see Johnson 2007; Benson 2009). According to Johnson (who supports her critique with scholars like Stanley Fish and John Milbank), Mouffe seems to occupy (an illusory) neutral position when she assumes “that we can distance ourselves from our present situation enough to see conflict for what it is” (100). What needs to be questioned, Johnson continues, is whether radical democracy actually ‘radicalizes’ political liberalism or whether it simply falls into the critique generally attributed to liberalism (ibid.). Speaking from an explicitly Christian theological position, Bruce Ellis Benson, critiques radical democracy for not being radical enough and that it “turns out to be little more than another form of universalism, with a deep secularism at its core” (2009, 248). Although I find this critique worth considering, I do not share the underlying assumption behind this critique which often appears to come from the perspective of ‘an ontology of peace’.

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Education, Radical Democracy and Religious Subjectivity

Radical democracy does not give much attention to education per se, but an educational response to its theory is currently emerging among philosophers of education. The emphasis on democratic negotiation makes it difficult to simply implement radical democracy into education as a model for democracy. The strength of this, these thinkers argue, is that it raises caution against any political attempt to ‘use’ education as a means to political ends as when teachers and educators are required to educate either for democracy or through democracy (Biesta 2004, 2006; Todd 2009a). What radical democracy might be able to give back to education is a focus on the student – the subject of education – but this subject, as we have seen, is not only autonomous and rational but affected, dependent, conflicted and perhaps also ‘religious’. Before concluding this chapter let us bring the aspects discussed above to bear on education, reflecting on what changes of perspective they initiate for teachers and religious students in schools. These themes will be returned to in more details in the final chapter of this thesis, offering a bridge between the liberal models of education and the educational issues emanating from the windows.

Love: Educating Passionate Adversaries

As a way of transforming enemies into adversaries a key role for education, Claudia Ruitenberg (2009) argues, is to prepare citizens for the role of the political adversary. This implies acknowledging the role of emotions in education and even if this has been recognized before, as Ruitenberg points out, the political implications of our emotions have not (275). Citizenship education is traditionally masculinist and there is still a heavy emphasis on dispassionate analysis and rational deliberation within its discourse (276). What matters, according to Ruitenberg, is not only that emotions are recognized but how and, she writes, “the emotional education required for political education based on agonistic pluralism would focus not on seeing the emotions as a private site of control or means of personal success but rather on understanding the cultural significance and significations of emotions” (ibid.).

What is needed, according to Ruitenberg, is that students learn to distinguish their private emotions from those of the collective and to make distinctions between moral rage and political rage. The difference between them is one of object, she argues (277), something which makes possible an educational distinction between them. For our purposes here, such distinctions would make it possible to discern what kind of anger is at stake when it emerges, for example, against Muslim girls who ask to be exempted from sex education or swimming-classes. Is this moral or political and under what conditions? An important distinction to be able to make, it seems to me, if
we seek to educate children for becoming adversaries (whom we respect) instead of enemies (whom we wish to destroy).

Even if transforming enemies into passionate adversaries also implies a certain moment of ‘taming’ (or cultivation), there is a difference between this and educating for the establishment of a rational consensus. The latter suggests that students need to cultivate certain attitudes ‘before’ they can qualify for participation in deliberative conversations whereas a radical democratic approach sees educative potential in political emotions (Ruitenberg 2009, Todd 2009a). Educating passionate adversaries implies finding ways in which distinctions between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ can be democratically negotiated and one way of doing this, Todd points out, is to introduce students into a political language about exclusions rather than solely into a language of morality (2009a, 114). This might suggest, for example, that the political implications of what it means to cover one’s face (or not to cover one’s face) are to be discussed as being different from moral ones. If students would come to see the political consequences of their passionate commitments, Todd continues, the potentially violent and antagonistic conflicts might be transformed into agonistic ones (ibid.). As thinkers like Mouffe argue, a well-functioning society needs antagonists and protagonists, and if the political force of democracy is to survive, then strategies need to be developed that recognize the tensions between them without allowing them to erupt into violence.

Freedom: Educating Dependent Subjectivities

Renouncing the category of the subject as a unitary entity complicates the goal and aims of an education that prioritizes autonomy and rationality. A theory of hegemony helps us see the subjectivities available to us are only those that the contemporary hegemonic discourse makes possible. The ways in which religious students are perceived in education is therefore profoundly related to how secular students are perceived (and vice-versa). When subjectivities in this way are relationally constituted, every process of ‘my’ becoming is profoundly dependent upon ‘yours’, and ‘who’ we can become is, therefore, limited to a certain context. This might seem self-evident at this point, but it creates an important corrective to pedagogical practices that seek either to fix the meaning of subjectivities or to argue for their complete openness. An educational discussion about the relational character of subjectivity would reveal the political implications of these constructions and how every identity (or identification) is constituted in a web of relationships. Even if other identifications might feel threatening the crux is that it is only if the other is different from me that my subjectivity can become possible (Biesta 2006).

A political consequence of the above relationality, as we have seen, is that uncontaminated subjectivities such as purely ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ citizens
are an impossibility. Since these categories are politically produced, there are no innocent or objective categorizations. What this calls for is an attentiveness to how these categories are created and recreated in education and whose purposes they serve. Educating for dependent subjectivities might imply that students come to see themselves as utterly dependent on their ‘constitutive outside’, suggesting that my ‘secularity’ might be related to your ‘religiosity’.

What is made possible through a radical democratic emphasis on political relationality and a ‘constitutive outside’ is a shift from the essentialized ‘religious student’ to discussing in relation to what and whom the religious student ‘becomes’ religious. In focus, in other words, are the contestations between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ (or the non-religious) and how these categories are created in relation to and not independently from one another. If there is an increase in the number of women who choose to veil themselves in secular liberal democracies, what does this ‘say’ about the context in which this happens?\footnote{I have chosen to see the wearing of the veil as a religious issue although I am aware that, for some women, veiling is more a cultural practice than a religious one.} For educational contexts dominated by moral and psychological explanations to student behaviour (Smeyers, Smith, & Standish 2007), a focus on relationality would shift the question from asking what it is ‘in the students’ that give rise to increasing religious sentiment to asking what it is in their encounters with certain sentiments in society that sets it in motion.

**Dialogue: Welcoming Dissent in Education**

One consequence of the critique of rationality is that it is no longer possible to explain students’ xenophobic or religiophobic sentiments as simply a lack of knowledge. The psychoanalytic heritage of radical democratic theory helps us see that there are affective factors – such as the ‘phobia’ itself – that prevents students from acquiring knowledge. To give room for voicing such sentiments might be a risky path to take, but following radical democratic theorists, it would be more risky to reject them.

The emphasis on negotiation, antagonism, and conflict asks for an acceptance of the idea that a wholly inclusive education is an illusion. If the inclusion/exclusion mechanism is inevitable for every kind of identity formation, a wholly inclusive education could only mean that difference is erased. As Gert Biesta critically observes, striving for inclusion creates a situation where it is always the already included that set the agenda which the excluded have to meet if they are to be included (2007, 25). Instead of seeing this as a failure of democracy, a radical democratic approach sees the very tension between the included and the excluded as a political process seeking to transform it into democratic designs.
Todd argues along similar lines when she suggests that to welcome dissent in education implies helping students recognize that “the point is not to win the argument, or to eschew the passions of others, but to live in the fragile and unstable space of ‘conflictual consensus’” (2009a, 114). This implies an acceptance of other people’s different beliefs and practices without having to convince them how wrong, odd, or irrational these are. It might also imply accepting that agreement might not always be reached and that we need to live with the uncertainty involved in not reaching understanding. This does not mean that critical questions cannot be raised; quite the opposite. Given the point made earlier about the need to distinguish moral arguments from political ones, welcoming dissent in education implies helping students to make these distinctions. To live in the fragile space of a conflictual consensus, it seems to me, means helping students to ‘cultivate an acceptance’ of one another’s difference and to endure with one another despite conflicting views.

Conclusion: ‘Post’ the Post-Secular and Post-Political

In a post-secular situation where religion is becoming increasingly visible, radical democratic theory offers possibilities for seeing the definition of religion and religious subjectivity as part of the political struggle. Since all subjectivities can be viewed as results of a certain political negotiation, unified and stable definitions of ‘secular’, ‘democratic’, or ‘religious’ citizens are difficult to uphold. In this way, it has been argued, religion is given a political space in which it can neither be positioned as anathema to democracy, nor as being entirely compatible with it. How the relationship between religion and democracy is to be constituted remains therefore an open question.

Instead of seeing the tensions religion is causing in liberal democratic societies as ‘problems’ to be solved, radical democratic theory offers an approach where the tensions themselves are seen as sites of political interest. In other words, instead of discussing where lines should be drawn between the private and the public or what ought to be shown and what must remain hidden, a radical democratic approach sees the negotiation itself as political. This is what Mouffe and others refer to as a ‘return of the political’ in a ‘post political society’ that tries to eliminate conflict through appeals to consensus. Recognizing the contingency and hegemony within current political arrangements makes us able to question the status quo. It also makes it possible – and this is an important point for our purposes here – to follow democratic rules in a plurality of ways. This means we can legitimately disagree about how values such as liberty and equality can be interpreted and lived. By helping us think more creatively about how ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ are relationally constituted, radical democracy does not leave us stranded in unhelpful bifurcations.
What needs further exploration, it seems to me, is what the alterations above would look like in more concrete terms. Radical democracy offers a starting-point for our renegotiations but it fails to offer any substantial images of what the passage from enemies to adversaries might look like. What would such transformations mean for the different subjects involved? What would it mean, more concretely, to recognize dependency and to engage in dialogue when conflict and antagonism are permanent features of human sociability? Radical democracy offers us a framework for the renegotiation between religion and democracy but what is needed now, it seem to me, are more thorough examples of what this might mean. More simply perhaps: what would a renegotiation of religion and democracy through the notions of love, freedom and dialogue look like if antagonism, dependency, and conflict are taken as our starting-points?

Societies will always produce ‘remainders’, that is, people who do not fit into the present hegemonic order. The recognition of this in radical democracy serves the function to create spaces of possibility for our passionate religious and political concerns that more adequately allow for disagreement and difference. Education might become such a space and if there is educational potential to be explored in the tensions between religion and democracy, as I argue, it needs to be further explored what it might mean to educate beyond the situations of the post-secular and post-political.

In a situation when an increasing political aggression is given religious overtones – I am returning here to the publications of the caricatures, the increasing radicalization in Malmö, and the re-occurring debate about veiling – a radical democratic perspective makes it possible to discuss these issues from a position of self-critique. Given the focus on contestation, there is a built-in attentiveness in this model of democracy not only to contingency and hegemony but also to a critical reflection on how radical democracy itself operates as a theorizing of these tensions. Instead of shutting contestation down we could look at them as sites for critical self-reflection and, as I am arguing in this dissertation, as questions for education.

Emphasizing political struggle instead of an alternative definition of what democracy ‘is’, radical democracy has made new vistas possible for renegotiating the relationship between education, democracy, and religion. The notion of ontological difference has paved way for this and the coming three ‘windows’ seek to offer other ways of seeing love, freedom, and dialogue building on the radical notions of antagonism, dependency, and conflict.
Part II
Windows
Introduction

This chapter can be seen as a commentary to the cosmopolitan proposal to educate for a ‘love of humanity’. The aim of this proposal was to develop a compassionate politics but, as was shown, this came to degrade and exclude religious loves and attachments. In chapter two we therefore turned to a model of radical democracy where passions and affected modes of existence were seen as constitutive of democratic coexistence and the potential antagonism of the friend/enemy distinction created the starting-point for this. What was left unexplored, however, was what it might mean – as a question of love – to transform antagonism (enemies) into agonism (adversaries).

As a way of keeping the human subject at the centre of the renegotiation of religion and democracy, the overall purpose of this chapter is to explore whether ‘love of neighbour’ can bridge the passage between antagonism to agonism and, at the same time, bring religion and democracy together on a new basis. The questions addressed here are the following: What kind of love would make it possible for religious subjects to love religiously in public spaces and what would it mean, on a more general level, to love the neighbour in the midst of particularities, passions, and affects?

The chapter begins in Hannah Arendt’s ‘love of the world’, a notion that calls attention to the plural and particular instead of the universal and abstract. For Arendt, ‘the world’ is what comes ‘between us’ when we appear to one another in speech and action. Therefore, we are both separated and brought together on the basis of what we love. ‘Love of the world’ is also about ‘love of neighbour’ and she takes her understanding of both these ideas from Saint Augustine on whom she wrote her dissertation. Kierkegaard gives the in-between space introduced by Arendt a ‘religious’ reading but, for him, it is God (and not the world) that comes between us. The absurd act of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, he argues, can only be seen an act of love if God is ‘the middle term’ and if Isaac is loved as a neighbour according to the Christian command. Both Arendt and Kierkegaard address ‘love of neighbour’ through a thorough acknowledgement of its difficulty – Kierkegaard as a critic of a religious context that has come to love the theological
or philosophical system more than the particular subject and Arendt as a critic of a political situation that tends to use and pervert people’s loves for its own instrumental purposes.

Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard about the need for a break with the present order of things if love is to become other than simply a matter of exchange. Therefore, he translates the name of God into the name of the ‘wholly other’ suggesting that love ‘is’ to love the impossible, or, to love what is more than possible. The chapter brings the notion of the impossible to bear on two aspects of Derrida’s thinking; his idea of democracy and of what it might mean to love a particular neighbour in a situation of conflict. In other words, if the ‘wholly other’ does not remain at arm’s length distance but invades my space, what might it then mean to love one’s neighbour? Following Arendt, Kierkegaard, and Derrida, the chapter suggests that seeing love as a difference – a love’s difference – might offer new possibilities for religious subjects to love religiously in public spaces and, more generally, to love the neighbour in the midst of particularities and conflicts.

The issue of love touches upon the very heart of educators’ everyday practices. The chapter ends by pointing towards what the challenges for education might become if students are viewed as passionate lovers united and separated by these loves and not simply seen as rational individuals.

Love of the World – Love of the Neighbour

For the world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse.


Arendt writes in the ‘dark’ aftermath of the Second World War. Totalitarian forces are threatening to erase all possibilities for a humane world and in such a time, to paraphrase Arendt, ‘it is not enough that the human voice sounds’. What is needed is to bring the human subject to the centre of our attention. Since darkness is what comes when the open and light spaces where people can act and reveal themselves to others are foreclosed (Young-Bruehl 2006, 6), the threat to a humane existence is that people give up on the possibilities for political change and retreat from the public realm into

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55 As Arendt writes in the introduction to The Origins of Totalitarianism: “This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith” (1948/2004, xxvi). The spirit of faith, in this context, seems to suggest resisting the temptation to settle for simple solutions to difficult problems and to endure, instead, in a position of uncertainty.
the private. In the political climate Arendt addresses, this is precisely what has happened: the human being has lost his political status and his place in community and is “left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life” (1948/2004, 382).

Arendt is hesitant about bringing love to bear on the political. This is not so surprising given the fact that many revolutionary leaders such as Stalin, Lenin, Mao, and Hitler all manipulated people’s passions in order to enforce their respective revolutions. Given this, and that Arendt’s main concern is to fight the forces of totalitarianism in post-war Europe, her scepticism is well founded. Consider for example:

Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others … Love, by its very nature, is unworlly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces. (Arendt 1958/1998, 242)

Or the following,

love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public. (‘Never seek to tell thy love / Love that never told can be.’) Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world. (Arendt 1958/1998, 51)

In the first quote it is primarily the loss of space between us that makes love problematic as a political category. One can think here, for example, of how romantic love tends to absorb the lovers and turn them away from the world. When this is the case, Arendt seems to be saying, love is destructive of the political since it destroys the space between us. The second problem she draws attention to is the risk for manipulation, something which lies latent in any appeal to love as a political motivator. Love is perverted when it is used for political purposes, as a means, for example, to foster a certain kind of politics (or perhaps a certain kind of education). To make her point clearer she draws a parallel to the quality of goodness which, like love, must observe a certain caution vis-à-vis public life if it is to remain unexploited. It has always “led into absurdity”, she writes, to believe that “man can ever be wise or be good” (1958/1998, 75). Goodness, like love, is an ‘unworldly’ category that cannot be expressed in any direct sense. This does not mean that it is unimportant to politics but that neither love nor goodness can be represented in politics or used for political purposes. Hence, to motivate politics with appeals to love tends to become a misuse or an abuse of its meaning. Love is a delicate matter, Arendt seems to be saying, and if its

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56 I am using ‘his’ here in order to be faithful to Arendt’s terminology.
effects are not to become devastating to public life it can only appear in the world under certain circumstances.

Arendt’s work can be seen as a eulogy to the love of the world despite the above hesitation. In fact, it is ‘love of the world’ that motivates Arendt’s political mission to such an extent that she considered giving The Human Condition the title Amor Mundi (Young-Bruehl 1982, 324). What she explores are the political conditions for human existence and if we are to take the political troubles of our time seriously, she argues, we need to begin from another position than that of commonality and conformism. This position is to begin in ‘the fact’ of human plurality, that is, in “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1958/1998, 7). Plurality is “the condition … of all political life” (7) and human existence is therefore inevitably characterized by a life together with others that are not like me. Plurality is the only way to exist in the world and this has been so, she argues, already since Genesis where God creates Men in the plural, not Man, something which differentiates us from one another more profoundly than through simple reproduction.57 Plurality is not created by “repetitions of the same model” but through multiplication, something which points to the fact that “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (1958/1998, 8).58

What we share, given the fact of plurality, is not an abstract humanity but the world, ‘the world’ being not the natural world of animals and trees but the space of appearance where things can be heard and seen (1958/1998, 50). This does not mean that things appear in the same way to everyone but that “everybody sees and hears from a different position” (1958/1998, 57). For Arendt, however, this is not a problem to solve through, for example, deliberative procedures. Quite the contrary, difference is what makes a shared world possible. Sharing the world, for Arendt, is different from having things in common and even if the space of appearance (the world) is shared, our different positionings in this space make us see ‘different worlds’. Consequently, the space between us both separates and relates us to one another, a doubleness that is a fundamental part of the human condition:

57 For the sake of clarity Arendt makes sure to point out “the human condition is not the same as human nature” (1958/1998, 9-19). The human condition, in other words, should not be understood in essentialist terms.

58 A similar position is taken by the French philosopher Luce Irigaray who argues that difference, through the act of separation, is present already in the moment of creation in Genesis 1. When she reflects on the possibility to think through the difference between the sexes she writes: “In the beginning there was space and the creation of space … On the first day, the first days, the gods, God, make a world by separating the elements” (1993, 7). A similar point is argued by Jonathan Sacks when he suggests that the Hebrew word kadosh, ‘holy’, means being different, set apart, distinct (2002, 52). However, given Arendt’s radical adherence to plurality, the uniqueness implied here should not be understood in essentialist terms but in existential terms.

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To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates at the same time. (1958/1998, 52)

Through the image of a table, Arendt moves us from seeing plurality and difference as incidental to coexistence to seeing this as the very condition for human co-existence. What separates us, in other words, is what makes our life together possible and what is lost in mass society through the loss of separation are also those things that bind us together. Following this seemingly paradoxical emphasis that plurality and difference create bonds that bring us together, it might be worth asking whether the ‘motivational deficit’ (Critchley) discussed in the previous chapter has anything to do with the foreclosure of plurality in today’s consensual political climate. Could it be the case that meaningful engagements with others are reduced if plurality and difference are not acknowledged? What separation might mean, particularly as a kind of love, is a theme that is worth developing here.

Arendt’s thinking on love is deeply indebted to Saint Augustine on whom she wrote her dissertation, Love and Saint Augustine (1929/1996). In his thinking, she finds three kinds of love all related to love as a phenomenon of temporal existence: a world-oriented love (appetitus), an existential neighbourly love, and a transcendent love of the Creator (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 75). If the former is oriented towards the future and the latter towards the past, neighbourly love is the kind of love enacted in the present (ibid., 76). It is worth considering briefly here some of Augustine’s main points.

Augustine himself is most known for The City of God and Confessions and it is the fall of the Roman Empire in 410 A.D. that underlies the vision of a heavenly city, De Civitate Dei. Fallenness and human temporality is a recurring theme in Augustine’s writing and there would be no need for politics, he argues, if it was not the case that all forms of government tend to degenerate. As Robert A. Markus (2006) points out, it is Augustine that invents and defends the idea of a secular place within the religious creating in this way a necessary tension between the secular and the religious as early

59 As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl points out, Arendt’s reading of Augustine was not welcomed by her reviewers (1982, 74). The authorities of the Church argued that she had “presented the thinker Augustine, not the Bishop Augustine” but Arendt insisted that Augustine was not a theologian and by saying this she refused to partake in the debate between Protestants and Catholics on his relevance (74). For this reason, Young-Bruehl writes, “Arendt had sinned twice” for she had ignored both the theologian (Augustine) and the theologians (the contemporary theological scholars who claimed Augustine for their own) (ibid.).

60 The Roman Empire symbolized security and a civilized way of life and in this sense, as the Augustinian scholar Peter Brown points out, the addressee of The City of God (henceforth abbreviated DCD) is any citizen who has confused emotions about the time he lives in and who feels that stability can no longer be taken for granted (Brown, 1967/2000, 287-288). The City of God can thus be read as a ‘defence’ of the unsecure and messy conditions of life (DCD, xlv).
as in the fifth century. ‘The secular’, for Markus, is not to be wished away but a necessary condition for ‘the religious’.

Love is the dominant theme in The City of God and throughout this work Augustine elaborates the ambivalence of a double imagery: just as there are two loves – cupiditas and caritas – there are two goals and two origins.\(^{61}\) If ‘love of the self’ (cupiditas) orients us towards the earthly city, ‘love of God and neighbour’ (charity) orients us towards the heavenly.\(^{62}\) Both loves have craving desire or appetitus as their driving force but the difference between them lies in what they strive for and attend to. Simply speaking, people love different ‘things’, something which leads Augustine to formulate his now well-known utterance: “Love, but be careful what you love” (in Arendt 1929/1996, 17).\(^{63}\)

For Augustine, love has strong material connotations. Primarily, it relates to ‘things’ (or phenomena) in the world such as community and citizenship and it has little to do with emotions. This becomes clear already in the beginning of The City of God where he critiques Cicero’s definitions of both community and citizenship for being based on commonality (DCD II, 21). If Cicero defines a community as “united by a common sense of right” and a commonwealth as based on a “sound and just government” (ibid.), Augustine’s view is that this has never existed “because there never was real justice in the community” (ibid.). Against Cicero, he proposes the rather controversial definition of a people as being constituted by what it loves. A people, he writes, “is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love” (DCD XIX, 24).\(^{64}\) Defining citizenship this way – as a matter of a difference in love (or as a love’s difference) – frames the antagonistic dimension of human existence in a slightly different language. More precisely, in a language of love. It shows us, as Oliver O’Donovan points out, that every concrete community “is defined

\(^{61}\) Despite the dualistic tone in Augustine’s imagery, a recurring theme is a radical uncertainty for all citizens alike. Not only do we not know who belongs to which city, we can never know where we belong ourselves since we do not fully know who we are (Brown 1967/2000, 313).

\(^{62}\) By virtue of living in the world but not of the world there is a cosmopolitan theme present in Augustine’s thinking that finds resonance also in Arendt’s. There is a dual citizenship at play in his thinking and, as Peter Brown puts it, full citizenship for Christians was to be enjoyed only in the Heavenly Jerusalem (Brown 1967/2000, 285).

\(^{63}\) By arguing that we live in time but belong to eternity Augustine inverts the political order of his time and argues that man is a temporal being whereas the world and what we do in love of God and neighbour has the character of permanence. This is taken up in a discussion in Arendt’s dissertation about time and futurity (1929/1996, 27-35) and it constitutes a major theme of her thinking. For our purposes here, however, we will limit ourselves to exploring what eternity means as a way of loving one’s neighbour.

\(^{64}\) According to Oliver O’Donovan, one cannot look for political thought in The City of God because its scope is moral rather than political and it contains more or less nothing about the constitution of political societies or their government (2004, 48, 50-52). This is illustrated, I think, in how Augustine continues his argument suggesting that if a people is united by what they love “then it follows that to observe the character of a particular people we must examine the objects of its love” (DCD XIX, 24).
equally by the things it does not love together, the objects it refuses to accept as a ground of its association” (2002, 22).

The material and yet existentially ambivalent registers in Augustine’s notion of love are present also in Arendt’s. To ‘love the world’ is about having things between us that we cannot share because all of us see, relate to, or love differently. To ‘love the world’, then, is not to have a direct relationship to the world but to love what comes between us that both separates us and brings us together. The opposite of this happens when the public and private realms collapse into the social realm something which, Arendt argues, happens in tyrannies and mass societies alike. What is at stake in such situations is that we lose the necessary space that makes it possible to appear to one another as unique and different subjects (1958/1998, 58, 68-78).65 When plurality in this way is erased, that is when things are only permitted to present themselves in a unified perspective, we have reached the end of the world (ibid.). This is given an almost apocalyptic register in Arendt’s texts, and when she warns about conformism it is precisely the loss of possibilities for action (as a loss of the political) she is after. For Arendt, to love the world is a political act that strives to allow plurality to appear by keeping the space between us open.

Action, Arendt writes, “is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (1958/1998, 188). To live in the world – which is the only space where action, in an Arendtian sense, is possible – is inevitably to live in a space already inhabited by others. Becoming a human subject through speech and action is something that can only happen in the presence of others. The complexity of the co-existence Arendt suggests, given the fact of plurality, is that the other before whom I appear is radically different from me. This situation of inevitable difference is the very condition for me becoming a unique human subject. Arendt’s ‘love of the world’, in other words, is not an abstract love for a universal humanity but a concrete love for concrete neighbours who inhabit the world with me. In short, ‘love of the world’ is also a ‘love of neighbour’ since the world in which I appear to others is inevitably a world shared with others.

The passport on the journey to love of the neighbour, as Scott and Stark state in the introduction to Arendt’s dissertation Love and Saint Augustine, is Augustine’s famous exclamation in Confessions: ‘I have become a question to myself’ (Arendt 1929/1996, 121; Confessions X, xxxiii, 50).66 For Augustine this is said as an insight that God is not found in the external world but through an encounter with the abyss of his own heart. Hence, love of God and love of neighbour can only be experienced through a simultaneous dis-

65 A parallel can be drawn to Mouffe’s discussion about a post-political society (see chapter 2 of this thesis).
66 There are many translations of Confessions and Henry Chadwick’s reads: “I have become a problem to myself, and that is my sickness” (X.xxxiii.50, 1991, 208).
covery of the self. Even if Arendt is indebted to and apparently inspired by Augustine’s thinking, the turn he makes ‘inwards’ seems to disturb her. It suggests, she writes, that anyone who wishes to become a subject, “must withdraw into himself, into some inner region, turning his back on whatever the ‘outside’ can offer” (14). The turn inward to God and the self tends to devalue “the relevance of the neighbor” (93), a point where her critique of Augustine echoes Nussbaum’s.67 How can a self-denying person meet his neighbour, she asks, and what would the neighbour’s role in this encounter be? She writes:

By renouncing himself man at the same time renounces all worldly relations. He then views himself solely as created by God, rejecting whatever he himself has made and whatever relations he has established. In this way the neighbor loses the meaning of his concrete worldly existence, for example, as a friend or enemy. For the lover who loves as God loves, the neighbor ceases to be anything but a creature of God. (Arendt 1929/1996, 94)

Despite quotes such as this, however, Arendt remains fascinated by Augustine’s moral and political vision rooted, as it is, in an object-related kind of love. She continues therefore to struggle with what ‘love of neighbour’ might mean for politics especially, it seems, because she shares with him the recognition of the abysmal state of the human heart, a point on which they both radically depart from Nussbaum.

Arendt’s dissertation responds to the problem of self-denial by arguing that love of the neighbour is humanly impossible. Yet, its unworliday possibility lies in loving what is eternal in every neighbour and, she writes, building on a quote from Augustine: “In accordance with the meaning of being as being-forever, love of neighbor does not mean to love the other in his mortality, but to love what is eternal in him, his very own ‘whence’” (96).68

Even if this seems to be a compelling move, Arendt is not at ease with how the eternal seems to erase plurality between the self, God, and the neighbour. She continues her search by turning ‘backwards’, arguing that love of neighbour must derive from an altogether different source, that is, another beginning, than appetite or desire. She finds this source in Augustine’s Creator God (1929/1996, 45-92) and through this move she replaces Heidegger’s move towards death with a move towards birth. Hence, in jux-

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67 The ‘relevance of the neighbour’ is Arendt’s research question and her conclusion, according to Scott and Stark, is that “Augustinian philosophy is simultaneously both out of an engaged in the world” (Arendt 1929/1996, x), that is, both worldly and otherworldly.

68 Arendt refers to the passage in Confessions where Augustine mourns his lost friend. Augustine speaks of the love for his friend as if death is irrelevant. He writes: “I was surprised that any other mortals were alive, since he whom I loved as if he would never die was dead. I was even more surprised that when he was dead I was still alive, for he was my ‘other self’ (IV.vi.11, transl. Henry Chadwick 1991). Augustine’s friend (neighbour) survives through friendship and “the reason why I so feared death”, Augustine writes, “was that then the whole of my much beloved friend would have died” (ibid.).
tapon to the emphasis on mortality in Heidegger she founds the possibility for renewal in *natality*. That is, by virtue of being created, every man is our neighbour.

If we recapitulate where Arendt’s love of world and love of neighbour has brought us we find that to love the world is to love what comes between us. In ‘dark times’ when loving the neighbour is difficult we are helped, according to Arendt, to see the other person as ‘a creation’ and not a ‘creature’. This, however, should not be confused with fabrication or self-creation but suggests an existential way of loving the other beyond social encounters. It looks to the other as an existential and created being and to love the neighbour like this can be seen as an act of resistance against a society that ‘loves’ the neighbour on the basis of what he produces. The difficulty with this is that the world is a world of plurality (or, the world is a world of radical difference) which suggests that our chances to become unique human subjects is dependent upon others being radically different from me. This difficulty, however, is also a possibility since the condition for becoming a unique subject lies precisely in the fact that we are created as men and women in the plural and not as ‘human’ in the singular. In Arendt’s thinking, there is no ‘common world’ or ‘common humanity’ but only men and women who share a world of plurality. Given the fact of plurality, loving the world and the neighbour is only possible if we allow things to come between us and resist the temptation to strive for commonality. The gist of Arendt’s argument – and this is important – is that if we erase that which separates us we also erase that which brings us together. When we are offered conformity instead of plurality we are deprived not only of the world but our chances to appear in the world as uniquely different human subjects.

That Arendt speaks quietly of love in politics can perhaps best be understood as raising caution against the kind of manipulative politics that uses people’s passions for instrumental purposes. Speaking of love as an ‘unworldly’ and ‘antipolitical’ force while at the same time making ‘love of the world’ her main political theme is an interesting tension in Arendt’s writing. It seems to suggest that love is necessary if political life is not to become superficial and yet that love itself can never be used for political purposes. Love appears in the world in mediated form, disguised, one might say, in the ‘things’ that come between us. At the same time, it has its roots in the mysterious and incalculable force of human existence.

“Love is”, Arendt writes quoting Augustine, “the ‘weight of the soul,’ its law of gravitation” (in Arendt 1971, 95). In other words, love bends and binds. Following Arendt, we are bound by the weight of our own disability to love, and the other is therefore, in a certain sense, both my death and my life. As she reminds us, the burden of my neighbour ‘being different’ from me is also my chance to live, to be uniquely me. I may never share my neighbour’s loves but we share a world and we are, in this sense, inextrica-
bly intertwined. This is the essence of the ‘love’s difference’ that both sets us apart and brings us together.

Arendt’s emphasis on an in-between space is given a religious reading in Kierkegaard. For him, however, it is God that comes between us and loving the neighbour is only possible if God is made ‘the middle term’. The focus on new conditions for life finds echoes also in Kierkegaard but, for him, life does not begin with birth but with death. Hence, the religious command to love the neighbour inevitably involves sacrifice.

Love as Sacrifice and Command

Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world … He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago.


The story about Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac is a multifaceted story and in this window the challenge is to read it, following Kierkegaard, as an act of love. That Kierkegaard himself finds the story difficult to approach is indicated by the fact that he makes four attempts to begin it, starting all of them in the same way: “It was early in the morning” (1983, 10-14). It is if he is directing a film whose plot he cannot get right. When he finally gives up he does it by saying in a mixed tone of admiration and confusion: “No one was as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?” (14).

In *Fear and Trembling*, much turns on the expression “in virtue of the absurd” (Kierkegaard 1983, 20, 36, 37, 47). It is a phrase that points in several directions and from the reader’s point of view the absurd is that God both commands the sacrifice and calls it off. From Kierkegaard’s point of view, the absurd is that “God would give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He [Abraham] had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago” (36). It is beyond calculation and, indeed, beyond the reasonable that Abraham believes that if Isaac is killed, God will bring him back to life even after having himself killed him. Another ‘absurdity’ is that Abraham is demanded to give back what he has been given although, according to Kierkegaard, Isaac already belonged to God. For those familiar to the biblical story, Isaac is the son of a promise and Abraham has received him as such, that is, as a promise of a people, a land, a future – everything that makes life, as one might say, ‘worth living’. Hence, Abraham is torn between proving his love of God and saving his son and the aporia of the situation is that both the command to kill and the promise of life come from God. This means that if he sacrifices Isaac he jeopardizes the possibil-
ity that he, through Isaac, will become the father of a people and if he does not, he closes himself off to God and his promises.

What makes someone great, Kierkegaard argues, stands in proportion to what one loves and expects (16) and why Abraham is greatest of all is that he loves God more than both his son and himself and expects the impossible. To expect the impossible, for Abraham, is nothing less than to expect the absurdity of getting Isaac back already in this life. The key here is the present tense suggesting that if Abraham had simply believed that God would set everything right in a distant future, like in a Heaven or an afterlife, he would only have believed in the possible. As Kierkegaard points out, this is not faith at all but only “the most remote possibility of faith” (20). ‘The possible’ here seems to mean that if Abraham had anchored his faith in a future life he would not have faith at all. Instead, love is to believe the impossible in this life, here and now. This requires a leap beyond the logic of the possible and a faith like Abraham’s believes that what is humanly impossible can be carried out on a new basis: faith reconstituted by virtue of the absurd.

It is not difficult to see Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as fatalism or as an act of murder but, according to Kierkegaard, it is also an act of love. “The absolute duty can lead one to do what ethics would forbid,” Kierkegaard writes, “but it can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving” (74). It is even so that the greater the love the greater the sacrifice and Abraham “must love Isaac with his whole soul … and only then sacrifice him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice” (74). What we find in Kierkegaard’s reading of the story is an example of a thoroughly antagonistic relationship between two loves: the love of Isaac stands against the love of God and this paradox, Kierkegaard states, “cannot be mediated, for it depends specifically on this: that the single individual is only the single individual” (70). ‘The single individual’ is a key notion in Kierkegaard’s writings and in this context of absurd love it is used to point out that Abraham’s act cannot be converted into an ethical virtue. In fact, it cannot even be converted into a religious virtue because “[i]f the Church were to insist on this sacrifice from one of its members”, Kierkegaard writes, “we would have only a tragic hero” (74).

Kierkegaard’s point in suggesting that there is no mediation for Abraham is that his act can both be seen as love and murder, creating thereby an unbridgeable gap between the realm of religion and that of ethics. He writes: “The ethical expression of what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac – but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make one sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is” (30). It is of course crucial in this context to acknowledge how Kierkegaard defines ‘the ethical’, something that will be developed in the next chapter. Suffice for now is to point out that the ethical refers to the universal telos of his time – to consensus and reasonableness – and the paradox of faith belongs to a wholly different logic.
If one translates the sacrifice of Isaac only into the logic of ethics Abraham is a murderer. However, the contradiction we need to live with even if it makes us sleepless, Kierkegaard suggests, is that Abraham can be both a love and a murderer. These two logics – faith and ethics – need to remain separate and cannot be reduced to one another. This is why there is no mediation for Abraham and in order to change perspective and understand him as a lover, one has to make the movement of faith.

If we pause here and take a step back from Kierkegaard’s reading of the story it is difficult to ignore the fact that Abraham is prepared to kill his own son. If we read the text literally it seems adequate to ask whether he is not someone who ‘ordinary’ citizens in modern democracies should be protected from. A more generous approach would perhaps be to read the story less literally but, even if we do, is it not precisely these kinds of narratives that inspire fanaticism and extremism in contemporary political and religious conflicts? Still another approach would perhaps be to suggest that Abraham is in a state of psychological confusion and even if he is an important figure for three world religions, we need to find other examples of faith. We could also argue, following atheistic humanists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, that stories such as these are dangerous examples of what can happen to anyone who lets himself be ‘deluded by God’ and that this gives us a reason to shut religion out of the public sphere altogether.

Kierkegaard does little to help us resolve these dilemmas but it should be remembered that at the end of the story God calls the sacrifice off. In the Jewish tradition, and later in the Christian, the story has come to symbolize the end of human sacrifice. For Kierkegaard, however, the sacrifice that love of God seems to demand has deep personal roots and his primary concern is to find out what the price is for becoming a Christian.69 In a time like ours when religion, suicide bombers, devotion, conviction, and passion are all entangled in a web that is difficult to sort out, one could easily reject the story altogether for being too violent. The purpose of using it here, however, is to explore what it has to tell us about loving the neighbour in a time when ‘love’ seems to have become sentimentalized and romanticized.

What the above story highlights also for our time despite our likes or dislikes, it seems to me, is that there are people who fear God more than death. Following Arendt’s love of world and neighbour, the question raised for our purposes here is how people like Abraham can be loved as neighbours. A response to this question can be found in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love.

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69 Kierkegaard’s writing is coloured by the fact that most of his brothers and sisters died young. The urgent tone of his texts can be seen in light of life’s temporality, and what God demands of him, he thought, is that he gives writing his entire devotion. This meant sacrificing his engagement with Regine Olsen, the love of his life he never managed to forget.
(1995), a text where the Christian command to love the neighbour is given a very concrete reading as a ‘work’ of love.70

Fundamental to Kierkegaard’s approach to love of neighbour is the distinction between preferential and commanded love (1995, 52-90). Preferential love refers to what we usually call love, that is, to personal feelings and attachments and examples of this are erotic love and friendship. One may assume that Abraham’s love for Isaac is initially of a preferential kind. Preferential love operates on the plane of dissimilarities and differentiation and therefore, Kierkegaard argues, it is actually another form of self-love (53). Its foundation is within me and the friend or the lover is loved to the extent that they are attractive to me. There is consequently an apparent risk, Kierkegaard argues, that the command to ‘love the neighbour as oneself’ is turned into not loving the neighbour but rather loving the other as an “other I” (57). This sublimation of the other to me, Kierkegaard argues, is a kind of self-deification or idol-worship that wrongs the subject who is created in the image and likeness of God.71

Christian love, by contrast, is commanded. It is based on the Mosaic Law and three of the chapters in Works of Love can be seen as an exegesis of what this command might mean as a love of God and neighbour. He writes:

‘You shall love.’ Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change … This shall, then, makes love free in blessed independence. Such a love stands and does not fall with the contingency of its object but stands and falls with the Law of eternity – but then, of course, it never falls. (Kierkegaard 1995, 29; 39)

Commanded love is of an eternal kind and as such it creates a certain kind of equality before God. This equality makes everyone our neighbour and what seems to return here is an echo of Arendt’s emphasis on loving the eternal in every neighbour. Kierkegaard’s point is to secure love against the alterations and ambivalences that occur when we choose our friends, neighbours, and lovers and commanded love does not fluctuate in relation to the behaviour and the capacities of the beloved (or the object). Following Kierkegaard’s command to love, we do not choose who/what we love but the next person who enters through your door – whoever he may be – is your neighbour.

70 Kierkegaard’s focus on the singular individual alone before God in fear and trembling has caused some critics to accuse him of having little to say about institutional religion and politics and that he is mainly an irrational fideist (Caputo 2007a). In Works of Love (1995) it is nonetheless clear that Kierkegaard is both an austere critic of the religiousness of his time and that his writings are permeated by a clear socio-political focus. For a political approach to Kierkegaard’s work, see Mark Dooley’s The Politics of Exodus. Søren Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Responsibility (2001), New York: Fordham University Press.

71 The Danish word for neighbour [næste] and the Swedish [nästa] are akin to the English ‘next’ and has other connotations than the English ‘neighbour’. ‘Att elskes sin næste’ [Danish ‘to love one’s neighbour’] is not primarily someone who lives next to me but simply ‘the next one’, anyone, who crosses my path.
What he seems to suggest is a love that does not ask for reasons but looks beyond preference, purposiveness or usefulness. But still, how can love ever be commanded? Is this not contradiction in terms?

Commanded love is based on the counter-intuitive because not only is it impossible to live up to the Mosaic Law (from which the command emanates), it also goes against our ‘naturalness’ to love without preference (Quinn 1998, 359). In fact, preference is so strongly rooted in our natural inclinations that commanded love becomes an unnatural demand that creates unnatural ties (ibid.). Hence, motivated by a duty that goes beyond (or against) natural inclinations Kierkegaard seeks a pre-condition from which one can love the person whom one, humanly speaking, cannot love.

The condition on which one may love one’s neighbour despite its impossibility lies in what Kierkegaard calls ‘the middle term’. When it is impossible to love the neighbour, God is the only possibility. Kierkegaard explains:

In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being. Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the human being … Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal quality in loving, but the eternal quality is the opposite of preference. (1995, 57-58)

The only way to avoid turning the neighbour into the self (as in love thy neighbour as thyself) is to make God the middle term. In this way, love of neighbour can become possible because when God is loved you also love your neighbour and thyself “in the right way” (21). For Kierkegaard, love of self and neighbour are inter-related but it is only by loving God ‘above all else’, that I avoid confusing myself with the neighbour. If God comes between us, he seems to be saying, a space is created where the neighbour is able to remain distinct from me and I from him.

If God is the middle term we cannot love one another other than through God and it is an illusion to believe that one can love someone, a neighbour, a brother, a sister, a beloved, in an unmediated, direct way. God has to come between us, so to speak, and before one relates to the beloved or the friend one must first relate to God because “love is God” (Kierkegaard 1995, 121). Without God as middle term we would be back in the preferential love that is utterly a love of oneself. This being so, the logic of Kierkegaard’s argument is that Abraham would love himself and his own life more than God and Isaac if he did not give Isaac up and let God come between them. What is at stake in Fear and Trembling is a ‘right’ relationship to the things we love, Alastair Hannay argues, and seen this way “Abraham is, as it were, handing Isaac back so as to receive him again on the proper basis” (1985, 21). At the end of Works of Love Kierkegaard himself supports this suggesting that what it means to love ‘on a proper basis’, for Abraham, is that he is
called to love even his own son as a neighbour (1995, 438, also 108-109, 398). To love ‘on a proper basis’ suggests that the natural bonds between father and son need to be cut off and that the promises of Abraham’s life can be fulfilled only through a profound separation. In other words, Abraham has to renounce his fatherly (preferential) love for his son loving him instead through God as the middle term. If he had not given Isaac up and instead clung to his own ‘right’ as a father, then Isaac would be lost. As a way of saying that that the only ‘true evil’ that can happen to Isaac is that he loses trust in God, Kierkegaard writes, through Abraham’s voice,

So it must be, for it is better that he believes I am a monster, that he curses me and the fact that I was his father, and still better, that he prays to God – than that he should know that it was God who imposed the test, for then he would lose his mind and perhaps curse God. (Kierkegaard 1995, 398)

To sacrifice his fatherly love for his son in order to help Isaac love God, is the ‘work of love’ that Abraham must attend to. The only way for Isaac to ‘survive’, in other words, is to give him up to God despite the personal suffering this causes Abraham. The underlying idea behind this view is that all life has its source in God and is therefore a gift.

The moral of this story about a love that borders on the absurd is that love has another basis than reason. For Kierkegaard, it is God and not the world (as for Arendt) that comes between us and that both separates us and brings us together. This is what makes both Arendt and Kierkegaard suggest that it is illusory to believe that one may love ones neighbour in a direct sense, that is, without an in-between space of mediation. Loving, they claim, needs an in-between space and the neighbour can only be loved if I withdraw and ‘die’ from my own expectations of him. My preferences need to be ‘killed’, something which is the opposite of what is at stake when I use the other for my own purposes and causes.

Following Arendt’s political and Kierkegaard’s religious understanding of love, love of neighbour is founded on separation and distance. Arendt calls this space ‘the world’ and Kierkegaard gives it the name ‘God’ but both argue that love cannot be enacted in the world other than in mediated form. Arendt, as we have seen, is profoundly sceptical about relating love to politics and Christian love, according to Kierkegaard, is only possible through God. What needs further exploration, it seems to me, is how a love of neighbour founded on separation can become possible also for those of us who do not identify with a God in the religious way Kierkegaard does.
Go where you cannot; see where you do not see; Hear where nothing rings or sounds, so are you where God speaks.


What concerns Derrida in the essay On the Name (1995a) [Sauf le nom] is the exploration of new conditions for co-existence. To accomplish this, Derrida translates the name of God to the name of the wholly other in his famous “tout autre est tout autre”, every other is wholly other (73-74). This means that the name of ‘God’ does not belong exclusively to a religion but has something of general interest to say even if one is not a believer (Caputo 1997, 48).

Derrida can in this sense be said to ‘save the name of God’ (presumably from being hijacked by specific religious groups) by translating it into the ‘wholly other’ (ibid.). “The other is God no matter whom”, “no matter what singularity as soon as the other is totally other” (Derrida 1995a, 74).

On the Name is originally a contribution to the discussion about apophatic or negative theology, that is, to the Judeo-Christian tradition that refuses to define God in positive terms (as some thing) and, as we shall see, Derrida uses this negative space without positive content, to discuss new conditions for co-existence.

To refrain from defining the ‘wholly other’ in positive terms, that is in terms of categories, Derrida follows the mystical tradition of Eckhart and Silesius into the place of the desert (1995a, 57). In this tradition, the desert is not a place for silence and peace but of risk: the desert is a dry land that can only be entered by leaving the protection of the city. As David Jaspers points out, the desert is a metaphor for the harsh conditions of human existence: it is a place one goes to “to approach and to appropriate the nothingness that is at the heart of things – the heart of our thinking and the heart of our hearts” (2004, xi). At the deepest level, the desert it is a symbol of the ex nihilo. It signifies that there is a non-created reality from which everything

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72 For a critical response to Derrida’s notion of ‘tout autre est tout autre’ see Richard Kearney’s Anatheism: Returning to God After God (2010). Kearney finds the notion of the ‘wholly other’ to be lacking embodiment. He writes: “In the name of a universal openness to any other at all (tout autre est tout autre), Derrida’s ‘religion without religion’ seems to have no visage to speak of, no embodied presence in place and time” (64). Other critique of the notion of ‘religion without religion’ comes from Christian theologians who argue that Derrida’s purpose – to avoid the violence of concrete ‘messianisms’ – in fact does precisely this: it does violence to concrete, particular, religious traditions. For this critique, see for example Bruce Ellis Benson (2009). In my view, this critique is relevant if one reads Derrida with the expectation that his purpose is to address the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. In this dissertation I read Derrida as helping me translate the ‘religious’ to issues of more general interest, this in awareness that any such translation is partial and incomplete (see chapter 5 of this dissertation).

73 Derrida’s play with indifference here echoes Kierkegaard’s un-preferential love.
created can be derived, an idea that resonates with Arendt’s thinking on loving the ‘whence’ in every neighbour and her notion of natality. If another condition for human togetherness is to be thought, Derrida argues, it needs to come into being “starting from nothing” (1995a, 34). It has to appear as a condition thoroughly different from what already ‘is’, “an absolute heterogeneity” (43) that interrupts the present order of things.

According to Derrida, if new conditions for human coexistence are to appear we need a reality that interrupts the regime of the possible. This is a reality that is “more” or “hyper” than the present state of things and Derrida introduces this as the “possibility of the impossible” (1995a, 43). To go to the desert as a place where new conditions for co-existence can appear is to go to the impossible. The desert suggests that if a new togetherness is to become possible (it cannot be assured), then we need to go into unsafe territory where there things are put at risk. This is what is signified in the category of the impossible and the ‘possibility of the impossible’ should not be read as a nonsensical play with words but as an invitation to think beyond the horizon of the familiar and already imaginable. The impossible can be seen as an act of faith and in this sense Derrida is profoundly Kierkegaardian since faith for Kierkegaard, as we have seen, is precisely not about a ‘remote possibility’ but about believing the impossible by virtue of the absurd. What Derrida suggests is that when we are face to face with the other whom we cannot love – this in the midst of our conflicting and ‘different loves’ – the possibility for co-existence lies in the risky place of the desert. In other words, the condition for co-existence builds on the acknowledgement of the impossible. The question is what this has to do with love of the concrete neighbour.

To answer this, Derrida remains with the category of the impossible and he places love right at its centre: “why not recognize there love itself” (1995a, 74)? That is, why not recognize as love “this infinite renunciation which somehow surrenders to the impossible”, a movement that would “amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming toward the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible. To surrendering one’s weapons [render les armes]” (74). To give oneself over to the other and still allow the other to be inaccessible, this is the impossible (Caputo 1997, 49). The other is any other – God, the neighbour or the stranger – and to love along the path of via negativa would mean to “allow the other to be” (Derrida 1995a, 74). It would mean to love the other as wholly other no matter under what ‘name’ (e.g., religious, Christian fundamentalist, Muslim) this other comes. This is indeed, Derrida reminds us, where “the most difficult, indeed the impossible, resides.” (74). To love the wholly other starting from this risky place seems absurd and there are no maps or programs to consult.

What needs to be remembered is that Derrida’s category of the impossible is not simply the opposite of the possible (Caputo 1997, 51). It is better un-
derstood as “the more-than-possible, the transgression” (50) and what Kierkegaard and Derrida seek to accomplish through the paradox of faith and the possibility of the possible, Caputo writes, is to overcomes “the ‘paralysis’ of the possible” by leaping into something qualitatively different (ibid.). Both Derrida and Kierkegaard describe this as a “qualitative leap, the leap into something tout autre, the leap into the impossible” and they are discontent with remaining within the logic that simply reproduces what is already possible (ibid.). The love they suggest breaks, in other words, with the logic of the possible and it is a love that cannot be contained within the expected. But what does it mean, more concretely, to love beyond the possible or to have a passion for the more than possible?

Loving the neighbour for Derrida, following Silesius in the introductory quote, is to ‘go where you cannot go’. Anything less than this would not be love since it would mean being stuck in the logic of the possible. It is only by going into impossible territory that a new kind of love of neighbour (as wholly other) can become possible:

Go [Rends toi] where you cannot go [te render], to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of going or coming. To go [se render] there where it is possible is not to surrender [se render], rather, it is to be already there and to paralyze oneself in the in-decision of the non-event [anévénement]. (Derrida 1995a, 75)

It is only by giving yourself up – by surrendering to the other – that things can start to change. To attend only to what is already possible would be to confirm the status quo and it is only when we transgress the possible to what is more than possible that the paralysis of our present ways of being-together can begin to change. This new kind of community that Derrida seeks to envision has another destination than the being-together that builds on what is ‘already there’, that is, on notions like “participation”, “fusion”, or “identification” (1995a, 46).

In contrast to the politics that opts for a change of human co-existence through a universal solution, the ‘counter logic’ of the via negativa acknowledges “a politics of the singularity of the other” (Caputo 1997, 54). In such a “politica negativa” we cannot define humanity or democracy in positive terms but our understandings of democratic co-existence need to be twisted free from their “historically restricted concepts” (56). This kind of politics refuses to categorize the other as “this or that”, “not like us”, or as someone who is “privileged” (54). By translating the name of God into the name of the ‘wholly other’ it suggests a politics where our relationship to the singular other does not build on the need for categorizations and knowledge. It practices a docta ignorantia (56) remaining ‘blind’ to defining the other on such grounds. The effect of this open-ended, non-essential ‘ignorance’, Caputo argues, is an undetermined politics that cannot foresee what comes (ibid.). It
remains blind, because it is “the object of a faith, not a plan” (ibid.) and it cultivates, one could add, not a ‘love of humanity’ but an openness for what is more than possible.

Loving the more than possible appears also in Derrida’s thinking on democracy and concrete religious traditions. Before we conclude this chapter I would like to touch upon both these issues and the first appears in the notion of a ‘democracy to come’ and the latter in his reading of the binding of Isaac at Mount Moriah.

In the term ‘to come’ Derrida seeks to capture what democracy could come to mean if, following the path of the via negativa, we cannot say what democracy ‘is’. In Rogues. Two essays on reason (2005a) he discusses the present model of democracy as being haunted by the logic of the possible suggesting that democracy is something that we have or are about to achieve. What the ‘to come’ is meant to signal, by contrast, is that democracy can never ‘exist’ other than as an unfilled idea(l). There is nothing called democracy that can appear in the world just as there is no original model of democracy that could simply ‘return’. It is, in short, an illusion to believe that we can ever ‘have’ democracy. Derrida explains:

In the end, if we try to return to the origin, we do not yet know what democracy will have meant nor what democracy is. For democracy does not present itself; it has not yet presented itself, but that will come. In the meantime let’s not stop using a word whose heritage is undeniable even if its meaning is still obscured, obfuscated, reserved. Neither the word nor the thing ‘democracy’ is yet presentable. (2005a, 9)

‘Democracy’ can only ‘live’ by keeping itself open to the incomplete and the unrepresentable and any attempt to talk about democracy as if it ‘existed’, Derrida argues, tends to become a totalitarian system closed off from political work. The idea of democracy can only live, in other words, at the threshold of its own extinction and for this reason, Derrida writes, “[d]emocracy has always been suicidal” (2005a, 33): it survives only if it risks its own death. Despite the futuristic tone of the ‘to come’ Derrida’s point is not that democracy will one day become possible. The function of the ‘to come’ is rather to ‘twist democracy free’ from the logic of the same that paralyses any move towards change suggesting that the only way ‘democracy’ can survive is by remaining open to renegotiation. To remain open in this way, Derrida seems to suggest, creates a way to live in the present against all odds, as if another way of life could become possible. He writes:

74 Note here the parallels that can be drawn between ‘democracy’ and ‘religion’. Just as it is difficult to talk about a ‘return of religion’ it is likewise difficult to suggest an original democracy that can be re-installed. None of these concepts can be represented fully and they appear in the world only in mediated form, that is, as something else.
'Democracy to come' does not mean a future democracy that one day will be 'present.' Democracy will never exist in the present; it is not presentable, and it is not a regulative idea in the Kantian sense. But there is the impossible, whose promise democracy inscribes – a promise that risks and must always risk being perverted into a threat. ... And this impossible that there is remains ineffaceable. It is as irreducible as our exposure to what comes or happens. It is the exposure (the desire, the openness, but also the fear) that opens, that opens itself, that opens us to time, to what comes upon us, to what arrives or happens, to the event. (Derrida 2003, 120)

Judging from the above quote, risking democracy seems to be the only way forward if another democratic co-existence is to become possible. The chances for this rests on remaining open for the unexpected but this is a frightening movement because, as we have seen, it asks of us to do ‘more’ than what we have hitherto done. Through the ‘to come’, democracy becomes an unstable position in which we are not in control of what might happen when we seek to create a more democratic democracy. This openness towards the wholly other is a risky position because it means that I cannot control whether the other who comes will embrace me or kill me. According to Derrida, this risk needs to be taken because it is the only condition on which democracy can survive.

It perhaps needs pointing out that the openness of a democracy ‘to come’ does not suggest relativism or that anything can be permitted within a ‘democratic’ democracy. In the interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida explains this in relation to conditional and unconditional hospitality and argues that pure or unconditional hospitality can never be realized (1998a, 70). If hospitality would be unlimited, in other words, it would lose its meaning and no longer ‘be’ hospitality at all. And yet, if we give in to this ‘realistic’ paradigm and make conditional hospitality the only hospitality, we would end up in a situation where no new conditions for co-existence can appear. If we love democracy, Derrida seems to be saying, there is no way of securing beforehand who the neighbour is. We need to live with this insecurity and it “may be terrible”, Derrida points out, “because the newcomer may be a good person, or may be the devil” (1998a, 70). Just as there is no hospitality without the risk that the devil will appear on your doorstep, there is no democracy without openness to the unknown other. We might risk democracy in this openness but if we make the opposite move and seek to exclude, in advance, the possibility that “the newcomer is coming to destroy your house” – there is no democracy (ibid.). This aporia needs to be lived with and if democracy is to become possible it needs to remain in contact with the humbling condition of the impossible.

A democracy ‘to come’ is in this way an unfulfilled hope. But to become a living hope in the present the language of democracy must be released from its present house arrest within the already given meanings and expectations that have come to limit what democracy might become. To ‘love de-
mocracy’, if one may use such an expression, would imply loving the unfulfilled idea of democracy more than the possible, more than what is. In light of this, the sacrifice of ‘Isaac’ could be seen as an analogy to Derrida’s notion of a ‘democracy to come’ suggesting that a sacrifice of the present model of democracy might be necessary in order to receive it anew, that is, on a ‘proper basis’.

The binding of Isaac is one of the most momentous stories in the Jewish tradition and, as Derrida points out, it is a rite repeated the first day of the calendar on the Jewish New Year (2005b, 156). On this day which also announces the end of Yom Kippur, a feast associated with atonement, confession and the granting or refusal of forgiveness, the tale of the binding is read in all synagogues all over the world. What is associated with the fate of Isaac for all Jews on this day – between the Day of Atonement and the Day of the New Year – is the fundamental uncertainty that characterizes all human life. God can change his writing in ‘the book of life’, as Derrida puts it, and it is him who decides who is to go on living and who is not (ibid.) Therefore, on this day, every Jew feels he lives on the edge “between life and death, as if between rebirth and the end” (ibid.).

To bring the discussion of this chapter to a close I would like to draw our attention to Mount Moriah, the heart one of the most heated political conflicts of our time. Derrida reads this conflict in light of Kierkegaard’s exposition of the binding of Isaac and in present day Jerusalem, he points out, the site of Moriah makes the risk for annihilation and death visible in the most concrete way (1995c, 70). Moriah is the geographical place where the story about Abraham and Isaac is believed to have taken place and all three monotheistic religions claim this place to be one of their most holy sites. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Jewish Temple (the Western Wall) and Via Dolorosa all cross the same spot. Hence, Moriah is a place for devotion, passion and love and at the same time as it is a place for potential violence and conflict. Moriah is a site where not only three different religions with different histories and different perceptions of God meet but also, as Derrida points out, where their different orders of responsibility, theologies, books, and politico-ethical orders are embodied (ibid.). There is much at stake at Mount Moriah and the risk of conflict is a very tangible reality. It is a site, in other words, where loving the neighbour is put to a concrete test.

But how could it be that all these three monotheistic religions have settled in the same place? Could not the Muslims have built the mosque on the Mount of Olives, some hundred metres away or could not the Christians have kept their distance? Is there nowhere else to go? What I am asking here is whether this is a coincidence or if it has something to do with the fact that our loves – as conflicted sites – both bring us together around the same place and at the same time separate us on this very place? That Muslims, Christians, and Jews all come together on the same mount to manifest their ‘loves of God’ might not be a mistake. What it might reveal, I am inclined to think,
is something about the inter-relatedness of love and conflict itself, namely that when we come to the places where things matter the most to us – to the holy – there is nowhere else to go. Or, as Hamring (2009, 52) puts it: “The other, the stranger, the enemy, invades my space!”75 What Mount Moriah shows us about love of neighbour, then, is that love might involve withdrawing one’s own self in giving space, as it were, to the other. Sacrifice, as we have seen, is an inevitable part of this love and as Derrida shows us when pointing out that Moriah is the site where the Jewish tradition is founded – the site of the binding and the offering is simultaneously the site for renewal and rebirth.

If love is the passion of the impossible, loving ‘every other as wholly other’ requires a politics of singularity where one, despite the emphasis on ‘every other’ loves a particular other. This being so, loving the neighbour always involves betrayal because every time I respond to a unique neighbour – in that very moment – I sacrifice all other neighbours. This necessary irresponsibility in loving (for the sake of responsibility), is an aporia that can never be solved because love seems to ‘live’ only in the double bind between its impossibility and its betrayal. How else, Derrida writes, “would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years” (1995c, 71). For Derrida, therefore, Moriah symbolizes that “Isaac’s sacrifice continues every day” (1995c, 70).

Conclusion: An Education for Lovers?

In the end, only love (of which faith is a particular form) can achieve the well-nigh impossible goal of seeing a situation as it really is, shorn of both the brittle enchantments of romance and the dishevelled fantasies of desire.


The guiding questions throughout this chapter have been to explore what kind of love would make it possible for religious subjects to love religiously in public spaces and what would it mean, on a more general level, to love the neighbour in the midst of particularities, passions, affects, and ambivalences? The chapter has pointed to the necessity of a space between us suggesting that one cannot love the neighbour without a certain separateness and distance. For Arendt, the space between us is an objectively motivated space where the things that separate us are also the things that bring us together. To love the world means to love what comes between us and the

75 The translation from Swedish here is mine. For a recent and interesting commentary on Mount Moriah in present day Jerusalem as both a conflicted site and a ‘place for seeing’ (which is the etymological meaning of Moriah) see Hamring (2009) chapter two and three.
challenge lies in allowing plurality and resisting conformity. Kierkegaard gives the space between us a religious reading and for him it is God and not the world that comes between us. One cannot love on a proper basis, he argues, unless one sacrifices what one loves and loves it through God as ‘middle term’. In contrast to the cosmopolitan idea of love that accepts only those kind of ‘loves’ that support the overarching, universal purpose of ‘loving humanity’, the kind of love suggested here refrains from loving the neighbour for political or religious purposes. That Arendt speaks quietly about love, as we have seen, is motivated precisely by the risk of perverting it into a program for saving the world.

Likewise, Kierkegaard’s ‘absurd love’ rejects any kind of instrumentality and he is adamant in pointing out that love must remain a singular subject’s leap of faith. Derrida is in agreement with Arendt and Kierkegaard on the notion of distance but his contribution emphasizes the risk involved in loving. Through the metaphor of the desert – a dry, risky, and demanding place – he frames the act of loving one’s neighbour as a love of the impossible. In this move, and by translating the name of God into the name of the wholly other, Derrida brings democracy and religion into a conversation in a way that Arendt and Kierkegaard do not. In both neighbourly love and in our love for democratic co-existence, he argues, love is ‘loving the more than possible’. Following his lead, we are asked to live as if another being-together might become possible but this is a kind existence that we have not yet seen.

What brings the above thinkers together is that they all approach love from a thorough acknowledgement of its difficulty. The impossibility to love is in Arendt’s thinking a matter of looking beyond what the neighbour produces (as a creature) to the eternal in him, that is, what he or she represents simply by virtue of being created. Following the above thinkers, love is deeply interwoven with tension because when we come together in love, we seem to enter conflicted ground. In fact, conflicts can be seen as love since it is our ‘different loves’ that both separate us and bring us together. Looking at love as a difference, we come together as ‘lovers’ and the conflicts between us emanate from loving different ‘things’. For Kierkegaard, a religious subject’s ‘love of God’ is not anathema to loving the neighbour but the latter is possible only on the basis of the former. Hence, to delimit politically the possibility to love God in public spaces would risk affecting also these subjects’ possibilities to love the neighbour. These are the key features of the ‘love’s difference’ that this chapter have elaborated.

What then are the educational implications of love’s difference, that is, if students are passionate lovers united and separated by these loves and not simply rational thinking individuals? How might we perceive education as creating new conditions for democratic coexistence if students come together as desiring beings who love different things and if they are also separated by these loves? What would seeing love otherwise – as a love’s difference –
mean for religious subjects’ possibilities to love religiously in public schools and what would it mean for education at large?

Mediation, distance, and conflict: The main educational issue I would like to draw attention to is what kind of mediation that is needed if we come together in schools as lovers of different ‘things’ and if our loves both separate us and bring us together. If love cannot be made manifest in the world other than as something else, love itself cannot become the object of education. It has been argued that love appears only in mediated form, that is, as ‘things’ that comes between us. The kind of mediation needed in education is therefore one that acknowledges separateness and distance. When we come together in educational settings we enact our different ‘loves’ through what we attend to (or love) and how we live our lives. If our passions are not to become exploited and used for instrumental purposes, respecting distance in education suggests cultivating an approach to teaching, and to the students, that respects and attends to the ‘world between us’.

If we come together on the basis of our hunger, mediated love is also a question about acknowledging conflict. As it has been argued, I may never share my neighbour’s love and the difference that separates us is more unbridgeable than any social managerialism can solve. In this conflicted space we invade one another’s spaces. It is difficult to ignore that examples like Abraham stretch our notions of love and tolerance to the maximum and bring us to the limits of what can be justifiable and acceptable. How can we then, under such circumstances, educate for a love of the world and a love of the neighbour?

The challenge for education, as will be discussed in the last chapter, is to resist the temptation to solve the conflicts around religion and democracy. For both Kierkegaard and Derrida, love, sacrifice and danger are closely interwoven and instead of seeking refuge in rules of conduct, common sense, or reasonableness, living permanently with conflicting loves leads us to consider the difficulty in loving the neighbour. For Derrida, the possibility of ‘impossible democratic co-existence’ lies in faith in what is ‘to come’. In a certain sense, he admits, faith is blind but it is blind only to seeing democracy as a plan or programme for education to implement. What it sees, by contrast, is how seeing things otherwise might itself be a kind of love.
4
Subjected Freedom

Introduction

Much tension around religious beliefs and practices in contemporary societies can be seen as a discussion about competing notions of freedom. In simplified terms: a liberal definition of freedom as autonomy, and a religious understanding of freedom as submission. The liberal notion builds on the idea that freedom is attained when the individual deliberates about alternative authorities and makes its own life based on autonomous, individual choice. This idea seems to stand in contrast to how many religious traditions understand freedom suggesting, for example, that freedom is attained by submitting to the will of Jahweh, God, or Allah.\textsuperscript{76} Freedom as submission would, in light of the former view, appear to be a complete loss of freedom.

Educating for autonomy is one of the main goals of liberal education. Students are expected to develop ways of thinking independently of others, to find ways of living their lives independent from inherited traditions, and to critique undue authorities, not least within education itself. However, if subjectivity is relationally constituted even to such an extent that we are ‘contaminated’ by those who are not like us, as it was argued in chapter two, the idea of autonomy becomes problematic already from the start. Then, the human subject is not primarily independent but a dependent subject, becoming a subject only in relation to others.

The thinkers drawn upon in this chapter have all witnessed the eclipse of freedom. In different ways they argue that if freedom is to become possible we need to begin in what is prior to autonomy, that is, in relationality. In three different movements the chapter explores what a notion of freedom that begins in a heteronomous relation to the other would mean for renegotiating the relationship between religion and democracy. It begins in Levinas’s argument that ‘to welcome the other puts my freedom in question’, suggesting that one cannot start with ego-centeredness if one is to respond to the other. Where we need to begin is in a heteronomous relationship to the other.

\textsuperscript{76} I am referring here mainly to monotheistic religions which, although in different ways, hold some kind of idea about freedom as a submission to something or someone higher and above the self – a higher will or the will of God.
and he founds this in Abraham’s response to God: ‘Here I am’, a signifier of both responsibility and ethics. Kierkegaard places his view of freedom in the same Abrahamic response but what he critiques is a religion that has traded a heteronomous relationship to God for a moralistic kind of religiosity. Kierkegaard’s main point is that one can only become free and responsible if one ‘suspends the ethical’ in an absolute duty to God. Both Levinas and Kierkegaard, although they operate with very different definitions of ethics, suggest that freedom as autonomy can become a flight from freedom and from the subjection to the other that freedom demands. For both, the subject is authoritatively addressed and freedom can only be attained by responding to this address. With this in mind, the third movement turns to the political level and Arendt’s critique of the notion of sovereignty. Totalitarian political ideologies build on sovereignty, she argues, and they foreclose freedom by eliminating plurality. Arendt warns against a political loss of freedom and her concern is to make political freedom – in action – possible.

The chapter offers three different ways of looking at freedom that all take heteronomy as their point of departure. These ways of seeing freedom place the religious subject right at the centre of democracy. The question explored is what freedom may become if looked at through this lens and it is argued that the subjection of the subject can invite another way of looking at the conditions for democratic coexistence.

Freedom Called Into Question

A living being lives under the sign of Freedom or Death.

Emmanuel Levinas, “The Ego and the Totality”,
Collected Philosophical Papers (1987a, 26)

For Levinas, freedom is rooted in heteronomy: in a responsibility for the other to which one has been elected, prior to any choice. “To welcome the other”, he writes in Totality and Infinity, “is to put in question my freedom” (1969/2007, 85). To understand what he means by this one has to see that, for him, contemporary uses of the notion of freedom belong to the human order of the state and its institutions (1987b, 17). A just state sees it as its main task to protect its citizens from “the obstacles that threaten freedom” (ibid.). The state, in other words, expects people to obey its commands and in return it guarantees its citizens freedom and protection from tyranny. The problem with this way of looking at freedom for Levinas is that it produces a ‘freedom’ that offers no resistance against oppressive forces.

In “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity”, Levinas (1987c) articulates what freedom as autonomy has come to imply in the history of philosophy:
Freedom, autonomy, the *reduction of the other to the same*, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history. This reduction does not represent some abstract schema; it is man’s ego. … The ego, the oneself, the ipseity (as it is called in our time), does not remain invariable in the midst of change like a rock assailed by the waves (which is anything but invariable); the ego remains the same by making of disparate and diverse events a history – its history. (Levinas 1987c, 48)

The problem with autonomy, for Levinas, is that it reduces alterity to sameness and installs the ego at the centre of freedom. The diverse and manifold stories of life are reduced to one history where the ego, untouched by the course of the time, remains unchallenged (1987c, 48). In the choice between autonomy and heteronomy, Levinas continues, “Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the same” (ibid.). This version of ‘freedom’ reduces the other to fit what my eyes can see and make sense of.

Levinas compares the autonomous self with Narcissus, the Greek figure who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool and perishes for not being able to leave the beauty of his own image. Just like Narcissus, Levinas writes, autonomy is the name of the philosophy that “aims to ensure freedom” by being “complacent in itself” (1987c, 49). Freedom as autonomy justifies itself without any reference to anything different from itself and therefore it holds no possibilities to receive the other (ibid.). When something foreign appears within such a logic of sameness the stranger “becomes an obstacle” that “has to be surmounted and integrated” (ibid.).

If (another) freedom is to be attained one needs to begin in a moment that is *prior* to institutions, rights, states, and guarantees. For Levinas, this moment has its rootedness in an ethical relationship to the other’s face. The iconic face of the Other is the heteronomous relationship *per se*. It interrupts my intentions and can never be reduced to fit my frames of reference. The face, for Levinas, is this irreducible, heteronomous relationship and this relationship is ethics. He writes:

A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (1969/2007, 43)

‘The face’ in Levinas’s thinking signifies an ethical relationship between self and Other without positioning the Other with me or against me. Instead, the Other is simply there, present before me (Davis 1996, 46).

77 The capitalization of ‘Other’ for Levinas denotes an ethically significant relationship of a different order from the kind of otherness that is definitional of items in a categorization. The Other is not different from me in virtue of any perceivable characteristic or quality but because of its invisible interiority, its irrevocablc exteriority to me.
Hence, the presence of the Other’s face should not be seen as an oppositional force coming up against my freedom and with which I must compete on a social level (as in the liberal view where the other person threatens my freedom). This would be to subject to the violence of the other which is not what Levinas suggests. What he argues, by contrast, is that the ethical relation to the Other is originally a pacific, non-violent relation on a pre-social level (1987b, 19). What the face signifies, “is the fact that a reality is opposed to me, not in its manifestations, but as it were in its way of being, ontologically opposed” (ibid.).

What he is talking about here, in other words, is not a concrete other but a mode of existence where the gestalt of the other’s face precedes me, interrupts my egoism, and puts my (autonomous) freedom in question. Likewise, it is important to point out that when he speaks about ethics he does not refer to ethical principles or programs. Instead, he roots his idea of freedom that precedes autonomy in the fifth command of the Mosaic Law: ‘Thou shalt not kill’, a command that comes to me as a word of God in the iconic face of the other. In this sense, it is ‘I’ that am addressed because the other’s face speaks to me – it calls on me not to kill. Despite the command and the pacific relationship to the other, the prohibition to kill would not be a ‘real’ prohibition if killing was not, at the same time, a ‘real’ possibility. The other’s face appears to us both as a possibility to murder and as a command not to do so. The command ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is therefore, simultaneously, a command to let live: “Thou shalt make me live” (Levinas 2008, 300).

Following Levinas, the first question to be asked when we discuss freedom is not freedom itself but what is prior to freedom, that is, a heteronomous, ethical relation to the other. This relation has its roots in a command to life but unlike the societal laws that command this in a forceful manner, the Other’s face is non-violent and pacific. Hence, it does not primarily ask me to do something, but to hear and respond. A powerful critique, it could be argued, of a society where activism and re/action has become the dominating definition of what it means ‘to act’ – a thought that Arendt is to complicate, as we shall see below. But if, for Levinas, welcoming the other can be seen as putting freedom in question, what is there to be done? For Levinas, the face asks me to respond. This responsivity is fundamental to his view of ethics and is best captured in Abraham’s words me voici: ‘Here I am’ when he makes himself available to God’s command. This is a pacific response, but it is in no sense a passive one. On the contrary, it signifies openness and a willingness to listen to and to be for the Other, prior to any activity.

If we return to Levinas’s view that freedom belongs to the domain of institutions, rights, and states and relate this to his use of Hebrew scriptures, freedom correlates to the question Cain asks after having committed the first fratricide; ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ This question, for Levinas, is characteristic of the refusal to assume responsibility whereas Abraham’s responsibility is a signature of ethics. Cain’s question is a question about calculation. It
is the question we ask when we discuss whether we should give our individual freedom up for our brother’s sake or if we stand firm in our ‘right to freedom’. Cain’s question is the question that, prior to responsibility, asks for the right ‘balance’ between rights and duties for me and my neighbour.

But if, as in Levinas’s thinking, I come into a world that exists prior to me, then the question of rights and balances (which is Cain’s question) is thoroughly misplaced. If the world is already inhabited by others, it is I who am ‘the guest’ and the Other ‘the host’. The metaphor of guest and host gives content to what a heteronomous relationship to the other might mean, and it attains its most poignant formulation in the expression that “a subject is a hostage” (1981, 112,113-121). It is only through this condition of “being hostage” to the other, Levinas argues, that there can be compassion, pardon, and solidarity in the world (117). This captures the key feature of how Levinas understands subjectivity where the self only becomes an ‘I’ by being substituted to the radical otherness of the Other. The condition of being hostage to the other signifies that a certain bondage is necessary if freedom is to be attained.78 If responsibility is a characteristic feature of this bondage, asking for the limits of responsibility would be to renounce the possibility for subjectivity. Cain asks for symmetry, but Levinas’s notion of responsibility rests entirely on the asymmetrical command to let the other live no matter what. He writes:

There are a thousand and one ways to kill the other, not just with a revolver. We kill the other in being indifferent towards him, in not paying attention to him, in abandoning him. Consequently ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is the main thing: it is the order in which the other man is recognized as that which imposes itself on me. (Levinas 2008, 300)

Responsibility for the other is heteronomous and can never be expected in return because the Other, biblically speaking, is the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger, a person who does not share my power or my duties (Davis 1996, 51). This means that the welcoming of the other can never be universalized into a moral code just as it can never be traded for activities, something that is the case when we translate ethics into something one does or decisions one makes. Again, this is far from suggesting that we can do nothing for the other, quite the opposite. The asymmetrical relationship suggests that I am asked to respond and let live even if I can never ask for this in return. What Levinas’s pacifist relationship to the other’s face implies is that

78 For a critique of Levinas’ idea of being hostage, see Richard Kearney’s Anatheism: Returning to God After God (2010) and the chapter ‘Aliens and Others’ in his Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness (2002). Kearney is critical of the lack of discernment that he thinks follows from Levinas’s ethics. The “reduction of self-hood to subjectivity-as-substitution”, he writes, “…ultimately makes evil a more valid basis for ethical experience than good” (2002, 71). Generally speaking, Kearney thinks that radical passivity and persecution are insufficient in allowing human freedom.
we cannot reduce responsibility to sovereignty, that is, to ethical programs or something ‘I can’.

Thus far, the main argument has been to show that to attain freedom, for Levinas, one has to accept the questioning of one’s place in the world that comes with welcoming the other. This dis-positioning of the self as a renunciation of autonomy puts me in a heteronomous relationship to the other. However, it does not follow from this that Levinas rejects autonomy altogether because here needs to be some kind of autonomy at play if one is to respond to the other as someone. What he is saying is that prior to autonomy and activity the human subject is addressed and called to passivity.

A quote from the Talmud opens the essay “No Identity” and captures this ambivalence between autonomy and heteronomy well. “If I do not answer for myself,” Levinas writes, “who will answer for me? But if I answer only for myself, am I still myself?” (1987d, 141). The first of these questions, Merold Westphal points out, suggests that the self cannot simply disappear or dissolve but must remain on the scene as a self; but it also suggests that this self is never indivisible and self-sufficient (2008, 97-98). The self Levinas discusses is a self that is thoroughly relative to the Other and that “delivers itself over to freedom” in a certain kind of action (1987d, 145). As the title of the essay “No Identity” reveals, it is not the denial of any identity but the denial of an atomistic identity – an identity that exists prior to responsibility and freedom – that is put in question (Westphal 2008, 98).

The openness to the other that Levinas tries to capture through the notion of responsibility can be understood in several ways but in “No Identity” he describes it as a vulnerability embedded in the subject’s “incapacity to shut itself up from the outside” (1987d, 145). This implies that even before I make any decision – either to acknowledge or reject the other – my neighbour has already “slipped into me unbeknownst to me, thus alienating my identity” (ibid.). This means that the other is already part of me and inhabits me before I have any possibility to shut him out. This is what responsibility as a vulnerability to the other means on a profound level: to be ‘hostage’, to be ‘substituted’, and to be ‘elected’ prior to freedom.

Hence, unlike a Kantian, autonomous subject who encounters the world and relates to others on its own conditions, Levinas speaks of a subject who is profoundly conditioned by the other and who cannot become a subject if it rejects the vulnerability that exposure to the other calls for. The freedom Levinas suggests is a freedom we cannot escape without escaping also from what it means to be human.

If you are asking me what our freedom or our autonomy still mean in this situation in which we are hostage to the call the other addresses to us, my response is that this has nothing to do with constraint or nonfreedom, but that it corresponds to my deepest vocation. (Levinas 2008, 301)
In other words, if we begin in the position that we are hostage to the other, then the deepest vocation is not to act but – prior to acting – to hear, to listen to, and to respond to an authority that is not my own. The authority comes to me as a call to freedom issued by the other and to become a subject the self needs to subject to this authoritative call. The problem for Levinas is not that autonomy is unimportant but that it simply does not capture the depth of the kind of freedom he is looking for. Symmetry and calculation, as in Cain’s question, belong to the logic of ‘free action’ but it does not answer to the deeper vocation of becoming a subject. Subjectivity, Levinas writes, cannot be contained within a logic of calculation but “overflows the measure of freedom” (1987d, 145).

Kierkegaard shares Levinas’s idea that subjectivity can only be attained by subjecting to the authoritative call of the Other. For Kierkegaard the Other is God, but the link between Levinas and Kierkegaard is Abraham’s response – ‘Here I am’ – and they both take this as their starting-point for suggesting that one has to begin in heteronomy if freedom is to become possible. It should be pointed out, however, that Levinas and Kierkegaard do not read the story about Abraham and Isaac in the same way. Levinas finds Kierkegaard’s reading unnecessarily violent and the climax of the story, for him, is not when God calls the sacrifice off but when Abraham returns to his people (1996, 72-74). It is especially Kierkegaard’s ‘suspension of the ethical’ that troubles Levinas. He writes: “Violence emerges in Kierkegaard at the precise moment when, moving beyond the esthetic stage, existence cannot any longer limit itself to what it takes to be an ethical stage and enters the religious one, the domain of belief” (72). Hence, what Levinas finds troublesome in Kierkegaard is his ‘religiousness’ and what Levinas suggests Abraham does, is to ‘suspend the religious’ and return to the ethical order (74).

Both Levinas and Kierkegaard root their idea of freedom in a prior heteronomous relation to the other. As will become clear below, Kierkegaard defines ‘the ethical’ in a radically different way than Levinas and if one is to see Abraham’s subjection to God as an act of freedom, one has to explore what he means with ‘suspending the ethical’ as an absolute duty to God.

Freedom to Suspend the Ethical

“Abraham!” “Here I am.”
“Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am.”

Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (1983)

The ethical, for Kierkegaard, is equal to the immanent, universal, ethics of his time that has no point of reference outside itself (1983, 54). It can be described as ‘common sense’ or the norms and virtues that the society has
reached as a result of common procedures. This kind of ethics is in Kierkegaard’s view relativistic, because it is based on a general notion of right and wrong. To ‘remain within the ethical’ – which Kierkegaard throughout *Fear and Trembling* refers to as ‘a temptation’ – should therefore not be read from the perspective of Levinas’s asymmetrical responsibility for the Other but to remain within that which keeps us entrapped in the sphere of the universal. Caputo explains this difference in the following way: “when Kierkegaard says “ethics” he means the universal or general which cannot bind me in an unconditional way; when Levinas says “ethics” he means the unconditional which does not bind me in any general way” (1995, 225).

When we speak colloquially of suspending ethics we might refer to things like cheating or ignoring the ethical guidelines that a particular community has created. In Kierkegaard’s view, however, Abraham’s temptation is *the ethical itself*; that is, to do the only defendable think according to the ethics of his time: ignore God’s voice and save his son. For Kierkegaard, ignoring God’s command is not an act that leads to freedom since God is the guarantor of life. To trade his absolute duty to God for submitting to the common sense of his time (which he is ‘free’ to do also from a Kierkegaardian point of view) would be to flee the very possibility for genuine freedom. Hence, the choice is not to leave the test behind, which would be freedom for his contemporaries. The ‘choice’ is about submission, but either he submits to God’s absolute voice or to the general and universal voice of his time.

To attain freedom, for Kierkegaard, one needs to enter into an absolute relationship to God because to submit to the sphere of the universal is a flight from freedom and from becoming a responsible subject. On this point, Kierkegaard and Levinas are in deep agreement, because responsibility cannot be contained within a simple logic of autonomy. For both Levinas and Kierkegaard, as Westphal points out, the self “is always already in relation”, a relation which is “hierarchical, asymmetrical … prior to experience, prior to the choice of an aesthetic, ethical, or religious ”lifestyle,”” (2008, 105). To leave the sphere of the universal and become a singular, responsible subject is consequently a process that for Kierkegaard is associated with profound existential ambivalence. It is only by coming alone before God that this may become possible.

It is on the basis of this existential loneliness that Kierkegaard is often accused of being an individualist or of presenting an atomistic theory of the self (Westphal 2008, 105). According to Westphal, however, nothing could be further from the truth and Kierkegaard’s focus on singularity is profoundly relational. Westphal writes:

> Abraham is alone only to secular or pantheistic eyes for which the only actual Other is a human person. But Abraham is alone – before God. *Coram Deo* means that the knight of faith is never alone. … Kierkegaard regularly seeks to isolate the individual, to help reflect the individual, not out of every rela-
If Levinas suggests that the other constitutes me prior to any ‘identity’ and freedom, Kierkegaard suggests that Abraham, already in the beginning of the drama, stands in a heteronomous relationship to God that can neither be chosen nor rejected. This is why Abraham finds himself in a paradox: in the sphere of the universal it is incomprehensible that he chooses to sacrifice his son. This makes him a murderer in the eyes of the general public. At the same time he knows that he cannot obtain freedom in any other way than by suspending general opinion and by submitting himself to God. In other words, his relationship to Isaac is relative in light of his absolute relationship to God (1983, 70-71). Kierkegaard writes:

Therefore, either there is an absolute duty to God – and if there is such a thing, it is the paradox just described, that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal and as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute – or else faith has never existed … or else Abraham is lost. (1983, 81)

God is, so to speak, the guarantor for freedom and without this ‘absolute other’ Abraham will be trapped in a system where he himself is the measure of things, and then faith has no chance of surviving. The notion of the singular individual is key here and if Hegel suggested that the way to freedom was to give oneself up to the universal, Kierkegaard moves in the opposite direction. A liberated faith (i.e., as a freedom from an enslaving kind of religiosity) is only possible if one makes an exodus from the sphere of the universal and responds, as a single individual, to the call of the absolute Other. Kierkegaard’s critique of the religious establishment is crucial to his quest for freedom – an establishment that has turned people into “benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance” (1983, 41). This religiously motivated loss of freedom, he argues, has imprisoned people instead of setting them free.

Singularity is both the way to freedom and responsibility and if Abraham is to become a ‘knight of faith’ (Kierkegaard) he has to be faithful unto death to win a personal relationship to God (and hence, to ‘win freedom’ as a singular subject before God).79 The faith of Abraham – and Kierkegaard returns to this again and again – is that the paradox of faith cannot be integrated into the ethics of the time. It remains unintelligible to a life of ‘common sense’.

79 Derrida is critical of the economy that is implied in Kierkegaard’s relationship to the absolute Other (God), see The Gift of Death (Derrida 1995c). However, as we shall see in the next chapter, Derrida is more Kierkegaardian than Levinasian in his interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story. He sees the binding and the unbinding of Isaac as a moment where absolute duty meets the absolution from human or ethical duty. Derrida’s Kierkegaardianism, and, hence, his difference with Levinas is that he, too, is willing to suspend ‘ethics’ as something that refers to the logic of calculation (see Caputo 1997, 207).
Abraham cannot explain his actions without losing the possibility for freedom that can only be found in the absolute, singular relation to God. Kierkegaard places Abraham beyond the domains of common sense and to understand him one needs to make a ‘leap of faith’; however, on this side of the leap we have to live with that fact that the father of faith acts of out reasons that he cannot conceptualize or explicate.80

What the story about Abraham and Isaac brings to a head is that a life of faith demands of the singular subject to live day after day in conflict with the ethical (i.e., common sense). Faith borders on the absurd, and what Kierkegaard points out is that conflict may erupt in contemporary societies between the normative and consensually oriented democratic space, on the other hand, and the non-compliant religiosity that Kierkegaard advocates, on the other hand. What this seems to ask of the religious subject is a constant negotiation between loyalty to a democratically agreed upon consensus, and loyalty to God. Hence, what Kierkegaard illuminates is the ambivalence religious subjects in secular societies need to live with if they do not choose to retreat into an alternative ‘religious sphere’ with a ‘religious ethics’: a kind of constant negotiation between which orders and logics to subject to and which to suspend.81

The argument thus far has been to show how, according to both Kierkegaard and Levinas, becoming a responsible self is only possible by submitting to an authority other than one’s own. This implies that freedom, for both of them, has no ground within me but comes to me from the other. Hence, if I am to become a responsible self I have (no choice other than) to make myself responsive to this Other: be this the other person (as for Levinas), or God (as for Kierkegaard). The idea that Kierkegaard and Levinas challenge is the belief that freedom is a possession one can have at one’s disposal or that freedom is a right I can claim for myself.

The moral of the story, John Caputo argues, is to point out what the “absoluteness of duty requires” (1997, 202). The story of Abraham is a story about the binding of ethics, he writes, and to be ‘truly ethical’ (in a Levinasian sense and not a Kierkegaardian one) there is an absolute obligation to the other even without ethics, that is, without the sense of security that ethical norms and guidelines provide us with (203). Following the thinking of Levinas and Kierkegaard, the liberal focus on autonomy risks becoming a flight from freedom in making us believe that we are ourselves the

80 God leaves him free to refuse, as Derrida points out, and that is the test (1995c, 72). I will develop Derrida’s reading of the Kierkegaardian text in the next chapter.

81 There are scholars, like Alasdair MacIntyre, who see Kierkegaard as an irrationalist and as an advocate of blind fideism, that is, as someone who rejects ethical norms by making a ‘criterionless choice’ as a basis for ethics. For an example of this, see the debate between ‘virtue ethics’ and ‘existentialism’ in Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue, edited by John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (2001), Chicago: Open Court. This book is a response to MacIntyre’s critique of Kierkegaard in After Virtue (1981), especially chapters 4 and 5.
centre of the world and that we can attain freedom by our own powers. For Kierkegaard, it is only if we go beyond autonomy and the ‘common good’, beyond any talk about independence and mutuality, that the birth of a responsible self is possible. For both Levinas and Kierkegaard, there is a sense in which freedom is costly and this has to do with the demands freedom poses to the self. For neither of them is freedom an abstract right but something which puts one’s life at stake. For Levinas, the stakes are about a daily substituting of the self to the Other and, for Kierkegaard, it is about refusing to comply to the expected. What both Levinas and Kierkegaard have helped us see is that ‘subjection’ of the self to the other is prior to freedom.

The issue about subjection, submission or obedience is one of the main worries about religion in secular societies but what Kierkegaard and Levinas reveal, is that these issues come close to the heart of freedom. There is of course always a risk that the story about Abraham and Isaac is seen as encouraging religious violence or as suggesting undue loyalty to religious figures. It is important to remember, however, that this is precisely what worries Kierkegaard as well. Hence, his whole point in emphasizing singular responsibility is to make it possible for the subject to act against the established system, be this religious or political. It is also important to remember that human sacrifice is called off and that the command ‘Thou shalt not kill’, was never suspended. What was suspended was consensus and by framing this as a suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard creates a radical narrative about the necessary possibility of dissent.

Kierkegaard’s critique of religion begs the question as to whether also political ideologies can come to eliminate the possibility for freedom. This question is crucial to Arendt and for her it is beyond doubt that the violence and bloodshed that has come out of the secular and national political ideologies in the twentieth century has its roots in a deification of their own systems.82 “Surely the new political ideologies”, she writes, “…are far better fitted to immunize man’s soul against the shocking impact of reality than any traditional religion. Compared with them, the pious resignation to God’s will seems like a child’s pocket-knife” (1994, 380).

Hence, if Kierkegaard and Levinas have given us an ethical and an existential opening for seeing freedom otherwise, it is time to look at freedom from the level of the political. The existential approach is also Arendt’s, but what she adds to our discussion is a way of enacting or creating freedom. She shares Levinas’s and Kierkegaard’s view that freedom is suppressed in a world of conformism and sameness but her main question is the following: How is freedom related to politics and how can freedom appear?

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82 As an example of someone who flees freedom by obeying orders and, hence, embodies ‘the banality of evil’ is Adolf Eichmann. See Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963/2006). I am grateful to Ola Sigurdson (2009) for drawing my attention to this parallel.
Political Freedom: Freedom in Action

Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom.


According to Arendt, political ideologies in the twentieth century have deprived the human being of her freedom in the name of freedom. In fear that this will happen again, she argues in the essay “What Is Freedom?” modern times have separated freedom from politics (1954, 150). It has made people believe that freedom and politics have nothing to say to one another and that “[t]he less politics the more freedom” (149). This would suggest that the less space given to the political and the more human beings are allowed to act without interference of the state or other people, the more freedom (149). In such a depoliticized world freedom has become an inner space to which one can retreat in order to feel free, but such an “inner freedom” is, for Arendt, completely irrelevant (146). Neither politics nor freedom can be taken for granted but they are nonetheless mutually interdependent. “Freedom”, Arendt argues, is “the reason that men live together in political organization at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (1954, 146).

The polis is the space where freedom can appear (154). It is here that we appear to others in speech and action and this is why freedom, for Arendt, is a relational and political term. It is only in relation to other people that I may experience freedom (or the lack thereof) and therefore freedom can never be attained without others. The other human being is necessary to experience freedom at all and one does not meet the other human being in solitude but in public (ibid.).

A relational notion of freedom leads Arendt, like Kierkegaard and Levinas, to leave the notion of autonomy, although the term she uses is not autonomy but sovereignty. “If men wish to be free”, she writes, “it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (1954, 165). Arendt has two reasons for this. The first is that the political identification of freedom as sovereignty builds on a dangerous liaison between freedom and free will (164). The risk with this, Arendt argues, is that it either makes us give up on freedom (when we realize the insufficiency of the will) or that we give up on the political (when we realize that the sovereignty of one group or individual can only take place at the expense of the freedom of another). She writes:

Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with
which I force myself, or the ‘general will’ of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce. (1954, 164-165)

The second reason for why she renounces autonomy or sovereignty is that it eliminates plurality as the fundamental condition for human subjectivity. The striving for unity and similarity that follows from the idea of autonomy inspires us to believe that one’s own subject is intact. By instilling an exaggerated belief in one’s capacity to make sense of oneself, as Bonnie Honig (1993) puts it in her reading of Arendt, the notion of autonomy tempts us to trade the existing world for a non-existing one where there are no others (83). For Arendt, however, the rejection of sovereignty and plurality constitute one another. “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very notion of plurality” (Arendt 1958/1998, 234).

Arendt’s notion of freedom builds on a distinction between philosophical and political freedom. The former is characterized by the freedom of thought (vita contemplativa) and the latter by the freedom of action (vita activa). Freedom, in other words, is nothing that exists ‘in itself’ as an abstract reality but something that momentarily makes its appearance in the world in and through action. Philosophical, abstract freedom, Arendt points out with a tone of irony, is relevant only for those who live in a world without others (1971, 199). However, since the world is a world of plurality already inhabited by others (on this point, Arendt, Levinas, and Kierkegaard speak with one voice), the primacy of philosophical freedom is a delusion. If philosophical freedom rests on an ‘I will’, political freedom rests on an ‘I can’ (1954, 200). Hence, ‘to will’ and ‘to be able to’ are two widely different things, rendering the idea that an autonomous individual acts in accordance with his or her will far from self-evident. Following Arendt, it is more likely, perhaps even plausible, that people do not act in accordance with their will. For this reason, freedom in action is the distinguishing mark of political freedom. “Men are free”, she writes, “…as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same” (1954, 153). 83

Arendt’s understanding of political freedom in action is rooted in a relationality where the only possibility for attaining freedom is to (inter)act in a world of plurality where others already exist. Given its relationality, freedom is not an inner, personal experience that people make use of as sovereign subjects. Arendt, by contrast, speaks about an existential (or external) freedom beyond personal characteristics that is made manifest in and through

83 It should be pointed out that Arendt differentiates between labour, work, and action where labour refers to the activity that has to do with biological needs, work to the fabricated or produced things in the world (forces of production), and action to the force that appears between people, that is, the force that is released when human beings appear to one another in speech and action (1958/1998, 7).
action. To act means, in the barest sense of this term, to take initiative or begin something new; it is here Arendt places the possibility for freedom. To see this, it is necessary to shift the perspective from seeing freedom as a consequence of the human being’s ability to act to seeing freedom as an internal force in action itself. For Arendt, in other words, the human subject does not precede action but ‘comes into being’ (Arendt) through action. And yet, if political freedom is the possibility for action, how can freedom appear?

The term ‘to begin’ is essential here and since the human subject is born into the world as a new creation she is not, like animals, determined to enact certain kinds of behaviour. Freedom is therefore “to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known” (Arendt 1954, 151). Freedom as action or as ‘to begin’ signifies the appearance of something qualitatively different that breaks the laws of necessity and the determining forces of history. What is important here is the distinction between ‘to begin’ and any notion of activism. Just as Levinas’s unwillingness to confuse freedom with initiative is founded in a pre-social and pacifist responsibility for the other, so is Arendt’s notion of freedom founded in the idea that the human being represents the arrival of freedom into the world simply by virtue of being born.

But this should not be confused with an inner human disposition. “Man does not possess freedom”, she writes with reference to Augustine, “so much as he, or better his coming into the world, is equated with the appearance of freedom in the universe; man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence” (Arendt 1954, 167). Freedom, like the human subject, is created. Or better, perhaps, the human subject is a manifestation of freedom simply by virtue of being born as a new beginning into the world. Before the creation of the human subject, freedom did not ‘exist’. This is how closely tied freedom is to human subjectivity. The beginning of freedom is not the same as the beginning of the world but as the beginning of “somebody, who is a beginner himself” (Arendt 1958/1998, 177). Hence, freedom as action or as taking initiative is a second birth (176). A rebirth, it could be argued, where the subject from within given conditions transcends the laws of causality and initiates something new. What Arendt wants to fight, and here she directs our thoughts back to Kierkegaard’s need for suspension, are the political ideologies that make it difficult for the human subject to rise above the laws of necessity.

The possibility to transcend the laws of necessity should not be seen as something the subject attains ‘within herself’ but only as something she attains externally, that is, in relation to others. One could therefore summarize Arendt’s view on freedom as a shift in perspective from suggesting that the human subject ‘owns’ an inner, personal freedom irrespective of whether she makes use of it or not – which is the liberal view – to suggesting that the
subject is a free subject only to the extent that she is able to appear to others in speech and action. This latter position concretizes the radical democratic view of political relationality introducing the idea of seeing freedom otherwise.

To appear to others in speech and action, one must fight the forces that tempt us to retreat into the private sphere. “It requires courage … to leave the protective security of our four walls and enter the public realm” (Arendt 1954, 156). This is why freedom, for Arendt, can never be attained without fear and trembling. Courage is indispensable, she argues, because what is at stake in freedom is not life but the world (ibid.). This brings us back to the fundamental vulnerability that is the price for freedom illuminated also by Levinas and Kierkegaard, suggesting that to reduce freedom to autonomy and individuality would be to reduce the possibility for new birth. If the spaces where we may appear in the world as unique subjects are not be foreclosed it is necessary to reject the idea of independence and to see that we are born into an already inhabited world. This is a world where other people act upon us in ways that lie far beyond our comprehensibility. So fundamentally misleading is the idea of autonomy and so fundamentally relational is our dependency on others.

**Conclusion: Educating Subjected Subjects?**

By bringing in thinkers who seriously question autonomy and sovereignty, the chapter has tried to offer other perspectives on the notion of freedom. Through three movements that all have taken heteronomy and relationality as their point of departure, the purpose has been to create a contact zone where religious issues that in contemporary debates are simply discussed as a lack of freedom may be seen in a new light. I am thinking here of how subjection to, for example, religious traditions have mainly been given connotations to indoctrination, oppression of women and children, and the suppression of opinion. When a heteronomous relation is made the starting-point for thinking about freedom, the central question is not whether or not we have attained freedom but how freedom may be created and enacted. Levinas and Kierkegaard opened the discussion by making the authoritative address from the other the main possibility for freedom. For them, this means that the human subject is not primarily an agent but a respondent and that I receive freedom to the extent that I respond to the other’s call. This is a provocative approach, perhaps, to a society where freedom is often defined in terms of self-activity and the ability to make one’s own life.

Being subjected is different from being obedient or subservient and none of the thinkers above advocate a subject that simply obeys orders. What subjection points towards is rather a subject that attains freedom only in relation to others. If we are free ‘as long as we act, neither before nor after’ (Arendt), freedom is not about choice or the ability to act but about the enactment of a
certain force in action. Covering oneself with a *niqab*, for example, could in this way be seen as a way of en-acting freedom; a manifestation of a certain force; a way of becoming a subject through acting. It might ‘be’ freedom to cover oneself in this way and whether or not this act is a (free) choice is, in light of the above, only one way of seeing freedom. If the primacy given to autonomy is put in question, it seems to me that a more colourful conversation about different kinds of freedom can be opened up. This chapter has tried to create such openings.

According to the idea of autonomy the individual would attain freedom by liberating himself *from* the other person. As we have seen in Arendt, Kierkegaard, and Levinas, however, freedom can only be attained *in relation* to the other (either to God or another human being). Since freedom is not contained within ourselves, we can only become free by acknowledging that we are subjected from the very moment we come into the world. In this sense, Arendt, Kierkegaard, and Levinas can all be seen as advocating a ‘politics of exodus’: *from* the idea of autonomy *to* the insight that I cannot become free on my own. This critique of ego-centred philosophy serves to move our gaze from an idolatrous fixation of the self to the iconic face of the Other. Kierkegaard’s suspension of the ethical is perhaps one of the critical issues here and it is difficult not to read Kierkegaard’s reading of the story of Abraham as giving an excuse for religious violence, perhaps even for terrorism. We should keep in mind, however, that Kierkegaard’s focus is on the act of answering and not on using freedom for certain religious purposes (which one cannot if freedom is absolutely dependent upon a singular relationship to God). It is how freedom can be attained as an existential condition that is Kierkegaard’s question.

There is always a temptation to flee one’s own responsibility either by referring to a logic of mutuality embedded in questions like ‘Should I be the keeper of my brother’s freedom if he is not the keeper of mine?’ or by hiding behind religious or political orders. What is omitted in these situations is not only the possibility for freedom but also the possibility to become a subject. Instead of claiming ‘the right to freedom’ it is precisely this right, ‘my right’, that is put in question. As an answer to the question ‘Where is your brother?’ I can never respond (if I want to seek to act responsibly) that I have done enough. Freedom, in other words, is not a safe haven where I may seek protection from a threatening world. It is a demanding vocation and to a large measure a frightening experience, but it is at the same time what makes me become a responsible subject.

If the above discussion about heteronomy as prior to freedom is brought to bear on the challenges that the new visibility of religion seems to pose to education, which educational considerations are then brought to light?

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84 In Jewish tradition, ‘to answer’ is synonymous with to repent and to convert (see Hamring 2009).
Freedom, Authority, and Vulnerability: The main educational issue this chapter raises is the relationship between freedom, authority, and vulnerability. What would happen to education if it was seen through a heteronomous relationship to the other? If we acknowledge that our lives are relationally constituted and dependent on others, the question is not whether we are subjected or not but to what or to whom. Some of the tensions around religion that emerge in public education arise as questions about authority. In debates about religious schools or the place of religious practices in education, for example, the child’s right to a democratic education has come to stand against the parents’ right to influence their children’s schooling. There have been cases where religious authorities ask of children to think and act in ways that conflict with what is asked of them by their teachers in schools. The response to such dilemmas from liberal education has been to develop these students’ autonomy so that they can deliberate about religious authorities, traditions, and parents. Where this has tended to leave the religious student, however, is in a position of conflicting authorities where democratic education simply represents another authoritative force.

If a heteronomous relation to the other is prior to freedom, as this chapter has argued, it is not only religious students that are subjected to authorities but all students, indeed, all of us. It is therefore a key educational issue to reflect further on what it might mean to educate for subjected freedoms, recognizing in particular the vulnerability involved in being fundamentally dependent on others.

It is difficult to imagine an education that simply rejects autonomy and as we have seen in Levinas’s thinking, this is not what he suggests. His argument is simply to suggest that if freedom is to be seen otherwise, we need to begin in what is prior to autonomy, that is, in a heteronomous relation to the other. This is not to say that autonomy has no role to play in education but that if our discussions are only concerned with autonomy, we tend to minimize what freedom might mean. What has been emphasized in the work of Levinas and Kierkegaard is that the human subject, prior to being an agent, is a respondent, something which puts in question the tendency to define freedom simply in terms of individual and non-relational agency. These issues, that is, the inevitability of subjecting to authorities and the vulnerability this involves will be given a more fulsome exploration in relation to education in the final chapter of this dissertation.
Introduction

To understand religious beliefs and practices in education, religious students are sometimes given the opportunity to talk about themselves – who they are and what their religion means to them – in a climate that is as welcoming and tolerant as possible. The idea is that if dialogue around religious beliefs and practices can be initiated, especially within the protected realm of schools, societal tensions will decrease and the understanding of difference will increase. But what is at stake in narrating one’s life or in ‘giving an account of oneself’ (Butler 2005) and what might it mean for the particular subject to partake in dialogue? Since schools are sometimes seen as melting-pots for difference and places where the future is formed, there are high expectations on education to cure the ills of failed communication and to prevent the emergence of conflict. Increased knowledge about ourselves and others through dialogue, it is claimed within modern education, will bridge and reconcile conflicting views.

Chapter two highlighted the negotiative feature of communication through the notion of a ‘conflictual consensus’. It was argued that making sense of things is always about contestation, and that recognition and understanding is always fraught with ambivalence. The challenge for education, radical democratic theory suggests, lies in helping students endure the uncertainty of communication instead of seeking consensus and agreement.

Taking the idea of a ‘conflicted consensus’ a step further, this chapter explores three different aspects of what dialogue might mean as a conflicted and ambivalent encounter with others. The question of authorship is the main focus and the question under consideration here is what might it mean, ethically and politically, to ‘give an account of oneself’ (Butler)? When the subject who enters dialogue is conflicted already from the start, as I argue here, there are limits to what one can know about oneself just as there are limits to what one can know about others. Despite this, however, there is a desire at play in dialogic encounters that seeks understanding and recognition. The chapter illuminates the ethics and politics of this simultaneous limit and desire in order to rethink democratic co-existence. Hence, instead of
seeing conflicted dialogue as a democratic failure, the chapter operates with
the limit and the desire as a condition for seeing dialogue otherwise. The
purpose is to complicate the conditions for dialogue in order to see how it is
possible for dissenting voices – especially religious ones – to partake in
democratic deliberations.

Kierkegaard’s reading of Abraham’s speechlessness opens the chapter. Abra-
ham “cannot speak and even if he spoke, he could tell nothing” (Kier-
kegaard 1983, 113), something which is explored here as a loss of author-
ship. Abraham cannot explain himself in the language available to him be-
cause if he did he would no longer be Abraham. This aspect of Kierke-
gaard’s reading of the Abraham story is read in turn by Derrida as a secret,
suggesting that there is an untranslatable aspect of human existence reflected
in language. This is discussed as the double bind of translation: we are con-
demned to translation and are unable to reach full understanding. The third
section discusses the political and existential aspects of public speech. Fol-
lowing Arendt and Butler, there is an irony to narratability which claims that
none of us is the author of our own lives but that each of us is instead de-
pendent upon other peoples’ stories about us from the very moment of birth.
Dialogue is central to education and pedagogy and the chapter ends by draw-
ing out some educational considerations of its limits and possibilities.

‘Even if he spoke, he could tell nothing’

Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot
make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the
case with Abraham.

Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (1983, 113)

The first aspect of seeing dialogue otherwise goes back to Kierkegaard. The
issue that is brought to our full attention in the third and last Problema in
Fear and Trembling, is that Abraham has no language (1983, 10, 12, 21, 60,
87, 88, 92, 112-118). The story is littered with remarks such as “[s]peak he
cannot; he speaks no human language” (114), suggesting that Abraham can-
not make himself understood. He cannot speak to anyone – not even to his
closest family, his servants or his wife Sarah – because, on Kierkegaard’s
account, absolute duty to God goes further than the ethical responsibility for
the family (1983, 12, 112).

There is no doubt that Kierkegaard believes Abraham wished to seek
comfort in his family and that he would have wanted to speak and include
them in what he was about to do (1983, 144). Nor does Kierkegaard think
that the family would have completely failed to understand Abraham if he
had told them that he was going to Mount Moriah on God’s command to
sacrifice Isaac – they were, after all, not unfamiliar with what faith demand-
ed. Yet, Kierkegaard is still convinced that in the end even the family would beg him (Abraham) not to go saying “Why do you have to do this? You can abstain!” (1983, 114). This is why Abraham ‘is not speaking’. Kierkegaard explains:

Abraham remains silent … he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that – that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it – then he is not speaking. (1983, 113)

The key here is that even if Abraham speaks he is ‘not speaking’ if no one understands him. In other words, he can speak but he cannot say that which can be understood by others, that which belongs to public reason. Therefore he remains in silence and distress, “closed off from the consolation of consensus and community, from the common sense of the sensus communis” (Caputo 1995, 220).

To understand Kierkegaard’s exposition of Abraham’s silence one has to understand that the inability to speak does not lie on the social level of human language. That ‘he cannot speak’ does not suggest, as Merold Westphal (2008) points out, that it is difficult to find people with linguistic competence who can understand what he says (24). The paradox is that Abraham cannot

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85 Abraham “is a witness”, Kierkegaard writes, “never the teacher, and therein lies the profound humanity” (1983, 80). As a witness he demands of no one else to follow his example and he has no desire to instruct since he stands in an absolute relation to the Other. He cannot save his faith by giving an account of it to others. Instead, by giving in to the temptation to explain himself he would ‘fall back’ into the universal and he would cease to be Abraham. By rejecting the singular relation to the wholly other, God, he would reject both responsibility and the possibility for subjectivity. This is why he withdraws and refuses communication. This rather severe critique of reason exposes society to the instrumental rationality and the atomistic individualism that can be found also in modern politics and economics (Matuštík 1995, 239).

Abraham’s example (or exception) cannot be converted into general norms or to ethical principles just as he can take no advice from anyone else: it is a ‘movement of faith’ than he must make alone. The ‘movement of faith’ is one of Kierkegaard’s most frequently used expressions and what it helps explain is the idea that faith is nothing something one ‘has’ but something one ‘comes to’, meaning that one ‘becomes’ a Christian by changing one’s position, or, in Kierkegaard’s well-known terms by ‘a leap of faith’. This idea should be read as a critique of Hegelian philosophy because what Hegel affirms but Kierkegaard denies, according to Alasdair Hannay (1982), is that one must stay within the community, forged by a shared and common knowledge of what constitutes a good life (55, 84). The good life from a Kierkegaardian point of view however, Hannay writes, is not linked to knowledge or mutual understanding: human life is “something that cannot be ‘content’” (84). Kierkegaard is adamant to speak out against the complacent religion of his time that he thinks has traded the risky leap of faith for complacency and contentment. In Kierkegaard’s view, the witness that sacrifices the security of consensus in order to become himself “is equally accessible to all” (1983, 81). But whether another singular individual “is a knight of faith” can only be decided by the individual himself (1983, 79).
speak even if he – humanly speaking – can speak. Hence, the difficulty is not to explain his love for his son “in the most beautiful words … in any language”, as Kierkegaard puts it (1983, 113). What is at stake “is something deeper” (ibid.).

This ‘something deeper’ concerns the question of authorship. At the end of the second Problema this is brought to our full attention when Kierkegaard explains why Abraham cannot speak: “his life is like a book under divine confiscation and never becomes public juris [public property]” (1983, 77).86 Abraham is owned by rather than in possession of his own ‘book’ and therefore he does not author his own life. He cannot give reasons for his actions – at least not the way his community demands of him – because the authorship of his life does not belong to him.

Abraham’s life belongs to God and it is this that makes it impossible for him to give an account of himself: he does not belong to himself. When he responds to God’s call by saying ‘Here I am’ he gives up his own copyright, so to speak, and as a sign of this he enters into silence: Abraham is cut off from community the very moment he gives up his authorship to God. If Abraham is to remain within the paradox of faith (and remain in the process of becoming Abraham) he needs to endure the isolation of not being understood. But this unresponsiveness, as Caputo points out, should not be seen an expression of irresponsibility but rather as one of responsibility because Abraham enters a terrain of absolute undecidability, not knowing where this silence will lead him (1997, 199). All he knows is that it will bring him ‘fear and trembling’ and he leaves home “in silence” (Kierkegaard 1983, 10, 12, 14).

“But ethics demands that he speak”, Kierkegaard writes (92). That is, the social domain of societal common sense requires an explanation and a legitimation for Abraham’s action (1983, 92). For Kierkegaard, by contrast, “ethics demands disclosure” and to remain silent is the only way to keep open a space for ‘the paradox of faith’ (Kierkegaard). This can be seen as a protest against the discourse that tends to turn ‘the right to speak’ into an ‘ethical demand’ and that sees the refusal of linguistic participation as irresponsible. Kierkegaard’s view is different and he reads Abraham’s speechlessness as a responsivity that does not seek the support of the community:

If he remains silent, he takes a responsibility upon himself as the single individual, inasmuch as he disregards any argument that may come from the outside. As the tragic hero he cannot do this, because ethics loves him for the very reason that he always expresses the universal (1983, 87).

What was discussed as a rejection of autonomy in the previous chapter is here brought to light as a lack of authorship. The paradox of faith cannot be

86 This echoes Arendt’s idea that love risks becoming corrupted when it is made public (see chapter three of this dissertation).
mediated because, as Kierkegaard writes, "[a]s soon as this single individual wants to express his absolute duty in the universal ... he will not fulfil the so-called absolute duty" (1983, 70). For Abraham, absolute duty to God over-rules the universal (in his view relative) duties of society. The 'answer' Kierkegaard offers to this dilemma is rather straightforward: the temptation one must resist is 'to speak the unspeakable' because every time the paradox of faith is transported into the (public) sphere of the universal, there is no longer any room for Abraham in the world as a religious subject and, hence, he is lost.

What can a religious subject like Abraham — a person who not only refuses dialogue but who also rejects community — ‘say’ to a society that privileges democratic participation? Some of us would perhaps argue that Abraham is simply a religious fanatic whose refusal to participate and contribute to the common good of society leads to his own self-exclusion. If this conclusion is resisted, the question becomes whether Abraham’s speechlessness has anything to ‘say’ about democratic coexistence.

What Kierkegaard shows us at the end of Fear and Trembling is that Abraham does speak. Or, as Kierkegaard puts it, “one word from him has been preserved” (1983, 115). This ‘word’ is the response he gives Isaac when Isaac asks where the lamb is for the burnt offering: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (116). These are the only words that Abraham utters throughout the story. Kierkegaard sees this as ironic “for it is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything” (118). Hence, the irony of Abraham’s situation is that he is compelled to say what he cannot say and this ambivalence, Kierkegaard writes, is “the double-movement in Abraham’s soul” (119).

The Ethical Ambivalence of Translation

What of this being-at-home [être-chez-soi] in language toward which we never cease returning?

Jacques Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin (1998b, 49)

What we all share with Abraham, according to Derrida, is “what cannot be shared” (1995c, 79): a secret. Derrida’s whole argument in his comment to Kierkegaard centres on this notion of the secret; but sharing a secret, he argues, does not mean that something is equally revealed for everyone or that

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87 Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on the concept of irony but it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to do justice to this here. Suffice to say that for Kierkegaard irony functions as a threshold between necessity and revelation. See Andrew Cross (1998) “Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony” in The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard, (eds.) Alastair Hannay & Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
one shares the other’s faith (ibid.). On the contrary, Derrida argues, faith “must remain an initiative of absolute singularity” (ibid.).

What sharing a secret with Abraham means, however, is that we share something “we know nothing about” (Derrida 1995c, 80). The secret is a lack or a condition of un-knowability that we cannot share but that affects our existence. This does not erase the particularity of religion or the uniqueness of particular subjects because on one level, Derrida argues, we “are not all Abrahams, Isaacs or Sarahs … We are not Jahwe” (79). Therefore, sharing a ‘secret’ does not mean that we hold things in common or that we can replace Sarah, Abraham, or Isaac with ourselves. On another level, however, Abraham’s example is precisely this, an example for us all and the secret does not only stand for Jews, Christians, Muslims, but also “for everyone else, for every other in its relation to the wholly other” (ibid.).

Derrida’s universalized reading of the story can help us turn the question about speechlessness back to ourselves. Irrespective of whether or not one regularly attends Mosques, Synagogues, and Churches or identifies with a religious faith, the moral of the story is that there is something non-sharable about Abraham that concerns us all. What is shared, following Derrida, is not an essence or a something but a situation that we cannot escape. A state of loss, he writes, that can neither be taught nor shared (1995c, 80). If the previous chapter argued that the responsible subject is irreplaceable in its responsibility, we have now come to see that responsibility is also, because of its singular character, incommunicable. Hence, just as Abraham cannot put his reasons into words without rejecting the possibility for subjectivity and responsibility, his silence can be seen as a way to live in respect for the secret.

In A Taste for the Secret Derrida (2001) brings the notion of the secret to bear on the idea of consensus and he argues that the very condition for achieving consensus is that there is something that cannot be shared. He writes:

If I am to share something, to communicate, objectify, thematize, the condition is that there is something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable. And this ‘something’ is an absolute secret, it is the ab-solutum itself … it is the condition of any bond but it cannot bind itself to anything – this is the absolute, and if there is something absolute it is secret. It is in this direction that I try to read Kierkegaard, the sacrifice of Isaac, the absolute as secret and as tout autre [wholly other]. (Derrida 2001, 57)

Transported into the discussion about the conditions for dialogue it seems as if a non-communicable secret is necessary for communication. Seeing how this non-sharability works in favour of communication and democracy is a point worth exploring.

The secret, for Derrida, should not be seen as referring to a ‘thing’ or a content and even if he writes that “[t]here is something secret” (1995b, 25) it
is “a secret that is without content” (24). There is no secret in any essentialistic sense but with the notion of the secret he brings us closer to what he calls the “ethicity of ethics”, the “morality of morality” (16). This cannot be achieved through positivity alone (i.e., through thematization, objectification, communication) but needs an absolute as its condition of possibility that cannot be reduced to merely being a problem of knowledge. Following Derrida, it could be argued that the condition of possibility for a ‘democratic democracy’ and an ‘ethical ethics’ is that there is some secret without which both democracy and ethics would lose their force. A democracy that asks for full transparency would, by contrast, be an ‘undemocratic democracy’. As Derrida puts it: “[I]s there any worse violence than that which consists in … demanding that one give an account of everything”? (25).

When there is no room for the secret, the non-transparent, and the inarticulable, democracy is truly threatened. Such totalitarian politics emanates, he writes, from an impulse of fear or terror in the face of the political space … the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy. I can rephrase this in terms of political ethics: if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space. Belonging – the fact of avowing one’s belonging, of putting in common – be it family, nation, tongue – spells the loss of the secret. (Derrida 2001, 59)

Against this politics of fear, the secret can be read as issuing a prohibition against the kind of belonging that identity politics tries to create by advocating commonality, recognition, visibility, and understanding. Against this, Derrida defends ‘a right to the secret’ and he seems to argue that respect for the secret is the only ‘thing’ that can cure democracy from the ills of totalitarianism. The secret never allows itself to be defined in any social bond. It cannot be contained within the realm of comprehension and it cannot be identified within the categories of social identities. The secret, Derrida writes, “bears witness to a possibility which exceeds it … toward a solitude without any measure” (1995b, 30). It is “what does not answer” (ibid.).

Even if the secret is something that makes us tremble, as Derrida puts it in reference to Kierkegaard, he insists that we need not call the secret “[n]o responsiveness”, or, death, but that it might in fact be called “life” (31, emphasis in original). What is meant by this? It seems to imply that if the conditions of dialogue are not renegotiated so as to host also the incomprehensible – this is along the lines of what radical democratic theorists call a ‘conflicted consensus’ but which goes further than this in its incorporation of the secret – democracy risks becoming a totalitarian system that rejects the condition of possibility for democratic ‘life’. Hence, the choice of the word ‘secret’ here can be seen as a philosophical strategy to create separateness and space in a political context where dialogue has become a ‘name’ for de-
manding full transparency and comprehensibility as a condition for public deliberation.88

The notion of the secret can be brought to bear on Derrida’s discussion about a non-translatable element within language itself (1985). As an illustration of this and an emblem of our present situation of conflict, plurality and a multitude of languages, Derrida draws upon the biblical story of Babel. This is a story about a tribe, the Shems, who decide to impose one single language on all the peoples of the earth and, by doing so, make a name for themselves. According to the story, God decides to interrupt their edification and imposes the name ‘Babel’ upon them (Babel meaning ‘confusion’), so, against the name of the tribe (Shem means ‘name’) God imposes another ‘name’. In this way, the plan to enforce, by violence, one universal tongue on all people is rendered impossible. A consequence of the intervention is that the people of the earth are condemned to confusion and a multitude of languages, a situation that is paradigmatic of human existence, Derrida argues, and from which we can never escape (1985, 103).

However, as Geoffrey Bennington (1993) points out, the story of Babel does not suggest that we are subjected to complete incomprehension or total confusion (175). What it suggests, rather, is that we are subjected to linguistic limitations and that we are caught in the double bind between the necessity of translation and the impossibility of complete understanding. Since translation, as Bennington puts it, “only succeeds by producing confusion” we are bound to an aporia where the task to understand one another without the full possibility of doing so is an “infinite task” (178-179).

Derrida develops the relationship between translation and limitation and argues that translation never takes place “without an essential loss” (1985, 100). Just as there can be no unity or purity in a single language, “[t]ranslation can … get everything across except this: the fact that there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. Sometimes – I would even say always – several tongues. There is impurity in every language” (100). The impurity in language (and not just between languages) is important here since it suggests that there is something ‘secret’ in every tongue – an unstable element of meaning – that renders problematic any talk about successful dialogue. For Derrida, every language is affected by this ‘internal untranslatable element’ and therefore there is an impossibility at the very heart of meaning that makes communication both necessary and impossible. Following Derrida, the untranslatable element is not a ‘conversation-stopper’ but the condition that makes communication both possible and meaningful.

The impurity in language is given an ethical twist in Derrida’s writing and within every ‘proper name’ or unified identity, he argues, there is an ambiva-

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88 The secrecy that interrupts ‘the real’ from interior intensions, Levinas writes in Ethics and Infinity, is what makes pluralism of society possible (1985, 79).
lence at play between the desire to respect untranslatability and the desire for recognition. He writes:

I would say that this desire is at work in every proper name: translate me, don’t translate me. On the one hand, don’t translate me, that is, respect me as a proper name [and] on the other hand, translate me, that is, understand me, preserve me within the universal law. (1985, 102)

What Derrida alludes to here is the simultaneous but conflicting desire to create commonality and understanding and the desire to be respected. Hence, the desire for recognition: see me, hear me, ‘translate me’ stands in opposition to the desire for respect: ‘don’t translate me’ but respect me for who I am.  

The tension Derrida creates between ‘translate me’ and ‘don’t translate me’ disrupts any straightforward identity politics where ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ citizens oppose one another. Following Derrida, we are all ‘in translation’, torn between the desire to be known and recognized, on the one hand, and the desire to be respected beyond recognition, on the other hand. The task of the translator, according to him, is rather to keep open the unsettled space between the necessity of translation and the uncertainty it involves to live with the untranslatability of both oneself and the other. Derrida discusses translation as a self-transformative process that involves the movement from oneself to the other. The risk of this self-transformative movement is why translation “is no longer simply a linguistic operation that consists in transporting meaning from one language to another … We must translate ourselves into it and not make it come into our language” (1985, 115).

For Derrida, it could be argued, translation is not about you coming to me but about me losing myself in order to come to you. This is why translation has little to do with communication and information but has a messianic character. As I have argued elsewhere, the process of translation requires both the acceptance that translation is an infinite task and the keeping alive of the hope that one might see, through translation, the coming of another order of things (Bergdahl 2009, 38). A ‘good translation’ for Derrida, it seems, is one that enacts this performative promise.

Following Derrida’s notion of the untranslatable we are ‘condemned to plurality’, and dialogue creates no refuge from this. The untranslatable implies that no one can be fully at home in his or her own language and even if we find ourselves in a country, in a certain family or in a religion – a rootedness that we can neither choose nor reject – none of this (language, land, family, religion) ‘belongs’ to us in any possessive sense of the term (Deutscher 2005, 20). This means that we must settle with a semi-rootedness and a semi-belonging and live with a situation of permanent lack. For the

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89 For a more thorough discussion about Derrida’s notion of translation in relation to Jürgen Habermas’s, see Bergdahl (2009).
conditions of dialogue this implies two things: the first is that absolute understanding can never be reached; and, the second is that we must, despite this, continue to try. Hence, in contrast to the view that sees dialogue as a solution this understanding sees dialogue instead as a risky starting-point where both interlocutors are subjected to transformation.

Two implications of this ‘universal homelessness’ are that it becomes difficult to uphold any essentialist distinctions between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ citizens and it remains difficult to claim the possession of a ‘home’ in any permanent sense of the term. What is made explicit here, through the notion of the untranslatable, is that otherness resides not only in the other but within every one of us. What is apparently needed for a democratic politics to become possible is that the possibility to become an émigré from the sphere of the universal remains open. In other words, that one may have the democratic right not to speak.

We seem to have come a long way from the debate about religion and democracy that introduced this chapter and I would now like to return to this, taking the question of authorship and the notion of untranslatability with me. If untranslatability is at the heart of our being in the world we cannot be completely known to ourselves. What are we to make of this in the democratic arena? And surely, it is one thing to inhabit a white, middle-class, academic position and argue that you do not possess your religion, your family or your country, but it seems to me quite another to be in a position where this has never been possible or always has been under threat. In other words, what do we make of the above in relation to those who are discriminated against or those who are deprived – even before entering the deliberative conversations – of ‘the right to have rights’ as Arendt (1948/2004) so pertinently puts it?

It is important to remember that Derrida’s questioning of ‘ownership’ refers to an existential condition and cannot be translated into a conditional politics. Without collapsing these different levels, the next section seeks to bring together the existential and the political through Arendt’s understanding of speech (and action), seeing how this can contribute to viewing the political conditions for dialogue differently.

The Irony of Narratability

For what I know of myself I know because you grant me light, and what I do not know of myself, I do not know until such time as my darkness becomes ‘like noonday’ before your face.

Augustine, Confessions (X.v.7)

The polis, for Arendt, is not a physical place but the space that “arises out of speaking and acting together” (1958/1998, 198). What is characteristic for
political life is the possibility to act and speak with others in the polis, something that in the previous chapter was discussed as the mark of freedom. To speak and act in public is constitutive of the political, Arendt argues, and without this possibility we have no ‘world’ (in the Arendtian sense of this term), that is, no space where we can come into being as human subjects. The public is the space, she writes, where “I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (198-199). Or, as Adriana Cavarero (2000) puts it in her reading of Arendt: "One always appears to someone. One cannot appear if there is no one else there" (20).

For Arendt, the political has existential connotations. Speaking and acting have the revelatory function of disclosing ‘who’ someone is, something which is different from ‘what’ they are in terms of their qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings (1958/1998, 179). Being deprived of this revelatory possibility of appearance is therefore “to be deprived of reality” (199). As a space of appearance the public consists in enabling speech and action, on the one hand, by guaranteeing “the reality of the world” and, on the other hand, by saving the world from ruin (ibid.). A liveable life, for Arendt, is a life lived together with others and it is through speech and action that our uniqueness appears distinct from others (176). The opposite of this – life “without speech and without action” – would be a lifeless life “no longer lived among men” (ibid.). Hence, what makes life human, in contrast to animal life, is that we insert our physical appearances into the world through speech and action as a second birth (ibid.).

Speech and action always come in tandem: two modes in which we appear to one another and through which we become human subjects. “Speechless action”, Arendt writes, “would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words” (1958/1998, 178-179). On this point, Arendt could be read as arguing in direct opposition to Kierkegaard, suggesting that Abraham chooses a lifeless life when he refrains from speaking. Of course, in a certain sense this is true and in the eyes of the community, this is what it looks like. What I discussed earlier, namely that the right to speak is only meaningful if ‘the right not to speak’ is also acknowledged seems to lose its meaning.

However, Arendt’s emphasis on speech should not be understood simply as communication but has the purpose of revealing an actor, a who. Even if ‘who’ somebody is can never be separated completely from what somebody is, that is, a person’s “qualities, gifts, talents, or shortcomings” (1958/1998, 179), speech has this revelatory function that action alone does not have. Arendt writes:

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question
asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds; yet obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer than that between action and revelation, just as the affinity between action and beginning is closer than that between speech and beginning ... Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject. (1958/1998, 178)

Judging from the above quote, speech seems to have the function of presenting the subject to the world (and to other subjects) whilst action incarnates the subject in the world. Action, in other words, has a creating function whilst speech constitutes the address the act needs to break with anonymity and respond to the question ‘Who are you?’ (Arendt 1958/1998, 178). If Arendt described a love of the world that needed a certain kind of distance in order to take shape or form then we have now come to the point in the drama where love enters the world dressed in its ‘whoness’, that is, in a concrete person. When action in this way is enrobed in speech, it no longer remains anonymous but reveals an addressee and a subject.

The question ‘Who are you?’ is not a question of knowledge, as Judith Butler points out, but a question that puts in question the politics of recognition (2005). It assumes, she writes, “that there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition” (2005, 31). But before we explore further what this limited knowability could mean in relation to the demand for political participation through dialogue, it should be pointed out that the necessity of speech in Arendt and the speechlessness of Abraham should not be read as speaking against but as with one another. Kierkegaard, it could be argued, speaks for the single individual’s right to dissent from a system whose conditions for ‘speech’ he does not approve of. Arendt, on the other hand, speaks for the human subject’s possibility to speak in a system that forecloses these possibilities. In both cases it is the conditions for speech that are questioned, not speech itself. What is important to remember, however, is that Abraham never puts himself ‘outside’ of dialogue but simply rejects one dialogue (with his community) for another (with God).

To make this clearer, it might help to point out that Arendt, like Kierkegaard and Derrida, assigns a different weight to speaking than what we commonly mean with the term dialogue. For her, speaking does not in and of itself have a revelatory function and she makes a very clear distinction between speech and “mere talk,” the latter signifying what happens “whenever human togetherness is lost [and] people are only for or against one other people” (1958/1998, 189). ‘Mere talk’ reveals nothing (180). It is what characterizes “modern warfare,” she writes, and “it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda (ibid.). In this way, there is a difference between revelatory words that disclose a unique who and words that
simply dazzle us (at best) and deceive (at worst). There is a qualitative difference, then, between the kind of speech that is linked to action (in its Arendtian sense) and thereby creates new life, and lifeless ‘talk’. In a sort of Kierkegaardian and Derridean spirit, Arendt seems to warn against a kind of ‘being together’ that devalues speech and action into meaningless talk because when this happens the subject is lost.

Talk of ‘rights’ seem to mean nothing to Arendt because its instrumental focus on what rights can achieve: being a means to an end risks foreclosing the subject instead of disclosing it (1958/1998, 189). For Arendt, speech becomes meaningful only in so far as it reveals life in a living and acting ‘who’, which is why being with others in speech and action is something completely different from the kind of dialogue that seeks its motivation in criteria and procedures.

If we now return to the situation where the subject reveals itself in speech and action, the foundation of the disclosure, Arendt points out, is that one must be “willing to risk” (Arendt 1958/1998, 180). What is important to point out is that the subject that makes its appearance in the world is not a unified and stable subject who, so to speak, self-consciously and self-sufficiently leaves the private and enters the public. The revelatory character of speech comes to the fore with others and “nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed and word” (ibid.). Since I enter the world together with others, human togetherness is a ‘living situation’ over which I can have no control. I cannot foresee how others will respond to me, and what is worse, perhaps, I cannot know ‘who’ this ‘I’ is that is revealed. It is rather more than likely, Arendt writes, “that the ‘who,’ which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself; like the daimon in Greek religion, which accompanies each man throughout his life, looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters” (179).

The point Arendt helps us see here is that there is an irony to our appearance in the world. This comes to the fore in the idea that we cannot know ‘who’ we ourselves are, just as we cannot turn solely to ourselves to find this out. We are from the moment of birth dependent on other people’s narratives about us in order to become unique human subjects. The notion of authorship returns here and, through Arendt, we are given an extended understanding of what it can mean that Abraham does not own the copyright to his own life. Following Arendt, none of us owns our narrative; rather, we have to construct these narratives with the help of others. However, for Arendt, this is given a political charge:

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90 As Julia Kristeva points out, life is the theme of Arendt’s work (Kristeva 2001, 4-5).
91 Asking ‘who’ someone ‘is’ is a question of existence for both Arendt and Cavarero, not a question of essence.
Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author. (1958/1998, 184)

For Arendt, narratability is political and the irony involved is that we are never only the ‘producers’ or ‘authors’ of our lives. We share this task with our neighbours and are fundamentally dependent upon other persons to become human subjects. This is why human life is characterized by risk and frailty, and why political life can turn into both curses and blessings. The agent that is disclosed in action and speech is both an initiator to the very action itself and one who suffers its consequences. In other words, since we come to a world already inhabited by others, we are not only actors but acted upon, by others. Already from the moment of birth, we are fundamentally dependent upon other people telling stories about us back to us. Following from this, suffering seems to be an inevitable part of political agency. Or, as Judith Butler puts it: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (2004, 23).

Given the irony of narratability and the cost involved in revealing oneself in speech and action, it seems to be anything but safe to suggest that dialogue is either a way of attaining knowledge about one another, or a means for reconciliation. If the double bind of translation consists in the recognition of a double and contradictory necessity – the necessity of doing a certain kind of violence to our neighbour and the simultaneous necessity of respecting that person’s untranslatable secret – Arendt adds to this a dimension that complicates, on a political level, what it means to expose oneself in speech and action. Hence, the ‘reality’ of dialogue is that it is a costly proposal that reveals to every one of us how thoroughly dependent we are on other people’s stories about us for making sense of our lives. This puts emphasis not so much on the possibilities of dialogue but on its limitations. Hence, living together with others (which is the only possible life for Arendt) is by necessity both risky and difficult. This is the situation, borrowing from Derrida, from which we will never escape.

Returning to Butler’s point, if the question ‘Who are you?’ is not a question about knowledge but a question that presupposes that the other person is someone who we do not know, then we have come to the limit of recognition and understanding (Butler 2005, 31). Moreover, we have also come to the point where it begins to become apparent that what I know of myself is not my own merit but something I may attain only because you grant me light (Augustine). If education is to be something more than simply confirming already established knowledge about the other, then the question ‘Who are you?’ is, fundamentally speaking, an educational question. Hence, the ques-
tion ‘Who are you?’ is not a question that serves to categorize religious subjects in order to socialize them into the present conditions of deliberative dialogue. Rather, it is a question that can never be fully answered but that nonetheless holds unique educational potential. Given that it respects the possibilities and limitations of dialogue, ‘Who are you?’ is a necessary question to ask for an education that takes the fragility of the human condition seriously.

What might it then mean, as Butler puts it, “to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement?” (2005, 21-22). More precisely, what might it mean to educate in and through dialogue when consensus might not be reached, and when our knowledge is limited about ourselves and others? Or, with Biesta’s words,”[w]hat voice can we use if we want to speak with the stranger, with the one with whom we don’t share a common language?” (2006, 62).

Conclusion: Educating at the Limits of Dialogue?

My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account.

Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (2005, 40)

Contemporary models of democracy tend to reduce dialogue to social interaction. Based on the idea that the more we share through dialogue the more we will understand about one another (and ourselves), dialogue is seen as one way to solve (at least partially) the tensions related to religious pluralism.

In response to this, the present chapter has offered three aspects in which what is at stake in dialogue can be seen in a new light. It has been argued that dialogue is not simply about what we can ‘say’ to one another but that there “is that in me and of me for which I can give no account” (Butler 2005, 40). If one cannot fully explain oneself and yet has to do so in order to become a subject, then there is a built-in difficulty in all educational appeals to dialogue. This difficulty has in the present chapter been discussed as the ‘irony of narratability’ and ‘the ambivalence of translation’. Instead of seeing these limitations as a failure, the purpose of the chapter has been to take this as its starting-point for seeing dialogue otherwise. What we have come to see through Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Arendt is that to ask students to engage in dialogue or to give an account of themselves in class, puts nothing less at stake that to ask them to expose themselves to others.
If dialogue is to have any educational potential, it is of crucial importance that education takes the limitations of dialogue seriously. Given the discussion above, the main educational question to be considered is how we can continue in dialogue and yet respect the untranslatable of every unique human subject. As a response to this, I suggest that the question Who are you? can be asked in an educational way, that is, in a way that respects the secret of the other.

If there is that for which we can give no account and we still need to continue in dialogue, respecting the secret of oneself as well as the other seems to be an essential educational consideration. Against a model of democracy in education that has come to demand full transparency and explicability, the secret points in another direction. It points to a limitation or an ‘enough’ where the key issue is not to explain, see, and understand as much as possible, but to teach us to live in the frustrating space of limitation. If every human subject holds an untranslatable secret, as Derrida has pointed out, the educational question is how we can learn to live with the limitations of dialogue. What is needed, it could be argued, is a ‘double vision’ where I both acknowledge the other person’s secrecy (the impossibility of translation) and the desire for recognition (the necessity of translation). How teachers and educators might respect the secret of every human subject brings to light, on the one hand, the necessity of translation and, on the other hand, the impossibility of reaching full understanding. Hence, what has been discussed as ‘the irony of narratability’ complicates those kinds of pedagogies, such as deliberative and cosmopolitan education, that rest on optimistic notions of dialogue, recognition and narration. What Derrida, Kierkegaard, and Arendt have shown us, by contrast, is that recognition is an ambivalent and sometimes costly process for the singular subject.

Since our lives are always authored together with others, it is a profound question for education to reflect upon how the dialogues that it enacts contribute to creating human subjectivity. The irony of narratability suggests that the stories we create about one another, in and through education, also constitute ‘who’ we as human subjects can become. In this sense, teachers and educators not only present the world to the students, they also create the world through the narratives they produce. Seen in this way, education is a thoroughly ethical and political practice, and what requires elaboration is what respecting the secret might mean in particular educational situations. Seeing the question ‘Who are you?’ as an educational question might be a way forward because it presupposes the unknowable and does not ask for reciprocal recognition. Such a question, in other words, acknowledges both the limits and possibilities of dialogue.

Seeing Abraham as an example of someone who refuses dialogue raises questions about how to handle the current demand for dialogue in education, particularly in relation to the religious subject. It should be re-emphasized that it is not speech that Abraham refuses, something which, according to
Arendt, would deprive him of a liveable life and the possibility of becoming a human subject. What he refuses is dialogue, or the kind of speech that does not respect that there ‘is’ the untranslatable, that which does not make sense within the frameworks of the present consensual speech situation. In such situations, refusing to participate in dialogue might be the better way to contribute to change.

What has been argued above is that if the conditions for dialogue are not renegotiated so as to host the incomprehensible and the secret, democracy risks becoming a totalitarian system that does not respect the complexity of human life. For an educational system that seeks to create conditions for democratic co-existence, it seems essential that it does not shut itself off from dissenting voices but listens to them as resources for democratization. Given the question I posed above, how we might continue in dialogue when there is no common ground? it is essential that the conditions of dialogue are paid closer attention. In the final chapter of this dissertation I return to these conditions and discuss them in relation to a contemporary turn to narration and participation in education.
Part III
Visions
Introduction: Seeing Education Otherwise

What is discussed in this final chapter is what happens to education when religion and democracy become questions through the windows on love, freedom, and dialogue. If we look at love, freedom, and dialogue otherwise – that is, as a love’s difference, as subjected freedom, and as conflicted dialogues – we also come to see education otherwise. What altered perspectives emerge, and what would this imply for religious students in schools? Given the circumstances that religious students face in contemporary education, the discussion here has particular bearing for them but it also gestures towards a more general approach to teacher and student encounters.

In order to move closer to schools and classrooms, this final discussion lets the alarming perspectives of ‘clashing civilizations’ (Huntington) and ‘animal humanisms’ (Badiou) rest in the background. This is not about looking away from conflicts or tensions – indeed, it has already been argued that conflicts are an inevitable part of everyday encounters in schools. It is about seeking out the possibility that education can become a different kind of place if its task is not simply to react to troubling circumstances but to be an active part in the renegotiation of religion and democracy. It is about the hope that education can become a place where religion and democracy can be explored anew, not as clashing, abstract ideas but as relational concepts that address the concrete life conditions of human subjects.

Through what I call ‘an education of small gestures’, this concluding chapter seeks to concretize and activate – for education – the altered perspectives on religion and democracy introduced through the three themes of love, freedom, and dialogue. The idea is that what takes place in the seemingly small things we ‘do’ in schools – in our everyday encounters with students – has great significance. Like the vectors, eyes, and hands of the icon that discretely point out other directions, much can be invested in small gestures. Change can take place in seemingly insignificant everyday encounters, even in such ‘small things’ as a look and a question. In three sections I dis-
cuss the educational issues that were defined in the windows and I conclude with some reflections on what the ‘small gestures’ can mean for education more generally.

Through Another Love
Mediation, Distance, and Conflict

To love the world and the neighbour, it was argued in chapter three, *Love’s Difference*, is to love what comes between us. For Arendt, what comes between us is ‘a world of plurality’, for Kierkegaard it is ‘God’, and, for Derrida, it is the impossible conditions of loving. One of the main arguments in the chapter was to point out that what separates us also brings us together. This suggests that there is a simultaneous push and pull in loving: we are brought together by what we love without being able to share these loves with one another; yet, since we share ‘the world’ we cannot cut one another off. Hence, there is an unbridgeable distance – a kind of separateness – that must be maintained if love of the world and the neighbour is to become possible.

Love never appears in the world in itself, it was argued, which means both that the ‘sources’ of what we love remain hidden and that love can only appear in the world in mediated form, that is, as something. Seeing love this way means, concretely speaking, that religious beliefs and practices can be seen as ‘loves’ and the religious subject as a ‘lover’ who enacts his or her love in liturgies, in wearing *niqabs*, in eating habits, and dress codes among other things. Since these issues tend to cause separation and conflict in schools, cosmopolitan and deliberative education has chosen to focus on commonality. Driven by political goals they seek to reduce separateness, either by giving precedence to a cosmopolitan ‘love of humanity’ or by translating religious language into secular reason. However, if reducing what separates us also reduces what brings us together, the risk education faces if it adopts this line of thinking is not only that religious sentiment might erupt with uncontrolled force (Mouffe) but that students are cut off from those motivating bonds that bring them together.

Seeing love as a difference that can neither be shared nor reduced or ignored changes the way we perceive of education as a place for mediation as well as the role of the teacher as mediator. If students (and teachers) come together in schools not only as rational individuals who think differently *about* things but as lovers who love different things in different ways – what happens to education? More precisely, if education seeks to resist steering students’ loves in the direction of commonality for political purposes, what kind of mediation would be needed?

Schools are places for mediation in a double sense of the term: they are places where students’ loves are mediated but they are also, in themselves,
in-between places of mediation between the private and the public spheres. Or, as Arendt puts it, the school “is by no means the world and must not pretend to be; it is rather the institution that we interpose between the private domain of the home and the world” (1954, 188). The function of schools, in her view, is “to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living” (195). This means that the teacher’s task is not to socialize students by teaching them how to live, but to teach them how to relate differently to the world.

The ‘crisis in education’, for Arendt, is that social relations have come to overshadow ‘the things in the world’ and our love for it (1954, 173-196). The task she assigns to the teacher is to be a mediator who points away from herself to the world because the teacher, she argues, is its representative (ibid., 189). This role is profoundly related to responsibility, because teachers must assume responsibility for the world “although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly wish it were other than it is” (ibid.). What this means, Moira von Wright argues, is that “the teachers should love the world, not the children” and that “the teacher’s task is to show the world to the children – not to direct them to their own egos (nor towards the ego of the teacher)” (2010, 8).

What Arendt highlights also for contemporary education, in my view, is that it has traded a focus on ‘loving the world’ for a social focus on how to live one’s life. The iconic gesture of the Arendtian teacher points to ‘the world’ and in contrast to the teacher who draws attention to herself and the students, the attention here is drawn to the ‘things’ between us, to different views and different ways of enacting religion, politics, and democracy. Hence, the task of the teacher is to point to these ‘things’ without standing in the way and teach students to relate to them in ways that respect separateness and distance. This releases the teacher from the psychological burden of ‘loving one’s students’ in a direct sense, but it also emphasizes a responsibility for what one points out to the student and how.

“[W]hen we let children ‘see the world’,” Jan Masschelein argues, “we don’t show them the world, but what we see as the world, and what we consider important, valuable and useful about it” (2009, 1). The problem with showing the world to the students is not primarily that the teacher imposes his or her own interpretation or perspective onto the students. The problem it confronts education with, Masschelein argues, is “how to make the world ‘present’” (ibid.). This is neither a question of knowledge or normativity but about finding the right distance as a way of relating to the world (2). As Masschelein puts it: it is about finding “the right distance which opens up an existential space” (ibid.) This is a problem, he writes, that “concerns the gaze and the ethos of looking itself” (ibid.).

What Masschelein highlights in emphasizing the ‘right distance’ as a way of relating to the world, in my view, is to include the ‘things between us’ in teaching whilst maintaining the separateness and distance that love requires.
This can create an objectively motivated space where the primary focus is not to teach the students how to live (i.e., socialization), but to explore what comes between us such as religious beliefs and different ways of enacting love, freedom, and dialogue. What might be gained by this, particularly for religious students, is a type of conversation that does not primarily turn religion and democracy into questions about morality or social behaviour, but that explores them as different loves that generate different lives. Hence, what can turn education into an existential place is when teachers practice a way of looking with their students that does not draw attention to themselves but to the world itself. A shift in focus from teachers and students to ‘the things’ at stake between us might enable teachers and students to develop a relationship to the world and the neighbour which, indirectly, is also a kind of love if it both attends to and is respectful of that which comes between us.

In the essay “Why Mediate?” Robert Gibbs (2002), explores the relationship between love and communication in order to find another reason for mediation than, for example, Habermas’s model of communicative action (156-177). Habermas’s model is primarily strategic, Gibbs argues, and even if it requires other people and involves a certain decentring of the self, it is nonetheless driven by the purpose to harmonize differences and reach understanding (159). For Gibbs, by contrast, love is a command that can only be commanded by a lover (i.e., someone who loves), a command that, he writes, “contrasts with a purposive act which I choose in order to advance my own ends” (160). What can enable me to love and command me to love, according to Gibbs, is only “the experience of being loved” and in this sense love both commands and enables (160). Love, he continues, “suspends all knowledge of the other and all sense of my control in loving” (ibid.).

The main difference between the kind of mediation I suggest here and the kind suggested by liberal models of education is one of purposiveness. Seeing love as an ontological difference suggests that there is always something about love that cannot be made manifest and, hence, resists mediation. As teachers and educators we seem to have to live with the fact that we cannot control what our students love and that the extent to which we can direct these loves into common political goals is limited.

The effects of a love that acts without purpose are unforeseeable, Gibbs concludes, but this does not mean that love does not ‘work’ (2002, 160). “Love is promised to work”, he writes, it “cannot fail”, “but [it works] not under our control” (161). In other words, love works, but not when it is reduced to our own expectations or turned into a means to realize an already predefined goal. The dilemma with seeing love as a difference is that it is impossible to share what one loves and yet it is necessary to love both world and neighbour if democratic coexistence is to become possible. In this dilemma, the relationship to ‘the third’ becomes crucial and the challenge for education, it seems to me, is to resist striving for control and seek to ‘enable love’ by respecting the separateness that our different loves create.
If only the experience of love can enable love, as Gibbs argues, the challenge for schools is to become places where difference is maintained but where students (and teachers) learn to love what comes ‘between them’, even when this is religion.

The kind of mediation generated from an ontological notion of difference is one where we cannot share what we love but where we nonetheless have to acknowledge the different loves between us. Focusing on ‘things between us’ can make our conversations less preoccupied with individual attitudes or behaviours. In this way, everyday encounters in class-rooms may become less moralized and more object-oriented which is particularly helpful when discussing an issue like religion that is currently so infected by sweeping moral judgements. Educating passionate adversaries, as I have argued, implies helping students discern between a political language and a moral one (Ruitenbergen 2009; Todd 2009a). What can be added to this, is to introduce them into seeing passionate convictions and concerns not merely as creating a separateness that needs to be overcome but as creating a necessary condition for democratic coexistence. If distance and attentiveness to the things between us is maintained, antagonism might be transformed into agonism and an objectively motivated conversation initiated about what our different loves mean to us.

Through Another Freedom
Authority, Relationality, and Vulnerability

The main issue discussed in chapter four, Subjected Freedom, was that freedom as autonomy and individual choice are insufficient for understanding religious subjectivity. It was argued that this view also tends to belittle what freedom can mean on the basis that we come into a world already inhabited by others and are thereby dependent upon and subjected to others already from birth. A heteronomous relationality shows us that the other is necessary for my freedom not only in a relative but also in an absolute sense, implying that I cannot become ‘free’ on my own. If the authoritative call from the other (from God for Kierkegaard, and from other persons for Levinas and Arendt) is a necessary precondition for freedom, one educational issue that presents itself is how to deal with the question of authority in schools. If freedom rests on a prior relationality to the other, then it is not only religious students that are subjected to authorities beyond themselves but all students, indeed, every one of us is thus subjected. With this relationality in mind, what happens to the question of authority in education?

A question that often comes up in contemporary debates is whether or not religious students should be allowed to be excused from curricular activities when these involve activities that their religions find inappropriate. I am thinking here of exemptions from physical education and swimming-classes,
and from social events like Halloween parties or other festivities which might be inappropriate for Christian children or Jehovah’s Witnesses. How teachers and schools are to act in these situations becomes a difficult question. On the one hand, if such exemptions are allowed, schools fail to take responsibility for democratic formation, a task which implies introducing students into ways of life that are different from their own. It also fails in helping religious students develop an autonomous way of thinking vis-à-vis their religious communities and their parents. On the other hand, if exemptions are banned (which was suggested in the recent political proposition in Sweden mentioned in chapter two), teachers and schools risk imposing an illiberal demand onto the students and disrespecting individual rights and freedoms. The question of authority, then, gets turned into a question about how much authority the teacher can enact without becoming authoritarian, how much influence the students themselves can be given, and how much authority should be left to parents.

According to Charles Bingham (2004), modern education sees authority as something that autonomous selves possess and that can be measured in ‘more’ or ‘less’ authority (25-26). According to this view, authority is “something that one person has at the expense of another … it is construed as an entity that, once possessed, enables one to wield a certain amount of influence over another” (26). Following this line of thinking, which Bingham sees as rooted in individual autonomy, some educators see it is as acceptable to ‘have’ authority whereas others see it is as dangerous to ‘have’ too much and that authority should be shared with students (ibid.). For Bingham, however, authority is a relational concept. In contrast to autonomy that has non-relationality as its basis, he reconfigures authority as a relation by turning to psychoanalysis and hermeneutics.

From a psychoanalytic point of view our relation to authority reflects our past experiences and memories (Bingham 2004, 27). One responds to authorities in the same way one has previously responded to other significant figures such as parents, pastors, siblings, imams, grandparents – all these people inform how students react to teachers in the classroom. If a male teacher, for example, enacts a model of authority that resembles the way in which a pastor in the past misused his authority, the student is likely to reject that teacher. What this reminds us, Bingham argues, is that instead of us ‘having’ authority, “authority has us” (28). This means that when the teacher enacts authority over students in classrooms they need to be aware that there are simultaneously other, external relationships that are enacted over which the teacher has no control (29). This view contrasts with the intersubjective view so common in education, Bingham argues, where authority is seen as a battle between two opposed wills and where it is up to the teacher to decide what to ‘do’ with the student – that is, whether the teacher will share his or her authority with the student, give authority up, or enact it to its full (29-30).
What the psychoanalytic perspective offers is a general explanation to why the student either rejects or accepts the teacher’s authority. But there is also what Bingham calls “a textual life” at play in a relation of authority (33). With this he means that educational authority does not only concern the personality of the teacher, but has effects also on the content matter this teacher represents and teaches (33). Person and content are related and if a teacher misuses authority and therefore loses authority over the student, the student often rejects the teacher as an authority over the content being taught. The student has an active role to play in a relational notion of authority, having the ability to authorize the teacher’s pedagogical lead (ibid.). In other words, the teacher cannot ‘have’ authority unless it is granted him or her by the students. In this sense, a relational model of authority has profound educational significance, both in terms of its effects on the relationship between teachers and students but also in affecting the triangular relationship between teachers, students, and content.

The emphasis on relational authority is helpful for discussing the relationship between authority and freedom. It shows us that the question about whether or not religious students can be excused from certain curricular activities is more complex than simply being a question of rules. If authority is not something the teacher ‘owns’ but something that he or she is granted by the students, there is more to the role of the teacher than to enact authority vis-à-vis religious students (and their parents), and there is more to the role of the student than to simply reject or embrace, submit or not to submit to the authority of teachers and schools.

Bingham sees a connection between lost authority for teachers and lost interest in educative content and he puts his hope in the latter, in what he calls the “intermediate space” of content (33). His idea is that when the authority of the teacher is lost, there is still the possibility that the educative content may create a zone for student agency, in spite of teachers. Although I share Bingham’s view that authority and content matter are related, my concern is that when the ‘content’ is about democracy and this is framed as opposed to religion, ‘democratic education’ simply becomes another authoritative force that religious students may want to reject.

As several scholars of education have noted (e.g., Barnes, Conroy, Davis, Wright), ‘religious literacy’ is a neglected area in contemporary education. Bingham’s point about a connection between content matter and the authority of the teacher implies, in light of this, that a teacher who shows little understanding of different religions and for how religious authorities are influencing religious students’ lives risks being rejected as an authoritative figure in the eyes of the students. If this is the case, democratic formation ends up being a more complex issue than simply introducing children into different ways of life. Democratic formation seems to require also a thorough understanding of religion and religious ways of life. Then the primary question is not whether religious students should be excused from certain curricular
activities or not but how democracy can be enacted in respectful and well-informed relationships between teachers and students. If authority ‘has us’, as Bingham puts it, the teacher can only enact authority as something given by the student and democracy becomes, it seems to me, a relational question.

The challenge involved in educating for a freedom rooted in relationality, is to help students see that their ways of defining and enacting freedom – both when freedom is seen as submission or as autonomous choice – are thoroughly dependent upon other students’ defining and enacting freedom otherwise. If we return to the existential level of freedom discussed in chapter four, where relationality appeared as an inevitable condition for freedom, what would it mean to educate for freedom as a heteronomous relationship to the other? Is this possible, considering the vulnerability involved?

The radicalism of what is at stake in shifting focus from autonomy to a heteronomous relationship to the other is perhaps best seen in light of the norm of individualism and individuality that permeates much of contemporary education (see Biesta 2006; Masschelein & Simons 2002). As Masschelein and Simons critically point out, signs of this can be seen in the emphasis on “self-government” and “self-management” in contemporary educational discourses building on the belief that the individual holds an almost unlimited capacity “to shape her life according to her own project” (2002, 596). The person this creates, they argue, is an individual who should emancipate herself “from her dependencies, or at least make these transparent so that she can control and manage them in the context of her life project” (ibid.). The paradox of this is that the freedom to choose one’s life in a consumer based society has taken the form of more a demand than an offer. Autonomous choice is something that the dominant regime of ‘freedom’ demands of us. “It is not only the case that we are confronted with the freedom to choose ourselves”, they write, “this freedom is imposed upon us, and we are expected to understand our lives in terms of choices, and to understand it as a project” (ibid.).

It is something along these lines that I think both Levinas and Kierkegaard point towards when they suggest that there is a prior responsibility to be acknowledged in our relationships to others that rests on heteronomy, not autonomy. What Masschelein & Simons point out is that our being-together rests on an obligation and a dependency on others that we cannot free ourselves from (2002, 603). The risk involved in emphasizing autonomy, self-management, and self-sufficiency in education, they argue, is that we immunize against these obligations by “defining what we have in common”, “seeing every task we undertake within an economy of calculable exchange” (602). Hence, what threatens the movement towards freedom in education is the promise of exchange, consensus, safety, and security. An over-emphasis on autonomy risks creating an education that immunizes against responsibility and, hence, an education that leads to a loss of freedom.
As Zdenko Kodelja points out, however, a heteronomous relation to the other cannot simply be applied to education – neither as a replacement of autonomy nor as something that students can be taught (2008, 191-192). A heteronomous responsibility for the other cannot become a curricular goal because heteronomy, he writes, “is not the result of education” (193). Since I am responsible by virtue of the others presence “I do not need education to become responsible” (ibid.). If this is the case, the heteronomous relationship to the other as basis for responsibility is not something that can be taught, yet it cannot be rejected because it constitutes the very precondition for subjectivity. Instead of asking what the notion of heteronomy and an absolute responsibility for the other can ‘do’ for improving education, we could invert the question and ask, with Paul Standish, something like the following: What does it do to us if we deny the implications of this perhaps impossible demand” (2008, 58)? If we do, he argues, we might lose a “meaningful freedom” that “liberal education cannot afford to ignore” (65). In other words, in letting the discussions about freedom and authority in education concern only where we draw lines between individual autonomy and group loyalty, between the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech, we fail to address the deeper and more meaningful sense of what freedom might mean.

**Through Another Dialogue**

Respecting the Untranslatable – Who are you?

A common way of taking religious difference seriously in education is to create a climate that is as friendly, tolerant, and welcoming as possible, so that religious students will feel safe and religion can be discussed. The idea is that if a dialogue about religious beliefs and practices can get started, religion will become less obscure and misunderstandings about its beliefs and practices can be sorted out. Sometimes, religious representatives from outside the school are invited in to talk about religious life. Or, if there are religious students already in class they might be asked to talk about themselves – who they are and what their religion means to them – in, for example, Religious Education classes. The idea behind this is often both political and educational: if dialogue can be initiated, especially within the protected realm of schools, there are good chances that we will be able to create a more stable and more democratic society. Dialogue is likely to increase understanding and by taking part in one another’s personal stories, we can learn more about others and ourselves and hence reduce the differences between us.

Accompanying the turn to dialogue in liberal education is an increasing emphasis on participation. Behind this lies the idea that it is only by participating in dialogue and deliberative conversations that students can learn to become critical of dominant power structures (even educational ones) and
develop into free and responsible adults (Masschelein and Quaghebeur 2005). To pursue this, students need to ‘find their own voice’ and by offering students to partake in dialogue, they are given the chance to attain this voice – both on the institutional level by entering the democratic association of responsible and active citizens, and on the personal level by becoming active and responsible themselves (51-65).

The ‘voices’ that a rational community produces when it strives for a common discourse, however, as Biesta critically observes, is a voice where what matters is “what is said” and where the particular speaker “is inessential” (2006, 56). He writes:

> In the rational community we are therefore interchangeable. It does not really matter who says something, as long as what is said ‘makes sense.’ The rational community thus affords individuals a way into communication, but it is a very specific way. It is the way ‘by which one depersonalizes one’s visions and insights, formulates them in terms of the common rational discourse, and speaks as a representative, a spokesperson, equivalent and interchangeable with others, of what has to be said’ (2006, 56) (The latter is a quote from Alphonso Lingis 1994, 116).

Following Biesta, there is a risk that education offers the individual a way of communicating where what is said is the politically correct or what already ‘makes sense’. In rational discourse, the subject becomes a category – a religious, secular, or ethnic ‘what’ – and not a unique ‘who’, a person.

The attempt to ‘give a voice’ to religious students or religious representatives by asking them to give an account of themselves can, in light of Biesta’s point above, be seen as a welcoming gesture: a gesture that seeks to break with the anonymity of the rational society. What is usually not taken into account, however, is that it singles out the religious student (or the religious representatives) as being either different, odd, exotic, or ‘normal’ and ‘not different at all’. The price for this is often very high for the singular subject because it either stigmatizes him or her as ‘different’ (i.e., included as excluded) or reduces his or her particularity (included as ‘just like us’).

There have been attempts to refine the dialogic model in education. According to Naoko Saito and others, there is a newly awakened interest for narrative research both in educational theory and practice (Saito 2009; Smeyers, Smith & Standish 2007). Saito is critical of this, as it builds on the naive acknowledgement of the therapeutic value of finding one’s self through narration. It relies, she argues, on “[t]he myth of the ‘real me’” which suggests that “[t]he more you narrate about your past and present experiences, the closer you get to some inner core of the self” (2009, 255). This notion of narrativity builds on a desire to secure the grounds for identity formation and, for Saito, no such ground can be found. The way in which one’s ‘own self’ is always already in relationship with others suggests instead that we are ourselves already and always in translation (Saito 2009;
What Saito refers to as the inevitability of translation was discussed, at the end of chapter five, as the ‘irony of narratability’. What we come to see here is that there is more at stake in dialogue and narration than simply to ‘talk’ about one’s life. In both cases, students are asked to expose themselves to others. What needs to be discussed further, given the demand to partake in dialogue in educational contexts, are the conditions for this. If we return to the example of Abraham, we see someone who cannot partake in dialogue. Not because he cannot speak or does not have the vocabulary needed but because the conditions for conversation are such that he cannot make himself understood even if he spoke. As Derrida points out, this condition concerns every one of us and complicates any pedagogy that relies on optimistic notions of dialogue.

If there is that for which I can give no account, there is a limit to what I can know about you just as there is a limit to what I can know about myself. In addition, we are never fully the producers or authors of our lives. This is a task we share with our neighbour and in this sense we are fundamentally dependent upon other people’s stories to make sense of our lives. “What is required in educational projects that seek to deal with injustices and the freedom of individuals through democratic and political frameworks”, Todd points out, “is a sensitivity to this very vulnerability and exposure, to what a narrative encounter can ‘do’ to a subject” (Todd 2009b, 12).

According to Säfström, vulnerability is connected to what modern education has foreclosed: the anxiety of living in the “‘mystery’ of existence” (2003, 22). In the search for safety and security, education has served to explain the secrets and the mysteries of life and, consequently, dialogue has become a means to ‘know’ the student and to ‘do’ something with him or her (ibid.). If dialogue is neither something I can reject nor something I can participate in without anxiety, living in ‘the mystery of existence’ can be considered as a respect for the secret. Without this respect, education has no framework for dealing with the complex and sometimes costly aspects of dialogic and narrative encounters. Hence, if we are “to move away from the project of dialogue – both because it reduces the individual to social attributes and because it denies the presence of uniqueness” as Todd puts it (2009b, 11), how can we proceed?

One way to continue in dialogue and at the same time respect the untranslatability or the unknowability of the other is to ask the question ‘Who are you?’ in the context of education. What is necessary, however, if this question is to become an educational question (and not simply a psychologizing interrogation of the student) is to approach it from a position of radical difference. Asking the question ‘Who are you?’ is an educational question if it is asked from a position that acknowledges both the impossibility of fully knowing ‘who’ the other is and the necessity of finding out. In other words, if the question ‘Who are you?’ is approached in acknowledgement of the untranslatable I can never fully come to know ‘who’ you are just as I cannot
fully come to know myself. And yet, asking this question in sincere curiosity seems to be a way forward as an educational exploration of ‘who’ we may become together.

In my view, asking this question in the context of education could open up for an intersubjective exploration of the ‘the mystery of existence’ that modern education has foreclosed in its emphasis on rational communication. As Säfström points out, however, this kind of dialogue does not offer safety and security. In contrast to the hope that dialogue might generate understanding and consensus, we might not like ‘who’ is revealed to us just as we might not like ‘who’ we become ourselves. If the stories we create about one another in and through education come to constitute ‘who’ we as human subjects can become, teachers and students nonetheless ‘create’ the world through the narratives they produce. Seen this way, education becomes an important arena for communication and dialogue but not in a safe and self-evident way. Since we ‘author’ our lives together with others, the dialogic encounters enacted in and through education both create and recreate narratives and images of, for example, religious fundamentalists and political extremists. If we are to move beyond reproducing these categories, it seems to me that asking the question ‘Who are you?’ from the position of radical difference can be a way forward. It can help teachers and students leave fixed and predefined images of ‘what’ the other ‘is’ in the background, approaching the other instead as a unique subject. Dialogic encounters that in this way look away from the immediately visible in respect for ‘the mystery of existence’ can – instead of simply reproducing already given images of the other – create new conditions for democratic coexistence.

Although not directly concerned with education, the French drama film written and directed by Philippe Claudel I’ve Loved You So Long (2008) (Fr. Il y a longtemps que je t’aime), illustrates the uncertainty and unease involved in living with ‘the unknowable other’. It tells the story of a woman, Juliette, who struggles to find a place in society after spending fifteen years in prison. She is invited to stay with her sister’s family – the husband, his mute father, and their two daughters. The ‘secret’ in Juliette’s life is slowly revealed and it turns out that she had murdered her six year old son. Juliette had refused to speak throughout her trial and as a result, her family knows nothing about the circumstances. When she is pressed for details, she refuses to talk also after the release from prison. Because of Juliette’s secrecy, the sister’s husband refuses to leave the daughters alone with Juliette and some of the friends of the family are deeply disturbed by her silence. As the story unfolds, the sister, Lea, accidentally finds a photo of Juliette’s son together with a laboratory report that shows that the boy had terminal cancer. When Lea confronts Juliette with this, Juliette finally gives her story. The question ‘Who are you?’ hangs in the air throughout the film. Is Juliette a murderer or a loving mother? She is both, as it turns out.
The points that are of interest from an educational point of view are simply these: how do we continue to educate when we do not know ‘who’ the other is, and, through which circumstances does Juliette return to society despite everything that conditions her life? If the question ‘Who are you?’ is asked as an educational question respectful of the untranslatable, we can neither know for certain ‘who’ our students are nor fully understand the circumstances that have shaped their lives. We cannot know whether our students are potential murderers, religious fanatics, or political extremists. No action plans can offer relief from the profound uncertainty that follows from this. Hence, teaching is an uncertain profession where the student may always appear to ‘be’ someone we did not expect. Fundamentally speaking, however, this is the condition of possibility for the kind of democracy that Derrida refers to in his ‘democracy to come’. It means, bluntly speaking, that we cannot know beforehand whether the person ‘who’ enters our door is good or devilish. This uncertainty puts democracy to a test and it highlights its risks. Still, democracy seems to ‘live’ only if this risk is taken. What this asks of teachers and educators, it seems to me, is to remain in the unsafe place of education whilst striving to channel fundamentalism, fanaticism, and extremism into democratic designs. In Juliette’s case, the ‘small gestures’ of trust, care, and simple concern made her finally able to expose herself and give her story. I will return to these gestures in short.

Just as the desire for realism in Western art had a devastating effect on icons there is a risk, it seems to me, that the demand for ‘reality’ in schools leads to an over-emphasis on transparency and clarity and, hence, to a loss of the imaginative possibilities in language. As a consequence, the possibilities that one may invent, explore, and experiment with different kinds of subjectivities – in and through dialogue – may be foreclosed. If new conditions for democratic coexistence are to be created in and through education, it seems to me that allowing a certain ‘non-accountability’ in dialogue can assign a different role to dialogue in education. This means that if the primary purpose of dialogue is not simply to justify or rationally legitimize ones arguments, dialogic encounters in school can become exploratory and creative.

An alternative role for dialogue in education resembles the role Rowan Williams assigns to children’s literature which, his writes, is a “playground of the imagination with no intrinsic pedagogic content and no accountability to reality” (2000, 16). Hence, if one sees education as a place for imagination and experimentation, the sign of successful dialogue must not be that everything our students say is reasonable and makes sense. One way of encouraging students to expose themselves to others and prevent them from ‘opting out’ of dialogic encounters might be to help them imagine – through dialogue – what ‘alternative realities’ or ways of life might look like. When this is the case, teachers and students might be able to imagine together what

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92 See the section on Derrida in chapter three of this thesis.
it can mean for ‘secular’ students to adhere to a religion or what it might mean for ‘religious’ students to renounce or reject it? This might bring new light to the tensions around religion and democracy and open up for a more exploratory approach to questions about democratic and religious ways of life in and through education.

If we return to the small gestures, one can ask whether (and how) the way we look at each other can make a difference to how we engage in dialogue, how we live in freedom, and how (and what) we love. Small gestures are things we do – concrete, little things. By suggesting this as a way forward I venture to claim that what can alter the present paralysis in discussions between ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ in education is not simply more dialogue, new action plans, or ethical programs. The small gestures call for an approach along the lines of the ‘lived life’ Standish points towards when he writes: “In a sense we do not need to talk at all: we need to live in a certain way” (1992, 251).

Conclusion: An Education of Small Gestures

In modern liberal societies, democracy is seen as resting on clear divisions between, for example, the private and the public, the Church and the State, religion and politics. Religions build on divisions too, instantiating separations between the spiritual and the worldly, the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane. What changes when the concrete, particular subject is given centre stage in our conversations about love, freedom, and dialogue, is that the theoretical divisions that ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ rest upon are difficult to uphold. Seen through the prism of the subject, ‘democracy’ cannot be reduced to methods and procedures just as ‘religion’ cannot be reduced to attributes, rites, and behaviours. What emerges when the concrete subject is put into focus is a picture in which religion and democracy are relational practices that have human life and human coexistence at heart. The struggle between them is therefore a struggle about human subjectivity and about different ways of living a human life.

It is concrete subjects that teachers and educators meet in schools. Seeing religion and democracy as questions for education is meant to concretize this shift to the subject within the context of education. In other words, instead of seeing religion and democracy as abstract problems that need to be handled or solved in order to begin with education, the argument has been to show that by approaching them as questions for education there are resources to be explored within both discourses about what is means to lead a human life. Turning religion and democracy into questions brings the struggle for subjectivity into everyday encounters between teachers and students in schools, but far from being a solution to the tensions that religious pluralism seems to give rise to, it is not self-evident how new conditions for democratic coexistence are to be created. Through the windows on love, freedom, and
dialogue, religion and democracy have become educational issues with the subject at its centre. But what does it mean, more concretely, to see religion and democracy as questions for education? What is there to be done? Are we “left with empty hands”, as Biesta (2008, 207) puts it when he reflects on the difficulty of turning philosophical perspectives into educational programs, or is there something concrete one can do?93

In his short but remarkable book Writing in the Dust, Rowan Williams (2002) argues that what we have learnt after September 11th is that the most difficult thing is to know which acts make a difference and which do not. The challenge, he writes, is “trying to act so that something might possibly change, as opposed to acting so as to persuade ourselves that we’re not powerless” (2002, 26). Returning to the title of the dissertation I would like to conclude by reflecting briefly on the following questions: How can the act of seeing create new conditions for democratic coexistence? and What does it mean to act, and live, with questions in education? My idea is that small gestures – like the act of seeing and asking questions – can make a difference to how religion and democracy is henceforth renegotiated in education. It can make a difference to how religious subjectivity is perceived in education but it can also have implications for education more generally.

The act of seeing is a relational act, suggesting that one cannot see without drawing what one sees into a relationship with oneself. No matter how ‘small’ this act might seem, it makes a significant difference if one is looked upon with trust and openness, or with suspicion and distrust. Many Muslims today give witness to an increasing mistrust from majority populations in Western societies, a situation that is shared, one can assume, by Muslim students in school. If Gibbs is right when he argues that only the experience of love enables one to love, then it is the experience of a loving and entrusting gaze which allows one to trust and love. In this context, the act of seeing is also a bodily act in the sense that our eyes are the physical organ through which we receive one another into our own bodies. Whether religious students are welcomed or rejected in education is therefore an act that physically begins with one’s way of looking at them. As Paul Standish (2006) points out when he notes how the main character in the film Witness (1985) is transformed by seeing how religious beliefs are lived, a “witnessing of difference” (97) suggests that the task ahead for education is not primarily to help students acquire new information about religious ways of life. It is to help them see a different picture (96).

The act of seeing is an ethical act because to ‘regard’ someone (Fr. regarder, En. ‘see again’ or ‘receive’) is a way of caring for someone (Jay 1993). It is to refuse to turn the other into an object of visual knowledge and

93 As several philosophers of education have emphasized, the philosophy of, for example, Derrida and Levinas cannot be applied to education in any simple or managerial way (see also Biesta & Egéa-Kuehne 2001; Todd 2003).
the kind of vision needed for this is not a vision that ‘sees’ only what is immediately present. We need, as Levinas puts it, “a ‘vision’ without image”, a way of seeing “bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type” (1969/2007, 23). Hence, seeing as ethics refrains from seeing only predefined visions and looks beyond the immediately visible in search for ‘the invisible in the visible’, as Marion put it. Concretely speaking, the ethical vision asks us to look again, again, and again in a never-ending hope that one can come to see – in religious rites, practices, and beliefs or other ‘things’ that at first sight appear strange – something one did not see before.

Simply speaking, the way I look at you makes a difference to how I relate to you. A relational, bodily, and ethical way of seeing suggests that one, as a viewer, is thoroughly a part of – even a co-creator of – what one sees. The way we look at each other and the world between us makes a difference to the kind of world we create together. Hence, a relational, bodily, and ethical act of seeing suggests that there is no neutral place in which I can resign from responsibility for my neighbour. What it makes me see, by contrast, is that my subjectivity is profoundly related to yours and that there is no clear dividing-line between the ‘good’ and the ‘devilish’, the fundamentalist and the tolerant, or the mother and the murderer. Fundamentally speaking, the possibility to ‘kill our neighbour’ by asking Cain’s calculating question: ‘Am I to take care of my brother?’ resides within us all. The iconic vision as an ethical, bodily, and relational act of seeing asks us to partake in the life of the world. It invites us to look at ourselves, the world, and our neighbour in a way that enacts both separateness and the command ‘to let live’ (Levinas).

Seeing religion and democracy as questions for education is put to a test when facing the horror religious in figures such as Kierkegaard’s Abraham. Given that democratic coexistence is at stake, we might object to this entire approach of seeing religion and democracy as questions arguing that it is simply too much to ask of teachers to refrain from control and certainty. There is simply too much at risk to remain open to ambivalence and open-ended questions. But what, as Richard Smith asks, “would the university of uncertainty actually look like in practice” (2005, 142)? And what, I would like to add, would make it worthwhile?

According to Smith, the ‘certain university’ (or education) threatens to eliminate contingency and with contingency “particular forms of human relating” such as “intimacy” and “intellectual passion” (2005, 148). In the ‘certain university’ nothing is left to chance and, as a result, nothing is risked. “Without such risk and uncertainty,” he writes, “perhaps there is no education worthy of the name” (ibid.). As Mariana Papastephanou (2006) points out, risks are things we do – risks are ‘run’ and ‘taken’ – and by ‘taking’ risks in education, education is given ethical and educational significance (50). With the kind of education that, by contrast, rests on a ‘security imperative’, that is, on “an apparatus of planning and control … at odds with
the kind of ethical depth with which our lives otherwise confront us” (Blake et al., 2000, 11), the ethical and educational significance of education is lost. In other words, if education is to have ethical significance and ‘intimacy’ and ‘passion’ become part of education, there are risks to take. Given the seriousness of losing these ‘forms of human relating’ by striving for certainty, how are we to live with uncertainties in education?

For Smith, living with uncertainty finds its possibility in the idea that ‘the uncertain university’ has a therapeutic dimension (2005). What the teacher needs to possess in this university, he writes, is “the art of negative capability” which means being “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (2005, 149). This is an ‘art’ that listens to and accepts students’ thoughts and contributions without damning them as erroneous (ibid.). It is an art not unfamiliar to the teacher “keeping questions open long enough for patient and personal exploration”, he writes (ibid.). There is a second therapeutic dimension to ‘the uncertain university’ and this, Smith concludes, relies on its openness to chance. He illustrates what chance means in this context by emphasizing how some of the present practices that dominate education are driven by, what he calls, “features of compulsions.” (ibid.). As a result of compulsions, education is turned into a necessity driven by the fear of chaos: a “neurotic avoidance of the cracks between paving-stones [that] can be cured by demonstrating that nothing dreadful happens when you step on them” (ibid.). Practicing the art of ‘negative capability’ can help us understand, by contrast, that we cannot make the world more predictable and safe by reducing all kinds of rationalities into one form (149-150). What comes out of such “perfectionism” driven by “the fear of failure”, he writes elsewhere, is that we are turned into “spectators of the world … rather than making us part of it” (2006, 30-31).

To live with questions in education, taking part in them as participators and respondents is, consequently, to practice ‘negative capabilities’. In my view, it is to act so that things may change, as Williams put it, as opposed to proving to ourselves that we are not powerless. To live with questions, as Rebecca A. Martusewicz (1997) so eloquently articulates it, is to remain in a “moment of emptiness” (110). Questions, she writes, are “too often difficult to accept” but they are nonetheless “the condition for thinking itself. And also for teaching” (1997, 110). Following Martusewicz, living with questions can be seen as way of learning to love. Or, as she puts it: “To learn to love the questions is really a matter of learning to love, or better, learning to feel at ease in the uncertainty, even anxiety, brought on by the spaces opened up when one allows the questions to flutter into the open” (1997, 110-111). If we turn away from the questions, she continues, “we turn away from the care of the world and, ultimately, ironically, tragically, from care of ourselves” (111). I asked above what could make it worthwhile to learn to live with religion and democracy as questions for education. One answer is that living with questions – despite the uncertainties and risks – is a way to care
about the world, the neighbour and ourselves. Few thinkers have framed the essence of what it can mean to see education as an infinite love of questions as poignantly as Martusewicz. She writes:

To teach is to bring our questions to others, to share as teacher and as students in this process of thinking about who we are on this earth. … This means that teachers must learn to listen to and engage the questions posed by their students, even and perhaps especially when these questions are surprising and disconcerting, when they do not conform to preconceived expectations and goals. Yes, teachers with their students must learn to love the questions. That is the condition of education that we must be at peace with. It is indeed the condition for joy, for loving the world and ourselves as part of it. (Martusewicz 1997, 112)

The ‘disconcerting question’ that has been discussed in this thesis is the relationship between religion and democracy in education. It has been argued that religion and democracy can be seen differently through an alteration of love, freedom, and dialogue and that – when the particular religious subject is given centre stage – religion and democracy become relational questions for education. When the subject is in focus, the better question to ask is not how much religion that can be tolerated in democratic societies or whether it is really necessary that religious subjects make religion visible in the ways they do. Since democracy, likewise, is concerned about human subjectivity, albeit from different vantage-points, the better question to ask – the educational question – is how democratic ways of coexistence can be created so as to host the different loves, freedoms, and dialogues that human subjects enact and embody.

Keeping the concrete subject in focus when renegotiating the relationship between religion and democracy within the context of education forces us to live with questions. The ‘mystery of human existence’ cannot be solved and no situation is simply a ‘return’ of an original, previous one. Therefore, as teachers and theorists of education, we are part of an on-going conversation about what human existence and democratic coexistence might mean in every new situation. The study has aimed to show that education has an essential role to play in creating conditions for democratic coexistence by keeping conversations open and that this openness, at present, has particular implications for religious students in school. In addition, its aim has been to invite further and continuous reflection. When religion and democracy become questions for education they become part of an infinite conversation that cannot be exhausted.
Det huvudsakliga syftet med denna avhandling är att omförhandla relationerna mellan utbildning, demokrati, och religion genom att föra in det religiösa subjektet – post-strukturalistiskt förstått – i centrum av denna omförhandling. Tesen är att en omförhandling av alla tre (utbildning, demokrati, religion) är nödvändig om nya villkor för demokratisk samlevnad ska kunna skapas. Argumentet är att utbildning kan spela en viktig roll i demokratiska samhällen och skapa möjligheter för demokratisk samlevnad om religion och demokrati betraktas som frågor för utbildning och om det religiösa subjektet sätts i centrum.

Avhandlingen är en utbildningsfilosofisk avhandling och det bidrag den ämnar ge detta forskningsfält är att läsa de spänningar som religiös mångfald tycks skapa inom dagens utbildning genom ett post-strukturalistiskt förhållningsätt till demokrati, religion, skillnad, och subjektivitet. Detta betyder att varken religion eller demokrati ’är’ något i empirisk mening, utan att betydelsen av dessa två begrepp skapas i en ständig pågående förhandlingsprocess. Genom att ta sin utgångspunkt i radikal (ontologisk) skillnad och det mänskliga subjektet som ett ambivalent subjekt, kan avhandlingen ses som ett sätt att svara an på det behov av ’religiös läskunnighet’ som flera utbildningsfilosofer efterlyser, men som hittills mestadels formulerats utifrån liberaldemokratiska utgångspunkter. Studien riktar sig till dem som är intresserade av frågor kring pluralism och mångfald i skola och utbildning och i synnerhet till dem som är intresserade av religiös mångfald inom demokratisk utbildning.

Studiens kontext och fokus är utbildning, men den hämtar sin energi från de samhällsdebatter om religionernas roll och plats i demokratiska samhällen som livligt diskuterats på senare år. Dessa debatter har bland annat handlat om en politisk radikalisering med religiösa förtecken, humanistiska kampanjer mot religiös övertygelse, publiceringar av Muhammedkarikatyrer – debatter som kommit att framställas i en allt mer polariserad retorik. Flera av de här diskussionerna har inte sällan haft sin upprinnelse i skolan – jag tänker på debatterna om den muslimska slöjan (hijab eller niqab), statsbidrag
till religiösa friskolor, och förbud mot befrielse från skolans sexual- och simundervisning. Inledningen av avhandlingen talar om detta som den 'den nya religiösa synligheten', ett begrepp som implicerar att religionerna i ett post-sekulärt samhälle varken har försvunnit eller har återvänt i traditionella former. Om vi vill förstå religiös mångfald och religiös tillhörighet behöver vi således titta på vad som räknas som religion i en viss kontext, hur religion framträder, och i relation till vad, det religiösa framträder som just religiöst.


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För att föra in det konkreta subjektet i centrum av omförhandlingsprocessen vänder sig kapitel två till en modell av demokrati, radikal demokrati, där själva definierandet av subjektet är en politisk process. Radikal demokrati ser antagonism, affekt, och passioner som konstitutiva element för politiskt deltagande, något som radikala demokratiteoretiker (Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe m fl) själva talar om som en ’demokratisering och återpolikalisering av demokratin’. Särskilt betonas hur olika slags subjektiviteter skapas i en ständig kamp om hegemoniskt företräde. Mitt syfte med att göra radikal demokratiteori till utgångspunkt för omförhandlingsprocessen är att skapa möjligheter till att se konstituerandet av det religiösa subjektet, liksom spänningsarna mellan religion och demokrati, som en del av en politisk förhandlingsprocess. För att konkretisera detta visas hur de teman som lokaliserats i kapitel ett (kärlek, frihet, dialog) kan komma att förskjutas om vi ser dem utifrån radikaldemokratiska utgångspunkter, dvs. som en demokratisk kamp för att förvandla antagonistiska fiender till agonistiska motståndare, som ett ömsesidigt konstituierade av identiteter, och som en konfliktartad syn på konsensus. Kapitlet avslutas med att visa vad dessa förskjutningar i betydelse kan betyda för det religiösa subjektets plats inom demokratisk utbildning.

Kapitel tre är det första ’fönstret’, dvs. det första tematiska kapitel där Arendt, Derrida, Kierkegaard, och Levinas förs in i samtalen. Kapitlet låter ’kärleken till världen’ och ’kärleken till nästan’ bilda utgångspunkt för andra sätt att se på kärlek än den kosmopolitiska ’kärleken till mänskligheten’. För Hannah Arendt kommer ’världen’ emellan oss, vilket betyder att det som både förenar oss och skiljer oss åt är det som framträder mellan oss i tal och
handling. Kierkegaard ger detta ’mellan oss’ en religiös läsning och visar hur offret av Isaac, i den bibliska berättelsen om Abraham och Isaac, bara kan ses som en kärlekshandling om Gud kommer emellan far och son (as the middle term). Derrida översätter begreppet Gud till ’den helt andre’ (the wholly other) och menar att möjligheten att älska sin ’nästa’ ligger i att älska det omöjliga, en tanke som han både sätter i relation till demokrati och till den konkreta andre. Syftet med kapitlet är att visa att en viss separation eller distans mellan oss är nödvändig för att kärlek till världen och till nästan ska bli möjlig, och för att det religiösa subjektet ska kunna älska religiöst i det offentliga rummet. Kapitlet avslutas genom att peka på de utmaningar utbildning ställs inför om elever ses som passionerade, älskande, subjekt och inte endast som rationella, autonoma individer.


dialogen gjorts till ett medel för demokratisering och där eleven förväntas delta i dialog i syfte att lösa konflikter och uppnå samförstånd. Ett exempel på detta kan vara att den religiöse eleven i dialog med andra förväntas begripliggöra vad religion och religiositet betyder, detta i syfte att göra det religiösa mindre annorlunda och minimer spänningar och konflikter i klassrummet. Kapitlet avslutas med en reflektion över vad dialogens begränsningar kan betyda för möjligheterna till fortsatt dialog inom utbildning. 

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