

“I DON’T BELIEVE THE MEANING OF LIFE IS  
ALL THAT PROFOUND”

A study of Icelandic teenagers’ life interpretation  
and values

Gunnar J. Gunnarsson





Stockholms  
universitet

# ”I don’t believe the meaning of life is all that profound”

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# Abstract

What do teenagers recount about themselves and their interpretation of life and values, and what characterises individual teenagers' perceptions and statements? What is the relation between teenagers' life interpretation and values and social circumstances? What challenges to school religious education do the teenagers' perceptions and statements represent? These questions are central to the study *Icelandic Teenagers' Life Interpretation and Values*.

The purpose of the study was to investigate some central elements in teenagers' life interpretation so as to discuss the results in terms of social circumstances in Iceland and of school religious education. The background is that Icelandic society, having been relatively homogeneous, has changed during the past few years with increased plurality.

The material the study was based on consists of interviews with Icelandic teenagers. In four articles included in the thesis different parts of the material collected are interpreted using a hermeneutic approach. The main result showed that the teenagers were in a field of tension between homogeneity and plurality on the one hand and security and insecurity on the other. The main trends in the material indicate a common reference framework at the same time as plurality emerges in the teenager's verbal expressions; and while most spoke of their happiness and security, there was also awareness of the risk and threat that can transform the situation.

The material exhibited greater variation within each school than between schools. This suggests the effect of plurality on the younger generation in Iceland. Given this variation among individuals it is urgent to find an approach to religious education that takes greater account of the different pupils' backgrounds, personal experience and existential questions.

*Key words:* life interpretation, life philosophy, existential questions, values, teenagers, homogeneity, plurality, security, insecurity, religious education.

# List of papers

This dissertation is based on following articles. The articles are in chapter five and are referred to in the text by Roman numerals:

**I.** Finnbogason, Gunnar E. & Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2006). A Need for Security and Trust. Life Interpretation and values among Icelandic teenagers. In K. Tirri (Ed.) *Nordic Perspectives on Religion Spirituality and Identity. Yearbook 2006 of the Department of Practical Theology*, (Ed. Kirsi Tirri). (Helsinki, University of Helsinki. Department of Practical Theology), pp. 271-284.

**II.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). Life interpretation and religion among Icelandic teenagers. For publication in *British Journal of Religious Education* XX (?), xx-xx.

**III.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). 'To be honest and truthful'. Central values in the life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers. To be published in *Religious education and diversity – Nordic perspectives*, a collection of articles from the Nordic Conference on Religious Education in Stavanger in June 2007.

**IV.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). 'You try to be cheerful but sometimes you fail'. Adversity, sorrow and death in life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers. Submitted to a journal in England.



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# Introduction

Young people's interpretation of life is an area in which many researchers in the Nordic countries have become involved. Despite this, there is little research into children's and young people's interpretation of life, essential existential questions and values in Iceland. This is partly what prompted the present study of Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation since I consider that information on how young people think about and express their interpretation of life is important for religious education in schools. The changes Icelandic society has undergone during the past 10 – 15 years, with increasing plurality, also offer a good reason for research in this area. In addition, 1999 saw the implementation of a new curriculum for compulsory schools in Iceland, with more stress on the teaching of ethics and other religions than Christianity, and discussion of religious education in schools has since increased. My concern was to map and analyse some central elements in Icelandic teenager's (14-15 years) interpretation of life, for the purpose of increasing knowledge that can be related to basic educational values, to the curriculum and to teaching and learning; and to the social changes now taking place in Iceland. The study seeks to characterise the content of young people's statements and values and how they express their interpretation of life.

## Background and social context

When one approaches an examination of young people's interpretation of life and values, the community and the culture in which they live obviously constitute a significant background factor. People always shape their thoughts and actions in a cultural and social context. The young have grown up in a society and culture that has marked their modes of thinking and acting, their interpretation of life and their values. The island society that is Iceland, with its special natural features and close contact with natural forces, and its culture rooted partly in the old sagas and in Christianity as the prevailing religion for a thousand years, has its own peculiar features but also resembles other Nordic and western-European societies. As part of our cultural heritage, there are the old words of wisdom in the Poetic Edda which stress, among other things, friendship:

Veistu ef þú vin átt,  
þann er þú vel trúir,  
og vilt þú af honum gott geta,  
geði skaltu við þann blanda  
og gjöfum skipta,  
fara að finna oft.

(Hávamál, 44)

If friend thou hast  
whom faithful thou deemest,  
and wishest to win him for thee:  
ope thy heart to him  
nor withhold thy gifts,  
and fare to find him often.

(The Poetic Edda)

And the value of not being alone is described in a verse about a young man who set off by himself, and his joy when he met another person, since ‘Maður er manns gaman’ – ‘man is gladdened by men’:

Ungur var eg forðum,  
fór eg einn saman:  
þá varð eg villur vega.  
Auðigur þóttumst  
er eg annan fann:  
Maður er manns gaman.

(Hávamál, 47)

Young was I once  
and went alone,  
and wandering lost my way;  
when a friend I found  
I felt me rich:  
man is gladdened by men.

(The Poetic Edda)

Many of the old sagas give examples of friendship and its importance, which scholars have illustrated in their research (Beck 2007; Jóhannesson 2007; Stefánsdóttir 2007; Österberg 2007). Young people in Iceland know some of these texts from reading them at school.

Natural forces also have their influence. In times gone by they often threatened storms, hard winters, pack-ice and volcanic eruptions, farmer’s subsistence and seaman’s lives; and naturally these circumstances and living conditions, together with our cultural heritage, have influenced the Icelandic mentality and ways of thinking. But in the twenty-first century, Iceland has become a modern society with a good economy and high technical development and the threats that were have diminished, partly through modern technology and possible changes in climate. Young Icelanders have their roots in the country’s special features and cultural heritage and this is significant for many of them. But at the same time they are living in a global information society and taking part in international youth and pop culture through TV, film, music and the Internet.

### *The issue of plurality*

Icelandic society is small and it is often said that it was long homogeneous in religion and view of life. One can of course discuss how far a society is ho-

mogeneous and how far plurality has made its mark. Berger and Luckmann (1995, pp. 28-29) discuss the definition of the concept of pluralism in the contemporary context. They point out that, were pluralism defined as a situation in which people living their lives in many different ways live together in one community, then it would have little to do with any specially modern phenomenon. Both prehistoric and present-day India and mediaeval Europe exhibit class pluralism but despite different ways of living everyone related to a common value system and the interplay between social groupings was both limited and carefully regulated. Even if pluralism was defined as a situation in a society where people lived their lives in different ways without reference to a common value system, one could still find an example of a similar society in days gone by, namely the Roman Empire. There, too, interplay between different social groupings and peoples was regulated through 'superordinate stocks of meaning'. For this reason, different groups could interact within rational areas of action and at the same time remain linked to their own value systems. However, if these regulations do not exist or can no longer be preserved, a new situation has arisen, according to Berger and Luckmann, with serious consequences for the status of the value systems and the dominating views of the world, 'the taken-for-granted' status. Ethnic, religious and other groups differentiated by reason of different 'stocks of meaning', are no longer separated spatially nor do they mix only within a neutral ground of separated rules of action in institutionalised, functional areas. Meetings, or under certain circumstances clashes between different value systems and views of the world become unavoidable. Berger and Luckmann consider that there were in ancient times approximations of this situation, for example in the Hellenic world; but that this form of pluralism has become fully-fledged only in contemporary societies. Here the central structural aspects of this pluralism have gained status as 'enlightened' value over and above the various value systems existing and competing side-by-side. Berger and Luckmann consider that this modern form of pluralism is a fundamental condition for the increased spread of subjective and intersubjective crises of meaning. In a society where this modern form of pluralism has become fully developed, value systems and 'stocks of meaning' are no longer the common property of all members of society. The individual is growing up in a world where there are neither common values that determine action in different areas of life nor a simple reality identical for all.

Berger's and Luckmann's analysis of modern pluralism harmonises with the Norwegian Geir Skeie's definition of what he calls modern plurality. He uses the term plurality which he sees chiefly as a descriptive concept separate from the normative concept of pluralism. In his 1998 dissertation Skeie distinguishes between traditional plurality and modern plurality (Skeie 1998, pp. 22-24, cf. Skeie 2002, pp. 52-55). Traditional plurality describes primarily the existence of many different cultural groups, often but not always religious. Skeie's description of traditional plurality can be compared with the

pluralism that Berger and Luckmann speak of as having existed earlier. As against this, Skeie describes modern plurality as a designation linked to the collapse of a common frame of reference, both for the individual and for groups and institutions to which the individual relates. Particularly since the Enlightenment, values have been released from their religious connection and secularisation has reached an extent previously unknown throughout history. In addition there is a progressive individualisation, relativisation and independence of context that also set their stamp on people's relation to religion and life philosophy. For Skeie, this means that people in society are no longer bound together by common norms and values associated with religious institutions. This description is comparable with Berger's and Luckmann's definition of modern pluralism, and both their definition and Skeie's distinction between traditional and modern plurality can be used in the analysis of how far a society is homogeneous or pluralist.

Space precludes a thorough analysis of the development of Icelandic society over the past few decades but in my view it is possible to use Berger's and Luckmann's analysis of pluralism and Skeie's presentation of traditional and modern plurality to state that Icelandic society was fairly homogeneous until the end of the twentieth century and that the development towards increased plurality has been slower than in the other Nordic countries. Naturally there have existed different groups in Icelandic society, for example linked with class, but not so many ethnic or religious groups during the greater part of the twentieth century. Just over 20 years ago, i.e. 1985, for example, 93% of the population were members of the Lutheran Church of Iceland, and there were only 13 registered churches and religious denominations in the country, mostly Christian. Ten years later, in 1995, 91% were still members of the Lutheran Church of Iceland but by then the number of registered churches and religious communities had increased to seventeen (Hagstofa Íslands – Fréttir Fréttatilkynning number 4/1996). During the past ten years the homogeneous society in Iceland has started to change and now increasing numbers of immigrants are coming to the country with different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Statistics on the proportion of the population with citizenship other than Icelandic shows clearly the change over the past ten years. In 1985 immigrants represented 1.5% of the population, in 1997 2%, but in 2007 the proportion had increased to 6% (Statistics Iceland, population by citizenship). The development in terms of numbers of immigrants to Iceland is approaching that of many Western European countries. Despite this development with increased plurality, 80.7% of the Icelandic population still belonged to the Lutheran Church of Iceland on 1 December 2007; but now there are 26 registered churches and religious denominations and the number of non-Christian communities has increased (Statistics Iceland, population by religious organisations). Considering the change in numbers outside all religious denominations (1.3% in 1985, 1.5% in 1995, 2.5% in 2005) or who belong to non-registered religious denomina-

tions (0.2% 1985, 1% 1995, 3% 2005) the number has increased, especially for those classified as belonging to unregistered religious denominations (Hagstofa Islands – Fréttir. Fréttatilkynning number 4/1996; Statistics Iceland, population by religious organisations).

Thus we see that diversity and plurality have increased in Iceland, particularly during the past ten years; and that contemporary Icelandic society is marked at least by increased traditional plurality. But whether modern pluralism or modern plurality have made a mark on society is still open to question. Is there still today a common value system and a frame of reference to which the majority of the population refer, or are there many and different value systems and frames of reference of which none is common to the whole population?

It is not easy to answer this question without specially-directed research and this does not form part of the present study. It may nevertheless be interesting in this connection to refer to two large surveys conducted in Iceland with an interval of almost 20 years, that is 1986-7 and 2004, into Icelander's beliefs, world views and religious activities. The results of the two surveys may give a picture of the development of religious plurality in Iceland during the past two decades.

In the first study 731 Icelanders of a selection of 1000, aged 18-76, answered. They received a postal questionnaire covering different aspects of religious activity and attitude. The result shows, among other things, that the Icelandic population is more religious than other western and northern European countries. But although it was the Christian, church, tradition that marked religious life in Iceland, a diversity could be discerned when one looked more closely at Icelanders' religious ideas and attitude. The researchers considered that this diversity reflects a society strongly affected by individualism and pluralism (Björnsson and Pétursson 1990, p. 225). They note that the largest group in the survey, i.e. around 40% of their informants, stated that their faith was individual and personal and that closer analysis of their religious ideas and value judgements shows a diversity but without rejection of the Christian faith. This means, rather, that they choose from Christianity what they need but pass over what does not suit them. Björnsson and Pétursson consider that this reflects the pluralism and subjectivism of modern society where each individual feels free to accept or reject different religious ideas and views guided by his or her own reason. But alongside this group of informants another group, about one third, stated that they confessed the Christian faith, and it turned out to be more likely that they gave 'Christian' answers to various questions about faith and religious life than the other group did. In the survey only about 6% opposed religion or said that it was of no significance. Around 10% were unsure of their religious position (Björnsson and Pétursson 1990, p. 226). From this it may be inferred that in 1986/7, there was a mix of religious precepts among Icelanders. A good part of the population confessed the Christian faith, while an-

other part were more influenced by plurality in religious attitudes without denying Christendom. A small minority were unsure of their religious position or considered that religion was of no significance. This can indicate an initial development of modern plurality.

Considering the result of the 2004 survey in which 882 of a selection of 1500, aged 13-75 years, answered questions on religious attitude and activity, it turned out that the Icelandic population still saw itself as religious: just under 70% of the informants said that they were believers while just under 20% said they were non-believers and around 10% were unsure of their religious positions. It is striking that of those who said they were believers, 76% expressed Christian religious faith while only 22% said that their belief was individual and personal. Only one informant said that he belonged to another faith than Christian (Trúarlif Íslendinga, 2004). Here one notices a change compared with the 1986-7 survey. It appears that the informants this time had somehow a clearer standpoint. Around half confessed the Christian faith compared to 32% in 1986-7 while almost 20% were non-believers compared with 6% in 1986-7. While around 40% said in 1986-7 that their belief was individual and personal, only 15% of the informants do so now. What has not changed is the 10% or so who are still unsure of their religious positions. How this change should be interpreted is not simple. It is possible that increased traditional plurality as a consequence of the arrival of more immigrants with other cultural and religious backgrounds has meant that many who some 20 years ago described their faith as individual and personal without denying Christianity now tend more to consider themselves as Christian. It also seems that increased discussion of belief and non-belief during the past few years has led to more considering themselves non-believers. But even though clearer lines are somehow visible, when one analyses the informants' answers to other questions, e.g. on God and Jesus Christ, there turn out not to have been many changes and it is still possible to see a certain plurality in Icelanders' religious ideas and attitudes.

My conclusion is that traditional plurality has increased in Iceland during the past 20 years but that it is unclear how far modern plurality has started to make its mark on society. That there are still so many who describe themselves as Christians indicates that there is a common frame of reference and values to which most people refer. But the diversity that also obtains regarding religious ideas and attitudes indicates an initial development of modern plurality in consequence of the changes Icelandic society is now undergoing.

### *Church and school*

The Lutheran Church of Iceland still enjoys a strong position in Iceland even though membership has declined fairly quickly from 93% 20 years ago to the present 81%. The result of the 2004 survey mentioned earlier shows that over 80% took part in the church's children's and youth work while as



against this just under 15% took part in church work during the previous twelve months. And even though the large majority show a positive attitude to church in both surveys, 43% never attend the church's religious services. Only 10% go to church at least once a month but around 30% attend service a few times a year. The positive attitude therefore does not show in active participation in church work. My own research project starting at the end of the twentieth century into children's and young people's religious views showed that over 40% took part in church child and youth work in class five, but in class nine, that is the year after confirmation, only 9% still took part (Gunnarsson 1999b).

Confirmation is a strong family tradition in Iceland and around 90% of young people are confirmed in the Lutheran Church of Iceland or in Lutheran free churches. Just over 100 young people annually have received civil confirmation during the past few years while the *Siðmennt* – the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association – has since 1989 conducted a civil 'confirmation' for young people who do not wish to be confirmed in church but nevertheless wish for some similar ceremony without religious content. The teaching stresses among other things a humanist view of life and ethics (*Siðmennt. Félag um borgaralegar athafnir. Borgaraleg ferming*). I see it as confirmation of the strong position of confirmation that a civil confirmation like this exists and meets a need for a non-religious ceremony. One may ask how the strong position of confirmation and participation in confirmation classes affects Icelandic teenagers' view of life and values.

Turning to the Icelandic school system, it became secularised in several steps during the twentieth century (Pálsson 1984; 2008; Hugason 2001). In the first twenty years following the 1907 elementary school legislation (*Lög um fræðslu barna*, no. 59/1907) one of the school's roles regarding instruction in Christianity was to manage the teaching of the catechism and prepare young people for confirmation at age 14. This means that the instruction was confessional. But through new legislation of 1926 (*Lög um fræðslu barna*, no. 40/1926) schools should subsequently conduct Bible studies and the church itself would assume responsibility for teaching the catechism. This legislation thus may be said to involve a formal separation between church and school in Iceland. According to the act and the subsequent curriculum of 1929 (*Námskrá fyrir barnafræðsluna 1929*), children were to read selected texts from the Bible or Bible stories with explanations, particularly on the life and teachings of Jesus, and should learn some hymns. The new elementary school legislation of 1946 (*Lög um fræðslu barna*, no. 22/1946) and the new curriculum of 1960 (*Námskrá fyrir nemendur á fræðsluskyldualdri 1960*) involved only minor changes in content and teaching methods, but teaching hours for elementary-school teaching of Christian knowledge were reduced. Strikingly, however, the 1960 curriculum stressed that the teacher should bear in mind that his or her teaching of Christian knowledge was to form a basis for pupils' beliefs and morals throughout life, and that the

teacher must note that pupils came from homes with differing views regarding Christianity. The teacher was therefore to take care not to offend pupils, and to teach them tolerance. Here one can see for the first time in the elementary school curriculum in Iceland that account was being taken of pupils' differing religious backgrounds even though this so far concerned only different ways of understanding Christianity. In 1960 Iceland was religiously very homogeneous and the large majority of the population were members of the Lutheran Church of Iceland.

In 1974 new legislation for the compulsory school was passed (Lög um grunnskóla no. 63/1974) involving a number of changes. A proposal that the name of the subject religion should be changed to religious studies, however, did not gain support. Instead the name became 'Christian knowledge, ethics and religious studies'. Under the new law and the subsequent curriculum (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla: Kristin fræði 1976) there was for the first time to be instruction in other religions than Christianity, and the first textbooks on world religions came into use in the early 1980s. Scope for the teaching of other religions than Christianity has successively increased. This shows in the curricula from 1989 and 1999 (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 1989; Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla, kristin fræði, siðfræði og trúarbragðafræði 1999). But the main stress in religious instruction is still on Christian knowledge. In May 2008 new legislation finally changed the name of the subject to 'religious education' (Lög um grunnskóla no. 91/2008).

The legitimisation of religious education, its status and contents are based primarily on the specific influence of Christianity on Icelandic culture and society and on the fact that the majority of the population are members of Christian denominations, of which the Lutheran Church of Iceland is the largest. Many teachers have problems with the teaching because of both lack of knowledge of and interest in the subject, since it is common for all teachers to teach the subject irrespective of whether they are trained to do so. There has nevertheless been some discussion of the contents of religious instruction. At the beginning of the twentieth century the status and contents of religious instruction were fairly widely discussed. The issue then was whether school teaching should be viewed as part of the Church's catechism teaching. Following the 1926 legislation the contents of the instruction in Christianity were discussed relatively little, while the teaching returned to the agenda at the end of the century (Pálsson 1984; 2008; Hugason 2001). It is mostly those who describe themselves as atheists or who belong to the Siðmennt who have criticised the instruction. They consider that the Church still influences the instruction too much and that there should be instruction not only regarding different religious but also regarding non-religious views of life. In the upper-secondary school there is almost no religious education in Iceland and where there is, it is only as an elective subject.

The basic values of the Icelandic compulsory school are defined in the Compulsory Education Act, which has been unchanged since 1974. The

legal text runs: ‘schools’ activities [...] shall be marked by tolerance, Christian morality and democratic co-operation’ (Lög um grunnskóla no. 63/1974; no 66/1995). This remained unchanged in the legal text until the new legislation in 2008. In the bill presented to the parliament in the early 1970s only tolerance and democratic co-operation were mentioned, but the Church council which had criticised the bill for speaking of religious studies and not of Christian knowledge also proposed that the compulsory school, in co-operation with the home, should give pupils a Christian moral and social upbringing. To speak of Christian upbringing as part of the basic values of education was not supported, but one member of parliament proposed during the discussion that ‘Christian morals’ should be inserted together with tolerance and democratic co-operation. The result was that ‘Christian morals’ was introduced into the bill.

The curricula of 1989 and 1999 give more detailed explanations of the contents of basic educational values. They stress that democratic collaboration implies the equal worth of all people, respect for others and joint responsibility. The most important values in Christian morality are defined as taking responsibility, caring and the desire for reconciliation. Tolerance involves everyone’s right to their own convictions or views and their freedom to express them honestly. Weight is also placed on the fact that the compulsory school together with the home should foster pupils’ moral awareness and responsible behaviour (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla, almennur hluti, 1999). This means that the educational objective is to promote a basis of values marked by, among other things, Christian morality. In a new proposal for legislation on the compulsory school the formula ‘Christian morality’ has disappeared and instead terms have been inserted in the curriculum that explain what is meant by ‘Christian morality’. The bill now runs ‘educational activity shall be marked by tolerance, equity, democratic co-operation, responsibility, care, the desire for reconciliation and respect for human worth’ (Frumvarp til laga um grunnskóla, 2007). The new bill may be seen as a sign of the times or as a consequence of the secularisation and plurality of society. However, during the discussion in the parliament ‘Christian heritage of Icelandic culture’ was introduced into the bill (Lög um grunnskóla no. 91/2008). One may wonder what it has meant for social development and how far Icelandic education has been marked by what was stressed in the 1974 legislation and how far the values mentioned affect young people’s life interpretation and values.

### *Young people in Iceland*

Young Icelanders certainly differ little from young people in other western European countries. I have not compared youth cultures in Iceland with youth cultures in neighbouring countries but assume that the difference is not large. Similar changes have taken place in Icelandic society during the past

few decades to those seen in western Europe. There is not great difference between the family situation in Iceland and in the other Nordic countries. Both parents commonly work full-time and divorce has increased during the past few decades, so that just under 40% of marriages now end in divorce (Statistics Iceland, population, marriages and divorces). The environment in which young people have grown up has therefore changed compared with that of their parents and is marked by consumption, media and the Internet with consequent influence from what is termed globalisation.

One research project shows that the greatest majority of young Icelanders have their own TV and CD player and their own mobile telephone, and one third have access to the Internet in their own rooms, (i.e. 10-15 year olds in 2003). They watch TV for around thirteen hours a week and listen to pop music; and half of them use the Internet daily. Book reading is declining i.e. the proportion of young people who read no books in their free time is steadily growing. The same goes for newspapers (Broddason 2005). Other research among young people in compulsory school and upper-secondary school shows that a large proportion are nevertheless still interested in book reading and that they have knowledge of the Icelandic cultural heritage; and that this is significant for many (Guðbjörnsdóttir 2005). Research into young peoples' consumption and use of money indicates a materialist view of life among a large proportion (70%) (12-17 year-olds), but sometimes with what are called traditional values (55%). It therefore seems that materialistic values have greater weight than spiritual (Guðlaugsson 2005). The use of alcohol is a part of European youth culture. According to a survey in Iceland in 2003, 54% of young people in class ten had been drunk once in their lives and almost a quarter ten times or more. This is nevertheless fewer than eight years previously (Bjarnason 2005). Other research in Reykjavik from 2001 among children and young people in classes 5-10 gives similar results but also points out that those young people who had problems finding care and warmth from their parents were at greater risk of becoming drunk than other young people were. One-third of pupils at this stage, according to the survey, talk with their parents two or three times a week about how they are, but this is commoner among girls than among boys. In addition, the greatest majority of young people have many good friends. Nevertheless, 7-8% have no or few friends. The same project also showed that around 60% feel well at school and like school. In spite of this, the researchers point out that 13% of pupils in the upper third of the compulsory school state that they seldom or never feel well at school, often because of bullying or similar. There were also questions about participation in sports and free-time activities, showing that around half of the young people were regularly involved in these. The great majority did sports and attended the municipal leisure centre but only around 5% took part in church youth work (Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Ásgeirsdóttir, Sigfúsdóttir, 2002).

In the latest UNICEF report on child welfare in the OECD countries, a similar picture emerges. Iceland is in second place, after Sweden, concerning child health and security but when it comes to children's and young people's educational well-being Iceland is around average among OECD countries (UNICEF, Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries 2007). The report also shows that Iceland is once more in second place, now after Italy, in the chart showing how many 15-year-olds eat dinner or supper together with their parents 'several times per week'. But, turning to the percentage of 15-year-olds whose parents take time several times a week 'just talking to them', Iceland comes last but one (Germany is last) and 10% of young people feel lonely and rejected.

Iceland's economy has been good during the past few years with low unemployment (3.1% in 2004). But many Icelanders have a long working day. Average weekly working hours are 42.4, but many work longer (Statistics Iceland, wages, income and labour market). This may be one explanation of why so many young Icelanders feel that their parents take too little time just talking to them and why some of them feel lonely and rejected. I view these circumstances in Iceland and the changes society has undergone during the past few years as important background factors affecting young peoples' life interpretation and values.

In summary, research into young Icelanders' life interpretation and values takes place against the background sketched above. Research in the area is needed. One question is still how far the society in which these young people are growing up is marked by plurality and whether the young speak of their life interpretation with reference to a common framework of opinion and basic values. The position of the Church in Icelandic society is strong; the large majority of young people are confirmed and many take part in church children's and young people's work even though most are no longer active 1-2 years after confirmation. The school value basis is defined in the legislation and the curriculum but it is not clear how much this affects daily school work and teaching or the young people's life interpretation and values. However, it can be assumed that most young people have received school instruction in Christianity and religion and that this has affected their frames of reference. Many questions can be asked about how Icelandic society with its cultural heritage and traditions has formed the life interpretation of its youth and what characterises their conceptions. What effect does this have when a society becomes more or more multicultural? Are the youth culture and young people's ways of thinking still homogeneous, or have growing plurality and diversity started to affect their interpretation of life?

## Purpose and research questions

When considering instruction in Christian knowledge, ethics and religion it is important to take account of how pupils think and express themselves about their interpretation of life and values, what concepts they have when they talk about and discuss existential questions and value issues. I consider it important to increase our knowledge of young Icelanders' life interpretation and values in this connection particularly in view of social changes now taking place in Iceland with the development towards increased plurality.

The overall aim of my research project was to investigate Icelandic teenagers' interpretation of life and values and how they express their views, for the purpose of discussing this in connection with social developments and religious education in schools. The aim may be defined thus:

- to map and analyse some central elements of Icelandic teenagers' (age 14-15 years) life interpretation and values,
- to investigate what characterises the contents of the teenagers' conceptions and what is common and what is special for each,
- to discuss what characterises teenagers' life interpretation and values in connection with social development and with religious education in schools.

On the basis of the above I formulated the following questions:

- How do teenagers express themselves regarding their interpretation of life and values and what characterises individual teenagers' perceptions and statements?
- What common perceptions and values exist among teenagers and what differences are there between the sexes and between teenagers from different areas?
- What relationship is there between teenagers' life interpretation and values and social change?
- What challenges to religious education in schools do the teenagers' perceptions and statements present?

## Arrangement

The present dissertation is based on four articles. The first is already published and gives an overview of the material collected. The other three analyze and interpret selected parts of the material, placing individuals' statements particularly in focus and interpreting these against the complete material.

**Article I.** Finnbogason, Gunnar E. & Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2006). A Need for Security and Trust. Life Interpretation and values among Icelandic teenagers. In K. Tirri (Ed.) *Nordic Perspectives on Religion Spirituality and Identity*. Yearbook 2006 of the Department of Practical Theology, (Ed. Kirsi Tirri). (Helsinki, University of Helsinki. Department of Practical Theology), pp. 271-284. The article surveys the main themes and trends in the empirical material.

**Article II.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). Life interpretation and religion among Icelandic teenagers. For publication in *British Journal of Religious Education* XX (?), xx-xx. The article deals with how religion, belief and religious activity appear in young people's interpretation of life. In the article interviews with three of the young people are particularly analysed and interpreted.

**Article III.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). 'To be honest and truthful'. Central values in the life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers. To be published in a collection of articles from the Nordic Conference on Religious Education in Stavanger, Norway, in June 2007. The article places young people's values especially in focus, both the trends existing in the whole group and particularly in the statements of three young people.

**Article IV.** Gunnarsson, Gunnar J. (2008). 'You try to be cheerful but sometimes you fail'. Adversity, sorrow and death in life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers. This article deals with how young people speak of what they experience as failure, and about their fears and worries, about grief and death. The article raises the issue of the interplay between interpretation of life and existential questions and how young peoples' personal experience affects their existential reflections.

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters:

*Chapter 1, Introduction* gives a picture of the background and social context of the study, its purpose and questions considered. In focus are Icelandic society and the young people who grow up there and the social changes now taking place, i.e. the development from homogeneity to increased plurality. The cultural and social context is viewed as an important background factor for interpretation of the young people's statements.

*Chapter 2* describes the field of knowledge the study covers and the context and placing of the dissertation. The academic discipline to which the dissertation belongs is religious education and how this has been defined as an interdisciplinary field with one foot in educational theory and the other in religious studies or theology. To place the study in the educational context,

the question is raised of religion and religious education in schools in an increasingly secularised and pluralistic northern-European society. The research context of the dissertation is presented in a brief description of the area relevant to the study, particularly in the Nordic countries.

*Chapter 3* discusses the central concepts of the study. Nordic research in the area has discussed certain main concepts, i.e. life philosophy, existential questions and life interpretation. The issue is how they are linked to one another and how useful they are in empirical research. I investigate how different researchers in the Nordic countries have defined and used these concepts and attempt to reach a conclusion regarding which of them are relevant and which definition is suitable for my work of interpretation.

In *Chapter 4* I report the method, i.e. qualitative, used for collecting empirical material, and discuss several methodological issues. Then I describe the theoretical framework selected for my work of interpretation, i.e. the hermeneutic approach, and place this in relation to the approach to interpreting the interviews with teenagers.

*Chapter 5* contains the four articles mentioned, together with an introduction describing the relationship between them and briefly summarising their contents.

In *Chapter 6* a summarising discussion is given in which the results of the four articles are outlined and discussed in relation to the changes in Icelandic society and school religious education.



# The field of knowledge of the studies, and research in the area

To describe the field of knowledge of the studies and their scientific context and placing I raise in this chapter three main subjects. First I give an account of the discussion on religious education as a scientific discipline. This illustrates the scientific framework and context in which the results are interpreted and discussed. The second subject concerns religious education in schools and how it has developed in some northern-European countries with increased secularisation and plurality. The development of the subject religion together with the main understandings and approaches to religious education emerging from the discussion supply a basis for discussing young people's interpretation of life in connection with religious education in schools. Thirdly I place the study in a context of other research by presenting the research in the area which is relevant to my work, with particular focus on research in the Nordic countries.

The present dissertation is written within the subject of educational theory. To define its placing: this is a sub-area, an interdisciplinary subject with one foot in educational theory and the other in religious studies and/or theology. In English contexts one speaks of 'religious education' but in both German and Nordic contexts it has been called 'religious pedagogics' (religionspädagogik/religionspedagogik). Religious education has a more extensive connotation than the term 'religionspädagogik' / 'religionspedagogik' and refers both to religious education as a scientific discipline and to religious education as a school subject. Since religious education is a relatively young field of research which may be dubbed 'up and coming', I describe its development in the Nordic countries and the discussion of its knowledge basis so as to illustrate more clearly the dissertation's position.

When one considers the position of religious education (religionspedagogik) in the Nordic countries one finds that in Sweden it has not achieved any fixed status as an independent scientific discipline even though as early as the 1970s there were certain hopes for this and proposals were made for a definition of the religious-educational field (Bergling 1977; Larsson 1992). Yet the research environment was created, around adjacent fields, i.e. existential-question education (livsfrågepedagogik) (Hartman 1986a; 1986b; Selander 1993; 1994). In Denmark at the same time initiatives were taken for

religious-educational work at the Danish College of Education in Copenhagen (Bugge 1970; Bugge and Johannesen 1974) without this leading to the field achieving any strong position. Only several research projects have been carried out over the past few years (Buchardt 2004). Of the Nordic countries it is chiefly in Finland and Norway that the religious-educational research field has emerged (Kallioniemi 2004; Skeie 2004); in Finland with Kalevi Tamminen (1991) and in Norway with Ivar Asheim (1971; 1977; see also Evenshaug and Hallen 1983) as pioneers. Internationally, we have several examples of how religious education has developed as a scientific discipline and a research field, for example in Germany and England (Ziebertz 2004; Schweitzer 2004; Francis 2000; 2004).

In our part of the world, religious upbringing has for centuries been an important part of society's socialisation of its members. Religious education in schools has therefore played an important role in conveying the cultural heritage, and in northern-European countries the Church has often had influence on religious instruction. Christian knowledge has represented the greatest part of religious education and has been legitimised primarily as the handing-on of culture. In a homogeneous society this created no serious problems but social development in the twentieth century with growing secularisation, plurality and religious diversity both in Nordic countries and internationally, has altered the situation; and the debate on the legitimisation of religious education, its position and approach in state schools, has been on the agenda for the past few decades.

## Religious education

The debate on religious education has taken place at two levels, the theoretical and the practical; but at the same time these two levels are closely bound up with one another and keeping them apart is not an obvious move. At the theoretical level the discussion has concerned the scientific discipline employed by school instruction as its basis, i.e. where religious education is grounded and how it may be defined as a discipline. At the practical level it is more the status of religious education in schools and its legitimisation and approach that are discussed, with reference to its scientific-theoretical fundamentals. This level is also closely related with another interdisciplinary field, viz religious didactics, which I see as a more practice-oriented discipline focusing on teaching processes and their context. Since religious education and religious didactics are so close to one another, the delimitation is not always clear. To give an example, when Christina Osbeck, (2006, p. 97) defines religious didactics, she relies largely on Rune Larsson's (1992, p. 17) definition of religious education. Note also that while in Germany and the Nordic countries one speaks on the one hand of 'religious pedagogics' and on the other of 'religious didactics', in England a concept of 'religious edu-

cation' is used for both areas. My work has a religious-educational perspective since it concerns young people's life interpretations, which will be discussed in connection with, among other things, school religious education. This will deal with the status, legitimisation and approach of the subject religious education in schools, while religious didactics concerns concrete teaching processes.

### *Religious education as a scientific discipline*

There has been discussion internationally on how to define religious education as a scientific discipline. Naturally its development and distinctive character in different countries depend on historical and social circumstances. Nevertheless there is agreement that religious education may be described as a cross-discipline based on both theology/religious studies and educational theory. Hence it is a combination of 'religion' and 'educational theory' which gives the individual religious-pedagogical theoretical construction its special characteristics, often formulated as a grounding of religious education in one or other of the two main areas. Where the disagreement lies is in which of the two areas religious education should have its main roots, pedagogics or theology/religious studies. The debate here is often marked by each having their own institutional arenas of experience. Some experts in religious education, particularly those with a Church background or theological roots, refer to the relationship between the Church as the religious arena and the school as the pedagogical arena and continue eliciting the relationship between theology and educational theory. Other religious-pedagogical experts approach the relationship between religion as a subject and educational theory differently by taking the school as the main arena and developing a stronger educationally-grounded religious education with less stress on the relationship between theology and educational theory and more opening towards disciplines of religious studies other than theology.

In the Nordic countries it is predominantly in Norway that attempts have been made to describe religious education as an independent discipline with its scientific-theoretical fundamentals. Back in the 1970s Ivar Asheim at the Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo raised the question in two articles (Asheim 1971; 1974). His perspective is primarily theological, while Ole G. Winsnes' at the Department of Religious Studies of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, who has also worked on the issue, has a more general pedagogical social-scientific position (Winsnes 1984; 1988). Geir Skeie (1998 p. 117) continues the discussion on what knowledge basis religious pedagogics should have in his dissertation, *En kulturbevisst religionspedagogik (A culturally-aware religious education)*. He identifies the two basic positions or two different roots of religious education seen in Asheim and Winsnes i.e. the theological and the pedagogical. As examples he gives on the one hand the English religious educator Mi-

chael Grimmitt at the University of Birmingham who views religious education as a social-scientifically and pedagogically-based discipline and on the other the German Professor Karl-Ernst Nipkow at the University of Tübingen, who considers that it must be rooted in theology. Both are occupied with cultural diversity in modern society and the challenges it holds for religious education, while at the same time they are representative of two different traditions and national contexts. This partly explains their different fundamental positions (Skeie 1998, pp. 179-197. Cf. Grimmitt 1987 and Nipkow 1992a; 1992b). In Germany religious education is commonly confessional and the pupils take part in the instruction according to the confession to which their families belong, while in Great Britain religious education is non-confessional and the pupils receive instruction in the world's main religions.

It seems proper to speak of Grimmitt and Nipkow as representatives of two chief positions in religious education. Grimmitt with his sociology-of-knowledge perspective based on Berger and Luckmann stresses the point of departure of religious education in the sociocultural context. Though he speaks of the integration of religion and teaching theory in his description of religious education, he places the main weight on the pedagogical and religion assumes a secondary position (Grimmitt 1987). Nipkow, however, represents a theologically-based religious education and what he calls the 'connecting' paradigm (i.e. some kind of intermediate position between the two theoretical basic positions) is, he considers, distinguishable in German religious education. On the one hand this is a 'modern' paradigm that requires an educational and school-theoretical basis for religious instruction in schools. On the other hand it is a Church paradigm that places the main weight upon the pupil's need to deepen his or her own faith and church affiliation. Nipkow seeks to use pedagogical criteria together with theological criteria in expounding religious education (Nipkow 1992a).

In his comparison of Nipkow and Grimmitt, Skeie (1998, pp. 199-201) points out the clear difference between their views of religious education. Grimmitt differs institutionally more distinctly than Nipkow between school and religious community, and he seeks to keep theology outside the self-understanding of religious education. Instead it is religious studies rather than theology which together with pedagogics forms the basis of religious education. Nipkow in no way rejects the competence of religious studies but he is rather critical of religious studies playing the essential role as the basis of religious education. According to Nipkow it is unnecessary to involve religious studies for theory-of-science reasons since modern Christian theology is open to every form of scientific argumentation. Skeie also points out that Nipkow's stress on an historical and social point of departure leads him to focus on the relationship between society, upbringing, Christianity and Church instead of concentrating more generally on religion and religiosity.

Skeie (1998, pp. 171-172) seeks to avoid anchoring religious education in one or other of these two chief areas, pedagogics or theology. He describes his position as an intermediate one and argues for a cultural grounding for religious education. He considers the way open for better interplay between religious studies and pedagogical angles of approach in which the two perspectives illuminate the common area of knowledge and action. He also points out that general religious education cannot rest on a given theological view of religion. It may have as its starting point a general understanding of the phenomenon religion. The problem with such a general understanding of religion is that it operates largely with religion as a relatively limited perspective on reality. But by linking this understanding with religious practice, according to Skeie, the concept of religion can be open to other perspectives. In religious practice he would include a relatively broad spectrum of activity within what he calls the cultural, instead of limiting religion or religiosity too severely (Skeie 1998, p. 215).

Skeie (2000, pp. 160-163) assumes that there is much to be said for adopting a cultural perspective on religious education. Such a perspective reveals that what is played out in religious education nevertheless does not arise there. It arises in the sociocultural context surrounding religious education both as a scientific discipline and as a school subject. The interplay between religious education and its sociocultural surroundings is therefore important. Religion itself is also a cultural phenomenon. Skeie represents a contextual understanding of religious education. Culture becomes his chief concept and he refers among other things to the cultural understanding of the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In his dissertation, Skeie (1998, pp. 109-142) advocates an understanding of culture that stresses what is transcendent, meaning-giving and interpretive: he views this as something genuinely human. Culture concerns what we link meaning and values with, and ways of establishing this meaning. All human activity has an aspect of meaning and people search and find meaning in their encounters with the world. Seen in this way culture is something apprehensible, something we possess in common. Inside this broad cultural concept Skeie positions religion since it contributes to giving meaning to everyday events by interpreting them 'religiously'. He sees religion as a province of meaning within the larger framework of 'culture'. As culture, religion is not bound to certain historical institutions, accumulated knowledge and practice; it is predominantly present in communication. Skeie here uses an anthropological understanding of religion and introduces the expression 'potential religiosity', meaning that everybody has the potential to interpret their experience in a religious manner. But one may also imagine that religion is of scant importance for many in modern pluralised society, and that variation has increased regarding the perspectives people use when they interpret their experience. Religion seen in a cultural perspective is therefore viewed as part of a stream of meaning in which individuals' religiosity exists. Religion means something to the indi-

vidual concerning a holistic understanding of existence, self-understanding, fundamental trust and anchorage in value systems; and the content of religiosity is a single symbol universe, a relationship with something holy, certain mandatory values and actions. At the same time the individual is faced with social objectivisations of religion which also contribute to the forming of religiosity. Under the conditions of modern plurality, what will have religious functions in people's lives, and in the same way how individuals perceive organised religion and relate it to their own lives, is particularly unpredictable (Skeie 1998, pp. 150-157).

In her dissertation *'Det er jo vanlig praksis hos de fleste her...'* (*'It is common practice among most people here'*) Elisabet Haakedal (2004, pp. 50-124) at Agder University College, Norway, continues even further the discussion on religious education, or on what she calls 'contextual, culturally and subject-oriented religious education' ('kontekstuell, kulturfaglig religionspedagogik') which she presents as a separate cultural field. She observes that one problem of religious-pedagogical studies is the long tradition of understanding the field in the framework of practical theology, as theory about practice. She asserts that Geir Skeie in his dissertation contributes to the scientific-theoretical founding of a general 'interest-free' religious education, in that it views theoretical support as a general possibility. To elicit critically Skeie's scientific-theoretical foundation of religious education and her own scientific-theoretical and method-philosophical reflections, Haakedal refers both to the sociological action theory of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his method-reflecting field concepts and to the contextual theology of the Finnish theologian Tage Kurtén and his concept of life philosophy inspired by language games (cf. Wittgenstein). Haakedal observes that despite their differing scientific projects, both Bourdieu and Kurtén give empirical working methods a theoretical priority at the same time as they both focus on the same phenomenon, namely what is culturally self-evident. Haakedal considers that their differing cultural contexts and epistemological and moral-philosophical positions explain their different basic stances, i.e. Kurtén's cultural conservatism and Bourdieu's culturally sceptical stance. She also observes that Kurtén's and Bourdieu's differing views of mankind are significant in connection with the relation between the theoretical-descriptive and the practical-normative. While Bourdieu demands 'interest-free' linguistic acts for the intellectual field and differentiates in theory between scientific and cultural-political activity, Kurtén's hermeneutic dialectics – between everyday language and scientific language and between the participants' existential and the spectators' metaphysical linguistic acts – opens the way for a smoother transition between 'interest-based' and 'interest-free' linguistic acts.

Haakedal in her discussion wishes to create scientific-theoretical and method-philosophical material for her empirical study of the life interpretation of the religious teacher. Her study is based on hermeneutic understand-

ing and further reflection with connections to Skeie's cultural and religious concepts. She argues that key concepts in Bourdieu's theory of action and reflexive sociology may be used as critical tools for adjusting established sociological concepts. She assumes that Kurtén's life philosophy concept here is a conceptual tool for emphasising what is culturally self-evident as a binding element, seen in relation to Skeie's placing of importance on human linguistic acts as conscious and deliberate.

I view the Nordic discussion of the knowledge basis of religious education as an important contribution to the scientific-theoretic establishment of religious education as an interdisciplinary field and hence as belonging to the area of knowledge of the present dissertation. Skeie's and Haakedal's presentation of a general cultural and culturally-aware religious pedagogics stresses what is cultural and social, bringing out the sociocultural context. The interplay between religious education and the sociocultural environment is important and also permits improved interplay between religious-scientific and pedagogical angles of attack. Skeie's view of religion in a cultural perspective as part of a stream of meaning in which individuals' religiosity exists is also important. Religiosity does something for the individual concerning a holistic understanding of existence, self-understanding, basic trust and grounding in value systems. This is of importance in connection with the discussion of what characterises young people's life interpretation and values in terms of religious education in schools. Therefore it also calls attention to the discussion of religious education at the more practical level, i.e. the school subject, its legitimisation and approach.

### *Religion in schools*

Since one purpose of the present work is to discuss teenagers' life interpretation and values in connection with religious education in school, I create material for this purpose by reporting the development of religious education in the Nordic countries and in England. These countries (except Finland) have in common that there is general religious education for all compulsory-school pupils. In addition, social developments in all these countries have involved increased secularisation and plurality which has affected religious education and discussion thereof.

The ordering of religious education in a country often reveals how both the relation between Church and state and that between school and religion are defined. Where national identity and culture are strongly linked to a certain confession, this has affected how school instruction is perceived as regards religion. Secularisation and increased religious plurality have also affected how religious education is organised in many European countries. In present-day Europe there are three models of religious education in state schools: 1) confessional religious instruction, which still exists in many countries, 2) non-confessional religious education as in the Protestant coun-

tries of northern Europe and 3) no religious instruction, which is the case only in France (Willaime 2007; see also Schreiner 2000).

The development of religion as a subject in compulsory schools in four of the Nordic countries reflects the change from model number one to model number two, from confessional instruction to non-confessional, and may serve as an example of different perspectives or understandings in the discussion of religious education. Here there emerge both a particular religion's influence on culture and society and the effects of secularisation and plurality. Comparison of development in the various Nordic countries shows that it was similar in Iceland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden for the greater part of the twentieth century but during the latter third, certain differences are noted, i.e. as secularisation and plurality increased. At the beginning of the century religious instruction was confessionally bound to the Lutheran churches in all these countries but Church control gradually declined so that the instruction finally became non-confessional and teaching in other religions than Christianity became part of the subject. In Denmark, Norway and Iceland one still speaks of Christian knowledge but in Sweden the term religious education was used for the subject as early as in 1969.

I have already surveyed the development of religious education in Iceland (chapter 1) and while it is intended to be non-confessional, the main stress in compulsory schools has been on Christian knowledge. In Denmark the case is similar and until the mid-1930s religious instruction in Danish schools was seen as part of the Church's instruction for confirmation. But with the school legislation of 1937 the subject 'religion' was given the name 'Christian instruction', which was to define the school's task when Church control declined. The spiritual separation between Church and school finally came about with new educational legislation in 1975. Then the school became defined as a democratic and secularised institution without religious purposes. The name of the subject 'religion' was changed to 'Christian knowledge'. It was to be non-confessional and have a factual, objective and knowledge-mediating character. With new legislation in 1993 the name of the subject remained unchanged but its objectives now included a formulation to the effect that pupils should recognise and understand that the religious dimension is of significance for the individual's perception of life and his or her relations with others (Rydahl, year unstated; Bugge 1979; 1994; Buchardt 2004). In 2006, Danish schools received yet further legislation, but the present curriculum still places the main stress on Christian knowledge (Læseplan for faget kristendomskundskap).

In Norway, development of the school subject 'religion' has gone at the same pace as in Denmark and Iceland but it has also had special characteristics. When the Act on Compulsory Education was passed in 1969, the subject 'Christian knowledge' was still to be based on the Lutheran confession as support to parents' authority, since 95% of the Norwegian population belonged to the evangelical Lutheran national Church. With a revised cur-



riculum during the 1980s (1985/87) the legitimisation of religious education was changed to the handing-on of the knowledge and cultural heritage. Between 1969 and 1997 there also developed in Norway a model of parallel instruction in two types of religious and views-of-life teaching, i.e. Christian knowledge on one hand and views-of-life orientation on the other. But the school reform of 1997 evinced a desire to move away from the parallel model which had involved too many practical problems and, instead, to form a common religious programme for all. In consequence, a new curriculum for what was termed KRL, Christian knowledge with a religious and view-of-life orientation, was implemented, as an expanded Christianity subject to be obligatory for all pupils. There was a desire to stress the significance of common cultural frames of reference and to stimulate participants to a dialogue among different religions and views of life. The subject should give knowledge of religions and views of life but not indoctrinate anybody in one religion or another. Yet the special position of Christian knowledge emerges clearly from the name of the school subject and its contents, and there has been no consensus on this. The Norwegian Humanist Association, for example, has struggled against this within the legal system and before the European Court of Human Rights. This has led to changes in the KRL subject during the past few years (Haakedal 2004, pp. 12-28; Skeie 2007).

Comparing changes in religious education in Norway, Denmark and Iceland with those in Sweden reveals a certain difference, particularly from the start of the 1960s. At the beginning of the twentieth century the situation in Sweden was similar to that in the other Nordic countries, and religious instruction was confessionally bound to the Swedish church. With the plan of instruction for the elementary school in 1919, this tradition was broken and instead, non-confessional instruction in Christianity was introduced. But during the 1960s developments in Sweden began to move in a somewhat different direction from those in the other Nordic countries. With the first compulsory-school curriculum of 1962 the name of the subject was changed to Christian knowledge. The instruction was to be material-centred with great emphasis on objectivity. This development then continued with the 1969 curriculum to a more pupil-centred teaching approach and the name of the subject was changed to religious education. Pupils' existential questions became the starting point for the teaching. A community of problems (*problemgemenskap*) was identified between views-of-life traditions, cultural expressions and children's and young people's existential questions, so an existential understanding became prominent. Towards the end of the twentieth century the pendulum swung somewhat backwards; existential-question teaching was toned down and the concept 'life interpretation' was introduced (Lpo94). The term existential questions was replaced with several expressions, for example belief-and-views-of-life issues, and weight was placed on knowledge and reflection concerning different religions and views of life. In the early 2000s, a proposal for a new curriculum showed a tendency towards

a compromise where the term existential questions again came into use and the specific importance of the Christian tradition for Swedish society was stressed (Hartman 2000b, pp. 215-227; Larsson, 2004).

The difference between changes in Sweden and those in the other Nordic countries illustrates to some extent different views in the discussion of religious education in the compulsory school, i.e. one placing the main stress on Christianity and the cultural significance of the Christian tradition in religious education and its legitimisation, and the other emphasising a pupil-centred teaching approach with the pupils' existential questions and experience as the starting points. The situation in the early twentieth century in all the Nordic countries was marked by theological determination of the subject religion. It reflects social homogeneity and the strong position of the national churches. But with the increase of secularisation and religious plurality, the determination of the subject and its control by the Church disappeared. Perceptions of the subject gradually became more cultural and pedagogically linked but nevertheless still with an essential element where Christian knowledge represents a main component. Sweden, however, has developed further exhibiting an existential understanding of the subject with children's and young people's existential questions as important bases alongside views-of-life traditions and cultural expressions. This reflects how far the secularisation process in Sweden had reached during the last part of the twentieth century. Comparing with Denmark one may ask why the difference between the two countries is so great since secularisation in Denmark has been similar to that in Sweden. In Denmark, greater emphasis is placed on the culture-mediating role of Christianity as a school subject. This may represent the strong cultural position of the Danish National Church despite secularisation. It is also interesting in connection with the development of religion as a subject that in the last curriculum and course plans of the twentieth century for religious education both in Norway and Sweden, the concept life interpretation played a certain role in both countries but in different ways. I return to this in the next section on central concepts.

In Finland, religious education has an entirely different form from that in the other Nordic countries. The character of the subject is theological and there is what is termed a parallel model with confessional religious instruction in co-operation between schools and Church. The religious instruction is identical to the denomination to which the majority of the children in a class belong. If more than three pupils in the class belong to a different denomination than the majority or are outside all denominations, the school is obliged to arrange alternative instruction. It is common for there to be teaching in three alternatives: evangelical-Lutheran, Finnish orthodox and an alternative view-of-life subject. These subjects have their own curricula. Work is now in hand to arrange for more alternative offerings, which is a particular need in the large cities. The form of religious instruction obtaining in Finland shows the specific status of the evangelical-Lutheran church and the orthodox

church but both are considered as national churches (Elementary Education Act 21.8.1998/628). Since the instruction is confessional and bound to the denomination to which the pupils belong, no development towards a common religious subject for all has taken place in Finland as in the other Nordic countries. The Finnish situation thus resembles the German, where pupils also commonly take part in religious instruction at school according to the confession to which their family belongs.

Shifting the focus from the Nordic countries to another Protestant country in northern Europe where there is a common religious subject for all pupils, that is, Great Britain, we encounter a lively debate on religious education, RE. I include some main features of the development and discussion on religion as a school subject in Great Britain since it may illustrate different understandings of and approaches to religious education in a sociocultural connection where a certain religion has prevailed for many hundreds of years but where the secularisation process and continually increasing plurality have changed the situation. The discussion is therefore topical for religious education in countries with similar developments and which in turn become relevant to my discussion of teenagers' life interpretation in connection with religious education in schools.

Back in the early 1960s with Ronald Goldman's research into the development of children's religious thought and its consequences for religious education in schools, considerable discussion arose. Goldman's work was greatly influenced by Jean Piaget's research into human cognitive development and his result was that religious thought developed similarly in several steps with other human thought. Goldman concluded that abstract religious concepts should be excluded from religious instruction until pupils were ready for abstract thought (Goldman 1964; 1965). Goldman's work had great influence during the 1960s among other things on the contents of religious education, particularly in primary schools. But his research method and results were also heavily criticised in England and elsewhere (see for example Howkins 1966; Bugge 1970; Sundén 1974; Hull 1998).

From the mid-1960s and the early 1970s one may see how discussion of religious instruction in Great Britain started to take account of the increasing secularisation and plurality of British society. Towards the end of the 1960s professor Ninian Smart (1967) at the University of Lancaster started a project to investigate religious instruction and to develop suitable curricula. The result of the project was chiefly to criticise confessional models of religious instruction as unsuitable in state schools in a dominantly secularised democratic society with increasing religious plurality. Instead, a non-dogmatic phenomenological approach was advocated where both teachers and pupils were encouraged to bracket their understandings and to attempt in an empathetic manner to capture religion from the perspective of the insider. Smart's work hastened some fundamental changes in religious education in teacher training and in schools in England (Jackson 1997, pp. 2-3).

The discussion in Great Britain continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s and further, together with increased immigration; but there is neither reason nor space for a further examination of this. However I wish to bring out a few main features. In 1998 an educational reform (the 1988 Education Reform Act) was passed. Here for the first time in British legislation it was established that religious education was to take the nation's religious plurality into account (Jackson 1997, p. 1). The 1944 Education Act had reflected a homogenised understanding of Christianity and subsequent curricula were influenced by the then new discipline of comparative religion. Religions as constructed by Westerners were to be compared so as to demonstrate the sovereignty of Christianity. This was reflected in the curriculum and other religions were considered as separate systems with similar structures, mutually competitive. Other religions than Christianity were therefore represented in comparison with Christianity (Jackson 1997, p. 127). The new Education Act of 1988 was to change this by describing the world's main religions as a part of the British nation's spiritual and cultural life. Pupils in state schools were to obtain some knowledge and understanding of these religions.

As might be expected this educational reformation aroused lively discussion of the status and role of religious education in state schools in England. Among other things a viewpoint emerged that combined right radical and conservative Christian interests. This interest group argued for a stronger position for religious education in schools but against religious instruction that reflected the religious plurality in England. The arguments were in favour of the predominant Christian religious education, including confessional, while multi-religious instruction tended to be linked with secularism and relativism and considered confusing and a betrayal of the British cultural heritage. Dominating Christian religious education, on the other hand, wished to draw attention to the Christian faith and its role in the development of British culture; and moreover to cater for a particular kind of moral instruction with, as its aim, fewer social problems among young people. These viewpoints led to a compromise of educational reform in 1988 (the 1988 Educational Reform Act, section 8.3). According to this, religious instruction was to "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (Jackson 2004, pp. 22-24).

Edwin Cox and Michael Grimmitt are among those who in the 1980s took part in the discussion on religious education in England. Cox (1983, p.5) distinguished between what he calls 'understanding religion' and 'religious understanding'. Understanding religion involves a relatively objective knowledge of religion while religious understanding on the other hand requires experience of the convictions and practice of a faith and the ability to perceive and respond positively to its ultimate function. Grimmitt (1987) made a similar distinction by speaking of two different models of religious

education that may be useful tools in the analysis of different approaches to this. One model is 'learning about religion'. This means that pupils learn about the world's great religious traditions, their convictions, teachings, values and rites and their influence on individuals, societies and cultures. Grimmitt considers that learning about religion develops first and foremost objective knowledge and introduces pupils primarily to a non-personal and general form of understanding. The other model Grimmitt calls 'learning from religion'. This involves:

...what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves – about discerning ultimate questions 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them, about discerning *Core Values* and learning to interpret them, about recognising the shaping influence of their own beliefs and values on their development as persons, about unavoidability of their holding beliefs and values and making faith responses, about the possibility of their being able to discern a spiritual dimension in their own experience, about the need for them to take responsibility for their own decision-making, especially in matters of personal belief and conduct, and so on (Grimmitt 1987, p. 225).

Grimmitt considers that this type of knowledge acquisition may be said to result in self-recognition and personal understanding, i.e. foster subjective knowledge. He states that this entails involvement in two different but related types of evaluation. The first he calls impersonal, meaning the ability to differentiate between, and critically evaluate, the truth claims of the various religious traditions and their convictions and usages. The other he terms personal evaluation. The aim of this is to foster self-understanding, meaning that one both compares and contrasts one's own convictions and challenges one's own preconditions. Grimmitt sees the evaluation process as an interplay of learning *about* and learning *from* religion, and that this opens opportunities for pupils' knowledge of religions to become a significant element in their self-understanding (Grimmitt 1987, pp. 224-226). Grimmitt's approach therefore embraces an integration of the two models, i.e. learning about and learning from religion. This appears to be a common combination in the British context (Jackson and Steele 2005, p. 58). The question then becomes which of the two models receives the main stress in the integration.

Robert Jackson is one of the chief figures in the religious-pedagogical debate in England today. His approach to religious education, which he calls 'the interpretive approach', is an example of how to integrate Grimmitt's two models. In his book, *Religious Education, an Interpretive Approach*, Jackson treats fundamental issues concerning religious education. He is critical of the phenomenological view that has characterised religious education since the 1970s. In his approach he takes ideas from, among other places, anthropology and hermeneutics and integrates knowledge, understanding, reflection and constructive criticism in the learning process (Jack-

son 1997). The pupils' context and experience are stressed and hence one may speak of a contextual understanding of religious education. Another chief figure in the religious pedagogical debate in England is Andrew Wright, professor at King's College, London. He represents a more essential understanding of religious education and has presented an approach that has 'religious literacy' as its main objective. Without oversimplifying, I believe that one can maintain that in the discussion of religious education in England during the past few years, these two chief understandings – the contextual and the essential – have been prominent. In addition, both Jackson and Wright position themselves between two further approaches to religious education. On the one hand is the confessional/predominant Christian religious education, drawing attention to the Christian faith and to its specific role in the development of British culture (cf. Thompson 2004). On the other hand this radical understanding involves a post-modern approach to religious education (cf. Erricker and Erricker 2000).

Both Jackson (2004) and Wright (2004) raise the post-modernistic approach for critical discussion and reject its anti-realistic view of knowledge. Jackson in his book *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* summarises that the key element in Erricker's and Erricker's position is that reality is completely socially/linguistically constructed. There is no objective reality. All knowledge is a social or a linguistic construction which itself contains the ideological conceptions of those who constructed that knowledge. There is no objective knowledge, only different conflicting knowledges. In accordance with this, the only true knowledge is what children construct for themselves. They do not learn through some kind of pre-designed curriculum: this can only be done by listening to and reacting to other individuals' 'little narratives', the 'texts' being other children's personal accounts, artwork or anything else. The point is that no interpretation has to overlay this material. Pupils must construct knowledge for themselves. The teacher's role is to facilitate this process. This knowledge is not final. Children can change their understanding by reflecting on many narratives.

The chief problem with Erricker's and Erricker's version of post-modern religious education, according to Jackson, is that it postulates anti-realism. In its ideological argumentation it has common parts with different forms of 'faith-based' education. The Errickers' anti-realistic view dismisses any criterion for evaluation of different sources and personal narratives. The total stress on children's personal narratives denies children the possibility to investigate issues and other narratives in a broader context. In addition, the Errickers' approach omits important elements, according to Jackson. But despite his criticism Jackson agrees with Clive and Jane Erricker on the importance of making pupils and their interests a key element in religious education and reducing the volume of subject content so as to create time and space for reflective activity; and to treat both the emotional and the rational. Jackson considers that one can obtain important insights from these authors'

work without adopting their anti-realistic theoretical framework (Jackson 2004, pp. 58-74).

Andrew Wright similarly criticises Erricker's and Erricker's post-modern approach and their anti-realistic view of knowledge, in his book *Religion, Education and Postmodernity*. His conclusion is that it will only induce in children an anti-realistic world view (Wright 2004, pp. 199-207).

As already mentioned, both Robert Jackson and Andrew Wright have each presented their approaches to religious education. Jackson presents the interpretive approach in his book *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997). This involves rejecting the notion that the objective of state schools in a democratic society can be to induce children to accept a fixed religious world view. Instead, the aim must be to help children and young people to find their own position in the discussion through religious plurality. Jackson stresses that one should recognise the internal diversity of religious traditions and their disputed existence, and the complexity of cultural expression and change, on the basis of a social and individual perspective. This is chiefly an approach to understanding others' ways of conducting their lives, and is intended as a complement to other aspects of religious education.

Jackson points out that if religious education anyway involves understanding others' religious world views, this leads to the necessity of discussing a whole series of issues regarding the representation of religious material and methods for interpreting it. He warns of the danger of representing religious world views as closed systems of articles of faith and proposes a more personal and flexible model that allows scope for each person's uniqueness while also giving the various influences that help create the individual's personal and social identity, suitable attention. Instead of expecting that pupils set aside their own pre-conditions when they study other positions – as many phenomenological approaches often require – the pupils' own ideas and experience are used directly. Since interpretation involves the pupil in comparing currently-understood concepts and ideas with other people's, the pupil's own perspective becomes an important part of the educational process. The content of religious education is not only data obtained by the teacher but also involves the participant's knowledge and experience and an interactive connection between the two. The teacher of religion who works with children with differing backgrounds needs professional skill to manage dialectical teaching. Jackson notes that if teachers have the right degree of sensitivity both towards their pupils' own positions and towards the material studied, and can develop suitable teaching, then a true discussion form in religious education can come about, one that can handle diversity. He considers that such an approach embraces the possibility that pupils deepen their own views by studying other positions, either outside or related to their own traditions. It also offers possibilities for pupils to use their critical ability on the material studied and for creative approaches to the presentation. Pupils'

own religious-cultural experience, reflections and interaction can also be a part of the subject religious education. Since teachers are more conscious of the religious beliefs and values embedded in their pupils' experience, they are all the better equipped to create teaching situations designed to develop communication among pupils with differing backgrounds (Jackson 1997; 2000, pp. 87-108).

Andrew Wright (2004) is not only critical of the post-modern approach to religious education, he is also critical of the contextual approach which he considers primarily to have a starting point in pupils' immediate cultural context and focus on how their identities are negotiated at local level. His critique takes as its starting point the anthology *Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe* (Heimbrock et al. 2001). Wright considers that despite a given diversity in such an essay collection it seems to him that in many – though not all – of the contributions a common vision can be identified embracing two main propositions, i.e. religious context and religious competence. I include some points of Wright's criticism since contextual understanding of religious education is one of the main understandings of religious education today, and Robert Jackson's approach can be described as contextual.

Wright claims that contextual religious education tends towards an anthropological interpretation that reduces religion to a cultural dimension. This horizontal dimension of religion as a cultural phenomenon overshadows the vertical dimension which concerns questions of transcendence and ultimate truth. Wright notes that advocates of contextual religious education link their arguments among other things to the demand that the European Enlightenment view of religion as separate systems of belief should be abandoned in favour of a looser presentation of religious traditions and groups. Wright considers it unacceptable that the Enlightenment should bear the main responsibility for the view of religions as distinctive systems of belief and that before the dawn of the modern era religion had consisted of little more than a loose cluster of individual spiritualities. He also points out that it is not so easy to dismiss the vertical dimension of religion as he considers that the contextual-religious pedagogues do. He also sees the reduction by the contextual understanding of religion to a contingent aspect of local culture as flirting with anti-realistic philosophy since the nominalistic swing towards what is local and particular at the cost of the general and universal is a distinctive basic feature of post-modernism. Wright also has objections to contextual-religious pedagogues' view of the purpose of education, asserting that they assume that religion should be a tool for social and personal development rather than being approached as a unit worth studying for its own sake. Wright also considers that, by bracketing the transcendental aspects of religion, contextual religious education has actually destroyed the hermeneutic circle through which the local is interpreted on the basis of the universal and the universal on the basis of the local (Wright 2004, pp. 195-198).



In an article in the first issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education* 2008, Wright goes further in his criticism of the contextual approach to religious education by discussing particularly Robert Jackson's 'interpretive approach' and his criticism of essential understanding of religion. Wright states that Jackson tends to be both dualistic and nominalistic. Wright accepts the significance of contextual representation of religion in the classroom but nevertheless asserts that such representation itself does not give a sufficient basis for religious education (Wright 2008).

Andrew Wright's (1996) own position means making linguistic competence rather than experience the basis for the understanding of religions. In his view religion is fundamentally interested in claims regarding the truth. For him, present-day religion is not based on universal experience but in varied expressions of religious experience. Or rather it is a series of unclear competitive and often overlapping narratives on the true character of reality. It is therefore not experience that children need as a tool for understanding religion but rather 'religious literacy'. According to Wright the intention is not for pupils to be indoctrinated in religious or non-religious views. Instead, pupils should receive help to form well-reasoned positions vis-à-vis religious truth claims and ability to think, act and communicate with insight and understanding in the light of the diversity of religious truth claims that characterises present-day culture.

In his book *Religion, Education and Post-modernity*, Andrew Wright (2004) calls his approach to religious education 'a critical religious education', an approach inspired equally by the post-modern philosophy of difference and the insights of critical realism. He starts with issues of transcendence and ultimate truth and claims that any study of religion that does not basically explore these – irrespective of possible conclusions – will be from the beginning a reductive activity that fails to do religion justice. Wright stresses that religious education should be transformational, taking up David Hay's (1985) argument that it should bring about transformation of pupils' lives by liberating them from the narrow horizon of modernity and opening up the possibility of religious understanding of oneself and the world. Wright claims that transformational religious education must be conducted in an encounter with the narratives through which religious traditions attempt to describe and handle reality. Critical religious education must avoid the conventional line of using religion to support the meta-narratives of naturalism, romanticism, liberalism and anti-realism, and instead attempt to fulfil its transformational potential by opening pupils' eyes to issues of ultimate truth and by developing their religious literacy.

Wright also raises the issue of how the subject religion is legitimised in the school curriculum and considers that instead of doing this on pragmatic grounds by referring to its social role, it should be based on its own inherent significance; its ability to make available, and challenge pupils with, the truth claims the various religions make regarding the actual order of things.

Wright agrees that religious education should always be contextual since it operates within the historical, cultural and intellectual framework imposed upon it by its geographical and temporal location. As such, religious education should always participate in the transmission of specific knowledge, beliefs, values and stances. But if one departs from the inevitable contextual nature of religion the question becomes how religious education can tackle the pedagogical task by rendering issues of ultimate truth available and developing religious literacy (Wright 2004, pp. 208-222).

Jackson (2004) criticises several aspects of Andrew Wright's approach (a criticism that he wrote before publication of Wright's book *Religion, Education and Post-modernity* and therefore refers to other works of Wright). Jackson finds it surprising that Wright does not discuss construction of what he calls different public linguistic traditions seeking to explain the ultimate essence of reality, since his approach presupposes such determined narratives. He considers that in his attempt to achieve 'standard' religious languages, Wright reifies religions as clearly separate and distinct systems. He discusses Wright's criticism of the post-modern view that traditional religious systems do not really exist; there are only individuals who use similar religious symbols. Jackson notes that one does not need to be a post-modernist anti-realist to point out that the individual often has personal religious convictions and values created by experience and through interaction with others, including religious groups and institutions yet still relating to some comprehensive narrative. Jackson takes as an example the religious diversity existing among children even from Christian families, according to the result of the Warwick research project in which he took part. He asks how Wright would classify these children and draws attention to the inner plurality existing in religious traditions. Jackson is also critical of Wright's intellectual approach and the great weight he places upon rationalism and how he almost excludes feelings and their expression from religious education. Yet despite his criticism Jackson stresses that Wright's approach has many strengths. One of them is how inclusive it is. Wright stresses that the dialogue on religious education should involve everybody and should include plurality. No-one should be excluded for reasons of faith or world view and no methodology for the subject should take any position that suppresses a dialogue between pupils with different views or hinders discussion. Jackson sees Wright's ability to combine this view with a strong personal religious obligation as a powerful antidote to a confessional approach. Wright also reinforces the significance of language in religious instruction and the use of the ability to reflect critically on religious data (Jackson 2004, pp. 75-86).

In his answer to Wright's article in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, Jackson criticises his interpretation of his work but concludes by pointing out that even though he and Wright have in certain respects differing epistemological standpoints, he considers that they have some common

key principles and values regarding religious education, which are valuable. Thus both place weight upon an inclusive approach to religious education that makes religion as a school subject available to all pupils irrespective of their religious or secular world views (Jackson 2008).

There is no doubt that Jackson is positive towards the approaches to religious education that take account of plurality as a reality, stress openness and flexibility and recognise children's and young people's collaboration as important contributions to religious education. In his *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* he particularly identifies in this context Wright's approach, his own 'interpretive approach', and what he calls 'the dialogue approach'; but he grants, too, that they are not neutral. They recognise the inevitable influence of all plurality on children and young people and seek to help them to tackle this. They do not foster particular manifestations of belief but stress that pupils should have the possibility to study and reflect on different religious and philosophical views in a structured manner. They also recognise the right of individuals to have different religious or secular views and that some pupils inevitably bring with them to the classroom their family's or denomination's religious attitudes. Politically they ensure the individual's right to religious freedom and they can actively support religious tolerance and ideological diversity within the legislation. Ethically they both attempt to guarantee that the practice and requirements of religions are infused with sensitivity, exactness, intellectual precision and justice (Jackson 2004. p. 165).

### ***Conclusion regarding religious education***

Social development in the Nordic and western European countries shows that we can no longer speak of homogeneous societies. Diversity and plurality are on the increase. In Iceland, too, the same development is taking place even though it has been slower. Secularisation also means that church or religious communities no longer possess power over society's institutions such as education. What does this situation mean for religious education in state schools?

It cannot be the task of the general school to imprint upon pupils any given religious or secular world view. School religious education must be on school terms – not the Church's or religious institutions'. In this connection Grimmitt's contribution is important since he tries to build a scientific-theoretical basis for religious education which is the school's own and does not belong to the religious communities or institutions. In a pluralistic society it is also problematic that school, for historical and cultural reasons, should intend to foster a particular sort, in this case Christian, of personal and social morality. The school cannot isolate children and young people from the influence of plurality, and it is more important for schools to help children to work with and reflect over its influence.

Secularisation and plurality cannot in my view lead to the exclusion of religion and religious education from schools. If schools should be made secular in the sense that they lack all religious education, this would mean that religion is shifted to the private sphere (here we have France as an example). This can lead to children and young people having little or no general knowledge of religion or only having knowledge of their own religion. The same thing may happen if pupils have religious instruction only in the confession to which they belong, as for example in Finland and Germany. This can entail less understanding among young people with different religious backgrounds and even lead to an increase in prejudice. While knowledge and understanding are no insurance against prejudice, they are an important precondition for understanding and religious tolerance. It is therefore important that religion and religious education maintain their status in schools and that the school can be a forum for dialogue between pupils and teachers with differing religious backgrounds. It is important for schools to develop their pupils' skills in interpreting and reflecting over different religions and world views. Plurality cannot, either, lead to our introducing a post-modern approach with anti-realist views of knowledge as a condition. I consider Jackson's and Wright's criticism of the post-modern approach as reasonable and would claim that such an anti-realistic approach does not do justice either to the religions or the pupils.

It is open to discussion how far, or how, the Church and other religious institutions should influence the contents or arrangement of school religious education. In England the Church of England still has great influence on the curriculum for religious education (RE) but the involvement of the other main religions has increased during the past few years. Jackson points out in his book (2004, pp. 175-179) that the representatives of the religions have been criticised for reforming religious education without talking to or listening to the teachers who teach the subject. Grimmit (2000) has also criticised the representatives for presenting versions of religions that serve more the interests of the religions than those of the pupils. Jackson (2004, p. 177) considers that there is something in what Grimmit says, but that he exaggerates. But this does not mean that representatives from churches and religious institutions cannot contribute in a well-informed and constructive manner to religious education in the state schools. Yet there is perhaps a need for altered focus with more weight on the teaching process, on educational theory and didactics without, however, losing sight of content. There is always a danger that churches and religious communities place the most weight on their own interests and this can lead to conflict or struggle between religions and religious institutions and those who represent non-religious world views. Instead it is important, in my view, to require of both teacher training and state schools that the curriculum for religious education lay more stress on educational theory and didactics. The chief requirement on the school should be good quality in the teaching and that it takes account of the context, i.e.

the society that is at the same time based on ‘the Christian cultural heritage’ and becoming increasingly pluralistic.

It may be possible to find an intermediate position between Nipkow’s attempt to represent what he calls ‘connecting’ paradigms since this involves taking contemporary circumstances seriously, and Grimmit’s stress on educational theory as a basis. It can also lead to finding a middle way between the contextual understanding that Jackson and others present and Wright’s more essential understanding. Focusing what Jackson and Wright have in common, i.e. that the teaching shall be accessible to all, irrespective of faith or world view and stressing openness and flexibility, and recognising children’s and young people’s collaboration as important elements of religious education, then one finds a way to create interaction between pupils’ experience and contexts and the essential or structured contents of the religions.

It is important to construct policy and practice that lead to the greatest possible equity for all. School must take account of human rights and religious freedom and have as its goal to create religious tolerance. Requirements for freedom of belief and human rights mean among other things that state schools may not indoctrinate their pupils with a given religion or creed; but I agree with Wright that it is important for schools to be able to create the grounds for pupils to clarify, criticise, formulate and defend their own positions, together with increased understanding of other pupils’ world views and positions. If religion or religiosity are interwoven with the individual’s total understanding of him or herself in the world then it is the children’s right to raise in schools, and work on, subjects and issues connected with religion, world views and existential questions. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts both children’s right not to be discriminated against for reasons of religion (article 2) and their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 14). In addition mention is made of children’s spiritual, moral and social development (articles 27 and 32). In this context religious education can play an important part, but one might alter the perspective and stop speaking of religious education either on Church, religious-community or school premises and instead speak of school religious education on the children’s or pupil’s premises. I view this change of focus as important in connection with my study of what characterises young people’s life interpretation, and values and discussion on this, in connection with religious education in schools.

## Research in the area

The research context of the present dissertation is primarily the research within religious education that deals with children’s, and particularly young people’s, life interpretation, existential questions and values. To present the field I briefly survey the research in religious education that I consider rele-

vant in connection with my interpretation of the empirical material and discussion of the result. I confine myself first and foremost to Nordic research in the area since the Nordic countries' culture, social structures and school systems are related. Research in Sweden and Norway is at the forefront since research in the area has been lively in those countries. But first something on the position in the area in Iceland and the connection with my earlier research project.

### ***Research in Iceland***

There is extremely little research into religious education, or on children's and young people's interpretation of life, existential questions and values in Iceland – only three or four fairly small projects apart from my own research work from 1997 to 1999 regarding children's and young people's religious perceptions and practice. This was conducted among 1,100 compulsory-school pupils in the fifth, seventh and ninth classes in thirteen schools selected at random throughout Iceland. It was quantitative research and the children and young people were asked to answer questionnaires. The project was termed *Children's and young people's religious perceptions and practice*. The purpose was to collect information on, and to map, Icelandic children's and young people's religious attitudes, perceptions and practice, and to investigate the connections between, on one hand, gender, age, dwelling and religious upbringing and on the other the children's and young people's religious attitudes, perceptions and practice. The questionnaire covered religious attitudes, perceptions and practice, religious upbringing, understanding of religious concepts and ideas, views on grief and death and attitudes to what was most important in the participants' lives.

The results showed among other things less secularisation and that children and young people in Iceland are more religious or religiously active than for example has been seen in similar research in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. There were also greater differences between genders than expected. The girls were more religious and religiously active than the boys. There were also connections between age and religious activity, the older the children the less religious activity. Among young people (14-year-olds) there was increased religious reappraisal and doubt but without denial of belief in God and even though only 9% of the young people were active in Church work the year after confirmation, around half of them saying that they prayed often or sometimes. Those who had received religious upbringing at home, among other things by learning prayers, had a more positive religious attitude and were more religiously active than those who had only taken part in Church or school instruction in Christianity (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b; 2001; *Kundskab og oplevelse* (Knowledge and Experience) 2000, pp. 207-208). This research project was only a beginning of religious-educational research in Iceland and the present dissertation is a continuation of that study

but with a broader perspective. It focuses not only religious views and practice but rather young people's life interpretation and values, among these religion and religious perceptions. But the results of the previous project are used in connection with interpretation of the interviews with young people since they illustrate developments in Iceland and give important background information.

### *Under the influence of developmental psychology*

At first the focus of international religious educational research was affected by developmental psychology and Jean Piaget's theory of the development of thinking, and by Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of the development of morality. Examples of earlier religious pedagogical research are R.M.Loomba (1942) and E.Harms (1944) who both divide the development of children's religious thinking into three stages. Ronald Goldman's (1964) study mentioned earlier starts from and uses Piaget's theory and method, and he orders children's and young people's religious thinking into stages corresponding to Piaget's. Goldman in his time and owing to his results and criticism of the practice of religious education exercised great influence over the discussion, even in the Nordic countries (Goldman 1965; Bugge 1970).

Examples of religious-educational researchers in the Nordic countries inspired by developmental psychology are Knud Munksgaard (1980; 1984) in Denmark and Kalevi Tamminen (1991) in Finland. In the 1970s and 1980s Tamminen (1991) investigated the religious development of Finnish children and young people (7-20 years). This research exhibits an understanding of the differing dimensions of religiosity, i.e. religious experience, religious faith, religious thinking and religious consequences and practice. Finnish research in religious education has, by the way, over the years been more influenced by developmental psychology than research in the other Nordic countries has. Munksgaard's (1980) project concerned religious perceptions among children aged 9-11 years. He interviewed 98 pupils in three schools on, among other things, their faith in God, their religious activity, religious experience and attitude to instruction in Christendom. He followed-up his investigation and selected 27 of the 98 pupils to be interviewed when they were 12-15 years old. He wished to pinpoint how religiosity is part of individual development and what happens regarding the development of religiosity during the transition to youth. He also wished to investigate young people's ideas on school religious education and Church confirmation classes. An example of new research projects with developmental psychology as their starting point is Lars Gustavsson's study in Sweden from 2000 in which he elucidates moral development among young people aged 10 and 15 years. He uses, among other things, Piaget's and Kohlberg's developmental stages. His intention was "to describe and measure parts of young people's moral/social development" (Gustavsson 2000, p. 19). Since my interest

is not the developmental-psychological perspective but the content of the young people's statements I make little use of these studies in my interpretation. However, they stand as examples of a definite current in religious educational research and how the focus has shifted from the development of children's and young people's thinking to the content of their thinking.

### *Focus on the content of thinking*

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholars started to query the developmental view by stressing similarities between children's and adults' religious thinking. In Swedish religious educational research, the focus shifted to the contents of children's thoughts instead of the forms. Sven G. Hartman (1986a, pp. 21-27; 151-154; 173-174) is one of those who queried the notion of development in general and formal stages. He led three research projects and studies during the 1970s on children's views of life and existential questions, i.e. the UMRe, BaLi and UBOL projects. The projects were based in the 1969 curriculum, which had the pupil at the centre, among other things fundamental existential questions. Hartman then followed up his studies in the Balil project during the late 1980s. The first three projects are presented by Hartman in his book *Barns tankar on livet* (Children's Thoughts about Life) (1986a; see also Hartman 1986b and Hartman, Pettersson and Westling 1973). The purpose of the UMRe project was "to investigate how the school aim of objective teaching in the subject of religious education could be realised in a pedagogically suitable manner" (Hartman 1986a p. 29). The focus was on analysing premises of religious education, among other things by investigating problems of maturation in connection with teaching at the middle level of the compulsory school. In the subsequent BaLi project, attention was turned to younger children. The purpose was "to study pre-school and lower-level children's prospects of understanding questions regarding world views" (Hartman 1986a, p. 30). The third project, UBOL, had chiefly a theoretical orientation. The purpose was "to create an improved foundation for a study of how children's orientation to their surroundings and their world view develops" (Hartman 1986a; p. 30).

From 1987 to 1990 in the Balil project Hartman led follow-up studies on what children think about. One aim was "to provide deepened knowledge of how children in later childhood experience their life situation and how this is reflected in their questions about existence and in the development of their personal life philosophy" (Green and Hartman 1992, p. 13). Even though these research projects were aimed at pre-school children and children at the low and intermediate levels of the compulsory school, they are of interest for the research into young people's interpretation of life and values, both for the methods developed and because the focus of interest is the same, i.e. life philosophy, life interpretation, existential questions and values. The projects showed that the children formulate their own existential questions and are



interested in questions about the fundamental conditions of existence (Hartman 1986a; 1986b).

Of greatest interest for the present project is research into young people's interpretation of life and existential questions since this offers opportunities for comparison in interpretation and discussion of my material. As early as the 1960s there are examples of Swedish research into teenager's life philosophy and existential questions. In connection with the problems of religion as a school subject during the 1960s an investigation *Tonåringen och livsfrågorna* (The Teenager and Existential Questions, 1969) was carried out. Part of what was found most interesting in the survey result was the emerging experience of problems of man's fundamental personal and social conditions. Problems such as race, sexuality, love, suffering, value, meaning, freedom, responsibility, guilt, trust, loneliness and community, right and wrong, good and evil emerged as important, while questions relating to religion and non-religious perceptions of life had a significantly weaker outcome. The result brought forth what was termed existential-question education in religious education in Sweden at the end of the 1960s. It was considered there was a 'community of problems' (problemgemenskap) between teenagers and the great world life-philosophy traditions and that a primary task for teaching in schools should be to show how different views of faith and life attempt to answer man's existential questions. The actual 'community of problems' was seen as a given condition but the content, i.e. what questions were topical, could shift. The 1969 survey was followed-up in 1980. When this was published under the heading of *Tonåringen och livet* (The Teenager and Life, 1980) it turned out that the result of the previous survey had stood the test of time (Selander 1993, pp. 55-65). Fifteen years later a similar study of upper-secondary-school youths' existential questions in relation to school religious education was published (Sjödin 1995). The picture that emerges there has much in common with earlier studies.

Several Swedish research projects concerning existential questions among young people relate to the interest in teaching and learning in religious education. Bo Dahlin (1989) studied the conditions of religious education when he interviewed around 40 pupils in class nine, and their teachers. The overall purpose of his dissertation was to make "an existential-phenomenological and deep-psychological contribution to religious didactics" (Dahlin 1989, p. 12). He wished to survey perceptions of religion, the soul and the meaning of life. His results in the empirical part of the investigation show that religion is viewed as a matter of holding certain statements about a supernatural power to be true, that it exists, has created the world and can perform miracles. But since this does not tie up with today's scientific picture of the world, difficulties arise as to how to relate to the tradition perceived as conveying such assertions. Religion and science therefore became, for young people, either mutually-exclusive phenomena or mutually-supplementing phenomena. The results also showed that the large majority of young people viewed religion

as a way of life related by belief: they associate faith in a higher being with expectations of a certain way of living in both an ethical and a ritual sense. Religion as faith that brings security was also a large category in Dahlin's result. One can through prayer, attendance at religious services and so on experience closeness to the Godhead, get help and thus feel secure in one's existence. Concerning the question on the meaning of life, for many of the young people this was a matter of enjoying life socially (work, family, good health, 'having fun') of being able to realise their goals, dreams or ideals and of being able to do what they really and truly want (Dahlin 1989, pp. 66-92; 111-140).

Dahlin describes his contribution to religious education on the basis of his results and the 'crisis of identity' which he considered that religious education was undergoing. As its point of departure it has human experience and existence. The horizontal periphery of religious instruction should be in the border area between 'the known' and 'the unknown'. Pupils' attention should be directed towards what lies on the borders and they should be encouraged to find answers to such questions themselves. Hence this is a matter of existential questions, and Dahlin considers his interview material shows that such questions can be taken seriously by many pupils. They can also give sophisticated answers to such questions, which besides have parallels in traditional religious thought. He also claims that in order to be able to detect such parallels and be able to use them in teaching, great subject knowledge is required of the teacher (Dahlin 1989, pp. 319-320).

Keijo Eriksson (1999) describes in his dissertation *På spaning efter livets mening* (In Search of the Meaning of Life) a study that he made of two classes, also class nine, to which he taught religion and in which he had fifty pupils write texts so as to map the core values in their lives. The purpose of his study was to map the conceptions that 15-16 year-olds have of central existential questions, to survey how these might be placed in the context of a youth culture under development and to develop teaching designed so that young people would be stimulated to reflect on existential questions (Eriksson 1999, p. 57). Among the results of Eriksson's study are that the young people pondered much on existential questions and what is most important in life. They expressed love for the family and the importance of the family, fundamental trust in education, tendency to value-rational work morality, a developed reflective way of thought about existential questions, a pronounced value basis and faith in the future with special reference to temporally-related phenomena. It was also important for them that value judgements be transformed into practical action. Possessing moral competence is important for young people and values such as equality, solidarity and the equal value of everybody were stressed strongly, the young people showing great commitment to social questions, but most on the plane of action. In his didactic conclusion Eriksson stresses the importance of teachers stimulating their pupils. He considers that their maturity level, experience and thoughts

should be in the forefront, forming a basis for the teaching (Eriksson 1999, pp. 169-190).

Two Swedish projects of 2003 are also relevant to my work. The first is Roland Hallgren's (2003) study based on questionnaire surveys run between 1992 and 2003 with a total of 2,763 schoolchildren. The studies concern issues of man and attitudes to life, friends, feelings, belief in God, fear, justice, environmental questions and the future. Although the studies do not deal with young people, Hallgren's (2003, p. 85) remark that environmental factors affect the answers far more than he first thought is of interest to me. He also notes that children's picture of God is affected by their society and culture. In addition the study shows that relationships are of greater importance for girls than for boys, that being alone is a distress and that children are well aware of their key roles in adults' lives. Children, often girls, feel that a responsibility has been heaped upon them but there are nevertheless many children who believe that adults wish to create a secure future for them (Hallgren 2003, pp. 103-104; 126-130).

The other study from 2003, Kerstin von Brömssen's dissertation on children's talk of religion in the multicultural and postcolonial space, is also of interest to me since it shows how cultural and ethnic background affects and creates differences between pupils with differing backgrounds. Her purpose was to "investigate pupils' discursive constructions of their own and others' religion" (Brömssen 2003, p. 2). The study is based on interviews with 40 class-eight pupils in a multiethnic suburban environment in Göteborg. It shows that pupils articulate a reflexive knowledge of cultural and religious diversity, but that advanced translation is needed to bridge differences and constructions of difference. Religion emerges as a clear category differentiating between us and the Other, particularly in statements by pupils with Swedish ethnic backgrounds. Pupils with other backgrounds spoke of Swedish pupils as belonging to Christianity. Their utterances imply the view that being without religion is almost incomprehensible. There was also a difference between pupils with Swedish ethnic backgrounds and those with non-Swedish concerning religion and identity. For almost all pupils with non-Swedish backgrounds religion as a creator of identity is obvious, while for pupils with Swedish backgrounds the opposite is the case. Their positioning and what they say is marked by being secular and materialistic and they have a critical view of religious life interpretation (Brömssen 2003, pp. 299-349).

Lastly I include two new Swedish studies of young people, one conducted in a school context and the other with Swedish Church confirmation classes as the background. The first is Christina Osbeck's dissertation of 2006 *Kränkningens livsförståelse. A religionsdidaktisk studie av livsförståelselärande i skolan*. (The Hard Lesson of Life: A Study of /Re/construction of Life in School from a Religious Educational Perspective). The overriding aim was to examine the understanding of life that young people /re/construct, and in this sense learn, in the discursive practices

of school, and to describe how such a /re/construction takes place.” (Osbeck 2006, p. 80). As appears from the purpose the concept of understanding of life central to the study. It is intended to be “a lived understanding of how life functions, what values apply and what constitutes meaning”. (Osbeck 2006, p. 68). Osbeck identified that the concept is related to others that refer to corresponding or adjacent phenomena, including the concepts I consider central for my own study, i.e. life philosophy and life interpretation.

Her empirical material was gathered in ten group interviews with 14-year-olds in 2002 (Osbeck 2006 p. 17). The results show the central value of relationships, i.e. what significance teacher- and classmate-relationships have for the life understanding developed. Understanding of life is /re/constructed and learned collectively; it is in the fellowship, in relation to one another, that young people interpret and negotiate how life works and what gives value and meaning. Osbeck also points out the importance of the institutional framework for the life understanding learned. Osbeck (pp. 202-267) identifies three life-understanding discourses that flow in parallel from the interview material. The first, “Life as adaptation to individual competition” is hegemonic. Both teacher-pupil relationships and pupil-pupil relationships take place in schools as discursive practices that are conditioned and protect both individual performance and competition. The notion dominated among the interviewees that life is about adapting to optimise individual competition. In this way the individual can thus avoid negative, possibly offensive, reports. But at the same time in schools there is a consequence-ethical understanding that may contribute to legitimising this life understanding. The intention of negative reports is a good one, the individual can learn something. The other discourse “Life as adaptation to collective competition” deals with the relationship of subgroups to the hegemonic life-understanding discourse. It is an alternative to the hegemonic. The group jointly develops an alternative understanding of life that may reveal that “what’s wrong” need not be in the individual but can be the prevailing values and norms that need questioning. The third life-understanding discourse “Life as responsibility for human unity and universal fellowship” also questions the hegemonic life-understanding discourse. Instead, human unity and universal fellowship appear as goals in their own right. Since the three discourses exist in parallel, young people move among them and hence switch life-understandings. But the material also reveals the importance of the prevailing manners of speech for the maintenance of hegemonic discourses and how hard it is for the individual to escape their power. Osbeck notes that the institutional frameworks of school with their qualifying and differentiating tasks risk adding conditions to relationships so that rule-of-thumb, instrumental and performance-orientated relationships take shape. She considers that the results of her group interviews reinforce disquiet over this. She also feels that school religious teaching risks reinforcing such an understanding of life (Osbeck 2006 p. 372).

The most recent study I include here is Elisabeth Porath Sjöö's dissertation of 2008: *Konfirmandernas bildningsresa. Ungdomars berättelser om sitt deltagande i konfirmandundervisningen* (The Confirmation as a journey of Bildung. Young people's narratives about their participation in Confirmation classes). The aim was "using a Bildung perspective, to interpret young people's narratives about their participation in confirmation courses, in order to contribute to an understanding of meanings of the confirmation period" (Porath Sjöö, 2008, p. 12). She takes her definition of Bildung from Sven-Eric Liedman (2002), for whom it is a creative, free and unending process arising from every individual's unique life experience. Porath Sjöö claims that it is suitable to interpret the contents of the period of confirmation using the Bildung concept and links this to the metaphor of an educational journey (Porath Sjöö, 2008, pp. 11, 45-48).

To collect empirical material Porath Sjöö contacted six confirmation classes and asked if anyone was prepared to be interviewed. Fifteen young people were interviewed 1-3 months after their confirmation, in the summer and autumn of 2005 (Porath Sjöö 2008, pp. 60-70). In her summary of the results Porath Sjöö brings out particularly three important aspects. First, one of the most important reasons why the period was a positive experience for the young people was that it was their own choice. At the same time the interviews showed that was hard for them to make a choice without knowing what the period would involve: most thought the period would be different from what they actually experienced. Secondly, the young people brought out the significance of being met with respect. This concerned both how they were received by their leaders and the relationships among the candidates for confirmation. Thirdly, the young people reported that they found the confirmation period stimulating since it enabled them to acquire knowledge through their own exploration. They were challenged to take up standpoints and think for themselves. Experiencing with their own senses was also appreciated (Porath Sjöö 2008, p. 156).

Porath Sjöö sees the Church of Sweden as faced with challenges in its continued confirmation work and draws attention to several points emerging from her dissertation work and from which the Church could get help. Here she mentions the importance of giving information on what the confirmation period involves, how Church representatives should accompany the young people in spirit on their educational journey; that they should ensure that the period is not only limited but ensure that some continuity is created; they should relate to global citizenship and discuss other relationships, cultures or environmental questions; and they should offer stimulating and developing surroundings. Porath Sjöö stresses that during the period of youth more arenas for discussion than school, friends and the family are needed; and that young people need to meet other adults and discuss and reflect together (Porath Sjöö, pp. 158-162). Some of Porath Sjöö's observations may also apply

in the context of school religious education and are therefore relevant to my own study.

Turning to Norway there are examples of research focusing young people's interpretation of life and religiosity. Two projects are particularly interesting in my context. The first is Paul Otto Brunstad's (1998) study of religiosity and changes in religious perceptions and practice in an urban youth environment. His informants were in their late 'teens and hence somewhat older than "mine". He attempts to understand young people engaged in the transition from traditional religious attitudes and practice to alternative attitudes and practice. Brunstad studied young people's expectations of the future and includes their life interpretation, faith and thoughts about life. He understands life interpretation as a process in which the individual attempts to establish a meaning in the encounter with knowledge and experience (Brunstad 1998, p. 9). In reporting his results he uses the terms 'global pessimism' and 'global optimism'. Even though the young people have a large degree of certainty regarding global challenges the material betrays traces of powerlessness in the encounter with matters about which one can do nothing (Brunstad, 1998, p. 263). Religious perceptions among young people are largely abstract speculations, independent of any binding religious community. The young people have loose contact with traditions and they do not wish to be bound; their faith is not based on affiliation to any given community of faith or religion, and most of them do not find what the Church has to offer credible. The need for security is prominent among the majority of young people and Brunstad thinks it may be connected with the fact that most youths are going through an insecure search phase in which the need of security is great. In this situation one seeks traditional values but without any collective ideological or religious roots. Brunstad is critical of the present-day religious instruction in churches and schools, considering that the teaching is too one-sided. He challenges teachers to relate to the whole person, with the play of all the senses (Brunstad 1998, pp. 263-267). It is relevant to compare parts of Brunstad's results with the life interpretation of Icelandic teenagers, and his discussion on teaching in schools is also interesting in connection with my own work.

The second Norwegian project is that of Erling Birkedal (2001). He investigated belief in God and experience of religious practice in 13-15-year-olds and the connection between the environment and religious development. His purpose was to illustrate the connection between young people's religiosity and their experience of Church religion, seeking to clarify topical challenges for Church education. The issues he investigates are the interaction between young people's faith in God and their experience of Church religion from home and the local surroundings, and what educational challenges this interaction brings to the fore for Church teaching (Birkedal 2001, pp. 46-47). Birkedal's summary of his interpretation is intended as an understanding of the material within the framework of Peter L. Berger's and Tho-

mas Luckmann's (1992) theory of knowledge. This means that he perceives the individual on the one hand as an explorer affecting the world of his life. On the other hand the individual is affected by the socialising process where he lives. How far, and how, vary.

Birkedal's result is that his material confirms an interaction between external reality and a person's reason, a dynamic process happening as a continual movement between personal circumstances and the meeting with external reality. He refers to the three aspects of the interaction between faith in God and institutionalised religion, i.e. the cognitive, emotional and social aspects, pointing out that they correspond to Berger's and Luckman's theory of what is essential for understanding the maintenance or alteration of a religious perception of reality: in reflection, emotion and relationships. Using Birkedal's material, these aspects can also be characterised as an experience of meaning, security and fellowship. Young people need to perceive meaning in a belief in God and mental security. Social contact with and confirmation from significant others is also significant. Which of the three aspects is most significant at age 13-15 varies from person to person. But he finds in his material a concordance between the aspect of faith which is important for the individual and the type of experience that contributes to the maintenance of faith. Birkedal sees the difference between the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of this interaction as a help in understanding the connection between the grounding of young people's faith in God from childhood and experience of Church religion when aged 13-15.

According to Birkedal's material, maintaining belief in God depends on how far new experience in youth is capable of legitimising faith or rendering it relevant for a person. The basic requirement for it being experienced as relevant is not the same for everybody. Young people whose faith is cognitively grounded sometimes need intellectual discussion to stimulate this side of their belief. Those with an emotional grounding seek new experience to confirm the feeling of security in their faith. Those who have got their faith through social fellowship have, in turn, a need for fellowship of this type to maintain their faith. Birkedal's conclusion is that those with the greatest prospects of maintaining their faith are the young people who have their faith in God rooted in all three aspects and who also gain a variation in experience in the meeting with church religion that stimulates and confirms all three (Birkedal 2001, pp. 191-218). Birkedal later followed-up his study by contacting his informants again in 2006, ten years after the previous contact. The result appeared in his book "*Kanske jeg tror på en gud, men ...*" (Maybe I believe in a God, but...) (Birkedal 2008). Even though Birkedal's study deals with faith in God and Church religion, parts of his result are of interest in my context since it is linked to young people's interpretation of life and their experience of meaning and security.

## Summary

As already seen, the developmental-psychology view of children's development is not the concern of my study: I focus on some central elements of young people's life interpretation and values. For this reason, studies linking the contents of children's and young people's life interpretation with the connection to the community that surrounds them are the ones that form the context of my study and are the most relevant to the interpretation of my own material. Studies in Sweden during the 1970s and 1980s created the basis and developed methods and conceptual apparatuses in connection with studies of children's orientation in their surroundings, life philosophy and existential questions. They are therefore suitable for studies of young people's life interpretation and existential questions and therefore relevant to my study. All the examples I have taken from Swedish and Norwegian research into young people's life interpretation and existential questions; young people and religion and religiosity; and young people and religious education or confirmation classes are, in my view, relevant to the interpretation of my material. Many demonstrate in different ways the importance of the interplay between young people's thoughts and opinions and various issues in their surroundings, i.e. their context, experience and interactions with others (Birkedal 2001; Hallgren 2003; Brömssen 2003; Osbeck 2006). It also emerges from the results of many of the studies that school religious education or Church confirmation classes and work should be based more on the young people themselves, their questions, experience, conceptions and emotions (Dahlin 1989; Brunstad 1998; Eriksson 1999; Birkedal 2001; Porath Sjöo 2008). In addition, many of these studies contain interesting results that can be compared with those of my study to deepen the interpretation, for example of existential issues and the meaning of life (*Tonåringen och livsfrågorna* 1969 (The Teenager and Existential Questions) 1969); (*Tonåringen och livet* (The Teenager and Life) 1980); Dahlin 1989; Brunstad 1998; Eriksson 1999; Birkedal 2001). Since there is little Icelandic research into children's and young people's faith and world views, existential questions and values, it is important to place the study in its context and be able to compare it with similar research in neighbouring countries. I also view the result of my previous research project (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b; 2001) as important background material for the present work, since it pictures how children and young people in Iceland interpret their lives, with special reference to religion and religious practice.



# Central concepts

The delimitation and definition of the central concepts in the dissertation constitute an important step in the choice of theoretical tools for interpreting the empirical material. The concept of life interpretation is central since the chief purpose of the study was to investigate Icelandic teenagers' interpretation of life. In religious education and the study of world views, concepts such as life philosophy (livsåskådning), life interpretation (livstolkning) and existential questions (livsfrågor) have been discussed and all stand in mutual relationships. How to define and use these concepts as scientific terms is not obvious, and there has been lively discussion of their definitions in the Nordic context. In addition, some of these concepts have arisen in connection with the discussion of religious education in schools. In the following pages I attempt to extract important points from the discussion so as to arrive at ways of defining and using the concepts in research into young people's life interpretation and values. In the present context this involves both testing the relevance of the life-philosophy concept on the basis of other researchers' definitions and, not least, the life interpretation concept and its relevance in relation to my work.

## The life-philosophy concept

The life-philosophy concept is well known and very much discussed in Swedish life philosophy research during the past five decades. In the beginning this concept met the need for one with an overarching meaning which could accommodate both religious and non-religious life philosophies. Studies in the area and in religious philosophy contain a definition of the concept, i.e. how it can be understood as a scientific one.

### *The Jeffnerian tradition*

One of those who launched the concept was Ingmar Hedenius, professor of philosophy at Uppsala University. Around the middle of the twentieth century he criticised the Church, the Christian faith and academic theology and set science against religion. He used the philosophy of linguistic analysis to prove the unreasonableness of religious doctrine on the existence of God and the meaning of faith. He was critical of the great traditions of western culture

which he viewed as contradictory and confusing. With the concept of life philosophy, Hedenius wished as an alternative to the Christian view of life to foster a critical discussion of what a life philosophy is presented as being, and what it should be. According to Holte (1984) he did not produce any complete proposal for a definition but gives certain minimum rules for the use of the concept. Hedenius considered that what we call life philosophy should at least 1) contain a number of ‘dogmas of an extremely general nature about life and man or history or the universe’, which are held as true; and 2) ‘be of importance in a moral respect – be a background to the conviction regarding what in the most general terms is just and unjust’ (Hedenius 1951, quoted in Holte 1984, p. 24).

When he speaks of dogmas of an extremely general nature this means that the life philosophy concerns a type of un-testable assumption and assertion a person makes regarding existence. This is a matter of views of existence, what it is and what it means. Mikael Lindfelt (2003, pp. 47-48) at the Theological Department in Åbo Academy in Finland notes in his book *Att förstå livsåskådningar – en metateoretisk analys av teologisk livsåskådningsforskning med anknytning till Anders Jeffner’s ansatser* (Understanding life philosophy – a meta-theoretical analysis of theological life philosophy research with special reference to Anders Jeffner’s contributions) that the cognitive perspective permeates Hedenius’ draft for a definition. Life philosophy functions to express a person’s overall view of what he or she believes is true and real in existence. According to Lindfelt it appears that Hedenius is differentiating between a personal life philosophy and a more traditional collective life philosophy or life-philosophy tradition. Lindfelt summarises Hedenius’ position into recurrent and characteristic features:

...the understanding of life philosophy as such is markedly substantial en-  
thused with theoretical knowledge, truth, abstraction, logical coherence and  
requirements of conscious, individual-oriented critical reflection. The more  
existential aspects may be included but as a subordinate tone in his argument,  
but they are, as it were, bracketed. They get no real space of their own in his  
fundamental cognitive perspective (Linfelt 2003, p. 53).

It is remarkable that it does not occur to Hedenius explicitly in his definition that a life philosophy should have a moral aspect. He states instead that a life philosophy should have significance in a moral respect and represent a background to a person’s moral conviction. Anders Jeffner, who has been a central figure in life-philosophy discussion in Sweden, and who in his draft for a definition of life philosophy carries Hedenius’ definition further, includes on the other hand the moral aspect in the actual understanding of life philosophy. The background to Jeffner’s definition is the discussion of Hedenius’ criticism and the counter-reaction developed since the 1960s involving a new theological education. This had its headquarters at the Theological Department at Uppsala where the subject area Dogmatics was reformulated to

Studies in Dogma and Life Philosophy. In 1976 Jeffner became professor in the re-formulated subject area at Uppsala. His first draft definition from 1968 contained both cognitive and moral elements but his 1973 draft has a further component which he calls basic attitude:

By a person's life philosophy is meant that person's central value system and basic attitude, and the part of what the person considers he or she knows about themselves and the surrounding world which affects this central value system or basic attitude in a way that they are prepared to accept (Jeffner 1973).

This definition contains three components which Hartman and Petterson (1980, p. 48) describe as follows: a) a central system of values or the person's norms and values; b) a basic attitude to life explained as a relatively stable tendency to experience existence in a certain way; and c) the cognitive or theoretical elements involving what a person considers that they know about themselves and their surroundings and that the person thinks are significant for the value system and the basic attitude.

Comparison of Hedenius' and Jeffner's draft definitions shows that both contain a theoretical or a cognitive item as part of life philosophy, which refers to convictions about the nature of life and existence. Values are not counted under this item. Hedenius says the dogmas included in life philosophy should represent the background to our moral values. Morals are affected by theoretical convictions but not counted as a part of life philosophy. Here Jeffner follows a different path. He starts his definition with the items he calls central value systems. A value system embraces the moral convictions but also a number of other values, aesthetic and political. Such a value system is a whole which a person experiences as central and important for their self-understanding and identity. Jeffner speaks here of "the linkage with the ego experience" (Lindfelt 2003, p. 57).

The item in Jeffner's definition that lacks correspondence in Hedenius' draft is what Jeffner calls basic attitude to existence. Two people in the same situation may experience their own lives and existence in very different manners. This experience of life, which is partly independent of factual external circumstances, can be very difficult to describe. Holte (1984, pp. 24-26) notes that, for Jeffner, this appears to be connected with what one often puts into the life-philosophy concept. A person's experience thus depends partly on their basic attitude to existence. To warrant the designation 'basic attitude to existence', according to Jeffner, a person's experience of life must be fairly stable so that it remains the same in the same situations for a fairly long time. Lindfelt (2003, p. 57) understands this component of Jeffner's draft as a kind of overall attitude which does not express what values a person has or considers to be true; but rather what relation that person has to

their values and theoretical convictions. The basic attitude says something about how a person expresses their values and theoretical convictions.

How the three different elements in Jeffner's draft definition relate to one another has been discussed. Bråkenhielm (2001, p. 11; 2003, pp. 28-29) speaks of an interplay between theories of mankind and the world, values and norms of a fundamental nature and a fundamental attitude, i.e. how we experience our situation as people in the world. Jeffner in his definition starts from the point that the cognitive element or the theoretical convictions have significance for, and affect, the person's value system and basic attitude. The cognitive basic element thus represents the centre of life philosophy. This becomes even clearer in Jeffner's further development of his definition of the concept life philosophy. In his latest version he has changed the order of the three components in the definition:

A life philosophy is the theoretical and valuing assumptions that represent, or have crucial significance for, an overall picture of man and the world and that form a central value system, expressing a basic attitude (Jeffner 1982, p. 13, quoted in Aadnanes 1999, p. 198).

Here the cognitive component comes first and appears as the fundamental one in a life philosophy. Lindfelt (2003, p. 62) points out that the cognitive aspect of life philosophy in this definition has become so central that it really represents the central basis for the other two. Here one may wonder what this means in view of how relevant the definition is for empirical research. Is the focus too much on the cognitive? I do not go more deeply into how one can interpret or understand the dynamic connection between the three components of Jeffner's definition in different ways, but an overview is given in Lindfelt (2003, pp. 61-64).

In the Swedish context there are some early re-formulations of Jeffner's understanding of life philosophy, of which Lindfelt (2003) gives an account in his book (see chapter 3). But it is chiefly Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, Jeffner's successor to the Uppsala chair, who has upheld the Jeffnerian tradition. He by and large adopts Jeffner's definition of life philosophy, and his reflections are further developments of Jeffner's fundamental reasoning (see e.g. Bråkenhielm 2001, pp. 9-16). As already mentioned, Bråkenhielm states that life philosophy exhibit an interplay between the three components, but his description starts sometimes from the cognitive, theoretical element in life philosophy; while sometimes the ethical element or fundamental attitude is presented, as a kind of experiential aspect, as the first element. When Lindfelt (2003, pp. 120-146) presents Bråkenhielm's reflections, he notes that the life-philosophy definition Bråkenhielm adopts should, for him, be usable in empirical studies so that it (in Bråkenhielm's (2001, p. 10) own words) "delimits a phenomenon that can be researched using some reliable scientific method". Lindfelt summarises this by saying that "through the link

to Jeffner's tripartite life philosophy definition and his own further adjustment, life philosophy takes on a clear orientation towards establishing the content of a life philosophy as cognitive statements about existence, statements whose truth value it is a central task to judge" (Lindfelt 2003, p. 144). He continues

a life philosophy, according to Bråkenhielm appears as the fundamental conceptions or holdings-for-true linked first to fundamental values and norms that a person recognises as central for themselves, secondly are embedded in a fundamental life attitude and thirdly (possibly) are formulated following an overwhelming, emotionally-loaded fundamental experience of life; but fourthly precede the dimension of social action that may possibly also be expressed in common ritual behaviour (Lindfelt 2003, p. 144).

Lindfelt positions Bråkenhielm's understanding of life philosophy as cognitive-substantial at the same time as it has a functional dimension. The function of life philosophy is to represent a theoretical background motivating man's action and lifestyle. One can therefore ask whether there is not still too much emphasis on the cognitive aspect of the definition of life philosophy and whether the functional dimension needs further stress. But first I compare the definition of the concept of life philosophy with how religion has been defined to see whether this can contribute anything to our understanding of the life-philosophy concept.

### *Life philosophy and religion*

Jeffner, Bråkenhielm and other life-philosophy researchers in Sweden postulate a division into three in their definition of the life-philosophy concept. In a scientific connection it appears fairly common to speak of some form of tripartite division involving a cognitive element, an emotional element, and an action element. Hartman & Petterson (1980, p. 50) note that one can find in behavioural science a related division in the most common theories of attitudes and the formation thereof. When Ringgren and Ström (1974, pp. 7-8) discuss how to define the concept of religion, they draw attention to the definition by the American religious psychologist J.B.Pratt and on this basis state that there are three essential elements in religion: an intellectual one concerned with conviction, an emotional one concerned with the religious experience and a behavioural one concerned with action both cultic and moral. To this individual aspect of religion with its three elements they add the social aspect: religion creates forms of community.

While the description of the three elements of religion does not fully correspond to the description of those in Jeffner's definition of life philosophy, there are certain similarities. As already mentioned, the cognitive/theoretical element is fundamental to Hedenius' and Jeffner's definitions. It has to do with theoretical conviction and may be compared with the intellectual ele-

ment in the definition of religion. Jeffner's second element, fundamental attitude to existence, is connected with experience and attitude, what it feels like to be alive, a person's emotional 'basic attitude'. It has points of contact with the emotional element of religion. But Jeffner's description of basic attitude also touches on how a person expresses their values. This draws attention to the behavioural element. Jeffner's idea of a central value system may have points of contact with both the intellectual element and the emotional; but how those are expressed in action is connected with the behavioural element. I would point out an important difference concerning the behavioural element. In the definition of life philosophy, values and moral action are in focus, but in the definition of religion, cult action or participation in the rites of religion is included in the behavioural element. Holte (1984, p. 35) notes that the ritual social behaviour included in the definition of religion introduces elements not included in the definition of life philosophy. He raises the question of whether one can simply perceive religion as a species under life philosophy as 'genus proximum'. For him, religion cannot be viewed simply as a species under life philosophy. His argument is that part of religion is a way of behaving in relation to the higher power one confesses, through for example different forms of rite and cult. Here belong certain behaviour, certain experience and certain forms of social community, and in this way religion can also be said to be a way of being. Holte therefore attempts to link a general definition of religion with the definition of life philosophy. Religion is thus defined as

- (a) a life philosophy whose three components are marked by faith and trust in one – or more – higher power(s), and (b) ritual and moral behaviour grounded in social community and linked to this (Holte, op.cit., p. 37).

One may ask if one cannot do the opposite, saying that rites should be included in the definition of life philosophy. Rites exist not only in a religious connection and a life philosophy is often manifested through a rite. Jeffner himself raised this issue in a lecture at the Common Values symposium at the Stockholm Institute of Education in May 2003, when he pointed out the significance of ritual action (*Gemsamma värden (?)*, Stockholm 8-9 mai).

In connection with the comparison with the definition of religion and the issue of whether the rite should be included in the definition of life philosophy, it is interesting to see Bråkenhielm's presentation of 1995 where he starts from six elements in a life philosophy (Bråkenhielm & Hansson 1995), which have their correspondence in a similar division of the definition of religion into 6-8 dimensions in religious studies (see e.g. Smart 1998, pp. 10-22; Molloy 2004, pp. 5-7, see also Lindfelt 2003, p. 123)). Over and above the components included in Jeffner's tripartite division, Bråkenhielm has added a further three: first what he calls basic experience, secondly a mytho-

logical component and thirdly a ritual one (Bråkenhielm & Hansson 1995, pp. 79-80).

Bråkenhielm's six-component division and his description thereof is chiefly interesting when one considers a comparison of definitions of life philosophy and religion. The basic-experience component has a link to religious or mystical experience, and myths and rites are an important component of religion. Lindfelt (2003, p. 123) notes that Bråkenhielm views these six components as a theoretical construction using which researchers can analyse individual people's life philosophies. In the same way the dimensions in the definition of religion have been used for studying religions. The difference between religion and life philosophy here is that actual life philosophies are not in the first instance thought-out theoretical systems in the same sense as religion, but can be more integrated or less, or fragmentary.

This is the only occasion on which Bråkenhielm presents a differentiation of his understanding of life philosophy into these six components. Should one ask why, there may be an explanation in his book *Människan i världen* (Man in the world), 1992. It is possible that he wished to further develop his thoughts there but then returned to the Jeffnerian tripartite division. In this book Bråkenhielm compares world picture, life philosophy and religion. He asserts that a world picture can comprise both ethical and theoretical elements but lacks what Jeffner in his definition calls basic attitude, i.e. the emotional attitude which is interwoven with our fundamental values and overall interpretation of reality. Bråkenhielm also asserts that, compared with religion, the concept of world picture may be used for convictions that do not count on the existence of any God or any transcendent reality. In addition, myths and rites are more prominent in a religion than in a world picture and religion has clearer social functions. The same may be said of ideologies, in his view (Bråkenhielm 1992, pp. 18-19).

### ***A more functional reformulation***

Sven Hartman in his research into children's life philosophy and existential questions makes use of Jeffner's definition of life philosophy. He takes Jeffner's definition with its roots in the Uppsala theologians' need for a concept in systematic theology's discussion with philosophy, and adapts it to research on children and young people. I see Hartman's adaptation of the life-philosophy concept to research on children's life philosophy as significant since I investigate young people's life interpretation. Hartman (1986a, p. 160) notes that it is practical to differentiate between life philosophy in the sense of a given religious or political doctrine and a personal life philosophy as found functioning in an individual. He is here on the same track as Hedenius when he distinguishes between a personal life philosophy and the more traditional, collectively borne life philosophy or life-philosophy tradition. Hartman considers that while the personal life philosophy may be affected

by one or more of the established life- philosophy traditions it chiefly says something about the individual's way of understanding existence and his attitude to it. In this sense, Hartman considers that everyone in some way or other has a personal life philosophy. What is characteristic of Jeffner's definition is the very weight placed on the individual perspective; and on the basis of this Hartman portrays three important sides of a person's life philosophy.

First is the theoretical side which comprises the person's conviction and orientation to their surroundings, what they believe and know and is of importance for their personal life philosophy. Here may be counted faith and knowledge in a number of areas, which all concern different aspects of existence. As an example of elements in most life-philosophy systems and also in a personal life philosophy, Hartman mentions view of mankind, view of society, perception of God, world picture, perception of reality and view of history. Conviction and orientation to the surroundings in all these areas vary strongly between different life-philosophy traditions and different people, but in general there is some kind of explicit or implicit perception in all these respects. There is also an interplay between these areas. View of man is affected, for example, by view of society and conversely, and one's perception of reality may depend on one's perception of God.

Secondly, some type of valuation system is included in all established life philosophies. Values depend largely on the perceptions included in conviction and orientation to one's surroundings, and are often grounded in what a person thinks he believes or knows. Values show what one considers good or evil, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly; and are continually expressed in how one views existence and how one lives.

Thirdly, Hartman's life philosophy involves actual practice, i.e. the person's actions and preparedness for action. Thus a personal life philosophy is not only a way of viewing life but also a way of living. Here Hartman's definition of personal life philosophy differs from Jeffner's. Jeffner brings out the individual's basic attitude to life as the emotional attitude interwoven with our fundamental values and overall interpretation of reality. Hartman on the other hand treats Jeffner's basic attitude as a psychological variable affecting the forming of a life philosophy without being part of it. Instead, Hartman stresses the person's preparedness for action as the third element in the life philosophy (Hartman 1986, p .21; 82).

A similar critique of Jeffner's definition may be found in the Swedish religious philosopher Mikael Stenmark, who considers that Jeffner tends to overemphasise the system-marked, theoretically-oriented character of a life philosophy. Instead he maintains that a life philosophy must first have a practical or life-regulatory function (Lindfeldt 2003, pp. 181-182). Stenmark writes in his criticism:



That is to say, a view of life must actually lead an individual or a community in a particular way, actually regulate the way the adherents of it live their lives. A view of life does not only guide the way we *think* but must also concretely guide what we can actually *do*. To be counted as an adherent to a view of life one's assent cannot be only an act of intellect but must be an act of will. Every view of life is practical in the sense of being one to be actually lived (Stenmark 1995, p. 241, cited in Lindfeldt 2003, p. 181).

Hartman's and Stenmark's emphasis constitutes an attempt to balance a substantial and a functional life-philosophy understanding. Their stress on the action-regulating aspects makes their definition of life philosophy more practical and useful as an analytical instrument in empirical life-philosophy research. There is also an important stress in both Hartman and Stenmark that a life philosophy may be understood as some type of answer to man's existential experience and questions. According to this, Hartman does not view personal life philosophy as anything fixed, a once-and-for-all intellectual construction, since it corresponds to the individual's existential questions. As a person's life conditions shift in different phases of life, that person is also faced with new existential questions; and the answers one then seeks add new content to one's life philosophy. Personal life philosophy thus becomes, on this view, a phenomenon in which man continually processes his experience and life conditions (Hartman 1986a, pp. 161-163). Stenmark stresses that a life philosophy should be understood as a type of articulated answer to, or expression of, our specific existential experience. The life philosophy is thus formed in an interplay between a human being's relevant conceptions and the existential experience he has or existential situations he encounters (Lindfeldt 2003, p. 183).

A further criticism of Jeffner's understanding of life philosophy, but one that also brings out the existential dimension, is given in the Norwegian life-philosophy researcher Per Magne Aadnanes' discussion of Jeffner's definition of the concept. Aadnanes discusses the concept in relation to the introduction of the KRL subject ('Christian knowledge with religious and view-of-life orientation') in Norway in 1997 and the consequences for schools of secularisation and pluralism (Aadnanes 1999, pp. 194-196). Aadnanes criticises Jeffner for placing the main stress on what he calls the inside of life philosophy. He writes of Jeffner's definition of 1973:

The first thing we notice is that the definition does not actually speak of view-of-life in general, as an independent spiritual product. It concerns a person's view of life. This suggests an individualistic and hence subjectivistic perspective (Aadnanes 1999, p. 197).

Aadnanes considers that limiting the concept of life philosophy to such an individual and subjective inside is too one-sided. He maintains that the col-

lective is as important as the individual and that life-philosophy traditions and trends are as important to scrutinise as the individual life philosophy:

Our point is thus that the phenomenon philosophy of life does not only have an individual and subjective expression but that it can also be spoken of at a super-individual level, in the form of traditions and trends; and that it lastly can also be referred to certain common-cultural mental framework conditions (Aadnanes 1999, p. 202-203).

On this basis Aadnanes considers it but a step to develop methodological arguments in a hermeneutic perspective. He considers that in the first round it is important to realise that scholarly work on life philosophy rests on different types of foundation. First, the phenomenon life philosophy refers to certain general human requirements of life which may, for example, manifest themselves in what we call 'eternal questions' or 'existential questions'. Here we thus see a stress on the existential dimension of life philosophy similar to both Hartman's and Stenmark's, that is, that a life philosophy may be understood as some kind of answer to man's existential experience and existential questions. Secondly Aadnanes notes that from the historical perspective we see that shifting sociocultural conditions have been decisive for how humans experience and process these life needs. The individual is thus a child of his time in terms of what he knows and believes and thus in the forming of his life philosophy. Thirdly, historical change can possibly also change the very forms for expressing the phenomenon life philosophy. Aadnanes' point is thus that we must develop two complementary conceptions, namely belief that there is a general-human basis for the formation of life philosophy and a recognition that variable historical circumstances affect both the content and the way of expressing life philosophy (Aadnanes 1999, p. 203).

Aadnanes sums up his terminological framework in three points. First one or other conceptual content will be central to all that is termed life philosophy. For him, the greatest interest is ideas that can be arranged into the categories world understanding, view of mankind and perception of values/life ideals. Secondly he considers that life philosophy can be studied at two levels, namely in the individual as subjective life philosophy in the form of personal precepts and attitudes, and at a collective level in the form of certain delimited currents of ideas. He calls what is historically established life-philosophy traditions, but what is topical and more unfinished and shifting he speaks of as life-philosophy trends. Thirdly, Aadnanes also counts certain fundamental patterns of thought and experience of a common cultural character, i.e. life-philosophy frameworks that constitute the conditions both for a subjective formation of life philosophy and the reception of traditions and development of trends. For Aadnanes, these three points are the primary frameworks for understanding upon which he seeks to build his scrutiny of

the life-philosophy phenomenon. His main point is that one cannot ask fruitful questions or place the information obtained through e.g. interviews, into sufficiently clarifying contexts without the help of a historical-hermeneutic approach (Aadnanes 1999, pp. 204-205).

The Finnish life-philosophy researcher Tage Kurtén has also criticised Jeffner. According to Bråkenhielm (2001, p. 19) Kurtén's criticism is that one should not understand a life philosophy as an overall theoretical picture of truth; instead one should stress understanding its importance for human behaviour. Lindfeldt (2003, p. 228) points out that Kurtén's criticism of Jeffner is based on the linguistic-philosophical tradition inspired by the later Wittgenstein. Lindfeldt (2003, pp. 240-275) surveys how Kurtén's understanding of a life philosophy as a whole was formed. According to him, Kurtén in his definition stresses that a life philosophy is linguistic, i.e. it can be more or less articulated. This for him means partly that it is both communicative and based in a linguistic community; and partly that the linguistic is linked to our intellectual possibilities consciously to reflect on the conditions of human life. But the chief emphasis in Kurtén's definition is that a life philosophy is man's fundamental way of orienting himself in existence. A life philosophy 'therefore affects conceptions, attitudes, values and ways of acting linked with this fundamental orientation' (Kurtén 1995, p. 19). Thus a life philosophy is understood in a kind of internal connection with human action. In this connection, Kurtén makes as the central part of a life philosophy an inevitable basic trust in human life. He also speaks of the life-philosophy balancing act between independence and belonging. For Kurtén, then, it is crucial to articulate the relation between the subjective-individual aspects of life philosophy and its collective-traditional-historical aspects. The individual and his life philosophy are always grounded in something over and above himself, in a context where he lives and works – also in terms of the possibility to understand his own, highly personal experience of different kinds. Lindfeldt points out that Kurtén's argument involves the question of what underlying conceptual prospects there are of articulating the sense in which a life philosophy can be individual and the sense in which it is grounded in definite collective, tradition-historical elements (Lindfeldt, 2003, pp. 240-247).

Summarising, the point of the criticism of the Jeffnerian definition of life philosophy is that it is too cognitive and overemphasises a life-philosophical, system-infused, theoretically oriented character. It needs more aspects that are functional and action-regulatory (cf. Lindfeldt, Hartman and Stenmark). Similar views are found in Kurtén's criticism, where he considers that a life philosophy should not be understood as a theoretical overall picture of reality but instead, emphasis should be on understanding its significance for human action. On the other hand Aadnanes considers that the item 'basic attitude' in Jeffner's definition makes the emotional and experiential element into the primary one in life philosophy, and this leads to the limitation of the

concept to the individual, subjective inside. Instead he emphasises the relationship between the individual's life philosophy and the traditional-historical aspect of a life philosophy. Kurtén similarly stresses the relation between the subjective-individual aspects of life philosophy and their collective traditional-historical aspects. In connection with my own work, this may be useful together with Aadnanes hermeneutical perspective and considering the interplay between the individual teenagers' statements, the trends in my whole material, the life-philosophical traditions that have formed Icelandic society and the currents of ideas marking youth culture. The personal life philosophy of which Hartman speaks is formed and processed partly in the interplay with the traditional, collective life philosophies or life-philosophy traditions. But there is also an interplay between personal life philosophy and the existential questions and experience the individual encounters in different phases of life.

## Existential questions and life philosophy

Bound up with the concept of life philosophy is that of the existential question. Aadnanes (1998, p. 80) states that we can consider it a fundamental anthropological phenomenon to ask oneself existential questions, and according to Stenmark a life philosophy should be understood as articulated answers to our existential experience and existential questions (Lindfeldt 2003, p. 183). Hartman (1986a, pp. 162-163) has also pointed out the relation between the individual's existential questions and life philosophy. When a person's conditions shift in different phases of life he is faced with new existential questions and the answers then sought supply new contents for the life philosophy.

In Sweden, what was called existential-question education started to be discussed in the late 1960s. The phrase 'existential question' does not exist in the 1962 curriculum for the compulsory school (Lgr62), but the curriculum does state that there are important issues in life to discuss. But that curriculum is remembered primarily for its much-debated demands for objectivity in the teaching of Christianity. In the 1969 curriculum (Lgr69) there was a transition from material-centred teaching to more pupil-centred. Orientation in existential questions played a large part and it is here that the concept existential question was introduced. In the 1980 curriculum (Lgr80), existential questions were stressed even more strongly (Hartman 2000b, pp. 216-217). The background was that Christian knowledge had not done so well, pupils were often not involved and many teachers did not dare to commit themselves for fear of infringing the principle of objective teaching. There were similar problems in other countries. The answer to the problem was to find out what those who were to work most with religious education, namely the pupils, thought about the matter. In this connection the two surveys men-

tioned above were carried out in Sweden. They were commissioned by the National School Board and were carried out with an interval of ten years among pupils in the ninth class. The results were published in the research reports, *Tonåringen och livsfrågor* (The Teenager and Existential Questions) (1969) and *Tonåringen och livet* (The Teenager and Life) (1980). Religious knowledge as a subject was the starting point but the purpose was to provide material for teaching the subject on the basis of problems topical for teenagers. It proved that teenagers were interested in issues and problems concerning man's basic conditions and that they found no answers in the religions or life philosophies. It was also shown that the young people sought to be allowed to discuss and process their own existential questions at school (Selander 1993, pp. 55-65). These surveys among children also showed that existential questions were important to them: they occur remarkably often in the survey material. Beliefs, doubt and rebellious thoughts thus exist not only among youth but also in the younger children's world of ideas, reflecting the dynamic that exists between existential questions and a personal life philosophy among people of all ages (Hartman 1986a, pp. 164-169; 2000c, pp. 55-65).

It was against this background that the discussion of existential questions and life philosophy took place in educational circles in Sweden. The crisis in the subject Christian knowledge led to a change of perspective. Life philosophy and existential questions came into focus instead of what theology had traditionally judged to be important contents of Christian knowledge.

Hartman and Petterson (1980, pp. 26-32) discuss the existential-question concept and how existential questions cropped up in their research into children's existential questions and life philosophy in the 1970s. They point out that it would scarcely be meaningful to attempt to demarcate exactly the area occupied by existential questions or to state more precisely what the great fundamental existential questions should be. Existence is not divided into school subjects and is, moreover, in perpetual change. For this reason one must accept that issues regarding existence would also overstep the boundaries one attempted to establish. Hartman's and Petterson's conclusion is therefore that the area existential questions can be given a broad definition.

Hartman and Petterson ask how and why existential questions arise in an individual and what such questions mean for him or her. Their view is that existential questions exist because people reflect upon themselves and their situations. There is a wish to understand and find meaning in existence. Existential questions therefore always grow in a certain life situation but also in the person's earlier experience. Certain basic circumstances are common to everyone and should therefore create the prerequisites for a certain community of problems in the area of existential questions, for example that all humans are born, live together and die. But there are also factors that must act to differentiate, for example environmental factors and the person's varying ability to formulate and process personal experience.

The authors also point out that the terms for expressing existential questions used by different people fill a function in that person's orientation to existence and search for meaning. Questions about life formulated in such a way can, using philosophical terminology, be called existential. An existential question has then arisen from the individual's situation through an interplay between the questioner's subjective view of himself and the actual conditions of the external situation. Hartman and Petterson, however, consider it important to see that 'the question' even though it may be prompted by certain external circumstances, is always subjective in the sense that it must be asked by more or less conscious subjects. Only when it is experienced as the individual's own question is it existential. The two authors' draft definition of the concept existential question therefore includes a step that forms a link to the person and is as follows:

An existential question concerns the fundamental conditions for human life and for existence in general. When an existential question is encountered in a person it is an expression of a need to process and formulate the experience of the surroundings and of one's own personality in relation to these and to existence at large (Hartman and Petterson 1980, p. 32).

Stenmark stresses the importance of these questions when he determines what is meant by existential questions, saying that they are:

...of utmost importance for us. They are examples of what we could call 'important questions' – the ones we ask whose resolution, if we accept them, would deeply affect how we understand ourselves and how we live our lives. Existential questions are important because they are crucial for what it means to exist in the world as human being. So existential questions, or questions concerning choice of view of life, are important agent-questions which demand an urgent answer or response. They are normative questions, concerning basic conditions of human existence, asked by a reflective agent who *must* make choices, accept beliefs, and act on the basis of these choices and beliefs (Stenmark 1995, p. 249, cited in Lindfeldt, p. 184).

In both definitions, existential questions emerge as specifying the fundamental conditions for human existence. Hartman and Petterson stress the need to process the experience of one's surroundings and one's own personality in relation to them, while Stenmark maintains how deeply questions and their answers affect us, how we understand ourselves and how we live. Stenmark also notes that existential questions require pertinent answers and responses. But by and large there is no great difference between the two draft definitions.

Lindfeldt (2003, p. 242) notes that Tage Kurtén is one of those who connect the functional perspectives of life philosophy to man's attempt to handle the various existential life situations with which he is faced. Kurtén mentions that one can perceive a life philosophy as an answer to what is termed an

existential question. He is therefore in line with both Hartman and Stenmark. Kurtén views existential questions as those a person asks himself when he is attempting to find his way around the world in a fundamental manner. He considers that existential questions have both an existential grounding since they deeply affect the person in question and a contextual grounding since the questions asked cannot be answered independently of individual persons and their social and cultural context. Existential questions can relate to understanding reality, values, moral dilemmas and to various ways of emotionally, evaluatively and in action responding to the questions and answering them. For Kurtén, existential questions are those to which mankind's fundamental orientation in existence is linked (Lindfeldt 2003, p. 243). Here one notices a similar link between life philosophy and existential questions to that in both Hartman and Stenmark.

Hartman (1986a, p. 164) discusses in more detail the relationship between existential questions and personal life philosophy. In his view, the personal life philosophy is a framework in which it is natural to process existential questions and to which one also transfers any answers one may find. The different parts of the personal life philosophy then correspond to different types of existential question. Orientation to one's surroundings corresponds to existential questions of a knowledge type, or 'answerable' existential question; the conviction component corresponds to the 'unanswerable or eternal questions', and existential questions that are pure questions of value concern the valuation systems of the life philosophy.

This interplay between life philosophy and existential questions in which personal life philosophy constitutes a framework within which it is natural to process existential questions is, in my view, of great importance for interpreting my own empirical material. It places in focus the individual and his way of attempting to tackle his existential experience and questions. Thus the focus is shifted from the actual life philosophy concept to the interactive process between life philosophy and existential questions when man orients himself in his surroundings and seeks for meaning. But the interplay between the existential grounding and the contextual grounding is also significant, since the interactive process between life philosophy and existential questions does not take place independently of individual persons and their social and cultural contexts.

## Interpretation of life

As we have seen, Hartman's (1986a, pp. 162-163) view is that a personal life philosophy is not a mental construct fixed once and for all. In his opinion, therefore, one can speak rather of a phenomenon in which man is continually processing his experience and life conditions. A recurrent imbalance between the individual's existential questions and life philosophy, or between

different sides in the life philosophy, constitutes a motive force underlying the development and maturation of the personal life philosophy. Bråkenhielm (1992, p. 11) notes that in 'ordinary people' one seldom meets life philosophy in the form of a worked-out system. He considers that it is a matter, rather, of different – and not infrequently contradictory – fragments of a life philosophy. Even though 'ordinary people's' life philosophy is not always a worked-out system this does not mean that the person does not process his or her experience and conditions of life and attempt to create meaning in his or her existence. On the contrary, what characterises man in our time is his search for meaning.

### *Man the seeker for meaning*

The German theologian Paul Tillich has stated that the quest for meaning has become fundamental for modern man. In his book *Dynamics of Faith* he asks what values are the most central and influential in our lives and states in this connection the values that concern us ultimately. Our authentic worship or our true devotion turns towards what for us has an ultimate significance. In this connection Tillich (1957, pp. 1-4) speaks of faith as "the state of being ultimately concerned", and he views this as something much more powerful than religious belief as found in a profession of faith or dogma. Faith in this sense affects the individual's whole attitude to life and embraces how one lives one's life. It forms the way in which one invests one's deepest love and loyalty (Tillich 1957, pp. 1-29; 105-111). The American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr developed a similar attitude to the concept of faith in the 1950s. He views faith as something formed in the individual's primary relationship to those who care for him or her as an infant. He sees faith growing through the experience of trust and fidelity, mistrust and betrayal in our nearest and dearest. He also sees faith in the common visions and values that keep a human group together. Lastly he sees faith at all these levels in the search for integration and fundamental confidence as what gives life harmony and meaning. Faith is therefore, for Tillich and Niebuhr, of general human importance and a central factor in human life (Fowler 1981, pp. 3-5).

The American theologian and psychologist James Fowler (1981, pp. 9-36) builds on Tillich and Niebuhr when he speaks of man as a meaning-seeking being. He understands faith in a similar way as they do, i.e. not in an exclusively religious understanding but as a central and integrating factor of personality, as a general human factor that creates meaning and context in existence. Everybody – more or less consciously – forms for themselves a meaning for their existence that integrates all their experience. Personality is marked by the attempt to create a meaning that can be expressed in different ways, e.g. religiously or politically. Faith thus does not concern a definite religious doctrine or traditional content but is, rather, how people construct



their perception of reality; and Fowler is interested predominantly in how a person creates context in his experience.

In the construction of his theory, Fowler is also inspired by the German-American psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (Fowler 1981, pp. 109-110). Erikson considered that the individual's first experience of love, trust and consideration forms the foundation for what he calls 'the basic trust'. (It also creates the foundation for the individual's perception of God, according to Erikson.) The child's first emotional experience in connection with its parents is here of great importance since it forms the basis of its ability to rely on others and create a loving relationship with others, parents, friends and also God (Erikson 1958, pp. 113-114; Erikson 1959, pp. 57-67). Fowler has as his starting point Erikson's theory of 'basic trust' when he describes his concept of faith. Human personality is based on faith and trust. Trust may therefore be perceived as a necessary condition for relations between people. Trust is an important factor in the individual's development; and a society cannot function without mutual trust. But faith and trust among people presupposes loyalty towards common values. In Fowler's opinion, these values, through concepts, interpretations and ideals, represent something fundamental in society in which people place their hope (cf. also Niebuhr's stress on mankind's search for integration and fundamental trust.)

More recently with the increasing plurality of the multicultural society and more fluid and unclear frames of reference and values, there has been increased discussion of the crisis of meaning in modern society and what bases meaningful human life has or needs. In this discussion the search for meaning has become more complex where people lack common frames of reference and values. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1995) discuss this in their book *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning*:

Questions of cultural orientation are among the most urgent issues of modern society. Individualism and pluralism lead to the consequence that individuals more and more face the difficulty to define standards and values guiding their own lives. Individuals require these values to be able to find orientation in a situation which is defined by options and the necessity to take decisions (Berger and Luckmann 1995, p. 5).

I shall not go further into Berger's and Luckmann's discussion of why modern and post-modern critics of contemporary society and culture are convinced that the present crisis is fundamentally different from all other crises in the past. But they point out the importance of identifying general conditions and fundamental structures for meaningful human life. In this connection they discuss the concept of meaning:

Meaning is constituted in human consciousness: in the consciousness of the individual, who is individuated in a body and who has been socialized as a person. Consciousness, individuation, the specificity of the body, society and

the historico-social constitution of personal identity are characteristics of our species (Berger and Luckmann 1995, p. 10).

In their opinion experience lacks meaning without relation to other experience. Meaning is therefore a complex form of consciousness which does not exist independently. It always has a point of reference. Meaning is consciousness of the fact that there are connections between items of experience. Each experience is not related to another but to a *type* of experience, a schedule of experience, rules of life, moral legitimisation etc., achieved through many items of experience and either gathered in subjective knowledge or taken from social knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1995, p. 11). This definition of meaning appears to me to be important when discussing the life-interpretation concept, since it has links to the notion of the meaning-searching human being. The life-interpretation concept has occurred both in Norwegian and Swedish contexts.

### *The life-interpretation concept in the Norwegian contexts*

When the Norwegian Peder Gravem defines and discusses the concept of life interpretation, a concept which is related to the Swedish concept of life philosophy, he starts from man's attempt to find meaning and relevance in his experience and existence. Thus he places the focus on man as a seeker of meaning. He also includes in his discussion the perspective that faith and trust are a fundamental factor in this connection. Gravem (1996, pp. 235-236), like Fowler, starts with Tillich and speaks of 'meaning-seeking man'. He refers to the heading of the first main chapter in the Norwegian curriculum for the compulsory school, the general part. That chapter includes key words such as faith, morality and life interpretation which in his view indicate differing sides of man as a meaning-seeking being. Gravem also points out that the understanding of man as a meaning-seeking being has developed in various disciplines, for example psychology and religious sociology. What Gravem then raises for discussion is the concept of life interpretation. The background is the position of Christian knowledge as a subject in compulsory schools in Norway and reform of the compulsory school during the 1990s, first with a new general curriculum in 1993 and then the new curriculum for the compulsory school in 1997.

In connection with that reform the subject Christian knowledge was particularly investigated. As we have already seen this led to a proposal for an expanded subject, Christian knowledge with a religious and view-of-life orientation (KRL), which was to be obligatory for all pupils. It was felt that the solution of the previous few years, i.e. parallel instruction in Christian knowledge and view-of-life knowledge, had led to many practical problems. In addition there was a desire to stress the importance of common cultural frames of reference and to stimulate a dialogue between different religions

and views of life. After extensive discussion a new syllabus for the subject was approved and the subject KRL was launched. One of the chief goal formulations for the new KRL subject states that the pupil shall become familiar with Christianity and other religions as living sources of faith, morals and life interpretation. Life interpretation, the search for meaning and the creation of identity thus became important tasks for schools. It was against this background that the discussion of the concept of life interpretation took place in Norway in the 1990s.

As a starting point for that discussion Gravem (1996, p. 237) viewed life interpretation as an attempt to find meaning in our experience of life and the world. He wished to contribute to a better understanding of both individual life interpretation and various life-interpretation traditions. By individual life interpretation he meant that formed in individual human beings' life histories. As life-interpretation traditions he counted both different religions and traditions of ideas. He thus makes a similar difference to that e.g. of both Hedenius and Hartman when they distinguish between a personal life philosophy as found functioning in an individual and a more traditional, collective life philosophy or life-philosophy tradition even though he uses a different term.

Gravem (1996, pp. 242-246) has a precondition that human experience is by nature an experience of meaning, and he considers that this is a view that can be developed in connection with hermeneutic theory (cf. Aadnanes' hermeneutic perspective). One understands or experiences a phenomenon as something determined, by placing it in a larger context, i.e. the part gains a significance within the framework of the whole. Understanding something involves placing it as a part of the context to which it actually belongs. When one does not understand something one is unable to place the phenomenon in any known context, and misunderstanding happens when a phenomenon is placed in a context of which it is not a part. The process of understanding can, for Gravem, be illustrated in connection with our life histories. Each individual life experience gains its meaning in connection with the whole which our life represents, a whole in continual change. When we learn something new it is not only that our knowledge is supplemented with new elements. The context within which the individual parts are integrated also changes.

Gravem (1996, pp. 246-247) notes that what is to be understood by meaning is by no means obvious. But his starting point is that meaning concerns some things being interpreted or understood within the framework of an associated whole. The whole represents a context or system and only within such a whole do the parts gain their definite significance. A framework or context of meaning, according to this, consists of a whole in which the parts form a pattern or an ordered context. It is this understanding of meaning as context or system that underlies the assertion that all experience is experience of meaning. Gravem stresses that this is a concept of meaning deter-

mined on the basis of structures, not on the basis of any concrete contents. He therefore views this concept of meaning as contextual. It is the context that determines meaning (cf. Berger's and Luckmann's concept of meaning).

On this basis, i.e. the understanding of man as a meaning-seeking being and experience as meaning-experience, Gravem determines more precisely what interpretation of life is. He views it as a general human phenomenon. We as humans, both individually and collectively, interpret ourselves and our world in different ways depending on culture and form of living. Gravem defines interpretation of life as "understanding of our self and our experience of reality in the light of a holistic context of meaning" (Gravem 1996, p. 249). This means that life interpretation may have its focus directed both on individual phenomena and on the all-embracing horizon of meaning to which the phenomenon belongs. They posit each other mutually, since a phenomenon is not understood to its full depth without being placed within an all-embracing horizon of meaning. And the all-embracing horizon of meaning is abstract and far from life if it does not contribute to a better understanding of concrete phenomena. Gravem summarises this by saying that life interpretation is an understanding of the whole, of life and the world: it comprises both understanding of reality, view of mankind and values (ethics and morality). Here one may wonder whether there is any great difference between life interpretation and life philosophy on this definition. Gravem points out that 'view-of-life' is a sort of life interpretation since both involve holistic understanding of life and the world (Gravem 1996, p. 250).

Gravem does not go further into how the understanding of reality, view of mankind and ethics are to be understood in connection with each other, only hinting what chief perspective lies in his definition of life interpretation. This perspective is that understanding and experience are the most fundamental part. Meaning is not constituted through action. The opposite is the case. This means that morals and ethics are in practice interwoven in a more comprehensive understanding of reality. Understanding of reality forms the interpretive framework for ethics. Understanding of reality also includes view-of-mankind, according to Gravem (1996, p. 250). Here Gravem may lack a somewhat more detailed definition of the concepts understanding-of-reality and view-of-man.

It emerges from Gravem's definition that life interpretation comprises both self-understanding and understanding of reality. Our self-understanding unfolds through our relationship to the reality that surrounds us. Hence life interpretation has an existential dimension. To gain new knowledge our holistic understanding must be adjusted, but then something happens to our identity. We ourselves have been changed by the change in our horizon of understanding.

Gravem also maintains that meaning experience and life interpretation are possible only through an element of trust or faith in general understanding. When through life interpretation we attempt to understand ourselves and our

life experience by reconstructing a context of meaning which ultimately must be all-embracing there is no clear path from the parts to an ordered whole. For this reason we must reconstruct and anticipate the totality-of-meaning and arrange our lives on the basis of this draft while, in concrete life interpretation, the trust must stay firm in the one or the other, depending on what contents we give the meaning-totality (Gravem, 19996, p. 251). Here we see how Gravem approaches the notion of basic trust seen in Erikson, Niebuhr, Fowler and others. The same may be found in the Finn Tage Kurtén (1995) who in his research on the life philosophy of Finnish authors treats how they anchor their basic trust in the ego, in nature, in the social context, or in a Heavenly Power. Where trust has found nothing to hold on to, Kurtén speaks of a nihilistic orientation corresponding to an experience that life is meaningless. Lindfeldt (2003, p. 253) notes that Kurtén speaks of basic trust in a distinct conceptual sense, not in a psychological one (as e.g. Erikson and Fowler do). The form of basic trust he attempts to articulate is not a feeling or a kind of cerebral state but rather an attitude expressed in how we live and what we take for granted. Kurtén refers to the Danish theologian and religious philosopher Knud Løgstrup, speaking of trust as a fundamental element of human life. He views this kind of trust as a spontaneous starting-point for what we take for granted. When a child meets existence with a fundamental trust this is not due to assessments, analyses or deductions, and all the child learns starts in this unfounded, spontaneous trust (Lindfeldt 2003, pp. 248-249). The notion of basic trust appearing in many life-philosopher scholars affords an important perspective in the definition of the concept of life philosophy or life interpretation, especially if one starts with the view that man is a meaning-seeking and self-interpreting being.

When Geir Skeie (200b, p. 95) discusses Gravem's life interpretation concept he notes that Gravem places little weight on the difference between life interpretation as a process and life interpretation as an understanding or content. Skeie considers that Gravem does not consider the life-interpretation process to be the most interesting part. The focus is more on the result, either cultural traditions or the individual's interpretation of life. Consequently an important side of the concept's religion-pedagogical relevance is weakened, its grounding in the individual's personality, psyche and everyday reality. Skeie points out that the Swede Björn Wiedel goes the opposite way in his work on the life-interpretation concept in connection with Church teaching. Granted, there is little difference between Gravem's definition of life interpretation and the definition Wiedel uses: "Life interpretation involves reflection upon and interpretation of life as it has been experienced for the purpose of creating a structure of context, meaning and reasons for action" (Wiedel 1999, p. 93). But Skeie considers that the difference between the two shows in that Wiedel speaks of personal life interpretation in order to stress the psychological and individual aspect. In his reasoning, Wiedel stresses what is individual and in Skeie's view this reinforces

the religious-pedagogical relevance of the concept compared with Gravem. In addition Skeie considers he can trace cultural criticism in Gravem since the latter seems to imagine that man as a meaning-seeking being does not receive proper answers in a post-modern, fragmented culture. Gravem therefore stresses what is holistic, coherent and truth-oriented in life interpretation. But in this way something else moves into the background, namely the question of how life interpretation comes about and is modified (Skeie 1998, pp. 96-97).

Skeie's criticism may be seen in relation to that of the legitimisation and contents of the KRL subject (Christian knowledge with a religious and view-of-life orientation, see chapter two above) and the cultural understanding which he considers exists in the Norwegian compulsory-school curriculum. This type of cultural understanding involves a limitation of the concept of culture, he claims, and he points out that in the general-curriculum section that specially establishes religious education under the heading of 'man the meaning-seeker' one could expect a starting-point of man as cultural, thus a meaning-seeking, self-interpreting being, and one could then present religiosity in all its breadth (Skeie 1998, pp. 245-268).

Skeie's view of the concept of life interpretation is in line with this. When he develops a model for the religious dimension of the process of creating identity, the dynamics between the individual's existential questions and life interpretation emerge. For Skeie the concept 'life interpretation' lies close to the way 'life philosophy' has been used in Sweden, but since the corresponding Norwegian concept 'view of life' ('livssyn') has become politicised, often used almost as a supplement to 'religion', he finds the term 'life interpretation' more fitting. For Skeie, life interpretation means:

... the universe of meaning the individual builds up on the basis of his life experience, which is continually maintained and is modified to varying degrees. A life interpretation has a certain inner context but can at the same time be marked by contrasts and inconsistencies, seen through the eyes of logical rationality (Skeie 1998, p. 162).

What I find significant in Skeie's discussion is not primarily this definition but, rather, his stress on life interpretation as a process and the dynamic interplay with existential questions (cf. the Swedish discussion on the interplay between personal life philosophy and existential questions). This tallies with Wiedel's focus on the individual aspect and life interpretation as a process – which I view as more relevant than a life-interpretation concept that places more weight on the results. Moreover, Skeie's stress on the contrasts and inconsistencies in life-interpretation processes is valuable.

In the Norwegian connection Elisabet Haakedal (2004, pp. 54-64) continued the discussion on the life-interpretation concept. As we have already seen she writes in the same vein as Geir Skeie regarding contextual religious

education, pointing out that it is impossible to understand life interpretation only as an individual phenomenon. It is a function both in individuals and in human society. In her definition of the concept she stresses this, among other things. She understands life interpretation:

... both as a more or less self-evident or underlying anthropological and culture-forming phenomenon and as more or less reflected and holistic patterns of thought, experience and action in the life course of individuals and the history of groups via traditions and trends (Haakedal, 2004, p. 62).

Haakedal considers this definition involves three main points. First life interpretation as basic anthropological function, i.e. the human ability to reflect on life or existence. Here it is a matter of the ability to orient oneself, shown to different degrees in individuals, groups and larger institution-bearing traditions, interacting with the degree and pace of change in the conditions of human life. Secondly comes the social or relational function, i.e. more or less evident bonds between individual and society. Thirdly, she speaks of the substance of life interpretation, the more or less reflective patterns of thought, experience and action. As we have seen, Haakedal's definition of the life-interpretation concept was inspired by Tage Kurtén's definition of life philosophy.

It is important in Haakedal's definition that she indicates the interaction between the individual and society. An individual's life interpretation as a process always occurs in a social and cultural context. Kurtén's influence on her life-interpretation concept also makes the anthropological 'basic trust' an important component.

### *Life interpretation in the Swedish context*

Although the concept life philosophy was the key concept in life-philosophical discussion and research in Sweden during the first few decades, the concept life interpretation came onto the agenda around 1990. The Balil project (see chapter two above) was for example called 'Children's life situation and life interpretation' (Green and Hartman 1992). The Swedish scholar, Sven-Åke Selander is among those who have worked on the life-interpretation concept, particularly in connection with school religious education and its teaching. He also places the greatest weight on the functional, viewing life interpretation as "dynamic, a process, a way for pupils to broaden and deepen their own life worlds" (Selander, 1994, p.7). This requires not only new knowledge but also new methods for teaching in religious education. Life interpretation is about structuring, organising one's world of experience. People can choose different patterns of interpretation, and it is the job of religious education to indicate the presence of such alternative interpretations and point out the importance of choosing a pattern that

corresponds to one's personal needs and situation. Selander (2000) notes that both Norway and Sweden received new curricula and syllabi for religious education in the 1990s, and that the life-interpretation concept played a certain part in both countries. The 1994 Swedish syllabi for the compulsory school and upper-secondary school state that life interpretation concerns people's desire and ability to interpret and make sense of life. In the drafting of the curriculum the following definition of life interpretation was reached:

Life interpretation is a way of organising one's world of experience; it gives people patterns for making sense of existence and how to relate to it. Developing a life interpretation is a process that continues throughout life. (SOU 1992:94, quoted in Hartman 2000c, p. 72).

For Selander, the similarities between interpretation of the concept in Norway and Sweden lie in the concepts 'identity' and 'dialogue', and here he refers to Geir Skeie. He sees the differences partly in how the concept has been received. Its introduction seems to have awakened little discussion in Norway, while its use in Sweden has aroused lively discussion. Objections came primarily from Christian confessional circles and critics of the concept associated it with atheism. The consequence was that when the syllabus for religious education in the compulsory school was finally adopted, the concept was included only in one connection, viz. as a generic term for non-religious life philosophies. Selander draws attention to the fact that the intention of the revisers of the syllabi for religious education in 1992-1994 when they introduced the concept of life interpretation was not associated with any ambition to remove religions from syllabi or religious education from Sweden. Instead, the wish was to broaden and deepen the view of the didactics of religious teaching, since developments in the discussion of life philosophy had accelerated during the 1980s, making issues of faith, life philosophy and ethics all-embracing and widely discussed. Selander considers that both for discovering their own place in the order of things and for being able to make decisions on moral and ethical issues, people need a pattern to help them interpret and clarify existence. This contributes to people's identity, helps them to see a meaning and to find explanations for phenomena and events. Today an intensive search is going on for new models, or attempts to revise older models, for finding help in interpreting and making sense of life, since life and existence seem to be under threat. The 1980 curriculum was an attempt to tackle this, and the attempt to broaden and deepen the religious-didactic model in the early 1990s by relating to the concept life interpretation should be seen against this background (Selander, 2000, pp. 15-18).

In an article of 2000 the concept of life interpretation is central to what Selander calls "a personality-developing religious-didactic model". I do not go into this model here but in his discussion in that article he changes his view of the concept. He outlines the background to the concept in Norwe-



gian and Swedish contexts and notes that it has been understood both as a concept relating to content and as one that concerns the actual process of interpreting life. Selander considers that this way of using the concept raises the problem that it can easily appear as ambiguous, referring to conditions for forming anything from a perception of life philosophy, belief and ethics, the contents of the various religions and life philosophies, to the results of this process. To clarify how he uses the concept in his 'personality-developing religious-didactic model' he now distinguishes these three meanings by introducing the terms life interpretation (*livstolkning*), belief interpretation (*trostolkning*) and life-clarification (*livstydning*). By *life interpretation* is meant the necessary conditions for a person to develop an interest in and reflection on questions of existence, belief and ethics. These conditions can concern questions of maturity, questions about what existential questions are current, what principles apply for reflecting on these, and about how the actual process of interpretation can be constructed. By *belief interpretation* is meant issues of content concerning religion and other non-religious philosophies. Such contents can be described in phenomenological perspective and relate to the contents and function of religions and non-religious life philosophies. By *life clarification* Selander means the result of the meeting of life interpretation and belief interpretation, i.e. the individual's choice of patterns to use for interpreting and explaining existence. Life clarification also refers to the result of a process in which personal circumstances and interests are included both as contents and as forms of presentation in various religions and other life philosophies. In his 'personality-developing religious-didactic model' Selander sees life interpretation as a process, going on all the time in people who ponder existence and its meaning. People observe, experience, formulate, re-examine, revise and take a stand on religions and other life philosophies. What is central to these interpretations of belief is, for him, questions of belief or non-belief, which in turn are expressed in traditions, symbols, ways of celebrating religious services, need for new deepenings and new re-examinations. Life-clarification, the results, one's own choice then become central to Selander's model (Selander 2000, pp. 18-20).

Compared to Gravem (1994) and Wiedel (1999), what Selander contributes to the discussion is a division of the life interpretation concept so as to clarify the definition thereof. When interpreting empirical material it is important that the terms one uses are not ambiguous. Selander's contribution has also rendered the concept of life interpretation more clearly defined, and the definition places life interpretation-as-a-process in focus. But if one compares this with his earlier definition there is perhaps not such a great difference and even then the functional was in focus.

Sven Hartman, who earlier used the term 'personal life philosophy' for a person's endeavour to render his existence understandable and to relate to it, has more recently used the life interpretation concept instead. He considers

that this does not have such an intellectualistic timbre as ‘life philosophy’, and that it fits better with the dynamic processes observable in young people’s work as they tackle life’s challenges. He makes a clear difference between a person’s life interpretation and a more or less codified life-philosophy tradition. He even speaks of life interpretation as lived life philosophy. This normally includes dogmas and attitudes relating to e.g. view of mankind and society, cosmology, theology and view of knowledge. One ought also to be able to count a person’s values among these. Hartman presents a dynamic relationship, a continual switching between existential questions, life interpretation, life and action. Continual new experience gives impulses and changes the internal balance of this dynamic. Through continuous reflection, the contents and character of existential questions and life interpretation are modified. Hartman views this as a whole: existential questions, life interpretation, life and action are aspects of the same unity (Hartman, 2000c, pp. 71-72; Hartman and Torstenson – Ed. 2007, pp. 88-89).). Hartman’s view of life interpretation gives the same focus as Skeie and Selander and Wiedel did, seeing life interpretation and existential questions, life and action as a continual process. His view of the dynamic relationship between life interpretation and existential questions and life and action is also important when the concept is to be defined.

## Conclusion regarding the concepts

The concept of life philosophy is multivalent, as we have seen from the literature I have been through. There are definitions where the cognitive perspective is pervasive or represents the core of life philosophy. Here life philosophy has the function of expressing a person’s holistic view of what they believe is true and real in existence (Hedenius and Jeffner). Other definitions place more stress on the functional perspective. A person’s potential for action then becomes an important element as does the notion that a life philosophy must primarily have a practical or life-regulating function. Here a life philosophy is not only a way of viewing life, but also a way of living (Hartman and Stenmark). For me it is important that the definition of a life philosophy involves a balance between its constitutive components, i.e. the cognitive, the emotional and the behavioural. The actual definition is perhaps not so easy to describe and, as we have seen, there are many drafts.

The concept of life philosophy is also multivalent but in a different way. On the one hand it is used in the sense of life philosophy as collectively historical, as a life-philosophy tradition or as a given religious or political doctrine. On the other hand the concept is used for life philosophy as something individual or subjective, in the sense of personal life philosophy which says primarily everything about the individual’s manner of understanding existence and positioning himself with regard to it. There is similar ambiguity in

the definition of the term life interpretation, as Selander has pointed out. Personal life philosophy can, it is true, be influenced by the established life-philosophy traditions; but different theoreticians place differing weights on either the collective or the personal. Aadnanes' criticism of Jeffner was essentially that limitation of the concept to an individual and subjective inside is too one-sided and that the collective is as important as the individual. Aadnanes' hermeneutic perspective is important in this connection, as is the interplay between the two when a person continually processes their experience and their condition of life. There are similar hermeneutic perspectives in Gravem's discussion of the life-interpretation concept.

It is naturally a pertinent question in relation to my own work whether the life-philosophy concept is useable as an analytical tool for interpreting interviews with teenagers on their world views and values. It is in no way possible to map teenagers' philosophy of life after short interviews if these are based on the Jeffnerian definition of life philosophy. The concept perhaps becomes useable as a background one with, first and foremost, a designation in terms of contents, delineating at individual level some kind of a result of the process of work on shifting conditions of life and of experience, referring at the historical, collective level to a society's life-philosophy traditions and trends. The exception is 'personal life philosophy', since this covers a person's continual striving to make sense of existence and to take up a position vis-à-vis this. It therefore refers to a process.

The issue of what term to use to designate the process or the actual phenomenon leads the attention to the term life interpretation. As already mentioned, definitions of the concept are legion. It has been understood both as relating to contents and dealing with the actual process of interpreting life. In this, the definition of life interpretation resembles that of life philosophy. While Selander criticises this ambiguity in the definition, Skeie criticises Gravem for placing too little weight on the difference between life interpretation as a process and life interpretation as understanding or contents. Both Wiedel and Hartman have also brought out life interpretation as process. Talking of process also involves the interplay between individual and society, as Haakedal and others point out. The dynamic relationship between existential questions and life philosophy that occurs in Hartman, Stenmark, Kurtén and Selander is also important here.

The notion of life interpretation as a process raises the question of whether it would be relevant to speak of life interpretations in the plural, in the sense that new life interpretations occur all the time when a person orients himself in existence and seeks meaning. Does speaking of life interpretation in the singular imply that it forms *one* unit, and how does this tally with the plurality that marks the multicultural society when it cannot be assumed that people are rooted in *one* culture or social understanding? First I would point out that the term life interpretation is an established one in religious-pedagogical discussion and research, and that it appears in the singular

in curricula in both Norway and Sweden. Secondly I maintain that the term in the singular need not necessarily mean that life interpretation must form *one* unit or that there is too much focus on its result, cf. Geir Skeie's criticism of Gravem's definition of the concept. Life interpretation as a lifelong process is not in my view a matter of result but of a coherent phenomenon. As Skeie notes in his definition, it has an inner coherence, but at the same time it can show conflicts and inconsistencies. Hence I consider that there is good reason to use the term in the singular form, but that the concept can accommodate different dimensions and categories – thus it can involve different expressions, manifestations and variants in one or many people.

My conclusion is to use and define the concept of life interpretation in the sense of the process in which the individual is involved when finding his way about his existence, attempting to tackle the various life situations he is faced with, seeking answers to his existential questions and his life's meaning. This is a process with a certain inner consistency but also conflicts, and it can therefore take form in different expressions and manifestations. Life interpretation also occurs in a dialectical interplay between the individual and his/her social and cultural context. Life philosophy as a concept may be viewed as an interpretive framework within which it is natural to work on existential questions and experience. But life interpretation is the actual process of interpretation, man's attempt to make sense and meaning of existence. This he does in an interplay with his surroundings, both other people, society and culture. Man as a seeker of meaning and interpretation of life constitute the central point here, not life philosophy or life-philosophical traditions.

In my interpretation of the empirical material I therefore start with this notion of man the meaning-seeker and listen for the search for meaning in the teenagers' statements and how they interpret their lives and experience. The hermeneutic flavour of the life-interpretation concept results in the material being interpreted in a sort of hermeneutic interaction between the teenagers' perceptions and statements and the elements of their life philosophy as formed in the statements, both as individuals and in the whole material. It also involves an interaction between interpretation of individual interviews and the trends in the whole material and between the material and the social and cultural context in which the teenagers live. I return to this in the next chapter.

# Method and implementation

The overall purpose of the study was to investigate Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation and values and how they express their perceptions, so as to discuss this in connection with social development and school religious education. The focus is on the contents of these teenagers' life interpretation and its relation to the social changes towards increased plurality taking place in Iceland. To find out how teenagers interpret their lives, a suitable method for collecting and interpreting data material is needed. In this chapter, the research issues of the study are discussed in connection with the method selected for collecting the empirical material and with the theoretical perspective and approach on which I relied when interpreting the material. During the course of the work, the questions, the conceptual apparatus and the theoretical perspective all developed, and the articles included in the thesis were written at different stages of the work.

## Method

Interviews and discussion have been much used in connection with scientific research and are considered as important scientific methods in various disciplines, not least sociology and behavioural science. According to Dalen (2004, p. 16) an overall goal of the qualitative research tradition is to develop understanding of phenomena associated with persons and situations in their social realities. The aim is deeper insight into how people relate to their life situations. Kvale (1997, p. 14) notes that the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the interviewee's point of view, to develop the meaning of people's experience and reveal their life worlds. Qualitative interviews were therefore the method chosen to collect the empirical material for the present study, seeking as it did to learn how young people experience and interpret their lives. In my earlier research project from 1997-1999 I used quantitative methods with questionnaires answered by children and young people. The use of that method resulted in an overview of Icelandic children's and young people's beliefs and religious perceptions (Gunnarsson 1999a, 1999b and 2001). Qualitative interviews, however, should permit deeper insight and should further investigate how the teenagers express themselves and what characterises the contents of their statements.

Some issues connected with qualitative research interviews must be raised. Thus, the interviews can either be structured or unstructured. Since structured interviews follow a strict pattern, there is scant flexibility in the interview situation; while in unstructured interviews the discussion is open and without fixed points. Both these types of interview have their advantages and disadvantages. The most common interview form is therefore something in between, semi-structured. Here the discussions are focused upon given themes chosen in advance (Dalen 2004, p. 29). This form of interview appears useful for obtaining an insight into teenager's life interpretation and values; that is semi-structured interviews with some given themes.

An interview always involves an interaction between the participants, interviewer and interviewee. In this interplay, the interviewer has determined the themes and direction beforehand and during the discussion influences how it develops (Kvale 1997, pp. 24-26). This is an unavoidable problem, but awareness of what the interaction involves and what effects it has is therefore extremely important. Knowledge is constructed in the interaction between participants, each with their own background, experience and pre-conceptions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007, p. 349). The interviews thus gave insight into how the teenagers' interpretation of their lives and experience took form in their statements in an interactive discussion situation at a given time. To afford the material greater breadth the teenagers were interviewed twice with an interval of one year. This also permitted comparison of interviews from the two different occasions.

The material was collected in cooperation with my colleague at the Iceland University of Education in Reykjavik, Dr. Gunnar Finnbogason. Our first questions concerned what ages we should specify, the number of interviews and how we should select the informants. The result was that we interviewed teenagers at the upper level of the compulsory school, partly so as to be able to discuss the results in connection with religious education at compulsory school. We also decided that in the earlier interview they should be in the ninth class, i.e. aged 14. In Iceland this is the year after confirmation and we did not wish to conduct the interviews during the year when the greatest majority were attending confirmation classes, since we planned among other things to talk to them about religion and its influence. The second interview would then be conducted when the teenagers were in the tenth class, the last year of comprehensive school.

The teenagers came from three schools in Iceland. We chose schools we considered different, for the sake of variation. Two were in different parts of Reykjavik – one in an old quarter and the other in a new. One also had a number of immigrant children. The third school was in a fishing village in the countryside. In Autumn 2002 we contacted the schools and chose fifteen teenagers in the ninth class in each, at random. The parents of these teenagers received a letter with information about the research project and the request for written consent for their children to be interviewed. Around half

gave a positive answer, 7-9 from each school; in all 24 teenagers, 14 girls and 10 boys. Only a few gave negative answers while the rest did not respond despite reminders. It is not easy to see whether or how the study result was affected by the fact that only just over half of those chosen agreed to participate. Yet it is important to note that none of the parents of the few children with foreign backgrounds who landed in the randomly-chosen group answered our letter positively. A further reservation must also be made. Since the informant group was not all that large it is obvious that it does not admit generalisations, compared with a quantitative method with a large population. But I nevertheless viewed the informant group as large enough to be able to provide a survey of some main lines and trends in the material (Tylor and Bogdan 1998, pp. 87-92).

Following drafting and test of an interview guide the interviews were conducted in the Spring term of 2003. As mentioned, they were semi-structured. They lasted around one hour and were tape-recorded. We asked questions and discussed with the teenagers around some central themes that we had chosen in advance. Towards the end of the interview the young people were also asked to write endings to five different sentences. The interviews were then transcribed and this was finished in May 2003. One year later, that is 2004 we contacted the young people again, requesting them to participate in a similar interview. Sixteen of the 24 took part again, 10 girls and six boys. Of these 16, nine were then selected for further analysis and interpretation in three of the articles. The selection was guided by the differing backgrounds of the individuals, so as to obtain variation in the material.

As already mentioned, semi-structured interviews often focus on given themes chosen in advance. For the present study the following were chosen:

- Belief and religious activity
- Values and issues of values
- Joy and happiness
- Adversity, grief and death
- School and free time
- View of oneself and the future

This choice of themes may naturally be discussed, as may how they affect the picture the material gives of the teenagers' life interpretation and values. But in qualitative research one always gives several choices that affect the research process. I consider these themes as central subjects of discussion in connection with life interpretation and values, and that discussion with the teenagers and their answers to the questions based on these themes can represent important elements in their life interpretation. Since life interpretation is considered to be a process, there is matter for studying how young people's life interpretation and values are manifest in these statements when

they address themes that, among other things, concern the shifting conditions of human life.

## Theoretical perspective for analysis and interpretation of the material

As theoretical perspective for analysis and interpretation of the material I chose a hermeneutic approach. Knowledge is constructed not only through the interviews: analysis and interpretation of the material also create knowledge. Through the interpretative process, the researcher attempts to find meaning and connections in his data material and to develop deeper understanding of what is under study. The starting point is the informants' experience and understanding, as expressed in their statements (Dalen 2004, p. 108). But interpretation takes place also within a contextual framework. Here the hermeneutic interpretative process involved, among other things, interpreting the teenagers' statements in relation to their external world, i.e. Icelandic culture, traditions and social situations. When the question sought to elicit how teenagers' life interpretation and values related to changes in society, the meaning of what they said needed to be illustrated not only on the basis of their own statements but with reference to what was known about the external reality from other researcher's statistics on changes in Icelandic society, and with reference to its traditions and cultural heritage (see chapter 1). In my search for theories on which to base the interpretative process, Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1960/1996) existential hermeneutic theory with *Bildung* – the German word for 'education' also covers the attributes of a well-educated, cultured person – *tradition* and *experience* as a main concept, appeared relevant since it has direct links with the life-interpretation concept. Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1983) concept of culture and his semiotic and hermeneutic perspectives on anthropology are also notions I consider significant for my interpretative work since he stresses culture as a 'pattern of meanings embodied in symbols' that must be interpreted. In addition, Eva Lundgren's (1993) theory of gender constitution as a process was suitable in the interpretation of gender differences.

Per-Johan Ödman considers that hermeneutics seeks for possible contents in its objects of study. These are studied as texts and as language. Action and non-linguistic life expressions may also be considered. Contents and associations of meaning are mediated and understood primarily through linguistic interpretation, and interpretation is therefore the foremost form of knowledge in hermeneutic science. The interest of hermeneutics in knowledge has the linguistic context as its most important task, since understanding and language are fundamental for our exercise of life (Ödman 2004a, p. 72; 1979, p. 36.) Understanding young people's interpretation of life in-



volves interpreting their statements and values as linguistic expressions of life.

Researchers in the Nordic connection have discussed and defined the central concepts of this study from a hermeneutic perspective. The life-interpretation concept is particularly stressed as a hermeneutic concept in the Nordic context with reference to, e.g. Gadamer (Gravem 1996, cf. also Aadnanes' (1999) view of the life-philosophy concept). In view of Gadamer's existential view of hermeneutics this is relevant since life interpretation concerns meaning and context. Gadamer's discussion of concepts such as *Bildung*, experience and tradition are important in this context. For understanding the teenagers' life interpretation on the basis of their statements and the context in which they live, a hermeneutic perspective was suitable. Analysis and interpretation of the empirical material involved an interplay between the statements of individual teenagers, within the interviews (inter-textual interpretation) and in relation to the trends in the whole material, and to the teenagers' conditions of life in the family, among friends and in Icelandic society in general (contextual interpretation); or in other words switching between parts and the whole at different levels. From the beginning, a main theme of hermeneutics has been that the meaning of a part can only be understood if connected with the whole: the part can only be understood from the whole and the whole only from its parts. What is termed the 'hermeneutic circle', which has been a core concept in hermeneutics from Friedrich Ast and Friedrich Schleiermacher involves switching of this type between part and whole (Ödman 1979, pp. 17-31).

When Gadamer (1960/1996, pp. 10-19) in *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)* discusses the concept of *Bildung* he notes that it originates from Mediaeval mystics. For him, the rise and development of the *Bildung* concept calls for the old mystical tradition, according to which man must build the picture of God he carries in his soul and in accordance with which he was created. He criticises a teleological view of *Bildung* and considers that the result of *Bildung* is not produced for any technical purpose but grows forth from the inner course of its forming and shaping and therefore remains in a continuous process of *Bildung* and further *Bildung*. Gadamer claims that it was Hegel who developed the *Bildung* concept most clearly. Hegel based his analysis of *Bildung* on two main assumptions. First, *Bildung*, as being raised to the universal, is a human task that requires sacrifice of our particular inclinations. It is the universal nature of human *Bildung* to constitute itself into a universal intellectual being and whoever abandons himself to the particular is uncultivated ('ungebildet'). Secondly, this process involves learning to recognise what is one's own in the alien, to make oneself at home in that unfamiliar. The fundamental movement of the spirit according to this is nothing but a return to oneself from what is the Other. All theoretical education, including the unfamiliar languages and worlds of conception towards which one works, are only a continuation of a process of

Bildung that started long before. The individual who rises from his natural being to the spiritual finds in language, customs, the nature of his people, a pre-given material which he must make his own. This means that it is not alienation as such that constitutes the essence of Bildung, but the return to oneself, which indeed presumes a prior alienation.

Thus far Gadamer's understanding of Hegel, but this presentation of Bildung has a link to other concepts in Gadamer's theory, i.e. the principle of effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and tradition, and his theory of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*).

According to Gadamer we understand the world and ourselves through language; and we cannot understand ourselves without first understanding ourselves as situated in linguistically-mediated historical culture. This affects how we understand culture, art and historical texts. These are a part of our own tradition and therefore do not meet us in a neutral manner. Historical works are part of the horizon against which we live and they have therefore formed us before we have been able to meet them. Tradition thus exerts influences all the time, forming the framework in which our interpretation takes place. Gadamer (1960/1996, pp. 300-307) speaks of the principle of effective-history in this connection and asserts that when we attempt to understand a historical phenomenon we are already subjected to its effects. What is important is that we recognise that effective-history exerts its influence on all understanding whether or not we are aware of this. According to him the effective-historical consciousness is one element in the process of understanding, and for this reason it is first and foremost consciousness of the hermeneutic situation. Gadamer notes that one of the concepts that above all belong to the situation is that of horizon. According to him the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. If all meaning depends on context, understanding does not involve a relationship between subject and object but relations between horizons. Gadamer considers that the understanding of tradition requires a historical horizon but this does not mean that one opens this horizon by placing oneself in a historical situation or moving to alien worlds disassociated from our own. Instead these worlds together form the only horizon that embraces the historical depth of our self-consciousness beyond the limits of the contemporary. This horizon requires the past for its creation. Gadamer's conclusion is that there is neither a separate contemporary horizon nor historical horizons in which to place oneself. Understanding always takes place as a fusion of such presumably separate horizons. Where tradition prevails, the fusion takes place continually, old and new grow together unceasingly into something that has living value, without the possibility of asserting one above the other in any clear manner. The fusion of horizons also means that our prejudices are subjected to trials since we are compelled to re-formulate them in the meeting with the past and understanding of the tradition in which we stand, in order to overcome what is alien in a different cultural horizon.

This process is continual and it never achieves any conclusion or complete clarity.

We find a similar dialectic process in Gadamer's (1960/1996, pp. 346-362) analysis of the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*). He notes that it is important to maintain that the effective-historical consciousness has the structure of experience. He claims that experience itself can never be science and speaks of the dialectic of experience as not culminating in any definitive knowledge but in the openness to new experience to which experience itself opens up. He sees actual experience as experience of human finiteness; that all can be done anew proves to be an illusion and whoever is active in history continually experiences that nothing comes again. This also means that the possibilities of planning an expected future are fundamentally finite and limited. True experience is therefore an experience of one's own historicity. Thus the effective-historical consciousness must reflect the general structure of experience. With this fundamental law, Gadamer considers that hermeneutic experience has to do with tradition. It is tradition which must be experienced. But –

...tradition is not simply a process that teaches us to know and govern; it is *language* – i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou. A Thou is not an object; it relates itself to us. It would be wrong to think that this means that what is experienced in tradition is to be taken as the opinion of another person, a Thou. Rather, I maintain that the understanding of tradition does not take the traditional text as an expression of another person's life, but as the meaning that is detached from the person who means it, from an I or a Thou. Still the relationship to the Thou and the meaning of experience implicit in that relation must be capable of teaching us something about the hermeneutical experience. For tradition is a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou (Gadamer, 1960/1996, p. 358).

Gadamer also stresses the dialogue that goes on in all I–Thou relationships when he speaks of our experience of tradition. Such experience of a Thou corresponds to what he calls historical consciousness. This consciousness seeks understanding of tradition which means taking in one's own historicity through reflection instead of reflecting oneself away from one's living relationship to tradition. In this connection he speaks of the openness of the effective-historical consciousness to tradition. He compares this openness to a brotherly relationship, really experiencing Thou as Thou; that is, not disregarding the other's claims but allowing him opportunities to speak. The process of understanding therefore involves an interpretative dialogue with tradition, with continual openness towards it. The claims of tradition must apply not only in the sense that I recognise the Otherness of the past, but also that it has something to tell me.

To summarize and to relate back to the *Bildung*-education concept, the Gadamerian understanding of *Bildung* is that it is a continual process involv-

ing a complex dialogue between the past and the present, between interpreter and tradition, in which tradition is experienced as a Thou. A formed (gebildet) person is one who is always open to meeting the Other through new hermeneutic experience and to seeking different horizons so as to introduce them in the context that makes understanding possible. It is a matter of making continual new re-interpretations within the framework of tradition.

I consider Gadamer's theory suitable in connection with interpretation of Icelandic teenagers' statements and utterances. Their Bildung process involves continual dialogue between them and the tradition in which they grew up and in which they live. Here they find a given material which has already influenced them but which they must also make their own. In their life-interpretation situation they are in other words subject to the effects of effective-history. They are in a living relationship with tradition where the fusion of horizons is taking place continually. Old and new grow together and it is in the internal process of forming and educating that their life interpretation takes place.

The cultural understanding of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz is significant in this connection since he in his hermeneutic anthropology speaks of anthropology's task of understanding understanding. His definition of culture in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* is also useful in connection with Gadamer's concept of Bildung and teenagers' life interpretation. He describes culture as –

...a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life (Geertz 1973, p. 89).

Since we are dealing here with meaning that takes form in symbols that give individuals frames of reference for understanding reality, and since individuals by and large act according to a pattern of meanings, it is the anthropologist's job to interpret these meanings. Geertz therefore describes his anthropology as 'interpretative'. It seeks to understand the guiding symbols of each culture, which gain their meaning from the role they play in patterns of social behaviour. Culture and behaviour must be investigated together since it is through behaviour, i.e. social acts, that cultural forms are articulated. Geertz speaks of his concept of culture as semiotic and agrees with Max Weber that man is like an animal caught in webs of significance which he has woven himself, and he considers that culture is these webs:

I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical (Geertz 1973, p. 5).

Geertz therefore considers that the subject of his work can be called cultural hermeneutics. But it is so in the sense of abandoning any attempt to explain social phenomena through interweaving them in large textures of cause and effect and instead attempting to explain them by placing them in 'local frames of awareness'. Thus we are concerned with the local context. Geertz speaks of detours, of by-roads, and refers to Wittgenstein when he speaks of seeing the straight main road in front of oneself but naturally one cannot take it because it is always shut (Geertz 1983, pp. 5-6).

In his article *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 5-30), Geertz uses the concept 'thick description' to describe the task of interpretative anthropology, a concept that he borrowed from the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle claimed that human gestures often have multitudinous layers of meaning that can only be described through the symbols of which culture makes use. Ryle distinguishes between 'thin description', i.e. description of what is obvious on the surface and 'thick description', i.e. the meaning behind the action and its symbolical significance in society. According to Geertz, interpretative anthropology deals not only with 'I-am-a-camera, phenomenalist observation' but with cultural analysis and interpretation. This is a hard task. Geertz points out that what we call our data is actually our own construction of other individuals' constructions of what they and their fellow-countrymen are up to. Thus it is about explaining and also explanations of explanations. In a different connection, in the Introduction to his book *Local Knowledge* (1983, p. 5) Geertz speaks of 'understanding of understanding'. Cultural analysis must sort out 'the structures of signification' and determine their social basis and significance. Geertz describes the ethnographer's difficult task by comparing it with trying to read a manuscript –

...foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour (Geertz 1973, p. 10).

Geertz' description of culture as patterns of meaning that give individuals frames of reference to understand reality I see as harmonising with my definition of the life-interpretation concept. His view of the anthropologist's task of interpreting the meanings he describes as understanding of understanding may be compared with the task of interpreting teenagers' life interpretations. It is interesting that in his endeavour to make detours and use by-roads Geertz tends to use the essay form. There he raises for discussion different parts of culture or what he calls cultural systems which he often illustrates with examples from his own ethnographic studies or from others' texts and descriptions, maybe religion, art, natural science, law and also 'common sense'. Geertz' view of the latter is particularly interesting when we consider how we describe tradition or understand cultural heritage. Geertz points out

that religion relies on revelation, science on method, ideology on moral passion, but 'common sense' is based on the assertion that 'it is not a case at all', it's just life in a nutshell. 'Common-sense' wisdom is expressed in epigrams, proverbs, jokes, anecdotes etc., but not in formal doctrines, axiomatized theories or architectonic dogmas (Geertz 1983, pp. 75; 90). Since 'my' teenagers were interviewed about some central themes and interpretation of their statements and utterances in the four articles which are the basic material of the present thesis (see chapter 5) the articles contain part-perspectives on the young people's life interpretation. They concern religion, values, adversity and more, and here 'common-sense wisdom' also plays an important part. Together the articles should give a picture of how the teenagers' life interpretation took form in their statements and utterances when they were interviewed.

One research question in the study concerned what differences there are between genders in the informant group. There I find Eva Lundgren's (1993, pp. 190-193) theory of gender constitution suitable although she bases it on how gender reality is created in sexual-violent relationships. Being a man or a woman is, according to her, something that constitutes a lifelong process. She emphasises that individual action cannot be interpreted in isolation but must be seen in a wider project-context, both individual and collective. Her view is that all parts must be interpreted in the light of something more extensive and comprehensive which she calls a 'gender constituting project' (kjønnskonstitueringsprosjekt). Gender is constituted differently in different arenas, official and private ones as well as heterosocial and homosocial ones. It is a constant interaction process where we as actors constitute gender by presuming, creating, developing, deepening and changing 'gender norms'. By gender norms Lundgren means the cultural expectations and norms we use when gender ('masculinity', femininity') develops and which are accepted as the norms for how men and women should behave. Lundgren presumes that every individual has to act by these norms either by following them, adjusting them, changing them or breaking them. This is a complicated process because every individual's behaviour is guided by many different norm sets and their influence belongs to different phases of personal history and to different social contexts. I find Lundgren's theory useful when interpreting the gender differences in 'our' teenagers' utterances. Gender norms are indeed a part of the frame of reference for the teenagers' existential questions and life interpretation, and since the idea of the gender-constituting project includes both individual process and cultural and social contexts, it is relevant to relate it to the concept life interpretation and the interpretation of the teenagers' utterances.

The material is interpreted in terms of Gadamer's existential hermeneutics, Geertz interpretative approach and Eva Lundgren's idea of gender constitution as a process. But since Gadamer was involved in the limited value of method, his purpose in *Warheit und Metode (Truth and Method)* was not

describe a hermeneutic method but rather a philosophical theory. I consider this theory important for understanding the teenagers who were interviewed but the question remains, what sort of hermeneutic circle is most relevant in my work? In the interpretation of qualitative interviews such as those of my empirical material, the individual interview must be understood on its own merits; but at the same time it is obvious that behind each interview a totality of meanings is reflected. This totality exists for example in the whole material but not least in the tradition, culture, society and surroundings in which the informants lived and of which they are a part. But as I as an Icelander am also a part of the same. When I interpret the material I am also subject to the effects of effective-history and live in dialogue with the same tradition as the teenagers. This has both advantages and disadvantages, gives both conditions for understanding and affects my interpretation of the teenagers' statements. This requires of me that I in my interpretation am aware of my pre-understanding and that I in my interpretation create an echo or concordance with the informants. The polarity between pre-understanding and understanding is therefore significant. Gadamer stresses the same thing. Pre-understanding becomes a fundamental condition for understanding to be possible. The researcher is involved in an interpretative commonality, the world picture and understanding of which are governed by contemporary and cultural prejudices, both productive and unproductive (Ödman 2004b, pp. 86-88). Analysis and interpretation of interviews involves a search of or penetration into other individuals' fields of meaning or other individuals' horizons, but at the same time the researcher is affected by his own fields of meaning and horizons. In the fusion of different horizons it is therefore important when interpreting to be aware of one's own pre-understandings, one's blindness to one's own defects and of how one is governed by one's prejudices. As Geertz (1983, p .5) writes, interpretation is about 'understanding of understanding'. My interpretation of the teenagers' statements and utterances concerns how I understand or interpret their interpretation and understanding of their experience and of the meaning of life. This involves attempting to understand their interpretation of life within the framework of the culture and tradition in which they have grown up and of which they are a part; and also creating a framework for their understanding of reality.

My hermeneutic process involves switching between parts and the whole at different levels. The individuals' own statements are parts interpreted in interaction with individual interviews as wholes. But these also represent parts of the whole which the whole data material and the trends therein create. For this reason the individual interviews were analysed and interpreted in interaction with other interviews and the material as a whole. But the individuals both separately and as a group were also parts of yet larger wholes, i.e. in their external reality, in their families, among friends and at school and in Icelandic society in general. The content of both individual interviews and the whole data material was therefore also interpreted in interaction with the

young people's external reality, i.e. the information available on Icelandic society and its development, among other things in the results of other research and statistics. Thus this involved both an internal context and an external context for my analysis. Ödman (1979, p. 87) notes that "the existential always tends to interfere in the picture, simply because it cannot be separated from problems concerning human life. And we must accordingly go to the external context to understand the existential content of what we are interpreting". In my own analysis the interaction is therefore between the internal and the external, or between the existential content, i.e. what concerns the conditions and meaning of human life, in what the teenagers said, both as individuals and as a group, and their external reality and conditions of life. Mark W. Risjord (2000, pp. 93-94) stresses the same thing, that the interpretation must cover both an internal and an external explanation. One must capture both the agents' personal and experience-bound perspective and their social relations. The interpretation must be based on both individualistic and social explanations. In my analysis and interpretation, therefore, there was concern for understanding both the individuals and what in their external reality can explain their statements. The goal was to understand how they interpret their lives and speak of their values, and why they do so as they do.

The discussion of the results takes place on the basis of the hermeneutic process, starting from the results of interpretation of the empirical material, other religious-educational research into children's and young people's life interpretation and values, research and statistics on developments in Icelandic society, Icelandic youth research; and from the central concepts of the study. The notion of man the meaning-seeker and meaning-creator and life interpretation as a process then form an important perspective from which to portray and explain the meaning of the teenagers' statements and how these reflect their life interpretation and values. This is also discussed in connection with their external reality, Icelandic society and its development towards increasing diversity and plurality. But the discussion is also continued in connection with school religious education. Important here is the religious-educational model launched by Sven-Åke Selander (2000) in connection with his discussion of the life-interpretation concept and his 'personality-developing religious-educational model'. His model posits a spiral movement or hermeneutic circle. He views the concept of life interpretation as a process continually going on in people who ponder existence and its meaning. He considers that the job of religious education must be to help both pupils who have and those who do not have facts, understanding, language or skills for expanding and deepening their own knowledge, their own reference frameworks and their own existential experience. The knowledge process must contribute to pupils' practising how to express themselves concerning important existential and ethical questions and how to find expression of what one thinks and feels about these. Selander considers that pupils need a language that they can use (Selander 2000, pp. 24-28). The results of what



characterise the contents of the teenagers' perceptions and values must therefore also be placed and discussed in connection with the life-interpretation concept as a scientific one but also in a more practical context in school religious education. Here Robert Jackson's (1997, 2004 and 2008), Andrew Wright's (1996, 2004 and 2008) and others' discussions of different approaches to religious education in a society marked by plurality form an important basis. Jackson points out that if religious education anyway involves an understanding of others' religious world views, this leads to the necessity of discussing a whole series of issues on the representation of religious material and methods for interpreting this. I see the result of my research project as an important contribution here.

# The four articles

## Introduction

The four articles included in this thesis show different perspectives on the gathered empirical material. They report interpretation of different parts of the material but together are intended to give an overall picture of the result of the study. The relationship between the articles is thus intended both survey the overall picture in the material (article I), and then more detailed interpretations following various themes (religion, values, adversity) of selected individuals' statements compared with the overall picture (articles II-IV). The life-interpretation concept binds the whole together since all the articles deal with the teenagers' interpretation of their lives and the result is discussed in relation to their social background and Icelandic social development. The discussion is then carried further in the summarising discussion in Chapter 6. There, the results are also discussed in connection with school religious education.

In the first article, *A Need for Security and Trust. Life Interpretation and Values among Icelandic Teenagers*, (Finnbogason & Gunnarsson 2006) the purpose is to give an overview of the main lines and trends in the material and place this in a context of the central concepts and theoretical framework of the study. In many respects the teenagers had a common frame of reference in a society that was relatively homogenous for the greater part of the twentieth century. Security and trust were perceived as the most important components of the teenagers' life interpretation, but the question remains of whether this reflects an insecurity concerning the great changes of youth and the social developments towards increased plurality. A tension between homogeneity and plurality emerged in e.g. the teenagers' statements on religion and religious activity.

The other three articles focus first and foremost on different parts of the empirical material or various themes about which the teenagers were interviewed. In every instance the interpretation was placed in the context of the study's theoretical framework and central concepts. They overview the main lines and trends in the whole material but then each article includes a further analysis of three different individuals to bring out the variation in it and how different individuals' external contexts and personal experience affect their

statements and life interpretation. This involved further interpretation of a total of nine interviews in interaction with the whole material.

The second article, *Life Interpretation and Religion among Icelandic Teenagers* (Gunnarsson 2008 – for publication in the *British Journal of Religious Education*) therefore deals with how religion, belief and religious activity occur in the teenagers' life interpretation and how they speak of the meaning of life and death in this connection. The teenagers had both a common frame of reference and their own special circumstances and personal experience to which they refer in their life interpretation. Most considered that religion affected their life, but this took place in very different ways depending on their different backgrounds. There was also a certain gender difference. Experience in the family affected much and often and set its traces on how religion and religious experience appear in their life interpretation. The specific influence of Christianity on Icelandic culture and society was the greatest common context to which they referred, but a variation with a certain plurality emerged when different individuals' immediate context and personal experience became part of the alternation between the whole and the part in the hermeneutic interpretative process.

We see the same in the third article, *"To be honest and truthful"*. *Central Values in Life interpretation among Icelandic Teenagers* (Gunnarsson 2008, to be published in a collection of articles from the *Nordic Conference on Religious Education* in Stavanger in June 2007), an article that places the teenagers' values in focus. The first analysis of the trends and patterns in the material indicated a common frame of reference in a relatively homogeneous society, showing little variation in the teenagers' values and statements about what they considered most important in their life and action. Most of them spoke of how important both family and friends were for feeling happy and secure, and many stressed traditional values such as mutual trust, confidence, honesty and justice. But again, through further interpretation of three individuals' statements a variation emerged that had its background in the young people's personal experience in the family, school and among mates, e.g. illness in the family, bullying and loneliness.

The fourth article *'You try to be cheerful but sometimes you fail'*. *Adversity, Sorrow and Death in Life Interpretation among Icelandic Teenagers* (Gunnarsson 2008, submitted to a journal in England), deals with how the teenagers spoke of what they experienced as adversity, of their fear and trouble, and on sorrow and death. In this article, attention is directed specially to the question of the interplay between life interpretation and existential questions and how the teenagers' life conditions and personal experience affect their existential reflections and hence their interpretation of life. On this occasion there was greater variation in the material than on the other two. Greater gender differences also emerged than in other parts of the material. This is because when the discussion with the teenagers concerned fear and worry, not speaking of sorrow and death, there was much in the teen-

ager's personal experience to create insecurity and existential reflections with varying contents. The interplay between the basic conditions common to everybody, e.g. that everybody is born, lives together with others and dies, and the factors that appeared to distinguish, e.g. different experience in the close environment, events in the family, at school and among mates, led to different existential questions and existential statements among the teenagers.

Interpretation of the interviews with the teenagers showed that in their process of life interpretation they attempted to create meaning and context in their lives and existence. This they did by relating to common external conditions of life and to their differing backgrounds in the family, at the same time as the internal played an important part; to their personal experience and their existential reflections. Sometimes the teenagers' statements appeared paradoxical but this shows that in their life interpretation they are attempting to bring together different, often contradictory, components. This appeared in the overall picture seen in the material but even more clearly in closer interpretation of individual teenager's statements. But before me stood a group of teenagers who in their mid-'teens and surrounded by social change were struggling to interpret their lives with the difficulties and contradictions they contain.

# Article I: A Need for Security and Trust. Life Interpretation and values among Icelandic teenagers

Gunnar Finnbogason and Gunnar J. Gunnarsson

*Nordic Perspectives on Religion, Spirituality and Identity*. Yearbook 2006 of the Department of Practical Theology (K. Tirri (Ed.)). (Helsinki, University of Helsinki. Department of Practical Theology), 271-284.

## Introduction

Little or no research has been done on the life interpretation and values held by Icelandic teenagers, even though research has been carried out on various issues relating to Icelandic teenage life, e.g. interests, hobbies, drug abuse, etc. (Adalbjarnardóttir, 2003; Thórlindsson, 2000). In an age which sees society becoming more pluralistic, the framework of reference and values becoming less clearly defined, and the formulation of life interpretation and self identity becoming more complex, such research would appear to be both important and interesting as a subject for analysis. The issue is even more relevant in an Icelandic context, bearing in mind that Icelandic society has until the end of the last century been seen as essentially homogenous, while today it is clearly becoming more pluralistic and diverse. In this new social setting, just how do Icelandic teenagers actually express themselves regarding their perceptions on life and values, and what is it that distinguishes the two? In this paper we will introduce the findings of research carried out over the last two years on the life interpretation and values of Icelandic teenagers.

## Aim and Methodology

In 1999 a new curriculum was introduced for elementary schools in Iceland. This change brought with it a new syllabus in Religious Education and a new subject called “lífsleikni” (life skills) (Adalnámskrá grunnskóla 1999: Kristin fræði, sidfræði og trúarbragdafræði; Adalnámskrá grunnskóla 1999: Lífsleikni). The new syllabuses included a change of emphasis that reflects on the one hand the need for the school system to meet the needs of a pluralistic society and ever increasing multiculturalism, while at the same time supporting the student in developing self awareness and personal and social self identity. When considering the studying and teaching of Christianity, ethics

and comparative religious studies, as well as the new subject life skills, it is important to comprehend in some way how elementary school students think and express themselves regarding their perceptions on life and values, and evaluate their ability to grapple with and discuss existential questions. In addition to the above mentioned, our research had the following goals:

- To examine and explain some important aspects of the life interpretation and values of Icelandic teenagers.
- To discover what were the distinguishing features of the perceptions of teenagers.
- To understand their ability to express themselves on their life interpretation and values.
- To put what it is that distinguishes the life interpretation of teenagers in context with the basic values of elementary school education and the learning and teaching of religious education, ethics and life skills.

The methodology chosen was a qualitative one, where interviews were taken with teenagers in the ninth grade in elementary school in Iceland. This approach was considered to suit the research goals where the emphasis included seeing how teenagers express themselves as to their life interpretation and values and evaluating their ability to do so. Previous findings as to the religious beliefs and life interpretation of Icelandic teenagers were collected in quantitative research done by Gunnar J. Gunnarsson in 1997 and the results of which were published over the period 1999-2001 (Gunnarsson, 1999a, 1999b, and 2001). The interview method offers a better opportunity to evaluate both how teenagers express themselves regarding their life interpretation and values and what it is that distinguishes the content of their ideas and viewpoints. What has been done is not intended as long term research, rather interviews have been taken at particular stages and so provide an insight into how teenagers think and express themselves regarding their life interpretation and values at that point. We chose to have the cohort of interviewees large enough so that it would offer an overall view, even though it is clear that the generalizations drawn from the outcome are limited compared to research having larger cohorts (Tylor, & Bogdan, pp. 87-92).

The decision was taken to interview teenagers in three elementary schools. Two of these schools are located in Reykjavik and one in a small fishing village in the country. Of fifteen students randomly chosen in each school, 7-9 responded positively to participating. Altogether 24 teenagers took part, 14 girls and 10 boys. Over the period November 2002 to April 2003, each teenager participated in an interview that lasted approximately one hour. During the interview they were asked questions and discussed

specific themes decided beforehand. The themes included religion and life interpretation; values and value judgements; joy and happiness; difficulties, sadness and death; school and free time; self identity and the future.

Agreed, it is possible to debate the choice of such themes and what influence they could have on the impression given as to the life interpretation and values of teenagers. We regard these themes as being central and important subjects for discussion in connection with the life interpretation and values of teenagers; also the answers given could reflect a vital aspect in their perceptions and indicate how competent they are in discussing such subjects.

## Central Concepts

When researching life interpretation and values, there are certain concepts central to the analysis and classification of the data collected. In this context such concepts as life philosophy, life interpretation, existential questions, self identity and values could be mentioned. In the Nordic countries the concepts “livsåskådning” (life philosophy), “livstolkning” (life interpretation) and “livsfrågor” (existential questions) have all been central to research on life interpretation and people’s interpretation of existence. In Sweden the concept “livsåskådning” has been discussed and used in research from the time when Anders Jeffner (1973) first set forth his definition of the concept in the early seventies of the twentieth century. All discussion of the concept in a Swedish context has been done on the basis of Jeffner’s definition, and among those who have been to the fore in this discussion is Carl R. Bråkenhielm (Bråkenhielm, 2001). Mikael Lindfeldt (2003), in his book *Att förstå livsåskådningar*, focuses on the debate surrounding the concept and he, among other things, criticizes Jeffner’s and Bråkenhielm’s definitions for being too cognitively formulated, arguing that they should have a more functional dimension to them. In fact many of those working with the concept in a Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish context have emphasized a more functional definition. They focus more on those aspects of life philosophy relating to the development of behaviour and the individual’s constant evaluation of his experiences, circumstances and existential questions (Hartman, 1986; Stenmark, 1995; Kurtén, 1995; Aadnanes, 1999).

This emphasis on a more functional approach draws attention to the concept “lifstolkning” (life interpretation), though it should be noted that the difference between the concepts “livsåskådning” (life philosophy) and “livstolkning” (life interpretation) is at times blurred. Even though the concept of life interpretation has come up in discussion in Sweden (Selander, 1994; 2000; Hartman, 2000), it has been more marked in Norway. Peder Gravem (1996) has been in the vanguard of those attempting to define the concept in a Norwegian context, though there are others who have also done so (Brunstad, 1998; Skeie, 1998; Haakedal, 2004).

Gravem (1996, pp. 236-251) once put forward a proposal for a definition of the concept life interpretation. He differentiated between life interpretation seen from the individual's perspective, which he argues is influenced or moulded by his or her own life history, and life interpretation traditions, such as different religions and bodies of thought. In his definition of the concept life interpretation, Gravem works from the premise that the individual attempts to find relevance and meaning in his existence and experiences. Life interpretation is therefore a general experience where people, both singly and as groups, interpret their lives and experience of reality in different ways, depending on their specific culture, life style and overall understanding (Gravem 1996, p. 249). As such, life interpretation includes within it such concepts as the meaning of existence, understanding of the human being, self identity and values.

In his evaluation of Gravem's definition of life interpretation, Geir Skeie (2002, p. 95) points out that Gravem places minor emphasis on the difference in meaning between life interpretation as a process and as a point of view or content; consequently, he tends to be more concerned with outcome than with the life interpretation process itself. Skeie refers to the Swede Björn Wiedel (1999) as an example of the opposite approach where the focus is on the psychological and which is individual based. One could say that such an emphasis makes the life interpretation concept more practical in research carried out in religious education studies. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that life interpretation does not take place in some sort of vacuum, but in a social and cultural context that is constantly open to change. Haakedal (2004, pp. 62-62) points out that it is never possible to understand life interpretation solely as an individual experience that is independent of the society that individuals create. Life interpretation is a function occurring both within ourselves as individuals and in our interaction with others.

When looking at the social context, Skeie (2002, p. 98) also discerns a certain cultural criticism in Gravem's work; this could well be because in a post modern society reality tends to be more chaotic when seeking a relevance in life. However, rather than seeing this as a problem, Skeie would interpret it as a challenge for the process of constant life interpretation by the individual. Such a viewpoint is interesting in our case, since Icelandic society is now moving steadily from being one that is homogenous to one that is pluralistic and diverse. In our analysis of the interviews taken with Icelandic teenagers, we worked from the premise that life interpretation is a constant process occurring both within the individual and in relation to others, and taking in the context of a social and cultural environment.

Life interpretation is related to the individual's question of existence, personal identity and values. In the twentieth century and particularly in the forties and fifties there was a special interest in the concept of personal identity, especially within the disciplines of psychology and sociology (Engedal,



1996, p. 114). Through empirical and clinical research, an attempt was made to define the inner core of man's being. In this context one could name Erik H. Erikson (1959), who looked at personal identity, and G. H. Mead, who emphasized that personal identity was the result of our interaction with others (social identity) (Engedal, 1996, p. 115). Personal identity is therefore partly imprinted upon one and partly created by the individual. It is thus both internal and external (Krogseth, 1996, p. 99). Personal identity is for the most part moulded in the socialization process and is therefore a dynamic process, i.e. it is subject to change and is influenced by the environment and culture within which the individual exists. So, in essence, life interpretation is one part in the process of self identity creation. It is a question of who we are and a question we ask ourselves all our lives. Self identity is therefore not a fixed entity but is constantly changing. This viewpoint strongly challenges Post modernism by its rejection of the notion that self identity can be constant. Self identity is in fact multi-faceted and fluid with the resulting insecurity for modern man (Krogseth, 1996, p. 101).

In teenage years at the conclusion of compulsory education there is very often a marked change in self identity. Teenage years are a time of change and development where the young person is attempting to break free of family ties and is striving towards independence. This process creates a certain imbalance and insecurity (Shaffer, 1999, pp. 45-46). In addition, youth is open to the influence of a diverse and rapidly changing modern society with all its impositions. A societal structure that is multi-faceted results in the individual being forced not only to constantly re-evaluate self identity, but also regularly having to choose between different values. Judging something to be ethically good or bad is done so on the basis of certain values. Values are linked to the question of what is good in life and what is worthy of striving towards. Values are linked to where we place emphasis and what approach we adopt, thus they influence behaviour. In post modern society, the situation has been described as being a veritable buffet of values from which the individual makes choices (cf. Hargreaves, 1998, p. 37). One might ask whether each individual's choice is not linked to his/her life philosophy or religion, ideals, life style and taste. A sense of values will therefore be part of an individual's personal identity and self understanding and thereby influence how he/she interprets life (Finnbogason, 2004, pp. 172-173).

## General trends identified within the interviews

What does one find when looking at the trends and patterns emerging from the interviews taken in this survey and how does this relate to the concepts discussed earlier? In this article the aim is to focus specifically on the major trends found within the data on the basis of four of the themes dealt with in

the interviews, i.e. religion and life interpretation; values and value judgments; joy and happiness; and difficulties, sorrow and death.

The discussions with the teenagers on the theme religion and life interpretation centre on a number of issues, e.g. the influence of religion on their lives, the image of God, religious practice, the value of religion, etc. The interviews show that for many of the young people interviewed religion is an inherent part of their life interpretation and self identity, which is perhaps understandable since faith and religion constitute a real and active part of their environment.

The majority were of the opinion that religion had an influence on their lives. However, the nature of the influence varies. Some felt that religion first and foremost influenced their behaviour. Others considered religion as such to be important for the individual, for example, by giving one hope. A few equated religion first and foremost with religious practice, e.g. going to church, which would indicate a certain confining of religion to an ecclesiastical context. A number of interviewees who considered religion to have an influence on their lives experienced difficulty in explaining just how this was. Approximately one third felt religion had little or no impact on their lives. Some did however insinuate that some supernatural force might exist, but felt the influence of religion on their lives was minimal. Religion therefore played a minor role in their perspective on life and self identity and did not appear to be relevant when it came to their interpretation of life.

The image of God among those teenagers who felt confident enough to describe their ideas is for the most part fairly conventional within an Icelandic context. Roughly half of the young people described God as a benevolent spirit, merciful and helpful. God is aware of us and watches over us and it is good to seek His assistance when in difficulty. Here is a positive image of God where He is part of the everyday struggle encountered. A few described God in an anthropomorphic way, though it did not emerge whether this image of the Almighty reflected a particular influence from God on their life or life interpretation. A third of those interviewed had a vague or unclear image of God or doubted or rejected His existence; it emerged that girls had a clearer image of God and were more capable of expressing this. Much of the findings were similar to that found by Gunnarsson (2001) in his research at the end of the last century.

Answers relating to prayer further support the influence religion has on the life of young people; the vast majority were of the opinion that prayer has some value. This is also in accordance with the findings of Gunnarsson (1999a). When the interviewees were asked to be more specific as to the value of prayer, it emerged that most considered its effect to be of a psychological nature, there being a source of help inherent in prayer, especially if one is feeling bad or is experiencing some difficulty.

This is to a certain degree in accordance with the image of God described by the young people. It is good to pray to God because then one finds conso-

lation. From this the conclusion can be drawn that it is a part of the life interpretation of many young people that prayer does have value. The value lies foremost in the fact that one feels better when praying. Worth noting is that in Gunnarson's research (1999a) young people's belief that their prayers will be answered is more marked than in this study.

The attitude of the young people towards religions other than Christian ones and the value of religion in general reflect a tolerance in religious matters. It also supports the notion that religions and what they entail matters for many of them. Religion has a relevance for those who believe because of the importance of religious traditions and customs and because it helps when wrestling with existential questions. One third of those interviewed had difficulty expressing themselves as to the importance of religion, while only one individual considered that religion in no way mattered.

The young people's notions as to how the world came about and their understanding of existence is not clearly developed and would seem to be a type of blending of scientific and religious interpretation, coupled with their own thoughts on the meaning of life. Some offer what could be termed a scientific explanation, while others give a type of religious explanation where God is seen as having created the world, though in some cases this viewpoint is expressed with reservation. Then there are others who are non-committal and first and foremost ponder the questions on existence. In fact this is in tune with a growing plurality and diversity in society.

When it came to values and value judgements, the response was quite wide ranging. The pivotal question was what young people felt was of most importance in life. It is clear that the individual's immediate network of relationships was uppermost in the minds of many. The majority mentioned having good friends and a good family. Quite a number listed a good education and profession and being successful in life, and some mentioned good health, sports and a healthy lifestyle. Others regarded enjoying life and being positive and happy as being what is most important in life. All these responses would indicate that traditional and positive values matter to young people, and while a couple of them may have listed success and money, it is other values that matter more for the majority of those interviewed.

Because a good family and good friends were so important in the minds of so many, we decided to ask them why this was so. When discussing the family, three major viewpoints emerged. Firstly, there were those who regarded the family as a social safety net, i.e. the family is important in times of personal crises or when one needs support in coping with what has to be done. Secondly, there are those who value the company of one's family as being most important, i.e. it is good to have company, to be able to talk to someone and thus avoid being alone and lonely. Thirdly, there are those who emphasized the love and concern experienced within the family.

Similar viewpoints emerge when it came to discussing friends. Firstly, many teenagers value most the friendship experienced in the company of

good friends. Here it is worth noting that many of the interviewees were concerned with not being lonely. In addition, many of the interviewees value friends on the basis that they can be relied upon when the family safety net is not enough. Good friends are important when one has to deal with problems or needs support. Finally, there are some who mention the value of trust and confidentiality that exists between friends.

In light of the high esteem of a good family, it is not surprising that when asked as to what or who had influenced them most and whether they had any role models, the family or a specific family member was the answer given. The interviewees identified either the family as a whole or some family member, in particular their mother, as having influenced them the most. And while some mentioned well known personalities in the fields of sport, music and entertainment, the majority listed a family member. Girls commonly identified a mother or elder sister, while boys selected a father, brother or uncle or cousin.

In a discussion as to what young people felt was most important in their interaction with others, two main responses were given. On the one hand, qualities such as trust, confidence, integrity, honesty, understanding and truthfulness were mentioned. On the other hand, issues relating more to the tangible features of interaction, i.e. good manners, politeness, helpfulness and being supportive, or the absence of negative behaviour such as anger, arguing, meanness and back talk, were also listed. Worth noting in this context is the high degree of emphasis placed by young people on the qualities of trust and truthfulness, i.e. being able to trust others. A more detailed discussion as to what constitutes a good or bad person further supported this emphasis.

All of these examples point to the conclusion that security, trust, friendship and social company are highly rated in the order of values and the social self image of young people. In effect, they appear as a natural choice in this diverse age where radical transformations result in society moving from being homogenous to multifaceted and multicultural. The choice could also stem from the sense of imbalance and insecurity accompanying a young person's maturing process.

Similar trends emerge in the answers given by the young people to questions relating to joy and happiness, feelings they rate very highly, and questions on sadness, difficulties and death. The answers given by the teenagers to questions on joy and happiness confirm that it is friends and family that matters most and being with them makes them happy.

When it came to the issue of difficulties, sorrow and death, and the young people were asked about what they feared and worried about most, approximately half mentioned the death of someone close. It is worth noting, however, that over half do not fear death. The fear stems from the sense of loss but not death itself. The reason is very likely because death is something so divorced from the everyday life of young people, it having been institution-

alised in today's society. Among those fearing death, it would appear that thinking about it creates a degree of insecurity. In relation to death, they experience a sense of isolation and loneliness. Also, they are concerned about what will happen when they die and, in particular, whether death will be painful. Some raised the question of existence, wondering whether there is life after death.

When the teenagers were asked if they experienced loneliness, the vast majority admitted to having experienced such a feeling. Some explained how they felt a sense of being alone and abandoned and were frightened by such. Once again the fear of being alone was identified.

When it came to how one deals with or reacts to being sad or feeling down, almost all the teenagers had a way of coping. Some mentioned watching TV in order to escape, while others said that they find it helpful to talk to someone or be with friends when they are sad. Some said that they prefer to be alone under such circumstances. Responses as to where they seek comfort when they are in trouble showed a gender difference. It emerged that girls turn more to their mothers than boys. Boys more commonly seek out the company of friends and it is noteworthy that they do not turn more to their fathers when in this situation. Only one girl stated that she turned to God when she finds herself in difficulty. It is also worth noting that more of the interviewees do not mention prayer, bearing in mind that many of them felt in a different context that prayer had value. In the previously mentioned research carried out by Gunnarson (1999b), prayer or thinking of God was far more often seen as a solution when dealing with sorrow and feeling down than in this study. Here is a good example of a "fragmented" self identity, where teenagers do not transfer prayer to other aspects of their lives.

Once again it is clear from the teenagers' responses that friends and family that their anchor in life when they encounter setbacks. When in difficulty, it is friends and family that they place their trust in and in whom they seek support, security and shelter.

## Conclusion

What kind of life interpretation, self identity and values characterize this group of teenagers? When considering the religious factor, there is a certain degree of contradiction inherent. If queried directly, the teenagers would admit that faith and religion have relevance for most of them. However, this relevance considerably diminishes when the focus is turned to other issues, e.g. how they cope with difficulties and problems. In addition, some of them associate faith first and foremost with going to church. The same can be said when it comes to prayer. Many considered prayer to have relevance, especially in times of trouble; yet hardly any of them mentioned prayer when it came to discussing difficulties, problems and sorrow. This would indicate

that faith and religious practice are of relevance in their life interpretation and have to a certain degree influenced their self identity. This is understandable considering that they have been brought up in a society that has been homogenous, the state of both church and faith is strong and the majority of the teenagers have been confirmed in the church. On the other hand, it would appear that the religious aspect is isolated in their experience and that they encounter difficulty expressing themselves on the subject. This is very likely a reflection of the changes occurring as society becomes more diverse and pluralistic and where increasing secularisation results in a “privatising” of faith. Here we can see an example of the amalgamation of the personal and sociological aspects of a life interpretation within a constantly changing society (cf. Haakedal, 2004), i.e. the answers given by the young interviewees reflect both certain influences of homogeneity and growing diversity. Self understanding in this context is thus less clearly defined since the contextual meaning is less clear or less defined than previously (cf. Gravem’s definition of the concept life interpretation, 1996). Consequently, life interpretation is more difficult, or becomes a challenge in the words of Skeie (2002), and self identity is less clear in a post modern age (Krogseth, 1996).

When it comes to values and value judgements, one sees that the traditional and the immediate are highly rated, with family and friends being of considerable importance in the eyes of the teenagers, especially the social value of family and friends and the role they play in being part of the safety net young people see themselves linked to. Again and again the interviewees justify the traditional values such as trust, confidentiality, friendship and security. Reflected here is what Erik H. Eriksson referred to as the “basic trust” and its relevance in the self identity and faith of the individual (Erikson, 1958, pp. 113-114; 1959, pp. 57-67). One could ask whether this is a reflection of the homogeneity of society, i.e. a subscribing to traditional and good values, or whether it is a sign of insecurity in these times of rapid change, i.e. insecurity that comes with being a teenager and from the changes occurring in the structure of society. The fear of many of the interviewees of loneliness, separation and loss would seem to confirm the latter. In a time of uncertainty, such traditional values of trust and security will be an important support (cf. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999). At least it is clear that these values play a key role in the life interpretation of young people, as well as in their personal and social self identity and self understanding. The environment and interaction with others are important in this context (Engedal, 1996 and Krogseth, 1996). And while the interview data has not been fully analysed, the emphasis on trust and security is so clear in the responses that we can consider them as being crucial in the life interpretation, self identity and the scheme of values of these young people.

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# Artikel II: Life interpretation and religion among Icelandic teenagers

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## Abstract

Does religion play any specific part in Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation? This article examines Icelandic teenagers' talk about religion and presents some of the findings in interviews with teenagers in a qualitative research project. The focus is especially on how three individuals express themselves about the influence of religion on their lives and why they do so. The aim is to explore some important aspects of the life interpretation of Icelandic teenagers with special attention to religion.

*Keywords: life interpretation, religion, religious beliefs and activity, teenagers.*

## Introduction

This paper addresses Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation with special attention to religion, and introduces the concept of life interpretation and its meaning in a Scandinavian research context as the individual attempts to find relevance and meaning in his or her existence and experiences. Since little research has been done in this field in Iceland, it has been a challenge to focus on young people's life interpretation and religious beliefs and activity. The issue is even more relevant in an Icelandic context, bearing in mind that Icelandic society has until the end of the last century been seen as essentially homogeneous, while today it is clearly becoming more pluralistic and diverse.

It is often argued that the Icelandic people are more religious than people in other Nordic and Western European countries. This seems to be confirmed in a Gallup telephone survey from 2004. For example 70% of the participants regarded themselves as religious and of these around 75% consider themselves Christians. In the same survey it appeared that 86% learned prayers at home when they were children, which is in fact a strong tradition

in Iceland (Trúarlíf Íslendinga. Vidhorfsrannsókn febrúar-mars 2004). Similar results were found in a quantitative research study I carried out in 1997 where 1100 children and teenagers in 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades in 13 schools all around Iceland answered questionnaires with questions on religion, religious views, beliefs and practice and other existential matters. (Gunnarsson 1999a, 1999b, 2001).

Although a formal comparison of the results of these studies has not been made, it seems to me that the findings show that young people in Iceland were more religious and more interested in religious matters than children and teenagers of the same age in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. It seems that children are less secularised in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries. The Swedish scholar, Sven Hartman (1986a, 1986b), points out in his research on children's philosophy of life that a secularised society results in secularised children. The development toward secularisation and pluralism in Iceland is likely to be two or three decades behind that of many Western European countries.

## The aim of the project

The findings I present in this paper are a part of a research project I have been working on together with one of my colleagues at Iceland University of Education, Dr. Gunnar Finnbogason. It is a qualitative study in which interviews were conducted with boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 15 in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in three elementary schools in Iceland. Of fifteen students randomly chosen in each school, seven to nine responded positively to participating. Altogether 24 teenagers took part, 14 girls and 10 boys. In 2003 each teenager participated in an interview that lasted approximately one hour. One year later 16 of the 24 agreed to take part in a new interview, 10 girls and 6 boys. We chose to have the cohort of interviewees large enough to offer an overall view, even though it is clear that the generalizations drawn from the outcomes are limited compared to research having larger samples.

In the interviews the students were asked questions and discussed specific themes decided on beforehand. The themes included religion and life interpretation; values and value judgements; joy and happiness; difficulties, sadness and death; school and free time; self identity and the future. Of course it is possible to debate the choice of such themes and what influence they could have on the impression given as to the life interpretation and values of teenagers. However, I regard these themes as being central and important subjects for discussion in connection with the life interpretation and values of teenagers.

The aim of the project was among other things to:

- examine and explain some important aspects of the life interpretation and values of Icelandic teenagers

- determine the distinguishing features of the perceptions of teenagers
- explore their ability to express themselves on their life interpretation and values.

Dr. Finnbogason and I have already presented the major trends and patterns found in the data on the basis of the themes dealt with in the interviews (Finnbogason and Gunnarsson 2006). In this paper I refer to our conclusions and use them as a basis for my further examination of how three individuals express themselves about the influence of religion on their lives, the image of God, religious practice, the value of religion, etc. The aim is to explore some important aspects of the life interpretation of Icelandic teenagers with a special focus on religion.

## Theoretical framework

The quest for meaning and existential questions are fundamental factors in human existence. When Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1995, pp. 9-18) discuss the crisis of meaning in modern, pluralistic societies and the foundations of the meaningfulness of human life, they view meaning as “constituted in human consciousness: in the consciousness of the individual, who is individuated in a body and who has been socialized as a person. Consciousness, individuation, the specificity of the body, society and the historic-social constitution of personal identity are characteristics of our species...” (Berger and Luckmann, 1995, p. 10). Meaning is, therefore, a complex form of consciousness and it does not exist independently. It always has a point of reference. Meaning is consciousness of the fact that a relationship exists between experiences. Each experience is related not to one other, but to a type of experience, a scheme of experience, a maxim, a moral legitimation derived from many experiences and either stored in subjective knowledge or taken from a social store of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1995, p. 11).

When the Norwegian scholar Peder Gravem (1996, p. 249) discusses the concept *life interpretation*, he works from a similar premise, i.e. the individual attempts to find relevance and meaning in his or her existence and experiences. Life interpretation is, therefore, a general experience where people, both singly and as groups, interpret their lives and experience of reality in different ways depending on their specific culture, lifestyle and overall understanding. Another Norwegian scholar, Elisabet Haakedal points in a similar direction when she presumes that the definition of life interpretation includes three main points: (1) life interpretation is a fundamental function, – i.e. the human capability to reflect over life or existence; (2) the social or the relational function of the life interpretation, – i.e. the self-evident bounds between the individual and the society; (3) the substance of the life interpre-

tation, – i.e. the more or less reflective patterns of thought, experience, and action (Haakedal 2004, pp. 62-64). Both of these definitions make a point of life interpretation as a general experience or capability; and that it is never possible to understand life interpretation solely as an individual experience that is independent of the society that individuals create. Life interpretation is a function occurring both within ourselves as individuals and in our interaction with others. I can also refer to another Norwegian scholar, Geir Skeie (1998 and 2002), who places emphasis on life interpretation as a process, and to the discussion among Swedish scholars about concepts such as philosophy of life, life interpretation, and existential questions (Jeffner 1973; Bråkenhielm 1992 and 2001; Hartman 1986a; 1986b and 2000; Stenmark 1995; Selander 1994 and 2000; Wiedel 1999).

Life interpretation obviously has to do with religion. I look at life interpretation as a wider concept than religion but I agree with the Swedish scholar Ragnar Holte (1984, pp. 35-37) when he argues that religion cannot be looked at as a species under life philosophy (or life interpretation) as *genus proximum*. His line of argument is that religion includes a way of behaving with respect to a higher being whom individuals profess to follow, for example through different forms of rites and worship. Religion includes certain behaviour, certain experiences and a certain form of social fellowship. In that way religion can also be seen as a way to be and a way to understand human existence. Therefore religion refers to some central aspects of life interpretation.

Life interpretation is a central concept in my analysis of the data collected. I look at life interpretation as a process where individuals both singly and in interaction with others interpret their lives and experiences of reality in different ways depending on their specific culture, lifestyle and overall understanding. The interrelationship between the individual life interpretation and the society is of importance here. I have used a hermeneutical approach in my work. In the hermeneutic circle the focus is on the interplay between the parts and the whole. In my analysis the interplay is between the internal and the external, or between existential meaning of what the teenagers are saying in the interviews, both as individuals and as a group, and their external reality both in their family and Icelandic society in general. The central questions in my analysis are: How do the teenagers express themselves about their life interpretation and the influence of religion on their lives both as a group and as individuals? Does religion play any specific part in the teenagers' life interpretation? Is there anything in their environment that can explain how they talk about their life interpretation and the influence of religion?

## Analysis of the data

The analysis of the major trends in the data collected implies that for many of the young people religion was an inherent part of their life interpretation. Although most of them did not mention religion or a belief in God when they were asked about what they considered as the most important thing in life, the majority were of the opinion that religion had an influence on their lives and described themselves as religious. However, the nature of the influence varied. Although most of them were not active in the church's youth work any more they were religiously active in some way, for example in praying. Worth noting though is that it is more common among the boys than the girls to describe themselves as non-religious (Finnbogason and Gunnarsson 2006, pp. 276-280). Many of these findings are similar to those found in my previous research (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b and 2001).

When comparing the major trends and patterns in the interviews from 2003 with the ones from 2004 only minor differences appeared. For some of the interviewees it was evidently easier to talk about their views and values in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade than in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and they were often more convinced, for example that religion had an influence on their life or not, or of their image of God. This can be explained by the fact that they were one year older and therefore probably more mature in talking about things like this.

Moving from the major trends in the data to individual responses, I have chosen in this article to further analyse interviews with three of the teenagers. These three were selected because of their different religious background and activity that reflects the general patterns in the group of interviewees. Two of them had been, like the majority of the group, active in the church when they were younger but only one of them was now. One of them had a religious family background, but two of them little or no such nurturing. The gender difference is also of interest because in my former research the boys seemed less religious than the girls. The same tendency occurred in this study; the boys more often had problems with expressing themselves about religion and religious matters than the girls. I will especially examine how these three informants expressed themselves about the influence of religion on their lives, the image of God, religious practice, the value of religion, thoughts about death and other things. I will then compare them with each other and finally try to come to a conclusion by comparing them with the major trends in the group of interviewees. The names I use are of course fictitious.

### *Anna*

Anna has been active in The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland since she was very young, first in Sunday school and later in a church youth group. Her parents are also active in the church and she received religious nurturing at home. Anna is very happy and when she is asked about what she

considers most important in her life she feels that it is her family and her friends, but also to enjoy life and she values being positive towards life.

When Anna is asked in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade if religion or faith has any influence on her life, she states:

– *Yes, I would say so...much influence.*

A year later in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade she feels the same way and when she is asked to be more specific about what kind of influence, she considers herself to be a believer:

– *It gives me strength to have faith.*

– *What kind of faith?*

– *I believe in God and Jesus.*

When Anna is asked about her ideas about God it does not seem easy for her to explain. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade her answer is a very short one:

– *...anyway he is good and merciful.*

A year later she is willing to talk more about it. She admits that she often thinks about it and that it is quite difficult to understand. In her eyes God is not just “some guy”; God is a spirit. Maybe this reflects more religious maturity than in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

When thinking of how the world came about, in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Anna mostly thinks of volcanic eruptions and explosions, and also about the universe and a lot of stars. A year later her reflection is more a kind of blending of scientific and religious interpretation:

– *The world? Look, I believe in those theories about that there has been some kind of cosmic dust that became more and more compact and finally it became the world. But I believe that it was under God’s control, but not that he created everything as we are told in the Bible.*

Anna believes that Jesus Christ was the son of God who came to the earth to show us how good God is. When she is asked if Jesus has any particular meaning for her she is in no doubt:

– *Yes, He means a lot to me.*

– *How?*

– *I just think it is fantastic that somebody wanted to die on a cross for the whole of mankind. I think it’s very remarkable.*

When Anna is asked about prayer and its significance, she is sure about the meaning of praying. Both in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade she is convinced that it helps to pray and she prays often and in her own words. She says:

- *I'm not the type that sits down every evening and prays. I pray when I feel I need it, often every day or every other day.*
- *What kind of prayers?*
- *Generally I thank God for the day and then I pray for my family and friends.*
- *Who taught you to pray?*
- *It was my mother; we used to pray together when I was younger.*

It is obvious that prayer means a lot to Anna and that the religious nurturing at home has played an important role. Pivotal in her prayers are thankfulness and thinking about the ones she cares about.

Anna is positive about the importance of the church and is active in the church together with her family. From her point of view it is good that people can come together to hear about religion and faith. When asked about other religions, she finds it important to show respect and to try to understand. It seems to her that religion is of importance to people:

- *Often it is difficult to understand the world and therefore it is meaningful to believe in something, something that can help you.*
- *What do you think of people of other religions than yours?*
- *Of course I don't believe in the same things as they do, but I try to show respect and not say something negative about their religion.*

When asked about death, Anna admits in the former interview that she is afraid of death because she doesn't know what happens after death. She becomes sad when somebody dies but generally she tries not to think about death. A year later in the second interview she recognises that she sometimes thinks about death:

- *Yes, it happens; and it is difficult because this is something that we don't understand.*
- *What do you think will happen when we die?*
- *I think...I believe that maybe we will rise from the dead, but I am not sure that I believe there is a heaven somewhere where we live another life up there. Maybe we are just spirits hovering around.*

Anna's Christian faith is an inherent and influential part of her life interpretation. Her clear Christian beliefs are perhaps not what can be expected among the majority of teenagers in Iceland but it is evident that Anna's life interpretation takes place in interaction with her circumstances. Her religious



nurturing both in her family and in the church plays a significant role. Sometimes her answers are in a way theologically formed. She believes in God, and Jesus means a lot to her as the son of God who died on the cross to save the human race. It is interesting to see how she tries to find meaning and relevance by combining scientific and religious explanations on how the world came about. The consequences of her faith are confirmed by her religious activity in the church and in prayer. Her attitude to other religions emphasises the importance of religion and she also seems to be tolerant towards people of other religions. When thinking about death, she believes in a way in the resurrection from death but has problems with describing how it will be after death. A sort of tension between her Christian beliefs and existential questions appear just as it did when she talked about how the world came about.

### ***Berglind***

Berglind has not been active in the Church and she only went once to Sunday school with her friend when she was a child. Since then she has only visited the church on a school visit. She is not baptised and her confirmation was a civil one.<sup>1</sup> Her parents are not active in the church. Berglind is happy and she feels that happiness is of most importance in life along with having good friends to rely on.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when she was asked if religion or faith had any influence on her life, the answer was negative:

*– No, not much. I don't believe in Christianity. I had a civil confirmation. But I think there is something like that... yes, something supernatural.*

*– Do you have any ideas about God or a deity?*

*– I'm not sure what he looks like, but I talk to him when I am stressed or something like that.*

One year later her views are similar. She doesn't believe in God but she thinks that "there is something up there".

Regarding the creation of the world, Berglind talks about an explosion and some chemical material that life is made of. She does not think that life has special meaning and Jesus Christ has no special meaning for her despite her positive attitude:

*– He was just a man with a strong faith; and then people started to believe him.*

*– Does he have any particular meaning for you?*

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<sup>1</sup> Sidmennt, Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, has developed a civil confirmation and other secular life-cycle ceremonies, cf. <http://www.sidmennt.is/english/>.

*– No, but he was quite a good man, I think.*

When Berglind is asked about prayer she admits that sometimes she prays although she is not a believer. She is not sure about who taught her to pray but thinks it might have been in the church. In the 9th grade she gives a psychological explanation to her prayers or even some kind of hope for an answer:

*– I feel better... but I also think that He makes it happen, or at least something happens.*

A year later the focus is more concrete but her understanding of the meaning of prayer is similar:

*– I pray when something has happened or when I am going to an examination.*

Berglind has not been active in the church and the church has no special meaning for her personally but she recognises that it does for those who believe. When asked about other religions her view is positive as long as they don't go to extremes. It seems to her that religions are meaningful to people:

*– I think they need to believe in something; they need answers, why we exist and like that. It gives them security.*

*– How do you think of people of other religions than you are?*

*– It's very positive, as long as they don't kill other people.*

When asked about death in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Berglind admits that she is afraid of it:

*– I am afraid that it is painful.*

*– Do you think about death?*

*– Yes.*

*– How?*

*– The pain and what will happen after death. Maybe we will be born again or maybe we will just become soil.*

One year later her views are similar:

*– I always feel that we will live again although I know with my sense that we will just become soil. But I really don't believe it.*

It seems like Berglind longs for a life after death but at the same time she thinks it is more likely that death is the end of everything. However she has problems with believing it.

On the surface one could see Berglind's life interpretation as paradoxical and with a tension between rationality and faith or between secular and religious beliefs. She does not believe in God, that Jesus was the son of God or in Christianity, her explanations on how the world came about are scientific, the church has no meaning to her and she wants to look at death as the end of everything. This is in harmony with her non-religious background. She is not baptised, she and her parents have not been active in the church and she was confirmed civilly. At the same time she thinks that there is something supernatural and she prays occasionally. She has problems with thinking of death as the end of everything and she feels that we will somehow live again. But further analysis shows that she is trying to find meaning and relevance in her existence and experiences. Her background is perhaps paradoxical, coming from a family with secular beliefs but at the same time she is influenced by the predominant religion in the society or maybe by films and television programmes often showing religion playing a part in human life. It also appears that Berglind's view of religions is positive and she understands the meaning of religion for other people as giving security and answers to existential questions. This leads to the conclusion that Berglind's life interpretation is in interaction with her socialisation at home and in society where she reflects over her life and existence trying to find meaning and relevance, a meaning that includes both secular and religious elements.

### ***Einar***

Einar was active in the Sunday school when he was a child until nine or ten years old. He was confirmed in the church. His parents' activity in the church seems almost entirely connected with life-cycle ceremonies. Einar sees himself as rather happy and from his point of view the most important things in life are good friends and having money.

Both in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade Einar states that religion has an influence but not so much anymore on him personally. He doesn't view himself as a believer:

- *No, actually not. I believed in God when I was younger but not anymore.*
- *Do you have any ideas about God or a deity?*
- *No.*

When thinking of how the world came about he presumes that it was like what he has learned in biology in school.

In Einar's eyes Jesus Christ was a great man but he doesn't mean much to him. Prayer doesn't have personal meaning for him:

- *No, but I'm sure it has meaning for those who believe.*
- *Do you pray?*
- *No. Not any longer. When I was a kid I learned prayers and prayed. It was my grandmother who taught me how to pray.*

It seems that Einar was more active religiously when he was younger, but now when he is in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grades he is no longer. It is of interest that it was his grandmother who taught him to pray, not his mother or father.

Although Einar was active in the church for many years as a young child, the church has no special meaning for him any longer. But he acknowledges that people go to church because it matters to them, especially when they are sad or something like that.

Einar's views of different religions and the followers of those religions are positive. In his opinion, religion is important for people who believe:

- *Religions like that are very good as long as they are not misused.*
- *What difference do you think they make?*
- *Religious people can call upon what they believe in.*

It is notable that Einar, like Berglind, is also afraid of religions being misused, perhaps a result of the picture of religions and religious extremists given by the media.

When asked about death, Einar says that he is not afraid of it because everybody dies. Of course, he feels sad when somebody he knows dies. He admits in both interviews that he sometimes thinks of death:

- *Yes, I think of death.*
- *What do you think?*
- *What happens and how everything is going to be.*
- *What do you think will happen when we die?*
- *I don't know... it's hard to answer.*

Einar's life interpretation is influenced by the fact that although he was active in the Sunday school as a kid he is no longer active in the church and the church has no special meaning to him. He doesn't believe in God and no longer prays and Jesus Christ has a little or no meaning for him. Although he understands that the church and religion has meaning for some people, it doesn't for him. His attitude towards different religions is positive as long as they are not misused. If we look for an external explanation why religion has so little influence on Einar's life interpretation, it seems that he has received very little religious nurturing at home except from his grandmother who taught him to pray. There seems to have been a lack of coherence between what he learned in Sunday school and at home which might have led to his

quitting going to church and turning away from believing in God. Therefore when he tries to find meaning and coherence in his existence and experience religion now plays little part. It is also worth noting that Einar is not different from many of the boys in my previous research study where it appeared that the boys more often were not as active as the girls in religious matters (Gunnarsson 1999b). This fact could also clarify how Einar interprets his life, perhaps influenced by his friends.

## Discussion

When the responses of the three informants are compared, it appears that religion has had an influence on all of them but in very different ways. Anna is a Christian, active in the church with her family. Her faith is an inherent part of her life interpretation. Berglind, on the other hand, is a non-believer, not baptised and confirmed civilly. Nevertheless, she doesn't deny the possibility of the existence of something supernatural and she occasionally prays. Therefore, religion plays some part in her life interpretation although she does not consider herself as a believer. Einar was active in the Sunday school as a child and his grandmother taught him to pray but now he looks at himself as a non-believer and he doesn't pray any more. In his life interpretation religion occurs primarily as a part of the past and no longer matters to him.

The discussion on the quest for meaning and existential questions recognises both the internal and the external elements of the life interpretation. When Berger and Luckmann (1995) discuss the quest for meaning as a fundamental factor in human existence they view meaning as a complex form of consciousness that does not exist independently. In Gravem's (1996) definition of the concept life interpretation he points out that people interpret their lives and experience of reality in different ways, depending on their specific culture, lifestyle and overall understanding. Skeie (1998; 2002) and Haakedal (2004) identify the social or the relational function of the life interpretation, i.e. the self-evident bounds between the individual and society. The difference between the three teenagers examined in this paper reveals how the external context can help us to understand how they express themselves regarding religion as a part of their life interpretation. They have been brought up in a homogenous society where the state of the church is strong and where the majority (90%) of teenagers are confirmed. Christianity dominates the religious education in the elementary schools. Therefore, all three of the informants have been influenced by the predominant religion in Icelandic society. Besides, in many Hollywood films and television programmes shown in Iceland, religion often plays a role and in most cases it is Christianity. This might also affect how the young people interpret their lives. Of course many societal factors may influence how individuals think

about their existence and interpret their lives, but Christianity is probably one of the most important living factors in the teenagers' external context.

On the other hand, the teenagers are living in a society that is becoming more diverse and pluralistic. This is evidenced by the fact that they are brought up in families where the influence of religion is very different. The family is the intimate group that together with friends means very much to the young people interviewed in this study. Their life interpretations are dependent upon their specific culture and the conditions in their family. This must be kept in mind in order to understand the differences between Anna, Berglind and Einar. Anna's life interpretation is rooted in the harmony between her religious nurturing and her experiences within the family and church and she appears as a Christian believer. Berglind also refers to her experience in her family but at the same time she appears to be influenced by the religion in society, in school and among her friends. This means that she combines elements both from secular and religious views of life in her life interpretation. On the other hand, when Einar interprets his life, both the family and previous church activity are part of his frame of reference. But the contradiction between religious experience at home and in the church seems to affect his life interpretation and thereby religion no longer has meaning for him.

## Conclusion

The analysis of how the teenagers talk about religion and religious activity show that religion plays a part in their life interpretation. Looking at the major trends in the data and how religion appears as an inherent part of the life interpretation of many of the young people interviewed in this study and my previous study, it is easy to simplify and presume that this is a verification of the homogeneity of Icelandic society and the importance of religion (Christianity) in Icelandic society and culture. But when we look at the individuals, a diversity created by their family backgrounds appears. The influence of friends must also be kept in mind. Knowledge of this diversity of background is important to understand the individual's life interpretation and makes the picture of young people's life interpretations more complex. All three talk about the influence of religion or religious activity in their lives. However the nature of the influence varies and the religious activity is different. But for all of them religion plays a part in their life interpretation. The diversity that occurs can among other things be explained by referring to their religious background in the family. When they reflect over their lives and attempt to find relevance and meaning in their existence and experiences it appears to be primarily in interaction with their socialisation in the family, but also with friends and society in general.

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# Artikel III: “To be honest and truthful”. Central values in the life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers

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What is the content in the life interpretation of young people in Iceland at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Do they have any mutual frame of reference and values in times of social and cultural change? And if so, what is the essence of values in their life interpretation? Icelandic society had until the end of the last century been seen as essentially homogeneous, both concerning religion and values. Today it is clearly becoming more pluralistic and diverse. For example in 1990 only 1.9% of those living in Iceland were of foreign nationality, whereas by 2005 the proportion had risen to 4.6% (Statistics Iceland 2007).

In the latest report from UNICEF on child well-being in rich countries (the OECD countries), it is worth noting that Iceland is second, after Sweden, when it comes to children's health and safety, but in terms of young peoples' educational well-being Iceland is just average among the OECD countries (UNICEF, Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007). The report also shows that Iceland is again second, now after Italy, on the table that shows the percentage of 15 year-olds who eat the main meal of the day with their parents 'several times per week'. At the same time, Iceland is second-lowest of the OECD countries (only Germany is lower) on the table that shows the percentage of 15 year-olds whose parents spent time 'just talking to them' several times per week, and ten percent of these children consider themselves lonely and feel like outsiders, or left out of things.

Today the economy in Iceland is very good and unemployment is low (2.9%). But many people in Iceland have a long working day. Working hours per week average 42.4 but many people work more than that (Statistics Iceland 2007). This is perhaps one of the explanations why young people in Iceland are of the opinion that their parents don't spend much time 'just talking' to them and why some of them feel lonely and left out of things. An interesting question is whether these circumstances in Iceland affect teenag-

ers' life interpretation and scheme of values in any way. How do teenagers in Iceland at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century talk about their life interpretation and values?

## Method

The findings I present in this article are based on data from a qualitative research project started in 2003. Interviews were taken with teenagers in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in three elementary schools in Iceland, two of them located in Reykjavik, the capital city, and one in a small fishing village in the country. Of fifteen students randomly chosen in each school, 7 to 9 responded positively to participating. Altogether 24 teenagers took part, 14 girls and 10 boys. Each teenager participated in a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately one hour. One year later (2004) the teenagers were asked to take part in a second interview. 16 of the 24 agreed to take part this time, 10 girls and 6 boys. This size sample can offer an overview, even though it is clear that the generalizations drawn from the outcomes are limited compared to research based on a larger group of informants.

In the interviews, the students were asked questions and discussed specific themes decided on beforehand. The themes included religion and life interpretation; values and value judgements; joy and happiness; difficulties, sadness and death; school and free time; and how they looked at themselves and the future. Of course it is possible to debate the choice of such themes and what influence they could have on the interviewees' responses. However, I regard these themes as being central and important subjects for discussion in this regard, since in this paper the focus is on values and value judgements.

## Theoretical framework

When Berger and Luckmann (1995, pp. 28-29) discuss the modern form of pluralism they claim that a new situation is created if the interaction between different groups and peoples – insofar as they are not regionally separated – is no longer regulated such that the different superordinated stocks of meaning, as they call them, are uncoupled from the institutionalised schemes of the functional spheres. This new situation has serious implications for the taken-for-granted status of value systems and overarching views of the world. Ethnic, religious and other groups and communities are no longer spatially separated. Encounters or, under certain circumstances, clashes between different value systems and views of the world become inevitable. Berger and Luckmann see this modern form of pluralism as the basic condition for the spread of subjective and inter-subjective crises of meaning, but they leave the question open whether modern pluralism necessarily leads to

such crises. However they indicate that in highly developed industrial countries, i.e. where modernisation has progressed furthest and the modern form of pluralism is fully developed, value systems and stocks of meaning are no longer the common property of all members of society. The individual grows up in a world in which there are neither common values that determine action in different spheres of life, nor a single reality identical for all.

Berger and Luckmann's analyses of modern pluralism harmonises with the Norwegian scholar, Geir Skeie's (1998, pp. 22-24, 2002a, pp. 52-55) definition of what he calls modern plurality. In his discussion he distinguishes between traditional and modern plurality. Traditional plurality describes predominantly the existence of several groups with different traditions, customs, languages, religions etc. within the same society. Modern plurality on the other hand does not spring from the existence of different cultural groups, but is rather connected to the kind of functional differentiation so characteristic of modern societies. Common frames of reference do not exist anymore and the individuals are no longer connected to the same value system. Skeie presumes that the plurality we see in present societies has partly to do with traditional plurality and partly with modern plurality.

In an age that sees society becoming more pluralistic and the frame of reference and values becoming less clearly defined, the formulation of life interpretation becomes more complex. The concept *life interpretation* (livstolkning) together with another related concept, *life philosophy* (livsåskådning), has been defined and discussed by Nordic scholars for several decades (Jeffner 1973; Bråkenhielm 1992 and 2001; Hartman 1986a, 1986b and 2000; Selander 1994 and 2000; Kurtén 1995 and 1997; Gravem 1996; Skeie 1998 and 2002b; Aadnanes 1999; Wiedel 1999; Lindfelt 2003; Haakedal 2004). Life interpretation is a central concept in my analysis of the collected data. I consider life interpretation a more functional concept than the substantial concept life philosophy. I look at life interpretation as a process and have made use of the Norwegian scholar Peder Gravem's (1996, p. 249) definition of life interpretation as the individual attempts to find relevance and meaning in his or her existence and experiences. Life interpretation is, therefore, a general experience where people, both singly and as groups, interpret their lives and experience of reality in different ways depending on their specific culture, lifestyle and overall understanding. But I have also made use of the Finnish scholar Tage Kurtén's (1995, 1997) definition of the concept life philosophy because when he discusses the concept he employs a more functional than theoretical definition of the concept. According to him, life philosophy is the individual's fundamental way of orientating in life. He puts the human experience and activity in focus and has in mind "the linguistic expression of the (grown-up) individual's fundamental way of orientating in life. The life philosophy is therefore about ideas, attitudes, values and the way of acting connected to this fundamental orientation" (Kurtén 1995, p. 19).

Lindfelt (2003, p. 244), in his analysis of Nordic theological research on life philosophy, points out that in Kurtén's argument for a more functional rather than substantial definition of life philosophy he attaches great importance to the role of the unconscious and the taken-for-granted in a life philosophy. The individual's way of orientating in life does not always derive from experiences or rational choices. Thereby Kurtén points to the elements in our life philosophy that remain invisible self-evident presuppositions or what he calls "basic propositions" or "basic convictions". For him the essential component in life philosophy is the inevitable basic trust in human life. It means that every life philosophy is based on certain conceptions that can't be proven logically or empirically, but constitute reality for the individual. According to this view, in every life philosophy there are elements that are not results of one's deliberate choices or rational argumentation. On the one hand, Kurtén's definition of life philosophy includes what individuals in a specific cultural context have as a common basis in their normal life, a kind of fundamental conviction without a rational testing. On the other hand it also includes what is taken for granted in the individual's life and what he or she puts his or her self-evident trust in. Lindfeldt points out that this means that central features of a life philosophy can only be articulated from a specific tradition-historical perspective. For Kurtén it is most important to articulate the relationship between subjective-individual aspects and collective-tradition-historical aspects as a kind of a balance between independence and belonging. The individual's life philosophy is always rooted in something above his or her self in a context where he or she lives, acts and tries to understand his or her own experiences.

I consider Kurtén's discussion useful for my analysis together with Gravem's (1996) definition of life interpretation. The interrelationship between the individual's life interpretation and his or her context in society is of importance. In my work I have made use of a hermeneutical approach. In the hermeneutic circle the focus is on the interplay between the parts and the whole. In my analysis the individuals are the parts and their external reality in the family, school and the Icelandic society makes the whole. But the whole group of the interviewees also is both a part and a whole in the hermeneutic circle.

The context of my analysis is both existential and external. There is always an existential element because the analysis can not be separated from the problems of human life, but we must also refer to the external context to understand the existential meaning of what we are interpreting (cf. Ödman 1979, p. 87; Risjord 2000, pp. 93-94). In my analysis the interplay is therefore between the internal and the external, or between existential meaning of what the teenagers are saying in the interviews, both as individuals and as a group, and their external reality both in their family and the Icelandic society in general and what they take for granted and put their trust in when they talk

about their life and views. The aim is to understand how they interpret their life and talk about their values and why they do so.

## Major trends and patterns

Before analysing three of the interviewees I will first give a short summary of the major trends and patterns found in the data focussing mainly on the teenagers' talk about values and value judgements. The pivotal question was what young people felt was of most importance in life. It is clear that the individual's immediate network of relationships was uppermost in the minds of many. The family as a social safety net, the good company and the love and concern experienced in the family were the major viewpoints that emerged when discussing the family. Similar viewpoints emerged when it came to discussing friends, i.e. the company of good friends, the help and support from friends when one has to deal with problems, and the value of trust and confidentiality that exists between friends.

The answers given by the teenagers to questions on joy and happiness confirm that it is friends and family that matter most and that being with them makes them happy. At the same time many of the informants feared or worried most about losing someone close and experiencing a sense of isolation and loneliness.

In a discussion as to what young people felt was most important in their interaction with others it is worth noting the high degree of emphasis placed by them on the qualities of trust, honesty and truthfulness, i.e. being able to trust others.

Again and again the interviewees justify the traditional values such as trust, confidentiality, friendship and security, and it is clear that these values play a key role in the life interpretation of these young people (Finnbogason & Gunnarsson 2006).

## Three individuals

In this article I have chosen to further analyse interviews with three of the teenagers, two boys and one girl. The girl and one of the boys are from two different schools in Reykjavik and the other boy is from a small fishing village in the country. I will especially examine how these three informants expressed themselves about their values. I will then compare them with each other and try to come to a conclusion by comparing them with the major trends in the group of interviewees. The names I use are of course fictitious.

***“I would tell my mother”***

Arnar lives in Reykjavik. His father is a plasterer and his mother is an accountant. He took part in Sunday school<sup>2</sup> and later in a church youth group and the YMCA but now he has quit going. However, he considers himself a religious person. His hobbies are cars and badminton, and in the future he sees himself as an auto mechanic. He considers himself happy and especially his mother makes him happy. In his opinion happiness is the most desirable goal in life. He describes happiness as to be loved and knowing that you are loved, and to live a long and healthy life. The family also means very much to him and it is evident that Arnar values the love in the family very much; it comes up several times in the interview. The importance of the family, especially his mother, also appears when he is asked about what he fears most:

- *The death of my mother.*
- *Why?*
- *Because I love her. I would rather die than lose her.*

And in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when Arnar was asked about what makes him sad the answer was:

- *When my mother feels bad.*

There is something special about Arnar’s love for his mother and how important she is to him. No one among all the interviewees talks about his mother as he does. Maybe she has been ill or feeling bad, at least he describes his fear of losing her and how sad he becomes when she feels bad.

To have good friends also means a lot to Arnar and he likes to be with his friends:

- *Yes, otherwise you could be lonely and often alone.*

For him it is important to have somebody to count on. He does not have many friends, but a few. Asked if he sometimes feels lonely the answer is no. But it has happened and then he is bored because he has nobody to be with and talk to. A fear of being lonely appeared in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when Arnar was asked about what makes him sad:

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<sup>2</sup> In Iceland it is more common than in other Nordic countries that children participate in the church’s Sunday school as kids, but in the teens most of them no longer are active in the church. Of my informants three out of four had participated in the Sunday school but only two of them were still active in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

*– When my friends stop being my friends. I once had a very good friend but then he got a girlfriend and didn't want to be with me anymore.*

It is possible that Arnar's thoughts about loneliness and being left out are influenced by the fact that he doesn't have many friends. It is possible that his own experience also contributes to his thoughts of loneliness because one of the things that bothers Arnar most, he says, is when others tease him. He is not happy when somebody in school gets away with teasing others, and he regrets when he teased others when he was younger:

*– I didn't realise how bad they must have felt.*

What he values most in interaction with others is to be honest. A similar view appears when he is asked to describe what characterises a good person:

*– Someone you can trust.*

And a bad person is someone always teasing you. It seems like Arnar's key values in interaction with others are influenced by his own experience of teasing others or being teased.

Arnar says that he feels sorry for people that suffer or are feeling bad, and now he can't even think of making anyone suffer. Again his experience of teasing others when he was younger seems to influence his views. When he is asked whether it concerns him to help people in trouble he says it depends on who it is. If it is somebody close or a friend then he would help. Once again he mentions his mother when he is asked about what he would do if a group of teenagers were bullying his friend:

*– I would tell my mother and ask her to get some help at school.*

Worth noting is that Arnar says that there is not much bullying in his school or among his schoolmates, bearing in mind his talk about teasing. But if it happens he is ready to help his friends, although it costs:

*– Yes, I would help my friend if he was beaten even if I would be beaten too. I would do that.*

*– Why?*

*– Because he is my friend.*

The meaning of friendship for Arnar is again manifested. The same appears when he talks about forgiveness; it restores friendship:

- *You are making peace with a person that has done something wrong to you.*
- *Does it matter?*
- *It is better to forgive than not to. Then you can be friends again.*

Although Arnar puts friends and family in focus when he talks about helping people in need or in trouble he is also very much aware of the injustice in the world. And he emphasises the importance of people helping each other in solving the problems of the world. When discussing injustice in the world, Arnar recognises that he does not know where to start:

- *There is so much injustice in the world. All these massacres, Saddam Hussein, and what Hitler did to the Jews.*
- *What is justice from your point of view?*
- *That everybody sits at the same table.*

It is obvious Arnar has reflected over injustice in school and in the world and its consequences. Justice for him has to do with equality. When he thinks of injustice in school again his experience of teasing influences his views. He is also of the opinion that people should be held responsible for what they do, both in school and the world in general.

***“To respect every person”***

Bjarni lives in a small fishing village. His father is a fisherman and his mother works at an old people’s home. He was active in the Sunday school when he was a child but not any more. However, he considers himself religious and says that his activity in the church when he was younger had an influence on him. His hobbies are golf, football and music. Happiness for Bjarni is having a good family and good friends and knowing that he can lean on them. In the future the most important thing for Bjarni is to have a good family. It is obvious that the family means a lot to him. When he is asked about what is most important in life he specifies school and the family:

- *To do well in school, follow your expectations and hopes and live up to expectations... and the family.*

Asked further about the importance of the family, he talks about support and loyalty in the family and how important it is to have somebody to talk to. To have good friends is also very meaningful to Bjarni, and he has many friends:

- *You can tell them a lot of things. You can trust them...mutual trust...you can always count on them when something is wrong.*



The importance of family and friends is also manifested when Bjarni is asked about what he fears most:

- *To lose my family or friends.*
- *What makes you worried?*
- *If I lost my family. I think a lot about my family.*

Asked if he sometimes feels lonely the answer is no. It happened sometimes when he was younger and then he felt very bad. Then it is good to have somebody to be with. Bjarni's talk about loneliness is influenced both by the fact that he has many friends and therefore he never feels lonely and also the fact he has experienced loneliness. But because of his many friends now he seems able to talk about loneliness as a part of the past. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade he also mentions his girlfriend.

Bjarni was asked about what he values most in interaction with others:

- *To be honest and truthful...to be outspoken and not to hide something.*

A similar view appears when he is asked to describe what characterises a good person. A bad person is the opposite: someone who is insincere and untrustworthy. Again and again he emphasises these key values as mutual trust, honesty and truthfulness.

When Bjarni hears of people suffering he reflects on that it could also happen to him. He agrees that it concerns him to help others when in trouble, but it depends on who they are; if it is somebody he knows or is close he will help. If a friend of his was bullied he would certainly try to stop it or go for help. Bullying is unusual in his school or among his schoolmates but if it happens he is ready to help although it costs a lot:

- *Yes, you don't want to be bullied yourself.*

When Bjarni explains why he would help a friend if he was bullied he does not refer to the significance of friendship but to the fact that he doesn't want to be bullied himself. He might have in mind the golden rule which he refers to when he talks about respecting people of different religions or he just realises that he also could be bullied.

When Bjarni is asked about things that he regrets or gives him a prick of conscience his key values appear again; he talks about lies, going back on your word to somebody and hiding something from him. But sometimes he tries to justify himself:

- *When I do something wrong to somebody I often try to justify it. But I feel bad about it and then I try to do the right thing.*

- *What about forgiveness?*
- *To forgive if someone has done something that hurts you or somebody else...he gets a new opportunity...a trust.*

It is clear that forgiveness is of great importance to Bjarni and for him it includes a restored trust.

When discussing injustice in the world, Bjarni recognises that there is far too much injustice in the world and too often you hear on the news that rights have been taken from people. When he was asked to describe justice the answer was:

- *To respect every person for what she is...to respect her rights.*

Bjarni becomes enthusiastic when he talks about justice and injustice and he puts great emphasis on human rights and to respect every human being. At the same time as he limits his readiness to help those close to him he puts a great emphasis on people's rights and the importance of standing together to stop injustice such as bullying. Maybe this could be seen as a paradox but I would rather talk about a realistic way to interpret his way of life. Bjarni's strong emphasis on human rights appears to be the essence of his life interpretation. Here it is worth noting that he specifies among other things that "the history of the Blacks" is a subject he would like to learn more about in school.

### ***"Then I feel left out"***

Erna lives in Reykjavik. Her mother is an artist and her father a chef. When she was a child she was active in Sunday school for many years. But she is not active in the church any more and she was confirmed civilly.<sup>3</sup> Although she was very religious as a child she now considers herself to be irreligious. She has been active in a choir and is taking singing lessons and likes to sing. In the 9th grade she was sometimes happy and sometimes a little bit depressed but a year later in the 10th grade she considers herself to be very happy. She describes happiness as feeling good and being able to enjoy things. What makes her happy is to be with her family and friends. When thinking about the future the most important things for Erna are education, a good job and a good family and being able to use her talents.

When she was asked what the most desirable or important thing is in life she specifies happiness and a good family and friends. In her eyes it is important to have a family who cares about you and also reliable and good friends so that you are not lonely or alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Sidmennt, Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, has developed a civil confirmation and other secular life-cycle ceremonies, cf. <http://www.sidmennt.is/english/>.

Although Erna has many good friends, a fear of loneliness can be seen in her talk and asked if she sometimes is lonely she says both in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade that it happens, but not very often. Then it is because something has come up and then she feels sad, but she tries to be cheerful. When Erna was asked what worried her most in daily life she talked about being left out:

*– If I ask my friend if she wants to be with me and she doesn't want to or says: 'we are too many to be together at my home', then I feel left out.*

In a discussion as to what Erna felt was most important in interacting with others she talks about avoiding things she finds negative, such as fighting, nagging and being angry. Instead she places emphasis on being honest, telling the truth and being nice. When she is asked about what characterises a good person her answer is:

*– Trust. You can tell her everything you want and you can count on her always being there for you.*

A bad person is somebody who lies, backbites and fools you. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade she also talks about racism. Her views seem to be influenced by the fact that a lot of slander is going on in her school.

When Erna hears about people that suffer and are feeling bad she feels sorry for them and thinks about what she could do.

*– If it is somebody living somewhere faraway there is not much you can do about it but if it is someone here at school you start thinking about what you can do.*

Asked if it concerns her to help others if they are in troubles the answer is positive but with some reservations:

*– Yes, but it depends on who it is. A guy hanged himself outside the school and many girls in the class started crying. He was an uncle to one of the boys. I found it strange if I had started to cry because I didn't know him. It's not so much my concern. But it's quite different if it is someone you know, for example a friend of yours. Then it would affect you...and then you would say something.*

Erna has apparently thought about if and when other people's troubles concern her and in her talk she limits it to those she knows or are close to her. Therefore she is not sure if she would help anybody else. She wants to be good to everybody but considers that that it is impossible. On the other hand, she emphasises the obligation to help people in need because you should be

good to others. And she is ready to help if a group of teenagers were bullying one of her friends:

- I would try to help her. I would try to be more with her and not let her be alone so that they would not bully her.*
- Is bullying common among your schoolmates?*
- No, not bullying...but it's more like stories; all kinds of...a lot of bullshit. They are saying things about others they don't know anything about and make up some stories.*

It is not clear from the interviews if she has been hit by the kind of slander that seems to be circulating in Erna's school, but she becomes eager when she talks about it. Seen in relation to her fear of loneliness this could certainly be the case.

When asked about injustice in society and in the world Erna seems to be influenced by her fear of loneliness. She talks about children being alone or feeling lonely and about people having no quality of life. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade she also talks about death penalty in America and war, perhaps influenced by media or even films. She is not sure how to describe justice but mentions that everybody should have the right to have their own opinion.

When Erna thinks of school her feelings are positive. She looks at herself as doing well at school, she emphasises the importance of good education and she looks forward to getting a higher education in the future. She is not sure whether the school or the teachers influence her views but perhaps, to some degree. She talks about problems related to teachers who always talk about their opinions or views and takes as an example a teacher she once had:

- For example a teacher I had in 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade, he was very religious and we had to say prayers when we came to class. This is some lack of respect to immigrant pupils; but relates to the Christian pupils.*

Erna's view in this matter is obviously based on the question of justice and that the school is not a place for worship. The fact that she is confirmed civilly might influence her view. Sidmennt, the association that developed the civil confirmation, has emphasised that the school should be neutral in religious matters and criticised teachers who have practised some form of worship in the classroom. Immigrants are also in Erna's mind because she goes to a school where there are a number of pupils with immigrant backgrounds.

## Discussion

Although it can be discussed to what degree Icelandic society has moved from being essentially homogeneous to being more pluralistic, it can barely be seen as a society where the modern form of pluralism is fully developed and value systems and stocks of meaning are no longer the common property of all members of society (Berger and Luckmann 1995). It could rather be seen as developing from a homogeneous society to a society where plurality is growing and where this plurality is partly traditional and partly modern (Skeie 1998, 2002a). At least when I analyse my informants' talk about their life interpretation and values it appears that they still have a mutual framework of reference which seems to be connected to the same value system. Although many teenagers in Iceland say that their parents don't spend much time 'just talking to them', for all of the interviewees in this research project, the family as a social safety net, and the good company and the love and concern experienced in the family, were the major viewpoints which emerged when discussing the family. It is also clear, when analysing the data, that traditional values such as honesty, trust, confidentiality, truthfulness and friendship are again and again highlighted by the interviewees. If we look at life interpretation as a process where the individuals attempt to find relevance and meaning in their existence and experiences (Gravem 1996), or as the individuals' fundamental way of orientating in life (Kurtén 1995), these young people strike us as trying to interpret their life and experiences by referring to traditional values that have been conventional in Icelandic society. And what they put their basic trust in is family and friends, whom they value most of all and in whom they can have confidentiality. At the same time they feel to a certain degree a kind of insecurity. They fear losing family or friends and being lonely – or should I say, they are afraid of losing those whom they rely on.

The three interviewees I have analysed in this article have different backgrounds, two of them coming from Reykjavik and one from a small fishing village. But the essence in their life interpretation is actually very similar. This confirms that they seem to have a similar framework of reference. All of them talk about the love, concern and happiness in the family and about how important it is to have good friends to count on. And all three of them show a kind of fear of being lonely when talking about having friends. They talk about the same key values when discussing interaction with others, values such as trust, honesty, truthfulness and forgiveness. They all are concerned in other people's troubles although they recognise that they can't help everybody in need. Therefore in the main they don't stand out from the rest of the interviewees. But further analyses show a significant variation influenced by their personal experience in their family, school and among friends.

Arnar emphasises above all the family and especially his mother and how much his mother means to him. He is the only one among the interviewees

who talks so much about his mother and behind it there might be an experience of his mother being sick or not feeling well. His fear of loneliness and how much he values friendship is influenced by his experience of teasing. Arnar's experience in his family and among his friends and schoolmates has therefore made the value of friendship and the love for his mother important components in his life interpretation.

Bjarni's enthusiasm for human rights, as well as his emphasis on mutual trust and respect, are what most distinguishes him from the other interviewees. Bullying seems to be the underlying experience here because although Bjarni says that bullying is not common in his school or among his schoolmates he talks a lot about it. And when he talks about human rights he relates to standing together against bullying. Therefore it is easy to infer that these experiences influence how he interprets his life and make mutual trust and respect so important for him.

Erna's experiences from slander in school have obviously had an influence on her. If we relate this to her worries about being left out and her talk of being lonely we can see how this has had an effect on how she talks about what she values in other people's character and in her interaction with others. Another thing that distinguishes her from the two boys is her religious background. Confirmed civilly and describing herself as irreligious she comments on the injustice, especially towards pupils with immigrant background, when there is a religious activity in the classroom. Her emphasis on people's right to have an opinion can also be seen in this perspective. Again experiences in the family and at school influence her way of interpreting her life.

Therefore we can say that although all the three interviewees have a similar framework of values when they interpret their lives, they also show differences that stem from their experiences in their closer external context: in their families, schools and among friends.

## Conclusion

The interplay between the internal and the external, between existential meanings of what the teenagers say in the interviews and their external reality in family, school and Icelandic society in general, shows that they refer to similar framework of values when they interpret their life. But at the same time their closer external context and personal experiences lead to differences that are also of importance.

Icelandic society is small, with only 310 thousand inhabitants and has strong family bonds. This fact might contribute to a resistance in the development of modern pluralism or plurality as discussed by Berger and Luckmann and Geir Skeie. My analysis of the data shows that possible changes towards more plurality in the teenagers' external context influence their life

interpretation on only a small scale when they talk about values. Of course their strong emphasis on trust and their need for security could be seen as a sign of insecurity in times of change, i.e. insecurity that comes with being a teenager and from the changes occurring in the structure of society, but it can also be seen as a reflection of the homogeneity of society, i.e. a subscription to traditional values. But at the same time, personal experiences of the three teenagers show a kind of plurality that we also must keep in mind when we try to understand how they interpret their lives. If we look at life interpretation as a process, then this is even more important because different experiences in different times continually influence how individuals interpret their lives. One could reflect upon how the probable development of the external context of Icelandic teenagers towards more plurality in the coming years, both in the traditional and modern understanding of the word, will affect their life interpretation.

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# Artikel IV: “You try to be cheerful but sometimes you fail”. Adversity, sorrow and death in the life interpretation among Icelandic teenagers

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## Abstract

How do Icelandic teenagers express themselves regarding their perceptions on life and death, fears and sorrows? Does this play any specific part in their life interpretation? This article examines Icelandic teenagers’ life interpretation and existential questions with special attention to their talk about their fears and worries and about sorrow and death. It presents some of the findings in interviews with teenagers in a qualitative research project. The focus is especially on how three individuals express themselves about these things and why they do so. The aim is to explore some important aspects of the life interpretation of Icelandic teenagers with special attention to adversity, sorrow and death.

Keywords: *teenagers, life interpretation, existential questions, fears, worries, sorrow, death.*

## Introduction

The quest for meaning and existential questions seems to be a fundamental factor in human existence and closely related to the life interpretation of the individual. People’s living conditions and varied incidents of life influence their existential questions and how they interpret their life. The findings presented in this article are from a qualitative research study where teenagers in Iceland were interviewed about some central aspects of their life interpretation and values. Their talk about fears, worries, sorrow and death is of special interest because it reveals how they interpret their life and respond to existential questions when facing adversity and difficulties.

The background of this study is Icelandic culture and society. Shaped through the ages by the inclement nature of ice and fire and hard weather, together with strong literary tradition with its roots in the old Sagas, Iceland has in the 20<sup>th</sup> century become a modern society with a good economy and high technical development. In earlier times, stormy weather, hard winters

and volcanic eruptions, often threatened subsistence and life of farmers and fishermen, but to day because of modern technology and possibly because of climate changes the threat has decreased. Of course these circumstances and the cultural heritage have influenced the mentality of the Icelandic nation. Icelandic society is a very small one with only 310 thousand inhabitants and because of how far Iceland is from other European countries it was at times isolated. This has of course influenced the development of Icelandic society and until the end of the last century it has been seen as essentially homogenous. But today with modern communication technology and increasing immigration it is clearly becoming more pluralistic. Young people in Iceland have their roots in the nature and cultural heritage of the country and it has relevance for many of them. At the same time they live in a global information society with all its influences. In this social setting and in times of change that comes with being a teenager, just how do Icelandic teenagers actually express themselves regarding their perceptions on life and death, fears and sorrows?

## Theoretical framework

In my work I have looked for suitable instruments for the analysis of the data collected. In Scandinavian research context the concepts life philosophy, life interpretation and existential questions, have been used and discussed among researchers for several decades. I find this discussion and the definition of these concepts important in relation to interpretation of my data.

Almost all discussion of the concept life philosophy ('livsåskådning') in Scandinavian context has been done on the basis of the definition professor Anders Jeffner at the University of Uppsala set forth in the early seventies (Jeffner 1973; Bråkenhielm 1992 and 2001; Hartman 1986a, 1986b and 2000; Kurtén 1995 and 1997; Aadnanes 1999; Lindfelt 2003). Many of those working with the concept in a Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish context have criticized Anders Jeffner's and Carl Bråkenhielm's (Jeffner's successor in Uppsala) definitions for being too cognitively formulated and emphasized a more functional definition. They focus more on those aspects of life philosophy relating to behaviour and the individual's constant evaluation of his or her experiences, circumstances and existential questions (Hartman, 1986a; 1986b; Kurtén, 1995; 1997; Aadnanes, 1999).

I consider this emphasis on a more functional approach important and it draws attention to the concept life interpretation ('livstolkning'). Even though the concept of life interpretation has come up in discussion in Sweden (Selander, 1994; 2000; Hartman, 2000), it has been more marked in Norway. Peder Gravem (1996) has been in the vanguard of those attempting to define the concept in a Norwegian context, though there are others who have also done so or developed further his definition (Brunstad, 1998; Skeie, 1998; Haakedal, 2004). I consider life interpretation a more functional con-

cept than the substantial concept life philosophy and therefore more relevant for empirical research-projects. I have therefore made use Peder Gravem's (1996, 249) definition of life interpretation as the individual attempts to find relevance and meaning in his or her existence and experiences. But in accordance with another Norwegian scholar, Geir Skeie (2002), who criticises Gravem for placing too much emphasis on the result of the life interpretation, I look at life interpretation as a process. Life interpretation is, therefore, a general experience where people, both singly and as groups, constantly interpret their lives and experience of reality in different ways depending on their specific culture, lifestyle and overall understanding. Elisabet Haakedal's (2004, 62) comment is also important, when she stresses that it is never possible to understand life interpretation solely as an individual experience that is independent of the society that individuals create. It is a function occurring both within ourselves as individuals and in our interaction with others.

The concept existential questions ('livsfrågor') is also important in my work. Some of the Nordic scholars have discussed the relation between life philosophy or life interpretation and existential questions. The Swedish scholars Sven Hartman and Sten Petterson (1980) presume that existential questions occur because human beings reflect over themselves and their living conditions; they want to understand and find meaning in their existence. According to Hartman and Petterson (1980, 26-32) existential questions always have their roots in a given life situation but also in former experiences of the individual. Certain basic conditions are common to all human, e.g. every human being is born, lives her life with others and dies. But there is also a good deal of factors that are distinct, e.g. environmental factors and the individuals' different capability to formulate and deal with their experiences. The expression of existential questions we find by different individuals serve a purpose in their orientation in life and quest for meaning.

This brings fort the relationship between existential questions and life interpretation. Sven Hartman (1986a, 162-4) discusses the matter and points out that when the living conditions changes in different periods of life the individuals' stand before new existential questions and the answers they seek provide new contents to their life philosophy. Hartman uses the concept "personal life philosophy" in this context but in later writings (Hartman 2000; Hartman & Torstenson-Ed 2007) he has switch over to the concept "life interpretation". When he describes the process of life interpretation he talks about a dynamic state of being, a constant interplay between existential questions, life interpretation, life and action. From Hartman's point of view the life interpretation is the natural frame for the individual's reflections on his or her existential questions.

The Finnish scholar Tage Kurtén (1998) sets fort similar thoughts when he looks at existential questions as questions the individual asks oneself when trying to orientate in life in a fundamental way. He is of the opinion

that these questions both have an existential anchorage as they deeply concern the individual and a contextual anchorage because they can't be answered independent of the individual and his or her social and cultural context.

A gender difference that appeared clearly in my study called for some analytical tool that could be helpful in interpreting this aspect of the data. There I find Eva Lundgren's (1993, 190-193) theory about constituting of gender suitable. Being a man or a woman is, according to her, something that constitutes in a lifelong process. She emphasises that the actions of the individual can't be interpreted isolated but must be seen in a wider context, both individual and collective. Gender constitutes in a different way in different arenas, official and private as well as hetero-social and homo-social arenas. It is a constant interaction process where we as actors constitute gender by presuming, creating, developing, deepening and changing 'gender norms'. By gender norms she means the cultural expectations and norms we use when gender ('masculinity', 'femininity') develops and are accepted as the norms for how men and women should behave. Lundgren's theory is useful when interpreting the gender difference in the utterances of the teenagers. Gender norms are indeed a part of the frame of reference for the existential questions and life interpretation of the teenagers and since the idea of constituting gender includes both individual process and cultural and social contexts I see it relevant to relate it to the concept life interpretation.

Understanding the interplay between life interpretation, existential questions and the cultural and social context is important for my analysis and interpretation of the interviews with the teenagers. Their statements and utterances reflect their experiences and existential questions as well as the context they live in and how they react. The process of life interpretation includes interplay between these factors. In my work I have therefore made use of a hermeneutical approach. In the hermeneutic circle the focus is on the interplay between the parts and the whole. In my analysis the individuals are the parts and their external reality in the family, school and the Icelandic society makes the whole. But the group of the interviewees also is both a part and a whole in the hermeneutic circle.

The context of my analysis is both internal and external. The internal part includes always an existential element because the analysis can not be separated from individual experiences and the problems of human life. But we must also refer to the external context to understand the existential meaning of what we are interpreting (cf. Ödman 1979, 87; Risjord 2000, 93-94). This is in harmony with the discussion above on the concepts central to this study and the definition of life interpretation and existential questions.

In my analysis the interplay is therefore between the internal and the external, or between the existential meaning of what the teenagers are saying in the interviews, both as individuals and as a group; and their external reality both in their family and the Icelandic society in general. I also look at the

interplay within single interviews and how statements and utterances reflect existential questions and experiences of the individuals. The aim is to understand how they interpret their life and talk about their experiences and existential questions and why they do so.

## Method

The findings I present in this article are based on data from a qualitative research project started in 2003. Interviews were taken with teenagers in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in three elementary schools in Iceland, two of them located in Reykjavik, the capital city, and one in a small fishing village. Of fifteen students randomly chosen in each school, 7 to 9 responded positively to participating. Altogether 24 teenagers took part, 14 girls and 10 boys. Each teenager participated in a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately one hour. One year later (2004) the teenagers were asked to take part in a second interview. 16 of the 24 agreed to take part this time, 10 girls and 6 boys. This size sample can offer an overview, even though it is clear that the generalizations drawn from the outcomes are limited compared to research based on a larger group of informants.

In the interviews, the teenagers were asked questions and discussed specific themes decided on beforehand. The themes included religion and life interpretation; values and value judgements; joy and happiness; difficulties, sadness and death; school and free time; and how they looked at themselves and the future. Of course it is possible to debate the choice of such themes and what influence they could have on the interviewees' responses. However, I regard these themes as being central and important subjects for discussion in this regard.

## General trends and patterns

In this article the focus is on the teenagers' talk about their fears and worries; sorrow and death.<sup>4</sup> Before analysing three of the interviewees I will first give a short summary of the major trends and patterns found in the data. The main questions related to this theme in the interviews were about what the teenagers felt was bothering them in their daily life; what they feared and were worrying about; about loneliness; what makes them sad and what they did about their sorrows and bad feelings; and finally about death and what they think will happen when we die.

In the teenagers talk about what bothers them, about their fears and worries and what makes them sad clear patterns appeared. Their closest context

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<sup>4</sup> I have already presented some of the findings in my empirical material, e.g. the teenagers talk about themes like religion and religious activities (Gunnarsson 2008a) and central values and value judgements (Gunnarsson 2008b). I have also together with Gunnar Finnbogason presented an overview over the major patterns in the interviews (Finnbogason & Gunnarsson 2006).

was in the minds of most of them, family, friends, the school and interaction with others of the same age. Bullying, teasing and negative remarks from schoolmates or when something is wrong in interaction with others of the same age bothered many of them. Interesting is that when the teenagers were asked about their fears and worries one out of three said that they didn't fear anything or they were not sure about what they feared or worried about. But besides that their fears often centres upon losing someone close or worrying about someone in the family. A few of the interviewees talked about the situation in the world, wars and terrorism. Some of the girls talked about fearing illness or death and one of them talked about her fear of being raped.

Similar thoughts appeared when the teenagers talked about what makes them sad; death of someone in the family or a friend, illness of a relative or if something was wrong in the family. But there were also many who mentioned accidents, other people feeling bad or being witness to bullying.

When the teenagers were asked if they had experienced loneliness, the vast majority recognised having experienced such a feeling. Some explained how they felt a sense of being alone and abandoned and were frightened by such. Others just talked about how bad they felt and described their feeling of emptiness.

It appeared that almost all of the teenagers had a way of coping when they were asked about how they deal with their worries or being sad and feeling down. Some mentioned watching television, listening to music or playing football in order to escape, while others said they find it helpful to talk to someone or be with friends. Some said that they prefer to be alone under such circumstances. Responses as to where they seek comfort when they are in trouble or feeling bad showed a gender difference. It emerged that girls turn more to their mothers than boys. Boys more commonly seek out the company of friends and it is noteworthy that they do not turn more to their fathers when in this situation. A few of the girls mentioned crying, but none of the boys. Only one girl stated that she turned to God when she finds herself in difficulty. It is also worth noting that not more of the interviewees did mention prayer, bearing in mind that many of them felt in a different context that prayer had value. In a quantitative research study I carried out in 1997 where 1100 children and teenagers in 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades in 13 schools all around Iceland answered questionnaires (Gunnarson 1999a; 1999b), prayer or thinking of God was far more often seen as a solution among those in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when dealing with sorrow and feeling down than in this study.

When it came to the issue of death, it is worth noting that over half of the group does not fear death and this is even more common among the boys. The fear in this matter stems from the sense of loss but not death itself. Among those fearing death, it would appear that thinking about it creates a degree of insecurity. In relation to death, they experience a sense of isolation and loneliness. Many of them, especially the girls, sometimes or often think about death. Those who think about death are concerned about what will

happen when they die and how things are going to be. Some of them wonder whether death will be painful. Others raised existential questions, wondering whether there is life after death. When they were asked further about what they think will happen after death various thoughts appeared. Many, especially girls, considered that we will go to heaven or to a better place or somehow live again, i.e. some kind of hope for an afterlife. Only few were of the opinion that death is the end of all. But again existential questions and reflections appeared in the talk of many.

### Three individuals

In this article I have chosen to further analyse interviews with three of the teenagers, two girls and one boy. The girls are from two different schools in Reykjavik and the boy is from a small fishing village in the country. I will especially examine how these informants expressed themselves and then compare them with each other and try to come to a conclusion by comparing them with the major trends in the group of interviewees. The names I use are fictitious.

#### ***“I fear loneliness”***

Gunnhildur lives in Reykjavik. Her mother is a worker but her father works at an energy corporation. Her hobbies are reading and she likes reading books about visual arts, outdoor life and cycling. She describes herself as relatively happy and happiness is to have a lot of people around her, family and friends. It also makes her happy to have the opportunity to do almost everything she wants. When thinking about the future the most important thing for Gunnhildur is to keep the relationship with her friends. When she was asked what is most desirable or important in life she specifies having many friends and feeling good. The family is also very important to her. She has not been active in Sunday school but her grandmother taught her to pray. She considers herself religious and she occasionally prays.

Bearing in mind how important it is for Gunnhildur to have a lot of people around her the question if she sometimes is lonely becomes significant. In both interviews, in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she said that it happens very seldom. But if it happens she becomes afraid or feels bad. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade she was asked about what she fears:

- *I’m not sure... to be alone.*
- *Why?*
- *I fear the loneliness.*
- *What worries you most of all?*
- *That the world will come to an end in all these wars.*



Gunnhildur's fears are influenced by the importance of having good relationship with both family and friends. Although she seldom feels lonely her thoughts of losing these relations and being alone appears in her talk about her fears for loneliness. But she also seems to be under the influence of the media when she describes what worries her most of all:

– *That the world will come to an end in all these wars.*

When Gunnhildur is worried she usually turns to her sister. This is in harmony with how she talks about her sister in other contexts in the interviews. When Gunnhildur was asked about what makes her sad she thought about the situation in the world:

– *War... injustice.*

Here again her worries about war appears but she also is concerned about justice and injustice in the society. When she talks about it in another context she thinks of immigrants and their conditions. In her school there are a number of pupils with immigrant background and this might influence her views. When Gunnhildur feels sad she just likes to relax and think about it by herself. In another context in the interviews she talks about that she sometimes prays, for example about things that make her feel bad and that everybody could have a better life. Therefore prayer also seems to matter when feeling bad or thinking of the bad sides of life.

In a discussion about death Gunnhildur said that she sometimes thinks about it. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade she said that she was not afraid of it. A year later she recognised being afraid of death:

– *Because then everything that is has ended and I don't know what is going to be.*

– *But what do you think will happen when we die?*

– *I imagine that we will be born again or that we will go to another place.*

In Gunnhildur's mind, like in the minds of many of the teenagers, is the uncertainty about death and this creates some kind of an existential anguish. Although she describes herself as happy and has a many good friends a fear for loneliness is also a part of her anxiety. Her awareness of insecurity also appears in her worries about that the world will come to an end in a war.

***"I feel like she is watching over me"***

Helga lives in Reykjavik. Her mother is a nurse and her father a police officer. Her hobbies are acrobatics and dance. She is very happy and thinks that life is wonderful. What makes her happy is to among other things to be with

her friends. In her eyes the family is the most important thing in life but her friends are also significant and she has many good friends. In the future she wants to be a doctor. Helga did not go to Sunday school when she was a child, but she was active in the church youth group in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She considers herself as religious and believes in God. She learned to pray in the church and she prays when she feels bad.

When Helga was asked about what bothers her in her daily life she was not sure when she was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade but anyhow she talked about her grandfather:

*– I'm not sure... Often when I think about things like this I think about my grandfather because he is ill. That is the only thing that is bothering me.*

When the talk turned to what she fears most of all she describes her fear of being out alone in the evenings and that some bad guy would come and rape her:

*– I have heard about girls who have come up against such things.*

In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when Helga talks about her worries her grandfather is still in her mind. He is very old and she is afraid that he will die. Interesting is that Helga usually turns to her father when she is worried or in trouble because fathers are very seldom mentioned by the teenagers.

It happens that Helga becomes lonely but not often. She takes as an example that once some kids were lying and telling a lot of wrong things about her. Then she became lonely and it made her sad.

Asked further about what makes her sad the family seems to be uppermost in her mind. She talked about when somebody, especially in the family, dies or if something is wrong in the family. But in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade she also thought of the situation in the world and talked about orphan children and similar things she had seen on television. In another context in the interview poverty, hunger and disease were in her mind. She therefore seems to be concerned about other people in the world and how they feel.

When Helga is sad she finds it best to lie in bed. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade she talked about crying against the pillow but in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade she likes more watching a comedy, eating cookies and drinking Cola because then she stops thinking about her sorrows. In another context in the interviews she mentioned praying when she feels bad so this also appears to be a way of coping for her.

Helga does not often think of death and she is not afraid of death:

*– I'm not afraid of it. Maybe I'm a little bit psychic because I sense people, like my grandmother which is dead. I feel that she is watching over my. But I'm afraid of dead bad guys.*

This is in harmony with her talk in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when she said that her father told her that her grandmother would always be with her although she was dead. Therefore it is interesting when Helga is asked further about what she thinks will happen when we die, she becomes very down-to-earth, so to speak:

*– Then I think we will just go to the coffin.*

This might be seen as some kind of a paradox, talking about her sense for those who are dead and at the same time think of dead as just ending up in a coffin. But this can also be interpreted as an evidence of the complexity of the life interpretation process. When Helga tries to find meaning in her experiences, she has on the one side the memories of her grandmother and her feeling that she is still watching over her and on the other side the cold reality of burying the dead in a coffin. The death of her grandmother and her worries about her grandfather obviously influence her life interpretation. It is also interesting how she thinks of 'bad guys' both in relation with her fears of being raped and in her talk about the dead people she senses. Her ideas about being psychic can be related to a familiar interest in psychic matters in Iceland.

### ***“I try to do something I like”***

Ingvar lives in a small fishing village. His father is a store manager and his mother a stock manager. His hobbies are motorcycles and motocross. He is very happy and what makes him happy is his family; when everybody in the family is well and there are no problems in the family. He also talked about his friends. From his point of view the family, good health and good education are the most important things in life. When he thinks about the future things like a better security, better technique and a longer life comes to his mind. He does not consider himself to be religious although he was active in Sunday school when he was a child and was confirmed in the Lutheran national church. But he occasionally prays since his parents and the priest taught him to pray when he was younger.

When Ingvar was asked about what bothers him most in daily life he gave different answers. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade he talked about his parents fussing and boring teachers. A year later the focus is on things that don't go to well, both in school and elsewhere.

When the question is about what he fears most of all war and terrorism comes to his mind. In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade he is quit sure:

*– I most of all fear war. I hope that war will never come to Iceland.*

A year later he is not so sure, but anyhow he talks about terrorism. The media with regular news about war and terrorism obviously have an influence on him.

Usually Ingvar is not worried, but when it happens he turns to his parents. And talking about loneliness he said that it almost never happens to him to be lonely. In another context in the interviews, when he talked about how important it is to have friends he argued that it would be sad to have no friends, then he would be alone all the time. Obviously Ingvar appreciates friendship and he has a lot of friends. Therefore he practically never experiences loneliness.

What makes Ingvar sad is when other people feel bad or when he witnesses bullying, or that's what he said in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In another context in the interview he said that bullying happens very seldom in his school and if it happens then it is always stopped and nobody does have to stand alone. But in spite of this he seems to have experienced or witnessed some bullying. When Ingvar is sad he tries to forget it by doing something enjoyable:

*– I try to do something I like...try to forget about it...like doing something in the computer or to go out and play football.*

Ingvar is not afraid of death and he does not think much about it. He prefers to live the life, as he said. But when he thinks about it he wonders what happens after death:

*– That's the question. I just hope there is a life after death.*

It seems that Ingvar is a happy boy, having a good family and friends, and he is neither lonely nor does he often feel sad. His fears are more bound up with the situation in the world than something in his closer context. Interesting is that what makes him sad is how other people feels. Ingvar is like many of the boys in the group of interviewees not afraid of death. But his thoughts about death seem to be interplay between existential questions and a hope for afterlife.

## Discussion

If we look at the major trends in the data collected the first thing we pay attention to is how important role the teenagers nearest context plays in their life interpretation. Family and friends, things that happens at school or in interaction with those in the same age group is pivotal in most of the interviews. This external context is of course important since life interpretation

and existential questions not only have an existential anchorage but also a contextual anchorage, as Kurtén (1998) points out. The existential questions can't be answered independent of the individual and his or her social and cultural context and they express the context in which the utterances of life interpretation belong. Therefore it is interesting to see how the teenagers talk about their experiences in relation to their external context; how they react and what kind of questions they raise.

Various feelings, at times bad and negative, proceeded from their experiences with fear, worries and sadness, are often the core of the teenagers talk. Although most of them describe themselves as happy they seem to realise that they are living in a transient world. Fears of losing someone close or that something will happen to family and friends is in the minds of many; also that something will happen to them, fear of being abandoned and lonely or even violated. This raises questions on meaning and existence among many of them although a part of the interviewees say that they do not fear or worry about anything. Existential questions are especially manifested when talking about death and what will happen when we die. Death is one of the basic conditions common to all human beings that bring forth the quest for meaning and creates existential questions among young people as well as adults (Hartman & Petterson 1980).

A gender difference appears in some parts of the interviews. The girls are more concerned than the boys about things that could threaten their life and happiness. They also think more about death and reflect more over what happens when we die. There is also a difference between girls and boys as to where to seek support, security and shelter. Girls turn more to their mothers but boys more commonly seek out the company of friends. Similar gender difference appears in my former quantitative study (Gunnarsson 1999b). One can ask what it is in their external context that creates this difference in their experiences and interpretation of life. At first sight it could reflect the influence of the traditional gender roles in the life interpretation of the teenagers. But in some of the utterances it is also probable that we see the influence of gender norms (Lundgren 1993) on the teenagers' ideas how to talk about and react in given situations. Boys don't cry and they have to act without showing a fear.

When we compare the three individuals we notice how the gender difference in the whole material appears in these three interviews in several ways. If we begin with their fears and worries it is obvious that the two girls are more open than the boy in their reflections and they talk more deeply about what they experience as a threat to their happiness and life. This is in fact in harmony with the major trends in the material. Gunnhildur's talk about her fear of loneliness and Helga's worries about her grandfather's health and her fears of being violated are examples of this. They seem to experience this as a real threat and when they reflect over it they show more existential anguish than Ingvar does when he talks about his fears. The threats he talks about are

not in the same way in his closest context. Therefore when he talks about his experiences in connection with fears and worries we don't see the same evidence of existential anguish in his life interpretation as in the utterances of the girls. However, Ingvar's fears about war and terrorism and his hope for that it will never come to Iceland should not be underestimated.

All three had a way of coping when they were worried. They all usually turned to somebody in the family like the majority of the interviewees. What surprises is that none of them talked about their mother bearing in mind how common it was in the group as a whole, especially among the girls. Helga talked about her father and Gunnhildur her sister. Ingvar talked about both his parents. And when it came to sorrow and sadness two of them said they would do something enjoyable to try to forget. Gunnhildur said that she would think about it by herself. If we compare this with the major trends in the material we could expect the girls to talk about the importance of talking to others but none of these three does. Only Helga mentioned crying and both the girls talked in another context in the interviews about prayers when they felt bad. This shows that although we can see some major trends in the empirical material we can't generalize on basis of those findings. A more variation among the informants appears when the individual interviews are further analysed, a variation that depends on their different external context and experiences and their capability to formulate and deal with their experiences (Hartman and Petterson 1980).

In the talks of the three individuals about death we can also see a difference that has similar explanations. When Helga talks about how she thinks about death she is under the influence of her own experience of her grandmother's death. Gunnhildur is the only one of the four that recognises to be afraid of death and there she is in a company with around half of the girls in the group of interviewees. In her case it has to do with the uncertainty and insecurity in relation to death, indeed a familiar reason for being afraid of death among the interviewees. Although Ingvar is not afraid of death his talk is also influenced by the question of what will happen. Gunnhildur and Ingvar therefore formulate existential thoughts and questions and the paradoxes in Helga's utterances about death show a similar uncertainty in her existential reflections. But Helga's psychic experiences make her reflections unique among the interviewees. This again shows how the external context, various experiences and different capability to deal with them influence the life interpretation of the individual.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the teenagers talk about their fears and worries, sorrow and death brings forth how they find themselves between on one hand the happiness and security the family, good friends and a lot of opportunities in mod-

ern Icelandic society gives them, and on the other hand their awareness of how fleeting their happiness and security can be. While the vast majority of the interviewees talked about their joy and happiness, a fear of loneliness and separation was hiding under the surface among many of them. This appears especially among the girls. This tension between happiness and fear could be a sign of insecurity in times of change, i.e. insecurity that comes with being a teenager and from the changes occurring in the structure of culture and society in times of increasing plurality.

The analysis also brings forth how complex the process of life interpretation is, i.e. the constant interplay between the external context, the experiences of the individuals, their existential reflections and questions, and how they formulate and deal with their experiences. In the talk of the teenagers we see how their own experiences together with the experiences of others and a knowledge of circumstances that might threaten their life and happiness, creates fears and worries about that something could happen to them, their family and friends. The fear of losing someone close is particularly distinct. This often results in existential reflections and questions, especially when thinking of death.

Although significant major trends and patterns have been recognised in the interviews, it is important to emphasise the meaning of individual experiences and the closer external context. It creates diversity among the teenagers although they have a lot in common. The analysis of the three individuals reveals a difference that appears in their utterances. This difference both among the three individuals and between each of them and the whole group of interviewees comes from their different background and manifests how complex the process of life interpretation is. Although a group of teenagers in a small and relatively homogeneous society like in Iceland obviously have a similar external frame of reference, the analysis also shows that their closer context and personal experiences lead to variation in their life interpretation that also is of importance if we are to understand the existential meanings of what they are saying.

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# Summarising discussion

‘It’s terrifically hard to understand this. I don’t think that the meaning of life is all that profound... you just have to live your life and experience it... try and be a good person.’ Girl, class 10.

The overall purpose of the work presented in this thesis was to investigate Icelandic teenagers’ life interpretation and values and to discuss the results in connection with social change and with school religious education. Discussion of the central concepts life philosophy, life interpretation and existential questions resulted in the life-philosophy concept being considered too cognitive. The hermeneutic analysis and interpretation of the collected material was therefore based on the life-interpretation concept. Life interpretation was defined as a process in which individuals find themselves when they are finding their way about existence, attempting to handle the various existential life situations with which they are faced, and seeking answers to their existential questions and the meaning in their existence. It is a process that has both a certain inner coherence and contradictions, and can therefore be manifested in different expressions and statements. Life interpretation also takes place in a dialectic interplay between individuals and the social and cultural context in which they find themselves.

In my view, the life-interpretation concept may be linked with a hermeneutical theory, particularly Gadamer’s (1960/1996) existential hermeneutics and his *Bildung* concept. Young people’s *Bildung* process involves continual dialogue between them and the tradition in which they are growing up and in which they live. The results reported in the four articles and included in this thesis show a group of teenagers who in their life interpretation process are attempting to create meaning and context in their lives in the often contradictory situation in which they live. It emerged from many of the interviews that the teenagers sometimes thought it was difficult to understand the meaning of life. But for many this was about living life, experiencing it and attempting to live a good life; or in other words processing their experience and existential questions, creating their own meaning and converting it into action.

In the present summarising discussion I describe and discuss the main results of the study. They are based partly on the patterns and trends in the collected material and partly on interpretation of individual interviews. I

refer to the results of the four articles but also to other research in the area. The presentation involves the understanding of how the teenagers interpreted their lives at which I arrived through my analysis and interpretation of the data, i.e. my understanding of their life interpretation (cf. Geertz 1983, 'understanding of understanding'). I first draw attention to some main categories in the contents of the teenagers' statements. Then this is discussed in connection with their external context and social change in Iceland. Lastly the results are discussed in connection with school religious education.

## With focus on meaning

'I go out, I love being out walking about or whatever. Or baking, I love baking when I am happy... or just being by myself'. Girl, class 9.

'I ride a horse or play the drums or something... or snowboard. I play in a band, you know'. Boy, class 10.

A chief question in the study is how do teenagers express themselves regarding their life interpretation and values and what characterises individual teenagers' perceptions and statements? If we concentrate first on the contents of the teenagers' statements it comes out both that they have much in common and that there is also a variation. Most speak of seeing their joy and happiness, but life and teenagers' experience have many sides. Since the informant population consisted only of 24 teenagers, it is impossible to generalise on this basis regarding Icelandic teenagers as a whole. But in a group of this size one can nevertheless see certain patterns in the material, and I shall bring out as the results of the study some main categories in the young people's statements.

### *In the secure zone of trust*

'I think the most important thing is to have a family and friends who care about one... just being able to be together with them'. Girl, class 10.

'It's very important to feel at ease with your mates; not to be alone all the time and to be able to do something together with your mates.' Boy, class 9.

Most of the teenagers described the many good and positive sides of their lives and spoke freely about themselves as happy people. The source of their happiness and joy was good relations in the family and good friends (article III). Many spoke about how important it was to be together with family and mates, both when things were going well and also when there were problems

or difficulties. They appreciated the good fellowship they experienced in the family and among friends – the old saying ‘maður er manns gaman’, ‘Man is gladdened by men’ (Hávamál/The Poetic Edda) still applies.

This is not really surprising since it concerns the teenagers’ immediate network, and it agrees with other Nordic research (see e.g. Erikson 1999). The immediate social network constitutes an important framework of everyday existence and is therefore of great importance in the teenagers’ experience of their outer world and interpretation of life.

An important part of everyday existence is interaction with others, and what the teenagers valued highest in their doings with others was trust and confidence together with honesty and forthrightness (article I; article III). Being able to rely on other people, and being reliable oneself, recurred continuously in their statements. Similar needs for trust and security also emerge in other research in the Nordic countries: this may be connected with the fact that young people are in an insecure search phase where the need for security is great (Brunstad 1998). It seems as if the changes of youth and the changes that have occurred in Icelandic society during the past few years have set their trace on the teenagers’ life interpretation. In such a situation one likes to search for traditional values (Brunstad 1998) and this results in the young people’s great stress on friendship, trust and confidence.

Many of the teenagers were involved in questions of justice and injustice in their society and in the world (article III). They were maybe affected by what they see in the media since poverty, hunger, war, inequality and lack of human rights were apparent in the statements of many. But many also connected this with their immediate surroundings and spoke of bullying, teasing and exclusion. Teenagers appeared to think much about injustice in the world but when it came to action they turned to those who were close to them. This may be interpreted as a contradiction; but it may also be that the teenagers were realistic in this way and this showed first and foremost a typical way of experiencing and interpreting one’s reality, i.e. starting with what is nearest.

### *Out in the risk zone*

‘I’m so lonely and it’s so dull. It’s so awful.’ Girl, class 9.

‘If something tragic happens, if someone dies or something like that. Also if somebody says something about you that isn’t true, then perhaps you get angry. When people say unkind things about you without knowing anything about you.’ Girl, class 10.

Though the teenagers spoke of their happiness and security in the family and among their mates there was also an awareness of the risk and threat that can

completely change the whole situation, and this created anxiety amongst many of them (article III; article IV). This was based on their own and others' experience, under the surface even though they spoke little of it. When the teenagers interpreted their lives it was natural for some contradictions to appear, owing to varying life conditions and experience. Many were frightened of losing somebody in the family or were concerned that a family member was ill or that an accident could happen. Just as the social network was incredibly important for these teenagers, their worry that it could possibly fall apart was striking.

The same applied to their mates. Fear of losing friends, of ending up outside the group and being lonely was very near, though most of them had many good friends. School was likewise a place in which the teenagers' statements aroused both positive and negative feelings. Many viewed education positively as an important preparation for the future and it was good to meet friends and mates at school. But there was also talk of tiredness in connection with school and, as in other Icelandic research, negative statements also emerged since there was a risk of bullying and insults (Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Ásgeirsdóttir, Sigfúsdóttir 2002, see also Osbeck 2006). This double feeling played a part in the risk awareness found in the teenagers' statements. In their talk about their free time and about adversity, similar anxiety, fear of being left out, emerged. This fear of loneliness also appears in other Nordic research (Hallgren 2003). It also came out in the teenagers' statements that despite what was good and secure in their lives their existence was a risk zone, and this they felt was risky or threatening. But this was more beneath the surface in their statements and, concerning trouble and sorrow, all the teenagers had a way of processing such situations but in different ways.

Regarding death, many showed a hope for a life after death but many also, when they thought about death, reflected primarily over existential questions. The interaction between experience, existential questions and life interpretation was most obvious in the teenagers' statements about death and what happens when we die; but there was similar interplay in their reflections on the origin and purpose of the world. Thinking about life's origin and end is an important part of man's search for meaning, and this was reflected in the teenagers' statements.

### *Under the influence of religion*

'You've got to believe in something... you've always got to believe in something. So many people are believers, and it gives you hope, see.' Girl, class 9.

‘Yes I think about belief. If I wasn’t a Christian but a Muslim, for example, I’d behave differently. I’ve been shaped by Christian faith.’ Boy, class 10.

One finding of the study was that religion influenced most of the teenagers, but in different ways (article I; article II). The majority felt that belief affected their lives, but when they described this in more detail differences appeared. Many spoke of how belief affected their behaviour in both an ethical and a religious sense; others about how faith gave hope or security. These two categories are also prominent in other studies. In Bo Dahlin’s (1989) study many viewed religion as a way of life regulated by belief; but religion as belief that brought security was also a large category in Dahlin’s result.

For those teenagers who were able to describe their picture of God, it was in most cases fairly conventional for Iceland. Many described God as a well-disposed or good spirit who watches over us and is both merciful and helpful. My earlier quantitative study of children’s and young people’s religious attitude and practice gave similar results (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b; 2001). But the teenagers’ thoughts about the origin of the world showed greater variation. The issue of the relationship between belief and science was immediate for many of them, and from their statements there emerged a mixture of scientific and/or religious explanations together with their thoughts about the meaning of life. Some put forward the scientific position, others the religious and some were ‘both ... and’. Bo Dahlin’s (1989) study gives similar results where religion and science were, for the young people he interviewed, phenomena that either excluded one another or complemented one another.

Many of the teenagers were also religiously active in terms of prayer, and many had attended Church Sunday school when younger; but most had given this up. The same tendency appeared in my earlier quantitative study (Gunnarsson, 1999a; 1999b) but the influence of the Church and Christianity persisted in many and this showed in their statements. The majority considered that prayer was significant, particularly as a call for comfort and help. This may possibly be interpreted as privatisation of religion since most of the teenagers were not involved in Church work but were still actively religious in prayer. Since most did not speak directly about faith or prayer when the discussion was about adversity, sorrow and death one might deduce that religion or prayer were something isolated or routine with no real grounding in their own lives and therefore played no important part in their life interpretation. But one may also note that many of them felt that prayer was important when one was ill or did not feel well. My earlier quantitative study also showed that children and young people viewed prayer as one of the paths they could take when they met sorrow or adversity or were ill (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b). It also emerged from my earlier study and others of religion and religious activity in Iceland (Gunnarsson 1999a; Björnsson and

Pétursson 1990; Trúarlíf Islendiga 2004), that it is very common to learn one's prayers at home as a child. Prayer is therefore part of society's culture and tradition and has had its influence on young people's life interpretation not merely as routine with no grounding in their lives, but something of significance for them in various situations throughout life.

I conclude therefore that religion is a significant factor in the teenagers' interpretation of life, and is grounded in their external context both in Church and Christian influence on Icelandic society and in their families. The variation that appears often has its explanation in different background and experience in the family. This conclusion has support in other Nordic research, i.e. how the external context and surroundings exert an influence in this connection (see e.g. Birkedal 2001; Hallgren 2003; Brömssen 2003).

### *The influence of plurality*

'I talk to my Mum, or I also have a very good friend who I can count on.'  
Girl, class 10.

'I try to do something I think is fun. I try to forget... my computer or I go out and play football.' Boy, class 10.

The picture emerging from the material showed a group of teenagers who in the main had a positive attitude to life, and their values appeared based on what may be called traditional ones. To some extent the picture was homogeneous but diversity and variation were also visible. Since the purpose of the study was not only to investigate what generally characterised the contents of the teenagers' perceptions and values, but also to see what was special for each, the interactive, hermeneutic, interpretative process between individual interviews and the overall picture of the material was an important part of the results. It brought out various differences. What first aroused attention was the gender differences in the material. On many occasions the girls spoke more than the boys on matters connected with life interpretation and values. But other gender differences were also striking and prompted questions. The girls were more religiously committed than the boys, their troubles and fears more often concerned what could threaten their security and happiness in their immediate surroundings. It was more common among them to worry about the final comprehensive school exams; they reflected more over death than boys did; and when the girls sought help and support in adversity and sorrow it was commonest for them to ask their mothers, while the boys sought companionship with their mates. The fathers were conspicuous through their absence in the teenagers' statements. Of course there were exceptions and one must be careful not to generalise too much, but there were similar results in, for example, my earlier questionnaire survey (Gun-

narsson 1999a; 1999b) and in other Nordic research (see e.g. Hallgren 2003). There is some explanation for these gender differences in the society in which the teenagers grew up, with its own notions about gender-role patterns and gender norms that influence teenagers' lives. There is a dialectic interplay between their external world and how they interpret their lives. This means that each individual learns, adapts and develops attitudes and frameworks so as to live in harmony with – or conflict with – valid cultural expectations and gender norms (Lundgren 1993, see also Osbeck 2006). The contents of the teenagers' statements regarding gender differences should therefore be understood in the framework of culturally gender-determined behaviour. Here belongs, therefore, a study of culture and behaviour (Geertz 1973; 1983). For example my earlier quantitative study showed that it was most commonly the mothers and then the grandmothers who taught children to pray, and in Sunday school it was more common that the teachers were women (Gunnarsson 1999a). One may therefore wonder about the influence of example in this connection. In addition, the majority of pre-school and compulsory-school teachers in Iceland are women.

The differences between teenagers from the three different schools were insignificant, but there are other important differences in the material i.e. between individuals in each school. The closer analysis and interpretation of interviews with nine of the sixteen participants both in 2003 and 2004 (article II; article III; article IV) showed differences based on their immediate context and their personal experience in family, school, Church and among friends. This experience often influenced how individuals interpreted their lives and what they placed value on. When the analysis went deeper in individual interviews and the interplay was clarified between on one hand the individual's personal experience and existential reflections and on the other his or her external context, the life interpretation-process with its difficulties and conflicts became clearer. Since this concerned individuals' life interpretation taking place in this interaction, the picture we obtain of each individual becomes important for understanding of the teenagers. And when compared with the overall picture in the material it gives even better understanding of how the teenagers interpreted their lives, both as individuals and as a group. The result shows that even though the young people had grown up in a relatively homogeneous society with its culture and tradition there was also an important variation among the individuals. This underlines the importance of finding out about each individual's background and personal experience if one is to achieve understanding of how they think and act and create meaning and context in their existence. Then it is not primarily a matter of traditional plurality (Skeie 1998; 2002a) since the differences are not explained in different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The individual variation in the material, on the other hand, can be sorted under the concept of modern plurality since it can be explained using different frames of reference that the teenagers had when they experienced and interpreted their external



context. In this way the contents of the teenagers' statements testify to a group of young people who lived in a field of tension between homogeneity and plurality.

## In a field of tension

'To be happy... but in spite of this it's perhaps a bit meaningless. You have to do the best you can with it... do what you want and benefit from it... create your own meaning.' Girl, class 10.

Analysis and interpretation of the interviews with the teenagers show a picture of a tension both between homogeneity and plurality and between security and insecurity. The first tension concerned the teenagers' external world. Here we have on one hand Icelandic society and its cultural traditions and development during the past few years. On the other hand we have the teenagers' statement or narratives about their surroundings which to some extent may reflect the situation in society or their experience of it. The results of this study are therefore based on a process of interpretation that switches between the external context, i.e. the information we have about Icelandic society and the internal, that is, the teenagers' statements. Icelandic society has been formed by the country's nature and culture with roots in the old sagas and Church influence throughout just over a thousand years. This has formed its tradition (Gadamer 1960/1996), to which both the teenagers and I myself as a researcher belong and of which we are a part. General statistics on Icelandic development and research in the field suggest that society was relatively homogeneous for the major part of the twentieth century; but during the past few years development has been towards increased diversity and plurality. This is shown among other things in the figures for increasing numbers of immigrants to Iceland, and by changes in affiliation to religious communities (Statistics Iceland). But nevertheless the change concerns mostly traditional plurality (Skeie 1998; 2002a) since it is primarily an issue of cultural and religious background. Certain signs of pluralism or modern plurality (Berger and Luckman 1995; Skeie 1998; 2002a), however, may be discerned in research results on Icelanders' religious attitudes (Björnsson and Pétursson 1990; Trúarlíf Íslendinga 2004). Social change therefore involves a mixture of traditional and modern plurality. But other changes also occurred during the twentieth century that affect teenagers' lives and conditions in Iceland, i.e. development from a farming and fishing community to a modern information community with a good economy and high technical development. The teenagers were bang in the middle of this social situation and it created the framework within which they interpreted their lives. The tension between homogeneity and plurality therefore emerged in different

ways in their statements when interpreted in relation to social change. The main lines and trends in the interview material indicated a common frame of reference regarding e.g. the effect of religion on the teenagers' life interpretation and what common and traditional values were to be found in their statements (article I). The Church Sunday schools and confirmation classes together with Christian education in school have had their influence: participation in Sunday school has been very common in Iceland (Gunnarsson 1999a; 1999b; Trúarlíf Íslendinga 2004), together with the fact that the large majority of teenagers were confirmed in the Lutheran National Church or other Lutheran churches. Christianity as the dominant religion in society has therefore had its effect but at the same time there is a certain diversity in Icelanders' religious ideas and attitudes (Björnsson and Pétursson 1990; Trúarlíf Íslendinga 2004). The tradition and effect history of the Church and the Christian faith in Icelandic culture appeared in the teenagers' statements even among those who underwent civil confirmation and had therefore a non-religious family background (article II). The teenagers' stress on the importance of friendship (article III) also appeared fairly traditional, reflecting the weight placed on friendship in the cultural heritage, for example in the old words of wisdom of the Poetic Edda and the sagas' stress on friendship and human fellowship. This is what is traditional and 'common sense' in culture (Geertz 1983).

But plurality and diversity also showed in the teenagers' verbal expressions. Interpretation of individual teenager's statements in relation to their differing backgrounds in the family, with different traditions and experience show a variation that may appear paradoxical but reflects primarily the tension between homogeneity and plurality in which the teenagers found themselves. Different views of the influence of religion on their lives (article II) their differing views of death (article II; article IV), some variation in values (article III) and how they experienced adversity, and their differing responses in such situations (article IV) are examples of plurality in their utterances. Their life-interpretation process therefore comprises both the homogeneity of their society's cultural heritage and tradition and the plurality created by social change and different individual backgrounds and experience.

The other tension, between security and insecurity, concerned first the internal, i.e. the teenagers' own experience of their external world. But to understand their experience their statements had also to be interpreted in alternation with the external context. The results of other youth research in Iceland give important information in this respect. The family and work situation in Iceland here play a significant role alongside what we know about Icelandic youth culture and the teenagers' everyday situation. In general the family situation in Iceland resembles that in other Nordic and western European countries with an increase in divorce during the past few decades. The labour situation in Iceland, on the other hand, has been different since there

has been plenty of work (Statistics Iceland) and many also have more than one job or work overtime. This, among other things, has led to long working days for many parents and it appears that they have, or allow themselves, little time just to talk to their teenagers (UNICEF, *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries 2007*).

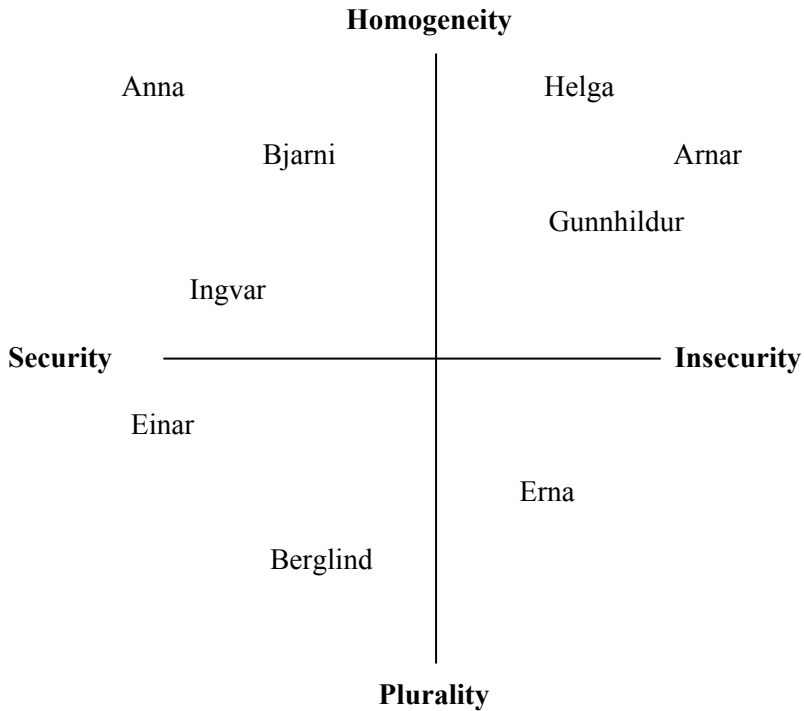
There are also, according to Icelandic research, young people who have few or no friends, and therefore loneliness is possibly part of the young people's experience of their reality (Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Ásgeirsdóttir, Sigfúsdóttir 2002). In addition, Icelandic youth culture has been marked by a materialistic view of life with consumption, TV, films, pop music and computers, but also by what is called traditional values (Broddason 2005, Guðlaugsson 2005; Guðbjörnsdóttir 2005). Interpretation of the teenagers' statements shows how their experience of this outer reality affects their life interpretation. Here the tension emerges between the happiness and security they experience in the family and among mates and the insecurity created by the feeling of meaninglessness and not least fear of losing their nearest and dearest and being alone. Expressions that show fear of loneliness and exclusion often arose even though most of our teenagers described themselves as happy and having many good friends (article III and article IV). This experience may have its explanation in the parents' long working hours, while from the teenagers' statements emerged the importance of good contact with their parents. The importance of good adult contact and the effect of a shortage of this have been shown in various research results (see e.g. Adamson 1999). The teenagers' personal experience and their knowledge of others' experience of loneliness and exclusion also had an affect in this connection. This had a consequence that the teenagers' mates and interrelationships played an important part and counteracted the danger of loneliness since most of them had many good friends. It appeared particularly clearly from the teenagers' talk of their free time and of what is of greatest importance for them (article III; article IV). But one must assume that there are young people with few or no friends even though this does not emerge generally in the statements of the teenagers interviewed.

School is an important arena, playing a significant role in young people's lives. How young people experience school also shows tension between security and insecurity in the young people's everyday situation. In this connection it is noticeable that even though research into schools in Iceland shows that the majority of upper-level pupils feel well in school and like school, 13% say that they seldom or never feel well at school often owing to bullying or similar (Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Ásgeirsdóttir, Sigfúsdóttir 2002). This picture of reality was reflected in the statements of the teenagers interviewed in the present study. The positive attitude to school was common among teenagers and the meeting with schoolmates was experienced as valuable. But fear of bullying and exclusion lay beneath the surface in many even though most claimed that there was no or very little bullying in their

school (article III; article IV). The tension between security and insecurity shown in the teenagers' life interpretation therefore becomes clearer when it is related to the outer circumstances that appear in other research results.

One thing that renders Icelandic culture special compared with, for example, that of many other northern and western European countries is how relatively homogeneous it has been. Iceland is one or two decades behind other northern European countries in its development towards diversity, but as already stated social change during the past few years has been towards increased plurality. It appears that development during the past few years has affected our teenagers' statements and despite all the homogeneity there was a spread in the interview material that reflected the tension field the teenagers occupied. The diagram below is an attempt to provide an overview of the variation existing among the teenagers. The diagram shows two variables, on one hand homogeneity versus plurality and on the other security versus insecurity. In the diagram I have placed the nine individuals about whom I wrote in articles II –IV. The diagram shows how they experienced their outer world and interpreted their experience. The categories I took as starting points regarding homogeneity versus plurality are how far the teenagers' statements reflected the relatively homogeneous culture, i.e. the influence of Christianity and traditional values. For the other variable, security versus insecurity, it was more complicated; but my starting point was how the teenagers spoke of their happiness and security in family and among friends and how far it appeared from their statements that they felt their security threatened in any way. Since most of the teenagers spoke both of their happiness and security and of their worries and fear, the variable security versus insecurity is more complicated and it is not certain that the material supports exact placing of different individuals in the model. But I made the attempt and then built further regarding the extent different individuals spoke of their worry and fear (see articles II, III and IV). The purpose was to indicate the spread among the teenagers and what it was like to be a youth in Icelandic culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a time marked by change.

Top left we have Anna, Bjarni and Ingvar, all shaped by what is traditional (religion, values) and they express no particular insecurity, except perhaps Bjarni. Helga, Arnar and Gunnhildur are also influenced by the traditional, but expressed their insecurity more than the three former teenagers (fear, worry) and they therefore come top right in the diagram. Einar, Berglind and Erna were either not shaped by Church tradition or had taken a stand against it and for this reason they come in the lower part of the diagram. Einar expresses almost no insecurity, Berglind a little but Erna the most of the three.



All attempted to interpret their experience in a cultural context that is both homogeneous and affected by increased plurality, and it appears that both social change and personal experience had created a certain insecurity or a ‘both – and’ feeling among the teenagers interviewed. This supports how complicated the life-interpretation process is with its conflicting elements.

## Teenagers’ life interpretation and school religious education

The spread and individual differences emerging from the material play an important part in connection with the study’s purpose of discussing what characterises teenagers’ life interpretation and values in connection with school religious education. One of the research questions was: what challenges to school religious education do the teenagers’ perceptions and statements present?

The discussion of the scientific-theoretical fundamentals of religious education and of the position and role of religious education in schools indicates that different theoreticians have presented proposals for various scientific

approaches to religious teaching in schools. The main threads of this discussion stress either theological or pedagogical grounding of religious education as a scientific discipline and essential or contextual understanding of religious education in schools. The fact that there emerges from the present material a larger variation within schools than between schools suggests the influence of modern plurality on the younger generation in Iceland, at least to a certain extent. Owing to the variation between individuals, it is important to find an approach in religious education where increased account is taken of the backgrounds, personal experience, existential reflections and existential questions of different pupils. Earlier there was discussion of whether school religious education should be on Church or school terms, and in most Nordic countries the result was that it was to be non-confessional and on school terms. It cannot be the job of the school to induce pupils to adopt a given religion or life philosophy. Diversity and plurality must be taken seriously when the approach in the teaching is being discussed, and then it is important to take account of the pupils' premises and different backgrounds. Although key figures in the discussion of religious education in England (Jackson 1997, 2004, 2008; Wright 1996, 2004, 2008) have presented approaches which in their theories of knowledge stress either the essential or the contextual, in both cases they have also stressed the importance of taking into consideration and using pupils' own experience of religion and of religious experience, and that religion as a school subject should be available for all pupils, irrespective of their religious or secular view of life. On the basis of research results in a Nordic context, similar views have been put forward and religious education has been criticised both in Church and in school for being one-sidedly cognitive. There has been stress on starting from the individual pupil, his experience, existential questions and feelings (Brunstad 1998; Eriksson 1999; Birkedal 2001; Porath Sjöo 2008). The Swedish existential-question-education approach also stressed the pupil perspective and pupils' existential questions as a starting point in religious education. This was based on the fact that pupils' interest in questions related to religious and non-religious life views proved according to research to be small, while interest in existential questions and problem experience regarding man's fundamental personal and social conditions was prominent (*Tonåringen och livsfrågorna*, The Teenager and Existential Questions, 1969; *Tonåringen och livet*, The Teenager and Life, 1980; Selander 1993; Hartman 2000b). In my view there are numerous reasons for focusing on the pupil perspective regardless of whether one's understanding of religious education is essential or contextual. The main question is then to what end. It may be tempting to do this first and foremost to attract pupils or attempt to increase their interest in religion as a subject, but it scarcely suffices as a basis for teaching. But one may also do this for the purpose of creating conditions for pupils to work on and clarify their own positions. One task of religious education must be to help pupils deepen their own knowledge, their

own frames of reference and their own existential experience, thus encouraging them to practise formulating important questions of life and ethics (Selander 2000). But this does not take place without an interplay with pupils' outer contexts, culture and traditions; and the contents of religions and life philosophy traditions. In an essay from the early 1900s, *The Child and the Curriculum*, the American philosopher John Dewey stressed similar interaction:

The fundamental factors in the educative process are an immature, undeveloped being; and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these forces (Dewey 1902/1956, p. 4).

Dewey warned against making the two factors antagonistic, insisting on one at the expense of the other. The danger is that we continually see conflicting elements instead of viewing what is educative as a whole. The child is set against the curriculum, the nature of the individual against the culture of society. This conflict results in what Dewey calls different educational sects which either fix attention on the significance of the contents of the curriculum or have the child as their point of departure, centre and purpose. Dewey's solution was to abandon the view that there is some sort of gulf between the child's experience and the different syllabus subjects. He also states that we should abandon the view of subjects as something fixed and ready-made, outside the child's experience; and that we should stop thinking of the child's experience as fixed. Instead we should view it as something, 'fluent, embryonic, vital'. Then we will realise

... that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies (Dewey 1902/1956, p. 11).

I consider Dewey's view has the same relevance now as a hundred years ago. If pupil's experience and the contents of the subject religion constitute the elements creating the process to take place in religious education, there is a hermeneutic interplay between pupils' own experience, existential questions and life interpretation and the contents, traditions and cultural context of the religions and life philosophies. We then line up with Gadamer's (1960/1996) concept of *Bildung* as a dialogical process, that means among other things being continually open to new experience and seeking different cultural horizons so as to introduce them into the context that renders understanding possible. In this way, religious education can support pupils in their processing of experience and interpretation of life and increase their ability

to understand others' experience and life interpretation by placing it in connection with the traditions and contents of religions and life philosophies.

The result of the present study shows teenagers in a field of tension between homogeneity and plurality and between security and insecurity. Despite a partly common frame of reference represented by the culture and traditions of society, their different frames of reference also emerged, depending on the different backgrounds and experience to which they referred in their life interpretation. This may act as an argument for a religious education that attempts to a greater extent to take its starting point in and to use pupils' own experience of religion and religious and existential experience and existential questions. Even though Icelandic society has been fairly homogeneous, it is now increasingly marked by plurality and diversity, both in the Christian tradition and also through increasing influence from other religions and non-religious life philosophies. Thus young people bring to their lessons differing understanding and experience, depending on their differing external contexts and their capacity to formulate and process personal experience and existential reflections. It is easy at first to view 'youth' just as a group with many common elements in their life interpretation, but the fact is that the group consists of different individuals with different backgrounds and experience that affect their life interpretation and values. In school religious education, this is the reality teachers must work with and can exploit in an interaction with the religion syllabus and its contents. The girl in class 10 thought it was difficult to understand the meaning of life even though she did not believe it was all that profound. You have to live and experience and translate the meaning of life into action. One purpose of religious education is to support pupils' search for meaning and interpretation of life and help them to understand other pupils' life interpretation and values, in this way creating a fusion of horizons with mutual understanding and respect. How this may best be done in practice requires further research into teaching methods and learning processes, into what happens in the classroom; but there we enter a different, closely-related field, i.e. the teaching and learning of religion - and that's the subject for different study!



# Svensk sammanfattning

Vad berättar ungdomar om sig själva, om sin livstolkning och sina värderingar? Vad karakteriserar de enskilda ungdomarnas uppfattningar och uttalanden? Hur förhåller sig ungdomarnas livstolkning och värderingar till förhållanden i samhället? Vilka utmaningar för skolans religionsundervisning aktualiserar ungdomarnas uppfattningar och utsagor? Dessa frågor är centrala i studien *isländska ungdomars livstolkning och värderingar*.

Syftet med avhandlingen är att undersöka några centrala element ungdomars livstolkning med sikte på att diskutera dem i anslutning till samhällsförhållanden på Island och till skolans religionsundervisning. Bakgrunden till studien är att det isländska samhället har varit relativt homogent största delen av det 20:e århundradet, men de senaste åren har samhället förändrats med ökad pluralitet som följd.

Studiens datamaterial består av intervjuer med isländska ungdomar i 14- och 15-årsåldern. I fyra artiklar som ingår i avhandlingen analyseras och tolkas olika delar av det insamlade materialet utifrån en hermeneutiskansats. Huvudresultaten visar att ungdomarna befinner sig i ett spänningsfält å ena sidan mellan homogenitet och pluralitet och å den andra sidan mellan trygghet och otrygghet. De huvudlinjer och trender som finns i intervjumaterialet pekar mot att det finns en gemensam referensram samtidigt som pluralitet framträder i ungdomarnas uttryck. Trots att de flesta av ungdomarna talar om sin lycka och trygghet finns det också ett medvetande om den risk och hot som kan förvandla situationen och det skapar en viss ångest hos flera ungdomar.

I materialet framträder större variation inom skolor än mellan skolor. Det pekar mot pluralitetens inverkan på den yngre generationen på Island. På grund av den variation som finns mellan olika individer blir det angeläget att hitta ett arbetssätt i religionsundervisningen där man i ökad grad tar hänsyn till olika elevers bakgrund, personliga erfarenheter, existentiella reflektioner och livsfrågor.

*Nyckelord:* livstolkning, livsåskådning, livsfrågor, värderingar, ungdomar, homogenitet, pluralitet, trygghet, otrygghet, religionspedagogik, religionsundervisning.

# Samantekt á íslensku

Hvernig tala unglingar um sjálfa sig og um tilvistartúlkun sína og gildismat? Hvað einkennir hugmyndir þeirra og framsetningu? Hvert er sambandið milli tilvistartúlkunar og gildismats unglingsanna og samfélagsaðstæðna á Íslandi? Hvaða áskoranir felast í hugmyndum og ummælum þeirra fyrir trúarbragðakennslu skólans? Þessar spurningar eru í brennidepli í rannsókn á tilvistartúlkun og gildismati íslenskra unglings.

Markmiðið með ritgerðinni er að rannsaka nokkra meginþætti í tilvistartúlkun unglings, setja þá í samhengi við samfélagsaðstæður á Íslandi og ræða í tengslum við trúarbragðakennslu í skólum. Baksvið rannsóknarinnar er að íslenskt samfélag hefur stærstan hluta 20. aldar verið álitni fremur einsleitt (homogen) en á síðustu árum hefur það breyst með vaxandi fjölhyggju (plurality).

Rannsóknin byggir á viðtölum við íslenska unglings á aldrinum 14 til 15 ára. Í fjórum greinum sem eru hluti ritgerðarinnar eru ólíkir þættir viðtalanna greindir og túlkaðir út frá túlkunarfræðilegri nálgun. Meginniðurstöður sýna að unglingsarnir virðast upplifa sig á nokkurs konar spennusvæði, annars vegar milli einsleitni (homogeneity) og fjölhyggju (plurality) og hins vegar milli öryggis og óöryggis. Meginlínur í viðtölunum benda til sameiginlegs viðmiðunarramma á sama tíma og fjölhyggja og fjölbreytni birtist í ummælum unglingsanna, og þátt fyrir að flestir unglingsanna tali um hamingju og öryggi birtist einnig í ummælum þeirra vitundin um þá hættu og ógn sem getur breytt aðstæðum og það veldur mörgum þeirra áhyggjum eða kvíða.

Í viðtölunum birtist meiri fjölbreytileiki milli einstaklinga innan skóla en á milli ólíkra skóla. Það gefur vísbendingar um áhrif fjölhyggju á yngri kynslóðina á Íslandi. Sú fjölbreytni sem birtist milli einstaklinganna gerir það aðkallandi að finna leiðir í trúarbragðakennslu skólans sem tekur í ríkari mæli tillit til ólíks bakgrunns nemenda, persónulegrar reynslu þeirra, tilvistarspurninga og tilvistartúlkunar.

*Lykilorð:* tilvistartúlkun, lífsskoðun, tilvistarspurningar, gildismat, unglings, einsleitni, fjölhyggja, öryggi, óöryggi, trúaruppeldisfræði, trúarbragðakennsla.

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In days gone by when Icelandic fishermen rowed their open boats to fish they faced complete uncertainty. Both weather and catch were unpredictable, and it was never certain that all the boats would return. But a good catch secured the family's upkeep. It would be unreasonable to compare the writing of a thesis to the continual risk and danger those fishermen ran. Yet I believe a research project *can* be likened to a fishing voyage. At least, much was uncertain and unpredictable when in 2001 I and my colleague Dr Gunnar Finnbogason at the Iceland University of Education applied for research funds to investigate Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation and values. We knew that a 'catch' was often uncertain when applying for a research grant. But the application to Kristnihátíðarsjóður, a research fund established in connection with the millennial celebration of Christianity in Iceland, gave a result. Thus we could start the project and prepare the interviews with the teenagers.

With larger and safer fishing boats it became common for Icelandic fishermen to sail to other lands with their catches, to sell them and return with good profits. When we had interviewed our teenagers the question arose of what we should do with the 'catch'. Should it be cured in the home port or was it realistic to sail overseas and see what could be done with it in a different context. The consequence was to sail to Sven Hartman at the Stockholm Institute of Education to see if the interviews could be used as material for a doctoral thesis. The result is now before you in this book.

The course we sailed was not always clear or straight. The first thought was to write a licentiate thesis, but then there was a change of course to a doctoral thesis based on four articles giving different perspectives on the material and its interpretation. The situation in Stockholm has also changed since I first sailed here in 2003. The Stockholm Institute of Education became a part of Stockholm University at the beginning of 2008 and new educational-scientific departments have replaced the Institute's old departments. This has actually led to my having the honour of writing the first doctoral thesis written at the Department of Education in Humanities and Social Sciences.

The support of the Iceland University of Education (Kennaraháskóli Íslands) made it possible for me to work here in Stockholm, first during the academic year of 2003 to 2004 and then again in 2007-2008. For this I am grateful, as I am for the inspiring research milieu into which I first came at

the Stockholm Institute of Education. Stockholm with its interplay of water and sea has inspired the time I have sat here, and my longing for Iceland's fells and glaciers has whetted the healthy homesickness that has powered the strenuous hours of work.

Many have given me wind in my sails during the course of the work. First I wish to thank Gunnar Finnbogason for his cooperation from the beginning of the project and Halla Jónsdóttir for her help with the interviews and their transcription. To my supervisor Sven Hartman go my great thanks for accepting the seafarer from Iceland, for excellent supervision, good advice and friendship during the years of the work. Likewise all those in Sven's research team and colleagues on E-corridor at the Stockholm Institute of Education have my warm thanks for all views, advice and encouragement at working seminars and in other contexts, not least for pleasant company round the coffee table. I thank Marianne Stevendahl specially for all kinds of help and support during the work. I also thank the readers in the reading group seminar, Anders Gustavsson and Lars Naeslund for useful comments and good advice, and Tim Crosfield, my translator, for a good translation of my 'Icelandic Swedish'. My thanks also go to my family, specially to my two daughters, my mother, brothers and sister and others who have both supported and encouraged me the whole time. The same applies to good friends and colleagues: warmest thanks to you all!

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Gunnar J. Gunnarsson

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