

Teaching about the Qur'ān in public schools in Norway

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Abstract This article discusses what teachers in Norwegian public schools have to say about teaching their pupils about the Qur'ān. Exploring what teachers find important or challenging is relevant to what both Muslim and non-Muslim pupils learn about the Qur'ān, since religious education (RE) in Norway is non-confessional and compulsory. The empirical material consists of four semi-structured interviews with RE teachers. Following James Watts' model (2013, 2019), which suggests that religious scripture is ritualized along three dimensions, this study finds that the interviewed teachers emphasize working with content and meaning (the semantic dimension) rather than recitation (the expressive dimension) or any special treatment (the iconic dimension) of the Qur'ān. Another finding is that the teachers are reluctant to address Qur'ān recitations in their classes. The article examines this uncertainty in relation to the teachers' perceptions of what pupils should learn about religious scriptures in general, pedagogical considerations about how to teach RE, and overarching RE-specific aims and concerns in relation to debates about Muslims and Islam in Norwegian society.

There has been increasing interest in Europe in what is being taught about Islam in public schools (Franken and Gent 2021; Toft 2017). In the Norwegian context, religious education (RE)¹ lessons about Islam also include teaching about the Qur'ān; however, we know little about the challenges that teachers encounter when doing so. This article is based on interviews with four teachers (with non-Muslim backgrounds), part of a larger research project on teaching religious scriptures in educational settings in Norway. The focus of the interviews was teachers' understanding of religious scriptures, as well as what they found important or challenging when working with them.

¹ I use "religious education" (RE) as a generic term to refer to teaching about both religions and non-religious life philosophies.

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The interviewed teachers expressed the view that teaching about the Bible and teaching about the Qur'ān should be similar in terms of narrative content, religious interpretation, and historical context. When I suggested Qur'ān recitation as a potential topic for RE, they appeared uncertain about its relevance and how they could implement it in their lessons. In this article, Qur'ān recitation thus functions as a “test case” to prompt discussion of the ideas and concerns teachers have on topics related to teaching their pupils about the Qur'ān, conceptualized as “teacher perceptions”. This is derived from Fives and Buehl’s (2012) concept, “teacher beliefs”, which is widely used in educational research to highlight taken-for-granted aspects of teachers’ practice, interpret why teachers do what they do, and explore what they think about specific aspects of their work². Through this lens, we can better understand the challenges teachers encounter when the Qur'ān and Qur'ān recitation is brought into the RE framework. Thus, the question discussed in this article may be framed as the following: which “teacher perceptions” influence RE teachers’ concerns and reflections on teaching about the Qur'ān?

In terms of theory, I approach scripture as something people *do*, applying James Watts’s (2019) framework, which helps describe how religious people ritualize scripture along different dimensions;³ however, when applied in the RE context, the question is not about the dimensions ritualized by teachers, but those found to be relevant in their lessons. The next three sections situate the study within the Norwegian context and recent RE research, followed by an outline of the study’s method and approaches to the material. The results are then presented in a three-fold structure: teacher perceptions of religious scripture, of pedagogical concerns, and, finally, of RE-specific aims and concerns. The findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and previous research.

² I use “teacher perceptions” instead of “beliefs” to avoid conflation with religious beliefs. Although ideas about religion drawn from personal experience can impact teacher perceptions, this was not the focus of the interviews.

³ This is in line with the tradition of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in which “scripture is a human activity” (1993, 18).

KRLE: A mandatory, critical, and pluralistic RE subject

In Norway, RE is titled “Christianity, religion, worldviews, and ethics” (KRLE), a compulsory, non-confessional subject in primary school, which includes all pupils from the start of first grade to the end of lower-secondary education in tenth grade.

In KRLE, pupils are taught about various religious traditions and worldviews, including Islam and the religious scriptures of Islam. The Education Act declares that lessons in KRLE “[...] must present different world religions and philosophies of life in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner”.⁴ This means that the teacher should under no circumstance evangelize or nurture pupils into a religious conviction; indeed, secularization and pluralization in Norwegian society have made Norwegian RE a much-debated subject for the last 25 years. Consequently, teacher training programs offer courses in RE equal to a minimum 30 or 60 credits, presenting multiple religions, various topics, and didactical reflections on teaching within the current curricular framework. RE teacher training courses cover pupils’ rights to partial exemption from the subject and how to plan lessons so that pupils do not need to invoke it,⁵ and also encompass the scriptures of various religious traditions, including Islam.

The Norwegian RE curriculum is organized according to competence aims that outline what should be covered by completion of fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. Different religious narratives and scriptures have been mentioned in the curriculum in the last 25 years, following decades in which pupils were only taught about the Bible and Christianity. With the introduction of a new, mandatory RE subject in 1997, the content of its curriculum prior to fifth grade was described in detail. For example, pupils should learn about “stories from the life of Muhammed (i.e., the birth of the Prophet, his childhood, the night journey, the revelation of the Qur’ān, the escape from Mecca to Medina, and his life in Medina)” (Kirke, undervisnings- og forskningsdepartementet 1996, my translation). In the curriculum from 2006, a comparable aim was that pupils should be able to “describe the Prophet Muhammed’s life, the revelation of the Qur’ān, and the content of central parts of the Qur’ān” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2015, my translation). However, when it was updated in 2020, the competence aims were reduced in number and made more open-ended for primary school, which has arguably made the extent to which religious scriptures should be included in classroom teaching vaguer than in the 2006 curriculum. There is no mention of any specific scripture or narratives, although pupils are expected to be able to “talk about and present central stories and beliefs” from Eastern and Western religious traditions after grade four

4 This formulation was added in 2007 when the European Court of Human Rights reached the verdict that the subject had violated parents’ freedom to ensure their children an education in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions (Lied 2009, 263). For further readings about this case, see Lied (2009) or von der Lippe (2018).

5 The Education Act section 2-3a: ‘Following written notification by parents, pupils must be exempted from attending those parts of the teaching at the individual school that they, on the basis of their own religion or own philosophy of life, perceive as being the practice of another religion or adherence to another philosophy of life, or that they on the same basis find objectionable or offensive. [...] Exemption cannot be demanded from instruction in the academic content of the various topics of the curriculum’ (Opplæringslova 1998)

(Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020, my translation). In the next sections, I discuss what might be taught about the Qur'ān in RE, based on previous research, and whether Qur'ān recitation should be a part of the lessons.

What do pupils learn about the Qur'ān in RE?

Previous research on religious scriptures in the Norwegian classroom has focused on how teachers and pupils interpret and use these texts, emphasizing the Bible (Hartvigsen and Tørresen 2020; Kjørven 2016). However, recent contributions have provided new insights into the discussion of *what* pupils learn about religious scriptures and *why* they learn these things. For instance, Flø and Mogstad (2021) show that upper-secondary pupils understand the Bible in a different way to the Qur'ān. While the pupils' knowledge of the former is mainly related to its content and biblical narratives they have encountered in lessons or textbooks, they draw upon information derived from the media when describing the Qur'ān. Research shows that lessons about Islam tend to include more news media coverage than any other religion in RE (Toft 2018), and, because the coverage is characterized by conflict and polarization in which the sensational becomes the normal (Døving 2013; Toft 2020a), it raises the question of how it influences what teachers find important when teaching about the Qur'ān.

Nonetheless, textbooks are the most common learning material used in RE (Broberg 2020; Tallaksen and Hodne 2014) and have considerable authority (Andreassen 2014); therefore, they impact which aspects of Islam, and the Qur'ān pupils encounter in the classroom. One tendency has been for textbooks to favour the presentation of normative traditions rather than an individual perspective on “lived religion” (McGuire 2008; Midttun 2014). This world-religion paradigm can be found, for instance, in the form of the template “the book, the man, and the faith”, which implies that most religions are presented with emphasis on what scripture is important, the most central person and what people believe in (Berglund 2021, 187). A textbook analysis by Midttun (2014, 338) found that religious scriptures and what Muslims believe are presented separately – as are Qur'ān recitation and knowledge about the Qur'ān (Midttun 2014, 337) – with the result, she suggests, that connections between

scripture and faith are lost (2014, 334).⁶ Nonetheless, references to the Qur'ān are made when emphasizing that the moral virtues expounded in Islam are opposed to practices like forced marriages and honour killings. Such examples provide an impression of how the Qur'ān is presented and portrayed in the material pupils encounter in KRLE, and, moreover, frequently function as starting points for teachers planning their lessons (Tallaksen and Hodne 2014). In this case, Qur'ān recitation might not be seen as a priority, even though it is central within Islamic traditions.

Kristina Nelson notes that it is important that non-Muslims understand the significance of the art of recitation (*tajwīd*) to Islamic culture and religion, as, through the process of memorizing and reciting the Qur'ān, God's speech is believed to become embodied (Nelson 2001, 14). Reciting the Qur'ān is described by Gade (2006, 486) as “a foundational element of Islamic education, practice and piety”. Thus, reading the Qur'ān is understood as a devotional act, whether this consists of reciting the words in prayer or striving to understand them through study and reflection (Eggen 2019, 91), and practices connected with it are manifold in Muslims' daily life (Hedman and Ganuza 2019); some may listen to Qur'ān recitations on their way to work, while others recite specific suras or passages from the Qur'ān before eating (Lyngsøe 2018). Therefore, distinguishing between knowledge about the Qur'ān, Qur'ān recitation, faith, and practice, as Midttun (2014) found in the textbook she investigated, may seem artificial when examining the role of the Qur'ān in the everyday life of Muslims. For Muslim youth and young adults, recitation could be learned through various types of media, such as smartphone apps, scheduled online lessons conducted via Skype, or in the supplementary Islamic religious education many undertake in their free time (Daugaard 2019; Sandberg et al. 2018; Aarset 2016). Yet some pupils who attend both supplementary Islamic education and secular mainstream public school in Sweden have reported that they choose not to talk about their ability to read and recite the Qur'ān because of teachers' reactions (Berghlund 2017, 525, 533). In other words, Qur'ān recitation may be an aspect of lived religion that is significant for Muslims, but not valued or known among teachers in public schools, which tells us that practices involving the Qur'ān may be more extensive and meaningful than would appear from the RE curriculum.

6 «Læreboka har plassert «Hellige tekster» og «Hva muslimer tror på» i hvert sitt avsnitt. På den måten får man ikke synliggjort den indre sammenhengen mellom tekster og trossystemer» (Midttun 2014, 334).

Approaching religious scriptures

Whether teachers see various practices involving the Qur'ān as relevant for KRLE is, according to Fives and Buehl (2012), related to the perceptions they hold about various aspects of education, which can function as filters for interpretation, a frame for defining problems, and a guide for action (Fives and Buehl 2012, 478). Even though the term “teacher perceptions” is not commonly used within RE research, the idea is present when, for instance, Vestøl and colleagues' write, “The understanding of religion is closely related to the understanding of the purpose of religious education”, influencing both the facts that are presented, as well as *how* they are used so as to “develop an understanding of, and respect for, religion” (Vestøl et al. 2014, 14-15). Perceptions about the purpose of KRLE, the relevance of religious scriptures, and the pupils' role in the learning process – whether based on earlier experience, education, or professional development – will impact what teachers find relevant in terms of content and methods. Furthermore, aspects teachers identify as challenges may guide their actions when planning and conducting lessons (Fives and Buehl 2012, 479-480). In this study, the concept of teacher perceptions is a useful tool when faced with the complexity of the interviewees' responses to questions about teaching about the Qur'ān; however, such perceptions must be understood in light of the dominant approaches to religious scriptures which are prevalent in RE and Western religious studies.

One assumption in research on religious scriptures in general has been “that by reading the sacred texts of a community, one gets some insight into that communities [sic] beliefs and practices” (Malley 2004, 12). Furthermore, the study of religious scripture has been biased toward the scholarly elements of Christian theology, that is, “toward the written, the reflective and the systematic” (Malley 2004, 13). The Lutheran Church has been the majority denomination in Norway for several centuries and played a central role in the history of the public school system. Most teachers in Norwegian schools know more about the Bible than the Qur'ān and are more familiar with the narratives presented in Christian traditions than those in Islamic traditions. KRLE has not been a confessional subject for a long time, but it is still relevant to ask how the Christian tradition has left its imprint on *what* teachers think about religious scriptures. Considering the Swedish context, Berglund (2021; 2013) finds

that, although there has been an attempt to secularize RE in Sweden, the subject still includes ideas about religion that are typical of the Protestant tradition.⁷ Berglund (2013) suggests using the term “Protestant marinade” to describe how such ideas permeate schools even today. There seems to be a similar marinade in Norwegian RE, which is notable, for instance, when teacher training textbooks in RE emphasize content and narratives when writing about religious scripture (Markeng 2023); presumably, the marinade also influences teachers’ perceptions of teaching about the Qur’ān.

Previous RE research on religious scriptures in Norwegian KRLE has been related to two topics: teaching about stories and narratives, and teachers’ and pupils’ interpretation of texts. According to James Watts, this touches upon only one dimension of the ways in which religious people ritualize religious scripture (Watts 2013, 2019). With an increasing interest in what people *do* with scripture and the functions it has in their lives, Watts proposes a model of how people ritualize religious scripture along three dimensions: *the semantic dimension* is related to the interpretation of the content and meaning of texts, which could be relevant when reading a text and interpreting its meaning as part of a religious ritual or privately, or working with content within a theological context: *the expressive⁸ dimension* is seen in any performative rendition of the scripture, such as oral or visual representations. Within this dimension, Watts (2019, 14) draws a distinction between “expressions of the words of scriptures and expressions of the content of scripture”. Recitations, songs, and graphic expressions of words or inscriptions are examples of the former, while statues, paintings, and films that portray the content of scripture exemplify the latter. The *iconic dimension* is expressed through special treatment or behaviours before, during, or after an interaction with scripture. These could include the placement of a sacred text in the home, rituals of “death” for scripture, such as burying a damaged Bible, decorations of the scripture, or embodied practices (Watts 2019, 15). When studying what teachers say about scriptures in RE lessons, the question is not whether they or their pupils ritualize scripture along these dimensions but, rather, which dimensions teachers find to be relevant and the perceptions about religious scriptures that are conveyed through their reflections.

7 As mentioned above, one example is how religion is presented in Swedish textbooks according to the template known as “the book”, “the man”, and “the faith” (Berglund 2021, 187).

8 The expressive dimension was previously termed the “performative” dimension (Watts 2013); however, Watts argues in his anthology of 2019 that the term performative is too broad, and that “expressive” is a more appropriate label (Watts 2019, 14).

Research design and methodological approach

In this study, I sought to investigate the potentials and challenges of teaching about the Qur'ān in primary and lower-secondary religious education in public schools from the perspective of the teachers. The four qualitative interviews were conducted as one out of three smaller studies that make up the empirical material for a PhD project. After reaching out to elementary and lower secondary schools, teachers with formal education and experience in teaching KRLE were asked to take part in the study.⁹ The four teachers who participated were, therefore, certified RE teachers.¹⁰ This strategy does not attempt to provide a generalizable sample; rather, it targets a particular competence in order to access people who have in-depth knowledge about a particular subject, in this case KRLE (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 219).

The most experienced teacher, Knut, had credits in *Kristendoms kunnskap* that he obtained during his teacher education over 20 years ago.¹¹ Berit and Anders had quite recently completed their master's degrees, which were related to religious education and social science, and Ellen had about 60 credits in KRLE. While Berit and Anders teach in elementary school, Knut and Ellen teach in lower-secondary education. The teachers taught at different schools in small- to middle-sized towns in the eastern region of Norway; however, the lower secondary schools were more rural than the elementary schools. Berit and Anders describe their schools as being religiously diverse, and some of the pupils they teach come from a Muslim minority background. Ellen and Knut explain that there are some pupils with Muslim backgrounds at their schools, and Knut has taught a couple of Muslim pupils over the years as well. However, in these schools, pupils with a Muslim background are no more prevalent than pupils belonging to other religious minorities, such as the Pentecostal church or Jehovah's Witnesses. To provide a context for the teachers' perceptions of the Qur'ān, it is worth mentioning that those in this study experienced their childhood and education, including teacher training, in the Norwegian context, and have non-Muslim backgrounds.

The interviews were held in the spring semester of 2022. Because of the teachers' busy schedules, two of the interviews were held at their workplace, one was held on a university campus, and one was held digitally.¹² The teachers were given a

9 The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) approved of the project in 2020, before I recruited the teachers.

10 The teacher education program has changed multiple times in the last decades. The most recent change was the implementation of a five-year master's degree in 2017. However, all the informants have their teacher's degree from earlier, as three started on a four-year program, and two then continued by writing an additional master's thesis. Knut attained his teaching degree when it was a three-year program called *Allmennlærerutdanning* in the late 90s. Presumably, Berit and Anders, who have written their theses in relation to RE, were especially interested in this subject.

11 The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

12 In this project, I have used Services for sensitive data (TSD) to collect, store and analyze the research data. TSD is provided by the IT services at the University of Oslo.

Assignments

1. What is the Qur'ān?
2. Why is the Qur'ān not accepted as God's word when translated into another language?
3. When did the Prophet Muhammed receive the first revelation?
4. How long did it take to assemble the Qur'ān as one text after the death of the Prophet Muhammed?
5. What is a hadith?

(Waale, Dolplads, and Wiik 2017, 195)

1. Qur'ān recitation

Listen to the recitation on the web page and describe what you hear. Write a text based on the following criteria:

- Describe what you heard.
- Is it singing or prayer?
- Are there any instruments?
- How did you experience listening to it?
- Have you ever heard something similar?

(Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017, 235)

consent letter to read and sign, with a detailed description of the research and larger study; they were also informed about their option to withdraw their consent at any point. The interviews offered a great deal of room in which to discuss religious scripture in general, although the interview guide also contained questions concerning the interviewees' knowledge of, and experiences with non-formal, supplementary Qur'ān education and the Qur'ān in particular. In addition, all teachers were given examples of textbook assignments related to this topic, both copied from RE textbooks, which functioned as the starting point for pedagogical reflections (Figure 1). The first was written for pupils in lower-secondary school, while the second was written for grades five to seven. It is worth noting that both textbooks were written prior to the new curriculum, but this was not seen as an obstacle because the tasks were still relevant within the new framework and most teachers still used textbooks from the older curriculum. These assignments were chosen because previous RE research and pedagogical literature have indicated that, for the Qur'ān in particular, recitation may not be what teachers first think of when discussing religious scripture (for example, Winje 2017). Additionally, the tasks were intended to elicit whether teachers had addressed Qur'ān recitations in class, why they had or had not done so, and what they viewed as important to consider if they were to give such an assignment to their pupils.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the author,¹³ and ensuing categorization was characterized by an abductive approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Thinking with the concept of teacher perceptions meant analysing what teachers said about KRLE, teaching in general, and religious scriptures more broadly, to shed light on approaches to the Qur'ān, even when these were not explicitly discussed. I established the following three categories: *religious scripture understood as the basis of faith*, *pedagogical considerations*, and *KRLE-specific concerns*. These categories are aligned with the well-known pedagogical practice of asking *what*, *how*, and *why* when planning and conducting lessons (Sødal 2009), to which I return throughout the discussion.

Results and discussion

During the interviews, all the teachers seemed eager to provide their perspectives on how religious scriptures are relevant to KRLE. Berit gave examples of how she would work with narratives, while Ellen reflected on the role written text had in her lessons. Knut, who teaches 15-year-old pupils, said, “In general, I think it would be strange to talk about the Bible and the Qur'ān without looking at the texts as well.” Anders, whose pupils are younger, said that they talked *about* scripture – for example, when working with digital videos of Biblical narratives – more often than they read or made use of religious texts. Even though there were differences in the role scriptures played in the teachers' RE lessons, the teachers expressed opinions about their importance and thus engaged in reflection on what they did and why they did it.

When I introduced Qur'ān recitation as topic, there was a change in the approach and the conversation overall. When describing assignments that required pupils to listen to Qur'ān recitations (Figure 1), three of the teachers were uncertain how they would move forward with such a task. Ellen said she would likely skip it. None of the teachers interviewed had presented Qur'ān recitations as part of their lessons. The explanations for their hesitation varied from “I have never even thought about it” (Berit) to “How are we going to assess that kind of work?” (Ellen). Meanwhile, Anders said that he would consider using this assignment to “challenge himself”, which could indicate that it

13 The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and excerpts were translated into English by the author for presentation in this article.

is not seen as straightforward to implement. Even though the teachers were uncertain regarding *how* they could implement Qur'ān recitation as part of their lessons, they did reflect on the potential and relevance of this example. The following three sections will present and discuss the teacher perceptions appearing in the interviews to cast light on their reflections and concerns.

Teacher perceptions of religious scriptures as “the basis of faith”

One of the first questions in the interview was *what* the teachers considered important to teach pupils about religious scriptures in KRLE. The teachers argued that religious scriptures should be included because of the role they play within religious traditions. Anders said the pupils “must know something about what [scriptures] contain, why they exist, and that they could be important for many people, and learn a bit about the human aspect”. This highlights the fact that multiple aspects of religion could be relevant when discussing religious scripture. In a similar vein, as Knut said:

They [pupils] must know the scriptures from the largest world religions. And have some knowledge about the historical background and, not least, what is the basis of faith. [...] So... if you are to learn about Christianity, the narratives are quite important. To know something about the Easter narratives, for instance.

Both Knut and Ellen use the word *trosgrunnlag*, which I have translated as “basis of faith”, a word which implies that religious scriptures are the foundation of religious beliefs and might explain what religious people believe in and why. Although this is a relevant and useful approach in many situations, it is worth noting that perceiving religion as faith is especially typical within the Lutheran tradition. The three phrases that summarize Luther's theology, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*, exemplify the importance of both faith (*fide*) and scripture (*scriptura*) (Thurfjell and Willander 2021, 312). Arguably, the Lutheran tradition seem to impact what teachers find important when teaching about religious scriptures. If religion is understood as faith, and religious scripture is understood as the *basis* of faith, then the semantic dimension is perceived as the most beneficial

in terms of providing the desired knowledge about religion.

Ellen, on the other hand, compared the use of scriptures in RE to the content and methods used in the natural sciences: “For me, it seems logical. If you are working with natural sciences, you would use the microscope to explain things.” Using a microscope as a metaphor suggests that reading religious texts could be seen as studying the components that make up and “explain” a larger whole. Later, she elaborated on this, saying that pupils should learn about the messages scripture convey: “Especially, [...] controversial topics. [...] How to make the pupils understand that [religious people] let something like this control their life. We can use the sources to explain it.” This example indicates that the semantic dimension of religious scripture can explain faith in and of itself. Only occasionally do the interviewees relate scripture to practice, as Berit does in the following excerpt:

[The pupils] must know what role [scriptures] play in different religions and know some of the religions' texts before graduating from primary school. That's my opinion. And, in Islam, it would be natural to learn about the time he... I don't remember exactly, but the time he was told the number of prayers a day. [...] It was a lot at the beginning and ended up being five.

Referring to *al-Miraj* (a part of the Night Journey described in various hadiths; Roald 2004, 33), Berit explained how religious scripture could be relevant when teaching about practice, in this case prayer. In other words, the semantic dimension is seen as a relevant and legitimate way to explain religious practices as well, which could also be related to the fact that, in the Lutheran tradition, written text holds great authority (*sola scriptura*). Moreover, Berit said that this narrative is not only relevant but almost obligatory when working with Islamic religious scriptures. Similarly, Ellen referred to *al-Isra*, another part of the Night Journey, when providing an example of the narratives that are found in the ninth-grade textbook she uses. Although the curriculum from 2020 no longer mentions any specific stories, the Night Journey seems to have retained its place in what Ellen and Berit perceive as a relevant “KRLE canon”. It was prominently mentioned in previous curricula (both from 1997 and 2006) and is presumably why both teachers mention Night Journey narratives when we discussed lessons about religious scriptures,

although the Qur'ān itself only contains very brief references to them, and they are primarily known from the hadiths (Bøe and Farstad 2023, 54).

According to Fives and Buehl (2012), teacher perceptions act as filters to help identify relevant knowledge. How teachers perceive religious scriptures – as the basis of faith, for instance – are examples of such filters. They provide a framework for lessons about the Qur'ān in which teachers draw upon the semantic dimension to explain what Muslims believe and do. Approaching the content and even working with the text itself are understood as important aspects of this kind of work. Because recitation is performed in a language unfamiliar to most teachers in Norway (Eggen 2019; Gade 2006), leaving the meaning of the words unknown, the content of scripture is not accessible through Qur'ān recitation. Moreover, if scripture as “the basis of faith” functions as a filter, other aspects of what religious people do with scripture will not come to mind when planning lessons, even though they can exemplify both faith and practice. A result might be that the various ways of making use of the Qur'ān in Muslim everyday life, especially Qur'ān recitation, may not correspond with what is conventionally perceived as relevant content – that is, the *what* – when teaching about religious scripture in Norwegian schools. I now turn to *how* teachers envision working with scriptures.

Teacher perceptions about pedagogical concerns

In this section, I examine interviewees' perceptions of pedagogical considerations, which could clarify why they are reluctant to bring Qur'ān recitation into their lessons. My focus is on the concerns that teachers voiced about the practicalities of *how* to teach this topic; however, such methods are understood as related to other pedagogical aspects like content, aims, assessments, and pupils' knowledge (Sødal 2009, 19). When discussing what they considered to be the best indicator of a good lesson, all four teachers emphasized the engagement and interest of pupils; yet they had different ideas about what contributes to such enthusiasm. Knut said the content had to be relatable for pupils “so they do not have to ask, ‘Why are we learning about this?’” Ellen would engage the pupils in discussions about dilemmas, while both Berit and Anders, who teach nine- and ten-year-olds, would show short movies, or use digital

presentations to vary their lessons. While it can be difficult to adapt methods such as examining dilemmas, discussing their lives, and watching movies in a way that corresponds with listening to Qur'ān recitations, what teachers perceive to be the most engaging methods could serve as a threshold for approaching Qur'ān recitation in KRLE.

It is worth noting that most teachers gave examples of how to approach the expressive dimension of the Bible through movies and artwork, which can be categorized as expressions of the *content* of scripture (Watts, 2019). Berit provided examples of other material she would show in the classroom, such as pictures of mosques, calligraphy, and YouTube videos of people dancing and singing during festivals. In other words, the teachers could bring in materials other than that provided in the textbook to make the lessons more varied. Furthermore, the teachers were open to reflecting on the possibility of working with recitation when I introduced the topic. Berit was the most thorough in this regard:

But I have not made pupils listen to the Bible either. But Qur'ān recitation is much more important in Islam than reading the Bible aloud is for Christians, so one could include it. There is something about, well, I do not want to present it to the pupils if it sounds strange. I must listen to it first. But why do I worry about it being strange? We talked about this today, what direction Arabic is written, and some said it is the wrong direction. Why do we think that it is wrong? It is, of course, neither more wrong nor right than anything else, so... [...] Perhaps we could listen to... Let us say we listen to someone performing the Lord's Prayer. We could do that, so we could probably listen to Qur'ān recitation as well. I have not even thought about it.

Primarily, Berit turned to the Bible and the Christian tradition to discuss the relevance of Qur'ān recitation in KRLE. At first, she argued that reading aloud from the Bible would not be relevant to her lessons and, therefore, neither would Qur'ān recitation. However, knowing that recitation is an important part of Muslim life and practice, Berit found something she believes to be closer to Qur'ān recitation than reading aloud from the Bible: namely, reciting the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, Knut suggests comparing recitation to listening to the Bible or church services.

You might describe some of the elements in what you are listening to, and that is okay, but then you need some knowledge and background information to know what you are listening for. Perhaps they could be looking for differences. Or perhaps they have listened to the Bible being read aloud or a church service or something so that they can notice differences.

Teacher perceptions about methods in KRLE emerge when teachers compare expressions from Christian traditions to Qur'ān recitation in order to find RE-relevant approaches to recitation. For example, the teachers note that there should be similarities in terms of how pupils work with scriptures from different religious traditions. As Anders said it:

As a starting point, I think it [how to work with scripture] should be similar. If pupils can look at the Bible, they should be able to look at the Qur'ān as well. This goes for every sacred scripture. So, when we are discussing looking at sacred texts, I think pupils should be able to do so with [texts] from every religion.

The idea that one should be able to approach every religion and scripture similarly explains why teachers would like to ensure that Qur'ān recitation is addressed comparably with other scriptures in terms of both content and methods, yet they are not sure how to accomplish this. When comparing the semantic dimensions of the Bible and the Qur'ān, as they do when they are discussing narratives, content, and the basis of faith, teachers may use approaches that are familiar from Biblical interpretation or literary analysis in general because scripture is perceived as *text*. When they search for something like Qur'ān recitation within the KRLE discourse, the teachers are looking for an expressive dimension, in this case the expression of the *words* of scripture (Watts 2019). Furthermore, they seem to be searching for something religious people are *practicing*.

Berglund (2021) argues that it can be relevant to compare the Bible and the Qur'ān as books with common narratives, as these teachers do; however, when drawing comparisons, it is important to keep in mind the differences that exist in the relationships between the scriptures and God within the Christian and Islamic traditions. As Wilfred C. Smith famously formulated, "Qur'an is to Muslims what Christ is to Christians" (1993, 46). Whereas

stories about the revelation of Christ are found in the Gospels, the revelation of the Qur'ān is described in various hadiths (Berglund 2021, 187) but, following the template of “the book, the man, and the faith”, many RE textbook presentations of religion omit such differences. Some posit that a more useful comparison to Qur'ān recitation is the Book of Psalms (Fujiwara 2016). While the traditions of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity contain examples of the expressive dimension of the Bible that more closely resemble recitation, it seems that the general approach to scripture in Norwegian RE can be understood as a (Lutheran) Protestant approach. In other words, tension could arise when the teachers perceive “similar methods” as the way to approach religious scripture in general, and at the same time perceive religious scripture as “the basis of faith”. Methods relevant to approaching the semantic dimension of the Bible or the Qur'ān will not necessarily provide relevant tools with which to grasp Qur'ān recitation. As Berglund (2021) argues, this could result in Islam being presented in a protestant manner.

When the teachers ruminated on potential approaches to Qur'ān recitation for (what seems to be) the first time, these reflections are not only affected by the fact that they do not know how recitation would fit within the pedagogical framework, but also what they *do* know about the status of the Qur'ān and recitation within Islamic traditions. For instance, one teacher specifically mentioned the physical aspects and special treatment of religious scripture as a relevant topic to teach pupils, bringing in both the Qur'ān and the Torah as examples of material belongings treated with respect by religious people:

The Qur'ān is incredibly sacred for some people, the physical copy; you are supposed to keep it in a special place and see to it carefully. Like the Torah scrolls in a Jewish synagogue; we have learned about them being wrapped in silk and so on. These are sacred belongings [...] For many people this, a careful and respectful treatment of such belongings [is important]. (Anders)

The objects Anders mentioned can be seen as examples of the iconic dimension of religion and, following Watts' (2019) argument, studying how people ritualize the iconic dimensions of religious scripture is a key to understanding why such scriptures are perceived as something other than “ordinary”

books. However, Anders was the only one who raised this issue in the conversation on matters relevant to teaching about religious scripture and, other than Anders' comment, the interviews do not provide much insight into how teachers address the iconic dimension when teaching (if they do at all). Examining the Norwegian teacher training textbook in RE provided a similar result: the iconic dimension is barely mentioned in pedagogical discussions on approaching religious scripture (Markeng 2023). Nevertheless, teachers' knowledge about this dimension (for instance their knowledge about what is, and what is not perceived to be respectful treatment of the Qur'ān) also seems to be relevant to their uncertainty when discussing Qur'ān recitation, with concerns being raised in relation to central aspects of Norwegian RE. I address RE-specific teacher perceptions in the following section.

Teacher perceptions of KRLE

While the teacher perceptions discussed above are also related to the subject of relevant content and methods, another common perception voiced in the interviews was that qualified RE teachers have knowledge about topics, matters, and values that are RE specific. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of the purpose and challenges of the subject, as well as what this requires of them, could shed light on the complexity of the teachers' responses to Qur'ān recitation. When discussing the recitation assignment (Figure 1), a concern the teachers expressed was how the pupils would experience listening to such recitations: on the one hand, non-Muslim pupils might think the recitation sounds strange, while on the other, pupils might become too involved when listening. I relate both sides of this concern to teacher perceptions of the overarching framework of KRLE.

First, I turn to the way in which pupils could perceive and react negatively to the recitation. Berit, quoted above, feared the recitation might “sound strange” to the pupils with a non-Muslim background, while Anders said, “[In the w]orst case scenario, it could be some sort of exotism, so you have to prepare the pupils by explaining that this is a completely normal thing for many people.” The teachers' concern about the reactions they might get from non-Muslim students can be seen in relation to the public debate about Islam. The increased attention paid to Muslims in Norway and widespread awareness of Islamophobic

attitudes are examples of how the relationship between Muslims and the majority society has become a matter of public concern (Leirvik, 2014, 142). Furthermore, a recent survey found that approximately a third of the Norwegian population agreed with the statements that “Muslims constitute a threat towards Norwegian culture” and that “Muslims do not fit in with a modern Western society” (Moe 2022, 9). Given the discourse of conflict concerning Islam presented in the media (Døving 2013), teachers are understandably worried both about contributing to exotic or harmful representations of it, and that such presentations will reflect negatively on pupils with Muslim backgrounds. Interviews with pupils from religious minority backgrounds have revealed a potential for alienation when their religious experiences are compared with the textbook or classroom presentation of religion (Nicolaisen 2013; Vestøl et al. 2014). In other words, it is not an unreasonable concern, and one which seems to be enhanced by what the interviewed teachers perceive to be the main objective of RE.

The four teachers agree that RE should promote values such as respect and tolerance. For instance, Anders said, “This subject does not only provide knowledge about different religions. Really, it is more about life skills. So that... the pupils are tolerant, that they can encounter different ideas about the world and put themselves in someone else’s situation.” Furthermore, Berit relates the world “out there” to the attitudes pupils obtain in KRLE: “I hope that the pupils get a better understanding of each other ... and the people outside the classroom they meet later in life. I think it is the most important thing... being compassionate.” In other words, the teachers argue that these are values and attitudes are needed to navigate within a society in which people of different religious and cultural backgrounds live together. The communication of certain values and knowledge about a multicultural society is also mandated in the KRLE curriculum; thus, RE teachers are expected to communicate respect and tolerance and teach their pupils about various forms of religious life. However, when these teachers reflected on the potential of Qur'ān recitation, the objectives of the subject seem to generate uncertainty. For instance, recitation could be one of many religious expressions pupils encounter with respect and tolerance within the “safe space” of the classroom, in alignment with the stated objective of the subject. However, if recitation is

perceived as strange and exotic, at worst its inclusion could be contradictory to the values teachers want to instil, and thus be counterproductive in terms of achieving the educational goals of the subject.

Avoiding difficult or controversial topics is not uncommon among teachers, and worrying about pupils' reactions is usually a reason for this (Børhaug and Harnes 2018; Flensner 2018; 2020; Von der Lippe 2019). Nonetheless, research demonstrates that teachers *do* include controversial and challenging topics, such as terrorism, as long as they find that the relevance and importance of the event or topics surpasses their insecurity about how to address it (Toft 2020b, 10). Qur'ān recitation is in itself not a controversial topic in RE.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as an expression of Muslim practice, it might start a conversation about other, more challenging topics which have been debated in the Norwegian public: for instance, attending a Qur'ān school as a leisure activity or public desecration of the Qur'ān. Such debates could potentially give rise to utterances which defy the attitudes and values teachers expect of their pupils when encountering examples of religious life that differ from their own. Yet interviews with RE pupils in upper-secondary education found that the pupils worried about whether teachers were romanticizing religion (Flø and Mogstad 2021). Therefore, selecting the types of religious expression to include or exclude based on pupils' predicted reactions might underestimate pupils' capabilities and, at the same time, actually weaken the credibility of teachers' presentations, creating unwanted distance between teachers and pupils.

The second concern the teachers voiced touched on pupils' feelings and experiences when listening to Qur'ān recitation. Ellen said, "I do not think they should put their emotions into it. But let's say we found an enabling YouTube video that meant that their feelings were not at stake..." Both teachers in lower secondary, Ellen and Knut, said that experiences were hard to evaluate and assess. According to Knut, combining pupils' emotions with listening to recitations is not beneficial in a RE context: "And the assignment about their feelings... It does not really provide anything. [...] Are we supposed to assess the creativity in describing what they have heard and experienced?" Not knowing what pupils should engage with in such an assignment, or what they could learn from reflecting on their experiences when listening, may be reasons why pupils' encounters with re-

14 This is according to definitions on controversial issues, presented and discussed by, among others, von der Lippe (2019) and Flensner (2020).

citation are more difficult to assess than, for example, discussion of ethical dilemmas, which was something the teachers found very relevant in KRLE. Although ethical dilemmas typically do not provide a single correct answer to evaluate, RE teachers have considerable experience with such approaches, and with what they want the pupils to experience through such discussions. Furthermore, dilemmas are usually presented in a way that relates ethics to *us*, thus making them easier to engage with. Religion, on the other hand, is usually presented as something related to *them*, demanding an outsider-oriented approach, which involves more distance (Unstad and Fjørtoft 2021, 4). Thus, the nature of Qur'an recitation as a *religious* expression seems to impact whether teachers perceive it to be valuable and acceptable for pupil engagement.

Although pupils are presented with various forms of religious expression through lessons, textbooks, and videos in KRLE, they seldom encounter them as audio alone. There seem to be perceived differences between *listening* to and *watching* Qur'an recitation, as Ellen suggests. One way to understand this is that listening to an expressive dimension of the *words* of scripture when one does not understand the language eliminates access to the semantic dimension, meaning that one must evaluate other aspects of scripture than what they would normally do in KRLE, with which teachers have little experience and hardly any methods of approaching. If the same ritual is presented in video form, a format well-known to both teachers and pupils, it is possible to adopt a descriptive approach that addresses other aspects of recitation, such as location, clothing, the body, and the Qur'an. Such an approach might introduce methods relevant to encountering expression of the *content* of scriptures, thereby maintaining a certain distance from the perceived religiosity of the practice.

A lack of distance could be one reason why combining emotions with the topic of religious recitation is found challenging. Following this argument, comments about emotions "at stake" could be related to concerns about pupils becoming *too involved* when listening. For instance, it is the pupils' right to be exempted from involvement in what they "perceive as being the practice of another religion or adherence to another philosophy of life, or that they on the same basis find objectionable or offensive" (Opplæringslova 1998).¹⁵ The interviewed teachers are aware of earlier debates and that there should be no

evangelizing or participation in religious practice within the subject. After Berit reflected on where she would draw this line if she were to include Qur'ān recitation in her lessons, she concluded, "Saying out loud the prayers or creed of other religions is not okay, so the goal would never be to learn this by heart or read it out loud. [...] But maybe... if the pupils are only listening, and not repeating it... I don't know." Considering that, according to Islamic tradition, God's speech is believed to become embodied through the memorization and recitation of the Qur'ān (Nelson 2001, 14), teachers may worry that parents or pupils will perceive that listening to recitation is moving closer to religious practice. Additionally, it is stated in the Education Act that different religions should be presented in an "objective, critical and pluralistic manner" (Opplæringslova 1998). This relates to the ideal of giving a neutral presentation, as Anders mentioned when he reflected on how he could teach his specific group of pupils: "We have a quite diverse group of pupils, multiple religions, and worldviews in the same class. So that might be why I find it challenging. Even though I think pupils can learn from other religions, there is something about... You have to make sure you are neutral, right."

Studies of RE classroom practices in Scandinavia suggest that a secular, non-religious position is seen as neutral and objective (Flensner 2018, 14; Hauan and Anker 2021). Thus, any expressions of religion elicited by teachers or pupils must fit within this framework to be seen as relevant (Gilliam 2022). Qur'ān recitation might challenge what is commonly perceived as expected and accepted expressions of religiosity in KRLE. Thus, the teachers could be uncomfortable with having to make the decision about whether or not to bring this expressive dimension of the Qur'ān into their classrooms.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed teacher perceptions of religious scripture, pedagogical considerations, and the frame and purpose of KRLE in order to cast light on teachers' concerns about, and reflections on bringing Qur'ān recitation, as an expression of the Qur'ān, into their KRLE lessons. On the one hand, recitation could provide an opportunity to learn about and encounter an important Islamic practice within a learning

¹⁵ The right to exemption only applies to activities. Pupils are not exempted from curricular knowledge.

environment. Offering pupils the knowledge needed to encounter this practice with respect and tolerance is one educational purpose of the subject. On the other hand, teacher perceptions of what religious scripture *is* and what role it should play in KRLE do not provide them with the applicable framework and approaches for listening to this expression of scripture. When teachers look for comparable approaches to religious scripture, they find methods most suitable to discussing the semantic dimension of the Qur'ān. Consequently, even experienced and highly qualified teachers find the expressive dimension of the Qur'ān both unfamiliar and challenging. Whether they worried about *too much* distance (pupils might find it weird or exotic) or *too little* distance (pupils might become too involved in this form of religious expression), the teachers' interviews address some of the major questions that have affected the debate on KRLE over the past decades: the academic presentation of religion, pupils' involvement, and the right to exemption. These results align with Keränen-Pantsu and Rissanen's (2018) study, which finds that teachers experience tensions between pedagogical ideas (e.g., student-centred and creative learning) and the sacredness of religious narratives.

When seen in conjunction with recent classroom studies, my question is whether teachers' uncertainty also relates to a public concern about the relationship between Muslims and Norwegian society in general. Knowledge about Muslim ritualization of an iconic dimension of the Qur'ān, bolstered by debates on, and reactions to public desecration of the Qur'ān, might be a part of this context. To counteract stereotypical presentations of Islam which are found in the public sphere, teachers will typically frame the content related to Islam so that it fits within the perceived framework and goals of the subject (Toft 2018; 2020). However, there seems to be a gap between the given framework on the one hand (for instance, a protestant approach towards scripture and a secular normativity in the public school [Hauan and Anker 2021; Gilliam 2022]), and the drive to present Islam in a way that contributes to the anti-discrimination of Muslims in the society, on the other. While teachers are aware of the importance of the Qur'ān and Qur'ān recitation for Muslims, without a solid pedagogical framework for encountering recitation as an expression of scripture they would rather not risk generating discussions or reactions which could reproduce stereotypical notions about a Muslim religious minority.

In other words, ongoing public debates and concerns appear to affect in-service teachers' practice and choices. The time pressure and multifaceted responsibilities teachers experience restrict their capacity to challenge the perceptions that impact *what* and *how* they teach about religious scriptures, and *why* they believe this is important. Exposing them to various expressions of religious scriptures and coherent pedagogical approaches in teacher education programs and teaching-learning resources could be a relevant starting point in this regard. There is also a need for further research to gain insight into how teachers and pupils relate to teaching and learning about all three of Watts' dimensions, the assignments that are given, how these are experienced by Muslim pupils who also learn about scripture in their leisure time, and the concepts that are required to grasp the various ways religious scripture functions in religious people's lives. Furthermore, given that this study is conducted with four teachers from a Norwegian majority background, another relevant question for exploration is how RE teachers with minority backgrounds approach and relate to religious scriptures.

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