

Thinking about Knowledge amidst Religious Diversity: Epistemic Relativity and its Impact on Religion in Education

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Abstract

In this article I explore the notion of epistemic relativity and its impact on Religion in Education. I argue that epistemic relativism in the study of Religion in Education has the potential to stimulate critical dialogue about religious content and assist interlocutors to balance their commitment to their own truths and beliefs and openness to the truths and beliefs of others. This includes an exploration of the relationship between social constructivism and epistemic relativism, as well as a realist response. A case study provides examples of how some of the theoretical notions unfold in practice.

Keywords: Religion in Education, epistemic relativity, social constructivism, realism, profound dialogue.

Introduction

Teaching and learning multireligious content is a complex matter. Lecturers often have to deal with students who enter classrooms with snippets of ‘knowledge’ that are generally framed by their own fears, misconceptions and/or personal ‘truths’ (Roux & Du Preez 2006). One way of meeting the challenges this presents is through reflecting on the processes of epistemological realisation, specifically in terms of the social constructivist theory of knowledge. Epistemological realisation, or the morphosis of knowledge systems in Religion in Education, is multidimensional and is

often accompanied by epistemic relativism. This is mainly because of the plethora of religious truths and beliefs about religions—whether in education or beyond—which characterises a religiously diverse postmodern society. In searching for a way of helping us deal with student’s fears, misconceptions and/or personal truths, this article explores the question: *What is the impact of epistemic relativity on the study of Religion in Education?*

First, attention will be given to the social constructivist theory of knowledge and how this leads to epistemic relativity. The position I take is that relativity in the epistemology of the study of Religion in Education should not lead to epistemophobia (cf. Boghossian 2006) of knowledge regarding different religions, and could be essential for the survival of Religion in Education. This is because Religion in Education necessitates that people acknowledge the diverse knowledge systems underpinning religions and belief systems.

In this article I will explain my understanding of epistemic relativity as a spin-off of social constructivism. I will also discuss the realist position in this debate. I will draw on my own classroom praxis to provide examples of some of the theoretical notions as well as on one narrative obtained from a student involved in a pre-service teacher training programme in Religion Education. These examples should not be seen as proof of the theory, but as indications of how the theory takes form in a particular context. The theory and examples will also be used as a backdrop to the concluding suggestions given regarding the significance of epistemic relativity in the context of the study of religion in education.

Theoretical Background

In this next part, I explore the theory underlying epistemic relativity. This will include the identification of two forms of epistemic relativity in the context of religion; an exploration into the the nature of knowledge and epistemic relativity in the study of Religion in Education; and a realist response to epistemic relativism. Finally, the implications of this theoretical exploration for the study of Religion in Education will be discussed.

Relativism Explored

Questions on relativism are not new to philosophy. Both Siegel (1987) and

Baghramian (2005) discuss how the early Greek philosophers grappled with the notion of relativism and how since then it has often been viewed negatively or even with profound scepticism. This stems from the assumption ‘... that relativism cannot be correct, for it succumbs to a self-destructive, self-referential incoherence’ (Siegel 1987:xiii).

I would argue that abhorrence of relativism has lessened with the rise of a linguistic turn in philosophy. This shift is evident in the second half of the twentieth century among French thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Pierre Bourdieu (Delanty & Strydom 2003:321-329). The linguistic turn in philosophy (or post-structuralism), amongst others, elevated anti-foundationalism and subjectivism (Delanty & Strydom 2003:365), as well as the relative nature of cognitive, moral and aesthetic realities (Baghramian 2005:6-7). Post-structuralism advocates scepticism about all aspects of the world and sees all judgements as relative and worthy of deconstruction and could therefore be described as second order relativism (Baghramian 2005:9) in which everything is viewed relatively.

Baghramian (2005:5) discusses the varieties of relativity in terms of two questions: [1] *what is being relativised?* and [2] *what is the context of relativisation?* Regarding the first question, she differentiates between *cognitive relativism*, which includes relativism about truth, rationality, epistemic and conceptual notions; *moral relativism* and *aesthetic relativism* (Baghramian 2005:6). With regard to the second question, a distinction is made between *subjective relativism* that proposes that an individual decides what is relative; *social relativism* which is based on the idea that relativity depends on social, cultural and historical conditions; and *conceptual relativism* that focuses on relativising ontology and conceptual schemes (Baghramian 2005:7). The discussion on the varieties of relativity is important because of the many shapes that have been adopted and the ways in which these forms are often conflated (Baghramian 2005:5). The above exploration on the varieties of relativity will be used in the next section to differentiate between the forms of epistemic relativity in the context of religion.

Two Forms of Epistemic Relativity in the Context of Religion

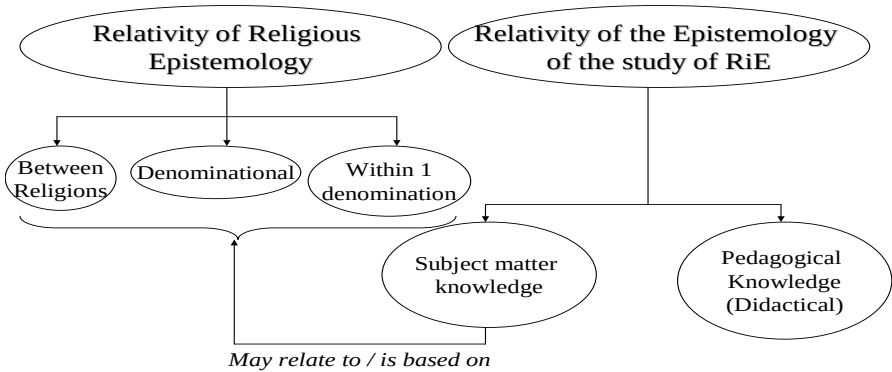
To facilitate a theoretical exploration of epistemic relativity in the context of religion one needs to differentiate between the *relativity of religious epi-*

stemology and the *relativity of the epistemology of the study of Religion in Education*. The first refers to the relativity regarding religious knowledge and truth (Baergen 1995). Just as there are differences between people belonging to the same culture about what constitutes knowledge and truth (Du Preez 2008; Dhillon & Halstead 2005), so too there are epistemic differences between adherents of the same religion or belief system. Such differences are often reflected in the establishment of different denominations, but are also found among people in the same denomination. In relation to Baghramian's (2005) varieties of relativism, the relativity of religious epistemology is a variety of cognitive relativity with specific reference to alethic relativism (relativism of truth). The centrality of alethic relativism also brings about the moral relativity underpinning this form of epistemic relativity. Here the context of relativisation is both subjective and social relativism.

The second form of epistemic relativity—*relativity of the epistemology of the study of Religion in Education* is biarticulate. On the one hand, it denotes the *pedagogical knowledge* that student-teachers need to master in order to present Religion in Education lucidly and, on the other hand, it refers to the *subject matter knowledge* regarding different religions (Raths 1999). The subject matter knowledge may relate to varying degrees to the relativity of religious epistemology because it is based on the episteme of the broader field of religion; whereas pedagogical knowledge constitutes the teaching-learning and facilitation of the subject matter knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge is subject specific and belongs to the realm of education in general. In terms of Baghramian's (2005) varieties of relativism, subject matter knowledge is much the same as the relativity of religious epistemology as discussed above. However, pedagogical knowledge in the context of religion embraces the rational and epistemic aspects of cognitive relativism, in addition to aesthetic relativism. This is because pedagogy represents a scientific study of education that can be rationally justified and epistemologically supported (McMillan & Schumacher 2001) and that is strongly influenced by aesthetic relativism (Greene 2008). The context of relativisation is conceptual relativism because of relativity of conceptual schemes and ontological views that underpin educational discourses (Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish 2005). Both these forms of epistemic relativity might also be influenced by other forms of relativism. However, for the

purposes of this article, only epistemic relativity in the context of Religion in Education will be considered. The diagram below illustrates the forms of epistemic relativity in the context of religion in education.

Diagram 1: Forms of Epistemic Relativity in RiE



There has been a great deal of work on the theory underlying cultural relativity and the relativity of religious epistemology (Dhillon & Halstead 2005; Du Preez 2008). Many of the notions regarding cultural relativity also apply to the relativity of religious epistemology. One criticism against cultural relativists (and by implication ‘religious relativists’) is that they view cultures/religions as being hermetically sealed and thus fail to acknowledge the complexity embedded in cultures/religions (Dhillon & Halstead 2005:157). Not much theoretical work has yet been done on the topic of the relativity of the epistemology of the study of Religion in Education. For that reason, towards the end of the article specific attention will be given to the pedagogical value of relativity for the study of religion in education.

Epistemic Relativism of Pedagogical Knowledge in Religion in Education: A Social Constructivist Approach

An exploration of the nature of epistemology in the study of Religion in Education must be preceded with an exploration of the influence of national

and international trends. For that reason, Outcomes Based Education will be discussed next as an example of a national trend, and the social constructivist approach will be described as an international trend that could affect the epistemological realisation of Religion in Education. The introduction of Outcomes Based Education in South Africa nationally came with a 'new' theory of the nature of knowledge (and methodology), i.e. the social constructivist theory. New is placed in inverted commas because, social constructivism has been criticised as not being new at all. Terhart (2003:42), for example, argues that,

... instead of a genuine creation of a new didactics, we see in constructivism the familiar, old, and romantic conception of learning and teaching well-known in 'progressive education' (*Reformpädagogik*). These ideas are presented in a new language....

In terms of the nature of knowledge, social constructivism centre on the assumption that knowledge of the world and the self is embedded upon communal interchange (Gergen & Gergen 2003:2) which is inevitably open to a variety of relativisms (Baghranian 2005). The study of Religion in Education was (and still is) directly influenced and shaped by this theoretical approach and its underlying assumption(s) and problems.

In broad terms, the social constructivist approach and its revolving assumption(s) about knowledge have gained prominence as a result of two critical international discourses, both strongly influenced by post-structuralist thought. Firstly, Boghossian (2006:5-6) argues that *post-colonialism* has brought with it the idea that '... there is no such thing as superior knowledge only different knowledges, each appropriate to its own particular setting'. Secondly, he postulates that *feminist epistemology*, with its commitment to situated knowledge that reflects the position of the knowledge producer and his or her historical and contextual situation, has also contributed to the heightened status social constructivism enjoys (Boghossian 2006:6). He argues that these two discourses have created a 'social dependence conception of knowledge' (Boghossian 2006:6) and that it is exactly this notion that brings about the '... many different yet equally valid ways of knowing the world' (Boghossian 2006:6). Boghossian, therefore, takes the position that social constructivist theory leads to epistemic relativism.

Realism, Social Constructivism and Epistemic Relativism: Critiques and Examples

In the next section, I will explore the realist response to epistemic relativism as evidenced by social constructivism. This argument concerns realist contentions against relativists in general (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter 2003) and specifically the feminist-realist response to constructivist views (Hepburn 2003). Realists argue that ‘... an external reality exists which is independent of human consciousness yet can nevertheless be known’ (Delanty & Strydom 2003:376). Gergen and Gergen (2003:228) argue that realists consider that the world cannot be constructed in any way one wishes to for two reasons. Firstly, there are inevitable realities that one must confront and, secondly, constructed realities have to be tested against these inevitable realities. On the contrary, Edwards, Ashmore and Potter (2003:236) state that ‘[r]ealism is the rhetoric of no rhetoric, marshalled in favour of one particular claim against another’. They conclude by saying that relativism at least provides one with a plethora of positions to argue for or against, whereas realism principally induces one to commit to one particular stance (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter 2003:236). Hepburn (2003:237), who agrees with the latter argument, explains the different anti-relativist arguments in four points. These four points includes the following: the choice between versions; textual idealism; feminist commitment; and influencing the community (Hepburn 2003:238).

The first point refers to the view that relativism cannot provide a basis for choosing between moral and political perspectives or between the claims made by different people (Hepburn 2003:238). Realists expect a basis or foundation from which to choose. Relativists, on the other hand, adopt an anti-foundational position and draw on a wide range of possibilities (Hepburn 2003:239). The second argument that realists would posit is that relativists are not in a position to explore real, worldly phenomena because of the anti-foundational nature (Hepburn 2003:240). Hepburn (2003: 241) rejects this view, arguing that an anti-foundational stance does not necessitate an idealist stance that denies the existence of a range of objects. The third point concerns commitment, specifically at the epistemological level. Hepburn (2003:242) explains this as follows:

When a relativist takes sides in a dispute some kinds of commitment

are involved Taking sides does not involve abandoning relativism ... taking sides does not mean that the relativist may not dispute what the sides are and how they are constituted

The last point of realist critique is concerned with the seeming difficulty that relativists have in persuading the research community, and beyond, of their claims (Hepburn 2003:243). Hepburn (2003:243) draws on constructionism, poststructuralism and discursive psychology to demonstrate relativist's ability to justify their beliefs. She concludes by arguing that '... relativists may be in a stronger—and more intellectually honest—position to deal with the many contingencies, arguments and agendas ...' (Hepburn 2003:244).

In order to contextualise some of the arguments provided thus far, I will draw on elements of my own praxis as a lecturer of Religion Studies to pre-service teachers. This praxis might also provide some context for the narrative case study to be discussed next. My classroom discussions with students are mainly related to topics such as discourses in Religion Studies in diverse educational contexts, trends in religion in society in general, and how religion is personally experienced by people. One of the things that has emerged clearly during these discussions is that knowledge has become even more relative as a result of postmodernity, of living in an information and communication age and of the ever increasing popularity of the social construction of knowledge. I have discovered that many students find it extremely difficult to deal with epistemic (and moral) relativity. Some students just accept the relativity and 'move on'; whilst others apprehensively contest it. Examples of the first two of these possible reasons for the increase in relativity will be provided next.

The students often describe how they encounter learners who have their own 'personalised or self-constructed religions'. Examples of this are learners who claim to be spiritualists or pagans in the broader sense of the words. These learners adopt elements of the religions and/or belief systems they like and ignore what is not to their liking. The growing trend towards customised religions contributes to the relativity of beliefs and consequently to epistemic relativity. Mason, Singleton and Webber (2007:174) state that

[a] large proportion of young people [are] moving between alternatives, especially during their teenage years. Most of this

movement appears to be away from traditional spirituality, either toward eclectic blends of mainstream and New Age spiritualities, or more frequently in the direction of secular indifference.

Another example is the very different ways that the media interpret situations and/or concepts and sometimes distort reality through generating ill-conceived 'truths'. Such distorted realities and ill-conceived truths are widely available and are often uncritically adopted by people, thus strengthening the notion of the relativity of knowledge. A popular example of this is the erroneous way that the *jihad* has been portrayed in the popular media since the September 11 attacks. This erroneous portrayal of *jihad* can even be found in a South African text book for intermediate and senior phase learners. Dangor (2005) and Bardakoğlu (2008) both address this issue by extensively describing the different dimensions of *jihad* in an attempt to challenge or eradicate misconceptions about this concept.

In response to the above two examples, realists would argue that both the situations are the results of relativist's rejection of the foundational nature of knowledge. I would argue that if we desire to live in an environment where no one metanarrative dictates our thoughts we ought to embrace this inevitable relativity. Embracing relativity does not mean one (whether a lecturer, student or learner) should naively accept relativity or commit to everything that is relative. Rather, it means that one should critically and convincingly adopt a position and then continue to investigate the other positions to avoid stagnation and dispel ignorance. This process of continuous scrutiny of possibilities makes it possible to be more informed when one 'personalise[s] a religion' or reads various media texts.

In the next section, I will indicate what I think the implications of these theoretical notions are for the study of Religion in Education. Thereafter these theoretical notions will further be expanded through applying it to a narrative case study.

Implications for the Study of Religion in Education

Firstly, despite the criticisms against social constructivism (Terhart 2003; Hacking 2003), I would argue that this approach has the potential to complement the study of Religion in Education. I think that many criticisms against social constructivism are based on a one-dimensional understanding

(often a Vygotskian understanding) of this approach (see for example Bencze 2000; Delanty & Strydom 2003). Delanty and Strydom (2003:372-374) discuss the various origins of the notion of constructivism and show how the original view of this notion (that was framed by logical positivists' understanding of meaning as constructivist) is insufficient to justify contemporary understandings of constructivism and their strong emphasis on reflexivity. Those involved in Religion in Education as a dimension of human and social sciences cannot ignore the fact that social constructivism provides a space for social actors to challenge the traditional view of truth, knowledge and objectivity as static. Challenging these traditional views is an important way of avoiding having any one metanarrative dominate the study of Religion in Education. Social constructivism also assists those studying Religion in Education to learn about this discipline within a familiar social and historical context.

Secondly, a realist fixation with foundationalism and 'inevitable realities' could also be questioned. My questions would be: *Can there be any inevitable realities in a religiously diverse society?* And: *Whose inevitable realities will count as foundational when constructed realities are tested?* (cf. Southard & Payne 1998). In my view, a realist position in the study of Religion in Education might—deliberately or inadvertently—endorse the superiority of 'one knowledge' or metanarrative. I would suggest an anti-foundational approach to the study of Religion in Education so as to enable an epistemological view that can cope with rapidly changing and evolving circumstances on the political, social and/or economical front (Du Preez 2009). Such an anti-foundational approach also enables those involved in the study of Religion in Education to gain a wide spectrum of options as well as opportunities to justify their positions.

The last sentence also brings me to my third argument. One's epistemological position which derives from one's ontological stance directly influences one's methodological and ethical views. For example, if a teacher views a child as a *tabula rasa* that has to be filled with knowledge, it is likely that such teacher would also view him/herself as an authoritarian figure that has to deposit (one-dimensional) knowledge by means of a methodology that enables the teacher to remain in control (Freire 2009). Approaching the study of Religion in Education from a social constructivist position, on the other hand, presupposes the use of certain methods such as cooperative learning

(Slavin 1991; Bitzer 2001) as well as dialogic approaches (Weiße 1996, Alexander 2006, Du Preez 2008). The aim is to offer learners options and opportunities—which is possible when epistemic relativity is present—to explore options, engage in dialogues and to justify their positions.

Fourthly, embracing relativity does not inexorably lead to a position where one is bereft of moral fibre. On the contrary, as was established earlier, it is in fact mandatory to commit to a position and then to question differences of opinion and how they are constituted (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter 2003:237). Informing students about reasoning processes in situations that are characterised by relativity might give them opportunities to practise their reasoning skills. In the light of the many religious disputes in our society, such exercise might benefit students (and learners) and simultaneously bring about higher levels of religious literacy (Goldburg 2006; Roux 2007).

To put it briefly, the value of epistemic relativity in the study of Religion in Education deserves careful consideration. Epistemic relativity may generate discomfort and/or discontent amongst some, but it should be remembered that learning often takes place when we are taken beyond the borders of comfort.

The Case Study: One Narrative

In the last part of this article I describe the methodology, methods and procedures associated with conducting a narrative case study before describing and analysing the narrative to demonstrate how some of the theoretical notions operate in practice.

Methodology, Methods and Procedures

The use of narratology has become all the more popular since the late sixties and is associated with the trend towards biography in social science research as well as to autoethnography as described earlier (Patton 2002:115, 116). Conceptually it is linked to hermeneutics, phenomenology and interpretivism (Patton 2002:115). Narratology, or narrative analysis, gives credit to people's stories or lived experiences and simultaneously gives these stories the status of scientific data (Patton 2002:115). Elliott (2006) offers five themes that concern narrative research. Two themes which were directly useful in this

inquiry are: '[a]n interest in people's lived experiences and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience' and '[a]n interest in process and change over time' (Elliott 2006:6). A narrative approach seems best suited to investigate an example of how epistemic relativism in the study of Religion in Education in a diverse society such as South Africa unfolds. This is because it allows the researcher to gain insight into a person's experiences—in this case the experience of a student regarding epistemic relativity—and to detect changes that might occur regarding one's epistemological stance.

The narrative data to be described below is a fraction of the data that was accumulated in the course of a year. One student studying a course in Religion Studies as part of her degree in Education spontaneously started to write letters to me (the lecturer) about her lived experience of the discussions during classes. The narrative writing was thus informally produced. After she gave permission to use the letters as data, I obtained some biographical background from her in order to further contextualise her experiences. An unstructured interview was also conducted to give her the opportunity to explain some of the experiences that were not clearly expressed in the letters. Thereafter, a summary of the data was made under the following two headings: [a] biographical information and [b] knowledge and relativism. This summary, together with some of my initial interpretations, was given to the narrator to assess and to add important issues that I seemed to have disregarded and/or to remove any misinterpreted inferences. Although many more clusters could have been made, I decided to focus only on knowledge and relativism since it featured so much during the entire narrative and to narrow down the scope for the purpose of this inquiry.

Narrative Description

a) Biographical Information of the Narrator

Biographical information about a narrator is important since it gives one a glimpse into the 'life lived' by that person (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf 2000). In this section I will explain this narrator's story and, at times, quote her directly. All her correspondence were written in Afrikaans and later translated into English. As mentioned earlier, the narrator (from this point, student) had an opportunity to view the translations and preliminary interpretations to confirm their authenticity. In the paragraphs that follow I will highlight several moments in this students' lived experience that,

according to her, influenced her ideas about relativism and knowledge in terms of religion to varying extents.

This student's Christian religion shapes her daily life and interpretations of the world around her. Early on she makes it very clear that her existentialist nature is probably due to her father being a Dutch Reformed minister and that religion is something that she often thought about and sometimes discussed with others. She describes how her own family are firmly Dutch Reformed, but that they also differ in opinion from the dogma of this denomination in some instances. At times she details examples of such differences and argues that such diversity is normal, healthy and correct. She mentions that it is unfortunate since diversity often causes people to abandon a denomination and adopt other ways that suit them better. On more than one occasion she gives examples of people she knows who had different views and consequently became religiously more extreme and/or fundamentalist in their thinking and doing.

It is worth noting that this student did some 'church-hopping' (attending services at Christian denominations) in mid-adolescence. She says that she did not do this to seek a better church, but because she found it quite interesting and that she was very curious. Already at that stage she was starting to examine the differences amongst Christian denominations critically. She says,

I wondered why we are Dutch Reformed and why this denomination is more correct in its way of interpreting the Bible than other denominations ... (Funnily enough, during this whole denomination issue I never wondered about other religions.).

She concludes by mentioning that this experience has taught her to think and listen critically when exposed to other denominations or religions.

She makes it very clear that she is not a Christian or Dutch Reformed because of her father's occupation, but because she chooses to be a Dutch Reformed Christian. Her discussion reveals that in late adolescence she critically examined her reasons for believing in Christianity. On another occasion, she states that she considers herself to be emotionally very independent of her parents, especially in the way she thinks about things. She believes that her father did not indoctrinate her and mentions that although

she has learnt a lot from him she believes that her opinions and views have been arrived at independently. She also writes:

because I'm so sure about my beliefs and why I believe what I do, I feel free and open towards investigating other religions. I also feel that I do not have to let go of my religion and beliefs

Finally, this student often discusses her thoughts about Religion in Education with other people in order to gain various viewpoints. She contends that she constructs knowledge when she obtains as much information about something as possible and then draws conclusions. For example, she contacted a minister so she could share some of her thoughts with him. This appears to have been a very enriching experience.

b) Knowledge and Relativism: Through the Looking Glass of the Narrator

On the topic of knowledge and relativism she argues that one cannot generalise when speaking about any religion because people are so diverse and unique. In her writing she says: '... it just seems that people are so different and everybody interprets things different—it is so relative ...'. She also once asked me: 'Do you think that everything gets more relative, or do people just become more self-centred and self-informed?' Later in her writing she expresses her annoyance with relativism and states: '... the 'fact' that everything becomes more relative—I hate it—I feel that there must be a right and wrong, but I understand that everything is all the more relative'.

After she had had an opportunity to view my translations and preliminary interpretations of her narrative for a second time, she commented on what is quoted above by writing:

I did say this, but actually I mean that there must be some 'limitations'. One cannot just individualistically interpret things because everything is relative—one has to search more widely for other perspectives in order to justify oneself.

She later stresses this point:

If you truly want to have a thorough understanding of something, you must get as many other perspectives as possible. Relativism is just as problematic, but I do not know whether it could or should be resisted. And this is problematic to me because I am a black and white person in the sense that things are either right or they are wrong. But there are also many grey areas in my life For instance, I wonder what knowledge is and what could be viewed as knowledge and what all the knowledge I construct in the religion class entails.

She concludes on a more positive note by expressing the excitement she feels when contemplating relativity and how the thing she initially hated now intrigues her. When I asked her how she experiences knowledge construction in the sea of relativist options, she replied as follows:

I feel like a bottle of Champagne that's been opened. When the process started, I wasn't able to stop it. And if questions arise now, I cannot just leave them—I have to pursue them.

Regarding the latter analogy she added the following comment after her second look at the narrative:

Yes, definitely! I realise that relativism is a reality, but this does not mean that I hold fast to all that is relative. I have to understand something as thoroughly as I can ... I discover different perceptions and opinions, but eventually I construct my own opinions and knowledge—so, obviously my questions are instigated by relativism!

Analysis and Interpretations

According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993:242), the process of analysing data requires one to compare, contrast, aggregate and order the data and then to begin with certain interpretations. The selection of narrative data that was obtained from this narrator was viewed as a nexus made up of different links. The links were not interpreted in isolation, but in unison. In this regard Mouton (1996:169) states that,

[t]he overall coherence and meaning of the data is more important than the specific meanings of its parts. This leads to the use of methods of data analysis that are more holistic, synthetic and interpretative.

With this in mind, I considered it important to look at the progress reflected in this student's thought processes. In the remaining part of this section moments that indicate progress and change in this student's thought processes will be highlighted and interpreted within the framework of the theory explored earlier.

From the biographical information it is clear that this student intuitively considered epistemic relativity long before she was introduced to this course in Religion Education. This is clear in her descriptions of her interpretation of her denomination against the interpretations of others, and also in relation to other denominations. The relativity that she experiences and expresses in her early writings are clear examples of the *relativity of religious epistemology*. These intuitive reflections on the relativity of religious epistemology not only seem to have created opportunities for her, but allowed her to become critical of her own religion and denomination and that of others (Roux 2007). The student often emphasises the necessity to have various opportunities and/or opinions to choose from. In my view, this is a preliminary acknowledgement and/or intuitive valuation in her journey towards accepting relativism.

This initial and intuitive response and acceptance of relativity becomes a highly contested matter for this student. Something that she later 'hates', but that remains intriguing to her (otherwise she would not have continued reflecting upon it). During the abomination stage she finds herself in the middle of the realist versus relativist debate when she describes her liking in definite boundaries between right and wrong and then later acknowledge the existence of 'grey areas', or that which is neither right nor wrong but dependent on a particular context. However, she begins to reflect upon this predicament and then appears to lean toward relativism with its various options, although she makes it clear that relativism must have proper justification.

What is evident from this narrative is that dealing with relativity requires not only introspection or reflection, but also interaction with others. The fact that the student spontaneously started to write these reflexive letters

demonstrates her introspective and reflective disposition. It appears that this process enabled the student to articulate her concerns or thoughts about relativity in preparation for taking a position. Furthermore, interaction with others, or as she puts it, 'getting as many other perspectives as possible', seems to be a way for her to justify her position in the different options. These requirements could be met by a social constructivist position that promotes interactive learning and frequent reflection on contents and/or situations.

Earlier Hepburn (2003) was quoted about relativist's commitment and simultaneous openness to assess various options. What is evident from this narrative is that the student balances commitment and openness quite well when she says,

because I'm so sure about my beliefs and why I believe as I do, I feel free and open towards investigating other religions. I also feel that I do not have to let go of my religion and beliefs

It could be argued that adopting a relativist disposition requires one to be certain or clear about what one is committed to and open to justifying and investigating other positions (cf. Du Preez 2007).

With regard to the argument about foundationalism versus anti-foundationalism, this student has Christianity as her 'foundation', but makes it clear that her foundation in Christianity may be different from that of others. In saying so, she acknowledges that there might be more than one foundation. Arguing in this way she acknowledges the fact that religious foundations are not necessarily one-dimensional and anti-relativist.

I would argue that the greatest value of relativism for the study of Religion in Education is that it could bring a dialogical character to the classroom. As the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001: 23) points out, dialogue is simultaneously needed and lacking in education in South Africa and should be promoted as a value. Relativity could introduce the questions that dialogue requires and thus assist students to engage in dialogue and to construct knowledge. From the narrative above, it seems that the anti-foundational pedagogical stance underpinning relativism also has the potential to stimulate students' curiosity and encourage intellectual sobriety.

It is furthermore important that the lecturer assist student-teachers

not merely to reflect and discuss the relativity of religious epistemology, but also to enter into dialogues about the relativity embedded in pedagogical knowledge and subject matter knowledge. The latter is an ongoing discourse that depends on the vigorous inputs from practitioners. It could be argued that emphasis on the latter form of relativity could result in a teacher corps that operate as reflective practitioners in a community of practice (Wenger 2006).

Conclusion

What emerges from this inquiry is that neither tacit acceptance of relativity nor denial of its reality is desirable. I would argue that the perplexity that many experience when exploring the implications of relativity probably results from being unable to deal with and balance openness to other truths and knowledge constructs and commitment to their own truths or knowledge constructs. It is not only important to be able to balance openness and commitment, but to rationally and reasonably address contradictions in this regard. This might, in the words of Hepburn (2003:244) put us in ‘a stronger—and more intellectually honest—position to deal with the many contingencies, arguments and agendas’.

In educating pre-service teachers, the focus should be on exposing them to a variety of opinions and providing opportunities for them to make persuasive arguments for the positions they adopt. Giving them such opportunities and making them aware of the pedagogical value of relativism in Religion in Education might encourage them to use the same approach in their praxis, which could bring about a society in which its members are able to rationally justify the positions they adopt and remain in constant dialogue with others about them. Although this approach might initially generate discomfort and discontent in a classroom, it could be argued that in such circumstances we give an opportunity to our students to make sense of their snippets of knowledge, to face their fears and to take different positions so as to eradicate misconceptions and ill-conceived truths as far as possible.

In conclusion, epistemic relativity in the context of the study of Religion in Education could be very helpful in that it could open possibilities for profound dialogues amongst students. Finally, I suggest that we expand this discourse and consider the following: *If there were only one right or wrong, black or white, only one metanarrative in our classrooms, how would*

we be able to justify diverse epistemological realities, which often reveal itself in the multiplicity of grey areas in our lives.

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