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## A Study-of-Religion(s) Based RE: A Must for All Times—Post-modern, Post-secular or Not!

Tim Jensen

### Unframing the Editorial Framework

In the invitation to contribute to this volume on “religious education in a post-secular age”, the editors, with reference to the introduction in Sweden in the 1960s of a non-confessional and in that way ‘secular’ religious education (RE), express the opinion that the then ‘intellectual space’, ‘cultural situation’ and ‘intellectual fundament’ has been, as good as, totally eroded.

According to the editors (or at least to -isms and views on religion, RE, and the study of religion(s) which the editors seem to see as highly influential if not dominant), post-modernism, post-secularism, the

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post-secular state, linked philosophy and recent studies of religion(s) have “undermined the intellectual fundament of non-confessional religious education”. The idea of “any kind of absolute neutrality can no longer be sustained”, the very ‘concept’ or ‘image’ of religion has been ‘questioned’ and [the then dominant notion] shown to be “distinctively Western (and also Lutheran)”, as well as reflecting ‘thoughts of the Enlightenment’. In a ‘post-secular state’ it has, the editors state, “become increasingly difficult to make sharp distinctions between what is religious and non-religious, confessional and non-confessional, teaching about religion and learning in (from) religion”. An ‘idea about neutrality’, a “belief in the possibility of conveying knowledge of religion entirely unaffected by the views of the teacher and the surrounding society”, a “larger secular liberation process in society from the inherited religion” (the then established Lutheran-Protestant Christian religion embodied in the Church of Sweden), a growing ‘pluralism in society’, as well as the notion of (and law on) “religious freedom, all paved the way for the introduction of a non-confessional RE with teaching *about* religion, with RE in public school conveying ‘knowledge *about* religion”.

The editors, nevertheless, also think that “[t]he subject of religion, based on diversity, has never been more relevant”, and the second half of the invitation is an invitation to “think through and find a new foundation for the model for religious education”, a new “intellectual platform to match the post-secular situation”.

Given this starting point and discursive framework, my first response to the invitation and my first suggestion for an “intellectual platform to match the post-secular situation” is to ask loud and clearly: is it really necessary ‘to buy into’ the ideas, thoughts and opinions expressed by the editors (or by those voices or discourses they refer to)?

No, it is not. At least so I think. Neither as a scholar nor as a citizen do I consider myself obliged to buy into the arguments and views of the ‘-isms’ or ‘movements’, be it ‘modernism’, ‘late or post-modernism’ or ‘post-secularism’, and I do not think they denote a well-defined ‘age’ or the most dominant characteristics of contemporary (Western, European, Danish, Swedish etc.) ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘religious situation’, ‘intellectual climate’ or the like.

Moreover, and more important than the question about the ‘truth’ of those views and discourses and my opinion on them: I do not think that thinking about, nor re-thinking, RE should take place within a discursive framework as the one outlined by the editors, *and* I certainly cannot see why (discourses on) post-modernism, post-modernity, post-secularism, the post-secular state, linked philosophy (of science) and studies of religion(s) should have “undermined the intellectual fundament of non-confessional religious education”.

Even if the mentioned -isms, the changes in regard to scholarly or popular notions about ‘religion’ and ‘religions’, *and* factual changes ‘on the ground’ as regards transformations or reconfigurations of the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, of religion and politics, and of religion and state(s) can be empirically proven to exist and be of importance, then that does not mean a thing in regard to arguments in favor of having a secular, non-confessional RE with teaching about religion in public schools in ways that are as ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ as possible.

On the contrary: I think arguments in favor of a secular, non-confessional, state-funded, totally normal, study-of-religions based compulsory and time-tabled RE in public schools as well as arguments in favor of the *importance* of it, are identical to what they have been for decades,<sup>1</sup> and that these arguments (and also more refined arguments) can and must be put forward with as much fervor and nerve today as ‘back then’. Within or without a framework of (discourses on, proponents of) so-called post-modernism/post-modernity or post-secularism/post-secularity.

## **Why a Study-of-Religions Based (Secular, Non-religious, Non-confessional) RE?**

Space prevents me from repeating or spelling out in any detail all my former and current arguments,<sup>2</sup> but here comes some of the most important ‘fundamentals’: if scientifically based knowledge in general is considered valuable and a must for a state (and I do find it a valuable must, not least in ‘post-factual’ times, and also despite whatever moral and political

shortcomings of some scientific endeavors), then scientifically based knowledge also about what is commonly (as well as by most scholars even in today's world) called religion necessarily must also be considered valuable, and scientific studies of religion(s)<sup>3</sup> ought thus also be financed by the state and located at public (state-) universities together with other human, social and natural sciences.

If scientifically produced knowledge of humankind, nature and culture, including religion, is considered of such a scientific and cultural value as to be funded by the state, then this state-funded research and the knowledge must be shared with the public at large and not kept as a 'professional secret' within the academia. I think. An easy and fairly sound way to do so is for the state to provide public education with school subjects that reflect and communicate the knowledge produced at the universities.

Though knowledge of religion(s) can and must be sought and produced by a series of sciences and also taught and touched upon in school subjects like history, literature, and natural and social sciences, specific study-of-religion(s) departments at the public universities are, in my opinion, not the worst thing that has happened in order to further a scientific study also of religion.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, a specific time-tabled compulsory and totally normal school subject, religion education (RE), taught by teachers educated at the study-of-religions departments also ought to be established. Only in this way can the state make sure that teaching about religion(s) in school is as scientifically based as is the teaching about all the other school subjects.<sup>5</sup>

By way of providing for the scientific study of religion at public universities and a study-of-religion(s) based RE in public schools, the state, moreover, provides for a second-order analytical-critical discourse on religion, a second-order discourse that may, arguably, be seen as crucial to the well-being and well-functioning of an open, secular (not 'secularist'), pluralist and democratic society. Moreover, the RE thus offered can help provide citizens at large as well as particular professional and civil servants with both 'general education' ('Allgemeinbildung'), important elements of what is today called 'citizenship education', and with skills, competences and knowledge that may prove useful for a qualified execution of particular professions in civil society. The contents of the public school

RE are to reflect—pedagogically and didactically tailored to the various age groups—the public university scientific study-of-religions programs and contents.<sup>6</sup> It is to be a ‘mini’—or ‘school’—study of religions.

So much for the ‘fundamentals’ in my suggestion for an up-to-date and viable ‘intellectual fundament’ for a study-of-religion(s) based RE. Let, me, however, be a bit more detailed as regards the importance of religion and ‘religion’, as well as of knowledge of and about religion, *and* knowledge of and about *discourses* or *notions* of religion, that is ‘religion’.

What most (not all but *most*) scholars of religion still—despite all ever so valuable and necessary critical approaches to the term and concept<sup>7</sup> as well as to specific ‘study of religion(s)/religious studies’ departments (cf. above and the linked note 4)—write about, analyze and discuss in terms of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’, are (whatever theories or definitions applied) ‘something’ that has been and still is of importance in the past and present history of the world, humankind, cultures and societies. What may be termed religious (or maybe also ‘proto-religious’) ways of thinking and acting have, according also to the most recent theories of cognition and evolution, been with humankind for a long, long time and played various and not unimportant roles in the evolution of humankind, societies and cultures. When scholarship on the history of religion (understood as the study of the history of religion(s)) can detect more ‘institutionalized’, for example, so-called post-axial, modalities of religion(s), the same (study of the) history of religion can show that various religions (or ‘religious traditions’ if this sounds a bit less of ‘reification’ or ‘essentialism’) have exercised, at least at times, considerable, influence on histories, societies and cultures throughout the world.<sup>8</sup>

Religion(s)—whether as what Frenchmen (also with regard to the teaching thereof in school) call the ‘fait(s) religieux’, as what may be called “the naming of something as ‘religion’”, as what may be called “giving something status of ‘religion’”, or as ‘religious’ and non-religious discourses on religion and ‘religion’—today as before, simply is/are important aspects of (factors and ‘markers’ in) humankind, of culture, of social formation, of meaning making, and of identity construction, including past and present ‘politics of identity’.<sup>9</sup>

Knowledge of ‘religion-related discourses’ (including practices), then, is important knowledge if ‘we’ want to have (and if states want their

citizens to have), qualified knowledge of the world, of ‘world-making’, humankind, social formation, identity construction etc.—and knowledge of all of this is important if we want to have qualified knowledge of religion. As well as of study-of-religion(s) theories, definitions and discussions about religion, religions, and the notion thereof, including the notion of ‘world religions’.<sup>10</sup>

My (rhetorical) question now is this very simple one: has this part, the importance of religion(s), discourses on religion(s), ‘out there’ and within the academic study of religion(s), of the ‘intellectual fundament’ for RE been shattered or even eroded to such a degree that it cannot serve as an ‘intellectual platform’ for a contemporary and future RE? The answer is equally simple: No, of course it has not.

Neither have, thus, my arguments in favor of a secular and scientific study of religion and a RE based on it. Admittedly, I cannot provide a full-fledged definition (or defense) of ‘science’, nor a detailed overview of the scientific (philosophical) discussions about such a task (defining ‘science’), whether the task is about defining science ‘as such’ or science as in ‘natural’, ‘social’ and ‘human’ science. It is not the place, either, for fleshing out in any detail suggestions for key constituent characteristics of the secular, scientific study of religion.

The following must suffice. I start quoting Armin W. Geertz from his contribution to *Secular Theories on Religion*, edited by T. Jensen and M. Rothstein in 2000:

The secular study of religion is understood [...] to mean the non-sectarian, non-religious study of religion. It is not necessarily an atheistic approach. It simply chooses to interpret, understand and explain religion in non-religious terms. It confines itself to analytical models grounded in a view of the world based on the insights and achievements of the natural sciences. The study of religion, obviously, is not a natural science. It applies methods, theories and models developed in the human and social sciences: history, sociology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, ethnography and philosophy. It is further characterized by a comparative interest in all religions throughout human history. But its view of the world is secular and humanistic. (Geertz 2000, 21)

In the light of the discourse on 'post-modernism', I hasten to add that even the most up to date and in that way 'post-modern' scholars of religion do not think that 'anything goes' within a scientific study of religion(s).<sup>11</sup>

Allow me to also add that only a small minority of scholars of religion(s) consider so-called alternative (alternative to scientific knowledge) kinds of knowledge, including what may be called religiously based or 'esoteric' knowledges, equal or superior to the knowledge produced by science.

Donald Wiebe, in an article where he is, by the way, also arguing against such claims of a plurality of (postulated) equally valid and valuable 'knowledges' about religion, writes that 'fields of study' within the 'modern research university' which are 'beyond the range of the natural and social sciences' [...] 'present no significant challenge to the overall scientific ethos of the modern university which is predominantly concerned to discover and disseminate public (i.e. objective) knowledge about public (i.e. inter-subjectively available) facts concerning states of affairs in the natural and social worlds' (Wiebe 2016, 191).

Such 'fields of study', including the study of religion(s), ought not and must not, and I agree with Wiebe also in this (ibid.), 'present no significant challenge' to the overall 'scientific ethos' of the modern (or 'post-modern') universities where departments for the scientific study of religion(s) are located.

Though such departments in some places are located together with theology, and though much research done within theology by theologians are unmistakably scientific in both theory, method, and aim, *other* kinds of theology, for example, within systematic or practical theology, are not equally evidently so. And, as said by many a scholar of religion over the years: some kinds of theology and some theologians are not colleagues but study objects to the scholar of religion(s). Besides, most theologians study but one religion, most often, moreover, the one they themselves adhere to and believe in as the true and best religion, and many theologians study their religion not just to gain more knowledge of religion or of humankind but in order to do what they can to make their religion relevant to their contemporaries.

In a secular, scientific study of religion(s), on the contrary, the scholar of religion (apart from often specializing in one religion or one region or

one period of one region and one religion) ‘masters’ an encyclopedic knowledge of the world’s religions past and present, and he has been educated, furthermore, in practicing cross-cultural comparison in a skilled way as a *sine qua non* for a study of religion(s).

Moreover, the scholar of religion(s) traditionally brackets the ‘truth claims’ of religion(s) in order to study religion in a scientific way as a human, social and cultural phenomenon and ‘fact’. This is why the study of religion(s) approach to religion is often said to be methodologically ‘agnostic’ and ‘impartial’, trying its best to be ‘neutral’, and ‘objective’. Moreover, a significant number of scholars of religion continuously wrestle with past and present epistemological and methodological issues, inter alia issues linked to efforts to emancipate the secular study and scholar of religion from religious notions on religion in order to hopefully approach religion(s) in a more scientific, neutral and impartial way.

There is, thus, as I see it, something that qualifies as science and can be seen as different from non-science, and there is something that qualifies as (more or less) scientific studies of religion(s) to be distinguished from other kind of approaches, including religious and some theological approaches, to religion. And the differences and distinctions *do* matter. And they can be seen and documented. By more than one scholar.

The same goes for telling and spotting the difference(s) and distinctions between what is religious and non-religious (secular) RE, between confessional and non-confessional RE, between, on the one hand, teaching *about* religion and learning from the study of religion(s), and, on the other, instruction in/teaching religion and learning from religion.

This author (see e.g. Jensen 2017a, b), as well as several others (see e.g. Alberts 2019; Kjeldsen 2019b), have so far had no problem when overlooking the situation in Europe and elsewhere with identifying confessional RE over against non-confessional RE and/or to see that many kinds of so-called non-confessional RE in fact is what I have called “small ‘c’ confessional” RE, or, as it has recently been adopted with a slight difference by Wanda Alberts, “small ‘i’ religious instruction/indoctrination”.<sup>12</sup>

True, as also documented and discussed (see inter alia Jensen and Kjeldsen 2014b; Jensen 2017a, b) in recent analyses of, for example, RE in a German context: some formally, legally and in reality confessional



kinds of RE no doubt are supposed to deliver (and most likely deliver even if I do not have classroom observations to back this claim) objective, informative and neutral information about religion on top of what else they are supposed to also deliver, for example, morally and spiritually edifying knowledge of the ‘confession’ (religion) in question, knowledge supposed to be central in the formation of the identity of the pupil and future citizen.

And equally true: some formally and legally non-confessional kinds of RE, like the one in primary school in Denmark, are not at all secular and non-religious but what I and Kjeldsen (cf. above) have termed “small ‘c’ confessional”, something that is not always obvious to everybody but something that is always obvious and observable to the trained and critical study-of-religion(s) based scholar of RE (e.g. Kjeldsen 2019b; Alberts 2019).

Now what about the claims that philosophy (of science) has long ago shot dead the belief in the ‘neutrality’ of the (religion) scholar and the (RE) teacher? My short answer is this: none of my now late professors or current colleagues within the academic, scientific study of religion(s) or within RE in school never ever ‘believed’ in something close to what the editors talk about as ‘absolute neutrality’ or the ‘possibility of conveying knowledge of religion *entirely* unaffected by the views of the teacher and the surrounding society.’ (my emphasis). I also honestly do not know of one single colleague ever putting forward in private or in public, in writing or speech, such a point of view. Just like very few scientists as well as few scholars of religion actually believe in Truth with a capital T. Claiming that there once was such an unshattered belief in or claim about ‘absolute neutrality’ among for example scholars of religion(s) and teachers of RE (and that this postulated claim disqualifies the study of religion(s) and a study of religions based RE because such a ‘positivistic’ view is totally outdated and wrong) is but a ‘straw man’, and I have nothing more to say about it until I see documentation as to such claims made by scholars of religion(s) and RE teachers.

What quite a few scholars and colleagues, past and present, *have* claimed is that it is of paramount importance that they and all other scholars (on religion) try their very best, in their scientific research as well as in the communication of the results thereof, to proceed in as impartial,

neutral, objective, informative, and balanced way as at all possible for a scientist, scholar and RE teacher who is also a human being and a citizen with extra-scientific emotions, values, aspirations and so on. But I must ask, is this disciplined effort really so bad, so naive, so ridiculous? Is it an aim and a methodic procedure that they ought to kiss goodbye because some philosophers or so-called post-modernists teach and preach that *absolute* neutrality, something they never believed in, nor claimed to practice, is impossible? Is it so bad that scholars of religion, often educated and working within specific departments for the study of religion(s) have, as indicated already, wrestled for years with the notion of religion, struggled to deconstruct an inherited Protestant notion of religion, kicked and yelled to free themselves of religious ways of looking at religion, trying to pave the way for as neutral and impartial way to study religion as at all possible?

I have, time and again, alluded to discussions (within the global community of scholars of religion(s)) about religion, religions, world religions, including popular and scholarly *notion(s)* thereof. Discussions sometimes, though not always, linked to discussions about ‘secular’ (over against something non-secular or religious), and at times, thus, also to discussions about ‘secularization’, ‘secularity’, the ‘secular state’—as well as to ‘de-secularization’ and ‘post-secularity’.

Space prevents me from entering into any discussion about secularization (secularization theories or ‘secularization paradigm’) and (some kind of) de-secularization (and theories thereof). Here, I only want to address, in a very matter-of-fact way, the idea about a ‘post-secular age’. Not in general and not by way of arguing against the arguments of particular scholars. But by way of a look at the situation in the Kingdom of Denmark. My context, the immediate context for RE in Denmark.

First ever so briefly about ‘secularity’ and ‘post-secularity’: The Kingdom of Denmark is not a secular state! At least not according to the common definitions of a secular state.<sup>13</sup> It is not ‘post-secular’ either. The Constitution as of 1849 and 1953<sup>14</sup> is totally clear as to the establishment of the Evangelical-Lutheran kind of Christian denomination (‘Folkekirken’) as the religion to be supported by the state. Though there is freedom of religion for the individual citizens (except for the king, the head of state), there is no equality of religion(s), and the Ministry of

Ecclesiastical Affairs as well as the Minister thereof is not a Ministry and Minister of Religion.<sup>15</sup>

A landmark Supreme Court case in 2007<sup>16</sup> made it equally clear that in Denmark one cannot clearly separate state and religion. But this is not something new! On the contrary. The established religion, as the ruling quite correctly states, handles, so the court rules, tasks that otherwise the state should handle (and the court ‘judges’ them ‘non-religious’ or secular), and the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs also handles what the court also rules to be ‘non-religious’ tasks, *inter alia* burials (*sic!*)

All citizens, also those who are not members of the established religion, contribute via the income tax to the payment of part of the salaries of bishops and ministers, and to the maintenance of the buildings belonging to the established religion. Buildings, though, defined in this ruling as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’. Of course. And it is as the ruling says, a tax paid only ‘indirectly’, via the normal income tax. No problems with the right to freedom of religion (as defined in international Human Rights conventions) of the plaintiff, thus, and also no violation of the Danish Constitution either.

Moreover, the perfectly (?) secular Danish Parliament celebrates and marks the beginning of each parliamentary year with a service in the nearby church; the calendar is full of Christian holidays; the Danish EU passports have as their marker (of Danish identity) an image of the crucified Christ (called the ‘birth certificate’ of Denmark). Religion: a matter of privacy? Citizenship and state separated from religion? No, but also nothing new. Not much ‘post-secularity’ in this regard.<sup>17</sup>

The elementary state school has a kind of RE that is called ‘Kristendomskundskab’ and despite being formally non-confessional as of 1975, it serves—today as in the past—primarily to familiarize the pupils with the majority religious tradition and what is considered the main cultural and ethical values that tradition is said to have provided to help make Danish culture and society so wonderfully democratic and civilized as it is often said to be. The year most pupils ‘go to church’ in order to receive, as part of their preparation for confirmation, religious instruction by the local minister, RE in elementary school is suspended for that whole year! Not a particularly secular school and RE, but also not a particularly ‘post-secular’ school or RE!<sup>18</sup>

Moving from a state (or meso-) level to more of a micro-level, I also want to ever so question claims and notions about Danes and the country of Denmark as being extremely 'secularized' or visibly 'post-, or de- secularized'.<sup>19</sup>

First of all, on the micro- and meso-level, one cannot escape the fact that what I consider an impressive number (74.7%) of Danes, even anno 2019/2020, are still paying members of the established religion, that an equally fairly large number of Danes actively do practice the religious 'rites of passage' (a very normal and universally well-known way of 'having' religion), that is, via baptism of their newborn babies (of those born in 2017 59% in total), confirmation (in 2018 69.9% in total of the annual batch), and burials (in 2018 82.6% in total of those who passed away),<sup>20</sup> everything with a strong and highly visible bond to the established religion, all in or in the vicinity of visible spaces and places that are evidently seen as religious and not as secular. But again: this is not something new or recent, and it does not differ (except that the numbers of members and practicing members after all has decreased somewhat for various reasons) from what was the case in, for example, 1975 when a formally and legally non-confessional RE was introduced into the public school.

To me, then, it does not make much sense to discuss this picture in terms of neither 'post-modern' nor 'post-secular', and it definitely makes no sense at all with regard to a framework for *re*-thinking about RE. It is much rather the *continued* importance of the established religion (with the usual differences between countryside and big cities), and the accompanying ways of having and thinking about religion that matters. Some of the ways of having and thinking religion may very well have changed and may even be characterized as 'post-modern', but they may equally well be seen as indicative of a very old 'obsession' (shared by a continuously fairly large part of Danes *and* a fairly large part of other people around the world) with constructing individual and family identities with the use of the traditional religion. An 'obsession' to be 'normal', to baptize your child and celebrate confirmation and to thus have the opportunity to gather the family, have a party, mark the transitions of life etc. A quite normal way of having religion. Maybe what religion is (almost) all about!

Of interest too, also for any argument about the need for a study-of-religion(s) based RE, are the normative and religious notions (stereotypes, prejudices), that are shared by quite a few Danes as regards 'mature' religion, that is, a 'modern', progressive and civilized way of having religion. From my analyses of the ways journalists, politicians, as well as official documents about RE in elementary school, discuss the majority Christian religion as well as minority religion(s), especially today Islam and Muslims, earlier on the 'new religious movements, I dare say that a widespread essentialist notion is that religion has a 'core', and that 'core', and thus 'religion when it is best or true', is something that begins in the 'heart' of the individual human being. It is a 'belief' or a 'faith', and it is about 'meaning', that is, about (occupation with and answers to) the so-called big questions of life (existential questions of life and death, suffering etc.), and about morals ('love your neighbor', pro et contra abortion etc.). Religion, 'truly' understood and practiced, as by the majority of Danes, is a 'matter of privacy', something 'of the heart', and 'not-going-to-church' (apart from the above-mentioned rites-de-passage visits which are normally neglected in discussions about practicing religion or not among Christian secular Danes) on a regular basis is but the very best way of being religious (and a good Christian) (Jensen 1994, 1998).

At the same time, seen from another point of view, the same Danes, or equally large parts of them, seem to not care about religion or Christianity at all, or at least not in their daily lives. Moreover: they most likely simply do not see what I see as 'religion'. Yes, they get confirmed, married or buried in a church, but they do not define it as religion but as 'tradition' and as a 'cultural' and festive background, and celebrating Christmas is of course not a religion or something religious but a 'tradition'. Muslims, on the other hand, most likely are mostly seen as celebrating Ramadan as a religion and not as a tradition. Danes are 'culture' Christians ('kulturrkristne') while Muslims (also Danish Muslims) are religious (and often fanatically so) Muslims. Muslims by and large have religion in a 'pre-modern' way, in an 'old-fashioned' backward way. They show their religion in their clothes and in what they eat and do not eat. They have, as one Danish pastor once wrote with reference to Muslim rules on purity, religion in a childish way. (Jensen 1994; cf. Andreassen 2014).

The conclusion to this quick look at the Danish situation: Danish society cannot easily be classified or characterized neither as secularized nor as de-secularized, nor can the majority population of religious (or secular?) ‘irreligious Lutherans’. This author at least sees a lot of religion and a lot of deep-seated religious (Protestant) notions of religion in Denmark and among the Danes, and he thinks that Danes may be seen not at all as very ‘secular’ or ‘secularized’ but as highly dedicated Lutheran-Protestants, ‘practicing’ their religion in what they consider a perfect and perfectly Christian way. However, he also thinks that they may be seen also as being neither secular nor post-secular, neither secularized nor de-secularized, neither in their ‘belonging’ nor in their ‘behavior’, neither in their views on religion and Christianity nor in their ways of ‘having’ religion.<sup>21</sup>

As regards the state, though, I find it much more easy to say that the Danish state, with its past and present in ‘handling’ of religion(s), most definitely never entered any kind of ‘post-secular age’, and my analyses elsewhere (e.g. Jensen 2011b) of a few court cases (as well as of the Muhammad case that never made it to the courts) related to religion and freedom of religion also seem to indicate that Danish courts are not eager to let secular law accommodate or give much (more) space to religion or ways of having religion (e.g. manifesting your religion by wearing a kirpan) in a public sphere held to be secular.

When a former Minister of Education not so long ago publicly declared that he did not want the Danish public school to be or become secular,<sup>22</sup> he simply meant to protect it from being bereft of the possibility to celebrate Christian festivals and holidays, to have the pupils sing Christian songs and psalms and the like. His claims that he wanted it to be and stay ‘multi-religious’ was but rhetoric. The Danish public school never was anything close to multi-religious. Only Lutheran-Protestant religious. So: not much ‘post-secularity’, neither in the courtrooms nor in the schoolyard and classrooms.

Swedish scholar Jenny Berglund (2013) wrote that the famous Swedish ‘secular’ RE actually was ‘marinated’ in Lutheran-Protestant Christianity. This can most certainly also be said about Danish society, the ways Danes practice and think of religion, and the ways in which the state handles religion. Including, as already indicated above, the way religion and RE

in Danish primary school is handled. RE in Danish public (or 'state') school never emancipated itself from the support of the state to the established religion, and despite the nominal introduction in 1975 of a formally non-confessional RE, RE in the Danish elementary school (in contrast to what is the case in upper-secondary school) has remained crypto-confessional, a kind of "small 'c' confessional RE".

To conclude: if this brief look at the Danish situation somehow supports the claims of the editorial invitation as regards difficulties distinguishing religious from secular (or vice versa), then this author claims that this, nevertheless, does not support the linked claim, namely that this difficulty is particular to this moment in Danish history. More important: there is nothing about this situation that erodes the intellectual foundation for a secular, non-confessional RE and teaching about religion, at least not in Danish state schools. And I think not elsewhere either:

The job for the scholar of religion and study-of-religion(s) based RE teacher is the same today as it was (supposed to be) decades ago: to study, teach and question all of what is happening, including all that scholars (this one too), other pundits, and the public at large write, say and think about religion, past and present. RE now as then has to teach about religious changes and transformations, including those that take place in the contemporary 'history of religion(s)', and it has to do so in line with the ways in which religion scholars and the study of religion(s) see and discuss it. This ought to be as obvious to everybody else as it is to me. This is what a study-of-religion(s) based RE is good for, and what a RE teacher educated at a study of religion(s) department is good at. A study-of-religion(s) based RE furthermore is, thinking about the issue of 'neutrality', the only kind of RE that can live up to the by now well-known 'legal', European as well as US, criteria for a compulsory, normal, time-tabled RE for all pupils, irrespective of their religious or secular family background and 'belonging', namely that it must be 'objective, critical, and pluralistic'.<sup>23</sup>

That scholars of religion arguing in favor of a secular, non-confessional study-of-religion(s) based RE in public schools are up against powerful resistance goes without saying. The resistance comes from religious people, from other RE scholars, from theologians (within religions and also

some of those employed at universities), from governments, from politicians, from a part of the public that simply has no idea about what a study-of-religion(s) based RE might be, from another part that simply cannot think of religion and RE except in religious terms (terms strongly influenced by the dominant religion and religious discourse on religion) and then, of course, from a lot of people who do not care about religion to such a degree that they can see any point in dedicating a school subject to teaching it.

Resistance is also linked to age-old as well as contemporary ways of conceiving of the implications of the ultimate aims of the public elementary school (educating the pupils into becoming 'good' citizens), and corresponding aims of promoting the majority religion in school and RE. It is intimately linked, now as before, to religion-related 'identity construction' and 'nation-building', to age-old normative perceptions of 'religion' and how best to 'understand' it.

Establishing, practicing and developing an academic, scientific, study of religion(s) may be uphill. Some scholars even argue that it will never happen! Establishing, practicing and developing a study-of-religion(s) based RE in public schools, especially in the elementary school, is, beyond a doubt, not just uphill, but as I have written in other articles: uphill, uphill, and uphill! No matter if one counts in or counts out whatever opposition that may be characterized as (linked to) 'post-modernism' and 'post-secularity'.<sup>24</sup>

## Core Contents for RE 2020

How, the reader finally may very well ask, does this author then see the outlines of the core contents of the kind of RE he recommends, that is, totally normal, compulsory, time-tabled school subject taught by teachers educated for to do so at study-of-religions departments at the public universities?

In a nutshell: as a study-of-religion(s) program in a mini-format, tailored, didactically and pedagogically to the various age groups and levels, of first primary, then secondary and then upper-secondary school.



A first obligation, however, for a study-of-religion(s) RE (and maybe not always equally so for the program at the university) is to teach about religion and religions, past and present, majority and minority, collective and individual, as something that actually do exist, one way or the other, 'out there', in the world, in society, in the world of today and of the past, in the (ongoing) history of humankind, culture(s), societies etc. Because there *is* something out there, I insist,<sup>25</sup> that can, despite whatever theoretical and methodological issues and complexities implied, be identified, classified and studied as religion(s) and not just as another kind of cultural, classificatory, social etc. 'system', way of living, way of seeing, way of life.

RE has to teach about, one way or the other, religions of the past, whether indigenous religion or the religions of, for example, ancient Greece. And, even if the ancient Greeks or the Maoris did not have religion (neither a term for religion)<sup>26</sup> that matches dominant Western, Christian or whatever ways of having and seeing religion, they certainly did have something that can beyond a doubt be studied and taught about as religion. Take the first song of the Iliad: there is a lot of religion, and to deny that it makes sense of talking about the divine beings, the prayers, the sacrifices and the notion of honor too in terms of 'religion', is simply 'over the top'. Much more could be said about this, but space prevents from doing so.

But RE also has to find time, of course, for teaching about today's religion(s) and contemporary developments and transformations of religion(s), and whatever relations between religion and politics, religion and non-religion, religion and the secular, religion and human rights and so on in the country in question and in the world at large. It must teach about, for example, in Denmark, all that I have discussed above as regards religion and non-religion in Denmark, and it must provide the pupils with skills, knowledge and competences to critically analyze such themselves. As skilled, critical and competent RE pupils and as critical and competent citizens.

RE, beyond a doubt, also has to provide teaching about those religions which for a long time, by a lot of people, scholars, teachers et al. have been labeled 'world religions'. Of course. In Europe and in the Western part of the world in general, RE, in my opinion, also has to give the

majority Christian religion, and the local variant thereof, more time and more attention than any other single religion. To teach in school, in a study-of-religion(s) based historical and comparative, critical-analytical way, about this majority religion is a *sine qua non*. Not only because it is the largest religion in the world and in most of the countries in the Western part of the world. It is a *sine qua non* in order to deconstruct dominant 'folk categories', dominant, normative, stereotypical ways of thinking about religion. It is a must in order to make students familiar with a study-of-religion(s) approach and to de-familiarize them with religion, not least 'their own'. And this is one of the most prominent tasks of RE in school. (cf. Jensen 1997).

RE must, in my humble opinion, teach not just about religions past and present, at 'home' or around the world. It must also teach about that which for decennia was called (cross-cultural) 'religious phenomena', that is, (religious) 'myth', (religious) 'ritual', 'divine beings', (religious) 'sacrifice', (religious) 'divination' and so on. This is one way to teach about religion, not 'as such', not as a 'sui generis' phenomenon or platonic 'idea', but about religion in general. It is, furthermore, the royal road to make pupils familiar with an important part of a study-of-religion(s) based analytical toolbox with the mentioned phenomena constituting some of the most important analytical concepts and terms.

It has to do all of this (and more than that), as a matter of course, today as before, in a self-reflective and self-critical way (there are other ways of approaching and 'understanding' and teaching religion), in a way that reflects, moreover, current, up-to-date theories, methods, approaches, methodological issues and debates within the academic study of religion(s). Including discussions about 'religion' (the notion of it and the term), about religion 'as such', about 'world religions', about essentialisms, reifications, stereo- and prototypical ways of thinking about religion(s), Christo-centric ways of thinking about religion, and (e.g.) ways (first maybe Western now maybe almost global) of thinking about religion in Human Rights articles, and, needless to say, discussions about the very notion of 'world religions'. And, also needless to say, the 'phenomenology of religion' recommended is not the one of say Otto, Eliade, van der Leeuw but an up-to-date kind of comparative studies of religion and religious 'phenomena', among which today something like (religious) 'rhetoric', (religious) 'legitimization' and 'gender' may be added.<sup>27</sup>

An up-to-date RE certainly must also make room for teaching about some aspects of cognitivist and evolutionary approaches and perspectives. The 'big questions' in RE nowadays ought not be the so-called existential questions (where do 'we' come from, who are 'we', and where do 'we' go to when we die). Those questions to a large degree are (religious, philosophical) questions formulated within a religious rather than a scholarly framework, and they pertain to a kind of RE that aims at having the students learn from religion rather than from the study of religion. No, the big questions of an up-to-date RE ought be the questions about the origin, coming into being, function and use of religious ideas, practices and institutions. Why do humans and human societies have religion? This is not a question that science has answered yet, and it is of utmost importance to a study-of-religions based RE that the questions asked by the scientific study of religion be asked and dealt with in RE.

Since I can go into no detail in regard to what is said above, I shall end encouraging readers to look up some recently produced electronic materials for a study-of-religions teaching about religion(s) (see references: IESR) and (most recently) materials from a linked project that focused on (how to hopefully) countering stereotypes and prejudices about religion(s) with reference to a study-of- religion(s) approach (see references: SORAPS).

Hopefully, the reader can thus see that the RE recommended here is not at all some kind of lofty 'academic' enterprise but something of social, cultural and political relevance, in general and to the pupils. Something that can be implemented in curricula, textbooks and teaching. Something pupils will be fascinated to 'have' in school, something they will engage in with interest and enthusiasm.

## Notes

1. As can be glanced from the references, I, for one, have produced numerous articles over the past 30 or so years trying to promote a study-of-religion(s) based RE. Though, hopefully, some arguments have been added, and some refined and qualified, by and large they are the same because I think the *raison d'être* is the same.

2. There are limits as to my ingenuity in terms of trying to say the same but in other words. Consequently, some redundancy cannot be avoided. In this contribution the following pages render almost verbatim my most recent effort (Jensen 2019) to give a 'programmatic summary' of what I find the fundamentals in regard to the propagation of a study-of-religion(s) RE.
3. I use, indiscriminately 'scientific (academic, secular) study of religion(s)' or just 'study of religion(s)' as umbrella term for what the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) (despite its name) sees as the kind of the academic studies of religion(s) that it promotes, namely a wide range of historical, comparative, critical-analytical, sociological, psychological etc approaches to religion, as a human phenomenon (and theoretical object), and to religions as more or less observable historical, social and cultural traditions.
4. I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Jensen 2019, 39–41) in favour of distinctive departments for the study of religion(s), but let me repeat with special regard to the theme of this article: hundred years or more of focused historical and comparative research and reflection on religion and how to study it has taken place at departments for precisely that kind of studies. That has produced a valuable reservoir of knowledge, theories, methods, including self-criticism, including sincere efforts to constructively deconstruct the notion of religion and thus emancipate the study of religion from e.g. religious notions of religion(s). Scholars of religion working at these departments, have managed to move forward and change the scientific study of religion(s); some have been first movers in critically rethinking religion *and* the study of religion(s). True, there are no doubt more to be done, a lot to improve, and I agree with part of the criticism aimed at certain study-of-religion(s) department by e.g. Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe (2012a, b). There are, no doubt, departments around the world with 'religion appreciation' and the promotion of social cohesion, peace and understanding may have taken the place of teaching about and practicing a scientific study of religion. And, cognitive constraints may, as claimed by the two, add to the difficulties linked to emancipation from religious and theological ways of thinking. But, there are, as also written by e.g. Hubert Seiwert (2012) more to the story about the state of art at study-of-religions departments. There is no alternative to study-of-religion(s) departments when it comes to the education of RE teachers and the secular, scientific basis for RE.

5. I have also argued elsewhere (most recently ever so briefly in Jensen 2019, 43) in favor of having a distinctive RE school subject rather than, as is the case in France, having teaching about religion taking place within the framework of subjects like History, Literature, et al. A key argument for this is the fact that teachers who are not educated in the study of religion(s) generally simply do not master teaching about religion(s) in as qualified a way as those who are. Besides: when was a teacher educated within Literature supposed to also master History, or vice versa?
6. I do, of course, know that study programs in study-of-religion(s) departments differ from each other, and that the study programs at Danish universities, including my own, at the University of Denmark cannot be seen as neither exemplifying what is going on all over the world in departments that carry that or a similar name, nor as exemplary. However, I actually think that the programs in place in Denmark may serve as sort of good examples not least because they have, for almost a century, served as the place for the education of Upper-Secondary school RE teachers, and their programs strike a balance between what is needed for 'production' of future scholars and future RE teachers. See Jensen (1994, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015), Jensen and Geertz (2015), Jensen and Kjeldsen (2014a).
7. I cannot list all works of all relevant scholars who have been key movers in regard to discussions and deconstructions of religion and 'religion'. Readers are referred here only to the works listed in the references by Fitzgerald and McCutcheon, especially their most recent works where readers can find references to earlier work and most other relevant literature.
8. See the (very) few titles by Armin W. Geertz (2013, 2016) as well as the Festschrift edited in his honour by Anders Klostergaard Petersen et al. (2019) for introductions and references to the massive output of important scholarly works on religion, cognition and evolution, including e.g. recent theories linking evolution and history of religion to the so-called 'axial age'.
9. For theories and analyses of religion(s) and 'religion' as a dimension/marker/classifier of e.g. social formation, authorisation, hierarchy and power, identity construction, etc. readers are referred to, apart from classical works of e.g. Durkheim (and his Paris 'equipe'), to more recent and highly influential books and articles by religion scholars like e.g. Burton Mack, Jonathan Z. Smith, Bruce Lincoln, Russell T. McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, to mention but a few. In this article explicit references are not given to all relevant works of these or other authors.

- McCutcheon (2019) is highly recommended as it revisits and updates earlier work of McCutcheon as well as provides the reader with most if not all relevant references to other scholars of religion and earlier works of McCutcheon himself.
10. As for criticism of ‘world religions’, see works by Masuzawa (2005), Owen (2013), Cotter and Robertson (2016).
  11. Göran Larsson, in a highly recommendable ‘pixi-like’ book on Human Science as yet another of the sciences, pages 21–22, lists several basic criteria for what it takes for something to be scientific rather than ‘commonsensical’, and Larsson, in an very down to earth way thus also distances himself from any ‘anything goes’ approach to the academic study of religion(s) (Larsson 2019).
  12. See Alberts (2019, 57). T. Jensen & K. Kjeldsen first introduced the category ‘small “c” confessional’ (drawing on Donald Wiebe’s classifications of different kinds of theology) in an article in *Temenos* in 2013.
  13. I adhere to the definition given by D.E. Smith: “The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporative freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion” (Smith 1963, 4).
  14. See <https://www.ft.dk/da/dokumenter/bestil-publikationer/publikationer/grundloven/danmarks-riges-grundlov>. In particular §§ 4, 6, 66–70. (Last accessed February 1, 2020)
  15. Apart from my own work, readers are advised to consult other scholars and their (different) approaches and views as regards what has been called the ‘religion model’. See e.g. Christoffersen et al. (2012).
  16. See <http://www.hoejesteret.dk/hoejesteret/nyheder/pressemeddelelser/Pages/Foedselsregistreringogstatstilskudtilfolkekirken.aspx> (Last accessed February 1, 2020)
  17. The editors (W. Sullivan et al. 2011) of *After Secular Law*, did not chose the image of the crucified Christ inserted in the late 1990s in the passports of alle Danish citizens for the cover of their book in order to give an example of something ‘post-secular’ but in order to indicate the entanglement of the secular and not-secular in a state and country they and others otherwise looked at as exemplary in regard to secularization and secularity. And, of course, to ‘shock’ American readers used to a discourse about a ‘wall of separation’.
  18. See the articles by Jensen (2013, 2016, 2017a), Jensen and Kjeldsen (2013, 2014a), and Kjeldsen (2019a) for critical analyses of RE in the Danish elementary school.

19. Phil Zuckerman's work (see e.g. Zuckerman 2008, 2009) has been influential in 'promoting' this view but the same notions about the Danes and Denmark as utterly secularized and secular, have been extremely influential in Danish politics and in the Danish public as well.
20. See statistics at <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/>. (Last accessed February 1, 2020). As for weddings and blessings numbers are not equally impressive, and I do not have a percentage. As for the decrease in membership over the past decades, see same statistics showing that in 1990 the percentage of paying members was 89.3%.
21. The summary of my analysis here presented in all haste still owes a lot to my past analyses, e.g. Jensen (1998, 115–159). On Christianity in Denmark, with special regard to elementary-school RE representations, curricula and textbooks see Kjeldsen (2019a), and for a study-of-religion(s) based textbook for upper-secondary school, see Hvithamar (2007).
22. See my 'response' to Bertel Haarder, the Minister in question, in my essay (kronik) in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* as of March 10. 2005: <https://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/art5694509/Religion-p%C3%A5-skemaet> (Last accessed February 1, 2020)
23. See Andreassen (2013), Haynes and Oliver (2007), Jensen (2005).
24. Most of my articles also deal with the reasons why a secular study-of-religion(s) based RE is not just embraced by everybody and every country. One reason, of course, is that politicians and the public at large cannot conceive of religion and 'religion' in a secular, non-religious way. I have argued that one ought consider adding to the list of criteria for a 'secular state' the criterium of having a non-religious RE in public schools. Alberts (2019) also notes that most European states have a problem with being secular when it comes to RE.
25. Again: space prevents me from giving a detailed argument. Suffice it to say that I contend that there are good reasons for why why some buildings, actions, people, thoughts, some ways of eating and being together, some ways of having sex, dressing etc. may 'stand out' as not just or only profane, non-religious (they are of course always also that) but as something that may be termed 'religious'. I tend to subscribe to (operational) definitions of religion as a cultural (sub-)system that differs from other such by way of a reference to a postulated more than human and more than natural something ('power', 'being', 'scripture', etc.). My favorite more detailed definition, and pupils should be told about the one guid-

- ing the teacher, is the one by Bruce Lincoln, briefly rendered in Lincoln (2000b), later explicated in greater detail in Lincoln (2003). Lincoln (2003) develops, moreover, the useful notions of ‘minimalist’, respectively ‘maximalist’ stances among insiders.
26. Nongbri (2013) in my opinion is somewhat overestimated. It was a matter of course back in the 70s when I was student of the history of religions in Copenhagen that the Greeks as well as indigenous people did not have religion (or morals for that matter) as ‘we’ had it. I also want to refer readers to the interview I with others conducted with late JZ Smith (Smith et al. 2014). During the interview Smith is asked about what has almost become his most famous ‘dictum’ (from *Imagining Religion*) that there is ‘no data for religion’. Smith replies: “If I had a nickel for every time that sentence has been quoted I could have retired forty years ago. But i have to say that sometimes the way the quote is used is de-familiar tio me.” (p. 67). Later on the doorbell rings. Smith gets up and walks to look out the window but does not open the door but comes back exclaiming: “Hah! It’s Jehovah’s Witnesses. That’s our data at the door.” (p. 72). There is data for religion. Sometimes, as said, also theologians are data for religion and for the scholar of religion.
  27. See for one of the most important arguments in favor of comparative religion, Sinding Jensen (2003). For a more modest up-date on a post-Eliadean ‘phenomenology’ or comparative study of religion, see Jensen and Podemann Sørensen (2015).

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