

Article

Religious Education in Denmark: Towards a More Multifaceted Subject?

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Abstract: The article deals with religious education in Denmark, especially the impact of philosophy of life in the curriculum. It will address the question of whether “Christian Studies” has become more multifaceted, or whether it is really a Christian upbringing/existential upbringing in disguise. The article begins with a presentation of the religious, political, and the pedagogical landscapes in Denmark. Subsequently, it examines the impact of the “Philosophy of Life” elements, which form part of the subject taught under “Christian Studies” (Kristendomskundskab). This is followed by an analysis of the new legal framework for “Christian Studies”, which now highlights areas, such as comparative religion or sociology of religion. It also examines the work of the committee, formed by the former Minister of Education in spring 2019, which had the task of revitalizing the curriculum of “Christian Studies” in the Danish school system.

Keywords: Danish religious education; Christian Studies; secularization; philosophies of life; K. E. Løgstrup

1. Introduction

Denmark—along with Sweden—is often described as one of the most secularized countries in the world (Zuckerman 2008). According to one study, only eight percent of Danes say that “Religion is very important” in their lives (Pew Research Center 2018). One might therefore be tempted to believe that Christianity does not play a central role in Denmark in general, nor in the public school (the Danish *Folkeskolen* covers grades 1–9). However, Danish schools mandate the teaching of religious education in primary and lower secondary school (according to *Act on the Folkeskole of 2019*, paragraph 6, parents have the possibility to exempt their children from religious education). While this teaching is not related to either preaching or even Christian upbringing, the school subject of “Christian Studies” (*Kristendomskundskab*, literal “knowledge about Christianity”) focuses on Christianity in a way that has some associations with the idea of “Christian upbringing” or “Christian way of life”. Furthermore, the Danish state law on education obliges every school to teach the subject as part of safeguarding the “Christian cultural heritage” (*Act on the Folkeskole of 2019*, paragraph 1 and paragraph 6). In the following, there will be a discussion of the teaching of “Christian Studies” in Danish primary and lower secondary schools as it relates to the recent developments in the law. On the one hand, there seems to be a trend towards a more multifaceted understanding of “Christian Studies”. Academic disciplines, such as Comparative Religion and Sociology of Religion, now play a larger role in the new legal framework than previously. On the other hand, the so-called “main area of knowledge” remains evangelical Lutheran Christianity, its history, and its current relevance. Furthermore, the subject area called “Philosophy of Life and Ethics” still plays a pivotal role. Is the importance of philosophy of life and ethics a sign of a secularization within the subject? Or is this just a “repackaged” form of Christianity (Böwadt 2009a, 2009b) that has been adapted to the Danish school system? It is not easy to present a simple description of “Christian Studies” as outlined in the new legal framework. There exist several approaches, some of which are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, this article will address

the question of whether “Christian Studies” has become more multifaceted, or whether it is really a Christian upbringing/existential upbringing in disguise.

In order to gain a fuller picture of religious education in the Danish primary and lower secondary school, there will be a presentation of the religious, political, and the pedagogical landscapes in Denmark. Then the impact of the “Philosophy of Life” elements that form part of the subject taught under “Christian Studies” (Kristendomskundskab) will be examined. This is followed by an analysis of the new legal framework for “Christian Studies”, which now highlights areas, such as comparative religion or sociology of religion. Moreover, the work of the committee, formed by the former Minister of Education in spring 2019, which had the task of revitalizing the curriculum of “Christian Studies” in the Danish school system, will be examined.

2. The Religious Landscape in Denmark

As mentioned at the beginning, while Denmark is normally described as a secularized country, the picture is much more complex. Similar to some of the other Nordic countries, we observe tendencies toward both secularization and desecularization (Christensen et al. 2019, p. 10). If one views Denmark over a period of forty years, we can observe comprehensive changes in the Danes’ relation to religion. On the one hand, there has been a decline in the number of members in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1990, almost 90 percent of the Danish population were members. Today, only 74.9 percent of Danish citizens and permanent residents (of all religions) are members of the Church of Denmark (Folkekirken). Furthermore, there has been an increase in the group of non-religious people (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 236). Though this tendency could be evidence of secularization, the situation, as mentioned before, is not so simple.

In the newest value survey from 2017, researchers highlight three different theories in order to explain religion and religiosity among Danes. They talk about a theory of secularization, a theory of individualization and finally, a theory of complexity (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 232). The researchers find that the theory of complexity is best able to explain the religious landscape in Denmark.

The theory of secularization claims that secularization is both an unavoidable and irreversible process. It also claims that secularization entails the decline or decrease in every form of religious belief or expression (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 232). By contrast, the theory of individualization asserts that religion and religiosity do not disappear, but change character. Noteworthy in this regard is that religiosity is composed of various elements that do not correspond to the established religions, and may not be attached to formal religious institutions, such as the Danish National Evangelical Lutheran Church. Furthermore, these new forms of religious belief and practice may often be mixed with different forms of spirituality (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 233).

The theory of complexity attempts to surmount the approaches that point to religion as either something that will disappear over time or as something that has not disappeared, but is simply changing. The theory of complexity claims that the different movements are occurring simultaneously. There is both a decrease and an increase in religiosity among the Danes. In this sense, the complexity approach rejects the idea of Denmark as a secularized country; secularization is only half the story. In this paper, it will be shown that the same complexity exists in the different approaches to the teaching of “Christian Studies” in the Danish school system. Hence, although there has been a marked decrease in the number of titular members of the Danish National Church, the number of people attending church services has remained the same. Attending services on Christmas Eve has recently become very popular as a family event before the Christmas Eve dinner. What motives do people have for attending this special service? It could be interpreted as a sign of civil religion instead of being a sign of cultural Christianity (Warburg 2013, p. 38).

Regarding religious belief, the overall tendency is that fewer people in Denmark express a belief in God. Approximately one-third are nonreligious (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 245). However, religion and religiosity are not disappearing, and as will be shown below, Christianity has now taken on a central role as a political marker of Danishness, a role which it did not have a few decades ago because society

was not, to the same degree, marked by religious diversity. In the following, the political landscape in Denmark will be examined in more detail.

3. The Political Landscape in Denmark

A cursory look at the political landscape in Denmark makes it very clear that the debate about foreigners—immigrants and refugees, many of whom come from Muslim countries—is one of the primary political issues (Buchardt 2014, p. 40). According to a sociologist of religion, Brian Arly Jacobsen, 5.5 percent of the population in Denmark belongs to the Islamic faith (Tranberg 2019), making Islam the largest minority religion in the country. Today, many politicians refer to Denmark as a “Christian country” and underscore the importance of safeguarding Denmark’s “Christian cultural heritage”. Presumably, this kind of rhetoric is not a result of any increasing religious engagement—as mentioned before, the number of members in the Evangelical Lutheran Church has decreased. Rather, Christianity is now used as a marker of Danishness (Iversen 2018, p. 85). This new instrumentalization of Christianity had led to a considerable amount of value-based policies over the past 15–20 years, including what some Danes condemn as “symbolic politics” (*symbolpolitik*). These kinds of policies can be expressed and enacted in several ways. In 2015, the former government stated in their program that “Denmark is a Christian country” (Iversen 2018, p. 74). In August 2018, a ban on face-coverings and masks in public space, popularly called the “burka ban”, took effect after prolonged political and public debate. This debate occurred under a center-right coalition government (which, however, had the support of the strongly anti-immigrant Danish People’s Party). Under the same government, it was decided that the ceremony granting Danish citizenship would require the new citizens in Denmark to shake hands with an official as part of the ceremony. Furthermore, there has been a debate about Muslim free schools (*friskole*), (which are 85% financed by state subsidies). Politicians from both left and right have suggested revoking the grants given to these Muslim private schools because they are under suspicion of being hotbeds of radicalization. Therefore, the regulations for supervision of the free schools have been made more rigorous over the last twenty years. This occurred in 2002, 2005, and again in 2017. For instance, it has been emphasized that all free schools must support the pupils to respect gender equality and democracy, and the inspections of these schools—especially the Muslim free schools—have been increased.

In the public schools, controversies have as well arisen regarding value-based policy (Kühle and Christensen 2019, p. 252). Most of these policies were concerned primarily with topics related to Islam, even if they were formulated in general terms for legal reasons (a ban on burkas, for example, was considered discriminatory, so it was changed to a ban on all “masking of faces in public”, which covered anarchist demonstrators or even carnival masks; similarly a ban on religious symbols, clearly aimed at schoolgirls wearing veils, would include a ban on the Jewish skull cap or even a cross worn around the neck). The debate has touched upon religious clothing, religious symbols, participation in physical education, swimming and sexual education, attending the school’s Christmas ceremony in the local church, issues of serving pork in canteens, halal slaughtered meat, and whether Muslim pupils should be compelled to eat or drink during Ramadan (Jensen 2019, p. 138; Gilliam 2014, p. 35). The Christmas ceremony in the local church, which is a widespread tradition and marks the last school day before the Christmas break, has been highly debated (Böwadt 2019b; Brandt and Böwadt 2018, p. 141). In Sweden, the Christmas ceremony is handled differently, in that that a Christian ceremony is viewed as not being in accord with a non-confessional school; the Christmas ceremony is banned in Swedish schools (Osbeck and Skeie 2014, p. 246). In Denmark, the decision to hold a Christmas ceremony is decided by each schoolmaster. As mentioned, the public school has an obligation to safeguard Denmark’s “Christian cultural heritage”, although it is not clear what that heritage consists of exactly. This lack of precision about the content of the Christian cultural heritage is often used as an argument to defend Christian traditions in school and to retain the importance of evangelical Lutheran Christianity in the teaching of “Christian Studies” (this argument resembles the familiar arguments that the Bible is not just a religious scripture but more importantly, should be read as the foundation of

Western culture). Nevertheless, the Danish school is regarded as a secular place, where religion as such does not (and should not) take up space (Jensen 2019, p. 146). Whereas the Swedish public school focuses on Sweden as a diverse, multicultural society, the Danish public school has not emphasized this focus to the same degree. Since 1993, it has been underscored in the Primary Education Act that the pupils must be *familiar* with Danish culture and history and *understand* other cultures, a formulation normally interpreted as giving favoritism of Danish Culture. In other words, the aim of the Danish school is not primarily to teach the pupils to navigate in a diverse (multi-ethnic/multicultural) society. The aim is more focused on Denmark as a monocultural society.

In this political and education environment, Danish politicians must deal with several issues concerning religion (Kühle and Christensen 2019, p. 254). That was not the case 25 years ago. In this sense, Jürgen Habermas is correct in his definition of society as “post-secular” (Habermas 2008), in the sense that people have returned to a religious type of practice that they had once abandoned, with religion now taking the form of “culture” or “identity”. This could lead one to believe that the field of religious education in the universities has now become a high-priority area in Denmark. In fact, this has not been the case. Today, religious education as a university discipline or sub-field remains a very small area for research. There is no specific professorial chair for religious education studies at any Danish university. One of the reasons is that the former Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, in 2002, was transformed into a university, The Danish Pedagogical University, and subsequently into the Danish School of Education, one of the consequences being the demise for what had been research in religious education. While there is considerable research in religion and theology, there is hardly any research in religious education. At University Colleges, where teacher training is located, there is research in didactics, but only in the “major” subjects such as Danish, Mathematics and Natural Science. This situation of course influences religious education in primary and lower secondary school. The lack of resources earmarked for the study of religious education is not extraordinary for Denmark. We find a similar “lack of resources” (read: low priority) in the other Nordic countries as well (Rothgangel et al. 2014, p. 10). Despite this, there has recently been an upgrade of the Danish teachers. Today they must be trained in religious education in order to teach Christian Studies in the school, but it is still far from enough, and often the upgrading is nothing more than symbolic or superficial (Schäfer 2018). The majority of Danish teachers who teach religious education in primary and lower secondary schools are still not educated in this field.

4. The Pedagogical Landscape

Since 2014, comprehensive changes have taken place in the Danish school system due to a targeted reform which has focused on academic achievements, outputs and tests. The reform has been heavily criticized and is still highly debated. The changes have been characterized as placing pedagogy under economizing controls (Kristensen 2017a, p. 17). This trend is hardly unique to Denmark, but here it has resulted in an extensive debate about the aim of the school and particularly the role of general education (as in the German “Bildung”). This debate has been made more complicated because there is no general agreement regarding the content of such general education (Kristensen 2017b, p. 50). Broadly speaking, there are two main positions, “political-administrative” and “pedagogical-conservative”.

On the one hand, there is a group that emphasizes specific academic achievements, according to which the school should be organized in order to adapt to the labor market. This position emphasizes the need for Denmark to be able to compete with other countries; hence the designation for this group is the “political-administrative” position (Hermann 2016, p. 8). In contrast, there is a group that focuses primarily on the school as a locus of general education in the German sense of *Bildung* or the French *formation*. These proponents of a more significant role of education often refer to a tradition that is closely connected to the Danish theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) and his pedagogical ideas. A central concept in Grundtvig’s thought is that of “enlightenment of life” (*livsoplysning*). From this enlightenment of life perspective, this group advocates a focus on a more existential education that goes beyond specific scholastic achievements. They also talk about “life skills” or capacities (“*livsduelighed*”).

(Böwadt 2019a). According to this second position, the aim of the school is not to educate the pupils in order to fit into the labor market or to fit into society but to fit into “life”. This position has been characterized as “pedagogical-conservative” (Hermann 2016, p. 8). We will return to the influence of Grundtvig, because his ideas have not only had an impact on the school in general but especially on the subject of “Christian Studies” and how it should be taught.

One of the consequences of the changing pedagogical landscape in Denmark is that the focus on academic achievements has resulted in a neglect of “Christian Studies” in the school. Instead, the policy and pedagogical focus has concentrated on what are assumed to be the crucial subjects, i.e., Danish and Mathematics, where skills can be measured. In contrast, “Christian Studies” has traditionally focused on more existential and moral questions than on academic achievements. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the new legal framework that appeared in 2019 would focus more on academic achievements. However, the main focus is not knowledge about religion as such, but instead the capacity to understand and relate to the meaning of “the religious dimension”, i.e., an existential or life-oriented education. One might also assume that there would be more focus on religious and cultural diversity, as Denmark is no longer a homogenous society, but this has not been the case. The core areas of “Christian Studies” remain evangelical Lutheran Christianity and philosophy of life, with its connotations of anti-intellectualism. Although the academic discipline, comparative religion, now plays a larger role in the teaching of “Christian Studies”; the basic academic discipline of the subject remains theology.

5. The Impact of “Philosophy of Life”

In 1975, the teaching of “Christian Studies” was mandated not to contain any sort of preaching. It is due to a secularization of both society and the school (Bugge 1979, p. 173). Since 1995 the subject has been dominated by a focus on “philosophy of life” (Böwadt 2007, 2009a, 2009b). It is especially the two Danish theologians, N. F. S. Grundtvig and K. E. Løgstrup (1905–1981), who have influenced the Danish understanding of “philosophy of life” and hence the shaping of the subject in the school. In both Grundtvig’s and Løgstrup’s thinking, the idea of “creation” takes up much space; hence, we often find aspects of the theology of creation in Danish religious education. Grundtvig did not define himself as a philosopher of life, but he nevertheless has had a pivotal influence on Danish philosophy of life thinking. The dichotomy life-death—the main dichotomy in philosophy of life—is crucial in both Grundtvig’s theology and in his pedagogical thinking. In opposition to the Rationalist idea of enlightenment, Grundtvig talks about “enlightenment of life”. In this sense, enlightenment is about the common human life and not about knowledge. In the tradition of philosophy of life in general we encounter an anti-intellectualism, for instance manifested in a criticism of reason or a criticism of the universities which purely academic with no contact with “life itself”. We encounter the same type of anti-intellectualism in Grundtvig’s thinking. Løgstrup was inspired by Grundtvig, but he was also influenced by the German *Lebensphilosophie*, especially through Hans Lipps (1889–1941) and Max Scheler (1874–1928). Løgstrup is thus an important link between Danish and German philosophy of life thinking. The term “life itself” is frequently used in Løgstrup’s early writings, a concept crucial to philosophy of life. Later on, Løgstrup talks about “the sovereign expressions of life”, such as trust, love, and mercy. According to Løgstrup, there are spontaneous expressions that creep up on us, and these expressions originate from the created life.

The focus on “life” in religious education is not extraordinary for Denmark. In many countries in Europa we can identify a similar trend, where concepts such as “life themes”, “life itself”, “life questions”, “life orientation” have been on the agenda (Heimbrock 2005, p. 110; Böwadt 2009a, p. 36). One possible explanation for this focus on “life” is secularization. How can we legitimize religious education when religion no longer has the role as a guiding force in life and in society? Simply put, when it is no longer possible to preach Christianity, one can “preach” life. In this way, the movement from religion to life is an example of secularization. While one can accept the trend toward secularization and the downgrading of religion, there will nevertheless be argued that the focus on “life” has not emerged

simply because Christianity no longer plays a central role. Rather, “life” has become a reshaped—or re-branded—form of Christianity. As mentioned before, the Danish “philosophy of life” tradition is based on the theology of creation; “life itself” is always the created life. This is a leading idea in the thought of both Grundtvig and Løgstrup. The Christian idea of creation is a part of their pedagogical thinking. Grundtvig thus makes an important distinction between “faith” and “opinion”. Faith is attached specifically to Christ, while opinion is a view of life, a world-view, which is shared by both Christians and non-Christians. In Grundtvig’s view, both groups agree that life has been created by God. Initially, he thought that the school should help the pupils attain eternal salvation. During the 1830s, however, Grundtvig changed his views. This is due to a visit to England, where he was inspired by the English liberalism (Böwadt 2019a, p. 51). He began to claim that faith should not be an issue of concern for the school, but only for the church. According to Grundtvig, both Christians and non-Christians could attend school together. Faith had nothing to do with school, but the idea of creation did. Grundtvig’s distinction between faith and “life created” was carried on by Løgstrup. According to Løgstrup, God has created the worldly life so that it can develop in a worldly manner; therefore, Christians do not possess any sort of privileged knowledge over non-Christians. Christians and non-Christians exist together in relation to the worldly tasks, for instance to discuss and organize the school (Løgstrup 1978, p. 280; Böwadt 2019a, p. 52; Böwadt 2009a, p. 30).

As mentioned earlier, the school subject of “Christian Studies” has not gone along with the trend toward academic achievements. Presumably, this is due to the influence of “philosophy of life”, which is often dominated by anti-intellectualism. The “philosophy of life” tradition took form as a contrast to the Age of Enlightenment. As such, the philosophy of life tradition contains a criticism of reason, science and modernity. The academic world is often criticized for being pure theoretical and otherworldly. The focus is on wondering instead of reflection, on experience instead of knowledge, on life as lived and created rather than life as an object of meditation. Philosophy of life is a practical rather than intellectual philosophy.

Although the “philosophy of life” approach remains dominant in the new legal framework for “Christian Studies”, the past 25 years have seen some major changes in the curricular area known as “Philosophy of Life and Ethics”. Today, the impact of “philosophy of life” is diminished, and by implication, so is the idea of creation. In the earlier curricula, children were characterized as “philosophers of life” with a special access to “life itself”. This special access was said to originate from the child’s “unique capability to wonder and to be spontaneous”. In the curriculum from 1995, the teaching should “enhance the child’s ability to wonder”. However, the child was not supposed to wonder about just anything. She should wonder “about the incomprehensible that we are alive and experience the world” (Ministry of Education 1995, p. 21). This romantic view of the child is characteristic of “philosophy of life” thinking. We can find the romantic view of the child at the two antipodes Løgstrup and Nietzsche. Both are philosophers of life, but they distinguish themselves in their views of Christianity as, respectively, a critic and as defender.

The reason why “philosophy of life” has diminished in importance may be linked to the massive criticism of its impact (Jensen 1999; Rothstein 1999; Böwadt 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Because of this criticism—a criticism, which deals with the indirect Christian “preaching” in the “philosophy of life” tradition—the new legal framework has difficulty defining what “philosophy of life” might consist of. It is underscored as the key curricular area, but what it is and what it implies, is not explained, which creates obvious difficulties for a teacher in religious education. In the following therefore this new legal framework will be examined.

6. The New Legal Framework

In summer 2019, a new legal framework of religious education was published. The framework is a composite of several very different approaches, some of them, as mentioned, being mutually exclusive. Several features from the previous framework have been retained. In examining specific themes within the areas of Christianity and “philosophy of life”, the main focus remains evangelical

Lutheran Christianity (Ministry of Education 2019). The main theme of the subject is presented as an interpretation of life (Ministry of Education 2019, p. 26). The aim of the subject is still “the religious dimension”, a concept inspired by the German/American theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), which first entered the curriculum in 1995. Although the meaning of “religious dimension” has been very much debated, it nevertheless shows that the subject derives from existential philosophy and “philosophy of life” approach. The purpose is still to qualify the pupils to reflect on the basic conditions of life (Ministry of Education 2019).

As a teaching subject, “Christian Studies” consists of four curricular areas: “Philosophy of Life and Ethics”, “Bible Stories”, “Christianity”, and “Non-Christian Religions” (Ministry of Education 2019, p. 27). “Philosophy of life” has priority. According to the curriculum guidelines, the curricular area “Philosophy of Life and Ethics” has the advantage of being able to integrate with the other areas; hence, the pupils can ask questions derived from their own life experiences (Ministry of Education 2019, p. 27). Although the impact of “philosophy of life”, as mentioned above, has been reduced since 2004, it is still highlighted as the most important area. “Philosophy of life” is apparently so important that it is recommended as an axis or point of orientation for the other three areas as well. The downplaying of “philosophy of life” is visible in the lack of descriptions of what “philosophy of life” is. It is a kind of “ether” that permeates the entire teaching program of “Christian Studies”.

The clear tilt toward Christianity as opposed to other religions is shown in the way the other world religions are presented. There is an important difference between the aim of the curricular area “Christianity” and the curricular area “Non-Christian Religions”. Christianity is taught at every school grade, while non-Christian religions are taught in the upper grades. The teacher can choose to involve non-Christian religions on every level if there is a pedagogical reason to do so. However, there is also a difference in the approaches. The Bible stories are taught for the purpose of showing certain existential and ethical themes, and they must be interpreted in relation to “basic values” and “fundamental” life questions. These features are not mentioned in connection with the non-Christian religions. Here the purpose is not existential, but only to impart knowledge. The pupils must learn about the leading ideas in these other religions, whereas evangelical Lutheran Christianity is elevated as a means of learning about life questions and immediate life issues. Learning about Christianity is intended as a means to learn about one’s life, one’s ethical values and other existential questions. Learning about the “non-Christian religions”—still called “foreign religions” (Ministry of Education 2019, p. 23)—is a task of simply becoming aware of other ways of viewing the world. This learning is not intended as a path toward any deeper self-understanding. This pattern, whereby evangelical Lutheranism is a pathway to self-understanding whereas the other religions are relegated to mere areas where knowledge is required, also becomes clear when we look upon the list of central concepts to be taught in the “World Religions” unit. The Christian concepts mentioned include topics such as “Creation and Sin”, “Judgment”, “Grace”, “The Remission of Sins”, “Hope” and “Love and Mercy”. The Muslim concepts to be covered include “The Six Articles of Faith”, “Halal/Haram”, “Hadith”, “Sharia”, and “Umma”. Grace, hope, love, and mercy are not mentioned in connection with Islam (Ministry of Education 2019, pp. 72–74).

In general, there is a clash between approaches from, respectively, philosophy of life/theology of creation/existential theology versus approaches from comparative religion/sociology of religion. This is also a clash between a more normative approach and a more descriptive approach, and a clash between the proximity and existential intimacy of Danish evangelical Lutheranism and the distance towards these “foreign world religions”.

What is new in the new legal framework? As shown, many features remain the same. Nevertheless, there are some new tendencies as well. The sociology of religion and comparative religion now play a larger role than before, and “philosophy of life” is toned down, though still predominant. There is a tendency toward a more multifaceted subject, but the overall priority on evangelical Christianity remains the same. One factor that speaks against a more multifaceted subject is the name of the subject. Presumably, it would make a difference if the name of the subject changed from “Kristendomskundskab”

to something more neutral. On and off, this has been debated. The controversy over the name of the subject is several decades old. For instance, the association for primary and lower secondary school teachers of religion, in Danish “Religionslærerforeningen”, advocated changing the name from Kristendomskundskab to “Religion”. Of course, this change would not be effective if it were not followed by a change in the course content of and pedagogical approaches to the subject. In any case, the old name remains.

In many ways, there is not much that is new in this new legal framework. Evangelical Lutheran Christianity and Danish philosophy of Life are still the main focus in the subject. If one examines the teaching materials, they give more acknowledgement to Denmark having become a more diverse society. Hence, teaching materials directed to the primary school include mention of world religions other than Christianity, even though the legal framework stipulates that is only mandatory to instruct in Christianity. In the vast majority of teaching materials, however, Christianity still has special status (Kjeldsen 2019, p. 131).

7. A Revitalization of the Subject?

Historically, there has been a close association between the school and the church in Denmark. This connection still exists, though in attenuated form. The connection remains visible, however, regarding the Christian Studies in the school. This clearly manifested as recently as the spring of 2019, when the then Minister of Education, Merete Riisager, set up a committee with the task of revitalizing and upgrading “Christian Studies”. The rationale for this committee, according to the minister, was that the school was a part of the foundation in the Danish society, and the Danish society is marked by evangelical Lutheran Christianity. Therefore, Christian Studies plays a significant role in the educational objective of the school, and there must be a renewed focus on the subject. The aim of Christian Studies in the school should be to equip the pupils with a ballast with which they can confront existential problems of rootlessness and loneliness (Ministry of Education). This focus on rootlessness and loneliness and its connection to Christianity is a means of both psychologizing and politicizing Christian Studies. However, it also promotes and continues the Danish “philosophy of life”. Pupils must be given the tools to create their own life, and evangelical Christianity is one of these. The so-called “revitalization” of Christian Studies in the school concerns the existence of the pupils. It is not about acquiring knowledge of Christian or other religions. It is not about academic achievements or about prioritizing research in religious education. Unlike artificial intelligence, gene technology or public health, religious education is not a “strategic research area”.

Among the ten-member Christian Studies committee, three came from the ranks of the evangelical Lutheran church, an indication of the close connection between the public school and the church. There were no representatives from any of the other religious communities present in Denmark. Only the majority Lutheran Christian religion was represented. At present, Spring 2020, the work of the committee is on standby due to the change of government in June 2019.

8. Conclusions

The American sociologist of religion, Phil Zuckerman, has characterized the Danes’ attitude towards religion as “mild indifference”. His research, conducted in 2005–2006, was based on interviews with Danes about their attitudes towards religion (Zuckerman 2008). In some ways, Zuckerman’s characterization is correct. Outright atheism is not very widespread in Denmark. For instance, the Atheistic Society of Denmark has only about 1000 members. Weekly church attendance in Denmark is low, but nevertheless, cultural Christianity takes up space. Often, cultural Christian practices are invisible, because these practices are viewed simply as engrained cultural habits, as being “Danish”. They are not seen as religious acts. The religious landscape in Denmark is thus more complex. This complexity is reflected in the public school, which is often described and certainly considered to be a secular place. However, the school is also a site where Christianity takes up space and is favored

in many ways, notably through the teaching of Christian Studies. This is the case both generally in the different traditions and in the space allocated to the teaching of Christian Studies.

As underscored above, Christianity now plays a central role in the Danish political landscape, mainly as a marker of Danishness and as a reaction to diversity and Islam. As a result, probably no politicians today, with the exception of those from the far left, would dare promote a change of name from Kristendomskundskab to a more neutral label such as “Religion”. This resistance to name change is due mostly due to the importance of Christianity as a politically expedient marker of Danishness and certainly not because of any academic discussions or recommendations as to how Christian Studies should be taught or what should be included. In a country where the slogan “Denmark is a Christian country” goes uncontested, the signal value of the course named Christian Studies is too important to be reduced to discussions about the actual content of the course or sensitivity to non-Christian pupils. Politicians from both the right and the left are afraid of losing votes to the anti-immigrant/anti-Islamic Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti), and they are afraid of being accused of appeasing Islam in the name of tolerance. Viewed in this light, the current political situation in Denmark has but a brake on any development towards a more multifaceted subject. This situation is made that much worse because there is almost no research in religious education being conducted at Danish universities or teacher training colleges. The situation remains stagnant.

Evangelical Lutheran Christianity is the majority religion in Denmark. Denmark is a country where Christianity matters and does not matter at the same time. It is a country where cultural Christianity plays an important role and where invoking the word Christianity is used as a rhetorical marker for Danishness. However, Denmark is also a country that is regarded as very secularized, where commentators complain of empty churches on Sundays. In other words, Denmark is marked by both secularization and desecularization. In some ways, we find the same complexity in the school subject of Christian Studies. On the one hand, the subject is dominated by evangelical Lutheran Christianity with its invocations of a Christian or moral upbringing. On the other hand, some of the approaches in Christian Studies teaching point toward a more secularized and multifaceted subject that endeavors to give all pupils some kind of ethical anchor in their lives that is not associated with Lutheran Christianity as such. As mentioned, the new legal framework reveals several very different approaches to the subject. We find little cohesion. Christian Studies as a school subject points in several directions, in a kind of schizophrenic fashion; with tendencies to retain the traditional Lutheran foundation, and tendencies to adapt and modernize to multi-cultural Denmark at the same time. One feature is clear: the world religions are not treated or handled equally in the curriculum. Christianity has a special status, and unlike the other world religions, Christianity is combined with “philosophy of life”, where the idea of “creation” plays a crucial role. Furthermore, the biblical stories according to the legal framework are intended to highlight certain basic values and are attached to the pupil’s life experiences. This contrasts with the teaching of the other world religions, where the goal is simply to learn about what they stand for. If one operates with the well-known distinction between learning *from* and learning *about* religion, it shows that when it comes to Christianity, the pupils will learn from the religion and learn about “the good life” and what is called the basic life questions. Concerning the other religions, the pupils must learn about them, but these other religions are considered as offering nothing to help the pupil’s understand their own lives or deal with their life questions and spontaneous experiences. They learn about these religions but not from them. This pattern is very clear, despite the fact that the legal framework states that every religion must be treated equally in teaching ([Ministry of Education 2019](#), p. 53).

In the introduction to this paper, the question was raised as to whether Christian Studies as a school subject contains an element of “Christian upbringing”. The answer is, “Yes”, to some extent. Today, Grundtvig’s pedagogical thinking does not take up much space in the public school, which is a consequence of the 2014 school reform. However, the subject of Christian Studies remains dominated by Grundtvig and Løgstrup, as a kind of pedagogical anachronism. If there is going to be any change in the Christian Studies, both in approach and in teaching methods, there must also be a change in

the general programmatic objectives of the Danish National School System. These objectives clearly articulate that “Danish culture” is favored, and in the public school law, Danish culture is specifically connected to evangelical Lutheran Christianity. Such a change, essentially a “divorce” between Danish culture and Danish Lutheranism, will only occur when there is also a change in the political landscape. At present, this change does not seem to be on the horizon.

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