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Why Religion Education, as a Matter of Course, ought to be Part of the Public School Curriculum¹

1. Why Religion must be Studied and Taught about – Fundamentals

1.1 Religion Education – a Must for an Open Society and a Secular State

My arguments why religion education² ought to be a normal and compulsory school-subject in all state run public schools (as well as publicly funded private schools) are based on a (normative) premise, namely that, to put it in a nutshell, scientifically founded knowledge is a positive value and to be preferred to lack of knowledge (ignorance), and that the positive evaluation of science and knowledge, historically as well as logically, is linked to extra-scientific, ideological-political, values. Values intimately connected to the notions of an open (and secular) society³, an enlightened and pluralist democracy constitutionally and legally committed to human rights, including, of course, freedom of religion.

It is, thus, also based on the premise that vital to a pluralistic democracy is the existence of a public sphere⁴ where citizens and civil entities can discuss matters of common interest, and can do so in an enlightened way, based upon knowledge and the use of analytical-critical competences. Though the open,

1 As can be seen from the references, this is not the first time I advocate that a non-confessional religious education based on the academic study of religions be made a compulsory school subject in public schools. In this paper I present some new arguments and perspectives, but part of it has been elaborated in similar ways in other articles.

2 'Religion education' is used here for religious studies based religious education. As the term 'Religious Education' can give the impression of being a confessional subject, I prefer 'Religion Education'.

3 Though not subscribing in detail to the work and 'open society' of K. Popper (Popper, 1945), my notion of an 'open society' is reminiscent of Popper's.

4 As with the notion of an 'open society', I do not want to subscribe in detail any of the many definitions of the public sphere (or public arena) in circulation. Nor do I want to refer to all the discussions that have popped up regarding religion in the public sphere. My use of the term is similar to the use made by several contributors to the debate, also the debate about the place (or no place) of religion in the public sphere. I must, though, stress that as a scholar of religion, I never understood how anybody who did not have but a strictly *normative* notion of religion could imagine that religion could be easily defined as and confined to something 'private' or 'individual'. I also never understood, how one could imagine that religious voices could be kept out of the public debate in a society claiming to be democratic, pluralist and secular, – but not anti-religious. I also doubt that Habermas's (2006) recent distinctions and proposals according to which religious voices and argumentation ought to be excluded from the formal public/political sphere but must be allowed in the informal public sphere, are legitimate.

democratic, and pluralist society is also a secular society (no matter if the *state* can be defined as secular), it is not a secularist, i.e. anti-religious society. Rather, it is a framework for religious as well as non-religious groups and individuals, for religious and non-religious worldviews, discourses, practices and institutions. The open society and its public sphere cannot but also be open to and give room to religious voices; it is exactly the secular and pluralist character of this society that is the guarantee for freedom of religion, including, of course, freedom from religion. This also means that the open, democratic and pluralist society cannot be, neither discursively nor politically, dominated by any one religious discourse, and this is exactly why the very same society must develop a second order, non-religious, scientifically based discourse *on* religion.

Though this is my main premise, a few words on my concept of a 'secular state' and its obligations in regard to religion and religion education may be added (for further discussion see also the chapter of Cliteur in this book): the category and use of 'secular' may be as problematic as 'religion'. In regard to the definition of a 'secular state', things are less complicated I think, and I think the definition of D. I. Smith's (Smith, 1963, Ch. 1) is fairly straightforward as well as useful:

"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."

If judged with reference to this definition, quite a few European states, in terms of their constitutions and legal systems, evidently are not totally secular. If the ways they have or do not have religious education are also considered, this becomes even more evident (for overviews of various kinds of religious education in Europe: Alberts, 2007, pp.315ff.; Jensen, 2005; Schreiner, 2002a, 2000b; Wil-laime, 2007; Pépin 2009).

But even those EU states that have some kind of 'established' religion and maybe some kind of confessional religious education as well, most likely would think and insist that their *educational* systems are based on *non*-religious (Enlightenment) principles, and most of them, irrespective of a constitutional link and support to a religion or confession, will boast that they are politically secular and in favour of a secular public sphere. A secular sphere functioning as a framework for, as said, religious and non-religious groups and individuals, for religious and non-religious worldviews, discourses, practices and institutions.

Looking at the ways such states, and the states that do not favour a particular religion and thus are more entitled to be labelled as 'secular', for instance some of post-communist states, handle the issue of religious education, it becomes obvious that, after all, they have a problem with religion: they have a problem with conceiving of and dealing with religion and religious education in a secular, i.e. non-religious or trans-religious way. It is as if they have not quite managed to

emancipate themselves from a religious point of view concerning religion, making something special out of religion, instead of viewing it as yet another human, social and cultural phenomenon. They have, so to speak, not developed fully secular approaches to religion (Jensen & Rothstein, 2000).

Actually, I find it tempting to add another criterion to the definition of a 'secular state': to qualify as a secular state, the state must have emancipated itself from religion and religious interests to such a degree that it provides for academic and scientific studies of religion at public universities and for compulsory religion education in public schools. Studies of and education about religion must be construed and practiced totally in line with any other study and any other normal school subject (Jensen, 2008a).

1.2 Religion – an Important Historical, Human and Social Fact

Having said so, without further ado, I serve up a series of further basic reasons and arguments why religion, as a matter of course, must be studied by scholars and taught by teachers, educated by those scholars, to children and young people in public schools.

What is, amongst religion scholars as well as non-scholars, despite all the intricacies linked to finding a universally valid and accepted definition, called and conceived of as religion and religions⁵ seem to play, today as before, a not insignificant role in human life and world history, in social, political and cultural formations, discourses, and conflicts.

A scholar of religion as well as everybody else may, for one reason or the other, consider religion in general, some religions, one religion, specific aspects of religion or just of certain religions, to have but a negative value in relation to what s/he considers the desired development of humanity, 'the good life', the 'good' society etc.

A scholar of religion, *qua* scholar of religion, may even pass beyond the normally accepted *methodological* atheism or agnosticism to what is normally considered not-acceptable *ontological* atheism and s/he may even take an anti-religious activist atheist stance towards religion, a stance that denies e.g. the ontological existence of the trans- or superhuman entities postulated by religions.

Yet, though the scholar of religion as well as any other citizen in a given society may thus wish that religion be eradicated from the surface of the earth and that humankind at large be emancipated from religion, then neither the scholar nor the imagined activist atheist can deny the *fact* of religion, in the world of yesterday and in the contemporary world.

5 My own preferred general definition runs: Religion is a cultural (sub-)system differentiating itself from other cultural systems by way of a reference to a postulated non-verifiable and non-falsifiable trans-historical and trans- (or super-)human entity.

The vast majority of the population of the world (still) adheres to a religious tradition, religious people day after day live their lives more or less in accordance with the worldview contained within their religious tradition. Religion plays a role in identity politics, in the mass media, in culture with a capital 'C' and culture in general, in the public and political debates, in regard to old kinds and new kinds of religious pluralisms in Europe and elsewhere, in regard to heated discussions about freedom of expression, gender and gender roles, immigration and integration etc. Religion, thus, in spite of secularisation (and of the most general and sweeping *theories* of secularisation) is still a part of the present world, including Europe, and in the world – including Europe – a sort of 'revival', within well-known religions as well as in the shape of less institutionalised and more individual 'religiousness', may, according to several observers, be traced.

Religion, as far as science is concerned, may very well be a 'hang over' from the time when human beings were still as much prey as predator, and/or it may be a continuous consequence of the way human minds, cognition and societies work and are construed. Whatever it is, though, it is a social and historical fact, a human and a social phenomenon. Superhuman or divine beings, often called gods, thus, irrespective of their ontological status, exist and are real, to those who believe in them and communicate with them (e.g. in rituals), *and* they thus also exist as social and cultural facts, as real as, e.g., words in languages and figures in narratives. Religion, whatever else it may be said to be, is a human and social phenomenon, – and has thus to be studied like other such phenomena.

Religion matters. To religious people and to non-religious people. The Muhammad-cartoon affair and crisis, and the last five years with an astonishing increase in atheist literature and literature on atheism are but two of several evident signs of this.

1.3 Core Conclusions

From this fact of religion, from the fact that religion is a human and social phenomenon, a phenomenon that has influenced, for good or bad, other areas of life, society and culture (also Culture with a capital 'C') and continues to do so, several important consequences may be deduced. Scientifically grounded knowledge of humankind, history of the world and history of the (European) nation states, of cultural, social and cognitive constructs and mechanisms, of literature, visual and musical art, of politics, etc. must include studies and knowledge of what is referred to as religion, including a selection of past and present religions.

This conclusion in turn leads to another, equally logically and equally evident. If science and scientifically grounded knowledge, in general and of religion, is held by the state to be of positive value and preferred over against ignorance, then scientific approaches to and knowledge of religion and religion

related matters must be of value too. The state thus has to establish or support a scientific study of religion. Neither for the sake of supporting religion (frequently *one* religion or one strand within one religion) nor for the sake of fighting or ultimately getting rid of religion, but for the sake of providing scientifically grounded knowledge of also *that* part or aspect of history, mankind, etc.

This scientific study of religion and religions, in order to be in line with the basic values of the open, pluralist and democratic society, cannot be equal to or limited to the – ever so scientifically conducted – self-reflective or ‘theological’ studies within one religion. No matter if the state supports one religion (an ‘established’ religion) more than others, no matter the actual degree in one particular state of (different kinds of) religious pluralism, the past and present world (and normally also the country in question) is *multi-religious*. Citizens will adhere to more than one religion, and even among those who adhere to one religion, there will be a wide variety and they may adhere to various formations within the same religion. But there will also be citizens who do not identify as religious, who are not adherents to any religion, and there will, furthermore, be citizens who are no just a- but even anti-religious.

Though the public sphere has often been normatively defined as secular, it cannot be, as already touched upon above, neither by definition nor in practice, secularist in the sense of being anti-religious and exclusive about religion. Religion, in the shape of individuals and groups, in the shape of buildings, institutions, symbols, narratives, and ‘voices’ is (at least so far and to varying degrees) a part of the public sphere (and space) and participant to the public debates. It is so as a matter of fact, and it is so in accordance with the ideals of an open and pluralist society and democracy as well as with human right norms.

For the secular and open society to stay secular, pluralistic, enlightened and open, i.e. to not be defined nor dominated by one (religious) discourse, and to not draw its authority or legitimacy from a reference to some trans- or superhuman entity, the public sphere needs to add and secure the existence of a non-religious discourse on religion, a second order discourse on religion and religions, to the first order discourse(s) it also allows for.

Thus, the kind of scientific study of religion to be established, not at the cost of, but next to the mentioned ‘theological’ studies, must be a study of religions and of religion in general, and its theories and methods cannot be derived from any one religious tradition but solely from the theories and methods of the human, social and natural sciences as these have established themselves independent of religious traditions knowledge. The knowledge about religion thus produced is different from religious knowledge of religion, and the scientific discourse on religion thus differs from the religious discourses that it studies. It is a second order discourse on religion and religions. A second order discourse on religion, not anti- nor pro-religious, but over and above religion and the singu-

lar religions. The logical location of this scientific study of religion is within the public state universities.⁶

There may be scientific as well as extra-scientific problems related to the category and use of 'religion', – and to studying it as some 'thing' special at special departments for the study of religions instead of studying it as part and parcel of e.g. history and society at history or social science departments. Yet, I contend that scientific, critical and self-critical thinking about religion (and about the category 'religion' as well as about the many possible ways to study religion) actually has taken place at specific departments for the study of religions such as these have developed over the last century and more.

Now, part of the obligation of the public state university is to not just pursue and produce scientifically grounded knowledge but also to feed the public sphere and debate with the results of the scientific, academic endeavours, *in casu* the scientifically grounded theories of, approaches to and knowledge about religion. In Denmark, this obligation was, furthermore, written into the 2003 *University Act*.

There are many ways in which academics can (or must) share their knowledge with the society at large, and discussions about the most *appropriate* ways are important discussions⁷, not least in today's world where the public sphere (as well as religion and politics) is heavily mediatised and where the media available for 'sharing' are many and diverse. Parts of the discussions must touch upon the challenges related to efforts to communicate the scientific knowledge in that part of the public sphere and debate which to a very large extent 'takes place' within and on the conditions of the commercial mass media. The language of science and religion is not the same, but neither are the language and interests of science and the language and interests of the media. 'Infotainment' may be better than no information, but it holds its own risks, and at a time when religion is the subject of heated public and political debates, sharing knowledge about religion via the public mass media may be quite risky. Even the most 'objective' piece of information may become and be seen as not just impartial and neutral information but as a controversial political statement. With a (re-)politicisation of religion, there is a risk that the scholar who shares his knowledge ends up politicising, – or being accused of doing so. By so doing, the scholar, actually trying to pave the way for an acknowledgment of the value of scientifically grounded knowledge, may also end up putting his own reputation at risk, and what's worse: he may actually put the reputation of his science at risk since this reputation hinges on the understanding of valuable science as value free, a-political.

6 My formulations of these arguments owe a great deal to an article by Ivan Strenski (2010).

7 I have, using also my own experience, discussed some of the relevant issues with special regard to religion scholars and to the international discussion, in e.g. Jensen, 2008b. See also Jensen & Rothstein, 2000 for remarks by leading scholars of religion on the issue.

Though I do agree with those who warn against such risks implied in ‘going public’ and acting as, e.g. an expert to the media, I also think that at least some scientists and scholars, also of religion, need to take these risks and participate in public debates also via mass media.

Fortunately, this is not the only way to share with the wider public and society at large. There is another way, less risky and much more agreeable to many more scholars and colleagues: participation in education, not just of students who are going to become scholars, but of students who are going to become teachers (*in casu* religious education teachers) or performing other kind of jobs where knowledge (*in casu* knowledge about religion) is either absolutely necessary or an essential asset.

Scholars can thus share with the wider community and society by educating (religious education) teachers, by being active in committees that draft (religious education) curricula, by writing textbooks (for religious education), etc.⁸

This way of sharing knowledge, as well as the analytical competences needed to produce (as well as critically assess) that same knowledge, thus goes hand in hand with what I consider the best and traditional way for the state to produce citizens capable of participating in and securing the open pluralist, enlightened democracy and society: the establishment and running of a qualified and well functioning public educational system. And, within this education system, I contend, space must be carved out to make room for education also about religion.

1.4 Additional Arguments

What I have said so far ought to suffice to serve as convincing and valid arguments why knowledge about religion, as a human, and thus historical and social phenomenon, and about various religions and religious phenomena, ought to be conceived of as part and parcel of what constitutes ‘*allgemeine Bildung*’, and thus also part and parcel of the public school, the purpose of which normally is not just education aimed at future vocation or higher education but ‘*allgemeine Bildung*’. A well educated (*gebildete*) citizen also needs to know something about religion and must have competences needed to critically read and analyse, interpret and explain literature, art and political and public discourses related to religion. The knowledge and skills acquired is ‘emancipatory’, essential to the furthering of an enlightened and open society, to the furthering of what the Germans call a ‘*mündig*’ person and citizen.

Yet, many other good reasons for having religion education may be adduced. The absolutely most dominant argument in almost all of the many, many recent studies and recommendations issued by various transnational, European institutions (but also in various US documents) is that religious education is or may

8 S. Wanda Alberts (2007, p. 385ff. and 2008, p. 325ff.), likewise argues that this ought be a key way of applying science of religion.

be a key instrument to solving major conflicts and meeting what is thought of as pressing challenges, in Europe and in the whole wide world. Religious education is recommended as key to the furthering of tolerance towards 'the others' in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society and world, key to inter-cultural competence and understanding. Arguments presenting religious education as a key instrument in meeting some of the current challenges said to confront not just the EU, but the whole wide world. Tolerance, peaceful coexistence, alliance rather than a clash of civilizations, human rights, all of this can be furthered by the right kind of religious education.⁹

I too surely hope and also think that religious education may help contribute to love, peace and understanding, tolerance and the implementation of human rights. I do, however, have my doubts as to the utility of serving up this as the core argument for the *raison d'être* and utility of religious education, and I am getting more and more convinced that this argument should not be stated as the main or even explicit aim of religious education but be seen as a potential positive side effect. Allow me to explain why.

First of all, to my knowledge there is no solid research that knowledge about religion acquired in public schools so far has proved to be an important or efficient means in regard to producing tolerant citizens. In Denmark, we conducted a small scale survey that indicated that many students when asked would say that he or she had become more tolerant towards other religions after having been taught about them, their inner logic, and their 'nuances'. The larger scale REDCo project also indicates that pupils when asked think that tolerance ought to be pursued and that religious education might prove helpful in that regard. But this is far, far from bearing any evidence at all to the hoped for positive effects of religious education in a long term perspective and in terms of real life and politics. Intolerance and prejudices may be fought by means of religious education, but there is no evidence that it can be conquered by knowledge about religions.

This, however, is not my primary reason for not putting this argument and aim before anything else. No, over the years I have come to think, that it may be

9 See Schreiner in this book for overviews of the many projects (REDCo included) and political initiatives. See also Jackson 2007, 2008, 2009 for overviews of the many projects and policy initiatives. Jackson himself has played a role in many of these, also in the recently established Wergeland Center. The EWC is a European Resource Centre on Education for Human Rights, Democratic Citizenship and Intercultural Understanding, cf. <http://www.theewc.org/>. The *Toledo Guiding Principles* is a central manifestation of the role that many hope for religious education to play (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). In the USA, C.C. Haynes's commentary on S. Prothero "Americans don't know much about religion, but does it matter?" (Haynes, 2007a) may serve as a good example of how the 'challenges' especially after 9/11 enter discussions almost inevitably. The AAR/Teagle White Paper (http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Religion_Major_and_Liberal_Education/default.asp) (Retrieved May, 5, 2010) is another example how the utility of religious studies (and by extension religious education) is stressed with regard not just to liberal education but also to current global challenges seen as religion-related.

to the advantage of religious education as well as of religious studies, *and* to the success of mine and others advocacy thereof, if the (potential) utility in regard to specific contemporary political-social-cultural contexts, 'challenges' or problems, is downplayed. I actually have come to fear that a religion education construed on the basis of *too* explicit and one-sided reference to its utility in regard to contemporary 'challenges' or '*epochale Schlüsselprobleme*' (Klafki) may actually make such religion education *less* useful exactly in that very same regard.

Why? For one thing, contexts and challenges are changing. Knowledge and skills have to be of such a kind that they can be applied to a wide variety of (future) contexts and tasks. Very few, if any, of the scholars of religion who actually *do* contribute with valuable and useful knowledge and analyses to contemporary issues, have been *trained* to do so, e.g. by way of going through a study program or a religious education *explicitly* aiming at such contemporary issues and challenges, – most likely at the cost of other issues or important matters, and most likely at the cost of the development of a generally applicable capability to analyse, understand and explain current as well as future issues.

Moreover, the focus on 'challenges' pertaining to religion in the contemporary world, is, I think, oftentimes based on analyses that attach much too much importance to the role of religion in those 'challenges' or conflicts than religion can actually be proven to play. If religious education, like a large segment of the media and politicians, thus contributes to blowing the role of religion in conflicts and problems of e.g. integration and peaceful coexistence out of proportions (also as a means of selling itself to the public and to the politicians), religious education or the advocates of it risk(s) contributing also to the negligence of the equally or even more important roles of e.g. economy, education, and politics, – and thus to the negligence of more relevant and effective means to solve the problems than religious education.¹⁰

Another reason for caution is that many of the most influential and at the moment popular recommendations of 'problem-solving-religious education' have an approach to religion and religious education that I find hard to reconcile with an approach based on religious studies, and also hard to reconcile with the requirements for a compulsory and thus objective and neutral religious education. The *Toledo Guiding Principles* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007) may, as I have pointed out before (Jensen, 2008a), serve as an example. Though stating that teaching about religion must be based on professional expertise and training, sound scholarship, and professional standards, that it must be objective, and impartial, it also states that teachers must have a specific attitude to religion: the subject matter must be treated with respect, the curricula must show sensitivity to the local religious and secular plurality, and the recommendation ends up promoting religion, or

10 Consequently, when C.C. Haynes (2007) reviews and recommends the *Toledo Guiding Principles* in a commentary titled "To advance religious freedom, teach about religion", it may be feared that the good will so evidently behind this title and recommendation, as well as the recommended religious education, may be used for rather different and contrary purposes.

rather some kinds or aspects of religion that are in support of human rights, democracy and pluralism, and when discussing contents, it is recommended that sources from the religions that support peace, tolerance and human rights are highlighted. I see the reasons, the good will, the need to persuade politicians, the need to please religionists, – but this is not an impartial nor objective religious education.

Though I thus have certain hesitations in regard to stressing the utility of religion education in this regard, I have no hesitations when it comes to stressing the usefulness of religious education in regard to '*allgemeine Bildung*' nor in regard to what normally accompanies the aim of furthering '*allgemeine Bildung*', namely the aim of educating for a profession or vocation: knowledge about and analytical skills in regard to religion, the possible links between religion and matters pertaining to integration, meeting of cultures, individual, cultural societal conflicts, identity constructions etc. may be crucial to citizens who are to perform their working profession in a competent, rational and skilled way. Politicians, diplomats, soldiers, policemen, judges, businessmen, social workers, doctors, nurses, prison personnel, teachers (those who do not teach about religion but about other school subjects), all, I think, ought to have at least a minimum of education about religion and religions, and the kind of education about religion they ought to have can easily be profiled in regard to the various needs of the various professions and easily added to the general religious education provided in public schools.

2. A Compulsory, Separate Religion Education: Fundamentals

The wish to have a *compulsory*, separate Religion Education, time-tabled and to be taught all through primary and secondary (elementary) public school as well as in upper-secondary school (Gymnasium, 6th form college) necessitates that this religious education meets certain requirements as a consequence of the right to freedom of religion, to education *and* to parent's rights in regard to the (religious) education or upbringing of their children (Jensen, 2005).

Several articles in several human rights documents (e.g. article 26 of the 1948 *UN Universal Declaration*, article 5.1 [and 5.2] of the 1981 *UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, and Article 2 of Protocol no 1 of the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*) state, on the one hand, the right to education and the importance of education, also in regard to the promotion of, *inter alia*, "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups". On the other hand, however, the very same human rights documents limit the possibilities of the state to implement such education. This is especially so when it comes to religion: children shall not be compelled to re-

ceive teaching on religion or belief against the wishes of their parents, and parents have the right to ensure education for their children in accordance with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

These rights, of course, must be recognised and respected, and due to them, some countries that provide religious education in public schools also have an 'opt-out' possibility and/or offer an alternative (e.g. 'Ethics/Philosophy') for the parents to choose instead of religious education. However, faced with a compulsory religious education, some parents have brought the state or school authorities before the court, complaining that the school-subject offered was in conflict with their religious convictions and their rights. A famous and recent case was the *Folgerø and others vs. Norway*.

The relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights, however, provides a parameter for the kind of religious education which does *not*, according to the Court, violate the parents' rights. According to the rulings of the Court (rulings very similar to rulings by the United States Supreme Court), religious education may be made compulsory if the "information and knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner".

The compulsory religion education I recommend thus must be able to stand the test of the European courts and the European Court of Human Rights. The courts must be able to reject any claims made with reference to faith/conviction, simply by referring to the executive orders for the religious education in question.

A first, basic prerequisite is that the religious education in question is *not* confessional. It cannot be religious religious education, i.e. religious instruction. It must be neutral teaching *about* religion and about religions, i.e. not just about the religion or confession of the majority, e.g. the majority state- or established religion.

In public schools, the model for a compulsory religious education must correspond to what Alberts (Alberts, 2007) has termed 'integrative religious education', what I call 'secular Religion Education'. A school subject taught in the same classroom at the same time to all pupils/all students, irrespective of their or their parents' religious adherence.

Religion education must be over and above any religion, including the religions taught. It must be as neutral and impartial as at all possible, it must, to use a slightly different set of words, be methodically 'a- or transreligious' in its overall approach to the subject matter. All religions must be approached in the same manner, and a general analytical terminology must be developed and used for analysis and understanding of the religions and the religious phenomena, for analysis and understanding of differences and similarities between the religions.

The religions must be taught as dependent variables within their historical, social, and cultural contexts, but they must also be approached from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective.

The material used (and the teacher) must try to unfold what the religion, the religious practices, symbols may mean to a group of religious insiders and practitioners as well as to an individual adhering to that group or tradition. It must in its description be 'in solidarity' so to speak with the insiders 'ways of seeing' things. It must, however, also teach about the redescriptions, representations and explanations provided by outsiders, not least the outsiders in the shape of scholars of religion; the scientists specialized in the study of religion as a historical, human and social phenomenon.

In 1993, many years before the many recent recommendations and policy statements (most of them unthinkable if not for 9/11 incidents and most of them therefore focused on the utility of religious education in regard to the mentioned 'challenges'), a group of teachers gathered in Donaueschingen on the behest of the Council of Europe at a seminar on "Studying religion in social sciences at school" (Palmer, 1995). At the end of their deliberations, they agreed on the following recommendation which I have quoted time and again and which I prefer to many of the more recent ones:

"... we ... recommend that each country should have formal professional time-tabled non-confessional Religious Education ... By "Religious Education" we mean teaching about the diversity of faiths and diversity within faiths; about core teachings and local variations; about key beliefs and cultural manifestations of religion. It should include sensitivity to beliefs but also a critical edge. It should also ensure space for proper handling of issues related to minority groups – both minority faiths and minorities within faiths. ... To implement this (viz "... the teaching of religions as cultural and social facts and value bases, the analysis and understanding of which is necessary for an understanding of the past, present and future") we suggest that experience and modules developed in Religious Studies Departments and/or History of Religion in Universities be shared with those responsible for teacher training and thus for the development of formal Religious Education ..."

As I see it, in 2010, as I did in 1993, the only way to secure a religion education that is "objective, critical and pluralistic" is to educate the teachers at the mentioned religious studies departments, and thus make religious studies the scientific, academic, university basis of the religious education. Religion education in public schools ought be a miniature of religious studies, recontextualised by the national educational authorities and commissions, combining the knowledge and expertise of scholars of religion with the knowledge and expertise (also in didactics and pedagogic) of religious education teachers in primary, secondary and upper-secondary schools.

I do not intend to 'flesh out' in greater detail the contents of religion education at the various educational levels. But I have a few remarks concerning what I consider 'fundamentals' in such a religious education.

Though I agree that something similar to the well known 'world-religions cum phenomenology of religions' or 'multi-faith approach' may have its limitations, I cannot at the moment see any real alternatives. Of course, the very notion of 'world religions', the methodological shortcomings of an essentialist phenomenological approach, integration of other 'phenomena' (or analytical concepts) than 'myth', 'ritual', 'divine beings' and the like *must* be introduced, and ways to deconstruct religions as monolithic reifications likewise must be found. But some kind of introduction to the larger contemporary religious traditions of the world, as well as to cross-cultural religious phenomena must be part of the religious education in question.

Likewise, I think religion education must deal with the ethical dimensions of the religions, and with possible ways that the general ethics of the religious traditions are applied to contemporary ethical discussions and issues.

Religion education must also find a way to deal with issues pertaining to minority religions over against majority religions, to issues pertaining to discussions about the place of religion within the state and public sphere, to issues pertaining to politics and religion, and to other such issues of religion-in-relation to global challenges, including the handling of religious diversity, freedom of speech and religious sensibilities, and the like.

In all of this, importance must continuously be paid to training the competences and skills of the pupils in various age groups in analysing and discussing textual as well as other sources, applying religious studies theories and methods, so that the pupils and future citizens can analyse and interpret the wide range of 'texts' on religion they meet as citizens via the mass media, popular culture, and elsewhere in a competent manner.¹¹

Finally, a few desiderata for a few more core contents and aims of the religion education I recommend. First: the very question about the concept and notion of religion as well as of the way religion is represented in various media (from sacred scriptures, to popular movies, websites and religious education textbooks) must be made part of the core curriculum. Second: a first class up-to-date religious studies based religious education must get beyond thinking and teaching that so-called 'existential' big questions are the essence of religions and therefore also the essence of religious education, and that all pupils no matter their religious background simply are born to relate to and find such questions 'existentially' interesting. This is not necessarily so, and religion education teachers and textbooks at least ought to supplement this approach and these big questions with another series of big questions: Why is 'there' religion in the first place? What functions may it serve, – beyond giving answers to the so-called

11 It would be fascinating to have more research based knowledge about the main sources for the citizens' knowledge and thinking about religion and religions. I have, though, no doubt that the massmedia and popular culture (film, TV series etc) play a dominant role, and it is, I think, exactly the knowledge generated by such media, rather than those generated by religious education that may prove important in regard to e.g. tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

big questions? All of these questions must be raised and related to recent efforts to answer the questions with reference to e.g. biology, evolution, and cognition. Third: intensified teaching about the concept and notion of religion and the mentioned new kind of big questions is central to what I consider a key task of a religious studies based religious education, namely that of 'de-familiarising religion' (Jensen, 1997, 1999) something as important as making pupils 'familiar' with religion(s). Why? Because most pupils, religious or not, have notions of religions influenced by specific religious traditions and by public discourses on religion. In this way they are (or think they are) often all too familiar with religion(s), and that goes for those pupils who are indifferent or hostile too. De-familiarising religion is therefore part of the job of Religion Education, and relating questions about religion to biology, ecology, evolution and cognition may be helpful also in that regard. Fourth: though implied in what I have said above, my last point concerns the need to explicate that religion may be approached, studied, and taught in more than one way, also in other ways than that of religious studies, religious education and the teacher in question. Fundamental to teaching about the concept, notion, and representation of religion, of course, is teaching about different scientific approaches to religion and different approaches to religion in education. Aspects of the didactics of the religious studies based religious education must be an integrated part of the school subject. It must be so because science and thus also the school subject based upon a scientific approach must always question itself, and because an explicitly self-reflective and self-critical dimension is necessary to prevent that a religious studies based religious education may justly be accused by opponents for constituting yet another hegemonic 'discourse', thus no longer capable of meeting the requirements for a compulsory Religion Education.

3. Final Remarks and Arguments

States, governments, ministries of education, and religious groups may have various objections to my proposal. I shall not deal with most of them, since most of them are based on ideological (incl. religious) rather than educational reasons.

However, I find two objections reasonable in terms of educational and non-ideological reasoning. The first one, a very simple yet persuasive one, was raised, *inter alia*, by a former Minister of Education whom I met in Slovenia in 2009. Having stated that he agreed with all my arguments in favour of religion education and that he very much would want a time-tabled school subject along the same lines as I had indicated in a lecture, he had to face the problems related to finding the time and the money for yet another school-subject.

Each country, he rightly remarked, must consider their priorities. At a given moment, the country or state in question may be in more need of an education that ends up assisting the country in producing more food or fight climate

changes than education about religion. Knowledge of and teaching about religion no doubt is important, but the same can be said about many other matters and school-subjects.

I agree, and I find his argument hard to counter. Still, I do believe that religion is important, and I do actually believe that quite a few countries consider their school subjects in terms of the needs and challenges of the current situation. I shall not repeat what I have said already about the role of religion in the past and present but I do believe that the need for scientifically grounded knowledge and education about religion, in regard to *allgemeine Bildung*, to a competent performance of several professions in a multi-religious world and society, and to meeting the challenges related to a peaceful and civilised living together in an open and democratic pluralist society, ought convince governments that it is time to establish a time-tabled compulsory religion education along the lines indicated, *inter alia*, in this presentation.

Before countering less good arguments than the one mentioned above, I want to mention another good argument, this time against a separate timetabled religion education. This is the, also quite reasonable, argument that proceeds from a theory or definition of religion that stresses that what we call 'religion' is a second order category, the use of which may contribute to making something too special out of religion, making religion a so-called '*sui generis*' phenomenon rather than a human and social phenomenon, a historical invariable rather than a historical variable. Such a point of view, stressing the impossibility of studying religion outside of the multiple non-religious contexts in which it is embedded to the degree of identity, may lead to a recommendation that religion is best and most 'correctly' to be studied not at separate study of religions departments but at history departments, art departments, departments of social sciences and anthropology etc. Religion never exists in splendid isolation and must always be studied in specific contexts. This argument, of course, may lead to the recommendation that religion should not be taught in a specific school subject called Religion Education or the like. Religion ought to be taught when relevant in the already existing school-subjects, be it history, social sciences, literature, biology, arts etc. This is what Alberts (2007) has called the 'dimensional' approach.

Though I find this a well reasoned argument, I still want to warn against choosing this solution for a variety of reasons. In terms of the mentioned requirements in order for religion education not to conflict with parents rights, making it a dimension, more or less im- or explicit, of some other compulsory school subject may, I think, cause problems. Parents may have reason to be suspicious and to protest.

In line with this, there is also the problem that this solution makes it unlikely that teachers teaching about religion in the contexts of the various other school subjects have the required expertise about religion and teaching about religions, an expertise also stressed by e.g. the *Toledo Guiding Principles*. It takes a specific education to teach about religion, it takes specialist knowledge, and it takes spe-

cialist teachers to provide a first quality education, also about religion (for evidence in support of a separate religious education, see Cush, 2007). This does not mean that religion and religion education cannot be part of cross-disciplinary teaching in schools, for instance as part of thematic courses and projects. But a professional religion education teacher must be part of such projects.

Most of the most common, yet less good, arguments against the kind of secular, compulsory religion education recommended here are as said above based on ideological (including religious) reasons or prejudices, not on educational and scientific reasoning. Most of them simply mix up ideas about religion as a personal matter and religion as a matter of fact, a social and human phenomenon that must be studied and taught about, – a matter much too important to be left to the religions and the religionists.

Besides, introducing religion education as recommended here does not prevent any religious group or institution and parent from providing their children with confessional religious education, i.e. religious instruction in their own religion. Neither does it prevent the state from also supporting, financially and structurally, such instruction. Such instruction can take place now as before in Sunday schools, in Quranic schools, in private religious schools, at home etc. But it should not take place in the public school because this is reserved for the ‘common good’ and part of the secular state and public sphere.

Another argument, mostly coming from religious people, theologians and people who are in ‘the business’ of religious education as representatives of religions and confessions, frequently runs: religion education like recommended here by Tim Jensen will be but a dull, dry and bloodless teaching about ‘facts and figures’, the so-called ‘phenomena’ of religion, not capable of engaging the existentialist interests of the pupils, because unwilling to and incapable of engaging the truth claims of the religions, the experiential and spiritual side of the religions.

I have already ‘countered’ that argument with reference to the postulated interest of pupils primarily in existentialist *cum* religious big questions, and I certainly think some pupils may become as fascinated by questions about the origins and nature of religions as they are when being taught about the mysteries of the natural universe and the human body. Science of religion and religion education based thereon need not be duller than astronomy, astrophysics, evolution, biology and the school subjects dealing with related matters. Besides, I see no reason why the approach and the religion education here proposed should not include discussions about the degree to which religions have to do with the big existentialist questions.

Furthermore, no matter if the religion education here has to be as objective, neutral, and critical as possible, also to live up to the demands to a compulsory subject, I simply cannot understand why it should be dull. Most ever so, neutral and factual information about the religions taught are interesting and engaging information. The religious texts and images studied and analysed are as fascinat-

ing as any piece of good literature. The material dealt with in religion education is itself 'engaging'. Teaching about religions in today's world, in relation to immigration and integration, religion and politics, religion and terrorism, religion and human rights, religion, climate and ecology, religion and ethics in general and religion and specific ethical issues, all of this is fascinating also to pupils. All that it takes to make religion education a very popular school subject are well educated, professional and therefore also engaged and dedicated teachers.

In Denmark, religious education in upper-secondary school has for years been as increasingly popular as the study of religions has been at the universities. Why? Because religion is all around, because the pupils and students are curious to know about this 'thing' called religion, no matter if they are religious, non-religious or anti-religious. They want to know more about why religion matters 'out there' in the world, in society, in politics, and thus also why it matters to people who 'have' religion. It is this intellectual interest in religion rather than a spiritual quest that seems to motivate and drive most religious studies students, at least according to research conducted in Denmark and Germany (Sørensen, 1997; Sigurdsson, 2004; Führding, 2009). The results of the RED-Co project seem to corroborate this attitude on behalf of the religious studies students with evidence on the attitudes of pupils from several other European countries (Weisse, 2010).

So, my final word to the EU member states: by establishing a compulsory religion education in public schools along the lines here outlined, you will live up to and strengthen some of the finest Enlightenment and humanist traditions in Europe at the same time as you will help provide future citizens with solid knowledge about religious traditions past and present, in Europe and around the world. You will provide them with a qualified and first quality '*allegemeine Bildung*' as well as with knowledge and critical analytical tools, – of the uttermost importance for an open and democratic, pluralist society in general and with regard to a qualified performance of several key professions within that same society. Try it, in spite of what the parents and priests may say. The pupils, the future generations of EU citizens, love it.

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