CHAPTER 7

What Does Conceptualisation of Religion Have to Do with Religion in Education?

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Introduction: Norway as a Case

Since religious education for all was established in Norway in 1997, the subject area curriculum has been changed several times and even the Education Act has been altered regarding the place and role of religion in education. A central impulse for these changes has been criticism from international human rights bodies based on complaints from parents. One central theme of debate has been the role of Christianity—as ‘culture’, both in terms of legislation after the separation of church and state, and the consequences of this in the field of religious education (Andreassen 2011; Breidlid 2012). Even if much of this has been a focus of attention in academic circles and media debates, there are also ‘how to do’-issues that have been much discussed in schools. Concerns have been raised about the practical operationalisation of impartial teaching in religious education; how to create a safe space for conversations about religion; how to deal with religious services and festivals during the school year and participation in these; how to perform practices of ritualisation; and the use of symbols in classrooms related to critical and joyful events in the school and local contexts.

England, Norway and Sweden are examples of countries with a distinct religious education subject in public schools, where the core of teaching and learning content deals with a range of religious and world view traditions. This is sometimes called ‘multi-faith religious education’, even if non-religious world views and other content may also be included.1 After decades of experience with this kind of religious education, it is becoming an issue of both international comparison and self-reflection and this includes deliberations about

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1 While ‘multi-faith religious education’ is a contested term, e.g. because by using the term ‘faith’ other aspects of religions, like practice, are less prominent and therefore this can be understood as a Christian bias. The label is used here only to indicate a religious education that covers a range of religions and beliefs in a descriptive way, as opposed to ‘confessional’ religious education where the perspective is somewhat more normative and often with less emphasis on presenting the diversity of religions and beliefs.
The change in practical terms means that a formal regulation will secure that Christianity is allocated about half of the teaching time. The main argument is that Christianity as the dominant religious tradition in Norway’s ‘cultural heritage’ should be well known. There is no argument implying that the change has something to do with strengthening belief in Christianity or proselytisation.

The dynamics at play in the Norwegian setting as it has developed during the last 15 years can be seen as illustrative of more general aspects of religion in education. It raises questions about the political sensitivity of the issue, the relationship to national cultural heritage, the role of religious and non-religious interest groups and the role of experts in religion and religious education. These interrelated questions and the relationship between them are often reduced to more particular issues in general public debates where political strategies and public sentiments may come into play. Like in other debates about education, there is little respect for research-based knowledge and so we