



## Introduction

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The theme of this special issue is: “Religion, public space and education”. The aim is to provide fresh insight into the interaction in the educational policy and practice of Western societies between what has been considered the secular public space and religion. The question of religion in the public space (prevalent policies, discourses, institutions) has been a constant topic in the literature in recent decades (Habermas 2006). It is well documented that there is already a broad body of literature discussing secularisation in Western societies (Casanova 2014; Modood 2010; Hofstee and van der Kooij 2013). In addition, in recent decades much of the research on religion has noted the re-emergence of religion in the public space in the 2000s after the ideological and institutional developments termed “secular” in Western societies (Habermas 2006; Coulby and Zambeta 2008; Coulby 2008; Kunzman 2006; Carnoy 2003; Beyer 1994)—a change that contested the divide between private religion and the secular public (Hofstee and van der Kooij 2013).

These developments are parallel and connected with the advances in European policies towards the recognition of diversity and enhancement of social harmony between religious/ethnic populations. Likewise, the educational policies in Europe have tried to increasingly reflect the inclusive recognition aims of generic policies (Jackson and Fujiwara 2007; Jackson 2014). However, public education has been criticised for reacting too slowly to societal change and for maintaining social structures which is partly due to its state preservation agenda (Toom and Husu 2016; Ubani 2013).

### 1 Inter-disciplinary study

Scholarship into religion and education is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research field. Subsequently, this special issue falls into the intersection of the study of religions in education (including Religious Education) and intercultural/multicultural education. There is also increasing cross-disciplinary interest in discussing questions regarding religion and education. A number of articles not only highlight the importance of the topic but also combine the different disciplinary approaches.

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The increasing cross-disciplinary interest in research on religion, public space and education shows that not only is this topic of broad interest, but also that this topic is of broad relevance. Parallel with the emergence of religion from the private sphere to the public sphere, religion and education is being increasingly recognised in the literature beyond what can be termed traditional disciplines of religious education, such as theology, religious studies, educational sciences and psychology of religion. For instance, the articles and their authors of the special issue feature the anthropological, sociological, psychological and philosophical dimension concerning issues related to religion, education and secularisation in Western educational contexts. The theoretical frameworks of the articles include literature on governance, recognition, pluralism and secularisation that touch issues related to memberships and participation in and ownership of both religion and society. While their immediate contexts vary, and their approaches differ, each of the articles show in their own way how the categorisations concerning religion prove to be problematic in depicting living realities concerning religion today and how educational institutions succeed or struggle to adapt to the situation.

## 2 Precis of articles

The special issue begins with an article by Robert Jackson (UK). In the article, Jackson discusses how religion and education on religions is perceived in the secular framework of European educational policy especially in terms of human rights. According to Jackson, an impartial and inclusive form of religious and world view education is justified due to its intrinsic worth as part of liberal education. Jackson recognises the instrumental value to the students' personal development and to their social development as members of society as important. In his article, Jackson writes about modern human right codes as a basis of the principles to apply at the political level with regards to religion in education. He discusses that while at a personal level it is possible to commit to a particular set of beliefs, at the political level, operating in a human rights framework is suitable.

The article by Zvi Bekerman (Israel) shows how the premeditated political identification categories of Jews and Muslims as well as religion and culture are problematic in schools in Israel and restrict developing practices that increase recognition and social harmony. Bekerman bases his studies on the data he has gathered at integrated bilingual and multicultural schools in Israel. He discusses how the Israeli teachers have difficulties in escaping from particular forms of national/nationalistic socialisation and problematic labelling of Jewish versus Palestinian. Bekerman's article proposes novel educational efforts to address such issues.

Tuula Sakaranaho (Finland) discusses the governance of religion in education by comparing how Islam is being managed today in two different European contexts by balancing between recent public policies on diversities and national traditions. In Ireland and Finland, Islamic education is incorporated into the public school system and the state has taken an active role in controlling how Islam is being taught in public education. Sakaranaho argues that the 'management' of Islamic education is riddled with contradictions arising from the difficulty of an emphasis on particular national traditions and the public policies concerning religious diversity.

The article by Jenny Berglund (Sweden) and Bill Gent (UK) is an empirical study on how Muslim students who have participated in what they call two different 'traditions' of education have experienced the differences between Islamic education and public

education in the UK. According to Berglund and Gent, students seem to appreciate the skills of memorisation and focusing as positive transferable abilities. One interesting finding in the research is that, during the course of the research activities, students began to openly articulate what they regarded as the positive impacts of their experience of memorisation as Muslims on their education within the mainstream school setting.

Martin Ubani (Finland) discusses how religion is managed in the educational practice of Finnish public schools and what kind of problems prevail there. Among other things, the article discusses how teachers in a Finnish school attribute students of Islamic background with attributes of the representatives of the most distinguishable form of Islam and how segregated religious education may contribute in this process. The article also describes how in school practice questions concerning religion, migration and social integration interact and how activities in school are connected to broader social issues.

The sixth article, authored by Hammer and Schanke (Norway), describes the complexities of a situation regarding teachers' pedagogical decision making when the name and curricula of the religious education have been changed or modified several times lately—the current situation emphasising that the teaching must be critical. Hammer and Schanke identify problems that the new critical secularist “objective” approach in religious education brings to the handling of religions among teachers towards the students' personal views on religion. Hammer and Schanke claim that teachers may be reluctant to express criticism themselves in class even though they would consider a partial criticism of religion legitimate. In the article, multi-perspectivity, knowledge and internal diversity were regarded as useful strategies when teachers' reflections on how to handle students' spontaneously uttered criticism of religion were in question.

### 3 Conclusion

The articles highlight the tensions inherent in the changes in the lived reality of societies and the stagnancy of the educational policies, structures and practices concerning religion. One important topic that the articles call to attention is the question of religious education in public education. This includes the political, structural and practical aspects. In light of the articles, an important issue to be further developed is that of a reductionist understanding of religious education. In fact, in public schooling, there is an increasing demand to look beyond the subject of religious education to education about religions in the comprehensive socialisation endeavour to what the citizens are subject to (Ubani ff.). The key issues in religion and education today such as the prevention of religious radicalisation, recognition of diverse identity attachments to one or more nationalities, ethnicities, cultures or religions, or the demand for inter-religious dialogue and tolerance (OSCE/ODHIR 2007) are challenges that are not sufficiently addressed in one, single school subject: these are questions of global and broad societal relevance with complex and far-reaching mechanisms that are represented and reproduced in educational policies, educational structures and educational practices.

Religious education as a school subject has been given a task in many Western countries to manage the issues related to religious diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism (Biseth 2009; Franken 2017). However, much education concerning religion(s) in society takes place outside of the RE classroom. Even if we limit our scope to the immediate surroundings of the classroom: it becomes evident that religious education is just one agent in the interplay of formal and informal education concerning the place and

representation of religion in public life. Furthermore, one can argue that using religious education as a remedy for changing societal problems contributes in the non-clarity of the identity, objectives and justification of the subject and thereby enhances the subject of religious education to be about “all things religious”, rather than having a clear vision, coherence and continuity as a subject with a good self-esteem in public education.

In conclusion, we would like to advocate an increase in research where education concerning religion in public education reaches beyond the subject to the formal and informal situations in the school where religion is recognised, reduced or neglected. It is our belief that this could contribute in religious education not just as a subject about “all things religious” but also a subject with a clear vision, task and identity.

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