

RELIGION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION – DENMARK

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I. GENERAL BACKGROUND

1. Facts and figures

The Danish constitution imposes an obligation on parents to ensure the education of their children between the ages of 7 and 16, whereas there is no formal obligation to attend school. Parents may choose between the public school system, the so-called the *Folkeskole* (*Volksschule*, people's school - the same word as in people's church or parliament) or a very broad system of free schools (*Freie Schulen, friskoler*), funded by the state to the tune of around 90 %. Most of the free schools are based on a common idea whether it be broadly Christian (*grundtvigian*), Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim. There are also socialist free schools, schools for the German minority and a group of traditional private schools more oriented towards better discipline or a better grading for the pupils. 12-15 % of pupils (approximately 100.000) attend free schools, of which there are about 450. A greater part of the pupils only go to the free schools for parts of the period of schooling, a great number only for one year of free-boarding-school.

575.000 Danish children go to around 1700 municipality-driven public schools which are subject to state legislation and supervision and which are also subject to a significant degree of influence from parents' boards. They start at the age of 6 in a pre-schooling-year, followed by 9 years in a common and undivided school-system. There are 25-28 pupils in each class mainly organised on the basis of geographical criteria.

2. *Religion as a Subject of Instruction and its substitutes.*

The aim of the public school system is among others to make the pupils familiar with Danish culture and history, give them knowledge about other countries and cultures, and prepare them for a society characterised by freedom and popular democracy. “The School must therefore work in an atmosphere of spiritual (or intellectual) freedom, equality in value and democracy”.

All pupils have lessons on *Christendom* (orally translated: knowledge on Christianity) at all levels of the school system (from 1st to 9th grade) except, as it is stated in the law, the year which is used for preparation for confirmation. Preparation for confirmation is delivered by the church minister in the local church, but within the hours of the school day - the scheme of the school day in the 7th or 8th grade is organised in such a way as to give two hours off on one or two mornings a week to “go to confirmation preparation”.

It is the school board and/or the municipality board which decides how many hours a week is to be devoted to each topic – and this includes classes on *Christendom* - whereas the government department for education decides the framework for the topics, that is, which areas should be covered within each school topic and which goals should be reached by the pupils at each level.

The goal of lessons in *Christendom* is to acquire knowledge in order to understand the religious dimensions of humanity and what impact religiosity might have on the approach of individual human beings to life and their relation with other human beings. The central field of knowledge is Christianity (historically and currently). The pupils must know the biblical narratives and their impact on the value foundations of our culture. Moreover, the pupils must also gain knowledge about non-Christian religions and life styles. The teaching shall give the students a foundation for personal decision-making and for responsibility in a democratic society through the encounter with different types of questions and answers about the life in both Christianity and other religions and beliefs.

KOPFZEILE 1

The teaching of *Christendom* was explicitly made non-confessional in the 1970s. It is a normal school topic and the teachers learn the topic as part of their normal training.

The Lutheran people's church has established a programme for collaboration with local schools so that pupils can follow courses (for example) about Easter – these are established in collaboration between school and church. Sometimes, school pupils also visit synagogues and mosques.

Danish church hymns are part of curriculum for music and Danish literature in the same way that for example the Reformation is part of the curriculum in history and Lars von Trier's films in the arts.

II. RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED BEHAVIOUR IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

There are no religious symbols in public schools, apart from the flag (Dannebrog) which itself carries a cross! But there are traditions related especially to Christmas and some schools still have a Christmas service in December. Very few schools still start the morning with a hymn or with a Danish song on for example history or nature which may have a minor religious dimension. Even fewer schools also include a prayer which was until now supported by the government.

III. OPTING OUT OF SCHOOL OBLIGATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS REASONS

Even though the topic *Christendom* is seen as non-confessional and a normal school topic, there is a system of opting out which is decided upon by the government (that is, on the level of the state). Parents who want their children to opt out may be exercised by the non-confessional character of the topic and the fact that there are no classes to opt into instead of *Christendom*. If the parents nevertheless want an opt-out, that can only be granted from the beginning of a school year and only if the parents accept the obligation themselves to teach their children the school topic - the obligation is to get taught, not to go to school.

KOPFZEILE 2

There are pupils who wish to opt out of e.g. gymnastics etc for religious reasons, but most families in this position send their children to free schools. We do not have students opting out of public school with regard to creationism, but there is debate on this – however, once again, such children go to free schools. Very few (among them the former government minister of education) are educated at home, that is however a *grundtvigian* freedom rather than religiously motivated.

The Norwegian *Folgerø* case has stimulated some debate, especially with regard to collaboration with the church on religious matters, but so far the current system has prevailed.