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Islamic Education in secular society: examples from Northern Europe

Abstract: State-funded Muslim schools have since the 1980s emerged in Europe. In several countries, there among the Nordic ones, there has been considerable debate about these schools. In Norway, the only Muslim school closed down in 2004 after a couple of years, but at least two schools that have received permission to start in 2012. In Denmark, who has the longest tradition of Muslim schools among the Nordic countries, there has been considerable attention given to these schools and acquisitions of extremist teaching. In Sweden, the debate about these schools was very intense for a while. In recent years, since the National Agency of Education has intensified the control of all religious schools, the debate about Muslim schools has calmed down. In Finland, where Muslims have the right to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in public schools, there are no Muslim schools. In this paper I describe and compare the establishment of Muslim schools in the Nordic countries. Since my own research concerns Muslim schools in Sweden and the content of Islamic religious education (IRE), there will be a special emphasis on the Swedish situation.

Key words: Muslim schools, Nordic countries, Islamic religious education.

State-funded Muslim schools have since the 1980s emerged in Europe. In several countries, there among the Nordic ones, there has been considerable debate about these schools. In Norway, the only Muslim school closed down in 2004 after a couple of years, but at least two schools that have received permission to start in 2012. In Denmark, who has the longest tradition of Muslim schools among the Nordic countries there has been considerable attention given to these schools and acquisitions of extremist teaching. In Sweden, the debate about these schools was very

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intense for a while, in recent years the National Agency of Education has intensified the control of denominational schools, the debate has calmed down. In Finland, where Muslims have the right to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in public schools, there are so far no Muslim schools.

In this paper I intend to describe and analyze the establishment of Muslim schools in the Nordic countries. Since my own research concerns Muslim schools in Sweden and the content of Islamic religious education (IRE), there will be a special emphasis on the Swedish situation.

Background

The populations of the Nordic countries are today estimated to 9 million in Sweden; 4,6 million in Norway; 5,5 million in Denmark and 5,2 million in Finland. Sweden, Norway and Denmark are constitutional monarchies¹. Finland is a republic, with a president and a prime minister. Denmark, Finland and Sweden, are members of the European Union, while Norway remains outside but closely follows EU policies. In terms of religion, Lutheran Protestantism dominates the Nordic countries. Norway and Denmark have Lutheran state churches, while Finland and Sweden have separated the ties between the former Lutheran state churches and the state. Instead they have been turned into “national churches” i.e. churches, which are identified with the nation and its history, but which are no longer governed by state ministries.

The Nordic countries are often characterized as welfare states according to a model where the state to a large extent is the supplier of social services where benefits tend to be defined at the individual level, but with differences depending on each person’s history on the labour market. The state finances social services by taxes and fees. This has importance for our discussion, since schooling, both public and the so-called “independent schools”² which is the category that Muslim schools belong to in the Nordic countries, are financed by the state.

¹ I.e. the monarch is a symbolic head of state, the head of government is the prime minister.

² The word *independent* here refers to the fact that the schools are run independently, i.e. they are run privately, not by the municipality or the state.

Immigration

After the Second World War, Sweden, Norway and Denmark became immigration countries. Finland was instead a emigration country until the nineteen eighties. Labour migration, mainly between the Nordic countries and from southern and eastern Europe, made an essential input to the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish economies between the fifties and seventies. Immigration policies changed from being focused on labour migration to refugees and asylum seekers in the beginning of the eighties,. Around 2005, approximately 12 percent of Sweden's population was foreign born; 7 percent in Norway; in Denmark 8 percent; and in Finland around 3 percent. Of these Muslims constitute around 3,8-4,4 percent of the national population in Sweden; 3,5 percent in Denmark; Norway 2,5 percent; and in Finland 0,8 percent.

Islam in the Nordic countries

Islam is today the largest non-Christian religion in the Nordic countries. Geographically, nationally and socially, Muslims in the Nordic countries come from diverse areas, although the number of Muslims born there is steadily increasing. The theological and political differences are very large, which means that Muslims in the Nordic countries must be categorized as a very heterogeneous group.

Muslims in Sweden

The presence of Muslims in Sweden is relatively recent, with the Tatars having been the first to arrive at the end of the 1940s. The 1960s marked the beginning of Muslim labour migration; and when the need for labour decreased at the end of the 1970s, immigration policy once again became more restrictive [Svanberg & Westerlund, 1999]. At present, there are no reliable statistics regarding how many Muslims currently reside in Sweden. However, with as many as one hundred established communities, Islam has clearly become this country's largest non-Christian religion. Available data indicates that the Swedish Muslim population stands at about 400,000¹. Of these, approximately half are held to be secularised²,

¹ Larsson & Sander, 2007, p. 71; Otterbeck & Bevelander 2006, p. 16.

² Hjärpe 2004, p. 153.

an estimated one-third are considered to be school age and younger, and around 110,000 are said to belong to some kind of “registered” Muslim organisation¹. In Sweden, as in many European countries today, issues relating to Islam and Muslims have been the focus of intense public debate. The establishment of Muslim schools has been one such issue².

Muslims in Norway

As already mentioned, in Norway the church is not separated from the state, which among other things mean that the church budget is integrated with the municipal and state funding. A compensatory system has been created that gives other registered churches and religious organisations as much state aid per member as the state church [Leirvik, 2003, p. 122]. This system has contributed to the fact that a larger proportion of the Muslim minority is registered in Muslim organizations than in the neighbouring countries. The number of members of the registered Muslim organizations was in 2010 99 000 which is about 60 percent of the Muslim population [Leirvik, 2013].

Muslims in Denmark

Most Muslims in Denmark as in Sweden and Norway either economic migrants or refugees. The number of Muslims in Denmark is assumed to be approximately 175-200 000. Organizational patterns are usually members’ ethnicity, while the sub-units are organized for religious or political differences [Svanberg, 1999, p. 389]. In 2010, 21 different Muslim religious organizations had status of official recognized religious societies, something that gives them tax benefits³.

¹ Those organisations that are “registered” receive financial support from the Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities [*Samarbetsnämnden för stöd till trossamfund*], see Otterbeck & Bevelander, 2006, p. 15. Communities that are not organised in relation to the Islamic Cooperation Council are dependent on voluntary membership support and/or support from organisations located in Muslim counties. For a description of the process of Muslim institutionalization in Sweden, see Larsson & Sander, 2007, p. 169 ff.

² Other issues that have instigated fierce public debate concern the establishment of mosques, veiling, *halal*-slaughter, male circumcision, infibulations and the matter of so-called “honour-crimes”, see Larsson & Sander, 2007; Otterbeck & Bevelander, 2006.

³ <http://www.familiestyrelsen.dk/11/godkendte-trossamfund-og-menigheder/islamiske-og-islam-inspirede-trossamfund-og-menigheder>

Muslims in Finland

Finland has had no labour immigration in the post-war period, making the number of Muslims far fewer than in the other Nordic countries. But due to Finland's EU membership this has changed over the last decades leading to a whole new situation affected by global migration. The number of Muslims in Finland is now estimated to be 45 000 [Martikainen, 2012]. Finland is the only Nordic country which has a Muslim population of older date than around the sixties, namely the Tatars. They fought in the Russian army and settled in Finland in the end of the 19th century. In 1925, after Finland's independence, the Tatar Muslims gained official recognition as a religious body¹. Minority religions were granted rights in the Religious Freedom Act in 1922, although Lutheran and Orthodox Christianity have historically had a privileged position [Berglund, 2014]. All registered religious congregations receive financial assistance from the State [Olin, 2000, p. 111]. The fact that most of the Muslim immigration to Finland is of late date means that the establishment of organizations is just starting to take off although the Tatars have had special organizations since the early 1900's.

Religious education

For Muslims as a religious minority in the Nordic countries there are many challenges. One such challenge is the question of Islamic education and instruction. How to “transmit” religious tradition to the coming generation is known as one of the most important questions for survival of a religious minority². Some Muslim children attend supplementary classes in afternoons and weekends to learn about their religious tradition, others are taught at home. A crucial question in this discussion is who should have responsibility for this instruction and what interpretation of Islam should be taught.

In the second article of the First Additional Protocol of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), we can read the following:

¹ The majority of Finland's Muslims came with immigration from the 1980s, and today represents around 20 nationalities, roughly corresponding to those in Denmark and Sweden.

² See Berglund, 2011, where the term “transmit” is criticized for giving an inaccurate view of religious instruction.

“No one shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of the activities the State may incur in terms of upbringing and education, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure their children’s upbringing and teaching in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions” [Council of Europe, 1995].

ECHR guarantees parents the right to choose philosophical or religious education for their children. There are several ways for states to deal with this issue which has importance for our discussion about Islamic instruction and Muslims schools. Within each country, religious education has been shaped by a multiplicity of forces, including the specific structure of its educational system as well as its history, politics and so forth. In Europe, two models for RE can be discerned within the public school sector: 1) the denominational (sometimes confessional) approach; and, 2) the Religious Studies approach. A primary distinction between these types concerns who is ultimately responsible for determining the content, developing the curricula, selecting the materials and training the teachers. In countries that have adopted the denominational approach, these responsibilities are handled by the denominations themselves or denominations together with the state. In those countries, such as Sweden, that have adopted the Religious Studies approach, they are handled by the state [Schreiner, 2002]. It is here important to note that regardless of the approach adopted, the state is presumed to be neutral relative to the matter of religious conviction. With the denominational approach, the state’s neutrality is said to manifest in the fact that it grants the denomination responsibility for RE-content development and makes RE attendance only an option that parents can either accept or reject. With the Religious Studies approach, the state’s neutrality is displayed by providing school courses that are intended to be neutral respecting religions, thus guaranteeing that religious education is made acceptable to persons of all faiths. Most often countries that adopt the denominational approach have separative RE, i.e. students with different religious belongings are taught RE in separate classrooms and those countries that have Religious Studies approach have integrative teaching, i.e. pupils are taught RE together irrespectively of their religious belonging.

Sweden

The Nordic countries have a long history of Christian education related to the Lutheran State Church. In the case of Sweden schooling was

made compulsory for all children in 1842. Back then, the most important school subject was religious instruction *into* Lutheran Christianity and this remained the case in Sweden until a major curriculum adjustment in the year 1919, the starting point of the secularization of Swedish schools. Thereafter, religious instruction was reduced by fifty percent, other subjects were introduced to balance the difference, and “[f]ostering for national citizenship instead of the Lutheran faith became the task of the school system” [Hartman, 2007, p. 260].

In 1962, a school reform in Sweden required the subject of Christianity to maintain a “neutral” profile with respect to questions of faith; and in 1969, the subject’s name was changed from Christianity to “Religious Knowledge” (*religionskunskap*), indicating the transition from a denominational to a non-nondenominational form of religious education that prioritized teaching *about* religion – including different religions – from a Study of Religions perspective. The current Swedish national curriculum contains the following statement:

“Education in the Swedish school system shall be non-denominational. The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in social life by giving of their best in responsible freedom” [Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Pre-school Class and the Leisure-time Centre, 2006]¹.

The use of the term non-denominational (*icke-konfessionell*) in the above quotation is meant to imply that in the Swedish school system religious education is to be presented such that no particular worldview is prioritized and pupils from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds would feel comfortable in attendance. This neutrality, however, does not extend to the realm of what is described as society’s “foundational values”, the mediation of which the national curriculum considers a primary task of Sweden’s educational system. This is one of the reasons why RE is taught in terms of the Religious Studies approach and, in 1996, was made obligatory for all pupils. The following quotation from the national curriculum explains:

“The school has the important task of imparting, instilling and forming in pupils those foundational values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak

¹ This is the official English translation, the word used in Swedish for non-denominational is *icke-konfessionell*, which could also be translated into non-confessional.

and vulnerable are all values that the school should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility”.

An aim with the non-confessional religious education that is stipulated by the Swedish national syllabus is to learn *about* different religious traditions and worldviews. It is clear that school should not teach the pupils to practice any specific religion; instead it is supposed to be “neutral” in relation to religious traditions. The “neutrality” of religious education has been highly questioned and it has been claimed that the non-denominational religious education rather is an education *into* secularism, or a secularized version of Protestantism [Berglund, 2013]. It has also been suggested that to claim a certain “value foundation” independent of religion is as much an expression of faith as any religion, since it makes a truth claim that is binding for everyone.

As mentioned above it is since 1996 no longer possible to be exempted from RE in Sweden, because of its non-denominational character. This is from a European perspective, a unique phenomenon. In almost all other European countries, it is possible to be exempted from the municipal or state religion taught in school if parents so wish. The aim of the RE school subject in the Swedish curriculum is supposed to be in line with the European Convention [Kilkelly, 1999].

Norway

As for religious education in schools, the Norwegian school system has had a stronger connection to Christianity than Sweden. Religious education was until 1997 Christian instruction and teaching (CRE). Students could be excused from CRE if they had at least one parent who did not belong to the state church. The schools who had a large number of exempted students organized “world view orientation” (*livssynskunnskap*) as an alternative [Opsal & Skauge, 1996]. In 1997 however, Norway changed the Christian religious education to “Knowledge about Christianity with religion and worldview orientation” (KRL). Despite this change, the government had to introduce yet another school subject (2008) with a stronger Religious Studies approach after the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg had ruled that Norway was violating the principle of freedom of religion with the former obligatory RE school subject. The

Norwegian way to deal with RE in state schools thus came closer to the Swedish model.

Denmark

In Denmark CRE is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary school. Parents have the right for exemption if they take responsibility for the child's religious education themselves. Public school CRE teaches about different religious traditions but the primarily focus is on Christianity. Parents can ask for exemption for their children from these classes. Recently suggestions have been made that there should be cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Muslim organizations in the curriculum development.

Finland

Finland has a system of Religious Education where pupils are taught according to the religious tradition they belong to. A majority of the pupils in Finland belong to the Evangelical Lutheran church and are therefore taught Lutheran RE (LRE) in school. Since the 90ies when a new school law was passed certain minorities, such as the Muslim, have the right to their own religious education if there are at least three minority pupils who require a certain RE. Since then there is also a common framework for all religious education in comprehensive schools was also established. According to its aims, all pupils were to attain "religious literacy", either from RE connected to their own religion or through Finland's non-denominational alternative [Kallioniemi, 2011].

In 2003 the Finnish parliament reformed the *Religious Freedom Act*. This included a shift from "confessional religious education" to "religious education according to one's own religion" and placed the different REs on the same level, with the intention of promoting religious equality [Kallioniemi, 2010]. Pupils cannot ask for exemption but those who do not belong to a religious community should be provided a non-denominational alternative. The Finnish system is unique from a Nordic perspective since it gives children from religious minorities the right to participate in RE according to their own religion within public schools [Berglund, 2014]. What should also be mentioned though is that in practice, organizing several forms of religious education is often difficult but also expensive.

In Finland, like in Denmark, education and not schooling is compulsory. This means that there are opportunities for home schooling

but home schooling has to be paid by parents in contrast to public schools that are free of charge. Children who are taught at home must pass special tests every year to prove that they reach the required national level.

The establishment of Muslim schools

Sweden

In Sweden it has, with few exceptions, not been permitted to establish denominational schools, although there are a few exceptions¹. In 1992 the educational policies were adjusted its to make it possible for a range of private actors, including religious denominations, to obtain state funding for independent schools. In 1993 Sweden's first Muslim school opened in the southern city of Malmö; to date, that number has increased to fifteen. Of these, nine have been classified as "Islamic" by the Swedish National Agency for Education (see table below) and six have been classified as "Swedish-Arabic" or the like. Because a number of the schools characterized as "Swedish-Arabic" provide some sort of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) – e.g., lessons in the Quran – here called "Muslim" as well². Each Muslim school currently educates between 20 and 750 pupils.

Even though a small number of Christian schools as well as one Jewish school existed in Sweden before the 90-ies, the policy change lead to a vast increase of denominational schools:

	Christian	Muslim	Jewish
Compulsory schools	54	9	3
Upper secondary schools	6	0	0

Denominational schools in Sweden (2006)

¹ There are a few examples of denominational independent schools before 1992, such as the Jewish Hillel School was established in 1955, Ekeby Holm school run by Seventh Day Adventists and Anna School in Jönköping (see for example Algotsson 1975:461, Johansson 2007, Peste 2007). Today, independent schools in Sweden have to respond "to the general objectives and values that apply to education in the public school system" (Education Act in practice: designs and comments 2005:117).

² One reason that the Arab private schools in the agency's statistics described as ethnic language may be, that the application process has shown that it is easier for linguistic-ethnic schools to get permission to establish themselves than for denominational private schools (Abdelcader 1998).

Although the above table only lists schools designated as “denominational” (*religiösa friskolor*) by Sweden’s National Agency for Education, it nonetheless indicates that the number of Muslim schools is far less than the number of Christian schools. It also shows that Muslim schools are presently confined to the compulsory segment of the Swedish school system, since no Muslim upper secondary schools (not compulsory in Sweden, but nearly all pupils continue to upper secondary school) have been established.

According to the Education Act, independent schools must open their doors to everyone, regardless of faith, and must be approved by the National Agency for Education. While run privately, Sweden’s Independent schools are as already been mentioned subsidized by the state. The nature of one denominational school may be extremely different from another, and a distinction is often drawn between those that have “strong” and those that have “weak” profiles. These classifications pertain to the degree of impact that a specific religion has on the profile of the school.

In most cases “denominational profile”¹ means that schools are adding specific substances, such as reading Quran, Arabic, Islamic history and Islamic singing in Muslim schools [Berglund, 2010]. An independent school is private in the sense that it has a private owner, however, it is funded by the state. The Muslim independent schools run by different local Muslim organizations [Berglund, 2013b].

In accordance with Sweden’s Education Act, the so called “foundational values” as well as the general goals outlined in the national curriculum (see above) are meant to be achieved in both non-denominational and denominational settings, and thus the “objectivity” of education is not to be intruded upon by indoctrination or tendentious modes of discourse, regardless of the school’s profile – denominational or otherwise. In pursuit of these aims, most schools with denominational profiles arrange only a small number of hours per week for the introduction of certain religious subjects. In the specific case of Muslim schools, this number amounts to one to three hours per week of Islamic religious education (IRE). And since there are no national syllabi for such subjects, local syllabi must be written instead. These, however, must also adhere to the above described

¹ Municipal Schools might also have a profile for example, football, arts or a specific pedagogy. So far though, there are no Municipal Schools that have chosen (or even tried to) establish a denominational profile in Sweden.

“foundational values”, which tend to be interpreted differently by different schools. In combination with the fact that those who have established Muslim schools belong to different theological traditions, this means that the local syllabi and what is taught in different IRE classrooms can differ widely (for examples see Berglund, 2010).

Norway

In Norway, the political debate on private and independent schools has been ongoing since the 1920s [Flateby, 2003, pp. 61-62]. The law that gives the possibility to establish private schools has strong links with international laws regarding parental rights i.e. Article 2 of the ECHR (see above). In 2003 a new law made it easier to establish independent schools. The requirement was that the independent school should be a religious, ethical or substance educational alternative to public school [Bergesen, 2003, p. 51].

In 2010 there were 95 Christian schools but no Muslim ones in Norway. Nevertheless several attempts have been made to establish such schools and Urtehaugen Muslim school functioned in Oslo for a number of years. The first attempt to establish a Muslim school was turned down in 1995 on the grounds that it would have negative impacts on integration. According to Carolyn Midsem the refusal was a violation of the prohibition of discrimination, since similar arguments have never been used when Christian schools have been established in Norway [Midsem, 2003, p. 21]. The refusal was never legally tested [Ibid]. In 1999 the same application was amended by a new government (Christian democratic instead of Social democratic) and Urtehaugen Muslim school could opened. However, the school closed down after a couple of years due to internal problems. Since then there have been discussions about establishing other Muslim schools in Norway and in 2009 the ministry of education approved an application to establish a Muslim school in Oslo, but the municipal government later turned the local application down. At the moment at least two schools have been given permission to start during 2012.

Denmark

In terms of denominational schools, Denmark differs from the other Nordic countries since they have a long tradition of independent denominational schools. As early as in the middle of the 19th century a large number of denominational schools characterized by the so called “Grundtwig

revival” (the 19th century) were founded [Ihle, 2007, p. 29]¹. Independent schools have been disputed, but are considered an integral part of the Danish school system. The strong tradition of these schools in Denmark is also related to the fact that the Danish Constitution that imposes compulsory education, but not that children have to attend school, as is the case in for example Sweden.

Independent schools in Denmark are not totally financed by the state as in Sweden but partly by individual contributions. Approximately 15 percent of all children attend independent schools in Denmark.

In view of Denmark’s long tradition of independent schools, it is no coincidence that it was in Denmark that the first Muslim independent school in the Nordic countries was founded (1978), today there are around 20 schools [Nielsen, 2004, p. 82; Ihle, 2007, p. 54]. A difference compared to Sweden is that Muslim schools, like other independent schools in Denmark, are not fully financed by the state, instead parents have to contribute by paying a fee (in 2004/2005 the monthly fee was approximately 40€). Another difference is that they are not inspected by a national agency of education; instead they are supervised by an external examination board chosen by the parents as well as the ministry of Education [Ihle, 2007, pp. 39-45].

Finland

In Finland the Tatars ran a Muslim school in Helsinki from 1948 to 1969 [Martikainen, 2004, p. 116]. Today there are no Muslim schools in Finland but the Rabita mosque in Helsinki performs home schooling with a small number of pupils since several years back. Being granted Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in all schools seems to have diminished the request for Muslim schools and has according to some scholars created a trust for the Finnish school system and society among diverse Muslim minority groups in Finland [Rissanen, 2012].

Reasons for choosing a Muslim school

Considering the reasons for establishing Muslim schools in Sweden, a study conducted in 1997 by the Swedish National Agency for Education

¹ Christian movement that is considered to have been of great importance for the development of democracy in Denmark and for the development of particular folk high school and friskolerørelsen [Jensen, 2004, p. 80; Lundgren & Lärarförbundet, 1996, p. 222].

concluded that certain Muslim parents send their children to Muslim schools because of negatively biased and inaccurate views of Islam in municipal schools and schoolbooks, disregard for common Islamic rules regarding diet, dress, prayer, chastity, fasting, and so forth, poor religious education by the standards of Islam, insufficient discipline, fear of exposure to narcotics and alcohol and too great a diversity of immigrant groups in the neighbouring municipal schools. Another important reason concerns the difficulties encountered by Muslim parents in their interactions with municipal school officials and staffs – interactions that had left them feeling humiliated, alienated and shamed. Reportedly, it was such incidents that had convinced them that it was impossible to effectively execute their parental responsibilities within the municipal school framework; thus they opted to send their children to a Muslim school instead. A more recent study concerning the matter of “choice of school” indicates the same thing: parents choose to send their children to Muslim schools more for purposes of security and well-being than for the purpose of religion although the criticism against the perceived “neutral” position also exists (Bunar & Kallstenius 2006). Thus their choice might be seen as one way of avoiding discrimination and obtaining acceptance of difference – i.e., as primarily involving concerns over power of influence and democratic rights. It is impossible to exclude such considerations from any comprehensive discussion regarding Muslim schools in Sweden and Ajagan-Lester even claims that the establishment of Muslim schools in Sweden might be seen as a reaction against municipal schools as they have nothing else than heteronomy and submission to offer to minority pupils. Whether or not one accepts the validity of the preceding reasoning, it is also of importance to many Muslim parents to locate an educational environment in which their children can be educated not only *about* Islam via RE textbooks based on a secularized religious studies approach, but also *into* Islam via confessional lessons in which Islam is the norm and the child learns about the “good life” from the Islamic point of view. Notably, choosing an education *into* could alongside the above arguments also be understood in terms of opposition to an education *into* secularism, which is the “neutrality” that municipal schools is considered to uphold. A surprising circumstance for this discussion is that there is up to date no available statistics comparing the performances of Muslim pupils in Muslim and municipal schools which of course also would be interesting for the present discussion.

Although, as indicated above, the decision to send one’s child to a

Muslim school is not usually based on the fact that it offers IRE, the appearance of this extracurricular subject in the school syllabi is nonetheless significant in terms of drawing a formal distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim schools in Sweden, Denmark and presumably Norway. The case of Finland is as already mentioned some what different since it is possible for Muslims to get IRE within the public school.

Reasons for the choice of Muslim independent school in the other Nordic countries are similar in many respects one another (see for example Ejrnæs & Skytte, 1987; Olesen, 1987; Ihle, 2007). In Denmark (as for example in the Netherlands) many Muslim parents choose to put their children in Christian, especially Catholic, schools instead of public schools. This is considered mainly due to the Christian schools' positive attitude to religion, the strict discipline and a lower proportion of children of foreign origin [Shadid & Koningsveld, 1995, p. 106]. However, it is important to remember that there are Muslims in Sweden as in other Nordic countries that are opposed to both religious and Muslim schools. These opponents warn that the Muslim private schools at risk of becoming isolated islands in the society, which increases the already widespread segregation. Some also believe that there is a danger that Muslim schools are recruiting for “extremist” Muslim groups (see for example Pekgul, 2005).

Controversies

In 2003 and 2004 Swedish National Agency for Education conducted, extensive inspection of the Muslim and Arab independent schools. This was to a large extent a consequence of a television program which showed the existence of problems and violations in a number of Muslim schools. The results of the first inspection conducted in autumn 2003 was that two of the reviewed schools' permissions were withdrawn, and that six schools were requested to report improvement [Skoverket, 2003]. In 2004, the National Agency made follow-up visits. In a “result-memorandum” they write “The interviewed students generally express that they are happy in their schools and feel secure during their school day”. Furthermore, it appears that all schools have taken action in the areas where the National Agency previously identified deficiencies. These measures are considered to have led to “significant improvement” in the schools [National Agency for Education,

2004]. Never the less, the TV program led to increased debate about Muslim schools in Sweden. Even those schools that were not criticized in the program experienced the effects of the program, in terms of negative attitudes from society. Many Muslim parents and teachers at Muslim schools thought that the program is part of a “conspiracy” on Muslims in Swedish society [interview with Parent, May 2004]. However, there are others who share the program’s criticism, and who think it is good that the situation in the schools was investigated. It is also clear from interviews with staff at some Muslim schools that the debate after the programs have led to increased awareness and discussion of how the curricula and syllabi should be realized. This makes it possible to assert that the critical debate has had a positive effect by initiating a discussion on professionalization at some Muslim schools.

Urtehangens Muslim School in Oslo was while running also under considerable debate. In the spring term of 2004, about a 100 of the pupils at home by their parents because they wanted to show his distrust of school management. Even the teachers were protesting against the management by taking sick leave [Norsk Utdanning, 2004]. The County Governor of Oslo was asked to investigate the school's problems [Aftenposten, 2004] and criticized the way school dealt with its finances. As a consequence, Urtehangens headmaster decided to close the school.

During the early 1990s, the Danish media took an interest in Muslim schools which led to a strong criticism of schools. The criticism can be summarized in three different levels: a) criticism of management and economics, b) critique of education level, c) criticism of the values and standards. As a consequence of the debate the law on independent schools was altered. According to Jensen, the changes could be construed as a consequence of the rancorous debate that raged in both media and among politicians about the integration of Muslims in Denmark. The change in the law meant that schools must prepare students to live in a society with “Freedom and democracy”. In addition, it requires that the school management has to be able to speak and write Danish and that the teaching of all subjects that should be part of elementary school teaching should also be conducted in Danish [Jensen, 2004, p. 82]. In 2003-2004, the Danish Ministry of Education visited, a large number of “independent schools for Children with two languages”. This led to even further regulatory requirements.

Concluding discussion

The establishment of Muslim schools could be understood as one of many initiatives taken by some Muslims in the Nordic countries to facilitate the ability to live life according to Islam in a Nordic context. The Muslim private schools activities may be one of several ways to convey Islam as the norm for both learning and living. However, it is important to remember that the differences between various Muslim schools are great in many ways. According to Waardenburg (2003) first-generation

Muslims often formulate their Islam in the new country in accordance with the ideas offered in the home country. He argues that future generations, and especially women see new needs in relation to the new country and thereby make changes that can either mean that they become “secular” Muslims or, for example, seek authoritative answers to the newly arising issues directly in the Quran and *hadith* literature. Others reinterpret and study to include the religious texts in new ways, for example, by freeing themselves from traditional forms of textual interpretation [Waardenburg, 2003, pp. 326-327]. It should be noted however, that while all Muslims share a few basic rules and doctrines, Islam can be formulated and practiced in a variety of ways. This variation is combined with national, social or individual characteristics [Waardenburg, 2003, chapter 11]. In the Nordic countries yet another variable will be added, since the existent variants will be combined with the cultural, social and individual conditions, which are characteristic of each country. This dual or rather three-dimensional variation in living conditions, lifestyles and interpretations make it impossible to speak about Islam in the Nordic countries, as well as of Islam in Muslim schools, in generalized terms. This means that not only different schools represent different theological traditions within Islam (to some extent they sometimes compete with each other) but also that how they function and what the content of IRE is very extensively between schools (see Berglund, 2010). Awareness of what these differences between various Muslim schools may mean is very low in the Nordic countries. How much of the school day that is influenced by religion also vary widely between the schools. In some schools the religious element is only one lesson with IRE a week and leave at Muslim holidays while in other schools it is more important and shape many activities in one way or the other. A concrete example of this variation may occur is how different Muslim schools handle

the teaching of the Quran. In some schools, it is an integral part of IRE, in other schools there is none at all. In some schools every single word the students learn to recite is translated into Swedish while in yet other schools teachers argue that pupils should first learn the meaning of what is “proper Islam” and then learn to understand the words in the recited verses (for further discussion of Quran teaching see Berglund, 2010).

One of many things that are interesting about independent schools and IRE is that Islam is not the only norm. Schools must also live up to their respective national educational objectives. This means that yet another dimension that shapes what actually can be taught. The significance of independent schools and/or the formulation of IRE within the educational system will vary. The requirement to meet the national goals of education may act as an “incentive” to formulate an Islam that takes the Nordic social aspects seriously. Schools could therefore help in responding to newly emerging issues on how to live life as a Muslim in the best way.

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