

Culturalized religion in Denmark: Legal and social regulation of Christmas in public schools

Kirstine Helboe Johansen

Department of Theology, Aarhus University, Denmark

Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen

Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo, Norway

Lene Kuhle

Department of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University, Denmark

Introduction

Recently, *culturalized religion* has emerged as an important category of religious identification whose character is primarily cultural and thus largely divorced from belief in religious dogma or participation in religious rituals (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, pp. 223-224). Canadian sociologist Lori Beaman has argued that the ‘culturalization of religion’ (or the transformation from religion to culture) could be seen as a way of regulating religion, which offers majority religion a place in the public sphere. She also argues that constructing religion as culture is a manoeuvre with costs, particularly for those for “whom Christian symbols and practices are more than relics” (Beaman, 2020, p. 131). Similarly, German political sociologist Christian Joppke finds that while the culturalization of religion craves out a privileged role for Christian symbols in Western Europe, it is not a process in the interest of religions. The churches do not like it, he claims, because “the notion of Christian identity without a Christian faith ‘makes no sense’” (Joppke, 2018, p. 240). Hence, Joppke states that “culturalized religion marks the ultimate victory of secularization as the religionist’s true enemy, the Christian not less than the Muslim” (*ibid.*). Thus, culturalized religion can provide religious traditions, history, symbols and practices new life and legitimacy within secularly defined public domains, however, it may also promote the diminishment of religion by

ignoring it as a lived, contested, historically produced phenomenon (Beaman, 2020, p. 131). However, analysing how religion, and particularly practices related to Christmas, is regulated legally and socially in public schools in Denmark, we will add to research showing how culturalized religion differs and is shaped by specific socio-historical contexts. In particular, by analysing how different modalities of culturalized religion are regulated legally and socially in public schools in Denmark, we will argue that the Danish case exemplifies that culturalized religion represents ‘proper’ lived religion making sense in the public sphere and for religions.

Analysing culturalized religion implies examination of how a majority religion is positioned legally and socially within the context as issue. Denmark is one of the few national states where a majority church can be categorized as a state church. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) is often referred to as ‘the folk-church’ and constitutionally, legislatively and executively entangled with the state (Kühle, Schmidt, Jacobsen, & Pettersson, 2018). As in other European countries, Denmark has become more religiously pluralistic and secular, but contrary to the trajectories in most of Europe, culturalized religion is almost uncontested in Denmark. Even when compared to other Nordic countries, culturalized religion in Denmark is largely taken-for granted by the state, and the majority church is more approving than critical to its manifestations. Hence, Christmas in schools is a well-suited case because it enables observation of how the phenomena of culturalized religion plays out legally and socially in everyday life in Denmark.

Analytical framework

Sociologists Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl propose to study culturalized religion through its modalities. *Constituted culture* is collectively produced and relatively stable but schematic semiotic structures, cognitive schemata, and value systems, not necessarily consciously acknowledged as religious by individuals or institutions (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 212). As such, it is “inscribed in the political and legal architecture of modern society in ways that we typically do not recognize” (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 214). However, constituted culturalized religion also has the capacity to emerge through creativity. Referring to Bourdieu and Sewell, they point out that culture once externalized is transposable, “allowing cultural shemas or practices to spread beyond the context in which they were initially developed” (p. 215).

Pragmatic culture primarily captures how religion is defined as culture by actors promoting concrete political projects. Thus, a conscious discursive framing where religion is understood as culture for instrumental purposes. As example

Astor and Mayrl point to how Danish mainstream politicians have positioned Christianity as central to Danish culture, as opposed to Islam (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 216). According to Astor and Mayrl, the pragmatic modality redefines religion as culture in a way that “offers a means of providing majoritarian religions with the rulings and policies they prefer, while upholding the letter of laws mandating neutrality among majority and minority religions” (p. 217).

Religion as identity captures aspects of culturalized religion that are primarily communal, often termed as “belonging without believing”, where makers of belonging remain significant as emblematic markers of collective identity, but most often without a deeper religious participation (p. 217). Astor and Mayrl argue that notions such as “cultural history,” “nostalgia,” “vicarious religion” can be applied beyond studies of majorities. Conditions that reinforce cultural, religious identities, such as ethnoreligious conflicts and extended periods of oppression and exclusion, are also relevant to understand how minorities might construct their religious identities as culture (p. 218).

We employ this threefold analytical framework in a meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative research on Christmas in Danish schools, as well as some media cases, emphasizing how the different modalities may reinforce, work as resources or destabilize one another (Astor & Mayrl, 2020). Our main analytical target is how Christmas worship services, offered to local schools by the majority church, the ELCD, are legally and socially regulated. Opting for a dynamic analysis of the complexity of culturalized religion, our analysis is unique by addressing how religion is regulated legally and socially in schools in Denmark from a wide range of perspectives and actors: state authorities, school leaders and teachers, non-Christian minority pupils, pastors in the ELCD. Finally, we examine the dynamic between the different actors in one specific media case caused by a school cancelling the annual Christmas worship service.

Legal regulation of Christmas in Danish Public schools

Public schools are obliged to introduce pupils to Danish culture and history (Law on Public Schools Ch. 1 §1), in which the Evangelical-Lutheran majority religion unquestionably plays a tremendous role. In line with this, Religious education (RE) is taught with a “main knowledge domain when teaching Christianity” being “the Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity of the Danish Folk-church” (Law on Public Schools § 6). This expression as well as the name ‘Kristendomskundskab’ [‘Knowledge about Christianity’] stresses how the topic is knowledge-based (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019).

Teaching is however not devoid of a religious dimension as a “life philosophy-existentialist” approach in which pupils is to learn “about but also from religion(s)” adds a certain “pro-religious and Christian-theological” dimension to the teaching (Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 149). Exemption from this otherwise mandatory subject is possible, yet alternatives for pupils with other religious backgrounds or no religious affiliation are not provided.

The emphasis on knowledge clearly resonates with Astor and Mayrl’s modality of constituted culture, but the explicit confessional boundaries of the school as such and RE in particular as well as the possibility of exemption suggest that more is at play. The school also aims to nurture a specific culturalized religious identity. The ambivalent interplay between culturalized religion and the Lutheran church as a faith community clearly plays out in the rules governing the school participation in Christmas services. In a Q&A section on the website of the Ministry of Education, it is explained that at Christmas the individual school may decide to carry out activities with a religious content as part of the school’s teaching, including joint events, to the extent that the activities are organized in a way that is non-preaching (Undervisningsministeriet, 2017).

It is added that the distinction between preaching and non-preaching concerns the presence of an intent to influence the pupils in a specific religious direction and that the assessment will depend on the specific circumstances and ultimately rests upon the school leader. In addition, it is emphasized that it is always possible to receive total exemption from participating in a Christmas event in a church regardless of whether it constitutes a service *i.e.*, it is not enough to ask the pupils to participate passively or to not engage in prayer or song (ibid). The potential tensions between constituted culture and culture as identity is thus solved through an emphasis on the duty of the school to prevent the enforcement of culture as identity upon pupils and the freedom of pupils to reject any such influence if they find it to be present even at an event that the school leader has assessed as religious, but non-preaching.

Thus, Christianity is inscribed as constituted culturalized religion in the legal architecture of Denmark, enabling Christmas activities as part of school life in Denmark.

School leaders and teachers’ social regulation of Christmas

Even though the state by regulation offers the majority religion a place in schools, schools in Denmark are relatively independent agents with a strong secular identity. The relative autonomy of local schools means that it is the responsibility

of local school leaders and teachers to regulate the presence of religion in such a way that school harmony and cohesion is not challenged by religious dissonance. Parents have a right to exempt their children from attending the RE subject, but since 2014, a new procedure decided by the Minister of Education obliges parents who want exemption to attend a meeting with the school leader. At this meeting, parents receive information about the RE subject as a non-confessional subject. According to school leaders interviewed by Jensen, a meeting leads to fewer exemption requests, also at schools with a significant number of pupils with a Muslim background (2019, p. 137).

The Minister of Education, as well as the school leaders, thus perceive exemption not as a principal question about basic human rights, but as a question of providing information about RE as non-confessional subject. However, the parents' "misconception" is highly understandable. In most places in the world, a school subject explicitly linked to a specific religious institution would be considered confessional. However, in the Danish context, teaching Christianity as the Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity of the Danish Folk-church (cf. the law), is interpreted as culturalized religion providing all Danes with a collective identity, not requiring confession or individual faith.

The link between the formal aim of the RE as subject and school activities during Christmas, and the low number of exemption requests from minority pupils, is visible in a study by Johnsen and Johansen (2021) on how Danish school leaders understand Christmas, one school leader explains:

That service is part of tradition. And if anybody asks, it is part of school. It is just like Christianity classes [a mandatory subject until 7th grade]. Nobody is exempted from Christianity classes either. Well of course, we have migrant children and children from Muslim backgrounds, but they participate just like everybody else (school principal, AarhusSuburban).

As shown, the expression of this school leader is in accordance with how religion is legally regulated in schools in Denmark, and it is also representative of most Danish school leaders. According to an 2011-interview study of school leaders (response rate 27%) 70% of schools arrange Christmas services (Jensen, 2019, p. 138), while 86% indicate that they cooperate with the local church (139). Comparatively, 21% has visited a mosque. A 2015 study (response rate 24%) found that 84 % of schools arrange or participate in Christmas services (Jacobsen, 2019, p. 230).

TABLE 1. Interviews with school leaders (Jensen 2016, 2019).

School leaders on (pct.)	Disagree	Either /or	Agree	Don't know
Christianity should be a major part of the values of the school	34	31	34	1
Compared to other religions, Christianity should have more influence at school	30	27	42	1
Christianity is a personal religion which does not have anything to do with school	34	27	39	0
The significance of Christianity for the school regards culture and tradition	3	6	91	0
Christianity should not impact the circumstances of the school	37	24	38	1

Table 1 underlines how many Danish school leaders, regardless of their own evaluation of Christianity, view the proper role of Christianity at schools as culture and tradition. Jacobsen similarly finds that among school leaders 95% argue that schools celebrate Christmas because it is a tradition, 87 % argue it is to celebrate community. Puzzling, only four out of ten considers Christianity to constitute the 'the aim' of Christmas (Jacobsen, 2019, p. 233). An established differentiation between Christianity as culture and as religion enables this social regulation of Christmas services in the ELCD as part of Danish culture, and therefore as part of what it is expected of the school to teach their pupils. However, as mentioned, school leaders are relatively autonomous agents.

In the study by Johnsen and Johansen, a school leader at a school with most pupils with a minority background explains that school services are not part of what they do during Christmas at school. Instead, the school leader initiated that the school invites all neighbours and parents, many of them unaccustomed to Christmas celebrations, to gather around an enormous Christmas tree in the school's front yard in the afternoon of the last Friday in November. At this gathering, the tree is lit for the first time. They sing traditional Christmas songs but no hymns, and the school principal gives a short speech. The school leader underlines that arrangements related to Christmas is not religiously motivated, but a way to help children, often from other religions, understand 'why Danes go crazy almost from October and onwards'.

The school leader aims to make minority pupils and their parents aware of and knowledgeable about Christmas; and thereby, to enable them to construct a sense of culturalized belonging to Christmas as a collective identity. This aim denotes an understanding of 'religion as identity' (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 217), namely that the main purpose is matter of inclusion in the larger community.

Minority pupils' experiences of Christmas in Public schools

Even if Christianity has a prominent position legally and socially in schools in Denmark, not all pupils come from a Christian background or consider themselves Christians. In 2009, about 10% of all pupils in the Danish primary school system (the state-run as well as the free schools) had a non-Danish origin. Of these, 7% had a Muslim background (Sedgwick, 2014). A pertinent question is thus how minority pupils, including pupils with a Muslim background and pupils identifying as non-religious, experience Christmas activities, such as worship services.

A study of Muslim pupils in primary schools supports the finding that Muslim pupils do not necessarily understand the participation in Christmas services as problematic. Sally Anderson's interviews with young Muslim refugees from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, attending small-town schools in the Danish countryside generally accept the Christmas service as providing them with knowledge about Christianity as well as providing them with a comparable perspective vis-à-vis their own religion, Islam (Anderson, 2014, 78). Nargis (16 years old and from Basra) enjoyed the Christmas service:

Yes, I have been to the church, but I thought 'this is their faith'. It is ok but not for me... I like to know about what other people believe – not to say 'this is wrong' or 'this is right' because they might be in regard to some issue. Maybe it is different to think in this way, but I think this is the way to think. Some Muslims would say that we should not go into church but I don't believe it. I would like to see how they practice their religion and why they go to church. I like to be there and watch their... eh belief and such (p. 79).

Contrary to the school leaders presented above, these Muslim pupils regard Christmas services as a confessional religious practice. To be present in the church is expressed as an issue of consideration, but to be present may also help understand "their faith", an expression probably covering fellow pupils, and Danes more generally. This "misunderstanding" of Christmas services during

school hour as a religious practice can be explained due to their newly arrival as refugees. The concept of culturalized Danish Christianity is quite subtle, and is probably something they will realize more gradually when they become more acquainted with the public position of the ELCD.

While the presence of Christianity in Anderson's study of small town schools with very few non-Christian pupils is associated with little conflict, other Danish scholars report of a more conflictual patterns. Marianne Holm Pedersen has encountered Muslim parents that attempt to limit their children's exposure to the production of Christmas decoration, but also Muslim parents, that encourage their children to participate in all activities including those associated with Christmas (Pedersen, 2015, pp. 30-31). Laura Gilliam found that in one of the classes where she did fieldwork, Muslim identities, which had a clear oppositional character, were prompted by the celebration of Christmas in school (Gilliam, 2015, pp. 175-177). In another school, the presence of oppositional identities, which were less directed towards the school activities and authorities displayed a "relaxed [Muslim] religiosity" which included a level of cross-cultural tolerance (Gilliam, 2015, pp. 179-182).

These case studies indicate that the harmony between culturalized religion as *constituted culture* and *as identity* is present in some schools, and that some parents and pupils with Muslim background accept the dominating interpretation of Christianity as culture. But also, that a higher proportion of Muslims may upset the concord. In that case, the presence of Muslim pupils becomes 'a problem' which may entail changes to the Christmas service by for instance replacing hymns with American Christmas pop songs, an accommodation, which those Muslims, who are "without a fuss" is believed to find acceptable (Gilliam, 2021, p. 1105).

In this case, the schools adjust their Christmas activities in line with popular culture. The protests from Muslim pupils have probably made the school leaders more aware of the religious or 'churched' character of some elements previously not acknowledged as religious neither by them as individuals or by the schools as institutions. A recent representative survey (table 2) of both the majority population ('Danish descent') and different groups of ethnic minorities shows that most of the adult Danish population are content with the tradition of schools celebrating Christmas in a church. About half of the population agree or agree very much that all pupils should participate in this tradition regardless of their religious background. Support is highest (52%) among the 'Danish descent' and lowest among the 'other, non-western' youth (35%). Disagreement is also highest among this group (38%), with 'Danish descent' having the second largest group of people who disagree (29%). The least likely to disagree is the group of 30+ from MENAP countries or Turkey (24%).

TABLE 2. Many schools have the tradition of attending a church service at Christmas. Do you agree that all pupils regardless of religion should attend? N=4693 (Integrationsbarometer, 2021).

Percentages	Fully agree/ agree	Either/ or	Fully disagree/ disagree	Don't know	Do not wish to answer
Danish	52	16	29	3	2
MENAP and Turkey 18-29	41	23	20	6	4
MENAP and Turkey 30+	48	17	24	8	4
Other non-western 18-29	35	21	38	5	1
Other non-western 30+	50	15	25	7	3

In summary, while the support for the tradition remains high, it is worth noticing that it is lowest among the youth across ethnic backgrounds. This finding might indicate that the acceptance of Christianity, and the ELCD, as part of Danish culture is about to lose legitimacy and become more contested (Gilliam, 2021, p. 1105).

Pastors understanding of Christmas Services offered to schools

In her examination of the 2013 discussion paper from the commission for a more cohesive and modern governance structure for the ELCD, Danish sociologist of religion, Marie Vejrup Nielsen emphasizes that the ELCD manifests a self-understanding as an inclusive community (Nielsen, 2015, p. 22). Stemming from this self-understanding, the commission explicitly positions the ELCD as also responsible for cultural cohesion. The ELCD is thereby also, according to the discussion paper, “a carrier of culture, which contributes to creating cultural [folkelig] cohesion and interpretation of meaning in the life of the individual human being and in Danish society” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 22). An important point being that the church as defined and delimited by its evangelical-Lutheran confession and the church as

carrier of culture in Danish society is understood as complementary, not as contradictory. Thus, the close bond between ELCD and Danish culture is part of a theological understanding of what the church is which furthers a responsive and inclusive relationship to the broader culture.

Reflecting on the covid-19 cancellations of the traditional Christmas service with schools, a pastor maintains the importance of churches engaging with schools at Christmas: “We could have chosen just to cancel it all saying that we resume our traditions next year instead. But I believe that all agree that the children should feel that the church is present at Christmas time” (Kristeligt Dagblad, 3.12.2020).

Thus, resembling religion as identity, the basic tenet is that Christianity is part of culture and the Christmas service with schools is needed for this purpose. Thus, the Christmas service is not understood as an expression of individual faith, but as an emblematic marker conveying the church and its pastors as part of a Danish culturally religious history and identity. Contrary to Joppke’s claim that churches do not like culturalized religion (Joppke, 2018, p. 240), the ELCD perceives “belonging without believing” not as an enemy but as something valuable and part of its own self-understanding.

However, pastors acknowledge that demographic changes increase cultural and religious plurality, which demands further reflections on what Christmas service is all about. A 2019 report by the ELCD interfaith organization “the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark Committee for Church and Encounter with other Religions” finds that church services for schools at Christmas are socially regulated as self-evident by both pastors and schools. The church is part of the local town and its life and as such its interactions with the school at Christmas is not questioned (Religionsmøde, 2019, pp. 8-9). In continuation with the engagement with cultural formation found above, one pastor explicitly envisions an open and inclusive church (Religionsmøde, 2019):

As pastor for the cultural Christians it is my finest job to open the door at make it a meaningful room. If I was pastor for the insiders, I could just sit and be a connoisseur; but I am not; and I believe that it is our mission to open that door (p. 6).

By inviting the schools into church, the church not only contributes to the cultural formation already taking place in school, but it also adds another layer of solemnity. A quality deemed important at Christmas, as described by a male pastor: “Christmas service is solemn, not entertaining. Christmas cookies stay at school” (10). Accordingly, the pastors regard Christmas services similarly to surveyed school leaders, signalling that both parties are part of a shared

and relatively stable semiotic structure where the Christmas service, and the church as such, is perceived as part of constituted culture. Still, and somewhat contrary to Astor and Marl's claim about constituted culturally religion as part of an unconscious cognitive schemata (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 212), the pastors reflect upon the challenges in inviting a religiously diverse school into church. These reflections surface in a discussion about the right name for the event. Some maintain that it is a "Christmas service", others prefer to call it a "Christmas celebration". However, it is not just a matter of a name. A "Christmas celebration" in church will typically be without prayers and blessing, just as the pastor holds a speech rather than a sermon (Religionsmøde, 2019, p. 7). One pastor explicitly connects her practice of having a Christmas celebration with the school rather than a Christmas service to the ELCD organization "The church's school service", which is a church funded initiative creating school projects and teaching material for schools to enhance and assist them in their knowledge-based teaching in Christianity and Christianity related topics (Religionsmøde, 2019):

This is what I lean on, it is the school-church-cooperation, they do not attend a church service. The school visits the church and it is the pastor that communicates. I do not compromise with one fiber in my body, I know that there are colleagues who think that I do (...). What I do at the celebration is not different from the other things that I do in a school-church-cooperation (p. 13).

As discussed, schools in Denmark are legally obliged to link the RE subject to a specific religious tradition. Offering different knowledge-based educational activities, is thus one way the church assists schools realizing their legal obligation of teaching "the Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity of the Danish Folk-church". Christmas services, or modifications, like Christmas celebrations, are understood as part of a school-church cooperation where pupils, regardless of their own religious faith and background, become knowledgeable about the Christianity of the majority church. However, other pastors maintain that preaching is part of what they do in Christmas services. "When we have activities by the [church] school service, then I weigh my words carefully, but at the Christmas service with the school, I communicate more freely. There is more preaching." (Brandt & Bøwadt, 2018, p. 123). Thus, though there seems to be a general agreement on culturalization as part of the backbone of the ELCD; there seems just as well to be a disagreement about the degree to which more distinct religious practices such as prayer and blessing can be upheld as part of cultural formation in cooperation with a culturally and religiously diverse school.

The way that the ELCD actively engages in and treasures its responsibility for Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity as part of cultural identity, challenges Joppke's and Beaman's argumentation that culturalization is not in the interest of churches and also adds into Astor and Mayrl's reasoning about how the different modalities of culturalized religion may stabilize each other. The pastors are active agents in culturalized religion and contribute to the stability of a culturalized social regulation of religion beyond what the state or schools are able to do on their own. Even if individual pastors want to include preaching, these major societal institutions reinforce one another by their shared understanding of culturalized religion as part of schools. Hence, our Danish case shows so far that the church reinforces the relation between constituted religion and religion as identity in public schools. However, culturalized religion can also be a matter of intense contestation in Denmark.

Destabilizing cultural religion

December 2017, a school (Gribskolen) in the Northern part of Zealand hit the news across Denmark because school leadership decided to cancel the former tradition with a Christmas service in the local church. The school leadership argued that not all children belong to the ELCD:

We are very fond of cooperating with the churches and we will definitely continue this cooperation. However, the Christmas service is also preaching, and it should be up the individual families whether they wish to participate in the Christmas service as part of their private celebration (Ritzaus Bureau, 10.12.2017).

The association of School leaders instantly confirmed that schools are free to decide whether or not to celebrate Christmas in church (Stiften.dk, 11.12.2017). Nevertheless, the school faced severe criticism from dissatisfied parents (DR.dk, 11.12.2017) as well as from the city council (Dagbladet Roskilde, 19.12.2017). A mother argued that "it is good to get to know traditions and see how other people do things, and then it is also a nice time that gathers people", while a conservative member of the city council was more explicit: "A Christmas service is something very Danish, a beautiful and proud tradition". Even the prime minister, who used to attend this school, publicly challenged the decision, and received support by other ministers (DR.dk, 11.12.2017). According to Minister of Education, it was an "ill-conceived concern on behalf of some pupils", whereas the Minister of Ecclesiastical affairs deemed it "an expression of fright of religion and tradition that I simply do not understand" (DR.dk, 11.12.2017).

This case proves that social regulation of religion in schools can be politically explosive, and that controversies lie behind the surface of shared understandings. Still, this school in northern Zealand spurred a roar that they did not seem to have foreseen. For the school leadership, the Christmas service in church did not fit their ideals and profile as a diverse and inclusive school – and they rightly presumed for it to be their own decision. However, as shown above, the critique did not resolve around the issue of inclusion of minorities. Thus, it is not a typical example of pragmatic religion, as Astor and Mayrl describe it, where culturalized religion is made into a political project promoting Christianity as opposed to Islam (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 216). Cancelling the Christmas service provoked a massive number of responses because it destabilized, and threaten to undermine, constituted culturalized religion, as well as religion as cultural identity. The local parents, as well as national politicians, engaged with full force because an interpretation of Christmas services in schools as religion undermined the legitimacy of a collective culturalized Christian identity as ‘belonging without believing’. Thus, this debate was not only about a local school in the outskirts cancelling a Christmas service. It was reacted upon as a national threat against fundamentals in how religion is regulated as culture legally and socially in Denmark.

Interpreting it as a protest against transforming culture to religion, is strengthened by other media reports from schools with an even more diverse population, which continue to attend church at Christmas (information.dk, 12.12.2017), and by interviews with Muslim parents supporting the tradition. A Muslim father explains:

We live in Denmark and therefore, my children get to know Christianity. For many years it has been a tradition at school to attend church at Christmas, and I like that. If others do not want their children to attend, they can just keep them at home or let them stay at school (Kristeligt Dagblad, 15.12.2017).

At an extraordinary meeting, the school board supported the decision of the school leadership but it caused two members to leave the school board in dissatisfaction (SN.dk, 15.12.2017). Accordingly, the line of reasoning seems to be that the school leaders in Northern Zealand provoked a deeply held cultural value that most others in the country, even more diverse schools, as well as Muslim parents, approve or at least do not problematize. Paradoxically, to publicly accept Christmas services as part of school can constitute a way in which Muslim parents and pupils is not ‘the other’, but a part of the Danish community.

Events in church are acceptable in schools, also the highly diverse ones, if they are socially regulated not as religion, but as culture.

Though the debate was intense, the school did not change its decision. In 2018, they however agreed with the local church to host a Christmas service, but left the decision as to whether the classes should participate or not to the teachers – of course still with the possibility of individual exemption. Such a solution indicates that schools, and their leaders, are granted a high level of autonomy, but that opposition against the legal and social regulation of culturalized religion in Denmark comes with costs.

Conclusion

Utilizing the material on Christmas services in school thematically through the different modalities of culturalized religion, as proposed by Astor and Mayrl, we find that the legal and social regulation of culturalized religion in Denmark is quite distinct, and nuances the modalities of culturalized religion in important ways.

First, the legal regulation of religion in schools explicitly state that the main knowledge domain when teaching the RE subject “is the Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity of the Danish Folk-church” and this legal regulation influences how religion is regulated socially within schools, in relations between school and church, and by the church. Christmas services for the schools in local churches are not regarded as predominantly religious, but as part of Danish culture. This understanding is highly approved by school leaders, teachers, pastors, as well as by pupils and parents with a minority background. Claims about the Christmas service in schools as expressions of faith are present in the material, but such statements are less socially accepted, and have been sanctioned politically in local and national media.

Second, we find it particularly telling that Muslim pupils and parents articulate that they perceive and participate in Christmas services in schools as part of culture, and not as religion. More research is needed, but understanding Christmas services, and the RE subject as such, as knowledge about Danish culture, can be attractive to immigrants because you can attend and be part of a Danish collective identity, instead of, or in addition to, a representation as “Other”.

Third, in the Danish case the church is an active proponent of culturalization. The majority church has a theological self-understanding supporting religion as a valuable part of Dane’s cultural and collective identity marker. Thus, the church represents itself as a community for those who believe, and for all those who belong without an individual faith.

In conclusion, Astor and Mayrl argue that culturalized religion needs to be theorized as a particular phenomena, and not as some kind of diminished subtype lesser “real” than “proper” religion (Astor & Mayrl, 2020, p. 211). Our analysis has shown that a legal and social resistance against transforming culture to religion exists in Denmark. By exploring this less discussed aspect of culturalized religion, we have offered support for the study of culturalized religion as both “real” and “proper” religion.

References

- Anderson, S. (2014). Religionens mange dimensioner: Skoleteologi og muslimske børn i en dansk provinsskole. *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*, 8(2), 77-100.
- Astor, A., & Mayrl, D. (2020). Culturalized religion: A synthetic review and agenda for research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 59(2), 209-226.
- Beaman, L. G. (2020). *The transition of religion to culture in law and public discourse*: Routledge.
- Brandt, A. K., & Bøwadt, P. R. (2018). *Gud i Skolen. Religiøse dilemmaer i skolens praksis*: Samfundslitteratur.
- Gilliam, L. (2015). Being a good, relaxed or exaggerated Muslim: Religiosity and masculinity in the Social Worlds of Danish schools. In M. Sedgwick (Ed.), *Making European Muslims* (pp. 177-198). New York and London: Routledge.
- Gilliam, L. (2021). Being Muslim “without a fuss”: relaxed religiosity and conditional inclusion in Danish schools and society. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1-19.
- Integrationsbarometer, D. n. (2021). Medborgerskab, ligebehandling & selvbestemmelse. Retrieved from <https://integrationsbarometer.dk/tal-og-analyser/medborgerskab-ligebehandling-og-selvbestemmelse>.
- Jacobsen, B. A. (2019). Den usynlige religionspolitik. In H. R. Christensen, B. A. Jacobsen, & S. E. Larsen (Eds.), *Religion i det offentlige rum et dansk perspektiv*. Aarhus Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Jensen, S. V. (2019). Religion og folkeskolen. In H. R. Christensen, B. A. Jacobsen, & S. E. Larsen (Eds.), *Religion i det Offentlige rum. Et Dansk Perspektiv* (pp. 135-148). Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Johnsen, E. T., & Johansen, K. H. (2021). Negotiating Christian Cultural Heritage: Christmas in Schools and Public Service Media. *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 57(2), 231-257.
- Joppke, C. (2018). Culturalizing religion in Western Europe: Patterns and puzzles. *Social Compass*, 65(2), 234-246.
- Kjeldsen, K. (2016). Citizenship and RE: Different interpretations in discourse and practice: A Case from Denmark. In J. Berglund, Y. Shanneik, & B. Bocking (Eds.), *Religious education in a global-local world* (pp. 145-163). Springer.
- Kühle, L., Schmidt, U., Jacobsen, B. A., & Pettersson, P. (2018). Religion and State: Complexity in Change. In I. Furseth (Ed.), *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere* (pp. 81-135). Springer.
- Nielsen, M. V. (2015). Grænser for forandring. Præsten som garant for den danske religionsmodel. *Religionsvidenskabeligt tidsskrift* (62), 15-28.

Pedersen, M. H. (2015). Islam in the family: The religious socialization of children in a Danish provincial town. In M. Sedgwick (Ed.), *Making European Muslims* (pp. 33-50). Routledge.

Religionsmøde, F. O. (2019). *Skolens kirkegang til jul – En kompliceret evergreen [The School in church at Christmas. A complicated evergreen]*. Retrieved from https://religionsmoede.dk/_Resources/Persistent/f/a/5/5/fa558e558af7f4d544d682056fd454a1b5b3a43e/Skolens-kirkegang-til-jul.pdf.

Sedgwick, M. (2014). The Distribution of Pupils with Muslim Religio-Cultural Backgrounds in Danish Schools. *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*, 8(2), 123-132.

Undervisningsministeriet, B.-o. (2017). Juletraditioner. Retrieved from <https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/folkeskolens-maal-love-og-regler/spoergsmaal-og-svar#dfd1869a90ea4f099892fa14f67ca5f6>.

Undervisningsministeriet, B.-o. (2019). Kristendomskundskab. Fælles Mål. Retrieved from <https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/fag-timetal-og-overgange/faelles-maal/om-faelles-maal>.

Other sources

Dagbladet Roskilde 19.12.2017. "Skoleledelse får hård kritik" [School leadership heavily criticized].

Dr.dk 11.12.2017. "Minister om sløffet julegudstjeneste: En fattiggørelse af vores Samfund" [Minister on cancelled Christmas service: A deprivation of our society].

Information.dk 12.12.2017. "Indvandrerskoler går gerne i kirke til jul" [Immigrant schools happily attend church at Christmas].

Kristeligt Dagblad 15.12.2017. "Muslimsk far: Islam forbyder ikke min datter at gå til julegudstjeneste" [Muslim father: Islam does not prohibit my daughter to attend Christmas service].

Kristeligt Dagblad 03.12.2020. "Elevs kirkebesøg bliver erstattet af videohilsner" [Pupils' church attendance is replaced with video greetings].

Ritzaus Bureau 10.12.2017. "Skole sløjfer julegudstjeneste og skaber debat i Gribskov" [School cancels Christmas service and raises debate in Gribskov].

SN.dk 15.12.2017. "Forældre forlader skolebestyrelse efter sag om gudstjeneste" [Parents leave school board after issue about worship service].

Stiften.dk 11.12.2017. "Skoleleder: Juleafslutning behøver ikke foregå i kirke" [School leader: Christmas celebration need not take place in church].