**Islamic religious education in Danish state schools**

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**State-church relations, Islam and the Muslim communities in Denmark**

*State and church in Denmark*

Historically, State and church have always been intertwined in Denmark. In 1739, King Christian the Sixth introduced mandatory confirmation for all children, which meant a certain level of literacy and schooling was necessary. It was administered by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the dominant church since the Danish Reformation in 1536. Church and State were closely intertwined in the decades that followed (Buchardt, 2017, 286). When mandatory schooling was introduced in 1814, mandatory education began at age 7 and was concluded with the Confirmation, tying the educational system together with Church rituals (Kjeldsen, 2016, 72). While the constitution in 1849 introduced freedom of worship (§67), the constitution’s §4 maintains: “The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is the Danish Folk Church and is as such subsidized by the State”(own translation) (Grundloven/The Constitution, §4).

Compared to other religions, the Evangelical-Lutheran national Church ‘*Folkekirken’* (The People’s Church) enjoys extended privileges in Danish public life. *Folkekirken* is, for instance, administratively responsible for registering births and deaths in counties[[1]](#endnote-2) (Jacobsen, 2015, 195) and its priests and bishops are paid by the state. Though other religions can receive tax deductions, they cannot receive direct state funds. Religions can apply to become recognized communities of faith and receive tax benefits, license to perform wedding ceremonies and baptisms and have residency permits issued for religious leaders (e.g. rabbis and imams). Recognized communities of faith are plentiful in Denmark, as the communities of faith are not divided along merely religious lines, but often also relations to specific national contexts or in branches of religion (e.g. The Armenian Apostolic Church in Denmark and mosques connected to the Turkish state). The last estimate conducted in 2015, listed 160 recognized communities of faith (Øager, 2015).

*The Muslim communities in Denmark*

It is not legal in Denmark to register religious affiliation, making for a significant margin of error when estimating the number of affiliates of each religion, especially as only Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity and Islam are sizable religions in Denmark. Other religions are estimated to be observed by no more than 1% of the population. The official number of members of *Folkekirken* was nearly 75% in 2019 (Pedersen & Fahrendorff, 2019). Nonetheless, while the vast majority of the population are members of *Folkekirken*, fewer categorise themselves as religious: in 2016, a survey indicated that less than 20% consider religion very important in their day-to-day lives, while 30% were indifferent to the importance of religion (Kønigsfeldt, 2016). The number of Muslims has grown steadily since the rise of labour migration in the 1960s and, since the 1980s, Islam has been one of the largest non-Christian religions. At present, the Muslim population is estimated at somewhere between 5 and 5.5%, making Islam the second most common religion in Denmark (Pew Research Center, 2017; Jacobsen, 2018). Due to the majority of early migration of Muslims stemming from the guest worker programmes of the 1960s and early 1970s, migrants tended to come from Sunni Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Turkey (Buchardt, 2016a, p. 93). When the guest worker programmes came to an end, later waves of Muslim migration originated in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon (mostly Palestinians), Somalia, Iraq and, more recently, Syria. They arrived through either asylum or family unification with previously arrived migrants.

**Religion and education in Denmark: general overview**

Religion and state in Denmark are also intertwined in the state education system. In the 1100s, priests and other Church-related professions were receiving a sort of organised education in terms of learning to read and write in Danish and Latin (Appel & Fink-Jensen, 2013). Following Luther’s Reformation in 1536, the so-called ‘*Kirkeordinansen’* (the Church Ordinance) was issued (Appel & Fink-Jensen 2013, 43–45). As a result, schools, based on Lutheran Christianity, were established in all major cities (Appel & Fink-Jensen, 2013, 29-30). Thus, the Reformation did not result in severed or weakened ties between State and Church, but rather to a different and tighter integration between the two (Buchardt, 2017, 286). In 1739, King Christian the Sixth introduced mandatory instruction for *all* children, in order to prepare them for their Confirmation. The main object of learning was Luther’s small Catechism and the Church and the state were closely intertwined (Buchardt, 2017, p. 286).

With the School Act of 1814, the mandatory years began at age 7 and were concluded with Confirmation, tying the educational system together with Church rituals (Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 72). Historical and demographic developments – first the granting of religious freedom with the constitution of 1849 and later the expansion of the welfare state during the 20th century – have been accompanied by a decrease in the Church’s direct influence on education, although Christianity still makes up an important element of the school curriculum as part of the ‘culture’ and ‘history’ of the nation.

While knowledge of Islam is being increasingly taught in lower- and upper secondary schooling’s RE, Christianity is still emphasised in the curriculum for the subject *Kristendomskundskab* (Knowledge of Christianity) as well as in the paragraph on the purpose for schools. The current 1§ notes that pupils should be familiarised with Danish history and culture, and have knowledge of other cultures and countries (Undervisningsministeriet, 2017). A transformation process has in other words taken place meaning that Lutheran Christianity is currently viewed as a historical component and a foundation of Danish culture intertwining evangelical Lutheran Christianity and culture (Buchardt, 2015). With the legislative change of the Bill of Public Schooling in 1975, the subject changed status and content: rather than *preaching* Christianity, the current subject aims at *teaching* *about* Christianity.

*Organisation of schooling in Denmark*

*Folkeskolen* (The People’s School), the public institution for schooling in Denmark, begins with a mandatory form 0 called ‘*Børnehaveklasse’* (Kindergarten class) and continues up until the 9th or 10th grade, equivalent to at least ten years of schooling in the comprehensive primary and lower secondary school. While national legislation does not dictate the number of hours allocated to each subject, municipalities hold a significant power in determining both the assigned hours, as well as the organisation of the schools, the hiring of principals and other strategic decisions. The Ministry of Children and Education determines the regulations and objectives for each subject, including *Kristendomskundskab* (Buchardt, 2014b, 50). *Kristendomskundskab* is mandatory from grade 1 to 9, and is divided into three stages : 1st to 3rd grade (age 7 to 9), 4th to 6th grade (age 10 to 12) and 7th/8th to 9th grade (age 13 to 16) (in the 10th grade it is an elective subject). In either the 7th or the 8th grade, depending on the municipality, the pupils will spend a year preparing for their Confirmation if they wish to remain (if baptised) or become a member of *Folkekirken*. During this year, the pupils do not receive lessons at school, but go to the parish priest for lessons. Pupils who opt out of Confirmation preparation do not receive these lessons. In recent years, the number of Confirmations has decreased and, instead, some pupils choose a so-called “humanistic Confirmation” which emphasises ethics, critical thinking, reflection and humanism (Abildtrup, 2017).

After 10 years of comprehensive schooling, pupils either move on to different tracks of upper secondary education, vocational education or enter the optional 10th grade. At the upper secondary level, or high school, ‘Religion’ is taught at varying levels and intensities, depending on which academic track is chosen. Exemption is allowed on the grounds of ‘conscience conflict’, although the principal of the school is required to inform the parents of the non-confessional approach of *Kristendomskundskab* (Undervisningsministeriet, 2014). While exemption from *Kristendomskundskab* is allowed in primary and lower secondary schooling, the subject ‘Religion’ in upper secondary schooling is mandatory at the lowest minimal level (C-level, having the subject for one year) (Abildtrup, 2017).

**The place of Islam within national life and education**

Following the 1960s labour migration, public and parliamentary attention on Muslims and their relation to Danish society and education increased. Politically, the early 1970s saw an increased focus on migrants and often connected them to “cultural problems” which were, in turn, connected to Islam (Buchardt, 2018). Debates focused mainly on adult migrants and, initially, the presence of migrant pupils in the Danish education system was relatively unnoticed in public discourse (Padovan-Özdemir & Moldenhawer, 2017).

During the 1980s and 1990s, attention on Muslim children and women as well as on integration increased (Buchardt, 2016a, 13). At the same time, the national centre for statistics (Statistics Denmark) started to collect more detailed data on migrants and their descendants. Within schools, the education of migrant children was also becoming of interest to practitioners – as evident by the number of textbooks teachers themselves began to produce (Buchardt, 2016a, 25–33; 2018, 65).

There have been several issues brought up in public debates regarding Islam, including the questions of Halal slaughtering and the veiling of women. In 1980, Halal slaughtering was made legal in Denmark, but it was not without protests from both the left and the right wing (Jacobsen, 2015, 177). In the 1990s, concerns of particular interest were the *hijab*, the *niqab* and the *burka* (Jacobsen, 2015, 81). A smaller number of principal legal decisions gained significant attention, and it became clear that employers were allowed to introduce dress codes prohibiting women from wearing the *hijab*. In 2009, jurors and judges were no longer allowed to wear political and religious symbols visibly, making *hijabs* de facto illegal for these state officers (Jacobsen, 2015, 182). A further tightening of the regulation on Muslim women can be seen by the 2018 legislation banning full face veils, indirectly banning *niqabs* (Reuters, 2018). Confessional schools in general have received attention as well (cf. infra). Following September 11th, 2001, there has been an increased political concern about the radicalisation of young Muslims in Denmark. This increased after the so-called ‘Muhammed crisis’ which unravelled in 2005, when a number of drawings satirising Islam and the Prophet Muhammed were published in the national newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Hansen & Buchardt, 2011). The drawings became the centre of a crisis, as Jyllands-Posten was accused of deliberately offending Muslims. Events and debates related to the drawings lasted several years, and brought further focus to the Muslim minority in Denmark, and the perceived dichotomy between being ‘Danish’ and being ‘Muslim’ (Hansen & Buchardt, 2011, 61).

**RE and IRE in Denmark: the current situation**

Competencies pupils have to acquire during their lessons in a specific subject in the *Folkeskole* are referred to as ‘*Fælles* *Mål’* (Common Goals). These list the abilities students should have obtained during the course for specific age groups. Goals for RE in Denmark include aspects such as knowing the historical value of Evangelical Lutheran Christianity and the main points of the history of Christianity. For the additional subtheme in the older grades, ‘*Ikke-Kristne Religioner og Andre Livsanskuelser*’ (Non-Christian Religions and Other Life Perspectives), goals relate to “the main points and issues [*problemstillinger*] within the large religions” (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019d), which are Islam and Judaism, and to a lesser extent also Hinduism and Buddhism. While it is only required for pupils to learn about the non-Christian religions from the 7th grade onwards, the ministerial guides offer examples of how to include particularly the Abrahamic religions as elements of comparison in earlier forms. The aim of RE is described as follows: “The pupils should in the subject *Kristendomskundskab* obtain knowledge and skills, making them capable of understanding and relating to the religious dimension’s importance for the life perspective of the individual person and their relation to others” (own translation) (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019d).

The document continues with emphasising the importance of understanding Christianity’s historical and contemporary importance in Danish history and culture, and concludes that pupils should also learn about other religions and life perspectives. In combination with this, though, this should raise pupils’ academic abilities in relation to personal positioning, responsibility and action in a democratic society (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019d). In a similar vein, the subject *Kristendomskundskab*, which is officially non-confessional, maintains Christianity as the most important religion in respect of Danish culture and history. Other religions are a compulsory part of the subject, but they are considered of lesser importance than Christianity. Politically, Christianity is positioned as an important part of a shared national cultural history.

As Christianity has always had a prominent role in RE, it has taken a considerable time for other religions to be included in the subject, and non-Christian religions are still not a theme in the examination. In 1993, *Kristendomskundskab* was expanded to include ‘non-Christian religions and other life perspectives’ for older students in grade 7 to 9. Nonetheless, Islam is not explicitly referred to in the guide for the subject *Kristendomskundskab* or within the goals for students’ outcomes. While there were ’Common Goals’ for several areas within the subject by 2004, the theme “other religions and perspectives on life” does not have any explicit goals until pupils have completed 9th grade (Buchardt, 2016b, 98). Since 2007, *Kristendomskundskab* has been eligible as a possible exam, decided by a randomised draw alongside social studies and history, an exam method that has been expanded to include a wide array of subjects[[2]](#endnote-3) (Buchardt, 2016b).

Since the School Act of 1975, it has been possible for pupils to be exempted from *Kristendomskundskab*, initially only if they were not a member of the church, but now also on the grounds of a ‘conscience conflict’ (Kjær, 1999, 17)*.* The number of exempted RE pupils is not registered, but a ministerial answer reveals that, according to a sample, 1.3% of pupils nation-wide did not attend lessons in *Kristendomskundskab*. One sampled school had an exemption rate of nearly 70%, which means that if that particular school had been excluded from the calculation, the percentage would be closer to a 0.5% exemption rate nationally (Ministeriet for Børn, Undervisning og Ligestilling, 2016). While there have been debates in recent years about making the subject mandatory, there is no official legal proposal as yet (Ritzau, 2016). Since 1994, it has not been possible to be exempted from the upper secondary subject, *Religion* (Jensen & Kjeldsen, 2013, 203)*.*

*Islamic confessional schools*

Since the law on free schools in 1855, it has been possible for anyone to open a so-called *Friskole* (‘free school’ or private school) (Ihle, 2007, 30). Schools in Denmark can therefore be either public or private, and around 17% of pupils attend a *Friskole* (Danmarks Statistik, 2018). Due to state subsidisation for private schools, only a few *Friskoler* in Denmark require enrolment fees and, although schools themselves appoint their board, the state still controls and supervises the schools to ensure that they comply with national objectives (Buchardt, 2014b, 56). In private confessional schools, the subject of RE is often referred to as ‘Religion’ and plays a more confessional role (Buchardt, 2014b, 54). Of those who attend a *Friskole,* 20% attend one with a religious component and Catholic schools account for the highest number of pupils[[3]](#endnote-4) (Frie Skolers Lærerforening, 2016). In 2019, about 5,000 pupils attended Islamic confessional schools. Prior to the 2018 closing of four schools, there were 29 Islamic confessional schools in Denmark (Jensen, 2018) and, in 2012, approximately 10% of the pupils in free schools were bilingual (Coninck-Smith & Appel, 2013).

Denmark now has approximately 25 Islamic confessional *Friskoler*. Annette Haaber Ihle has classified Islamic confessional schools into three types based on whether the school caters for a specific ethnic group: to Arab-speaking families or to Muslims generally (Ihle, 2007, 49). In spite of referring to them as Islamic schools, only around half of them explicitly mention religion in their statement of aims (Shakoor, 2008, 34). Islamic confessional schools have in the past couple of decades been under increased public scrutiny (Ihle, 2007, 34) and between 2000 and 2007, the Government made 22 changes to the law on free schools, all restrictive in nature (Ihle, 2007, 45). Islamic schools have been suspected of under-reporting ‘failure to thrive’, as they report 9 times fewer cases than public schools to the municipality (Wang, 2019). Several schools have lost their state funding, which in many cases, and particularly for Islamic schools, is crucial to the schools’ capacity to exist, as state funding frequently accounts for 75% of a private school’s financial foundation (Jessen, 2017). In 2017, a broad coalition in Parliament decided on an increased supervision of schools, especially in order to weed out schools not taking measures to ‘prepare pupils for a life in Danish society’ (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2017). The first and only upper secondary school with an Islamic profile opened in 2016 and closed again in 2018. The reasons for this termination were financial difficulties after losing state funding due to poor financial management, high absentee rates of students and the poor educational level of the teachers.

**IRE: curricula, textbooks, teacher training and inspection**

*Curricula*

In a 2018 *Vejledning for faget Kristendomskundskab* (Instruction for the subject *Kristendomskundskab*), it was emphasised that RE lessons may not under any circumstances be preaching Christianity: as such, referring back to the 1975 legislative change, focussing on knowledge *about* Christianity rather than *preaching* Christianity (Undervisningsministeriet, 2018, 7). Subjects in primary and lower secondary school are currently guided by so-called learning goals. Rather than dictating what should be taught by teachers, they emphasise the competencies pupils should obtain through teaching. The pupils receive a total of 300 hours of *Kristendomskundskab*, which does not include the traditional 7th grade Confirmation preparation administered by the church (Gilliam, 2014).

Prior to the 7th grade, pupils are introduced to the three themes of biblical stories, Christianity, and life philosophy and ethics. ‘Non-Christian religions and other life perspectives’ are introduced as a theme for grades 7 through 9. The ‘*Fælles Mål*’ (‘Common Goals’) for the subject do not mention any specific non-Christian religions. While Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism are all mentioned as possible objects of study, there are no strict requirements for the study of these religions (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019b). Throughout the ministerial guides, they are primarily used as means of comparison with Christianity, and not as an individual object of study (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019b, 2019c). An example of how Islam is primarily utilised in RE as a means of comparison to Christianity can be found in *Læseplanen* (reading plan) (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019c), which describes “the foundation of the lessons in *Kristendomskundskab*” (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019c, 3). Within the area of non-Christian religions and other life perspectives, it is explained how the lessons “should be organised so that pupils learn to find similarities and differences in the religions” (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019c, 10).

The curriculum for *Kristendomskundskab* offers different methodological approaches to the study of religion. The historical-critical approach, which is currently the dominant approach in Danish RE, has been widely discussed in the academic field (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019c, 6; Buchardt, 2014b), and has been rudimental to how *Kristendomskundskab* has been conducted by teachers in the Danish education system. This approach focuses on balancing between facts and interpretation, but was challenged by the narrative approach in the 1980s (Nørr, 1979, 85). Other notable approaches challenging the historical-critical approach in Denmark include comparative, existential, symbolic, anthropological and biographical approaches (Buchardt, 2016b).

*Textbooks*

Even though Islam was rarely mentioned in textbooks prior to the presence of Muslims in Denmark, and even though it was not a requirement for children younger than the 7th grade to learn about any religions other than Christianity, Kjeldsen (2016, 278) found out that textbooks in her samples from the 3rd and 6th grade all included chapters on Islam. She also found out that Islam and Judaism are commonly used as religious comparators to Christianity in schools, and that textbooks take their point of departure in Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity.

An early example of the increased attention for Islam can be seen in 1981, when *Danmarks Radio*, the governmentally-sponsored public channel (‘Radio Denmark’), created a radio and TV show called “Allah in Denmark” (Buchardt, 2016a, 94). This was part of an increased focus on the religious background of migrant pupils, and especially on the role of Islam in their lives. The manual that followed the TV show also featured a chapter on ‘the cultural meeting between Danes and Muslims’ thereby labelling Islam as a separate culture from the ‘Danish’ one (Buchardt, 2016a, 94). This simultaneous problematisation and curiosity regarding Islam was present from the 1980s. Since then, a categorisation of Islam as a cultural marker in conflict with a Danish culture has become the prevalent perception in Danish society, both politically and pedagogically (Buchardt, 2018, 68).

At present, textbooks still seem to keep this perception of Islam. One of the commonly used book series in RE in Denmark is *Liv og Religion* (Life and Religion). Cecilie Kudal has in her MA thesis criticised the series’ portrayal of Islam. Her research suggests that (Evangelical-Lutheran) Christianity is portrayed as heterogeneous, historically adaptable and personalised to the individual, whereas Islam and other religions are portrayed as ahistorical, impersonal and homogeneous. Whereas the series shows everyday life situations in relation to Christianity, Muslims are portrayed exclusively related to prayer/other religious practices or even as criminals (Kudal, 2015). This portrayal of Islam is similar to the findings of Karna Kjeldsen’s PhD dissertation. She discovered that Islam is portrayed as a religion of rules, whereas Christianity is promoted as a religion of love and faith in another textbook series[[4]](#endnote-5) (Kjeldsen, 2016, 231). Kjeldsen further found out that the textbooks portray Judaism and Islam as religions related to conflicts and ‘war in God’s name’, as it mentions examples such as Taliban and the Palestine-Israeli conflict, whereas Christianity is essentially portrayed as a conflict-free religion (Kjeldsen, 2016, 229).

*Teacher training*

Currently, teacher training in Denmark is divided between primary and lower secondary education on one side, and the education aimed at upper secondary education on the other. The former takes place at a four-year Bachelor’s level in teacher training colleges, involving a general course and specialisation in three subjects. The latter goes to the Master’s level in two subjects and takes place in universities concluded by an in-service training programme in pedagogy (Buchardt, 2014b, 62). In the teacher training colleges, *Kristendom* used to be one of the three elective subjects. In 1999, merely 10% of teachers who taught *Kristendomskundskab* opted for this elective subject during their teacher training programme (Kjær, 1999, 133). In 2013, *Kristendomskundskab* was the school subject with the highest number of non-specialised teachers (Jensen & Kjeldsen, 2013, 190–191). This has seemingly led to a change in teacher education, whereby, since 1997, *Kristendomskundskab* has been combined with the thematic ‘*Livsoplysning’* (‘Enlightenment of life’) and since 2007, has been included as a part of one broader societal theme in the general course of the teacher training programme. As a consequence, *Kristendomskundskab*, which used to be its own subject, is now a mandatory subject area for all teachers (Kjeldsen, 2016, 96). The subject is taught as a part of a broader societal introduction, including citizenship education and *Livsoplysning*. Thus, the subject focusses broadly on *Almen dannelse* (’Allgemeine Bildung’ or ‘General formation’) and citizenship, and tries to capture both a secular, globalised and diverse world, while still maintaining that religion, and especially Lutheran Christianity, has a cultural and historical importance, and is valid as a world perspective on par with democracy and (political) ideologies (Buchardt, 2014b, 65).

*Inspection*

There are currently two legal requirements for *Friskoler* in Denmark. The first requirement is that pupils attending a *Friskole* are entitled to the same level of education as those who attend public schools (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2018b). The other requirement has to do with ‘freedom and democracy’: this aspect was introduced into the law in 2002 and has been included to ensure that schools who employ a certain political, religious or life perspective do not affect the pupils in a way that is incompatible with democratic citizenship (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2018a). If the inspection discovers that schools do not meet these requirements, they can lose their funding. In this case, the schooling will fall under municipal inspection under §34 in the law of *Friskoler* and will be considered similar to home schooling (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019a).

Over recent decades, it has become evident that not only (confessional) *Friskoler* are confronted with closer governmental attention, but that the subject name and content of *Kristendomskundskab* can also be ‘provoking’. The public Ålholm School for instance, came under governmental scrutiny because the school had created its own RE curriculum, wherein religions are qualitatively viewed as equal (Buchardt, 2016b, 42). In line with this change, the subject name in the school was changed from *Kristendomskundskab* into ‘Religion’. Going back and forth between the school, the county[[5]](#endnote-6) and the state, this shift in name was finally prohibited by a county sub-division of the Ministry of the Interior.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The *Folkeskole* was in 1814 initially under inspection by bishops and priests, but neither the schools, nor the subjects *Kristendomskundskab* and *Religion* are under church inspection any longer. From the beginning of the 20th century, debates regarding Christianity’s place in the Danish state became frequent. It was not until the inspection law of 1933 that separation between Church and state increased regarding school inspection (Bugge, 1968). Priests were no longer automatic members of school commissions, and they were reduced to only being involved with inspection when it came to *Kristendomsundervisning*[[7]](#endnote-8) (Bugge, 1968). In 1975, the school and the Church were formally separated and *Kristendomskundskab* was no longer confessional. Currently, inspection in public comprehensive schools is the municipalities’ responsibility, although the state maintains oversight of how the municipalities perform in this aspect (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2018c). There are certain standards being measured that a school or a municipality is expected to adhere to: the standards for pupils’ 9th grade results; expected rate of pupils moving on to further education; satisfactory performance on barometer of pupils’ well-being. If these levels are not satisfactory, the municipality can be asked to create an action plan for the school, and learning consultants can be brought in to assess and make improvements (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2018c). Every other year, the municipalities are required to compile quality reports for their schools.

**Improving education about Islam in Denmark: recent trends and initiatives**

Teachers seem in general to increasingly include Islam in *Kristendomskundskab* for pupils in lower grades through, for example, visits to local mosques (Buchardt, 2016a). With an increasing Muslim student population, numerous teachers also started to incorporate Muslim pupils’ experiences in their lessons (Buchardt, 2014a). However, this does not come without the occasional pushback from public discourse. For example, an event which gathered momentum and attention was a YouTube video uploaded by a parent whose child was seen in the video performing a Muslim prayer as part of a thematic week at a public school called ‘*Kend mit liv*’ (‘Know my life’), where pupils teach each other components of their everyday lives. The school experienced a so-called ‘shitstorm’ (a sudden influx of negative feedback in response to a particular statement or event), where some parents were outraged that Muslim practices had been taught in that particular school which was public and therefore non-confessional (Bagge, 2019). Thus, while the place of Christianity rarely causes outrage, this incident concerning an otherwise everyday practice for many Danish Muslims elicited strong reactions.

With regard to policy developments, the most recent legislative change within RE came into effect in 2015, with the ‘Simplified Common Goals’, which is a ratification of the 2009 ‘Common goals II’. In 2015, the ‘Simplified Common Goals’ put emphasis on competences, and the focus in *Kristendomskundskab* shifted from ethics towards these competences. For upper secondary schools, the most recent change of relevance was the 2006 curriculum change, when Islam was introduced as the ‘other prominent religion’ necessary to study. This means that it is no longer merely an option to study Islam: this religion *must* be included in the teaching. As the minimum number of religions studied is three, teachers are free to choose one extra religion in addition to Christianity and Islam, and it is often Judaism, Buddhism or Hinduism which is chosen.

**(I)RE: recent trends and initiatives**

Islam is currently a religion included in *Kristendomskundskab*, and textbooks and observed lessons indicate that teachers include the religion earlier than suggested by government standards (7th grade) (Buchardt, 2016b; Kjeldsen, 2016). Although the number of Islamic and other non-Christian students increases in Denmark, the organisation of the subject *Kristendomskundskab* and the materials provided result in an ‘othering’ of Islam (and other religions) in favor of Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity (Buchardt, 2016b; Jensen & Kjeldsen, 2013).

There have been discussions about the right to exemption from *Kristendomskundskab* and, although reports have indicated only low numbers of Muslim parents exempting their children from this subject, the previous conservative-liberal coalition suggested making the subject mandatory, with no possibility to opt out. This, however, has not gathered the momentum necessary for a change in legislation. Instead, the newer discussion revolves around the mere name of the subject. *Kristendomskundskab* (‘Knowledge of Christianity’) strongly implies that the subject exclusively centres around Christianity, and while an estimated 54% of the population in 2016 preferred the subject’s name to be changed to ‘Religion’, this preference has, per January 2020, yet to amount to a proposed bill (Pedersen, 2016).

The education reforms of the 2010s were an immediate consequence of OECD’s PISA tests, which gave credit to blossoming Asian countries and left Denmark and other Nordic countries in a state of shock over their countries’ (perceived) poor educational results. In order to improve the Danish education system, the 2012 ministerial programme “New Nordic School” was introduced. The programme initiated reforms within the education system, with an emphasis on those values shared by the Nordic countries (Buchardt & Plum, 2020). ‘Danish’ or ‘Nordic’ values have received increased attention in political discourse and are often combined or associated with ‘Christian’ values. This could be regarded as a general political trend in favour of a greater emphasis on Christianity and ‘Christian cultural heritage’ (The Ministry of Culture, 2016). In a world of increasing globalisation and diversified cultural and religious perspectives, an Evangelical Lutheran *Folkekirke* has thus become a marker for national historical identity. As a part of this policy, the Danish state utilises RE in a modern context: although freedom of religion is emphasized, a secularised education system is rejected in favour of *Kristendomskundskab* as a cultural and historical identity marker for the formation of Danish youth.

In this regard, Merete Riisager, the previous conservative-liberal government’s Minister of Education, established a group of experts charged with the strengthening of *Kristendomskundskab*. In the press release, she focussed on the importance of including experts from *Folkekirken*, and on the way the subject can help marginalised youth who are experiencing loneliness and struggle with their identity formation (Grynberg, 2019). Recent debates indicate no change in the strong bond between the Evangelical Lutheran People’s Church and the State, and RE in Denmark is, accordingly, still in line with the general criterion of freedom of religion, but not with the particular issue of the equality of different religions. The cultural importance of Christianity remains the default argument for keeping the subject’s name and theme as *Kristendomskundskab*, leading to a *de facto* emphasis on Christianity and a subsequent explicit ‘othering’ of Islam (and other religions/worldviews) in Danish public schools today.

We argue that the Danish state has crafted a “third way” with regard to RE (Buchardt, 2015). A way to avoid both complete secularization as well as complete integration of religious institutions and the state. This third way consists of retaining State and Church relations in a diluted version, but at the same time framing Christianity as a cultural component of national identity. This cultural emphasis on Christianity as a cultural entity crucial to the Danish State places Islam as ‘the other’ in a dichotomy: nearly 500 years following the Reformation’s initiation in the Nordic State, Danish Evangelical Lutheranism has shifted from being churchly, theological and administrative in nature to becoming a cultural and historical national signifier.

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1. This is not the case for the South Jutland region of Denmark, which used to be a part of Germany, and therefore switched to having a designated person to register deaths, births and marriages. This system is still in place today. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For a comprehensive list of combinations for examinations, see: <https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/folkeskolens-proever/proeveterminer-proevefag-og-planer/proevefag> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. It should be noted that the high number of pupils attending Catholic schools does not correspond to the number of Catholics in Denmark, but rather reflects the schools having an academic profile different from public schools. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. ‘Under the same sky 9’, a textbook for the oldest pupils [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Counties, ‘*amter’*, were dissolved in 2007, and instead larger municipalities and five regions, ‘*regioner’*, were created. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. In practice, however, many schools can for smaller periods of time put ‘Religion’ on the timetable, as schools are allowed to let timetables reflect what is currently being taught in classes (such as changing ‘History’ to ‘Wars the past 200 years’). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Except for Copenhagen, where priests for quite some time had been completely uninvolved in school commissions. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)