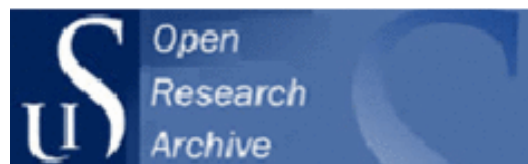




University of
Stavanger

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Diversity and the political function of religious education

Geir Skeie

Questions about the relationship between religion and politics are discussed with particular focus on the consequences for religious education. Norway is taken as an example of a country where increasing cultural diversity challenges traditional politics of religion. In the present climate of conflicting views on the role of religion in politics, religious education is higher on the political agenda in many European countries, but it is unclear which path the governments choose to follow. For religious educators it is important to engage critically in the political debate about religion, and to show a basic political loyalty towards the education of the individual child and towards improving the lifeworld of children.

Keywords: *Religion; education; politics; corporatism; diversity; culture*

Introduction

On a world scale religion and politics are as mixed as ever and a massive secularisation of international and national politics seems to be far away. This is not only the case in countries where religion is considered fundamental to the constitution of the nation-state. The president of the most powerful state in the world does not hesitate to mention religious motivations behind his world politics. It seems to be a paradoxical relationship between the political rhetoric of some US leaders and the freedom of religion cherished by the constitution of United States. In European politics religion is also on the agenda. The recent debate about the constitution of the European Union revealed strong disagreements over the role of religion. Should there be a reference to Christianity in the constitution or not? In the end it was not mentioned, but before that decision among others a well-known Norwegian professor of political science commented the debate in this way:

The new struggle for a Christian identification threatens to turn back the civilisation process of Europe. It demands homogenisation where we now have pluralism. It is the overtones of universalism, the cosmopolitical perspectives that represent the most valuable in the development of Europe—and it is this development that fundamentalists now threaten to reverse. (Eriksen, 2004, quotation translated by the author)

Indirectly Eriksen activates the metaphor of a crossroad. Europe has to choose between two alternatives. One is a secular vision expressed through the declaration of human rights, which is democratic. Another alternative is to identify Europe as being 'Christian', which means homogenisation or at worst fundamentalism. In line with the tradition going back to the enlightenment Eriksen has for many years argued a 'politics of deliberation' inspired by the theories of J. Habermas and K. O. Apel (Eriksen, 1995). This means that neither the basic values of society nor political discourse as such can be based on religion or other metaphysical entities. Only the rules of conversation are justified as foundational, securing the right of everyone to take part in the communication, and this communicative rationality is secular in the sense that it is relying on the best argument as its basic value.

A secular ethos for European societies could mean that schools should also promote this ethos, but such a uniform solution is not as straightforward as it may seem to some. Many European countries have a combination of public and private educational institutions and on the whole we find a complex structure of institutional arrangements reflecting national historical struggles and compromises. The size of the private school sector differs greatly even within the closely related Scandinavian countries. Denmark has about 12% of children in private schools, while Norway has only 2%. The vast majority of the private *religious* schools are Christian, a few are run by non-Christian religious organisations, and many have an ideological or pedagogical ethos as their base. Since many private schools are religious schools, issues relating to private schools are intertwined with other questions that arise from the complex landscape of religious education in Europe (Schreiner, 2001). Some countries have confessional church-run religious education in public school premises, and in school hours, with or without alternatives for non-church members. Others have religious education for all run by the public school, and others have no religious education at all in public schools. On the one hand these very differentiated arrangements seem to be perfectly adapted to local situations, on the other hand there seems to be debate about the politics of religious education everywhere, including France where there is no religious education (Jackson, 2004). The secular perspective of communicative rationality has an important role to play in the debate, but it seems to be limited by an implicit connection with the idea of secularisation as a necessary follower of modernisation. This idea is now abandoned by social theory (Beckford, 2003). To get a broader perspective this article looks into the history of religion and politics, taking Norway as an example, and on this basis addresses the cross-national challenges related to the changing cultural and religious composition of European local communities. Even if the challenges are common, they should be understood on the basis of national and local contexts, and this justifies using Norway as a case.

Norway is both an exception and a more common case in a European context, being economically well off, not a member of the EU, with a young nation's strong national ideology. Norway has a strong public sector historically based on social democratic welfare policies and egalitarian values. For some decades now increasing diversity has challenged the dominant understanding of Norwegian society and culture, and caused political changes. Within the realm of religious education this resulted in 1997 in the reconstruction of the compulsory school subject from a confessional 'Christianity' to a broad multi-religious curriculum, but with a main emphasis on Christianity. This new subject is common for all students and has no general right of exemption.

A closer look at the Norwegian case shows that religious education is a politically sensitive project closely related to the politics of religion. As religion is becoming more focused in politics globally we should therefore expect religious education to become part of this. In the following I will discuss some aspects of the relationship between religion and politics, drawing on some examples, mainly from Norway, in order to reflect upon the political role of religious education particularly in Europe.

The role of Christianity in the political construction of Norwegian religious education

The main focus of Eriksen in the above-mentioned column was the debate about the European constitution, but his view has implications for other areas, including the politics of education. He argues that the privileged position of Lutheran Christianity in the constitution, with the Lutheran church being a state church, in principle has common features with fundamentalism, even if—in a secularised country like Norway—this does not have the practical implications associated with fundamentalism in some other countries. Eriksen points particularly towards the way religious education is treated in the Norwegian school system. Here he sees the privileges of Lutheran Christianity as an example of intolerance implicitly supported by the constitution, and with its roots in the absolutist state. The question is whether this is simplifying a more complex issue?

The position of Lutheran Christianity within Norwegian state schools has consequences on several levels, the first being general aims of education. Article 2 in the constitution says the following:

All inhabitants of the Realm shall have the right to free exercise of their religion. The Evangelical-Lutheran religion shall remain the official religion of the State. The inhabitants professing it are bound to bring up their children in the same. (<http://www.ub.uio.no/ujur/ulovdata/lov-18140517-000-eng.doc>)

In its original shape (1814) this paragraph meant that the state was bound to follow the Lutheran Confession in all its actions and that all the inhabitants had to belong to the Lutheran faith. Much later (1964!) the sentence about freedom of religion was added. The authority of the church and the state was brought close together, and even if the original power and control system has changed, the paragraph still forms the legal

basis of the state church system. A formal system dating back to the absolutist state has needed reinterpretation several times over the years, and often such reinterpretations caused great debates.

This example shows that because of the particular constitutional arrangement of a state church, issues of religion and politics in Norway are often directly related to the role of the state. This tendency is reinforced in a new way by the strong position of the welfare state, providing public service solutions in many areas of daily life. Still, there is some continuity between the present state system, built by social democratic governments, back to the state system run by conservative civil servants in the nineteenth century, and this continuity is possible to trace in the politics of religion. In both cases there are traces of a pessimistic view of modern culture and the sociocultural developments relating to modernity. It is also possible to find a common will to use the power of the state and the recourses of religion to counter what is seen as cultural disintegration. The strategy of the elite around the 1880s was to see Christianity as a unifying social and ideological force, referring to doctrinal and confessional Lutheranism. Today's worries about disintegration caused by postmodernity and the challenges of a multicultural society are in the background of the religious education reform of 1997. The present remedy is partly a recognition of diversity, but mixed with a 'cultural' and ecumenical version of Christianity, used as a kind of 'civil religion', putting emphasis on national heritage and moral values (Skeie, 2003).¹ Here there are similarities to the debate about the role of Christianity in the European Constitution.

The legal background of the present formulations in the curriculum is found in the Education Act. Neither school nor religious education is formally connected to the Church of Norway, but the Christian religion is still present in the general aims of Norwegian schools as these are stated in Section 1–2:

The object of primary and lower secondary education shall be, in agreement and cooperation with the home, to help to give to pupils a Christian and moral upbringing, to develop their mental and physical abilities, and to give them good general knowledge so that they may become useful and independent human beings at home and in society. (Education Act, Section 1–2)

From a point of principle, the mentioning of Christianity can be seen as a modified version of the constitutional statement. Religious education is singled out as an extraordinary school subject by being treated in detail in the Education Act. Aims, content and even teaching methods in religious education are regulated by the Act. Section 2–4 is given here as an example:

(...) Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Education is an ordinary school subject that shall normally be attended by all pupils. Teaching in the subject shall not involve preaching. Teachers of Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Education shall take as their point of departure the objects clause of the primary and second-ary school laid down in section 1–2, and present Christianity, other religions and philosophies of life on the basis of their distinctive characteristics. Teaching of the different topics shall be founded on the same educational principles. (Education Act Section 2–4)

In spite of the legal arrangement, the position of Christianity in the present national religious education syllabus is not so much treated as an issue of principle, based on the state church or general aims of school, but rather more in line with the reasoning in the general core curriculum with focus on public support for a Christian cultural heritage. The aim in religious education for learning about Lutheran Christianity is ‘to provide thorough knowledge’, while goals for the learning about other Christian denominations as well as religions or world views only mention ‘knowledge about’ (Education Act, Section 2–4). As a practical consequence of this, it is stated in the religious education syllabus that Christianity should be allocated about 55% of the teaching time of the subject, reflecting the strength of Christianity in Norway. The remaining time is split between 25% for non-Christian religions and world views, and about 20% for ethics and philosophy (Læringscenteret, 2002).² (Lutheran) Christianity is therefore privileged in terms of aims and content. To some extent the teaching will also benefit from this, having more time for different teaching methods. It is also stated that local schools should adjust religious education teaching to a certain extent in order to reflect the representation of religious and world views in the local community. This may lead to an increased emphasis on Christianity in most local schools, but also the opposite in some parts of the larger towns.

On the one hand Christianity in the Lutheran form therefore has a particularly strong position in law, while on the other hand the Lutheran church has no direct influence on religious education in Norwegian schools today. The reasons voiced in school policy are using ‘cultural’ and ‘democratic’ arguments, stating that the support for Lutheran Christianity in the population justifies the privileged position in the curriculum. This may be the reason for some Muslim countries showing interest in the Norwegian KRL-subject; the possibility to open up religious education, but to keep some connection between the nation and the dominant (state) religion. As with all other religious organisations, the Church of Norway is responsible for the religious nurture of its own members. In order to secure this, the Parliament has recently commissioned a tax-based funding for nurture within the Lutheran state church as well as other religious organisations and organisations for people with non-religious world views. This element of corporation between state and religious communities is now being implemented.

The religious education reform of 1997 was justified by a combination of legal and pragmatic political reasoning and managed to include many political parties in the compromise solution where Christianity had a role in strengthening traditional values, functioning as national ideology, and as a cultural resource for national identity against relativism and postmodern indifferentism. Apparently, broad compromises turn out to be important in religious education politics. Still some are left out; in school policy particularly the secular humanists have challenged the political role of religion for a long time, and in recent years religious minorities do the same. This reflects a more general problem; how does a Christian ‘civil religion’ work in a society that gradually discovers itself to be a multicultural and multi-religious nation?

Cultural and religious diversity and the political construction of Norwegian religious education

In the present national curriculum in Norway (1997; revised 2002 and 2005) religious education includes Christianity and world religions, secular world views, philosophy and ethics. One important reason for giving it this content was the idea that a multi-religious society needs to give its members knowledge of different religions and world views, and that all children should learn about religions together, not be separated according to beliefs. In this respect the last curriculum has changed the aims, content and teaching in Norwegian religious education significantly. The curriculum states that religious education teaching should be impartial and neutral and treat all religions and world views equally and that all children should be supported in identifying with their own tradition. It is no longer possible to be exempted from religious education as such, only from particular parts that include participation in some activity that may be considered difficult for reasons of belief. This has been challenged on legal grounds drawing on international conventions about general human rights, freedom of religion and parental rights. The Norwegian Humanist Association has taken this issue to the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg, where it is presently being considered. After extensive evaluations and much debate, religious education still continues in its original shape (including the exemption rules), even if minor changes were made in 2002. In late 2004 a recent decision by the UN Committee on Human Rights has challenged this, urging Norway to either introduce the right of full exemption, or to change the aims and content of the subject.³

While worries about indifferentism and moral relativism were much debated some years ago, the present political debate about religious education in Norway is almost totally focused on the relationship between different religions and world views. The political construction of Norwegian religious education is therefore running on two tracks, combining two strategies:

- (1) Religious education is countering relativism, indifferentism, disintegration and other aspects of a late modern society, what I have elsewhere called the problems of 'modern plurality'. Here the main tool seems to be a privileged 'cultural' role for (Lutheran) Christianity, and improved teaching methods to vitalise the presentation of the Christian tradition.
- (2) Religious education is countering conflicts among religious and ethnic groups, discriminations, racism or what may be called the problems of 'traditional plurality'. Here the tool seems to be a multi-religious curriculum and teaching methods with a focus on sharing, comparing and dialogue.

The combination of the two strategies justifies the compulsory subject with only limited right of exemption. A recent theoretical study of religious education concludes that it is valid and justified to interpret the subject as one and coherent, and that the relationship between majority and minority is taken properly care of (Gravem, 2004). It is, however, not difficult to see that these two strategies may come into conflict with each other. What satisfies the majority may be problematic for

minorities and vice versa, even if ‘majority’ and ‘minorities’ are not at all unproblematic labels. As long as this is not solved politically, the conflict issues are left for the schools and the teachers to deal with. They need a working interpretation of the religious education, including aims, content and teaching methods that work in practice, and that is in conjunction with their professional ethos. This interpretation process is a daily process in the individual school and classroom, and more research is needed to understand this better (Haakedal, 2004).

On the political level the combined strategy seem to have formed a compromise between those who are most worried about moral decay among ‘our own youth’ (strategy 1) and those who are most worried about the integration of ‘the minorities’ (strategy 2). It was probably also the intention to reach a compromise between the interest groups, in this case the Christian churches (comforted by strategy 1) and the minority religions and secular humanists (comforted by strategy 2). This has not worked so well; the churches (in particular the Lutheran) seem more satisfied with the situation than the minorities. Still, there are signs that the sharp confrontations of earlier years have come to a halt, and that the increased representation of interest groups in policy-making has been important in this respect, together with a non-confronting implementation of the subject on the local school level. Some more informal reports indicate that the minority children are often more positive about the subject than their parents are. If this observation is correct, it may indicate that we are witnessing a well-documented tendency in modern Norwegian political history where sharp conflicts between classes, interest groups or cultures are gradually mellowed by what may be called ‘corporative’ solutions both on national and local level.⁴ This corporatism is not ideologically based, but a series of ad hoc solutions to political challenges (Nordby, 1994). Norway is one of the countries in the world with the highest percentage of the population participating in volunteer organisations/social movements, and has been ranked as one of the most corporatist among several western industrialised countries (Wilson, 1990). According to Brochmann and Rogstad (2004), minority organisations may also become part of this corporative relationship with the state. As interest groups they are actors and may participate in the policy-making on a consultancy basis, and in return for this influence open confrontation is avoided.

Religion and the politics of difference

European history is full of examples of differing relationships between religious organisations and the state and how religiously based organisations have tried to influence the state politics. One example of religion and the politics of difference can be seen in the story of the early Christian Socialists in Norway (Skeie, 1980). Their ambition was to bridge the gap between church and the emerging working-class movement, but the Christian Socialists ended up being marginalised by both. In the early twentieth century, the Workers Party (Labour) became revolutionary, anti-religious, and strongly against religious education in schools. But in the longer run, after the Christian Socialists had been almost forgotten, the Workers Party formed a

government, became reformist, and also developed good relations with the Lutheran Church. Today it is often among social democrats that we find the strongest defenders of a continuing state church system. They support liberal positions in church politics and want liberal theological views to be represented in the clergy. They see this as an effort to serve the interests of the majority of church members, and in their opinion this is best done through a state–church partnership. This may be called a ‘corporative’ model since the state church to a large extent plays the role of an interest group, however a particularly privileged one.

Seen from a 150-year perspective, social and cultural tensions in Norway have mellowed towards the political and economical structure of a modern welfare society with a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth. The possibility for a conservative church leadership to have direct influence on political power in the 1880s was effectively stopped,⁵ and the emerging Norwegian workers’ movement therefore did not face a strong conservative church leadership with some public support as their most challenging ideological opponent. Instead they were confronted by a strong lay church movement, partly recruited from the same social strata as Labour, and having critical attitudes especially towards those in the church clergy who supported liberal theology. Between these two popular movements there was a struggle over cultural hegemony in large parts of the twentieth century. Perhaps this struggle had some influence on the Norwegian social democrats, having been the most radical workers’ movement in Scandinavia, but entering into reformist policies in the 1930s. Also pulling towards reformism was the experience of German occupation, when the vast majority of the Lutheran Church joined the resistance together with the workers’ organisations and others. The reconstruction after the war was largely considered a common national effort and the struggle over cultural hegemony gave way to increased focus on living standards and building a welfare state, before new kinds of ‘difference’ appeared on the scene. First came ‘youth culture’ in the 1960s, and later came ‘minority cultures’ with immigration in the 1970s. Multicultural Norway became publicly visible in the 1970s, politically recognised in the 1980s and discussed in its full consequences in the 1990s. Parallel to this, but with modern organisations dating back to 1917, rights of the indigenous Sami people of Norway were recognised, and gradually other national minorities with long history as well.

The general welfare state approach to difference, to redistribute goods to all in small but equal portions, cannot work when differences are ‘cultural’. The mechanisms for ‘distribution’ of culture, for sharing and not sharing, do not function like the (re-)distribution of wealth and benefits.⁶ Therefore the cultural aspects of society cannot be fully managed by the state even if there are many basic questions of rights and power that have to find political solutions. Cultural differences are boundaries that can be contested, negotiated and changed, and we can hope for them to be respected, recognised and discussed. In Norway the political system has often contributed to these processes by use of corporative solutions. The establishment of social movements and interest groups with legitimate leading representatives and the competition between these groups has made it possible for the state to have consultations and hearings and, by this, to slowly approach a compromise (Rokkan, 1966),

and this can also be observed on the local level (Hernes & Selvig, 1981). This is a possible, but also challenging, path to follow through the politics of majority/minority relationship. Particularly in the last decades the politics of multicultural integration seem to swing between a communitarian group orientation that is close to the corporative tradition, and a liberal individualism with emphasis on rights and duties of each citizen, as preferred by the present government (Brochmann, Borchgrevink & Rogstad, 2002; Gressgård, 2005). The political dimensions of difference also interact in complex ways with social and cultural ones, which can be seen by comparing the way gender and ethnicity are dealt with in a Norwegian context (Longva, 2003).

The debate about the *hijab* (veil), as well as the practice of using it, is an illustrative example of how issues of gender, religion and education interact with politics and universal principles such as freedom of religion in separate national contexts (Shirazi, 2001). In Norway, as in other western countries, *hijab* is also part of a discourse about modernity (Kristensen, 2003). According to newspapers, the increasing practice of using *hijab* has occasionally caused problems for individual Muslims in Norway, but in later years this has developed into a public debate, much influenced by debates in the rest of Europe, and several positions has been voiced in public (Høstmælingen, 2004). Those who support the prohibition argue along somewhat different lines:

- The young Muslim girls are oppressed and forced to wear a veil by male authorities in the religious communities. In school they should be helped in their liberation process by prohibiting the veil at least in school.
- The wearing of the veil is not really a religious issue, but a cultural one, and should be prohibited because Islamists are using the veil issue today as a political statement.
- Modern religion is beyond the use of regulations about purity and non-purity and focuses on issues of spiritual nature. There is no reason to accept anything else in public, even if it is free in the private sphere.

When the most recent debate broke out in 2004, the present liberal/conservative political government quickly stated that a prohibition of the veil in Norwegian schools was not on the agenda (NTB, 2004). One important explanation for this position is that there are elements in the political construction of Norwegian religious education that quite strongly point in the direction of allowing the veil. The 'two-track-model' displayed in the regulations of religious education, as well as the syllabus itself, underlines that every individual child should be supported in the development of their own identity based on their religious background. This is strengthened by the fact that parental rights are so important in Norwegian school policy, and was actually earlier used as an argument for a mono-Christian religious education: Since most parents have baptised their children, a Christian religious education is in accordance with the will of most parents. In conclusion, a prohibition against wearing the veil in school could threaten to disturb both strategies.

The position of the Norwegian government is clearly different from the official French position:⁷

All of France's children, whatever their history, whatever their origin, whatever their beliefs, are the daughters and sons of the republic. They have to be recognised as such, in law but above all in reality. By ensuring respect for this requirement, by reforming our integration policy, by our ability to bring equal opportunities to life, we shall bring national cohesion to life again. We shall also do so by bringing to life the principle of secularism, which is a pillar of our constitution. It expresses our wish to live together in respect, dialogue and tolerance. Secularism guarantees freedom of conscience. It protects the freedom to believe or not to believe... It is the neutrality of the public sphere which enables the harmonious existence side by side of different religions. It cannot be tolerated that under the cover of religious freedom, the laws and principles of the republic are challenged. Secularism is one of the great achievements of the republic. It is a crucial element of social peace and of national cohesion. We cannot allow it to be weakened. We have to work to consolidate it. In all conscience, it is my view that the wearing of clothes or of symbols which conspicuously demonstrate religious affiliations must be banned in state schools. (Chirac, 2003)

Towards post-national politics of religious education?

However distant the official French position is from the official Norwegian or English position, it is clear that the political importance of social cohesion is vital to all three countries. There are even tendencies in Norwegian integration policies under the present administration that may be seen to point in the direction of a liberal 'republican' ideology not too far from the French, however without the same sanctions on religious symbols (Gressgård, 2005). The question is how the different strategies of integration will develop and influence each other in a more united Europe. As we have seen, the politics of difference are often linked with the politics of religion, and politics of religion in Europe are closely related to the varied arrangements of religious education. These are largely based on a history of Christian churches being partners or opponents of the state. In large parts of Europe today, non-Christian religions and ideologies also play an important role, and politically it is particularly important to address the issues arising from the significant Muslim minorities.

The case of the veil may serve as an example of regulations that spring from the politics of difference. These are regulations mainly made to deal with the Muslim population, but once established they will have consequences for other religions, including Christianity. Regulations on symbols may very well touch upon traditional customs or practices that have developed over generations, and what used to be seen as the ordinary way of life becomes a matter of 'culture', which today means 'politics'. In this way politics of religion converges with politics of culture, politics of identity and politics of citizenship and this complexity needs to be included in the way European politics approaches different aspects of growing diversity (Cooper, 2004).

In Norway the political reconstruction of religious education in the 1990s was mainly based on the ambition to deal with difference by solving certain societal problems conceived as integration of marginalised groups. These problems were partly seen as postmodern disintegration and partly as multicultural disintegration. The educational challenges associated with problems of postmodernity historically date back to the 'generation gap' of the 1950s, and can be seen as an extension of

the problems of modernity (Skeie, 2002). The educational challenges associated with the multicultural society have a much longer history, even if they are often conceived as 'new'. Earlier the perspective was openly based on an ideology of assimilation particularly directed towards the Sami population, but still difference is mainly seen as a majority/minority relationship of how to help disadvantaged, discriminated, alienated ethnic or 'cultural' groups, while the majority is often not pictured as being 'cultural'. Different governments have tried to apply 'group solutions' in religious education, but this has mainly worked to the satisfaction of the majority group. Minority groups therefore protest, partly by using arguments based on individual (human) rights like the cases brought to the UN Committee for Human Rights. The effect of this may paradoxically lead to a less group-oriented approach from the authorities, with more emphasis on individuals and parental rights, while the 'corporate channel' is less used, particularly on the local level. There has so far been no parallel in Norway to the English system of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education.

It is puzzling that the religious education policy of late modern society has often been quite focused on the individual as member of a (cultural) group. In syllabuses, as in the Norwegian, the development and learning of the individual child is included as one of the main aims, but this is not so often reflected in the political discourse on religious education. At the same time, western culture is often labelled as individualistic. Modern educational theory from Rousseau to Dewey has given much attention to the education of the individual child. For many teachers, pupils appear as individuals, and the group perspective is often more applied to the dynamics of the class than to understand the sociocultural context of children. It seems important, therefore, to balance the attention towards the individual and towards the group, particularly in religious education.

Religious educators in many countries have worked to get political attention towards the multi-religious composition of schools and the implications this has for education in general, and religious education in particular. Many researchers and practitioners in religious education have contributions to make, based on many years of involvement in the multicultural school, but are not always comfortable with playing a political role. The recognition of religious groups is increasing in educational policy, but it does not necessarily mean that this is done in a context-sensitive, generous and democratic way. Here, educational policy may benefit more from the insights of specialist knowledge, including those researching religious education, but then researchers must be independent and not used for specific political purposes.⁸

In addition to the importance of investigating the religious communities, it seems appropriate for religious education researchers to keep focusing on the individual child, interpreting its life world and its potential, but by reflecting contextually. This is also a political position, partly drawing on the perspectives of human rights and more particular children's rights, partly drawing on the democratic ideals of educational theory. A child-oriented perspective need not be an attempt to escape from plurality whether intra-religious or inter-religious; on the contrary, individuals should be seen as different from each other as well as being complex human beings.

The political role of religious education is inevitable and must be dealt with on many levels. As researchers, I suggest that presently our political responsibility should be towards the individual child and the context the child lives in, and our aim should be to interpret this towards the political level of the nation state as well as transnational bodies. We should work for curricula as well as teaching that gives the individual person access to knowledge that can support both different kinds of believing and of not-believing, and gives opportunities to exchange thoughts on views and values with others, without fear of being threatened or ridiculed, but also with the possibility of developing in new directions. Based on this knowledge, children may also be better equipped to engage in the political struggles over power and justice, and to come forward with their visions of a good society.

Notes

1. For more general background knowledge about Norwegian religious education, see Haakedal (2001).
2. The RE syllabus established in 1997 was revised in 2002 and again together with the other school subjects in 2005. These revisions have not changed the main issues discussed here. Some general information about Norwegian religious education is available in English (<http://www.ls.no>).
3. As a result of the instructions from the UN Committee on Human Rights the Norwegian government revised parts of the school law, the syllabus and the rules for exemption, putting this into practice in the autumn 2005. The main content of these changes was to treat the different religions and worldviews more equally within religious education, and to make the system for exemption more flexible and easy to practice. There is still no right of full exemption. The changes mentioned were not fundamental, but since they were done during the writing of this article they cannot be discussed further here.
4. 'Corporatism' is not used in its original meaning referring to authoritarian state corporatism as in Mussolini's Italy, but to indicate an integrated cooperative relationship between independent organisations and state. Rokkan (1966) has described the particular role of organisations in the Norwegian political system as 'corporative pluralism', a concept still discussed in political science.
5. One illustration is the debate about the religious foundation of politics in the 1880s during the struggles for a parliamentary system of government and independence from Swedish rule. A special call to 'the friends of Christianity in our country' was issued by the conservative elite just before the elections of 1884 (Wisløff, 1961; Oftestad, 1998). Seen from a longer perspective, some of the underlying ideas of the infamous call of the 1880s can be detected even in current policies.
6. Barth (1994) discusses in Chapter 8 the understanding of culture in complex societies and particularly emphasises the different degrees of 'sharing'.
7. This comparison of Norway and France ignores important historical differences; the French secularism with roots back to the Enlightenment is also a result of the church-state relationship established in 1905 after many years of struggle (Beckford, 2003, pp. 91-94).
8. An example of an initiative from researchers that also has a bearing on political decisions is the ENRECA policy statement; see <http://enreca.isert-network.com/docs/index.htm>. The work of the Oslo Coalition is also relevant here (<http://www.oslocoalition.org/>).

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