

# The teaching of Islam in Scandinavia

## Three ways to handle religious minorities, societal ideals, and moderate secularism

Education plays a crucial role in the maintenance, preservation, and survival of religious systems. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that religious education and instruction lie at the very heart of all religions. For members of a dominant majority religion, the means by which the religious traditions are transmitted to future generations differ from those operating in a minority religion. The majority society is, in some sense, “marinated” in the majority religion (Berglund 2022:111); hence, certain religious values and narratives are “transmitted” through state institutions, official media, traditions, cultural expressions, and so on – although formal education is also necessary for a religion’s long-term survival. Yet, for minorities, the opportunities to teach their religion to future generations are far more limited and thus urgent; if not somehow taught, it will eventually disappear. In consequence, Islamic education is of great concern to many Muslims in Europe. As they cannot rely on state institutions to ensure the management and continuity of their religious community, Muslim minorities often depend on networks and institutions outside the state. Numerous Muslim children, teenagers, and even adults attend privately run supplementary classes on Islam in the afternoons or at weekends, while others attend private schools or are taught by parents or other family members at home. Within the last decade, and increasingly during the recent COVID pandemic, the number of online, often transnational, teaching opportunities has also risen.

Meanwhile, the increased vigilance with regard to Islamism and Muslims since September 11, 2001 and the Islamist terror attacks in European cities, has made Islamic education a concern for most European governments: a practice to be controlled and

surveilled for fear of rising radical Islam, while still ensuring minorities' constitutional rights to religious freedom (Gent & Franken 2021; Berglund 2015). This goal of striking a balance between providing religious freedom and controlling religious minorities explains why Islamic religious education (IRE) has become a topic of intense public debate; people are concerned that their government is either intervening too little or too much when it comes to shaping the spiritual beliefs of private citizens. State strategies have ranged from sponsoring Islamic education in state schools, providing state funding for religious schools, organising state-supervised training of teachers of Islam, and monitoring curricula and teaching practices in Muslim private schools, to forgoing the provision of opportunities for Islamic education entirely – with policies varying according to national ideologies of secularism, multiculturalism, and political culture (Taylor 1998; Modood 2007; Mannitz 2004; Berglund 2015).

The topic of Islamic education has been handled in both similar and different ways in the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, all of which have been dominated by Lutheran Christianity but are now considered among the most secular societies in the world. The three countries are all strong, universalist, welfare states that grant social and human rights to all citizens, meanwhile retaining the right to interfere in their lives to ensure security, equality, and cohesion across social groups. This encompasses high demands for the 'integration' of minority populations, including accommodation to the majority's stance on religion and secularism (Gullestad 2002; Rytter 2019; Gilliam 2019). There are, however, differences between the three countries when it comes to the role of Christianity and religion in relation to the state, civil society, and schools, and in the lives of individuals. Furthermore, there are some differences in the political reception of Muslim migrants; in how the teaching of religion, including Christianity and Islam, is named, organised and practiced in state schools; in the possibility of and rules for public funding of Muslim organisations and what is termed either Muslim free, independent or private schools and; the manner in which the schools, mosques, and organisations are surveilled by the state.

In this special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies*, we present studies on Islamic Education in the Scandinavian countries that illuminate how the teaching of Islam – and the children, youth, parents, and teachers engaged

in it – is affected by the specific Scandinavian context. The studies discuss the rules, practices, and debates relating to the Muslim minorities' transmission of Islam to the next generation, in both institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms. The articles range from focusing on teachers in state schools who teach Islam as part of non-confessional religious education (Markeng), on informal activities in homes, seminars and study groups (Lyngsøe), through mosque-based versions (Berglund and Eggen), to formalised Islamic education of imams and missionaries in an Islamic movement (Mahmood).

In this introduction, we provide context and background information to help clarify both similarities and differences between the Scandinavian countries with regard both to their handling of Islamic education and the experiences and practices of Muslim parents, teachers, and students involved in the teaching of Islam. We begin by examining some general characteristics of the position and handling of Christianity, secularism, minority religions, immigration, and Muslim migrants in the three countries, followed by an outline and discussion of how the teaching of religion in state schools is organised, and the legislation and handling of Muslim schools and Muslim organisations. Our intention is not to draw a comprehensive comparison between the three countries, as it is beyond the scope of this introduction and the studies that we have available differ between the countries, but rather to help readers understand the context of the following articles and to draw attention to similarities and differences within Scandinavia that other scholars may explore further.

## Christianity and Secularism

In all three societies, Christianity has a special position and relationship to the state. In Denmark, the state and church were divided as early as 1849, but in Sweden and Norway this only happened in 2000 and 2017 respectively. However, despite this division and political legislation ensuring religious freedom and recognition of minority religions, Christianity is still the culturally dominant religion, defined as the people's church (*folkekirke*) in all three countries. This means that its churches are intrinsically tied to the national identity and subsidised through taxes in various ways. Thus, while identified as secular,

and among the most progressive and liberal societies in the world, all three Scandinavian societies can be understood as merely moderately secular (Modood 2004; Thurfjell 2015; Thurfjell & Willander 2021). Although the separation of religion and politics has gradually become hegemonic, Christianity is still financially subsidised and privileged in educational institutions and in everyday cultural interactions (Berglund 2023; Jensen 2001).

In Denmark, the constitution of 1849 authorised the division of the state and the church and defined the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the Danish people's church (*den danske folkekirke*). As of 2023, 72% of Denmark's 6 million inhabitants are members of the church and, unlike members of other religious communities, pay 1% of their income to the church, a 'church tax'. According to a large survey of Christianity in Europe, two-thirds of Danes identify as Christians, yet despite this comparatively high number, only 10% go to church at least once a month (the median is 18% in Europe) and 55% describe themselves as non-practicing Christians (Pew Research Center 2018a). Compared to Norway (43%), and Sweden (42%), a smaller number – 30% of Danish inhabitants – identify as non-affiliated to any religion (*ibid.*). Studies show that Danish church members predominantly use the church for rituals, such as baptism, marriage ceremonies, and funerals, and family traditions like Christmas service. Hence, their religiosity often takes an individualised and 'relaxed' form, in which Christianity affords identity, family rituals and community, and not least national community, as Christianity is regarded as a central aspect of Danishness (Jensen 2001; Mouritsen 2006). As pointed out by political scientist Per Mouritsen, while Christianity no longer provides the overarching meaning system for Danish citizens, a view of 'secularised Christianity-as-culture' is broadly accepted, and also promoted by politicians who argue that Christianity is conducive to Danish egalitarianism, open mindedness (*frisind*), and liberal democracy (Mouritsen 2006).

While the Norwegian state-church relation was dissolved in 2017, a change in the constitution was made prior to this, in 2012, redefining the State Church of Norway as the people's church of Norway (*folkekirke*) and "supported as such by the state". This happened after several rounds of discussion at political and church levels, a process which was willed and pushed forward by the church officials in order to gain independence (Staalset

2023). Nevertheless, the Church of Norway is still in a unique position compared to other religious communities in the country, and is actually entirely financed by public budgets, a relationship grounded in §16 of the Norwegian Constitution: “The Church of Norway, an Evangelical Lutheran Church, remains the people’s church (*folkekirke*) and is supported as such by the state” (translation by Selimović). In Norway, 43% of the 5.5 million inhabitants declare that they belong to a religion or religious community. Yet, according to statistics from 2022, 63.7% of the Norwegian population are members of the Church of Norway. This number is drastically larger than any of the numerous other religious or non-religious communities in the country, which have fewer than 400,000 members in total (SSB Norway). Yet, reports demonstrate that church attendance is changing; statistics, for example, show that fewer people attend church regularly and fewer young people have their confirmation in the Church of Norway. This is an interesting tendency as the Norwegian Humanist Association (HEF) has experienced a rise in confirmation numbers (non-religious confirmation); on the other hand, in terms of weddings and baptisms in the Church of Norway in recent years, the numbers show an increase. In short, the majority of Norwegians use the church for rituals and, through their membership, acknowledge the Church of Norway as part of their identity.

Sweden’s population stands at approximately 10 million. Prior to 2000, the Evangelical Lutheran Church was Sweden’s official state church. Today, however, its status is also that of a people’s church (*folkkyrka*), meaning that it is no longer directly tied to the Swedish state. Membership in the Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*) has decreased to around 60% of the Swedish population in recent decades (Willander 2019) and sociological surveys affirm Sweden’s status as one of the world’s most secular countries; according to the Pew Research Center in 2018, up to 72% of Swedish respondents believe religion has no influence on their lives. Only about 15% of people reply in the affirmative to the question, “Do you believe in a personal God?” (Pew Research Center 2018b). On a typical Sunday, about 1% of the population attends a Church of Sweden service. This is a low score, but statistical evidence suggests that the very low level of church attendance has been fairly consistent for as long as there have been numbers to compare. When church attendance in Sweden started to be registered in 1927 attendance was around 5% (Gustafsson 2001; Willander 2019).

## The political reception of immigration and Muslim migrants.

While often grouped together in the past as the progressive and liberal states of Northern Europe, the three countries have had distinct political approaches to immigration in general and to Muslim migrants in particular. One could argue that the three countries, following Mikkel Rytter's description of Danish ideas about 'integration' (Rytter 2019), have different social imaginaries about the nation, the welfare state, what constitutes 'us' and 'them', and how to handle this relationship.

Sweden has more than 200 years of history as a neutral state, and neutrality and non-alignment have long been part of the Swedish self-image, which is evident in its attempt to define its role as a 'humanitarian superpower' but also in its feminist foreign policy. As Simons and Manoilo noted in 2019, cracks had for years been visible in the domestic consensus as the contradictions of the humanitarian superbrand and feminist foreign policy became more salient (Simons & Manoilo 2019). Today Sweden is not only waiting to enter NATO, it has also radically changed its migration policy, once a strong ideology of international solidarity and hospitality demonstrated during the 2015-16 refugee crisis, when many other countries closed their borders. In the 2014 election, the anti-immigrant and especially anti-Islam 'Sweden Democrats' political party received 13% of the vote in the election and in 2022 they gained 20% of the vote, becoming the second largest party. Islamophobia and hate crimes are on the rise in Swedish society and, in 2023, the polarisation of society entered a new level with the discussions on the burning of the Qur'an in front of mosques and Muslim-majority embassies. In the public debate, Islam and Muslims are often depicted in a negative light and Muslim immigrants regularly problematized, often being described as a minority that is resistant to democracy and secularisation and opposed to the established separation of church and state.

There are no reliable statistics for the number of Muslims in Sweden, only various estimates. According to statistics from 2016, Sweden's Muslims accounted for 8% of the total population. The Pew Research Center estimates that 810,000 people in some way identify as Muslim and that the country will have the largest Muslim population in Europe by 2050, ranging from 11 to 30 percent of the population depending on the migration rate.

Muslim immigration to Sweden started in the 1960s with labour migration from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. Since the 1980s, the majority of Muslims who have moved to Sweden have either been refugees or relatives of people who already live there (Sorgenfrei 2018). In 2021, Thurfjell and Willander's large-scale quantitative study compared Swedes with Muslim family backgrounds to Sweden's secular, post-Lutheran dominant culture. Contrary to expectations, the Christian respondents show more affinity with their religious heritage than Muslims, and there is a noticeable fusion between the groups. While both groups largely distance themselves from their own religious heritage, Muslims do so in a more definite way, with Muslims upholding more secular values and identities than Christians. Thurfjell and Willander conclude that, on the basis of their findings about Muslims in Sweden, equating religious familial heritage with religious identity is hasty. Nonetheless, although Sweden's Muslim population is to a large extent secular, the majority population perceives Muslims as more religious and the debate about Islam is coloured by an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy with a tendency to support the idea that 'normal' religion is one that is either protestant or invisible.

As with Sweden, the first substantial groups of Muslim migrants came to Denmark from Turkey, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia as 'guest-workers' in the 1960s and 1970s. While this immigration was severely restricted by new laws in 1973, the families of the predominantly male migrants were allowed to enter until 1983, bringing with them children of Muslim background in need of education. Since the 1970s, new Muslim inhabitants have arrived as refugees from wars in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon (Palestina), Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, and Syria, among others. Typically, these families have been placed in social housing estates alongside poor Danish families, meaning that the children have grown up in ethnically mixed and socially deprived areas. Whereas registering religious affiliation in Denmark is prohibited, it is estimated that there are 300,000 Muslims in Denmark (5% of the population), representing 84 nationalities (Religion i Danmark 2020). The largest group comprises people who have migrated from Turkey, followed by Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan; 85% are Sunni Muslims and 10-15% Shia Muslims (Kühle & Larsen 2017). We do not have studies of their religious identification, but Lene Kühle estimated in 2006 that 20-25 % of Danish Muslims were

members of a mosque organisation and, in 2017, that 7-9% participated in any particular Friday prayer (Kühle 2006, Kühle and Larsen 2017).

While migrants to Denmark have always reported experiences of discrimination, Denmark long had a national social imaginary of Denmark as a humanitarian, inclusive welfare state. Yet, in the 1990s, a more hostile environment for migrants, and especially Muslims, was developing. Municipalities became increasingly frustrated with the huge task of integrating the many new refugees and the cost of this due to their eligibility for welfare benefits. In response, in 1998, a government led by the Social Democrats and the centre-left party Radikale Venstre introduced a significantly lower 'introductory payment' to refugees. Yet the hostility increased as a new right-wing government came to power just two months after the 9/11 attack. With parliamentary support from the far-right Danish People's Party, this government remained in power for ten years and initiated a radical change in Danish foreign and immigration politics, including active engagement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. During this time, and fuelled by the Danish cartoon crisis in 2005-6, the government instigated a politics of securitization, introducing a range of strict anti-terror legislation and pre-emptive methods, including surveillance of Muslim organisations, as well as restrictive immigration and integration policies (Rytter & Pedersen 2014). While a more inclusive and pluralist approach is promoted by left-wing parties, civil organisations, and in everyday encounters in institutions and workplaces, the Social Democratic and right-wing governments, which have been in power since 2011, have continued to promote these policies. Likewise the Danish debate is dominated by the concern that an undemocratic and patriarchal Islam threatens the Danish modern, liberal, egalitarian way of life (ibid.; Kublitz 2010). Discussions often focus on freedom of speech and gender equality, recently ignited by the banning of burkas, recommendations from a committee to forbid Muslim girls from wearing the hijab in school, and public burnings of the Qur'an by the right-wing activist Rasmus Paludan and others.

As in the two other countries, the character of immigration to Norway changed in the 1970s and onward with the introduction of labour migration from countries like Pakistan and Morocco. In the 1990s refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina were the largest migrant group to enter Norway, but refugees from several



countries on the African continent also arrived in this period, followed by large groups of refugees from Afghanistan and Syria in the 2000s. The statistics show that immigrants from Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria, together with their families, are the three largest groups in the country today, while the registered number of Muslims – that is, members of a mosque – is 182,607 (2023), making it the largest non-Christian community in Norway.

Most of the Norwegian political elite describe and define Norway as a peace-loving country; it engages in and facilitates peace talks, and is a vocal member of the United Nations; the Nobel Peace Prize is also awarded in Norway. However, as pointed out by the parties furthest to the left, Norway is also a warmongering country as weapons production and their export is high, and Norwegian soldiers are being deployed to various types of operations led both by the UN and NATO, but also in the American-led operations in Afghanistan post 9/11, the so-called “war on terror”. Another central aspect of Norwegian self-understanding is that it is both a secular society and also a multi-faith society in which religion and belief can be expressed, a perception Norwegians term *et livssynsåpent samfunn* (NOU2013, 1), “a society open to a diversity of religion and life stances”. Since 2013, this term has been applied to describe the Norwegian policy towards religious communities and lifestyles and the way they are met by society (Stålsett 2021). However, although the Norwegian self-perception is that their society is open to religious beliefs and lifestyles, a number of political parties, individual politicians, and various organisations are very critical of the Muslim presence in Norway. The political discourse concerning immigration, especially Muslim migrants, has had several peaks in the last twenty years and has become a revisited theme in pre-election debates. Of the ruling parties, the most vocal critic of Islam and Muslims has been the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet). In recent years the party leadership has made use of terminology such as ‘stealth islamisation’ (*snikislamisering*) when criticising the changes instigated by Muslim immigration, such as discussions about halal slaughter. The current leader of the party has used the example of Sweden, inherent in the term ‘Swedish conditions’ (*svenske tilstander*), in order to communicate that Muslim immigration leads to integration problems. Sweden has been used as a model of what not to do, while Denmark, on the other hand, is upheld as an example to follow due to the country’s more restrictive policies.

Moreover, the presence of right-wing extremism has been prominent in Norway for years, clearly exemplified by the right-wing terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011 and 10 August 2019, and anti-Islam activism, fronted by, among others, the organisation SIAN (Stop the Islamisation of Norway).

However, all the political parties in the Norwegian political landscape have developed policies concerning what some characterise as 'Muslim issues'. These include, for example, the wearing of the hijab and related matters, but also the building of mosques, caricatures, and the burning of the Qur'an in public spaces. Some of these have been discussed under the umbrella of religious freedom and/or freedom of expression, at times leading to heated debates among Norwegian politicians but also stakeholders.

## Religious education in state schools

In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, the vast majority of Muslim children pass through the state school system. Indeed, in Sweden, 27% of all pupils in school have an immigrant background (Skolverket 2022/2023), although as yet there are no available statistics on how many of these are Muslim. Likewise, there are no available figures on how many Muslim pupils there are in Norwegian classrooms; however, some numbers from 2016 can give an indication. According to SSB Norway (2016), in a report on immigration and education, it is stated that there were 46,329 children with immigrant backgrounds in Norwegian kindergarten, just above 16% of all kindergarten children. The number of children with immigrant backgrounds in the age group 6-15 was 102,900 in 2016, or about 16%. These numbers do not give specific information about the pupils' religious identity; however, we can presume that a significant number come from Muslim families. While the religious affiliation of pupils is not registered in Denmark either, 10% of pupils in Danish schools are bilingual, and the majority of these have Muslim backgrounds. An estimate from 2014 is that approximately 7% of Danish pupils are Muslim, and 90% of these attend the Danish state school (Sedgwick 2014; Gilliam and Kühle 2014), although they are not distributed equally. In fact, in 2014 Mark Sedgwick calculated that 76% of Danish state schools had lower than 5% Muslim pupils, while 50% of

children with a Muslim background attended schools with between 10-50% Muslim pupils, and 22% attended schools where there was a Muslim majority (Sedgwick 2014).

There are important differences between the three countries in how the teaching of religion is organised in state schools and how Christianity and other religions, including Islam, are prioritised. In the three countries Christianity was the main subject since the Middle Ages, in a Lutheran-evangelical form after the reformation, and, while gradually pushed aside by other subjects and a general secularisation, it was still taught as a confessional subject until recent times. It is worth noting that Scandinavian approaches to religious education differ from most other European countries. France, for example, is characterised by a strict secularistic approach, banning religious symbols in schools, having no separate school subject for religion, and teaching the history of religion within the history syllabus. Central and East European countries have generally retained the confessional teaching of religion and invited the different religious communities into the schools to conduct faith education for different groups of children (Mannitz 2014; Gent & Franken 2021). The current Scandinavian and wider Nordic model, on the other hand, provides the teaching of religion in a non-confessional way, privileging Christianity to different degrees both quantitatively and qualitatively, including acknowledging the Christian holidays of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

Of the three countries, Sweden has the longest history of non-confessional integrative religious education. A school reform in 1962 required the subject of Christianity to maintain an 'objective' profile with regard to questions of faith (Skogar 2000), and the subject's name was changed from Christianity to Knowledge About Religion in 1969, which is a direct translation of the Swedish word *religionskunskap*. This name change symbolised the transition from a confessional to a more non-confessional school subject that prioritises teaching about religion, including various non-Christian religions, from a Study of Religions perspective. Since 1996, non-confessional religious education (RE) has been an obligatory school subject taught in all state-funded (i.e. also in all independent schools including the confessional ones) schools from primary to upper secondary. The emphasis in primary school is on the local community and storytelling, whereas at higher levels it is on key ideas within

what are called ‘the world religions’ (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, according to the syllabus) as well as on secular worldviews, or ‘outlooks of life’ as they are called in the English-language documentation from the National Agency for Schools (Skolverket 2011). In upper secondary school, one RE course is obligatory. The first sentences in the syllabus clearly show its departure point: “The subject of religion has its scientific roots primarily in the academic discipline of religious studies, and is by its nature interdisciplinary. It deals with how religions and outlooks on life are expressed in words and action, and how people formulate and relate to ethical and existential issues” (Skolverket 2022).

The use of the term “non-denominational” (the term used in the official translation to English) is meant to imply that education is to be presented in such a way in the Swedish school system that no particular worldview is prioritised and that pupils from all cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds should feel comfortable (Skolverket 2018, 5). This neutrality, however, does not apply to the realm of what is described as society’s “fundamental values”, the mediation of which the national curriculum considers a primary task of Sweden’s educational system (Skolverket 2018, 5). Despite the fact that all school subjects are supposed to be non-denominational and non-confessional, they can be understood to be “marinated in Lutheran Protestantism” – not only the country’s factual history, but also in terms of how people think and talk about religion in society, how religion is taught and holidays are celebrated in schools, how institutions are built, and who receives state subsidies (Berglund 2023).

The confessional character of religious education remained much longer in Norway – until 1997 – probably because since 1974 pupils had had the option to choose between a confessional religious subject with close ties to the Christian Church and a ‘lifestance communities’ (*livssyn*) subject presenting other worldviews and religions. However, the growing influence of the Norwegian Humanist Association and religious/lifestance cooperation had an important impact on imminent changes. Acknowledging that globalisation and migration had changed Norwegian society and the pupils in Norwegian schools, and in order to counteract growing social and cultural fragmentation, a non-confessional but compulsory subject teaching about different religions and worldviews was introduced in 1997

(Skrefrud 2022). Meanwhile, critics voiced the concern that the teaching was still highly influenced by the dominance of Christianity and thus argued against its obligatory status. The matter was raised in the Human Rights Court of Strasbourg, which also criticised the amount of Christianity in the syllabus, and the subject was revised in 2008, with specifications that it should be taught in a pluralistic, objective, and critical way (ibid.). In 2015, the government reinstated 'Christianity' into its title, which did not create much debate, presumably because the subject was now characterised by a religious studies and intercultural approach. The topic is now called Christianity, Religion, Lifestances, and Ethics (*Kristendom, religion, livssyn og etikk* or KRLE) at the primary school level (Grades 1-10) and Religion, Lifestances, and Ethics (*Religion, livssyn og etikk* or RLE) in secondary school.

In Denmark, the subject became non-confessional in 1975, at which point it was renamed 'Knowledge of Christianity'. Even though it is intended that the subject be taught in a neutral and scientific manner, Christianity is described as the central area of knowledge, and it was not until 1993 that the teaching of 'other religions and perspectives of life' became obligatory in the seventh grade and onwards. An ongoing political debate concerns whether the subject should be called 'Religion', as it is in upper secondary schools, and align the teaching of different religions, or the focus on Christianity should be retained in both name and content. Whereas left-wing parties and the association of religion teachers argue in favour of the former, a consistent majority of politicians insist that Christianity should remain the main subject because it is perceived as a central part of the national cultural heritage. While national conservatives proclaim that the subject should be obligatory for all children for the same reason, pupils can be exempted from the subject due to legislation on religious freedom. Yet, in reality only a low number – 1.3% – are exempted from participating in the weekly hour of the subject (Buchardt & Enemark 2021). A smaller qualitative study found that Muslim parents whose children had been exempted had often been concerned that their children would be taught about Islam by school teachers with little knowledge of the Islamic faith (Holm Pedersen 2014). Studies also show that some teachers of 'Christianity', especially in schools with a larger proportion of Muslim children, choose to include the teaching of Islam and other religions before the

seventh grade in an attempt to be inclusive of their Muslim pupils (Gilliam 2019; Buchardt & Enemark 2021).

In the remaining three years of the school, Islam is taught alongside Judaism and Buddhism, in limited periods of the scheduled hours, and primarily as a means of comparison to Christianity. This subject is often taught by teachers without a specialisation in Knowledge of Christianity but even those who have this specialisation only have very limited professional education in the non-Christian religions (Gilliam & Kühle 2014; Gilliam 2014; Buchardt & Enemark 2021). The Christian focus of the subject is underlined by the fact that in the seventh or eighth grade, the time scheduled for the subject is switched into confirmation lessons organised by and taught in the local churches, and the remaining pupils have the time off.

Research from all three countries shows that despite these significant differences in approaches to the teaching of religion, there are similarities in the teaching of Islam and the stances towards religion and religiosity reflected in the religious education in state schools, and that this has an impact on Muslim pupils who attend these schools.

Studies of textbooks and teaching in the subject Knowledge of Christianity syllabus in Danish schools show that whereas Christianity is described as heterogeneous, changing over time, personal, and a religion of love and faith, Islam is generally depicted as homogenous, ahistorical, and impersonal, governed by rules and related to conflicts and radicalism, as well as foreign to Denmark (Sedgwick 2014; Kudal 2015; Kjeldsen 2016; Gilliam 2017; Buchardt & Enemark 2021). Studies also demonstrate that pupils of Muslim background are expected to be religious and are thus often called upon to explain or represent Islam in lessons on Islam (Buchardt 2010; Pedersen 2014). As Mette Buchardt describes, by “pedagogising” Muslimness, the lessons also tend to produce a legitimate flexible and a non-legitimate inflexible Muslim subject (Buchardt 2010, 2014). Similarly, although teachers strive to ease the participation of Muslim pupils in the everyday routine of Danish schools, and perceive their approach as secularistic, Muslim pupils demonstrate that what they have learned is that while the presence of Christianity in school is normalised, Islam should be invisible and kept private (Khawaja 2014; Gilliam 2014). In line with this, other studies find that Muslim pupils pick up that they are associated with terrorist acts and wars in Muslim countries and that

religious differences are potentially conflictual. At the same time, they note that the school requires them to tone down their religiosity, participate in Christian practices, and be “relaxed Muslims” (Gilliam 2009, 2014, 2015, 2022).

Although one might expect the neutral religious studies approach to the teaching of religion in Sweden and Norway to result in a more neutral presentation of Islam, this does not seem to be the case. Two studies of textbooks about Islam for non-confessional religious education in Swedish schools have shown that throughout history, the choice of words and events with which to describe Islam has often been negative. Although the content is not specifically wrong, this reiterated pattern creates a tedious picture of Islam as a whole (Otterbeck 2004; Härenstam 1993). Berglund’s studies on the subject demonstrate that Swedish textbooks follow the format of ‘the man, the book, the faith.’ (Berglund, 2014). A type of presentation that is prone to cause problems since it indicates to students that the Qur’an is the same type of text and serves the same purpose as the Bible in Christian traditions. Both are of course books, and thus can be compared as such; they have a common story and gallery of characters, but what is important to remember is that their function in theology differ. Another problem that is not specifically related to Islam but to all religions presented in Swedish textbooks is that persons representing a religion in textbooks are often ‘maximalists’: in other words, those who are most devout and most self-assured about a specific tradition. This could have two negative consequences: (1) students belonging to a specific religion may believe they are not good adherents because they do not live as the maximalist representative depicts, and (2) students not belonging to the religious tradition depicted may believe that all its adherents live according to the maximalist representation (Berglund 2020; 2021)

Despite the secular (not favouring any specific religion or world view) but not secularistic (favouring a world view in which religion should be kept in the private sphere) outlook of the Swedish school system, studies have shown that religion is frequently associated with a historical time when people didn’t know better – that religion may have played an important role in the past, but modern people do not need it anymore. Karin Kittellmann Flensner (2016) demonstrates that taking a non-religious and atheistic stance is considered a neutral and normal

attitude toward religion, and that being religious is frequently presented as problematic for a modern, rational, and independently thinking human being. Apart from this dominant discourse, which can be understood as a specific normativity, some students and teachers in Kittelmann-Flensner's study talked about Sweden as a Christian country with reference not to beliefs but to Swedish traditions and history, frequently using them to define a 'we' in relation to 'the others', who were frequently religious people in general, and Muslims in particular (Kittelmann-Flensner 2016). An interview study from Sweden also shows that pupils who receive Islamic supplementary education - often consisting of memorizing passages of the Qur'an - have been the target of negative comments to the effect that it is at odds with modern, rational Swedish society (Berglund 2017, 2018). Although it was common 50 years ago for Swedish pupils to have to memorise not only poems, hymns, and Bible passages, but also features such as the periodical system and Sweden's rivers and lakes (which are numerous), this is no longer the case. Instead, the school system's discourse on memorization is very negative and frequently referred to as 'old fashioned' in contrast to the prevailing educational ideal in Sweden – and the West more broadly – of interactive learning. Muslim pupils thus face an underlying presumption of negative outcomes if they discuss the knowledge and skills gained in their supplementary education, with teachers and friends labelling them as 'too religious'.

In Norway, in contrast to Sweden and Denmark, there has been little research on representations of Islam in textbooks, with some exceptions that include work by Ann Midtun (2014), Jon Magne Vestøl et al. (2014), Hallvard Nestby (2019), and Bengt-Ove Andreassen (2014, 2021). Andreassen writes that teaching about Islam was made mandatory in Norwegian schools in 1974; however, the curricula and textbooks in Norway have tended to promote a stereotypical representation of the religion (Anderssen 2021). Furthermore, teaching in classrooms has been "influenced by public debate, popular culture, and news media" (Anderssen 2021, 2026). This is supported by Audun Toft's research in Norwegian classrooms, which shows that media depictions of Islam and Muslims in connection with terrorism, extremism, and the oppression of women are used as starting points for teaching about Islam and selecting themes that are deemed important to deal with in class (Toft 2018, 2019, 2020).



Therefore, even though Muslim pupils in general are positive towards Islam being taught as part of RE in schools, the focus on these stigmatising themes is making it a challenge (Toft 2017, 2018; Andreassen 2021). A report (2022) developed by the KIFO Institute for Church, Religion, and Worldview Research underlines this, as it demonstrates that pupils with a Muslim background in Oslo experience the teaching in Christianity, Religion, and Life Stances (KRLE) as stigmatising and a burden (Bangstad et al. 2022).

## Muslim schools

All three countries incorporate so-called *friskolor* - free or independent schools - into the school system; however, it should be noted that these schools are not free but privately run, state-funded, and subject to the laws and regulations of the state or municipality. Some of these schools are faith-based, also called confessional schools. In Sweden, only 1% of all pupils attend a faith based school. Sweden's first state-funded Muslim school (a state-funded, independent, faith-based school) opened in Malmö in 1993. At present there are 10 Muslim schools. Like other independent schools in Sweden, these are 100% funded by the state. No new Muslim schools have been founded since 2004 (Henrekson 2023).

One of the reasons these Muslim schools were established in Sweden in the early 1990s is that the Education Act was amended in 1992 to make it easier to establish independent schools. Although independent schools (including faith-based schools) must have the same basic goals as state schools, an independent school is allowed to have a profile or mission that distinguishes it from state schools, including a specific school ethos and extracurricular subjects (such as Islamic religious education [IRE] in Muslim schools) that are incorporated into the weekly schedule. Confessional school subjects or gatherings can consequently be added to the weekly schedule, but these subjects cannot be mandatory. The goals outlined in the national curriculum (see above) must be met in faith-based independent schools, meaning that non-confessional religious education is taught as a mandatory school subject in Swedish Muslim faith schools, whereas Islamic religious education (IRE) must be optional. The profile of one Muslim school may be very different from that of

another, and a distinction is frequently made between schools with 'strong' and 'weak' profiles, classifications which are based on the degree to which a specific religion influences the school's profile (Roth 2007).

Several studies show that parents' decision to let their children attend a Muslim school is not primarily influenced by the presence of IRE or even the Islamic school ethos. In her study, Mohme (2016), for example, shows that parents chose a Muslim school for their children primarily to provide them with a good academic education, one that, in the parents' opinion, was not possible to obtain in the suburb where they lived, whose state school standard was perceived to be low (Mohme 2016). Other studies of school choice show that parents send their children to Muslim schools for reasons of security and well-being, that is, to avoid discrimination and achieve acceptance of difference (Bunar & Kallstenius 2006; see also Berglund 2010). Although RE or IRE may not be the most important factor in parents' decisions to send their children to Muslim schools, these schools do provide an environment in which children can be educated about Islam through textbooks based on a secularised, study of religions approach, and also through confessional lessons in which Islam is the norm and the child learns about the 'good life' from an Islamic perspective.

In Denmark, free schools were introduced in 1855 as a result of the 1849 constitution, which established the Lutheran-Evangelical church as the Danish people's church and at the same time guaranteed religious freedom. By extension, parents were granted the right to establish schools teaching their children according to their own convictions. Some of the present free schools have been founded by religious minorities, but many rather adhere to a specific pedagogical idea. Since 1980, groups of Muslim parents have used this possibility to open either Muslim free schools, schools catering to Arabic-speaking children, or schools for children of specific ethnic groups where Islam is taught in more or less confessional ways, often in a subject called 'Religion' (Ihle 2007; Shakoore 2008; Buchardt & Enemark 2021). Like private schools which exist alongside free schools, free schools in Denmark are partly subsidised by the state, currently at 75% of the cost of pupils in the state schools. They thus require a school fee from parents, which is waived for families of low income.

In 2022, there were 24 Muslim free schools in Denmark with

5,000 enrolled pupils, amounting to 10% of Danish Muslim children (Mouritsen, Ahrensberg, & Kriegbaum 2022). While free schools had previously been obliged to align with the academic level of the state schools and their teaching of democracy, following the general post-9/11 concern about Islamic radicalism, Muslims isolating in ‘parallel societies,’ and post-PISA<sup>1</sup>) worries regarding the academic level of Muslim schools, the government made these demands more specific (Reeh 2010). In 2005, a new law required the free schools to follow the multiple academic goals of state schools and “to prepare the pupils to live in a society like the Danish, with freedom and democracy, as well as developing and strengthening the democratic literacy of the pupils and their knowledge of and respect for fundamental freedom and human rights, including equality between the genders” (Friskoleloven, paragraph 1, stk. 2, Gilliam’s translation). In 2017, new rules regulating and monitoring the schools were implemented, including strict academic and financial supervision as well as inspection of the schools’ teaching of freedom and democracy (Kofoed-Pihl 2021; Mouritsen, Ahrensberg, & Kriegbaum 2022). In 2018, this led to the closing of four Muslim schools when the state terminated their subsidies. In a study of ninth grade pupils at 22 of the 25 Muslim schools and Muslim pupils from state schools with more than 20% Muslim pupils, Mouritsen, Ahrensberg, and Kriegbaum (2022) explore whether Muslim schools harm the children’s integration to citizenship. The survey suggests that the pupils from the Muslim schools are more religious and have more resourceful parents than Muslim pupils in the state schools, but show no signs of being less integrated with regard to issues of citizenship. In fact, they identify more with the Danish identity and less with the ethnic identity of their parents than the Muslim pupils in the state schools. They report that they and their parents have chosen the schools because they recognize their Islamic values, the close home-school relationship, and due to their calmer, safer, and better learning environment (Mouritsen, Ahrensberg, & Kriegbaum 2022)

In Norway, a *friskole* is defined as a privately owned, independent school with the right to public funding that offers an alternative pedagogical profile or one that is religion or life-stance based. As such, these schools function as an alternative to publicly run state schools. In contrast to Sweden and Denmark, as of 2023 there are no Islamic or Muslim privately run schools

1 PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment.

in Norway. While there are many private schools that in some way hold a Christian value base, it has not been easy to establish schools based on Islamic values. There have been several attempts to register a Muslim free school or private school in Norway, but the applications have been denied, often on the basis that they represent “a hindrance for integration” (Ekgren 2019). It should also be noted that in Scandinavia, as in other European countries, many Muslim children attend Christian free/independent schools, one reason for this being that parents expect the respect for religion to be higher in these schools than in mainstream secular state schools.

## Muslim organisations and mosques

Outside the school and education institutions, the Muslim organisations in Scandinavia that offer Islamic education are affected by the political concern with avoiding radical Islamic influence while maintaining the constitutional rights of religious freedom. Here the universal welfare models of the Scandinavian countries tend to increase the state’s influence and decrease the role of civil society. All three countries have thus been concerned with the rules and regulations the organisations should apply in order to be eligible for public funding, yet they have solved this question in different ways with consequences for the conditions of the organisations seeking such assistance.

The Swedish state recognises seven umbrella organisations that represent Swedish Muslims today which, in 2021, were estimated to have 224,458 members in total (Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund 2021). Despite the fact that most organisations, with the exception of the Bosniak Islamic Association, founded in the mid-1990s, recruit members from various ethnic backgrounds, Sweden also has a sizable number of smaller, ethnically defined organisations and congregations. One such is the Ahmadiyya community, but there are also Salafi and Wahhabi groups, which have drawn followers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Olsson 2019); some Sufi groups are ethnically homogeneous, while others, particularly those led by and recruiting Swedish converts, are more mixed (Sorgenfrei 2016). Funding is available for religious organisations through the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, although potential recipients must adhere to certain values and

organise in a certain way to be eligible. Some of this funding is used to educate children and teenagers, but also grown-ups. Muslim organisations that do not receive state funding must find other means of financing the Islamic education they offer, or base it on voluntary work and private funding.

By the late 1950s, there was a basement mosque in Kärrtorp, situated in the southern part of Stockholm. Sweden's first architect-designed mosque was built by the Ahmadiyya community in Gothenburg in 1975–1976. The most famous mosque in Sweden is probably the large mosque on the island of Södermalm in Stockholm, which was inaugurated in 2000. Most Muslim communities in Sweden collaborate with the surrounding society. Many receive study visits from schools and municipalities or participate in information meetings with them, are represented in local consultation bodies and in committees in the residential areas where they have their premises, and collaborate with tenants' associations, women's shelters, temperance and education movements, and not least with other religious communities (Sorgenfrei 2019). In contrast to Denmark and Norway, Swedish children are entitled to mother-tongue education in school, which probably means that fewer children attend mosque education purely to learn the Arabic language as in the other two countries (Iversen forthcoming).

In Norway, formally registered faith organisations may apply for public funding if specific criteria are fulfilled, a possibility prompted by the funding of the Church of Norway, which is financed by taxpayers. As a result, all Muslim faith organisations are financed by the state in accordance with the number of members, which in turn gives the state the opportunity to make demands (Stene 2020). As of 2017, there are two umbrella organisations representing Muslim groups in talks concerning legislation that targets religious institutions, among other issues.

On 1 January 2021, a new law on religious communities came into force, which requires that each must have at least 50 paying members in order to receive state grants and, as of 2023, the rate for calculating state subsidies is per member. Among other things, there are new reporting requirements qualifying applications for grants; one that has been discussed relates to how the organisations are governed and to what degree women and men are represented in the governing bodies. In the past,

religious communities did not face such requirements. In addition to state financing, the different organisations and communities can apply for grants through many different state and private institutions by developing specific projects.

Muslims registered within faith organisations in Norway numbered about 180,000 in 2023 (Statistics Norway 2023); however, the overall number is higher as many are not registered members: Three forms of organisation may be distinguished – mosques, educational institutions, and cultural centres – although these often have overlapping activities. Mosques are often organised on ethnic/national lines, whereby religious education is combined with the preservation of cultural memory of the ‘homeland’; however, some are transnational, offering both religious education and ritual worship in different languages. Most mosques follow the Sunni-Shia divide and the majority belong to the Sunni denomination, although in areas where there are few mosques it has been recorded that Shia and Sunni worship in the same building. The Ahmadi community has its own mosques and there is little public communication between the leadership of the Ahmadi community and Sunni and Shia leaders.

Norwegian society has undergone considerable changes in terms of religious pluralism since the 1970s, materialising in the development of inclusive policies, the so-called ‘lifstance open society’ (*livssynsåpne samfunn*), and through legislation. Nonetheless, even though pluralism is recognized and deemed a positive trait in Norwegian society, religions other than Christianity (and sometimes Judaism) are still defined as ‘immigrant religions’ (*innvandrers religioner*), situating their practitioners as religious ‘others’ in some circumstances. This implies that, unlike Lutheran Christianity, immigrant religions are not part of the everyday patterns of society and are, therefore, taught in limited form in schools.

In order to bridge gaps between the majority religion/population and minority religions – but also as a result of work already done in this regard – the focus on communication through interreligious dialogue has become an important element in the Norwegian religious landscape. The need for official representatives to take part in conversations between the two largest religious communities in Norway indirectly led to cooperation between Muslim organisations, especially mosques, and the establishment of an umbrella organisation – Islamic

Council of Norway, IRN (*Islamsk råd Norge*) – in 1993; in 2017, a second – the Muslim Dialogue Network, MDN (*Muslimsk dialognettverk*) – was established. The two umbrella organisations represent different mosques, and only MDN is a member of the Council for Religious and Lifestance Communities in Norway (STL). It is here noteworthy that the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Norge, which is related to the organisation presented in Amna Mahmoud's article (this issue), is not a member of either the IRN or the MDN although it partakes in dialogue conversations on the same footing in the STL. According to Leirvik (2001), religious dialogue has been important in developing Norwegian society into one where religious beliefs and lifestances are welcome.

Islamic education in Norway is organised in different ways, but mostly through already established faith and/or cultural organisations, and teaching national languages is part of the curriculum; thus, pupils attending a Bosnian mosque will have the possibility to learn and practise Bosnian, as the textbooks are in Bosnian. Transnational mosques offer different classes, for example in Arabic and Norwegian, depending on the mosque organisation – transnational or national – but also on the language skills of the teacher/imam and the pupils attending the classes. However, Arabic is learned as the language of ritual. A report on the education of children in MDN mosques in Oslo was published in 2023 underlining the internal differences based on both the theological stance and national belonging of the mosques (Eggen 2023).

In Denmark, the first mosque was established in 1967 and the first Muslim faith and cultural organisation in 1977, and since then the number of both mosques and Islamic faith organisations has increased, amounting to 170, primarily Sunni, mosques in 2017 (only 20 are Shia and two Ahmadiyya) and 28 Islamic faith organisations approved by the Danish State (Kühle and Larsen 2017). Both mosques and faith organisations are primarily organised according to ethnicity. According to religious sociologist Lene Kühle, approximately 20-25% of Danish Muslims were members of these organisations in 2006 (Kühle 2006). During the years after the cartoon crisis in 2006, three umbrella organisations (Muslimernes Fællesråd [2006] Dansk Muslimsk Union [2008], Den Islamiske Union i Danmark [2013]) were established to support the cooperation of the many Muslim organisations and provide them with a collective voice

when engaging with politicians and the media.

According to Danish law, a Muslim organisation can apply to become a recognized religious organisation if it is set up as an association and has at least 50 adult members with resident status and Danish citizenship. Some mosques establish a specific association for their cultural activities and can receive financial support for this work if what they do can be defined as civic education for their members. Once recognized as an organisation, it is indirectly subsidised by the Danish state through tax deductions for donations made by its members and exemptions from property tax. It also attains the right to perform marriages with civil validity and access to visas for overseas imams, yet the organisations must be authorised to receive these donations and visas, as the law bans – especially overseas – donations from, and visas for persons “who oppose or undermine democracy, and fundamental freedom and human rights” (Report on International Religious Freedom: Denmark 2022). With increased concern for the role played by Muslim organisations, measures have thus been taken to surveil their funding from foreign states and organisations, as well as their initiatives to invite imams.

A study by Marie Bisbjerg (2011) of 73 mosques depicts that 83 of them provide education for 10% of Danish Muslim children and youth, including reading of the Qur’an, teaching about Islam, language instruction, and homework tutoring. In another more qualitative study of after-school activities for children and youth in Danish mosques, Tina Maagaard (2011) notes that the participating mosques all include the teaching of the Qur’an, Islam, and Arabic, but that the Arabic mosques focus on recitations of the Qur’an, whereas the Pakistani and Turkish mosques concentrate more on the teaching of Urdu and Turkish. Her study also finds that the mosques organise sports and social activities for the attending children and youth. It has also been pointed out that there is an overlap between some mosques and Muslim free schools, as imams teach in the schools and the schools provide space for Friday prayer (Kühle & Larsen 2017).

## The articles in this issue

The articles in this issue address different types of Islamic education.

In the first article, Maria Lindebæk Lyngsøe examines the



pivotal role of education in the lives of Danish Muslim women who are students and voluntary instructors in Islamic education. The knowledge-sharing of these women occurs in domestic settings, where Islamic teachings are seamlessly integrated into their upbringing practices, and in institutionalised spaces like mosque-based programs. The women emphasise the unique significance of Denmark's context to minority religious practice but also reveal how their Danish middle-class identity plays a significant role in their 'intensive' engagement in their children's education. Their motivation stems from a strong desire to educate their own children in Islam and a belief in nurturing virtue through care and commitment to a broader moral community. Here, sharing knowledge of Islam serves a dual purpose: shaping the future of Muslim generations and enhancing their personal piety. The article thus challenges the view of education as individual self-building, highlighting its role in fostering communities and piety as something nurtured through relational lines.

Synnøve Markeng discusses the perceptions teachers in Norwegian state schools voice regarding teaching about the Qur'an as a religious scripture in Norwegian religious education in state schools. Analysing religious scriptures and rituals along three dimensions, she shows that the interviewed teachers emphasised work with content and meaning (the semantic dimension) rather than recitation (the expressive dimension) or any special treatment (the iconic dimension) of the Qur'an. This is partly due to the comparative approach of the subject and the fact that the teaching of Islam is modelled on that of Christianity, but also caused by a concern that listening to the recitation of the Qur'an will be understood as confessional or contribute to an exotic or harmful representation of Islam.

In her article, Nora Eggen investigates the history of the *koranskole* (Qur'anic school) in Norway, and shows how it has become a catch-all term that conceptualises non-formal, religious, educational leisure-time activities organised in mosques. She argues that although the Qur'an is central to Muslim faith and to Islamic religious education, *koranskole* is not an emic term coined on the basis of the Islamic tradition. Instead, although representing a diverse range of activities, it is an orientalist trope that has brought them all together under the same label, which is used as a standard in debates concerning Muslims in Norway and their religious education versus their

successful integration into Norwegian society. She also suggests a typology for the meaning, use, and function of the term *koranskole*.

Based on interviews with young Swedish Muslims, Jenny Berglund discusses some of the co-curricular activities within the broad category of Islamic supplementary education in mosque organisations, such as football, mathematics, and homework, which take place in connection with more classical forms of Islamic education. Her analysis shows that Islamic supplementary education with its co-curricular activities, allow students to make friends, improve their social skills, and get involved in new activities that might not otherwise be accessible to them. They can therefore be understood as sources of extra-familial social capital that have a compensatory effect for children and students without ready access to it otherwise.

In her study on Jamia Ahmadiyya (AMJ) UK, a UK-based institute for the education of Ahmadiyya imams and missionaries, and its Scandinavian-born students and alumni, Amna Mahmood presents various sites of learning within the organisation. Focusing on *tabligh* (propagation) and *tarbiyyat* (upbringing), she demonstrates that the practice of learning is a multifaceted and crucial part of the AMJ and that it is necessary to understand the organisation as a missionary movement to grasp how religious education is formulated and practised. Furthermore, Mahmood makes the point that education and learning are essential in the preservation of minority religions in Scandinavia, discussing how contextual needs and boundaries are negotiated and how a double minority ensures its survival. She shows that for the Norwegian Ahmadi Muslims the opportunity to educate scholars at the Jamia UK is essential, as the “import” of non-Norwegian Ahmadi imams is not an option, while leaders should have first-hand knowledge of the society within which they are to function. Mahmood’s article also indirectly explains the active engagement of the Ahmadi community in Norwegian society by virtue of Ahmadi imams who take part in various discussions in society, but also through active engagement on different platforms.

## Conclusion

The outline in this introduction points to both similarities and

differences between the three Scandinavian countries with regard to the role of Christianity, the practice of secularism, the political approach to Muslim migrants, how Christianity and Islam are taught in state schools, and how Muslim minorities' religiosity and claims regarding Islamic education in Muslim free schools or by Muslim organisations are perceived, handled, and governed.

Although all three countries are considered among the most secular in the world according to world-wide statistics (PEW), the role of Protestant Christianity varies in relation to self-understanding. While the division between state and church happened much earlier in Denmark, the majority of Danes define themselves as 'cultural-Christians', and a secularised form of Christianity is broadly perceived as a central part of Danishness. This is not the same in Norway and Sweden, where the state and church were split later. While the majority of Norwegians and Swedes are members of the Norwegian and Swedish Christian Churches, a larger percentage of the inhabitants, compared to Denmark, identify as non-religious and a smaller percentage as non-practicing Christians; however, while secularity is a more explicit component of the Norwegian and Swedish self-understanding, the Protestant heritage is still visible on closer examination. As we have seen, this may have had importance in relation to minority religions such as Islam, with both Norway and Sweden maintaining a more welcoming approach up until recently. This has however drastically changed in recent years, with the anti-Muslim discourse also becoming much harsher in these two countries.

As members of the European and international community, the Scandinavian countries are committed to religious freedom and public expression, as well as the right to non-discrimination based on culture, religion, and ethnicity. However, both the growing number of Muslims and the notion that Islam is now a part of Scandinavian national culture and identity present a number of challenges to the general public. In terms of Muslim immigration we can see both similarities and differences between the three countries. Over the past decades, Sweden has, in line with its 'humanitarian superpower' image, welcomed significantly more immigrants than either Norway and Denmark. While Denmark has increasingly tightened its migration, Sweden has tried to retain a more humanitarian stance. The 2015 refugee crisis can be characterised as an immigration

shock, which sparked a major policy change, and a variety of new policy proposals were made in all three Scandinavian countries in order to stem incoming migration. Although the direction of policy change was similar, the policy instruments used, as well as the style and content of policy actors' legitimising and coordinating discourses, differed. In short, we can see that Sweden broke away from its humanitarian path, Denmark continued along its already strict path, and Norway maintained its middle line (Hagelund 2020).

All three countries have a strong welfare state that prides itself on ensuring social equality and welfare, including free education, for its citizens, which improves the educational opportunities of minorities. Yet, often explained by a concern for integration, social and cultural cohesion, and a worry about Islamic radicalism, the welfare state also engages actively in the education of minority children and in how Muslim citizens organise their religious lives. The way the three countries organise religious education and teach Islam in their state schools reflects, to a great extent, their general approach to secularism, Christianity, and Muslim migrants, as well as their specific social imaginary about the nation and the welfare state. In Sweden, the identification as a neutral, inclusive, and humanistic society is reflected in the choice to teach religion as a neutral, non-confessional subject called Knowledge About Religion wherein knowledge about Christianity is not prioritised but taught alongside other religions from a 'study of religion' perspective. In Norway, the politics of a 'lifstance open society' is seen in how pupils and their parents up until 1997 were given a choice between a confessional religious subject with close ties to the Christian Church and a 'lifstance communities' (*livssyn*) subject. Finally, in Denmark, the national imaginary that Christianity is part and parcel of Danish culture and the state school is the societal channel for this culture may be seen in how Christianity has remained the main syllabus topic and also in the name of the religious subject, while other religions take second place and are not mandatory until seventh grade. Thus, while the Swedish schools and, from a later date, the Norwegian schools strive for a secularistic and neutral approach, with Swedish teachers of religion identifying particularly strongly with this neutral stance wherein Christianity is not privileged over other religions, Danish schools more explicitly prioritise Christianity and only teach about Islam in a limited way.

It is noteworthy that research shows that, despite these large differences and the intention to provide neutral teaching of religion in Swedish and Norwegian schools, the teaching and textbooks in all three school systems tend to treat Christianity as the norm and Islam and Muslims as the problematic other. Resting on the twin pillars of an understanding of religion as archaic, and negative media images of Islam, Muslims are portrayed as more religious and tied by religious rules and more prone to dogmatism and radicalism than Christians, who are often portrayed as free-minded, 'cultural Christians'. Research from Norway and Sweden thus reports that Muslim pupils find the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the religious education syllabus stigmatising.

Interestingly, both Sweden and Denmark provide opportunities for Muslim parents to organise their own schools and, thus, the education of their children, which has facilitated the teaching of Islam in a more confessional manner. In Denmark, the possibility to establish Muslim schools is a consequence of parents' constitutional right, established in 1849, to organise the teaching of their own children, which cannot be denied to Muslim parents. In contrast, when Sweden amended the Education Act in 1992 to ease the establishment of independent schools, it was well-known that religious communities could make use of this possibility. Nonetheless, the main public debate in Sweden on Muslim schools relates to the potential lack of integration, and likewise in Denmark, where the schools have been seen to challenge the integration of Muslim children and thus the social and cultural cohesion of Danish society. The arguments against establishing Muslim schools in Norway reflect the same concern that Muslim schools will be a threat to the integration of Muslim children. In the Danish context, a central concern has been that this teaching will foster radical Islamism, and this has led to an increased surveillance of the teaching and funding of the schools and, as a consequence, the closure of two of them.

In all three countries, Muslims come together in a range of different types of organisations, often mosques, and often along ethnic lines; however, umbrella organisations gather together the different Muslim groups and associations, with the primary intent of presenting a collective voice to the state and the media. There are two such umbrella organisations in Norway, three in Denmark, and seven in Sweden, indicating both a difference in

numbers of Muslims living in the countries, and also the internal diversity among Muslims. The organisations are eligible for public funding in all three countries – although only for their cultural activities in Denmark – which gives the authorities a way to monitor and regulate their practices. Comparing this to how the three states act towards Muslim schools, the Muslim organizations and mosques in Sweden and Denmark are also affected by the overall national self-understanding in these countries; that is the neutral/open, but increasingly controlling approach in Sweden and the controlling stance in Denmark. In Norway, the situation is more complex. Whereas Norway has a not-approving stance to Muslim schools, which is in stark contrast to the idea of a “lifestance open society”, the situation is different for Muslim organisations and mosques. As there are no Muslim schools in Norway, mosques have developed into both spaces for worship and socialisation, and also important educational institutions and facilitators for communication with Norwegian society more broadly (Stokke Nielsen 2010; Stene 2020; Eggen 2023). This development can be seen as a result of the needs of the Muslim community in the country, but it is also relevant to see this development through the lens of lifestance open society, which is official state policy towards faith and life stance communities and the recognition of these as important and significant community builders (Staalset 2023). Further research and comparison of how state policies in the three countries envision and influence the ways Muslims organise religious education is of importance in understanding the role of Islamic education for Muslims in Scandinavia.

In this introduction we have provided context and also pointed out similarities and differences that are of importance for further understanding the articles. As we see it, putting Denmark, Norway, and Sweden side by side, in some sense comparing them, opens up interesting perspectives and insights that would not be visible with a focus on only one country. The challenge of drawing such comparisons is complicated by the fact that each country, despite considerable common history, has its own unique historical, cultural, social, and educational background and national self-understanding, all of which can create significant differences in their approaches. This notwithstanding, working comparatively across national borders can enable us to see the need for new national research, since it provides an opportunity to make visible how a national context,

i.e. national laws and norms, shape a specific issue. We hope that this introduction will have this function.

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