

The Secular Future of Religious Education in Europe

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<i>Title:</i>	<i>Integrative Religious Education in Europe. A Study-of-Religions Approach</i>		
<i>Series:</i>	<i>Religion and Reason</i>		
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<i>Publisher:</i>	<i>Walter de Gruyter</i>	<i>City:</i>	<i>Berlin, New York</i>
<i>Year:</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>Number of pages:</i>	<i>xvi + 442 pages</i>
<i>Price:</i>	<i>98,00 €</i>	<i>ISBN:</i>	<i>978-3-11-019661-0</i>

Introduction

- ¶1 The academic study of religion(s) in Europe has, in the past few years, become aware of *religious education* (hereafter: RE) as an important research field. Whereas research on RE was previously considered a task for the (confessional) theological didactics of religion, the view is now emerging that the academic study of religion should develop its own *secular* didactics of religion and lobby for the replacement of confessional RE in public schools with RE taught from a neutral, study-of-religions viewpoint.
- ¶2 An important figure in the development of a secular didactics of religion is Wanda Alberts from Bergen (Norway), earlier Bremen (Germany). Alberts has recently edited a theme issue of the journal *Numen* (2008, vol. 55, no. 2-3) on didactics of religion that included her own programmatic article *Didactics of the Study of Religion* (Alberts 2008a). In this article she identifies three tasks for the didactics of the study of religion: »(1) analysis of models of education about religion/s, (2) development of concepts for education about religion/s, (3) engage-



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Published by: ZJR – Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft | ISSN 1862-5886
URL: <http://zjr-online.net>, URN: <urn:nbn:de:0267-18625886-9>

Citation: Davidsen, Markus (2010): *The Secular Future of Religious Education in Europe. Review of: Wanda Alberts: Integrative Religious Education in Europe*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007, in: *Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft*, v (July), URN: <urn:nbn:de:0267-201007-davidsen-1>

ment in practical issues related to education about religion/s, including participation in political and public debates about religion, religious plurality, education, and religious education« (ibid., 300).

- ¶3 In her thorough and lucidly written PhD thesis *Integrative Religious Education in Europe. A Study-of-Religions Approach*, Alberts engages in the first two tasks. The nuanced analysis of integrative RE in England and Sweden will perhaps primarily attract the interest of specialists in the field, but Alberts' clear vision of the secular future of RE in Europe deserves the attention and concern of everybody engaged in the academic study of religion (see the third section below).

Integrative RE in Sweden and England

- ¶4 The core of the book is an account of integrative RE in two selected case countries, England and Sweden. By *integrative* RE Alberts understands non-confessional education about religion where the entire class is taught as a whole. The opposite of integrative RE is *separative-confessional* RE where the class is split up so that the pupils receive different education according to their confessional adherence. In Germany, for instance, classes are normally divided into groups receiving either Roman-Catholic, Protestant or general non-religious ethics (*Alternativfach Ethik* or *Werte und Normen*).
- ¶5 England and Sweden have been selected because they are pioneers with regard to integrative RE and therefore provide good examples to follow for countries that are only now beginning to move from separative-confessional to integrative RE. England is interesting, because the country since the 1960s has fostered internationally influential RE theorists (such as Ninian Smart, Michael Grimmitt, and Robert Jackson), and because its de-central organisation has allowed for much experimentation with different approaches and projects. Sweden has been chosen because it was the first country to introduce mandatory integrative and secular RE in schools (as far back as 1962; 221 and 226¹) and because it is still the only European country to have done so.
- ¶6 Alberts outlines the didactics of religion, the political and juridical regulation of RE in schools and the existing textbooks for both countries. Her book does not, however, contain studies of RE in practice, the learning outcome, pupils' and teachers' attitudes towards the subject, nor the possible influences of the chosen form of RE on society. These are all areas which Alberts conceives of as possible future research objects for the emerging secular didactics of religion.
- ¶7 RE in Sweden takes place within the framework of a centrally regulated state school system (215). The subject matter is not only religions, but all kinds of *livsåskådningar* (outlooks on life), including secular ideologies (236-244). Christianity nevertheless plays a dominant role in the curriculum (245). This is legitimised partly with reference to the demographic importance of Christianity as the unquestionably largest religion in Sweden and partly through a determination of

1 If not noted otherwise, page numbers refer to Alberts (2007).

the Swedish school's *värdegrund* (foundational values) as Christian-Humanist (217-218). However, the Swedish RE does not rest on any theological assumptions, such as the existence of God (226). The educational aim is to combine what Alberts calls a *descriptive* dimension (learning about different outlooks on life) with an *existential* dimension (developing one's own outlook on life; 226-229). The strongest emphasis is put on the existential dimension (*ibid.*), and it is thus an important goal of Swedish RE that pupils reflectively develop their own opinions and take a stand on existential matters.

¶8 RE in England is locally organised by the so-called *Local Educational Authority* bodies. These bodies lay down the subject matter and structure of RE in close co-operation with teachers as well as with representatives from both the Anglican Church and other denominations and religions (94-104). In contrast to Sweden, the subject matter of English RE focuses on the so-called »world religions«, generally leaving out non-religious outlooks on life and the world. In consonance with Sweden, however, English RE strives to combine »learning *about* religion« (the *descriptive* dimension) and »learning *from* religion« (the *existential* dimension; 100)², and the existential dimension is most often considered primary. While it is generally agreed that confessional RE is no task for public schools, the nature of RE is not clearly secular as in Sweden. On the contrary, it is laid down nationally in the Educational Reform Act of 1988, that the school should further not only the »moral, cultural, mental, and physical« development of the pupils, but also their »spiritual« development (105).

¶9 Because of the local organisation, England has seen many more different local experiments and approaches to integrative RE than Sweden. Alberts presents seven approaches to RE (as well as two less interesting approaches to integrative education on Christianity that I will not consider further). The different approaches provide a detailed documentation of the developments in English didactics of religion from the 1970s to the present day.

¶10 Alberts' main point of critique of integrative RE in England is that most of the older approaches (from the 1970s and 1980s) and some of the newer ones (1990s and 2000s) are *religious* or *universal theologian* in nature because they aim at giving pupils a general religious sensibility, even though they are non-confessional and not aimed at educating the pupils into a specific tradition. Since the English language does not allow one to speak of »religious RE«, I will in the following use the more cumbersome term »*religionist* RE« to be able to clearly distinguish between »religious education« in general (whose *subject matter* is religion) and »*religionist* RE« in particular (whose *approach* is religious, but not confessional).³

2 The now widely used distinction between »learning from religion« and »learning about religion« is Michael Grimmitt's. Grimmitt operates also with the third concept »learning religion« denoting confessional RE. See, for instance, Grimmitt (2000).

3 In my view, the religionist approaches that Alberts discusses, are based on the same three main assertions. The first two are *theological*: (1) They *ontologically* assume the existence of the Divine or Sacred, and (2) they *universally* claim that all religions lead to this same Sacred. The final assertion is *anthropological*: (3) The religionist approaches *existentially* claim that religion and religiosity are indispensable parts of being human.

¶11 Alberts rightly considers religionist RE incompatible with the modern, secular and democratic school. She therefore criticises the *Westhill Project* for its emphasis on »spiritual development« and its »universalistic interpretation« of religions as expressions of the same divine source (119). The *Experiential Approach* is criticised for the assumptions about the existence of a sacred source that one can learn to experience (138), and the *Critical Approach* for its focus on »spiritual literacy« and the reference to »ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth« in its understanding of religion (170-171). The approach called *A Gift to the Child* comes under fire for listing »belief« among its learning goals (128). As far as I can see, the *Narrative Approach* which aims at liberating authentic and subjective »faith« from the alienating, ideological »religions« (183), and the *Constructive Approach* which has a similar aim (177), are equally religionist, but Alberts fails to criticise this because she rather wants to stress their emphasis on ideology critique of religions – which is a cardinal point for her. Another element that Alberts points out as positive in one of the religionist approaches is the wide definition of religion in the *Critical Approach* which allows for the inclusion of non-religious outlooks on life and the world amongst the subject matter of RE (171).⁴

¶12 Not surprisingly, Alberts is most positive towards the single genuinely secular English approach to integrative RE, Robert Jackson's *Interpretive Approach*. This approach, which is the English approach resembling the Swedish model most, is praised for developing proper and up-to-date textbooks built on anthropological fieldwork among young adherents of different religions in Britain, its only minor weakness being the lack of a gender dimension (161-162).⁵

The Future of Integrative RE in Europe according to Alberts

¶13 In the last and highly interesting chapter of the book, Alberts condenses best practices from England and Sweden into a coherent vision for the future of RE in a modern and multicultural Europe. Her view can be summarised in the following seven main points.

¶14 Firstly, like in Sweden and England, RE should be organised as a school subject of its own, and not merely as a »learning dimension« of other school subjects as is the case in for instance the Netherlands (355).

4 Religionist RE is not only an English phenomenon. With the School Law of 1994 the Danish primary school education took a step backwards from a knowledge-promoting, integrative RE to a religionist, integrative RE centred around Paul Tillich's concept of »the religious dimension« of life. In a recent article, Katharina Frank and Christoph Bochsinger have shown that much non-confessional religious education in German-speaking Switzerland is still religionist (2008).

5 Recently the Danish sociologist of religion René Dybdal Pedersen published a similar kind of textbook (2008) for lower secondary school religious education in Denmark. It was enthusiastically received by both pupils and teachers.

- ¶15 Secondly, also following both the English and Swedish model, RE in public schools should be *integrative*. Pupils with different religions and pupils without religion should be taught together without the possibility of exemption (355). This first point implies a critique of the old-fashioned German system of separate and confessional RE.⁶
- ¶16 Thirdly, following the Swedish model and the *Integrative Approach*, RE should be *secular*. Thus, RE should be neither confessional nor religionist (356) and the teacher training should accordingly be modelled on the academic study of religion rather than on theology (383 and 386). With this third point Alberts extends her critique to countries such as England and Denmark with integrative, but religionist RE.
- ¶17 Fourthly, Alberts allows for both a descriptive and an existential dimension in RE. But in contrast to both the English and Swedish traditions, she clearly states that the descriptive dimension should be primary, a view that she shares with for instance the Danish scholar of religion Tim Jensen (2008) (358).
- ¶18 Fifthly, following the Swedish model and the *Critical Approach*, Alberts suggests that the subject matter should not be just religion/s, but also non-religious outlooks on life (374). Furthermore, she suggests the inclusion of political and even economical ideologies such as capitalism (389).
- ¶19 Sixthly, Alberts stresses that not only religions themselves, but also the *representations of religions* in the media, political discourse, textbooks etc. should be subject matter in RE (379).
- ¶20 Finally, both religions (as well as secular outlooks on life) and representations of religions should not only be studied, but also be subject to (ideology) critique. Religions should be criticised if, for example, they breach human rights (26, 269 and 359f). Representations of religions should be criticised if they present an untrue and ideologically distorted or essentialist depiction of the religion in question. Alberts is correct to point out the huge problem that many RE textbooks repeat ideological and essentialist stereotypes (376-377). It is worth emphasising that Alberts criticises both overly negative representations (such as the representation of Islam in Swedish textbooks as essentially violent, fundamentalist and intolerant, 278ff) and overly positive ones (such as the Western misconception that Buddhism is inherently open and tolerant, 381).
- ¶21 I fully share Alberts' vision of the future integrative RE in Europe as it is put forward in the seven points mentioned above. Nevertheless, in the remainder of this review I want to discuss a few minor points of critique relating to the last point, the critique of religions and representation of religions. This is both important in its own right, as well as in the light of recent articles in this journal devoted to the critical impetus of the academic study of religion (Schmidt 2006; Albrecht 2007).

6 Alberts briefly outlines the implications of her model for German religious education in a recent article in *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* (2008b).

Ideology Critique in RE

- ¶22 Alberts' view on ideology critique in RE seems to have two sources of inspiration. Firstly, Alberts is inspired by educational theorists such as Wolfgang Klafki for whom education as such should be critical and emancipatory, i.e. reflectively question and discuss all knowledge, values and authorities (63f and 361). Furthermore, Alberts is inspired by the German scholar of religion Kurt Rudolph's call for a critical and self-critical academic study of religion (25).
- ¶23 As mentioned above, RE should, according to Alberts, be critical towards both religions and representations of religions. However, since non-religious outlooks of life and the world are included in her ideal RE, she furthermore asks for a critique of capitalism (389) to be included in RE as well as a critique of the national politics if they violate human rights (310).
- ¶24 I generally agree with Alberts that RE should include a critique of (ideological) representations of religion. I see, however, three interrelated problems with this notion as presented throughout the book.
- ¶25 One problem is that while Alberts praises the critical research approaches of post-colonialism and feminism for their ability to unveil the true ideological nature of Euro-centric and anthropocentric representations of religions, no critique is levelled against the ideological agendas of post-colonialism and feminism themselves.
- ¶26 Another problem concerns the unreasonably large range of phenomena that Alberts wants RE to criticise. As mentioned above, this range should according to Alberts also include a critique of politics and capitalism. I find it reasonable that the academy voices a critique of the introduction of a capitalist logic into the university, including departments of religion (as does Albrecht 2007, 25), or into the educational sector (as does Alberts 2007, 363). A general critique of capitalism and other political and economical ideologies is certainly important. But I do not consider it an important task for the academic study of religion (but rather for sociology and educational science), nor a relevant issue for RE (but rather for a social science school subject).
- ¶27 The third problem is that Alberts, despite her continuous deconstruction of the arguments of other groups, seems to believe that she herself speaks from a privileged position. I will give two examples. Firstly, she states that »[p]oliticians need to distinguish clearly between religious, ideological, economical and educational interests and make educational interests the prior concern in decisions about education« (387). But what exactly constitutes an *educational* interest or an educational argument? There are plenty of examples of education and edification theorists who claim, on what they consider to be educational grounds, that public education should contain a religious dimension. Even though I concur with Alberts' disagreement with such a *non-secular* position on education, I cannot see how we can disqualify it as *non-educational*. Nevertheless, that is exactly what Alberts does when she, in opposition thereto, claims her own model of RE to be not only »educational«, but »truly educational« (354; her emphasis). Secondly, Alberts writes that

»[it] is high time that (religious, economic and other) lobbies are actually recognised as lobbies« (366f). She seems to think that while the view of others on RE is always political, ideological or even religious, her view is not – hers is supposedly educational and scientific. But Alberts' ideas on RE are just as much founded on an ideology, hers only being a secular and humanistic one. Alberts should thus confess to belong to a lobby as well, namely the secular, human rights watching study-of-religions lobby, trying to gain influence on the future of European RE.

¶28 Despite my above mentioned points of critique and minor disagreements with Alberts, I want to emphasise that I fundamentally agree with her seven points on the ideal future RE in European public schools. It is my hope that she will continue contributing to the development of an academic didactics of religion and to the strengthening of a study-of-religions lobby able to secularise European RE.

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