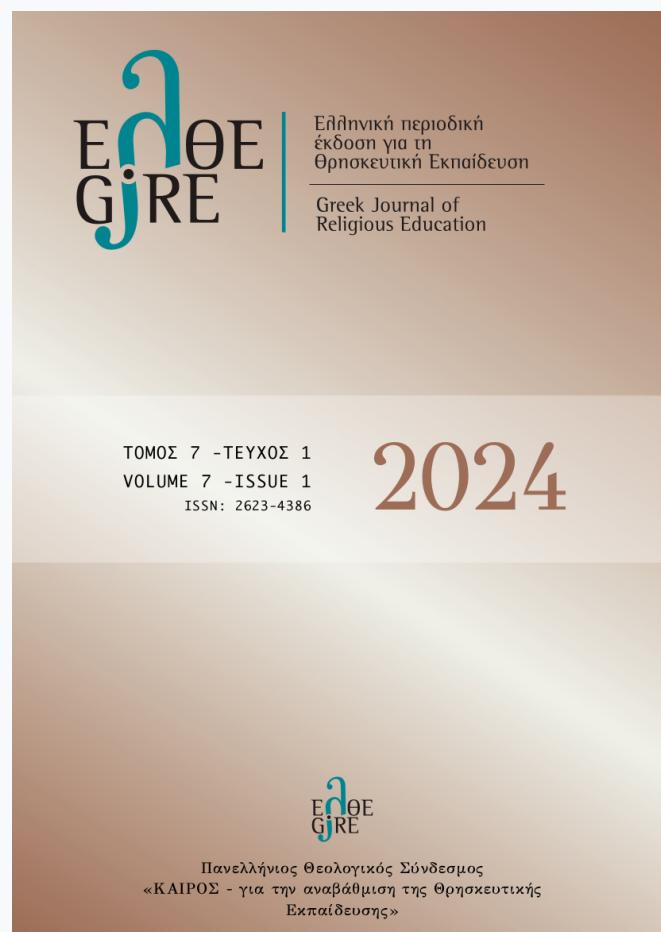


# Greek Journal of Religious Education (GjRE)

Vol 7, No 1 (2024)

Greek Journal of Religious Education



## The Narratives of Secularization and Their Implications for Religious Education

Marlene Printz Jellesen

doi: [10.12681/gjre.39559](https://doi.org/10.12681/gjre.39559)

### To cite this article:

Jellesen , M. P. (2024). The Narratives of Secularization and Their Implications for Religious Education. *Greek Journal of Religious Education (GjRE)*, 7(1), 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.12681/gjre.39559>

# The Narratives of Secularization and Their Implications for Religious Education

**Marlene Printz Jellesen** , Associate Professor at the Department of Teacher Education, Aalborg, Denmark, and PhD student at the Centre for Education Policy Research, Institute of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, Denmark, [mpj@ucn.dk](mailto:mpj@ucn.dk)

## Abstract

In Religious Education (RE), it is not possible to talk about the role of religion today without addressing the concept of secularization. Using an explorative methodology, this article explores the potential of approaching key topics in RE, in this case secularization, with a narrative approach. The article presents four narratives of secularization and explores their possible implications based on research literature on RE. In doing so, it draws on empirical research from a Nordic RE context and reads this research as if it were narratives of secularization. The article demonstrates that the narrative approach has potential in RE and can be an alternative to the distinction between learning *about* and learning *from* religion, as students always learn both *about* and *from* the content they are presented with. The distinction is due to the recontextualization in the school not being an option in the pedagogical practice. The article also shows that the narratives about secularization must be in motion so that the teachers do not pass on an outdated secularization hypothesis but present the complexity of religion in a post-secular context.

**Keywords:** Secularization, recontextualization, narrative approach, RE, learning *about* and *from* religion

## 1. Introduction

The secularization of Western European societies is the result of a long historical process in which the role of religion has changed. It is not possible to talk about the role of religion in RE without addressing the concept of secularization. In the recontextualized pedagogical-didactic context in RE, teachers make simplifications: A school subject is never a direct reflection of an academic subject at the university level. Given the aim of the school, the school subject will always be embedded in a political,

societal, cultural, and pedagogical-didactic context in ways that are different from other educational facilities. The English linguist and sociologist of education Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) clarifies this theme with the concept of recontextualization (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33). The school is a pedagogical Bildung institution that aims at understanding the content it works with. Therefore, in a school context, one will endeavor to ensure that students learn *from* the academic content they are learning *about*. The very widespread religious didactic distinction between learning *about* and learning *from* religion (Grimmitt, 1987, p. 235) therefore contains some built-in challenges in a pedagogical context. In what follows, a narrative approach will be explored as a possible alternative based on the secularization theme. Students encounter narratives of secularization in RE that they both learn *about* and *from*. It is therefore crucial that the narratives are nuanced and in motion so that an outdated hypothesis of secularization is not passed (Berger, 1999).

In my ongoing PhD thesis, I am examining how religions are constructed in the context of RE in the classroom in the Danish primary and lower secondary schools (8. and 9. grade: 14-15 year old students). Through classroom studies, the thesis intends to study which discourses about religion are present in the classroom. By applying critical discourse analysis (Fairclough) and with the use of Bernstein's methodology, it is the aim to study these discourses' influence on the students' opportunities to participate and hence their academic benefit. How teachers talk about religion and secularity can have an impact on the students' ability to engage, participate, and understand the phenomenon of religion. In Denmark, where the subject is non-denominational, it is necessary to talk about religion in a secularized context, but it becomes crucial how the teacher recontextualizes secularization and its consequences to give the students an understanding of religion in modern times.

## 2. Research Question and Methodology

The article has an explorative character and will study the following research question: Can the narrative approach be a way to approximate key religious phenomena in RE, in this case secularization, and act as an exploratory tool that supports students' nuanced and critical understanding in RE practice and which secularization narratives carry implications to be challenged by multi-layered narratives? The research literature on RE is in the article read as if it were based on certain narratives of secularization to explore the narratives in the recontextualized and pedagogized classroom and investigate what possible implications they may have for RE. The study does not aim to use the narratives as analytical tools but as explorative tools to test whether the narratives can function. In addition to Bernstein's concept of recontextualization, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is applied (Fairclough, 1992). The 'narratives' are treated in the article as 'discourses' that are related to studies in the sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, and RE. Narratives can contextualize abstract concepts such as secularization and conceptual knowledge and understandings and be a mediating tool and structure that is familiar to students. Narratives can be seen as

---

academically exploratory tools through which the students can think and learn (Wertsch, 2008).

The article will first clarify the concept of 'Narratives of Secularization' and give a brief insight into how secularization and secularity have been dealt with in religious studies and in RE research. Studies on religion and religiosity from different disciplines and research areas (e.g., sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, and theology) help to clarify what understandings of religion the process of secularization has led to, and these disciplines also help to challenge the narratives. Four narratives of secularization are presented, and based on classroom research from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, including elements from my own ongoing research project, the possible consequences of these narratives of secularization for RE and students' academic benefit.

### 3. Narratives of Secularization

Narratives of secularization express the recontextualization of religion and secularization that happens in the classroom, in stipulations, and in society in general, for example, through the media. The term recontextualization is, as mentioned, taken from the English linguist and educational sociologist Basil Bernstein and used in my thesis to study the interaction between the levels of the education system and the pedagogical practice in RE. Bernstein identifies three central fields in the educational system: the intellectual field, the official field (stipulations), and the pedagogical field (pedagogical device) (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein emphasizes that recontextualization takes place both in the official field through the stipulations, which are "colored" by the time and the political, cultural, theological, and pedagogical currents that prevail, and in the pedagogical field, where a wide range of pedagogical-didactic conditions come into play when academic knowledge is selected, disseminated, and pedagogized (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33).

In a pedagogical didactic context, simplifications are always made. But every teacher must ensure that these simplifications do not become an obstacle to understanding the phenomenon of religion. Even though the secularization hypothesis has been rejected (Casanova, 2015; Habermas, 2006; Berger, 1999), the secularization thinking associated with it, inspired by Max Weber (1864-1929) and the early Peter Berger (1929-2017), among others, has had significant impact and historical consequences, resulting in narratives about religion that can have an impact on RE in schools. I will try to clarify the problems and counterproductive results that certain secularization narratives can cause in RE. Without an awareness of the multi-layered nature of different narratives, secularism risks becoming the normative and dominant approach to RE.

#### 4. Secularization – a Complex Phenomenon – also in RE

Secularization is a framework condition for RE, but what do we mean when we use the term “secularization”? And how do we make students aware of the complexity of this concept? The secularization of Western European societies, including Danish society, is an expression of a long historical process in which the role of religion has changed greatly. Internal religious factors in the West and societal changes and decisions have contributed to the process. The process of secularization is not an evolutionary, irreversible process, but the result of several complex cultural and political conditions (Dobbelare, 2002, p. 157).

A distinction must be made between secularization at the political-institutional level, caused by concrete changes in law, and secularization as a condition of the worldviews and lived reality of individuals and communities, caused by changes in ideas and social attitudes (which may of course be underpinned by the political-institutional level). In Denmark, for example, church and state are not separated in the constitution from 1849, as the state supports the Evangelical Lutheran Church as stated in section 4 of the law. None the less however, the Danes are very secularized when it comes to religious consciousness. In general, they don't see themselves as thinking or acting in terms of religion. It is therefore essential to introduce students to a narrative with this distinction, just as it is crucial to teach them to distinguish between secularization and secularism. Denmark, for example, is a secularized country, especially on an individual level, but is not characterized by secularism like France. There is room for religion in public spaces such as schools, high schools, and hospitals.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1931-) problematizes in *A Secular Age* the secularization hypothesis with the question: ‘*Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, the year 1500 in our Western society, while in the year 2000 many of us find it not easy but even inevitable?*’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 25). He unfolds the process of secularization by nuancing the common understandings of secularization, either understood as the liberation of the state and its institutions from religion, where religion is displaced from the public to the private sphere (societal level) or a historical dismantling and decline of religious belief and practice (individual level). Secularization, according to Taylor, indicates instead a historical development from societies where it was impossible not to believe in God to societies where belief in God is one option among many (Taylor, 2007, p. 5).

The modernity narrative that characterized the secularization hypothesis has been challenged and post-secularity has been used as a concept to capture the renewed influence of religion in society. (Habermas, 2006). Post-secularity is an ambiguous concept that can be defined in different ways, e.g. “as a Rediscovery of a Continuity with the Past” and “as the Resolution of the Sharp Boundary Between “the Religious” and “the Secular” or “Non-religious” (Franck & Thalén, 2021, pp. 1-16). The public school must thematize this ambiguity and how religion manifests itself in new ways both on a societal and individual level. Norwegian professor of RE Øystein Brekke challenges the assumption that a secular approach will ensure equal treatment of

religions and worldviews in RE because it is based on a problematic dichotomy between the secular and the religious. Instead, he points to a worldview-open disciplinary ontology where both critical and resource-oriented disciplinary approaches are used (Brekke, 2022, pp. 323-328).

### ***Narrative 1: Religion is a Private Matter and the Implications***

One of the dominant narratives that recontextualization of secularization has led to is that religion may be constructed as something private and individual, detached from the public and the common sphere. The discourse of religion as a private matter is very dominant both in RE and in general (Flensner 2015, pp. 130ff., 145ff.; Risenfors, 2011): For example, in a 2011 survey of 1,500 Danish primary schools, 409 school leaders responded to a questionnaire about the role of religion in schools, where the survey showed that the statements that received the most support were 1) Religion is a personal matter that has nothing to do with school, 2) conflicts about religion are about something else, and 3) religion is a source of conflict (Vive Jensen, 2019, p. 143). The background for this narrative is, of course, the Enlightenment's secularization efforts, which sought to remove religion from the public sphere domain on a secularist ideal. The general individualization of modernity has also contributed to this, and in the Western countries Freedom of religion naturally implies that religion is a private matter (cf. Section 67 of the Danish Constitution; UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18). But this narrative can exclude insight and prevent learners from gaining a broader understanding. They might think that religion has no significance for common public life, which is contradicted by both historical, educational and welfare research (Buchardt, 2023; Holland, 2020; Østergaard, 2005).

In Denmark, as mentioned, there is still a bond between the state and the church in our constitution (§ 4 & 6), and following tradition, the Danish parliament opens the political year first Tuesday in October with a religious service in the national folk church ("folkekirken"). Many schools in Denmark visit the folk church in the run-up to the Christmas holidays and take part in a Christmas service. On the Danish passport is a picture of Jesus painted on a stone from the Viking Age—the so-called Jelling Stone from 965. So, no matter whether you are an atheist, Muslim, or Christian, as a Dane, you have Jesus in your passport as a symbol of the historic connection between Christianity and the Danish nation. Therefore, when a teacher in my research, after telling the students about secularization and the relationship between state and church in Denmark, sums up that religion is a private matter, it is a problematic, simplistic narrative (Observation 190923).

A vague and sharp separation of the private and the public sphere when it comes to religion can lead to a particular "school secularism," which makes religion taboo and difficult to talk about in the public space that is the school (Gilliam, 2015). We have seen this in a Danish research project on "Muslims in the 'secular' Danish primary school." Teachers downplayed the role of religion in general and in RE and did not want religion to play a role in the daily life of the school (Gilliam, 2015, p. 173ff.). The ideal in the school was a relaxed and moderate religiosity. In RE, only

similarities between religions were emphasized because the teachers were afraid that revealing any differences between the religions would promote conflicts between the students (Gilliam, 2014, p. 47).

If, as in Gilliam's research, religion becomes a private matter and this becomes a hegemonic discourse in the classroom, it can lead to the misunderstanding that religion has no significance for common public life. That will make it difficult to legitimize the subject's place in a public school and difficult to understand the role of religion in public debate. The students with no religious affiliation may lack motivation for participation in the subject (Flensner, 2015). However, religion is a public and common matter, both societally and existentially. In the newspapers and on TV, there are daily stories involving religion; e.g., an issue has been the burning of Qur'ans in Sweden and Denmark and the public discussion of the relationship between freedom of expression and violations of religious feelings. This has led to an extensive public debate about whether the governments should ban the burning of religious books or not. The Danish government decided to ban Quran burnings in December 2023. The law, which has come into force, reads: '*... publicly or with intent to disseminate to a wider circle is guilty of improper treatment of a writing that has significant religious significance for a recognized religious community, or an object that appears to be such a writing*' (§ 110 e).

If you detach the subject of religion from controversies and challenges and make religion an individual, ahistorical, and apolitical phenomenon, the school fails to support the purpose of preparing students for a pluralistic society (Barnes, 2006, p. 398). Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam make it clear that religion is a public matter and that it is therefore important that RE is a part of education in the public sphere. They argue that RE is about making it possible for children to understand "*what a religious way of existing in the world might offer in leading one's life individually and collectively in order to play an educative part in the lives of children and young people as they come to speak and think and act in the world*" (Biesta & Hannam, 2023, p. 108). In *Religion and Education. The forgotten dimensions of Religious Education?* Hannam raises the question, "*What should religious education seek to achieve in the public sphere?*" (Hannam, 2021, p. 124). Education should be seen as preparing students for participation in the public space, and therefore she finds it desirable that students gain insight into the meaning of answers to existential questions expressed in religious and secular traditions and how people organize their lives as lived religions (Hannam, 2021, p. 131f.).

### ***Narrative 2: Religion and Faith as the Opposite of Knowledge and the Implications***

Another narrative that the recontextualization of secularization can entail is that religion, or faith, and knowledge constitute two completely different areas. Max Weber's (1864-1920) secularization thinking, with its focus on rationalization, has contributed to this sharp separation. Also, a subjectivation of religion, as we see for example in the religious existentialism of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), can increase the distance between faith and knowledge. In *Fear and*

*Trembling*, Kierkegaard states that “*Faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off*” (Kierkegaard, 1843/2003, p. 38) to clarify that religiosity has to do with the absurd and the incomprehensible. There is an incommensurability between the inner and outer when it comes to religiosity, which makes communication about the religious difficult. There is a hidden fervor attached to religion that has nothing to do with knowledge (Kierkegaard, 1843/2003).

Conflicts can arise between faith and knowledge, for example, if one wishes to relate religious doctrines to recognized scientific statements about, for example, the age of the universe or the biological evolution of species from a fundamentalist biblical view. However, too sharp a distinction may overlook the fact that faith and religion are also thought and reflection, and that beliefs have an epistemological content. Thus, faith and knowledge must be thought of dialectically so that RE can focus on ‘what is believed, what faith is, what it is to know, and what is known’ (Huggler, 2008, pp. 13-35).

A paradoxical approach to the relationship between belief and knowledge can be found in students` statements. In an interview I conducted with a religion teacher, she points out that students often come up to her and say, “*You know a lot about religion. [...] How can you not believe in it?*”. She also states, “*It's still me – right up until they are 15-16 years old – who must be the guarantor that they can believe. I believe so you can too. I would rather be a stone in the shoe because that's how it is with believing and not believing. It's only you who must take a stand*” (interview, 310523). It's thus as problematic to blur the distinction between faith and knowledge as it is to separate the two. The relationship between faith and knowledge must be thought of dialectically, and RE must deal with believing as a concept as well as the content of the belief. The Danish theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig's (1783-1872) distinction between faith (da. tro) and belief (da. anskuelse; view) can be used. Where faith indicates the private immediate trust in a metaphysical power, then belief indicates the belief content that the subject must provide knowledge of.

In several research projects, the Swedish researcher in RE, Karin Kittelmann Flensner, has shown how a generalized “we” is established in the classroom in RE in the upper secondary school (students aged 16-18). The generalized “we” is linked to the idea that religion belongs to the past, where there was less knowledge. A dominant discourse is that religion plays no role today, while atheism represents a kind of “neutrality” and “normality.” Religion is constructed negatively (especially Islam and Christianity) and linked to fundamentalism, oppression, and superstition, while secularity is linked to modernity (Flensner, 2015, p. 117ff.; Flensner, 2018, pp. 8-9). A non-religious position becomes dominant, which also means a clear neglect of the knowledge part of the subject while religious students keep a low profile and feel segregated (Flensner, 2015, p. 285f.).

A singular hegemonic discourse with a dichotomy between faith/religion and knowledge can lead to a neglect of the knowledge dimension of the subject and a negative social understanding of religion (Fairclough, 1992). Flensner shows, for

example, how a course on the Reformation and Martin Luther becomes more about what students do not believe in than giving students knowledge about this central part of European history and its historical consequences (Flensner, 2018, pp. 11-12). It can be a pedagogical challenge by focusing only on faith as a subjective certainty that one either has or lacks, as it leads to an anti-intellectualism that makes it difficult to discuss the content of faith as a subject matter (Huggler, 2008, p. 17).

### ***Narrative 3: Religion is Weakened and the Implications***

A third narrative of secularization that is dominant in the classroom is that there has been a general weakening of religion (Flensner, 2015). This is evident in the sense that religion has lost power and influence at a societal level, and there has been a significant decline in the membership of religious institutions in most European countries, such as the National Church in Denmark. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of “nones”— people with no religious affiliation (Andersen, Erkmen & Gundelach, 2019, p. 231). But if we delve deeper into sociological research on religion, the matter seems more complex, at least in Denmark. There are fewer non-churchgoers in the latest value survey from 2017 than in the 1981 survey, and there has been an increase in church attendance at festivals from 1990, which has remained constant since. In addition, there is an increase in belief in a divine power, while there is no or very little change in the proportion who believe in life after death, heaven, or hell (Andersen, Erkmen & Gundelach, 2019, pp. 236-237).

Anne Lundahl Mauritsen's PhD thesis examines the phenomenon of "The Scandinavian Paradox"— that is, the seemingly contradictory paradox that Scandinavians remain members of their national churches but identify themselves as irreligious. Based on semi-structured interviews with 30 people from Denmark, the analysis shows that the majority consider Christianity as a national, cultural foundation of society, even if they consider themselves irreligious. They associate Christianity with holiday celebrations and a strong foundation of values. The interviews showed little interest in matters of faith but were instead concerned with identity, meaning, tradition, and relationships. These are not mutually exclusive identities, but rather identities characterized by flexible and situational standpoints (Mauritsen, 2022). The research shows a need to take a broader perspective on religion and, for example, include the phenomenon of lived religion (McGuire, 2008). Emotions, narratives, embodiment, and practices must be considered when talking about religion. Everyday religion rarely follows dogmatic beliefs but is instead dynamic and highly context dependent (Mauritsen, 2022).

Focusing solely on the fact that membership in religious institutions is declining gives students a distorted and simplistic picture of religion in modern societies. For example, value studies and interviews must be included in RE to provide an antagonistic discourse and thus a more varied understanding of how religiosity is changing in the contemporary world. Complexity theory can nuance students' understanding because it makes clear that "*religious weakening, growth and change are occurring simultaneously*" (Furseth, 2018, p. 16). Secularization and individualization

alone cannot be referred to, thus breaking away from mainstream theories of religion, as there is no single indicator to understand religiosity: all indicators must be considered equal to examine how they relate to each other.

Having a hegemonic discourse of the weakening of religion will result in students thinking that religion is an outdated phenomenon (Flensner, 2015, pp. 100, 118). As a teacher, you can, whether deliberately or not, pass on an outdated secularization hypothesis, which will be problematic and unhelpful in understanding a society that is characterized by post-secularity (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). The renewed role of religion in society is not captured if such a narrative is not challenged in the school.

#### ***Narrative 4: Religion is a Phenomenon of Deprivation and the Implications***

A fourth narrative the recontextualization of secularization can entail is that religion is constructed as a phenomenon of deprivation. Religious conviction and commitment are explained by the fact that religion provides comfort and compensation when people are in a state of deprivation. This understanding of religion has roots back in Karl Marx's theory of religion but was further developed by American sociologists in the 20th century, especially Charles Glock (Furseth & Repstad, 2024).

We find the deprivation theory in the American sociologist of religion, Phil Zuckerman, who conducted field studies in Denmark and Sweden in 2007-2008. He interviewed a total of 150 people about their faith and concluded that a large proportion of Danes represented what he termed "mild indifference". One of the main explanations he finds in the Nordic universal welfare state, which has ensured a high degree of equality and security in the Scandinavian countries: according to Zuckerman, the welfare state has made religious life in Denmark redundant (partially), as Danes no longer live in a state of (material) deprivation. He makes comparative analyses in relation to the American context, where the various religious communities play a crucial social role (Zuckerman, 2009).

Zuckerman overlooks the internal connection between the welfare state and Evangelical Lutheran religion and does not distinguish between a secularized and a secularist approach to religion. There is still, in the light of demographic developments, a high level of adherence to the National Church in Denmark (71.4%) as an expression of a sense of belonging and being that is both religious and cultural (Mauritsen, 2022; Skeie, 2021, p. 41). Zuckerman's analyses indicate a pietistically oriented approach to religion, which is not widespread in Denmark and is more characterized by a liberal theological and Grundtvigian position. Nor does he address the Danes' lack of religious language. In a critique of sociological studies of religion and what they can capture, the Danish sociologist of religion Iben Krogsdal points out that if you ask in isolation what people believe in, religiosity in Denmark cannot be captured (Krogsdal, 2012, p. 10). In her PhD, she has studied people from the Danish National Church, their religiosity, and the changes it is undergoing. Through interviews, she clarifies that for many Danes, Christianity disappears as a foreground but lives on as a background, where a do-it-yourself spirituality is linked to personal life stories (Krogsdal, 2012).

A hegemonic deprivation discourse about religion can distort students' understanding the phenomenon of religion. There are studies that, through interviews with religious students, show that these students blame teachers for allowing a hegemonic secularist perspective to dominate the classroom. Teachers are criticized for supporting the stereotypical presentation of religion as an historically outdated phenomenon of deprivation and for generally presenting an image of their tradition and religion that the religious students cannot recognize and are not comfortable with (Holmqvist Lidh, 2016; Osbeck & Skeie, 2014). These deprivation constructions of religion can promote indifference, lack of curiosity, and segregation of students with religious backgrounds in the classroom (Flensner, 2015). RE teachers therefore must make sure that religion as a deprivation phenomenon is only one discourse to religion among others.

## 5. Narratives in Movement: A Critical Reflection on Learning About and From Religion

Within RE research, the distinction between learning *from* and learning *about* religion is often used. This distinction originates from Michael Grimmitt, who formulated the distinction to point out the importance of including an educational and Bildung perspective in RE (Grimmitt, 1987, p. 235). It is a distinction that has been used in numerous Religious Education research projects to show key aspects of RE (Everington et al., 2011; Härenstam 2000; Osbeck, 2014; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). For example, the distinction was part of a larger European questionnaire with 16 countries, in which a large group of Swedish teachers participated. The study showed that 95% of Swedish teachers supported learning *about* religious perspectives, while only 49% supported learning *from* religious perspectives (Osbeck & Petterson, 2009). In the recent Danish dissertation on the subject from 2016, this divide is also a key element in the analysis of executive orders, teaching materials, and teachers' lesson plans (Kjeldsen, 2016).

In the history of the distinction, learning *about* and learning *from* religion have been separated. For example, Associate Professor Bengt-Ove Andreassen has pointed out that learning *from* religion would be in violation of international conventions on religious freedom when it takes place within the framework of a compulsory religion subject (Andreassen, 2016, p. 216). What might seem to appear to be a good analytical approach is in an educational, sociological, and pedagogical context incomplete, like separating knowledge/skills and Bildung (formation). When a school has overall educational and Bildung aims (cf. the mission statement of the school) and the curriculum has recontextualized these aims focusing at understanding and democratic education, the students must and will learn *from* every time they learn *about*. It is not possible to separate the two categories in pedagogical-didactic practice, and you would probably not make this distinction in other school subjects. Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam offer an alternative to the distinction learning *about* and *from* by pointing out the difference between *students finding meaning in the subject matter* and *the teacher deriving a single meaning from the subject matter*. In a school with a non-affirmative

educational aim, the latter is problematic, while the former must be the ideal. They also point out that RE should open new existential possibilities: religion should be seen as a belief, as a practice (rituals, ethics), and as an existential matter (Biesta & Hannam, 2016). This can be linked to the fact that school and education must aim at qualification, socialization, and subjectification (Biesta, 2011, pp. 30-32). Religion is neither just about knowledge nor just about belief, but about being in the world in a particular way, where both cognitive awareness and emotional aspects play an important role. It is also crucial that the training of teachers for RE supports that teachers can nuance the secularization phenomenon to give students an accurate picture of the role of religion in late modernity. There is a need for the subject to be linked both to academic skills and powerful knowledge (Young, 2009) (learning *about* religion), but also to students' socialization (a democratic and culturally broad "we") and to students' subjectification (a humane, existential 'we'). All three domains contribute to students' education and Bildung (formation).

Overcoming this distinction between learning *about* and *from* requires challenging dominant and hegemonic secularization discourses with value studies, interviews, and inside perspectives and using different approaches to deal with religion; for example, combining phenomenological approaches with existential-life philosophical approaches will contribute to this. Not passing on hegemonic secularization narratives that statically fixate on what secularization means. Antagonistic secularization discourses serve to give students a nuanced picture of what religion can mean in modern life and society. Because what the students learn about and how they learn about it is also what they learn from. The narrative approach can help ensure that the narratives of secularization are not static but rather in motion, as new narratives are constantly emerging. This could also apply to narratives about rituals, prayer, and religious ethics. A narrative approach can help give students a more nuanced view of religion.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

It is not possible to talk about the role and importance of religion today without addressing the concept of secularization. In the recontextualized pedagogical-didactic context of the school, simplifications are necessary. However, it is crucial that students are not presented with hegemonic narratives of secularization that do not nuance the phenomenon and put in relation to post-secularity. Simplifying the complex theory of secularization should not be an obstacle to understanding the role of religion in contemporary times. RE risks developing in a one-sided normative secularist direction. The narrative approach can help avoid this by presenting narratives in motion to the students. This is significant because when religion is embedded in a pedagogical-didactic context, students learn *from* religion every time they learn *about* religion.

## References

- Andersen, P., Erkmen, J., & Gundelach, P. (2019). Udviklingen i (ikke)religiøsitet (The Development in (ir)religiosity). In M. Frederiksen (Ed.), *Usikker modernitet. Danskernes værdier fra 1981 til 2017 (Uncertain modernity. Danes' values from 1981 to 2017)*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Andreassen, B.-O. (2016). *Religionsdidaktikk. En innføring (2. utg.) (Religious didactics. An introduction)*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Berger, P. L. (1999). *The Desecularization of The World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Barnes, L. P. (2006). Misrepresentation of Religion in modern British education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00356.x>
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogizing Knowledge: Studies in Recontextualizing in Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bernstein, B. (1990). The Social Construction of Pedagogic Discourse. In *Class, Codes & Control Vol. IV. The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G., & Hannam, P. (2023). The world is not enough. Religious education beyond worldview perspectivism. In L. Philip Barnes (Ed.), *Religion and Worldviews. The Triumph of the Secular*. London: Routledge.
- Biesta, G., & Hannam, P. (2021). *Religion and Education: The Forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education?* Leiden: Brill/Sense.
- Biesta, G., & Hannam, P. (2016). Religious Education and the Return of the Teacher, *Religious Education*, 111(3), 239-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1172854>
- Biesta, G. (2011). *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy, 1st Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Brekke, Ø. (2022). *Religionshermeneutikk. Forståing i ei polariseret tid (Hermeneutics of religion. Understanding in a polarized age)*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Buchardt, M. (2023). *The Nordic Model and the Educational Welfare State in a European Light. Social Problems Solving and Secular-Religious Ambitions When Modernizing Sweden and France*. New York: Routledge.
- Casanova, J. (2015). Are We Still Secular? Exploration on the Secular and the Post-secular. In P. Nynäs, M. Lassander, & T. Utriainen (Eds.), *Post-secular Society. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (pp. 27-46). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Dobbelaere, K. (2002). *Secularization: An Analysis at Three levels*. Brüssels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang.
- Everington, J., Ter Avest, I., Bakker, C. og Van der Want, A. (2011). European religious education teachers' perception of and responses to classroom diversity and their relationship to personal and professional biographies. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33(2), 241-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2011.546669>
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Flensner, K. K. (2015). *Discourses of Religion and Secularism in Religious Education Classroom*. Springer, Ph.d; Gothenburg University.
- Flensner, K. K. (2018). Secularized and Multi-Religious Classroom Practice-Discourses and Interactions. In *Education sciences in the Special Issue "There is a Crack in Everything-Education and Religion in a Secular Age."*
- Franck, O., & Thalén, P. (2021). Introduction: Religious Education and the Notion of the Post-secular. In O. Franck, & P. Thalén (Eds.), *Religious Education in a Post-Secular Age*. Springer International Publishing.
- Furseth, I. & Repstad, P. (2024). *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion. Classical and Contemporary Perspectives. 2nd Edition*. Routledge.
- Furseth, I. (2018). Introduction. In I. Furseth, (Ed.), *Religious Complexity in the public sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries* (pp. 1-29). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilliam, L. (2015). *Being a good, relaxed, or exaggerated Muslim. religiosity and masculinity in the social worlds of Danish schools. Routledge studies in religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Gilliam, L. (2014). Når religion i skolen er 'uproblematisk': Moderat sekularisme, civiliserings-idealer og "afslappede muslimer (When religion in school is 'unproblematic': Moderate secularism, ideals of civilization and "relaxed Muslims"). *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*, 8(2), 35-56.
- Grimmitt, M., (1987). *Religious education and human development: The relationship between studying religions and personal, social, and moral education*. Great Wakering: McCrimmons.
- Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the Public Sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x>
- Hannam, P. (2021). What Should Religious Education Seek to Achieve in the Public Sphere. In Biesta & Hannam (Eds.), *The forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education?* Leiden: Brill sense.
- Holland, T. (2020). *Dominion – The Making of the Western Mind*. Little, Brown.
- Holmquist Lidl, C. (2016). *Representera och bli representerad. Elever med religiös positionering talar om skolans religionskunskapsundervisning (Represent and be represented. Students with a religious orientation talk about the school's religious education* Licentiatuppsats, Karlstad Universitet.
- Huggler, J. (2008). Viden, tro og tænkning (Knowledge, faith and thinking). In H. V. Frandsen (Ed.), *Pædagogiske værdier & religion (Educational values & religion)* (pp. 13-35). Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag.
- Härenstam, K. (2000). How to choose Knowledge for Swedish Schools and Text-books in RE. *Panorama. International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values*, 12(1), Summer 2000.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1843/2003). *Fear and trembling*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kjeldsen, K. (2016). *Kristendom i folkeskolens religionsfag. Politiske og faglige diskussioner, repræsentation og didaktisering (Christianity in the primary school religion subject. Political and professional discussions, representation, and teaching)*. Odense: Ph.D. Syddansk Universitet.

- Krogsdal, I. (2012). *De måske kristne (The maybe Christians)*. Frederiksberg: Anis.
- Mauritsen, A. L. (2022). *Understanding the Scandinavian Paradox - An Interdisciplinary Investigation of Nonreligion and Cultural Religion in a Danish Context*. Aarhus: Ph.D. University.
- McGuire, M., (2008). *Lived religion. Faith and practice in everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University press Inc.
- Osbeck, C., & Skeie, G. (2014). *Religious Education at Schools in Sweden in Religious Education at Schools in Europe. Part 3. Northern Europe*. Göttingen: Vienna University Press. <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737002738.237>
- Osbeck, C. (2014). Conditions for Teaching and Learning in Religious Education (RE) - Perspectives of Teachers and Pupils at the Beginning of the 6th Grade in Sweden. *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 4(2), 76-96.
- Osbeck, C., & Petterson, P. (2009). Sweden: Non-confessional and Confessional Education. Religious Education in Public Schools and in the Church of Sweden. In H.-G. Ziebertz, & U. Riegel (Eds.), *How Teachers in Europe Teach Religion. An International Empirical Study in 16 Countries* (pp. 211-226). Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Risenfors, S. (2011). *Gymnasieungdomars livstolkande (High school youth's interpretation of life)*. Doctoral thesis. Göteborg: Acta universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Skeie, G. (2021). Dealing with Religion in Education in Post-religious and Post-secular. In O. Franck, & P. Thalén, (Eds.), *Religious Education in a Post-Secular Age*. Springer International Publishing.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Vive Jensen, S. (2019). Religion og folkeskolen (Religion and the public school). In *Religion i det offentlige rum - et dansk perspektiv (Religion in the public space - a Danish perspective)*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Ziebertz, H-G., & Riegel, U. (2009). Europe: A Post-secular Society?. *International Journal of practical Theology*, 13(2), 293-308. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2009.18>
- Zuckerman, P. (2009). Why Are Danes and Swedes So Irreligious? *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 22(1), 55-69. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1890-7008-2009-01-04>
- Young, M. (2009). Education, globalization and the 'voice of knowledge'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22(3), 193-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080902957848>
- Wertsch, J.V. (2008). Collective Memory and Narrative Templates. *Social Research*, 75(1), 133-156.
- Østergaard, U. (2005). Lutheranismen og den universelle velfærdsstat (Lutheranism and the Universal Welfare State). In J. H. Schjørring, & J. T. Bak (Eds.), *Velfærdsstat og kirke (Welfare state and church)* (pp. 147-184). Frederiksberg: Anis.

**Notes on contributors:**

**Marlene Printz Jellesen** is Associate Professor at the Department of Teacher Education, University College Nordjylland North Jutland, Aalborg, Denmark. She has taught the subjects “Religion/Knowledge of Christianity” and “Religion, Ethics/Philosophy, and Citizenship” since 2002. Currently, she is working on a PhD thesis on “Participation opportunities in the subject Knowledge of Christianity (kristendomskundskab)” in the Danish primary school at Aalborg University, Denmark. She has a master’s degree in theology and a master’s degree in pedagogy and citizenship.

This article is inspired by a workshop I held at the XVth EFTRE Conference in Rome 2023: Bridges Over Troubled Waters – RE in Changing Times.

**ORCID**

Marlene Printz Jellesen  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9610-1801>