

Religious education and multiculturalism in Norwegian curriculum

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Abstract

Norway whose economy burgeoned with the discovery of the new petroleum and natural gas resources through the end of the 1960's, has reached a level of prosperity by allocating more funds into education, health and social security and started to allow in immigrants. Through these immigrants' various religions, beliefs and cultures were adopted and Norwegian society turned into a multicultural society. This unfolding of events let the Norwegian administrators foresee the need to develop a new religious curriculum that also included the religions other than Christianity.

In this paper the importance and historical development of religious curriculum was inspected in context of multiculturalism.

Keywords: Norway, religious curriculum, Christianity, multiculturalism.

1- Introduction

Norwegian society has developed into a multicultural and multi-faith society with the immigration of workers and immigrants from Western Christian countries and Eastern countries most of whom are Muslim. (Stenersen-Libæk, 2003)

As it is known, Norway didn't have power in international relations since the economy was low and climate conditions were unfavorable and the economy was based on fisheries and energy production until 1960s. However, with the discovery of oil and natural gas reserves in the 1970s and the beginning of export in 1971, Norway gained a rapid recovery in economy and has achieved great prosperity by raising living conditions within the country (Riste, 2001; Kvalheim, 1998).

In this respect, it started to receive immigration from foreign countries and has a multicultural structure with different cultures and languages. Today, Norwegians constitute about 90% of the Norway population (Libæk-Stenersen, 2003; Solberg, 2005; Midgaard, 1971). Apart from the people of the country, it has also hosted many ethnic communities from different countries besides various indigenous ethnic groups such as Sami and Tater. Most of them are migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers came from Eastern countries who started to settle in the country since the 1970s. Through these migrations, the Norwegian society, which has become multicultural, hosts citizens from 200 different countries (Libæk-Stenersen, 2003; Stensvold, 2005). Immigrants from Western countries are Polish, German and Swedish; Non-Western countries are Pakistani, Turkish, Moroccan, Somalian, Iraqi and Iranian (Eidsvåg-Lindholm-Sveen, 2004; Repstad, 2010). Among these immigrants, the majority was taken by Pakistanis and the second by the Polonies (Christensen, 2010).

Islam is the fastest growing religion that resides in the Norwegian society among the other religions such as; Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Bahaism. (Kværne-Vogt, 2002)

According to the studies conducted, the largest religious community is Christianity and Islam takes the second place in numbers in Norwegian society. (Daugstad-Østby, 2009)

Currently in Norway where religious freedom and religious education is held of great significance and the general view of the education system is to increase the education level of the students and to create virtuous individuals. (Duman, 1992) In addition, in the curriculum it was stated that religion and faith has a significant role in shaping the social structure particularly in individual's self-awareness. Also it was pointed out that religion has a central effect in individuals' standpoint towards other cultures and civilizations. In regard to all these factors religious studies were accepted to be a mandatory lesson that every student participates. In other words, "Christianity knowledge and education of religion and ethics" lessons have become mandatory in primary education.

2- Institutive Religious Education

In Norway Education System, radical changes have been made many times about the name of religion lesson, its syllabus and whether it should be compulsory or not. First studies about religion education were started in 1700s. Accordingly, religion education was made obligatory to popularize religion education and make people religious. Additionally, Christian Public Schools were founded in 1739 to teach Christianity to the people of Norway.

Main radical changes in religion education have been made since 1960s. In this subject, the most important development is to accept religion freedom as a constitutional right. However, some certain restrictions have continued in some respects. For example, religion lesson teachers were provided with membership to Lutheran Church (Kværne-Vogt, 2002) until 1969 and in 1969 for the follower of Norway Church, "Christianity Instruction" was made obligatory. But, in 1974, a religion lesson which has a nonreligious philosophy of world was added to the syllabus. (Kaymakcan, 2007)

In 1990s, a need to rearrange the religion lessons in schools emerged. So, government officials and various clergymen had a talk to form a new syllabus. At the end of those talks, an education reform was made in 1997. Religion education was rearranged again based on this reform. Accordingly, the name of the religion lesson was changed as “Christianity Knowledge, education of religion and ethics”, it was made obligatory and lesson credit increased in elementary schools.

On the other hand, the syllabus of the religion lesson undergone a change by dividing it into parts as follows; 60 percent to Christianity, 30 percent to Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, and the last 10 percent to Humanism and moral education (Leirvik,2009). With the help of this new syllabus, learners had the chance to study Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism at the same time, and also the philosophical and humanist perspectives.

These changes that came with the new curriculum reform led to some quarrels in Norway. The main problem for Christians is the inadequacy of lesson credit of Christianity. On the other hand, other religions’ followers think that the religion instruction in primary school highly dependent to Christianity which dominates the other religions in curriculum. (Rasmussen, 2000) Christians object to the new arrangements which were made to privilege other religions giving the reason that Christianity is not only the basis of Norwegian culture but also plays a unitary role in society. On the other hand, *the groups of minority religions* criticize the hours of the lessons that Christianity has many whereas the other religions has few. (Stensvold, 2004) Additionally, it is criticized that the Christianity centered religious education is obligatory in basic education and Christianity is brought in to the forefront changing its name into “Christian Culture, Religion and Moral Knowledge”. (Leirvik,2014; Eidsvåg-Lindholm, 2004).

As a result of these objections, additional arrangements has been made in 2002 and the hours of lessons of other religions have been increased. Moreover, the name of the lesson has been changed into “Christianity, Religions and World-view Knowledge”. According to this arrangement, all of the students would get knowledge of Christianity and the Bible as the source of cultural heritage and morality, and at the same time they would learn about various philosophical thoughts and living religions on earth such as Judaism, Islamism, Buddhism and Hinduism. As a result, the students who are familiar with all the religious and philosophical views would have conversations with each other even if they belong to different religions. (Leirvik, 2005) However, these new arrangements didn’t satisfy the groups of minority religions. As a matter of fact, in 2004, United Nations Commission of Human Rights found their complaints about changing the name of the lesson reasonable.

Besides, Humanist Association/Union sued Norwegian Court in 1999 and could not get a result, and the union litigated European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. European Court of Human Rights recognized the objections and decided that obligatory religion lessons violate the second clause of European Convention on Human Rights. Besides, it is agreed on religion lessons mostly on Christianity is a wrong implementation. (Leirvik, 2014)

Because of this judgment, Norwegian Ministry of Education had to make broader regulations both on the name of religion lesson and its curriculum. The curriculum is reformulated to contain all the religions and the domination of Christianity is reduced. (Leirvik, 2014) Also, to end the discussions about the name of the lesson, a revision has been started on the legal statements about Christianity based religion lesson and firstly the name of the lesson changed into “Education of Religion, Ethics and Philosophy”. (Jacobsen-Leirvik, 2012) Religion lesson has turned into an ordinary school lesson like the other lessons that all students participate. Subjects are thought as an informing session not as a sermon. (Rasmussen, 2005) In this new curriculum, to present each of them ideally, religions are approached as doctrine and within their historical context. Also, Ethics are thought as a different lesson. Two of the fundamentals of the lessons are to gain conversational skills about religion and ethics and familiarize the modern criticism of religion. (Jacobsen-Leirvik, 2012)

3- Minority Private Schools and Minority Religious Education: Muslim Groups

In Norway, there are also private schools besides public schools. The foundation, approval and supervision of these schools is carried out in accordance with the Special Education Act (Sorgenfrei, 2010). There are about 150 private elementary and secondary schools in Norway. However, the number of private schools is relatively small in Norway compared to other European schools. In 2000, about 1.7% of primary school students and in 2006, 2.2% of the students enrolled private school.

Muslim immigrants have made many attempts to establish their own private schools, but they have not received any results. The Muslim organization that has been fighting the most in this direction is the Urteghagen Foundation. The foundation was founded in 1991 by Norwegian Trond Ali Linstad, who previously worked for a kindergarten and youth club, in the name of "The Islamic Foundation (Urteghagen) / Islamic Foundation".

Two years after establishing the foundation, Linstad submitted a proposal to the Labor Party government to open a private Muslim school, but the proposal was rejected by the government, concerning that it may interfere in the integration of the children. When the Christian People's Party (Lideri Kjell Magne Bondevik) came to the government after the Labor Party, Linstad reapplied for private school. This application was accepted by the Government in 1999. Then, in 2001, the first Muslim private school named "Urteghagen Friskole" was opened and as of August 75 students started education. However, disputes between students in the spring of 2004 caused the school to close (Kværne-Vogt, 2002).

A similar attempt was made in Drammen in 2006, but the initiative was also negatively affected by the decision to stop all new private schools by the left-wing government in 2005 (Sorgenfrei, 2010). The Islamic Norwegian Council also applied to Norwegian authorities in 1995 to open Islamic primary schools. However, this application was also rejected (Vogt, 1995).

In Norway there are several private schools where Jews and Christians can teach their religion and culture. However, there is no private school for Muslims who can teach religion education or even national culture and values.

In addition, the Norwegian education system has not been given adequate training and education of Islam. For this reason, Muslim students are unable to receive Islamic religious education in state schools as they should. Muslim immigrants who do not see enough religious education in the school have tried to meet this need in religious education by opening, mosques, Quran courses and training centers in the direction of their own possibilities.

For this reason, religious and socio-cultural services such as Quran education, basic religious information, national culture and values education are given to Muslims of all ages regardless of children, young people, adults, men and women, as well as worship in majority of the mosques constructed abroad. Apart from these, there are a few kindergartens opened by Muslims. These schools in Oslo are under the control of the Urteghagen Foundation.

4- Vocational Religious Education: Muslim Groups

In Norway, no professional religious education is given outside of Christianity. No attempt has been made by the authorities to establish a national training program for imams. However, a proposal was made by the committee of the Islamic Council (IRN) representatives to establish an "Islamic Research Center" at the University of Oslo in 2007 (Jacobsen-Leirvik, 2012). Upon this proposal, the Faculty of Theology at Oslo University prepared a training program for imams as well as for other religious leaders under the title "Becoming a Religious Leader in Norwegian Society". Most of the participants of the program is composed of imams. However, none of these imams received their basic education

in Norway (Leirvik, 2009). In 2010, a parliamentary proposal was presented by the Liberal Party to the educational program for imams at the academic level in the university, but this proposal was rejected (Jacobsen-Leirvik, 2012).

5- The Education of Religion Models

The religion lesson curriculum prepared by Norwegian Ministry of Education has an objective, critical and pluralist structure and contains all the religions and beliefs. In the curriculum, presenting session are prepared by sorting the subjects according to the ages of the students. Moreover, it is emphasized that discussing a subject, fair and objective manner among the religions is necessary.

On the other hand, religion lesson curriculum is prepared to give opportunities for the students to learn how to behave each other respectfully and tolerantly. Students share the same classroom no matter what their belief and religion is and the lesson is not presented based on just one religion. (Capcioglu, 2006)

In this Norwegian new education system, religion lesson is thought to be a part of education not to be a part of church. Religions are dealt as disciplines and there is no discrimination and guidance among them. Therefore, religion lesson is defined as a branch of the education and school lesson, not the education of church or church lesson. It is made obligatory for all the students. (Rasmussen, 2000)

In religion lessons, lessons are taught as comparative religions history. Thus, it is important to teach all the religions equally. However, in religion lesson curriculum, a big part is reserved for Christianity. For instance, today 55 percent of the religion lesson curriculum is about Christianity. 25 percent is about the other religions and 20 percent is about philosophical views. (Rasmussen, 2000)

Norway's method in religious education is the one which is not doctrines, and even the one used in the need of a religious education which is not religious. The aim is to be able to supply a religious education for students coming from various religions and even the students who do not belong to any religion. (Capcioglu, 2006) Also, it is aimed that students should be informed about religions objectively instead of being trained according to principals of a specific religion. For that reason, various trips and visits to holy places were organized so that students could see and be informed by personally being in holy places of worship of each religion through question and answer sessions there. The most crucial side of these visits is informing the authorities about the visit before, so that they would inform the students about both their religion and the features of these places of worship. In that way, students can learn the religion through the most authorized religious people.

Another prominent issue in Norway's religious education is that philosophy is dealt with a part of religious education. Despite different explanations for that, one of the most important ones is that philosophy is more objective than religion. The other one is that philosophy helps promoting tolerance in multi-religious societies and strengthens children's logical and moral views. (Capcioglu, 2006) It's aimed that students should be informed about religions' life views, main principals and philosophies rather than their acceptances or refusals towards the religion. Alive religions' roles in society and world politics and the philosophical movements shaping human behaviors along with other various philosophical trends take part in the high school curriculum of religious education. This new method which is applied and tried to be improved in Norway is called "Monoculture Model" or "Pluralistic Model".

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