Religious Education in a Post-Secular Age

Case Studies from Europe

Edited by
Olof Franck · Peder Thalén

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Preface

The concept of non-confessional and diverse religious education that was realized in the Swedish schools during the 1960s was shaped in an intellectual space of a distinctively modern kind. Discussions about late modernity or post-modernism had not yet begun and the thought of post-secularism had barely made any sense. The idea of neutrality which permeated the new model for religious education was characterized by a belief in the possibility of conveying knowledge of religion entirely unaffected by the views of the teacher and the surrounding society: knowledge *about* religion. Similar views can be found in England and Wales, where phenomenology of religion played an important role as a platform for the shaping of Religious Education (RE).

The rise of the new religious education in Sweden also needs to be understood against the background of a cultural situation in which the state church of that time had recently possessed the power in society to define how people should relate to life, through both its language and content. Against this background, the reformed religious education of the 1960s appears as part of a larger secular liberation process in society from the inherited religion—a process during which the law of religious freedom, passed in Sweden in 1951, was an important milestone. After the introduction of this law, it became unsustainable to conduct a school education partial to the state church. The impossibility was later strengthened by a beginning pluralism in society.

As we look back and reflect upon what has taken place during the past 50 years, a few things become immediately apparent. Continental as well as analytical philosophy has undermined the intellectual fundament of non-confessional religious education. The idea of any kind of absolute neutrality can no longer be sustained. Also, the concept of religion itself has been questioned from many directions. The image of what religion is, which was taken for granted in the 1960s, was distinctively Western (and also Lutheran) to its character and reflected the thoughts of the Enlightenment. In a post-secular state, it has also become increasingly difficult to make sharp distinctions between what is religious and non-religious, confessional and non-confessional, teaching about religion and learning in (from) religion. Such polarized ideas built on binary opposites also make dialogue difficult.

Important parts of the intellectual fundament have also collapsed, due to the development in society, and at the same time, the need for a meeting point in schools where different outlooks are allowed to clash has increased—a place where populism and fundamentalism may also be met. The subject of religion, based on diversity, has never been more relevant. This is why it is important to thoroughly, at the core, think through and find a new foundation for the model for religious education which was created in Sweden in the 1960s, but also has equivalents in several other European countries, even though the background histories may vary.

In this anthology a number of European researchers approach the challenges and possibilities of religious education in a post-secular age from various angles and perspectives. Nigel Fancourt initiates the line of contributions by highlighting post-secular perspectives on religious education with regard to current neoliberal governance of education. Fancourt begins his presentation by looking at Habermas' arguments for religion in the public sphere and then discusses the implications of this for religious education. The analytical perspective is widened by a critical examination of the effects of neoliberalism on education in general as interpreted by Milton Friedman. The focus is then turned towards an analysis of the relation between Habermas' and Friedman's theories. Fancourt finally presents some hypotheses regarding the presence and place of

confessional forms of religious education in a post-secular, neoliberal culture of governance.

In the next chapter Geir Skeie explores the historical relation between religion and education by starting from the assumption that "the place and role of religion in education tells something important about the role of religion in society". Skeie focuses on historical and present-day perspectives on religious education in a Scandinavian context, particularly in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The transformation of absolute Lutheran states into modern, secular welfare states is observed as an arena for development of a system of education for all, and Skeie examines the aim of qualifying and socializing future citizens with regard to religious education, for example, as it is presented in the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish curricula. The issue of how to describe "post-secular" religious education is exemplified by the Norwegian case. Skeie ends the chapter with a discussion about how the term "post-secular", with its porosity, could contribute to investigations of the changing forms of religious education.

In Chap. 3, Kerstin von Brömssen and Graeme Nixon present an analysis of three religious education curriculum constructions. The presentation is based on a discursive reading of the religious education curricula for state-maintained primary and lower-secondary schools in Denmark, Scotland and Sweden. After having explored some of the theoretical curriculum perspectives with regard to the question "why study a school subject?", the authors turn to an analysis of the curricula in these three countries. This analysis includes a general contextualization of the subject with regard to the general school system. Some comparative dimensions are also discussed, for example, regarding the meaning of "denominational religious education". In the final section of the chapter, von Brömssen and Nixon bring conclusions from the analysis into a discussion about religious education in the light of a discourse on post-secularity.

The next chapter is written by Gunnar Gunnarsson, who highlights religious education as part of the Social Studies National Curriculum Guide in Iceland. Gunnarsson examines how religious education is related to the six "fundamental pillars" representing the educational policies in Iceland. The changed role of religious education, which is made

visible by being included in the document in question, is presented as exemplifying the post-secular era. In the Curriculum Guide, "transformative education"—that is, education that aims to strengthen students' democratic competences and critical thinking—is prescribed. Gunnarsson discusses whether such an aim is possible with regard to religious education and, if so, what this might mean.

In their contribution, Martin Ubani, Saila Poulter and Inkeri Rissanen examine some of the current challenges facing religious education in a Finnish school context. By presenting an overview of how the subject has developed between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries—a development that includes a shift in responsibility for religious education from the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church to the state—the authors create a platform for a critical analysis of how questions of diversification, secularization and post-secularism have come into focus in the discussion about religious education. They discuss whether religion and world view can be used as parallel concepts and can be approached using a common pedagogical framework. The main issue here is whether "world view education" indicates a move away from theology as the disciplinary basis of religious education—a move that Ubani, Poulter and Rissanen criticize with regard to the main arguments developed in the chapter.

In Chap. 6, Julian Stern opens up a general discussion about present-day religious education. What are its aims and what is its contribution to post-secular education? Stern develops his approach to these questions with regard to "two stubborn particulars of religious education": uncertainty and mortality. Critical perspectives are presented on conceptions of education, according to which a striving for certainty and justified truths are the main concerns. If creative uncertainty is nurtured by teachers and students alike, this will stimulate a process of exploration of values and beliefs. This holds true for the theme of death and mortality in religious education. Examining what he describes as "the certainty of mortality and our uncertain knowledge of death", Stern considers how care drives religion's encounter with mortality and how post-secular religious education could contribute to reflection and discussion which, in areas of disagreement, might lead to the recognition of the value of uncertainty.

In Chap. 7, Denise Cush, in a historical overview, explores the development of the subject of religious education in the United Kingdom over the last five decades. The starting point in this exposé is the "game-changing moment" in 1971, when the Schools Council Working Paper 36 was published and where Ninian Smart is ascribed a crucial role. A range of important and influential steps and dimensions are touched on, like globalization, philosophical challenges to modernist ideas of "objectivity" and "neutrality", critical analyses of the concepts of religion, religious and secular and a discussion about the concept of post-secularism. Cush dedicates the final part of her chapter to the Commission on Religious Education that was set up in 2016, and its report, CoRE 2018, which is described as a possibly "new game-changing move" in English religious education.

In the next chapter, Peder Thalén critically examines some of the proposals—CoRE 2018 and a plan for revision put forward by the Dutch scholar Siebren Miedema—to reform non-confessional religious education in state-funded schools by replacing, in whole or part, the concept of religion with the concept of world view. The chapter gives an overview of and analyses the main difficulties with the world view concept—the most central being a tendency to reinforce relativism and establish absolute boundaries. Some of the internal problems with the concept of religion, in particular an over-emphasis of the cognitive dimension, appear even stronger when switching to that of world view. According to Thalén, it is doubtful whether the proposed conceptual innovation constitutes any real progress, which means that religious education may have to try another route for renewal.

Tim Jensen, in his contribution, vigorously defends a "scientifically based" approach to religious education—"Study-of-Religion(s)"—in state-funded schools that is similar to the scientific study of religion at universities by providing a second-order analytical-critical discourse on religion. According to Jensen, this concept of religious education is still valid and has not been undermined by post-modernism or post-secularism. It is still feasible to draw a clear line between a scientific and non-scientific approach to the study of religion. Jensen also rejects a description of Denmark as secular, despite this being common amongst researchers and the Danish population. It therefore does not make sense

to talk about Denmark as post-secular. At the end of the chapter Jensen discusses the resistance to this approach to religious education amongst academics and the public.

In Chap. 10, Leni Franken discusses the various dimensions of a shift from "confessional, theology-based and denominational religious education" to "non-confessional, religious studies based on non-denominational RE". She highlights the arguments against a neutral or impartial religious education and its possible consequences in terms of "reductionism" and "relativism". Franken criticizes such arguments for being based on a misunderstanding of how a justification of non-confessional religious education can be conceived. The scope in her presentation is education and religious education in liberal democracies, and she distinguishes and elaborates on various possible dimensions of a non-confessional and integrative religious education in a post-secular context. She contends that such an education is one that, in line with a Rawlsian "genuine reasonable option", enables students with diverse religious backgrounds to learn about different religions.

In the book's final chapter, Olof Franck examines how what can be described as "post-secular religious education" may open up for religious ethical claims without giving them an exclusive position in which they can escape criticism. In order to sharpen the argument, the focus is on claims that seem to challenge democratic values conceived as guidelines for both religious education and education in general. It is argued that religious claims, regardless of whether the context is described as "post-secular" or not, can inspire critical reflection and argumentation by questioning present democratic moral and epistemological beliefs, norms and ideals. According to Franck, the treatment of such claims requires ethical and epistemological work on the part of their advocates and critics.

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Notes on Contributors

Denise Cush is Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education at Bath Spa University. She was a member of the Commission on Religious Education 2017–2018, and Deputy Editor of *British Journal of Religious Education* from 2011–2018. Publications include *Buddhism*, a still much-used textbook (1994), the Routledge Encyclopedia of Hinduism (2009), *Celebrating Planet Earth, a Pagan/Christian Conversation* (2015) and many others on religious education. In 2016 she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala, Sweden.

Nigel Fancourt is Associate Professor of Teaching, Learning and Values in the Department of Education, University of Oxford, and a co-convenor of the Religion, Philosophy and Education Research Group. He has studied theology, social anthropology, law and education, and worked as a lawyer and teacher before becoming an academic. He completed his doctorate at Warwick in 2008, on self-assessment in religious education. His current research is on legal and pedagogical challenges for religious education (including a more detailed study of neoliberalism), and on professional epistemologies and ethics.

Olof Franck is Professor in Subject Matter Education, specialising in Social Studies, and Associate Professor in Philosophy of religion at the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg. His publications focus on issues in ethics, reli-

gious education and philosophy. He is presently engaged in research on conceptions of ethical competence in Religious Education, and on fiction-based approaches to Ethics Education. He has been engaged as a subject expert by the Swedish National Agency for Education, for example, in the work with reforms for compulsory and secondary school.

Leni Franken studied philosophy (University of Antwerp/KULeuven) and religious sciences (KULeuven). She obtained her PhD in political philosophy at the University of Antwerp, where she currently works as a teaching assistant and senior researcher. Her research focuses on autonomy-based liberalism, church-state relations, neutrality, faith-based schools, and religious and citizenship education. She authored two monographs and numerous national and international journal articles and book chapters, among others, on state support for religion, Religious Education (RE) in Belgium, comparative studies in RE, freedom of religion and education, 'neutrality' in RE, and Islamic RE.

Gunnar J. Gunnarsson is Professor of Religious Education at the University of Iceland, School of Education. He graduated as a teacher from the Teacher Training Collage of Iceland in 1971 and in theology from the University of Iceland in 1978. He completed a PhD degree in education from Stockholm University in 2011. In his research, the main focus has been on religious education and diversity, and children's and young people's life view, life interpretation and values in a multicultural society.

Tim Jensen is a senior lecturer, Director of Teaching at the Study of Religions, University of Southern Denmark; honorary professor, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Leibniz Universität, Hannover; and a senior research fellow, Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg.
He was President of the IAHR, the International Association for the History of Religions (2015–2020). Though specialized in ancient Greek religion, he has done research and written widely on study-of-religion-related methodology; religion, law and human rights; applied religious ethics; religious environmental activism; public discourses and notions on religion; and public religious education from a study-of-religion perspective.

Graeme Nixon is a leading figure in the ongoing development of RE curricula in Scotland. He has contributed publications, guidance and advice to bodies who oversee the provision of Scottish education. These include Learning and Teaching Scotland, Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Nixon is a senior lecturer within the School of Education at the University of Aberdeen. Nixon has written and presented research on Religious Education for peer-reviewed journals and international conferences. This includes research on the 'philosophication' of Religious Education; management in schools; the effects of secularization on Religious Education; and mindfulness in schools. His current research is on conscientious withdrawal from Religious Education, which includes a review of international and European perspectives on the rights of the child and parents in the context of Religious Education.

Saila Poulter (PhD, Docent) is University Lecturer in Religious Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. Her research interest concerns religious and worldview education, teacher training, and intercultural and citizenship education. Currently she is doing research on values and worldviews in early childhood education, and she is Project Leader in the research project "Creating Spaces for Diversity of Worldviews in Early Childhood Education".

Inkeri Rissanen, PhD is University Lecturer in Multicultural Education at the Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University. Her research interests include multicultural education, religions and worldviews in education and Islamic religious education. Much of her research has focused on the inclusion of Muslims in public education. Currently she is the principal investigator of "Implicit theories of malleability as the core of teachers intercultural competence" (CORE) (2019–2022).

Geir Skeie is Professor of Religious Education, UNESCO Chair and Science Ombud at the University of Stavanger, Norway. He is a guest professor at NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, and affiliated to Stockholm University. His research includes both empirical and theoretical contributions with a particular interest in questions about religion in education in a diverse socio-cultural context. He has had a leading role in several national and international research projects.

Julian Stern is Professor of Education and Religion at York St John University, UK, General Secretary of ISREV: the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (@ISREV1978 #ISREV), and Editor of *British Journal of Religious Education*. He was a schoolteacher for 14 years, and has worked in universities for 28 years. Stern is widely written, with 16 books (plus 5 second or third editions), contributions to 21 other books, and over 30 peer-reviewed articles.

Peder Thalén holds a PhD in Philosophy of Religion from Uppsala University and is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Gävle, Sweden. His research fields are the Atheism movement in Sweden, didactics of religion, the role of science and religion in post-secular societies, methodological questions in Religious Studies, in particular sociology of religion. His most recent publications are *Interkulturell religionsdidaktik: Utmaningar och möjligheter* (Intercultural Didactics of Religion: Challenges and Possibilities, co-edited with Olof Franck, 2018) and *Kunskap, motstånd, möjlighet: Humanistisk forskning i dag* (Knowledge, Resistance, Possibility: Humanistic Research Today, co-edited with Ulrika Serrander, 2017).

Martin Ubani, PhD, MTheol is Professor of Religious Education at the School of Theology and the School of Educational Applied Science and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland. His research interests include religion, multiculturalism and education, RE teacher education and didactics of RE. He holds several academic positions of trust. Since 2017 he has been a library fellow at the Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem.

Kerstin von Brömssen is Professor of Educational Science, University West, Sweden. Von Brömssen's research is primarily aimed at three different areas within the field of educational science. The first area focuses on children, youth, migration, learning and teaching from a broad educational sociological perspective. The second area of research consists of studies in religious studies didactics, that is, on teaching, learning and critical investigations on religion as a phenomenon at the intersection of categories such as gender, ethnicity, age and nationality. The third area concerns internationalization, especially in teacher education, where von Brömssen has experiences from student and teacher exchange with

England and South Africa. Her latest publication is von Brömssen, K. (2018). Young Students' Memories and Reflections on the July 22, 2011 Terror Attacks in Norway. In W. David, J. A. Lankshear, & J. F. Leslie, (Ed.), *Values, Human Rights and Religious Education: Contested Grounds* (pp. 217–234). Peter Lang Publishing Group.

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Introduction: Religious Education and the Notion of the Post-secular

Olof Franck and Peder Thalén

In the preface, we write that the non-confessional religious education that was introduced in Swedish schools during the 1960s was shaped in a distinctly modern intellectual space. The concept of the post-secular is a useful tool for describing how this intellectual space has undergone major changes and for drawing attention to some of the challenges facing religious education today. In this introductory chapter, we try to answer the question: What is the post-secular context of religious education?

Although there is no consensus as to how the term "post-secular" should be understood, it is still possible to distinguish some of the recurring themes. We outline the major themes in this chapter. The concept of post-secular is also somewhat ambiguous. This is partly because the "secular" content is unclear, and partly because the meaning of the

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concept of the secular has changed with time. However, it is possible to grasp the main points in the discussion about the post-secular without first discussing the different interpretations of "the secular". Indirectly, issues relating to "the secular" will be touched on in this introduction.

Post-secularity as a Slow Cultural Change

The first meaning of post-secular refers to the disintegration at a cultural level of the ideology that was inherited from the Enlightenment, which assumed that religion would more or less disappear as society became more enlightened. From a global perspective, this assumption was false. In fact, opposite tendencies are visible across much of the world (Berger 1999), although what will happen in the West is difficult to judge.

Well-known nineteenth-century proponents of this ideology are Marx and Comte. Their visions of a "religion-less" society can, despite mutual differences, be interpreted as particular instances of this wider belief in the disappearance of religion. Also, the so-called secularization thesis that dominated sociology for more than half of the twentieth century was heavily influenced by this general outlook (Warner 2010).

According to José Casanova, the belief in an inevitable disappearance of religion has not been restricted to an intellectual elite, and he contends that Western society as a whole is still permeated by a "stadial consciousness" (Casanova 2015, 31–32). This influence on society can probably be explained in part by the success of some of the ideologies from the nineteenth century. However, despite the various explanations, what is important is that post-secularity in this broad cultural sense not only affects academic thinking, but also concerns the whole of society. It is about a changed consciousness, a loosening of the grip of stadial consciousness that in turn leads to that the secular lifestyle no longer appears as a natural consequence of modernization (Casanova 2015).

A common criticism of the traditional secularization thesis by sociologists is that it is based on a simplified picture of the relationship between religion and modernity: "In places where … stadial consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western

postcolonial societies, processes of modernization are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline" (Casanova 2015, 32). In other words, there is no correlation between modernization and secularization (religious decline). Instead, we have "multiple modernities". Another criticism of the traditional secularization thesis is that it is too sweeping and needs to be broken down into various components. The differentiation thesis is still relevant but none of the other components (Casanova 1994).

From a philosophical point of view, the general belief that religion is an outmoded way of living and thinking that will soon disappear is similar to a so-called grand narrative and is equipped with all the intellectual difficulties characterizing such metanarratives (a penchant for binary opposites, lack of discernment/nuances, absolutizing, an ahistorical mode of thinking, etc.). This philosophical critique reveals that the first meaning of post-secular is closely related to the concepts of postmodernity or late modernity. According to this philosophical outlook, what has lost power in our society is not only the belief that religion will disappear, but also a whole package of beliefs, such as the belief in science as a superior authority and a belief in development as a steady, ongoing process (the latter became impossible already after World War 1). Some thinkers would even argue that "secular reason" has been undermined in the historical process (Milbank 2006).

Taking this first notion of post-secularity seriously means that there is no longer any point in discussing the future of religion itself (whatever that would mean today). At least in the area of Religious Studies, the academic discussion has already gravitated towards a very different yet related question: the validity of the concept of religion influenced by Western thinking and, in particular, the ideas of the Enlightenment (Thurfjell 2016). To be more precise, what is questioned today is not religion itself, but a cultural construction of it that has profoundly affected popular culture, academic studies and the self-understanding of religious traditions. The eventual disappearance of this construction could lead to a "religion-less" society, although in a very different sense than that imagined by the early proponents of such a society in the nineteenth century.

Post-secularity as a New Form of Cultural Relativism

One aspect of late modernity—and one of the biggest challenges for religious education—is a new form of cultural relativism. In the modern period, a secular view characterized by a strong belief in reason/science and technological progress, often mixed with an atheist conviction, functioned as an unquestioned framework for the interpretation of reality. As a result of a growing awareness of the limitations of the Enlightenment heritage, this secular view has become a target for critical analysis in the same way that religion was previously targeted. A well-known example of this new intellectual orientation is the work of Charles Taylor. In his book *A Secular Age* (2007), he describes secularity as a "new context of understanding":

> … the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one of human possibility among others. (Taylor 2007, 3)

 Taking this argument about one "possibility among others" one step further, it follows that *all* today's life stances, including atheism and its correlations, are relative. Absolute claims no longer appear credible. This relativistic turn is visible at many levels of society. Apart from postmodern intellectual trends and a deepened historical awareness, it is related to and reinforced by social factors such as globalization and the increased presence of multicultural life forms in the West. At the same time, and taking the complexity of the situation into account, unbelief is still dominant in modern civilization and has achieved hegemony in, for example, academic spheres (Taylor 2007).

A prominent feature of this relativistic attitude is that individuals now have much more room to formulate their interpretations of life, even if it is not clear whether or how young people perceive such activity as meaningful or if it is comprehensible to everyone. What was an external authority in the modern period—science as an institution and a

normative ideal for gaining knowledge—has now lost a lot of its power in society as a whole, which is visible in, for example, climate scepticism and medical self-treatment. Trying to decide for others what should be regarded as true or reasonable is perceived as patronizing. Such considerations are now regarded as private matters and expressions of individuals' freedom of choice.

The second meaning of post-secularity denotes a particular, relativistic aspect of the slow cultural change already dealt with above. What is happening now is not only a disintegration of "stadial consciousness". In the wake of this disintegration, and also taking the weakened cultural position of science into consideration, what is left of secular reason can no longer function as a protective wall against "the religious"—what was deemed by many as "irrationality"—at a societal level. The distinction between high and low has now more or less been eroded. The influx of magic and occultism in popular culture, what Christopher Partridge (2005) calls "occulture", is a clear sign of this.

A recurring aspect in the discussion about post-secularity is whether this phenomenon is to be understood as a change in our way of reflecting on social and historical reality, or whether the change reflects a transformation of society, dawn of a new era. This section shows that both things are involved. The reorientation of critical thinking, exemplified by Taylor, where reason has begun to question its own secular foundation, marks a change in our thinking. The rampant relativism and the erosion of intellectual standards point to an actual change. However, how deep the latter change goes is still an open question. Some layers of society seem to be affected, whereas others are not. In the basic activities of everyday life, truth still matters.

Post-secularity as a Rediscovery of a Continuity With the Past

A dominant feature of modernity has been the will to completely detach from the past, to break radically with tradition and to build a new society based on science and reason. The great role model here is Descartes and

his attempt to rebuild all knowledge from scratch. At the same time, this feature has been a utopian endeavour. The power of tradition and the way it always reappears, not least through language, were underestimated. The ties to the past were never cut but were suppressed and made invisible. A dominant feature of post-secularity is the willingness to make these ties visible, trace the genealogy of modernity and recapture the continuity with the past.

Many researchers have highlighted how political ideologies, such as communism and liberalism, convey a religious heritage, albeit in a transformed and sometimes distorted form. In a similar way, secular life views and teachings are often viewed as translations of religious doctrines and messages. One remarkable example from 1959 is the German philosopher Eric Voegelin's argument that Marxism had taken over central themes from antique Gnosticism, which could consequently be apprehended as a new, or modern, Gnostic movement (Voegelin 2005). Another example is the writings of the Jewish thinker Hans Jonas. In the epilogue of the paperback edition of his classic *The Gnostic Religion* (1963), Jonas exposed structural similarities between existentialism (modern nihilism) and antique Gnosticism. As early as 1922, Carl Schmitt, in his controversial book *Political Theology* (2005 [1985]), tried to demonstrate how concepts in political science were secularized theological concepts (cf. Sigurdson 2009).

However, the appreciation of the significance of the past is not merely an academic matter. The political arenas of our time show a range of cases in which politicians and debaters make reference to traditional religious teaching in order to emphasize a dependence, or at least an inspiration, which, with its long history, could make their arguments look sound. The past is no longer a problem that we have to overcome, but a resource.

A recent example in a Swedish political context is the Christian Democrat leader Ebba Busch Thor, who on various occasions has formulated her vision for meeting the challenges of a multicultural society by referring to a Christian platform. In an article entitled *The suburbs would also benefit from Christianity*, published in April 2019, Busch Thor claimed that "Becoming a Christian Democrat is perhaps a way of saying that one has seen what makes a society successful and understood what gives the inhabitants the greatest possible freedom. Upholding Jewish

Christian ethics and Western humanism is not a method of sneaking in morning prayer and Sunday school to create a religious Sweden, but a guarantee of the opportunity to have a liberal lifestyle"[1] (*Expressen* April 20, 2019).

What happens here is that Jewish Christian teaching is used to make a political statement in a new and different historical context from that in which this teaching is rooted and that seems to promote some kind of universal claim. The teaching in question is presented by Busch Thor as providing a solid and significant foundation for what is taken to be a successful liberal method for dealing with the challenges facing Sweden's multicultural suburbs in the twentieth century. This example also shows a blurring of the borders between what is apprehended as "secular" and "religious" (see the next section).

Close to the political arena is the school context, which is our final example in this section. In 2009, the Swedish National Agency for Education was commissioned by the government to develop a new religious education syllabus. Christianity had been given a special position in the Agency's proposal, which mainly reflected its historical significance for Swedish society. The government chose to reinforce this special position in a number of points by adding "values and culture" to underline the historical significance, and it was emphasized more clearly that Christianity has a special role in relation to the other world religions. This revision reflected an increased emphasis on Christianity as a cultural heritage, which could in fact be regarded as a post-secular turn in Swedish society (Thalén 2019).

Post-secularity as the Resolution of the Sharp Boundary Between "the Religious" and "the Secular" or "Non-religious"

The previous section leads into the theme that could be very significant in terms of how religious education is designed in the future. The sharp distinction between what is and what is not religious is currently being dissolved in society, and categories and conceptual boundaries are

becoming blurred. The book *Post-Secular Society* (Nynäs, Lassander and Utriainen 2015), edited by members of a Finnish research team, contains plenty of empirical examples from different areas of society of how contemporary religiosity is in a state of change that is marked by "individualization, democratization, fluidity, hybridity, relocation, and the transgression of boundaries" (Utriainen et al. 2015, 189).

The social mechanisms behind this blurring are manifold. In contemporary society the ideological dimension of religion is increasingly losing its importance. The differences between religions become less important for individuals, which also tend to dissolve the boundaries between the religious and the secular. A change from dogma to subjective experience and a shift from the collective to the personal occur when the authority of religious institutions is dissolved (Frisk and Nynäs 2015; Warner 2010). The empowerment of the individual has given rise to eclecticism, where secular and religious views are blended together, facilitated by globalization. Moberg and Granholm stress the role of the media and popular culture in this transformation:

> … if the increasingly sustained focus on the visibility of religion in the public sphere … were to be coupled with an equally sustained focus on the impact of the media (in the forms of both technologies and institutions), popular culture, and consumer culture, then scholars might well arrive at drastically different interpretations of the actual composition and general character of the religious landscape of the West …. (Moberg and Granholm 2015, 114–115)

Further, according to Moberg and Granholm, the impact of the media, popular culture and consumer culture re-shapes "what 'counts' as religion, what the function of religion is, what the various arenas and locations of religion are," (Moberg and Granholm 2015, 115).

The fact that popular spirituality expresses itself in both a religious context (e.g. sacred dance and meditation) and secular culture (diverse practices of well-being such as yoga and mindfulness) means that there are no longer any "sharp borders between the religious and the secular, between holy and profane" (Frisk and Nynäs 2015, 56). Several examples of this phenomenon—Utriainen, Hovi and Broo use the expression

in-between-spaces—are found in hospitals, health care and palliative care (2015, 93). Religion can today be seen as something that is multi-located and people do not need to see themselves as either religious or non-religious. The same conclusion, based on other premises, is reached by the Finnish theologian Tage Kurtén: "At the beginning of the 2010s, we must understand human life beyond the secular—religious distinction"[2] (Kurtén 2014, 259).

There are also cultural mechanisms or large-scale historical processes behind the blurring of categories. The category religious–secular/non-religious has been developed within the framework of the Enlightenment's way of thinking, which is characterized by general (ahistorical and time-less) divisions that disregard linguistic and historical differences. The breakdown of the category religious–secular/non-religious at a societal level reflects and interacts with the breaking up of the Enlightenment paradigm at a historical level.

The cultural aspect of blurring the categories appears most clearly in those academic contexts in which the concept of religion is critically discussed (cf. Thurfjell 2016). The "secular" is usually seen as the opposite of "the religious". But if the Western concept of religion is deconstructed, or is shown to be a mixed product of Western Christianity and Enlightenment patterns of thought, "the secular" category will be undermined and exposed as a cultural construction. In the future there may not be any non-religious people in the West. Not because of a religious revival that achieves total hegemony—that is pure fantasy—but because the modern division between "the religious" and "the secular" may no longer be meaningful or understandable. We need to go no further than the Reformation era to find such a cultural reality.

Post-secularity as the Return of Religion in Society

The fifth meaning of the concept of post-secular is the most common and, at the same time, the most controversial, namely the idea of the return of religion in society. A lot can be said about the use of the term

"return" in this context, but a common denominator is that it often refers to at least partly measurable phenomena (even though it is difficult to estimate or measure non-organized religion) that are not only of interest to sociologists of religion. This empirical trait makes this interpretation of post-secularity different from the cultural and philosophical approaches mentioned earlier. A fully possible position is to affirm post-secularity in the cultural/philosophical senses and at the same time deny that there is any visible sign of increased religious/spiritual activity in the West, indicating some kind of significant trend shift or even reversal of the so-called process of secularization.

The question of the "return of religion" has been widely discussed amongst sociologists of religion. A well-known study in Great Britain from 2001 to 2003, conducted in the small market town of Kendal by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005), concluded that there was evidence of the beginning of a spiritual revolution in terms of religion giving way to spirituality. This conclusion has been contested by Steve Bruce (2017) and other defenders of the "orthodox" secularization thesis. In their opinion, the number of people practising "alternative" or "holistic spirituality" is far too low and cannot fill the gap of the general decline of traditional, organized religion. Inspired by the Kendal study, a group of Swedish sociologists of religion investigated the spread of religion and spirituality in Enköping, a small Swedish town similar to Kendal in important aspects. However, in contrast to the Kendal study, no clear signs of a "spiritual revolution" could be detected (Ahlstrand and Gunner 2008).

In recent sociological research in a Nordic context, attempts have been made to try to bridge the conflicting views between those who defend the secularization thesis and those who regard it as more or less obsolete by introducing the concept of religious complexity (Furseth 2018). Using this concept as a theoretical framework makes it possible to discover and discuss simultaneous aspects of the growth, decline and changes in religion in different spheres and at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society. Advocates of post-secularity are thus regarded as too one-sided "and fail to account for multiple religious trends that appear at the same time" (Furseth 2018, 15). Characteristic of this example of current research is that the research team (wisely) refrains from making any