RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN DENMARK

ABSTRACT

Denmark has been and still is a predominantly mono-religious nation-state with an Evangelical-Lutheran local variety of Christianity as the constitutionally established religion. Tim Jensen says some religious pluralism took place only very recently, from the 1960s and onwards, due to immigration. Even so, religious pluralism in terms of institutionalised religions, is limited. Consequently, the minority-religions of Denmark truly are in minority, and this fact, together with the long mono-religious tradition, partly explains why even this modest religious pluralism has become a matter of central public concern and fierce discussion.

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History

The Christianization of Denmark began with Ansgar (801-865), missionary and archbishop. It was, however, a king, Harald Blåtand (d. 986) who, according to the text written by himself on a runic stone, "made the Danes Christians".

Though the proud statement of King Bluetooth must be read more as a demonstrative than a descriptive statement, Christianity, enforced by the church, a series of kings and later by the state, has influenced Denmark for some 1,000 years.

With the Reformation (1536), the old type of Christianity, now the Roman-Catholic Church, was forbidden, and the Lutheran-Evangelical type became the one and only.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Roman-Catholic Church, the Reformed Church (with a French, Dutch as well as a German congregation), and a Jewish community, were given, by Royal Decree, certain rights equal to the Lutheran-Evangelical church: The right to perform their rituals, not least marriage with legal validity, to have buildings and burial places of their own, and to register births and deaths.

It was not until 1849, though, with the Constitution of that year, that freedom of religion became a legal right. The same Constitution, however, in § 3 (today § 4) states: "The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is the Danish Folk Church (or: 'The Church of The People'='Folkekirken') and as such to be supported by the state".

But more Christian churches or denominations have entered into the Kingdom of Denmark since then. Today, besides the churches mentioned above, there are Russian, Greek, Romanian, Macedonian, and Serbian Christian Orthodox religious communities. There is a Swedish, Norwegian, and an Anglican church, as well as a great number of so-called Protestant Free (or 'Independent') Churches (Baptist, Adventist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Apostolic et al). Also Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons have congregations in Denmark.

Most of the above mentioned religious communities are the results of immigration, and today members are descendants of former and more recent immigrants and refugees. Though there is quite a few different Christian denominations, the number of members is little compared to the total population to the number of members of The Folk Church.

The same goes for the non-Christian religious communities. All the so-called world religions can be found in today's Denmark, most of them establishing themselves from the early 70s onwards. So-called new religious movements as well as new age practices and ideas have, of course, also have arrived during the last 30 years.

Denmark, then, has been extraordinarily homogenous in terms of institutionalised religion and its relation to a territory, an ethnos, and later on a nation state. Equally characteristic is the widespread opinion, (almost a dogma, and most certainly in line with some Lutheran as well as liberal ideas) that Denmark is a very secular and secularized country. In Denmark, so the traditional story goes, in spite of the constitution, 'we' have separated religion and politics, and the majority of the Lutherans are 'irreligious Lutherans'.

Numbers

By January 1, 2005 the percentage of registered, paying members of The Folk Church was 83.1 per cent (4,498,703) of the total population (roughly 5,300,000) and about 87 per cent of the total number of Danish citizens.

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3.8 per cent (some 200.000) of these may be classified as persons with a Muslim background. The remaining 0.7 per cent are comprised of 7,000 Hindus (mainly Tamils from Sri Lanka, but also some from Northern India and an insignificant number of members of ISKCON), 8,000 to 12,000 Buddhists (from Vietnam, Thailand, Tibet, Denmark, and other Western countries), around 3.500 members of the two Jewish communities (mainly very well-integrated or assimilated descendants of migrants from a variety of countries), and some few hundred Sikhs (organized in two main groups). Besides the adherents to these so-called world religions, there are some few and extremely small, new religious movements.

As for the Christian churches, the Roman-Catholic Church has roughly 30,000 members (mainly ethnic Danes but also a number of immigrants and refugees from a wide variety of countries of origin) and is the largest. Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other so-called Free (or 'Independent') Churches, together with Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and others amount to about 60,000, the Jehovah's Witnesses being one of the largest groups with some 15,000 members.

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Out of the 100 formally and legally acknowledged and recognised religious communities, 66 are Christian. There is one Bahai, four Buddhist, six Hindu, two Jewish, 17 Muslim, one Sikh religious community, and a couple of religious communities which cannot be classified in relation to the traditional world religions.

The constitutional framework

The Constitution of 1849 (revised 1953) introduced freedom of religion (though this term is not used, not even in 1953). § 81 states: "The citizens shall be entitled to form congregations for the worship of God in a manner consistent with their convictions, provided that nothing in variance with good morals or public order shall be taught or practiced." And, § 84 adds: "No person shall for reasons of belief [or: 'creed'] be deprived of access to full enjoyment of his civic and political rights, nor shall he for such reasons evade compliance with any common civic duty." Besides, § 82 states that "No one shall be liable to make personal contributions to any denomination other than the one to which he adheres [...]."

Why the terminology, impregnated by Christian theistic and mono-theistic notions, was not brought more in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1953 remains to be explained.

Freedom of religion, in 1849, was mainly understood as a freedom from the clerical authorities, a freedom to form other Christian faith-communities. The freedom to be non-religious, however, was implied, even if it was not until 1857 that baptism was no longer compulsory; freedom to have a non-religious civic marriage also played a role.

Since 1849 (or 1857) it has been up to the individual (or the parents) whether he or she wanted to be a member of the The Folk Church. Only the King/Queen (as the formal Head of State) must, as stated in the Constitution, be a member of The Folk Church (§6).

In Denmark, f*reedom* of religion is not equal to *equality* of religions. This shows not only in the Constitution: Apart from a special "church tax" paid only by the members of The Folk Church, a portion of the general income tax also goes to various expenses connected with the administration, and maintenance of the church, as well as to the financing of part of the salaries of the vicars who are all employees of the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, i.e. the state.

Besides, education of the ministers/vicars of The Folk Church takes place at the free, public, state universities, and students can obtain extra financial subsidies from the state. It may be argued that this too is a violation of § 82, and most certainly it demonstrates that there is no equality of religions, since the possibility of having ministers or imams or the like educated and trained for free is not an option for all religious communities.

Discussing violation of § 82 it is often argued that the state church administers certain affairs (especially the registration of births) which, otherwise, the state (and taxpayers) would have to finance anyway. It is also argued that the tax money going to the maintenance of the church buildings, go to 'cultural heritage', and the acknowledged or recognised religious communities are also finaced by everybody since they have certain kinds of tax-deduction and exemption from various taxes.

A toughening of laws with special regard to the Muslim minorities can also be seen in the otherwise very liberal laws and rules regarding the establishment of p*rivate schools*.

Today, there are more than 430 such schools with more than 75,000 pupils. Many are Christian schools, and then there are some 18 Muslim/Arabic ones with (2001) a total number of pupils between 3,000 to 4,000, i.e. some 10-12 per cent of all the pupils in Denmark have some kind of Muslim background.

The curriculum and teaching has to meet the standards of the public school, and each school must have a supervisor to guarantee this. But, in 1998 and again in 2002 and 2003 the law on these schools has been toughened: The language used in teaching must be Danish, the headmaster must master the Danish native tongue in writing and speech, and the schools are

obliged to prepare the children for a life with freedom and democracy. Though there has been, most recently, some criticism of certain Christian schools, the debate mostly has focued on the Muslim ones.

Looking at Danish legislation besides this, it should be mentioned that it does not have any general principle of equality or a general prohibition against racial or religious discrimination covering all fields of law. Nor is there a general provision of equal opportunities in Danish legislation. So far no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation has been initiated.

Looking at the Danish *Penal Code*, the most interesting features in regard to religious pluralism are the following:

§ 140 prohibits *blasphemy*, and runs as follows:

> Any person who publicly ridicules or insults the religious teaching or worship of any religious community legitimately existing in this country, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 4 months.

This paragraph has not been in use since 1938, but following the murder of Theo Van Gogh in November 2004, there has been a political debate on whether the section should be repealed. On March 18, 2005 the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) presented a bill to repeal § 140. The bill has not been considered yet.

§ 266b prohibits the dissemination of expressions of racial prejudice, and has the following wording:

> (1) Any person who publicly or with the intention of dissemination to a wide circle of people makes a statement or imparts other information threatening, insulting or degrading to a group of persons on account of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years.
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> (2) When handing down punishment, it is to be considered as an aggravating circumstance that the statement is in the nature of propaganda.

§ 266b criminalises statements that are disseminated publicly or to a wide circle of people. To the knowledge of The Danish Center for Documentation and Consultancy on Racediscrimination (DRC), the paragraph has rarely been used against statements offensive to religion, but it has been used against statements offensive to race. These cases have, however, often concerned Muslim victims, and the fact that they were Muslims has often been part of the aggravation.

Public schools

The Danish elementary school (covering 9 years, from age 6 to 15) is a comprehensive school. The general aim is to educate children to become tolerant, open-minded, creative, independent citizens in an open democracy with respect for human rights.

The executive orders for the school in general also state that a major aim is to "make the children familiar [intimate] with Danish culture and acquainted with other cultures". Since Danish culture is defined by reference to the majority religion of the country, this amounts (in principle) to some sort of religious instruction or religio-cultural indoctrination on all all levels of elementary school. In this context, 'we' and 'Danish culture' does not include the minorities and 'the other', for example the Muslims. The elementary school, then, is still used as an ethnic and national key instrument in acculturating newcomers as well as ethnic Danes to a kind of Danishness which is not particularly pluralistic in terms of religion.

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This may come as a surprise, nevertheless, since this school subject was (finally) freed of its close connection to The Folk Church in 1975. At this time only, it became, in principle at least, non-confessional, and *instruction* in the core teachings of the Lutheran-Protestant Church was (in the executive orders) replaced by words saying that the central *subject matter* shall be the teachings of The Folk Church.

The subject still had and has a special position since it is mentioned in a separate paragraph in the overall executive orders for the elementary school, and a possiblity of opting out still exists. In 1975 a compulsory

subject matter was introduced, "foreign religions and philosophies of life", to be taught either in Christian Studies, in History or in another subject. In 1993 this was integrated into Christian Studies, where "other" or "foreign religions" shall be taught, but only on the upper-levels, not the first five years of school.

That non-Christian religions are taught only at the upper-level is problematic for several reasons, but mainly because in many schools there are pupils whose parents belong to another religion, especially Islam. Criticisms raised against this is frequently met by four arguments: Denmark is a Christian country; the name of the subject is (and must stay) 'Christian Studies' and not 'Religion'; children at this age cannot handle the fact that there is more than one religion, and they must first have a 'safe foundation' in their own religion before they are 'confronted' with other religions.

Finally: In a public discussion on freedom and equality of religion in Denmark, the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs (also the Minister of Education) refused to discuss what he termed 'formalities'. His point of departure, he said, was a cultural one, and culturally viewed Denmark as a Christian country. In a discussion on RE in elementary school, he repeated the above mentioned point of view that the name must be as it is and that the main purpose is to familiarise all pupils, not least the Muslim ones, with the backbone of Danish culture, Lutheran-Protestant Christianity. When asked to discuss the possi-bility of opting out and the fact some (very few actually) Muslims parents with-draw their children from RE, he pondered the means to make sure that those parents who do so, in accordance with the same law, really do provide their children with knowledge of Christianity.

Pondering the possibility of simply doing away with the opting-out possibility, the Minister stated that he was afraid of doing so, because that would be equal to saying that the school was secular. He did not want that. He wanted the school to stay, as he said, multi-religious.

The interesting thing is not that he called it multi-religious (which it can hardly be said to be). No, the interesting thing is that he said that it was not, and must not be, secular. His statements, consequently, may be interpreted as a rather rare interpretation of article 4 in the Constitution, making it a must for all state insti-tutions, not least the public school, by way of religious education and other school subjects and extra-curricula activities, to support the state church.

An interesting interpretation, also if one considers that all members of parliament have to swear to uphold the Constitution. Interesting, also to those who considered the school a secular school, separated, in principle at least, from the church by the Constitution of 1849.

Concluding remarks

Looking at numbers of adherents as well as the constitution, I find it fit to stress that Denmark is *not* a multi-religious country, but a pre-dominantly mono-religious country with recent tendencies towards more plurality. It must, however, be added that in specific localities (certain bigger cities and neighbourhoods, certain schools, and the beliefs and practices of indi-viduals) the religious pluralism is much more of a fact.

The economic, intellectual and symbolic power of the institutionalised, state supported Folk Church and the kind(s) of Christianity and Lutheran-Protestants notions of religion in regard to politics, science and business, cannot and must not be underestimated. Less than six percent of the 83 per cent Folk-Church Danes are regular churchgoers. Many belong to the church, but don't believe in it and those that are believers often believe in various "new age" ways. Despite this, the impact of hundreds of years of indoctri-nation cannot be and must not be underestimated. Not least if one wants to look at the minorities having to navigate in this field, and if one considers the problems they as well as the majority face in view of the current situation and tendencies towards a change in the religious landscape.

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In regard to freedom of religion, though, the situation in Denmark is not too bad, especially in comparison to other countries.

This is also true in regard to the new religious movements. Denmark has an anti-cult move-ment, but their influence has weak-ened during the last 10 years, and historians of religions actually have managed to compete with them as favorite experts in the media. Besides, there is no longer the same focus on these NRMs as 10-15 years ago. Islam and the Muslims have taken over as the significant other.

Nonetheless, things can always be improved. First of all, it may be argued that the constitutional privileging of The Folk Church should be changed, i.e. the state ought to become secular, because a secular (not secularistic) state is the best guarantee for freedom of religion, and the most pragmatic framework for a democracy housing a plurality of religions.

This step would not only give the very same Folk Church more freedom, it would also serve the purpose of creating, on the constitutional level, an equality of religions, which – in my opinion – is a prerequisite for more freedom of religion.

Due to the politics and rhetorics on religion, culture and identity, and to the present political climate and par-liamentary situation, a change of the Constitution, not least the articles pertaining to the privileging of The Folk Church, seems unlikely to take place in the near future.

I still think that the most important duty for the state, be it secular or as it is now, is to do better when it comes to educating its citizens about religion. Even if the (nation) state thinks that it is in its interest to build and rebuild the identity of the nation by building and rebuilding the identity of the citizens (as defined in regard

to the traditional majority-religion), it should provide knowledge of other religions and do so in a neutral, informative and pluralistic way.

Looking at the situation for e.g. Muslims in Denmark, there can be no doubt that the public discourses on religion, the Muslims, the 'us' and the 'other' in the media is a major player. The relationship between majority and minorities is to a large degree dependent on the representations of religion, in general, and in regard to our religion and the religions of the 'other', in the media. Journalists and editors, well educated in the results of the comparative study of religions, would be better equipped to meet the needs of a society and a world with more religions, more gods, and more truths.

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