Book Review

Niels Reeh


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The process of secularization is often said to particularly mark Nordic countries, but has also been described as “the twenty century’s great myth” (Cox 1999, 135). In times in which religion has distinctly and, occasionally violently, returned to the foreground of the global scene, the thesis concerning secularization is undoubtedly worth revisiting. Niels Reeh does this in his work entitled *Secularization Revisited – Teaching of Religion and the State of Denmark 1721–2006*. Reeh claims that the study of secularization has been abandoned too quickly in the field of sociology of religion and he asks how, why and where the dominant theories of secularization went wrong. Reeh points to two issues in particular that make up “blind spots” in the field of classical secularization theory: the interreligious agency and the agency of the state. These two perspectives are critically investigated, developed and used as a theoretical framework to present a long-term historical sociological case study of the teaching of the subject religion in elementary schools in Denmark. The theoretical framework is complemented with an outline of a new theory that conceptualizes the concept of religion as consisting of interrelational dynamics. According to Reeh, this must be done in order to understand the states’ – in this case Denmark’s – close agency on religion. For this theory on the close agency of religion by the state, the concept of “survival unit,” developed by Norbert Elias, is used by Reeh. Here, religion is understood as “a specific historical type of survival unit” (p. 2). Such “religious survival units” are anchored in the field of other religions where struggles and contestations are played out. These contestations form...
speech acts and collective consciousness, in turn forming social constructions that comprise distinctions between “us” and “them.” Here, Reeh claims, the state plays a significant and important role, but has not been studied greatly in the secularization literature. This is also the case when it comes to the role of the state and religious education in the field of sociology of religion; especially, there is a gap in relation to the macrolevel. Thus, the argumentation and importance for this work is clearly pointed to and discussed, both from gaps in using theories on secularization as well as from analysis on education, especially concerning religious education on the macrolevel.

To move on from the introductory chapters on theories on secularization and the development of a new theoretical approach to religion, Reeh analyzes religious education in Denmark as a case study from 1721 until 2006. The work is divided into 10 chapters; the first is entitled “The despotic state of absolutism of 1721” and the last is entitled “The Public Management State: 1989 to 2006.” With the help of the theoretical framework, especially the concept of “survival unit,” Reeh succeeds in demonstrating how the state manages religious education in order to discipline and form its population and citizens. Religion and religious education is, in the introduction to compulsory schools in 1721, a vital area of interest and the disciplining of different groups of its population is of basic importance, even though the arguments differed for different groups. There was a hope that poor people would learn some basic skills in order to get a job; for peasants, however, the focus was just as much on making them loyal and obedient to the state through religious education as on how to reach salvation. Thus, according to Reeh, schools were almost entirely developed to the teaching of religion for the peasants, and education was almost entirely religious in nature. Interestingly, the Act on Confirmation of 1736, as well as the law on confirmation, was suggested by a military commission. This underlines the strong interest and agency of the state in religious education and the interest to foster loyalty and obedience, at least among the male population, and to get them to register as soldiers and defend the nation. During this initial time of compulsory education, the fact is that Denmark as a state was severely threatened by Sweden. Thus, the links between schooling, religious education and the defense of Denmark is strong. Reeh argues, in this case, when education is being established, that the links from school policies to the defense of Denmark need to be taken more into account, especially if we are to understand religious education as compulsory in education, as well as understanding the development that follows. This first example of a historical analysis of the state’s policies on religion in compulsory education, the construction of the field of religion and its strong link to education is consistently followed up in the book up until 2006. Through a strong perspective of external relations of the Danish state and a conceptual lens of “religious survival units,” Reeh shows how external relations have been of vital interest to the state in forming educational policies, whether it is the peasants during the early 18th century, fighting against Nazism during the German occupation of 1940–1945, or Islamic terrorism since 2001.

The analyses are accurate and interesting throughout Reeh’s work and, for many, perhaps more exciting the closer they approach present times. The last chapter of the case study is entitled “The Public Management State: 1989 to 2006” and deals with common trends in education such as accountability, measurement and competition in the educational arena. It is obvious that religious education has changed considerably through the
long-term historical period Reeh covers, but even now the subject has a function of foster subjects of the state; now, for example, in the name of Christianity as “culture” and helping in the creation of “Danish values,” as well as constructing a distinction between being a Dane or a Muslim. Thus, the Danish state is still concerned with its citizens’ religion and religious socialization and education. In relation to his work, Reeh argues that theoretical work using secularization theories is relevant but must pay more attention to states and their external relations as religious changes are deeply contingent upon the state; or, as Reeh puts it, “the state has used the means at hand in its struggle for survival, including the existing religion of its habitants, which it has tried to influence and reconstruct in ways that served its interest” (p. 186). In summary, this work analyzes the agency of the state in a long-term historical perspective and presents religious education being constructed in the interest of the state. There is nothing new in the understanding that states shape their population or citizens through the construction of education. However, Reeh’s work is important, innovative and interesting, especially as it is done on the subject of religious education in a long-term historical perspective. Furthermore, the analyses are related to discussions within classical theories of secularization, thereby also making a theoretical contribution in this field. Reeh’s work is important reading for students in religious studies as well as in education, not least for students preparing to become teachers in religious education. This work really adds to the understanding on the importance of education and to the struggle of constructing a curriculum, which is mentioned as a “complicated conversation” by the curriculum theorist William Pinar (2012, p.1). This is even more deeply understood after having read Niels Reeh’s work.

REFERENCES