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Developments of Islamic education in the Nordic countries: From public schools to Muslim communities

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Abstract: The Nordic countries, although each of them has their own history and particular features, share a culture that is strongly influenced by Lutheran Protestantism on the one hand and by a strong secularization process on the other. They all profile as Nordic welfare states, where the state has an active role in providing public services including education. This article looks at how and in what forms Islamic education has been developed in the Nordic contexts. Although there are similarities in the Nordic states in terms of how religion and its role in the society are understood, different forms of Islamic religious education have emerged in these countries due to the existing structures and frameworks of religious education in each country. Focusing on Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, the article will look at Islamic religious education as a subject in public schools and privately run Muslim free schools, in addition to provision of Islamic supplementary education in mosques and religious communities. It will detect some similarities in the Nordic contexts such as homogeneous national imaginaries in which Islam and Muslims are seen as the "others" and the perceived threats of Islamic education to national unity and integration.
Keywords: Islamic religious education, Islamic supplementary education, Nordic countries, non-confessional, secular Lutheranism

Zusammenfassung: Die nordischen Länder haben zwar alle ihre eigene Geschichte und ihre eigenen Besonderheiten, aber sie teilen eine Kultur, die einerseits stark vom lutherischen Protestantismus und andererseits von einem starken Säkularisierungsprozess geprägt ist. Sie alle profilieren sich als nordische Wohlfahrtsstaaten, in denen der Staat eine aktive Rolle bei der Bereitstellung öffentlicher Dienstleistungen einschließlich der Bildung spielt. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie und in welchen Formen die islamische Bildung in den nordischen Ländern entwickelt wurde. Obwohl es in den nordischen Staaten Ähnlichkeiten im Hinblick auf das Verständnis von Religion und ihrer Rolle in der Gesellschaft gibt, haben sich in diesen Ländern aufgrund der bestehenden Strukturen und Rahmenbedingungen des Religionsunterrichts unterschiedliche Formen des islamischen Religionsunterrichts herausgebildet. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf Schweden, Norwegen, Dänemark und Finnland und befasst sich mit dem islamischen Religionsunterricht als Unterrichtsfach in öffentlichen Schulen und in privaten muslimischen Schulen in freier Trägerschaft sowie mit der Bereitstellung von islamischem Zusatzunterricht in Moscheen und Religionsgemeinschaften. Dabei werden einige Gemeinsamkeiten in den nordischen Ländern aufgedeckt, wie z. B. homogene nationale Vorstellungen, in denen der Islam und die Muslime als die „Anderen" angesehen werden, und die wahrgenommene Bedrohung der nationalen Einheit und Integration durch den Islamunterricht.
Schlagwörter: Islamischer Religionsunterricht, islamischer Zusatzunterricht, nordische Länder, konfessionsloses, säkulares Luthertum

1. Introduction

This article deals with recent developments in Islamic education in four Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. Iceland is omitted in this overview because of the rather small scope of Islamic education in the country (Sigurðsson, 2023). The Nordic countries share many societal and cultural characteristics such as the historically strong position of the Lutheran Protestant Church, strong secularization of the society, and a profile as Nordic welfare states where the state takes responsibility for public services including education. Typical of the Nordic Lutheran religiosity is low attendance of religious services in the Church, but high participation in life rites, which has been described in the research literature as post-religious, but also as "the Nordic paradox" (Skeie, 2021; Poulter, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi, 2015). In all Nordic countries the majority still belongs to the Lutheran Church (varying between 60-72%) while only a small minority of the people identify as religious or consider religion as relevant in their lives. Lutheranism is seen rather as a part of the national history and culture, which has been described in research literature as secular Lutheranism (Sinnemäki, Nelson, Portman & Tilli, 2019). The Lutheran tradition and its embeddedness in the national cultures as well as secular liberal ideals of neutrality of the public space strongly influence the way in which religious education is managed in the public education systems.

During the recent decades, questions of Islamic education have also come to the fore along with the growing Muslim populations in these countries (Berglund, Gilliam & Selimovic, 2023). Apart from the Tatar community in Finland which has existed since the 19th century, Muslim communities in the Nordic countries have their roots in the labour immigration during 1960s and 1970s from southern Asia, North Africa and Turkey to Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Later immigration consisted mainly of the family members and relatives of the guest workers and refugees. In Finland, immigration waves from Muslim majority countries started later, in the 1980s and 1990s, as Finland started to receive refugees from countries such as the Balkans, Somalia, and Iraq. Due to the more recent refugee crises, the Nordic countries have also received refugees particularly from Syria and Iraq. Currently, Sweden has the largest Muslim minority with approximately 8% of the inhabitants, Norway about 4-6%, Denmark 5-6% and Finland around 2-3% according to various estimations.

On the one hand, the Nordic countries put high demands on integrating the immigrant populations into the wider societies and providing freedom of religion and equal opportunities for religious minorities. On the other hand, however, the Muslim communities and their differing understandings of religion and religiosity are seen in public discourses as a threat to the secular homogeneity of the Nordic countries as well as their social cohesion (Berglund et al., 2023). Furthermore, during the recent years, all Nordic countries have witnessed the emergence of far-right parties and anti-Islamic activism, such as the Quran burning incidents and attacks against Muslims and the generally negative attitudes of the public towards Muslims (Berglund et al., 2023). All these phenomena have an influence on developments of Islamic education whether it be in the public or private sphere, as the activities of Muslims are under constant scrutiny.

Against this background, this article examines developments of Islamic education in the Nordic countries based on a review of current scholarly literature. It aims at providing a general picture of what opportunities are available for Muslim children and youth in the Nordic countries to be educated in their own religion. The article will provide a report on each country separately covering a) religious education (RE) in the public school system and whether Islamic religious education (IRE) is provided as a separate subject or taught within the general RE curriculum, b) Islamic religious education in faith-based Islamic schools if it is available and c) Islamic supplementary education provided by Islamic communities and organizations. The discussion section will draw together some conclusions from the country-specific reports in terms of similarities and differences in the various Nordic countries. A topic that seems to arise frequently in studies relating to the Nordic context is the strong emphasis on

homogeneity in the national cultural traditions, which seem to exclude Muslims (Rissanen & Poulter, 2023; Thomas, 2017). In the light of this, the article will reflect on the notions of non-confessionality, neutrality and equality as manifestations of the Nordic ideal into which the Muslims are expected to "integrate".

2. Islamic religious education in public and private contexts in the Nordic countries

The following country-specific overviews will examine first how RE in general has been organized in each country while observing the influence of cultural Protestantism or Lutheranism on the way that religion and religious education are conceptualized. The existing models of RE are further examined in terms of how Islam is considered within the official RE curricula. Special attention is given to the Finnish context as there, contrary to the other countries under examination, IRE has been developed as a separate subject and teacher education for IRE teachers has also been developed. The Finnish case is thus of particular interest as Islamic education has been taken into account within the state-funded educational system. In addition to RE in the public educational system, the country-specific overviews will consider alternative educational options for Muslims such as Muslim free schools and Islamic supplementary education (ISE) provided by Muslim communities and institutions.

2.1 Sweden

The first country in the Nordics that introduced non-confessional RE in the public schools was Sweden. In 1962, Swedish RE was changed from "Christianity" to "Knowledge about Christianity" and became non-confessional. In 1969 the subject's name was further changed to "Knowledge about Religion" (*religionskunskap*). Since 1996, RE has been an obligatory subject and its scientific roots are in the academic discipline of the study of religion, which is clearly stated in the syllabus. Teaching is non-confessional (*icke-konfessionell*) meaning "that no particular worldview is prioritized and that pupils from all cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds should feel comfortable" (*Skolverket* in Berglund et al., 2023). Although the curriculum emphasizes neutrality and objectivity, Berglund (2022) has noted that these principles do not extend to what are considered as the society's fundamental values, which are explicitly stated to be based in Christianity and Western humanism. Berglund has also noted how Swedish RE, regardless of its neutral self-image, in fact appears very "Lutheran marinated" for students coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds (Berglund, 2013 & 2022). Also, other scholars have expressed criticism of some of the theoretical underpinnings of Swedish non-confessional RE. For instance, Ensted, Flensner and Kardemark (2024) have argued that the secular doxa of non-confessional RE in Sweden risks dismissing religion as something outdated and non-logical rather than cultivating an understanding of religion. In the Swedish school culture in general, non-religious and atheist approaches to religion seem to be considered neutral and normal (Kittelmann Flesner, 2015).

The content of RE focuses on the local community and storytelling in the lower grades and key ideas of the major religions and secular worldviews in the higher grades. Islam is included in the curriculum as one of the major religions. According to the curriculum, the students need to learn some ceremonies, symbols and narratives of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in the lower grades, and key ideas, documents, history and practices of Christianity and other world religions in the higher grades in addition to different phenomena related to religion (Berglund, 2021). Studies on how Islam is represented in the schoolbooks have shown negative, although not necessarily wrong, depictions of Islam compared to Christianity (Otterbeck, 2005). Also, the model "the man, the book, the faith" is applied to teaching about world religions, which can be seen as a particularly Lutheran approach to religion (Berglund, 2021).

In Sweden, although the public schools do not allow for developing Islamic religious education as a separate subject, this is possible in the privately run and state financed free schools (*friskolor*). In the

early 1990s, the education act was renewed in Sweden and the founding of private schools was made easier. Following this, the first Muslim free school was founded in Malmö in 1993 and currently there are around 15 schools that can be described as having an Islamic profile; some of them are classified as "Islamic" and some "Swedish-Arabic" or something similar (Berglund, 2021; Berglund et al., 2023). The free schools can have a specific ethos, or they can include extra subjects such as IRE, but they need to comply with the same basic goals and curriculum as the state schools; thus, teaching non-confessional RE is obligatory while IRE can be only optional. The profiles of the schools vary as does the role that religion plays in the general culture of the school. According to Berglund (2011) the Muslim schools have "weak" or "strong" profiles in relation to how much emphasis is put on the special ethos of the school. Teaching of Islam differs in these schools according to the profiles of the schools and teachers' pedagogical approaches: for instance, how the Quran is taught and what is emphasized. The teachers negotiate the position in Swedish context but also use pedagogical approaches that are dominant in traditional Islamic education such as Quran recitation. Thus, the teachers seem to have freedom to apply Islamic educational practices that also consider the tradition. Berglund (2011) has noted how global influences, and different interpretive traditions influence the teaching and how an individual teacher has an important role in what kind of interpretations of Islam are transmitted in the classroom. The Muslim schools face both external and internal challenges: external struggles for space as an Islamic school and internal struggles about which interpretations should be given space among Muslim youth. Reasons why the parents send their kids to these schools include, for instance, wellbeing, security, better academic profile, avoiding discrimination and Islamophobia in state schools, and providing an Islamic environment (Berglund, 2021).

There are no statistics available of the number of children and young people who attend Islamic supplementary education in Sweden. However, it is known that there are about one hundred established Islamic organizations and about 750 non-profit organizations with Islam or Muslim in their names (Berglund, 2023). The existing research about the Islamic educational activities of the Islamic organizations in Sweden is limited to a few case studies in which students' experiences were studied. (Berglund & Gent 2018 & 2019). According to Berglund and Gent (2018) participation in the Quran schools seems to be more frequent in the poorer areas. While the liturgical skills that the Muslim children gain in this education are not much valued in the mainstream school by teachers, students and their families value it positively. In addition to Quranic literacy and recitation skills, the Muslim communities in Sweden also provide other activities such as sports, study help and cultural activities, which has a positive influence on the students' overall wellbeing.

2.2 Denmark

In Denmark, similarly to Sweden, RE in the public schools became non-confessional in 1975 and was renamed as *Kristendomskunskab*, i. e., "Christian studies" or "Knowledge and Christianity". The main content of Danish RE is Evangelical Lutheran Christianity and it has the goal of safeguarding "the Christian cultural heritage", but according to the principle of non-confessionality, RE should not have elements of religious socialization (Böwadt, 2020). Representative of the Christian emphasis of Danish RE is that in the seventh/eight grades teaching switches to confirmation teaching organized by the local churches (Berglund et al., 2023). Although there has been a shift towards "existential" or "life-oriented" education in Danish RE instead of focusing on knowledge about religion as such, there has not been more focus on religious diversity. Islam is taught as part of the curriculum on "non-Christian religions" (Ministry of Education 2019 in Böwadt, 2020). While Christianity is taught from the perspective of basic values, fundamental life questions and has an existential purpose, non-Christian religions, including Islam, are only studied in order to impart knowledge of them (Böwadt, 2020; Jensen & Kjedsen, 2022). Studies of the portrayal of Islam in *Kristendomskunskab* have shown that Islam is presented as an ahistorical, impersonal and homogeneous religion and also in connection with conflicts. Muslims are

depicted exclusively as performing religious obligations or sometimes even as criminals (Buchardt & Enemark, 2021). In the upper secondary school, Islam is to be included in the curriculum of *Religion* as the "other prominent religion" alongside Christianity. Regardless of the relatively strong Christian character of RE in Denmark, according to Buchardt and Enemark (2021) reports have indicated that only a few Muslim families use the right for exemption from RE, although it is allowed in the Danish system. There have also been debates about making the subject obligatory for all (Jensen & Kjedsen, 2022).

Another option for Muslims in Denmark is to enrol their children in Muslim free schools, as the Danish system is the most liberal of the Nordic countries regarding the establishment of private free schools. In Denmark, the first Muslim free school (*Friskole*) was founded in 1978 in Copenhagen. Free schools are partly subsidized by the state (75%) and parents contribute by paying fees. In 2022 there were 24 Muslim free schools in Denmark and about 10% of Muslim children attended these schools (Mouritsen, Vestergaard Ahrensberg & Jensen, 2023). Research about Danish Muslim schools has shown that whereas the schools in the beginning had a very traditional character and emphasized the language and culture of the countries of origin, starting from the 1990s their goals were revisited as many families understood that they were not going to return to their countries of origin but were to stay in Denmark. Thus, a new emphasis on knowing the Danish language and culture started to become more evident in the school curricula (Simonsen & Daun, 2018; Shakoor, 2014). As in Sweden, the Islamic character of the schools varies. Only about a third of the schools mention Islam in their mission statement as a part of the ideological foundation of the school. The Muslim schools can have Islamic RE as part of their curriculum. The Muslim free schools have been under constant surveillance and specific rules have been enforced in 2002, 2005 and again in 2017; for instance, inspection of the schools' teaching of democracy, freedom and gender equality. The Muslim schools are under suspicion for being potential hubs for radicalization and the schools are expected to take active measures for "preparing students for a life in Danish society" (*Børne- og undervisningsministeriet* in Buchardt & Enemark, 2021). Following the inspections, several Muslim schools were closed. This development is simultaneous with a tendency in Danish politics to identify as a Christian nation (Böwadt, 2020). However, in their research, Mouritsen, Vestergaard Ahrensberg and Jensen (2023) found that Muslim schools in fact seemed to have better results in terms of national belonging and social trust as well as outgroup prejudice and liberal democratic orientation when compared to Muslim students attending state schools.

2.3 Norway

In Norway, non-confessional RE was introduced in the public schools in 1997. Prior to the shift to non-confessional RE there had been a non-confessional option for Christian RE, *livssyn* (philosophy of life), which also presented other religions and worldviews (Berglund et al., 2023). In 1997 the two RE subjects were merged into one shared RE subject for all, named *Kristendomskunnskap med religions- og livssynsorientering*, i. e., KRL (Christianity and Orientation to Life Questions). The subject was later criticized for its emphasis on Christianity. In 2001, the Norwegian Humanist Association and the Norwegian Islamic Council with an independent group of parents brought a lawsuit against the state and demanded right of exemption from KRL. The Norwegian Supreme Court ruled against the applicants. After that, two cases were raised against it: one in the Human Rights Court of Strasbourg and one in the UN's Human Rights Committee, Geneva. After the critique from the Human Rights Court and Committee, the subject was revised in 2008, and the name of the subject was changed to RLE (Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics). However, in 2015 Christianity was again reinstated into the title of the subject, which is now called *Kristendom, religion, livssyn og etikk*, i. e., KRLE (Christianity, Religions, Life stances, and Ethics) (Andreassen, 2021). At the same time a regulation was added that half of the teaching time should be allocated to learning about Christianity.

Learning about Islam is included in learning about other religions. Markeng and Berglund (2024) noted

that whereas the previous curricula included clear descriptions of content that the students were expected to learn related to Islam such as "stories of the life of Muhammad", or describing "the Prophet Muhammed's life, the revelation of the Qur'ān, and the content of central parts of the Qur'ān", in the current curriculum there are no references to specific scriptures or narratives although the pupils are expected to be able to talk about and present narratives from different religious traditions. Markeng & Berglund (2024) studied how Norwegian RE teachers incorporate learning the Quran in their teaching and noted insecurities in how the teachers related to teaching about the Quran. They also emphasized dimensions of religious scriptures typical of Christian RE. In the upper secondary school, Islam is the second mandatory religion to be taught. Experiences of Muslim students about Norwegian RE have been both positive, as Islam is included in the curriculum, and negative as Islam is tied to the phenomena of terrorism and extremism in a way that other religions are not (Andreassen, 2021).

The Norwegian system, similarly to Sweden and Denmark, allows for establishing free schools, but although there are around one hundred Christian free schools (with the number steadily rising), no Muslim schools currently exist. A Muslim school, *Urtehagen skole*, was established in Oslo between 2001-2004 but it was closed due to internal struggles. In this school, RLE was taught with an emphasis on Islam (Islamic Knowledge with Religious and Philosophical views) (Andreassen, 2021). In 2004, the *Urtehagen upper secondary private school* was also founded. It is an adult education centre focusing on preparing the students for the citizenship test. The school has teaching in Islam, health, Arabic, data and sports and most of the students are immigrant women. Apart from the short-lived *Urtehagen skole*, no other Muslim primary schools have been established. The Muslim Primary School Foundation (*Stiftelsen Den muslimske Grunnskole*) previously applied to establish a Muslim free school, but its application was turned down by the Ministry of Education on the basis that it would oppose the idea of integration and weaken the preconditions of language training and socialization with other Norwegian children (Andreassen, 2021). Thomas (2017) analysed the media debates related to the Muslim school case and noted that the opposition to the Muslim schools in the Norwegian context is based on the idea of their aspirations for "differentiation" which is seen as negative. For instance, it is feared that the Muslim schools would only take Muslim students which would be against the idea of equity and inclusion or "school for all" (*enhetskolen*). In the Norwegian imaginary, to be different is a threat to the ideal of national unity and "sameness" (Gullestad, 2002, in Thomas, 2017); however, the Christian free schools are not seen as a threat as they do not challenge the hegemonic cultural values.

In Norway, formally approved and registered religious communities receive financial support from the state. As the public school system offers no options for Islamic religious education and no private Muslim schools are available, Islamic supplementary education (ISE) provided by the religious communities has developed into an important space for Islamic education. A recent report published by the Muslimsk Dialognettverk, a Norwegian umbrella organization for Islamic communities founded in 2017, examined ISE in six Norwegian Muslim organizations with different ethnic and Islamic orientations. It notes that teaching in the communities is linked to their different cultural traditions, but it is also influenced by the Norwegian school system in terms of physical surroundings, pedagogical methods and topics addressed. Teaching is often on weekends and includes native languages, Quran, Islamic knowledge about rites and ethical reflection. Norwegian is increasingly used as a teaching language (Eggen, 2023a). Also, there are examples of transnational Islamic educational initiatives such as the Madina Institute's Norwegian branch. It provides classes in Arabic and Islamic studies and chaplaincy and leadership programs for Muslims online and in person.

Eggen (2023a) has noted that, in the Norwegian context, Islamic supplementary education is also often seen negatively by outside viewers, while Muslim families have positive experiences of it and see it as valuable. For instance, teachers in public schools might be uninterested in the extracurricular studies that Muslim students participate in. Eggen (2023b) has also noted how the term *Koranskole* (Quran

school) is generally used for Islamic supplementary education in the Norwegian public discourse with a negative connotation, while the activities in the communities are much more varied than just learning the Quran. It is estimated that just under 30% of Muslim children in Norway participate in mosque education.

2.4 Finland

In the Finnish context, a compulsory for all non-confessional RE subject has recently been hotly debated. However, until now, Finland has maintained a model of RE in which RE is organized separately for students belonging to different religious denominations. This model dates back to the 1920s when it was decided that RE was to be provided according to the confession of the majority (i. e., Lutheran Christianity) while giving exemption for the students who did not belong to the Lutheran Church. A non-confessional option, "History of religions and moral philosophy" (*Uskontojen historia ja siveysoppi*), which was later renamed "Knowledge of life view" (*elämänkatsomustieto*) has been provided for those not belonging to the Lutheran Church. Also, students belonging to the Orthodox Church (in Finland the second official Church as Finland used to be a part of the Russian Empire) were given the right to their own religious education. The existence of a prominent officially acknowledged minority in Finland has paved the way for a system in which the rights of the religious minorities were accommodated in the form of allowing them RE according to their own convictions (Sakaranaho, 2006).

In the 1990s, following the immigration waves, Finnish schools also started to become more diverse, and they needed to consider the religious education of the immigrant students. Islamic religious education (IRE) as well as other minority religions such as Baha'i, Buddhism, Krishna in addition to smaller Christian denominations established their own RE. Curricula were developed in cooperation with the religious communities and the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE), and teachers were hired from the respective communities. At that time, the framework was still confessional in the sense that the law stated that RE was to be taught according to the "confession" of the students. However, Finnish RE also experienced a non-confessional shift in 2003 as a follow-up to the reformulation of the *Freedom of Religion Act*. The increased plurality of the Finnish society and the critique by some of the religious minorities towards the position of the Lutheran Church in Finland led to demands for its renewal. As a result of the policy changes, the formulation of RE in the *Basic Education Act* was changed. While the old separative model was maintained, in the new legislation the term confession was renounced, which was interpreted as the official launching of non-confessional RE. Instead of RE according to the student's confession, RE was now to be according to the student's own religion. In conjunction with the new RE policies, the curricula of RE were rewritten and the teacher qualification requirements of RE teachers were changed so that the teacher did not need to belong to the religion which s/he teaches. The current model thus tries to balance between two goals: providing general educative knowledge about religion while approaching religion from the perspective of a particular religious tradition. The model is not without tensions and, in practice, there seem to be different interpretations of the framework among teachers, particularly between the Lutheran majority and the religious minorities. Currently, there are 13 accepted syllabi for religious education including Lutheran and Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and several smaller Christian and non-Christian denominations. *Elämänkatsomustieto* (literally "knowledge of life view", recently translated as "culture, worldview and ethics"), is offered as a secular option for those not belonging to any religious community.

Islamic religious education has been organized in Finnish schools starting from the 1980s. In the beginning the Imam of the Islamic community in Helsinki used to circulate among a few schools to give instruction in Islam for the Muslim students. As the number of students grew, more teachers were hired from the Muslim communities (Sakaranaho, 2006). The number of Muslim students has been constantly

rising; according to recent statistics 3.3% of students in basic education participate in IRE; 82.8% in Lutheran RE; 11.1% in *elämänkatsomustieto*; 1.8%; in Orthodox RE and 0.5% in other religions (Suomilammi, 2024). In some parts of the biggest cities the number of students participating in IRE might outnumber the students participating in Lutheran RE. However, in other parts of Finland IRE is not provided at all because there are no Muslim students and, in some cities, again, even though there would be enough students, IRE is not provided because there are no teachers available. Still, in some cases Muslim students do not participate in IRE even though it would be available. The Finnish system allows Muslim students to participate in *elämänkatsomustieto* or Lutheran RE if they so wish. Furthermore, if they do not choose any of these, they can participate in Islamic education in their own communities if they obtain a certificate of attendance (Ikkala & Putkonen, 2022). However, this right is much debated, and the current RE policies aim to restrict this opportunity (Opetushallitus, 2025).

Following the shift to non-confessional RE, the curriculum drafting process changed so that the curricula were no longer drafted in close cooperation with the religious communities but rather by working groups set by the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE). In the current *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (2014), all RE syllabi are designed to include the same core areas, which are "relation to one's own religion, "world of religions" and "good life". In each RE syllabus these main areas then include different topics from the religion at issue and other religions and non-religious worldviews as well as other content such as children's rights. Study materials for RE are usually produced in Finland by commercial publishers and different publishers might produce somewhat different approaches to RE (Sakaranaho, 2019a). In the case of IRE and other minority religions, because of their smaller number, the FNAE has coordinated the publishing of the schoolbooks. The very first textbook for IRE was *Islam Yhteinen Uskomme (Islam Our Shared Faith)* (2003), which was a concise, fact-oriented study book for classes 3-9. The first and until now the only book series covering all grades from 1-9, *Salam Islamin polku* (*Salam the path of Islam*) has been published between 2013 (the first books) and 2020 (the book for grades 7-9). The *Salam* book series includes separate books for grades 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 and 7-9. They are arranged around different topic areas such as Quranic suras, stories of the prophets, prayer and purification, principles of faith, and manners. The book for grades 7-9 also includes basics of Islamic law. The books have been written by IRE teachers with Muslim backgrounds and the book for grades 7-9 also included the Imam of an Islamic organization in Helsinki. The books introduce Islamic vocabulary and core concepts while introducing the different topics through the book's characters, Muslim children with various backgrounds who live their everyday life in Finland. In addition to introducing a pedagogical approach to learning, the books clearly aim to introduce a "Muslim perspective" to living in Finland. They apply an Islamic worldview while maintaining a "general Islamic" framework that considers different interpretations, such as differences between the Sunnis and the Shia (Sakaranaho, 2019b).

Teacher education for IRE teachers has been available at the University of Helsinki since 2007. According to the Finnish RE teacher qualification requirements, the RE teacher studies need to include teacher's pedagogical studies and a certain number of studies in the teaching subject. The teacher's pedagogical studies for minority RE teachers are organized by the Faculty of Education whereas the subject studies of Islam are conducted at the Faculty of Arts and starting from 2018 alternatively at the Faculty of Theology. The degree program for IRE teachers has contributed to the professionalization of IRE teachers, but simultaneously it has contributed to the "non-confessional shift" in the character of IRE. Whereas in its early years, IRE was mainly taught by Muslim teachers who were often also active members of the religious communities, currently many of the qualified teachers are of non-Muslim background. Even though formally qualified, the teachers may not share the lived experience of a Muslim community, their everyday culture, and discursive practices. In some cases, this has led to conflicts between the teachers and the students and their parents. For instance, in one case the Muslim community contacted the Finnish security police (SUPO) to solve a dispute at a school where the teacher

of IRE had taught in a way that was seen as unsuitable by the students and their parents (Sakaranaho, 2019b). Another recent case that received media attention demonstrates that some schools might prefer teachers who are not themselves of Muslim background for the sake of neutrality. In this case, the faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki had helped a school in southern Finland in its recruitment process for hiring an IRE teacher while contacting only students "whose names sounded Finnish". This was due to the fact that the school did not want a teacher "who was too confessional" (Parikka, 2021). The case demonstrates that there still seem to be strong prejudices in schools about immigrant background/Muslim teachers and that confessionality as a negative attribute is often associated with teachers of IRE in particular.

Some parents still opt for IRE in the religious communities which is an option according to the Finnish regulations although some municipalities restrict it. Putkonen and Ikkala (2022) studied Islamic classes at two established communities in the Helsinki area. Some reasons for their choosing community teaching were that school IRE did not correspond to their expectations or that the teacher belonged to a different Islamic orientation or was not a Muslim. Teaching in one's own religious community provides a more holistic environment and often teaching of the students' home language is also included. The teachers might use the same schoolbooks but also add their own materials. Islamic supplementary education organized by the Islamic communities in Finland is still little researched. During the recent years, there have been also emerging private initiatives that provide weekend Islamic education classes, publish Islamic children's literature and teaching materials and organize events, such as Tähtikuu Books, a publishing company founded by Finnish Muslim educational professionals. Also, an Islamic school operating as a homeschooling initiative has recently been founded in the Helsinki area. Homeschooling is an option in Finland, although quite rare, as the public school system is widely considered good. Also, free schools are a rarity in Finland. While some free schools currently exist, none of them are Islamic. The only example of an Islamic school in Finnish history is the Turkish grammar school (*Türk Halık Mektebi*) that was maintained by the Tatar community from 1948 to 1969 in Helsinki (Bedretdin & Stahlberg, 2021).

3. Concluding remarks: differences, similarities and future prospects of Islamic religious education in the Nordic context

The above country-specific reports demonstrate that there are both similarities and differences in the Nordic countries regarding the way that religious education in general and Islamic religious education in particular is handled. As for the organization of RE as a subject in the public school system, most of the Nordic countries have gone through similar developments: from confessional Christian religious education to non-confessional religious education which aims at balancing between transmitting the Christian national and cultural tradition and accommodating religious diversity. Fuess (2007) argued that this model has perhaps become prevalent in the Protestant countries because it seems to give the impression that the dominant church has become tolerant towards other religions while the arrangement does not threaten its position as the leading church. It also provides theoretical equality for different religious groups.

However, as the examples from different Nordic contexts demonstrate, theoretical equality does not translate into equality in reality. While non-confessional RE is usually presented as an impartial and objective approach to dealing with religion, it has also been critiqued for its "Lutheran marinade" (Berglund, 2013 & 2022) and privileging of Christianity to different degrees (Berglund et al., 2023). Furthermore, although Islam is included in the curriculum in all of these countries, it is seen more or less as the "other" and it is often portrayed in the teaching materials in a negative light (Buchardt & Enemark, 2021). Finland is an exception, as it organizes IRE separately for Muslim students and thus

aims to consider the Muslim perspective as well. The Finnish curriculum, however, resembles the other Nordic countries in its emphasis on non-confessionality of RE.

The secular Lutheran landscape and the national imaginaries extend to "management" of Islamic religious education as well. For instance, in Sweden, where Muslims can establish faith-based schools, the curriculum must follow the national guidelines and thus non-confessional RE is obligatory, while it is possible to organize Islamic RE only as an optional subject. In the Finnish context, while IRE is available as a regular subject in the public schools, it still needs to balance with the requirement of non-confessionality. The aspiration for neutrality and non-confessionality can manifest, for instance, in schools preferring non-Muslim teachers. In the Norwegian context, again, the mere idea of a faith-based Muslim school is seen as a threat to national unity. As Thomas (2017) has demonstrated in his study on the media handling of the Muslim school case in Norway, Muslims' aspirations for Islamic faith-based education are seen as negative because they diverge too much from the idea of sameness. Similar arguments have been used in the Finnish context in the debates against the current model of RE, namely that the separative teaching causes segregation and instead, students should learn the same content together. Here again, the Finnish model, in which students learn religion at least partly based on their "own" religious traditions, seems to conflict with the ideas of neutrality and sameness. In these discourses, education based on an Islamic framework is seen as a threat as it diverges from the mainstream approach to religion and education, which is seen as neutral and universal. As Berglund et al. (2023) have noted, Nordic ideals of integration can turn out to mean moulding the minorities' conduct to be in line with the majority and even accommodating the majority's stance on religion and secularism.

The above overview further demonstrates that research on Islamic religious education, particularly related to its content and approaches, both as a subject in public schools and Muslim free schools as well as the Islamic supplementary education provided by the Islamic communities is rather scarce. In the future, positively contributing research on how Muslim educators engage in developing Islamic educational practices in both public and private contexts could challenge the current negative discourses attributed to Islamic education.

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