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'Jensen's Scientific Approach' to Religion Education

TIM JENSEN¹

∞ Following an initial programmatic summary of 'fundamentals', the author puts forward (with reference to other programmatic 'minimum presuppositions' for the scientific study of religion(s)) his basic presuppositions and principles for a scientific study-of-religion(s)-based religion education as a time-tabled, compulsory, and totally normal school subject, taught by teachers educated at study-of-religion(s) departments of public universities. The article, thus, reflects what Cathy Byrne named 'Jensen's scientific approach' to religion education.

Keywords: religion education, scientific approach to religion education, study-of-religion(s)

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Jensenov znanstveni pristop k religijskemu izobraževanju

TIM JENSEN

☞ Sledeč izhodiščnemu programskemu povzetku 'osnov', avtor predstavi (s sklicevanjem na programske 'minimalne predpostavke' za znanstveno preučevanje religij(e)) svoje temeljne predpostavke in načela za na religiologiji temelječe religijsko izobraževanje, ki poteka v obliki v redni urnik umeščenega obveznega in povsem običajnega šolskega predmeta, poučujejo pa ga učitelji, izobraženi na religioloških oddelkih javnih univerz. Ta prispevek osvetljuje tisto, kar je Cathy Byrne poimenovala 'Jensenov znanstveni pristop' k religijskemu izobraževanju.

Ključne besede: religijsko izobraževanje, znanstveni pristop k religijskemu izobraževanju, religiologija

Programmatic ‘Fundamentals’

1) Religion is a human, cultural, social and historical phenomenon. 2) Granted that scientifically based knowledge of humankind, history (evolution too), nature, culture, social formation, identity formation, etc. is considered essential and valuable knowledge, then scientifically based knowledge of religion(s) must be considered equally essential and valuable. 3) Religion(s) can, like other historical, social, and cultural phenomena, be scientifically researched, analysed, interpreted, and explained, – *and* the scientific research results can be ‘translated’ into teaching, at both the university and public school levels. 4) The production of valuable scientifically based knowledge of religion(s), leading to more and more qualified knowledge of humankind, history, evolution, culture, etc., can and must engage a variety of scholars from the natural, social, and human sciences. However, specialist knowledge of religion(s) has for more than a century been pursued by scholars at specific university departments for the study of religion(s). These departments are still a *sine qua non* for a concerted and strategic scientific study of religion.² 5) If scientifically produced knowledge of humankind, nature, and culture, including religion, is considered to be of scientific and cultural value and, therefore, to be funded by the state, then this state-funded research and knowledge must be shared with the public at large and not kept as a ‘professional secret’ among scholars within academia. 6) For a state to ensure that this valuable knowledge is shared with society at large, it must ensure that public school education reflects and transmits the knowledge produced at the public universities. 7) Though knowledge of religion(s) can and must be sought and produced by a series of sciences and also taught and touched upon in school subjects such as history, literature, and in the natural and other social sciences subjects, a specific time-tabled compulsory and totally normal school subject – study-of-religion(s)-based religion education (RE) – taught by teachers educated at the study-of-religions departments must be established. Only in this way can the state ensure that teaching about religion(s) in school is as scientifically based as is the teaching of other school subjects. 8) By providing a scientific study of

2 In this article, the author refers indiscriminately to ‘science of religion’, ‘scientific study of religion(s)’, and ‘religious studies’ in order to refer to what has also been called ‘*Religionswissenschaft*’, ‘history of religions’, ‘comparative religion’, and the ‘study of religion’ (or ‘study of religions’). With reference to the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) and its notion of the academic study of religion(s) as ‘historical, social and comparative’, the author subscribes to a concept of a kind of ‘history’ or ‘study’ of religion(s) that includes a wide range of historical, comparative, critical-analytical, sociological, psychological etc. approaches to religion as a human phenomenon (and theoretical object) and to religions as more or less observable historical, social and cultural traditions.

religion(s) at public universities and a study-of-religion(s)-based RE in public schools, the state, moreover, provides for a second-order analytical-critical discourse on religion, a second-order discourse that may, arguably, be seen as crucial to the well-being and well-functioning of an open, secular (not 'secularist'), pluralist and democratic society. 9) Moreover, the RE thus offered can help provide citizens at large with 'general education' ('*Allgemeinbildung*'), as well as with analytical and communicative competences needed for the skilled execution of various professions in today's society and world. Such competences are often also aimed at in so-called 'citizenship education'. 10) The contents of the public school RE are to reflect, pedagogically and didactically tailored to the various age groups, the public university scientific study-of-religions programmes and contents. It is to be a 'mini' (or 'school') study-of-religion(s).

'Religion: A Human Phenomenon'

If scientifically based knowledge, in general, is considered valuable and a must, at least to such a degree that the state finds it worthwhile to produce such knowledge at state-financed public universities, then scientifically based knowledge about religion necessarily must also be considered valuable, and scientific studies of religion(s) thus also must be state-financed and located at public universities. This, then, is the first evident matter of fact as well as the primary, totally straightforward, logical and solid argument in favour of a scientific study of religion(s).³

However, let me add a few more words: the so-called 'modern research university', dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge *for its own sake*, has been and still is 'under attack'. It has, nevertheless, as scholar of religion Donald Wiebe (2019) points out, been an exponent of what Ernest Gellner in *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* called a specific 'Western epistemic tradition', an expression of what constituted 'a new cultural value' (Gellner, 1992, p. 85).

What most scholars of religion still, despite all critical approaches to the term and concept 'religion' as well as to the 'study of religion(s)', analyse and discuss in terms of religion, is 'something' that has been and still is of importance in the past and present history of the world and mankind. What may be termed religious ways of thinking and acting have, according to the most recent

3 Having theology departments at the public universities, it must be added, is *not* the same. Though much work done within theology is unmistakably scientific in both theory, method, and aim, other kinds (e.g. within systematic or practical theology) are not. Furthermore, most theologians study but one religion – quite often the one they themselves adhere to – and many do so not just to gain more knowledge (of religion or humankind in general) but in order to make the religion relevant to contemporaries.

theories of cognition and evolution,⁴ been with humans for a long time. When scholarship on the history and evolution of humankind and of religion(s) can detect institutionalised modalities of religion(s), the same (study of the) history of religion(s) shows that various religions (or ‘religious traditions’) have exercised considerable influence on histories, societies and cultures throughout the world.

Religion(s), including, for example, the naming of something as ‘religion’, giving something status of ‘religion’, and religious and non-religious ‘discourses’ on religion simply are essential in the social formation and identity construction,⁵ including past and present ‘politics of identity’. Knowledge of all these ‘religion-related discourses’ (including practices), then, is important knowledge if ‘we’ want to have (and if states want their citizens to have) qualified knowledge of the world, of ‘world-making’, humankind, social formation, identity construction, etc., - *and* knowledge of all of this is vital if we want to have qualified knowledge of religion. To quote scholar of religion Jeppe Sinding Jensen: ‘Delving into human nature might tell us something about religion and, conversely, exploring religion should enable us to probe into human nature’ (Jensen, 2019, p. 115).

The Scientific Study of Religion(s)

The modern science (or academic study) of religion⁶ may have many forerunners, but it seems certain that the development of it in Europe was linked to the Enlightenment and its plea for rationality and reason, including, not least, rational and critical approaches also to religion (see Wiebe, 2016; cf. also Preus, 1987; Strenski, 2006; Stroumsa 2014).

In order to hopefully avoid misunderstandings among readers unfamiliar with the history of the scientific study of religion(s), it can be added that what is often called the ‘naturalistic’ approach to religion (a first instance of which one may find in, e.g., David Hume’s [1777] *Natural History of Religion*) is not an invention by some hard-core atheist scholars of religion or anti-religious philosophers.

4 See titles by Armin W. Geertz (2013, 2016) as well as the Festschrift edited in his honour by Anders Klostergaard Petersen et al. (2019) for introductions to the massive output of research on religion, cognition and evolution.

5 For theories and analyses of religion as a dimension, marker, and classifier in regard to social formation, authority, hierarchy, power, identity construction, etc. see – apart from classical works of e.g. Durkheim (and his Paris ‘équipe’) – the influential work by scholars like Burton L. Mack, Jonathan Z. Smith, Bruce Lincoln, and Russell T. McCutcheon (specifically McCutcheon, 2019).

6 This article does not provide a full-fledged definition of ‘science’, be it science ‘as such’ or science as in ‘natural’, ‘social’ and ‘human’ science, nor does it flesh out key constituent characteristics of the scientific study of religion(s). What follows is, however, sufficient for the purpose of this article and its argument.

It was (as also emphasised by, e.g., Ivan Strenski, 2006) in many cases imagined and promoted by people and scholars who were religious themselves.⁷ Some were also (Christian) theologians. Nevertheless, many of the very same scholars agreed that a science of religion (and what frequently has been called a methodological 'agnosticism' or even 'atheism') as a human and natural phenomenon was possible, and that the science or study of religion(s) ought to be institutionalised and housed in universities together with, next to, and/or in direct opposition to theology. Though the study of religion (precisely because of its critical-analytical study of religion as a human, social, historical and cultural phenomenon and construct) is 'religion-critical' – especially if seen from the point of view of a religious insider – it is so in a non-ideological way. This, at least, is the norm.

Consequently, when the highly influential scholar of religion, Bruce Lincoln, in an effort to characterise 'religion' as a particular kind of 'culture', writes that the defining characteristic of religion is the way it invests 'specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth' (Lincoln, 2000, p. 416), Lincoln, by way of the 'mis' in 'misrepresenting', may, in my opinion, be seen as taking a step in the direction of a normative and therefore not so normal definition of and analytical-critical approach to religion.

A younger scholar, Russell T. McCutcheon (often mentioning Lincoln as a 'mentor' and often considered more radically critical in his approach to religion than most other scholars) takes pains to distinguish his critical approach from a normative critique of religion.

Such a stance satisfies what I take to be the requirements of a non-confessional approach to the study of religion, one that is in keeping not only with the publicly funded nature of the field but also with the widely adopted canons of the Human Sciences (much as we'd hope, I would imagine that a Political Science course studies the mechanisms of party politics and avoids deploying normative judgments about which of their politics is progressive and thus preferable). (McCutcheon, 2019, p. 99)

The study of religion(s) (traditionally) brackets the 'truth claims' of religion(s) in order to study religion in a scientific way as a human, social, and cultural phenomenon. This is why it is often said to be methodologically 'agnostic' and 'impartial', trying its best to be 'neutral', and 'objective'.

7 F. Max Müller, famous for editing the ground-breaking (1879-1910) *Sacred Books of the East*, for his ideas for a science of religion (as 'comparative religion'), and for his (re-) use of Goethe's dictum "He who knows one knows none", was but one of many 'founding fathers' who, one way or the other, were 'religious'.

This, however, also means that (most) scholars of religion do not think that ‘anything goes’. Only a small minority of scholars of religion consider so-called alternative kinds of knowledge (including what may be called religiously based or ‘esoteric’ knowledges) equal to the knowledge produced by science.

Donald Wiebe, arguing against such claims of a plurality of (postulated) equally valid and valuable ‘knowledges’ about religion, writes that the academic study of religion, in order for it to ‘live by the same epistemic constraints as the other sciences’, must let its claims be ‘governed by the boundary conditions established by the methodologies and substantiated knowledge of the natural and social sciences’, and produce ‘knowledge expressed in testable propositional claims’ (Wiebe, 2016, p. 192). Though not explicitly mentioning the *human* sciences, Wiebe, however, adds that:

[...] “fields of study” within the “modern research university” which are “beyond the range of the natural and social sciences [...] present no significant challenge to the overall scientific ethos of the modern university which is predominantly concerned to discover and disseminate public (i.e. objective) knowledge about public (i.e. inter-subjectively available) facts concerning states of affairs in the natural and social worlds. (Wiebe, 2016, p. 191)

This author is in full agreement: such ‘fields of study’, including the study of religion(s), ought and must ‘present no significant challenge’ to the overall ‘scientific ethos of the modern research university’. Or, in the words of another prominent and influential scholar, Armin W. Geertz:

The secular study of religion is understood [...] to mean the non-sectarian, non-religious study of religion. It is not necessarily an atheistic approach. It simply chooses to interpret, understand and explain religion in non-religious terms. It confines itself to analytical models grounded in a view of the world based on the insights and achievements of the natural sciences. The study of religion, obviously, is not a natural science. It applies methods, theories and models developed in the human and social sciences: history, sociology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, ethnography and philosophy. It is further characterized by a comparative interest in all religions throughout human history. But its view of the world is secular and humanistic. (Geertz, 2000, p. 21)

R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1924-2015), one of the most prominent scholars within the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR), the preeminent international association for the cross-cultural, analytical and historical study of religion, during the 1960 IAHR World Congress in Marburg, Germany, formulated a series of presuppositions for the kind of academic study of religion(s) to be pursued by the IAHR and its (today) more than fifty national, regional and international member associations and affiliates. Werblowsky's 'presuppositions' have, time and again (and most recently in Jensen & Geertz, 2016) been seen as the basis for work of the IAHR and its global membership.

The full statement cannot be reproduced here, but key parts read:

1. [...] 'Comparative Religion' is a well-recognized scientific discipline whose methodology may still be in great need of further elaboration, but whose aim is clearly a better understanding of the nature of the variety and historic individuality of religions, whilst remaining constantly alert to the possibility of *scientifically legitimate* generalisations concerning the nature and function of religion.
2. *Religionswissenschaft* understands itself as a branch of the Humanities. It is an anthropological discipline, studying the religious phenomenon as a creation, feature and aspect of human culture. The common ground on which students of religion *qua* students of religion meet is the realization that the awareness of the numinous or the experience of transcendence (where these happen to exist in religions) are – whatever else they may be – undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history, to be studied like all human facts, by the appropriate methods. [...] [T]he discussion of the absolute value of religion is excluded by definition, although it may have its legitimate place in other, completely independent disciplines such as e.g., theology and philosophy of religion.
3. The statement that „the value of religious phenomena can be understood only if we keep in mind that religion is ultimately a realization of a transcendent truth“ is to be rejected as part of the foundations of *Religionswissenschaft*. [...]
4. The study of religions need not seek for justification outside itself as long as it remains embedded in a culture pattern that allows for every quest of historical truth as its own *raison d'être*. Whatever the subsequent use made by the individual scholar of his special knowledge, and whatever the analysable sociological function of scientific activity in any specific cultural and historical situation, the *ethos* of our studies is in themselves. (Schimmel, 2016 [1960], pp. 82–83; italics in the original)

This statement has, as said, been a ‘guiding light’ for generations of scholars and is, to this very day, used by the IAHR leadership (cf. Jensen & Geertz, 2016) to indicate a consensus as regards basic presuppositions for a scientific study of religion(s). I – per extension – add that it is therefore also indicating the basic presuppositions for the study-of-religion(s) based RE that I find the only one appropriate for a public school. The *ethos* of such a study-of-religion(s) based RE is no different from the *ethos* described and prescribed by Werblowsky.

The Scientific Study of Religion(s) in the Academy

When reading (and, to a large extent, agreeing with the works of ‘de-constructivist’ or ‘discourse theory’ scholars⁸ as well as works of scholars applying cognitivist, biological, and evolutionist approaches,⁹ it is tempting to say that science and knowledge of religion(s) (and of humankind, history and evolution), if *thoroughly* scientific and qualified, *must* be produced in inter- or cross-disciplinary university settings, with tight collaboration between the natural, human, and social sciences, between specialists in culture as well as in cognition, biology, neurology, sociology, philology, and history (to mention but some of the forms of expertise needed).

One may, moreover, argue (for equally good reasons) that a continued use of the notion of ‘religion’ (as anything but a contested *analytical* category) as well as the continuous life of ‘departments for the study of religion(s)’ may well be an impediment to gaining the very knowledge aimed at because starting out from a notion of ‘religion’ that is, despite sincere and thorough reflections on the epistemological pitfalls, misleading. Some, for instance Fitzgerald (2017, p. 138), may also claim that the very notion of ‘science’ over against ‘religion’ (like ‘religious’ over against ‘secular’) – and thus also a ‘science or study of religion’ – are but instances of a “modern liberal myth transformed into common-sense reality.”

Others (e.g., Martin & Wiebe, 2012) argue that existing departments of religious studies are not appropriate places for a scientific study of religion(s) because they are not sufficiently emancipated from religious ways of thinking about religion and from non- or extra-scientific aims. Martin and Wiebe think that in most such departments, not least in the USA, students learn about religion(s) as well as the study of religion(s) as reservoirs of (what is considered

8 See, e.g., Russell T. McCutcheon (2000, 2007, 2017, 2019) and Timothy Fitzgerald (2017).

9 See the already mentioned works by Geertz (2000, 2013, 2016) and in honour of Geertz (Klostergaard Petersen et al., 2019).

positive) values. As treasuries for (what is also considered *positive*) personal, human development, and for the 'mastering' of so-called existential questions about life and death, meaning and meaninglessness, tolerance, inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding, and peaceful coexistence: all aims that Wiebe and Martin (quite rightly, I think) consider at variance with the aims of (the mentioned presuppositions for) a scientific study of religion(s). All examples of what Wiebe earlier (1984, 2011) criticised as a 'failure of nerve' of the study of religion(s). Courses in many departments named religious studies are, Martin and Wiebe claim (2012, p. 12), courses in 'religion appreciation.'

The author of the present paper sees the point in each of the mentioned critical approaches to the study of religion(s) as well as to some study-of-religion(s) departments, and there certainly are indications that not all existing departments for the study of religion(s) are 'fine-tuned' to the kinds of scientific studies of religion(s) that, e.g., the above-mentioned scholars of religion consider appropriate and timely.¹⁰

Nevertheless (and Wiebe and Martin (2012, p. 13) also admit to this) there *are* quite a few scholars engaged in (striving towards) practising a study of religion(s) as a scientific *discipline* and as a discipline housed by departments of this name. Like Hubert Seiwert (2012) in his response to Martin and Wiebe (2012), I do not think that a disciplined scientific study of religion(s) is an impossible 'delusion'. In fact, I am convinced that it could be empirically proved that despite the continued use of the problematic term 'religion' and despite the theological or 'religion appreciation' bias or tendencies of some study-of-religion(s) departments, scientific, analytical-critical, and non-religious theories and methods on religion are produced in specific study-of-religion(s) departments.¹¹

That scientific and valuable research on religion is also taking place in sociology, anthropology, and (even) theology departments is, of course, not denied. However, the more than hundred years of focused historical and comparative study-of-religion(s) work that has taken place at departments for precisely that kind of studies simply has produced a valuable reservoir of knowledge, theories, and methods, including self-criticism, that cannot be overestimated. It can probably always become better, more qualified (as Werblowsky noted in

10 One such indication is provided by the 2013 (Religious Studies Project) analysis of self-presentations of departments for religious studies on their respective websites. See <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2013/12/06/what-is-the-study-of-religionself-presentations-of-the-discipline-on-university-web-pages/>.

11 Despite criticisms of and problems pertaining to the concept of 'religion', and though seeing 'the study of religion [...] more like an organized, specific-purpose field trip into the general region of social and cultural processes than [as] a fenced-in disciplinary or departmental acre with its own, non-shared, special-to-religion methods', Willy Braun also speaks in favour of a discipline (and departments) called 'the study of religion(s)' (Braun, 2000, p. 15).

1960), and further developed. This is the very ‘soul’ of science. Nevertheless, this is, I claim, precisely what has taken place for decades in departments and international fora for and about the study of religion(s) by scholars of religion.¹²

Scholars of religion, educated and working at these departments, have, over the years, moved forward and changed the scientific study of religion(s), and some have been first movers in critically rethinking religion *and* the study of religion(s). Consequently, I have no problems recommending states to support the production of scientifically based knowledge of religion primarily by way of establishing specific study-of-religion(s) departments.

Making Science-of-Religion(s) Knowledge Known to the Public

Contrary, for instance, to Wiebe who seems to insist that science (of religion) must aim at nothing but the production of scientifically based knowledge, I insist that it is possible and desirable to combine research for the sake of (and with the aim of) the production of knowledge with the aim of sharing, also with society and public at large, this knowledge. In my country, Denmark, the current University Act (as of 2002) has made a law of what I consider a virtue: scholars are obliged to share their knowledge with society at large, and universities are obliged to encourage this. My reason for not just finding it possible but also laudable is this: scientifically based knowledge about everything – about humankind, about the history and evolution of humankind, *and* about knowledge, theories and approaches to religion(s) developed within the study of religion(s) – is essential and valuable: a ‘cultural value’.

However, the academic and scientific knowledge of religion(s) is also valuable for a linked yet slightly more specific or maybe even extra-scientific reason, namely for what I consider the well-being of an open, democratic, pluralist, secular state, and society.

If an open, democratic, pluralistic, and secular (not ‘secularist’ in the sense of ‘anti-religious’) state wants to stay so, then it must give space and voice

12 I say this well aware also of the recent biting and detailed criticism of Leonardo Ambasciano (2019), and I strongly recommend readers who think that a study-of-religion(s) RE (as well as ‘Jensen’s scientific approach’) is *too* scientific (or not scientific enough), to consult Ambasciano’s book starting with this question: ‘How come that, despite centuries of scientific research, the main academic discipline dedicated to the historical study of religion has been – and still is – so blindly devoted to an apologetical study of its research object?’ (2019, p. xi) That his first chapter starts with an equally critical quote from Luther and Wiebe, followed by a reference to ‘Theses of Method’ by Lincoln almost goes without saying. However, I still do not change my mind. I put my hope in this very discipline or field and in critical scholars like Ambasciano, Lincoln, Martin, Geertz, Wiebe, and a host of other scholars of religion. There is, as remarked by Werblowsky, always place for improvements.

to people thinking and speaking of religion in various kinds of ways (religious, a-religious, anti-religious), - at times also relatively ignorant ways. However, it must likewise establish an analytical-critical and knowledgeable second-order discourse on religion, and this is precisely what the scientific study of religion(s) located at public universities provides.

In order, however, for the state to ensure that this second-order discourse on religion be available and known to the public at large (i.e., to citizens of the state), the state must find a way to disseminate it, so that it is not locked up within the walls or 'ivory tower' of the academy but shared more widely.

Sharing with the public is, however, not as easy as it sounds. The language of science is not identical to the language of, for example, the mass or social media (see Murphy, 2000), and communicating in a language other than that of research and of the scholar is not easy. It is, furthermore, not without risks. Entering the public sphere means entering the political sphere, and it is evidently a risk for a scholar and the scientifically based (in principle and to the highest possible degree value-free, neutral, and a-political) knowledge that s/he puts forward to become (or be seen as) all but neutral, value-free, and a-political. The knowledge that is valuable precisely because it is value-free (to the highest degree possible) risks becoming less valuable, maybe even totally de-valued, politicised, and thus useless.

The scholar, just like this author during the Danish Muhammad-cartoons affair (cf. Jensen 2008b; Jensen forthcoming), risks becoming a (masked, undercover) politician, a 'scholar-preacher' rather than a 'scholar-teacher'. The risks mentioned, of course, evidently are also there if the scholar is a scholar of religion, not least at times when religion and religions are hotly disputed matters in the public sphere and political debates.

Taking Science of Religion(s) to Public Schools

The obvious thing to do (and not at all equally risky) is to make a study-of-religion(s)-based RE part of the public school curriculum, to make the departments for the study of religion(s) responsible for the education and training of RE teachers, *and* to make sure that RE syllabuses, textbooks and teaching in public schools are all solidly based on the scientific study of religion(s). RE offered in public schools, then, has to be nothing but a 'mini study-of-religion(s)', and what the pupils are supposed to learn about religion is the same as what the students at the universities learn about religion *and* about the academic way(s) of studying and seeing religion. Pupils and students are not there to learn from religion but from the academic study of religion(s) approach to religion. Only,

of course, that the teaching and learning in the school are, in terms of didactics and pedagogics, tailored to the new context and constraints (e.g.. the time and lessons dedicated to the subject, the various age groups and the steps in the educational system).

In this way, RE will finally be a normal school subject. It will, just like any other school subject, be linked to the respective university-based human, social, and natural sciences. Nobody would dream of having school subjects like biology, history, literature, mathematics, and social sciences taught by teachers who did not know about and teach in line with the scientific field or discipline in question. Nobody would dream of having textbooks that did not respect and render (even if didactically adjusted) what the respective scientific field or discipline in question had to say about the subject matter in question. Why then, should the human, social, phenomenon called religion and the school subject RE constitute or pertain to a totally different category? A majority of scholars of religion, most of them paid by the state to do their work, agree that it can and must be studied just like any other human, social, historical and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, they (at least quite a few of them) have shown this to be possible for more than a century.

RE-teachers, educated by scholars of religion at study-of-religion(s) departments, naturally, will also have to be well educated in the *didactics* and *pedagogics* of a study-of-religion(s)-based RE, regardless of whether this RE takes place at the elementary school level (primary and secondary school) or at the upper-secondary level (gymnasium). This means that the education of RE-teachers within the study-of-religion(s) departments has to include training in the art of *sharing* scientific knowledge, study-of-religion(s) theories, methodologies, and methods with different age groups within the framework of the various general and particular curricula or syllabuses for RE in public schools.

Reduction is a scientific virtue but also a didactical and pedagogical necessity – and a challenge. But, tailoring the scientific approaches to religion to teaching about religion to various age groups is an art that can be taught, and the same goes for producing RE textbooks. How to generalise, how to reduce, how to teach about, in principle, (almost) everything pertaining to religion as studied by the academic study of religion(s) in school, all this can be taught and learnt.

This part of the education of RE-teachers may, of course, be combined with teaching about sharing with the public at large via other media than the school and text-books, for instance by way of the scholar functioning as an expert to the media, as author of essays in mass media (including social media), as constructor of websites, and as consultant or teacher in regard to qualification

of various professions (diplomats, doctors, police officers, prison personnel, lawyers, judges, etc.) in need of qualified knowledge of religion(s).

RE as a 'Mini-Science-of-Religion(s)'

I am thus (in line with the arguments in favour of specific study-of-religion(s) departments as reservoirs and workshops for accumulated and specialist knowledge of religion(s), discourses on 'religion', theory and methodology in the study of religion, and the history of the study of religion(s)) in favour of a time-tabled, compulsory, secular/non-religious RE in public schools.

In order for it to be a normal, and thus also compulsory, school subject with no opt-out possibilities and no alternatives,¹³ it has to be precisely what I argue it must be: study-of-religion(s)-based and thus (as far as possible) in contents and approaches also in line with criteria for a compulsory RE such as those formulated in landmark cases by the European Court of Human Rights and the US Supreme Court: the information and knowledge must be conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner (cf. Jensen, 2002, 2005a).¹⁴

Consequently, I am not only not in favour of religious, confessional, multi-confessional (or multi-denominational), inter-religious, inter-cultural, or 'small-c confessional' RE. I am also not in favour of 'dimensional' RE, such as it can be found in France when teaching about 'faits religieux' takes place within the context and contents of other school subjects.¹⁵

RE ought be a separate, 'mini study-of-religion(s)' RE, taught by teachers trained at study-of-religion(s) departments, with syllabuses and curricula drafted (on behalf of, e.g., a ministry of education) and textbooks written by study-of-religion(s) scholars and RE teachers, without any 'assistance' (and thus contrary to what has been the case in the UK) from so-called religious 'representatives' or insiders.

A study-of-religion(s)-based RE also means that the pupils/students, when entering the classroom enter as pupils and students (not as, for example, atheists, 'nones', Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists) with the RE-teacher, from

13 In many places there are alternatives like 'Philosophy and Ethics', '*Werte und Normen*' and the like. The opt-out possibility and/or alternative typically exist because public school RE is confessional (as in, e.g., Germany) but it can also exist, as in, e.g., Danish primary school, even if the RE offered *formally* is non-confessional. The opt-out option and/or alternative is normally there with some more or less explicit reference to human rights articles on freedom of religion or belief, and on the rights of parents to choose the 'religious upbringing' of their children.

14 The *Toledo Guiding Principles* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007) has a useful discussion of this and related matters in Europe and the USA (Ch. II, and Appendix III); for the US, see Haynes and Thomas, 2007.

15 See Jensen, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, and Jensen & Kjeldsen, 2013 in which the mentioned various kinds of RE in existence in Europe are listed, analysed, criticised and discussed.

day one, telling and teaching them that this is not about learning from religion nor about 'religion appreciation' (cf. Martin and Wiebe above). Such an approach has nothing to do with being 'disrespectful' or not taking into account the background of the pupils/students (and their parents). This is simply about RE being a totally different 'ball-game' from religion, religious upbringing, and religious instruction.

This kind of RE, contrary to what is claimed, for example, in the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, does *not* demand specific 'sensitivities' or 'respect' from teachers. The RE teacher must, as said, from the first lecture make it crystal clear what 'this' is all about, and s/he may well find inspiration to do so in Bruce Lincoln's (2000) 'Theses on Method' (in which he stresses, inter alia, that '[r]everence is a religious and not a scholarly virtue').

RE is about learning about and (as first formulated by Wanda Alberts) *from* the study (history) of religion(s). It is about learning about and from scholarly discourses on 'religion' (the notion, the analytical term, the signifier, the classifier, whether applied to whatever and for whatever reasons by insiders or outsiders), but it is (of course) also about what many scholars of religion still refer to, delineate, define (if only operationally), (re-)describe, analyse and explain as religion(s), religious people and places, nay indeed, as (what used to be called) 'religious phenomena' (e.g., myths, rituals, specialists), despite the equally many references to, for example,, Jonathan Z. Smith's 'map is not territory' (1978), and his, equally [in-]famous, dictum that there is 'no data for religion', and that 'religion' is solely the invention of the scholar.¹⁶

Having thus mentioned something that may, at least to some colleagues, sound almost blasphemous ('religious phenomena'), I hasten to stress that pupils nowadays, of course, must learn that those 'phenomena' are not 'out there', to be found just like, for example, stones on a beach and as instances of some transcendental 'sacred'. They are 'there', but they are also there to be 'searched out' for the scholar for a specific purpose: to be constructed and used as 'analytical tools'. Just as pupils can and must be taught to use 'religion' as an analytical tool (and disputed notion), so they can and must be taught about the various past and present scholarly uses and discussions of 'myth' and 'ritual' (including possible relations between the two).

16 Without entering into a detailed discussion, I only want to say that I think there are good reasons why some buildings, actions, people, thoughts, ways of eating and being together, ways of having sex, ways of dressing, etc. may be seen as and 'stand out' as not just or only 'profane', non-religious (they are of course always also that) but as something that may be termed 'religious'. I am in favour of an (operational) definition that sees religion as a cultural (sub-)system differing from other such by way of a reference to a postulated more than human and more than natural 'something' (power, being, scripture, etc.). Lincoln's detailed definitions and discussions (Lincoln, 2000, 2003) are quite helpful, I think.

Mentioning cross-cultural 'religious phenomena' (and thus also methodic comparison), I cannot resist emphasising that a study-of-religion(s) based RE (just like a study of religion(s) programme at the university) *must*, as I see it, make quite a lot of comparison(s). If the study of religion(s) is not comparative (as well as radically historical), then it is not scientific, and then there is no study-of-religion(s). It is by way of controlled comparison of data carefully selected for precisely that purpose that we can talk about a specific discipline and expertise, and it is only by way of comparison of things we consider similar to each other that we can detect the significant (historical) differences as well as develop and fine-tune our analytical tools.

Furthermore, the skilled comparison that encompasses, in principle, religions and religious phenomena from all over the world, past and present, is what 'we' can add to whatever other 'knowledge' of religion(s) that other scholars, pupils, and people, in general, may have. This is the sorely needed distance and juxtapositioning that we can offer to contemporary short-sighted debates about, for instance, so-called new religions, minority and majority religion(s), what religion 'is', 'ought' to be, and where it 'truly' belongs.

A contemporary study-of-religion(s) based RE cannot but also teach about contemporary works and theories on the history and evolution of religion in relation to the history and evolution of humankind and civilisation. I am convinced that teaching about this will help pupils realise the degree to which a modern study-of-religion(s) based RE partakes in the efforts of other human, social, and natural sciences to penetrate further into the 'mysteries' of the first human beings, the evolution of humankind and the coming into being of culture and civilisation. Teaching about this, indeed, can open the eyes of the pupils for other kinds of 'mysteries' and 'wonders' than those which RE in many places wants pupils to 'see' by way of an existentialist and/or crypto-religious 'big questions'- approach to religion and RE.

Last, but not least, pupils, in my opinion, will benefit from learning something about the largest and most influential of the so-called 'world religions', including something about the early, later and contemporary histories of these religions as well as about their positions in various countries as majority or minority religions. Pupils in a country like Denmark have to learn more about the Lutheran-Protestant kind of Christianity that has been dominant in Denmark for more than five centuries than about any other single religious tradition. Only in this way may they come to apprehend a scholarly second-order approach also to this religion, only in this way may they be able to emancipate themselves from normative, prejudiced, Lutheran-Protestant notions of religion(s).

At the same time, they must, of course, learn about the now well-known criticism of the ‘world religions paradigm’, as well as about contemporary study-of-religions anti-essentialist and de-reification efforts and approaches, closely linked, often, to discussions and deconstructions of stereotypical and prejudiced notions of religion (and ‘true’ religion) as something with an essence and a core – up against which so-called ‘abuse’ of (a) religion or ‘false’ religion may be detected and condemned.¹⁷

All in all: the study-of-religion(s) based RE aims, as I wrote decades ago (Jensen, 1997, 1999), at *familiarising* the pupils with the second-order study-of-religion(s) discourse and outsider approaches to religion, at the same time as it aims at *de-familiarising* them with whatever religious, ‘folk’ or ‘prejudiced’ notions of religion(s) that they may have acquired from their parents, friends, society, or public, popular and political discourses at large.

In this way RE can contribute, as do other school subjects, to ‘*Allgemeinbildung*’, understood as closely linked to the adoption of knowledge, skills and competences which are *sine qua non* for a life in modern society as critical and ‘enlightened’ citizens, capable of critically and analytically ‘reading’ everything, also everything that has to do with religion – be it religion ‘out there’, or be it religion and notions of religion in religious, academic, public or political discourses.

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17 For a study-of-religion(s) based teaching about religion(s), including some of the so-called world religions, stereotypes and prejudices linked to religion(s) and ‘world religions’ see Jensen et al 2018. For the ‘world religions paradigm’, see Owen, 2013; Cotter & Robertson, 2015; and Alberts, 2019. I cannot resist adding that the 2017 revision of the national curriculum for the study-of-religion(s) based RE in Danish Upper-Secondary School (Gymnasium) has, with reference to the criticism of the ‘world religions paradigm’, dropped the term. However, it is the same religions that are taught, even if, of course, in ways sensitive to criticism of essentialism, reification etc. For essentialism and teaching about religion in school, see Hylén, 2015.

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