

An argument for a combined religion and ethics in the National Curriculum for social cohesion

Arlen Sharp
Murdoch University
arlen.sharp03@gmail.com

Abstract

The Basic Education Act 628/1998 (Oikeusministeriö 2010) governs religious education in Finland. This legislation stipulates that the basic curriculum shall include 'religious education or ethics' according to the religion/non-religion of three or more pupils. Therefore, exceptions exist within this framework for irreligious pupils and pupils of religions other than the majority Evangelical Lutheran. In practice, this structure serves to reinforce the Lutheran majority, which has a visible effect on the Finnish self-conception, even amongst the relatively secular Nordics.

This paper presents and discusses an argument that religious education curricula benefit from alignment with the historical and contemporary majority religion of a society (taking Finland and the Nordics as examples). It posits that the historical basis for the contemporary ethical framework of a culture ought to be understood in relation to the pre-existing religious frames, and build upon these to ensure practical social cohesion. It also critiques positions that place religious education in opposition to, or as a substitute for, ethics.

The most pressing issues in developing peaceful and cohesive societies—developing high-trust among citizens, and between citizens and institutions; maintaining a unique and well-defined identity; and stabilising the ethical 'bottom-line' of a culture—may be better supported if such alignment were implemented.

Key words

ethics, Finland, National Curriculum, Nordic, religion education, social cohesion

1. Introduction

... the formal education of state-supported schools reproduces the main cultural values of the society, and reinforces a given national identity. Education, thereby, is crucial when modern societies aim at confirming

and redefining their unity and identity in the face of rapid global and local changes. (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 226)

Every modern society is challenged with maintaining its own political, economic, social, and cultural mores. This issue has come to the forefront recently in the face of emerging pluralism spurred by globalisation. The extent to which a society accepts a migrant population, how this population is introduced into the current socio-political fabric, and how to balance the worldviews of migrants with the unique national character are among the most important questions. Frequently, the education system and the national curriculum have assumed the role, often previously the domain of religious institutions, to raise generations of native and non-native peoples with the values and beliefs of a society. Therefore, great importance is now being placed upon the appropriate use of education to ensure the social and political stability of increasingly diverse societies.

In this paper, two arguments will be forwarded and discussed: that it is beneficial for social cohesion that religious education be taught, without dogma, in line with a nation's historical religious identity; and that it is useful for religious education to be taught alongside ethics as one of many moral theories. In the first instance, we will explore the concept of a 'national character,' its relationship to social cohesion, and the impact a long religious tradition has had on the Finnish and Nordic context. Secondly, an outline of the Finnish treatment of religion and ethics in schools will be presented with reference to the work of Tuula Sakaranaho, and an argument made as to whether this supports or undermines social cohesion. Thirdly, the argument for religion as an ethical framework will be made, supporting its inclusion alongside philosophy in the national curriculum and concluding with a statement concerning how the pedagogical combination of the two supports social cohesion. It will be shown through this argument that religion education/ethics ought to be offered as a part of a national curriculum, and that this will be of benefit to cultural self-identification and cohesion. This endeavour will be supported by discussion of the Finnish, and broadly Nordic, system of education and welfare-state particularities. However, this argument remains relevant to other diverse socio-economic systems and does not situate itself solely within the context of the Nordic countries—it is the hope of the author that the arguments presented may be considered broadly.

The 'Nordic countries' encompass a particular geographical and cultural region of Northern Europe, and include the five sovereign member states of the Nordic council (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden). The histories and cultures of these

countries overlap, and they share political, social, cultural, and economic commonalities while maintaining important linguistic and ethnic differences.

It is important here to define ‘religious education’ (hereafter RE). State-funded and non-confessional education about religions and religiosity may be called ‘religious education’ or ‘religion education’ depending on regional context (Jackson & Council of Europe 2014, p. 28–29). Religious education in the Finnish education system is set out in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (NCC) by the Finnish National Board of Education (Opetushallitus 2016). It is ‘taught along confessional lines (but with a non-confessional content)’ (Buchardt 2015:2, p. 132). While the particular local/school curriculum is decided by the education provider, RE must ‘complement and emphasise the goals, policies that direct the activities, key contents and other aspects related to the organisation of education specified in the core curriculum’. Education providers ‘may neither fail to comply with nor deviate from the National Core Curriculum’ (Opetushallitus 2016, §1.2). In each grade range (1 to 2, 3 to 6, and 7 to 9), students learn about their own religious background and worldview as well as those of others. This approach promotes teamwork, critical and creative thinking, and the development and justification of personal interpretations rather than rote memorisation of content characteristic of dogmatic pedagogy (§13.4.6, 14.4.6, & 15.4.10). This follows from the aims of the NCC, which emphasises individuality, humanity, equality, democracy, and cultural diversity (§2.2). The departure from rote learning, especially, exemplifies the distinction between a faith-based religious education and the secular, sociological religious education mandated by the NCC.

2. Lutheranism’s role in the Nordic national characteristics

To speak of a nation as having a unique ‘character’ is vague: do we mean that there is a stereotypical way of being a member of a nation? Or that a nation and its political/social/economic structures naturally incline its citizens to particular actions and thoughts—particular traits? ‘National character’ here refers to any number of characteristics that may be said to be shared between the members of a nation. Sociologists have attempted to describe the national characteristics of one or many nations. Dean Peabody’s seminal 1985 study of the national characters of France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the USA sought to ‘compare the characteristics of nationalities as judged by ordinary people’ (Peabody 1985, p. 20; Realo & Allik 2020, p. 3100). This study suggests that perceptions of national characteristics exist and can include perceptions that members of particular nations

have particular psychological characteristics. A comparative study by Terraciano et al. (2005) concluded that in-group perceptions of national character 'may be informative about the culture, but they are not descriptive of the people themselves' (p. 99). Both Peabody and Terraciano draw a stark distinction between lay-judgements (called 'national stereotypes') and empirically verifiable national characteristics. This is to avoid objections to stereotypes that risk undermining otherwise relevant cultural trends (Peabody 1985, pp. 5–19; Terracciano 2005, p. 96). If this distinction is successful, then an important cross-cultural comparative approach holds, and analyses may be conducted on the origins of cultural particularities, including religious influences.

Anu Realo and Jüri Allik (2020) outline a definition of national characteristics and write that nations and ethnic groups (considered separately or together) are 'often perceived to have a distinct character which can be described by a set of specific personality traits' (p. 3100). The authors divide stereotypes about national characteristics into hetero-stereotype (out-group) judgements and auto-stereotype (in-group) judgements. These stereotypes are: 'temporarily stable', 'formed on the basis of different geographical, historical, economic, and social factors', and 'may, but do not necessarily need to, be inaccurate' (p. 3101). Auto-stereotype judgements were found to be moderately accurate to self-rated mean personality traits (interestingly, especially in Finland; Realo et al. 2009, pp. 240–242) and may therefore provide a more accurate measure of the general feelings, beliefs, and values of the people of a nation. Evidence of auto-stereotypes in a Finnish context can be read in the work of Klaus Helkama and Anneli Portman (2019), who identify four values strongly associated with Finnish culture: 'egalitarianism, work-related (or Protestant ethic) values, education-related values ... and honesty' (p. 82), across the individual and cultural levels of value, following Shalom H. Schwartz's (2011) current value theory. The authors find that work-related (Protestant ethic) values are empirically associated, both hetero- and auto-stereotypically, with Finns and 'Finnishness', which they find exemplified in the high number of references to these values mentioned in annual presidential New Year speeches (Helkama & Portman, pp. 87–88). This suggests that the historical affiliation between Finland and Lutheranism may have had a striking impact on the national character and the shared cultural identity of Finns. Lutheranism as a motivating factor in the development of Finnish cultural particularities could, therefore, be explored.

The concept of a 'national character' is related to social cohesiveness both as a normative set of traits to which individual members of a society aspire during the

process of socialisation and enculturation, or as a descriptive measurement that points to other social forces which motivate the process of socialisation and enculturation. When members of a nation or culture are said to possess certain ‘national characteristics’, these are understood either as traits to which individuals feel they are expected to conform, or as the result of broader social forces that shape individuals toward a particular set of shared traits, which are then identified as the ‘national characteristics’. In both cases, notions about ‘national characteristics’ may motivate social cohesion.

The Nordic countries each have a ‘national church’—a Christian church that is associated with its specific ethnic group or nation-state (e.g. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland/Denmark/Norway, etc. Finland has two; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, and the Orthodox Church of Finland). The term ‘folk church’ (a church associated with a people, rather than a nation-state) has been used alongside ‘national church’ to describe the Nordic Church situation¹ (Church Council of Finland, n.d.-a), implying that ‘... it was one of the national characteristics to belong to a certain church, which expressed the history and spirit of the nation’ (Thorkildsen 2005, p. 352). The concept of a national church binds together the ideas of nationhood, a people, and religious belief—a connection that has not gone unchallenged.²

In personal conversations with Finnish peers, they have shared that it is clear to them that the role of the Church today is as a nucleus of cultural values, and ‘as a place of culture, rather than one of religion’.³ This reflects the changing relationship between the church, state, and people that has occurred over the last 150 years. This change has been noted by scholars of religion and society. It has been suggested that Protestantism (specifically Evangelical Lutheranism) has become an implicit part of Nordic culture, and one of the important forces behind the development of the Nordic social welfare systems through the political institutions of the Nordic countries (see Buchardt 2015; Nelson 2017; Sinnemäki et al. 2019). Lutheranism became *culturalised* into the Nordic societies. In the context of Nordic society, the term ‘culturalisation’ refers to the process by which Christianity was recontextualised as ‘a central part of the culture and values of the nation, and as such not something to learn about, but

¹ Where capitalised ‘Church’ is used, this is in reference to the specific (but sometimes unspecified) national churches of the Nordic countries, rather than the ‘church’ as a concept.

² For further reading on conflicts surrounding the role of the Church in society and culture and its relationship to the Finnish legal and political system, please see Titus Hjelm(2014), below.

³ K, A (2024) Response to Google Form ‘Questions Regarding Religion Education in Finland’. Google Form written by the author.

also as something *to be learned*' (Buchardt 2015, p. 138, emphasis in original). Such an inter-Nordic discussion is enabled by the close historic relationships formed between the Nordic countries over hundreds of years, both 'complicat[ing] any ambition of diagnosing a model across the Nordic countries of how to handle religion in relation to schooling, with the teaching of religion as a central feature', while also 'encouraging such diagnosis' (Buchardt 2015, p. 132).

Mette Burchardt (2015) writes that the process of culturalisation has been the result of a concerted effort on behalf of particular 'Cultural Protestants' working through various highly influential Social Democratic parties within the Nordic countries. It was the goal of these theologians, scholars, and pedagogues to *sacralise* the state—make the state 'sacred' in the eyes of its citizens (Buchardt 2015, p. 155). Their work 'softened [the Social Democratic parties'] attitudes toward religion and church' (2015, pp. 136–137). The culturalisation of the Church and subsequent sacralisation of the state was to be established by the state absorbing the historic role of the Church in society. The Marxist-inspired Social Democrats initially resisted this. As they gained public support and formed government, however, the relationship between the church and state changed as the former became 'the organ of the state for managing the religious life of society', 'now regarded as part of the state administration' (Sejersted 2011, pp. 284–286). Education became a central state institution, 'aimed at including the whole population in a comprehensive system ... defined by a goal of creating social mobility through education, and by an aim of schooling citizens into a mentality ... suitable for the welfare state' (Buchardt 2015, p. 137). Furthermore, an explicit connection was made by Cultural Protestants between the teaching of RE and social cohesion in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. The goal of maintaining social cohesion led to the 'development of unique but also complicated models for the secularisation of the school system while religion was maintained as a formative force' (p. 137). From the work of the authors cited, an important (but not definitive) link can be drawn between the Reformation in the Nordic countries, the work of the Cultural Protestants through the Social Democratic parties, and the gradual development of the early Nordic welfare system. The history of the changing relationship between the church and state, and the place of religion in the school system as a nation-building and socially-cohesive process lays the groundwork for a discussion about the potential for religion to continue to promote social cohesion in modern, pluralistic societies.

The idea of historical religious influence behind the welfare systems of the Nordic states is somewhat obscured by the notion of the highly secular Nordics (Sinnemäki

et al. 2019). This is not entirely incorrect, in that (as with many other Western countries) secularism and non-belief in God are significant phenomena and continue to gain favour (as seen in Special Eurobarometer 341, European Commission 2010, §5.3). However, it would be incorrect to conclude that secularism equates to complete irreligiosity; rather, religious values have become so ingrained as to have evolved into something unrecognisable as purely faith-based principles. Historian Pasi Ihalainen (2019) has pointed out that ‘secularized societies in which the religious and secular spheres have become quite separate may still remain deeply religious in character’, a phenomenon which can be seen in the Finnish and Swedish polities (p. 295). Non-belief in God and state control of the churches does not necessarily contradict a history of religiously-inspired social and cultural values.

3. Religion and ethics education in Finland

Religion and ethics education in Finland is governed by the Basic Education Act 628/1998 (§13) at the primary/comprehensive level (*peruskoulu*) and the Upper-Secondary Education Act 455/2003 (§16) at the secondary level (*lukio*). These pieces of legislation determine the procedure for how a pupil is to be placed: either in religious education (RE) (according to their own, or familial, religious convictions, or by personal choice in both *peruskoulu* and *lukio*), or ethics or ‘worldview’ studies (*peruskuolu* and *lukio* respectively). Tuula Sakaranaho describes how RE and ethics education is ‘separative’ (2013, p. 227)—students are separated into different classes by their personal or familial beliefs or their own or their guardians’ choice. The purpose of these separative parameters is to create an equality of opportunity for minority religious and ethnic groups (Opetushallitus 2016, §2, 3), as well as to raise the pupils with the skills necessary to live and work in a modern, pluralistic world. Further, the objective of religion and ethics education aims at ‘familiarizing the pupil with his or her own religion and with the Finnish spiritual tradition ... introducing the pupil to other religions’ and ‘helping him or her to understand the ethical dimension of religion’ (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 236). The Finnish Ministry of the Interior, in its 2008 security programme, stated that every citizen of Finland should know and understand different cultures and religions (Sisäasiainministeriö 2008, §6.2); equally, knowledge of one’s own cultural and religious background would support building and managing one’s own self-identity.⁴ RE and ethics education in Finland, therefore,

⁴ ‘Toimivien etnisten suhteiden kannalta on tärkeää, että niin valtaväestöllä kuin etnisillä vähemmistöilläkin on riittävästi tietoa kulttuureista ja uskonnoista. Myös oman kulttuurin ja uskonnon tuntemus tukee merkittävästi yksilön identiteetin rakentumista ja hallintaa.’ – ‘For effective ethnic relations, it is important that both the majority population and ethnic minorities

has a three-point purpose: to prepare its pupils with the knowledge and skills necessary to cooperate with different worldviews, to enhance self-knowledge and awareness (arguably, also to the benefit of the former), and to prepare them ‘... to take social responsibility, and to participate in cultural interaction’ (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 236).

These are secular goals, yet they are not entirely reiterated in the pedagogical aims of non-Lutheran (e.g. Orthodox, Islamic, or Catholic) RE, whose minority status requires a privileging of identity over secularism. For example,

While the main focus of Lutheran religious education is “to introduce the pupils in diverse ways to religious culture ...”, the Orthodox religious education states as its main concern “the strengthening and maintenance of the pupil’s Orthodox identity” (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 237)

and

In contrast ... the education of Orthodox and Catholic Christians has been closely connected to the catechetical education of these churches, encouraging pupils to an active commitment to the religious tradition in question. (p. 245)

A similarly confessional approach was noted in the first ‘Overall Curriculum of Islam’ of 1995; however, this was altered in the 2005 curriculum to ‘avoid confessional language in a theological sense’ (Sakaranaho 2006, p. 360). Sakaranaho points out an interesting difference in wording between the Lutheran RE and Islamic RE curricula: ‘... while the curriculum of Islam aims at knowing Islamic tradition, the curriculum of Lutheran religion aims at familiarity with “religious culture”... The curriculum of Lutheran religion, therefore, reveals some sort of “universalist” tendency’ (p. 360). Sakaranaho (2013) writes that ‘it has been noted that contemporary Lutheran religious education represents some sort of general Christianity (*yleiskristillisyyys*), rather than Lutheranism in any strict sense’ (p. 237). Furthermore, teachers of religious minority education may be critical of the nationally-mandated curricula that pertain to them. For example:

have sufficient knowledge about cultures and religions. Knowledge of one’s own culture and religion also significantly supports the construction and management of an individual’s identity.’ (Translated using Google Translate, with input from a native Finnish speaker).

with respect to the scientific approach, the emphasis on “Western Islamic studies” has recently been criticized by members of the Union of Teachers of Islam in Finland ... who ... would rather welcome the establishment of a Department of Islamic Theology as the main provider of teacher training of Islam. Departments such as this have recently been established in Germany, but there is nothing to suggest a similar development in Finland ... in the near future. (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 241)

While the objective of learning from and understanding other religions found (to a degree) in each RE curriculum aligns with the overarching secularist and egalitarian national values set out in the Constitution and National Core Curriculum (NCC), to allow education with a more confessional bent (as preferred by some non-Lutheran RE providers seeking primarily to preserve identity) possibly undermines these same secular and egalitarian values. Models of RE that do not correspond with each other on majority values risk unequally dispersing those values throughout society, undermining the social-cohesive and pluralistic goals set out under the NCC and the Constitution of Finland.

While this is not currently a major issue in the pedagogical aims of RE in Finland (given the relatively low numbers of non-Lutheran pupils), this issue may need to be addressed as the country develops into an increasingly pluralistic nation. Responding to the theme of this special edition, the recommendation this essay attempts to present and discuss is to teach RE alongside and as a part of ethics and ‘worldview’ education, and to teach the historical majority (and therefore cultural and ethically foundational) national religion. Furthermore, this position in a Finnish context negates the significant problem of cost associated with a separative, pluralistic, and compulsory RE, as ‘for small municipalities in particular, the demands arising from the growing plurality of religious education are already now overwhelming’ (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 243).

The majority of Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (approximately 66.5%; Church Council of Finland, n.d.-b), and from personal experience, many young people continue to associate their self-identity with Lutheranism, Christianity, Finland, and Finnishness. However, research done by Finell, Portman, and Silfver-Kuhalampi (2019) on the connection between Finland as a nation and Christianity among *lukio* students within the Helsinki metropolitan area found that religion did *not* play an important role in the Finnish self-conception, nor the conception of Finland as a nation. This research utilised two studies, one

quantitative and one qualitative, to attempt to answer three questions: 1) the importance of being Christian as a criterion of being a Finn, 2) whether Lutheran symbols and services were associated with other unique national symbols, and 3) how it was reasoned that Christian symbols were seen to be characteristic of Finland (Finell et al. 2019, p. 156). Most responses pointed to Christianity as being ‘... not an important criterion of being a Finn ...’ and that ‘Christianity does not play a major role as a criterion of nation ...’ (p. 166). The researchers explained the divergence between previous research, which identified the importance of Lutheranism to the Finnish national identity, and this conclusion by pointing to the ‘prevalent norm’ of Finns as ‘suspicious of fundamentalism and strong religiosity’ possibly reflecting ‘the division between “cultural religion” and active participation’ (p. 167). For example, Helsinki Cathedral was viewed by a majority of respondents as a *national* symbol rather than a religious symbol. Finell et al.’s (2019) research, rather than detracting from, may be read to support the argument that while more expressive displays of religiosity (religious holidays, symbolism, Church participation, etc.) *may or may not* have an impact on the cultural values of a nation, the historical majority religion ought nonetheless to be acknowledged as a major motivating factor behind the current national character and cultural/ethical frameworks.

This goal is not entirely supported in the Finnish education system, however. Tuula Sakaranaho (2013) points out that religious education in Finland is ‘ridden with contradictions’, wherein ‘it is obvious that the needs of the religious majority and minorities are seen as different’ (p. 247) despite ostensibly conforming to the same secularist and pluralist national goals. An integrated RE model (sometimes referred to as the ‘Swedish model’) offers an alternative system in which secular religious education is the same for all pupils, avoiding denominational segregation that hampers intercultural dialogue and strains financial resources. This paper would offer a similarly structured alternative. A struggle can be read within the socio-political zeitgeist of Finland (Hjelm 2014) between different views of the Church’s role within society and Finnish culture, but it remains the case that a strong relationship has existed and continues to exist between the two. This may be used to inform the national curriculum if societal cohesion is to be retained. By teaching about the majority religion in a non-confessional format, pupils would gain a greater understanding of a significant foundation of the contemporary socio-cultural structure. This could be further supported by the inclusion of ethics education alongside religious education which, it will be argued, are complementary subjects. Non-confessionalism would align with the national value of religious freedom, while

furthering the secondary goal of maintaining social cohesion and an understanding of Finnish culture and society.

4. Religion as an ethics, and their combination in the national curriculum

The second argument this paper seeks to present is the combination of religious education and ethics/philosophy in the national curriculum. The overall argument is motivated by three points: the overlap in content between religion and ethics education, the practical financial implications, and the potential role in supporting social cohesion.

Part of what defines a 'religion' today is, among other factors, as an ethical framework—that is, a religion is a set of beliefs and practices, justified by a metaphysics, that forms an ethical framework for its adherents, as in the polythetic concept approach presented by Kevin Schilbrack (2022, §2.2). To be a member of a religion means to hold this particular ethical framework to be true. This is the case for many modern religions and their various sects. Religion and ethics has a long history as an object of study in sociological and philosophical circles. Theological ethicist James M. Gustafson argues that 'a comprehensible theological ethics must be developed in relation to four distinguishable base points':

- a. the interpretation of God and God's relation to the world and particularly to human beings, and the interpretation of God's purpose;
- b. the interpretation of the meaning or significance of human experience ...;
- c. the interpretation of persons and collectivities as moral agents, and of their acts; and
- d. the interpretation of how persons and collectivities ought to make moral choices and ought to judge ... acts. (Gustafson 1984, p. 143)

These points may form a strong foundation for what a study of ethics in religion could deal with, compared and contrasted with secular ethical theories. The study of religious ethics is already suggested in the Finnish NCC, which states that 'the pupils familiarise themselves with ethical thinking in the studied religion and in other religions, and the pupils are encouraged in personal reflection on ethical questions' (Opetushallitus 2016, §13.4.6, 14.4.6, & 15.4.10). These, it is argued, are significant overlaps, paving the way for an exploration of their combination in the curriculum.

Why, then, the separation of the educational streams, RE and ethics, in the current system? Law scholar Martin Scheinin (2001) suggests that the increasingly smaller numbers of Lutheran RE students in Finland is the underlying reason for restricting freedom of choice, and that ‘many Lutheran pupils, if given the chance, would actually choose Ethics rather than Lutheran religious education’ (quoted in Sakaranaho 2013, p. 244). That the NCC is a political matter suggests some level of underlying political will to maintain a socially relevant Lutheranism, as is suggested in analyses of parliamentary discourse surrounding religious equality, freedom of religion, and national identity (Hjelm 2014), although this political will is, of course, not held universally. But, while the separative, denominational system may be one way of maintaining a socially relevant Lutheranism while upholding the rights of religious minorities, the increased cost associated with offering (and, in fact, potentially obliging) the teaching of different religions as well as their various denominations may be overwhelming for the organising municipalities (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 243). It is the view of this paper that this overwhelming financial strain could be avoided, as well as the goals of the NCC and Constitution assisted, if a singular RE and ethics curriculum were adopted.

It need not be the case of one or the other; religion can be taught as one ethical framework alongside other diverse, secular ethics within the Finnish education system. Furthermore, to have a singular religious tradition and associated theological ethics to draw from, rather than the current pluralistic but separative approach, is supported by those who would prefer an integrative model. They argue that the separative model favours segregation at a time when intercultural dialogue is crucial, and that this is not in line with the aims of RE as set down by the NCC (Sakaranaho 2013, p. 243). To include RE alongside ethics education therefore serves a twofold purpose within a national curriculum; to cut the costs of an institution that already draws heavily from the national expenditure, and to uphold the main cultural values and national character of a modern society.

5. Conclusion

This paper interrogated the problem of how religion and ethics education could be handled within a national curriculum to enhance social cohesion, taking the Finnish and Nordic contexts as its examples. The argument presented took a two-pronged approach. Special attention was given first to a closer examination of how a long religious tradition may affect the national character or identity of a nation, focusing on the case of Lutheran Finland. The Nordic countries continue to fall under the

influence of their shared religious heritage, and it has been suggested that this is expressed most obviously in the realm of politics, having influenced the ways in which the modern welfare state systems have been developed and managed today. This foundation has had a strong effect on the values and norms that are visible both in academic research and everyday praxis, and which may contribute to the placement of these countries at the top of the lists of developed nations in terms of democratic rigour, general well-being, and social cohesion. On a personal level, this has been made obvious to me through my own experiences of Nordic honesty, stoicism, and work ethic for which its citizens have become known.

Secondly, we interrogated how Finland, in particular, treats RE and ethics education at a national level. RE and ethics education is a prominent tool for the adoption of the shared values and norms of citizens, as schools are spaces and institutions in which children learn of, and develop a respect for, their cultural surrounds. However, we saw that the Finnish system is not perfect, and taking a separative and compulsory approach does not entirely serve to maintain the values from which it is drawn. A respect for the values that underpin its pluralistic nature—egalitarianism, a strong worth ethic, and rigorous education—are under pressure, and religion educations that undermine these values are given comparative, but not quite equal, treatment. This is to the detriment of the entire system through increased cost and a perceived failure in some quarters to achieve foundational objectives.

Finally, we investigated an alternative pathway, separate and distinct from both philosophy instead-of religion and philosophy as-part-of religion. This third way argued for religion as an aspect of philosophy, especially as an aspect of ethics. Treatment of religion as a philosophy is not unique—indeed, much of the scholarly treatment of religion is as an analysis of various religious doctrines, and their metaphysical underpinnings and normative ethics. This treatment would allow, furthermore, for RE and ethics to be used as a tool within the education system to the benefit of efficiency, social relevance, and cohesion. By universally teaching a secular curriculum based around a singular religious tradition, the goals of a national core curriculum may be met without risking both an increased cost to municipalities and the values and culture that the national curriculum seeks to instil. This final argument does not pertain necessarily solely to the eccentricities of the Finnish or Nordic education systems, but would be of benefit to modern nations with comparable goals and histories.

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