



Book Review

Merethe Roos

The Quest for a New Education: Social Democracy, Educational Reforms, and Religion in Norway after the Second World War

Berlin: De Gruyter
2024, 176 pp.

In this volume, Merethe Roos sets out a very clear and specific aim: “to address the role of Christianity in Norwegian compulsory education in the years following World War II” (p. 1), an aim which is met – and exceeded – with significant success. Roos manages to weave together (with great impact) detailed narratives of particular individuals (most centrally Helge Sivertsen and Eva Nordland) with unfolding policy developments, and interactions between state, church, secular groups, and others. In doing so, she brings the spotlight into focus on the role of educational policy analysis as a crucial step forwards in better understanding Nordic models of welfarism, building on the work of Mette Buchardt.

The first chapter (The Book and its Background: Christian Education in Post-War Norway) takes the form of an extended (and very detailed) justification for the work. Here there is a thorough contextualisation of the study, explaining the relation of the work to the current context of KRLE (religious education) in Norwegian education. This segment clearly answers the “so what?” question than can arise with historical work. Here, the relevance of this book is very clear: understanding this history helps us understand how we got to where we currently are, and in turn influences our

understanding of where we might head to next. Moreover, this chapter offers some tantalising snippets of information (developed in later chapters) which draw the reader further into the debates and the complexity of the history. In doing so, the author clearly defends this work as occupying a unique space in the broader discourse, pointing out where the work differs from work that has gone before. Finally, there is a very clear articulation of the theoretical framework that guides the work. Not only does Roos consider which words were used in the narratives she explores, (for example, effectively problematising taken-for-granted terminology, such as “secular” (e.g. p. 11)), she also reflects on what those words were meant to communicate, in other words, what the authorial intention was. In addition, a discussion of the sources used is a very valuable addition to the work (augmented by an extensive bibliography).

The broader context in which the narratives unfold is set out in chapter two (A Social-democratic Order, the School, and the Secular State. A Diversity of Contexts). Like the other chapters in the book, this demonstrates a significantly detailed and forensic exploration of the political, cultural, and theological conditions that created the circumstances in which the post-war curriculum was able to develop. Rather than deal with each of these conditions as a separate, “siloeed,” discussion, Roos very effectively captures the huge complexity of the interactions between them. The coverage is wide and comprehensive, extending from the Hell Debate, the development of the National Humanist Association (and civil confir-

mation), through the language disputes of the 1950s, and the variously differentiated political and theological factions, movements, and divisions that rose and fell in prominence over the period under focus. The changing tensions between autonomy, religion, education, and secularism (or de-Christianisation) are accounted for here with great sensitivity, and with significant rigour.

Helge Sivertsen and Eva Nordland are the central characters for Chapter three, which starts with the claim that there is a “fundamental assumption that [these two] play a significant role in the development of the social democratic school project in post-war Norway” (p. 91). Initially, I was unsure about this claim, and wrote in the margin “this claim needs to be substantiated!”. However, this is exactly what the chapter does; alongside detailed biographical portraits of these two characters, there are meticulously detailed discussions regarding, for example, the intertwined nature of Norwegianness and Christianity and broader considerations of what schooling *is for*. For both Sivertsen and Nordland there are thorough reviews of their published works, and the influence/impact that these generated. The one question that remained for me at the end of this chapter is why did each character not have their own chapter?

The final chapter of the work brings its readers back to the key questions, with an encouragement to consider these through the lens of authorial intention; again the chapter is packed full of detail, rigour and clear contributions “to making the history of Norway in the aftermath of World War II into a prominent example of how Protestant Christianity blends with culture” (p. 147). The articulation of the relationship between education

and the development of the welfare state is masterful, and the imperative to see “more research on the intersection of theology, culture, politics, and education” (p. 155) is very timely.

Across the volume, one aspect of particular note (which I very much appreciated in reading) was that whenever a name is mentioned, the person’s dates are included, and often a brief pen-portrait is added in the text (not relegated to footnotes). This is a minor detail, often overlooked in other volumes, which on the one hand helps the reader construct the narrative timeline more accurately in their mind, and on the other, reassures the reader that every statement, sentence, phrase, is based on very detailed, rigorous, and comprehensive research.

There is a huge amount of detail densely packed in this work, yet it is articulated in a very accessible manner, all of which leads to a very significant contribution. At one level, the contribution to knowledge of Norwegian KRLE and how it developed to become what it is. But at a much deeper – perhaps wider – level, there is a significant contribution here in relation to understanding the role of Protestantism (in a variety of forms) in the political context of post-war reconstruction. This gives the book an appeal to a wide range of audiences; those in training to teach KRLE in Norway for example would benefit significantly... but more widely, historians, theologians, those interested in secular movements of public opinion, those interested in detailed life histories, and cultural historians, as well as those interested in methodological matters.

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