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Emplotting a privileged position. The construction of the history of secular humanism in Norwegian religious education textbooks

Espen Schjetne and Ole Henrik Borchgrevink Hansen 

Religious Education and Ethics at the Faculty of Education, Østfold University College, Halden, Norway

ABSTRACT

There has recently been an increasing focus on the inclusion of non-religious world-views in religious education (RE). An important concern for the legitimacy of an RE subject in public education in liberal democracies is that all traditions, whether religious or secular, are treated in an equal and inclusive manner. This article examines the Norwegian case, where secular worldviews have been integrated as a central part of the compulsory national curriculum in RE for over 20 years. It does so by considering how the history of secular humanism is constructed in Norwegian RE textbooks. Theoretically, the article draws on the postmodern historiographic critique presented by Hayden White. A central concept is emplotment and the idea that emplotments convey moral arguments. Three narratives – ‘rationality’, ‘humanity’ and ‘rights and democracy’ – are identified as the core of the history of secular humanism being told in the material. The article suggests that the way these narratives are emplotted grants secular humanism a privileged position and that the fair and balanced representation of worldviews in RE education calls for alternative emplotments of this history.

KEYWORDS

Secular humanism; history; textbooks; religious; education

Introduction

An important and ongoing debate concerns the integration of non-religious worldviews in religious education (Jackson 2014; CoRE 2017). In addition to being a debate about whether non-religious worldviews should be included (Watson 2010; Aldridge 2015) or excluded (Felderhof 2012; Barnes 2015), the debate has also been concerned with didactical approaches and conceptual and representational challenges of how to best depict such worldviews in RE (Bråten 2018; Everington 2018). An important aspect of this debate relates to equal treatment of different religions and worldviews (Jackson 2014; Åhs, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2019). In this article, the questions of representation and equal treatment are central concerns. More specifically, the focus is on the representation of secular humanism (livssynshumanisme) in Norwegian RE textbooks. By ‘secular humanism’ we mean humanism understood as a non-religious life stance.¹ The Norwegian RE subject is interesting because, unlike most European countries, secular worldviews, with a special focus on secular humanism, have been integrated as a central part of the compulsory national curriculum in RE since 1997.

It is safe to say that the RE subject has been controversial in Norway, with the controversy revolving around the hegemonic role of Christianity. The debate culminated in 2007, when the European Court of Human Rights found that parents’ freedom of religion had been violated by giving Christianity a privileged position. However, the question of who holds a privileged position during religious education classes is not a straightforward one. There is empirical evidence

CONTACT Espen Schjetne  espen.schjetne@hiof.no

suggesting that there is an increasingly secularistic discourse in RE classrooms (Flensner 2015; Lidh 2016; Husebø et al. 2019), where secularism and non-religious positions are considered by many to be neutral and objective, while religion is a historical remnant and a thing of the past, at least in Scandinavia (Flensner 2018).

It is an important concern for the legitimacy of an RE subject in public education in liberal democracies that no tradition, religious or secular, enjoys a hegemonic position, but that such traditions are treated in an equal and inclusive manner. Based on this, the representation of secular humanism in an educational context warrants further attention. This article examines the history of secular humanism, and more specifically, *how the history of secular humanism is constructed in Norwegian RE textbooks*.

There are two reasons for this approach. First, the *construction of history* is important, because such a construction is charged with values, thereby expressing what it means to be a secular humanist today. The construction of history is especially interesting when it comes to secular humanism, because its history is different from that of world religions. Although the pupils encounter secular humanism alongside the main world religions on an equal footing, as a living and collective tradition, its history is much shorter. The term 'humanist' as a self-identifying category for a non-religious, secular life stance, was not in use until the mid-19th century, and organised secular humanism was not established until the 20th century (Norman 2004; Blankholm 2017). This renders the identification of the historical roots and traditions of secular humanism more open. Second, *textbooks* are important because they are central in shaping teachers' and students' views of school subjects (Valverde et al. 2002). As widely used powertexts, textbooks introduce 'key knowledge' and produce representations, which contain values, perspectives and possible patterns of power (Andreassen 2014).

In recent years, several empirical studies focussing on the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE have appeared. These studies have been concerned with different aspects of the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE (Bråten and Everington 2019), the views of different stakeholders (Everington 2018; Åhs, Poulter, and Kallioniemi 2019) and how the concept of worldviews is taught, understood and used in classroom practices (Bråten 2018). Although multiple empirical studies have been conducted on the use of textbooks in RE (Frank 2014; Vestøl 2014, 2016; Thomas and Rolin 2019), to our knowledge, there have been no empirical studies on secular humanism.

We first present the theoretical perspective and the two theoretically informed research questions we will be pursuing. Second, we present the materials and methods before conducting the analysis. In the analysis, three core narratives emerge: 'rationality', 'humanity' and 'rights and democracy'. The article then moves on to a more theoretically driven analysis; based on the core narratives, it claims that two overarching narratives come across as granting secular humanism both intellectual and moral authority. Finally, the relationship between religion, humanism and secular humanism is discussed, and we argue that there is evidence suggesting that secular humanism is given a privileged position in RE textbooks.

Theory

To analyse the construction of history in secular humanism in RE textbooks, we draw on what can be referred to as postmodern historiographic critique, especially in the version put forward by Hayden White. White's *theory of emplotment* is used as an analytical tool and heuristic device to examine this construction more closely. White's theory is presented in his seminal *Metahistory* (1973b) and several essays, most notably, 'Interpretation in history' (White 1973a), 'The narrativization of real events' (1981) and 'The content of the form' (1987).

According to White, history consists of many facts, and the historian needs to both select and interpret them. Constructing a story implies including some facts and excluding others, but it also inevitably means combining – plotting – the chosen facts into a narrative of a certain kind. This emplotment provides the narrative with patterns of meaning with the ambition of conveying

a comprehensible historical process to the reader. One can say that a historical narrative derives its plot structure by tracing the causes and consequences to tell a story that is perceived to be true. White (1973b, 7) argues that, like poetic fiction, this emplotment appeals to pre-generic plot structures existing in our culture. He states that a certain chain of events can be emplotted as either tragic, romantic, satirical or comic, and the same chain of events can be emplotted in different ways.

The theory of emplotment/narrative archetypes has earned both support and criticism. It has been criticised for being too strict or considering too high a level of generality to be of practical use (McCullagh 1998; Carroll 2001). We do not venture into that debate. Our use of White's theory as an analytical device does not depend on the level of generality of these pre-generic plot structures, but rather, on the idea that any recounting of history is inevitably a construction, and this construction takes a narrative form that seeks to explain a selection of facts in a comprehensible manner. White's theory is primarily used to analyse academic historical writings. In line with Vanhulle (2009, 265), we argue that this theory is especially fruitful when applied to textbooks, since these texts are expected to present a clear, coherent narrative in a limited space.²

What does this mean for the construction of the history of secular humanism in RE textbooks? It signifies that any recording of history is a construction of some kind, and it can never be neutral. It does not mean that historical narratives do not have epistemological value; rather, the narrative form makes the historical facts moral and involves an imposition of values (White 1981; Pihlainen 2013). Therefore, historical narratives are also moral arguments simply because narrative closure of any kind is ultimately moral closure too (White 1987, 23). It is important to be able to reflect on what type of moral argument the narratives convey, especially when it comes to RE in pluralistic societies aspiring to treat different religions and life stances neutrally and in a fair and equal manner. In light of this, more specifically, we *examine the history of secular humanism by identifying which stories are central in the history of secular humanism and the moral arguments conveyed in the emplotment of these stories*. Because we are interested in which position secular humanism holds in RE textbooks, we also *examine whether the emplotment of these stories can be described as inclusive or exclusive in relation to religious traditions*.

Materials and methods

This is a qualitative and exploratory study examining the construction of the history of secular humanism in Norwegian RE textbooks. The research is situated in what – in a wide sense – can be called an interpretive paradigm. The study seeks to identify and understand the meaning of the narratives constituting the history of secular humanism found in the material. The study is also inspired by post-structural perspectives in the sense that it sees history as constructions, and because it focuses on questions of privileges and equality, rather than on whether these narratives can be confirmed as right or wrong. The empirical material analysed in this article is found in five RE textbooks used in the Norwegian RE subject (KRLE)³. The material comprises of the latest RE textbooks published by the three largest publishers of textbooks in Norway. There exists no statistics for the use of different educational texts in the Norwegian educational system. Being explorative in nature, however, the study intends neither to produce generalisable findings about the different histories of secular humanism Norwegian pupils are being exposed to, nor to say anything about the situation in other countries. The aim of the article is to explore the narratives being told in central educational RE-texts in the Norwegian educational system.

The textbooks cover both primary school (pupils aged 9–11 years old) and lower secondary school (12–15 years old). The following books have been examined: *KRLE-boka 5–7* (Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017), *KRLE-boka 8–10* (Wiik and Walle 2016), *Vivo 5–7* (Bondevik et al. 2010), *Horisonter 9* (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007) and *Store Spørsmål 10* (Hove et al. 2017). The data being analysed consist of written text and historical timelines. The texts that make up the data of this study are all found in the chapters dealing with secular humanism.

The data have been coded to identify what facts comprise the history of secular humanism. The main codes being used are ideas and values, actors, institutions, historical periods and events. Three categories of thoughts and ideas have been inductively identified as core elements in the history of secular humanism, thereby constituting three stories (Miles and Huberman 1994, 249). The stories have been read closely and repeatedly to identify the narrative form they take. Based on a closer examination of the three stories, two overarching narratives are identified. The analysis undertaken is partly coherency-related and partly teleologically oriented (Vanhulle 2009). More specifically, we have identified which values and ideas are the most prominent; what actors, institutions, historical periods and events occur; how these are highlighted and characterised; the degree to which they are recurring in the material; and whether they are connected to create a whole. This also means that we have identified the specific goals, historical changes and types of fulfilment (of ideas and values) these stories express, as well as potential tensions, inconsistencies and struggles in these stories.

The history of humanism as the history of secular humanism

Four of the five books being analysed have chapters named 'Secular humanism' (livssynshumanisme). Three of these have sub-chapters dedicated to history. These are titled 'The history of humanism' (two books) and 'Important events in the history of humanism'. The fourth book – which incorporates the history section into a sub-chapter dealing with the secular humanistic perspective of life – also focusses on the history of humanism. The fifth book organises the subject slightly differently. Here, the main chapter is called 'Humanism and critique of religion'. It consists of the following sub-chapters: 'The humane', 'Humanism in history', 'Secular humanism', 'The Norwegian Humanist Association' and 'Critique of religion'. Except for a brief reference to the establishment of and membership growth in the Norwegian Humanist Association, the only section in this book focusing on history, is the sub-chapter 'Humanism in history'. As a whole, this means that, in the textbooks, the history of secular humanism equals the history of humanism. It is worth noting that the history of humanism is exclusively related to the chapters dealing with secular humanism.

When analysing the textbooks, the history of humanism consists of three stories. These stories are emplotted as narratives of *rationality*, *humanity* and *rights and democracy*. We examine each core narrative in turn in the next section.

Three core narratives

The rationality narrative is mainly emplotted as a narrative of the growing understanding of *the importance of reason, knowledge and science*. Acknowledging this importance is conveyed as a core humanistic ideal. The following examples are illustrative: Socrates, who is called 'the first humanist' is said to 'greatly emphasise human reason and the good in human beings' (Wiik and Walle 2016, 98), while the Enlightenment in the 18th century was a period when additional humanistic thoughts grew. 'Knowledge had become important' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 214). It is worth noting that the association of reason with humanism in the textbooks is often expressed in general, almost self-evident terms. Sometimes, this is straightforward, as in, 'Everyone can find out what is right and true by thinking and asking critical questions' (Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017, 68). At other times, the acquisition of knowledge has a specific purpose, as in, '[K]nowledge should fight superstition' (Hove et al. 2017, 16), or the use of reason implies or is exemplified in various ways as being critical to or free from tradition and religion (Bondevik et al. 2010, 214; Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017, 68). Another important element in the rationality narrative is the focus on *logic and perception as primary sources of knowledge*. This is clear when Aristotle's emphasis on knowledge as 'based on experiences, thorough investigation and logical thinking', is depicted as an important 'event' in the history of humanism (Holth,

Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 158). Similarly, important humanistic ideas in Antiquity are described as man's desire to 'understand the world by observing it and by the use of reason' (Hove et al. 2017, 19). The rationality narrative also implies that either nature or human beings can be seen as meaningful and valuable objects of study (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 158; Wiik and Walle 2016, 100; Hove et al. 2017, 15). This focus on nature and human beings, paired with the importance of human reason, lays *the groundwork for the development of natural sciences* as the final part of the narrative of rationality. Sometimes, science is simply a tool for human progress and prosperity, since science comes up with explanations and answers to the problems humanity is facing. At other times, the focus is on the potential and possibility of scientific answers clashing with religious answers, thereby providing reasons for criticising religious thoughts and breaking away from religion (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 158; Bondevik et al. 2010, 216; Wiik and Walle 2016, 100; Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017, 70; Hove et al. 2017, 17).

The narrative of the *(re)discovery of humanity* is expressed in three core ideas, which are as follows: 'human value', 'the good human being' and 'human uniqueness'. According to the textbooks, the humanistic idea of human value can be seen throughout history. Humanists have often 'emphasised the value of man' (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 156), and humanist-oriented thinkers focussed on the idea that 'human beings were valuable' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 214), 'all human beings have equal value' (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 159) and human value is 'inviolable' (Hove et al. 2017, 14). Another important element in this narrative is how humanistic ideals are said to embody and emphasise the idea that human beings are 'good by nature' (Wiik and Walle 2016, 100) and 'noble' (Hove et al. 2017, 14); moreover, they can 'think right', 'do good for others' and 'distinguish right from wrong' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 212–4). A third idea relates to human uniqueness. The textbooks specify as humanistic ideas that humans are more intelligent than animals (Hove et al. 2017, 14) and that '(l)anguage separates us from animals' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 214). Our uniqueness also pertains to the beauty of humankind and the human body (Bondevik et al. 2010, 214; Wiik and Walle 2016, 100; Hove et al. 2017, 14), and to the endless possibilities human beings have (Wiik and Walle 2016, 100). Sometimes, the perspective of humans as good and unique is contrasted with religious perspectives that describe humans as sinful and weak (Hove et al. 2017, 14).

The narrative of *the fight for rights and democracy* is related to the previous narrative, especially the idea of 'human value'. However, it is a separate narrative. According to the textbooks, the history of humanism is a history about ideas like 'freedom and equality for all' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 212), in which 'all humans are born equal and should have equal rights' (Hove et al. 2017, 16). The humanistic fight for a 'society where people can think freely and say what they mean' goes all the way back to Socrates, but the narrative centres on the Enlightenment period. In this period, 'the humanists fought for people's right to choose what to believe and to participate in decision-making'; they 'wanted the king and the upper class to be deprived of power' and thought 'the right to vote should be given to workers and women' (Børresen, Hammer, and Skrefsrud 2017, 68–9). The fight for these ideals is explicitly connected to the birth of modern democracy, and the emerging democratic constitutions are said to 'be characterised by humanistic ideas' (Hove et al. 2017, 16). In the textbooks, both the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789 and the *American Declaration of Independence* of 1776 (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 158), as well as the expansion of free democratic societies and the establishment of *UN Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948 after the Second World War, are seen as important events in the history of humanism and as tokens of the growing importance of humanistic ideas in the world of today (Hove et al. 2017, 18). In two of the textbooks, the *UN Declaration*, along with the foundation of Amnesty International in 1961 (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe. 2007, 159; Bondevik et al. 2010, 212), are placed as endpoints on a timeline describing important events in the history of humanism.

The intellectual and moral authority of the humanistic tradition

To this point, we have seen that the history of humanism is emplotted as a history about the *importance of rationality, (re)discovery of humanity and fight for rights and democracy*. We argue that, as a whole, the three stories constituting the history of secular humanism are emplotted in such a way that two overarching narratives emerge. In this section, we argue that these narratives grant the humanistic tradition considerable intellectual and moral authority.

In the textbooks, humanism assumes *intellectual authority* because humanism becomes synonymous with what may be called 'European philosophical and intellectual tradition'. This is because the history of humanism is emplotted as a *philosophical narrative of a certain kind*: It is emplotted as the history of those ideas that have been at the core of the most important epistemological, moral and political–philosophical debates in European history. Further, the history of humanism is emplotted as a philosophical narrative; that is, it is organised around certain historical eras and connected to certain individuals that clearly belong to the Western philosophical 'canon'. According to the textbooks, the history of humanism stretches from the 6th century BCE to the 20th century CE, but is identified by three distinct eras, which are as follows: Antiquity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. These eras are the same as those frequently used in the academic literature to characterise the European 'history of ideas' or 'geistesgeschichte'. The list of historical persons associated with humanism further strengthens the intellectual authority of humanism, associating humanism with such key figures as Socrates, who is (by far) the most frequently mentioned 'humanist' in the textbooks, as well as Aristotle, Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Olympe de Gouges, to mention a few⁴. It must be said that there are considerable variations between the textbooks. Some only mention a couple of thinkers, whereas others provide extensive lists of philosophers, thinkers and intellectuals associated with humanism, from Ancient Chinese and Indian philosophers, via stoic philosophers and Muslim, Jewish and Christian thinkers in 12th-century Spain, to modern philosophers like Kant, Rousseau, Mill and Russell (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe 2007). The intellectual authority of humanism is also supported in that the history of humanism deals with the same questions and issues as the chapters dedicated to ethical and philosophical subjects do, sharing the same intellectual figures and making explicit cross-reference to these chapters.

The *moral authority* of the humanistic tradition, we would argue, consists in that the history of humanism is being emplotted as the *realisation through history of truth, goodness and justice*. This narrative is sometimes clearly articulated in the textbooks: 'We find traces of humanistic ideas way back in history. Many people have talked about doing good for others, about using reason, about justice for all, about human dignity and gender equality' (Bondevik et al. 2010, 213). Socrates, being introduced as the first humanist, is said to emphasise 'human reason and the good in man', intending 'that truth, goodness and justice should rule people's lives' (Wiik and Walle 2016, 98). This realisation of truth, goodness and justice is also dominant in the three narratives described above. In fact, they may be seen as articulations of what the realisation of truth, goodness and justice comprises. The narrative of rationality pertains to the search for truth, often against religious superstition, and human ability to achieve progress and prosperity via the use of reason and science. The narrative of the (re)discovery of humanity relates to the equal value of all human beings, and in the ability of man to do good. The narrative of rights and democracy pertains to the just, which is captured in the ideals of equal and inviolable rights and freedoms for all, as expressed in universal human rights.

The moral authority of this narrative is further strengthened because the history being told is streamlined and without inconsistencies. There are no internal conflicting values or ideals, no struggles about the right interpretation of values and ideas and no internal debates identified. Thus, the thoughts and ideas that history recounts come across as undisputedly true, good and just. The most decisive argument for the moral authority of the humanistic tradition, however, arises because, overall, this narrative expresses a set of general values and ideals that enjoy near

universal support. Although they are not embraced by all citizens, these values and ideals are largely conceived as unproblematic, and they remain a central part of the value basis of public education. Thus, one could argue that, in the textbooks, modern values are identified as humanistic values, and therefore, the history of humanism becomes the history of 'our' common values.

The concurrence between humanistic values and modern common values is important, because it brings about a narrative closure – which is also very much a moral closure – giving pride of place to humanism⁵. Thus, the narrative of the *realisation through history of the truth, goodness and justice* is a story of a specific type, resembling what White refers to as a 'romance' in his classification of emplotments. According to White, a romantic emplotment of a historic narrative can be described as 'drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall' (White 1973b, 9).

The history of humanism and religious traditions

Suggesting that the history of humanism is emplotted as a triumphant narrative in which the struggle against religious superstition and churchly power is an element begs the question of how the relationship between humanism and religion is emplotted in this narrative: What role is religion given in the history of humanism? In the material, there are two versions of this role. In one of the textbooks, religion plays no positive role in this history. It is only present as a phenomenon of which the humanists have been critical or that they have defined their worldview in opposition to. In the other, which is the dominant version, religion is given a positive role. Here, it is emphasised that the history of humanism cannot be told without religious persons. The following quotation is typical:

Taking a closer look at the history of humanism, we cannot only include those who have been opposed to religion and belief in God. What we must look for are thinkers who have put the human at the centre of their thinking, regardless of whether they have been religious or not. Socrates and many other philosophers of Antiquity were religious. The humanists in the Renaissance were all Christians, and most of the rebellious thinkers of the 18th century had some form of religious belief. It is only during the last 200 years that a comprehensive non-religious humanism has been developed in the Western world. (Holth, Kallevik, and von der Lippe 2007, 156).

Where does this place religion in the narrative of the history of humanism? Are religious traditions being granted some form of intellectual and moral authority through being emplotted into humanism's history? The answer, we claim, is clearly no. In the narrative, religion does not seem to contribute to the growth of the humanistic thoughts and ideas. The 'roots of humanism' are traced to individual thinkers and activists identified as humanists because they are promoting the humanistic ideals. Some of them are religious individuals, and they are occasionally called Christian, Jewish or Muslim. This makes them contributors to the history of secular humanism. However, their Christian, Jewish or Muslim faith is bypassed in the story being told. The main narrative is that humanism is emplotted as a stream of core ideas that have existed *independently of any tradition* until the beginning of the history of organised secular humanism. In the course of history, these new humanistic thoughts are said to 'spring up', 'sweep over' Europe, 'bloom', 'grow' or 'be spread', but they are never said to have gained foothold due to, or having been caused or inspired by, any existing religion or body of thoughts.

Finally, we argue that the history of humanism comes across as a history exclusively owned by the contemporary secular humanist movement. This ownership does not mean that religious people cannot call themselves humanists. Four of the five books underscore that the concept of 'humanism' is not identical to that of 'secular humanism'. As something distinct, humanism refers to a set of values that both religious and non-religious persons can hold. However, in the material, contemporary secular humanism is portrayed as a product and fulfilment of earlier humanism. A telling example of this teleology is the sub-chapter titled 'The background of humanism' in

Bondevik et al. (2010, 215), where the closing paragraph states, 'It was not many people who thought and wrote about humanistic ideas in old Athens, in the Renaissance and in the Enlightenment. But those who did, participated in spreading the new ideas which have become today's secular humanism'. This teleology is confirmed by the timelines present in the material. With one exception, the timelines of the history of humanism end with the establishment of various secular humanist organisations in the mid-20th century.

Concluding discussion

In our material, the history of secular humanism equals the history of humanism. As shown, this is the history of a specific set of intellectual and moral ideals. We have further demonstrated that this history is emplotted in such a way that the humanistic tradition becomes almost synonymous with the European intellectual tradition. Finally, we have shown that, at best, religious traditions play a marginal role in this history, both in historical and contemporary contexts. In light of this, we think it is reasonable to say that the construction of the history of secular humanism in Norwegian RE textbooks grants secular humanism considerable intellectual and moral authority, and thus, gives it a privileged position. It is privileged because it is the secular humanist movement, which becomes the movement that propounds the modern ideas of rationality, humanity and rights and democracy. This privileged position also consists in the portrayal of the history of secular humanism as a largely unproblematic and friction-free intellectual narrative, without inconsistencies, internal tension or struggle among humanists, where the emplotment of this history makes secular humanism the endpoint of the European intellectual tradition.

In relation to the requirement of treating different religions and worldviews in public education in a fair and equal manner, such a privileged position in textbooks may be problematic for several reasons. Thus, it deserves serious attention from textbook authors, educators and policymakers. Identifying common ideas and values so closely with the history of *one* tradition simplifies the complex emergence and development of these values and ideas through history, thereby indirectly discrediting the role of religion in shaping the history of modern liberal democracies. Granting a specific group ownership of common ideas and values – through historical emplotment – also risks influencing the classroom environment in a negative way. It could, for instance, hamper the possibilities for religious pupils connecting to common values and ideas, as a part of their identity formation, and perhaps contribute to polarisation and an increasingly secularistic discourse. Consequently, it may also stifle important discussions across religious and worldview divides on the nature and legitimacy of such common values and ideas, and perhaps, the possibilities of reaching an overlapping justification of them.

An important question is how RE textbooks could avoid giving secular humanism a privileged position, that is, how the history of secular humanism could have been constructed otherwise. Evidently, and as White argues, narrativisation is inescapable when constructing history. This means that other emplotments of the history of secular humanism are also constructions, which most certainly would have been contested. This does not imply that a post-modern plotless historiography is the desirable method for RE textbooks. However, it does imply that, in light of the equal treatment of different religions and worldviews, the narrative needs to be an object for the attention of those responsible for writing RE textbooks. More specifically, this suggests that awareness of the possible ways narrativisation plays a central part in any recounting of history is important, and this is especially the case when this history plays an important part in the identity formation of young people in an educational environment.

A comprehensive discussion of alternative emplotments of the history of secular humanism is beyond the scope of this article. However, we can provide two possible alternative strategies that we think need to be explored further. One strategy, in line with Duyndam's (2017) perspective, is identifying humanism as a *critical tradition*. This history of humanism, we suggest, could be told as part of a broader, dialogically oriented history of philosophy. By structurally separating the history

of humanism from secular humanism, humanism as a critical tradition could engage in a (critical) dialogue with both secular humanism and different religious traditions from the past and present. The internal tension in the humanistic tradition could also be more easily exposed. Another strategy, which largely follows from the first one, is placing the starting point of the history of secular humanism in the 19th century, when its history as an organised worldview saw its beginnings and the term 'humanist' was adopted as a self-identifying category for people adhering to a secular life stance. This would be more in line with the similar constructions of the history of the main world religions.

Finally, a concern for a fair and balanced representation of worldviews in RE education also calls for examination of the construction of the history of religions. Clearly, these histories are also emplotted as narratives with distinct teleologies and moral arguments, which may grant one or more religious traditions some form of privileged position. Understanding the historical identity these traditions are being given in RE textbooks is equally vital for an RE education aiming for equal treatment of different religions and worldviews. It falls outside the scope of this article, however, to examine these constructions.

Notes

1. All of the Nordic Humanist Organisations describe their humanistic worldview as 'a secular life stance' ("Nordic Humanist Manifesto 2016" 2016).
2. According to White, emplotment is only one of three forms of explanations, which are suitable to answer questions such as 'What does it all add up to?' and 'What is the point of it all?' (White 1973b, 7) The two others are 'explanation by formal argument', which provides explanations of what happens in the story by invoking principles of combination, which serve as putative laws of historical explanation (White 1973b, 11), and 'explanation by ideological implication', which focuses on the ethical elements in the particular position assumed by the historian on questions of the nature of historical knowledge and on the implication that can be drawn from past events in order to understand present ones (White 1973b, 22).
3. *Kristendom, religion, livssyn og etikk* [Christianity, religion, worldviews and ethics].
4. Charles Darwin is also frequently mentioned. However, he does not figure as a humanist; instead, he plays an important role in the capacity of his scientific contributions through his theory of evolution. The theory helps lay the ground for religious criticism and opposition to Christianity and the Church.
5. A telling example is when the potential reform of Islam is discussed in one of the textbooks, and 'many Muslims' are said to be of the opinion that 'Islam needs to be reformed in order to adapt to the modern world and humanistic ideas' (Hove et al. 2017, 226).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Espen Schjetne is associate professor in Religion and Ethics at the Faculty of Education, Østfold University College. His research interests include professional ethics, public education and cultural and religious diversity. Schjetne has previously been a primary school teacher.

Ole Henrik Borchgrevink Hansen is associate professor in Religion and Ethics at the Faculty of Education, Østfold University College. His research interests include human rights, liberalism, public education, ethics and cultural and religious diversity. Hansen has previously been a secondary school teacher.

ORCID

Ole Henrik Borchgrevink Hansen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2768-0347>

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