

# Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe



# Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe:

*Past and Present Volume II*

Edited by

Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa

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## INTRODUCTION

# Jehovah's Witnesses in Northern Europe, Great Britain and Romania

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*Gerhard Besier & Katarzyna Stokłosa*

Why does the European history of Jehovah's Witnesses, the second volume of which we here present, appear mainly as a history of persecution? It is because this religious community is perceived as a threat to "society." This is the answer offered – at differing levels and varying degrees of intensity – by the persecutors. For the most part, these opponents have been the large established churches that have formed alliances with secular authorities for the mutual preservation of power. Religious sociologist John Milton Yinger recognised this as early as 1946; a fact documented in this book by Corneliu Pintilescu.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 2,000 years, Christian reform movements have challenged these alliances and repeatedly urged a return to the biblical roots of Christianity. In an appendix to his article, Bertil Persson has charted the various forms of religious revivalism in Sweden during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He includes the Bible Students (as Jehovah's Witnesses were called prior to 1931) among the Christian revivalist movements, thus breaking a dogmatic barrier set by the established churches. Owing to their study of the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses – like many religions springing from Pietism and revivalist movements – reject certain teachings that the Christian churches have enforced as doctrine since the great councils of the early church until the present day. The Witnesses have instead followed the Christian school of thought that precedes Neoplatonism and have added ideas which they firmly maintain are revealed in the Bible, but which the established churches consider "divergent doctrine" and therefore reject as

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1. Cf. Corneliu Pintilescu, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Twentieth-Century Romania – Between Tolerance and Repression*, 219–220 (in this volume).

unscriptural. Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in the Trinity, the inherent immortality of the soul, a literal hell, purgatory or predestination. Their teachings include the millenarian vision of an eternal life for the righteous on a paradise earth and the physical resurrection of the dead. The Kingdom of God is ruled from heaven by Jesus, the messianic Son of God. As the Father of Jesus, God is the "Great Timekeeper" who knows the future and tends to human affairs.

Imitating the missionary activities of the early Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses evangelise from house to house and implicitly obey Bible commandments, all of which they identify as true. The Bible – whose symbolic and inspired content they carefully examine – has absolute priority over all other duties in life. Sometimes these "radical" features bring them into conflict with non-biblical customs and cultural mores, especially when it comes to the demands of the State on its citizens. Because they are a universalist community and stay true to the biblical principle of neutrality, their consistent refusal to fight for "their" country has caused them much suffering. In almost every nation they have been tried, convicted, tortured, imprisoned and even executed. From a psychological standpoint, this "otherness" – the marginalisation as well as self-exclusion – makes it tempting to relate legitimate stories of martyrdom, to suggest parallels to Jesus, and to draw therefrom a certain self-affirmation based on humble pride in their faith.

In painstaking doctrinal discussions, some Christian communities have agreed on specific interpretations of controversial issues in the context of the Christian message. However, in many other cases, they find it impossible to reach mutual agreement on basic Christian doctrine and to accept other religious communities as equal.

Tolerance between religious communities is in short supply – besides, the concept of tolerance can be artfully moulded to suit the interests at stake.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the rivalry between world religions, irreconcilable motives still arise when considering the potential for intolerance within Christianity. How can a Christian reform movement – driven by the need for renewal – tolerate the very convention and tradition against which it protested? By doing so, it would discredit its own concerns and its serious claim on truth, especially

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2. Most recently, cf. Hans-Martin Barth, *Religionen und Toleranz. „Wahrhaftig sein in der Liebe“ – wie macht man das? [Religions and Tolerance. "Being Truthful in Love" – How is this done?]*, in: *Kerygma und Dogma. Zeitschrift für Theologische Forschung und Kirchliche Lehre [Kerygma and Dogma. Journal of Theological Research and Church Teaching]*, 60 (2014), 153–168. See also Martha Nussbaum, *Die neue religiöse Intoleranz. Ein Ausweg aus der Politik der Angst [The New Religious Intolerance. Exiting the Politics of Fear]*, Darmstadt 2014.

since more is involved than a mere live-and-let-live concept; according to Christian understanding, the salvation of the entire human race is at stake. Mission-oriented revivalist movements must proclaim what they know is true as well as what they perceive as false on the part of the established churches. The latter have polemicized against the “false prophets” for decades, warning their members not to get caught in the clutches of dissenters for fear of losing their very souls. However as church influence waned, apologetic warnings were shifted from the religious sector to the secular. The salvation of the soul is no longer at risk due to false doctrines; today’s controversy is the conduct of new religious communities: allegedly endangering peaceful coexistence and impairing personal psychological development. The star witnesses hurling such allegations are usually disgruntled believers who have turned their backs on the new religious community.

Sweden is perhaps the only European country to have largely eliminated the privileges of its former state church and to broadly award the same degree of rights to all religious communities. Thus Sweden followed the groundbreaking developments in European religious law, which adopt a pluralistic approach and promote formal equality. As a consequence, the former state church in Sweden could no longer culturally marginalise smaller denominations nor discriminate against them in other subtle ways – even if it wished to do so. This also signalled the end of the dominant religious culture that had been accepted and practised for centuries – not due to new religious majorities, but to the victory of secularism embodied in universal human rights.<sup>3</sup> Neither the established churches nor the newer religious communities can remain indifferent to this current development, although the latter can understandably breathe easier for the time being. While the state churches in Denmark and Norway remain deeply woven into the cultural fabric of these nations due to their government-granted privileges,<sup>4</sup> theological issues and conscience matters in Sweden have largely been abrogated by secular law.

The religious remains of the late-modern era will either be revitalised in postsecular society or will gradually disappear. Should a postmodern religious romanticism dawn, then conflicts between universal human rights and the unwavering obedience to God’s biblical commandments will inevitably

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3. Cf. Rosemarie van den Breemer/José Casanova/Trygve Wyller (eds.), *Secular and Sacred? The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space* (Research in Contemporary Religion 15), Göttingen 2014; Johannes A. van der Ven/Hans-Georg Ziebertz (eds.), *Human Rights and the Impact of Religion* (Empirical Research in Religion and Human Rights 3), Leiden-Boston 2013.

4. For more on this subject, cf. “Lutheranism and the Nordic Welfare States in Comparison,” in: *Journal of Church and State*, 56/1 (2014).

occur more frequently within the Christian cultural sphere. In Sweden the key modern concepts of freedom, autonomy, tolerance, universality and human rights have resulted in legal reforms that grant state aid to all registered religious organisations, because they “uphold and strengthen the fundamental values of society (democracy and equality).”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, smaller religious communities may not wish to pursue these goals. In view of universal human rights, pastors of the Lutheran Church in Sweden must perform religious same-sex marriages despite having theological reservations. Failure to comply would result in the church losing its legal right to perform marriages.<sup>6</sup> Such dilemmas have been repeatedly highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, established religious communities and those still fighting for their establishment will be moved closer together than they would like. On the other hand, they will all come to appreciate what it means for their members to live as religious people in a democratic constitutional state where non-partisan courts can be appealed to, and a religious community can fight in these courts – under the banner of universal human rights – for official recognition as a religious group. Even when political elements join with the established churches (that hope to dominate the field) in defaming and slandering smaller religious communities in order to turn society against these “outsiders,” such agitations will ultimately have little impact on a functioning legal system – particularly at a higher level.

Such is the situation in the Nordic countries. A number of Northern and Eastern European societies are still in transition and have yet to implement the legal understanding found in the Scandinavian model. But many countries – that have been admitted into the European Community – are already moving toward the Scandinavian model, as numerous articles in this volume document.

On a separate note, this book also contains an article on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Britain and Ireland, regions that doubtless belong to Western Europe and should have been included in the first volume. The article appears in this second volume for purely technical reasons at the discretion

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5. Kjell Å Modér, „Die Mauer der Trennung“ als Thema der Kirche und des Staates in den Nordischen Ländern [“The Wall of Separation” as the Theme of Church and State in the Nordic Countries], in: RSG 14/1 (2013), 31–50; quote: 42.

6. Cf. loc. cit., 43–44.

7. Cf. Gerhard Besier, „Diktatur des Relativismus?“ Zur Individualisierung von Weltanschauungen und religiösen Überzeugungen [“Dictatorship of Relativism?” The Individualisation of Ideologies and Religious Convictions], in: Gerhard Besier (ed.), 20 Jahre neue Bundesrepublik. Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten [Twenty Years of the New Federal Republic: Continuities and Discontinuities], Berlin 2011, 125–142.



of the editors. However, those who read this volume from cover to cover may see a deeper significance: Alongside with predominantly sombre articles, such as those about Jehovah's Witnesses in Romania and the Hungarian Autonomous Region, the history of Britain bolsters confidence that times can indeed change and that freedom of religion will prevail in the end.

Gerhard Besier  
and Katarzyna Stokłosa

Stanford  
in Spring 2017

# DENMARK AND NORWAY

## **Jehovah's Witnesses in Denmark and Norway**

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*Birgitte Cosmus*

### **I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

A historical void exists today as a study of Danish and Norwegian Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>1</sup> has never been undertaken. Our focus will be to document that the Witnesses, because of their religious stand, have been oppressed by the authorities on the basis of Danish and Norwegian law due to their controversial standpoints relating to blood transfusion, house-to-house preaching, and political neutrality. Despite their religious convictions, Jehovah's Witnesses still share the same democratic rights as all other citizens. Nonetheless, this study will present source material from the early 1900s to the present day to establish that their democratic rights have been violated on numerous occasions. Moreover, this study will document that the Witnesses in some cases have chosen to place their God above the laws of the land and have thus deliberately waived some of their civil rights.

These issues will be examined on the basis of extensive source material. Jehovah's Witnesses in Denmark have in their possession a large archive that is regularly updated and have kindly granted us full access to their material. We have therefore been able to use many primary sources, but have also quoted from secondary sources in the form of reference works, such as "Den Store Danske Encyklopædi" [The Great Danish Encyclopaedia (SDE)] and similar works, to validate background information. Both older and newer works have been used, as well as newspaper articles, statements from inter-

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1. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (WTS) is the legal instrument that Jehovah's Witnesses use to publish their literature. It adopts different legal entities in different countries. For example, in Denmark, it is known as the "Vagtårnets Bibel- og Traktatselskab."

nal letters, transcripts from court decisions, etc., in order to provide a broader perspective of the discussion.

We also feature statements from life stories and memoirs. To curtail subjectivity, we quote passages relating to specific events rather than emotional expressions. Likewise, consideration has been given to the time period of the accounts. Many relate to events that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, yet were recorded and submitted to the Witnesses' branch office in 1971. Hence, we expect that the writers were still able to recall what took place with a reasonable degree of credibility.

Our approach to the various primary and secondary texts in the source material has been both source-critical and historical, that is, through a literary and comparative analysis we have analysed the textual content of the sources and collated this with the historical developments in Danish society. To accomplish this, we examined both official legislation and prevailing societal attitudes. Our approach has been a systematic, chronological examination of the archive material by subject; enhanced by relevant historical events pertaining to the Witnesses in order to better understand their motivations and the reactions of others.<sup>2</sup> This study will first focus on Denmark and then on Norway.

## II. DENMARK

### 1. Pre-World War I

#### 1.1. Church and State

To understand the religious climate in which the Bible Students operated during their humble beginnings in Denmark, we will briefly outline how the Church and State were related historically and officially.

The Church and State maintained a close relationship after the Reformation. The *Danske Lov* [Danish Code] of 1683 stated that the King was the Church's highest authority, and Denmark had a Lutheran State Church until 1849. Today, the country's religious and Church affairs are regulated by the Constitution. The main principles are found in the provision stating that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark (the People's Church) – and only this church – is to be supported by the State (Article 4),

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2. Cf. Sebastian Olden Jørgensen, *Til kilderne! Introduktion til historisk kildekritik* [To the Sources! Introduction to Historical Source Criticism], Copenhagen 2005, 28.

as well as the provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion, speech, and assembly (Articles 67, 68, 70, 77, 78). The State's support is both financial and administrative (State holidays, contributions toward clergy salaries and pensions, collection of Church tax, Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs and diocesan boards, supervision, consultant aid, etc.). This support, and the history of the Lutheran Church in Denmark, makes it a natural part of the country's culture and tradition.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2. The Religious Climate

The concept of freedom of religion that was incorporated into the Constitution of 1849 created an opening for several religious revivals that swept through Denmark in the nineteenth century. One example was Grundtvigianism: a Church faction that embraced the ideas of theologian and priest Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872). He strongly advocated both religious and political freedom and is likely the most influential figure in Danish theology. He felt that too many priests in the Danish Church did not live up to their vocation, and the solution was, according to Grundtvig, that the State Church should merely serve as a framework for the individual's faith, from which religion and morals could grow – a “personal” Christianity. He formulated his view in the phrase: “Human first, then Christian.”<sup>4</sup>

As this maxim indicates, for Grundtvig, appreciation for life was a prerequisite for being a Christian. This idea greatly influenced the open relationship between the ecclesiastical realm and everyday life that exists in Denmark. Grundtvig was also inspired by the national-romantic ideas of the nineteenth century and he incorporated elements of both Nordic and Danish history into his hymns. In this way, he combined Christianity with Danish national sentiment.

Another initiative in Grundtvig's endeavours to enlighten the individual Dane was the establishment of folk high schools. These high schools had a twofold mission: to instil love for the motherland and promote the true human way of life as Grundtvig saw it, based on a Christian outlook. These high schools have left their mark not only in Denmark, but also other countries:

“In the field of general education, the influence of Grundtvigianism reaches far beyond Danish borders; the high school form of activity according to the

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3. Cf. *Den Store Danske Encyklopædi* [The Great Danish Encyclopaedia (SDE)], *Kirkehistorie*, 466.

4. Cf. Annika Hvithamar, *Danske Verdensreligioner – Kristendom* [World Religions in Denmark – Christianity], Gyldendal 2007, 97.

Danish model has been adopted not only in Scandinavia, but also in other countries such as Switzerland, England, and America [...] and has been of fundamental importance for the spiritual and cultural life of our people.”<sup>5</sup>

Because of these ideas and initiatives, Grundtvig helped sow the seeds that allowed other Christian groups to form free congregations with their own ministers, often even within the People’s Church. Nonetheless, Grundtvigians did not fully benefit from this new religious freedom since they still kept their activity within the framework of the Church. Nonetheless, Grundtvig became a priestly answer to the lay revival movements.

The industrialisation of the nineteenth century led to other changes in Danish society including the introduction of compulsory education, which increased literacy rates; hence, more Danes were able to read the Bible and other writings. They thus started to form their own opinions on the clergy’s interpretation of these writings, and this was an important factor leading to the religious revivals of the nineteenth century. It was no longer the priestly office, but inner conviction that gave leaders their authority. Consequently, some groups left the Church while others chose to reform it. During this period of spiritual unrest, some noted inconsistencies between what the Bible taught and what the State Church practised. Furthermore, a number of people developed an interest in Bible prophecy relating to Christ’s return. The Bible Students, and those who listened to them, were caught up in this revival and so became a part of the general wave of religious revival in Denmark.

While this new religious interest was blossoming in Denmark, the country was also inundated with atheistic and evolutionary ideas that came from Britain and Germany, which led many, especially intellectuals and the working class in Denmark, to lose faith in God and develop a hostile attitude toward the Church. Among the atheists were Danish authors Johan Skjoldborg (1861–1936) and Holger Drachmann (1846–1908) who supported the socialist workers’ movement as opposed to the religious movement promoted by Grundtvig.

This divided ideological climate formed the background for the activity of the early Bible Students in Denmark. During a visit to Europe in 1891, the first president of the Watch Tower Society, Charles Taze Russell, noted the people’s openness and contemplative inquisitiveness regarding religious matters. Translations were prepared, and in March 1894 the first volume of “Millennial Dawn” along with a few pamphlets were published in Danish-

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5. Aage Bentzen/Søren Holm/Niels Hansen Søe, *Illustreret religionsleksikon [Illustrated Lexicon of Religions]*, vol. 2, Copenhagen 1950, 67; 225.



At that time, there was no centralised organisation or guidelines for meetings, evangelising, or Christian conduct, etc. It was not until 1903 that the Danish Bible Students came under the supervision of a branch office of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society that had been established in Barmen-Elberfeld, Germany. Each year, between 1909 and 1914, Denmark received an encouraging visit by either Charles Taze Russell (then president of the Watch Tower Society) or Joseph F. Rutherford (who would later succeed Russell) from the headquarters in the United States – often as part of their European tours. Because they were so few in number, the Bible Students carried on with their work largely unnoticed by the media or general population. The only source materials in Danish from this period relating to the Bible Students are the translated publications they distributed.<sup>10</sup>

The Danes who lived at the beginning of the twentieth century were not fearful of religion and were accustomed to a Christian religious climate. Increased literacy, the socialist workers' movement, intellectual groups of authors, clergymen, and others, forged the way for personal reflection and expression. It is in the wake of this development that the Bible Students enter the scene as part of a new wave of religious revival.



**FIG. 1-2** Charles Taze Russell in Denmark, 1909 (by courtesy of Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania)

10. Cf. VT Oct. 1903, 24; May 1909, 40a; May 1910, 39; Mar. 1911, 48; Aug. 1912, 128; Aug. 1913, 128; Jul. 1914, 111.



## 2. World War I

During the First World War, Denmark was able to maintain its neutrality although often conforming to German wishes. For example, the Storebælt (or Great Belt) was blocked by mines despite an international obligation to keep the passage open.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1. The Danish Bible Students and Military Service

The following will evaluate how individual Witnesses viewed participation in active warfare. In recent times, Jehovah's Witnesses have formed a clearly defined stand on military service (see section II./5.4.), however, during the First World War their position was unresolved. This is confirmed by an eyewitness account from World War I. A Danish Bible Student named Christian Bangsholt writes:

“The brothers [Bible Students] did compulsory service in the army and attended meetings dressed in uniforms.”<sup>12</sup>

In the same breath, Bangsholt mentions other issues on which the Bible Students later changed their attitude, such as hanging pictures of leading men in the religious community on their walls, playing the lottery, and accepting unchristian religious customs like Christmas and birthdays. Bangsholt's candid expressions support the accuracy of his portrait of the Bible Students, since these are matters that Jehovah's Witnesses today are not proud of and would find convenient to exclude.

The Bible Students in Denmark did not uniformly follow a clear line of action regarding military service. Some joined the army, some remained neutral. This ambiguity may have resulted as the organisation was small and lacked structure; consequently, no clear guidelines were available (see section II./2.4.). Moreover, all their publications came from the United States, a country that did not have compulsory service like Denmark. American Bible Students did not have to deal with conscription at that time, hence, it was neither discussed nor mentioned in their literature. Although remaining neutral during the First World War, Denmark's citizens were subjected to food rationing and military conscription. Nonetheless, the evangelising work of the Bible Students experienced no significant limitations.<sup>13</sup>

11. Cf. SDE (note 3), Neutralitet, reguleringspolitik og politiske konflikter, 1914–1920 [Neutrality, Regulation Politics and Political Conflicts, 1914–1920], 573.

12. Life story (LS) of Christian Bangsholt, 17 Mar. 1971.

13. Cf. Kolding Folkeblad [Kolding People's Newspaper], 24 Aug. 1914.



## 2.2. The Case of Marie Due

Some Bible Students, however, were forced to struggle against government authorities, the clergy, and the general attitude of society in order to maintain their religious conviction. One such example is a schoolteacher named Marie Due from Skagen. This intriguing case is the first conflict between the Bible Students and Danish authorities that is well documented in government records, newspaper articles, and letters.

In 1915, Marie Due joined the Bible Students and withdrew her membership from the Danish National Church. This affected her employment since she felt she could no longer teach religion in primary school. Consequently, she was dismissed at the age of 44, initially without a pension, although this

was later restored. The grounds for her dismissal were noted in a government Ministry's letter which stated that Marie Due "no longer meets the requirements that have been established for the qualifications of teachers, namely that a teacher must be a member of the National Church."<sup>14</sup> However, the same letter refers to other cases wherein the authorities had decided to keep a teacher and it states that the responsibility for such decisions rests with the local school board. If they wish to dismiss a teacher, they have the right to do so.<sup>15</sup> This tactical move by the Ministry failed to absolve it of responsibility because the Minister of Culture still had to approve the decisions taken by the local school boards and is the agency of appeal for the ordinary



**FIG. 1-3** Marie Due in 1915 (by courtesy of Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania)

14. Letter from the ministerial consultant to Marie Due, 14 Jan. 1916 (Archive of Jehovah's Witnesses in Denmark [JWArchDM]).

15. Cf. *ibid.*

citizen. Hence, various newspapers and internal publications presented the Minister of Culture as the agency that dismissed Marie Due:<sup>16</sup>

“The Ministry dismisses her on a weak basis – and even without a pension.”<sup>17</sup>

Why the Ministry attempts to evade the decision is curious given that Janus Nielsen, teacher at a State school, had posed this very question in 1912 about religious freedom of teachers and their right to stand by their personal convictions and he received an affirmative answer. Like Marie Due, Janus Nielsen left the National Church. After a year of deliberation, the authorities came to the conclusion that he could remain in the education system provided he did not teach religion or propagate his religious views among the children. As confirmed in a letter to Janus Nielsen from the then Minister of Culture, Jacob Appel, this case would set a precedent.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in the case of Marie Due, this precedent was not considered prior to her dismissal. Rather, it is the local school board that ordered the dismissal. The board’s chairman, Pastor Busch, eagerly recommended that Due resign and even encouraged her to do so.<sup>19</sup> Several sources suggest that this pastor was the leading figure in Marie Due’s dismissal. A membership magazine for teachers said:

“The dismissal seems in particular to have been staged by the evangelical Pastor Busch in Skagen.”<sup>20</sup>

A similar assumption is presented by a municipal teacher by the name of Krarup:

“Pastor Busch explained the matter to be like this: Personally, he could accept that Miss Due stay in her vocation if she would solemnly promise to keep her views to herself both in and out of school; but only on this very condition, and that had always been his position.”<sup>21</sup>

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16. Cf. Janus Nielsen, *Lærerinde Frk. Dues Afskedigelse – En mærkelig sag* [Dismissal of Teacher Miss Due – A Strange Case], in: *Folkeskolen – Medlemsblad for Danmarks Lærerforening* [Elementary School – Bulletin for Denmark’s Teachers Association], 33 (11), 16 Mar. 1916 (JWArchDM). Janus Nielsen was a primary school teacher (Candidatus theologiae magisterii [Danish master’s degree in theology]).

17. Th. Heltoft, *Frk. Dues Afskedigelse* [The Dismissal of Miss Due], in: *Aarhus Folkeskole* [Aarhus Elementary School], 6, 15 Mar. 1916, 32–33.

18. Cf. Nielsen, *Lærerinde* (note 16).

19. Cf. *ibid.*

20. Heltoft, *Frk. Dues Afskedigelse* (note 17), 32–33.

21. Kr. Krarup, in: *Folkeskolen* (note 16), 33 (20), 18 May 1916, 256. Krarup was primary school teacher.

According to Krarup, Busch could accept that Marie Due keep her job, but only on the condition that she, like Janus Nielsen, did not speak about her religion. She could easily comply with Pastor Busch's demand that she keep her views to herself "in school." She had not "been employed to teach religion in particular," and it was well-known that "Miss Due had not disputed the teachings of the National Church in school and that she was willing to promise not to do so in the future."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Marie Due had immediately transferred her religious lessons to other teachers.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, none of the school board's letters allege that she promoted her ideas at school.<sup>24</sup> However, the Pastor's demand that Marie Due should keep her views to herself "outside" school was absurd. He had neither the right, nor the authority to control the individual citizen's freedom. Hence, this was an extraneous demand that should have been disregarded.

It should be noted that being employed as a teacher at that time implied being in agreement with the National Church and its teachings, and Marie Due knew that. From this perspective, she deliberately overstepped the (unwritten) conditions of her employment, but not the laws of the country. There was "no Danish law obliging teachers in public schools to be members of the Lutheran Evangelical Church." In fact, there were other teachers who were not members of the National Church.<sup>25</sup> Yet, it was expected that those holding a public occupation act in agreement with the National Church as shown by another episode involving Charles Taze Russell. In 1913, the Danish weekly magazine "Nær og Fjern" [Near and Far] published Russell's sermons on a regular basis, but stopped after three months because Russell's views did not agree with the National Church's teachings. The Marie Due case should be examined in the context of this *Zeitgeist*, since it was customary to be a member of the National Church or to agree with its teachings. This reveals much about the fixed role of religion in Danish society.<sup>26</sup>

How could a clergyman like Pastor Busch have such great influence in this case? Was it a coincidence that he had been chosen as chairman of the school board? No. Referring to the ecclesiastical supervision of Danish schools, the study "Stat – forvaltning – samfund" [State – Administration – Society] says:

"With the new municipality law in 1867, parish councils received the responsibility for the external matters of the school system (financially) while the

22. Heltoft, Frk. Dues Afskedigelse (note 17).

23. Cf. Kr. Krarup, Frk. Dues Afskedigelse, in: *Folkeskolen* (note 16), 20 Apr. 1916, 198.

24. Cf. Nielsen, Lærerinde (note 16).

25. Cf. Nielsen, Lærerinde (note 16); Krarup, Frk. Dues Afskedigelse (note 23), 198.

26. Cf. VT Oct. 1913, 160.

school boards, chaired by a vicar, became responsible for internal matters (supervision of teachers and curriculum). It is interesting to note the school's relationship to the Church prior to 1933, and 1949, before clerical supervision was abolished. By contrast, this was done as early as 1861 in Sweden, in 1889 in Norway, and in 1866–1884 in Finland [...] Likewise, it is thought-provoking to observe that the strong connection between Church and school almost nullifies the Constitution's paragraph on religious freedom."<sup>27</sup>

The dismissal of Marie Due triggered a response from a number of townsfolk. In March 1916, a petition was signed by 512 Skagen residents who stated they did not want Marie Due dismissed. In an internal magazine for members of the Danish union of teachers, one clergyman stated:

“It has made a painful impression throughout the country that a teacher, Miss M. Due, employed in Skagen's municipal school system, has been dismissed without a pension for religious reasons.”<sup>28</sup>

Marie Due was persistent and requested that the Ministry of Education initiate a renewed investigation in order to have her pension approved. The decision was favourable and she was awarded the pension that was “denied on her dismissal.”<sup>29</sup>

### 2.3. Conclusion

The case reveals much about societal views of the time. Religion played such a large role in the education system that schools were not independent from the Church. But the fact that many individuals criticised the dismissal and questioned the religious motive indicates that personal considerations and individual rights carried greater weight than the legal powers of the Church. It evokes thoughts relating to the citizen's democratic right to freedom of belief and expression – subjects that are currently of great importance. According to Janus Nielsen, freedom of expression was particularly at stake in the Marie Due case. He comments on her right to religious independence and her subsequent dismissal, stating:

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27. Kenn Tarbensen, *Skolen, præsten og kommunen – Kampen om skolen på landet 1842–1899* [The School, the Vicar and the Municipality – The Struggle for the Rural School 1842–1899], in: *Stat – forvaltning – samfund* [State – Administration – Society], Study 5, Copenhagen 1994, 563.

28. Nielsen, *Lærerinde* (note 16).

29. Janus Nielsen, in: *Folkeskolen* (note 16), 46, 16 Nov. 1916, 584.

“Practised in this way, our praised freedom of spirit and expression becomes an empty phrase that we adorn ourselves with on festive occasions but do not enact when matters are truly at stake.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Janus Nielsen, it was the moral duty of every person, and especially those in the teaching profession, to support Marie Due’s case by all means. Not only because she is a colleague, but also because it was in everyone’s interest to safeguard the Constitutional right of religious freedom. The Marie Due case also had “great principled significance” as it concerned a public institution, the public school, and this may explain the great interest shown by the media.<sup>31</sup>

How the case unfolded may relate to how women were viewed at that time. Marie Due could have avoided all this commotion if she had simply found a new job, but she decided to fight. In 1916, it was unusual for women to take such a forceful stand, and it may have created quite a stir in the small community of Skagen where she lived. Nonetheless, it was likely to her advantage that she was single, because unmarried women had already gained a measure of legal independence by the middle of the nineteenth century in several countries; unlike married women in Denmark who became legal minors upon their marriage and could neither testify in court, nor dispose of their own wealth. In the early 1900s, women had started to enter the labour market, especially in the service trades, and the Constitution of 1915 granted women the right to vote, but *married* women’s right to work outside the home was still hotly debated into the 1930s. Many of the key issues that the Danish Women’s Association had fought and won were either toned down or attacked during the inter-war years.<sup>32</sup> Society maintained a striking polarity between the roles of men and women, and Marie Due was considered remarkably different for her day, which may explain the great stir that was created by her dismissal.

## 2.4. The War Years

The Bible Students were a relatively small group during the First World War. In 1916, there were 365 Bible Students across 14 towns and villages; in 1917, there were 388 in 16 towns and villages; and in 1918 there were 354

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30. Nielsen, Lærerinde (note 16).

31. Heltoft, Frk. Dues Afskedigelse (note 17), 32–33.

32. Cf. SDE (note 3), Dansk Kvindesamfund [Danish Women’s Association], 620 ([http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,\\_jura\\_og\\_politik/Samfund/Kvindesagen/Dansk\\_Kvindesamfund?highlight=Dansk%20kvindesamfund](http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Samfund,_jura_og_politik/Samfund/Kvindesagen/Dansk_Kvindesamfund?highlight=Dansk%20kvindesamfund) [last accessed: 8 Feb. 2013]); Nielsen, Lærerinde (note 16).

in 14 Danish towns and villages. There are no records for 1919 and by 1921 there were 538 Bible Students living in 27 towns and villages.<sup>33</sup>

What could explain the irregularity in the number of Bible Students? And why is there no record for 1919? Let us start with answering the first question. According to a number of eyewitness reports, the Bible Students felt that their message met with great interest. Turbulent times often prompt religious interest as people tend to seek meaning and hope. One eyewitness, Thyra Larsen, relates how the Bible Students could arrange conventions and freely spread their faith using the “Photo-Drama of Creation,” a motion picture and slide presentation. She noted the reaction of the public:

“It was very encouraging to be there, people were so enthusiastic and it was a great success. Yes, it was an eventful time.”<sup>34</sup>

That the Bible Students were able to meet freely suggests that the war did not overly inhibit their religious activities. Nonetheless, their growth was stymied by an internal crisis when Charles Taze Russell died on 31 October 1916. A leadership vacuum emerged, accentuated by the hopelessness of war:

“After the death of Brother Russell, we experienced hard times. Divisions began in America, and the repercussions also reached Denmark.”<sup>35</sup>

A number of members left the Bible Students the following year because of internal differences, which could account for the decrease in 1918. Despite these losses, their numbers still increased in 1917, highlighting the resilience of their remarkable growth.

Now to the second question: Why is there no record for 1919? One possible explanation could be the Spanish influenza that raged in Denmark in 1918. Early in July 1918, Denmark’s first cases were reported among army and navy personnel, followed a few days later by the first fatalities. An epidemic law was passed, requiring all cases of sickness to be reported. Victims were given the right to medical treatment and private homes were to be disinfected at public expense. Additionally, it was the first time the measure was ever taken to close schools.<sup>36</sup> These actions made it possible to register how

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33. Cf. VT May 1916, 80; May 1917, 82; Apr. 1918, 64; May 1921, 80.

34. LS Thyra Larsen, received on 19 Mar. 1971 (JWArchDM); LS Johanne Larsen, received on 19 Mar. 1971, 3 (JWArchDM).

35. Ibid.

36. Cf. Lene Otto, »Sygdommen kom som en Explosion«: Den spanske syge i Danmark 1918/1919 [“The Disease Came as an Explosion”: The Spanish Flu in Denmark 1918/1919], in: Fortid og Nutid. Tidsskrift for kulturhistorie og lokal-