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Rooms of Silence at three universities in Scandinavia

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Rooms of Silence at Three Universities in Scandinavia

In recent decades, a new type of room has been established in public institutions in Europe: the rooms of silence. In this article, rooms of silence at three Scandinavian universities are analyzed with focus on intention, materiality, and use in relation to increased religious diversity in the student population, individualization and ongoing secularization. This is done by using a typology which distinguishes between individual and collective use and use associated with religious, spiritual, and secular practices. The analyses show that plans and policies for the rooms emphasize stress-reduction and spiritual or secular reflection. The chaplains actively facilitate the shift from collective to more individual use of the rooms. The analyses also show that the restricted materiality of the rooms shapes practices in ways that either hinder collective Muslim prayer or force students to perform prayer as an individual ‘silent’ action.
INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a new type of room has been established at public universities in Northern Europe: the rooms of silence. The provision of these rooms at universities is part of a larger pattern of such rooms in a wide range of institutions: hospitals, prisons, schools, and public spaces like airports, train stations, shopping malls, and sports arenas. The ‘room of silence’ concept is part of a larger conceptual landscape, where ‘place of worship’, ‘prayer space’, ‘multi-faith room’ (Gilliat-Ray 2005:367), and other combinations of ‘multi-faith’, ‘prayer’, ‘faith’, ‘quiet’, ‘meditation’, ‘contemplation’ or ‘silence’ with spatial nouns are used interchangeably. A common characteristic of these rooms is that they are open for use by adherents of different religions and intentionally established to address diverse religious or spiritual needs (Hewson and Brand 2011:7).

Rooms of silence have been defined as rooms “in a public (institutional) space, generally accessible for anyone and set apart primarily to offer space for prayer, reflection, meditation and personal ritual” (Holsappel-Brons 2010:224-5). It is noticeable that this definition includes ‘secular’ usage of the room parallel to religious and spiritual usage. Rooms of silence are therefore open to everyone regardless of religious affiliation or the lack thereof. Research on rooms of silence (under this or other names) is part of an emerging interest in shared rooms in public institutions in Europe, whose three main points can be summarized as follows: First, shared rooms (in public institutions) are widespread and on the rise: “All Western countries have, by now, developed an extensive and varied network of so-called ‘rooms of silence’” (Post and Molendijk 2007:279). The total number is unknown, but an estimate is that there are at least 1,500 ‘multi-faith’ rooms in Britain alone, most of which have been established since the millennium (Crompton 2013:475).

Second, the shared rooms are becoming more and more inclusive. Sophie Gilliat-Ray speaks of a re-produced space in public institutions in the UK, as rooms become subject to
new interests and competing policies which entail ‘neutralizing’ and re-naming space to facilitate usage “by people of all faiths, and none” (2005:5).¹

Third, shared rooms are often associated with conflicts (Bobrowicz 2018). Sometimes these conflicts are insignificant and can be solved by minor re-decorations, but conflicts have also led to the shutdown of rooms as was the case for well-established rooms at three German universities in 2016 (Warnke 2016). The conflicts appear driven by two interrelated issues: the alleged ‘take-over’ of the rooms by Muslims and debates on whether state-run secular universities are to provide rooms of silence at all. The debates thus reflect the joining of Christianity with secularism and liberalism, which has become popular in European nationalist-populist discourse in recent decades (cf. Brubaker 2017). Brubaker uses the term ‘Christianism’ to denote this secularized type of Christianity, which is focused on cultural (civilizational) identity, rather than religious beliefs and practices. Christianism sides with secularist and liberal values and positions itself against Islam (Brubaker 2017:4).

There is a growing presence of rooms of silence in Europe, but research on the reasons behind the establishments, the constructions, and the outcomes of these rooms shows ambivalent and complex processes, and that there is still a lot we do not know about these processes (see also Cadge et al 2017). The purpose of this article is to analyze the intentions behind rooms of silence, the design and location of these rooms, and their actual use. Furthermore, we want to show how these three dimensions are negotiated in relation to increased religious diversity in the student population and to processes of individualization and secularization. This will be done by using rooms of silence at three Scandinavian

universities – Aarhus University (DK), University of Agder (NO), and University of Malmö (SE) – as the empirical examples.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SHARED SPACE

The emergence of these rooms reflects a changing religious landscape. From one perspective, some scholars regard their establishment as the result of the growth in religious diversity, where shared space is a necessity ‘from an economic standpoint’ if the need for rooms that several different religious groups have is to be accommodated (Velasco 2014:4; Matthias 2015:125). However, to be requested to share religious space is not without consequences. Physical space is not a kind of ‘blank slate’ which generates any set of practices. Indeed, sociological research on religious buildings shows how materiality interacts with social groups (Brenneman and Miller 2016:84; Price 2013; Vergara 2005: ix). Drawing on empirical evidence from religious buildings, they point out that space is a product of and producer of social relations which shape and regulate the actions as well as the meaning. From another perspective, other scholars, for example Sophie Gilliat-Ray, argue that these rooms are evidence of an important religious change:

The creation and design of shared sacred spaces in public institutions […] is a contemporary religious innovation which reflects a society that is arguably shifting away from ‘religion’ towards a form of ‘spirituality’ that is increasingly self-defined and mediated (Gilliat-Ray 2005:367, see also Matthias 2015:125).

Gilliat-Ray’s distinction between religion and spirituality is similar to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead’s argument in their work on the spiritual revolution (2005). They distinguish between ‘life as’, i.e. worldviews and practices with reference to an external authority, and ‘subjective-life’, which expresses the centrality of the authority of the individual after the
subjective turn (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:3). Life-as corresponds more or less to what we usually consider ‘religion’, while subjective life corresponds to what is often called new age or holistic spirituality. This perspective highlights the religious change being promoted through the establishment of shared rooms. Furthermore, rooms of silence, or religious materiality, are in our context situated within the confines of secular spaces. A third perspective would therefore emphasize how, under processes of secularization, sectors of society (such as universities) have been removed from the domination of religious institutions and are therefore governed according to a secular logic (Berger 1967:107).

According to traditional theories of secularization, it is to be seen as a multi-dimensional process (cf. Dobbelaere 1984). The central characteristic of societal secularization is the relocation of religion to one among a number of spheres in society. Apart from secularization at the macro level, we find secularization at the meso level (internal accommodation of religious organizations to secular norms) and at the micro level (privatization or decline of beliefs at the individual level). From these perspectives, the establishment of rooms of silence at secular institutions is difficult to understand. It will most likely be seen as secular reasoning overtaking religion, subsuming it under a secular logic. However, secularization theory has been criticized for its implied teleological line of reasoning. The privatization of religion has been challenged by, for instance, José Casanova and his theory on the deprivatization of religion (1994; 2006) as well as by Jürgen Habermas and his idea of the post-secular era (2006; 2010). In post-secular society, liberal democracies need to acknowledge religion in the public sphere in order to be societies based on equality and tolerance. The post-secular condition is inherently ambivalent, as the existence of shared spaces at otherwise secular institutions shows. They are an indication of the deprivatization of religion at both the meso and micro levels, as well as a way of supporting values of equality and tolerance. Secular public institutions like universities voluntarily, or in response to
popular demand, establish rooms for religious practices, thereby acknowledging that students may be religious individuals and acknowledging that they have a responsibility to support values of equality and tolerance. This support is, nevertheless, also characterized by ambivalence. In some current public debates, there is a clash between equality and (in)tolerance because some demands for equality are less acceptable to secular liberal democracies than others (Modood and Kastoryano 2006). This ambivalence is based on a fear of tolerating the intolerant, i.e. a fear that tolerance may facilitate processes of religious radicalization. In this way, showing openness towards religion (primarily Islam) involves the risk of supporting the kinds of religion that do not support secular liberal democracy.

Overall, space and religion call for a thorough exploration of the material dimension of social contexts. *Materiality* as a concept is more than space and its construction in discourses, politics, and legislation. It offers a lens for widening our perspective on space, taking into consideration the physical forms (architecture, artefacts, location) in which religion is embodied in everyday life. In recent years, materiality has become a central dimension in the sociology of religion (Hervieu-Léger 2002, Flanagan 2004; Knott 2005; Arweck and Keenan 2006; Chambers 2006; Collins and Guillén 2012; Davie, 2012, Cadge 2012, 2013; Brenneman and Miller 2016). The materiality of religious life has been important for the understanding of the relation between materiality and the practice of religion (Hall 1997; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008). This literature has contributed to the understanding of how materiality on the one hand shapes and restricts religious practice and on the other hand is shaped by and reflects religious practice.

Overall, we are interested in the intentions: the arguments, ideas, and aims behind the establishment of rooms of silence. Do the intentions support equality and tolerance and an effort to accommodate students with different religious or worldview paths? But places are more than ‘things in space’ or a background for events. They bring together physical, mental,
and social dimensions of reality (Lefebvre 1991:11). In this regard, we are also interested in the actions in the shared spaces. Following Pierre Bourdieu, we regard social reality as based not only on what it is said to be, but how it is practiced. The interaction between social organization and the physical space generates meaning through social practice (Bourdieu 1977:89). Consequently, in order to understand the establishment and use of rooms of silence as shared spaces in secular public institutions, we need to address the intentions behind the rooms, the materiality of the rooms, and the actual practices in the rooms.

**Rooms of Silence as Part of Shared Space**

The modern history of shared rooms usually begins with either the room established in the UN building in New York in 1957 (Duttweiler 2017) or the inauguration of a multi-faith space at Vienna Airport in 1988 (Crompton 2013:477), from which subsequent rooms are considered to emanate. We will, however, argue that it is fruitful to distinguish between three different traditions of shared rooms. One tradition finds its expression in the ‘Meditation Room’ or ‘A Room of Quiet’ in the New York UN building, which was established in ‘the service of peace’ and is ‘dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense’ (quoted in Duttweiler 2017:193). The room is clearly part of a trend involving ecumenical or ‘supra’-religious projects which attempted to transform religious expressions by integrating insights from Eastern spirituality (Matthias 2015:145; Post and Molendijk 2007:279).

Another tradition of shared rooms, connected to migration-induced changes to religious landscapes, speaks of the co-existence of faith traditions, employing terms like multi-faith, the most used term in the UK and Australia, or interfaith, the most used term in the U.S. (in particular in relation to Protestant bilateral encounters with other religions) (Halafoff 2013:1). In Europe, multi-faith initiatives are relatively new, gaining popularity from the late 1980s (Crompton 2013:477), and have come to play a particularly prominent
role in the UK, where a multi-faith paradigm became the basis of government policies of engaging in civil society partnerships from the late 1990s (Dinham 2012).

A third, and less known, tradition of rooms evolved in the Netherlands from the 1970s where rooms were constructed in shopping malls, city centers, and airports on the initiative of Protestant churches (Holsappel-Brons 2010:224). Even if more research is needed, “this type of ritual space seems to have developed from the traditional (devotional) chapel” (Post and Molendijk 2007:279) as a Protestant theological reaction to secularization. Catering to secular people, the rooms were to be used for various purposes from commemoration to stress-reduction. Holsappel-Brons interprets these rooms as representing the “changing position of traditional religion in the Netherlands” (2010:224), but the impact of secularized Protestant theology on the establishment of shared rooms seems to cover a large part of the North European landscape including Germany and Scandinavia, where shared rooms often carry names like rooms of silence, reflection or contemplation, while the concepts of multi-faith or inter-faith are also used occasionally (Matthias 2015). This illustrates that while it is possible to distinguish between these three traditions historically and analytically, in reality they have merged.

In the service of ‘conceptual hygiene’ (cf. Beckford 2003:79) and analytical vitality, we present a typology of shared rooms which will be used as the basis for an analysis of rooms, together with the three dimensions of intention, materiality, and practice. The first axis of the typology involves a distinction between individual and collective aspects: is the room intended for individual or collective use (intention), is it decorated to support individual or collective use (materiality), and is it in fact used by individuals or groups (practice)? In all three cases, the response can obviously be both. The distinction between individual and collective practice is important because universities in Scandinavia are public institutions,
and the position of rooms of silence between individual and collective use tells us something about how the state conceptualizes religion.

The second axis involves a distinction between religious, spiritual, and secular practices. In an article about religion and spirituality on American college and university campuses, Victor Kazanjian avoids a distinction between religion and spirituality, and simply speaks of spirituality and spiritual practice, which he defines as encompassing those “humanistic, religious, and spiritual beliefs and practices through which persons seek to find meaning and purpose as they deepen their understanding of self, other, and world. In this definition of spirituality, humanistic beliefs include those who identify as agnostic, atheist, and secular.” (2013:99). This usage, however, ignores what has been called “the current success of the notion of ‘spirituality’ as a newly emergent practice which opposes both ‘secularity’ and ‘religion’” (Becci, Burchardt and Giorda 2017:75). We agree that at least in a European context, it is crucial to make such distinctions.

We will treat the two axes as analytically separate. We will follow Heelas’ and Woodhead’s distinctions between religion and spirituality and will, similar to Nancy Ammerman’s rejection of a “misleading effort to draw lines between individual and communal...” (2013:289) when discussing spirituality, emphasize that subjective-life spirituality does not necessarily erase collective practices. The individualization associated with subjective-life spirituality may worship the individual, but it does not exclude collective worship. Our position will furthermore be that even if religious, spiritual, and secular worldviews are intertwined empirically, analytic distinctions are useful; a central analytical focus will be how different intentions, materialities, and practices may co-exist and create ambivalences and potential conflicts.

On the basis of these two axes, we will in the following distinguish between six ideal types of shared spaces, depending on the extent to which the focus is on religious, spiritual,
or secular practice and whether the focus is on individual or collective practice. By using this typology, we can qualify the three dimensions we are addressing: intention, materiality, and use. The term ‘room of silence’, which is the name carried by all three rooms we analyze, will be treated as what Roger Brubaker terms a category “of (social, political or religious) practice” (Brubaker 2013:2), which is a term used in daily life. The terms prayer room, contemplation room, room of reflection, multi-faith room, meditation room, and recreational lounge will (even if they could also be considered categories of practice) solely function as ‘categories of analysis’ (cf. Brubaker), expressing aspects of the typology we will use for our analysis. This is done on the assumption that even if terms are often used interchangeably, they have different connotations: terms like chapel or prayer room carry Christian connotations of space (even if also used by other religions), while some of the other terms may emphasize a neutral place as a deliberate reaction ‘to perceived religious bias’ (Hewson and Brand 2011:8). The terms will help us to distinguish analytically between different types of shared rooms which are empirically intertwined.

Table 1: A Typology of Shared Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Prayer room</td>
<td>Contemplation room</td>
<td>Room of reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective</strong></td>
<td>Multi-faith room</td>
<td>Meditation room</td>
<td>Recreational lounge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examining the intentions behind the rooms, we analyze what kind of reasoning the universities or other administering organizations use to legitimize the rooms: Have they been established because individuals and groups from different religions need a space for religious practices in their everyday lives? What rules and regulations govern the use of these rooms?
Do the intentions of the rooms emphasize the inclusion of all religions – or of anyone regardless of religion?

The second dimension is the materiality of the rooms. Do colors, styles, and material objects in the rooms confirm and reproduce the intentions behind the rooms? According to an examination of pictures of rooms of silence, Martin Radermacher argues that “the architectural equivalent to an ideology of “neutral” spiritual space seems to lie in a reduction of stimuli” (2016:315). Rooms designed for multi-faith purposes may contain different objects that can be easily removed, but the architecture and decoration may still frame the room in such a way as to prioritize certain users depending on how the materiality supports or discourages certain practices.

The third dimension refers to the actual use of the rooms and may be more or less independent of the intentions and materialities of the rooms. The rooms are in themselves ‘empty’ and without meaning, and according to Crompton, shared spaces tend to be taken over by those who use them most frequently and become ‘de-facto mosques, chapels or new-age spaces’ when they are not managed (Crompton 2013:480). We will examine if the practices in the rooms can be regarded as religious, spiritual, or secular. We also want to see if the rooms are used by individuals or groups and if this use is organized or not.

**METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

There are eight universities in Denmark, seven in Norway, and 17 in Sweden. The choice of the three universities in question is to a certain degree a matter of convenience. The researchers are all employed at one of these universities. Despite the convenience, the universities and the rooms of silence are comparable on several accounts. None of them are located in the capital area, which is often more diverse than other areas. They all include schools of natural, social, and health sciences as well as the humanities, ensuring a similar student diversity across the universities, which would not have been the case had one of the
chosen universities been a technical university. The universities are, however, not of similar size. Aarhus University (DK) has 35,000 students, University of Agder (NO) has 12,000 students, and Malmö University (SE) has 24,000 students.

The empirical material for the study has been compiled by the authors of this article and students in preparation for their Bachelor’s and Master’s theses. Throughout the 2016 fall semester, the students participated in events and devotion sessions. Furthermore, they visited and observed the use of the rooms at different times during the day and on different days during the week. Fall is a period with only few Christian holidays, and fall 2016 did not include any major Muslim holidays, which means that the observations are not biased due to holidays.

In addition to the student observations, all authors have visited the rooms at their universities during spring and autumn 2017 and for some also during spring 2018 to document and collect data on the design and decorations of the rooms. Due to ethical considerations, we have not studied actual individual practices inside the rooms. The data consist of existing material, such as policy documents at national and university levels, university newspapers, minutes from relevant meetings, flyers, posters, and digital documents, such as webpages and Facebook pages. Additionally, part of the material has been constructed for this specific study: interviews with chaplains and observations of the rooms with descriptions of the interior design and decorations. The interviews focused on the chaplains’ knowledge of the history of the rooms, the choices behind the decorations of the rooms, and their knowledge of the use of the rooms.

**SHARED SPACE AT SCANDINAVIAN UNIVERSITIES**

The three universities are, as most universities in Scandinavia, state-funded and free for students to attend. As state-funded institutions, they must comply with the overall values of
the Scandinavian welfare states. Even though the universities are secular with no formal ties to any religious organization, religious student organizations (mostly Christian) are present and their activities are visible on the campuses in the same way as other student activities. At many Scandinavian universities, ministers from the national Lutheran Churches, to which a majority of the populations belong, work as university or student chaplains. Some chaplaincies and most rooms of silence have been established since the turn of the millennium.

Of the eight universities in Denmark, six have shared spaces. There are no general regulations governing rooms intended for religious practice, and the faculty boards and university administrations decide if this type of room is to be established. Indeed, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science would not be aware of the number or functions of these rooms in the tertiary education sector if it were not for the proposal to ban religious rooms at educational institutions in 2016 (Uddannelses- og Forskningsudvalget 2016). The University of Copenhagen has nine rooms, and in total there are 14 shared spaces at Danish universities. A number of names are used: room of reflection (‘fordybelsesrum’), room of silence (‘stillerum’), prayer/worship room (‘bederum’), and room of retreat (‘retræterum’). The room at Aarhus University is, however, different from the rooms at the other Danish universities. Its history dates back to 1960, when students successfully raised funds for a chapel, although it was rejected by the university administration with the argument that religion and university are incompatible. However, from 1965 the student congregation was allowed to use a meeting room for noonday service (‘tolvsang’) on a regular basis, and from 1991 the congregation had a permanent chapel. The chaplain at Aarhus University applied to change the room from a chapel into a room of silence in 2001, mirroring the development at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences at the University of Copenhagen where a ‘multi-religious’ room had been created earlier that year (Christiansen et al. 2005:52). Despite being
renamed as a room of silence, the noonday service remained a major part of its usage, and the
decor made it a mainly Christian room (Danckert and Larsen 2009:24). The noonday service
continued until 2001, when the university decided to use the period of the day from 12 noon
to 1 pm for teaching (Campus #5 2005:9), and a morning prayer replaced the noonday
service. The noonday service was revitalized in 2008 but was discontinued after about five
years, and during the same period the room was transformed from a very Christian room into
a ‘neutral’ room

There are rooms of silence in all seven Norwegian universities and in most of the
university colleges. Most of them are called ‘room of silence’, but other names are also used,
such as prayer room (‘bønnerom’), room for faith and contemplation (‘rom for tro og tanke’),
and room for religious and worldview practice (‘rom for tro- og livssynspraksis’). The
University of Oslo, Oslo Metropolitan University, and The Arctic University of Norway
differ from other universities and colleges as they have dedicated a room for Muslim prayer
(‘Mosalla’). In addition to the ‘Mosalla’, the University of Oslo has a chapel and a room for
other religious groups than Muslims and Christians. The general rule for the universities is
that the university chaplains are in charge of the rooms and are responsible for the decor. At
the University of Agder, rooms of silence are found at the Kristiansand and Grimstad
campuses. When the University of Agder was being planned, a committee was tasked with
organizing religious and worldview activities for the upcoming university. The committee’s
objective was to equip the university with two different rooms: a room of silence and a
chapel. The establishment of a chapel is, however, no longer an issue.

Sweden has 17 universities and all of them currently have or used to have rooms of
silence. The terms used for these rooms also vary in Sweden from room of silence (‘stilla
rum’), prayer room, spiritual room, room for meditation, and devotion room (‘andaktsrum’)
to recreation room (‘vilorum’), and they are located in various places at the universities, such
as in libraries, healthcare centers, entrance halls, basements, or at student-union locations. Initiatives for establishing the rooms also vary, and are proposed by ministers belonging to the Church of Sweden, student unions, or university staff responsible for equality and diversity. There seems to be no general policy at the universities on how to govern the rooms of silence. Malmö University has three rooms of silence. The oldest one, which is also the one in focus in this study, was established in 2005 when the building for the Faculty of Education was constructed, and it was placed in the library on the fifth and top floor. The other rooms of silence were established at the Faculty of Technology and Society (2011) and the Faculty of Odontology (2016), respectively.

The Intentions Behind the Rooms of Silence
There are no national rules regarding the establishment of shared spaces in Denmark. In fact, the most Islam-critical party in the Parliament, the Danish People’s Party, has made several law proposals to ban prayer rooms in the entire education system of Denmark (primary, secondary, and tertiary schools – in January 2017 (B54), in May 2017 (B152), and again in January 2018 (B57) – as prayer rooms allegedly cater only to Muslims, establish ‘social control’, and further the establishment of ‘parallel societies’.

At the local level, Aarhus University (DK) has no actual policy for shared rooms. The room is located in the Student House, which is an organization closely associated with the university, but not formally part of it, and its relation with the university is therefore ambiguous. The room is administered by the university chaplains who have their office next to the room. The Church of Denmark employs them, and the chaplain webpage is not hosted by the university (whose domain is .au.dk). Nevertheless, the webpage uses an URL that signals an affiliation to the university (www.studenterpraest-au.dk). On the other hand, the chaplains’ emails are university emails: ‘[name of chaplain]@au.dk’. There may be historical reasons for these ambiguities, but when seen in connection with the lack of an actual policy,
they signal a less than whole-hearted embrace of religion at the university. From the
information leaflet, we can identify the kind of religion that is welcome in the room of
silence. The leaflet, which is a small version of the poster on the door to the room, describes
the room as a place where ‘you do not need to perform and deliver… you are always
welcome to use the room, as long as you respect the silence of others. The room is open
during the day and evening, and is open for all regardless of religious belonging’.

In April 2017, the Danish Government asked all educational institutions to report to
the Minister of Education how many prayer rooms they have. Aarhus University reported that
they did not have a prayer room, but that they had been informed that student chaplains had a
room of silence. Not only did the university distance itself from religion and prayer, but also
from the student chaplains and the room of silence. As a response to the many answers to the
Minister of Education, the Danish People’s Party acknowledged that there are not a lot of
prayer rooms at Danish universities (or primary and secondary schools), but in order to keep
it that way, they wanted to ban the establishment of prayer rooms and thereby avoid social
control. “Religion is exclusively a relation between the individual and his or her god” (B152
May 2017).

In Norway, there is a long history of religion at the universities and especially at the
University of Agder (NO), as it is located in a region with a strong Christian identity and
many active members in Christian organizations. The history of the rooms of silence at the
University of Agder (NO) exemplifies how rooms of silence at other universities have
developed: A chapel was established and a minister from the Church of Norway was
employed to support the students’ religious life at the time the University of Agder (NO) was
a university college. When it became a full university in 2007, as did many other university
colleges, the administration saw the need for an interreligious room which could meet the
needs of a growing group of students who belonged to other religions than Christianity. In
order not to give religious students exclusive facilities, the university board found it important to define these spaces not only as interreligious rooms but also as rooms for silence, relaxation, and thinking without reference to religion. The ideas behind the rooms are mirrored in the government white paper on religion and tolerance (NOU 2013), according to which colleges and universities have an obligation to facilitate student beliefs, for instance through access to prayer rooms or rooms of silence. The paper points out that the latter must be neutrally designed (NOU 2013:181). At the University of Agder (NO), the student chaplain is in charge of the room, and he organizes the different religious activities in the room as part of his role as a resource person for questions related to religion at the university (Sætane 2016). On the university webpage, the student chaplain writes:

Sometimes we need a different kind of room. A haven from stress. A refuge from demands and expectations. A room of rest, prayer, meditation and reflection. You can find such a room at the Gimlemoen [Kristiansand] campus and the Grimstad campus. This room is not consecrated. We use it in the spirit of mutual respect – regardless of faith or worldview. The room of silence is, so to speak, always open (https://www.uia.no/student/-ressurscenteret/studentpresten).

The chaplain, the student parliament, the student welfare organization, and religious student organizations (Muslim and Christian) express some dissatisfaction with the current situation of the two rooms at the Kristiansand (NO) and Grimstad (NO) campuses. They want to rename them ‘rooms for belief and reflection’, which, according to them, signals that silence is not required and that conversations and organized group activities are welcome. Nor are they satisfied with the size of the rooms or the location at campus Kristiansand. They would like to have a larger and more central room for meetings and interreligious dialog. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that it is too difficult to find information about the room when searching for a room of silence on the university website.
Sweden has no general rules stating that the universities need to have shared spaces. However, the Student Social Welfare and Study Environment Act could be interpreted to support demands for shared spaces, such as rooms of silence. The Higher Education Act states that ‘higher education institutions shall also be responsible for other [than healthcare] student welfare activities to support students in their studies’ (The Higher Education Act 1993:100). Initially, there where provisional rooms in the basement of various university buildings at Malmö University (SE), but the students and the university chaplains were not especially pleased with this solution (Kosovac 2016). When the building for the Faculty of Education was constructed in 2005, a room of silence was included in the plans, and the reason given for constructing a room of silence was that Christian students at the university had asked the student union to make such as room available to them. However, the exact story behind the establishment of the room is not clear, and the university chaplain and a Christian student group probably also played a role in its establishment (Kosovac 2016). The room was inaugurated in March 2006, and the university chaplains were responsible for the ceremony. Subsequently, in 2010, the vice-chancellor, the head of administration, and the chairperson of the student union wrote a policy document about the rooms of silence (Kosovac 2016:28ff). The document begins with a reference to the room of silence at the UN and argues that such a room is relevant for all, as the need for calm is universal. In the policy, it is also stated that the room is open for ‘individual devotion, prayer and contemplation for students and staff only’, and it is ‘open to anyone regardless of religion, sex or sexual orientation’. However, it cannot be used by groups unless a chaplain arranges the meeting. Furthermore, the room should be non-confessional, and the interior decor cannot have a religious motif – with the exception of ‘marking the direction to Mecca’. The use of religious accessories is permitted if they can be put away after use (Policy för stilla rum på Malmö högskola, 2010). The policy in Malmö (SE) thus supports the idea of a contemplative room,
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stressing both the spiritual need for silence and restrictions against collective meetings. In 2011, a second room of silence was established at the Faculty of Technology and Society initiated by Alhambra, the Muslim student association, which argued that many of the students at the faculty were Muslims and that they needed a room of silence in closer proximity to their location.

The Materiality of the Rooms of Silence

Even if the intention of the rooms of silence at the universities indicates what the rooms should be, this intention is not always reflected by the materiality of the rooms. All three rooms have distinct architecture and interior decor distinguishing them from an ordinary classroom, auditorium, study room, office, or other rooms at the universities. The room of silence at Aarhus University (DK) does not contain permanent religious artefacts, but has non-figurative art objects made of white plaster on the walls, and several birch branches decorate two corners of the room. When entering the room, you will see seven wooden chairs with leather seats, as well as a big square stone container full of sand. Next to the stone container there is a Tibetan singing bowl, several packs of incense sticks, and matches that litter the floor. There is a small bookcase, and in one of the corners is a large poster advertising daily morning meditation. The furniture arrangement and the strong smell in the room signal that the room has a particular purpose. Ordinary chairs and mediation chairs are placed in a circle, the singing bowl, the stone container, the incense sticks, and the strong smell of incense give off a strong ‘non-Protestant vibe’. The religious literature on the bookshelf is, however, strictly Christian literature and hymn books, signaling that the religious practices taking place in the room are ‘Christian’ mixed with ‘spirituality’. Muslim prayer is hard to accommodate to the room as there are no washing facilities, no sign directing people to remove their shoes, and the stone container makes it difficult to place prayer mats on the floor.
The changes in the religious landscape in the Scandinavian countries are also reflected at the University of Agder (NO) campus. Although clearly inspired by a Christian tradition, explicit references to this tradition in the room are missing. The room of silence is artfully decorated with a modern altar-like table and candles, installations, and non-figurative art on the walls, all in matching colors – white, metal-grey, and blue. In front of the room, there is an altar-like table, there are chairs in rows and pillows stacked in a corner. Even though the position of Christian tradition appears to hinder the inclusion of other religious and worldview practices, the simplicity of the room’s decor and the empty space seem more akin to a modernist church room than a multi-faith room. The way the furniture is arranged, the artistic work, the decorations with candlesticks, and the placement of the altar all connote a room for Christian worship. The non-figurative works of art and the absence of dominant Christian symbols is more reminiscent of a funeral chapel. There are no cupboards or other facilities for storing religious symbols or ritual objects for any kind of religious practice in the room.

The room of silence in Malmö (SE) is a thirty-square-meter room in the middle of the university library. The walls consist of large window panes with the lower and middle parts half frosted. Only a few religious symbols and traditions are discernible from the architecture and the interior design of the room. On two of the walls there are texts stating that this is a room of silence. The room has three cupboards, one in the middle of the room, which also functions as a room divider, and two small cupboards in the left and right corners seen when entering the room. In front of the cupboard in the middle of the room, there is a shoe shelf (there is also a sign asking people to take off their shoes), and behind it there is an open area with a large red round soft carpet on the floor. Under the carpet, a green arrow is taped to the floor showing the direction to Mecca. On the front wall, there is a small altar with three small bowls, two with sand to put candles in. In the right corner, there is a concrete and glass
decoration that might be seen to represent a tree, and there is a small bench to sit on in front of the large cupboard. There are no chairs in the room, but the cupboard contains 12 pillows that can be used to sit on.

The interior of the room takes the religious diversity of Swedish society into account. First, it welcomes Christians through the altar-like installation. Second, the three bowls of sand give associations to incense burning practices in Asian religions or candle lighting in Christian churches. Third, the invitation to remove one’s shoes in respect for prayer traditions welcomes Muslim practices, although the lack of washing facilities indicates that the room is not fully adapted to such practices. Additionally, the carpet on the floor makes it difficult to place prayer mats but also to arrange chairs for Christian prayer.

The organized collective activities that these rooms were not intended for – i.e. the chaplains’ services and prayers in Aarhus (DK) and Agder (NO), the chaplains’ mindfulness meditation in Aarhus (DK), and the Christian group’s meetings in Agder (NO) – have impacted the materiality of the rooms. The organized Muslim and Buddhist activities are not visible in the design of the room in Kristiansand (NO), while the mindfulness activities in Aarhus (DK) and the Christian activities in Agder (NO) appear to have a privileged position in the design of the rooms. The decor, objects, and arrangements reflect the ritual actions taking place in the room, signaling that the material needs required to perform such actions have been met. The decor, objects, and arrangements reflect the ritual actions taking place in the room, signaling that the material needs required to perform such actions have been met. The chaplains – or Christian groups with institutionalized rituals – have the power to decide what objects can be placed in the rooms. Through their choice of chairs, footstools, lighting facilities, equipment, the altar-like table, and the literature on the shelf or in the cupboard and the arrangements of them they shape the visual impression of the room. On the shelf in the rooms in Aarhus (DK) and Agder (NO), we find candles as well as Christian literature and
songbooks which could serve Christian groups and activities. In Aarhus (DK), apart from books, there are candles and a single yoga mat. The cupboard in Agder (NO) keeps Buddhist prayer beads and a music ball with a matching wooden stick. The cupboard also contains hijabs, prayer mats, and a compass. However, the religions where these objects are used in ritual actions are not expressed in the design of the rooms.

The most direct presentation of secularities is found in the artistic work in the rooms. The art objects do not have any associations with religious symbols or religious traditions. The white non-figurative plaster and the birch-branch installation in Aarhus (DK), the non-figurative image in Agder (NO), and the tree in Malmö (SE) do not clash with the image ban in Judaism or Islam.

What we can see here is that even if the intentions of and the policies that apply to the rooms consist of ideas about the function of the rooms, the architecture, the furnishing, and the interior decor of the rooms in many ways militate against this. The question is how the use of the rooms will be influenced by the plans and ideas for the rooms, as well as by the actual materiality of the rooms.

The Actual Use of the Rooms of Silence
Intention as well as materiality set a framework for the uses of the rooms. Taking materiality as a production of relations as well as a product of relations, the actual use generates meaning. While formal regulations set by the universities or the chaplains are important, students who use the rooms are not forced to adapt their practices to the space. They can potentially come to a compromise in a re-choreography of bodies and objects.

Observations of the three rooms show large differences in how they are used. The rooms in Aarhus (DK) and Agder (NO) seem to be little used, and even if several weekly events are arranged, few people attend them. In Aarhus (DK), attempts at establishing a noonday service (‘tolvsang’) in the room has been unsuccessful due to poor attendance. In
Agder (NO), the chaplain performs a Christian service every week with about ten attendees; the Christian association (Norges Kristelige Student- og Skoleungdomslag) has a meeting every Thursday, which brings ten to fifteen students together; the Muslim student community has prayer sessions twice a day with two to ten male students attending\(^2\), and the Buddhist group Snow Crystal Sangha has mindfulness meditation every Tuesday evening with about five attendees (some university staff, some from outside the university). One professor at the university also uses the room daily for mindfulness meditation. The room is, however, seldom used for other individual practices.

In the room at Malmö University (SE), group meetings are only allowed if the chaplain permits it. Individual use is quite frequent, with an average of about five people per hour, probably mainly for Muslim prayer.\(^3\) After several complaints, the university chaplains have started using the local church for collective meetings, which emphasizes the individual and silent use of the room (Kosovac 2016:36). Overall, this means that even if policies allow for group meetings and times for these meetings are allocated, it is the actual (non-)practices in the rooms that make them what they are: an empty space with no actual meaning in Aarhus (DK), a sequentially (not simultaneously) multi-religious room (Crompton 2013, see also Cadge 2013) in Agder (NO), and an individual Muslim prayer room in Malmö (SE).

The rooms are supposed to be open for different religious practices, which is how they are used. They cannot, however, be seen to have a multi-religious use in the sense that they are used simultaneously by different religious traditions, which is the intention behind a future room in Agder (NO) and the room in Malmö (SE) at the inauguration of it. Despite the

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\(^2\) The female student chose to pray at home or in a group room at the university (Husveg 2017).

\(^3\) Over four days, and a total of 16 hours of observations, we noted 89 persons entering the room. During the observation on 18 May, 2017, all of the women entering the room were Muslims wearing a hijab, and those during another observation who were asked why they had been in the room all said that they been there for Muslim prayer (Kosovac 2016:36).
stated intentions, the use of the rooms appears mainly to represent ‘traditional’ religious practices, except for Aarhus (DK), where the practices initiated by the Lutheran chaplain (for instance heartbeat meditation) represent spiritual practices. In Malmö (SE) and Agder (NO), the prominence of Muslim practice is evident, even if the intentions of the room both in terms of policies and materiality did not manifestly imply this.

ROOMS OF SILENCE: COMPLEXITY AND AMBIVALENCE
The concept of a room of silence has been present in the Scandinavian countries since the turn of the millennium, but it is not a well-established concept in any of the countries. While only directly challenged at the University of Agder (NO), the unsettled nature of the name is clear from the variety of names used by the universities in the three countries. However, the results from our study also show marked differences between rooms that carry the same name: differences in intentions, materiality, and usage.

First, the rooms of silence are established with an intention, but only in relation to the room established at the University of Agder (NO), this intention is clearly anchored in national political documents recommending universities to facilitate student belief. At all three universities, the process of establishing the room is clearly connected to the university chaplain, and the intention of the room is described on the website or on posters by the entrance to the room as a ‘haven from stress’, ‘a refuge from demands and expectations’ (Agder, NO), a room to fill the ‘spiritual need for silence’ (Malmö SE), or as a place providing a ‘breather where mind and body can enjoy silence’ (Aarhus DK). This clearly connects the rooms to what student life is and produces a normative understanding of what religion can contribute in relation to the stressful effects of competition and performance among students at the universities. The rooms appear to cater for what Cadge has termed spiritual secularism, i.e. “a broad meaning-making rather than something explicitly connected to religious traditions” (Cadge 2012:200). Employing the definitions from Table 1,
the intention of the rooms appears to be closest to the secular column as rooms of reflection and recreation or perhaps meditation and contemplation.

Second, while all three universities have named the rooms – which look broadly similar – rooms of silence, there are differences in the materiality of the rooms: No Muslim objects in Aarhus (DK), no carpet in Agder (NO), and no chairs in Malmö (SE). However, since objects (religious books, singing bowls, hijabs, arrows, compasses) are stored in cupboards and chairs are stackable, these differences appear less significant at first sight. Still the hidden objects indicate that the rooms are not just neutral. The hidden religious objects reflect ambivalence towards religious diversity and perhaps a sense of anxiety towards Islam. Ambivalence and anxiety are also evident in the design. The rooms do not initially provide the space and facilities for collective Muslim prayer. Muslim students in Agder (NO) and Malmö (SE), who are the most active users of the rooms, can only use the limited materiality the rooms provide. Rearranging the rooms with prayer mats gives them a direction. Practices are also shaped by the materiality. There are no curtains in either of the rooms, which could facilitate gender separation. In Agder (NO), both genders only use the room if they are alone or in the company of others of the same gender. This illustrates how users shape materiality at the same time as adapting their practices to the materiality of the room.

The materiality of the rooms is thus ambiguous: they appear neutral on the surface, religious entities are hidden in the cupboard, and there are no traces of diverse religious practices when the users are gone. From the materiality (employing the definitions from Table 1), the room in Aarhus (DK) appears to be a contemplation or meditation room, while the rooms in Agder (NO) are closer to prayer rooms, mostly for Christians (due to the altar), but also for Muslims (due to the artefacts), whereas the materiality of the room in Malmö (SE) is the most ‘secular’, poorly adapted to both church services and Muslim prayer, which brings it closer to the secular alternatives of rooms of reflection or recreational lounges.
Nevertheless, the request to remove your shoes, the few religious objects in the cupboard, the direction pointer to Mecca under the rug, and the small altar-like installation point to a possible religious use of the room.

Third, in all three countries the rooms are used for different purposes. They are all open to individuals during the day, and there are also collective activities to varying degrees. In Aarhus (DK), the room is primarily used for collective spiritual activities led by the chaplain, and in Agder (NO), the rooms are used by Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist groups. Collective religious practices are viewed with some suspicion in all three countries. In Malmö (SE), the policy states that this can only be done with permission from the chaplain; there are strict requirements of silence in Aarhus (DK), and arrangements must be made with the chaplain if the intention is to use the room for collective worship in Agder (NO). These restrictions mean that Christian and Muslim student organizations in Aarhus (DK) and Malmö (SE) meet elsewhere. The suspicion owes to the fact that a variety of actors with a variety of needs and agendas want to influence the shape, and decor of religious spaces, and conflicts may arise over how such a space can be used and interpreted (Brenneman and Miller 2016:88-89). Furthermore, also owes to the fear of tolerating the intolerant (Modood and Kastoryano 2006). Emphasis is therefore placed on what may be called individual practices or rituals. In Malmö (SE), the majority of the individual users appear to be Muslims, while in Aarhus (DK), despite the presence of a good number of Muslim students and the existence of a Muslim student organization at the university, few if any Muslims find their way to the room of silence. The reason that Agder (NO) and Malmö (SE) succeed in attracting Muslim students is that even if they lack distinct permanent Muslim symbols, the presence of ritual objects for prayer sends a discrete signal that Muslims are included. However, only individual Muslim prayer is encouraged, and the rooms do not have the facilities to create gender-separated spaces. One may ask if this, in the long run, impedes
collective aspects of Muslim practice also in other places. This normative understanding of how religion functions best in a plural society is contingent on religion as an individual matter; practiced individually and independently.

While the three dimensions are analytically distinct, they actually mix. This is clear when investigating the location of the rooms. Indicating how universities regard religion, but also framing the materiality of the room, the location will obviously confine or enable its usage. The room of silence in Aarhus (DK), for instance, is located in the middle of a long corridor next to the chaplain’s office, and close to the office for legal counselling for students, the university student council, and the university sports office. There are no lecture rooms in the building, so the students do not coincidentally come across the room when going from one place to another. In Agder (NO), the room of silence at the Kristiansand (NO) campus is located on the second floor above the student cafeteria in a corridor with several group rooms and some classrooms. The student cafeteria is the heart of the university and where the students spend most of their time both studying and in between classes. The room of silence is not centrally located, but it is not hidden away either. However, one has to know where the room is as there are no signs directing people to it. In Malmö (SE), where the room has a central location in the university library, there are no signs directing people to the room. The lack of directions and the locations of the rooms at the three universities thus fit Cadge and Konieczny’s apt description of shared rooms in American hospitals as religion ‘hidden in plain sight’ (Cadge and Konieczny 2014).

In conclusion, it is clear that all three rooms provide different images of a room of silence, depending on whether we look at the intention, materiality, or practice. With reference to Table 1, the rooms may be called contemplation rooms catering for secular individuals if we focus on the intentions, and to a certain degree prayer rooms (Malmö (SE) and Agder (NO)), multi-faith room (Agder (NO)), and meditation room (Aarhus (DK)) if
focus is on materiality and use. In this way, all three rooms are ambivalent rooms. The ambivalence may come from the mixed, reflective, Protestant, and multi-faith heritage of the idea of a room of silence, which has not been realized and addressed. But it may also be due to contradictions between supply and consumer demand, as the inclusiveness of all faiths and worldviews, which is paramount for the intentions of the rooms, sits uneasily with the reluctance to tolerate forms of worship that are collective or loud or will not for these or other reasons be accepted by the Lutheran chaplain who oversees the rooms. While these three rooms are not particularly conflict-ridden, it is not hard to imagine that tensions could arise due to the ambiguities. As Saba Mahmood notices with reference to post-colonial Egypt, but with the intention to speak more generally, the promise of a modern liberal state of inclusion and equality, and of universal access and rights for everyone is more likely to bring conflict than harmonious coexistence. As the modern liberal state breaks up traditional relations and hierarchies in order to create “a body politic in which all its members are equal before the law” (Mahmood 2015:2), existing inequalities are transformed and often intensified when these promises are not fulfilled. The rooms of silence may provide good examples of exactly this mechanism. While emphasizing their availability for all students and not providing, for instance, space for Muslim prayer or access to washing facilities, the rooms of silence come to reflect and support the practices and priorities of the majority Lutheran churches.

The majority churches in the three Scandinavian societies are Lutheran, and historically they have had a very strong relationship with the state. The Lutheran chaplains are responsible for the rooms’ decor, but they do not ‘own’ the rooms. Their function is closer to that of a custodian, taking care of the rooms on behalf of the student population. The chaplains have been active in transforming the rooms from Christian spaces to multi-religious, spiritual, or even non-religious spaces. In the U.S., it is not uncommon to find a very close relationship between shared rooms in hospitals and chaplains (Cadge 2012:59).
The role of the Scandinavian chaplains is different because they are paid and employed by their churches and serve as their representatives. On the other hand, Cadge’s arguments about the presumed universality of prayer and silence (Cadge 2012:67, 75) are also relevant in Scandinavia, as the shared room under the custody of the chaplain is available for silence and prayer for all individuals regardless of religion. If preferences for prayer and silence are traits of a certain Protestant tradition (Holsappel-Brons 2010:224; Post and Molendijk 2007:279), the establishment of rooms of silence at Scandinavian universities could be regarded as the continued secularization of a Protestant tradition that emphasizes well-being over dogma and authenticity over authority, or rather where well-being has become dogma and authenticity the new authority. This, however, also restrains Lutheran congregations and chaplains in their use of the room for religious services.

One of the most striking results of the study of the rooms of silence is how strongly room regulations discourage collective uses. While the intention and materiality of the rooms certainly support the interpretation that the rooms cater to individualized types of religion, which resonates well with the shift away from religion towards spirituality suggested by Cadge, this needs to be supplemented with other understandings. The room in Aarhus (DK), which gathers groups mainly for (collective expressions of) spirituality, is little used, but the rooms in Agder (NO) have collective gatherings for different religious groups at least twice a day. The room in Malmö has many individual visitors, but mainly Muslims performing prayers, which may be seen as an individual but not individualized or self-defined practice.

The use of these rooms thus expresses the renewed importance of traditional religions, which due to migration encompass not just Protestantism but also other types of Christianity, as well as the Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu religions. The establishment of the rooms may be seen as a prescribed norm of ‘functionalization of religion’, as referring to “the capacity of religious discourses to perform functional roles within modern social systems” (Herbert
The religions are given a place at universities to the extent that they ‘deliver’ what the university requests in terms of stress relief or harmonious coexistence. By responding to these demands, religion becomes ‘more publicly visible’, and we see what Herbert terms the “‘republicisation’ of religion’ (2013:18). Republicisation is connected to the arrival of immigrants who are more religious than the population in general (Herbert 2013:5), but it concerns not so much the presence of more religion as the increased visibility of religion, often in the context of media controversies (Herbert 2013:22). The rooms are therefore indicators of increased public attention and awareness among political decision makers that religion and religious diversity need to be addressed.

From this point of view, religion is too important to be left to the religious and consequently secular actors (politicians and university administrations) choose to become engaged in issues involving religion. The differences between the countries reflect contingent historical developments, including different stances towards the role of religion in the public sphere and in public institutions. Henrik Reintoft Christensen has described how political and media debates on religion in Norway display higher levels of tolerance of religiosity, and explicitly refers to Norway as a more multi-religious society than Denmark or Sweden (2010:187). In Denmark, the debates have been the most polarized, displaying more restrictive attitudes towards immigration and Islam than in Norway and Sweden (2010:181). In the Swedish political and media discourses, religion is seen more positively than in Denmark, but through a ‘secular’ equality perspective. These ideas also infuse the intentions behind the rooms. They can be efforts to create peace and harmony through meditation and prayer, efforts to innovate Protestant ritual traditions as a response to secularization, or efforts to cope with religious diversity through the shared use of the rooms. The different traditions and their different aims come together in the rooms of silence in Scandinavian universities, but the management of religious diversity prescribes a certain use of the rooms, supporting
the individualization of religion, while discouraging or even prohibiting collective rituals and the community-forming aspects associated with them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Several studies have noted that the names of shared space often contrast with the uses (Cadge 2012:67; Nagel 2015:36; Duttweiler 2017:203). When it comes to the rooms of silence at Scandinavian universities, this prompts us to ask how to interpret these ambiguous and flexible rooms. On the one hand, actual practices might make the intentions behind the rooms visible through the facilitation of encounters in a religiously diverse institution. On the other hand, such encounters might be excluded because a room designed to fit all ends up fitting none.

We have examined the ways in which universities have adopted strategies that attempt to integrate a concept of religion separated from other rooms and settings at the university. The strategies have transformed into several meta-narratives – the nurturing of an emotional attachment to the idea of contemplation, an overarching idea of the need for individual ritual actions, and contemplative religion or spirituality in a civic, plural, and liberal democracy. This article has examined approaches to religion that are aware of materiality. That is, the universities have established rooms at the campus that serve as mnemonic devices of religion. The rooms become loaded with ideas, narratives, and practices that provide social distribution of a particular concept of religion and may become material reference points for religion. From this perspective, it follows that we need to understand the ways in which universities are continually imagining religion in the context of materiality, and we need to ask if the rooms of silence reflect a broader imagination of religion in contemporary society.

We have argued that the rooms are based on normative understandings of the relationship between religion and society in general and religion and education in particular. At the macro level, there are strong secularization narratives, but, as argued above, slightly
different ones in each of the three countries. At the meso level, the majority churches that originally had the rooms at their disposal have actively facilitated the shift from a collective to a more individual use of the rooms. This has been done in concert with the universities, which may have several reasons for approving this shift. The names of the rooms have changed. They no longer have any references to religion, which supports the idea of equality in a religiously diverse society and may be attractive in the competition for the best students in an international and globalized field of education. At the micro level, the actual use of the rooms has changed from religious collective practices towards individual practices that can be both religious and spiritual. The architecture, artefacts, and location of the rooms make some practices more likely than others. While the rooms are not designed for Muslim collective ritual actions in which men and women can participate according to the divine nature of the commandments, the restricted materiality does not prevent the Muslim men who visit the rooms from performing actions which do not fit very well with the materiality. Particularly Muslim students adapt their ‘silent’ actions to the rooms. The rooms are designed as rooms of silence, which, for instance, excludes some (non-silent) types of practices. Consequently, we see a convergence between religious-cum-spiritual rooms of silence and secular rooms of reflection. As long as the practice is individual, it is tolerated and encouraged in order to promote student welfare.

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