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COVERAGE OF RELIGION IN THE MEDIA IN NORDIC COUNTRIES IN 1988–2008: CONCLUSION

The four preceding articles in this volume of the Nordic Journal of Religion and Society were about the coverage of religion in the Nordic media and are related to the ongoing research programme entitled «The role of religion in the public sphere: A comparative study of the five Nordic countries» (NOREL). The overall research aim of the programme is to provide an outline of the changing role of religion in the public sphere since the late 1980s, and it is partly a continuation of an earlier study by Gustafsson (1985, 1987), which was a comparative study of religious change in the Nordic countries in 1930–1980.

The results of the study allow us to discuss whether the changes give support to the notion of a new visibility of religion in the public sphere or whether they support the thesis of the decline of religion in the Nordic countries. The results also allow us to analyse whether the changes in the media reflect the actual changes in the religious situation: for example, the increase in religious diversity and the decline in church membership and attendance. Our findings may be used to discuss to what extent the five Nordic countries are similar or unique in the way they present religion in the media and what this reveals more generally about the religious situation in these countries.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Our research is the first large research project to compare the coverage of religion in the media in the five Nordic countries using the same measuring methods and indicators in all countries. We have done so by studying newspapers, magazines and films. We studied a total of about 2,300 issues of newspapers, more than 700 magazine issues and about 150 films (of which 50 were selected for more in-depth analysis). The data include nearly 5,000 newspaper articles and more than 2,000 articles in popular magazines. When studying the newspapers and magazines, we concentrated on three selected years: 1988, 1998 and 2008. When studying Nordic films, we primarily analysed films that came out between 1998 and 2008. In doing so, we collected data which we were able to handle. The data can also be used to say something about the general
development in these countries and to compare them. However, regarding newspapers and magazines, since we have only analysed three selected years (1988, 1998 and 2008) and do not have figures from the years in between, we have to be very cautious in drawing far-reaching conclusions based solely on the number of the articles dealing with religion.

In our analysis, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Using quantitative methods, we wanted to find generalizable information about the changes in the five countries during the research years and compare them. We used qualitative methods in the study of magazines and films in order to go deeper into the material.

There are some limitations to the data. In our study of newspapers, we had to limit ourselves to only one newspaper each in Iceland and Denmark. In Denmark, this was due practical problems with data collection; in Iceland, it was because there was only one newspaper published in 1988–2008. In our study of the magazines, Iceland was not included due to resource limitations. In our look at films, we mainly studied the years between 1998 and 2008 and, to a much lesser degree, material from between 1988 and 1997. This was mainly for financial reasons, but it was also evident that films of interest, that is to say films dealing with religion, were more prevalent between 1998 and 2008.

Our data was coded by different people, and newspaper coding was done by a different person (or persons) in each of the five countries. The magazine material was coded by the same two people in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and by another person in Finland. Although we had clear coding guidelines, we realize that the fact that several people were involved in the coding process may influence our results. Our results suggest that this was especially true in determining whether a newspaper article was a main or medium-sized article. We took these issues into account when interpreting our results. However, we had no other option than to use several persons for coding since we were working with such a huge mass of material. Due to the language differences between the five Nordic countries, this was also seen as the most trustworthy solution. In the study of magazines, Finland was left out of the qualitative analysis process due to language problems.

Increase, decline or continuity?

There have been many claims that a major trend in the most recent decades is that religion has become more visible – and more contested – in public life. What is the conclusion, based on our results?

Our results regarding newspapers and magazines show that, if we compare the years 1988 and 1998, there was generally an increase in the coverage of religion in the media during this period. This was the case with newspapers in all five Nordic countries. The trend was the same if we take into account the size of the articles. For the study of magazines this was the case in Norway, Denmark and Sweden (when analyzing mean number of articles per an issue). However, if we compare the years 1998 and 2008, there was a decline in the number of articles on religion. This same decline was also seen in the newspapers studied from all five countries, and in the magazines studied from Norway, Sweden and Finland. The study of films revealed more films on religion between 2005 and 2008 than previously.
The greater share of the films in 2005–2008 also regarded religion as a problem rather than an asset. However, the differences are rather small. For this reason and on the basis of the number of articles or films on religion, our results do not support the greater visibility of religion in the media that has been proposed. That there are possible limitations connected with choosing certain years and not others should, however, not be forgotten.

From homogeneity to diversity

When it comes to the coverage of various religious groups, our results showed a clear trend. Newspapers, magazines and films show similar tendencies towards increasing diversity in 1988–2008. If we look at the different religions and religious groups, we find that Christianity and especially the Lutheran majority churches generally appear more in the media than the other religions. However, the coverage of the Lutheran majority churches declined over the years: in some of the countries, this decline was very clear.

The study of films revealed an upswing in recent years in the number of Nordic films on religious traditions other than Lutheran Christianity. The study of magazines found that the percentage of articles on the Lutheran majority churches declined in all the Nordic countries except Sweden. At the same time, the percentage of newspaper articles on the majority church declined most in Sweden. In Finland and Norway, the drop was more moderate, but still very visible. There was no decline in Iceland; in Denmark the percentage of articles on the majority church was already very low in 1988, both in magazines and especially in newspapers. It declined even more in 2008. At the same time, Iceland offered a very different case: the Lutheran majority church is very much present in the newspapers, to an increasing degree. However when interpreting the results from Denmark and Iceland, we must keep in mind that our study of newspapers consisted of just one newspaper in these countries compared with four each in Sweden, Finland and Norway.

The results generally show that institutional forms of religion were increasingly being challenged. The film material studied showed that conservative and «restricting religions» were seen as «bad» religion, whereas «good» religion was individualized. «Good» religion focuses on community and the needs of the individual. However, it is not the case that «bad» religion was only criticized in the narratives; rather, most films seemed to aim at a greater understanding, even of the religion that was presented as a problem. Our results also show that the representation of religion is in some cases surprisingly traditional. For example, when clergy were portrayed in the Nordic films, they were mostly men. The few women in the films were portrayed as young and more or less of an asset. Generally, clergy were most often represented neutrally (half of the films), and equally often as an asset, a problem or a source of conflict. While Lutheran majority churches were represented in varied ways, the same does not apply to some of the other religious groups, which were portrayed mostly as a problem.

Coverage of Islam increased greatly in the Nordic societies during our research years. However, when we analysed the coverage of Islam in the media, the situation varied greatly across the five Nordic countries. The greatest amount by far of coverage of Islam in the
newspapers was in Denmark, and there was also a clear increase here. Coverage was notably weaker in Finland and Iceland. In 2008, more than half the newspaper articles on religion in Denmark were about Islam, but only a few percent in Finland and Iceland. Denmark seems to be a unique case also in another respect: coverage of parapsychological phenomena was by far greatest in Danish magazines.

The five Nordic countries: Unique and similar

All five of the Nordic countries have Lutheran majority churches with a large share of their population as members (varying from 69 to 80%). Also the rites of passage within these churches continue to hold a fairly strong position. Measured in other terms, the Nordic countries are generally regarded as fairly secularized, and regular church attendance is especially low. Especially Swedes and Danes stand out as secular when it comes to attachment to institutional religion, believing, attendance and other traditional measures of religiosity (see e.g. Bertelmans Stiftung 2009; Kääriäinen et al. 2005; Ketola et al. 2011).

From our findings, we see that the Nordic countries are to some extent similar when it comes to religion, but at the same time they are in many ways unique. Our results showed that the Lutheran majority churches appeared more often in the media in Finland and Iceland than in the other Nordic countries. In the case of Finland, the same was found in our study of newspapers and magazines (Icelandic magazines were not included in the study). However, the results from the newspaper study are very clear: in Iceland, newspapers seemed to portray traditional religion and mostly report about the majority church, even more than we might expect based on the percentage of the population that belong to this church. In these two countries, religion is less often constructed as a problem in films than in the other Nordic countries.

Our results also show that the religious terrain in these countries seems to differ a great deal, our study revealing five Nordic countries that should not only be seen as one congruent region, but also as five unique countries with unique tendencies. Iceland and Finland are notably more traditional and more oriented towards Christianity and their majority churches than the other countries. Based on our results from the media, the role of the Lutheran majority churches in the public sphere also seems to vary in these countries. In Finland and Iceland, they seem to have a much stronger presence in the public discourse than in the other Nordic countries, and they are far from being restricted to the private sector. In Sweden, Norway and Denmark, the religious situation is more diverse and, according to the newspapers, even more diverse than membership statistics show, and the majority churches seem to have a fairly weak presence in the media.

Future challenges

The results of our study challenge the notion of a new visibility of religion in the public sphere. First of all, there is nothing new in it any longer: during our research period from 1988 onward, religion has been actively covered in the media in the Nordic coun-
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tries. Second, according to our results from the newspaper and magazine studies, the trend is not towards greater visibility of religion but towards an increasingly varied and diverse presence of religion in the public sphere. The minority and alternative religious groups are increasingly covered in the media, whereas the majority churches are less present, but the total coverage has more or less remained the same from 1988 to 2008. Only our results from films show an increase in total coverage.

According to the theory of mediatization, the media do not directly reflect the changes that have taken place in the field of religion, but are themselves active and independent actors molding religion and other cultural fields (Hjarvard 2008; Hepp 2012). Thus the way religion is presented in the media may give us some hints of future developments in the field of religion. The media themselves may also serve as a secularizing force in society or, in turn, support change towards a larger and more diverse visibility of religion in the public sphere. The results of our study show that in Iceland and Finland – the media may act as a supporting factor for institutional religion. Our results indicate that this applies especially to Iceland. Also in other countries, regional newspapers seem to support institutional religion. This means that clear regional differentiation still exists within the countries.

In all the Nordic countries except Iceland, the media present a highly diverse view of religion and the majority churches get less space. In general, the developments described in our study challenge the institutional forms of religion. Tabloids and magazines are in front of this trend. The coverage of the majority churches in the media, especially in magazines and tabloids, is notably weaker in general than its membership rates would suggest. Especially in Denmark and Sweden, other forms of religion are increasingly gaining exposure in the media. In Denmark, this especially means an increase in the coverage of Islam and parapsychological phenomena; the situation is more varied in Sweden. These representations of religion in the media may suggest something of future trends. These results suggest an increasing turn toward greater diversity for Denmark and Sweden, and slower, more moderate and more traditional development in Finland and Iceland. Norway stands somewhere in the middle.

Our research draws attention to the need for further research in this area. Since we have mainly analysed three selected years (1988, 1998 and 2008), it is difficult to draw conclusions about strong tendencies. This calls for further studies to be done in the different countries and the different regions within the countries, studies that would look more precisely at the development patterns in each country and go beyond the year 2008. There is also a need for more combined quantitative and qualitative research on religion in the media in the Nordic countries, and for further studies employing similar measuring methods to compare the five Nordic countries in these fields.
References


