
This book deals with several complex types of problems. The first is how to evaluate experiences of paranormal phenomena. Since the group of respondents consists of people with a Christian worldview, the next problem is to look at ways in which these experiences are interpreted by and integrated (if at all) with these respondents’ Christian beliefs. The authors also aim to relate the experiences of today to similar historical experiences in this context. Thirdly (and perhaps the most important point according to the authors), is the problem with the Norwegian Lutheran Church and the way it reacts to testimonies regarding paranormal experiences? Generally speaking, the book is a normative project in the sense that the Church is given a guideline containing ways to deal with individuals who have had paranormal experiences several times throughout the book, and particularly in the final chapter.

The authors seem to be well-qualified for this endeavor. Henriksen is professor of systematic theology in Oslo, and Pabst is an ethnologist working at a museum in southern Norway. Judging from the book’s final sections, it seems as if this work is primarily a theological project.

The first area of interest is paranormal experiences themselves. This focus is also clearly expressed in the subtitle of the book, «Paranormal Experiences in Encounters with Traditional Belief». Furthermore, the book is as a whole structured along the different types of paranormal experiences found in the interviews, including Christian healing, angels, good – evil and meeting the dead. In addition, there is a concluding chapter that provides a summary of the authors’ findings.

The authors seem astonished by the fact that modern Norwegians make such experiences public in spite of what the authors call «the repressive orthodoxy», which they believe is in the media as well as in the scholarly fields of medicine and religion. However, it is not limited to the secular sphere but is also to be found in parts of the Church, a fact that appears to occupy the authors most of all.

The fact that modern Christians from primarily conservative religious backgrounds make such experiences public ought not to come as a surprise, as they are primarily made public only in this unique milieu - and not to a wider audience. This milieu is actually primed to be receptive to such experiences; indeed, it is well known that people with traditional Christian beliefs are overrepresented among those who also believe in paranormal phenomena. This tendency became clear in my own study (Ahlin 2005) with regard to all paranormal experiences presented to the respondents; healing, ghosts, astrology and soothsaying. The largest overrepresentation was in relation to healing (an explanation for this may be found in the fact that healing is practiced in a certain number of Christian circles). Similar findings had been presented earlier by
several other scholars, for example Orenstein (2002: «Religion and Paranormal Belief» in JSSR: 41(2)), Bainbridge and Stark (1980: «Superstitions: Old and new» in Skeptical Inquirer 6(4)) and Wuthnow (1978: Experimentation in American religion). The explanation for this is given by another scholar, Erich Goode (2000: «Two paranormalism or two and a half? An empirical exploration» in Skeptical Inquirer 23(1)), stating that it is not a great leap «from spirits to ghosts, from the wrath of God to King Tut’s curse, from miracles at Lourdes to psychic surgery, from the power of prayer to therapeutic touch, from angels to aliens».

Interestingly, what is more important to the authors than the experiences as such (though they stress the importance of taking them seriously) is the fact that their informants are self-professed Christians. Moreover, the encounter between the informants’ Christian beliefs and the extraordinary experiences is essential, given the ways they interpret the latter in light of their traditional beliefs and try to integrate the two in a way that makes sense to the individual.

We have now come closer to the authors’ mission, which is to explore the way in which the surrounding world (and primarily the Church) not only responds to extraordinary experiences as such but also the way in which the Church responds to the interpretations of these events. This is, according to the authors, an important point in the ongoing debate concerning the relationship between traditional and alternative religiosity.

It is obvious that from the authors’ perspective, the Church has a responsibility to start becoming receptive to these kinds of experiences. One important aspect of this is the way the Church handles the issue of people’s «health». This is not something to be delegated to a private religiosity, as has been the case up to now. Actually, they say the growth of alternative therapy may be seen as a critique of not only traditional medicine but also the Church for failing to bring up the health issue. The authors believe that this failure to act might end up having negative consequences for the Church. If the Church displays an attitude of rejection with respect to alternative therapy, as both liberal and conservative milieus in the Church do, it is easy for those having had paranormal experiences to move over to alternative spirituality, since they are met with acceptance in these circles. «Is this what the Church truly wants?» the authors rhetorically ask.

Therefore, the authors give the Church resolute advice regarding how to handle the above situation. Moreover, theology is also given an assignment, namely to make the individual feel that all of their religious experiences have a place in their Church. Such changes are necessary if the situation at hand, which is perceived by the authors to be a threat from alternative spirituality against the Church, may be solved in a positive way for this traditional institution.

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After decades of privatization religion is more visible in the public sphere and in the media today than some years ago. Theories about a resurgence of religion have been posited by such scholars as Jose Casanova, Peter Beyer and Jürgen Habermas. The increase in public interest in religion has connections with globalization and migration. Is the new public role of religion a good or a bad thing for the churches and other religious organizations? And does it lead to a reverse of the secularization process? These are questions scholars of religion are currently discussing and that the present book touches upon.

In this new book on religion in the press two Norwegian historians of religion, Cora Alexa Døving and Siv Ellen Kraft, look at how religion is seen through the lenses of the press. The authors mainly focus on the way newspapers present different religions and religious phenomena. The book deals with topics as varied as Jewish circumcision, the use of the hijab among public servants, the building of mosques, religiosity in the Royal family and the Norwegian Christian healer called «Snåsamannen» (the man from Snåsa). The material reflects recent public debates involving religion. Some of the themes, especially the building of mosques and the use of headscarves among public servants, have also been debated in Denmark and Sweden. Other topics are very much related to the Norwegian context, i.e. religion in the Royal family and celebrities’ views on religion.

The book is organized into two parts, the first deals with topics relating to versions of the majority religion in Norway and the second about minority religions such as Islam and Judaism. Each of the selected cases is interesting in itself and in the last chapter of the book some of the cases are compared and the findings are discussed in the light of new theories on religion in the public sphere.

The book is not only intended for academics in the field of religion, as it also contributes to the meta-dialogue on public debates in Norway: what are the topics, who are the actors and how do they interact with each other? The Norwegian press itself has given the book much attention; journalists obviously like to read and write about themselves.

The authors have done an impressive job in collecting a great deal of interesting data on religion in the press. The material consists mainly of newspaper texts written by journalists, religious actors and ordinary citizens. It is not always easy to establish the status of the texts because journalists sometimes act as mediators of other people’s views and sometimes present their own views.

The included cases were all given very much media coverage, which means that they bring something new into the public debates on religion and that they create drama and conflict. The book would have profited on bringing into the discussion some reflections on how the media works and how journalists think when they choose what to write about and what to print.

The Danish media scholar Stig Hjarvard has formulated a theory about the mediatization of religion and the effects the media have on religion. Hjarvard introduces
three arguments about media and religion; first media have become an important source of information about religious issues, second religions are influenced by media logic and third, media has taken over some of the functions of institutional religion. This theory is mentioned in the book but not followed up in the discussion of the cases. The book would probably have profited from taking into account the distinctions presented by Hjarvard.

On the critical side, one could ask what the criteria for the selected cases are and to what extent the cases are suited for comparisons. The cases covered in the book differ in many ways not only because they deal with different religions. According to the authors, the cases were selected mainly because they received very much media attention. The use of stricter criteria may have led to other cases being selected. The Muhammad cartoon crisis in 2005/2006 is not included despite its extensive press coverage. One possible answer would probably be that this particular case has already been discussed in other academic books.

The book is at its best in the sections that compare cases and try to find common explanations. The chapter that discusses the media coverage of religion in the royal family seems suited for this analytical strategy. Why are the religious views of the Crown Princess Mette-Marit accepted by the press but not the views of Princess Märtha? Several elements make the two cases different. The ways in which religion and money are combined in the case of Märtha provoke negative reactions. There are also negative reactions to the way Märtha combines her role as royal princess with the building of a business. According to the authors, the traditional Christian worldview of Mette-Marit is treated with more respect than the New Age influenced worldview of Märtha because the first view is related to the Christian heritage and common national values. The conclusion that Christian religiosity is viewed more positively than other religions is underlined by other chapters. The positive image of the Christian healer «Snåsamannen» is related to the way he promotes Norwegian national values, such as austerity, humbleness and «popular religion». His habit of not charging his clients is also an element that distinguishes him from other faith healers.

The chapter on July 22, 2011 also deals with the significance of national values in press coverage. It concludes similarly, even if the described situation is quite different. When it comes to minority religion, the press usually focuses on problems and conflicts. In the weeks after July 22, however, the press portrayed minority religions in a positive light and underlined their contributions to the greater society. It is interesting to note that data material that appears to point in opposite directions can be used to support the same conclusion. The reason for this was of course that the period after July 22 was so special that the everyday rhetoric was put aside and the core societal values came more to light. These values are not only related to the Christian heritage but also common values such as freedom, tolerance and justice.

Another interesting finding in the study is that religious actors use secular language when they communicate with a broader audience though the press. This is very much the case when religious clothing and headscarves are discussed in the press. According to the authors, the intensified focus on religion in the public field does not lead to desecularisation. The more attention religion receives in the public sphere the more
secular interpretations are actualized and a call for a secular state that does not discriminate between religions arises.

The main conclusion in the book is that Christianity is treated with more dignity and respect by the press than other religions. According to the authors this is due to the significance of the Christian tradition as the official religion of the state. This is a plausible explanation. A follow up question would be if Norwegian journalists are more concerned about national identity values than journalists in other countries. At least the Swedish press sometimes complains about the focus on national symbols in the Norwegian media, especially around Norway’s national day, 17 May. Journalists’ views on religion and national identity values would be an interesting topic for future research projects. According to Døving and Kraft, journalists in general are not very interested in religious topics and prefer liberal versions of religions. This book makes it clear that despite their personal views on religion, journalists play a crucial role in creating the general image of religion in society.

This book is a good starting point if you want to obtain an overview of what is occurring in public debates on religion and what theoretical perspectives are at hand. The book’s conclusions are interesting and somewhat controversial. This study will probably lead to new studies in the field of public religion in a Nordic context.

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Religious communities have always played a central role in defining and addressing social problems. Though the welfare state assumed this role in the 20th century, we now see how religious communities are again becoming important actors in solving social problems. Conversely, modern society – particularly after 9/11 – has brought forward religion as a social problem in itself.

This complex and interesting anthology concerns a) the relationship between religion and social problems, b) a growing awareness of religion as both a resource and problem and c) the question of how to study the interaction between these rather complicated categories. The book is based largely on papers presented at the 2007 and 2009 Conferences of the International Society for the Study of Religion (ISSR/SISR). Titus Hjelm has done an excellent job as editor, keeping focus on the overarching problem area even as the chapters are occasionally a little divergent. It is of great value that the contributions are built on new research, often with extensive empirical material. The aim «is to display a variety of approaches in hopes that something might emerge that is more than the sum of its parts» (p. 2). I think the editor has achieved this modest objective well.
Hjelm argues that the sociology of religion only in a limited sense has become involved in the construction of theories addressing social problems. He refers, however, to a 1990 article by James Beckford as a notable contribution to social problems theory. In the anthology (chapter 4), Beckford is asked to follow up his discussion from this article. The chapter contributes with clarifying definitions. His point is that growing religious and social diversity in a global context is the background against which new partnerships between faith communities and governments should be understood. Interestingly enough, faith communities have not only become visible actors on a welfare market, but, as Beckford calls it, expedient for governments to «control» religious minorities and in this way increase a possible cohesion in society.

Hjelm argues further that there has been an epistemological transition in the research on social problems from the study of an objective condition to the interpretation of a subjective awareness of certain cherished values. Referring to Spector and Kitsuse’s book *Constructing Social Problems* (2001), he states that what matters are the public claims made regarding what is seen as a social problem – not the reality of the phenomenon. The matter of making claims about problematic conditions therefore becomes the focus of a constructivist approach.

The chapters are thematically divided into three parts with articles based on both quantitative and qualitative material. It is a pedagogically clear division of religion a) as an Impact (on social issues), b) as a solution to social problems and c) as a social problem. I shall refer very briefly to the articles one by one. The first part of the book consists of two chapters that illustrate the «impact» perspective well. Amy Adamczyk’s study shows how Muslim proscriptions against extramarital sex, restrictions on alcohol use and circumcision seem to result in lower rates of HIV/AIDS in Muslim countries in Africa. Peter Andersen and Peter Lüchau secondly show that education and (a conservative view of) gender are more important factors for the employment rate amongst Muslim immigrants in Denmark than any «particular Muslim work ethic».

The second part considers religion as a solution to social problems. James Beckford starts this section with his article considering religion as simultaneously an asset and a problem. The following chapter by Sanna Lehtinen is a clearer example of religion as a solution. Her study of the Lutheran Church in Finland shows how the Church is functioning as a social partner to local authorities in fighting unemployment. The study indicates however how complex the relations between state and church are in the Nordic countries. She writes: «In terms of welfare responsibility in Finland, the role of the local parishes is unclear and parish social workers are seeking their place in society» (p. 79). Next, Lina Molokotos-Liederman shows that the development in post-1989 Eastern Europe has resulted in greater social engagement by the Orthodox Churches in the public domain. Although national in character, Orthodoxy has taken on a new and more ecumenical international outlook. Ignatius Swart discusses social capital formation and social development in post-apartheid South-Africa and how religious actors play a part in ongoing developmental processes. Gastón Espinosa shows that religious leaders are providing politicians with both language and moral authority which reframes the political debate on Latin American immigration in the US. Concluding the second part, Marian Burchardt’s chapter examines how faith-based «life
skills education» is one of the most important ways in which «traditional» intimate relationships and sexuality have been questioned and how AIDS is constructed as a social problem. Though different in character the contributions illustrate the argument that religion can be a solution to social problems.

The third part deals with religion as the source of social problems. After 9/11, religion – Islam, particularly – is being discussed as potentially problematic in a way that was previously limited to sects or cults. Two articles by Abe W. Ata (chapter 10) from Australia and Yasemin El-Menouar - Melaine Becker (chapter 15) from Germany explain how education and the media influence stereotypical portrayals of Islam. Eileen Barker’s excellent overview outlines how the so-called «cult wars» are likely to continue as long as New Religious Movements and reactions towards these appear. The reactions are called ‘secondary constructions’ and explains the widespread perception of cults as social problems. Michiaki Okuyama describes this in his chapter. He deals with two cases, a) the Aum Shinrikyo affair in 1995, when deadly nerve gas was released in the Tokyo subway system, and b) the visit of the Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine, by which he appeared to pay official respect to war criminals. Both cases raise questions on the convergence of religion, state and society in past and future Japan. Another kind of study is Derek H. Davies analysis of President Bush’s Faith Based Initiative. Presented as a solution to social problems, it functioned instead as a threat to the constitutional interpretation of church-state relations. Steven Engeler’s interesting study shows how a Neo-Pentecostal church in Brazil constructs Afro-Brazilian religions as «demonic» and how by defining this problem also contributes to identity formation. This chapter is important not least for its theoretical depth.

This excellent anthology raises profound questions about the place of religion in late modern society with its religious and social diversity. It also raises questions about the need to study religion in its social context and how to relate these studies to general sociology. The constructivist approach is highly relevant in order to increase the understanding of processes when cultures and societies label religion, in its different forms, as either resource or dangerous problem. This volume illustrates well the thesis Titus Hjelm is arguing for, namely that religion and social problems are, perhaps increasingly, intertwined in the modern world.

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The topic of Islam and Muslims in Europe has generated intense public debate, especially on the Internet. The Utøya Massacre was a horrifying example of violent action based on the notion that Europe is in danger of annihilation due to Muslim immigration,
which in turn is caused by «traitors» among European politicians. Judging from the content of Breivik’s own Manifesto, he was strongly inspired by writers who fervently foster and predict a scenario of war in the near future, along with an image of Muslims as sharing, albeit secretly, one and the same agenda: to eventually rule the world and fight for the implementation of shari’a laws everywhere. In contrast to the apocalyptic visions of essayists such as Fjordman and others, the present volume provides some sound research material about how Muslims actually live and adapt to European society, exploring the lines of conflict between Islamic principles and implementation in different European cultural contexts. The various articles investigate different aspects of the cohabitation of modern European society and Muslims, thereby touching upon some burning issues in contemporary Europe.

The volume is organized in four parts, covering various aspects of the theme. The first part provides some overarching perspectives; one article deals with the different usages of the concept of secularism (written by Heiner Bielefeldt), and the other concentrates on minority-majority issues in general (written by Guy Haarscher). Bielefeldt’s discussion of secularism is to the point, successfully bringing forth complexities, nuances, and the lines of conflict implied in different understanding and usage of secularism. His distinction between a doctrinal secularism (a substitute for religion) and political secularism (born out of a liberal concern and respect for difference) is very useful and timely. Guy Haarscher also provides valuable insights in his discussion of minority issues, and points out that the mechanisms involved are not necessarily to be understood as a «Muslim» problem. Moreover, his discussion of the growth of Islamism and the Arab socialist movement helps the reader to understand the complexities in the cultural dynamics in Muslim countries as well as among Muslims in Europe.

The second part includes three case studies from Germany, Belgium and France, which mainly focus on Islamic law and the legal system in these countries. As Mathias Rohe points out, it is already a fact that several European states already have passed or are working on legislation on Islamic norms pertaining to clothing, animal slaughter practices and family law. Rohe’s article on the situation in Germany illustrates several problems that arise when judges and jurists appeal to Islam and base their verdicts on their own perceptions about what Muslims think, or «really» should endure. The diversity between Muslims’ attitudes to European law is also emphasized by Rohe, who points out that a large number of Muslims simply do not care about religious law, and take a rather pragmatic stand, or a «muddling through approach» towards the European legal framework (p. 61). Rik Torf’s article on Muslims in Belgium in particular discusses the problems involved in finding a credible representative body to operate as an interlocutor with the state. The majority of Muslim religious societies do operate with either a hierarchical, structured leadership or one constituted by institutions comparable to the Catholic Church. This represents a real problem on the political level, a fact that is thoroughly discussed in this text. Isabelle Barrière Brousse’s text focuses on the situation in France, discussing the delicate and difficult matter of finding a balance between defending the values upon which human rights are based while at the same time displaying respect for foreign cultures. As she rightly remarks, conflicts between
the laws in secular countries and religious legal systems seem to rise mainly in the field of family relations; where secular law is based on the principles of equality between the sexes and freedom, religious law is based on ancient cultural patterns of male dominance and, consequently, female submission and control. The third part concentrates on education and finance, and is the largest part of the volume, consisting of five articles. Topics covered range from the training of Imams, to religious education in Turkey and Bosnia, to banking in Malaysia. The last part centers on the topics of extremism and security. Here we find a legible article discussing what came to be known as the «Danish Cartoon Crisis», as well as an article reflecting upon the ideological foundations for terrorism. Petra Wayland’s text on culturalization and securitization is a lucid discussion of the construction of self and others, and the tendency of reducing Muslims of all kinds to one homogenous mass of *homo islamicus*.

The range of topics discussed and the number of articles do not allow me to go into details in this brief review. However, where the articles in general seem very well reflected and informed, dealing with subtle nuances and complex processes, the introduction authored by the editors seems to operate with rather essentialist concepts of religion and culture and implicit assumptions that should be approached more carefully. In general, it appears that the editors’ usage of the term Islam is plagued by a tendency to regard Islam as a monolithic entity. Thus, the concepts of «Islamic culture» in contrast to «democratic culture» seem a bit simplistic and appear somewhat infelicitous. «Islamic cultures» in particular is a rather problematic expression, as it lumps together all kinds of Islamic expressions and cultural patterns found in Muslim countries. A further clarification of concepts and a more nuanced presentation of the lines of conflict would be appropriate here. The editors’ reference to the Arab spring also illustrates this problem, as it gives the impression that what happened - or, is still happening - may be explained by referring to a simple scheme involving Western-inspired progressive forces (or «democratic cultures», according to the editors’ terminology) on one side, and the Islamic, conservative forces («Islamic culture») on the other. Moreover, in its claim that Islam has been «prominent in its resistance to the amalgamation of ideas and ideals taking place in modern Europe» (p. 1–2), the abstract entity «Islam» is attributed with agency. A basic insight in religious and cultural studies is that neither religions nor cultures are able to act; only humans can do that. However, it appears that the contributors avoid slipping into these kinds of simplistic categories. This volume contains up-to-date, readable and sound scholarship, and is highly recommended for anyone interested in current issues in the multicultural and multireligious Europe.

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