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DANNEBROG: WAVING IN AND OUT OF DANISH CIVIL RELIGION

Abstract

The Danish national flag, Dannebrog, is a central symbol for Danes, and its myth of origin is civil religious. The article will show that the present use of the flag places it inside Danish civil religion on some occasions and outside at other. The traditional parading of Dannebrog on the 15th of June (the national flag day) is a civil religious event organised jointly by civil society and the state, and it can be analysed by regarding the Durkheimian and the Rousseauian perspective on civil religion as complementary to each other. The 15th of June tradition is on the wane, but the flag is increasingly displayed on other occasions, including commercial ones. Danes use the flag in public and in private on the most different occasions, and the flag is a central symbol in the present intensified discourse on national Danish identity. Various uses of Dannebrog today are investigated from a range of primary data, including participant observations. The contemporary use of Dannebrog indicates that in addition to state and civil society the market is beginning to influence the use of Dannebrog as a symbol waving in and out of Danish civil religion.

Key words: national flag, civil religion, state, civil society, market

Introduction

One of the effects of globalisation has been a revitalisation of public and political debate in Denmark about the identity and coherence of the Danish nation. For example, the Danish government’s formulation of canonical lists of works of art, literature, and key historical turning points is a political initiative, directly linked with the ideology of national coherence (Kulturkanon 2006). On a more symbolic level, the Danish national flag Dannebrog, has also been drawn into this debate about the identity and coherence of the Danish nation.

Dannebrog is not just a secular symbol of the Danish state; like other national flags it symbolises the sacred character of the nation (Firth, quoted by Billig 2006: 39). This broad expression, «the sacred character» can be sharpened, as Michael Billig does, by distinguishing between the explicit use of the flag as a national emotional symbol (the «waved flag») and the routine use of the flag in public (the «unwaved flag») (Billig 2006: 9–43).
In line with prevailing conceptions of what is often denoted the «third sector» between state and market, civil society is composed of many different civic and voluntary organisations which constitute an arena of uncoerced, non-commercial collective actions (Centre for Civil Society 2007). One of these voluntary organisations, called Danmarks-Samfundet (The Denmark Society) celebrates the flag on the 15th of June by organising parades and donating flags and standards to other civil society organisations all over Denmark. These arrangements receive a strong support from the state and the national Evangelical-Lutheran church.

While the organised parading of Dannebrog on the 15th of June is on the wane, the flag is increasingly displayed on other occasions. Danes use the flag in private and in public on the most different occasions, from family birthdays to football matches. In the recent decades, Dannebrog as a symbol has also found increasing commercial use, branding many Danish companies from food producers to furniture removers. At the same time, the political use of the flag has become an issue in an intensified discourse on national Danish identity.

In this article I shall present and analyse different uses of the flag and show that some of the traditions around the flag and its mythical origin are part of Danish civil religion. Other examples of the Danes’ use of Dannebrog are secular, but even in such cases there may be a reference to its civil religious myth of origin. Thus, Dannebrog seems to be waving in and out of Danish civil religion.

The Danes’ conception of and use of Dannebrog further serves to take up a thread from one of the current discussions of civil religion, namely the question of bottom-up versus top-down processes in the creation and sustaining of civil religion. In other words, should a Durkheimian or a Rousseauian interpretation prevail in the analysis of civil religion, or could they be combined as suggested by Marcela Cristi (2001:10–13, 237–242; see also Cristi and Dawson 2007)?

The article is organised as follows: In the introduction the article recaptures relevant topics in the discussion of civil religion, both in general and in the Nordic countries. Then follows a brief discussion of the Danes’ use of Dannebrog followed by an analysis of the 15th of June parades and their background. It is also shown that the flag is still a central symbol for Danes, in private and in politics. The article ends by a discussion of the secularisation and commercialisation of the use of Dannebrog and how this development may suggest a model, which places civil religious symbols and acts between three spheres of modern society: state, civil society and market.

General Aspects of Civil Religion

The concept of civil religion in modern states was introduced in Robert Bellah’s seminal article from 1967, «Civil Religion in America», and most of the theoretical discussions and many of the examples in the literature are placed in an American context (Bellah 1967; Jones and Richey 1974; Bourg 1976; Gehrig 1981; Mathiesen 1989; Cristi 2001: 47–89; Cristi and Dawson 2007).
Empirically, civil religion incorporates a conglomerate of myths, rituals, symbols and texts, which hallow the people or the nation by reference to something transcendent, usually called God. It should be noted, however, that when citizens, individually or communally, hallow the nation or their own belonging to the nation, they do not themselves identify their attitudes and acts as «civil religion» in these situations. In fact, no members of a group in a country would label themselves adherents of the civil religion of that country. Borrowing the categories of *emic* and *etic* from linguistics (Pike 1967), civil religion is therefore not an *emic* term, i.e. an insider’s term, unlike the labels of ordinary religions, e.g. Roman Catholicism, Judaism, or the Baha’i Faith, because nobody uses civil religion as an internal label (Warburg 2005a). I consider civil religion to be a purely *etic* term, i.e. an outsider’s term. It is an academic, abstract construction, which has proved its usefulness in the sociology of religion for analysing a range of diverse empirical cases where the nation or its people are hallowed in a transcendental frame of reference.

The civil religion of a given nation is not usually clearly differentiated either from the church or from the state (Coleman 1970). This is relevant when discussing civil religion in Denmark with its state-sponsored majority church. In connection with the later discussion of civil religion in the Nordic countries and the analysis of the 15th of June ceremony in Copenhagen I shall argue that the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church in this case plays a civil religious role together with representatives of both the state and civil society.

The idea of the existence of a civil religion in contemporary modern societies has been widely accepted in sociology, except by a few such as Richard Fenn who opposed it in a debate with Bellah (Fenn 1976; Bellah 1976). Despite its general acceptance, Bellah’s specific understanding of civil religion has been criticised for many things: for being ideological, unclear, inadequately substantiated, and for downplaying conflicts and special interests in influencing the American civil religion (Hughey 1983: 157–170; Mathiesen 1989). Some of this criticism ultimately reflects the different views on religion represented by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, respectively (Hughey 1983:171–173; Furseth 1990; Cristi and Dawson 2007). For Durkheim religion was an integrating, given factor in society; for Weber, religion did not have any *a priori* status but could be shaped and changed by competing social actors.

An illustrative example is Michael Hughey’s discussion of Lloyd Warner’s study of the Memorial Day Parades, which is often referred to, as it is one of the rare examples of a study of ritual in civil religion (Warner 1974; Hughey 1983:109–123). Warner’s own description is a classical Durkheimian interpretation of a ritual that serves to integrate citizens across individual creeds in a common commemoration which involves both the nation and God:

> Here we see people who are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox involved in a common ritual in a graveyard with their common dead. (Warner 1974: 97)

Hughey criticised this interpretation, showing that the parades also served as battleground for different competing groups which wanted to promote themselves or exclude
others (Hughey 1983: 109–123). This criticism is, however, directed towards Warner’s Durkheimian interpretation of the meaning of the parades and is not intended to invalidate the concept of civil religion as such.

Civil Religion – Bottom-up or Top-down?

A related problem emerging from the American discussion of civil religion was raised by Hammond (1980) and by Demerath and Williams (1985), and later pursued by Cristi (2001: 114–136). It concerns a Durkheimian interpretation of the concept of civil religion versus a Rousseauian interpretation. The latter considers situations where civil religion is created by the state to promote societal integration. The distinction between the two interpretations has often been left unclear and unresolved in the literature on civil religion.

This blur in distinction is rooted in Bellah’s original concept of civil religion, because he conflated the two interpretations in «Civil Religion in America» (Bellah 1967). In the introduction to his article Bellah argued for considering civil religion a Durkheimian religious dimension of society, and he suggested that it had been overlooked because it was foreign to a prevailing Western concept of religion (Bellah 1967: note 1). Later in the article Bellah referred to Rousseau and used presidential speeches, the Declaration of Independence and the American constitution as sources to the contents of American civil religion. Even though these «sacred scriptures» (in Bellah’s words) must be regarded as civil religion created by the state, Bellah also implied that these messages were in concord with popular sentiments about the characteristics and destiny of the United States. This implication, which may mainly hold for the old Protestant elite of the USA (Hughey 1983: 157–170), emphasised the Durkheimian interpretation again.

Cristi suggests that the two types of interpretation are best used as ideal types, which are opposite in their view of the origin of the elements of civil religion (Cristi 2001: 11–13, 237–242). Yet, they are not dichotomous, but constitute each end of a continuum along which different nations can be placed depending on the way their particular civil religion is constructed, expressed and sustained (Cristi 2001: 229–233). As short terms for the two types of interpretation Cristi used «civil religion» for the Durkheimian type and «political religion» for the Rousseauian type. The Durkheimian interpretation sees the creation of civil religion as a bottom-up process and focuses on civil society; the Rousseauian interpretation views it as a top-down process with a focus on the role of the state.

Both interpretations have obvious limitations. The Durkheimian interpretation with its functionalist implications tends to emphasise concrete examples of civil religion as expressions of the traditions of the masses, adopting a majority-oriented, hegemonic view on national culture. The issue of integration versus conflict in civil society has not been resolved satisfactorily by the Durkheimian interpretation, which is exemplified by Hughey’s criticism referred to above.
The Rousseauian interpretation casts a complementary light on many empirical examples of civil religion, and it also pays attention to the political use of civil religious themes. The Rousseauian interpretation prevails, for example, in the discussions of the priestly and prophetic types of American civil religion (Marty 1974; McGuire 1997: 193–194; Cristi and Dawson 2007). However, it cannot stand alone, because it does not take into account the issue of popular acceptance of such civil religious themes. One thing is to create a civil religion from the top in the spirit of Rousseau’s idea of a civil religion, another is the response in civil society: if there are largely indifferent or negative reactions towards the Rousseauian civil religion, it will fail, as exemplified by dictator Augusto Pinochet Ugarte’s (1915–2006) attempt of creating a Chilean civil religion to justify his coup-d’état (Cristi and Dawson 1996).

Civil Religion in the Nordic Countries – Durkheim versus Rousseau

In Denmark and the other Nordic countries the discussion on civil religion has centred around the question of whether civil religion in the form proposed by Bellah and others exists in the Nordic countries, or if it is something particular to the USA and linked specifically to her history (Harmati 1984; Riis 1985; Furseth 1990; Gustafsson 1997: 182–186). The prevalent view among Nordic sociologists of religion is that the Evangelical-Lutheran national churches in many respects fulfil a role of civil religion in society in addition to being purveyors of Lutheran Christianity on a broad confessional basis (Riis 1985; Sundback 2000; Andersen and Lüchau 2004; Warburg 2005a; Warburg 2006a).

This view, however, does not necessarily mean that for example Danish civil religion is completely contained within the frame of the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church. Historically, Danish civil religion and the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church were inseparable when the church was a state church headed by the absolute king of Denmark, but today the two are only partially overlapping (Warburg 2005b; Warburg 2006a). This conclusion is based on my studies of several national rituals in Denmark, where I have followed the urge of historian John Wilson (1974) that a study of such rituals would provide needed empirical substance for the possible existence of a civil religion (Warburg 2005a; Warburg 2005b; Warburg 2006b). I agree with sociologist of religion Göran Gustafsson that civil religion in the Nordic countries is related to the official religion – in the case of Denmark that is the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church – but that it also may include certain functions, which are not contained within the official religion when this is defined substantially (Gustafsson 1997:187–189). When worship of the nation takes place within the frame of the Evangelical-Lutheran church it is something additional to servicing the members of the church with Lutheran Christianity. It is noteworthy that this additional, civil religious function of the church is not unproblematic when viewed from a more confessional oriented Christian position, as noted by Pål Repstad (1995).
The question of whether a Durkheimian interpretation or a Rousseauian interpretation is most relevant has not been salient in the discussion of civil religion in Denmark. Nor, though, has it been overlooked, and Ole Riis, who initiated the discussion in Denmark, leaned implicitly on both interpretations. For example, when he explained how the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Denmark became the dominating institutional frame for Danish civil religion, he saw this development as the result of a deliberate attempt from the Social Democratic governments to ensure a generally accepted way of providing the people with religious services (Riis 1985). This is a case of an implicit top-down interpretation. Elsewhere, he points to the Danes’ Durkheimian sense of a common identity and destiny, and he discusses several examples of civil religion that clearly would fit with a bottom-up interpretation.

The conclusion drawn from the above is that in concrete situations Danish civil religion – and likely civil religion in general – seems to be formed and sustained by bottom-up processes (i.e. organised by civil society) as well as top-down processes (i.e. organised by the state) in interplay. This indicates that civil religion should be analysed as a multi-dimensional concept, requiring at least a combination of bottom-up and top-down interpretations. The two interpretations are *complementary* ideal types. By this term I mean that they represent two (or more) dimensions, which are needed together for an adequate, exhaustive analysis of a given phenomenon or event. As I see them, complementary ideal types are not mutually exclusive, nor do they occupy opposite ends of a continuum, as Cristi suggests (Cristi 2001: 229–233).

Figure 1 is a model of the juxtapositions of the two ideal types of civil religion, the Durkheimian type and the Rousseauian type. To the left is how I model the relation proposed by Cristi, to the right is my proposal of a complementary relation between the two ideal types. The circles with A and B denote a predominantly Durkheimian civil religion and a predominantly Rousseauian civil religion, respectively.

*Figure 1. Conceptions of the relation between Durkheimian civil religion and Rousseauian civil religion*

I shall later argue for also considering the influence of the market, after having discussed the empirical case, the Danish national flag, Dannebrog.
Research Questions and Data
The recurrent question addressed in this article is to investigate the hypothesis that the Danish national flag is a secular national symbol, which is also entangled with Danish civil religion. It is this entanglement that is covered by the expression that Dannebrog is «waving in and out of Danish civil religion». Data for investigating this hypothesis are retrieved from a broad range of different sources: participant observations at the 15th of June Parades (both in 2005 and a follow-up in 2006), manuscripts for speeches and sermons in the naval church on the 15th of June, pamphlets, newspaper clippings of letters, articles and advertisements, a broadcasted discussion of Dannebrog as a political symbol, Internet pages dealing with Dannebrog, a registration of the use of Dannebrog in advertisements in three daily papers and a local weekly in four weeks from mid-February to mid-March in the decades from 1947 to 2007, and secondary historical sources to the use of Dannebrog.

Dannebrog – A National Symbol with Divine Reference
Dannebrog is the official emblem of the Kingdom of Denmark. Historically, Dannebrog was primarily the banner of the Danish king and of the navy, and ordinary citizens were not allowed to use the flag. The strong national-liberal currents in the 1840s created a popular movement for civil use of the flag, but it was only in 1854 that its civil use was made legal (Adriansen 2003: 127–137). Since then, Dannebrog has developed into being the primary national symbol of Denmark, of Danes and of Danish identity, and it has been adopted by all levels of society.

Dannebrog is a national symbol with a clear reference to the transcendental. I am here alluding to the white cross on its crimson cloth and its myth of origin as a heavenly support to a Danish military adventure in Estonia in 1219. This transcendental frame of reference, which will be expounded below, makes Dannebrog an important civil religious symbol. This, however, does not imply that any use of Dannebrog is part of Danish civil religion. For example, the Danes’ private use of the flag to mark the birthday of a family member is hardly civil religion, because the purpose of hoisting the flag and putting small paper flags in the birthday cake is not immediately related to the meaning and existence of the Danish nation. The ubiquitous use of the flag among Danes to mark a birthday first and most means «happy birthday» to a Danish individual, and its expression of a banal nationalism among the Danes may only lurk in the background (Billig 2006). Dannebrog is here a festive symbol first, and only a national symbol next (see also Adriansen 2003:168–170).

In the 1850s the nationalistic bourgeoisie in Denmark introduced a custom of putting festoons with small paper flags on the Christmas tree (Adriansen 2003:137). This tradition is a civil religious use of the flag, because it connects the symbol of the nation with a religious holiday. Interestingly, the custom is sometimes condemned in confessional Evangelical-Lutheran circles, which confirms Repstad’s point above that
the mixing of civil religion with Lutheranism is not without its controversies. On the Christmas tree, Dannebrog is waving inside Danish civil religion.

In commerce, Dannebrog is conventionally used as a label on products to show their Danish origin. There is, however, a trend of an increasing and broader commercial use of Dannebrog. This development is of interest here, because commercial interests are becoming entangled in an intensified political discourse on the use and symbolic meaning of Dannebrog.

The public uses of Dannebrog are often of civil religious nature. Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church buildings often have a flagpole outside, and Dannebrog will then be waving during a service. The image of a white-washed village church with red tiles on the roof and the red-and-white flag hoisted outside is a recognisable national icon. This unification of church and nation is clearly civil religious, and Dannebrog is here waving inside Danish civil religion. Inside the church, it is also often seen that a standard with Dannebrog is present during a special service in the church, for example at some funerals and when commemorating a national historical event. An outstanding example of the presence of Dannebrog in the church is the service and parading on the 15th of June, the day connected to Dannebrog and its myth of origin.

15th of June – A Civil Religious Ceremony in Decline

The myth explaining the divine origin of Dannebrog is known to most Danes and runs as follows: In 1219, the Danish King Valdemar the Great invaded Estonia with an army, allegedly to convert the pagan Estonians to Christianity. A decisive battle took place on the 15th of June. The fight was tougher than anticipated, and the Danish army was in trouble. The bishop accompanying the army then prayed to God for help, raising his arms towards heaven, and the fortune of war began to turn. Weary of keeping his arms up, however, the bishop relaxed, but then the Estonian army began to push forward again. To keep up the Danish advance he therefore had to be supported by two helpers. The bishop’s prayers got further divine support when the red flag with the white cross fell from heaven and finally brought victory to the Danes.

The legend has no historical support; the first record of it dates from the 16th century, and the earliest record of Dannebrog being the banner of the Danish kings dates to the late 14th century (Adriansen 2003: 127–129). Nor is the legend unique, but seems to be composed of recycled mythological stuff: the cross appearing in the sky during a critical battle has several parallels elsewhere in Europe, and the invocation of divine help by raising priestly arms is found in Exodus 17: 10–13, where Moses prayed with his raised arms supported by Aaron and Hur before Joshua finally defeated Amalek. Despite its dubious provenience the legend served the growing Danish nationalism well in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. The myth was perpetuated in paintings, in songs, and in popular histories of Denmark, and since the late 19th century it has become part of Danish collective remembrance.

In 1908, a voluntary society, Danmarks-Samfundet, was formed with the purpose of strengthening the Danes’ love of their country and flag. Thanks to the efforts of the
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society, the 15\textsuperscript{th} of June became an official national flag day in 1912, and it still is (Adriansen 2003: 160–162). On this day the Danish colours are flying from public buildings, city buses, and in some private gardens too.

The home page of Danmarks-Samfundet carries the classical painting from 1809 by C.A. Lorentzen, showing the battle of 1219 with the flag falling from the sky through a sunlit opening between the clouds (Figure 2). The bishop and his two helpers are depicted to the left in the middle of the battle. In the foreground, the great news of the divine intervention are brought to King Valdemar sitting before a tent with a large cross on the top pole.

Figure 2. Dannebrog falling from heaven on 15th of June 1219. Painting by C.A. Lorentzen (1809).

Each year Danmarks-Samfundet, which has the younger brother of the crown prince as its royal protector, organises parades in about twenty places around Denmark. These parades are outdoor events, and only in some cases the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church is involved in the arrangement. In Copenhagen, an evening service is, however, held in the prestigious naval church Holmens Kirke, which is filled with flags and standards. In 2005, the priest held a sermon praising the red and white colours of the flag and placed them in a Biblical context, referring to the Song of Solomon 5:10, «My beloved is white and ruddy, Chief among ten thousands». The priest explained that this
verse had inspired the leading 19th century figure in the Danish Lutheran church, N.F.S. Grundtvig, who had alluded to Dannebrog when he praised Christ as white and red in several hymns (Thyssen 2005).

Following the sermon, a speech is delivered by a high ranking public figure, and in 2005 it was the chairman of the Danish parliament who spoke in the church. His speech opened as follows (Mejdahl 2005, my translation):

It is nearly eight hundred years ago that Dannebrog became our state flag. For these many centuries it has floated over Denmark in war and peace, in grief and joy.3 The flag – the banner of the cross – testifies that we are an ancient, Christian people.

In 2005, the year 1219 was, indeed, nearly eight hundred years ago. Of course, the chairman of the Danish parliament does not believe in the historical reality of the legend of 1219. Obviously, he reiterates the mythical origin of the flag as part of a ritual, which takes place in a church and stresses the close connection between Dannebrog and Christianity. This is civil religion endorsed from the top by the highest elected representative of the Danish democracy.

After this speech follows a ceremony in the church where the local branch of Danmarks-Samfundet donates standards and flags to different voluntary organisations of Danish civil society, such as scout groups and sport clubs. A member of the royal family, Her Highness Princess Elisabeth, a cousin to the reigning Queen Margrethe II, performs this duty. Afterwards, there is a parade through the city where the participants carry standards of Dannebrog to the tunes of popular flag songs. Until the 1960s these parades were big events attracting many hundreds, if not thousands of participants; today, the tradition is in decline, with about 180 persons in the church and 120 in the subsequent parade. In Odense, however, the event in 2005 gathered more than a thousand persons (Dølby and Petersen 2006).

The 15th of June parade in Copenhagen is not just civil religion created from the top. Danmarks-Samfundet is a voluntary organisation representing civil society, not the state. The many voluntary organisations which apply for and receive a flag from Danmarks-Samfundet – in 2005 59 flags and 120 standards were donated – represent a broad segment of Danish civil society, in particular the voluntary youth organisations (Dølby and Petersen 2006). This is the Durkheimian part of the 15th of June parades: without the recipients of the standards there would be no meaning of the ritual.

It is likely that most Danes – if asked – would regard the 15th of June parades as out-dated. This is, however, not so with other uses of Dannebrog. When thousands of football fans paint Dannebrog in their faces and wear silly hats in the colours of the flag, they are carriers of a recently invented popular tradition by which they celebrate the Danish nation at the international football matches.4 The ritual face painting and the dresses in national colours at football matches are part of an international trend, and it corroborates Fenn’s proposition that with secularisation official forms of national piety become more laicised (Fenn 2001: 125). A generation ago, this practice would probably have been regarded as disrespectful to the flag.
The football fans’ ritualised appearance and behaviour at football matches exemplify a worship of the nation on the borderline between civil religion and banal nationalism. The example is included in a functional definition of civil religion, but not in a substantial one. The scene has all the characteristics of a Durkheimian ritual expressing the feelings of the masses. It is not organised by the state, but depends on individual decisions of football fans to invest their time and money into this tradition. The reference to the transcendental is not obvious, however, and my conclusion is here that Dannebrog is waving outside Danish civil religion.

The face painting and national dress code at football matches also exemplify the commercial use of Dannebrog. The special hats and other red-and-white accessories for football fans have become commodities, branded under the name «Roligan» (http://www.roligan.dk/). Roligan is a pun which conveys an explicit distance from the violent British hooligans («ro» means «calm» in Danish).

The Commercial Use of Dannebrog

The classical commercial use of Dannebrog is the branding of products and companies to show their national origin. The commercial use of the flag has proliferated during the last decades, and its use has broadened; for example some businesses have begun to celebrate their own anthropomorphic construction of a «birthday» with flags everywhere (the word used by businesses is, in fact, «birthday», not anniversary).

The two examples shown in Figure 3 are typical. To the left is the traditional branding with a Danish flag to show the national origin of the product; to the right is an example of the commercial waving of the flag as a festive symbol – a trend, which also Adriansen has noted (Adriansen 2003: 168–170).

To substantiate that the commercial use of Dannebrog has increased I arranged a systematic survey of the advertisements in three Danish daily newspapers (Berlingske Tidende, Jyllands-Posten and Ekstra Bladet) and a local, weekly paper financed exclusively through advertisements (Villabyerne). In the survey it was recorded whenever an advertisement contained a drawing of Dannebrog or had Dannebrog integrated into the company logo. The two first newspapers are conservative, national, daily papers, the third Ekstra Bladet is the leading popular newspaper in Denmark. The survey covered four weeks (week 8 to 11, from mid-February to mid-March) in the years 1947, 1957, 1967, 1977, 1987, 1997, and 2007. The branch of business (clothing, food, beverages, house and garden, transportation and travel, service, political and voluntary associations, and other) was also categorised, and it was noted if the use of the flag was connected to a claimed «birthday» of the business.
Figure 3. Commercial uses of Dannebrog. To the left is a bag of pork rind cracklings, a traditional, popular snack with beer; to the right a wine company advertises with reference to its 4-year’s «birthday».

Figure 4 shows that the use of Dannebrog in advertisements has grown significantly in the recent decades. The total number of such advertisements in the three daily newspapers grew from 5 in 1947 to 26 in 1967 and then reached the present peak with 139 in 1997 and 132 in 2007. In the weekly Villabyerne, the number of advertisements with Dannebrog grew from zero in 1947 to 7 in 1987 and then doubled to 14 in 2007 (in a four week period). The number of pages and advertisements in these newspapers has by far not grown proportionally to this rise, so there is no doubt that the observed rise in the number of advertisements with Dannebrog represents a real and significant trend. The dominating branches using Dannebrog were house and garden (42% of all advertisements carrying Dannebrog) and transportation (36%). In 2007 the advertisers in Ekstra Bladet were innovative and for the first time they put Dannebrog on advertisements for poker games and erotic films, too (these count for the category of «other»).
No businesses celebrated their «birthday» with Dannebrog in 1947 and 1957; in the subsequent years this particular use of Dannebrog began to grow to 4% in 1967, and to 23% of all advertisements with Dannebrog in 2007. This trend, which borrows from the birthday traditions of the family sphere, exemplifies what Anthony Giddens calls commodification, whereby he means the pervasive invasion of the private by the market (Giddens 1991:196–201). In this case the market «steals» the private joy of birthday celebrations by borrowing the central symbol of the birthday, Dannebrog.

The increased commercial display of Dannebrog as a festive symbol with Dannebrog flags here and there and everywhere in the public space is in resonance with an undercurrent of new nationalism among Danes. As expressed by an author of the advertising trade: «With seismographic accuracy, advertising must register the floating spirit of the times. No cultural trend without the involvement of advertising» (Groot 1996). This holds also for advertising peoples’ perception of the use of Dannebrog — as will be discussed in the following, the symbolism of the flag has acquired a new significance during the last decade.
Who Owns the Flag?

All national flags are surrounded by ceremonies elevating them above any other piece of coloured textile, and the use of Dannebrog is no exception. There are traditions and rules for how it should look and how it can be used in different contexts. It is noteworthy that Denmark does not have a specific flag law, but various regulations and rules can be found spread out over many state documents, from the 17th century till today. The civil use of Dannebrog develops continuously, and the most reliable reference for the proper use of the flag can be found in a leaflet issued by Danmarks-Samfundet (2006). In a civil religious perspective this indicates, as before, that the traditions around Dannebrog are created and modified in both a top-down and a bottom-up process, apparently without much of a conflict between top and bottom, between state and civil society. In the particular case of Danmarks-Samfundet this lack of conflict may be due to the fact that it is difficult to distinguish sharply between state and civil society in this organisation. It is a voluntary organisation grown out of civil society, but its top has always been dominated by officers and state officials, and it enjoys royal protection. The home page of Danmarks-Samfundet can also be reached directly through the official homepage of the state of Denmark, www.danmark.dk.

However, the use of Dannebrog does create conflicts, although not with regard to its proper handling, but with regard to its use as a rallying symbol of the Danish people. For several generations until the 1970s, it was a popular perception that Denmark was a culturally, religiously and ethnically homogeneous, sovereign state – and this was not far from reality (Christiansen 2007). This image has been seriously challenged by the demographic and political developments during the last two decades with increasing immigration and tighter European integration.

Dannebrog is central in the rising political fights over Danish identity. The popular perception of how Denmark once was and should still be is most overtly expressed in the party programme of the Danish People’s Party, the most nationalistic of the political parties in the Danish Parliament: «Denmark is not an immigrant country and has never been so. Therefore, we will not accept a transformation to a multiethnic society» (Dansk Folkeparti 2006, my translation). This party was founded in 1995, and after the general election in November 2007 it represents nearly fourteen per cent of the voters. As the only party it has incorporated the flag in its party logo. Danish People’s Party is also known for having taken Dannebrog to its heart at all its meetings and rallies, perhaps to such an extent that some Danes are beginning to feel uncomfortable about using Dannebrog. The following case is a remarkable and unusual indicator of such feelings – a registering of the «floating spirit of the times» (cf. Groot 1996 above).

In April 2005, the advertising agency Propaganda McCann had paid for and placed a whole-page advertisement in a leading Danish newspaper (Politiken 2005). The headline of the advertisement went: «We want Dannebrog back», and the advertisement deplored that the Danish flag had become associated with nationalism and xenophobia, because the flag should be for everybody, also for those of a different opinion than yourself. The text acknowledged that perhaps Dannebrog did not drop down from heaven on 15th of June 1219, but it has served the Danes well, anyway. Therefore, the
advertisement urged everybody to use the flag in all possible – and impossible – situations, because in this way «we might recapture the flag and again make it the property of all the people». With this expression the advertisement deplores that Dannebrog, in Billig’s terms, cannot serve the banal nationalism of the Danes, because someone (read the Danish People’s Party) has begun to wave the flag pretending that this waving represents general feelings of the Danish people (Billig 2006: 39–40).

In the perspective of civil religion, this advertisement is telling. It refers to the 15th of June myth, which shows that the authors of the text take the public knowledge of this civil religious myth for granted – it is not just a relic of national romantic sentiments of the past two centuries. The text presents an urge to wave the flag – not necessarily as a civil religious symbol – but with a reference to the common myth which explains why the flag is the property of all Danes. As God-given it has never been meant to be the flag of one particular political party. The advertisement also reveals an understanding of the symbolic significance of the flag, suggesting that the strategy for recapture must be symbolic and activist.

The activist strategy has, in fact, later been adopted by Margrethe Vestager, the leader of the Danish Social-Liberal Party, which is a party in opposition to the Danish People’s Party. At an important roundtable discussion in May 2007 she wore conspicuous earrings with Dannebrog and declared that «we want Dannebrog back from the Danish People’s Party».

This policy was re-stated at the Social-Liberal Party’s annual meeting in September 2007 (Børsting and Mygind 2007). Another member of the Danish parliament, the Danish-Pakistani Kamal Qureshi from the Socialist People’s Party, has also declared that he wants the same flag back, which he was proud to wear as a young traveller (Qureshi 2007). Finally, on 14 November 2007 Propaganda McCann again brought the whole-page advertisement «We want Dannebrog back» (Berlingske Tidende 2007). The timing was appropriate: it was one day after the general election in Denmark on 13 November where the Danish People’s Party gained an additional seat in the parliament.

David Kertzer has expressed this political struggle over national symbols most succinctly: «It is hard to argue with a flag, especially if you do not have another flag of your own» (Kertzer 1988: 184). Among Danes there is no powerful alternative flag to Dannebrog, so there is only this flag to fight over. This interest in the use of Dannebrog and its meaning is a parallel to Furseth’s notion that civil religion is most likely to be reinvigorated in times of national crisis (Furseth 1994). In the case of Denmark today, the crisis is that the Danes’ national identity is perceived to be questioned, when globalisation brings about increased immigration, and the European integration is seen by many as a loss of national sovereignty.

The advertisement’s call for a fight over Dannebrog seems at a first glance to comply with a Durkheimian interpretation, because it is a private initiative. However, it should be realised that the advertisement is first and foremost a business initiative, not an initiative emerging from civil society. It is a catchy way for the advertising agency Propaganda McCann to attract new customers in a time where ethical and/or politically progressive business principles are in the vogue. It is an indicator of the trend among certain business sectors to show «corporate social responsibility» and take
part in a wider range of societal issues and beneficial activities (Carroll 1998). With the advertisement Propaganda McCann expressed the interests of the market to take part in a political debate around Dannebrog as a national symbol.

A few months after the first printing of the advertisement, Dannebrog became a controversial symbol internationally. The international crisis in connection with the Danish Muhammad cartoons in 2005–2006 led to anti-Danish reactions in several Muslim countries, and for the first time Danes could witness their flag being burned at demonstrations.

Three Dimensions of Civil Religion?

Both the shaping of the 15th of June parades and the rules of the use of Dannebrog reflect a combination of bottom-up and top-down influence on the use Dannebrog both inside and outside a civil religious context. This may reflect the special corporative nature of Danish political and social organisations, where many decisions are taken only after a process of reaching a consensus between the political establishment and representatives of civil society (Christiansen 2007). The examples of concrete uses of Dannebrog in a civil religious context indicate that the most fruitful strategy for analysing civil religion – at least in a Danish context – is to apply a Durkheimian interpretation and a Rousseauian interpretation, and that they are regarded as complementary to each other.

In several of the previous sections I have suggested that the market should be considered, too. In the case of the 15th of June parades, the traditional civil religious use of Dannebrog, the market element in is not very pronounced, which is confirmed by the annual accounts of Danmarks-Samfundet (Dølby and Petersen 2006). Both business thinking and mass behaviour drive the ritual face painting and dress-up in Danish colours at the international football matches. The increasing commercial use of Dannebrog as a festive symbol – as documented in the analysis of the newspaper advertisement – is a secularisation of Dannebrog through commodification. But even commercial thinking and professional business objectives are not always disentangled from the civil religious symbolism of Dannebrog, as shown in the Propaganda McCann offensive for the recapturing of Dannebrog. The decline of the 15th of June parades and the rise of the market-based uses of Dannebrog exemplify, as discussed before, a secularisation where the use of this civil religious symbol change from institutionalised forms to more disperse and laicised forms open to negotiation (Fenn 2001: 125).

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas is noted for his delineation of the development of the public sphere in Western democracies (Habermas 1989). Habermas departs from an idealistic conception of a bourgeois public sphere in the 1700s as the main arena of political discourse among equals, and he shows how this public sphere, which is set in civil society, has been increasingly intertwined with the state in modern society and also increasingly influenced by mass media and commercial interests (Habermas 1989: 181–235). Both the 15th of June parades and the Propaganda McCann advertisement are manifestos in the public sphere, where they contribute to a current discourse on the meaning of Denmark. More broadly, the commercial interests in the use of Dannebrog should be seen as a part of this general commercialisation of the public sphere.
My cautious conclusion from this is that I find that even a combination of the Rousseauian interpretation (top-down or state-driven) and the Durkheimian interpretation (bottom-up or driven by civil society) is inadequate for grasping and analysing civil religion as it is manifested in the beginning of the 21st century. We must also incorporate the commercial aspects of civil religion, because these aspects are not just derivatives of state interests or citizens’ interests in civil religion; they are a third avenue of creating and influencing elements of civil religion.

This consideration of a relation between the market and civil religion has occasionally been forwarded in the literature. For example, Hughey’s discussion of Warner’s article on the Memorial Day parades points to the business advantages of these parades (Hughey 1983:109–123; Warner 1974). More recently, Wilson (2003: 72–74) draws attention to the market as a place where the «American religion» is expressed.

The Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church, which plays a central role in Danish civil religion, does not in my view represent an independent avenue of influence. Formally, the church is part of the state, and the sermon in the naval church is official religion (Gustafson 1997:186–189), but in this case with a civil religious turn. When the church participates in a civil religious ritual like the 15th of June service, its contribution represents a state influence on Danish civil religion. This conclusion does not conflict with that in other situations the Danish Evangelical-Lutheran church could rather be considered to be part of civil society because of its internal autonomy with respect to direct state influence, the lay influence through the parish councils, the liberty of the individual priests with respect to the sermons, and the non-commercial and non-coercive scope of its activities.

These considerations suggest a tripartition of the dimensions of civil religion, as is illustrated in the model shown in Figure 5. State, civil society and market interact with each other in the public sphere, and civil religion – which belongs primarily to the public sphere – is influenced by and influences all dimensions. The model stresses that civil religious symbols and acts are affected by the tension field between state, civil society and market.

Figure 5. A model of civil religion between state, civil society and market
Future studies along these considerations should investigate the influence of the market expressed in concrete examples of civil religious symbols and events. Such examples may substantiate my proposal that in modern society the meaning and existence of the nation and the rights and duties of its citizens also seems to have become the matter of business.

Notes

1 I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article and the editors for valuable, critical comments.

2 See for example Warburg 2006b on the church service held in memory of a battle at Fredericia during the Danish civil war of 1848–1850.

3 This sentence is an allusion to the oldest of the Danish flag songs (ca. 1807), *Vift stolt på Kodans bølge*, verse 1, line 5–6, which describes the flag as floating over heroes who sing in the embrace of death.

4 The tradition is dated to the mid-1980s (Adriansen 2003:168).


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