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THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IN THE NORDIC
REGION AS SEEN FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF
THE NORTH SEA

Introduction

The publication of the first issue of the English-language Nordic Journal of Religion and Society (NJRS) calls for special recognition. It represents a significant addition to the «stable» of English-language journals in the sociology of religion. Such additions have been rare in the last few decades, so this is an occasion that not only warrants a warm welcome but also gives rise to a number of questions. One wonders what will be the long-term implications of the decision to re-name the 18-year old Tidsskrift for kirke, religion og samfunn and to publish mainly articles in English. What will the decision's impact be on Nordic sociologists of religion? And what will be the impact on sociologists of religion outside the Nordic region of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden? Only the passage of time will answer these questions, but it is immediately clear that sociologists of religion who can read English, but who cannot read articles in any of the Nordic languages, are now in a better position to appreciate the work of their Nordic colleagues. Indeed, the first issue of the re-named journal is particularly informative for «outsiders» because it documents the history and institutionalisation of the sociology of religion in each Nordic country. But, as I shall suggest below, the journal now has the opportunity to do much more than disseminate the writings of Nordic scholars to a wider audience.

This article has two main objectives. The first is to reflect critically on the distinctiveness of the Nordic sociologies of religion as they are presented in the five articles by Göran Gustafsson, Pétur Pétursson, Pål Repstad, Ole Riis and Kirsti Suolimaa about the historical development of the sociology of religion in, respectively, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Finland. These articles constitute the NJRS 18 (2) 2005. The second objective is to identify a few of the opportunities and challenges that may arise for the NJRS in the foreseeable future.
A few preliminary notes of caution are necessary at this point. First, I must acknowledge that it is risky to comment on material about which one is not especially well-informed. I am well aware of how little I know about religion – and the sociology of religion – in Nordic countries. Nevertheless, I have learned a lot from the presentations that Nordic sociologists of religion have made at international conferences and seminars. Moreover, it has become increasingly common for them to publish some of their work in English, to collaborate in research programmes with colleagues from other regions of the world, and to employ conceptual tools that are widely used outside the Nordic region. In short, my ignorance is not complete, thanks to the willingness of many Nordic scholars to communicate in English when the occasion seems to warrant it.

A second reason for caution is that the differences between Nordic countries in terms of both religion and sociology of religion are strong enough to make an outsider hesitate before making observations about them collectively. Indeed, the articles in the NJRS 18 (2) delineate some of these differences very clearly. Nevertheless, the same articles are careful to identify areas of interest that are common to all, or most, of the five countries. In the circumstances, then, the best policy is to seek a balance between analysis at the Nordic level and at the national level – whilst also not forgetting that wider Baltic, European and global forces must be taken into account as well. As a reminder of this point, I shall refer to «Nordic sociologies of religion» in the plural. This will also have the advantage of signalling the – perhaps limited – diversity of approaches to the sociology of religion within each country.

It has to be added, as a third note of caution, that it would be unwise to use the articles in the NJRS 18 (2) as the sole basis for assessing the Nordic sociologies of religion. The articles do not claim to be exhaustive of the full range of Nordic interests in the sociology of religion. Nor are they necessarily representative of the full range of interpretations about the history and characteristics of the sociology of religion practised in the Nordic region. Interesting and informative as the articles undoubtedly are, they are unlikely to be the last word on their topics.

Finally, by way of qualifying the aims of my argument in the next two sections, it should be emphasised that the Nordic region is not different in all respects from some other regional or linguistic groupings in the sociology of religion. For example, it shares with the communities of, say, Dutch- or Japanese- or Spanish-speaking sociologists of religion the same dilemma about the use of the English language. Pressure is growing to adopt English as the primary language of scholarly discussion at the international level. This not only places the users of other languages at a disadvantage but it also runs the risk of introducing a bias in favour of concepts and theoretical ideas that originate in English-language communities of scholarship. In fact, languages are not neutral: they structure perception and comprehension in powerful ways – especially when there is no convenient translation of concepts from or to English. For example, since French notions such as «la dérive sectaire» and «la laïcité» have no exact equivalent in English-language discourse, their reception among American, British or Australian sociologists of religion has been, at best, sceptical or bemused, and, at worst, dismissive. One can only hope that an international collaborative project will, one day, produce a dictionary of «difficult-to-translate» ideas. Paradox-
Nordic Distinctiveness

The biennial conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion that took place in Helsinki in 1989 was the first major occasion on which sociologists of religion from many parts of the world had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the work of their colleagues from Nordic countries. The experience for me was both fascinating and humbling. It was evident that the orientation of the sociology of religion in some, if not all, Nordic countries was more closely aligned to mainstream churches than was common in the rest of Europe. Equally, it seemed to me that the empirical basis for sociological investigations of religion in the Nordic countries was more robust and, in some ways, more precise than in many other places, including the UK. This view was confirmed by Göran Gustafsson's account (2005:138–141) of the pioneering contributions of Berndt Gustafsson to the establishment of the sociology of religion as an academic subject in Sweden. The fact that Berndt Gustafsson showed enthusiasm for the work of Gabriel Le Bras – the doyen of the intensely empirical «religious sociology» in post-World War II France – is further confirmation of the orientation towards empirical study of primarily church-oriented religion. The situation was even clearer in the case of Finland, where the Evangelical Lutheran Church had taken the initiative to use sociological research methods in order to understand better «its position as a 'church for the people'» (Suolinna 2005:16). In Iceland, according to Pétursson (2005), sociology of religion in the post-war period had some of its roots in church ethics and practical theology. By contrast close relations between sociology and churches did not emerge in Norway until the 1990s. Even today, «the links between sociology of religion, church bureaucracies and theological schools are weaker than in the other Nordic countries» (Repstad 2005:162). This supports my claim about the historical prevalence of close ties between the sociology of religion and churches in Nordic countries, whilst nevertheless noting that Norway is a partial exception in so far as these ties did not become close until relatively recently.

Given the centrality of churches to the civil society – and to the civil administration – of most Nordic countries, the orientation of many sociologists of religion towards studies of churches in the 1960s and later is entirely understandable. I shall return to this point later. Moreover, a similar situation prevailed at that time in some other countries such as the Netherlands and Spain. What is perhaps more surprising to a Briton is that the sociology of religion did not develop mainly within university departments of sociology in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, it tended to develop in the research departments of churches and/or in departments of theology and religious studies – despite the fact that, in Finland at least, «the theological faculty greeted the sociological research interest with a certain degree of ambivalence»
(Suolinna 2005:110). By contrast, Repstad (2005:170) outlines a growing convergence between sociological interests and those of the church in Norway: «the institutional growth in Norwegian sociology of religion is clearly more present in theological and church-oriented settings than in sociological ones». This is associated with a concern that «the relatively close position Norwegian sociologists of religion have to the church is resulting in an over-communication of the role of religion in contemporary society» (Repstad 2005:170–171). This concern may also be allied to the warning issued by Riis (2005:189) against the dangers of subsuming the sociological study of religion under «religionism» or «theologism», whilst, nevertheless, acknowledging at the same time that «sociologism» presents its own dangers. The case of Sweden is different only in so far as the number of professional sociologists of religion increased in the 1980s and 1990s, although the new positions were not necessarily in departments of sociology (Gustafsson 2005:146). Furthermore, the rate of growth slowed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In this respect, the history of the institutionalisation of the sociology of religion in Nordic countries is significantly different from that in, say, Japan, France, Germany and most of the English-speaking countries. The case of Denmark calls for special comment, however, because, as Riis (2005:177–187) argues, a number of pioneering sociologists of religion had previously been based in social science departments, but it was only at the University of Aalborg that the subject continued to thrive in a department of sociology after the 1980s. The other major developments all took place either in departments of theology and religious studies or outside universities altogether. The institutional «trajectory» of the sociology of religion in Denmark in the late twentieth-century therefore seems to be unusual in comparison with other Nordic countries and is, no doubt, germane to Riis's criticism that the «attachment to general sociology» has weakened in that country (2005:190). In a similar vein, Suolinna implies that «the sociology of the church» has also developed in Finland without strong reference to the kind of general sociology that might produce «a critical discussion on religious organizations and religious lifestyles» (2005:116–117).

This is the moment at which I would like to return to a point made earlier about «church-oriented sociology». It strikes me that few commentators have examined the ambiguity of this widely used phrase since its appearance in Thomas Luckmann's influential book *The Invisible Religion* (1967). He was undoubtedly correct to observe that sociologists of religion tended to confine their empirical studies – at that time – to phenomena that occurred in formal religious organisations (or «churches»). Luckmann was also correct to argue that important religious phenomena occurred outside the confines of churches. This much is clear, but the theoretical implications of Luckmann's arguments are ambiguous. Many sociologists of religion have inferred from these arguments that church-oriented sociology lacks any connection with general theoretical ideas – just as C. Wright Mills (1959) had previously criticised the mainstream of American sociology in the 1950s for allegedly practising «abstracted empiricism». Nevertheless, it seems to me that the sociology of organisations – religious and non-religious alike – is not necessarily doomed to be a-theoretical (Beckford 1973, 1985; Harris 1998; Chaves 1997). In fact, the sociological analysis of churches can draw on a wide range of theoretical ideas from the sociology of religion.
as well as from general sociology. In other words, if there is a problem with church-oriented sociology it is not necessarily because this area of research is disconnected from theory. It is more likely to be the case that church-oriented sociology simply neglects to take account of religion outside churches. I would therefore find it interesting to know more about the theoretical underpinnings of the extensive research conducted in Nordic countries into churches as organisations.

One of the reasons for the relative lack of concern with general sociology among sociologists of religion in at least some of the Nordic countries may be that the influence of formative thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber was weaker than in many other countries. Leaving aside the materialist and socialist influences that Pétursson (2005:121–122) detected in late nineteenth-century analyses of religion in Iceland, the so-called classics of modern sociology did not determine the conceptual framework within which sociologists of religion worked in other Nordic countries. In fact, the followers of Westermarck in Finland actively resisted the growing influence of the classics – as mediated by Parsons and Merton in the USA – in preference for their own evolutionary and comparative perspectives (Suolinna 2005:109). Moreover, no conscious attempt was made in Sweden to establish «a particular school of thought in sociology of religion» (Gustafsson 2005:149).

Moreover, Norwegian sociologists of religion are said to be increasingly critical of «all types of structural, functional and cultural determinism» (Repstad 2005:168). And Riis (2005:187) characterises the state of the sociology of religion in Denmark as «empirical richness combined with theoretical poverty» – despite Theodor Geiger’s introduction of theoretical ideas from Germany in the late 1930s.

In short, it seems that the balance between empirical investigation and theoretical thinking in Nordic sociologies of religion is weighted towards the former. It also appears to be the case that the relative lack of priority accorded to theoretical concerns follows, in part, from the relatively weak influence of the classics of Western sociology during the formative years of the 1960s and 1970s. Further examination of this question would be interesting.

Another distinctive characteristic of some Nordic sociologies of religion is that the initial interest arose from phenomena that were highly specific to particular countries. A clear example concerns Iceland, where «one of the first and most prominent tasks on the agenda of sociology of religion … was to examine the question of why spiritism and theosophy had such a strong position» (Pétursson 2005:123) at the time of opposition to the first home rule government in 1904 and in connection with agitation for full national independence from Denmark. Another distinctive aspect of the development of sociological perspectives on religion in Iceland had to do with debates about the extent of continuity between modern religion and the hero mentality of pre-Christian values. In Sweden, by contrast, the agenda for sociologists of religion was shaped more by the long-standing authority of «church statistics» and by the question of how religion could contribute to the welfare state. In at least two Nordic countries, then, the problematics of «de-christianisation», secularisation and privatisation – which tended to dominate the sociology of religion in many Western European countries in the mid-twentieth-century – took second place to other interests. By contrast, my impression is that issues concerning social ethics and moral integration had con-
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siderably greater salience in Nordic sociologies of religion than elsewhere in Europe or North America. This is understandable in the context of advanced welfare states where social democratic forms of politics tended to be dominant in the mid-twentieth-century.

It is also noticeable – but perfectly understandable – that certain analytical themes that were popular in other European sociologies of religion in the late twentieth-century did not attract the same degree of attention in the Nordic region. For example, questions about the relationship between social class and different styles of religion were less frequently raised there. Similarly, issues associated with gender relations seemed to take longer to surface in Nordic sociologies of religion than in some other places. And, with the partial exception of Denmark, sociological interest in new religious movements was never as intense in the Nordic countries as in Germany, the USA or the UK.

Opportunities and Challenges

If the conclusion of the previous section is that Nordic sociologies of religion are distinctive without being entirely different from their counterparts in other parts of the world – especially the English-speaking parts – the question arises of how far this distinctiveness will be maintained in the future. For, in view of the increasingly rapid and intense communications between all regions of the world these days, there is good reason to believe that national and regional specificities could be eroded.

My personal impression, based on varying degrees of familiarity with developments in the communities of sociologists of religion working in the English, French, German, Italian or Spanish languages, is that some measure of cross-national and cross-linguistic standardisation has been taking place for the past two decades. Let me be clear about this. I am not arguing that a rigidly uniform agenda is either being imposed or welcomed. My argument is simply that the same – or similar – topics and ways of posing sociological problems are occurring with increasing frequency in the publications, conferences and research proposals of sociologists of religion in different parts of the world. Perhaps the notion of a «regression towards the mean» is a good way of conveying my understanding of this process. As I suggested earlier, this is undoubtedly facilitated by the dominant position of the English language in international communication and by the numerical strength of sociologists of religion in countries such as the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that this process is just another effect of McDonaldization (Ritzer 1995). Something more subtle and more interesting is happening. The process amounts to a form of creative adaptation to, and refraction of, global forces – at the level of countries and regions. Roland Robertson’s (1992) interpretation of «glocalisation» is applicable to this phenomenon because it emphasises the dynamic interplay and mutual adaptation between local and global forces. The way in which Pentecostalism had spread to most regions of the world by the end of the twentieth century, for example, can be understood partly as a result of interaction
between transnational ideas about the Holy Spirit and local ideas about spirits (Lehmann 2002).

In relation to Nordic sociologies of religion, then, the pressure to adopt perspectives, problems and concepts originating mainly in Anglo-American discourses throws down a challenge. But it also creates an opportunity for Nordic sociologists of religion to respond on the basis of their own «local» resources. This could take the form of «filtering», i.e. extracting only those elements of Anglo-American ideas that are suitable for the purposes in hand. Alternatively, it could take the form of deliberately rejecting the ideas that are dominant in other parts of the world in order to focus on issues that are considered more significant or salient in Nordic contexts. Both of these possible responses to the opportunity to develop distinctively Nordic ways of engaging with sociological ideas about religion that are fashionable in other regions of the world would generate fascinating material for the NJRS. Moreover, any such articles would be all the more useful for appearing in English. This would make it more difficult for the English-language community of sociologists of religion to ignore the specificity of Nordic religion – and of the Nordic sociologies of religion.

There is also a possibility that articles published in the NJRS in English will have an impact on the large communities of French-speaking sociologists of religion. A growing number of these scholars choose to read publications in English; and some are interested in publishing their own work in English. Indirectly, then, the NJRS could act as an intermediary between Nordic scholars and the largest single community of sociologists of religion in Western Europe – French-speaking scholars not only in France, Belgium and Switzerland but also in countries where the French language is widely used for intellectual purposes such as Italy, Spain and Portugal.

The possibility that the NJRS could indirectly strengthen communication between the English-speaking and French-speaking communities of sociologists of religion is particularly interesting in connection with relations between states and religions. The extremely close relations that still exist between states and Lutheran churches in Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Norway are in sharp contrast to the constitutional separation between the Republic and religions in France since 1905. (The case of Sweden is different – but no less sociologically interesting – because a constitutional separation between religions and the state was introduced there in 2000.) Furthermore, the contrast between most of the Nordic countries and France is timely and important because the recent growth of religious – and ethnic – diversity in both of these parts of Europe constitutes a major challenge to some prevailing ideas about the proper place of religions in late modern societies.

To be more precise, the apparatus of laïcité in France not only places major constraints on the use of religion in the institutions of the Republic but also promotes an ideology of secular republicanism that supposedly transcends religious and ethnic differences in order to promote the unity and indivisibility of the Republic. The report of a major commission (Stasi 2003) recently concluded that laïcité remained essential to the values of national solidarity and cohesion. A new law of 14 March, 2004 seemed to reinforce this opinion by forbidding students in state schools from wearing symbols or clothing that flaunts membership of a religion.² In short, the increasingly diverse character of French society, which now includes at least four million Muslims, serves
to reinforce the official and popular view that the institutions of the Republic, such as publicly funded schools, hospitals, military units and prisons, must preserve their neutrality and their freedom from the influence of all religion. The French enthusiasm for *laïcité* is not confined to politicians: support is widespread among intellectuals and academics as well.

There is also support in some quarters for exporting *laïcité* to other countries, including the People's Republic of China. On 10th December 2005 – the one hundredth anniversary of the French law of separation between churches and the state – a «Universal declaration on *laïcité* in the twenty-first century» was published in Paris and signed by many academics from various countries. The Preamble begins by acknowledging the growth of religious and moral diversity; and the thrust of the following eighteen clauses is that states can only treat human beings and religions with equality if the political realm remains free from the domination of any particular religion. As such, *laïcité* is said to be essential to democratic life. But the covering letter makes it clear that the primary aim of the Declaration is to reject the idea that *laïcité* is necessarily confined to France or even Europe or the West. The aspiration to global applicability could hardly be clearer.

By contrast, Nordic countries have Lutheran Churches close to the centre of their civil society. Moreover, only Sweden lacks a close relation between the Church and the state. And, in the case of Denmark, the Church is actually administered by a government department. Nevertheless, David Martin (1978:23), linking what he called Scandinavian churches to the pattern in England, argued that Protestant churches, especially Lutheran and Anglican ones, are more subject to the state than the Catholic church and for that reason adapt themselves more rapidly to changes in the character of the state... Hence, as the establishment becomes more liberal or socialist the church adapts itself to the new situation and only retains the strictly doctrinal and subjective sphere of faith as its sole prerogative.

If this characterisation is correct, I would not expect the response to growing religious and ethnic diversity to lead to *laïcité* in Nordic countries. On the contrary, my expectation is that social democratic regimes with advanced welfare states would try to find ways of integrating minorities, as such, into the public sphere – not excluding them in the name of a strictly individualistic notion of equal rights. Indeed, my research on chaplaincy in the prisons of England and Wales, for example, showed that liberal Christian chaplains were instrumental in «brokering» or «sponsoring» the provision of religious facilities for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh prisoners in the late twentieth century (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). Meanwhile, Lene Kühl (2001, 2004) has documented the past and present struggles taking place in Denmark to respond to growing religious diversity among prisoners and members of the armed forces. Similarly, Inger Furseth (2000, 2001) has analysed the obstacles – and the limited progress – towards the accommodation of members of religious and ethnic minorities in Norwegian prisons and the armed forces. None of these developments in Britain, Denmark and Norway is free from controversy or conflict, but the fact is that countries with a Lutheran state church or an Anglican national church are predisposed to *seek* the integration of new minorities on a communal basis.
It seems unlikely, then, that *laïcité* will spread to the Nordic countries or to the UK despite the fact that they display low levels of participation in Christian worship and low levels of subscription to conventional doctrinal beliefs. It is much more likely that the particularities of the «organic» relations that Lutheran and Anglican churches tend to have with states will condition the «local» responses to the growth of religious and ethnic diversity. In other words, the would-be «universal» solution to problems associated with high levels of religious diversity – i.e. the exclusion of all religion from the public sphere – is probably incompatible with local circumstances.

One of the important roles that the NJRS could play is, therefore, to serve as an English-language medium for arguments about possible alternatives to the increasingly «missionary» posture of the advocates of *laïcité*. Sociologists of religion in the Nordic countries – and the UK – are well placed to explore these alternatives to would-be global ideas about the response to religious and ethnic diversity. Another, closely related topic on which Nordic scholars have considerable expertise is the contribution of religious organisations to the theory and practice of welfare states. Here again, it is helpful to have an English-language journal – that is not American – in which to publish articles that do not conflate the American idea of «faith based initiatives» with the Nordic and British patterns of more organic, institutional co-operation between religious organisations and agencies of the state. Equally, studies of the relations between religions and social welfare policies should not overlook the difficulties that arise when levels of practice in Christian churches are low and when levels of religious diversity are rising (Beckford 2005). The experience of Nordic countries could be a valuable corrective to the one-sided – but opposed – views that prevail in countries such as the USA and France.

It would also be interesting and helpful if the NJRS seized the opportunity to foster debate about ambitious theoretical ideas that are widely assumed to apply to the Nordic region – by virtue of its location in Europe, the West or late modernity – but that may, in fact, have only limited or conditional applicability there. I am thinking of, for example, rational choice theory or «subjective rationality» (Stark and Finke 2000); the notion that religion is undergoing restructuring («recomposition» in French) rather than decline (Hervieu-Léger 1993); and the idea that the logic of late modernity allows religion to survive as «the return of the repressed» (Giddens 1991). Without wishing to endorse the claim of Ole Riis (2005:188) that «a theoretical framework is needed to interrelate all the findings about the role of religion in social life», I believe that sociological understanding of religion can benefit strongly from empirical attempts to test the usefulness of high-level theoretical assumptions and assertions. More to the point, I also believe that this kind of conceptual and empirical work is particularly valuable for being conducted outside the regions where the theoretical ideas originated. For, unless theorists specify that their ideas are relevant to only certain countries or regions of the world, the implication is that the ideas have universal applicability. The question in my mind, then, is how far the sociological analyses of religion in Nordic countries today confirm or disconfirm the high-level theoretical ideas that, by definition, are supposed to be applicable there.
Conclusion

From my British point of view, the availability of the NJRS as an English-language journal in Europe offers many advantages. In practical terms, it will be a useful complement to the Belgium-based Social Compass, which publishes roughly half of its articles in French and half in English. And it will become a European rival to the Paris-based Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions, which has historically published most of its articles in French.

In more intellectual terms, the NJRS will be all the more valuable if it provides a forum for arguments that transcend the current fashions in the USA for studying congregations as the primary unit of analysis in the sociology of religion and for explaining religion exclusively in terms of rational choice or subjective rationality. These particular preoccupations undoubtedly have an important place in the agenda for sociologists of religion in many countries, but a more even-handed approach would foster a wider range of intellectual problems, theoretical ideas and explanatory strategies (Beckford 2003). I doubt whether I am the only British scholar who welcomes the arrival of another English-language journal for the study of religion and society. And I look forward to reading articles in the journal that will expand the theoretical and empirical horizons of all sociologists of religion.

NOTES

1. Nevertheless, post-war researchers took the writings of Durkheim and Weber as «their starting point» (Suolinna 2005:109).
2. Article 1 of Law number 228, passed on 14 March, 2004 holds that «Dans les écoles, les collèges et les lycées publics, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit.»

REFERENCES


