Religious Complexity in Nordic Public Spheres

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ABSTRACT
This article studies empirically the complexity of religion in the public sphere by systematically comparing the five Nordic countries. Sociologists debate if current trends in the West point to secularization or a return of religion (deprivatization, desecularization, or post-secularity). By drawing on the social science complexity reference, this article offers a critique of current scholarship and introduces the concept of religious complexity. The empirical study asks how religion is regulated, debated, and negotiated in the state, the polity, the media, and civil society in the Nordic countries since the 1980s. It is based on multiple sources of data. The analysis shows several religious trends at different levels: A growing secularization at the individual level, and the deprivatization of religion in politics, the media, and civil society. The conclusion outlines the religious complexity in the Nordic countries and discusses possible explanations that link the different and seemingly inconsistent trends.

Keywords:
Deprivatization, Nordic countries, post-secularity, religious complexity, secularization
INTRODUCTION

During the last forty years, the Nordic countries have become relatively religiously diverse. While Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland developed their policies on religion in contexts characterized by historically dominant and privileged Lutheran churches and small religious minorities, these traditional ways of managing religious diversity are facing limitations. In recent decades, questions about the equal treatment of all religions have come to the forefront. As in many other European countries, the issue of the role of religion in the public sphere appears at the core of this debate.

In the 1980s, most sociologists of religion assumed that the growing trend was secularization. A Nordic research project, led by Göran Gustafsson, concluded that the major trend during 1930–1980 was a weakening in the official presence of religion, with the exception of the media (Gustafsson 1985, 263; 1987). Religious changes in the 1970s and 80s led sociologists to question the secularization theory, and some claimed there was a return of religion in the public sphere (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Habermas 2006). Recently, several large empirical research projects have analyzed religion in public places in Europe (Bäckström et al. 2010, 2011; Christoffersen et al. 2010; Ferrari and Pastorelli 2012; Woodhead and Catto 2012), and in Canada (Lefebvre and Beaman 2014). What is obvious from these studies is the need to understand the many seemingly inconsistent findings by turning away from theories that focus on single dimensions of either secularization or return of religion, toward theories that emphasize complexity.

This article asks: Has religion become more visible, and perhaps more contested, in public life in the Nordic countries during the past thirty years? Is there a growing presence of religion in the Nordic states, politics, media, and civil society during this period? Do the trends go in the opposite direction, where religion is increasingly disappearing from these areas? Or is there religious complexity in the sense that multiple – and seemingly inconsistent – religious trends co-exist at the same time? To answer these questions, a Nordic research group conducted a comparative study of religion and state, politics, media, and civil society in all five countries since the 1980s. To understand the role of religion in these countries further, data on religious trends in the populations were included (Furseth 2018a). This article discusses first some key concepts and theories, research questions and data, before it analyzes religion in the Nordic populations, states, politics, media, and civil society. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and the implications of the findings are discussed.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Debates on the public sphere are strongly affected by Habermas’ work (1989/1962). He analyzed a part of society located between the state and civil society that is open and available to all, separate from the private, where citizens participate in conversations about the common good in society and its pursuits. The public sphere has a dual role: As a meeting place for citizens and a channel for communications and interests towards the state or government. The public sphere consists of institutions and forums committed to the improvement of society, free speech, and dialogue that cooperate and communicate (Engelstad et
The focus here is on the visibility of religion in various national public spheres: 1) the media, as they filter public communication, 2) civil society groups, or national religious interest groups and interfaith organizations that express issues publicly, and 3) parliamentary politics. The relationship between the public sphere and politics is complex. Politicians depend on input from the public sphere, while the public sphere is also the object of political regulation (Adut 2012, 247). Finally, we address 4) the state, as its relation to religion has proven significant for policy formations on several issues (Benson 2009, 188–89; Kirkham 2013).

SECULARIZATION OR RETURN OF RELIGION?

While several scholars have observed both a growing secularity and religious assertion (Davie 2015; Stolz et al. 2016; Woodhead and Catto 2012), there is a lack of theorizing regarding the presence of multiple religious trends. As noted, sociologists debate if current trends in the West point to secularization or a return of religion (deprivatization, desecularization, or post-secularity). Orthodox secularization theory (Berger 1967; Bruce 2011; Wilson 1991) has been criticized because it does not account for the visibility of religion in the public sphere. A main problem with Berger’s (1999) theory of desecularization and Habermas’ (2006, 2008) notion of postsecularity is the conceptual fuzziness. This makes these concepts difficult to use in empirical studies (for further critique, see Furseth 2018b).

A more promising approach came with Casanova’s (1994) idea that differentiation and individual secularization took place at the same time as deprivatization, or a greater visibility of religion, at the civil society level. However, a weakness in these theories is that they fail to account for multiple, and seemingly contradictory, religious trends that appears at the same time. There is, therefore, a need to develop new concepts to analyze the religious situation in contemporary Western societies.

RELIGIOUS COMPLEXITY

The concept of religious complexity draws on insights from the social science complexity frame of reference and the sociology of religion. Since “complexity theory” is not a unified theory, it is common to speak of complexity as a frame of reference (Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 79, 233), which is characterized by an emphasis on ruptures, nonlinearity, and rejection of reductionism (Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 17–38; Thrift 1999, 33–39; Walby 2007, 456–57). This article uses some insights offered by theorists who emphasize complexity that can be useful in a study of various religious trends. In what follows, the concept of religious complexity is introduced before some implications of using complexity as a frame to study religion is addressed.

Here, religious complexity is used as a meta-theoretical concept that refers to the presence of several, sometimes contradictory, religious trends that may co-exist at the same time at different levels in society. In contrast to deprivatization, which refers to meso level phenomena (Casanova 1994, 219–21), religious complexity refers to a broader set of phe-
nomina: The co-existence of religious decline, growth and change at macro, meso, and individual levels, and multiple religious forms at each level.

Wuthnow (1997, 248–49) was the first to use the term “religious complexity,” which he understands to mean religious diversity. Our argument is distinct in that religious complexity is broader than religious diversity. Religious complexity may exist in relatively homogeneous societies, as in countries with a dominant religion that experiences both religious decline, growth, and change at different levels. It is more difficult to think of religiously diverse societies without some form of religious complexity.

Also, Wilde and Glassman (2016) use a similar term, namely “complex religion,” which they define as the ways in which “structures of inequality are deeply intertwined with religious group membership” (2016, 408). Their term refers to an intersectional approach that focuses on multidimensional social stratifications, where religion intersects with structures of gender, race, ethnicity, and class inequalities (Wilde 2018). Religious complexity is different, as it focuses on processes of changing religious trends at different societal levels.

In the following, the discussion centers on three selected ideas from the complexity frame of reference that are relevant to developing the concept of religious complexity. First, the complexity frame of reference is concerned with the relationship between different levels in empirical analyses. Many secularization theorists tend to link levels of analysis (Gorski and Altinordu 2008, 58) and reduce societal secularization to the organizational and individual levels (Berger 1967; Wilson 1991). Various return of religion theorists also reduce from one level to another, either in an upward direction (Berger 1999) or upward and downward direction (Habermas 2006, 2008). Sociologists who emphasize complexity reject upward and downward reductionism and treat each level as a separate hypothesis (Byrne 2005, 99, 102–3; Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 20–24, 43–47, 57; Urry 2005, 45; Walby 2007, 462–63). Religious complexity means that different religious trends exist at various levels, and that multiple religious forms coexist at the same level and show different patterns of growth, decline, and change.

Secondly, social development is often described in a hierarchical relationship. Many secularization theorists emphasize the hierarchical link between modernization and secularization (Bruce 2003, 252; Dobbelaere 2009, 600–7; Wilson 1991, 155) and grant little autonomy to religion at meso and individual levels (Chaves 1994, 754). The complexity frame of reference suggests that changes are reciprocal (Byrne 2005, 105; Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 180–82; Urry 2005, 4; Walby 2007, 463). Rather than focusing on differentiation as a single directional impact, an alternative approach is to leave it open to empirical studies to see the different ways in which religion at macro, meso and individual levels is linked and change each other.

A third issue is related to views on social change. Most secularization theorists use long-term and somewhat linear perspectives (Berger 1967, 106–13; Bruce 2011, 4; Casanova 1994, 13; Martin 1978, 4; Wilson 1991, 150–51). The complexity frame of reference stresses ruptures, path dependence, and non-linear changes (Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 17–20, 22, 34, 148, 187–88; Pierson 2004, 142–53; Urry 2005, 45; Walby 2007, 463–64). By using complexity as a frame to study multiple religious trends, it is possible to move away from perspectives that predict single and coherent patterns toward a more contextual approach.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA

The earlier Nordic study (Gustafsson 1985, 1987) selected three years for more detailed study: 1938, 1958 and 1979. Our study concerns change since the late 1980s, which led us to follow the same structure and study 1988, 1998, and 2008, with many updates until 2014, when our project ended, and some updates until 2019. The present study focuses on five areas. The first has to do with religion at the individual level. Are the Nordic populations becoming increasingly secular? Or are they more religious? This is studied by analyzing European Values Studies. The second addresses religion and state. Do religion and state become more differentiated in the sense that there is a growing separation between them? These relations are studied by examining constitutional amendments, formal arrangements, and law making. Are the religion and state relations the same at the macro-level as they are at the level of public institutions? This is studied by examining religion in public institutions. Do the states demonstrate complexity in the form of more differentiation and involvement in religious issues at the same time?

The third area is the political sphere. Has religion become more visible and politicized in recent decades? Here, parliamentary debates are analyzed. Fourth, debates on the public visibility of religion largely take place in the media. To which extent has religion been visible or ignored in the Nordic media since the late 1980s? We examine: 1) Journalism on religion in the daily press, and 2) Religion in lifestyle magazines and films. The fifth area addresses the meso level, the faith and worldview communities. Have they become more visible in the public sphere or more marginalized? Here, we study the interfaith infrastructure and Norwegian leaders of faith and worldview (secular humanist) communities. Finally, we ask if the findings are consistent in all five areas and show an increasing or decreasing visibility of religion. Or do the findings show complexity in the sense that there are multiple and contradictory religious trends at different levels that appear at the same time?

Before the analysis, we will briefly specify what is meant by the visibility of religion, which is a key concept in this article, but also elsewhere in the research literature (see Hjelm 2015). Köhrsen (2012) argues that in order for public communications to be considered religious, the religious actors must refer to “a supernatural – transcendent – reality” (Köhrsen 2012, 280). Mia Lövheim and Marta Axner (2015) criticize Köhrsen’s restrictive view and expand it by introducing a fourfold typology that distinguishes between: 1) religious actors who perform religious communications, 2) religious actors who perform nonreligious communications, 3) nonreligious actors who perform religious communications, and 4) nonreligious actors who perform secular communications (Lövheim and Axner 2015, 39–40). The approach used here is to view religion to be public if categories 1–3 are fulfilled.

In this study, the concepts of visibility and presence of religion are used interchangeably in a descriptive sense. The focus is on the invocation of religion as a topic in political deliberations and the media. The valorization of religion in politics and the media is also studied by examining how religion is addressed as an issue, i.e. how it is debated and framed. This study also focuses on the role of religion at the level of the state and public institutions. Finally, it analyzes the visibility of religion at the meso level by studying institutional arrangements, and the public presence of faith and worldview communities and their leaders.
Some secularization theorists claim that the presence of religion in the public sphere is not sufficient to conclude that religion has social functions, power or authority (Bruce 2012, 159–60; Chaves 1994, 762). This is a somewhat naïve understanding of visibility, as visibility is related to power and status (Adut 2012, 252). The visibility of religion may not mean that its dogmas have influence. Yet, its growing presence has consequences for religion and state relations, law making, and institutional arrangements. At the same time, visibility of religion in the media may imply not more social influence, but rather a growing contestation (Lundby 2018). The complexity frame of reference reminds us that one cannot reduce from a public presence to individual religiosity. The latter points to the significance religion has for individuals, while the former shows the public presence of religion as a topic, either in a descriptive way or because it is valued or contested.

NORDIC POPULATIONS

Before we begin the analysis of religion in the public sphere, we want to provide a brief description of the Nordic countries and religious trends in the Nordic populations. The Nordic countries are small, although their populations have grown since the late 1980s. From 1988 to 2019 the increase in Sweden was from 8.4 to 10.0 million; from 5.1 to 5.8 in Denmark; from 4.9 to 5.6 in Finland; from 4.2 to 5.4 in Norway; and from 251,000 to 340,000 in Iceland. Population-wise, Sweden is the most populous; Denmark, Finland and Norway are in the middle, and Iceland is much smaller. Immigration accounts for the population growth, since all countries have aging populations with below-zero population growth, in spite of higher birth rates than other Western European countries (Kivisto and Wahlbeck 2013). These countries have a variety of immigration rates due to different policies. Sweden has the highest immigration rates; Norway and Denmark are in the middle, while Finland and Iceland have the lowest rates.

In the Nordic countries, the Lutheran majority churches were closely intertwined with the state from the Reformation in the 16th century until the 19th century. During 1988–2014, the proportion of the populations that are members of these churches declined from 90–66 percent in Sweden, 88–74 percent in Finland, 88–75 percent in Norway, 90–78 percent in Denmark, and 93–75 percent in Iceland. In addition, the “nones” have grown in all the countries, but more so in Finland (10–24 percent) and Denmark (9–19 percent) than Norway (3–13 percent) and Iceland (2–12). There are no Swedish data on this group.

Another trend is the growth of people who belong to faith communities outside Christianity. They have grown from very few in 1988 to a little over 1 percent in Sweden and Denmark in 2014, and as much as 3 percent in Norway, and 2 percent in Iceland (Table 1).
Table 1. Members in registered faith communities outside Christianity, 1988–2014. N and percent of total population*

<table>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>66,369</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>100,239</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,333****</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway****</td>
<td>4,488</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>53,416</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2,285</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2,918</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1,096</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The table shows official membership rates. The actual number of participants is most likely higher.
** Data are for 2013.
*** Data unavailable.
**** Not including members of registered Muslim communities, as data were unavailable.
***** The figures are for 1980 and 1999, as data were unavailable for 1988 and 1998.

In all the countries except Iceland, Islam is the second largest religion in 2014. In Iceland, Buddhism is the second largest religion. The number of members in faith communities outside Christianity is much higher in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark than in Finland and Iceland, which reflects different immigration rates. Although the percentages are relatively small, they show steady growth, which has transformed Sweden, Norway, and Denmark into relatively religiously diverse societies.

Large parts of Nordic populations are members of one faith community or another. At the same time, studies show that they are increasingly secular (Botvar and Schmidt 2010; Norris and Inglehart 2004).

Table 2. Belief in God in the Nordic countries. European Values Study 1990–2010. Percent

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Den</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>1030</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the European Values Studies from 1990–2010 show that belief in God is declining, except in Denmark (Table 2). The amount that does not believe is growing, except in Sweden, where people with doubts have increased. The EVS surveys also show a decline in attendance at religious meetings. About half of all Nordic people never attend religious meetings, with the highest in Sweden during 2008–2010 (66 percent) and the lowest in Denmark (44 percent).

Another trend is a shift in religion itself. Religion has begun to move outside the established institutions, and the religious scene has become more differentiated. There has been a growth in holistic spirituality, and the more individualized and subjective approach to
faith, dogma, and practices affect several different religious traditions. The contemporary Nordic religious landscapes are characterized by religious trends that seemingly go in different directions of declining majority churches and growing religious minorities, more nones, and a growing secularity and individualization, which puts pressure on the arrangements that previously gave the majority churches a place of privilege. These and other religious questions are raised in political debates and in the media and addressed by the faith and worldview communities. These are the topics for the remaining part of the article.

RELIGION AND STATE

Casanova’s (1994) neo-secularization theory offers strong support for the differentiation thesis. Has religion and state become more differentiated in the Nordic countries during the last three decades? The following is structured, first, by examining the legal regulation of religion and secondly, by religion in public institutions. The church–state relations in the Nordic countries began to change slowly in the twentieth century. The first and most profound change came in Finland, as religion and state were formally separated as early as 1919, although the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland continued to function much in the same way as its Nordic counterparts. Finland has two “official folk churches,” the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Orthodox Church. After the introduction of a new church act in 1993, the parliament can only ratify church law, while the church synod has authority over elections, organization, diocesan administration, and the appointment of bishops (Kääriäinen 2011, 160; Seppo 2010, 93–94). The Orthodox Church Act from 2006 gave the Orthodox Church the right to propose its own church law, and the synod has the legislative authority over church order, administration, and operations. A new church law in Iceland from 1997 made The Evangelical Lutheran National Church of Iceland an independent religious association with status as a legal entity. Even if the country’s president remains the formal head of the church, executive authority and administration was transferred to the bishop’s office and the church synod obtained legislative powers (Petursson 2011, 194–95).

Church and state relations also changed in Sweden in 2000, which involved amendments to the constitution and new laws. The Church of Sweden became a legal entity with legislative authority and executive administrative competence. In 2012 church–state relations changed in Norway with a constitutional amendment and full implementation in 2017. The Church of Norway is a legal entity, the church appoints bishops, and the monarch is no longer the head of the church. Yet, the constitutional stipulation of the Evangelical Lutheran faith as the official state religion was substituted with the Church of Norway as the “Norwegian folk church.” During the past thirty years, most Nordic majority churches have gained greater autonomy from the state. The only Nordic country with a traditional state church system in 2017 is Denmark, where the state’s legislative power in parliament has legislative authority, and Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs has executive authority (Kühle et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, the majority churches continue to have privileged positions. There are constitutional preferences for the majority churches in the Danish, Icelandic, and Norwegian constitutions. Despite the new laws on faith communities in Finland, Sweden, and
Iceland, the principles for state economic support of the majority churches have mostly remained the same. However, there are also changes that point to deregulation and less concern regarding these churches’ normative and legal privileges, as demonstrated in more permissive legislation and regulation of public holidays and abolition of blasphemy laws. Regulations of religious freedom and recognition of faith communities have remained constant, but the opportunities for faith communities to be exempted from legal requirements, such as gender equality and anti-discrimination, are more limited.

How is religion present in the public institutions, such as the military, prisons, and hospitals through chaplaincies? In the Nordic countries, most chaplains are ordained ministers from the Lutheran majority churches (Kühle et al. 2018). All Swedish minority religions’ chaplains in prisons and hospitals, half the Danish prison chaplains, and all Norwegian hospital chaplains are state funded. The Norwegian and Finnish militaries fully fund their chaplains, while the Swedish and Danish militaries do so in part. This means that the churches employ and fund most chaplains. During the last decade, Buddhist, Humanist, Muslim, and minority Christian chaplains have been included, although they remain few in number. Since the 1980s, growth as well as professionalization has characterized the chaplaincies in public institutions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In many ways, this trend indicates a growing presence of religion in public institutions.

The previous Nordic study found a growing differentiation and church autonomy in the Nordic countries during 1930–1980, except Denmark (Gustafsson 1985, 1987). This development has continued. One may expect Denmark to follow its neighbors, but differentiation is not a unilinear, systematic process. The Nordic religion–state relations are multidimensional and complex. In addition to differentiation, the ties between religion and state continue, as evident in the public institutions. At the same time, the growth in chaplaincies suggest a growing presence of religion at this level, and part of a European pattern of partnerships, whereby states make religions adjust to liberal ideals (Turner 2007, 124). The constitutional and legal changes in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland are justified by references to religious diversity and human rights (Kühle 2011, 114–15), while polarized debates in Denmark have limited multiculturalist claim making (cf. Kivisto 2011). A growing religious diversity is driving these complex developments, but relations between state and religion are also structured according to other concerns, such as the welfare state, gender equality, immigration, and integration.

RELIGION IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

During 1930–1980, religion was a “non-issue” in most Nordic political debates (Riis 1985, 34). Since then, has religion become more visible and politicized in Nordic politics? If so, how are these trends related to our claim of religious complexity? Drawing on Ivanescu (2010), the politicization of religion is understood as a process whereby religion is used in order to influence political debates. The politicization of religion may take various forms. Religion may be invoked in politics as an object in the form of identifiable religious actors, or in order to push other issues up the political agenda. The politicization of religion is here studied by analyzing the invocation of religion in parliamentary debates. Data consist
of parliamentary debates from Folketinget (Denmark), Eduskunta/Riksdagen (Finland), Alþingi (Iceland), Stortinget (Norway), and Riksdagen (Sweden) from the parliamentary years 1988/89, 1998/99 and 2008/09. A quantitative analysis was conducted whereby the number of speeches and debates with reference to religion was counted and categorized (see Lindberg 2014).

**Table 3. Number of parliamentary speeches and debates with references to religion. N***

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>102 (22)</td>
<td>21 (4)</td>
<td>42 (34)</td>
<td>130 (22)</td>
<td>309 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>643 (42)</td>
<td>64 (9)</td>
<td>69 (42)</td>
<td>409 (64)</td>
<td>277 (38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Debates in brackets

Table 3 shows that the total number of speeches related to religion in Nordic parliamentary debates increased during 1988/89–2008/09 in all the countries, except Sweden. The change is most obvious in Denmark, followed by Norway, although there is an increase in Finland and Iceland as well. The growing number of speeches with reference to religion is a possible indicator of the increased visibility of religion. However, the growth is not linear, but specific debates stand out with a much higher number of speeches in 2008/09 than in 1988/89, particularly in Denmark and Norway. Changes have taken place in Sweden since 2008, which suggest that similar changes are underway, as the populist right-wing party Sweden Democrats obtained seats in the parliament in 2010 and became the third largest party in the 2014 election (see Lindberg 2015, 579).

**Table 4. Keyword clusters in parliamentary speeches. Percentage of total number of speeches with references to religion***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
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<th>Sweden</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion in general and rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Christianity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Islam</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other religions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total percentage in one country in one year may exceed 100 percent, as some speeches may contain keywords from more than one cluster.
We also wanted to see if there was a change in the religious traditions that were debated. Table 4 shows that the most obvious change took place in speeches with reference to Islam, which grew the most in Denmark, while they were fewer in Sweden, and Norway was in between. The contrast is between these three Scandinavian countries and Finland and Iceland, where speeches with references to Christianity grew, while they declined in the Scandinavian parliaments. Table 4 also shows a growth in debates on religion in general and religion as part of human rights in all the countries except Finland. Issues related to religious diversity have been more commonly debated in the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish parliaments than in the Finnish and Icelandic ones.

Finally, we wanted to know which political parties made religion an issue and if they invoked religion in the debates in new ways. The analysis showed that the topic of organized religion (in particular the majority churches) has been relatively stable since the 1980s. However, religion has increasingly been linked to human rights, and to some degree security, especially in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. These findings suggest that religion has entered new areas of political debates, especially in the more religiously diverse countries.

These findings suggest a greater politicization of religion, especially in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and to some degree, in Finland (Lövheim et al. 2018). Religion has become more visible in Nordic politics since the late 1980s. These trends support our claim of religious complexity, as religion has become more diversified in terms of the political issues to which it is linked, and the range of religious traditions that are debated. The outcomes are also complex, as more debates on religion do not necessarily mean more influence for religious actors, but could mean more control of religion in the public sphere and thereby less influence for religious actors. These changes seem to be related to the growing religious diversity and the presence of right-wing populist parties. The latter tend to politicize religion as part of their anti-immigration policies. This is particularly evident in Denmark, and to some degree in Norway. Sweden and Finland demonstrate different patterns, perhaps due to the fact that these parties arrived later there.

RELIGION AND THE MEDIA

The presence of religion in the media is crucial in understanding religion in the public sphere. Are there signs that show religious complexity in the media since the 1980s? And to what extent do the media contribute to religious complexity? The media communicate religious expressions and narratives, play a significant part in constructing the representations of religion, and influence the understanding of religion in society, i.e. “mediatize” religion (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018; Lövheim and Lied 2018). Here, two forms of mediatized religion are studied: 1) Journalism on religion in the daily press, 2) The mixture of individual faith, religious and spiritual texts, and popular culture in lifestyle magazines (popular religion). To which extent are the two forms of mediatized religion present in the Nordic countries in the selected years 1988, 1998 and 2008? And how is religion visible in journalism on religion and lifestyle magazines?

The study of journalism on religion is based on the analysis of fourteen main newspapers from all the Nordic countries (four in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, and one in Denmark
and Iceland) (Lundby et al. 2018). All articles on religion were collected in four two-week periods in 1988, 1998 and 2008. The days before the major Christian holidays Easter and Christmas were included, as was the period preceding the Muslim celebration of Eid, and a period in October without any specific religious focus. A total of 2,352 single issues of newspapers were analyzed. A wide range of key words was used to search for articles that had to do with religion, and altogether 4,919 articles were coded. The analysis examined the coverage of religion by focusing on changes in focus, form, and character (religious tradition).

Table 5. Changes in focus through the share of main articles on religion. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(105, 152, 96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24*</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(518, 595, 490)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>26†</td>
<td>13†</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(159, 216, 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>40*</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>(483, 643, 614)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>24*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>(246, 310, 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27*</td>
<td>35*</td>
<td>40*</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>(1511, 1916, 1454)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* When comparing the proportion of main articles, the observed count is significantly different at the .05 level from other years.
† In Iceland 1988 and 1998 are significantly different from each other, but 2008 is not different from any of them.

First, changes in focus analyze how prominent religion is in the content of the article and the length of the article. Analyzing the development in the share of main articles gives an indication of the amount of attention the newspapers pay to religion. Table 5 shows that the prominence of religion in the newspapers has increased in all countries during the studied period, except in Iceland. The growth is primarily due to main news on Islam. The change in focus is so definite that it is reasonable to argue that religion increased as a topic in the Nordic secular press up until 2008.

Secondly, the change in form is related to changes in journalistic genres. The data show a decrease in religious columns and news on religion between the years we studied, while feature articles and editorials remain the same. However, the shares of debate articles increased between the same years in almost all the countries, especially the Scandinavian ones. From 1988 to 2008 debates on Islam grew in Denmark (25–57 percent), Sweden (2–27 percent), and Norway (2–12 percent).
Table 6. Changes in character through the share of different religious traditions. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1988</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority church</td>
<td>57.3*</td>
<td>52.2*</td>
<td>42.3*</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>4.1*</td>
<td>8.3*</td>
<td>13.4*</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World religions outside Christianity</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-institutional religion</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7†</td>
<td>4.2†</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1512</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>1489</td>
<td>4918</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a The categories “unclassifiable” and “religious critical” have been omitted, which explain why the table does not sum to 100.

b The category “world religions outside Christianity” covers Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Individually they are only sporadically covered, and we have collapsed them into one category.

c The “non-institutional religion” category consists of spirituality. This can also be found within the other categories such as spiritual Buddhism, but Buddhism is coded as Buddhism as long as it has an institutional dimension. Thus, most coverage of Eastern Buddhism falls into the “other world religion” category, while most coverage of Western Buddhism falls into the “non-institutional category.”

* When comparing the proportion of religious tradition, the observed count is significantly different at the .05 level from other years.
† With regard to non-institutional religion 1998 and 2008 are significantly different from each other, but 1988 is not different from any of them.

Third, the change in coverage of religious tradition shows (Table 6) that the newspapers’ coverage of Christianity is declining, while the coverage of Islam is growing. The highest increase in the coverage of Islam in the main news is in Danish newspapers (17–53 percent), followed by Sweden (2–19 percent), and Norway (3–13 percent), while Finland has a more continuous coverage (5–9 percent). Iceland is an exceptional case, with a growing coverage of the majority church. The secular press continues to have an interest in religion, with a shifting focus from the majority churches to Islam, especially in Scandinavia. The shift from religion as news to debates is also an indicator of the greater contestation around religion.

The data from the lifestyle magazines provide a contrasting coverage of religion. The analysis is based on a quantitative study of seventeen Nordic men’s and women’s magazines and family weeklies (Iceland excluded) from 1988, 1998, and 2008 (Gresaker 2013). These magazines had a strong coverage of Christianity, which was declining, except in Sweden. In contrast to the newspapers, the growing trend was alternative spiritualities as the main topic. There is also a slight increase in the coverage of Islam. A qualitative analysis of four Scandinavian magazines also shows how religion is contextualized in line with dominant discourses and the magazine logic. The coverage of religion in these magazines is linked to detraditionalization and individualization with a main emphasis on individual needs and interests.

This study shows that there have been signs of religious complexity in the media since the
1980s. Religion is definitely visible in the media, but the trends are not linear. Rather, the data showed more coverage of religion during some periods, but also continuity across the growing diversity, with national differences. The data also show that the media contribute to religious complexity. The representations of religion are formed according to various media logics. While the newspapers frame their religion coverage according to a conflictual perspective, the lifestyle magazines frame it as part of feelgood individualism. These findings show the importance of distinguishing between various representations of religion, and how religion becomes mediatized in different media forms.

**FAITH AND WORLDVIEW COMMUNITIES AND THEIR LEADERS**

Finally, we study the faith and worldview (secular humanist) communities and their leaders. While the Nordic majority churches used to have hegemony in the public sphere concerning religious issues, what new channels of communication have developed in this area during the past three decades? One possible channel is when representatives from faith and worldview communities form new organizations and bodies and make public statements (Haynes and Hennig 2013). The growth of interfaith initiatives is a worldwide trend (Halaloff 2013; Pearce 2012), which has also taken place in the Nordic countries (Furseth et al. 2018). The development of what we here call the interfaith infrastructures has taken place in three waves. The first wave began in the early 1900s and consisted of Christian umbrella and ecumenical organizations. The second wave began in the 1930s and represented the first attempts at forming umbrella and worldview organizations outside Christianity. The secular humanists formed organizations first in Finland (1937), followed by Norway (1956), Sweden (1979), Iceland (1990), and Denmark (2008), and the Jews formed umbrella organizations in Finland (1948) and Sweden (1953). The third wave began in the 1970s and consisted of umbrella organizations outside Christianity and interfaith organizations. The Islamic umbrella organizations were first formed in Sweden (1974), then Norway (1992) and Finland and Denmark (2006). The national multilateral organizations came in Norway (1996), Finland (2001), Iceland (2006), and Sweden (2010).

The bilateral and multilateral interfaith bodies act jointly as advocacy groups and lobby state and local governments. They promote dialogue, voice views on legal proposals, issue statements in the media, some on more general social issues. The interfaith infrastructure is more extensive in Norway, Finland, and Sweden, where the states support these bodies. There are several local initiatives in all the countries, which remind us not to reduce from national to local levels.

We wanted to pursue the question of visibility of religion by studying national religious leaders. Which views do they have on social issues? Do they engage in lobbying to promote them? In 2011–2012 we interviewed 28 Norwegian leaders from a wide range of faith and worldview communities, including some umbrella organizations and one interfaith body. The data showed that most leaders were relatively left-wing in their views on income inequality and environmental issues and favored less restrictive immigration and asylum policies. They were relatively conservative regarding sexual ethics, such as gender equality...
and LGBTQ rights. Many had lobbied members of government, governmental ministries, members of parliament, civil servants, local politicians, and used the media to affect public policies on religion. Most also participated in interfaith organizations.

The interfaith infrastructure seems to facilitate the public engagement of faith communities, and national leaders participate in the public sphere as other actors who attempt to influence public policies. The leadership study is not representative for the other countries, but it is likely that the results would not differ much, although more research is needed. The findings show deprivatization of religion at the civil society level. In line with the complexity frame of reference, the infrastructure at the national level did not necessarily reflect local levels in each country.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has introduced the concept of religious complexity to understand simultaneous, seemingly contradictory religious trends at different levels. Indeed, the present comparative study of religion and state, politics, media, civil society, and religion at the individual level in the Nordic countries since the late 1980s demonstrates the religious complexity at different levels in these countries.

In this comprehensive study, what were the main conclusions? We did not find single, definite trends of a return of religion in the public sphere. Even if the data show more public visibility of religion since the 1980s, religion never disappeared from the Nordic public spheres. There is, thus, a continuous pattern of religion in the public sphere, in addition to both secularization and deprivatization.

Another main finding is the complexity at the macro level. While a common assumption in secularization theory (Berger 1967; Bruce 2011; Casanova 1994) is that institutional differentiation between state and religion constitutes a driving factor in secularization, our study shows that Nordic religion–state relations are multi-dimensional. There are long processes of differentiation between the Finnish, Swedish, Icelandic, and Norwegian states and the majority churches, which seem to continue. Although the changes in church–state relations in Sweden and Norway often are described as separations, our study showed that the Swedish and Norwegian states, and the others, continue to be involved in the majority churches, and in the other faith and worldview communities either directly or indirectly. The Nordic states are linked to religion in many ways, and the differentiation thesis is in need of revision.

Our study also suggests that the relationship between the different spheres is dialectical. Some secularization theorists (Berger 1967; Bruce 2011) tend to assume a hierarchical link between religion and state differentiation and secularization. Our study shows that the changes in the different spheres are reciprocal and affect each other. The analysis of parliamentary debates shows that religion has become more visible as a topic, especially in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, which suggests a deprivatization of religion. Religion has also become more visible as a topic in the secular press in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. The changes in content go in the same direction as in politics: a declining focus on established Christianity, and a growing focus on Islam. On the one hand, the media reflect...
the overall religious complexity and the ways in which the state and politicians manage religious diversity. The greater presence of religion in the secular press may also be a result of how the faith and worldview communities and their leaders use the media to lobby their causes. On the other hand, mediatization refers to the process whereby religion is shaped by the formatting of the media. These findings show, in line with the complexity frame of reference, how these developments are reciprocal, where changes at state level, politics, media, civil society and individual levels are linked and change each other.

These findings call for more detailed studies of how developments in one sphere travel to another. Based on the findings in this study, it would be of interest to know how narratives of “religion as a problem” have travelled from one sphere to another. Here, the dialectics between politics and the media are of special interest. For example, where did the notion of “Islamization of society,” which is used in political debates in Denmark and Norway, emerge? How did it travel – from individuals to the media, to political deliberations, and in some cases, to law making? Did it travel from one country to another? Also, how have this and similar notions and debates affected different faith and worldview communities?

By conducting more detailed empirical studies of different spheres, we would gain more knowledge of how different spheres are linked and change each other.

The political analysis suggests that there is a growing influence and contestation of religion. Long-standing ways of managing religious diversity face limitations, and the question of how to facilitate equal treatment brings religion to the forefront in politics. The mere visibility of religion in the media does not necessarily mean that religious worldviews or dogmas have social influence. Yet, visibility may also indicate power. Even if the media frame Islam as a problematic issue, the coverage can also give Muslim elites and citizens visibility and chances to be heard.

In line with the complexity frame of reference, the changes in the Nordic state–religion relationships can be understood as a form of path dependency, i.e. a situation of stability where sudden ruptures appear that lead to new paths (Pierson 2004). The sudden change came with immigration, as new religious minorities put pressure on the established political arrangements concerning religion; the growing secularization, the growth of “nones,” as well as cultural and religious individualization, all contributed to this pressure. The Nordic countries’ contact with global laws on human rights strengthened the awareness of minority rights. These factors pushed the Nordic states and the privileged majority churches in new directions (Herbert 2013). Yet, these changes are not linear. While most of these states have become more secular, they are increasingly involved in the area of religion. By looking at the overall national policies on religion in the different countries, and the management of religion in public institutions, it is evident that the trends at different levels are not consistent and cannot be reduced to one another.

However, non-linear ruptures and path dependence are not the only explanations for the changing relations between religion and state. Our study also offers a critique of the complexity frame of reference for a limited view of social change. In addition to path dependency, gradual aggregate effects through layering (Mahoney and Thelen 2009) or a combination of both (Thelen 2011) can explain these institutional changes. In all the majority churches except the Danish one, democratic structures have been formed at different levels, which have made these churches more autonomous. Since the 1980s, the
aggregate effects also consist of new religious elements, such as new religious buildings, symbols, elites, and interfaith groups that are introduced in public. As the Nordic populations have become more secular during the same period, it is perhaps not so surprising that religion has become a more visible, and simultaneously, a more contested issue in the public sphere.

Our study shows the need to turn away from theories that predict single patterns toward a more contextual approach. The social science complexity frame of reference was useful in developing the concept of religious complexity, which helped us to tease out these different and inconsistent religious trends at different levels.

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