

JENNI HOKKA

An instance of secularization?

The Finnish online discussion of the issue of same-sex marriages

Introduction

In October 2010 one of Finland's four national TV channels aired a panel discussion dealing with gay and lesbian rights in society. Among the debaters were members of parliament from various parties, well-known actors and other public figures, as well as a priest, a bishop and other religious spokespeople. Although the conversation initially was about gay and lesbian rights in Finnish society overall, the conversation both in the TV studio, and especially in the public debate afterwards concentrated quite heavily on the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its attitude to homosexual people. The most debated topic became whether the Lutheran Church should and could grant same-sex couples the right to have a Christian wedding ceremony.

A great number of people publicly expressed their views on same-sex marriages. Further, the ways the Lutheran Church treated the same-sex couples, as well as the reasons and outcomes of a vast number of resignations from the Church were discussed, particularly in the online discussion forums, but also in newspaper articles and in letters to the editor. The public discussion spread rapidly, especially through the social media, whereas newspapers covered the issue after a slight delay.

People had already started to resign from the Church during the television broadcast and did so via a website provided by the *Vakaumusten tasa-arvo* (the Equality of Convictions Organisation). Despite the fact that the most prominent opponents of same-sex marriages on the TV panel were two MPs – including the chairperson of the Christian Democrats and a member of The Finns, a populist right-wing party – numerous people announced publicly that they had resigned as a protest against the intolerant views of the Church. During the weeks that followed a record number of people were to resign.¹

1 In less than a week following the TV panel, 24,000 people resigned, whereas in the whole previous year there had been 43,650 resignations. In 2010 altogether 83,097 people resigned (sakasti.evl.fi 2011).

Resignations from the Church are often perceived as a clear sign of the decline of religious beliefs and practices, which is an integral aspect of the secularization process. But lately the whole notion of a secularization of society has been questioned. Many sociologists have begun to doubt that a decline of religious beliefs and practices exists. José Casanova has proposed that we should rather talk about a de-privatization of religion rather than a marginalization of religion into the private sphere (Casanova 1994: 211–14; Casanova 2011: 60). A growing number of researchers have stated that the concepts of resacralization, desecularization, or a resurgence of religion would actually better describe the current situation than the theory of secularization (see Köhrsen 2012, Moberg *et al.* 2012). Yet the Nordic countries have often been taken up as examples of countries where the secularization theory still works (see Sidenvall 2010). The aim of this article is to examine whether the concept of secularization still has some explanatory power – if revised as Marcus Moberg and others (2012) propose – at least in the Nordic countries. Another aim is to contemplate what kind of knowledge has this special case – namely that of the same-sex marriage debate – to offer when thinking again about secularization?

According to José Casanova the theory of secularization entails three related but distinct processes: 1) the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, 2) the decline of religious beliefs and practices, and 3) the marginalization of religion into the private sphere (Casanova 1994: 211; Casanova 2011: 60). The online public discussion around same-sex marriage provides an interesting case when considering secularization in the Nordic countries, since here the diverse processes of secularization have become strongly intertwined. Furthermore, the online users themselves express their views on the above-mentioned issues. Firstly, the issue of a differentiation of society was tackled by the online users as they argued over the separation of church and state. Secondly, the participants conveyed what they believed in and what not, and furthermore, also assessed other people's beliefs. Thirdly, the discussion on religion was not marginalized but took place in a public arena. In addition, the participants debated on the public prominence of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society.

The studies of religion and religiousness have mostly depended on surveys and they have, no doubt, a great deal of useful information still to offer. However, one should pay attention to the fact that Europeans tend to understate their religiosity when asked about it (Casanova 2011: 67–8). As Grace Davie (2007: 27–30) has indicated, new kinds of methods are also needed in order to grasp the complex relations that people have towards religion(s)

and religiousness: not everything can be reckoned in numbers. This study approaches secularization from the perspective of online users and the discourses that they use when talking about religion, Christianity and the Lutheran Church. In my analysis I ask the following questions: How did the participants express their relationship to the Church and/or to religion? How was the place and role of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society seen in this debate?

The online discussions as research material

The research material collected for this study comes from two online discussion forums. Both are linked to an online version of a Finnish newspaper. The first one, *Helsingin Sanomat*, is a nationwide, capital-based newspaper that reaches around 1 million of the 5 million Finnish population. Roughly 50 per cent of these are located in the Helsinki metropolitan area. It is often considered as being liberal in its social values, but has also been seen to have a troubled relationship with the Lutheran Church (see Teräsvirta 2002). The second newspaper, *Kaleva*, is a provincial newspaper that reaches approximately 190,000 people, mainly in the north western part of Finland. In this area Laestadianism, a conservative Lutheran revival movement, has a strong impact, but the relationship between *Kaleva* and the Laestadians has also been tempestuous.

The online discussion boards have a reputation for being places for hostile verbal attacks and irrational, hastily written posts, and in many cases this is true. However, this is not the whole picture. Though the online discussions have not fulfilled the dream of a deliberative public sphere, there are still many reasons to look at them more closely. The basic characters of online conversation – interactivity and dialogue between the users, the opportunity to bridge physical distances between people, the potential for anonymity and the reduced feelings of social presence make the online discussions an interesting source of research material when analyzing ideological and political conversations (Stromer-Galley and Wichowsky 2011: 168–70).

In studying the discourses on religion the above-mentioned characteristics of the social media are also essential. This is especially the case in Finland as it can be argued that making public one's reflections on one's relation to religion is in some sense a taboo subject (for a slightly similar situation in Denmark and Sweden, see Zuckerman 2008: 12–14). Also those people who wish not to be taken as religious publicly are able to take part in an anony-

mous online discussion on religion. Further, the capacity of online discussions to connect people with different backgrounds and attitudes is clearly visible in the threads that I am analyzing. Among the participants there were people who stated that; 1) they had resigned from the Church, or 2) had considered resigning, or 3) wanted to maintain Church membership; and there were even those who stated 4) that they had considered rejoining the Church. Thus, the online discussions analyzed here are not merely 'religion online' (Helland 2000 in Campbell 2011: 234) or 'religion in cyberspace' (Karaflogka 2007: 14–15), but a combination of religious, non-religious and undecided views on the Church, on Christianity and on religion in general.

I concentrate on analyzing altogether five discussion threads: three threads from *Kaleva* and two from *Helsingin Sanomat*. The entire material consists of 1,141 individual messages. All the threads were launched within a few days of the TV panel discussion, which was aired on the 12th of October 2010. The time span of the threads varies, but all the messages were sent between the 13th and 23rd of October. There are more messages from *Kaleva* (748 in total) than from *Helsingin Sanomat* (393 in total) but the messages on *Kaleva*'s discussion forum tend to be distinctly shorter than those on *Helsingin Sanomat*'s board.

The two online forums are a bit different from each other. On *Kaleva*'s discussion forum you are able freely to start a discussion on your chosen topic. On the *Helsingin Sanomat* site the discussion forum is connected to a specific article. So in principle, people are expected to comment on the article and/or its topic. The tone of the discussion on these two forums is also slightly different, as the *Kaleva*'s discussion contains more poorly argued posts and some provocative messages. However, on both forums the majority of the messages involved quite serious and thoroughly validated reflections on same-sex marriages, on the Lutheran Church as well as on the teachings of the Bible.

On online forums there are often a few very eager participants who write to the board very frequently (see e.g. Mäntymäki 2006: 121–5). This applies also to my research material. Yet, these few active writers do not control the conversation; there is plenty of room for other participants' views too. Furthermore, as I am interested in the discourses relating to religion and the Lutheran Church, the amounts of messages of some writers are not so relevant to my analysis. When I use the term discourse I mean, following Michel Foucault, practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak, and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention (Foucault 1989: 49). Thus, when repeated discourses construct the way people see Christianity and the Lutheran Church, as well as its priests and membership. Furthermore,

discourses are essential to the formation of identities and shape the ways in which people see each other.

On the discussion board, the same writers often reiterate certain discourses again and again. On the other hand, some writers depend on more than one discourse in a single message – even contradictory ones. Especially when explaining the resignations of other people the users may also repeat other discourses relating to the Church and religion than which they publicly and knowingly adhere to. Hence, my interest lies not in the motifs or ideologies of individual writers, nor in the exact number of different kinds of messages, but in the various ways in which the Lutheran Church and its activities are currently understood and interpreted. My aim is to scrutinize the multiple ways in which people themselves explain their relationship to the Church, to its membership and to resignation in the context of the same-sex marriages debate.

In my analysis I have outlined five discourses which entail divergent, though closely intertwined, understandings and ways of speaking about the Lutheran Church. Each of them embodies a similar way of understanding the role of the Church, even though they may contain contradictory views and interpretations of the Bible, of same-sex marriages, or of the current situation of the Lutheran Church. The discourses are; 1) the Church as a promulgator, 2) the Church as a community, 3) the Church as a state institution, 4) the Church as a service provider; and 5) the Church as a meaningless institution.

Even though the two discussion boards have some differences in their structure and tone, all five discourses are clearly evident on both boards.

The Church as a promulgator

Within a discourse of the Church as a promulgator the stand the Church takes in the same-sex marriage issue is very meaningful in people's lives. Here the main role of the Church is understood as offering people guidance, teaching what the Bible says and saying what is right and wrong. Thus, the writings dependent on this discourse share this perception of the Church as an important moral instructor. In several messages the writer declares that he/she will decide on the basis of the stance of the Church whether to continue membership or to resign.

This discourse includes plenty of debates on what the Bible says (or does not say) about homosexuality. The argument on the teachings of the Bible follows a repeating pattern. While others hold out for the claim that according to

certain scriptures in the Bible homosexuality is a sin, some question the logic of such literalistic interpretations and question why only these commandments are taken as coercive while others are not (see similarities in Swedish youngsters' discussions in Lövheim 2007: 88–90).

Consequently, this discourse entails antithetical views on same-sex marriage, as the writers' interpretations of the scriptures of the Bible, as well as its role in the Lutheran Church differ from each other. The arguments based on literalistic interpretations state that the Church should stick to the teachings of the Bible. It is quite often stated that the Church ceases to be a church if it does not adhere to the teachings of the Bible. In these messages the problem of the Lutheran Church is not the same-sex marriage issue, but the reluctance of the Church to state publicly that homosexuality is a sin. This interpretation often entails a perception that the Lutheran Church is renouncing the true teachings of the Bible and, furthermore, is doing this in order to hold on to as many members as possible:

The Lutheran Church dares not to make its stand clear, for it wants to fawn on all the people. That is not morally right. The church should call sin a sin, even if someone gets hurt and resigns. This kow-towing in every direction irritates people more than proclaiming the truth. This is something that the church will find more clearly in the near future. The church has not learnt its own mission, which is the teaching by the Bible. The teachings are taken from the world though everything should be asked from God. The Church does not understand that when you bow in one direction you moon to the other. This does not work anymore, unfortunately. The church must not make fool of a man.²

The Finnish Lutheran Church has lately embraced the idea of the multi-voiced church which has its basis in the Lutheran doctrine of the general priesthood.³ But this idea seems to be confusing to many writers:

The reason for resignations is the spiritual emptiness of the church. They say themselves that its walls are wide and the roof is high. It does not make clear to a common man what the message of the church is. The

2 All the quotations are taken from the discussion boards of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Kaleva*.

3 E.g. the opening speech by the Archbishop Kari Mäkinen in the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in 2.5.2011 was entitled 'A multi-voiced Church necessitates adulthood, humility and braveness' (Mäkinen 2011).

thing you can notice is that they can't discuss with each other very deeply. One thinks one thing and someone else another. Then they sulk and scold each other in the papers. Disagreement is the thing that comes to your mind when you think about the folk church. What I am sure of is that disagreement has nothing to do with God's will. Why should one seek for guidance from such shepherds?

According to views of this kind the Church has failed in its role as a promulgator, either because its message is unclear (it is hard to know what the Lutheran Church says on this matter and who has the authority to represent the Church); or the idea of the multi-voiced Church is understood as disintegration, as in the previous example.

It is often claimed that modernity pressures religions into forms of pluralism, in the process relativizing their messages. Religions are seen to take on worldly commitments at the expense of 'the pure'. This pluralizing process is seen to be speeded up by an increasing personal autonomy in faith practice which encourages religions to further relativize their message in order to compete in a secular-media-defined marketplace of ideas (Hoover and Kaneva 2009: 9). Yet it is important to highlight the intricate nature of this process. The messages entail an expectation of the Church as the supreme authority which pronounces unto all the people what is a sin. But, after the Church ceases to be the kind of authority that these writers expect they may take their faith and religious practices into their own hands. Thus, the growing lack of religious institutions to control the beliefs and religious practices that secularization theory – and the mediatization theory presupposes (see Lövheim 2011) – seems to suit this case in the sense that the Church is really losing its authority. However, in the messages under analysis here the diminished control is preceded by feelings of having been betrayed by the Church in its inability to use its legitimate right and power to control its members and society overall.

In the writings that take a positive stand towards same-sex marriage the position of the Church is seen as hypocritical and not in line with the message of Christianity. Hence, these writers refer more to the main principles of Christianity – as they see it – than to certain scriptures.

Fortunately there is an option that you can resign from the church, for you can't resign from your sexual orientation. That is a thing that God has created. Why does the Church allow murderers to marry but not decent citizens? I don't understand this, for doesn't it say in the Decalogue that Thou shalt not kill, so that those kinds of people are against God's rules.

The position of the Church on the issue of same-sex marriage is important to these writers, and they hope for approval from the Church towards the same-sex couples:

From the agenda of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland you can find guidelines for the blessing of the home, the sowing of the crops, the harvest, the school, the industrial plant, the office or some other working place. I know that a motorway has been blessed, as well as the newest building of Parliament. One parish of Helsinki has arranged blessings for pets on the Senate Square. How hard it is to bless two loving people?

In these kinds of writings the practices of the Church are understood as being an integral part of its moral instruction. The conferring of a blessing on something or someone is mostly seen as approval of their existence by the Church – not as the presence of God in their lives and actions. In relation to the concept of secularization the outcome of the analysis is, again, complex. The messages encompass a perception of the Church as something meaningful – and as an authority, too. At the same time, within this discourse as a whole, the understanding of the teachings of the Church may be tentative. But the idea that this is something that has changed during the process of modernization, as the theory of secularization presupposes, is debatable. Several researchers have pointed out that it is a mistake to presume that people in Nordic countries had internalized the teachings of the Christian Church in pre-modern times, or even in the last few hundreds of years (see Markkola 2003: 56–9; Sidenvall 2010). What can be said is that in this discourse neither Church nor its norms are separated from the secular spheres. Further, the Church and religion are not marginalized into the private sphere, but seem to be important elements in the writers' lives.

The Church as a community

In the discourse of the Church as a community the Church is primarily seen as a union of its members; as a congregation. The idea of the community is understood in two different ways. Some emphasize the duties of the members to follow the rules of the community. In messages written from that perspective, the writers are usually against same-sex marriages and stress the obligation of the commandments of the Bible to the Church members. As in the following example, many also claim that the Church has obligations towards its

'old' members whereas the proponents of the same-sex marriage and/or gays and lesbians are presumed to be people who either have not been members at all or are not, at any rate, devoted members of the Church:

The church should respect its old membership and not run after the few per cent of new members. Some free religious groups have acted in a more fair way, as in them a preacher who has disagreed with others has founded his own congregation and the members have been able to choose freely to which shepherd they have wanted to listen. I am myself a member of the Orthodox Church. If I wanted to act for the clerical rights of sexual minorities, I would switch to the Lutheran Church and would not make a racket in my present church. Everyone should seek an appropriate church or other religious community for themselves and stop trashing their present church if they disagree with its teachings.

Others accentuate the possibility of members to make an impact inside the community, including the teachings and religious practices of the Church. According to this way of thinking the idea of the multi-voiced Church is highlighted and appreciated:

I belong to a church where the most important thing is neither homosexuality nor its demerit, but whole different things. I belong to a church where people disagree on many things but where things are discussed and, people are trying to build something good and right together. These kinds of things are discussed energetically now on Facebook. Luckily Päivi Räsänen,⁴ or other persons who expressed their views on the TV panel are not the whole church. There are many of us on the other side, too.

As in the messages which express the view that the Church should respect those of its members who are devoted to the teaching of the sinfulness of homosexuality, so also the writers that advocate same-sex marriage postulate that the Church should listen to its members when making decisions on the issue. Especially in the context of the forthcoming parish elections which were scheduled for the following November (2010), many writers urge others on to vote and in that way make an impact in the Church:

4 Päivi Räsänen is the chairperson of the Christian Democrats Party.

The parish elections are on their way. Now parishioners have a great opportunity to bring out their views on which kind of church they want to belong to. I hope this discussion will make people vote and vote for candidates that believe in an equal, tolerant, forgiving, merciful church which also approves gay people. I am amazed how some of the ancient writings are still interpreted literally and some as depictions and embodiments of their time which cannot be applied to the present.

The discourse on the Church as a community is especially interesting in relation to the theory of secularization. Secularization theory embodies a presumption that modern values lead to the decline of religious beliefs and practices (see Casanova 2011: 60). However, in these messages people take such modern values as equality and tolerance for granted but also imply that they are devoted to the Church as a community. Therefore, they neither insist on a separation of the Church and state nor consider resigning from it but want to influence the Church to be modern and tolerant. As Hoover and Kaneva have stated, modernity does not inevitably lead to a decline in religion; modernity might rather be said to co-evolve with religion (Hoover and Kaneva 2009: 8). Thus, modernization may lead to the rise of new forms of religion rather than to secularization.

The Church as a state institution

The discourse of the Church as a state institution⁵ – or as almost a state institution – includes most atheistic views. In these kinds of messages the right of the Lutheran Church to collect taxes from its members and especially from enterprises is seen as unjustified. Many writers demand the separation of the Church and state. Mostly these statements include a stated position of the writer as a nonbeliever who is irritated by the fact that the Lutheran Church

5 The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is not a state church in the precise meaning of the concept. The Church has autonomy in its internal affairs. However, on the basis of its public rights in state legislation, the Church is entitled to collect taxes. In addition to Church members, societies and corporations are also required to pay church taxes, with the exception of registered religious organizations and free-thinker societies. Parishes continue to take responsibility for maintaining census registration data concerning their members, and for their funeral services. With rare exceptions, parish cemeteries are to remain the usual burial place even for non-members of the Lutheran Church. See the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

still has so strong an influence – as they see it – on Finnish legislation, on the Finnish primary and secondary school system and on other state-related institutions and practices. In the same-sex marriage issue the Church is required to act according to the civil laws as long as – in practice – it still has a position as a state church:

This is very hard to accept as long as we have two churches in a special position, supported by the state, which means that they are public corporations. If they each were funded only by their members they could do as they like. But as long as every Finn takes part in funding these institutions, everyone also has a right to criticize their actions.

The church is the real fare-dodger. The right to carry taxes implies that fairy tale club in question would somehow be connected to the state and to legal society but this fairy tale club regularly closes its eyes to the offences of the constitution and the Equality Act.

There are also some messages where writers who declare their commitment to Christianity also propose the separation of Church and state, or at least a loosening up of the relationship. In these writings the separation is seen as a way to maintain the autonomy of the Church, especially in terms of doctrinal issues, such as same-sex marriages:

Church and state should be separated quickly. The separation would purify them both.

If the Evangelical Lutheran Church decides to start marrying gay couples then I will resign from the Church, too, and I think that so will many others. The right of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to tax should probably be narrowed down – maybe these bristling demands for tolerance would in that case diminish.

Thus, both sides see the separation or the distancing of the state and Church from each other as a solution to the same-sex marriage problem: as a free religious community the Lutheran Church could apply its own rules despite of the possible changes in the civilian law. The differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms is something that within this discourse both declared believers and non-believers demand. It can be claimed that the differentiation of secular and religious spheres is, in a way, a secular resolution as such, but the motives behind this conclusion may also be religious.

The Church as a service provider

In the discourse of the Church as a service provider writers discuss primarily how it functions as a provider for various kinds of services, usually rather practical ones, such as children's clubs or aid for poor people. In few cases the spiritual services are also mentioned, but this is rare. Within this discourse marriage is a service you are entitled to, regardless of your sexual orientation, since you have paid for membership:

The rainbow folk belonging to the Church finance the people's church as much as other citizens, in the same way that we all finance this common society. Since anyone's tax money serves for church it is then rather strange that at the same price someone gets a different standard of service.

Within the discourse of the Church as a service provider the church tax is understood as a payment for the Church's services. In most of these messages the writer declares that he/she has recently concluded that the Church is a lousy service provider when it comes to his/her needs. This kind of discourse is also strongly opposed in many messages, for example, those emphasizing that the Church is not an enterprise. Further, these kinds of claims are seen as unjustified attempts to 'falsify' religion. However, the opposing stands are not as widespread in the discussion as are messages posted in a vein similar to the quoted example.

In addition, many suspect that other people still belong to the Church only because of the services, such as Christian wedding ceremony, that it provides. One message entails a vision of a discount membership of the Church:

It would be interesting to see how many would take up a discount membership of the church in which you would only be entitled to those church weddings, e.g. 10 per cent discount of the full membership. How many of the present members would change to cheaper option and how many of those who resigned would rejoin?

Instead of that of a believer the messages embrace the perspective of a consumer. David Lyon has claimed that the individualistic approach to religion may be associated with consumerist attitudes and lifestyles in which choice is the supreme value. Consumerism is a challenge to religious institutions: in economic terms, the cultural and religious monopolies are being dismantled, and a deregulated cultural marketplace is emerging. Old religious institutions

are not able to compete in this situation. People are still believing and seeking, but they do it in ways that sideline the old institutions. Furthermore, the religious institutions have also started to talk about the promotion, marketing and delivery of their services (Lyon 2000: 32, 74–80).

It can be claimed that in Finland the Lutheran Church has itself engaged in the consumerist way of thinking to some extent. The Church has carried out an inspection of its services, analyzing their customer orientation (see Vuokko 1996) and on a four yearly basis has asked of the parishioners what kind of image, for example, the Church has in their opinion and what kind of expectations they have for Church (see e.g. Gallup Ecclesiastica 2007). But the above-described discourse is different from what Lyon terms as a consumer's selection of beliefs. In the discourse of the Church as a service provider which is found on the net, belief is a secondary, or even irrelevant, thing. Instead, the Church is approached in the same way as any other service provider who just happens to offer activities for children or Christmas carol sing-songs, while its religious or spiritual mission seems to be rather insignificant. This applies both to people who seem to believe in God and to those who do not. In many cases, the writers' relationship to religion is not mentioned at all:

It is a shame that the appearance and the views of some people cause resignations from the church. The Church does a lot of good work that is not done by municipalities or the state, or completes it. For example, the activities for children and the young people, and for the old people. In addition to this, the church is a significant actor on the music front.

Oh no, hundreds of people resigned from the church. What's the fuss, people resign every day, because the church does not provide anything. You have to pay for everything, even the church tax, and what do you get: nothing. Even the Christmas carol events are subject to a charge nowadays.

Several writers state that they are still members of the Church because of the services it gives to people with limited resources. During the recession in the 1990s the social work of the Church gained much positive media publicity (Yeung 2003: 204), and earlier studies show that Finns have previously considered the social work of the Lutheran Church as one of its most important areas of work (Veikkola 1990: 494). Anna Birgitta Yeung has claimed that this heightened public role of the Church can be understood as a sign of de-privatization, and as a result of this thinking, she brings up a question of the

possible resacralization of Finnish society (Yeung 2003: 206–7). Yet the web forum messages analyzed here suggest that using the services of the Church have no relation to the commitment of the religious teachings of the Church. Thus, the marginalization of religion into the private sphere – which is one aspect of the José Casanova’s conceptualization of the secularization – is clearly not happening – which the whole public discussion on the same-sex marriage in the Lutheran Church demonstrates (see also Moberg and Sjö 2011). Despite this fact, the significant public role of the Church does not seem to have a clear relationship to the other aspect of secularization – the decline of religious beliefs and practices. What seems to be more accurate in this case is that the individualistic discourse related to neoliberalism is also applied to religion and the Church. Whereas in previous studies this individualism and neoliberalism has been linked more strongly to ‘popular religion’ (see Frisk and Nynäs 2012: 50–1) in this case an individualistic approach is also used in the context of ‘organized’ religion. In the Finnish (and possibly in the Nordic) context the critical discourse related to the welfare state seems to also include the Lutheran Church, as it is understood to be a public resource.

The Church as a meaningless institution

This discourse has the most variety of views on the Church, and especially on the Christian religion. What unites the contributions is an understanding of the Church as something which is irrelevant. In many messages it is stated that the writer believes in God but does not need the Church to believe. Others have a somewhat hazy relation to religion, or they have renounced their faith – at least their faith in the teachings of the Lutheran Church. But regardless of their beliefs, in this discourse the Church is seen as a remote institution that has nothing to do with their personal beliefs or morals:

I resigned from the church years ago, and I really don’t need a priest to stand my by grave. I have agreed with my children that I will be cremated and there will be no party. They do what they want with the ashes. The Lutheran Church is only 2 per cent of all the Christians, how could only it be right?

The above statement could also be used as an example of the relativization of religion. This entails that individuals form their religious identities in the knowledge that their religion is only one of several possibilities (see Frisk and

Nynäs 2012: 52). This may lead to a non-religious worldview, as in the previous example. Or it may lead to religious eclecticism, as Liselotte Frisk and Peter Nynäs bring up, and as the following quote exemplifies:

I don't want a church blessing for my marriage because it would mean that their views would interest me, or that I would let them affect on my decisions. It is quite reasonable to believe in God or spiritualities, for we can't know the truth of the creation of the world and so on. But the bible is written by man and it can't be accepted as a 'god's' word, and to discriminate with a hand on it.⁶

Yet, the separation of Church and belief within the Nordic countries has been remarked upon before. As Birger Nygaard has shown in his study about 'ordinary' Danes, people seem to have clear distinctions between the two parts: belief is in one category while the institution of religion and religious practices are in another category, and these two categories are separated from each other (Nygaard 2010). The following quote illustrates well this kind of attitude:

I did not resign from God or the angels, but from the church, which I do not want to respect as an institution. My God and angels can be found in nature and my own innermost being. I will give my money to people that I know and I can trust that they will take it to help there where there is poverty and misery.

When contemplating this discourse in the context of secularization it is once again important to notice the complexity of the current situation. Within this discourse many messages point to a (fairly) secular worldview. Further, if a writer professes some kind of belief it is then considered as private matter, grounded in individual choice. But this privacy of religion is only in relation to the Church as a religious institution. In relation to the media, the writers discuss their beliefs at least in the semi-public environment of the web discussion forum.

The messages within this discourse may indicate that another kind of religious change is happening than what the 'old' secularization theory forecast. According to Frisk and Nynäs this process is now accelerating because of globalization which is resulting in a religious change characterized by

6 God and Bible are written with a small first capital in the original online message.

eclecticism, an emphasis on personal experience, non-institutionalism or religiosity in the private mode, radical egalitarianism, self-spirituality and emphasis on this-worldliness (Frisk and Nynäs 2012). These tendencies are all seen in the messages within this discourse. On the other hand, the emphasis on personalized belief has a long history in Europe which can be traced from the Reformation (Taylor 2011: 214–28) to the new-age-influenced spirituality that emerged on a larger scale in the 1960s (see Martin 2010: 65). In the end, what these messages have in common is the lack of belief in dogma or to the authority of religious institutions.

Conclusion: partly secular but not secularized?

The online discussion on the same-sex marriage issue encompasses a contradictory range of material when thinking again the concept of secularization. On the basis of this particular discussion it seems that at present, there are simultaneously a variety of processes going on that have a very different social and cultural history and a varying time span. Furthermore, if religiousness is changing, this change is linked with ideological changes in other sectors of Finnish society.

As to the issue of religious belief and practices, the material analyzed gives an insight into the great diversity of Finnish society which has often been understood as very homogeneous in its religious view of life. The messages include a lot of secular views – but on the other hand, also plenty of confessions of belief, and the discussion shows the great variation in the people's relationships to the Church. What becomes clear is that the number of church membership resignations is not something that one could use to draw conclusions about secularization. However, neither is the percentage of membership something that you can take as a sign of devotion to the Church or its teachings.

The Lutheran Church and therefore Christianity as a religion has not been marginalized out of the Finnish public sphere, nor has it been totally separated from the secular institutions. In the Finnish context, the Church still bears the profile of a significant public actor – in both negative and positive ways. This obviously has to do with its particular position as a folk church. However, it is possible that the Church's history as a folk church has recently led to another kind of tendency in thinking. When the earlier tradition of the folk church combined with a welfare state ideology is then mixed in with the new kind

of neoliberalist and individualist thinking, the outcome is a perception of the Church as a service provider among other institutions and enterprises.

The claimed new trends of eclecticism, with an emphasis on personal experience, non-institutionalism or religiosity in the private mode, radical egalitarianism and self-spirituality are present in the discussion. At the same time, it seems that these kinds of trends are being mixed with earlier influences of Lutheranism, such as an emphasis on personalized beliefs. These ideological tendencies also seem to have their impact on the established relationships between the Lutheran Church and its parishioners. However, it is important not to exaggerate the recent changes, especially in the Nordic context, for it is not clear that the orthodox ways of belief ever prevailed in the decades before the age of 'secularization'.

References

Internet sources

Gallup Ecclesiastica

2007 <<http://www.fsd.uta.fi/en/data/catalogue/FSD2710/meF2710e.html>> (accessed 29.8.2012).

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland website: <<http://evl.fi/EVLen.nsf/Documents/A47B48B9B3B2188AC22572B400213CE6?OpenDocument&lang=EN>>.

Helsingin Sanomat: <<http://www.hs.fi>>.

Kaleva: <<http://www.kaleva.fi/juttutupa>>.

sakasti.evl.fi

2011 Seurakuntien väkiluvut ja väestömuutokset 2007–2010 (Population and its changes in the parishes in 2007–2010). <<http://sakasti.evl.fi/sakasti.nsf/sp2?open&cid=Content20EBDF>> (accessed 29.8.2012).

Bibliography

Campbell, Heidi

2011 Internet and religion. In Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (eds), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*; pp. 232–51. Chichester: Blackwell.

Casanova, José

1994 *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2011 The secular, secularizations, secularisms. In Graig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *Rethinking Secularism*; pp. 54–75. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davie, Grace

2007 Vicarious religion: a methodological challenge. In Nancy T. Ammerman

(ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*; pp. 21–37. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel

1989 (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Translated from the French by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London and New York: Routledge.

Frisk, Liselotte, and Peter Nynäs

2012 Characteristics of contemporary religious change: globalization, neoliberalism, and interpretative tendencies. In Peter Nynäs, Mika Lassander and Terhi Utriainen (eds), *Post-Secular Society*; pp. 47–71. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

Hoover, Stewart M., and Nadia Kaneva

2009 Fundamental mediations: religion, meaning and identity in global context. In Stewart M. Hoover and Nadia Kaneva (eds), *Fundamentalisms and the Media*; pp. 1–21. London: Continuum.

Karaflogka, Anastasia

2007 *E-religion: a Critical Reappraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web*. London: Equinox.

Köhrsen, Jens

2012 How religious is the public sphere? A critical stance on the debate about public religion and post-secularity. *Acta Sociologica* 55(3): 273–88.

Lövheim, Mia

2007 Virtually boundless? Youth negotiating tradition in cyberspace. In Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*; pp. 83–100. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2011 The mediatisation of religion: a critical appraisal. *Culture & Religion* 12(2): 153–66.

Lyon, David

2000 *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mäkinen, Kari

2011 Moniäänisyys edellyttää aikuisuutta, nöyryyttä ja rohkeutta. Opening speech by Archbishop Kari Mäkinen at the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, 2.5.2011. <<http://www.evl.fi/arkkipiispa/Kirkolliskokousavaus02052011.htm>> (accessed 29.8.2012).

Mäntymäki, Eeva

2006 *Hyvinvointivaltio eetterissä. Yleisradion rakentuminen populaarien diskurssien kentällä*. Media Studies. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Markkola, Pirjo

2003 Mitä on sekularisaatio? In Harri Melin and Jouko Nikula (eds), *Yhteiskunnallinen muutos*; pp. 47–63. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Martin, Bernice

2010 Contrasting modernities: ‘postsecular’ Europe and enspirited Latin America. In Arie L. Molendijk, Justin Beaumont and Christoph Jedan (eds), *Inter-*

national Studies in Religion and Society, vol. 13. *Exploring the Postsecular, the Religious, the Political and the Urban*; pp. 63–91. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Moberg, Marcus and Sofia Sjö

2012 The Evangelical Lutheran Church and the media in post-secular Finland. In Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lövheim (eds), *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*; pp. 77–89. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Moberg, Marcus, Kenneth Granholm and Peter Nynäs

2012 Trajectories of post-secular complexity: an introduction. In Peter Nynäs, Mika Lassander and Terhi Utriainen (eds), *Post-Secular Society*; pp. 1–27. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

Nygaard, Birger

2010 The separation of beliefs and religion in Europe. *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34(3): 285–8.

Sidenvall, Erik

2010 A classic case of de-Christianisation? Religious change in Scandinavia c. 1750–2000. In Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape (eds), *Secularisation in the Christian World*; pp. 119–35. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Stromer-Galley, Jennifer, and Alexis Wichowski

2011 Political discussion online. In Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (eds), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*; pp. 168–88. Chichester: Blackwell.

Taylor, Charles

2011 *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Teräsvirta, Laura

2002 Objektiivisia uutisia vai merkityksiä tuottavaa retoriikkaa? Suomen evankelisluterilainen kirkko yhteiskunnallisena toimijana Helsingin Sanomien uutisissa. In Tuula Sakaranaho and Heikki Pesonen (eds), *Uskonto, julkisuus ja muuttuva yhteiskunta*; pp. 47–75. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Veikkola, Juhani

1990 Kansakirkko suomalaisessa maisemassa. In Hannu Mustakallio (ed.), *Kirkko ja politiikka*; pp. 483–500. Suomen Kirkkohistoriallisen Seuran toimituksia 153. Helsinki: Suomen Kirkkohistoriallinen Seura.

Vuokko, Pirjo

1996 *Asiakaslähtöisyys kirkossa. Mitä se on ja onko sitä?* Sarja A, nro 68. Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus.

Yeung, Anne Birgitta

2003 The re-emergence of the Church in the Finnish public life? Christian social work as an indicator of the public status of the Church. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18(2): 197–211.

Zuckerman, Philip

2008 *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*. New York and London: New York University Press.