

**Inger Furseth (ed.):** *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 341 pp.

*Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere* is the final report of NOREL, a large Nordic project in the field of the sociology of religion. The project aimed to produce a comparative study of religion in the five Nordic countries in 1988, 1998, and 2008.

The book presents and discusses the results of this project according to four themes: religion and the state; religion and politics; religion and media; and faith communities and interfaith organisations. Each theme gets its own chapter, and the volume is completed by introductory and concluding chapters written by the head of the project and editor of the volume, Professor Inger Furseth from Oslo, as well as a chapter presenting an overview of the Nordic religious landscape. Altogether, 23 researchers are listed as the book's authors.

The overall aim of the book and the project is to compare the place and role of religion in the five Nordic countries, as well as to study processes of religious change during the period in question. The project is a follow-up to a similar Nordic study conducted in the 1980s. The previous project was written within a secularisation paradigm; a central premise for this book concerns whether religion is 'returning'.

As the book covers a large spectrum of issues within the sociology of religion, a variety of theoretical

perspectives is also brought to bear. However, the overall theoretical view is already indicated in the book's title: religious complexity. This describes a situation with an increased diversity of religious traditions in which secularisation and the increased public visibility of religion may occur simultaneously, and in which the processes of religious change are non-linear and unpredictable.

Overall, the approach is quantitative, presenting percentages for comparison between countries and over time. Much of this functions as an overview of the religious situation in the Nordic countries and often provides corroboration of previous knowledge instead of any big surprises. There are also a number of quite rewarding case studies which add concrete detail to the overviews. For example, the chapter on religion and the state contains discussions on church services at the openings of the respective parliaments, as well as on religious elements at celebrations at the end of the school year. Both cases are very relevant and frequently discussed. The media chapter presents studies of Nordic film and Scandinavian lifestyle magazines. Both studies provide excellent concretisation for the theoretical discussion of mediation running through the chapter. The chapter about faith communities conveys results from a study of Norwegian religious leaders – an exception to the rule of comparison.

The comparative perspective is the book's guiding principle and en-

tire *raison d'être*. As such, it serves its purpose well. Some minor issues with the comparative approach can be highlighted. Not least in the Nordic context it triggers something of a competition between countries: who has progressed furthest on the road of religious change, as it were, and who is lagging behind? Comparison also requires extensive knowledge, which the inclusion of researchers from all the Nordic countries is intended to achieve. There are still some small mistakes: the last Swedish government is given the wrong political colour, and a member of the Finnish parliament is described as a 'blogger and aspiring politician'. A stylistic issue with the comparative approach is its tendency to compile lists.

All these are minor matters. Another more critical point needs to be mentioned: the text is plagued by recurring errors of language and misprints. The large number of authors is the most likely explanation for this, but it is a regrettable and unnecessary shortcoming in an otherwise valuable book.

The book's main target audience is probably international scholars with an interest in the Nordic situation, but it will also be suitable for Nordic scholars and students, not least as an ambitious and comprehensive overview. With its thematic chapters the book reads as a handbook for the Nordic sociology of religion. As such, the book will surely be a reference work for years to come.

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