

From Lutheran Dominance to Diversity: Religion in Finnish Newspapers 1946–2018¹

TEEMU TAIRA

University of Helsinki

Abstract

This article examines religion in Finnish newspapers, arguing that religion-related discourses have changed from one of Lutheran dominance to one of diversity. The main data consists of a longitudinal sample (1946–2016) of the most popular Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, and especially of its editorials and readers' letters. Additional data covers a wider variety of newspapers from the 1990s to 2018. The data is analysed using quantitative content analysis and a discursive approach. It will be suggested that it is possible to discuss diversity both as an emergent discourse and a theme in the Finnish media since the mid-1990s, thereby overcoming earlier frameworks that took Lutheranism for granted or gave it a special role in the private sphere. The analysis shows that these shifts do not provide clear support for the idea that newspapers and journalism are anti-religious; rather, it suggests that they may be understood as having a 'liberalizing' effect, especially when religious values are not seen as compatible with those of journalists and newspapers.

Keywords: religion, newspaper, media, Helsingin Sanomat, Finland, the Lutheran Church, diversity, secularism, quantitative content analysis

Finland has long been one of the most homogeneous societies in Europe (Eurostat 2011). To be a member of the Lutheran Church has often been considered part of what it is to be an ordinary Finn. However, membership has declined from 95 per cent in 1970 to less than 70 per cent in 2018. Currently, religious groups other than Lutheran constitute a total of less than 3 per cent. The rest – around 26 per cent – is unaffiliated. These membership figures tell a story of secularization with slightly increased diversity. Another

1 This article is based on the material collected in the author's research project *Discourse on Religion and the Secular in the Finnish Media: Longitudinal and Comparative Study (1946-2010)*, funded by the Academy of Finland. The author would like to thank Research Assistant Katariina Björkman (University of Helsinki) for her help in collecting and coding the most recent data (2012, 2014, 2016).

more complex story emerges when public discourse is studied, though it is not completely different. This article offers a (new) narrative about religious change by studying Finnish newspaper discourse. By focusing on the most important Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, it examines how discursive frameworks – established meaning-systems that provide a partial view concerning the topic or theme at hand – and religion-related themes have changed in Finnish newspapers since the end of the Second World War. With the aid of previous studies and one contemporary case, the material studied covers a much larger spectrum of Finnish newspapers and media outlets.

Having introduced the data and methods, *Helsingin Sanomat*'s religious coverage will be explored. The analysis proceeds from the question of the visibility of religion to the argument about the main discursive shifts in its coverage. It will be suggested that it has been possible to speak of diversity both as an emergent discourse and a theme in the Finnish media since the mid-1990s, thereby overcoming earlier frameworks that took Lutheranism for granted or gave it a special role in the private sphere. The analysis shows that these shifts do not provide clear support for the idea that newspapers and journalism are anti-religious, but rather suggests that they may be understood as having a 'liberalizing' effect, especially when religious values are seen as incompatible with those of journalists and newspapers. The initial findings are based on one newspaper, but they will be contextualized in the Finnish media more generally with the aid of previous studies. The argument about the current importance of diversity will be further demonstrated by analysing the media debate concerning the singing of the Summer Hymn at school celebrations. Before concluding, this article offers an interpretation of continuities and changes in religion in Finnish newspapers by discussing the findings in relation to recent debates concerning the changing trends in the relations between the media (especially newspapers), religion, and society (Taira 2019).

Data and methods

The main data consists of editorials and readers' letters from the most influential Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, between 1946 and 2016. In addition to the longitudinal material from *Helsingin Sanomat*, consisting of approximately 7 000 pieces, this article utilizes a variety of Finnish newspapers – national and regional papers, broadsheets, and tabloids – to highlight the more recent developments. These include one week's sample of three newspapers from 2014 (*Helsingin Sanomat*, *Turun Sanomat*, *Ilta-Sanomat* – a

national paper, a regional paper, and the most popular tabloid), and several newspapers (from the 1990s to 2018) and digital media platforms which discuss the Summer Hymn.

Soon after the Second World War *Helsingin Sanomat* grew from being a local newspaper to the biggest in Finland. In 2017 it had more than 300 000 subscribers and almost 700 000 readers daily (in a country with 5.5 million inhabitants).² It is the most powerful, serious, and most widely read newspaper in Finland. It has been nominally independent since 1932, but not always in practice. It is regarded as more liberal, right-of-centre, urban, ‘westward-looking’, and ‘modernizing’ than the Finnish media and the general population. Data has been collected from every second year between 1946 and 2016. The years have been collected in full. Although sampling in this manner may leave some topics unaddressed if they appear only in the years falling outside the sample, this sample covers the large-scale discursive shifts from the end of WWII to the present day.

Special emphasis will be placed on editorials and readers’ letters, because both have a more argumentative and persuasive function than (ideally) more descriptive news material. Furthermore, the editorials and readers’ letters complement each other: the editorials are not the most widely read part of newspapers, but they explicate the position of the paper in their authoritative, argumentative, and often anonymous style, construct the collective ‘we’, and raise topics for (other) people in power (Fowler 1991, 208–221), whereas the letters are one of the most widely read parts of the paper, addressing readers’ concerns to the general public. Indeed, the letters section of the newspapers have been – and still are, even in the age of the Internet and digital media – important public arenas where ordinary people as well as experts may have their opinions and ideas heard (Richardson 2007, 149; Taira 2013). Despite the development of comment sections on newspaper websites, 2010 was the record year for the number of submitted opinion letters to *Helsingin Sanomat*. What makes this observation more relevant in relation to religion is that the most popular topic – both in the number of letters sent and opinions published – concerned the Lutheran Church and same-sex relations.

Although editorials and published letters in newspapers cannot represent the public discourse, public opinion, or even the newspaper as a whole, these sections have been important arenas for public discussion in Finland. The letter selection process includes many typical traits and criteria: letters are usually written by readers; they are often written as a response to published articles and news; they must pass the editor’s selection process; they are edited in accordance with the paper’s style; and they are often placed next

2 Levikkitilasto LT2017 <http://mediaauditfinland.fi/levikit/tilastot/>

to opposing opinion on the same topic (Richardson 2007, 151). The selection criteria include newsworthiness, entertainment value, brevity, and authority (both in textual competence and personal character) (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002).

The analysis of primary material is based on mixed methods and broadly follows a combination of quantitative content analysis (QCA) (Bryman 2004) and the discursive approach utilized in Knott, Poole, and Taira (2013). QCA has been performed for the editorials and readers' letters, including coding based on several variables, such as date, genre, the author's religious affiliation, the author's gender, the religious tradition covered in the story, primary and secondary themes, attitude and use of certain keywords ('religion', 'secular', 'atheism', 'faith'), depending on applicability. All 1 448 religion-related editorials were coded; reader's letters were coded for every ten-year period (1946, 1956, 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996, 2006, 2016), but collected and manually counted from every second year. Only some variables will be analysed in detail in this article, but QCA provides numerical evidence and patterns for an analysis of discursive shifts.

The visibility of religion in *Helsingin Sanomat*

One of the current issues in scholarly debates is the question of the visibility of religion (Taira 2019). Although visibility can mean many things, this analysis pays attention first to the quantitative dimension. The result of QCA supports the idea of the increased visibility of religion. This is especially the case with editorials. The increase has been clear since the mid-1990s (Table 1). In the years analysed there was a total of 1 448 religion-related editorials. The annual average was 40.2, and there has been no year below the annual average since 1992.

Table 1: Religion-related editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat* (1946–2016)

Years	Religion-related editorials, annual average (and highest annual)	Editorials with words 'religion', 'faith', 'atheism', 'secular', or 'sacred', annual average
2012–2016	80 (2014 & 2016: 82)	9
2010–2004	82 (2004: 92)	25.5
2002–1996	86 (2000: 100)	23
1994–1988	31 (1994: 45)	7.5
1986–1980	27 (1986: 33)	8.75
1978–1972	27 (1974: 39)	7.5
1970–1964	31 (1966: 42)	12
1962–1956	21 (1962: 41)	6.25
1954–1946	11 (1948: 17)	4.6

The fact that the number of religion-related editorials has increased suggests that religion has become a topic that is considered worth discussing. Furthermore, as editorials often focus on world politics, the quantitative change demonstrates that religion and Islam in particular have become part of the global political debate. When editorials are coded according to whether they see religion gaining or declining in significance, and whether this is a positive or negative development, there is a major change in the mid-1990s. Since 1996 religion has been seen to gain significance, and the editorials have understood this as a somewhat negative development. This relates primarily to how the role of Islam is seen in conflicts. It is not only established religious traditions that have become more visible. Terms such as ‘religion’, ‘faith’, ‘atheism’, ‘secular’, and ‘sacred’ – arguably key terms in the discourse on religion – have been used much more frequently since the mid-1990s (Table 1).

The visibility of religion is also seen in published opinion letters, but the increase is not as obvious as in the editorials, and there are annual increases and declines (Table 2). The numbers between 1980 and 1986 are very high, peaking in 1982 with 328 letters, partly because the debate concerning Israel and Palestine was then extremely heated. Only in 2010 are there more published opinion letters (390), with the relationship between the Lutheran Church and homosexuality being the most popular among topics that extended to the Finnish church-state model and church resignations. However, it should be remembered that the overall space provided for readers’ letters has changed many times over seventy years, meaning that years are not fully comparable.

Table 2: Religion-related opinion letters in *Helsingin Sanomat* (1946–2016)

Years	Religion-related opinion letters in <i>Helsingin Sanomat</i> , annual average
2012–2016	122
2010–2004	227
2002–1996	166
1994–1988	169
1986–1980	217
1978–1972	117
1970–1964	138
1962–1956	140
1954–1948	63

If the increased significance of religion was seen negatively in the editorials (especially after the mid-1990s), the reverse is true for opinion letters. While the peak in imagined growth and significance was in 2006, what emerges overall is that religion is in decline, and that this is a negative phenomenon. Eighty per cent of the editorials saw religion as gaining in significance; only 25 per cent of the opinions shared this view. This complicates the task of interpretation, but two aspects should be highlighted. First, it reveals a general difference between the newspaper's editorial stance and readers' views. The editorial stance has been slightly more critical of religion than those who write opinion letters. Second, it stresses the difference between the themes in editorials and opinions. The former often deals with world politics and writes critically of the rise of 'political Islam', whereas the latter includes plenty of letters in which the declining and challenged role and status of the Finnish Lutheran Church is seen as an unfortunate development. Both developments contribute to the overall visibility of religion, but in different ways.

When the opinion letters are divided by the author's gender, it is clear that men's voices dominate the visibility of religion. In 1946 and 1956 most opinions were unsigned, meaning that the gender of the writers is unknown. Later years give a more precise result: women's opinions cover 23–48 per cent of the signed religion-related letters every year between 1966 and 2016. The overall gender division is 70 to 30 per cent in favour of men, though the share of women writing readers' letters has increased. The women's share is highest in 2016. What also characterizes this increased visibility is that the percentage of religiously identified people in opinions has increased. In 1996 the percentage of Lutherans was 17, and in 2006 it was 21; previously, the percentage was less than 10. Furthermore, religiously identified non-Christian authors have written more letters in recent decades: there is only one in the sample before 1986 (in 1966), but there have since been twenty-seven in the remaining four years (1986, 1996, 2006, 2016). This is not a big number, but it marks another small change in the visibility and diversity of religious voices.

Overall, QCA suggests that the visibility of religion has increased, but how exactly religion and its role have been understood in the newspaper requires a more detailed reading of the material.

Lutheran dominance and secularism before the 1990s

The history of the newspaper discourse on religion in Finland since the end of WWII can be divided into three main phases. According to the data collected from *Helsingin Sanomat* the role and location of religion in the first

phase, which continues until the mid-1960s, can be described as public, even though religion features rarely in the editorials. Lutheranism was a normal, mainly taken-for-granted part of Finnish society, and the Lutheran Church was seen as one of its moral backbones. This is exemplified in the fact that *Helsingin Sanomat* used to offer the writing of one of its editorials to church people during Easter and Christmas. This tradition continued until 1964. On Good Friday 1962 Bishop Olavi Kares signed the paper's only editorial, which suggested that even in good economic times it was important to remember 'the ultimate values of life':

The word of Christ, according to which one does not live on bread alone, refers to a fact whose value remains the same at all times. [...] In this great day of Christendom we are reminded of the deepest values of life that hold no less in recession, in troubled times, and when facing death (20 April 1962).

From today's perspective such an editorial is inconceivable. It is a manifestation of the then strong presence of Christianity in Finnish society as a whole. When I mentioned at a conference that church leaders had written and signed the main editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat*, a person who had worked for the paper for years was astonished. She later told me that she had not at first believed it, because she had started working at the newspaper during the second phase, when attitudes were already different.

Something changed in the mid-1960s. It is possible to say that the role and location of religion was now seen as private by *Helsingin Sanomat*, or at least more private than before. The Lutheran authorities were less visible in the newspaper, and the paper itself introduced a new hierarchy. Secular modernization was seen as leading the country to success, and the Lutheran Church was accepted and even valued if it did not prevent this more urgent and important process from happening. The paper supported clear and further separation of the church and state, but it cannot be said to have been anti-religious or anti-Lutheran as such. Religion was conceived as something that does not really belong to the public life of the modern world, but it could have many positive functions in its own differentiated sphere.

As early as 1962 a *Helsingin Sanomat* editorial declared that we had moved to the age of science, suggesting that the results of scientific research were a precondition for progress in our culture (23 February 1962), but the implications for religion and the Lutheran Church were made explicit later. An example of a 1972 editorial illustrates the official stance of *Helsingin Sanomat* regarding the changed church-state relationship:

In principle there is a consensus in Finland that the church should be autonomous and independent of the secular power, and that the state should be religiously neutral. In practice, the rethinking of the relationship between the church and state comes down to money: the church does not want to give up its right to tax. This is why the separation between the church and state requires an even longer process here than in Sweden (8 March 1972).

QCA identified the same shift. When editorials' views of the relationship between religion and the secular as conflictual or compatible were coded, the result was striking: between 1946 and 1966 there were more editorials about compatibility, but this trend has since reversed. As more than half the editorials were coded as 'undecided' (56 per cent), this result is not entirely trustworthy, but the reverse in the balance is so clear that it supports the argument that a discursive shift occurred in the latter part of the 1960s.

The main discursive shift is from taken-for-granted Lutheranism to the emergence of secularism. Two qualifications, however, are important here: first, secularism did not mean an anti-Lutheran stance but a 'moderate secularism' (Modood 2010); and second, the secularist discourse was limited to the educated elite and entailed no serious decline in people's general religiosity. Indeed, church membership fell only 8 per cent between the 1940s and 1990s (from 96 to 88 per cent). What was significant was the new hierarchy between Lutheran religion and secular modernity. Religion-wise, the norm was still that one size fitted all, as there was as yet no serious debate on religious diversity.

The emergence of diversity

The newspaper discourse changed again in the mid-1990s to one of 'diversity'. In this phase the role and location of religion becomes floating and contested as the Evangelical Lutheran Church has to justify itself against secularist voices and in relation to other religions. Almost all conversation partners agree that Finland is a country where people have different convictions, though they differ concerning the extent and type of diversity they support. This can be detected by looking at the debates where the agreed principles can be studied (as in the Summer Hymn case, analysed later in this article) or by looking at the newspaper content. In this shift towards diversity *Helsingin Sanomat* does not fully reject its previous position, but several pro-Lutheran views can be identified in the editorials, even when diversity is emphasized.

There was a large increase in the number of immigrants in the 1990s (Martikainen 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that the media discourse on religious diversity emerges gradually at the same time. In *Helsingin Sanomat* the debate concerning the recognition of various minorities begins in the 1980s, but religion was not then a dominant theme. It was rather indigenous minorities and refugees who became the topic of public debate.

The increasing religious diversity as it pertains to Islam can be demonstrated quantitatively. The most commonly mentioned religious traditions in editorials are Islam (42 per cent) and Lutheranism (20 per cent). Christianity combined is mentioned in 37 per cent of editorials. The changing balance is interesting: in 1986 there were eight editorials about Islam and sixteen about Lutheranism, but in 1992 the respective numbers were fifteen and five.³ Every year since then Islam has received more editorial coverage than Lutheranism. The two dominant themes in the coverage of Islam are terrorism and the clash of cultures, both of which were practically non-existent themes in this data before the mid-1990s. However, editorials are quite a specific genre, often focusing on world politics. In this material, 74 per cent of the editorials dealt with foreign issues. The percentage has increased since 1988, and this suggests that awareness of the role of religion has become more global and consequently more diverse (as in Sweden, see Lövheim 2019).

Table 3: Increasing diversity in *Helsingin Sanomat* editorials

Editorials, <i>HS</i>	Before 1990 (21 years)	After 1990 (14 years)
Lutheranism	206	90
Islam	76	524
Catholicism	49	53
Judaism	62	78
Buddhism	5	10
Hinduism	7	21
New Religious Movements	1	9

The increase in diversity can be demonstrated by counting the number of editorials focusing on a particular religious tradition before and after 1990. Table 3 draws attention to the fact that the overall increase in diversity is led by Islam but not limited to it. Editorials dealing with the Lutheran Church have become rarer, but this is partly explained by its assumed diminished importance in Finnish society. Fewer editorials address the internal issues

³ For a similar development in Norway see Lundby 2019.

of the church, the role and place of Christian holidays, and the church's public role in Finland and abroad.

Increasing diversity can also be detected in readers' letters, though the number of letters focusing primarily on non-Lutheran religious traditions is relatively low. There is a clear increase in opinion letters dealing with Islam since the mid-1990s (0–1 letter per year 1946–1986, 10–27 1996–2016) and some increase in those dealing with Catholicism and Judaism. This does not mean that other traditions are not dealt with at all, but that they are not often the main tradition mentioned in the letter. Overall, the Lutheran Church dominates the topic of religion-related opinion letters, partly because opinion letters focus on local issues, but the material supports the idea that the emergence of diversity as a discourse and theme in Finnish newspapers should be located in the mid-1990s.⁴

Changes in opinion letters' themes over time offer further support for the argument about diversity. In 1956 and 1966 letters addressing the internal decisions of the Lutheran Church were popular, but this theme later loses its urgency. When this is contrasted with the increase in letters about the clash of cultures and religions in 1996 and 2006, the big picture emerges: the Lutheran Church's internal issues are rarely discussed – and the clash (and also cooperation) between different values and convictions is more emphasized.

The analysis of *Helsingin Sanomat* demonstrates the emergence of diversity in Finland's most influential newspaper, but it also reveals the continuing dominance of the Lutheran Church. Other studies largely confirm the increase in diversity, especially in relation to Islam. According to the sample of Finnish newspapers from 1988, 1998, and 2008, Islam's annual percentage in all religion-related articles has increased (4, 5, and 6 per cent respectively), whereas the percentage of Lutheran Church coverage – while clearly dominant – has decreased (56, 52, and 46 per cent respectively). There is no detectable proportional increase in non-Christian 'world religions' or non-institutional religions, but there is a clear increase in newspaper stories dealing with religion-critical groups (1, 2, and 6 per cent respectively) (Niemi 2013, 61–62; for Norway see Lundby 2019). A general rise of atheistic voices in the Finnish media since the mid-2000s has been noted in previous studies (Taira 2012).

4 Although the coverage of Islam is dominated by foreign news, there has been a significant increase in the coverage of Islam in Finland (as for local Islam in the Danish media, see Christensen 2019).

Liberal diversity: three observations on how the Finnish media currently deals with religion

The emergence of diversity as a discourse and theme represents a significant shift, but it does not tell us about (1) the media attitude to any particular religion. It focuses mainly on established and institutional religious traditions (i.e. ‘conventional religion’, see Towler 1974; Knott, Poole, and Taira 2013), but says little about (2) ‘popular’ religiosity and spiritualities. In addition, editorials and readers’ letters in *Helsingin Sanomat* tell us little about (3) the variety of newspapers and their religious coverage in Finland. These issues will be addressed briefly by focusing on the current situation.

(1) It is a common conception that the media is anti-religious, and there are often good reasons to think this. In Finland *Helsingin Sanomat* is considered to be especially critical of religion. However, the situation is more complex. Although the perception of the paper’s anti-religious flavour is strengthened by editorials that view religion and the secular as in conflict more often than compatible (83 and 17 per cent respectively), the reverse is the case for opinion letters (31 and 69 per cent respectively). Furthermore, when three Finnish newspapers were analysed – *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Ilta-Sanomat* (the biggest tabloid), and *Turun Sanomat* (the third biggest morning paper, based in the city of Turku) – from one week in early 2014, it was found that 20 per cent of all stories were positive, and only 9 per cent were negative (71 per cent resisted easy classification on the positive/negative story axis) (Taira 2014). These results resemble those of previous studies. Niemelä (2013, 63) found that only 3 per cent of the stories about religion in Finnish newspapers from 1988, 1998, and 2008 were clearly negative; 11 per cent were clearly positive. Rahkonen (2007, 36) concluded his study of newspaper coverage of the Lutheran Church by arguing that the mainstream media’s attitude to Christianity and church issues was positive and respectful, though sometimes distant. These results reflect interviews with twelve Finnish journalists who frequently write about religion: none identified as atheist; nine were members of the Lutheran Church; and four identified themselves as believers (Mutanen 2009, 44).

The analysis of newspapers suggests that negative coverage typically concerns value-conservative Christian revival movements, Islam, the Catholic Church, and New Religious Movements (Taira 2014). In the age of diversity, Lutheranism receives more positive coverage than other religions. The notion of the secularizing effects of the media’s increasing power (Hjarvard 2012; 2013) does not therefore find unambiguous support in Finland, especially when tested against the newspaper coverage of the Lutheran Church. It can therefore be suggested that the Finnish newspapers are ‘liberalizing’

rather than 'secularizing' (i.e. they are against religion only when there is a clear clash of values).

(2) Topics such as yoga and angelic healing are relatively popular in Finnish women's magazines (Puustinen, Rautaniemi, and Lauha 2013; Utriainen 2013), but they are not the only media forms which cover such non-institutionalized religiosity. In a case study dealing with references in Finnish newspapers during one week in 2014 it was found that 32 per cent of all stories were about weakly institutionalized popular religiosity and spiritualities (Taira 2014) (or what is sometimes called 'common religion' as opposed to 'conventional religion'). This large percentage is partly due to the fact that it covered a wide area from spiritualities to mythologies, and supernatural beings to magic and clairvoyance. Many of the references were short and not intended to be taken seriously, but as a whole they contributed to thematic diversity. Furthermore, a few stories suggested that popular religiosity outside institutional settings was a common element in Finnish newspapers, especially outside hard news stories.

(3) In the same study it was found that *Helsingin Sanomat* contained more references to religious issues than other papers. This was mainly because it has more pages than the other papers. A more significant difference in their profile was that the biggest tabloid, *Ilta-Sanomat*, contained only 45 per cent of conventional religious references, whereas in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Turun Sanomat* such references comprised 72 and 84 per cent respectively (a similar pattern has been found in the British media, see Knott, Poole, and Taira 2013). Where conventional references were concerned, *Helsingin Sanomat* was more diverse and contained more articles about Islam and other non-Christian established religions than other papers (Taira 2014). This was also found in another study focusing on three regional newspapers – *Ilkka*, *Kaleva*, and *Karjalainen* – in addition to *Helsingin Sanomat* (Hokka et al. 2013; Sumiala et al. 2017). Another significant difference was that *Helsingin Sanomat* contained slightly more articles featuring 'outsider' commentators (such as experts, researchers, officials working for the government or in public institutions) than articles with religious commentators. Outsider commentators were rarely used in *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Turun Sanomat* (Taira 2014). As some of the findings are based on a small sample, we should be cautious about drawing conclusions, but it can be suggested that this at least does not offer evidence for the argument for an anti-religious media, because religious people are often the only ones who get to speak in religion-related news articles in addition to the journalists themselves. In a sample of thirty-five stories about religion, twenty-two used only religious commentators, while only

six excluded religious voices altogether. Seven stories used both religious representatives and other experts (Taira 2014).

These observations add to the emerging discourse and theme of diversity. They show that even when the idea of diversity is shared, (1) newspapers are quite supportive of the social and cultural role of the Lutheran Church. (2) Relatively positive content is sometimes extended to non-institutionalized 'spiritual' expressions in newspapers, though this is more common in tabloids, and (3) other Finnish newspapers tend to be even more approving of religion than *Helsingin Sanomat* in their highlighting of 'insider' religious voices.

Debated diversity: the case of the summer hymn

One of the best examples of recent developments in newspapers' conceptions of diversity is the continuing controversy about the singing of the Summer Hymn (*Suvivirsi*) in schools. This is an old song that is sung at spring celebrations in schools before the summer holiday. The lyrics deal with the blossoming of nature and refer to God (second verse), the Lord (third verse), the Creator (third verse), and Jesus (fourth verse). It is included in the Lutheran hymnal and is typically part of the Sunday service at Midsummer. The general attitude to singing the song in schools is very positive. According to Gallup *Ecclesiastica* surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015 84–85 per cent had a positive or very positive attitude to the practice. Only 4–5 per cent opposed it (Sorsa 2016, 184). Despite the popularity, there has been an ongoing debate in the media since the mid-1990s about whether its singing should be allowed.

The Summer Hymn has been sung in most Finnish schools since the end of WWII. It has been part of an upbringing in a 'homogeneous culture' with strong ties to the Lutheran Church. There were some debates at the beginning of the 1970s (Lehtonen 2012, 225), but the contemporary debate is of a larger scale, and there have been more cases of principals deciding to drop the hymn from schools. I have studied the debate based on material collected from several newspapers and interest group publications such as teachers' and freethinkers' journals from 1990 to 2018.

The media debate about the Summer Hymn intensified in the mid-1990s, coinciding with increasing diversity in Finland. The debate has continued in the twenty-first century, as Table 4, which includes information about the number of articles with references to the Summer Hymn in two of the biggest Finnish newspapers, shows. The debate underlines that the public discourse has shifted since the time when the role and status of practices

related to and associated with the Lutheran Church were not continuously questioned. It is framed according to the understanding of Finland as a diverse society including a variety of religious and nonreligious convictions.

Table 4: Articles referring to the Summer Hymn in *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*) and *Ilta-Sanomat* (*IS*).

Years	Annual average of Summer Hymn articles in <i>HS</i> and <i>IS</i>
2015–2018	22
2010–2014	38
2005–2009	23
2000–2004	21
1995–1999	22
1990–1994	5

The main issue in the debate is whether it is appropriate to sing a ‘religious’ song in a public, ostensibly ‘secular’, school. Various solutions are offered – to drop the song altogether, to continue to sing it, to sing it but offer an opportunity to opt out of such events, or to include songs and celebrations based on other convictions. There are two key positions in the debate concerning the classification of the hymn. First, that the song is part of Finnish tradition, not an example of religious practice, and it is therefore reasonable to continue the practice without a special requirement to integrate the practices of other religions and convictions at school events. This is the dominant and most popular position – and the position of the public voices of the Lutheran Church. An example of this is a column written by Ulla Appelsin, the editor-in-chief of *Ilta-Sanomat* since 2010:

However you twist the issue, it is difficult to regard the Summer Hymn as anything other than a song that celebrates life and symbolizes the ending of school. It is a beautiful tradition which brings tears to the eyes of many mothers and fathers. A single song cannot be a big problem. It just cannot be (Ulla Appelsin, 25 March 2014, *IS*, column).

The second position argues that the song is religious. It privileges one religion, and it may offend nonreligious and non-Christian people. It should not therefore be sung in schools. This is the minority position of campaigning atheists, secularists, and freethinkers – some of whom are also teachers.

Here is an example written by a teacher of philosophy, Juha Eerolainen, published in two opinion letters in *Helsingin Sanomat*:

Is the Summer Hymn religious? According to the church, hymns are sung prayers, and this includes the Summer Hymn.

Freedom of religion is part of human rights, and Finland has committed itself to follow them. [...] It is part of schools' educational task to guide pupils to be sensitive to various minorities. We should allow all pupils, independent of their convictions, the opportunity to participate in the spring celebration of their own school (Juha Eerolainen, 12 June and 2 July 1996, *HS*, opinion letter).

The examples clarify how the hymn is classified differently, but they also reflect other tendencies. The first is a column written by an editor-in-chief, while the second is a reader's letter. Critical and secularist views are more likely to be found in letters than in editorials or news stories. The first example highlights emotions; the latter focuses on rights. This reveals how the debate is framed: supporting the singing of the hymn is assumed to be a sentimental and sensitive issue for many; its classification as 'religious' must be stated within the rhetoric of rights to be taken seriously.

It is revealing that representatives of other religions are rarely heard in the debate, but both key positions share the idea that the issue must be justified against the presence of a diversity of convictions. In the first position diversity is neutralized by claiming that singing is part of tradition and therefore neither religious nor in violation of anyone's belief or conviction. In the second position diversity is seen equally as a fact to be taken into account, but the solution is to drop the song entirely from schools on the basis of equality and freedom *from* religion.⁵

It is perhaps most surprising that it is difficult to find opinions from non-Christian religious voices in the media, and even more difficult to find any non-Christian religious voice opposing the singing. In other words, immigrants and adherents of non-Christian religions are not heard, but they provide a framework for the discussion. This is further evidence of the discursive shift previously sketched in this article. Thus, the discussion

⁵ The first position is also an example of the 'culturalization' of Christian symbols and practices that have typically been classified as 'religious'. Christian Joppke (2018) sees this as an example of secularism, whereas I follow Lori Beaman (2012; Beaman et al. 2018), who sees it as a strategy by which Christian hegemony is re-established in times of diversity.

of the justification of singing the Summer Hymn is itself an example of the changing discourse: without a shared understanding of the 'fact' of diversity, the entire debate would make little sense.

The newspapers have been very supportive of singing the hymn. The editor-in-chief of the biggest conservative tabloid even initiated a petition in 2011 for maintaining school celebrations, including the singing of the Summer Hymn. Diversity is something that can be accepted and taken into account, as long as it does not require the dominant culture to change too much. This is the position the newspapers defend, though the opportunity to opt out from participating in the singing event is also considered necessary.

Interpreting continuities and changes

It is difficult to determine precisely the extent to which social, political, and economic changes have affected how newspapers portray and understand religion. Finland has undergone rapid modernization since the Second World War. In the late 1940s and 1950s the Finnish economy was still strongly based on agriculture. The newspaper discourse labels this period the time of the 'moral economy', in which a presumed homogeneous and unanimous Finnish society felt it was its moral task to construct an affluent society after the war (Alasuutari 1996). My analysis suggests that religion played the role of a social glue that reminded people of the existence of a moral community, symbolized by the Lutheran Church and its largely unquestioned role in society. Newspapers for the most part contributed to the construction, maintenance, and dissemination of this discourse.

In the mid-1960s the 'planning economy' discourse was formed. It suggested that society and the economy blossomed best when rational organization and state-led planning were taken as the leading principle and combined with a belief in economic progress and democratic values (Alasuutari 1996). This was the period of further industrialization, when the factory became the bedrock of the economy. Religion – still referring mainly to Christianity and the Lutheran Church – was subjected to these ideals. It also indicated the development of a religious-secular binary in the media, and in the official stance of *Helsingin Sanomat* especially, it crystallized in the demand for the further separation of the church and state.

The shift from a 'planning economy' to a 'competition economy' occurred in the 1980s. The new discourse emphasized free market competition rather than state-led planning. People were conceptualized as individual customers with individual desires rather than, say, healthcare patients, social welfare

clients, and members of religious communities. This can be seen as a shift from the industrial to post-industrial mode of production, in which the locus of production was not the factory but the company. If the earlier dominant newspaper discourses on the economy are easily matched with the changes analysed here, the competition economy is visible in the context of religion a little later. It was especially in the mid-1990s that growing diversity started to play a role in the newspaper discourse. Diversity placed pressure on the previous 'partial monopoly' (Davie 2015, 97) of the Lutheran Church and enhanced competition. However, this did not entail the end of the Lutheran Church's privileges. It is rather the case that the Lutheran Church was required to justify its role in public discourse, and this justification was not made by defending the religious nature of practices, but increasingly by referring to tradition, cultural heritage, and public utility. The media maintained this framework for public discussion, but within it they tended moderately to support the 'liberal' sections of the Lutheran Church.

The recent developments analysed here go hand in hand with the gradual dismantling of the traditional state-church model in Finland. Changes in legislation concerning religion can be seen as attempts to accommodate diversity (Kääriäinen 2011), but it would be too simple to call this a dis-establishment process. On the contrary, it appears the 'weak established church' – referring to the idea that other religious communities are given support or certain privileges, bringing them closer to the established church (Davie 2015, 95–8) – is the strategy by which the Lutheran Church can best guarantee its own privileged position when diversity has become a shared principle in the media discourse on religion.

Religion has become a more visible topic in the Finnish newspapers, but this does not mean that people have become more religious or that religion is more appreciated than before. The 'resurgence' of religion (see Taira 2019) is not therefore the best term to describe the situation: it does not describe Christianity in the Finnish media and society accurately, and although the discussion of Islamic fundamentalism plays a prominent role in the media, it is debated primarily in the context of world politics rather than that of local and national issues. Moreover, while Lutheran leaders especially are valued public voices in the media, visibility is not the same as 'public religion' (Casanova 1994). Religious voices may be rational conversation partners and remain acknowledged resources in times of crisis, and they can enliven the debate concerning the public good, but such cases are exceptions and such voices are limited to liberal Lutheran leaders. Casanova's argument about the de-privatization of religion and the formation of public religion

since the 1980s therefore applies to a very narrow section of society. It is also clear that religious voices have existed as rational conversation partners in the media throughout the studied period.

The emergence of diversity is connected to a parallel development in which religion changes from being based on collective obligation to individual choice. It is almost a trivial observation that there is no duty to believe, to participate in religious events, or to be a member of a religious group. However, two qualifications should be made – both relevant to the newspaper coverage of religion. First, being a member of the Lutheran Church or having a relatively positive attitude towards the role of the church in society is still the preferred option, and this is reflected in moderately positive newspaper coverage of liberal Lutheranism and in somewhat critical coverage of anti-religious voices (Taira 2012; 2015). Second, religion is typically presented as a collective activity. There is an increasing number of stories about individual paths, but for the most part religious people do not have an individual voice in the newspapers – they are taken as representatives of a particular community independently of their actual position within it.

Religion is often covered as part of conflict, but religion is also covered, understood, and largely accepted as a public utility (see Taira 2019). This is mainly the case with the mainstream Lutheran Church, and much less when the focus is on minority religions. Everyday newspaper coverage of the Lutheran Church often concerns rites of passage such as marriage ceremonies and funerals. The tabloids are particularly keen on publishing stories about celebrity weddings and funerals that take place in churches, whereas civil marriages and nonreligious funerals are rarely used as material, though civil marriage is now more popular than church marriage.

Another aspect of religion as a public utility is the enhanced role of religious institutions in providing welfare services (in the Finnish and Lutheran context see Kallunki 2010; Yeung 2003). The crisis of the welfare state is a popular topic in newspapers, and religious institutions are increasingly part of this debate. Some media stories accept the idea that the Lutheran Church is a force for good, because it has taken on some of the welfare roles the state no longer supports as strongly as it once did. However, this discourse is mainly generated by theologians and bishops, who are given space in the newspapers as guest columnists and opinion writers. The professional journalists themselves, at least in the context of *Helsingin Sanomat*, play a less significant role.

The statistics show that secularization is underway in Finland. This is crucial for the legitimacy of the church, because one of the key justifications of its role has been that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is the church of the majority of Finns. There was a peak in church resignations

during the recession in the early 1990s, but this was otherwise a period of slow decline. A new crisis began in the 2000s, especially after 2003. The recent resignation peaks in 2010 and 2014 were related to the church's allegedly conservative nature, which has been highlighted in media debates. The peaks clearly demonstrate how influential the media can be, supporting the idea of the mediatization of religion (see Taira 2019), but this does not mean that the media or newspapers are unambiguously a secularizing force, as previously suggested. The media has considerable power over religious institutions, but at least in the Finnish context it is by no means clear that the media, or newspapers more specifically, uses its power to spread anti-religious ideas.

Conclusion

This article has offered an analysis of religion-related discursive change in Finnish newspapers and suggested that a shared discourse about living in a diverse society has become a dominant framework for religion-related media debates since the mid-1990s. Diversity is not embraced by all, but it is a starting point for both the newspaper coverage of religion and the subsequent debates. None of this has entailed the end of the privileged position of the Lutheran Church, but its privilege must be justified in public discourse within the frame of diversity. This discursive change in Finnish newspapers aptly echoes what Anthony Giddens (1994) has called a 'post-traditional situation', in which all traditions lose their taken-for-granted status and must be justified in public discourse. In the diversity framework Lutheran Church practices are often justified by reference to tradition, culture, or heritage. The most influential media outlets defend Lutheran 'tradition' in general and the singing of the Summer Hymn in schools in particular. This means that a certain kind of religiosity is seen as compatible with the current mode of modernity – especially liberal, moderate Lutheranism – while the privileges of the Lutheran Church are publicly negotiated and challenged at the same time.

A significant element of this discursive change is the increased media awareness and visibility of religion. This article has offered quantitative evidence and qualitative analysis of that development. This visibility does not indicate a rise in religiosity as such; it testifies to religion being seen as both a problem and a resource (as in Sweden, see Lövheim 2019). In its capacity to direct people's understanding of religion the media is a powerful institution, but on the basis of this study Finnish newspaper coverage is not

anti-religious as such. Although papers publish stories that are critical of religion, especially when journalists and readers who write opinion letters consider themselves more liberal than religious communities, they usually write favourably about the Finnish Lutheran Church while maintaining that the diversity of conviction is important.

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TEEMU TAIRA is Senior Lecturer in Study of Religion, University of Helsinki.
E-mail: teetai@utu.fi

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