

'The Swedish Condition': Representations of Religion in the Swedish Press 1988–2018

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine changes and continuities in the coverage of religion in Swedish daily newspapers between 1988 and 2018. Previous research has shown that Sweden in comparison with other Nordic countries is more secular in terms of its population's religious belief and practice, and more tolerant of immigration and religious diversity. Against this background the article discusses whether the representation of religion in four selected newspapers during 2018 reveals a change with regard to trends identified in previous studies, covering the period between 1988 and 2008. It especially asks if such changes indicate the continuity of the 'Swedish condition', meaning a more tolerant approach to religious diversity as expressed in the daily press. The analysis shows that the coverage of religion in the Swedish press during the period between 2008 and 2018 develops through parallel trends of the continued acknowledgement of religious diversity, a heightened focus on Islam and the public presence of religion, and more contestation with regard to the political and social implications of this situation. In assessing these trends further study is needed concerning the interrelations between media representations of religious diversity and changes in other institutions in Swedish society such as politics, law, and education.

Keywords: *Sweden, newspapers, mediatization, religious diversity, Islam*

In 2017 the main Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* published an article by Norwegian crime author Anne Holt concerning the frequent references to 'the Swedish condition' in Norwegian political discussion (Holt 2017). This 'condition' did not concern Sweden's position as one of the highest ranking countries in the world with regard to secularity, welfare supply, or gender equality. It was used as an abusive term, referring to uncontrolled immigration with the subsequent ruin of Swedish society and the censorship of 'political correctness' in the dominant media, suppressing critical opinions about the dangers of religious and cultural diversity which, as a consequence, had established its presence on social media.

The image of Sweden as different from the other Nordic countries in terms of attitudes to religion and immigrants is also visible in the findings of two recently concluded research projects: *The Role of Religion in the Public Sphere: A Comparative Study* (NOREL 2009–2014, see Furseth 2018)¹ and *Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments*, CoMReL 2014–2018, see Lundby 2018).² As is pointed out in the introduction to this special issue, several international surveys reveal that Sweden stands out from the other Nordic countries as being more secular in terms of religious belief and practice in the population, and having a less pronounced connection between religion and national identity, and a higher tolerance of immigration and religious diversity. A survey undertaken in 2015 by the CoMReL project revealed that although Sweden had the highest number of immigrants from Muslim majority countries, Swedish respondents were less concerned about the display of religious symbols, and especially Islamic ones, in public settings and less prone to see Islam as a threat to national culture than Danish and Norwegian respondents (Lövheim et al. 2018a). As will be discussed further below, references to religion in the Swedish daily press also differ in several ways from the trends in Denmark, Norway, and Finland reported in previous research.

The article aims to examine representations of religion in four of the largest Swedish daily newspapers during four selected periods in 2018. It also discusses changes and continuities in this coverage of religion in comparison to the findings of previous research in the period between 1988 and 2008. This research was conducted in two projects. The first, the NOREL project, compared representations of religion in the daily press in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden in 1988, 1998, and 2008 (Lundby et al. 2018; Niemelä and Christensen 2013). The second project, *The resurgence of religion?! A Study of religion and modernity in Sweden with the daily press as case study*³ (henceforth the Swedish editorial study), focused on representations of religion in Swedish editorials between 1976 and 2010 (Lövheim and Linderman 2015; Linderman and Lövheim 2016; Lövheim 2017).

Against this background the main question the article addresses is: Does the representation of religion in the selected newspapers from 2018 reveal a change with regard to the trends identified in previous studies? In

1 NOREL was funded by the Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS), 2009–2014.

2 CoMReL was financed by the Norwegian Research Council, 2015–2018.

3 *The resurgence of religion? Religion and modernity in Sweden with the daily press as case study* was funded by the National Research Council of Sweden, 2010–2014.

particular, do such changes indicate a continuity of the 'Swedish condition', meaning the trend towards a more tolerant approach to religious diversity as expressed in the daily press?

Theoretical starting points: visibility, complexity, and co-structuring

As the introduction outlines (Taira 2019), the articles in this special issue share a theoretical framework of selected key concepts drawn from contemporary scholarly debates regarding relations between religion, media, society, and culture in Nordic societies. This debate addresses a situation of continuous secularization in the sense of the status of religious organizations in Nordic societies and beliefs among the population, and the increased visibility of religion in political debates and the media, for example. In summarizing the findings of the NOREL project Inger Furseth (2018) suggests the concept of 'religious complexity' as a frame of reference in accounting for the multiple, parallel, and seemingly contradictory trends of religious change. The core argument in this approach, which draws on complexity theory as a framework (Furseth 2018; see also Walby 2007), is that changes within different institutions in society are interrelated, but that neither a linear direction over time nor parallel tendencies of increase or decline between different levels of analysis should be assumed. Religious complexity thus offers a frame for studying religious change that shifts from predictions of single and coherent patterns to a more contextual approach in which variation, the reciprocal influence between various levels, and uneven patterns of change over time are the focus. Starting from this perspective, I will analyse changes in the representation of religion in the daily press by highlighting concurrent trends, as well as contradictions and variations. Concerning key concepts for discussing changes, the article will focus on *visibility* in the quantitative presence of religion-related articles and references in the daily press, and as a qualitative measure for *how* religion is visible in these texts. Against the background of recent discussions of secularization theory it is relevant to focus on how religion comes to be represented as a *personal* or a *public* phenomenon in the newspapers. To take this analysis further, the concepts of *individuality* and *public utility* will be used to discuss whether the media coverage assumes individuality as the norm with regard to religious beliefs and practices, or whether religion is represented in terms of its contribution to society's common good. As *religious diversity* has become a principal issue of debate, a final category of analysis will be whether religion is represented from the viewpoint that

Sweden is or should be a secular or a religiously diverse society. In such representations religion can be depicted as a resource for or source of societal conflict (see Hjelm 2015; Beckford 2015).

This perspective aligns with new developments of mediatization theory in studies of the media and religion in Scandinavia. These studies discuss change as an outcome of how various social institutions, such as religion and the media, overlap or intersect with each other, as well as with other institutions. Hjarvard and Lundby (2018) argue that neither the affordances of particular media nor the overall media system determines processes of mediation, but they influence the scope and forms of communicative agency in various ways by framing events in particular ways, or provide stages upon which conflicts are performed. The media may thus co-structure developments by setting the conditions for access to and the voice of political actors, for example (Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær 2015). Thus, possible changes in Swedish media coverage's trend towards tolerance of religious diversity will be analysed by highlighting connections between other social events (political and legal) during the period of study as indications of the media co-structuring changes within Swedish society.

Overview of longitudinal changes in previous research 1988–2008

In the NOREL project four newspapers in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden were selected, representing two of the largest morning papers with different political profiles, the largest tabloid paper, and one larger regional paper. The Swedish national papers were the daily morning papers *Dagens Nyheter*, which is independent/liberal, and *Svenska Dagbladet*, which is liberal/conservative. The chosen tabloid was *Aftonbladet*, which is social democratic, and the regional paper was *Göteborgs-Posten*, which is liberal. The analysed media texts were published over four two-week periods in 2018: before Easter (15–28 March), before Eid (1–14 June), a regular period in the autumn (8–21 October), and before Christmas (11–24 December). The sampling included different genres of newspaper material: opinion texts (editorials, op-eds), news articles, features, and cultural reviews. The Swedish editorial study used a different form of sampling strategy, with a randomized selection of editorial pages from the largest newspapers in Sweden, published between 1976 and 2010 (Linderman and Lövheim 2016).⁴

4 The newspapers analysed were *Aftonbladet*, *Arbetet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Dagens Industri*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, *Kvällsposten*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* and *Helsingborgs Dagblad*.

Thus, this study was limited to editorial pages, but based on continuous data from the period. The NOREL project and the Swedish editorial study used a similar set of search words to identify references to religion in the media texts, covering a broad spectrum of expressions: 'Religion', 'Islam', 'Christianity', 'Judaism', 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'new forms of spirituality', 'secularity', and 'religious metaphor'.

The NOREL project showed an increase in main articles referring to religion between 1988, 1998, and 2008 (Niemelä and Christensen 2013, 14).⁵ However, this was not a linear and general trend over the period, because the frequency of the coverage differed between the Nordic countries and between regions and article genres (see Lundby et al. 2018; Lövheim and Lundby 2013). In the case of Sweden the number of articles covering religion was notably lower (736) than in Norway (1,740) and Finland (1,603, see further Niemelä and Christensen 2013, 11). There was an increase in the main articles about religion in Sweden, from 24 per cent in 1988 to 38 per cent in 2008, but no significant differences between the four periods. These changes in the coverage of religion are confirmed by the longitudinal study of references to religion on editorial pages in the larger Swedish newspapers. While 22 per cent of the editorial pages referred to religion in the first five-year interval between 1976 and 1980, this increased to 31 per cent in the final interval between 2006 and 2010. There was a peak between 1996 and 2005, where 40 per cent of the editorial pages referred to religion (Linderman and Lövheim 2016, 106).

Both studies also show an increased diversity with regard to the representation of religion. The NOREL project reveals that compared with the other Nordic countries, coverage of the Lutheran majority church declined most in Sweden, from 57 per cent in 1988 to 15 per cent in 2008. The coverage of Islam increased more in Sweden, from 2 per cent in 1988 to 21 per cent in 2008, than in Finland and Norway, though not as much as in Denmark. The Swedish editorial study shows a similar trend, with references to Islam, Christianity, and religious metaphors increasing over the period. References to Islam showed the most drastic development, increasing from 3 per cent between 1976 and 1980 to 9 per cent between 2005 and 2010.

It is important not to overestimate the significance of religion in public debate based on the frequency of references to it in the daily press. The Swedish editorial study clearly shows that more visibility in terms of more references to religion does not imply that religion plays a more significant

5 Following Niemelä and Christensen, the main articles are frontpage articles of any size (except teasers), as well as articles of three or more columns (2013, 22).

role in political discourse (Lövheim and Linderman 2015). Editorials mentioning religion descriptively or metaphorically, often in connection with international conflicts, were more common than editorials discussing religion as a political issue of national concern. This editorial category increased over the period, but still did not comprise more than 20 per cent of the total number of articles analysed. Further analysis of editorials where religion was the main topic revealed a trend towards less discussion of the status and role of the Church of Sweden in society and more focus on religious diversity in Sweden, human rights, gender equality, and the freedom of religion (Lövheim and Linderman 2015, 38). In a study of coverage of Islam in the Swedish news media 2015, Axner (2015, 47) found that the majority of the articles appeared in foreign news coverage, and generally represented Islam in connection with the themes of terrorism, violence, and extremism. In news articles with a national or local scope the coverage focused more on individuals. The majority of articles focused on problems with integration, but there were also some examples of the contribution Islam makes to Swedish society and culture.

In conclusion, previous research covering the period between 1988 and 2008 reveals an increased visibility of religion in the Swedish press, in particular in references to Islam. Furthermore, religion was increasingly covered as part of national political debates concerning integration, human rights, and democracy (Lövheim and Linderman 2015, 46). This development shows that the visibility of religion in the Swedish press challenges a radical secularist position in which religion is separated from debates concerning public issues in Swedish society. In the period from 2000 debates about religion in editorial pages and opinion articles increasingly focused on accommodating different ways of expressing religion in a pluralistic democratic society (*ibid.*). This representation focuses mainly on tensions between religious diversity and the perceived core values of Swedish society, such as gender equality and individual freedom (Lövheim 2017). This affects the possibilities of various actors to participate in the debate. As Axner (2013) found in a study of opinion pieces signed by religious actors, minority religions are more limited in terms of the issues that can be addressed than representatives of the majority Lutheran Church of Sweden.

General trends in newspaper coverage, 2008–2018

The empirical material used for this article is derived from a search conducted through the National Library of Sweden's database of digitalized daily

newspapers (*Svenska dagstidningar*) for 2018. The search parameters were limited to the word 'religion' for time reasons. The analysis of the material was conducted in three steps. First, there was an overview of quantitative changes in references in the daily press from 2008. Second, the material was categorized based on the main categories used in the NOREL project (Niemelä and Christensen 2013) and one of the key concepts presented above:

- Main article or minor reference?
- What kind of religion is covered?
- Does the coverage focus on national or international issues?
- Is religion represented as a personal or public issue?

The third step used a content analysis to reveal the main themes in the material. These themes, which will be presented below, were then analysed following the key concepts of religion represented as an individual choice or as a public utility, secularity, or religious diversity as the assumed starting point, and religion presented as a resource or a problem for society.

A search for 'religion' among all the newspapers indexed in the National Library of Sweden's database shows a strong increase in references to religion among Swedish newspapers. In 2008 there were 1 879 hits, increasing to 14 833 in 2018, with a peak in 2014 of 28 553 articles. This increase can partly be explained by the larger number of newspapers indexed for 2014 and 2018 than 2008.⁶ Furthermore, as the database is not limited to the four papers on which the NOREL project focused, no direct comparisons of frequencies can be made.⁷ Despite this caveat, it is noteworthy that the general trends of previous research regarding greater religious diversity in the coverage seems to be supported. A search for 'Christianity' shows an increase from 124 hits in 2008 to 871 in 2018, while the number of hits for 'Islam' increases from 955 to 9 434 over the same period. Freedom of religion (*'religionsfrihet'*) increases from 92 hits in 2008 to 1 809 in 2018.

Specific searches in the NOREL study's four focus newspapers improve the potential for comparison. References to 'religion' in *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) increased from 512 in 2008 to 922 in 2018. The years between confirm this trend: in 2015, 2016, and 2017 there were more than 1,000 hits. The second morning paper, *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD), shows a declining trend, from 493

⁶ In 2008 only five large and nationwide newspapers were indexed; from 2014 another five medium-sized and regional papers were included.

⁷ *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Aftonbladet*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Sydsvenskan*, *Dagen*, *Göteborgsposten*, *Helsingborgsposten* as the largest papers, plus a number of smaller papers.

references in 2008 to 295 in 2018. This is also supported by examining the years between, with the exception of 2014 (489 hits). The tabloid *Aftonbladet* (*AB*) also shows a declining trend, from 543 hits for 'religion' in 2008 to 219 in 2018, which is supported over time. Finally, data for the regional daily newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* (*GP*) is only provided from 2013, where the search word 'religion' generates 266 hits. The trend is fairly stable, with 213 hits in 2018, peaking at 418 in 2015.

A more detailed analysis shows further differences between the newspapers. The first table shows the number of references in each two-week period per newspaper.

Table 1: References to 'religion' in four Swedish newspapers in 2018

Period	March 15–28	June 1–14	October 8–21	December 11–24	Total
<i>DN</i>	59	39	33	36	167
<i>SvD</i>	11	14	8	6	39
<i>AB</i>	13	10	6	5	34
<i>GP</i>	5	18	9	9	41

As this table shows, references to religion in *Dagens Nyheter*, which is also the largest daily newspaper in Sweden, greatly dominate.⁸ As there is no clear trend in hits for a certain period, the following analysis will be based on the whole of 2018. Since one article may contain several references to 'religion', this is a more relevant unit of analysis. The next table shows the number of articles per newspaper categorized by size (main topic/reference), religious tradition (religion in general/Christianity/Islam/other), personal faith or public role in society, and national or international scope.

Table 2: Categories of references to religion in all articles 2018⁹

Paper	Size	Tradition	Personal/Public	National/International	Total
<i>DN</i>	18/18	20/6/9/1	4/32	24/12	36
<i>SvD</i>	8/17	15/2/4/1	3/22	12/4	25
<i>AB</i>	6/12	9/3/5/1	5/13	12/4	18
<i>GP</i>	17/13	10/2/10/4	5/16	18/2	30

⁸ In February 2018 *DN* was estimated to reach 596 000 people, *SvD* 377 000, *AB* 540 000, and *GP* 281 000 (Orvesto Konsument 2018).

⁹ It was impossible to classify all minor articles under the categories of 'Tradition' and 'National/International'.

Main themes in the 2018 coverage

On the basis of this overview we can turn to the first part of the research question in this article, which concerns *visibility*, in the sense of changes in the quantitative presence of religion-related articles in the daily press between 2008 and 2018. The clearest example of an increase is in the largest paper *Dagens Nyheter*, while the other papers show a declining or stable trend. Furthermore, in the two morning papers there seem to be no large differences in the number of main articles and smaller pieces referring to religion, while shorter references are more common in the tabloid, and the regional paper has more main articles, often in local news. In all the papers 'religion' as a general term and 'Islam' are more frequently covered than Christianity. Other religious traditions are almost absent. Remembering the caveats concerning methodological differences in data collection, this accords with the trends reported in the NOREL and Swedish editorial studies. Following Lundby (2019) and Christensen (2019), there is a similar growth trend in debate and commentaries primarily on Islam and the Muslim presence in the Danish and Norwegian daily press. Furthermore, articles focusing on religion in society or its public expression occur more frequently than articles about religion as personal faith. The majority of articles focus on national events and issues, while most of the articles with an international scope can be found in *Dagens Nyheter*. The main themes taken up in the 2018 articles are presented below. This presentation departs from the articles where religion is the main theme and which refer to events within Sweden, i.e. with a local and national scope. As the majority of the articles focus on religion as a public phenomenon, themes related to this category will be presented first.

Religious schools

Discussions of what are referred to in Sweden as 'religious free schools' are the most prominent among articles focusing on the public role of religion (14 articles). In the Swedish education system some eighty-two percent of all pupils attend schools that are organized and funded by the state (municipalities). 'Free schools' are schools organized by a non-governmental organization or private company but still primarily funded by the state. All schools are governed by the same law, the School Act, and a national syllabus and curriculum decided by the Swedish National Agency for Education. During the studied period *Dagens Nyheter* (14 March) and *Göteborgs-Posten* (4–5 June) both published a series of feature articles examining schools

established by religious, primarily Muslim, organizations. The focus of the articles, which will be presented in more detail below, was on revealing control by the schools over children's dress, and interaction between boys and girls in various activities. Following these articles, a number of letters to the editor (*DN* 15 and 23 March, *GP* 8 June), columns (24 March) and editorials (10 June) addressed this issue. In the other two papers the issue is also discussed in op-eds and columns (*SvD* 20 and 28 March), and letters to the editor (*AB* 21 and 22 March). Connected to this topic, there are also a news article, letters to the editors, and reports concerning halal food in Swedish schools (*AB*, *GP* 13 and 14 June).

Harassment and violence in the name of religion

The second largest theme (12 articles) concerns violence against or harassment of (primarily) women on the basis of religion. The most conspicuous event is a number of articles in *Aftonbladet* about 'moral policing' in the suburbs of Gothenburg and Stockholm (12 and 14 June). The articles followed an op-ed written by representatives of the conservative party *Moderaterna* in *Göteborgs-Posten* on 5 June arguing for a national investigation of this issue to ensure that 'Swedish law is applicable everywhere and for everyone' so young people and women were not limited in their right to freely choose their lifestyle and partner. Islam was not singled out in this article, but people interviewed in the follow-up articles argued that it was wrong to scapegoat fundamentalist Muslims, as this was an issue which concerned the use of 'culture, norms, or religion' as a motivation and legitimation for controlling individual behaviour. This issue was also the topic of a debate article criticizing the exclusion of a politician from the leftist party *Vänsterpartiet* for being too outspoken on issues of religious fundamentalism and honour crimes in the suburbs (*AB*, 9 October).

Public expressions of freedom of religion

The third largest theme (9 articles) raises different aspects of the freedom of religion as expressed in the public sphere. The most prominent issue is a debate about whether or not calls for prayer from a Muslim minaret should be tolerated, initiated by an op-ed from a representative of the Conservative party *Moderaterna* in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 1 March. The debate continued in the printed version (19 and 20 March) but mainly in the digital edition, and surfaced in *Dagens Nyheter* in letters to the editor (21 March). The second

larger event reported under this theme concerned *state support for religious organizations*. On 13 March 2018 a new Swedish commission on state support for faith communities in a religiously diverse society was presented. This generated editorial comment (*DN*, 17 March) and op-ed articles (*SvD*, 27 March) concerning whether the state should support religious organizations. During the period there were also a couple of articles about the freedom to leave a religion, connected to decisions by the Swedish immigration agency concerning conversion (*DN*, 7 June, 16 December).

Religion as individual faith

Articles presenting religion as individual faith can largely be found in the culture pages (reviews of books, music, art), interviews with individuals, quizzes, and the comic pages. Several of these articles portray religion as a source of peace, meaning, and moral guidance for individuals. A three-page article on 24 December in *Göteborgs-Posten*, portraying football player and practising Muslim Nasiru Mohammed, serves as an example. The title of the article read 'Nasiru trusts that prayer will make him ready to play' and was illustrated by a picture of Nasiru Mohammad praying in a mosque in Gothenburg. In the main text Nasiru described the significance of faith for attaining his life goals and his experiences of religious faith as a successful football player in a secular country like Sweden.

Changes in coverage: trends

The second research question for this study concerned changes in *how* religion was visible in the daily press in 2018 compared with 2008. As the previous section shows, the majority of the articles focused on the role of religion in society, especially on Islam in Swedish society. Turning to the analytical category of secularity or religious diversity as the assumed starting point for representation, the articles reveal a both-and situation rather than an either-or one. However, religious diversity is the premise of the coverage in the dominant themes, which focus on religion in schools and in the use of public space. Yet, as we shall see, the notion of secularity as central for organizing public space and for individual and collective rights is clearly present in how the articles characterize religion. This tension overlaps with the question of whether religious diversity is presented as a resource or problem for society. The presentation of the main themes in the previous section shows that very few articles approach religion and

religious diversity as a resource for society. There is a clear tendency for articles (news and editorials, debate, and letters to the editor) to focus on religious diversity as a problem with regard to integration, and the use of public space and public funding. Articles focusing on the public role of religion frequently adopt a more critical stance regarding religious diversity than articles focusing on religion as a personal choice. This focus on transgressions or boundary disputes with regard to religion as a public or private issue concurs with trends in the Danish press, as Christensen (2019) discusses. However, these patterns are not clear-cut. Religion is predominantly portrayed as a problem with regard to human rights, in particular the rights of women and children, but this is often connected to fundamentalist, violent, and controlling forms of religious authority. Articles about ‘moral policing’ in the suburbs, however, include different voices/opinions about whether and what kind of religion is the problem. This signals an awareness in the media of religious diversity, which introduces variation in terms of the role religion can play in society and for individuals. Representations of how religious diversity can be fruitfully handled, however, are predominantly to be found in articles focusing on personal faith. In the next section we will explore how these tensions between secularity and religious diversity as a problem or a resource find expression in selected examples from 2018.

Religious free schools: diversity, individual rights and public utility

The thematic analysis shows the most salient issue in the period on which this article focuses concerns religious schools. The Swedish education system, based on state funding and regulation, makes schools a key element in the discussion of religion as a public utility in terms of its relationship to the state and its contribution to the common good of society. This issue was actualized by the impending election of September 2018, in which the Social Democratic Party, *Socialdemokraterna*, the largest and then governing party, presented a proposal to forbid schools organized by religious groups.¹⁰ The question of religious schools also highlights the issues concerning whether Sweden is or should be a secular or religiously diverse society, including individuality as a norm for expressions of religion in the public space.

An article in *Dagens Nyheter* on 14 March headlined ‘Extremism in schools’ was divided into two sections. The first was a news report about

¹⁰ The original proposal included existing and newly established schools. During the autumn of 2018 this has been amended to include only new establishments.

the Social Democrats' proposal to ban religious schools. The article described the background of the proposal and explained that it did not ban individual religious practice but such practice in an organized form during the school day. The article included two quotations from the minister for public administration Ardalan Shakarabi expressing the reasons for the ban: 'We have seen a development where religious schools in several cases have supported religious oppression. If we are to overcome segregation, we must totally forbid religious schools.' The quotation continued: 'The Swedish school should be directed by teachers and pedagogues, not priests and imams. At present we cannot guarantee this, and it presents a serious problem if we are to hold Sweden together.'

As this short summary demonstrates, the news article focused on the balance between the individual's rights to practise religion and the school as a state-funded public space. The minister's quotations reveal two other salient points: the risk of religious schools contributing to segregation; and the question of control of schools by teachers employed and educated by the state or by religious leaders. As the first quotation shows, this control was depicted as 'oppression'. The focus on the risks of extremism and oppression was also salient in the second article, which reported from a school in Gothenburg where the principal and staff had been accused of connections with Islamic extremism. It was a school in an area with high levels of socioeconomic exclusion, but which had been able to show good results in its students' learning outcomes. The principal of the school was interviewed. He denied contacts with extremist and violent Muslims. When asked about his own opinions he said: 'I have five children who were born in Sweden, and I want to protect this society that has protected my children.' The article thus depicted the Muslim principal as caring for Swedish society.

On the same day the main editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* commented on the proposal to ban religious schools and the commission report on changes in state support for religious organizations (*DN* 14 March). The editorial pointed out that only seventy schools, representing one in a thousand of all Swedish schools, were religious. Most were Christian and had never been criticized. The proposal was thus 'unfair', and a better solution would be to reform the bad schools. The editorial pointed out that it was no coincidence that these two events were contemporary. The critique of religion was advancing following a long period of more tolerance of faith communities and organizations which had had positive and negative implications. The editorial argued that practices such as polygamy, female circumcision, op-

pression of LGBTQ people, the gender segregation of pupils, and 'suburban caliphates' enforcing conservative religious values were all a 'phenomenon that cannot be allowed in Sweden'. However,

the state must guarantee freedom of religion. It is dangerous when loud opinions turn against religious minorities and expressions of religious faith are increasingly presented as unnatural and obsolete. Political decisions in the direction of secularity are not by definition wise and do not contribute to the good of society.

The editorial placed the debate in the context of changing social and political opinions regarding religion: from more tolerance of to resistance against religious minorities. The editorial clearly labelled some 'conservative religious' practices as unwelcome in Sweden. However, this differentiation between the 'positive and negative implications' of a more tolerant attitude was also one part of the argument in this editorial for religious diversity as the premise for the state's handling of religion. This was made even clearer by the emphasis on the state's duty to guarantee the freedom of religion and fair treatment of religious organizations, and by the questioning of secularity as a political solution. The editorial's approach was mirrored in an article by Niklas Orrenius, a reporter at *Dagens Nyheter*, commenting on the newspaper's exposure of problems within Muslim groups in Sweden (9 June). The reason, he argued, was not 'because I am against the religion – but because I see Islam as a Swedish religion, as part of our society'.

The articles in *Göteborgs-Posten* were published as a series between 4 and 5 June under the headline 'In the name of religion'. The frontpage of the paper announced the articles with the headline 'Schools pressured by religious demands' and the caption 'GP's examination shows that several Swedish schools give in to demands from parents connected with honour and religion'. The focus on the oppression and control of pupils in the name of religion was noticeable in the newspaper's examination: in the first article a journalist rang Muslim pre-schools in Gothenburg, Malmö, and Stockholm pretending to be the father of a five-year-old girl and asking whether they were prepared to control her wearing of the hijab during school days. Twenty-seven out of forty schools were prepared to meet such demands (GP 5 June). Further examples in the article concerned teachers ensuring that boys and girls did not mix during swimming lessons or break the Ramadan fast.

The second article featured interviews with 'secular Muslims', who reported that 'moral policing and a religious culture of honour are destroying their lives' (GP 4 June). This clash between religious and secular values also feature prominently in the follow-up article to the examination of control in pre-schools (GP 4 June). The articles contained interviews with school staff in areas with large groups of practising Muslims. The principal of one of the schools referred to the schools' policy and the School Act as sufficient for handling these situations, but the interviewed teachers were quoted as being afraid of being accused of intolerance or xenophobia when rejecting the demands of parents to adjust school activities in accordance with religious values and practice. A politician responsible for school issues in Gothenburg was quoted as saying 'according to my opinion this is against the School Act' (GP 5 June). The chairperson of one of the targeted municipalities was quoted as saying that schools should 'not expose them (children) to religious or political persuasion. But I understand that this is a dilemma, where the value policy of schools sometimes clashes with the right to religion' (5 June). In a final follow-up article on 8 June an imam and board member of the Gothenburg interreligious council responds to the articles, saying that 'children do not have religious duties', which meant controlling their dress or behaviour in schools was not supported by Islam.

The editor-in-chief of *Göteborgs-Posten* explained in an article 'why GP is investigating religious oppression' (4 June). The introduction read: 'Freedom of religion does not only concern the right to practise one's religion but also the right to not practise any religion at all. For some people this is sadly not self-evident. *Göteborgs-Posten* has therefore chosen to investigate religious oppression in Gothenburg.' Referring to a 2015 police report declaring fourteen areas in Sweden to be in need of additional resources to handle criminality and segregation, of which seven could be found in Gothenburg, the editor argued 'it is our duty as the largest paper in the region to look more deeply into these problems'.

The core tension on which *Göteborgs-Posten's* articles focused was religion, especially Islam, as a threat to individual freedom, in particular the freedom not to follow religious rules. As the editor-in-chief argued, the paper had a duty to its readers to expose the problem of religious oppression to safeguard this constitutional right in Swedish society. In these articles religious diversity was clearly seen as a problem, while secularity – in the form of secular laws and the experience of secular Muslims – was implicitly portrayed as a guarantee against religious oppression. The themes of religious schools as oppressive, and the division between schools as secular public space

and religion as individual practice, were also expressed in a letter to the editor on 15 March: 'It would be great to ban all religious schools. Practising religion is something people can do in their free time.' Nevertheless, ambiguity regarding secularity as a norm in Swedish society is also present in *Göteborgs-Posten's* articles. This was expressed, for example, in the teachers' fears of being intolerant or xenophobic in disregarding the demands of religious parents, and the recognition of local politicians of the dilemma between the value policy of schools and the right to practise religion in public. This tension between values was expressed in an interview in one of the articles with a lawyer at the Swedish National Agency for education. She explained that controlling children's dress in school was difficult to handle because the protection of individual freedom and integrity in the School Act was based on the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which also granted children the right to practise their religion and parents the responsibility for their children's upbringing (*GP* 5 June).

These two examples of the newspaper coverage of the issue of religious schools show the complexity of media representations of religion in 2018. The main angle of the articles in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Göteborgs-Posten* is to portray religious authorities and regulations as a problem for individuals (oppression and control) and society (segregation). Nevertheless, the articles also reflect various opinions and dilemmas, which shows an awareness that diverging religious opinions and practices cannot be ignored or banned in contemporary Sweden. Secularity as a given model for the state is challenged by increasing diversity in practice and demands from citizens, and by Swedish and European law granting individuals and groups the right to freely practise their religion in public. The editorial and column in *Dagens Nyheter* go further in accepting religious diversity as the starting point for how a democratic state should handle religion as a public utility. *Göteborgs-Posten* appears to focus on a separation between religion as primarily an individual freedom and secularity as a principle for public life, while still recognizing calls to accommodate religious diversity in public opinion and legal practice. Thus, individual freedom as a norm for expressions of religion in the public space is complex when individuals may choose to embrace as well as opt out of religion.

Complexity, continuity, and change

Finally, we will return to the question of whether the representation of religion in 2018 indicates a continuity of the trend of a more tolerant approach

towards religious diversity in the Swedish daily press. Most of the material analysed in this article is too limited to offer a coherent answer to this question. Bearing this in mind, it is still possible to point to some trends when comparing articles from 2018 and trends reported in previous research from the period between 1988 and 2008. First, the material from 2018 shows that religion is predominantly discussed as an issue that concerns public life in Swedish society. This can be seen as a continuation of the trend towards including religion as part of broader political debates rather than as a separate section of society (Lövheim and Linderman 2015, 46). Thus, articles appear to depart from religious diversity as a new reality in Swedish society, while secularity in the sense of a strict separation of religion from the public sphere is no longer the given premise for the coverage of religion. While these findings indicate an *awareness* about religious diversity in the daily press, the question of tolerance is more ambiguous. As has been pointed out, previous studies have shown that tensions between religious diversity and gender equality and individual freedom are a prominent feature of the representation of religion in Swedish editorials (Lövheim 2017). Following Hjelm (2015), the coverage from 2018 also shows a continuation of a focus on practice – religious clothing and schools, or the treatment of women – rather than belief in the public discourse about the visibility of religion. The analysis shows that Islam exemplifies regulations and practices considered problematic more often than Christianity. Although there are several examples of articles where Muslims in Sweden respond to the critical coverage of Islam, or articles that show diverging opinions within Islam, these are still the minority. Thus, the existence of a ‘conditioned tolerance’ of religious diversity, especially in relation to Islam, noted in previous research is clearly present in the 2018 coverage (see Axner 2013).

It is interesting that the question of Swedish tolerance of religious diversity is explicitly addressed in the material, most clearly in the editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* and in the news articles and columns in *Göteborgs-Posten*. It is also present in an editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet* arguing that Swedish society must face the implication of allowing the freedom of religion (7 June). On the Swedish national day an editorial in *Aftonbladet* states: ‘Swedishness has become a burning political issue. Ethnicity, language, religion, and culture are the most brutal battleground of the new age’ (6 June). This indicates that although religious diversity continued to serve as a starting point for the newspaper coverage, a debate about its *consequences* was more conspicuous in 2018 than in the period between 1988 and 2008. The material analysed in this article clearly shows that dilemmas and diverging opinions concerning

the implications of the tolerance of religious diversity for Swedish society is a burning issue in the daily press. The reflections by journalists in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Göteborgs-Posten* on the balance between the duty to expose problems within Islam, the reality of religious diversity, and the dilemmas of interpreting the meaning of the freedom of religion are mirrored in other studies about the coverage of Islam in the Scandinavian public service media (Lövheim and Jensdotter 2018; Hjarvard and Rosenfeldt 2018).

With regard to the mediatization of religion, these findings do not support a simplistic conclusion that mediatization over time increases or diminishes the significance of religion in society. As previous research has shown, mediatization as a process of change in the public presence of religion needs to be contextualized within changes in the interplay between the media and other institutions in Swedish society. The media co-structures developments by framing events in a particular way and by setting conditions for other actors (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). In the introduction the question of a change in the Swedish newspaper coverage of religion has been set against the background of demographic and political changes since 2008. In a situation of greater religious diversity new questions arise concerning how to combine the core social democratic values of egalitarianism in the distribution of welfare, and the diverse rights and needs of the population. The NOREL study revealed an increasing focus on religion in parliamentary debates in the Nordic countries between 1988 and 2008. Islam was more frequently debated in the Danish and Norwegian parliaments than in Sweden during the period, while references to religion as part of human rights issues increased most in Swedish parliamentary debates (Lövheim et al. 2018b). In 2010, when the right-wing populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* (the Swedish Democrats) won seats in the Swedish parliament, debates in the parliament began to more closely resemble those in the other Nordic countries. The Swedish Democrats became the third largest party in the elections of 2014 and have since pushed for stricter immigration policies, more control of religious schools, and a focus on Swedish culture, traditions, values, and religion (*Skolpolitiska inriktningsmanifestet* 2018). The most prominent themes in the material analysed in this article concerning religious schools, the investigation of 'moral policing', the allowance of calls to prayer, and state subsidies for faith communities followed from political initiatives published as op-eds in the daily press. Besides references to these initiatives, religious freedom in the Swedish constitutional law, the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and the European Court of Human Rights feature prominently in several articles. As the analysis in this article

shows, the newspapers' representation of religion is interconnected with changes in political opinion in Sweden, as well as juridical debates in the European Union concerning the freedom of religion in secular or mono-religious societies. Thus, the new visibility of religion in Swedish society is framed through the implications of this situation for the secular state. As Hjelm (2015) points out, the construction of religion as a social problem takes place where other social problems are defined and handled – in the media, politics, and the legal system.

The analysis shows that the daily press sets the stage for political initiatives but also engages in political debate. As Hjarvard argues in analysing media coverage of the Mohammad cartoons (2016), traditional newspapers have become more inclined to engage in opinion journalism, with increasing competition between print and digital news outlets. Similarly, Lundby (2019) argues that changes in the visibility of religion in the Norwegian daily press need to be analysed in conjunction with such structural changes in the newspaper industry. The analysis in this article shows that the newspapers co-structure political and religious change not only by representing various opinions in news articles and columns, but by taking a stand concerning the complex issues of how a democratic state should handle the freedom of religion.

In conclusion, this study shows that the coverage of religion in the Swedish press between 2008 and 2018 has developed through parallel trends of the continued acknowledgement of religious diversity and more contestation with regard to the implications of this condition. By highlighting the complexity of parallel and overlapping trends, and multi-vocal and at times inconsistent representations, this article can contribute to further studies of the interplay between the media and religious change that move away from predictions of single and coherent developments. Media representations of religious diversity are interrelated with changes in other institutions in Swedish society, such as politics, law, and education. Further analysis of how the media co-structures changes in attitudes to religion and religious diversity in Sweden are needed to assess the future of the 'Swedish condition'.

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