

Studying Religion in Nordic Newspapers: An Introduction

TEEMU TAIRA

University of Helsinki

Abstract

This article introduces the topic of this special issue: religion in Nordic newspapers. It provides a general framework for the following four articles based on a longitudinal study of religion in Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish newspapers by clarifying what characterizes selected 'Nordic' countries, their media spheres, and their religious landscapes. Furthermore, this article suggests that despite significant changes in the media sphere, including factual media production and consumption, there are good reasons to study religion-related media content produced by the dominant and conventional media outlets, including newspapers. However, this should not be done by isolating newspapers from society and the rest of the media. This introduction and the following articles therefore propose that the selected key concepts and debates among sociologists of religion are particularly useful in thinking about religion-related newspaper content.

Keywords: media, religion, Nordic, press, newspapers, mediatization, secularization, diversity, Christianity, Islam, digitalization

In recent decades sociologists of religion have debated whether modern societies are secularizing (Bruce 2002; 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pollock and Rosta 2017; Voas 2008; Voas and Chaves 2016; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas and Doebler 2011), encountering return, resurgence, or increased visibility of religion (Berger 1999; Butler et al. 2011; Casanova 1994; Herbert 2011; Hjelm 2015; Kepel 1994; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009; Ward and Hoelzl 2008), moving towards new forms of religion beyond national churches (Hunt 2005; Lyon 2000), transforming religion into a provider of welfare services (Bäckström et al. 2010; 2011), or facing religious diversity (Martikainen 2013; Stringer 2013; Weller 2008). In some cases the role of the media has not been theorized (or even mentioned) as part of these developments, but it has become increasingly obvious that there is a need to consider how religion-related media discourses and portrayals and the almost ubiquitous media outlets are entangled with social changes in their

capacity to direct and reflect the public presence and boundaries of the groups and practices conventionally named 'religious'.

The aim of this special issue is to study the longitudinal changes and continuities in how religion and religious issues have been represented and discussed in the daily press of four Nordic countries in recent decades. The key starting point is that Nordic societies have witnessed a slight decline in religious 'practical monopolies' (Davie 2015) and increased diversity – both as an empirical fact and discursive framework. These developments have changed the conditions of the religion-related content in newspapers, and the discourses concerning how religion and its role in society is debated and negotiated in them. At the same time the Nordic countries have witnessed significant changes in the overall media sphere and in the capacity of media outlets to influence religious institutions (Hjarvard 2013; Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012; Lövheim and Lynch 2011). Thus, while the media reacts to and reflects social changes, media outlets themselves contribute to the changing conditions of religiosity in contemporary societies, as will be argued in this issue. The rise of new and digital media also has implications for religion and its change in general, and for the coverage of religion in the mainstream media in particular, but what they are remains open to empirical scrutiny. Although the Nordic countries will be the empirical focus of this issue, the articles aim to contribute to a more general theoretical understanding of the present articulations of religion, the media (especially newspapers), and society, and exploring how longitudinal newspaper religion-related material can be fruitfully studied.

How content and discourses have changed in Nordic newspapers and how they can be understood as part of more general changes in the media, religion, and society are the key questions this issue is designed to answer. While focusing on changes, it must be remembered that we cannot talk about the total decline of the 'practical monopolies' of the Nordic churches (or total deregulation and decline of the Nordic public broadcasting system); the point is rather to acknowledge that the dominant Lutheran churches have had to react to new challenges posed by migration, globalization, secularization, and the development of diversity in media environments and society more generally.

What characterizes the Nordic countries?

The 'Nordic countries' is a classification which puts Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland in the same basket. This issue focuses on four of them (omitting Iceland) and assumes that it is reasonable and fruitful

to study them together. However, the 'Nordic countries' do not constitute a homogeneous unit. This issue therefore pays careful attention to differences between each country. Nevertheless, the Nordic countries share many religious and media-related features. These will be highlighted later in this introduction, and they will also become obvious in reading this issue's country-based articles.

'Nordic' is a term that emphasizes the different countries' features. It therefore tends to bypass the differences between them. In international comparative studies especially, it is typically Denmark or Sweden that represents the rest. This issue assumes that it is relevant to compare and contrast selected countries, and at the same time consider what they have in common. All five Nordic countries have a welfare state. The model emerged properly in the 1980s, combining an efficient market economy with a social safety net, a stable labour market, a high level of social cohesion, a strong emphasis on equality, and relatively moderate gender differences (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 5). There has been a shift from the social democratic welfare state in the era of the market (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 8), but the welfare state and welfare society have been defended strongly in both public discourse and practice compared with many other countries. In three – Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – the languages are sufficiently similar for people to understand each other. Icelandic is a little different, and Finnish belongs not to the Indo-European but the Finno-Ugric language family. Nevertheless, the Nordic countries have been seen as culturally, politically, and economically similar but not homogeneous. Their active cooperation has fostered the image of the Nordic countries as a unit.

Religion¹ in the Nordic countries

Traditionally, the four Nordic countries explored here have maintained a relatively homogeneous self-image. This has included the idea that despite the freedom of religion, there is a single dominant religious institution with strong support from the state, and everything else is seen more or less as a deviation from the norm. All the Nordic countries have had a strong

1 This issue understands religion as a discursive formation whose boundaries change historically. In analysing newspapers it focuses on groups and practices that are conventionally understood as 'religious' – including boundary cases such as spirituality, psychic powers, and fortune-telling techniques if relevant in the data – in the Nordic societies, but it also explores some of the discourses in which the boundaries of what should be classified as 'religious' are publicly negotiated if they are present in the data.

protestant (Lutheran) tradition and national churches, with varying but close links with the state. The churches act as public utilities, caring for cemeteries and contributing to social work. Their pastors are educated at tax-funded public universities and have a presence in publicly funded institutions. There are army, healthcare, and prison chaplains. Schools provide religious education, which has traditionally entailed a confessional education in the dominant tradition, but its content and level of 'confessionality' differ in each country. Despite this, the Nordic countries are in many ways known as 'secular societies' in which living without religious beliefs, identity, and affiliation is not a social stigma. The details vary to some extent between Nordic countries, but in international comparison they score highly on the secular end of the scale with traditionally strong national churches (Taira, Rimmel, and Jansson forthcoming; Zuckerman 2007).

If the various parameters of religiosity in the Nordic countries are compared, it is obvious that – despite significant differences – they follow a similar pattern. Surveys of individuals confirm that the Nordic countries are all predominantly Lutheran, with a relatively large percentage of unaffiliated and/or nonbelieving people. Muslims are a small but growing minority, with a strong presence in contemporary media debates on the roles of religion and religious diversity in the Nordic countries. Weakly institutionalised forms of spirituality – including their media coverage (Døving and Kraft 2013; Kraft 2017; Petersen 2012; Utriainen 2013; Winell 2016) – have deservedly gained a fair amount of scholarly attention, because of the theorizing of religion that has followed from such an interest, but there is little numerical evidence of their social significance (Furseth 2018, 52–5).

One of the key religious trends is that the number of people identifying as protestant has decreased in the Nordic countries. In 1990 the numbers were between 76 and 89 per cent according to the European Values survey, whereas in 2008 they were between 59 and 85 per cent (Bréchon 2017, 147). A recent Pew Research Center (2018a) survey reveals that the figures for self-identifying Christians in the Nordic countries are between 51 and 77 per cent (Norway 51 per cent, Sweden 52 per cent, Denmark 65 per cent, Finland 77 per cent), whereas the Western European median is 71 per cent. The number of people who regard themselves as atheist, agnostic, or 'nothing in particular' ranges from 22 to 42 per cent (Norway 43 per cent, Sweden 42 per cent, Denmark 30 per cent, Finland 22 per cent), whereas the Western European median is 24 per cent.

The recent Pew survey focused on Western Europe, but if standard international comparative surveys, such as World Values surveys, European Values surveys, and International Social Survey Programmes are explored, the overall picture is very similar: people in the Nordic countries are less eager to identify as religious than in the rest of Europe (and the world); they do not believe in God as much as people in other countries; they are passive in participating in religious events; and they do not consider religion important for their lives (see e.g. Bréchon 2017). Which Nordic country is the most secular depends on the criteria used, but Finland tends to emerge as the most religious, and Sweden as the most secular. However, the recent Pew survey suggests that Norway is catching up with Sweden in many respects. Of these four Nordic countries only Finland appears slightly more religious than some non-Nordic Western European countries, but when the whole of Europe is researched, Finland is clearly on the 'secular side' of the picture. However, Nordic countries have high membership rates in dominant churches, though the percentage has decreased in recent decades. The figures in 2017 were: Denmark 75.9 per cent, Finland 70.7 per cent, Norway 70.6 per cent, and Sweden 59.3 per cent.² Furthermore, attendance at religious services has declined steadily in the Nordic countries (Furseth 2018, 55–56).

Another Pew survey (2018b) reveals that people in the Nordic countries consider religion a less important component of national identity than Europeans in general. Even Finland is significantly below the median, although the percentage was considerably higher in Finland than in other Nordic countries (Finland 32 per cent, Norway 21 per cent, Denmark 19 per cent, Sweden 15 per cent) – 24 countries scoring higher and nine lower than Finland. The situation changes somewhat when the possible incompatibility of Islam with national values is surveyed ('Islam is fundamentally incompatible with our country's culture and values'). The Western European median is 42 per cent; in Denmark (43 per cent) and in Finland (62 per cent) the attitude is more negative than the median, and even Norway is close to the median (40 per cent; Sweden 34 per cent) (Pew 2018a). This is interesting because the percentage of Muslims is lowest in Finland (slightly more than

2 2017 has been used here for comparison. Cases where more recent figures are available (Denmark and Finland) show a small decline. The information has been taken from Statistics Norway <https://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/statistikker/kirke_koetra/aar, the Finnish church statistics website <<https://www.kirkontilastot.fi/viz?id=43>>, the Church of Sweden's website <<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik>>, and the Church of Denmark's website <<http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/folkekirken-medlemstal/>>.

one per cent) and highest in Sweden (around five per cent), suggesting that an increasing proportion of Muslims in one's country appears to correlate positively with more positive attitudes to Islam.³

The statistics concerning individuals, their identifications, attitudes, and institutional affiliation are only one piece of a larger puzzle. Declining religious affiliation and trends pointing towards the increasing secularization of Nordic countries should be observed alongside increasing diversity, the continuing privileged status of the dominant churches, and the prominence of religion in the public sphere, including the media. It appears that Nordic countries share a need to renegotiate the role and location of dominant churches in society. While secularist policies have some impact on this, it is arguably the increased mobility of people and immigrants' religious identities that have played a key role. The number of immigrants varies from one Nordic country to another, and the period that is regarded as the key turning point in the emergence of discourses on diversity differs in each country. Islam plays a key role in religious diversity, despite the quantitative and qualitative differences in its presence and visibility in different Nordic countries (see Larsson 2009). There is also arguably an increased awareness of the presence of religion globally, partly because of a more global media and partly because of the role religion plays in world politics. However, none of this means the trends pointing to the decline in religious beliefs, practices, identities, and affiliation have been reversed. The overall situation has therefore recently been described as religious complexity (Furseth 2018). This resembles what Grace Davie has called a 'persistent paradox' regarding religion in the British context – that 'the process of secularization continues', and 'religion persists as a topic of discussion, indeed dispute, in the public sphere' (Davie 2015, xiii).

The media in the Nordic countries

This issue focuses primarily on (printed) newspapers, but it refers to other media outlets such as television and digital and social media when it is relevant for an understanding of newspapers and the situation in selected countries. For background it is useful to understand the peculiarities of the Nordic media, especially because public service broadcasting and news-

³ This is simply a hypothesis derived from survey results. It should be studied more comprehensively. Its further study is not part of this issue, but it challenges the stereotype sometimes heard in public discussion that negative attitudes towards Islam are directly related to the increased number of Muslims.

papers animate the current situation, despite media deregulation and the crisis faced by the print media.

In their classic, albeit widely debated and later slightly refined, study Hallin and Mancini (2004 67, see also 2016) suggested that Nordic countries had a 'corporatist democratic' media system, in contrast with 'polarized pluralist' and 'liberal' models. This is an ideal type, referring to high newspaper circulation, an historically strong political party press, a recent shift towards a neutral commercial press, strong journalistic professionalism and state intervention, but protection for press freedom, press subsidies (especially in the Nordic countries), and strong public service broadcasting. Their classification includes Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and all the Nordic countries except Iceland.⁴

Other scholars have suggested that despite the differences between the Nordic countries, there are a number of relevant similarities that justify the language about a 'Nordic media system'. One is historical. The Nordic media has been dominated by national and regional newspapers, as well as by highly regulated broadcasting systems. Their ideals have been based on equal access to information and active audience participation to enhance democratic participation. Institutionalized press freedom developed early: Nordic countries were among the first to implement laws to protect the press. Furthermore, the self-regulation of the press (i.e. the idea that journalists themselves agree on a set of rules which is controlled by the press or media councils) has been strong in the Nordic countries (Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad 2017, 57; Syvertsen et al. 2014, 48–52). A survey conducted in 2016 shows that the level of trust in the news media in the Nordic countries is relatively high by international comparison (Newman 2018, 16).⁵

The media has become more market-oriented and less tightly regulated since the 1980s (Hjarvard 2013, 24ff., 50f.), but the recent changes have not erased the historical traits. Newspaper readership has been – and still is – exceptionally high in Nordic countries, and few people never read newspapers. Even tabloids are relatively strong in serious news content

4 The Nordic media was used as one of the many test cases for Hallin and Mancini's classification. To put it briefly and generally, studies have argued against the predictions concerning convergence of media system towards a liberal model and added nuances (see Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011; Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad 2017; Rolland 2009), but no other grand classification has replaced Hallin and Mancini's model. Despite reservations, it has at least pedagogical value for an introductory text such as this.

5 However, the differences between the Nordic countries are notable. Finland topped a list of 37 countries for the highest trust in the news media. Denmark was sixth, Norway sixteenth, and Sweden twenty-fourth (Newman 2018, 16).

compared with Great Britain, for example. According to a Nordicom study published in 2010 the Nordic countries are among the top eight in terms of newspaper reach (Facht and Leckner 2012, 233). Readership figures are above the European average and higher still than those of Asia and the United States. The role of newspapers is the more remarkable given that such activity is not reflected for all media. For example, television is less popular in the Nordic countries than elsewhere in Europe. A high level of subscriptions and home delivery – 75–90 per cent of total sales – and availability also characterizes Nordic newspapers: Norway, Finland, and Sweden were the three highest ranking in newspaper copies per thousand inhabitants in 2006. All five were high on the list of the number of existing papers per one million inhabitants (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 24ff., 56f.). It should be noted, however, that the circulation of printed newspapers per thousand inhabitants has since decreased, but this trend is by no means unique to the Nordic countries (Harrie 2018, 30; Nordicom 2019a). Moreover, decreased advertising revenue has affected the financial situation of newspapers in the Nordic countries (Engelstad, Larse, and Rogstad 2017, 55; Harrie 2018, 37), but only in Finland has the number of printed papers declined significantly since 2000 (Harrie 2018, 27).

Although this issue argues that newspapers and their news production are important for a study of religion in the media, the diversification of television from the dominance of one or two national television channels controlled by public service broadcasting in the 1980s to multiple commercial channels, and the later development of the Internet and digital media, have challenged the role of newspapers, at least in their traditional form. Similar developments have taken place in many areas, but the Nordic countries score particularly highly on the ‘network readiness’ index for digitalization: nine out of ten people use the Internet; in Europe only in the Netherlands and Luxembourg are people as active in its use (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 28f.; Nordicom 2019b). Nordic people are active in their online news consumption, and all four countries examined here are in the top six list for highest online news subscription (Newman 2017, 24). They are also active on social media networks, but less active in blogging (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 33), though blogging is relevant to some for identity construction, including religious identities (Lövheim 2013). Digitalization, combined with more market-driven practices and decreased regulation, has contributed to a general fragmentation and diversification of the media sphere and challenged the print media’s role. However, the Nordic media sphere arguably continues to have a tendency towards ‘integrated publics’ compared with other areas. One indicator of this is that governments

have shown interest in maintaining strong public broadcast services and providing newspaper subsidies, though the policy is not identical in each country and is not limited to the Nordic countries (Syvertsen et al. 2014; Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad 2017, 57).

One of the challenges to print media is that people increasingly follow news outlets and newspapers online. While the form is different, this extensively disseminated content is commonly produced by the most powerful and resourceful media outlets. The news content of online versions is relatively similar to printed papers, though online news is frequently updated. This does not mean that recent changes are not important, but that there are interesting continuities within significant structural changes in the media sphere. For example, when a sample of Finnish university students was asked about their media use, the majority said that they were not active subscribers to printed newspapers, and many did not own a television. The low level of newspaper subscriptions was related to students' low income, but they followed the major Finnish newspapers online, typically the biggest national and one local paper, and watched television programmes on an Internet streaming catch-up service. This habit of following major media companies is further evidenced by the statistics on the most popular websites. The Finnish websites with the most hits are the two main tabloids, the news service of a major commercial television channel, the largest daily newspaper, and the public broadcasting company. The most popular discussion forum follows these. (See Taira 2013.)

Increased immigration and social pluralization are likely to change this pattern, but only slightly. A Norwegian case study shows that people with immigrant backgrounds are less interested in the national public service media and more interested in international and commercial channels, as well as channels from other regions. The difference between immigrants and the rest diminishes the longer people live in the country, so even immigration does not revolutionize media use. The existing studies indicate that the 'digital divide' has remained moderate in the Nordic countries (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 41ff.). Syvertsen et al. conclude:

There is still a high use of a print and other traditional media, while the main television channels remain popular. Digital media are predominantly used for seeking information from trusted news sources, for buying services and goods, and for sharing information with one's own network (Syvertsen et al. 2014, 45).

This conclusion describes the Nordic countries, but it is not fully limited to them. Elsewhere, scholars also theorize about the media's convergence with digital forms, reminding us about the continuities between the 'old' and the 'new', and the continuing power of large media companies to produce topics and themes for highly publicized debate (Meikle and Young 2012).

Why is it important to study religion in the Nordic newspapers?

The decision to organize this issue according to country-specific chapters rather than thematic ones is based on the idea that it is relevant to highlight the differences and unique developments between Nordic countries and demonstrate the diversity within them. One of the main benefits of this is that studies focusing on religion in newspapers and other media have usually been limited to one religion, Islam being the most popular recent choice (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013; Elgamri 2011; Karis 2013; 2014; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Petley and Richardson 2011; Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006; Said 1997). This issue does not focus on one tradition; it examines all established religious traditions and practices covered frequently in Nordic newspapers, including anti-religious perspectives. Furthermore, most studies dealing with many religious traditions are limited to one country, with no substantial comparative aspect between countries or areas (see Axner 2013; Døving and Kraft 2013; Knott, Poole, and Taira 2013; Sumiala et al. 2017). This issue focuses on four countries: although there is no separate comparative article, the shared key concepts provide opportunities for comparison between countries (see also the end of this article).

Of all the previous studies the most obvious point of comparison is the NOREL project, *The Role of Religion in the Public Sphere: A Comparative Study of the Five Nordic Countries* (Furseth 2018). One of its strands focused on religion in the Nordic media. The main part of the media study was a quantitative comparison of three selected years, 1988, 1998, and 2008. Three authors in this issue, Henrik Christensen (Denmark), Knut Lundby (Norway), and Mia Lövheim (Sweden), were directly involved in the project, and all the authors participated in some of its events. The authors have been able to use the data or findings of the NOREL project, and they have an opportunity to extend and supplement the understanding it affords concerning religion in the Nordic daily press.

Neither the NOREL study nor this special issue focuses on digitalization and digital media as such. Digital religion has proved a lively and important area of study (Campbell 2010; 2013), but this does not mean that studies highlighting the daily press are irrelevant. This issue's authors

argue that they are, for many reasons. Longitudinal studies would be difficult to conduct without similar data from earlier decades; they need to take (printed) newspapers into account. Much of the material uploaded to websites never becomes an issue of major public debate and influence, but newspaper items, when published in widely circulated papers, raise topics for public discussion more easily. Large media companies also produce much of the material circulating on the Internet and in social media. It is especially relevant for religion that people who are not primarily interested in it – and there are quite a number of them among the masses and leading politicians – are likely to get their information from mainstream media like newspapers (both print and digital) and television, rather than from websites specializing in religion or face-to-face settings (Hjarvard 2013, 61, 86; Lundby 2017, 252; Lövheim and Lied 2018, 70; Taira 2013). Digitalization is changing the media sphere and the traditional role of newspapers. It is also adding opportunities for religious groups to find like-minded others and achieve a wider audience. It is therefore unwise to exclude it. Instead, all results found in contemporary newspaper analysis must be interpreted and contextualized within the developing digitalization of the media sphere.

This issue makes a national, Nordic, and international contribution. First, individual country-specific articles combine an original study with the existing knowledge and studies of the topic, offering a longitudinal overview of how religion is portrayed and discussed in national newspapers and how, with other media, they play an active role in what is happening with religion and religiosity. Second, this issue highlights similarities and differences between countries, demonstrating that it is possible to discuss religion in the Nordic daily press as a (heterogeneous) unit while remaining sensitive to differences between countries. Third, as all its findings are theorized by reflecting on international studies of religion and the media, as well as selected key debates in the sociology of religion, this issue contributes to our overall understanding and the theorization of the roles and places of religion and newspapers in contemporary societies. Finally, the articles aim to contribute to the methodological discussion of the media and religion.

Key concepts

Rather than testing a single narrowly defined hypothesis, the articles in this issue operate theoretically with selected key concepts that are integral to contemporary scholarly debates in mapping the complex relations between religion, the media (especially newspapers), society, and culture. Each article, focusing on one Nordic country, highlights what is relevant for the

country and newspaper material in question, but also takes a position in relation to selected and shared key concepts that have been suggested as characterizing recent trends in the role and place of religion in an increasingly media-driven world. None of the articles deals with all the selected key concepts equally; they employ this repertoire to make clear connections between the sociology of religion and studies of religion and the media (see Granholm, Moberg, and Sjö 2015). What follows is a short introduction to the selected key concepts and debates used in each article.

One of the key debates concerning religion and the media, especially in the Nordic countries, has been the question of *mediatization* (Hjarvard 2012; 2013; 2016; Krüger 2018; Lundby (ed.) 2018; Lövheim and Lynch 2011). The mediatization of religion refers to a process in which the media – as a semi-autonomous institution – becomes increasingly intertwined with religious institutions, and influences religious institutions' capacity to act as religions become dependent on resources that the media controls (Hjarvard 2012; 2013). Stig Hjarvard (2012) names three forms of mediatized religion – journalism about religion, the religious media, and banal religion. This issue focuses almost exclusively on journalism about religion, exploring how 'secular' journalism deals with religion, and how religion may become mediatized in the process. From the perspective of institutional mediatization Hjarvard notes that the proper empirical test of mediatization should study 'whether, and to what extent, other institutions [...] stand to win or lose autonomy in their interaction with various forms of media' (Hjarvard 2013, 40). Because this issue focuses not on religious institutions but the newspaper coverage of religion, the test cannot be enacted here in its pure form. However, mediatization can and should be studied at the level of representations of religion too, examining how journalistic outcomes construct conditions for religions in the 'media age'. The dispute about the mediatization of religion forms one area of debate that informs these articles by providing insights into the overall relationship between the media and religion, and more specifically, about the location of sources, authority, and control concerning public representations of and knowledge about religion, as previous studies have suggested (see Hjarvard 2016; Hjarvard and Lundby 2018, 53–4; Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012; Lundby 2018, 5f.; Lundby (ed.) 2018).

Despite the weakened paradigmatic status of *secularization* in the sociology of religion, strong and convincing defences, as well as revised versions, of the secularization thesis remain (Brown 2009; Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pollack and Rosta 2017; Voas 2008; Voas and Crockett 2005).

While it is clear that the study of religion in the media does not solve the dilemma of secularization because the data for debating secularization is so strongly connected with statistics about beliefs, participation, identification, and affiliation, these articles shed light on the debate in at least two ways. First, as the Nordic countries are regarded as among the world's most secularized (Zuckerman 2007; 2008), the newspaper discourse and portrayals of religion tell us much about the issue's complexity: it may well be, as the selected criteria suggest, that the Nordic countries are secularized, but whether this also means that religion does not play a prominent role in the public media debate is an issue these articles address. Second, it has been suggested that the mainstream media may be a secularizing force contributing to overall secularization (Hjarvard 2012). This issue explores this question further at the level of newspaper content.

Visibility (as opposed to invisibility and absence). Visibility in this context is the presence and awareness of religion in the media. The discussion of religion's increased visibility may involve the quantitative presence of religion-related media and references, but it may also involve an increased awareness of the presence of religion and/or its increased significance in society, politics, and the media. This assumed visibility may mean religion is regarded as a resource for society, but also that religion is a source of conflict, tension, and controversy (Hjelm 2014; Lundby 2018, 4). It does not make inherent claims about how religion is visible; this must be specified in empirical research. Further, it does not necessarily mean the return of religion or its resurgence in a sense that would contribute to something like a reversal of secularization. Nor does it necessarily mean that religion is 'de-privatized' in the sense José Casanova (1994) suggests (i.e. that religions have increasingly become public conversation partners on societal norms and the common good). This is because religion – as a discourse, tradition, and practice – may be visible in the media both in 'private' and 'public' forms, where 'private' religion is understood as a form not extended or imposed on 'secular' domains of life such as economics, politics, and the state or as a form located in the 'sphere of life from which public authorities choose to exclude themselves in certain conditions' (Beckford 2003, 87). Our data can be used as a test case for the argument about the visibility of religion, and combined with previous studies, it allows us to consider both quantitative (Are there more stories about and references to religion in newspapers?) and qualitative (How is religion visible in newspapers?) questions. Whether the data supports Casanova's more specific claims about public or de-privatized religion, for example, will be of secondary importance in

the selected country-specific studies. Although this issue does not test any of the hypotheses concerning secularization and de-secularization directly, the concept of the visibility of religion and its quantitative and qualitative examination offers significant material for connecting the analysis of newspaper data with theoretical debates on secularization and de-secularization.

Diversity (as opposed to homogeneity). What happens in a period of increased immigration if the Nordic countries have maintained the image of homogeneity in general and especially in religiosity with strong national churches and a small percentage of religious minorities (Furseth 2018; Martikainen 2013)? It is likely that the diversity of conviction, religious or otherwise, becomes an issue dealt with in the media, and that religion is discussed within the framework of diversity. Does this challenge the role and status of the dominant churches in the Nordic countries (and if so, how?), and how is this diversity addressed in the media? Yet diversity is not limited to religion. The deregulation of the media system and the political challenges posed to the public broadcast system are paving the way to a more diverse media sphere. Whether this development has implications for newspapers' religious coverage is also worth considering.

Globalization (as opposed to locality). The globalization of religion (see Beyer 1994; 2006) goes hand in hand with diversity, but in the context of religion and the media this aspect highlights the global news production of religion, a possible increase in the relevance of geographically distant religion-related events and debates, and an intertwining of local issues with global elements. Again, this will be addressed in selected articles qualitatively and/or quantitatively, depending on country-specific research designs. An interesting aspect in this respect is to study whether newspaper coverage is qualitatively different in its treatment of domestic and foreign news and topics (see Hokka et al. 2013). The media studies perspective suggests that it is also relevant to consider how possible differences are related to the type of newspaper (national, regional, local), and whether different sections of the newspapers portray religion differently.

Individuality and choice (as opposed to collectivity and obligation). Sociologists have suggested for some decades that religion may be switching from being a collective to a more individual activity, and from being an obligation to a choice (see Beck 2010; Carrette and King 2005; Davie 2015; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hunt 2005; Luckmann 1967; Lyon 2000). What is meant by 'individual' or 'individualized' religiosity is not that people choose freely as autonomous individuals without any constraints (see Martin 2014), but that social forces present more alternatives and people are not expected

to conform as strongly as was once the case. Alternatives are on offer, and they are sometimes encouraged rather than simply tolerated options, but they are not supposed to extend their norms for others or for society as a whole. Whether the newspapers highlight such stories, and whether they assume individuality to be the new norm, is a question that will also be explored in this issue.

Religion as a public utility (as opposed to a self-enclosed institution). In recent years scholars of religion have suggested that religion may be becoming a public utility without a strong 'religious' identity (Bäckström et al. 2010; 2011; Davie 2015; Lövheim and Lied 2018; Woodhead 2012). The major religious institutions in various countries are seen as contributing to the public good by supporting the poor and marginalized, taking care of cemeteries, and advancing community cohesion. It is not that the services they offer are new, but that these activities are used to justify their public role, especially if they receive financial aid from the state or are granted tax benefits. It is possible that this justification has become more obvious during a period of increasing privatization of state-owned enterprises and the withering of the welfare state, and that religious institutions must be available for 'discursive justification' (Giddens 1994, 105) in the public sphere, especially in the media. In the context of the newspaper coverage of religion this entails a consideration of whether newspaper coverage of disputes about religious institutions deals with issues of public utility rather than, say, the churches' internal issues, and how explicit references to public utility may serve to justify the role and status of religious institutions.

Overview of the content

Each of the four articles following this introduction focuses on one Nordic country. They analyse newspapers' coverage of religion based on original data and previous studies. They address the key issues mentioned in this introduction, but at the same time they are independent explorations, in which tiny differences in the selection of data affect the emphases of the analyses and findings. The framing of the articles has been designed to provide material for a comparative analysis, without losing sight of the particularities of each country, whose history, religious landscape, and media differ from the others, despite being 'Nordic'. Each article focuses on the longitudinal developments of the newspaper coverage of religion in one Nordic country and selects some recent debates for a more detailed analysis to demonstrate how religion is currently covered and debated, primarily in the daily press.

The individual articles all make use of available quantitative content analyses or report original studies, but place equal emphasis on qualitative methods in longitudinal analysis. The timeframe of primary data depends on the country: all go back at least thirty years, but the focus is on the contemporary situation. A more detailed description of the data and methods will be provided in individual articles, and all the articles reflect on the methodological challenges posed by such an analysis.

All the articles are designed to be read independently. However, they have been carefully planned to make a contribution as a whole. *Theoretically*, they highlight the relevance of a mediatization framework in combination with the selected key concepts theorizing the relations between the media, religion, and society, though individual authors differ slightly in their applications – whether this is understood generally as claiming the increasing power of the media over religion or more specifically as furthering secularization – and interpretations of how comprehensive it is. *Methodologically*, the articles offer four ways of collecting longitudinal material and coding them, as well as four ways to combine qualitative methods with quantitative content analyses. All have strengths and weaknesses on which the authors reflect in their contributions, aiming to enrich and further the lively discussion about methodological choices in studying religion in the media. *Empirically*, they offer a detailed longitudinal analysis of religion in newspapers in the selected countries, but they also provide material for comparison.

Reading the four articles together demonstrates the differences between the Nordic countries. For example, it reveals that Swedish and Danish newspapers highlight ‘secular’ values more explicitly than Finnish or Norwegian newspapers. Here, however, I shall summarize the key similarities between the Nordic countries on the basis of the four articles.

Although the newspapers cover Islam considerably more than they used to, their values and preferences moderately support the Lutheran heritage. The dominant churches play a prominent, though increasingly contested, public role. Religion is debated and contested in relatively secular newspapers, and the media in general plays a major role in framing the debates. Newspapers may promote ‘secular’ values and views, but they are rarely anti-religious as such, though criticism of religion is slightly more visible than previously. There is no detectable increase in the value ascribed to religion in the newspapers. One development is that religious diversity has increased in newspaper coverage, and newspapers and their readers share a general awareness of it. This relates primarily to Islam, which has

increasingly become a domestic phenomenon – here rather than out there – and it is often seen as ‘problematic’.

The articles in this issue suggest that religion is typically covered in newspapers if there are conflicts or extraordinary events, but at the same time many newspapers actively use religious leaders as authoritative sources, and some give space to them as regular columnists. National and local events are more likely to be covered, but newspapers maintain a global awareness of the role of religion in world politics. Although religion is conceived of increasingly as an individual choice in Nordic societies, the newspapers mainly write about religion as an institution or collective.

The articles demonstrate that there are many different ways to measure the visibility of religion, and that such measurement is difficult. Some increase in visibility can be seen according to the measurements used here, but the development is not linear in each country. One of the methodological difficulties relates to the changing media sphere. Printed newspapers are losing ground, and many newspapers now have fewer pages. This does not mean the end of large media companies’ ability to create frames for public discussion, but it complicates the interpretation of the results of a longitudinal comparison.

The whole world is not ‘Nordic’. A substantive international comparison may be undertaken in future, but even a superficial juxtaposition of the Nordic countries and Britain reveals that the latter has a more confrontational media discussion style, and this includes religious issues. Newspapers feature religion-related stories of extremely high and low quality, whereas the Nordic newspapers tend to fall somewhere in between. Media representations of religion are dominated by Christianity and Islam, but other traditions like Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Paganism have a greater media presence. Even interreligious dialogue plays a more visible role in the media. Conservative Christianity features more prominently in most popular newspapers, especially in the tabloids. If a majority in the Nordic countries wonders how to live with minorities in times of diversity, in Britain multiculturalism – despite becoming a ‘dirty word’ in some political circles – is more internalised (see Knott, Poole, and Taira 2013). The authors of this issue hope that specialists in other areas and countries will continue the comparison in future by utilizing the theoretical, methodological, and empirical aspects examined in this issue.

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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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