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# DETRADITIONALIZATION, DIVERSITY, AND MEDIATIZATION: EXPLORATIONS OF RELIGION IN NORDIC FILMS

## *Abstract*

In this article we present the results of an analysis of the role allotted to religion in fifty Nordic films from 1998 to 2008 and ten films from 1988 to 1997 that all include religion as a major theme. We illustrate how the Lutheran majority churches, lay believers, and religious minorities, both Christian and others, are represented; what understanding of religion and the role of religion the films offer; and the changes in these representations. We argue that religion in Nordic films has become more varied over time, but that not all forms of religion are represented the same way. Not least, the religion of those represented as foreign or different more often becomes a problem. The findings are analyzed with the help of three current theories of religious change: detraditionalization, religious diversity, and mediatization.

Keywords: Nordic film, detraditionalization, religious diversity, mediatization

## Introduction

In the Nordic countries religion and film was long considered to be synonymous with works by world-renowned Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman and Danish director Carl Th. Dreyer, who both often focused on religion in their films, for example in *Nattvardsgästerna/Winter Light* (1963) and *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). While the study of religion and film was in its infancy, art films such as these were among the few films seriously discussed (see Nelson 1964). However, a lot has changed since then, both in the study of religion and film and regarding religion in Nordic films. Today, religion and film is a fast growing research area, with a large amount of articles, books and whole journals devoted to the topic (Lyden 2009; Blizek 2009; Mitchell and Plate 2007). Though a great deal of focus has been on Hollywood productions, there has also been a call for a wider focus on films from other parts of the world. For Nordic scholars, the great number of recently produced Nordic films dealing with religion has been inspiring (Danielsson 2009; Sjö 2012).

The purpose of this article is to present the results of an analysis of the roles and functions of religion in Nordic films interpreted from a sociological perspective. First, we illustrate which religious traditions are represented in fifty Nordic films made between 1998 and 2008, focusing specifically on whether religion in the productions comes across as an asset, as a source of conflict/problems, or neutrally. Second we compare the countries and highlight some changes over time, both with regards to how religion is represented and to which religions are represented. Here we also make a brief comparison of ten films from 1988 to 1997 to highlight these changes. Finally, we analyze the results with the help of three contemporary theories of religious change that we argue can help deepen our comprehension: detraditionalization, religious diversity, and mediatization.

## The films

In choosing the films that make up the main material of this study, approximately 150 films were viewed and from these the fifty with the clearest focus on religion were selected. By religion we mean characters, settings and themes that are easily identifiable as religious according to a substantial and traditional understanding of what religion is, that is to say an understanding that focuses on traditional religious organizations and/or expressions of faith in Gods, a higher supernatural order, or a spiritual realm (for comparison, see for example Spiro 1966: 121–122). A religious character in this study, then, is a character who, for example, fills a traditional religious role, either as a pastor or a bishop or by expressing his or her faith in god/gods/spirituality by talking about it, praying, or in other ways visually and/or textually stating their religious belonging. A religious setting is a church or a mosque, for example, or another place that by the use of traditional religious symbols is shown to fill a religious function. Religious themes are themes that are common in religious traditions and are connected to religion in the films, such as, in the case of Christianity, sin, redemption and forgiveness.

The fifty films chosen are from all the five Nordic countries and are divided between them as follows: Denmark 13, Finland 9, Iceland 7, Norway 8, and Sweden 13. Too much should not be read into these numbers. Though we do argue that the films are a good sample for studying the representation of religion in contemporary Nordic films, since it does, to the best of our knowledge, include the most known and discussed films about religion from the selected time period, the differences between the countries are partly due to the first sample chosen, which was to some extent guided by availability. The differences also have a lot to do with the difference in the number of films produced in the different countries, with more films being made in Denmark and Sweden than in the other countries. However, one difference the material is able to illustrate is the extent to which religion is presented as asset, conflict/problem, or neutrally, as well as which forms of religion are most common.

In choosing the films the goal was to find films made by many different directors and films that have reached a fairly large audience, in order to have material that can be argued to illustrate the prevalence of certain perspectives. The 50 films were made by 47 different directors and are fairly evenly spread out over the years in question with, however, a

somewhat larger part of the films from the later years: 1998: 1, 1999: 2, 2000: 7, 2001: 3, 2002: 4, 2003: 5, 2004: 4, 2005: 6, 2006: 5, 2007: 6, 2008: 7. These numbers again have to do with the availability of films and variations in the number of films being produced and do not suggest much about the level of interest in religion over time. However, the films do illustrate whether and how the representation of religion has changed over time.

## Theory and method

Theoretically we follow those who argue that films can teach us a lot about society, not least about commonly-held perceptions (Wright 1998: 1–5). Films are always to some extent a mirror of society, though of course they are not an exact reflection. We argue that recurring themes point to more prevalent attitudes, but that film can challenge typical understandings and offer alternative views as well. Furthermore we argue, following Gordon Lynch (2007: 109–125), that by bringing in theories from the field of sociology of religion, the films and their representations of religion can be set in a broader context and the link between popular culture and religion can be elucidated.

One of the sociological theories we have chosen is religious diversity. A lot has been written on this topic lately (see for example Banchoff 2008; McKim 2012). This has partly to do with the simple observation that the world we live in is becoming more religiously diverse. However, there are many varied understandings of what religious diversity means and how this relates to religious pluralism. We follow James Beckford (2003: 73–81) who distinguishes between religious diversity, acceptance of diversity, and pluralism as a positive value, ideas that are often joined together under the concept of pluralism. Our focus is on the first two categories. We are, in other words, interested in exploring the religious diversity in the films, in the sense of different religious traditions, but also any indication of the level of acceptance of these traditions that can be argued to come across via the representations.

Detraditionalization incorporates varying ideas of how religion has changed with time, ideas whose common thread is the thesis that tradition is being challenged, but religion is not necessarily disappearing. We limit ourselves to two aspects: a weakening of tradition and an individualization of religion. A weakening of tradition denotes challenges to traditional ideas and power structures, and individualization of religion the notion that religion is to be molded according to the needs of the individual (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 342–385; Heelas et al. 1996).

We also relate our findings to Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization and specifically to his theory of «banal religion», i.e. one form of mediatization that denotes the reuse, reconfiguration and shaping of religious elements, symbols, and rituals in media in accordance with the needs of, in the case of film, for example genre and narrative structures (Hjarvard 2011). A graveyard can, for example, be used to create suspense, but at the same time introduce religious elements into the story. Since it is not the traditional religious functions or connections that are highlighted, religion, in this case, often becomes something hidden or «unwaved», but something that can still come to shape beliefs and attitudes. Hjarvard (2012: 34–39) has for the most part connected this form of mediatization of religion

to American genre productions, but also discussed it in reference to religion in Nordic popular culture and the typical roles allotted religion here, a discussion this study adds to. Finally, throughout the article we discuss aspects of gender, age and ethnicity to better illustrate both the complexity and the recurring features of the material.

In developing our method of analysis we have taken into account developments in religion and film research that argue for contextualization and for consideration of the unique aspects of the film medium (Wright 2007: 11–30). For contextualization we have acquainted ourselves with the background of the films and studied reviews published in Nordic newspapers. In analyzing the function of religion in the films we have used a textual and narrative analysis that focuses on narrative structures and characterization, in other words how the story and the characters are constructed and the role of religion in all of this. In our understanding of film narrative we build on the works of David Bordwell (1985), Graeme Turner (2006), and Rick Altman (2008). Central to all narrative is action. In film, the action, the driving force of the story, is often created by conflict or opposition. In the classic film narrative a single protagonist struggles with a specific issue, comes into conflict with others, but solves the problem in the end. Contemporary film narratives are often a lot more complex with perhaps parallel stories or more narrative turning points, but here too oppositions and struggles are essential. Religion can fill different functions in all of this. It can be represented as something that causes conflicts and struggles, for example in religious leaders trying to control the actions of protagonists or religious norms causing anxieties. It can function as an asset, for example when religious characters help the protagonist in their struggles or faith in a God gives courage to proceed. Religion can also be represented neutrally when a representative of religion does not take a stand in struggles or religion becomes more of a setting for the action, but without obviously causing conflicts or helping in the solution.

In the following analysis we are specifically interested in these different functions of religion. We divide religion as an asset into three sub-categories: generally supportive/helpful, guiding/inspiring a transformation, and solving conflicts/problems. Religion as conflict/problem we divide into: religion that is generally uncaring/uninterested, religion as hindrance, and conflict/violence in the name of religion. We present the results of our analysis grouped into four categories: the Lutheran Church, other Christian groups, lay believers, and other religious groups. Each is illustrated with a few key films.

## The Lutheran Church

The religious institutions most represented in contemporary Nordic films are the Lutheran majority churches. This is not surprising since they are the dominant religious institutions in all the Nordic countries. In 24 of the films studied, we meet characters who are official representatives of these churches – usually clergy. In his study of clergy in selected Nordic films, Árni Svanur Daniélsson discusses the many different representations of clergy in Nordic films. According to Daniélsson, the representations are not strictly negative or positive – negative, positive and neutral representations all appear (Daniélsson 2009). Our material supports Daniélsson's claims.

Two very different and illustrative examples of clergy in Nordic films are found in *Italiensk for begyndere/Italian for Beginners* (Lone Scherfig 2000, Denmark) and *Så som i himmelen/As It Is in Heaven* (Kay Pollak 2004, Sweden). *Italian for Beginners* is one of the most successful of the Dogme 95 films, a type of film made famous by Danish film director Lars von Trier, one of its creators. What is special about Dogme films is that the filmmakers have to agree to certain rules that control the production. For example, films must be shot on location and music can only be used if it is a part of the scene. *Italian for Beginners* in many ways pushed the boundaries of what a Dogme film could be. While the earlier films had for the most part been art films only interesting for a limited audience, *Italian for Beginners* was a massive success, illustrating how Dogme films could challenge traditional film-making and still be entertaining (Schepeleyn 2005: 73–107). The reviews were often enthusiastic. The Danish film critic Ebbe Iversen writes that «watching *Italian for Beginners* is overall a heartwarming pleasant experience, because it is an unusually engaging film that is lovable in the best sense of the word» (Iversen 2000).

Like many Dogme films, *Italian for Beginners* is an ensemble film with not one, but several, key protagonists. Therefore it is not possible to identify one central character. However, the character who opens the film and in a way leads us through it is the young clergyman Andreas. When the film begins, he has just received his first job as a pastor. His new congregation is far from active and he does not know anyone in the area. In time, he is introduced and connected to all the central characters in the film. Many reviews of the film describe it as a story about ordinary people who become rather extraordinary. Everyone has their own problem to which there is no easy solution, but where a course in Italian can be of great help. But help can also be found in religion. This is not a story of people being saved by grace, but it is a story of a clergyman who, by taking his time and listening, manages to aid many. For example, Andreas is a great encouragement for the insecure shop-assistant Olympia and helps her through her odd first encounter with a sister she never knew, but who will bring new meaning to her life. *Italian for Beginners* shows a church and a pastor who is a positive part of the society he lives in and is trusted by the parishioners. The supportive role of religion was mentioned by some critics. The Danish film critic Kim Foss writes about Andreas that he grows as a character «as both he and his friends start taking his qualities as a spiritual guide seriously» and continues in parentheses, «over all a good demonstration of the part the church *can* play in society» (Foss 2000, italics in original).

Like *Italian for Beginners*, *As It Is in Heaven* was a huge success with audiences both in its home country, Sweden, and abroad. In the beginning, the critics were somewhat apprehensive, but many declared their love of the film though also pointing out its weaknesses. According to Swedish film critic Malena Janson, the film is «in many ways irresistible. There are scenes in *As It Is in Heaven* you will never forget» but, in the end, you are offered «too much of a good thing, too many emotions, too much spiritual insight and too many newly chosen crossroads in life» (Janson 2004). The story is fairly simple. A famous conductor, Daniel Daréus, returns to his home village after a breakdown. He takes a job as cantor and starts instructing the church choir. The members are struggling with many troubles. Together they grow and face their fears and opponents. What makes this story somewhat unique is the central parts given to religion and spirituality.

A lot has been written about the religious aspects of *As It Is in Heaven*. The film has been compared to a Dionysian ritual (Hammer 2006) and a clear Messianic theme has been identified (Wallengren 2006). The film has also been discussed from the perspective of a spiritual turn, where traditional religion is argued to give way to spirituality (Johansson 2005). There is a clear openness towards religion in the film, but this does not mean that all religion comes across as an asset. The local clergy, Stig, is the cause of problems rather than the solution. Many have argued that he is the most stereotypical character in the film, but this does not make him less interesting. Stig welcomes Daniel to the village with the Bible in hand, underlining how his faith is in dogma, rather than love and support. When the choir becomes a huge success with many new members due to Daniel's inspirational work, Stig has Daniel fired. Inspired by Daniel, Stig's wife manages to get her husband to let go of his sexual restraints for a night of passion, but afterwards Stig is full of regret. He prays for forgiveness and asks his wife to forget this ever happened. When his wife leaves him, Stig threatens to kill Daniel, whom he holds responsible. There is a contrast in the film between Stig and Daniel as religious leaders, where Stig is a representative of a closed and patriarchal church that preaches law and dogma and Daniel is a representative of an open community which is characterized by love and care for the needy.

Andreas and Stig are very much the opposite points on a scale where most clergy in Nordic films end up in the middle. In the 24 films in our material where we meet clergy they are represented fairly neutrally in ten while we find them to be an asset in seven and a problem in just as many. When they are an asset clergy are most often generally supportive, but almost equally often an inspiration for change or a solution to problems. When they come across as a problem, they are usually represented as uncaring. However, very often clergy are fairly neutral characters. In particular, this is the case when we see them preside over funerals or weddings and not take part in the stories to a larger degree. In these films the clergy is more a part of the setting than a substantial character. When clergy are given bigger roles, they are also more clearly represented as assets or sources of conflict/problems, as the examples from *Italian for Beginners* and *As It Is in Heaven* illustrate. However, in a lot of the films we have studied, we do come across clergy of different kinds. This is the case in *Italian for Beginners* where Andreas replaces an older clergy, Wredmann. Wredmann has a lot in common with Stig in *As It Is in Heaven*. He is caught up in his own suffering and unable to be there for his congregation. A noteworthy age aspect appears here. In general – with a few exceptions – young clergy and their religion are represented as an asset while older clergy come across as more of a problem.

When it comes to clergy, gender is also a notable factor. Although a large percentage of clergy in the Nordic countries today are women, only three of the films in this study have women clergy as central characters. These are played by young women and they are all represented as more or less of an asset. Anna in *De Usynlige/Troubled Water* (Erik Poppe 2008, Norway) is a good example. This drama tells the story of Thomas, who has served an eight year prison sentence for killing a child. When he is released from prison he gets a job as a church organist. When Agnes, the mother of the child Thomas killed, visits the church, Thomas is forced to come to terms with his past. Anna is the clergy in this church. She functions as a moral voice and as an inspiration for change, forcing Thomas to reflect on his own actions and their consequences. Being a single mother, she also illustrates the

variety of clergy we find in Nordic films, a variety that women clergy have come to add layers to by introducing new issues and problems, such as how to be a single parent and a clergy. Just like *Italian for Beginners* and *As It Is in Heaven*, *Troubled Water* received very positive reviews, and its religious themes were contemplated. Regarding the religious symbolism in the film and the character of the pastor, Norwegian film critic Per Haddal wrote that the director Erik Poppe in the film used «religious symbols and a church setting directly, but without the anxiety of physical contact and clergy caricatures» (Haddal 2008) – perhaps with *As It Is in Heaven* in mind.

## Other Christian groups

While films dealing predominantly with the Lutheran majority Churches via clergy offer a varied image of religion, the representation of other Christian groups is more predominantly problematic. One such group is the Laestadian revival movement, a Lutheran piety movement led by clergy Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861) which grew forth in the 1840s. This movement exists within the frames of the Lutheran majority churches in the Nordic countries (with some exceptions), but in films it is often represented as a separate movement with few connections to these churches. In our material we find the movement in three films. In two of these, *Pahat pojat/Bad Boys* (Aleksi Mäkelä 2003, Finland) and *Populärmusik från Vittula/Popular Music* (Reza Bagher 2004, Sweden), the movement is represented not just as a problem, but as downright evil. Both films are coming-of-age-stories. We will focus on Reza Bagher's *Popular Music*, which is based on Mikael Niemi's (2000) best-selling novel with the same title. The film was fairly well received due to the popularity of the book, but did meet quite a lot of critique. As is usually the case with books turned into films, not all aspects can be reworked into the visual medium. However, religion was allowed a fair amount of space in both book and film. The story follows Matti and Niila from childhood into early adulthood. The two boys have very different backgrounds, an opposition that is central to the narrative. Swedish film critic Jaenette Gentele describes the differences: «Matti is the more uncomplicated with an apparently harmonic and humorous family. Göran Forsmark plays a very sympathetic father. In contrast to them stands the initially silent Niila, with his oppressive family and his father, abusive in the name of God. Jarmo Mäkinen makes him completely merciless» (Gentele 2004). In voice over, Matti defines Niila's father Isak as the worst type of Laestadian, «Laestadianism without God». Isak is shown beating his children bloody every time they break his rules. In the end, what saves Niila from this oppressive religion is popular music. He trades the family Bible in for a record, a record that represents his first step on the road to becoming a musician. As is the case with many other Nordic films about young people and religion, religion in *Popular Music* becomes a hindrance from which one has to break free to find happiness (Sjö 2011: 138–153).

In contrast to this rather gloomy image of Laestadianism, there are also several films that present different Christian churches in a positive light. Aki Kaurismäki's award winning *Mies vailla menneisyyttä/The Man without a past* (2002, Finland) is an illustra-

tive example. This film is filled with religious references, an aspect also picked up in many reviews. When M, the nameless main character, arrives in Helsinki, he is beaten up by a gang. At the hospital, he is declared dead, but soon, as Finnish film critic Helena Ylänen describes, «rises from the dead like Lazarus», after which he is given a second chance and ends up in the harbor slums, «a paradise on earth where people find delight in the little things» (Ylänen 2002). Several of the characters that M comes across speak of religion. The most obvious religious character is the Salvation Army soldier Irma, who takes pity on M when she first meets him and helps him get his life in order. She becomes an agent of his rebirth, a theme central to the proclamation of religious groups like the Salvation Army. Finally the two fall in love. As Finnish film scholar Anu Koivunen has pointed out, Kaurismäki uses a classical Finnish film trope here, the caring female Salvation Army soldier (Koivunen 2006: 133–138), a trope that helps present this specific religious organization very positively.

All together there are 15 films in which we meet members of other Christian groups besides the Lutheran majority churches. Through these characters, religion is represented as an asset in eight of the films and as a source of conflict/problems in seven. While the positive representations are usually a case of characters being supportive and helpful, the most common problem is that conflicts and violence are represented as rooted in the character's religion. In these films, ethnicity sometimes becomes an issue. However, it is usually not the non-native characters and their faith that are represented as a problem. Instead, in the films in which religion becomes most problematic, the protagonists are usually ethnically Nordic. In contrast to the clergy, this is not a group that is dominated by one gender; rather, we find both male and female characters and both women and men help represent religion as sometimes an asset and sometimes a problem.

## Lay Christian believers

While religious leaders in our material are occasionally represented fairly negatively, lay Christian believers are often given a positive treatment. Of the 28 films of interest here, 19 films represent religion as an asset if we look only to the lay believers. The numbers for neutral versus conflict/problem are 3 and 6 respectively.

One of the most sympathetic lay believers in the material can be found in the Finnish war drama *Rukajärven tie/Ambush* (Olli Saarela 1999). *Ambush* is one of the most popular Finnish films ever made and one of the films that came to highlight a turn in the interest in domestic films in Finland. Before the end of the 1990s, Finnish films were mostly art films with little popular appeal. After the state support of the film industry was restructured, Finnish films slowly became more audience friendly, reaching a new popularity at the turn of the millennium (Pantti 2005: 165–190). *Ambush* is director Olli Saarela's biggest commercial success, but it is neither the first nor the last film of his to use religion in characterization and mise-en-scène. The religious aspects of the whole film have often been commented. According to Finnish film historian Peter von Bagh (1999), what is special about the film is its «strong ethical, and even religious dimension; it is a work that, while telling a story, deals sensitively with larger issues» (Bagh 1999:119). Religion permeates the



whole film, but the most obviously religious character is the soldier Unto Saarinen. The film takes place in the summer of 1941 and follows a Finnish platoon at the Russian border. It is a war drama and a love story, the latter focusing on the platoon leader, Lt. Perkola, and his fiancée, Kaarina. Saarinen is not one of the main characters, but he fills a central function in the narrative. He is represented from beginning to end as caring and morally just, but also as a deeply convinced believer who is often seen reading his Bible. In many ways he becomes an inspiration for the other characters to do what is right even in the difficult reality of war. Towards the end of the film, Saarinen sacrifices himself and saves his platoon by holding a bridge that is under attack so the others can escape.

Saarinen is a Lutheran, but it is not just Lutheran lay believers who are represented as assets in our material. *101 Reykjavík* (2000, Iceland) is the debut film of the director Baltasar Kormákur. It is based on a popular novel with the same title, published in 1996 by the Icelandic author Hallgrímur Helgason. Both book and film were well received in Iceland and the film went on to win several awards at film festivals around the world and launched Baltasar's career as a director. The film was applauded by critics and Icelandic film critic Sæbjörn Valdimarsson writes in *Morgunblaðið*: «I think that Baltasar and Hallgrímur offer a convincing picture of the alienated youngsters in the city, in particular the night life» (Valdimarsson 2000). The film tells the story of Hlynur, a young slacker who still lives with his mother at the age of 30. It follows his adventures in the night life of Reykjavík and could be seen as an attempt to capture the atmosphere of downtown Reykjavík at the turn of the century. The life of this small family is disrupted when Lola, a Flamenco teacher, comes to live with Hlynur's mother Berglind. At first she is introduced as a friend, but she is actually Berglind's lover. While this disrupts Hlynur's existence, it eventually proves to be good for him when Lola encourages Hlynur to take responsibility for his life. Lola is a practicing Catholic and represented as a critical lay believer, who shrugs when she is challenged in church with the idea that the Pope might not like her being a lesbian. By showing Lola in church, the film illustrates how religion is a part of everyday life for her, and it is implied that religion serves as a moral compass for her. At the same time, the conversation in church about the Pope and homosexuality shows that for her, being religious is not about blindly following moral prescriptions.

## Other religious traditions

Though Christian traditions dominate the material, there are quite a few films that deal with other forms of religion. The religion that is dealt with in most of the films in this group is Islam, which features in seven out of fifteen films. A large number of these films would seem to present Islam as a topic of conflict, following some general trends in western (Shaheen 2009) and Scandinavian films (Tigervall 2003). One illustrative example is one of the bloodiest dramas in our material, *Gå med Fred Jamil – Ma salama Jamil/Go with Peace Jamil* (Omar Shargawi, 2008, Denmark).

*Go with Peace Jamil* was Danish/Palestinian director Omar Shargawi's first feature film. The film tells the story of Jamil who at the beginning of the film has just murdered the man who killed his mother in Lebanon many years ago. What follows is a bloody tale of

revenge played out in the backstreets of Copenhagen, where tensions, not least between Sunni and Shia Muslims, are at the centre and religious differences are used as an excuse for deadly retribution. The question becomes if there is a way out and if Jamil can save his family from the vendetta his actions have awakened. While the film does challenge the homogenous representation of Islam often found in films by introducing many Muslim voices, including those arguing for peace, the image of Islam that appears is far from unproblematic. As Danish film critic Ebbe Iversen describes, «the Arabic men are all, with the exception of Jamil, loud male chauvinistic Muslims full of aggression» (Iversen 2008). However, many have pointed to the significance of this story. According to another Danish film critic, Sophie Engberg Sonne, «the human drama and the dominating conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims are both educational and important. There are no clear bad guys in *Go with Peace Jamil*, they all have warring and atoning sides, which makes the tragedy so much greater» (Sonne 2008).

Though there is a peaceful religious message at the core of *Go with Peace Jamil*, the main function of religion is still as a source of conflict. This is also the case in many other films in this group; however, far from all of them. While religion is clearly a problem in six films, with half representing religious norms as the problem and half violence in the name of religion, four films reveal a neutral representation, and five films represent religion as an asset. A noteworthy film where Læstadian and traditional (pre-Christian) Sami spirituality is given a positive treatment is the Norwegian historical drama *Kautokeino-opprøret/The Kautokeino Rebellion* (Nils Gaup 2008). In this film we find both some typical religious characters in the context of Nordic films and some not-so-typical ones. The story tells of a conflict between Sami and merchants supported by the Lutheran majority church in the north of Norway in 1852. The film has often been described as a western set in the north, with a conflict between natives and settlers at its core. The main «bad guy» in this film is a representative of the Church, the clergy Stockfleth. Stockfleth refuses to see the real problem; that the merchants are abusing the Sami by causing alcohol problems and forcing them to sell off their livestock, the reindeer, to pay off their debts. The Sami, led by the young woman Elen and inspired by the teachings of Lars Levi Laestadius, break with both the church and the merchants. Here Laestadianism is represented as a positive force that helps the Sami to a better life. However, as scholars of religion, Cato Christensen and Siv Ellen Kraft (2011) have illustrated, traditional (pre-Christian) Sami spirituality is also a part of the narrative and given a positive treatment. This is done mostly visually and in connection to the reindeer, a central aspect of traditional Sami religion. Christensen and Kraft write, «via the images of the finely-tuned interplay between reindeer and Sami the Sami's strength as a native people and their vulnerability in the encounter with nature and the actions of the surrounding world is illustrated» (Christensen and Kraft 2011:24). The film was especially popular in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland and led to an important discussion on the treatment of the Sami minority.

In many films analyzed in this group, including *Go with Peace Jamil* and *The Kautokeino Rebellion*, questions of gender, age, and ethnicity surface. On average male characters seem to be more problematic than female characters, while the older generations are often represented as more problematic than the younger ones; the exception being many

representations of Muslims, where older male characters represent a challenge, not least to the ideas of some of the younger men.

## Difference and change

As the analysis of religion and religious characters above suggests, it is difficult to conclude that films portray religion as strictly an asset, neutrally, or as a problem. In many films analyzed here both kinds of representations can be found. Yet if we separate the films into groups in accordance with the dominant image of religion that appears, we obtain the following: neutral 14, asset 20, conflict/problem 16. In other words, a relative balance between representations of religion as asset or problem exists, suggesting a fairly varied perception of religion. However, some noteworthy differences appear when we compare the countries.

**Table 1. Films according to country 1998–2008. N**

	Asset	Conflict/problem	Neutral	Total
Denmark	4	5	4	13
Finland	6	2	1	9
Iceland	2	1	4	7
Norway	3	2	3	8
Sweden	5	6	2	13

In Danish and Swedish films, representations of religion as a problem are more common. In most of the Icelandic films the representations are neutral. Of the films made in Finland, a majority represents religion as an asset. Because the material is limited, too much should not be read into these figures, but they do deserve some consideration. Previous studies have shown Finns to be more religious than for example Danes, at least when considering church activity, and also more positive towards traditional, Lutheran beliefs (Gustafsson and Pettersson 2000). At a superficial level this could explain why religion in Finnish films is represented as more of an asset. However, this is far from a conclusive explanation since the specific religion that is represented must be considered as well. We shall return to this question shortly.

Another noteworthy difference appears if we look at the representation of religion over time. If we separate the films into two groups, 1998–2004 (26 films) and 2005–2008 (24 films), we notice that over time the number of films that represent religion as an asset has clearly gone down (from 12 to 8), while films that represent religion as a conflict or problem has gone up (from 9 to 7).

**Table 2. Nordic films from 1998–2004 and 2005–2008. N**

	<b>Asset</b>	<b>Conflict/problem</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Total</b>
1998–2004	12	7	7	26 (100%)
2005–2008	8	9	7	24 (100%)

In short, the representations of religion in the films studied here go from mostly an asset to more of a problem during the eleven years studied. One interpretation is that the perception of religion has changed during the time of the study and that the attitude to religion is more critical today. However, to comprehend this change we need to look more closely at the different forms of religion portrayed in the films selected for our study.

As we saw above, Christian lay believers are often represented as caring and helpful, and religion is here presented as an asset and as a private matter. This is true for positive representations of clergy as well. «Good» clergy are, according to the logic of Nordic films, those who see the individual and try to help. «Bad» clergy in turn try to control people and force their views on others. The same can be said of religious characters belonging to other religious traditions. For example, the Muslims who are represented as a problem are those that use their faith to control others, while for the «good» Muslim, faith is an inspiration to aid. However, characters who help turn religion into an asset are, in our material, somewhat less common in religious traditions outside the Lutheran majority churches. If we look at the general image of religion in the 29 films that offer us representations of the Lutheran majority churches via clergy and/or lay believers (leaving out Laestadians), we obtain the following: neutral 9, asset 13, conflict/problem 7. If we look at the 26 films that offer us representations of other religious groups, Christian or non-Christian (including Laestadians and keeping in mind that some of the films also offer representations of the Lutheran majority churches), we obtain the following: neutral 5, asset 8, conflict/problem 13. In short, Lutherans seem to be represented as much more of an asset than representatives of non-Lutheran traditions, Christian or non-Christian.

These diverse ways of representing different religious groups help deepen our understanding of the similarities and differences between the countries and over time. The material suggests that when it comes to the Lutheran majority churches, the attitude is similar in all five countries. However, in Sweden and Denmark more films dealing with different religious traditions are made compared to Norway and Iceland – seven and five against four and two. These films, in turn, generally represent religion as more of a problem and, furthermore, at least the representations of other religions have become more common over time – four films 1998–2004 and eleven 2005–2008. Finland still stands out as an exception. In six Finnish films in the material we come across other religious traditions than the Lutheran church, but only in two is religion overall represented as a problem. However, none of these films, in contrast to the Danish and Swedish material, deal with traditionally non-native religious traditions such as Islam; instead the focus is on pre-Christian themes and Orthodox Christianity.

The material would therefore seem to point to some changes in representations of religion taking place over the time of the study. However, to further highlight this issue, a brief look at ten well known Nordic films from 1988 to 1997 is useful. In this group are included a great variety of themes and genres, for example the Finnish family drama *Pohjanmaa/Plainlands* (Pekka Parikka 1988), the Danish fantasy adventure *Miraklet i Valby/The Miracle in Valby* (Åke Sandgren 1989), and the Norwegian historical drama *Kristin Lavransdatter* (Liv Ullmann 1995). This material is of course still too limited to make for generalizations, but it is indicative. Of the films – three Swedish, two Danish, two Norwegian, two Finnish and one Icelandic – only three represent religion as a problem. Overall, religion, mostly Lutheran Christianity, or Catholic Christianity when the films are set in the past, is represented neutrally or as an asset both through clergy and lay believers. One of the most memorable religious characters from the films from this period is no doubt the pastor Henning in *Änglagård/House of Angels* (Colin Nutley 1992, Sweden) and *Änglagård: Andra sommaren/House of Angels: The Second Summer* (Colin Nutley 1994, Sweden), who with a Christian message of love helps the community come to terms with its problems and fears of the unknown. Compared to the films from 1998 to 2008, the films from 1988 to 1997 represent religion as less varied and less of a problem, in accordance with what the changes over time in the material from 1998 to 2008 predict.

## Representing difference

It is obvious from the overview of the different religious groups in the material and the previous discussion of differences between the countries and changes over time that even though the Lutheran majority churches dominate, we are dealing with a religiously diverse material, in the sense that many religious traditions are present. However, one may also argue that it is the differences or the clashes between varying religious backgrounds/ideas/settings/values that seem to be the inspiration for many of the films. It is to a large extent the case that the diverse context is represented as leading to conflicts. In other words, the material suggests that a clear acceptance of religious diversity is not present and religious pluralism, as a positive value, is not apparent in the films.

Since many of the films deal with different forms of religion, the question becomes, who wins out in the end – or rather, who is represented as the greater asset? A simple answer would be Lutheran Christianity, but this is not entirely true and misses many dimensions in the films. What is represented in an affirmative way, we argue, is detraditionalized religion which here refers to a weakening of tradition, which denotes challenges to traditional ideas and power structures, and an individualization of religion, or the notion that religion is to be molded according to the needs of the individual. Sofia Sjö (2012) has in a previous study of religion in Nordic films illustrated a tendency to represent detraditionalized religion as beneficial and our study supports her analysis. Tradition is challenged in many ways in the films. Problematic religion is religion connected to characters who want to control and restrict in the name of their faith. This is also often represented as a conservative form of religion that keeps to traditional ideas and argues for the power and the importance of reli-

gious leaders. The religion that works as an asset is instead religion that is not interested in power, but rather community and individual needs. Religion is «good» when religious characters, inspired by their beliefs, aid individuals without judgment and when religion is shaped and modified to help individuals with their problems. Though many films would seem to suggest that not all religion is an asset, and in some cases that getting rid of religion completely would be the ideal, the dominant view is not that religion should come to an end, but that it must change. This, again, characterizes the theory of detraditionalization as used here. The problem is that it is also often suggested that it is the religion of those represented as in some sense foreign, not ethnically Nordic, or in some way different that is most in need of change.

When looking at contemporary Nordic films with a focus on how religion is represented and what kinds of religions that are represented, one cannot help but feel that many contemporary Nordic films suggest a suspicion towards religion, and especially non-Lutheran religion. However, is this really a fair reading of the films? While we do argue that Nordic films often represent religion and religious diversity as problematic and that this no doubt reflects prevalent perceptions, this is not true for all the films, nor is it all they have to say. As we have seen, religion can also be represented as a positive source for change and strength; but more importantly, films, even when they are critical, seldom offer just one perspective or suggest that there is nothing good to be found in a religion that causes problems in the narrative. Most films are as much about understanding as critique. Furthermore, the critique they present is seldom one-sided. Films can in other words be a way of highlighting problems, but also dealing with these problems and suggesting a different, more constructive path ahead. *Go with Peace Jamil* is a good example. Though we have seen a rise lately in the number of Nordic films dealing with other religious traditions than Lutheran Christianity, and a tendency in many of these films to present a critical view of non-Lutheran religion, many films are thought-provoking, educational and moving, as a lot of the reviews suggest. Religion might be argued to be a part of the problem, but just as much a part of it, it would seem, is our inability to see past our preconceived notions, recognize and challenge social injustice, and be open to alternative ways of viewing the world.

However, though it is easy to place the problem in society and see film as nothing more than a reflection of current perspectives, the theory of mediatization and especially the idea of «banal religion» help to highlight other views. Of course to some extent the films mirror Nordic society, but this does not mean that films are neutral intermediaries. Films, just as other media, shape and use religion according to their needs. This means that it is the aspects of religion that are needed to tell a certain story which will make it to the screen. Though the religion we focus on here is something more than the diverse religious elements that Hjarvard most clearly connects to banal religion, this religion too has been shaped according to genre and the needs of the film narrative. Furthermore religious elements are here structured into the stories in ways that do not necessarily highlight or explain their background in accordance with Hjarvard's theory (Hjarvard 2012). The different ways Laestadianism is represented in our material illustrate this. This revival movement with different internal groupings and principals are in the films portrayed with the help of a limited number of elements in accordance with what the stories demand. In *Popular Music*, the religion becomes nothing more than a cruel dogma enforced by a loveless father which in

turn must be torn down for the son to find happiness, in accordance with the coming-of-age-genre. In *The Kautokeino Rebellion* the teachings of Lars Levi Laestadius inspire a spiritual movement focused on community and love that help us identify with the Sami and see them as the good guys, but very limited space is given to what Laestadius actually taught. Neither portrayal then gives a particularly faceted view of the movement in question, but each representation makes sense in the narrative at hand. This is of course not problematic as such, but simply how films work and how religion works in films. However, it does become noteworthy if the medium continuously favors one form of religion for a particular function, be it then as asset or problem. Though the goal of the film might not be to either commend or critique, the potential to influence beliefs and attitudes are still present.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze how religion is represented in contemporary Nordic films made between 1998 and 2008 with a focus on films in which religion is a major theme. We were particularly interested in how different religious groups or their members were represented and possible differences between the Nordic countries and changes over time. Our analysis illustrated that Lutheran clergy was represented in varied ways, coming across as both an asset and a problem. The same was for the most part true for members of other Christian groups. When the focus turned to lay believers the representations became more positive while members or representatives of non-Christian traditions came across as more of a problem. Minor differences were noticed between the countries with religion being represented as more of an asset in Finland compared to Denmark and Sweden. The clearest differences appeared when comparing the representations over time, with more films representing religion as a problem in the material from 2005 to 2008. A key to understanding these differences turned out to be the religions represented. The Lutheran majority churches were represented similarly in all the Nordic countries and over time. However, over time other religious traditions became more common and were represented as more of a problem. These representations were furthermore a lot more common in films from Denmark and Sweden.

The findings were analyzed with the help of three current theories of religious change. First of all religious diversity could be seen as an inspiration for many of the stories and a problem with diversity was noticeable. Second, detraditionalization, in the sense of a critique of traditional hierarchies and dogmas and an individualization of religion, highlighted the differences between the types of religions that were most often represented as an asset or a problem. Problematic religion was usually represented as traditional and hierarchical, while religion as an asset focused on the needs of the individual. Religious diversity and detraditionalization illustrated how films can be seen to reflect common perceptions today. The theory of mediatization however demonstrated how religion in films is never a neutral reflection of society, but shaped according to the needs of the media.

The goal of this study has not been to give a final reading of religion in Nordic films, but to highlight some of the trends that are noticeable and hopefully inspire more studies. How to study religion in film is still a debated area, but we would argue that sociological

theories are of great use when trying to comprehend how religion is represented and how these representations change. This is not to say that the theories we chose are the only usable ones. Different attitudes to public and private religion have been hinted at and on this issue there is certainly more to be said. Gender, age and ethnicity have been touched upon, but more could be done here as well. Future research will hopefully look into these issues and continue to discuss possible theoretical and methodological perspectives on how to study religion and film. Since the production of films with religious themes in the Nordic countries did not stop in 2008, more material of interest is certain to be found.

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ix, 173 pages : 24 cm. Mediatization has emerged as a key concept to reconsider old, yet fundamental questions about the role and influence of media in culture and society. In particular the theory of mediatization has proved fruitful for the analysis of how media spread to, become intertwined with, and influence other social institutions and cultural phenomena like politics, play and religion. This book presents a major contribution to the theoretical understanding of the mediatization of culture and society. Includes bibliographical references (pages 157-169) and index. Religious Complexity in Nordic Public Spheres. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*. ISSN 0809-7291. 32(1), s 71- 90 . doi: 10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2019-01-05 Show summary. This article studies empirically the complexity of religion in the public sphere by systematically comparing the five Nordic countries. Sociologists debate if current trends in the West point to secularization or a return of religion (deprivatization, desecularization, or post-secularity).  
Conflictual Diversity and Contested Cultural Heritage: Newspaper Coverage of Religion in Norway 1938â€“2018. *Temenos*. ISSN 0497-1817.  
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