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MAKING RELIGION RELEVANT? REPRESENTATIONS OF RELIGION IN NORDIC POPULAR MAGAZINES 1988–2008

Abstract

Despite an increasing interest in the intersections between religion and media, few studies have been conducted on popular magazines' representations of religion. Based on 17 Nordic magazines from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, this article examines the presence of religion and analyzes its shaping in these media over the past two decades. Three questions are posed: What is the scope of religion in Nordic popular magazines in 1988, 1998, and 2008? What types of religion are represented? How are the representations of religion shaped by genres? While Christianity dominates in all the countries, astrology and parapsychological phenomena are prominent in the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish magazines. Both categories decline throughout the period. The Lutheran majority churches are represented by referring to the sermon genre and adapting to the advice column genre. The representations of the paranormal validate its existence and provide a prediction tool for everyday issues. This shows that the magazines adjust the representations of religion to make them relevant to people's everyday lives.¹

Keywords: religion, Nordic popular magazines, genre

**The author (who is the editorial secretary for NJRS) is not involved in reviewing articles, selecting articles for publications or editing article content.*

Introduction

Several religion and media scholars hold that media serves as an alternative, and perhaps significant, arena through which individuals come into contact with religion (Hoover 2006; Clark 2011; Hjarvard 2012). This also seems to be the case in the Nordic context (Lundby 2010; Lövheim 2008; Hjarvard 2005). Some scholars claim that media and popular culture normalize religion and religious expressions, and

reshape religion to fit the demands of popular media genres (Alver et al. 1999; Gilhus and Mikaelsson 1998; Hjarvard 2012).

Popular magazines constitute an interesting context for exploring coverage of religion. Media scholar Jostein Gripsrud (1999: 52) holds that magazines play a significant role for everyday culture and for the ideas that particular groups of people have about themselves and their surroundings. Even if magazines as implied by Gripsrud, do not reflect reality, they are still a part of reality and a space within which reality is constructed (Sarromaa 2011: 46). Because magazine producers want magazine content to be relevant to readers' everyday lives (Ytre-Arne 2011: 257), it is reasonable to assume that religion is portrayed close to everyday life in terms of gender, age, and lifestyle, and is contextualized within specific social, cultural, and historical settings.

Although research on religion and media has been gaining attention, few comprehensive studies in the Nordic context have been conducted on the representations of religion in popular magazines. A few studies should be noted. Some incorporate a time perspective, and show a variety of the types of religion covered in magazines (Gustafsson 1985: 256; Romarheim 2000; Ahlin 2001). In Gustafsson's study on religious change in the Nordic countries, Dahlgren (1985), Lundby (1985), Riis (1985), and Sundback (1985) conducted case studies on Nordic family weeklies in 1938, 1958, and 1978. Their findings suggest a change towards the growth of non-Christian religions, and an increasing coverage of what they label «superstition», i.e. spirits, magic, and parapsychological phenomena. For example, in 1978, horoscopes were a regular feature in all four countries. Ahlin (2001) also found a focus on the paranormal in his study on alternative religion in a Swedish magazine from 1975 to 1995.

Other studies explore how religion is customized to their target groups in specific types of magazines (Winell 2009; Johnsen 2006; Krogsdal 2010). These studies show more focus on alternative religion than the majority Lutheran religion in women's magazines (Winell 2009; Krogsdal 2010). Winell's study of a Swedish women's magazine found that the spiritual and the religious are constructed as diverging discourses, where the former is presented as the ideal for the target readership. Conversely, men's magazines depict religion from an outside perspective and as a «curiosity», implying that religion does not concern men (Johnsen 2006; Romarheim 2000: 110).

The aim of this study is to supplement and develop these findings by combining a longitudinal, comparative analysis and a qualitative analysis of the representations of religion in Nordic popular magazines. It examines the quantitative presence of religion in Nordic² magazines and what types of religion have been assigned significance in the years 1988, 1998, and 2008. It also qualitatively analyzes the mediation of religion within this context by enquiring into how different genres shape religion. As magazines represent and construct a space within which everyday culture is emphasized, my main focus is on how religion can be portrayed in relation to everyday life. Therefore, the notion of 'lived religion' (see McGuire 2008) will be applied when exploring the representations of religion.

Perspectives on media, popular culture, and religion

A significant strand of studies on the intersections between media and religion, and on popular culture and religion, focuses on everyday life and meaning making (see Clark 2007a, 2007b; Hoover 2006; Lynch 2007). One reason is that popular media/culture is perceived as constituting a significant part of modern life and providing the resources from which perceptions and understandings of religion can be formed and reproduced (Clark 2007a: 11). A key part of this process is production and circulation, «the giving and taking of meaning» (Hall 1997: 2), in which popular culture and media engage as part of the ‘circuit of culture’. In this article, the creation of meaning is explored through an account of how genres shape the representations of religion in popular magazines. Genres operate as directions for communication in society (Lüders et al. 2010: 961). Making sense of the representations of religion in magazines involves an examination of the representations and their different genres, and possibly how they differ. Popular magazines are recognized as a particular genre of their own. As magazines combine different kinds of text, they become hybrid, where, for instance, fact, fiction, and entertainment are mixed together.

Genre as analytical concept

In this article genre is employed as an analytical tool according to social semiotics’ (Van Leeuwen 2005) and Norman Fairclough’s (2003) approach to genre. The focus is on the «how» of communication (Van Leeuwen 2005: 117), and more specifically on genre as a type of meaning that figures discursively as a way of acting and interacting in the course of social events (Fairclough 2003: 26). Understanding genre as an action and interaction implies that there is a social relationship between communicating parties (i.e. producer/narrator and audience), and that the focus is on «(...) what people *do* to or for or with each other by means of texts»³ (Van Leeuwen 2005: 123). Genre may thus be classified according to the course of its communicative purposes (Fairclough 2003: 70), or its functions (Van Leeuwen 2005). Examples of different ways of interaction between communicating parties may be informing or advising. Furthermore, several purposes may be detected in a text and these might be hierarchically ordered (Fairclough 2003: 70–71).

Some genres are particularly associated with, and are specific to magazines, thus constituting ‘situated genres’. An example is the horoscope genre, which often appears as a regular feature in women’s magazines and has a somewhat fixed generic structure. Although magazines, as much as any other medium, are associated with certain genres, genres should be regarded as available resources that are potentially drawn upon in texts in different ways. A text might combine several genres which subsequently form an aspect of the text’s interdiscursivity. We can also discuss ‘disembedded genres’, which are genres taken out of their original setting and brought into other settings. One example is the interview, which has been specialized into different types, e.g. the celebrity interview and the political interview (Fairclough 2003: 68–69).

The purpose of including the concept of genre is to discuss how genres create meaning and contribute to shaping the representations of religion. This will be done by identifying

communicative purposes in magazine texts on religion, and by examining how these texts draw upon different genres.

Religion as lived and popular religion

The concept of 'lived religion' is a focal point in the works of several sociologists of religion (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2007; Roof 1999; Jeldtoft 2012), and refers to «how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of everyday lives» (McGuire 2008: 12). McGuire argues that religion in contexts outside organized and institutionalized religion has, as a result of definitional boundaries, been dismissed as «unofficial» and «invisible», and thus unnecessary to study. She proposes that popular religious expressions constitute an important element of everyday life as they enlighten the diversity and complexity embedded in people's daily religious practices. Previous studies (Winell 2009; Krogsdal 2010) suggest that magazine representations of religion are distinct from so-called «official» or institutional religion, notably the majority churches in the Nordic countries. For instance, representations of the paranormal have been suggested as a particularly prevalent phenomenon within the context of media and popular culture (Hill 2011; Endsjø and Lied 2011). The British media scholar Annette Hill (2011: 3, 64) proposes that the paranormal is about extraordinary experiences in otherwise ordinary lives. As the paranormal becomes part of popular culture, the extraordinary transforms into something ordinary and becomes lifestyle practices. This is for instance the case in women's magazines, where paranormal beliefs are reshaped as personal change. Hill's examples are taken from British women's magazines, which include «spells» for infertility and new beginnings (Hill 2011: 57–58). The Danish media scholar Stig Hjarvard (see e.g. 2012) advocates, as part of the mediatization thesis, that popular media mix different religious elements and frame them in particular ways, and often with the purpose of entertaining their audiences.

The notion of lived religion underpins the diversity of religion embedded in ordinary people's everyday lives. As magazines aim to connect with their readers by writing about the personal facets of everyday life (Ytre-Arne 2011; Hirdman 2002: 17), magazines may inform on the varieties of religion prevalent in contemporary societies by offering, for instance, alternative representations to those expressed in the news media and the political sphere. Popular magazines' genre may furthermore transform religious expressions (Hill 2011; Hjarvard 2012).

These perspectives will be helpful as the present study asks the following questions: What is the scope of religion in Nordic popular magazines in 1988, 1998, and 2008? What types of religion are represented in these magazines? How are the representations of religion shaped in terms of genres?

The study begins by providing an outline on the religious landscapes in the Nordic countries. Then, I turn to the quantitative analysis of religion in Nordic popular magazines for the selected years and examine the types of religion that are given prominence. Finally, I demonstrate how selected cases of religion from the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish material draw upon different genres by identifying their communicative purposes.

Religion in the Nordic countries

A dominant feature of the Nordic religious landscape is the Lutheran majority churches. Although these churches have experienced a decline in membership during the past 20 to 50 years (Lüchau and Andersen 2012: 28), membership rates are still high in all countries. Whilst Nordic populations have less religious faith and are less religiously observant compared to other countries, many still regard the Lutheran majority Churches as part of their national and religious identities (Davie 2007: 25). Several studies claim that Christian religiosity has become less dogmatic and more individualized in the Nordic countries (Botvar 2000: 81; Andersen and Lüchau 2011), and identify a growing interest in alternative spiritualities. A study finds that 44 per cent of Swedes born after the Second World War – especially women - believe in paranormal phenomena (Ahlin 2005: 91, 133). The Nordic religious landscapes have also become more diverse due to immigration. These factors imply that many people in the Nordic countries find their religious references outside the majority churches.

Even though the Nordic countries are somewhat similar, some differences can be identified - especially when it comes to relationships between the state and the majority churches. In Finland, the Constitution Act of 1919 and the Freedom of Religion Act implemented in 1923 indicated a formal separation between the state and the churches (Kääriäinen 2011: 157). In Sweden, the church and state were separated in 2000, while in Norway this relationship was altered in 2012. In Denmark, separation is seldom discussed (Christensen 2010: 41). Sweden and Denmark have been described as very secular in terms of religious beliefs, and Finland much less so. Norway is fairly close to the former two (Botvar 2000: 81). Additionally, Denmark has the largest share of non-Nordic immigrants, with five out of six immigrant groups originating from Muslim areas (Horsti 2008: 277; Christensen 2010: 45).

To summarize, the fact that the Nordic countries on the one hand share some similarities, and on the other hand differ from each other, makes them suitable for a comparative analysis.

Methodology

This study is based on 17 magazines, including five magazine publications from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark each, and two Finnish magazines.⁴ To explore both the scope and the shaping of religion in these magazines, this article combines a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative analysis of magazine texts.

The quantitative content analysis involves classifying text entities dealing with religion, meaning instances where religion is mentioned and has an impact on the text's content according to selected variables.⁵ These variables include the types of religion presented and whether religion is the main or supplemental topic. The classification of religion is aimed at capturing both institutional religion (the Lutheran majority churches, other forms of Christianity, and other world religions) and alternative spiritualities. Spiritualities include astrology, alternative medicine, UFOs, reincarnation, and parapsychological phenomena –

notably telepathy (reading thoughts, thought transference), clairvoyance, belief in ghosts, and spiritism.

As the distinction between text entities is somewhat blurred in magazines, one of the main challenges in the coding was to differentiate between text entities, i.e. what should count as a distinct entity. The general principle applied is that every text which is presented as a distinct text constitutes an entity. This is especially important in cases where magazines write a series of texts related to the main topic, and texts that share a header. An example is the feature *A meeting with the unknown*, presented in more detail below, consisting of several distinct texts written by different authors. Other examples are question and answer columns. The classification of such texts as distinct subsequently affects the analysis of religion coverage. Outlining the premises for coding the data is thus crucial in order for this study to be compared with previous studies.

To explore how genres shape the representation of religion, selected cases from the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish material⁶ are analyzed qualitatively according to the above-mentioned social semiotics' (Van Leeuwen 2005) and Norman Fairclough's (2003) approach to genre.

Bearing this in mind, I examine the presence of religion in these magazines, and look into which religions are given prominence. I also examine whether there are differences between the countries and changes in these issues from 1988 to 2008. Additionally, I explore how prominent religions presented in the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish material draw on different genres by identifying their communicative purposes.

Four criteria were applied when selecting magazines: that the magazines are described as lifestyle magazines, that they originate from the Nordic countries, that they can be regarded as equivalents in terms of target readers, and finally that the magazines' circulation figures are relatively high.

The selected magazines aim for different readerships. Three magazines in each country target women of different age groups and two men's magazines in each country hold a different lifestyle profile. Based on the magazines' descriptions, the following types of target readerships are represented: 1. Family oriented women in their 40s and older (*family weeklies*), 2. Women in their 30s and older who are established in terms of work and family, 3. Younger women (18 years and older) who are in the initial phase of their adult life in relation to education, work, and relationships, 4. «Traditional» men between 15 and 35 years of age who live in urban and rural settings, and 5. Urban, highly educated and trendsetting men between 20 and 40 years of age.

Some magazines are weekly magazines, some publish every other week whilst others are monthly. Table 1 lists the magazines included in this study, and indicates which type of target group they represent, and their publisher.

While magazine circulation in the Nordic countries has declined in recent years, except for Finland, magazine reading has remained stable (Nordicom 2009: 148). Readership figures for Finland are much higher compared to the other countries, with 48 percent of the population reading a periodical/magazine on an average day in 2008. In Sweden, the daily reach was 41 percent of the population, while in Norway the reach was a mere 13 percent (Nordicom 2012).⁷

Table 1. Magazines included in this study, type of target group, and publisher.

Type of target group	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
1	<i>Allers</i> (Aller Media)	<i>Allers</i> (Aller Media)	<i>Hjemmet</i> (Egmont magasiner)	<i>Seura</i> (Yhtyneet Kuvalehdet)
2	<i>KK</i> (Aller Media)	<i>Amelia</i> (Bonnier tidsskrifter)	<i>Alt for Damerne</i> (Egmont magasiner)	<i>Me Naiset</i> (Sanoma Magazines)
3	<i>Det Nye</i> (Egmont Hjemmet Mortensen)	<i>Vecko-Revyn</i> (Bonnier tidsskrifter)	<i>Sirene</i> (Egmont magasiner)	
4	<i>Vi Menn</i> (Egmont Hjemmet Mortensen)	<i>Slitz</i> (MDM Media)	<i>M!</i> (Benjamin Media)	
5	<i>Mann</i> (Egmont Hjemmet Mortensen)	<i>Café</i> (Aller Media)	<i>Euroman</i> (Egmont magasiner)	

A comparison of circulation figures from 2008 for the magazines studied shows that the magazines categorized as target group 1, family weeklies, distribute more copies than the other magazines except in Norway. Here the magazine representing target group 4 («traditional» men) has the largest circulation.

One issue per month in each of the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish magazines in the years studied are included in this study. For Finland, all magazine issues published during the three years are included. As some of the magazines did not exist in 1988, the total comes to 748 magazine issues (see Table 2).⁸

Table 2. Number of magazine issues analyzed by country and year.

	1988	1998	2008	Total
Norway	48	56	60	164
Sweden	24	56	59	139
Denmark	24	55	60	139
Finland	102	102	102	306
Total	198	269	281	748

As noted, previous studies focus on a connection between target readership and the representations of religion (Winell 2009; Johnsen 2006; Krogsdal 2010). Differentiation between the genders and age are characteristic features of popular magazines, and a

premise for most of these magazines' existence. This is also illustrated by a vast amount of research on how gender is constructed in different magazines (see for instance Gough-Yates 2003; Benwell 2003). The focus of the present study is, however, on a comparison of the Nordic countries, where the aim is to fill a gap in existing research on Nordic popular magazines and religion.

The scope of religion in Nordic popular magazines 1988, 1998, and 2008

In the following I will examine the scope of religion in Nordic popular magazines, and explore possible differences between the countries and changes during the periods 1988, 1998, and 2008. The scope of religion is measured by counting the number of texts on religion per magazine issue and calculating the mean. Another interesting measure on religion coverage would entail calculating the share of texts on religion compared to the total number of magazine texts. This is, however, a complicated operation which I have not been able to undertake.

The main findings are that the coverage of religion peaks in 1998, both in the Danish and Norwegian magazines. One aspect that should be taken into account is that the number of magazine pages in these countries also peaks in 1998. In effect, the relative proportion of religion coverage does not necessarily increase in the respective magazines. The Swedish magazines' religion coverage declines during the period studied and the quantity of magazine pages rises. The Finnish⁹ magazines show a slight increase in their coverage of religion (see Table 3).

Table 3. Texts on religion in Nordic popular magazines by country and year. N and mean.

	Norway		Sweden		Denmark		Finland	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
1988	204	4.3	118	4.9	108	4.5	62	0.6
1998	258	4.6	252	4.5	339	6.1	89	0.9
2008	203	3.4	197	3.3	318	5.3	99	1.0

I have also examined the prominence of religion in the magazines. Even if religion is present, what place does religion have in these magazines? To determine this, I counted the texts where religion is foregrounded, meaning texts where religion is the main topic, and the texts where religion functions as a supplemental topic in relation to other themes. The finding is that all of the countries depict religion as the main topic in more than 50 percent of the texts covering religion (see Table 4). For example, in 1988 more than 70 percent of the texts in the Norwegian and Danish magazines highlight religion

as the main topic. This finding suggests that most often when religion is included, it is emphasized and has a prominent place in the text.

Table 4. Texts on religion in Nordic popular magazines where religion is the main topic, by country and year. Percentage and N.

	Norway		Sweden		Denmark		Finland	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
1988	72.5	204	64.4	118	70.4	108	62.9	62
1998	59.3	258	50.8	252	64.9	339	56.2	89
2008	60.6	203	51.8	197	70.0	318	50.5	99

At the same time, all the countries show a decrease from 1988 to 1998 in depicting religion as the main topic. While this decline continues in the Finnish magazines until 2008, the Danish magazines go in the opposite direction. There is little change in the Norwegian and Swedish magazines from 1998 to 2008.

The countries show different patterns. Although the Danish and Norwegian magazines increase their coverage of religion from 1988 to 1998, the share of texts having religion as the main topic decreases during the same period. From 1998 to 2008, the pattern is the opposite for these magazines. While the Swedish magazines show a decline in their coverage of religion throughout the studied period, there is a decrease in the share of texts where religion is prominent between 1988 and 1998, and an increase from 1998 to 2008. So, in these three countries, once religion is included, it is given more attention. The opposite is found in Finland, where the presence of religion increases and the share of texts with religion as the main topic declines.

Types of religion in Nordic popular magazines 1988, 1998, and 2008

What types of religion are represented in Nordic popular magazines? According to the previous studies, expected findings are a growth of material on alternative spiritualities and world religions, and a decline of material on Christianity (Winell 2009; Krogsdal 2010; Ahlin 2001; Dahlgren 1985; Lundby 1985; Riis 1985; Sundback 1985; Gustafsson 1985). I will examine if this is the case here by outlining the main tendencies in 1988, 1998, and 2008, and by exploring the patterns in these countries. I also study which religions are given prominence.

Main tendencies 1988

In 1988 the Lutheran majority churches, and Christianity in general, dominate the religion coverage in all the countries except Sweden, where the Swedish magazines include more material on astrology (see Table 5).

Table 5. Types of religion depicted in Nordic popular magazines in 1988 by country. Percentage.

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
Lutheran church	26.0	19.5	19.4	33.9
Other Christianity	15.7	11.9	16.7	22.6
Islam	3.4	0.0	3.7	3.2
Other world religion	1.0	0.0	3.7	6.5
Astrology	27.0	38.0	25.0	8.1
Parapsychological phenomena	6.9	13.6	8.3	6.5
Several religions	7.8	4.2	6.5	8.1
Other	8.8	5.1	13.0	6.5
Unclassifiable	3.4	7.6	3.7	4.8
Total	100	100	100	100
N	204	118	108	62

By examining the prominence of religion in the magazines during this year, I find that astrology and parapsychological phenomena more often the main topic rather than Christianity in all the countries. Between 80–96 percent of the texts on astrology assign it prominence. Astrology often appears as a permanent feature in these magazines, mostly in the form of a horoscope. Hence, there is a continuation of the trend from 1978 where Gustafsson and his colleagues (1985) found a strong presence of astrology and the paranormal in Nordic popular magazines. Yet, the number of texts on the paranormal and astrology in Finland in my study are few (4 and 5 texts), so this trend could be incidental here.

In comparison, texts on the majority churches are more often the main topic in the Finnish (62 %) and Norwegian magazines (59 %) than in the other countries. In Sweden and Denmark, this religion is prominent in 39 and 38 percent of the texts.

These findings imply that although Christianity, and particularly the Lutheran majority churches, shows a major presence in Nordic popular magazines, astrology and parapsychological phenomena are given a prominent place.

Main tendencies 1998

Ten years later, we see that the coverage of the Lutheran majority churches has declined in all countries, except Sweden (see Table 6). The largest decline is found in the Finnish and Danish magazines. In contrast, the Swedish magazines include more texts on the majority church and less on astrology, compared to 1988. Whilst the Swedish and Norwegian magazines have lost interest in parapsychological phenomena, it has increased considerably in Denmark, mainly due to a regular feature in the magazine targeting women over 40. The coverage of world religions has increased, particularly in Finland, and the

unclassifiable has larger shares in the Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian magazines. «Unclassifiable» are texts where references to the transcendent are made, but it is impossible to categorize them as part of a specific religion or spirituality. Some are represented in presentations of films, games etc., particularly in the Danish magazines. One example is a review in the magazine representing «traditional men» of the computer game *Warhammer: Dark Omen*, which is described as a «Fantasy strategy in the world of the Middle Ages including magic, evil orcs and bad-tempered zombies» (*M!* 8/1998).

Table 6. Types of religion depicted in Nordic popular magazines in 1998 by country. Percentage.

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
Lutheran church	23.3	25.8	13.6	28.1
Other Christianity	15.1	21.0	16.5	28.1
Islam	2.7	2.0	1.2	2.2
Other world religion	5.0	4.8	3.2	11.2
Astrology	22.5	18.7	11.2	10.1
Parapsychological phenomena	1.9	2.4	26.8	1.1
Several religions	16.3	8.3	9.7	9.0
Other	7.0	6.0	8.8	6.7
Unclassifiable	6.2	11.1	8.8	3.4
Total	100	100	100	100
N	258	252	339	89

Astrology holds its status as the main topic in all countries, with more than 90 percent of the texts making it prominent. The tendency to depict the paranormal as the main topic has, however, changed. While Sweden (83 %) and particularly Denmark (96 %) tend to make the paranormal prominent, this theme has declined in the other countries. Another notable change is that the Finnish magazines to a lesser extent have the majority church as the main topic (44 %). In Sweden (52 %) and in Denmark (48 %) the situation is reversed – the former mainly due to a regular feature in the magazine targeting women over 30 years of age.

Although still relatively high, Finland has less emphasis on the majority church, which is consistent with an overall decline in religion as the main topic in these magazines (see Table 4). The changes in prominent religions in the Swedish and Danish magazines are, as noted, related to specific magazines, an issue I will analyze in more detail below.

Main tendencies 2008

By 2008, the coverage of Christianity has declined in all countries except Sweden where the coverage of the Lutheran majority church has somewhat increased (see Table 7). As in 1998, this religion is especially prevalent in the Swedish magazine aiming at

women over 30. Although all countries except Finland include a rather large share of astrology, it has declined during the period, especially in Sweden and Denmark. The Finnish magazines - and to some extent the Danish - direct more attention on Islam. Denmark differs from the other countries in one respect, as parapsychological phenomena dominate, primarily due to the magazine targeting women over 40. The unclassifiable religions/spiritualities have increased in all countries.

Table 7. Types of religion depicted in Nordic popular magazines in 2008 by country. Percentage.

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
Lutheran church	13.3	27.4	8.2	24.2
Other Christianity	15.8	19.8	14.8	18.2
Islam	3.0	3.6	7.3	13.1
Other world religion	4.4	3.6	3.2	3.0
Astrology	19.2	21.8	12.0	5.1
Parapsychological phenomena	14.8	3.0	30.0	5.1
Several religions	14.8	3.0	5.0	14.1
Other	7.4	7.1	9.4	4.0
Unclassifiable	7.4	10.7	10.4	13.1
Total	100	100	100	100
N	203	197	318	99

Astrology is portrayed as the main topic in all countries, with a particularly high share in the Danish magazines (97 %). Some changes are detected in the coverage of the paranormal. While the Danish magazines (96 %) continue to hold the paranormal as a prominent subject, the situation is reversed in Norway (87 %) and Sweden (67 %). Although in comparison to 1998 the Finnish magazines have an increase in the Lutheran majority church as the main topic (54 %), an even higher share depicts other forms of Christianity as prominent (61 %). On the other hand, both Denmark (62 %) and Sweden (57 %) have an increase in the majority churches as the main topic. Even more interesting is the change in Finland's coverage of Islam. Over half of the Finnish material presents Islam as the main topic, mainly as part of a regular feature.

Summary

Looking at the period 1988–2008, the findings are that Christianity holds a strong presence in all the countries, and the same is true for astrology, except in Finland. At the same time, the coverage declines for both categories, except in Sweden where the Lutheran majority church increases. When looking at prominence, I find that astrology

and periodically the paranormal are prioritized - especially in the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish magazines. These findings indicate a continuation from 1978, with a strong presence of these spiritualities in Nordic popular magazines (Gustafsson 1985; Dahlgren 1985; Lundby 1985; Riis 1985; Sundback 1985). At the same time, while Finland and Norway have a decrease in their share of texts giving the majority church a prominent place, the opposite occurs in the Swedish and Danish magazines. This is an interesting contrast to Krogsdal (2010) and Winell's (2009) findings where the majority church is less emphasized than alternative spiritualities. The increase of unclassifiable religions/spiritualities, of which some are introduced in presentations of film and games, may, as suggested by Hjarvard (2012), be an example of how religion is molded according to popular genres.

These tendencies suggest a change in the religion coverage in Nordic popular magazines during this period, where the countries go in different directions. As the majority churches maintain their status as a taken-for-granted tradition in the Nordic countries – although to different degrees – their strong presence is expected. Conversely, the growing emphasis on the majority churches in the Swedish and Danish magazines is surprising as these countries are perceived to be the most secular of the Nordic countries (Botvar 2000: 81). This finding could indicate that the readers here are presented with fuller descriptions of Christianity because of its decreasing place as a taken-for-granted tradition. The status of the paranormal and astrology as prioritized themes in magazines is perhaps related to their prominent place in the wider popular culture. For instance, the horoscope represents a taken-for-granted genre in (women's) magazines outside the Nordic context.

The most surprising finding is the small presence of Islam and other world religions. One reason may be that popular magazines tend to stay within the boundaries of what is normalized and taken for granted in society (Clark 2007b: 71), here meaning Christianity which may be perceived as the referral religion in the Nordic countries.

Genre analysis of the majority Lutheran churches and the paranormal

The quantitative content analysis shows the prominence of the Lutheran majority churches and the paranormal in the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish magazines. How are these shaped in the magazine texts in terms of the communicative purposes and the genres employed? In the following, I will explore these issues by conducting a qualitative analysis of selected cases from the Norwegian (*Allers*), Swedish (*Allers*), and Danish (*Hjemmet*) magazines targeting women over 40, and the Swedish magazines aiming at women in their thirties (*Amelia*) and «traditional» men (*Slitz*). All cases represent regular features where religion is the main topic, thus they have a significant status within the given magazines.

Representations of the Lutheran majority churches

The selected cases on the Lutheran majority churches are published in the Norwegian magazine *Allers* (1998), and the Swedish magazines *Amelia* (1998 and 2008) and *Slitz* (1998), and all of them focus on the clergy.

A regular feature in the Norwegian *Allers* in 1998 is a clergy column entitled *For reflection*¹⁰ («Til ettertanke»). Clergy Rolf Simeon Andersen reflects on different topics, such as work and relationships, and relates them to everyday life. The stories consistently end with explicit references to Christianity by citing passages from the Bible, a generic structure easily recognizable from issue to issue. The concluding remarks have a revealing function, as a disclosure of the column's «true» purpose: to signify Christianity's relevance in contemporary society. This is done by placing Christianity in opposition, and as a positive alternative, to self-centered individualism and materialism which supposedly characterizes the present society. For example, the clergy states that «Many have forgotten what true joy entails. (...) Joy is an answer to all good that has been brought to us by God: the people around us, the things that are close, the creation, the challenges, and everything that Jesus did for us» (*Allers* 41/1998). He advocates moral lessons as a reminder of the Christian values which allegedly are important in life. The main communicative purpose seems to be a confirmation of Christianity's significance, hence the main action that is performed is preaching. When referring to Christian faith, the clergy employs an internal religious discourse, and his extensive use of «we» and «us» addresses readers as insiders. The column draws upon the Sunday sermon genre performed by clergy in front of a congregation in a church setting. Such clergy columns are common in the printed media. A similar clergy column was included in *Allers* in 1978 (Lundby 1985: 190). Thus although it is disembedded from the church setting, it has been transformed into a specific genre associated with *Allers* and constitutes a situated genre.

In 1998, two Swedish magazines introduced the clergy as contributors to their advice columns. The women's magazine *Amelia* presented Annika Borg under the title *Ask Annika* («Fråga Annika»), which in 2008 was altered to *Someone to talk to* («Någon att tala med»). The column was introduced as a realm where readers could «draw strength from Annika», and more specifically as somewhere «you can turn to for that which is difficult, painful, and transforming» (*Amelia* 2/1998). The clergy, Roger Jarnehall, featured in the men's magazine *Slitz*, is part of an expert panel, including experts in the fields of finances, skin and body care, sex and relationships, diet, and exercise. Here readers are invited to «ask Roger about spirituality, religion and other stuff!» (*Slitz* 6/1998).

The generic structure of these columns consists of a question posed by a reader, often in the form of a problem, where the clergy answers by giving information and advice. These questions deal with religion, relationships, mental health, social, and existential issues. Religion is discussed in terms of both practical concerns (e.g. what to wear at a funeral: *Amelia* 15/1998, literature: *Slitz* 7/1998) and existential questions («What is the meaning of my life?»: *Amelia* 11/1998). While the questions posed in *Amelia* are of a more serious nature and allude to the confessional therapist genre, the use of irony and sarcasm describe those posed in *Slitz*. An example of the latter is a reader saying that he is suffering from a guilty conscience because he refused to buy milk for his girlfriend. Thus he wonders: «is it God who speaks to me or did I simply have a bad childhood» (*Slitz* 10/1998). *Slitz'* column

is also characterized by the readers' outside perspective on religion, which positions the clergy as an information provider not only on Christianity – but on religion in general.

These differences indicate that the clergy are allotted different roles, where the clergy in *Slitz* functions as an information provider, and *Amelia's* clergy operates as a therapist. Both are presented as experts, and are part of a discourse on professionalism, which suggests a power relationship between those who ask for help, the «helpless» and «ignorant», and «the resourceful and knowledgeable professional 'expert'» (Van Leeuwen 2005: 128). *Amelia's* column should also be seen in context of the therapeutic discourse which has found its way into popular culture (Madsen and Ytre-Arne 2012: 21). This is especially evident in 2008, where the readers' questions tend to deal even more with personal dilemmas. The advice column is a situated genre in popular magazines, which typically focuses on experts on such subjects as health, relationships, and sex. This genre is also disembedded from other social situations, e.g. patient-doctor/therapist relations. By featuring clergy, the magazines here customize religious experts in a manner to fit popular magazines' genres.

When comparing the Norwegian and Swedish cases on the Lutheran majority churches, it is evident that the former employs preaching as the main communicative purpose and the latter offers information and therapeutic guidance. While the Norwegian clergy addresses readers as Christian insiders, the audience in *Slitz* is constructed as outsiders of religion. In *Amelia*, the clergy column draws upon the therapeutic genre, which assigns Annika the role of therapist and in effect presents religion – or perhaps rather a religious perspective - as relevant in line with other more «typical» magazine topics and perspectives.

Representations of the paranormal

The selected cases on parapsychological phenomena are from the Norwegian (1988 and 2008) and Swedish (1988) versions of *Allers* and the Danish magazine *Hjemmet* (1998 and 2008), all of them targeting women over 40.

In 1988, the Norwegian and Swedish *Allers* included a regular feature entitled *A meeting with the unknown* («Møte med det ukjente»/«Möte med det okända»), mainly dealing with paranormal matters. This feature was excluded in 1998, but it reappeared in Norwegian *Allers* in 2008 under the title *Readers' stories of the supernatural* («Lesernes overnaturlige fortellinger»). In 1988, the feature was introduced by asking: «Have you experienced something extraordinary – something supernatural which is unexplainable? Write and tell us. The story has to be true and not previously published (...).»¹¹ (Norwegian *Allers* 27/1988).

The «encounters with the unknown» describe the meeting with a loved one who passed away, or situations where the storyteller or a relative is in danger or in pain. The references to the supernatural realm are either indistinct as in «There are so many things happening around and between us of which we will never fully know» (Norwegian *Allers* 43/1988) or they are categorized as «telepathy», «warnings», «ghosts», and «dreams that foretell the future». The texts are structured as a narrative where the storyline constitutes a single event in which the narrator participates, and towards the end the narrators claim that their story validates the existence of the supernatural. For example, they say that «one has to experience it to understand» (Norwegian *Allers* 12/2008). The narrators thus function as witness-

ses, and by drawing upon the real-life story and testimony genres, this feature aims to verify and legitimize these encounters of the paranormal as authentic experiences. The testimony genre has intertextual references to both judicial and religious settings.

John sees everything («John ser alt») is a column in the Danish magazine *Hjemmet* in 1998 and 2008. The feature centers on John who is «a psychic and helps you find lost items and explains strange events. If you are facing a big decision in your life, John can help» (2/1998). The questions from readers address practical issues and future predictions on work, health, personal finances, and relationships. Some readers are very personal, and write about substance abuse (2/2008), harmful relationships (46/2008), and depression (38/2008). Rather than giving guidance, which would be the procedure in advice columns, John presents the final outcome of the given situation without specifying which actions must be carried out to arrive at the predicted outcome. The column is constructed on the idea that the individual is a passive object and the future is controlled by external forces. This is consistent with Ahlin's (2001: 133–134) finding that family weeklies' horoscopes predominantly represent a fatalistic view of life and opportunities in life.

John's precision is acknowledged in several letters saying that «You were right, John», referring to earlier correspondence. These letters legitimize John's ability as a psychic, and underpin the idea that external forces control destiny. One of the main communicative purposes is problem solving, in terms of explaining the consequences of the given situation. This resembles the horoscope genre, which is not open to questions, but accepts the astrologist and the psychic as capable of predicting the future.

The difference between *Allers'* cases on the paranormal and *John sees everything* is that the former construct readers as participants actively engaging in the search for evidence of extraordinary experiences of the paranormal. The Danish feature is an example of how paranormal beliefs become ordinary (cf. Hill 2011), in terms of providing a tool predicting the outcome of people's everyday struggles in which they are passive objects. Furthermore, the Norwegian and Swedish features underpin the notion of 'lived religion' by focusing on experiences and interpretations made by ordinary people and not those advocated by religious authorities.

Discussion

In this article I have demonstrated a change in the coverage of religion in the Nordic popular magazines during the past two decades, with various patterns in different countries. A similarity between the countries is the strong presence of Christianity, particularly the Lutheran majority churches, during the period studied. At the same time, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish magazines focus on astrology and occasionally the paranormal, and also tend to present these as the main topic.

Differences in terms of scope and the types of religion depicted reveal that the majority churches are especially well represented in 1988 in Finland and Norway. From 1998 to 2008, this topic declines in these countries, while it increases in Sweden. These differences also cover the prominence of religion. Finland differs from the other countries by having far fewer texts on religion, and by mainly portraying institutional religions. It is, however,

worth noting that these differences between Finland and the others could be a result of shortcomings in the data, such as different criteria for when to include a text which in effect could give different results (see note 5).

How are we to understand the changes over time, and the differences between the countries? The high coverage of the Lutheran majority churches is not surprising as they represent a familiar and taken-for-granted religious tradition in the Nordic countries. The finding that this religion has the highest presence and is most prominent in Finland and Norway in 1988, while in Sweden in 2008, is nonetheless interesting. An explanation could be related to the fact that Norway and especially Finland have been referred to as the least secular in the Nordic context (Botvar 2000: 80–81). The decline in the coverage of the majority churches throughout the period may indicate a somewhat changed religious landscape, and a modification of this religion's prominent place. On the other hand, the increased share of texts having the majority church as the main topic in the Swedish magazines could imply that this religion needs fuller introductions here. However, as popular magazines do not purely reflect empirical reality, one should be careful to conclude directly from coverage to the factual role of religion in these countries.

The rather large inclusion of astrology in the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish magazines, and the high prominence given to astrology and the paranormal, show a continuation of a trend found in the studies conducted by Gustafsson and colleagues (1985). This emphasis may indicate that spiritualities distinct from «official» institutional religions are found to be more exciting and have a higher entertainment factor. The prevalence of these spiritualities should be seen in relation to their prominent place in the wider popular culture, which indicates that they have become normalized phenomena and part of mainstream culture (Endsjø and Lied 2011; Gilhus and Mikaelsson 1998; Alver et al. 1999; Hill 2001).

The qualitative analysis on the Lutheran majority churches in the Norwegian and Swedish magazines shows that while the former alludes to a traditional genre - the sermon - typically enacted in a church setting, the Swedish cases adopt an established popular magazines' genre - the advice column. The Norwegian clergy fulfills a preaching role which confirms or reminds one of the majority church's role in a temporary setting. In the Swedish features, the clergy represent roles distinct from traditional clergy by alluding to genres shaped in order to pinpoint issues related to people's everyday lives in late modernity. This is done, however, in different ways in the Swedish magazines by gendering the representations of religion. The sarcasm and irony characterizing the questions posed in the men's magazine contribute to constructing the readers as outsiders of religion, suggesting a secular perspective on religion (cf. Johnsen 2006). Moreover, this particular framing of religion also suggests that it should not be taken seriously. Hence the main communicative purpose may be to entertain rather than to inform. In contrast, the women's magazine *Amelia* refers to a therapeutic discourse addressing personal problems connected to (women's) everyday life and/or religion.

This finding that the representations of religion are formed according to the magazines' notions of their target readerships also applies to the Norwegian clergy column - suggesting that women over 40 are familiar with the sermon genre and the traditional role of a preaching clergy. The exclusion of this column in 2008 further indicates that its position as a situated genre changed over the course of time.

The paranormal cases show that while the claim of the extraordinary is evident in the Norwegian and Swedish's features, the Danish case constructs the paranormal as ordinary by providing a practical tool, hence it reshapes paranormal beliefs into personal transformations (Hill 2011: 58). The narrators actively participate in the search and claim for authentic experiences of the paranormal in the Norwegian and Swedish features, by being witnesses and reporting on extraordinary events in the narrative of a real-life story. As the narrators provide evidence of the paranormal's existence, these texts make intertextual references to the testimony genre. Therefore, skeptics – people who do not believe – are also addressed. Hence, the genre has an ambiguity in terms of the readers' possible responses. As proposed by Hill (2011: chapter 4) in her study on ghost hunting television programs and their audience, such ambiguity covers those who want to believe, those who are critical, and those who find this genre entertaining. Conversely, the Danish case is based on accepting John as a psychic and the idea that people's lives are controlled by destiny.

Similar to the Swedish representations of the Lutheran majority church, the paranormal cases refer to situated genres in popular magazines. The Norwegian and Swedish paranormal cases also correspond to other genres in popular media, e.g. various types of reality programs on ghost hunting.

Conclusions

During the past two decades, Nordic popular magazines largely cover religion familiar to the Nordic populations, notably Christianity. While Finland mostly depicts institutional religions, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish magazines give emphasize to alternative spiritualities, such as astrology and the paranormal. These findings show that the paranormal and astrology are normalized phenomena in the context of Nordic popular magazines. The Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish representations of the Lutheran majority churches and the paranormal allude to different genres, which construct divergent notions on this religion and spirituality. Overall, this study shows that popular magazines are not only distributors of religion and religious expressions, but also adapt the representations of religion according to the magazine context by presenting these in genres customized to fit their target readers. The Nordic popular magazines show the diversity in terms of how religion and spirituality are embedded in and made relevant to ordinary people's everyday lives. Here this is done by, for example, addressing readers' personal dilemmas or reporting on extraordinary experiences set in otherwise ordinary lives. Additionally, the magazines also frame religion with the purpose of entertaining their audience.

Notes

- ¹ I owe thanks to Kati Niemelä and the NOREL media group. Thanks to Professor Diane Winston, Joakim Dyrnes, and Line Grenheim for helpful comments on preliminary versions. Also thanks to the editors and an anonymous referee for suggestions and constructive comments.

- 2 Iceland excluded.
- 3 Original italics.
- 4 My PhD project, to which this article is related, concentrates on the Scandinavian countries. I have been granted access to the Finnish material, including two magazines, through my participation in the NOREL program (see introduction article this issue).
- 5 Joakim Dyrnes and I coded the Scandinavian magazines, and Katriina Järvenpää coded the Finnish magazines. This may have resulted in somewhat different findings, especially concerning the Finnish material. The Finnish material was coded a year earlier than the Scandinavian material. Challenges that occurred while coding the latter resulted in changes concerning specifications and criteria, and these could not be implemented in the Finnish material.
- 6 As I neither have access to the collected Finnish magazines nor speak the language, I have not been able to conduct a qualitative analysis of this material.
- 7 As noted in the report *The Nordic Media Market* (2009), the differences in measurement make it complicated to compare readership figures in the respective countries. I do not have access to readership figures for Denmark.
- 8 *Slitz* existed in 1988, profiled as a music magazine and therefore I exclude the issues published that year. *Sirene* was first published in 2001 and publications from its first year are included. As some issues were not available at the library where the magazines are kept, *Café*, *Slitz* and *M!* are not represented with a complete number of issues.
- 9 I do not have the number of pages in the Finnish magazines.
- 10 All magazine titles and texts have been translated by me.
- 11 Original italics.

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