

The role of religion in the public sphere. A comparative study of the five Nordic countries (NOREL) (www.religioninpublicsphere.no)

Main conclusions

The diachronic findings during the period 1988-2008 show that general theories of secularization, desecularization and post-secularity, which propose unified trends within countries and across countries, find little support in our data. Instead these countries are characterized by what we term religious complexity. Generally, religion never went away from the public sphere in either country, but has continually been present during the period studied. The religious complexity is evident in the sense that, on the one hand, there is increasing secularization in the Nordic populations. On the other hand, religion continues to be present in the public sphere, and is changing. There is less focus on Christianity, and more attention is given to religion – in combination with human rights, so that the public sphere is becoming more religiously diverse. There are also signs of desecularization at the civil society level, where the faith and worldview communities seem to be increasingly outgoing and active in promoting civic values. We choose to term these trends religious complexity, which point to the fact that there are opposing trends of secularization, continuity and desecularization within single countries and across these five countries. The synchronic findings show that Sweden and Denmark are more religiocomplex countries than Finland and Iceland, whereas Norway is somewhere in the middle.

Several factors are driving the changes toward increasingly religious complexity, such as immigration, secularization in the populations, human rights discourses, internal democratization processes in faith and worldview communities, and a general individualization and subjectivism of religious beliefs and practices.