

The role of religion in the public sphere. A comparative study of the five Nordic countries (NOREL)

4. Religion and civil society

The religious landscape has changed during the past thirty years in the Nordic countries. Immigration from Western and non-Western countries and the decline in membership in the national churches are some of the major factors that have resulted in profound religious changes.



First of all, it is of great significance to map the changes in religious diversity that have taken place in the Nordic countries during the period of study.

These faith communities and worldview associations operate at the level of civil society in their everyday activities. It is, therefore, important to analyze the relationship various majority and minority faith communities, as well as worldview associations, have to society in general and to each other. To what degree do they contribute to building bridges to others (bridging social capital), and to what degree do they contribute to isolation (bonding social capital)? More specifically, we would like to see how these communities look at society and important social issues. How do they view each other? How do they view their own role in society? Do they engage in activities with other communities? In this area, we will study majority churches, churches outside the majority churches, and immigrant religious communities (Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.).

Some of the indicators that will be studied the respective years 1988, 1998, and 2008 are:

1. Mapping the religious landscape

- Give an overview of the general situation.
 - The membership in registered faith and worldview communities, 1988-2008
- Describe the changes that are taking place within the majority churches
 - The participation in rites of passage in the majority churches. 1988-2008
 - Defections from the majority churches during two periods: 1988-1997, 1998-2007
- Map the religious diversity.
 - Number of registered faith communities in each country since 1980s.
 - Registered Christian faith communities outside the majority churches. 1998-2008
 - Registered faith communities outside Christianity
- Describe alternative spirituality and new religious movements in each country
 - Overview of New age magazines subscribers
 - Alternative spiritual organizations
 - Alternative spiritual businesses
- Give an overview of the interfaith organizations that are formed during 1988-2008

2. Views on relations between majority/minority faith and worldview communities

- Top-level statements made in public or in various documents published by these communities for the three selected years, 1988, 1998, 2008. Some of the issues included are:
 - Multi-religious society
 - Immigration policies
 - Gender and sexual equality
 - Other faith communities
 - Their social and political role
- Views on relations between majority/minority faith and worldview communities among the national elites of these communities (including holistic spirituality if possible)

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Summary of Findings:

We focused on the faith and worldview communities. How do they respond to the changing framework of increasing diversity? Are they primarily introspective or outward going? Our study shows that there has been a growth in interfaith infrastructure. In Norway and Finland, these bodies exist at a national level. In Sweden and Denmark, there are more activities at a local level, rather than at a national level. Initiatives to form these bodies are often taken by the faith and worldview societies, although state and other public stakeholders also take initiatives (Finland, Sweden, Norway). Common activities within these bodies seem to be interfaith meetings and leadership forums, which mostly take place at a top leadership level, whereas fewer activities involve members. To a large degree, the faith and worldview communities seem to be increasingly outward going and initiate contact with each other and engage in societal issues.