

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

1. State and religion

A significant theme is the stable arrangements that regulate the relationship between state and religion in the five Nordic countries.



NOREL will outline the relationship between the state and the majority churches. Here, we will consider church-state relations and the role of religion in public institutions, such as schools, universities, hospitals, prisons, and the military. We will also assess the legal and economic rights of religious minorities.

In addition, NOREL studies the policies on religious diversity and multiculturalism within the various countries. In our view, the context of the host country is crucial in understanding minority/majority relations. Which policies are enacted and which strategies are used when it comes to the rights of religious minorities and their roles in the public sphere? Whereas some would like to strengthen the position of the majority religion, Christianity, others think that religion should be kept outside the public sphere. A third strategy is to expand the space for religion in the public sphere. The aim of NOREL is to provide a systematized overview of the various ways in which these strategies are pursued in the five Nordic countries.

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

1. Legal regulation of religion

- Legal position of established church(es)/majority religion(s)
 - Mentioning in constitution
 - Existence of specific church legislation
 - Position of majority religion in other laws (for instance law on registration of births, marriages, burials)

- Legal position of other religious communities
 - Existence of special legal position
 - Position of minority religion in other laws (for instance law on registration of births, marriages, burials)
 - Existence of law on blasphemy and use of it. (including coverage in other laws, such as laws against harassment, racism, discrimination, etc.)
 - Existence of holiday legislation

- Legal regulation of spirituality
- Legislation on alternative spirituality

- Economic position of religions
 - Economic substitutes from the state, which distinctions between different religions are used, how is it possible to attain economic exemptions
- Exemption from existing and otherwise binding legislation
 - for instance animal welfare, patient rights, freedom of speech and criminal law etc.) granted to religious communities.
 - Reservation against women clergy and performing weddings for same-sex couples

While reporting the actual legislation and the changes is obligatory, the study of the actual implementation of the legislation is optional.

2. Religion in public institutions (should include not just chaplains, but imams and other religious leaders). In all institutions, include information about the total size of the members of the various faith communities, if known (for example number of Muslim inmates in prisons, the military, etc)

- Military, prison, hospitals
 - No. of chaplains, their terms of employment/funding and their working conditions
 - Special provisions in relation to religion (f.i. holidays, diet, dress, religious adherence on dog tag)
 - Extent to which spirituality/'alternative medicine' has impact
- Day care, schools, universities
 - Existence of chaplains
 - Teachings on religion, curriculum, possibility for exemptions
 - Special provisions in relation to religion (f.i. holidays, diet, dress, mention of religious adherence)
 - Cooperation with majority/minority religion (f.i. confirmation training, services for X-mas)
 - Extent to which spirituality/'alternative medicine' has impact
- Private Institutions (such as health care institutions, schools, social services), operated by religious communities / religiously based organisations
 - funding, regulation
 - relation to public institutions sector

All indicators are obligatory, though the details of the research in the different countries may vary.

3. Religion on official occasions

- Presence of service at the opening of parliament in 1988, 1998, 2008
- Use of religious rhetoric by head of state (prime minister/president/ royalty) in 1988, 1998, 2008
- Celebrations respectively commemorations (for instance - although it is the "wrong year" - the role of religion in the official rituals and commemoration after the tsunami)

- Presence of public authorities (such as government, the monarch "those in power") in religious rituals (such as intercession prayers), in which religious communities are included (only in the state churches?)

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Summary of Findings:

A majority of the population in Nordic countries belongs to national Evangelical Lutheran Churches. These churches used to be state churches, but recent changes in four of the five countries have provided the majority churches with more autonomy. Growing religious diversity also challenges the traditional structure of religion-state relations in Nordic states. There data show that there is a process towards more equality for minority religions as well as an increasing emphasis on the 'performativity' of religion.