

# **The Uses of Christianity in Nordic Nationalist Parties' Opposition to Islam**

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## **Introduction**

Nationalism is a concept that we react differently to, but one that has had an impact on every country in the world to different degrees. In some countries it is seen as a natural and important ground for common identity and in other countries it is viewed with scepticism as a cause of international hostility and a possible root for racism.<sup>1</sup> But this is also the case with religion and what I will try to show in this article is how these two concepts might be combined. In this particular case, when nationalist parties, or rather radical right-wing populist parties, incorporate religion in a cultural sense within their ideology and use rhetoric as a way of further strengthening their cause. In the Nordic countries, as in many other Western countries today, this is mainly for the purpose of pointing out Islam as a societal problem that needs to be solved, preferably through some form of exclusion from the public sphere.

What makes this especially interesting is that it is such an obvious sign of what many researchers today call the increased visibility of religion or even the return of religion in the public sphere, although it might also be disputed whether religion ever actually has disappeared from it. According to José Casanova, secularization is part of the societal modernization process and its functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres, primarily the state, the economy, and science, from the religious sphere.<sup>2</sup> But another change in the opposite direction also seems to have occurred, particularly fuelled by the emergence of militant Islam and an increased number of and visible presence of Muslims in Western countries,

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<sup>1</sup> This can, for example, be shown through a comparison between the results from variables like (V209) 'How proud of nationality' and (V210) 'I see myself as a world citizen' in The World Values Survey 2005-2008.

<sup>2</sup> Casanova 1994, p. 19.

in combination with a search for European identity.<sup>3</sup> This is the setting for what I am now about to discuss.

## **Nationalism as Imagining a Community**

According to Benedict Anderson, Professor of International Studies at Cornell University in the USA, nationalism had its origins in Europe in the late 1700s. In his classical work *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* he describes how the Enlightenment and the French revolution crushed the God-given hierarchical dynastic rule and thereby its legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

But, according to Anderson, this is not equal to religion being succeeded by nationalism. This is just a way of trying to explain which kind of systems it has sprung from, including how Christianity has promoted itself as the one and only truth, or at least the truest religion. Another parallel would be the imagination of a sociological organism that steadily moves through history, a figure of thought that could be applied to the Church just as well as a nation. On the other hand the secular nation state could be seen as a way of introducing religious freedom, where each individual now has the possibility to be ruled directly by his or her god(s), instead of through a human rule. The sovereign state is seen as a symbol for this freedom.<sup>5</sup>

To Anderson nationalism is related to kinship and religion rather than to liberalism or fascism. In our day nationalism is often connected with racism, but this is not necessarily so in his thinking. Nationalism is about a common historical fate, rather than a class struggle between superiors and inferiors as racism is. Yet racism obviously has at least been part of colonialism, which might be seen as a result of nationalist ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

Nationalism is a political construction, an imagined community, as reflected in the book's title. It is necessarily part of the imagination, because the members of one nation are unlikely to have met all other members. The nation is at the same time seen as sovereign and limited, as it has borders and does

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<sup>3</sup> Joas and Wiegandt 2009, pp 223-224.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson 2000, p. 22; Anderson 2006, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 22-25, 37; Anderson 2006, pp 7-12, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 21, 94-96, 144-145. Anderson 2006, pp 6, 93-96, 154-155.

not include the whole world. As such it has now spread to practically every contemporary society, no matter what ideological basis it has.<sup>7</sup>

Anderson stresses language as the most important tool for the growth of nationalism. It is the vernacular, as opposed to religious language (e.g. Latin), and it is a formalized language, spread through what he calls print capitalism. It can even be said to be the factor that actually has invented nationalism and not the other way around. As opposed to flags or folk dances, language is not a symbol. Above all it is a way of creating the imagined community. In spite of it being ever changing, it has at the same time something eternal to it, with dim origins. Language also creates national bonds through poetry and songs.<sup>8</sup> Language in the sense of a common capital-C Culture can be seen as a hegemony, the prime instrument for the construction of a collective identity.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to liberalism and Marxism, nationalism is interested in death and immortality. Another important characteristic of the nation is its purity, its nimbus of altruism. To most people it is considered to be nobler to die for one's country than for a political party or another organization. This is probably due to the essence of fate in nationalism, in part based on the fact that one cannot leave one's country the way one can leave a voluntary community.<sup>10</sup>

This is closely related to the importance of memory in nationalism, both referring to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten, to infuse the sense of a strong and good nation. The break with history at the end of the eighteenth century has created a need for a story of identity, a national genealogy where parts of the past are used for this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that Anderson does not connect nationalism explicitly with religion there is plenty of empirical evidence of such a bond, both historically and in our present day. Let us just mention the USA, Iran, or Russia of today, as well as all the countries with formal state religions throughout history.

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 21-22, 151. Anderson 2006, pp 6-7, 161.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 34, 45-46, 53-55, 79, 110, 129-133, 139-140, 144-145. Anderson 2006, pp 23, 36-37, 46-48, 77, 112, 136-140, 148-149, 154-155.

<sup>9</sup> Lincoln 2006, pp 51-56.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 23, 137-139. Anderson 2006, pp 9, 145-149.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson 2000, pp 183-193. Anderson 2006, pp 198-209.

In Anderson's exposé and reasoning there are also factors that could be used to link nationalism with religion. To start with, the similar purposes and origins of nationalism and religion are a possible connection which Anderson sees as having an obvious relationship. In the words of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim 'the idea of society is the soul of religion', indicating that these should be highly comparable entities.<sup>12</sup> This could of course be a potential source of conflict, but also a possible ground for cooperation or more or less voluntary integration.

Although religion has lost its more or less exclusive rights to a language of power in society it could still be considered to be part of a cultural language that stretches beyond the status of symbols, consisting of knowledge and values rather than words and grammar. It could, as I will try to show further on in this article, be a language that unites within a nation and at the same time excludes those who are not able or are unwilling to take on this language, e.g. immigrants of a religion other than that of the majority of a country.

Finally, the importance of memory within nationalism could be compared to Danièle Hervieu-Léger's well known thesis on religion as a chain of memory, where the past and the future are actualized in the present through religion.<sup>13</sup> Religion is a form of belief that specifically implies reference to the authority of a tradition. Thus losing such a memory is thought to cause a symbolic vacuum in society.<sup>14</sup> The functions of such memories seem to be very similar. I suggest here that religion could be used to complement nationalism with such a chain of memory, when it has played a major role in a national heritage.

## **Nations and Nationalism in the Nordic Countries**

Nation building in the Nordic countries has been a fairly peaceful story, since the nineteenth century, with the exception of World War II. The different countries have been united in different ways: Russia/Finland, Finland/Sweden, Sweden/Norway, Norway/Denmark and Denmark/Iceland, but have then split again through diplomacy rather than war. The emergence of Nordic nationalism during this period gave rise to the first embryonic

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<sup>12</sup> Durkheim 1976, p. 419.

<sup>13</sup> Hervieu-Léger 2000, pp 171-176.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.aquinasblog.com/blog/2008/12/07/notes-and-thoughts-on-religion-as-a-chain-of-memory-by-daniele-hervieu-leger/>

political parties in the region in the late 1800s, but also to counter-nationalist movements like the Finland Swedes. Nationalism in these countries has been primarily cultural, with emphasis on having one's own language and a unique identity.<sup>15</sup>

The Nordic model of party politics have since then been built around a five-party model, based on three basic cleavages: labour/capital (left/right), liberalism/conservatism, and centre/periphery. But from the 1970s two new and one revived cleavage have emerged: materialism/postmaterialism, morality/secularity, and centre/periphery, thus making room for new political parties like the Greens and the Christian Democrats.<sup>16</sup>

There have been changes of a different kind in the Nordic political landscape as well. Since the mid-1970s regions have become more important in many European states alongside a transfer of political power to the common EU. This might depend on factors like the overloaded welfare state and identity politics, causing homogenization. These are common factors all over Europe. The Nordic countries are examples of areas with an early and highly developed level of homogeneity, although regional disparities also can be found here. The trend has gone in favour of Euro-regionalism, with only limited support for state regionalism.<sup>17</sup>

Now there are signs of regionalism turning into nationalism again. At least that is a possible way of describing many of the new, or relatively new, political parties and movements in Europe, as I will try to show in a moment.

## **Nationalism and Religion**

From a traditional, liberal Enlightenment perspective the state should be neutral in relation to religious matters. The problem with that attitude might be that in practice it privileges secular beliefs over religious ones and therefore pushes religion to the outskirts of social life. And yet, there are only two constitutionally secular states in Europe today: France and Turkey (if we include that country). In the Nordic countries there are state churches in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Finland has two national churches that are formally free

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<sup>15</sup> Arter 1999, pp 23-38; Heidar 2004, pp 13-15.

<sup>16</sup> Arter 1999, pp 127-134; Heidar 2004, pp 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> Heidar 2004, pp 182-206.

from the state, but with very close links to it. The Church of Sweden is the most independent of these folk churches, but still has certain links to the state that give it a different position in society than other churches.<sup>18</sup>

There is a built-in tension in the relationship between church, state, and nation, where nationalism tends to undermine the state (unless they coincide with the nation) and the supremacy of the majority church. Sometimes the church, therefore, has worked as a uniting force and sometimes as a factor in conflict and opposition.<sup>19</sup>

Secularisation, understood as an institutional differentiation and a dismantling of religious monopolies, is an ongoing process since at least the mid 1800s.<sup>20</sup> But today many researchers, including sociologist of religion José Casanova, agree that we are in the midst of a cultural shift towards deprivatisation and repoliticisation of religion in Western societies. One of the most important factors behind this development is the problem arising over Islamic religious sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> In this light, European integration has become troublesome, not the least for the Social Democratic parties.<sup>22</sup>

In Eastern Europe today nationalism, anti-Communism, and clericalism often form a package, turning religion into a political factor. Nationalism also tends to promote discrimination against new religious movements, regarding them as anti-national, especially when they have a global centre outside of the state. Immigration, therefore, tends to polarise opinions over the relationship between religion and politics.<sup>23</sup>

## **Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties**

The master frame of today's nationalist parties, more commonly termed radical right-wing populist parties (RRPs), was developed in France during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It made its first success through the electoral breakthrough of Front National in 1984. The party, and its successors, share two common properties: ethno-nationalist xenophobia (meaning cultural

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<sup>18</sup> Madeley 2003, pp 7-18.

<sup>19</sup> Madeley 2003, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Enyedi 2003, p. 219.

<sup>21</sup> Madeley 2003, pp 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Bergman and Strøm 2011, p. 323.

<sup>23</sup> Enyedi 2003, pp 220-223.



rather than biological racism) and anti-political establishment populism.<sup>24</sup> But it also needs to be perceived as democratic, as long as an overwhelming majority of the electorate is in favour of democracy, in order to not become stigmatised.<sup>25</sup> As the Sweden Democrats put it: '[T]he battle now being waged in the world against for example totalitarian Islam is not an ethnic conflict but a conceptual one'.<sup>26</sup>

According to Jens Rydgren, some of the following political opportunities need to be present for an RRP to emerge:<sup>27</sup>

- 1) A niche, or a gap, between the voters' opinions and their perceived position of the parties.
- 2) Decreased trust in (established) political parties.
- 3) Politicisation of new issues, preferably immigration.
- 4) A high degree of convergence among the established parties.
- 5) An open political system, where new parties have a good chance to enter.
- 6) Allying with established parties might render credibility, but being controversial might also do the same.
- 7) The state's capacity and propensity for repression.
- 8) A potent master frame.

In the Nordic countries an RRP first appeared in the Danish Progress Party in 1972, although it was not fully developed as one such until the party split into The Danish People's Party in 1995.<sup>28</sup> Restrictions on immigration has been an important theme for both parties at least since the leader of the Progress Party, Mogens Glistrup, allegedly stated that 'as long as there are high taxes and Muslims we've got something to fight for'.<sup>29</sup> Similar parties have since developed in Norway, Sweden (although the Sweden Democrats originally came from a neo-Nazi position), and Finland.<sup>30</sup>

The progress for these parties depends on some factors in accordance to the list of eight above: the threshold for representation in the parliament is

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<sup>24</sup> Rydgren 2004, p. 478; Widfeldt 2000, pp 487-488, 491.

<sup>25</sup> Rydgren 2004, p. 479.

<sup>26</sup> <http://svedala.sverigedemokraterna.se/2011/02/10/svensk-hoger-tvarvander---moderaterna-ska-begrava-mangkulturalismen/>

<sup>27</sup> Rydgren 2004, pp 476-477.

<sup>28</sup> Arter 1999, p. 124; Widfeldt 2000, p. 490; Rydgren 2004, p. 480.

<sup>29</sup> Arter 1999, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Widfeldt 2000, p. 496.

two per cent in Denmark, but four percent in Norway and Sweden.<sup>31</sup> The Nordic countries have become more electorally volatile and less dependent on class voting.<sup>32</sup> The politicisation of the niche of immigration results from the fact that established parties significantly agree on the issues, despite the fact that many voters disagree with them in this matter.<sup>33</sup>

One result of the progress of the Danish People's Party is that other parties, including the major Social Democratic Party, also have adjusted their policies on immigration to a less open view.<sup>34</sup>

The point that I will try to prove here through the following empirical section is that the RRP, at least in the Nordic countries, also share one more feature, namely the use of religion (or more precisely Christianity) as a way of arguing against its main enemy Islam. This is then in accordance to what I have shown above about how nationalism often relates to religion.

## **Empirical Study of the Homepages of Nordic Nationalist Parties**

The Nordic countries are commonly thought of and described as probably the most secularized corner of the world. It also has a longstanding liberal tradition of keeping religion a private matter and therefore tends not to mix religion and politics. But that picture is changing, and maybe for puzzling reasons, through the emergence of RRP in Nordic politics, such as The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), The True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*), The Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), and The Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). There is no equivalent to these parties in the fifth Nordic country, Iceland, and therefore it is naturally excluded from this analysis.

Here I will perform a comparative study of the official websites, including the most recent versions of the party programmes, of these parties. I will examine how these relate to religion as a source for their claims and how majority religion (Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity and its national churches) is treated and actually used in relation to minority religions (primarily Islam).

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<sup>31</sup> Christiansen and Damgaard 2008, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> Bergman and Strøm 2011, p. 314.

<sup>33</sup> Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, p. 617.

<sup>34</sup> Rydberg 2004, p. 494; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, pp 623-624.



By religion here, I mean a traditional substantial definition of a system of belief in a supernatural reality, organized through myths, rituals, and symbols. I will be using the search function on each website to find anything related to any of these five words: Religion, Christian(ity), church, Islam, and Muslim. These will, of course, be translated into Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish.<sup>35</sup> I will be excluding texts in other languages than the official one(s) of each country, to make sure that there are no involuntary duplications.

The reason why I chose these words is that Christian(ity) and church should cover most of the texts related to the majority religion and national churches. Islam and Muslim should cover most of the texts related to the major non-traditional religions, as these terms represent the faith that could be considered to be the main threat to national unity by these parties. And finally the word religion should cover any principal discussion on the place and function of religion in society.

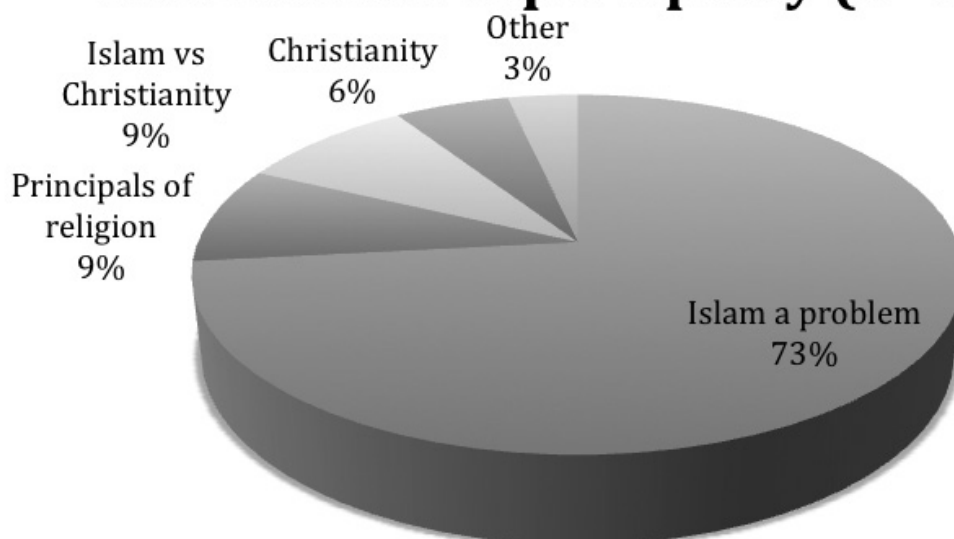
I will then in a simple form of discourse analysis try to determine whether the use of religion in each text supports nationalism (in a positive or negative manner) or if it seems to have another purpose. I will also do a very brief comparison with party programmes of the Social Democrats in each country as a least likely case (being a major, well established party on the left) to see if religion is handled any differently there.

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<sup>35</sup> In practice the internal search engine does not always work that well, so I have had to go through an advanced search through Google instead, focusing on the specific website. As I do not speak Finnish I will be using Google Translate to be able to understand the Finnish material. However, the results are being confirmed as reasonable by Adj Professor Kati Niemelä (ThD, Med), a Finnish-speaking Senior Researcher of the Research Central of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland. I have translated quotations used in this article to English.

## The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) in Denmark

### The Danish People's party (N=577)



Searching for the words Christian(ity), church, Islam, Muslim and religion on the website of the Danish People's party rendered as many as 577 articles. An absolute majority (about 73 percent) of these are about Islam being a problem. They are, for example, about Islam as violent, political, and hostile to women's rights and democracy. Some of the articles on more principal matters regarding religion also relate to issues that are raised by the visible presence of Islam in Denmark, like how religion should be taught in schools.

About thirty articles are solely about Christianity and the national church. Some of the topics here are the need for morning prayer in schools, same sex marriages in church, and above all the importance of Christianity in Danish society. The last of these topics is also significantly present when it comes to the approximately fifty articles that are about the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Here almost twenty of those underscore how wrong it would be to incorporate a Muslim country like Turkey into the EU since Europe is a Christian continent, according to the party. Many of the articles here are also about Muslims terrorising Christians in Denmark and other parts of the world in a way that makes it obvious who is 'good' and who is 'bad'. The underlying theme here is always that Christianity is an important marker of what is Danish, good, and modern. When the Social Democratic Party tries to turn the celebrating of (aspects of) Ramadan into a public holiday the Danish People's party react. 'The Social Democrats might as

well take the plunge and suggest making Islam Denmark's official religion instead of Christianity', according to Jesper Langballe.<sup>36</sup>

In the party programmes one paragraph is devoted solely to Christianity, the people, and ethics. Here the party states among other things that 'it's important to say that we in Denmark have a constitutional freedom of religion, but not equality of religion.' When the party talks about integration policies it stresses the importance of a Christian and democratic view on life. Within education Christianity again is one of many important factors.<sup>37</sup> In a fairly short principal programme Christianity and the national church once again have a paragraph of their own.<sup>38</sup> The Danish Social Democrats mention religion as part of the basic human rights in their programme and identify churches as part of the countryside in Denmark, but that is all.<sup>39</sup>

Conclusion: Religion is very important to the Danish People's Party in the sense that it works as a basic way of defining Danish identity against the threat that Islam is thought to be, more than an interest in specific religious issues within the national church. When the party describes itself ideologically it says: 'We are a critical party, who are critical when other parties choose to remain silent, for example against Islam, women's oppression, etc'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> [http://www.danskfolkeparti.dk/DF\\_rystet\\_over\\_S-forslag\\_om\\_at\\_sløjfe\\_Store\\_Beded-ag\\_til\\_gengæld\\_for\\_Ramadan-fri.asp](http://www.danskfolkeparti.dk/DF_rystet_over_S-forslag_om_at_sløjfe_Store_Beded-ag_til_gengæld_for_Ramadan-fri.asp)

<sup>37</sup> Dansk folkepartis arbejdsprogram 2009, paragraph 3. Kristendommen, folket og etikken, paragraph 5. Udlændinge-, asyl- og integrationspolitik and paragraph 11. Uddannelse – en forudsætning for Danmarks udvikling.

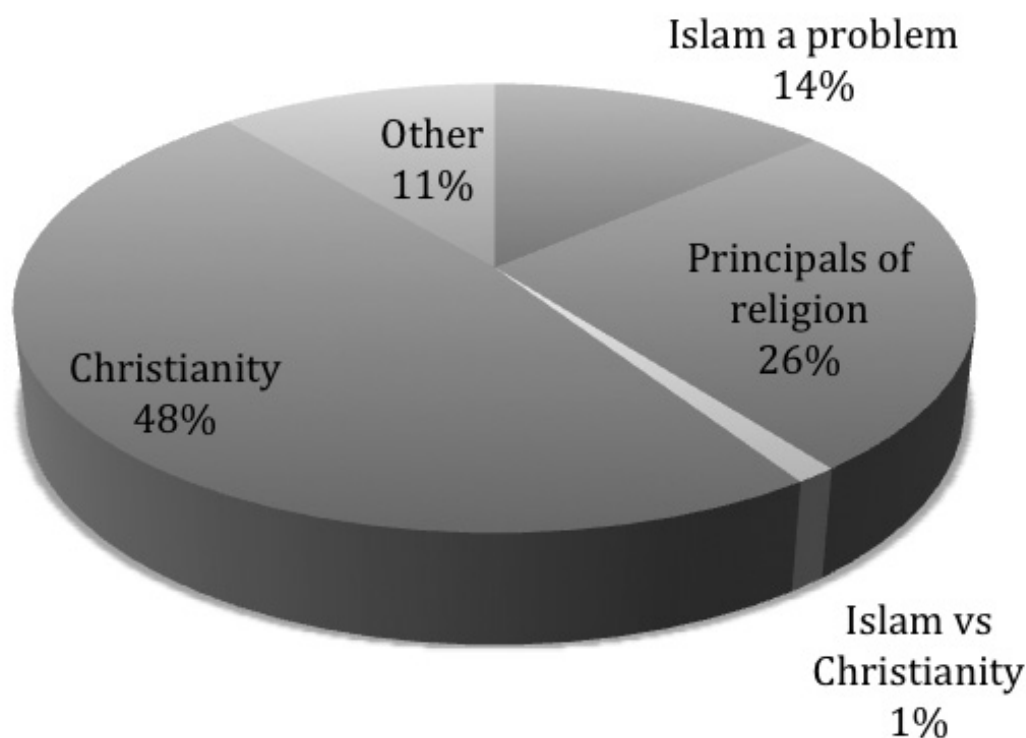
<sup>38</sup> Dansk folkepartis principprogram 2002:

<sup>39</sup> Socialdemokraterne. Hånden på hjertet. Principprogram 2008, pp 4, 10 and 12.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.danskfolkeparti.dk/Ideologi.asp>

## The True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*) in Finland

### The True Finns (N=81)



The search for my chosen words on this website only rendered eighty-one articles. This might be due to a language problem, although I have tried to go about the process exactly the same way as with the other three parties. But it might of course also be related to religion being less important in Finnish and particularly True Finns policies.

For the True Finns Christianity seems to be much more interesting than Islam. About half of the articles are exclusively about Christianity and/or the national church(es). At least half of those about principal issues on religion could also be about this subject as they refer to ideals like ‘home, religion, and country’ and that probably means Christianity rather than, for example, Islam. But the party also criticizes the (Evangelical Lutheran) church for being too liberal when it comes to issues like same sex marriages.

A few articles state that the True Finns is not a religious party, although Finland is a Christian nation and Christian values therefore are central to

the party as well. In one single article this is contrasted with fundamentalist Islam, declaring that they are not being compatible.

When Islam is described as a problem it is mainly on an international basis and not so often in connection with immigration. This should not come as a surprise, after all Finland has a much stricter immigration policy than the other three countries in this comparison.<sup>41</sup>

In the party programme the country is said to be built on social Christian values. Islam is said to be connected with the most troublesome spots in the world, while churches are described as helping people in need internationally.<sup>42</sup> The Finnish Social Democrats do not mention religion of any kind at all in its programme.<sup>43</sup>

Conclusion: The True Finns do not appear to be particularly interested in a detailed policy on religion. But Christianity, both explicitly and probably through descriptions like 'home, religion, and country', still seems to be part of the foundation for Finland. Islam does appear to be a negative issue although not an important one, but this might very well be related to the fact that the country has such a strict immigration policy.

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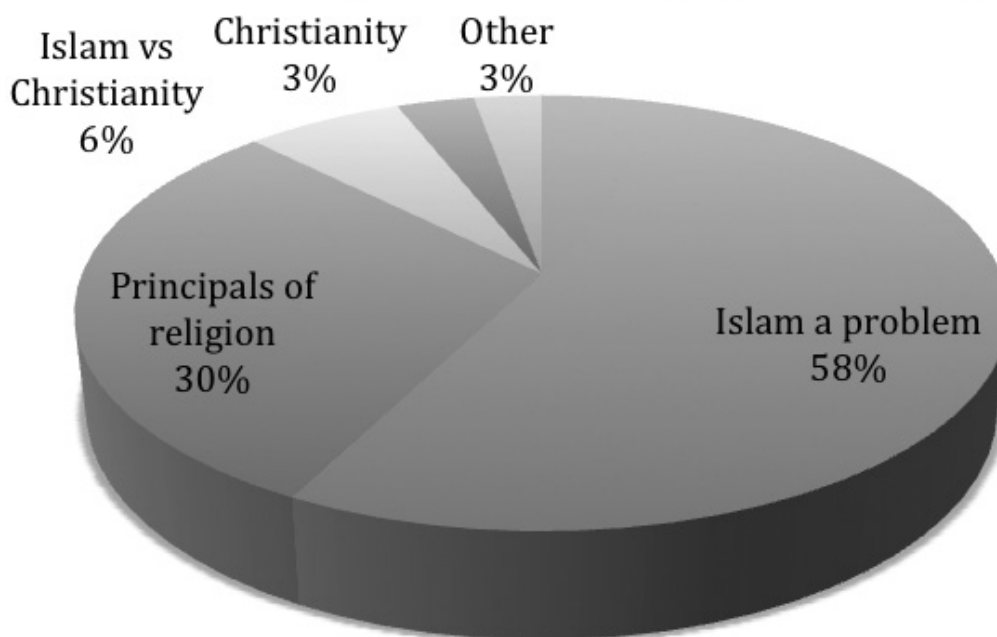
<sup>41</sup> Some examples: <http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/artikkelit/?issue=16>  
<http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/ajankohtaista/?issue=234>  
<http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/artikkelit/?issue=673>

<sup>42</sup> Perussuomalaiset rp: Program psvaali 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Finlands Socialdemokratiska Parti. SDP:s mål för mandatperioden 2007-2011

## The Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*) in Norway

### The Progress Party (N=217)



I have found 217 articles containing one or more of the words that I have been searching for. Of those I considered approximately 57 percent to be focusing on Islam as a problem, most of which are about the threat from fundamentalist, radical, violent, and political forms of Islam. The second largest group of those articles are about the use of the *niqab*, *burka*, and *hijab*.

Next there are articles of a more principal character, including parts of the party's programmes, where the party stresses its commitment that no one should be discriminated on the basis of skin colour, religion, or ethnic background. This theme is repeated over and over again in various articles, perhaps as a way of stressing the idea that the party is not a racist or undemocratic party.<sup>44</sup>

When it comes to the party's relationship to Christianity there are just a few references to it in the party programmes, including the sort of portal paragraph stating that the party is liberal, with its basis in a Norwegian and Western cultural heritage as well as in Christian view of life and humanistic

<sup>44</sup> Read more under 2.1.3 Radical right-wing populist parties.



values. The party wants the church to be separated from the state, to become more legitimate.<sup>45</sup> All in all the party seems to have much less to say about the national church in its programme than, for example, the Norwegian Social Democrats.<sup>46</sup> But in articles on the website focused on Christianity and the church the party stresses in a positive way the importance of Christianity and the Bible as part of national identity.<sup>47</sup>

As we have seen so far the party is very concerned with certain aspects of Islam, but it also uses Christianity as a tool in its nationalistic efforts. In fourteen articles the Christian heritage and its central position in the Norwegian constitution is contrasted with non-humanistic values that fundamentalist Islam is supposed to represent. The point is that Islam is a threat to the fundamental values of Norwegian society, as they are articulated in the Christian faith.<sup>48</sup> This type of articles is obviously not that frequent, but when it appears it is clearly a statement.

Summary: The Progress Party does not seem to be that interested in religion in its party programmes, but in practice it seems to be an important marker of the difference between 'us' and 'them'.

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<sup>45</sup> Fremskrittspartiets prinsipper 2009-2013, pp 4, 6; Handlingsprogram 2009-2013.

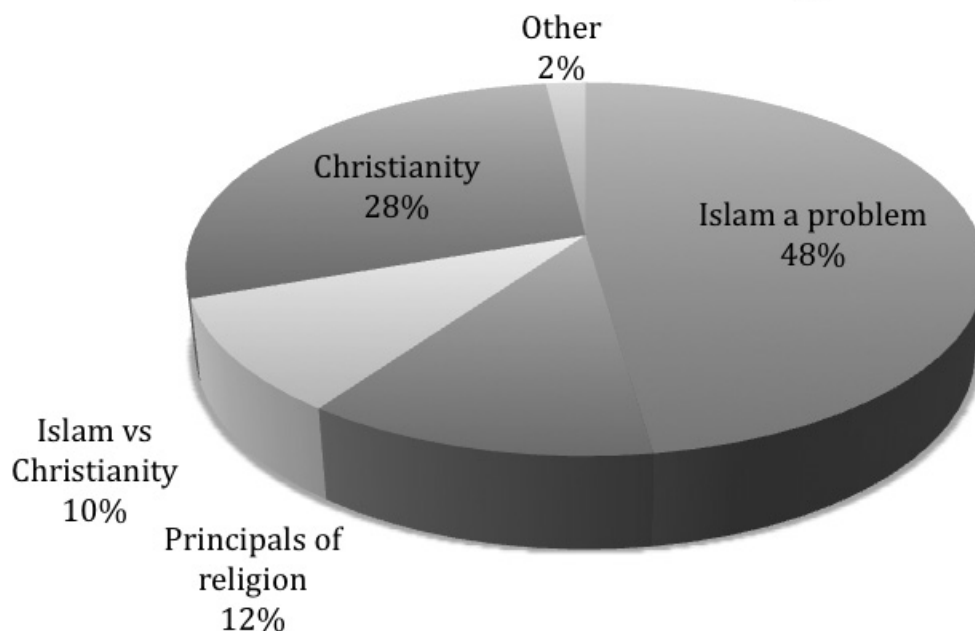
<sup>46</sup> Skape og dele. Arbeiderpartiets program 2009-2013, pp 50-51.

<sup>47</sup> Some examples: <http://www.frp.no/-+Kristen+kulturarv+ut+av+skolen.d25-S27DY0j.ips>  
<http://www.frp.no/Forslag+til+ny+formalsparagraf+for+skole+og+barnehage+er+den+god%3F.d25-S2JzG5J.ips>  
<http://www.frp.no/Kirke+og+stat.d25-TgZbI5n.ips>

<sup>48</sup> Some examples: [http://www.frp.no/Innhold/lagWeb/Ostfold/Sarpsborg\\_FrP/Frp+og+kristne+verdier.d25-SwlrUXt.ips](http://www.frp.no/Innhold/lagWeb/Ostfold/Sarpsborg_FrP/Frp+og+kristne+verdier.d25-SwlrUXt.ips)  
<http://www.frp.no/-+Sharialovene+strider+med+menneskerettene.d25-SwlrUZv.ips>  
[http://www.frp.no/FrP+og+de+kristne+verdier.b7C\\_xlfI2k.ips](http://www.frp.no/FrP+og+de+kristne+verdier.b7C_xlfI2k.ips)

## The Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) in Sweden

### The Sweden Democrats (N=265)



One of the revolving pictures on the top of the website of the Sweden Democrats shows a meadow with sheep and a big cross on it, which is probably not accidental since it is very similar to how the Danish People's Party depicts the church. Here the number of articles containing one or more of the words is 265. Of those I consider approximately 47 percent to be focusing on Islam as a problem, most of which are about the threat from fundamentalist, radical, violent, and political forms of Islam. Some of the articles with principal discussions on religion are about circumcision and could then of course actually be about Islam as well.

When the Sweden Democrats have engaged politically within the Church of Sweden the party has been accused of doing so just for the sake of gaining political legitimacy.<sup>49</sup> But I suggest here that it goes deeper than that. About half of the seventy-five articles on the website solely about Christianity and the church (28.3 percent) are about church politics and quite a few are about promoting the end of school celebrations in church.

The main theme in all of this is to stress the importance of the Swedish cultural and ideological heritage. In one article a party member even says

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.unt.se/tierp/kyrkan-ser-over-sitt-vals-system-323729.aspx>

that the Sweden Democrats have taken the place of the Christian Democrats as they are supposed to have left the Christian traditions behind.<sup>50</sup> It is an interesting thought and may serve an ideological embryo for further development within the party. In another text the party leader Jimmie Åkesson is quoted saying: 'Sweden has been a Christian country for a thousand years. We cannot remove all Christian symbols and references from public activities, without also violating our culture and identity'.<sup>51</sup>

When Christianity is mentioned in the same article as Islam it once again is a marker of Swedish identity, but the party also supports for example Christians in Iraq facing pressure from Muslims. One interesting theme here is same sex marriages. On the local level, especially when it comes to church politics, some Sweden Democrats argue against same sex marriages as being something apart from Christian teaching. But in the parliament the party uses homophobia as an argument against Muslims, as a sign of their un-Swedish ideology.<sup>52</sup> The acting in parliament could also be seen as a way of legitimizing the party by separating it from biological racism such as Nazism.<sup>53</sup>

In the party programme religion is only mentioned in a sentence about basic human rights. In the latest election manifesto religion –or more specifically Islam –is definitely presented as a problem in regards to domestic violence, the wearing of veils, and Islamism in Sweden. Christian ethics, in contrast, are mentioned as something of a central importance to society.<sup>54</sup> It might be mentioned here for comparison that the Swedish Social Democrats mention religion on four pages in its party programme, but none of the other words that I have been searching for here.<sup>55</sup>

Summary: The Sweden Democrats do not seem to be that interested in religion in its party programmes, but in practice it seems to be an important marker of the difference between 'us' and 'them': what is Swedish and what is not.

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<sup>50</sup> A possible niche to fill? Read more under 2.1.3 Radical right-wing populist parties.

<sup>51</sup> <http://sverigedemokraterna.se/2010/06/04/sverigedemokraterna-vill-alagga-landets-skolor-att-arrangera-traditionella-avslutningar/>

<sup>52</sup> See for example: [http://skurup.sverigedemokraterna.se/2009/09/19/title\\_2357/](http://skurup.sverigedemokraterna.se/2009/09/19/title_2357/)  
[http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=63&dok\\_id=GY10187](http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=63&dok_id=GY10187)

<sup>53</sup> Read more under 2.1.3 Radical right-wing populist parties.

<sup>54</sup> Sverigedemokraternas valmanifest 2010, pp 4-5.

<sup>55</sup> Socialdemokraternas politiska riktlinjer 2009, pp 20, 38, 60,66.

## **Conclusions**

Nationalism has its origins in Christian dynastic rules and therefore has part of its common ground in Christian thinking. Apart from more general characteristics, here I have stressed two important similarities between religion and nationalism: the need for a common language (which I here have stretched to mean cultural language rather than linguistic) and religion as a chain of memory that has a role in constructing national identity.

Through this article I have shown that religion (again) is part of the public political arena in the Nordic countries through the emergence of a more visible presence of Islam and of RRP. As the element of religion is not part of a common (minimal) definition of RRP I therefore would like to add it.

I have shown that nationalism and mono-confessional religion often go hand in hand, especially as a religion such as Islam emerges, with its roots and centre far away geographically. This is a clear example of what can be called politicized religion.

I have also shown that the Nordic RRP do not seem to be particularly interested in religion from a theological perspective, but rather as an important cultural marker of Nordic identity, or 'language' as mentioned above. They clearly state that they are not religious parties, but that they are devoted to their nations that are (to a higher or lesser degree) constitutionally and historically Christian. Here religion fills the function of a chain of memory in national identity. This poses a clearer division than other arguments as to why Islam should not be any part of their respective society.

Here Islam is always portrayed as a problem. The church and especially the Christian heritage are mostly positively portrayed, although the church sometimes gets criticized for being too liberal. In these aspects the RRP clearly differentiate themselves from the Social Democratic parties that I have tried to briefly compare them to. I have finally tried to demonstrate that the differences in the amount of interest that each of the parties pay to religion depends on factors like the level of (Muslim) immigration and how closely the national church is knit to the state.

An interesting development of this aspect of Nordic politics would be if the RRP's would try to fill the position that the Christian Democratic parties hold today in the morality/secularity cleavage.<sup>56</sup> Right now it does not seem likely, according to traditional secularization theories, but that might of course change due to factors pertaining to the increased visibility of religion in the public sphere.

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<sup>56</sup> Heidar 2002, p 47.

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