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Religion in Finnish Newspapers on an Ordinary Day: Criticism and Support

Teemu Taira / ORCID: 0000-0002-8122-2494

Senior Lecturer, Study of Religion, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
teemu.taira@helsinki.fi

Jere Kyyrö / ORCID: 0000-0002-2345-166x

University Teacher, Study of Cultures, University of Turku, Turku, Finland
jere.kyyro@utu.fi

Abstract

This article examines how three Finnish newspapers covered religion on an ordinary day in the 2010s. The study demonstrates that although religion may not be the primary interest of the media, it is by no means absent from everyday newspaper coverage. National and regional papers as well as freesheets have their own styles and emphases, but the differences in Finnish media are moderate. While coverage of diverse religions is not absent from the journalism – the presence of Islam in the foreign news is particularly notable – the overall coverage of religion in Finnish newspapers on an ordinary day highlights the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the dominant religious institution. Newspapers provide moderate support for the existing role and status of the dominant church against explicitly secularist views, even when critically examining problems within it.

Keywords: religion, media, Finland, journalism, mediatization, Lutheran, diversity

Introduction

This article examines the media coverage of religion by analysing articles collected in Finland on an ordinary day – September 17 – during three consecutive years: 2013, 2014 and 2015. By focusing on a time when nothing special regarding religion is expected to appear in the media (see Poole & Weng, 2021), it aims to provide an overview of typical religion-related newspaper content, reflect on how religion is portrayed outside exceptional events and contextualize the findings in relation to Finnish society.

The religious landscape in Finland is dominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Its role as a state church officially ended in 1869, but in practice the relationship between the church and the state is a close one. Depending on the definition, Finland can be considered an example of a country with an established state church, even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is usually called a folk church. This is because the majority of Finns are officially members of the Lutheran Church and the church takes care of some tasks that are considered socially significant, although critics suggest that this does not make it less of a state church. Independent of whether it is called state church or folk church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has privileges guaranteed by law, as does the Finnish Orthodox Church. While there are no clear signs that the official role of the Lutheran Church is about to change, the current situation can be best described as one in which its position, long taken for granted, has come under negotiation. This can be illustrated by five recent developments.

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First, the membership rates of the Lutheran Church have declined relatively quickly in recent years. Slightly less than 70 per cent of Finns are members of the Lutheran Church, whereas in the early 1990s the rate was almost 90 per cent. The membership rate is lower among young adults than among elderly generations, suggesting that the decline is a generational issue. In addition, the popularity of religious beliefs has decreased, and nonreligious identification has become normal, especially among young adults (Niemelä, 2015; Salomäki et al., 2020; Taira, Ketola & Sohlberg, forthcoming). The fact that Finland is steadily secularizing is putting a lot of pressure on the Lutheran Church, as it is losing revenue – members pay taxes to the church – and the justification of its privileged position is under negotiation. Second, the Lutheran Church is internally diverse, and this diversity – framed as an argument between liberals and conservatives, often focusing on the rights of sexual minorities and gender issues – is constantly debated in public (Taira, 2019a). Third, increased immigration, including refugees, asylum-seekers and work-based immigration, has made Finland culturally, ethnically and religiously more diverse, despite its relative homogeneity by European standards (Martikainen, 2013). This has more to do with Islam than any other established religious tradition. Currently, it is estimated that there are between 70,000 and 100,000 Muslims in Finland, making up between 1–2 per cent of the population. While this percentage is not high, immigration has opened a public debate about the religious landscape of Finland, provoking a number of negative comments about Islam by ordinary citizens and high-profile politicians. Fourth, there has been some increase in weakly institutionalized, “unofficial” religiosity (McGuire, 2002), which is sometimes labelled as spirituality or neo-spirituality (Ketola, 2020). Although this has more to do with interest and more or less active participation in events rather than consistent commitment (Kääriäinen et al., 2005), it is notable, for instance, that in relation to the overall population, Finland is a country with the most yoga practitioners in the world per capita, if the estimation of the Finnish broadcasting company Yle is to be believed (see Puustinen et al., 2013, p.22). Although only some practitioners consider yoga more than a physical regimen, its common portrayal in the media is that it is “more than exercise” (Puustinen et al. 2013). Fifth, a footnote to these major developments is activism by nonreligious organizations, such as the Union of Freethinkers and the Humanist Alliance. Arriving in Finland, the debate on New Atheism increased the number of people joining the Freethinkers and actualized the media presence of atheist campaigns (Taira, 2012; 2014; 2015; 2017), although the storm has calmed in recent years.

The Finnish and Nordic media landscapes are characterized by the prominent role of public service broadcasting and the continuing significance of print media, despite the deregulation and commercialization of media and the development of digital media. Hallin & Mancini (2004, 67) have suggested that Nordic countries have a “corporatist democratic” media system, an ideal type referring to high newspaper circulation, a historically strong political party press, a recent shift toward neutral commercial press, strong professionalization in journalism, strong state intervention but with protection for press freedom, press subsidies and strong public service broadcasting. Other scholars have suggested that Nordic media systems have been dominated by national and regional newspapers as well as a highly regulated broadcasting system (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p.48–52). (See Taira, 2019b.)

In Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, newspaper readership is exceptionally high. Few people never read newspapers, and even tabloids are relatively strong in news content. According to a Nordicom study published in 2010, the Nordic countries are among the top eight on the global list of newspaper reach. Readership figures are high above the European average and even higher above Asia and the United States. A high level of subscriptions and home delivery (75–90 per cent of total sales), as well as availability, also characterize the Nordic countries. Along with Norway and Sweden,

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Finland was among the three highest-ranking countries in the world in newspaper copies per 1000 inhabitants. (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p.24–26, 56–57; Taira, 2019b.)

Although many people use online media, according to statistics, the most popular websites are traditional media outlets, such as main newspapers, the public broadcasting company's news site and the main commercial television channel's news page (Taira, 2013, p.208). While it is obvious that digital media continues to change the situation, Syvertsen et al. (2014, p.41–45) conclude that the “digital divide” (i.e. fragmentation and social pluralization of media use) has remained moderate in Nordic countries and that “there is still a high use of a print and other traditional media”. Furthermore, despite crisis talk and some serious challenges, such as a decline in advertising and subscriptions, journalism has generally been a profitable business in Finland (Autio, 2016; Herkman, 2011).

Another significant bit of background information about the media landscape is that the political profile of Finnish media is rather homogeneous. Excluding the papers published by political parties, all major newspapers are nominally independent but practically situated slightly right of centre (Tommila, 2001, p.58). While this fact may be one of the main reasons why religion is portrayed as it is, other emphases and aspects – implied readership, regional variation, the sections included in the papers and so on – are equally relevant in explaining the differences in their religion coverage.

Previous studies focusing on the random samples of media coverage of religion in Finland are scarce. The most substantial ones in terms of the amount of data and systematicity are Hokka et al. (2013; see also Sumiala et al., 2017), Niemelä (2013; see also Niemelä & Christensen, 2013), Rahkonen (2007) and Taira (2019a). They demonstrate the moderate variety of newspapers in terms of their religion coverage and point out that rather positive representations of the Lutheran Church dominate the content, but they focus on news coverage of conventional religion. The closest to a study of an ordinary day of media coverage of religion has been Taira (2014). This will be consulted throughout this article, mainly because it utilizes a very similar research design. In contrast with most studies, Taira's (2014) work, like this one, is not limited to what we call conventional religion or news stories; it includes common (or unorganized) religion and pays attention to all newspaper content. Furthermore, its data consists of three newspapers over an ordinary week in January 2014.

Data and Method

We selected three different types of Finnish newspapers for this study, all dating to September 17 in three consecutive years (2013–2015). The first is the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the only truly *national* morning paper in Finland despite its reference to the city of Helsinki, although two main tabloid evening papers are arguably much more evenly distributed throughout the country. Its print distribution was 267,094 in 2015 and its estimated readership slightly over 1.9 million in a country with 5.5 million inhabitants (KMT, 2015, p.1; Stat.fi, 2016a). In the three-day selection, the size changed between 56 and 84 pages (average 69). The second is a *regional* paper. The *Turun Sanomat* is the third largest newspaper in Finland, published in the city of Turku and also read in the surrounding towns and cities. Its printed distribution was 84,462 in 2015 and its estimated readership 345,000 (KMT, 2015, p.1; Stat.fi, 2016a). In the selected period, it had 28–40 pages (average 32). The third is a *freesheet*. *Metro* is a Helsinki-focused freesheet with a print run of 255,000 in 2014 (Mediatiedot, 2015). Although the overall readership increases by more than 10,000 if the online version is counted, *Metro* is typically read in public places, on the way to work or during one's lunch break, as it is distributed on public transportation and in malls, office buildings, business parks and

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educational institutions. It is a rather slim paper, with 20–24 pages in the sample period (average 21).¹ *Metro* was chosen also for the possibility of an international comparison, as it is published in multiple countries by Metro International.²

The primary method we chose to employ was quantitative content analysis, which took a single piece of news, containing a reference to religion, as the unit of analysis. Each such item was classified by its type (domestic, international or mixed), genre, treatment of religious issues (main issue or passing reference) and the type of religious reference (conventional religion, common religion or secular sacred). The classification scheme of religious references was based on the one used in Knott, Poole and Taira's (2013, p.191–195) study of British media portrayals of religion. The categories of analysis were manifest and physical (identifiable with page numbers and sections in the newspaper), rather than latent, thus reducing the ambiguity in interpretation and possible reliability issues (Nelson & Woods, 2011, p.113; Sun, 2017, p.149–150).

Based on the quantitative content analysis, we then chose exemplary cases for further analysis to demonstrate the typical ways of portraying religion. Qualitative analysis of these cases allowed a more interpretive approach and discussion of how the exemplary cases relate to the prevalent media discourses on religion in Finland. By following common journalistic practice, we selected stories covering global, national and regional/local aspects for closer inspection (see also Poole & Weng, 2021). In addition, we highlighted the nature of media portrayals of conventional religion, common religion and secular sacred.³ The selection criteria for closer inspection were that the stories should reflect the quantitative findings of the sample and shed light on the “ordinariness” of Finnish media coverage of religion. Thus, the question of ordinariness was approached from temporal (“ordinary day”), quantitative (distribution of news items into categories) and contextual (connections between the data and prevalent discourses in Finnish society) points of view.

Quantitative Content Analysis of the Newspapers

The Finnish data consists of 94 items (articles, images, etc.) that refer to conventional religion (including world religions and new religious movements), common religion (non-institutional forms of religion, such as magic, witchcraft and supernatural beings) or secular sacred (e.g. atheism). The

¹ All three papers are published in Southern Finland: the *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Metro* in the Uusimaa region and the *Turun Sanomat* in south-western Finland Proper. Uusimaa is the largest and Finland Proper the third largest region by population. Compared to the rest of the Finland, these regions are more diverse, exemplified by the portion of people speaking other languages than the official Finnish or Swedish: 11.3 per cent in Uusimaa and 6.1 per cent in Finland Proper, compared to the 3.5 per cent of the rest of the country (Stat.fi, 2016b).

² International comparison is not the task of this article; that is left to our colleagues who have done similar analysis elsewhere at the same time.

³ The category of conventional religion consisted of references to institutional religions, world religions and new religious movements (e.g. Protestantism, Buddhism), while common religion included references to non-institutionalized religious beliefs and practices, such as fortune-telling or magic. The coding frame also included the category of secular sacred, namely, “beliefs, values, practices, places, symbols and objects that are formally speaking ‘non-religious’” but are considered “inviolable and non-negotiable” (Knott, Poole & Taira, 2013, p.10–11; see Poole & Weng, 2021).

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Helsingin Sanomat has the highest number of items and *Metro* the least. In relation to the average number of pages, the *Turun Sanomat* has the highest number of items. Religion is mostly dealt with in domestic news (see Table 1), although in the national paper, the *Helsingin Sanomat*, a third of the religion-related articles are international news stories. The number of mixed cases is very low in all three papers. The numbers are quite similar during the three years, except for 2013, which had a significantly lower number of international news. This is reflected in the lower total number of items and number of news on Islam that year. Islam is the dominant religion in the international news and Lutheranism in the domestic news (as was also the case in Hokka et al., 2013 and Taira, 2014).

Table 1: Volume of news: International/Domestic

	<i>Helsingin Sanomat</i>	<i>Metro</i>	<i>Turun Sanomat</i>	Total
Domestic news	30	10	29	69
International	12	2	7	21
Mixed	3	1	0	4

The most popular genres are news, advertisements and reviews, public reader responses, classified ads and obituaries (Table 2). The category “Other” consists of quizzes and daily Biblical quotes (see the end of this section), which appeared mainly on the pages of the *Turun Sanomat*. Although the news stories are the most popular and factual genres dominate, paying attention to all genres demonstrates that many religion portrayals will go unnoticed if the focus is on news only. The popular non-factual genre is mainly comprised of advertisements, and there are some religious references in reviews, cartoons and quizzes, exemplifying the cultural and entertainment value of both conventional and common religion. Interestingly, in this sample there are no references to religion in the sports pages. In another case study consisting of one week’s newspapers, there were a couple of metaphorical references to religious language in tabloids, thus highlighting the significance of sports by rhetorical means (Taira, 2014). It looks like Finnish sport journalism is not eager to cultivate religious language, and it does not emphasize the religiosity of athletes (on the British context, see Knott, Poole & Taira, 2013, p.47, 135–137).

Table 2: Volume of news: Genres

	<i>Helsingin Sanomat</i>	<i>Metro</i>	<i>Turun Sanomat</i>	Total
Advertisements	6	3	1	10
Cartoons	0	1	0	1
Editorial	3	0	0	3
Features	2	0	2	4
Front page	1	0	1	2
Images (without a story)	0	0	0	0
News	14	3	11	28
News in brief	1	0	4	5
Obituary	5	0	2	7
Opinion (column)	1	1	1	3
Public reader responses	3	4	1	8

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Reviews	5	0	5	10
Sports	0	0	0	0
Classified	2	1	4	7
Other	2	0	4	6

Religion is typically covered in passing references rather than being the main issue in the article. The ratio between passing references and main stories is roughly three to one, except in the *Turun Sanomat*, which had slightly more main issue stories than other papers (Table 3). The lack of religion-related international news in a sample day in 2013 is reflected also in the low number of main issue references that year. This confirms what has been suggested previously by Knott, Poole & Taira (2013): if the focus is on articles where religion is the main issue, a majority of religious references in newspapers remain unnoticed.

Table 3: News as a main story or passing reference

	<i>Helsingin Sanomat</i>	<i>Metro</i>	<i>Turun Sanomat</i>	Total
Main issue	11	3	15	29
Passing reference	34	10	21	65

In the Finnish data, the conventional religious references dominate, and there were only a few secular sacred references (Table 4). The ratio between conventional and common is approximately eight to one, with the *Turun Sanomat* displaying a clearly higher portion in common religion. However, it does not seem to be systematic; five of these references are associated with television, theatre and game reviews and one with a fortune teller's advertisement. What is striking, however, is that common religion references in news articles are totally absent in this sample. There are four reviews and advertisements, two classified ads, one column and one front page reference to a review. The common religion references are also predominantly domestic.

One of the main reasons for the relatively low number of common religion stories is the type of newspapers selected. In previous studies, it has been noted that references to common religion are most common in tabloids (Knott, Poole & Taira, 2013; Taira, 2014). In comparison to an earlier case study that included one tabloid, the overall balance is not necessarily ordinary in this sample; Taira (2014) found that 32 per cent of religion-related newspapers articles were about common religion, compared to 13 per cent here. Furthermore, in Taira's (2014) study, the percentage of common religion references was higher in the *Helsingin Sanomat* than in the *Turun Sanomat*, whereas it is the opposite in this sample. A shared finding in all studies is that common religion references are to be found in all Finnish papers, but conventional religion references dominate the overall newspaper coverage.

Table 4: Conventional Religion, Common Religion and Secular Sacred⁴

⁴ The total number of references in this table is 95, which is one item more than the number of total cases. This is because one of the cases had both conventional religious and common religious references. The case is a listing of events published in the *Helsingin Sanomat*, which included a church concert, yoga and tai chi classes, and lectures on miraculous icons (HS, 2013, B 17).

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	<i>Helsingin Sanomat</i>	<i>Metro</i>	<i>Turun Sanomat</i>	Total
Conventional	41	11	28	80
Common	4	2	6	12
Secular Sacred	1	0	2	3

Lutheran and Islamic references are the most common (Table 5). Furthermore, there are some references to mixed conventional religion (typically stories reflecting Christianity and Islam equally), Protestantism in general, religion in general, Buddhism and other Christian churches and groups. The most visible common religion categories are magic and fortune-telling techniques. When looking at the cases in which religion is the main issue, only references to Lutheranism (16 articles) and Islam (5 articles) remain, along with two mixed articles about Christianity and Islam. What is noteworthy is that references to extremist Islam are more often passing references than the main issue.

Table 5: Significant topics: Overall

	Overall
Lutheran	42
Islam	13
Mixed	7
Protestantism (general)	5
Religion (general), magic	4
Buddhism, fortune-telling techniques, other Christian churches and groups	3

When newspapers are profiled, it turns out that in the *Helsingin Sanomat*, half of the articles are about the Lutheran Church, and its coverage of Islam is higher than the other papers, partly because it dedicates more space to international news than the other papers (see also Hokka et al., 2013; Taira, 2014). For the same reason, it is more likely to cover other established religious traditions.

Metro is a slim paper. It has sections for domestic and international news, but it also highlights things going on in the greater Helsinki area. In this sample, less than a third of the articles were about the Lutheran Church. One of the typical stories was about how the local Deaconess Foundation was involved in helping asylum seekers. However, the reader is most likely to find comments concerning religion in published text messages. The messages are short – and sometimes difficult to interpret – but as the paper publishes approximately 40 text messages in a day, they are likely to include religion. This was the case in all selected papers; topics varied from Biblical apologetics and criticism of all religions, particularly Islam, to Christian metaphors.

Two-thirds of the religion-related articles published in the *Turun Sanomat* were about the Lutheran Church. The total number (19) was almost the same as in the *Helsingin Sanomat* (20), but given the difference in their size, the relative attention paid to church matters in the *Turun Sanomat* is significantly greater. This is reflected in the stories dealing with local parishes and also on the “Calendar” page. The daily page includes a “Word for the Day” section, which offers a Biblical quote with a short interpretation by a theologian, indicating the normalization of Lutheran Christianity in the landscape of Finnish media. Furthermore, the events section on the same page typically has a few Christian events – either mainstream Lutheran or more charismatic and conservative groups – but also a number of yoga announcements.

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Global, National and Regional Stories as Examples of the Ordinary

Global Story

Global news stories often focus on conflicts, catastrophes and world politics. When they are related to religion, currently it is Islam that makes headlines, particularly in its extremist forms. Our example of an ordinary global story is from the *Helsingin Sanomat* – a paper with the most international articles in our sample. The story, “Bitter Exit from the Home Country”, deals with the war and humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria. It follows a Christian family who had left their hometown Qaraqosh (also known as Bakhdida) because of ISIS and was about to leave the refugee camp in Iraq and head to Europe via Lebanon (Huusko, HS, 2015, A p.28–29.) There were two other stories in the same two printed pages: a more personal comment by the same author, about his visit to a refugee camp (Huusko, HS 2015, A p.29), and another by a different journalist, who listed which parts of Iraq are considered safe by the Finnish officials (Pettersson, HS, 2015, A p.29).

The overall impression one gets by taking the three stories together is complexity. The message seems to be that the situation is miserable and humanitarian help is needed. The journalists are not simply describing a tragic situation in a faraway area; because of refugees and asylum seekers, the stories have European and national relevance.

Quoting a Catholic archbishop, the journalists compare ISIS to cancer, indicating that the “tumour” needs to be cut away before the patient can heal. They do not equate ISIS and Islam, as they refer to a refugee camp of Sunni Arabs (in addition to a Christian refugee camp). However, they implicitly juxtapose Christianity (the family fleeing war) and Islam (ISIS) in a way that is unfavourable to the latter. Furthermore, they raise the issue of whether adherents of a particular religion should be preferred in refugee policy, although they by no means take an explicit standpoint on the matter. The stories tap into the political debate in Finland, where some ministers of Parliament have suggested that Christian refugees should be given privilege over Muslims. Moreover, information about officially safe areas and countries provides material for debating whether people should be allowed to leave the area and whether asylum seekers could be sent back to where they came from – both hotly debated issues in Finland. What is ordinary in the news is that Islam is connected to conflicts taking place relatively far away from Finland, and that there is also some local relevance in the story (see also Hokka et al., 2013; Taira 2008; Taira, 2014). In addition, it exemplifies that stories depicting religious diversity, despite becoming one of the dominant discourses organizing knowledge concerning religion, often primarily pertain to Islam (i.e. religion means Christianity and religious diversity typically means Christianity and Islam).

National Story

As mentioned, Lutheranism is the dominant religion in the domestic news. A typical example of a newsworthy and ordinary national story deals with a forthcoming church election and its politicization (Grönholm, HS, 2014, A p.10). The story starts by mentioning that there are more political election lists in the forthcoming elections than earlier. The politicization is framed as a juxtaposition between the national populist Finns Party, which defines its values as Christian-social, and the liberal Greens League and its member organization Armon Vihreät [Gracious Greens], which has a positive attitude towards the Lutheran Church. The Finns Party’s secretary Riikka Slunga-

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Poutsalo explains the growing political interest towards church politics in terms of the party's values and spontaneous interest of party members, whereas the Gracious Greens' chairperson Katri Korolainen relays that they want to emphasize the party's positive attitude towards the church and that the church's environmental work should be improved. Greens do not have their own list in the election, but the candidates have enlisted via an organization called Tulkaa kaikki [Come all], which seeks to develop the church in a more equal and open direction. Korolainen suggests that the "Church's attitude towards sexual minorities may have been for many individual candidates the reason to run as a candidate" (Grönholm, HS, 2014, A p.10).

Conservative and liberal views are personified in a side story by two young males, the 28-year-old chairman of the Finns Party youth organization Simon Elo and 36-year-old attorney Juha-Pekka Hippi, the chairman of a LGBT rights organization. Titled "Hippi would consecrate the gays, Elo would not", it asks about their reasons for running in the elections, whether the church should allow the consecration of gay couples, and if the church elections matter.

The matter of the church's relation to homosexuals has been the most visible sign of difference between the conservative and liberal Lutherans, but it also divides the Finns more generally. A cornerstone of this discussion was "Gay Night", a televised conversation organized by the public service channel Yle TV 2 on the current affairs program *Ajankohtainen kakkonen*, which discussed the civil rights of gay couples and was aired in October 2010. Christian Democrat MP Päivi Räsänen, who expressed critical views on homosexuality in the program, provoked a surge in resignations from the church, even though Räsänen did not speak as a representative of it (Moberg & Sjö, 2012, p.86–87; Taira, 2014; Helminen, 2015). This story frames the tension between liberal pro-LGBT people and conservatives as existing *within* the church, not between the church and the liberals. Since the "Gay Night" show, the church has emphasized its multivocality, and the church itself has become more visibly contested between the conservatives and liberals. Moberg & Sjö also point out that the "homosexuality debate is a good example of religious concerns re-entering and becoming a highly visible part of wider mediated national civil and political debates" (Moberg & Sjö, 2012, p.87), thus providing support for our suggestion that the internal diversity of the Lutheran Church has become a typical and ordinary aspect of media coverage of religion in Finland.

Regional Story

Our example of an ordinary regional news is actually a group of three news reports, published on the same page of the *Turun Sanomat*'s domestic news section in 2015, that focus on the problems of the local parishes (Turku and Kaarina, Rauma, Taivassalo) of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church in south-western Finland (Leppänen, TS, 2015, p.8; Jokela, TS, 2015, p.8; Lankinen, TS, 2015, p.8). The first one deals with the budgets of the parishes in Turku and Kaarina, which, taken together, form a parish union. It starts by mentioning that the budgets have not grown and church tax remains at one per cent, thus highlighting the relevance of the story to those members of the church for whom taxes matter more than spiritual issues. The news piece quotes the parish union's public relations officer and real estate manager and lists different sources of income (e.g. church tax, selling apartments) and future investments, such as renovations in church-owned real estate, masonry of a crematorium furnace and acquisition of a new organ. (Leppänen, TS, 2015, p.8.)

Acquisitions are discussed in the next piece, too, which deals with the poor atmosphere in the Rauma congregation, caused by a heavy-handed financial officer. The officer (who is not named) had changed the contents of a call for bids in the parish's weekly announcement without the church

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council's approval. The vicar notes that the council will gather to decide whether it will withdraw the call for bids and whether further action will be taken. The story also reports that the Turku chapter is already investigating the parish's problems and a complaint made about the vicar. Furthermore, the police are reported to be investigating the vicar and the financial officer for suspected eavesdropping. (Jokela, TS, 2015, p.8.)

The last piece also deals with real estate and local conflict. The news features a picture of Taivassalo's medieval church, surrounded by the churchyard and cemetery, to frame the story that the Turku administrative court has dismissed complaints against building a new congregation centre with an exceptional license. The complaint was made by two private persons and the Taivassalo heritage association. (Lankinen, TS, 2015, p.8.) As with the previous one, this piece of news is part of a longer chain of events, as the administrative court had investigated the license several times during the past years.

In these three stories, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is represented in a lay context with lay officers and church councils (the sole member of clergy mentioned, the vicar of Rauma, is also represented in the role of an official), along with public authorities and associations. Thus, these stories depict the church institution and its representatives as lay actors in the regional civil society; as part of the everyday news flow, they are stripped of any dogmatic or ritual content. In two of the pieces there is a continuous conflict related to finances and practical matters, which adds to their news value, and yet the church is depicted as an ordinary part of Finnish society. Taken together, these articles exemplify the continuing Lutheran dominance of the Finnish religious landscape in the media, despite increased diversity and the Lutheran Church's need to justify its actions in the media.

Ordinary in Common Religion and Secular Sacred

All of the examples above are related to what we call conventional religion. This is not accidental, as on an ordinary day the most in-depth religion stories are about established institutions and traditions. Common religion is often covered in passing references and understood as having entertainment value. It is not always taken seriously, but there are still examples found on an ordinary day when even the most prestigious newspapers publish common religion stories without any ridiculing or critical tone (Taira, 2014; Taira, 2019a, p.236). We suggest that even when the entertainment aspect is maintained, analysing common religion stories may offer significant insights about religion in the media on an ordinary day. We use video game reviews as an example.

The *Turun Sanomat* published two digital game reviews in 2014. The first one, "Space Opera Does Not Try to Reach Far Enough", is a review of a shooter console game, *Destiny*, which employs a "half-religious" story line, mythological elements and encounters with aliens (Salminen, TS, 2014, p.21). The second one is a short review of a "zombie slaughter game", *Dead Island* (Salminen, TS, 2014, p.21). A similar example outside our three-day sample is an article of the classic role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which players take a "knight's, priest's or wizard's role", and use "20-sided dice to determine the success of magic spells" (Pullinen, HS, *Nyt* 31 January 2014, p.18; see Taira, 2014).

In these reviews, common religious references are scarce and passing, but they provide a hint to why scholars of religion have become more interested in studying religion and gaming (see Campbell et al., 2014; Heidbrink & Knoll, 2014; Wagner, 2012) and exemplify what Danish media scholar Stig Hjarvard calls banal religion: "[a b]ricolage of texts, iconography and liturgy of various institutional

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and folk religions” removed from the frame of institutional religion. They serve the functions of entertainment, cultural rituals and self-development, and form the backdrop of cultural knowledge of religion. (Hjarvard, 2012, p.40.)⁵ In the games reviewed, these banally religious texts and symbols act as plot devices or part of the game mechanics, providing entertainment value; “half-religious” can also be a reviewer’s description of the game’s storyline.

Although pointing out common religion references in digital game reviews may be considered an isolated and insignificant example, scholars echoing Hjarvard’s ideas have emphasized how popular media culture provides material – non-Christian, in particular – for “re-enchantment” after the diminished importance of religious institutions (see Partridge, 2004; 2005) and even coined the term “paranormal media” (Hill, 2011) when referring to the media’s and the audience’s increased interest in paranormal phenomena. While these are unlikely to replace the scholarly narrative about continuing secularization, they are phenomena worth studying: as common religion references are not rare in popular culture, they offer food for imagination and enchantment outside established religious institutions and contribute to media-driven aestheticization of religion. Furthermore, they normalize such phenomena as part of our ordinary (media) landscape.

Articles in the secular sacred category were sparse in the sample. Two papers published a story about a Belgian inmate who had been fighting for his right to euthanasia. This story exemplifies how the right to euthanasia can be seen as a non-negotiable “sacred” value. However, we will focus on another story in this category, as it highlights one of the prolonged debates where religious and secular values and viewpoints clash, and thus qualifies as an example of an ordinary newspaper story.

The *Turun Sanomat* interviewed drummer and graphic designer Matti Ranki on its “Weekly Calendar” page, which gives readers suggestions about where to go and what to do in Turku. An interview with a human interest angle had a relaxed tone, with questions such as “How would you spend your perfect day?” and “Can punch drink be done for one person only?”, but it also included the following: “You are head of Finland for one day. What would you tax or, alternatively, which tax would you abolish?” Ranki answered, “I would probably terminate the church tax, because of [my support of] secularism and [my support for] the separation of church and the state, although I have nothing against religious people” (Rautiainen, TS, 2014, p.22). The nature of the interview was such that the questions moved directly to another topic. Therefore, there was not space to expand on or justify these ideas. However, given our experience in following and studying Finnish media portrayals and debates, we argue that this represents a typical and acute example of the secular sacred category in Finnish media. No matter whether the Evangelical Lutheran Church is called a state church or folk church (Hjelm, 2014), it is obvious to everyone that the relationship between the church and the state is a very close one (Kääriäinen, 2011) and that the media deals with the issue regularly. Newspapers are not unanimous in whether they support the status quo. For instance, while the regional papers tend to be content with the current system, the *Helsingin Sanomat* is known to be somewhat critical, at least in the past and particularly in editorials (Taira, 2019a, p.231–233).

In Taira’s (2014) study about religion in the Finnish media during an ordinary week, there was also a substantial story about the topic in *Helsingin Sanomat* (Savolainen, HS, 29 January 2014, A p.13). The background for the story was a bill suggested by the Union of Freethinkers, whose main pronounced aims are a secular state (i.e. greater separation of the church and the state) and equality

⁵ Hjarvard’s concept of banal religion is almost coterminous with our classification of common religion, but also includes conventional religious references that are removed from the institutional context.

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of convictions (i.e. a situation in which no religious or other organizations are privileged in public institutions). None of the representatives of the Freethinkers were interviewed in the story, but their previous activities, which were referred to in the article, raised the issue of separation. Spokespersons of the Lutheran Church were interviewed, as well as professors of church history and constitutional law, all of whom suggested that there is nothing illegal or problematic about the current situation. A privileged position applies to the Orthodox Church of Finland as well, but its role was not examined in detail in this story.

The main part of the story dealt with political parties and their opinions on the matter. All major parties, except the Left Alliance, were in support of the current system; therefore, the headline read “Parties Support the Folk Church: Only Left Alliance Ready for Major Changes”. Although the story gave voice to some doubts from the parties officially supporting the current system, such as the Green League and Finns Party, the ordinariness in the story is the fact that those in power, including newspapers, tend to avoid strong criticism of the church-state relation. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the *Helsingin Sanomat* was probably the most vocal supporter of secularist policy among non-party newspapers, but its standpoint has softened. While it may be critical occasionally, it tends not to suggest explicitly – and at least not systematically – that the church and state should be more clearly separate (Taira, 2019a, p.231–233). Instead, it gives space for views highlighting the societal function of the Lutheran Church, such as in taking care of cemeteries, and it uses the term “folk church” rather than “state church”. At the same time, the paper plays a role in keeping the debate alive. As these examples illustrate, diversity is not limited to religious views on an ordinary day in the media. It is rather the case that nonreligiosity – often represented by the Freethinkers and Humanists in the media (Taira 2015) – has become a more and more ordinary part of the religious landscape of Finnish media.

Conclusion

The relevance of studying newspaper representations of religion lies primarily in the fact that we live in a world where information and our understanding of religion are increasingly mediated by the news media. Most people do not regularly meet representatives of different religious (or nonreligious) groups or follow scholarly conversations concerning religion. For many, news media comprise not only the primary but practically the only source of information about religion, and even more so in increasingly secularizing contexts, such as Finland. In such a situation, ordinary news production is a crucial factor in deciding what kind of impressions people encounter in their everyday lives, and it contributes to the role and status of religion in society by supporting and challenging certain forms and types of religiosity.

This study of religion on an ordinary day in Finnish media has demonstrated that although religion may not be the main interest of the media, it is by no means absent from newspaper coverage on an ordinary day. National and regional papers as well as freesheets have their own styles and emphases, but the differences in Finnish media are moderate, as shown in this study. This is true even for tabloids, although they tend to cover common religion more extensively and publish more human interest stories, particularly about Christianity (Taira, 2014). The impressions about religion they provide for the Finns are relatively similar.

On an ordinary day, the overall coverage of religion in the Finnish media highlights – unsurprisingly – the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the dominant religious institution. Although the Lutheran Church is still part of the normal religious landscape of Finnish newspapers, as exemplified in our analysis of regional stories and the quantitative part of the study, analysis of media coverage

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of religion suggests that diversity has become more obvious and ordinary in different ways. Islam is covered rather widely, although a large portion of this concerns international news about conflicts, terrorism and extremism. Other established religious traditions are much less visible in this sample and in previous studies, although they are not absent. Normally, religious diversity refers to Islam rather than, say, Buddhism or Hinduism. Although religious diversity is most prominent in global stories, as demonstrated in this study, it is also present in national and regional stories. Furthermore, diversity does not apply to different religious traditions only. One of the hotly debated aspects relates to the internal diversity of the Lutheran Church, often discussed in national news stories and framed as a conflict between liberals and conservatives. In addition, diversity extends beyond conventional religion, as the media deals with what we call common religion. With reference to superstition, witches, magic, demons, myths and fortune-telling, the media distributes images and impressions of weakly institutionalized religious views, primarily for their entertainment value but sometimes more seriously. Media also covers what we call secular sacred, the most obvious examples being nonreligious people's worldviews and nonreligious organizations campaigning for the rights of nonreligious people and for diminishing the role of religious institutions in society.

These are all ordinary aspects of religion coverage by mid-2010s' Finnish media on an ordinary day. The sample used here supports the previous findings that Finnish media has a moderately positive tone towards the Evangelical Lutheran Church, although the institution's statements and activities are monitored and evaluated, whereas Islam and conservative Christian views tend to be treated more critically (Taira, 2014; 2019a). In some studies, the selection of Christmas and Easter for the sample may have led to a portrayal of Christianity that is biased towards the positive end of the continuum (e.g. Niemelä, 2013), but studies that focus little on regional papers published in more religious areas may give too negative a portrayal of Christianity (see Hokka et al., 2013). Our overall judgment is that while it is often complicated to decide whether individual articles contribute to a positive or negative view on religion, the way in which it is portrayed on an ordinary day in Finnish media does not provide full support for the mediatization theory's view on media as a secularizing force (Hjarvard, 2012; 2013). The media has become a significant authoritative institution in religion-related matters, as mediatization theory suggests, but at the level of ordinary coverage the media tends to prefer liberal views over conservative ones, individual choice and diversity over a like-minded collective. Yet, it still provides moderate support for the existing role and status of the dominant church against explicitly secularist views, even when critically examining the problems within the church institution.

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