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To do, or not to do God

Faith in British and Finnish journalism

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'I don't like sugary stories, how could I put it nicely, where everything is just wonderful and Jesus always helps. As the path is, in any case, long and hard. <...> I traveled once to a Nokia mission event with local Pentecostals and our bus broke down. We got a new bus, which was otherwise OK, but the heating did not work. It was freezing and Natrin Matti always said, 'Jesus helps' and others repeated, 'Jesus helps'. I thought that, yeah, but I'm the only one who can see that the driver can't see anything through that frozen windscreen. I was wondering if I was the only person on the bus who had no faith. Well, Jesus helped and we got there. <...> Oh, why did I not write a column about that journey?'

Interview with Aino Suhola 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä

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1 Introduction

1.1 Questions of the study

For many years, I have been tempted to state in job interviews that I'm keenly interested in science, sport and religion. I have not done that. Rightly or wrongly, I used to think that that combination sounded too freaky to get me a job, so I always dropped religion. As a result, I have never been in a position to write many religion-related stories. However, I had an impression of the strong conventions impacting on religion coverage. Those conventions seemed to be mostly unspoken. In this study, I want to make them visible. I tried to find out what sort of rules there are, how they differ in the UK and in Finland and what kind of thinking lies behind them.

As a starting point, I took the twofold criticism that has been expressed of religion coverage in the western world. Journalism is blamed for both marginalizing religion and for placing it beyond criticism. Some media scholars criticize the media for having a secular bias in news reporting and pushing religion out of the public sphere. While it is difficult to analyze the quality of religion news coverage, this claim has often been based on the quantitative lack of news on religion.¹ Lynn Clark and Stewart Hoover explain:

*'Media practice—particularly in news—has equated its task with a rational product—information—and thus assumes an implicit role in this secular project. Commitment to journalistic objectivity furthers the idea that although religious sentiments may be acceptable in private life, they must be kept out of public work, especially out of journalism'*²

There are also complaints of ignorance and negligence in religion reporting. The BBC governors' panel on religion impartiality reported finding 'inaccurate language' and 'simplifications that harden into orthodoxy' in public broadcaster's news programmes.³ Several academics argue that the media has replaced the function of religion. Some see the media itself as a religious phenomenon and suggest that the journalists structuring the bulletins are in fact engaged in a religious activity because 'putting a frame round our experiences, in the way that a news story format inevitably does,

1 Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*, Thousands Oaks, Sage 1998, pp. 11-12.

2 Lynn Clark and Stewart Hoover, *At the Intersection of Media, Culture and Religion* in Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture: Communication and Human Values*, Sage 1997, p.17.

3 BBC Impartiality Review Religion: Report to the BBC's Board of Governors, 2004, p.5.

is a religious service in the strictest meaning of the word'.¹

Part of this makes sense. The church and its clergy once used to communicate most of the information available to the masses and definitely put a frame around every experience of human life. Nonetheless, defining journalism as a religion does not seem illuminating or helpful when attempting to understand the coverage of religion in journalism.

In this study, religion refers to the phenomenon as we understand it in everyday life. I use the same definition as the British sociologist Steve Bruce. Religion here means beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu notion of karma, for example) which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs.² In this meaning, the media is not a religion even though people nowadays entertain themselves, obtain information and even build their world view by watching television instead of going to church.

The opposite side of the criticism is expressed by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who blame us for being too respectful of religion:

*'A wide spread assumption which nearly everybody in our society accepts - the non-religious included - is that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offense and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to other. <...> The rest of us are expected to defend our prejudices. But ask a religious person to justify their faith and you infringe "religious liberty".'*³

*'On this subject, liberals and conservatives have reached a rare consensus: religious beliefs are simply beyond the scope of rational discourse. Criticizing a person's ideas about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolite in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not. And so it is that when a Muslim suicide bomber obliterates himself along with a score of innocents on a Jerusalem street, the role that faith played in his actions is invariably discounted.'*⁴

Christians and Muslims have a tradition of teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue. This kind of faith is dangerous, and respecting it is irresponsible, say Dawkins and Harris.

The first line of criticism is often expressed by religious people who would be keen to restore

1 Chris Arthur, ed., *Religion and The Media, An Introductory Reader*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1993, p.1,12.

2 Bruce, *God is Dead*, p. 2.

3 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Black Swan 2007, p 42-45.

4 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, terror and the Future of Reason*, The Free Press 2006, p13.

Christianity at the centre of public life and our world view, with God as the ultimate truth. The latter critics, militant atheists, believe that religion is a harmful delusion and root of so much evil that the world would be a better place without it.

Whether we share these views or not, both groups have points that are worth taking seriously by journalists. Are we reluctant to recognize the significance of the religious faith around us and unwilling to understand and explain to our audiences what believers really think and how their beliefs influence their actions? On the other hand, do we leave religious ideas unquestioned and beyond criticism? If so, on what grounds are we doing that? The philosopher, Daniel Dennett, states that religion is a tricky field, even for academic scholars. Researchers tend to be either respectful, deferential, diplomatic, tentative – or hostile, invasive and contemptuous.¹ Might this be the case with journalists, too?

1.2 Studies on the portrayal of religion in the media

Very little empirical research has been conducted in Britain and Finland on representations of religion in the news media or the newsroom culture behind them. It is often claimed that the media ignore religion or are biased in their coverage of religion – but do these claims stand up to scrutiny? Kim Knott, Professor of Religious Studies, asked this in a study that she was conducting at the University of Leeds in 2008-09. The results were not yet available when this report was written.

The project included a content analysis of portrayals of religion in a selection of British newspapers and TV channels. It examined the ways in which the media represent religious issues, beliefs and practices. It was replicating a study conducted at the University of Leeds in the early 1980's. That study found, among other things, a tendency to simplify and stereotype religious ideas.

The Finnish Church Research Institute² published in 2007 a study on the representations of the Church and Christianity in newspapers. It was carried out by Juho Rahkonen from the University of Tampere. According to Rahkonen, there is a common belief that the coverage on religion in the mainstream media tends to be overly critical or negative. His study did not reinforce this

1 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin Books 2007, p 27.

2 The Church Research Institute is part of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

conception. A systematic content analysis of 1,081 pieces from 5 major newspapers revealed that the coverage was generally positive and respectful. There were only a few stories which questioned the standing of religion. Rahkonen concluded that the mainstream media also maintain and affirm religious traditions. This is striking especially at Easter and Christmas.

The notion of negative coverage may be due to the fact that media has paid considerable attention to the debates about the ordination of women and the reluctance of the Church to acknowledge the registered partnerships of same-sex couples. Rahkonen notes that negative news does not necessarily mean that journalism is being particularly hostile towards the Church or religion, since bad news is prevalent in most areas of journalism.

1.2.1 The Mohamed cartoon controversy

The Mohamed cartoon controversy in 2006 forced the newspapers publicly to contemplate their stance towards religious feelings and freedom of speech. Some academic reports have been published about these contemplations. None of the British newspapers published the cartoons. This is notable, because showing at least some of the pictures that had caused such an uproar would have merely been business as usual. The BBC did show some of them. The BBC Director-General, Mark Thompson, later explained:

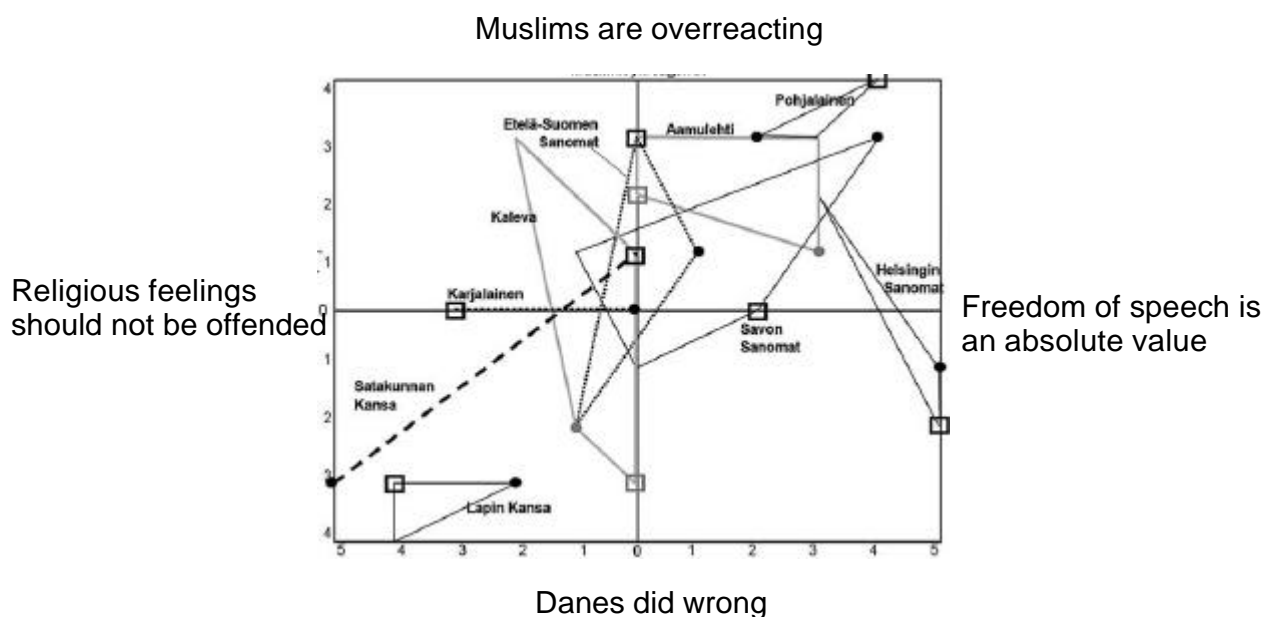
*'We didn't do it because we wished to cause offence, but because we thought that, without some level of depiction, it would be impossible for many viewers to understand the story at all.'*¹

In their leaders and other comment pieces, many papers defended the right to publish the cartoons though they had decided not to publish them themselves. The reason for this decision was not always clearly stated. Angela Phillips and David Lee note in their article that news journalists did not interview their editors or otherwise report the editorial deliberations, although they were clearly part of the story. The British editors who contemplated publication did so knowing that a backlash would inevitably ensue.²

1 Mark Thompson, Faith And The Media, Speech given at Cardinal Corma Murphy O'Connor Lecture 2008 series: Faith And Life In Britain Today. (Westminster, London 10 April 2008).

2 Angela Phillips and David Lee, 'The UK, A Very British Response' in Risto Kunelius, Elisabeth Eide et al. eds., *Reading the Mohammed Cartoon Controversy, Working Papers in International Journalism* 2007/1, p. 68.

According to Phillips and Lee, several commentators referred to the need to treat religion respectfully, and several spoke ruefully about the failure of Christians to protect their own religious icons and rituals from blasphemy. On the other hand, desisting from publication on the grounds that publication might cause harm was seen as tantamount to bowing to blackmail.¹ No Finnish newspaper published any of the original Jyllands-Posten Mohamed cartoons either,² but, through research on Finnish editorials at the height of the crisis, Anssi Männistö found distinctive differences in the stances adopted by the papers in their editorials. He illustrates his findings with a map on which the editorials are situated:



Three papers end up in the extreme corners. Lapin Kansa, from northern Finland, unambiguously condemned the publication of the cartoons and advocated respect for religious values. Pohjalainen from Western Finland criticized harshly the violent reactions and lack of democracy in the Islamic world. Helsingin Sanomat criticized both Jyllands-Posten for publishing the cartoons and Muslims for their violent reactions. At the same time, the paper was absolute in its defence of the freedom of speech and said nothing in defence of religious feelings.³

Of the 28 editorials included in the analysis, 11 stood for freedom of speech while nine defended religious values and feelings. Eight were neutral or flexible in this respect.⁴ In another article,

1 Phillips and Lee, 'The UK, A Very British Response', pp. 73-74.

2 Four papers published news photos of foreign papers in which the cartoons could be seen. The readers were thus informed but no one seemed to be offended.

3 Anssi Männistö, 'Sananvastuun ja -vapauden paini' in *Journalismikritiikin vuosikirja* 2007, p 53.

4 Anssi Männistö, 'Sananvastuun ja -vapauden paini', p. 47.

Finnish media scholars note that the national newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, favoured more secular, liberal views, while the provincial papers 'positioned themselves along more moderate lines and, through a kind of solidarity with the sacred, into somewhat multicultural positions'. The writers found this unsurprising, although they regarded it as being an interesting finding that a Lutheran religious sensibility led to multicultural reasoning. They assume that Helsingin Sanomat would look for its reference in the international arena and in the secular elite of the country, whereas the provincial newspapers would try take into consideration the religious feelings of its imagined, slightly more conservative, audience. This audience is by no means very open to Islam.¹

1.2.2 The portrayals of Islam in the Finnish and British media

According to Elizabeth Poole's extensive study on reporting Islam and British Muslims in the British media, published in 2002, Islam continues to be interpreted as a foreign phenomenon. Islam in Britain is deemed an alien culture, with the allegiances of its people held elsewhere. Religion is cited consistently as the prime motive for Muslims' (anti-social) behaviour. Islam is regarded as static and Muslims resistant to progress, 'engaged in antiquated and repressive practices that abuse human rights and often use their religion to manipulative ends'.²

Mari Maasilta, Juho Rahkonen and Pentti Raittila conclude in a report published in 2008 that, in Finnish newspapers, stories referring to Islam are mostly foreign news stories in which Islam is connected with terrorism or political violence. Stories about Finnish Muslims are different – 'from another planet', the scholars note – but they are so few that they fail to alter the bigger picture of Muslims as violent terrorists.³

The study also states that journalists comment on every aspect of Muslim life in terms of their religion. Stressing Muslims' faith seems to be an unconscious way of drawing a distinction between

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- 1 Risto Kunelius, Mari Maasilta and Jari Väliaverronen, 'Finland: Latent liberalism and explicit pragmatism' in Risto Kunelius, Elisabeth Eide et al.eds., *Reading the Mohammed Cartoon Controversy, Working Papers in International Journalism* 2007/1, pp. 214-215.
 - 2 Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, L.B. Tauris & Co, London 2002, p. 250.
 - 3 Mari Maasilta, Juho Rahkonen, Pentti Raittila, *Islam suomalaisissa joukkoviestimissä*, Tampereen yliopisto, Tiedotusopin laitos, julkaisu sarja A103, 2008, p. 62

the strange and the familiar.¹

This is why I selected for this study example stories which are only dealing with Christianity. When we start discussing Islam and other religions that are strange to us, we are instantly talking about cultural differences which affect many other issues besides faith. This would make the analysis difficult. This decision did not prevent journalists from repeatedly referring to Islam, as will be seen later in this report.

1.3 The method of the study

The aim of this study was to find out which attitudes and unspoken rules guide journalists when they are writing – or choosing not to write – about religion. To get a glimpse of them, I interviewed British and Finnish journalists, well knowing that we are not fully conscious of our motives and incapable of giving a reliable account of our behavior.

The philosopher, Daniel Dennet, writes:

‘One of the surprising discoveries of modern psychology is how easy it is to be ignorant of your own ignorance. You are normally oblivious of your own blind spot, and people are typically amazed to discover that we don’t see colors on our peripheral vision. It seems as if we do, but we don’t, as you can prove to yourself by wiggling colored cards at the edge of your vision – you’ll see motion just fine but not be able to identify the color of the moving thing. It takes special provoking like this to get the absence of information to reveal itself to us. And the absence of information about religion is what I want to draw to everyone’s attention. We have neglected to gather a wealth of information about something of great importance.’²

To provoke reactions and explanations, I handpicked ten religion stories from the Finnish and British media and wiggled them in front of the interviewees. All of the examples related in one way or another to the criticism presented at the beginning of this chapter. Another ground for choosing them was purely subjective: they all surprised me. Personally, I would have deemed them all uncommon in Finnish journalism. These stories were briefly presented to the interviewees and always the same questions were asked: Would this be a story for your paper? Would you do this story? Is this kind of story commonplace in British/Finnish journalism? When the answer was no, I

1 Mari Maasilta, Juho Rahkonen, Pertti Raittila, *Islam suomalaisissa joukkoviestimissä*, s. 63.

2 Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* p. 31

asked why not. These why-nots, I think, are the core of the study.

The descriptions of the stories were by no means exhaustive and someone else might have given a different account. The reactions of the participants were to these accounts, not to the actual stories, except in few cases where the interviewee recognized the story or had written it herself.

1.4 Choosing the interviewees

The structure of the press is distinctively different in Britain and Finland. The British newspaper industry is dominated by a highly competitive national press, while characteristic of the Finnish press is the strong position of regional newspapers. The leading regional newspaper is often subscribed to by the majority of the households in its core circulation area. For many Finns, their regional paper is the only daily newspaper that they read regularly.

This is why I chose to interview journalists from Finnish regional newspapers as well as those from a leading national daily and from a weekly news magazine. From the British press core, only journalists from national papers were interviewed.

I met 25 journalists in total, 13 in the UK and 12 in Finland. The British interviewees included four editors-in-chief,¹ three editors and five other journalists from the Guardian, the Times, the Daily and the Sunday Telegraph, the Mail on Sunday, the Independent, the Financial Times and the Economist. In Finland, I interviewed four editors-in-chief and eight other journalists from Suomen Kuvalehti, Helsingin Sanomat, Keskisuomalainen and Kaleva. A full list of interviewees is attached at the end of the paper.

I mainly looked for people who were regularly covering religion either as religious affairs correspondents or religion editors, otherwise assigned or writing at least occasionally on their own initiative. In Finland, there is no such title as religious affairs correspondent. Few papers have assigned someone to cover religion and this is always done in addition to other responsibilities. More often, there is an unofficial specialism among the staff writers. In the UK, five national quality papers do have a religious affairs correspondent, though not all of them work on religion

1 Three British editors-in-chief commented on only part of the example stories.

full-time.

In the following chapters, I will present the example stories and describe how the journalist interviewees commented on them.

2 In the public interest or a private matter

2.1 Doing God all over the place

The Faith of Tony Blair
(A cover story in a weekly news magazine)

*“Religion, the former Prime minister believes, is vital to understanding our common future. An exclusive look at his plans.” Inside there are four pages featuring the religious convictions and political intentions of Tony Blair.*¹

This excerpt made British journalists consider the famous line of Tony Blair’s press secretary, Alastair Campbell, who once intervened during an interview with the Prime Minister by saying, ‘We don’t do God’. Campbell later stated that he said this only to get rid of a journalist who was exceeding his allocated time, but this explanation has not been taken seriously.

Blair was prevented from talking about religion not only by his own advisers and his political sense but sometimes also by the media itself. In the address he gave to the nation on television at the beginning of the Iraq war, Blair wanted to say, ‘God bless you’. He was advised not to do so by both his own civil servants and the BBC’s chief political adviser. They told Blair this would not be a British prime ministerial thing to say.² Blair could have overridden the advice but he decided to follow it.

One of the interviewees thought that the reason for ‘not doing God’ might have been a Sunday Telegraph story that angered many people soon after Blair became Prime Minister. Blair had intimated in the interview that, if you are a Christian, you should be a left-winger rather than a conservative:

‘At least that was the way we interpreted what he was saying, that it leads you towards a left-wing rather than right-wing approach. <...> That obviously angered the Tories and lots of right-wing Christians. Because they can be perfectly good Christians and the implication they couldn’t was outrageous. So that was his first proper interview on his religious beliefs which we had in the Sunday Telegraph. <...> It probably led Alistair Campbell afterwards to tell him not to speak about his religious views because they were going to get him into trouble.’³

1 Michael Elliot, Tony Blair’s Leap of Faith, *Time*, 9.6.2008.

2 Interview with Stephen Whittle 10.3. 2009, London.

3 Interview with Jonathan Petre 1.4. 2009, London.

After stepping down, Blair converted to Catholicism, founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and has since been 'doing God all over the place'.¹ He has not only given interviews only to Time magazine and the British up-market quality papers but also written himself in the New Statesman and talked to Attitude, a glossy gay magazine, stating that he disagrees with the Pope on homosexuality.

Most of the British interviewees felt that to sit down with Blair and talk about his faith would make an interesting story for their papers as well. Many said that such a deep engagement in religious practice and religious belief would be an interesting aspect of any remarkable public figure:

*'It's important to know about political leaders and other leaders what makes them tick and if religion could be a major component of that so it's highly relevant to the decisions that they make and the sort of persons they are. So it's the sort of thing we would be anxious to know, ahead of the forthcoming election, where David Cameron is on that thing.'*²

*'Someone like Blair who has a record for saying that he prayed about the Iraq war and sought spiritual guidance, suddenly his religious convictions become more important because that stake is our national security, international security, the lives of thousands of British service personnel and Iraqis et cetera.'*³

*'It would be nice to learn more about how he was influenced in the government and particularly what he thinks is going on now. The thing you really want to hear is him criticizing Gordon Brown. If there is any way to get an interview where he would tell of his faith, perhaps talk about religious freedom or the Catholic Church being sidelined or whatever by Gordon Brown; it would be a great story.'*⁴

Still, writing extensively about the faith of a politician or other leader was not regarded as commonplace in British journalism, especially not by older religion correspondents. The main reason suggested was that very few political leaders would have a strong religious belief and even fewer would be open about it.

*'Practically nobody runs for high office in the United States without talking about faith. Almost nobody who runs for high office in the United Kingdom talks about faith.'*⁵

*'Politicians who parade their religious beliefs are supposed to be weird, sinister or both.'*⁶

Lately, some politicians have been referring to their belief, like the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, speaking about his Presbyterian background and the Liberal leader, Nick Clegg, claiming to be an atheist, and the editors noted that this kind of story has increased slightly in recent years.

1 Expression used by John Micklethwait in interview 17.4.2009, London.

2 Interview with George Pitcher 25.3.2009, London.

3 Interview with Jerome Taylor 24.4.2009, London.

4 Interview with Jonathan Wynne-Jones 15.4.2009, London.

5 Interview with James Harding 28.5.2009, London.

6 Interview with Andrew Brown 4.12.2008, Oxford.

The Finnish interviewees unanimously rated extensive accounts of the religious convictions of politicians as very rare. Young journalists said that they would consider it a big story if the president or prime minister spoke about their religious views. The editors-in-chief, however, were reluctant to make it into a big story. One of them said:

*'Religion does not have such importance in the Nordic societies that a big volume would be justified. But, of course, if a former prime minister wanted to reveal his views about religion, it would be news and, in that sense, it would find a place in the paper.'*¹

An experienced news reporter from the same paper said that he would cover this kind of story but doubted that his paper would.

*'It should be really a remarkable figure. And that volume of coverage, even if (president) Tarja Halonen or (the former prime minister) Paavo Lipponen turned to God and wanted to talk about it, I don't think we would do it with that volume. We would have to tell the news somehow, of course, but it might get the same coverage as (the speaker of parliament) Niinistö's wedding; two columns on the domestic news front page.'*²

All of the Finnish interviewees estimated that heavy-weight politicians would not want to say much about their religious beliefs publically. The older journalists said that, by doing so, a politician could easily be accused of 'fishing for votes'. Three interviewees used this precise Finnish expression, which implies that a politician is not speaking out of conviction but rather to allure voters.

During his term as Finnish President, Martti Ahtisaari was sneered at and criticized for the references he made to God and religion. In particular, his advice to the prayer group of the Finnish parliament to pray for the unemployed during the gloomy recession of the 1990's was seen as distasteful and false Christianity.³ Before being elected President, Ahtisaari had had a long career as a diplomat, spent decades abroad and had possibly lost touch with what was the proper use of religious language in Finland.

In a secular country, where 80 per cent of the population are still members of the Lutheran Church, it is simply the safest bet for a politician to be Lutheran, but not to express any religiosity.⁴ That is what the majority of Finnish voters do themselves.

1 Interview with Janne Virkkunen 7.1.2009, Helsinki.

2 Interview with Paavo Tukkimäki 15.1.2009, Helsinki.

3 For example Matti Kupari, *Pohjalainen* 18.11.1996 and Origo, *Helsingin Sanomat* 15.11.1996.

4 Teemu Taira, Uskonnollisten ilmiöiden uusia muotoja nykyajassa, lecture, Tieteen päivät, 8.1.2009, Helsinki University.

To this rule there is a recent exception, to which several interviewees referred. The outspoken leader of the populist party, True Finns, Timo Soini, has given interviews about his religious views after converting to Catholicism. Many of those interviews have been published prominently in the mainstream papers.

Some journalists noted that the extraordinary convictions of politicians could and even should be reported. In Finnish circumstances, a Roman Catholic politician is already an exception, let alone a Muslim or Hindu one.

*'If it is a very extraordinary conviction, not commonplace in Finland, it might have significance for understanding the person's behaviour. Say, the Prime Minister was a Muslim. That would be important to know because that's a deviation from our homogeneous culture. Normally, we all are just the same Lutherans and a few Orthodox here and there.'*¹

Should religion be a private matter? To this question, the majority of the British and Finnish interviewees gave a similar answer. If religious belief impacts on the decisions that the politicians take and the policies they make, people should know about their faith, even if they are unwilling to talk about it. Many Britons referred to Ruth Kelly, a member of Tony Blair's cabinet and a fervent Roman Catholic, who was alleged to be a member of the Opus Dei. Kelly had to resign over doubts whether she was supporting the government policy with regard to civil partnerships, adoption by same-sex couples and stem cell research:

*'I think voters would want to know whether she was making her mind up on the basis of religious doctrine or whether she was arriving at her views freely or on the basis of some kind of democratic mandate. You can't have a blanket statement that says that religion is always a private matter.'*²

Otherwise, most of the journalists in both countries emphasized everybody's right to keep his or her religious faith, beliefs or practice private, as well as a lack of them. Both the newspapers and the public would not be interested in minor politicians' religious thinking provided that it does not affect important decisions:

*'I think, if they use those views to advance or complement their political careers, then those views become a legitimate matter of inquiry. <...>However, if they choose, as some do, to keep their religious convictions completely private and never do or say anything which draws overtly on those religious convictions, then, no, I don't think they are a legitimate matter of inquiry.'*³

A minority noted that religion cannot simply remain a private matter, as it has a huge effect on the

1 Interview with Tapani Ruokanen 15.1.2009, Helsinki.

2 Interview with Alan Rusbridger, 23.6.2009, London.

3 Interview with Ruth Gledhill 12.6.2009, London.

identities and perceptions of good and bad, not to forget its official position in the structure of the state and school system in both countries:

*'I have had this debate with the Archbishop of Canterbury, where he says that religion is a completely neutral force; we don't try and impose our views on others. And I don't think that is true in this country because you have a large number of bishops in the House of Lords and on issues like assisted suicide and palliative care they have a bloc vote to prevent those things. It is not like the church is sitting here aside from the political debate. <...> I think, as long as you are in the government and you are the established church, you have to be treated the same as anyone else.'*¹

The strongest opposition came from a British religion editor who is also an ordained priest:

*'The idea that religion is something that should be private or is required to be private or works best when it's private is complete tosh. The Abrahamic religion, and amongst it Christianity especially, only works in relationship. It isn't something that is a kind of private self-improvement course. And, if it works in relationship and is a co-operate activity, then clearly it's not a private matter.'*²

2.2 What do people really believe, and does it matter?

Religion does more harm than good – poll (News in a daily newspaper)

According to the paper's own poll, more people think religion causes harm than believe it does good. 82% of those questioned see religion as a cause of division and tension between people. Only 33% describe themselves as "a religious person".³

Only a few Finnish journalists were eager to commission this kind of poll. All except one thought it would be uncommon if a paper conducted its own research to find out what people really believe or how they feel about religion.

All four editors-in-chief gave similar reasons. Faith is considered to be a private matter. It is a less central or interesting issue in Finland. Polls are expensive and those commissioned are mostly about backing the political parties or presidential candidates. Instead, the papers report surveys published by the Finnish Church Research Center and other institutes that conduct them regularly.

One leader writer summarizes:

1 Interview with Alan Rusbridger 23.6.2009, London.

2 Interview with George Pitcher 25.3.2009, London.

3 Julian Glover and Alexandra Topping, Religion does more harm than good – poll, *Guardian* 23.12.2006.

*'There is not so much tension or heat around this subject in Finland, at least not so far. So I don't know if we would need to do this. The results might be pretty predictable. On the other hand, the results of party polls are pretty predictable, too. Maybe we have just not noticed that there could be something interesting to find out. There's no tradition of doing it. And one reason certainly is that we get these surveys from two instances anyway.'*¹

The result of this particular example poll did surprise most of the Finns though, at least until they were told that it had been conducted in the UK, not in Finland.

*'That leaves me with many questions; what has been asked and, above all, who. I find the result quite exceptional.'*²

*'Would be interesting to see how that survey was done. The outcome is so radically different from all that I have seen in any research.'*³

Many expressed doubts on the adequacy of surveys on faith issues generally and the reliability of this poll particularly:

*'You can't ask if religion does more harm than good. It's like asking if love does more harm than good or if sex does more harm than good.'*⁴

*'I think this poll is pretty much nonsense. How can you measure by a survey if somebody believes in God—yes or no? I would think it over many times. Can you get anything out of this kind of subject by a poll? Even if I was doing that as an academic, I wouldn't try to collect any quantitative data; I would rather do ten profound interviews.'*⁵

One reporter thought that the blunt question about the harm that religion does might be too daring for his paper, which has a large number of religious people among its readership.⁶ The Britons were not amazed by the result. A reporter for the Mail on Sunday said that the poll would not receive much coverage in his paper as the result was not that surprising.⁷ Otherwise, the British journalists were open to this kind of approach. Most of them thought that their paper would be interested in polling faith issues. A poll like this would make a talking point because it is guaranteed to divide opinion. It could be a good way to get a story at Christmas or Easter when there is no other news and it would create a lot of spin off stories as well. Quite right—this story was published by the Guardian the day before Christmas Eve.

1 Interview with Pekka Mikkola 12.1.2009, Oulu.

2 Interview with Aino Suhola 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä.

3 Interview with Paavo Tukkimäki 15.1.2009, Helsinki.

4 Interview with Anna-Stina Nykänen 5.1.2009, Helsinki.

5 Interview with Jari Lindholm 7.1.2009, Helsinki.

6 Interview with Jarno Mällinen 12.1.2009, Oulu.

7 Interview with Jonathan Petre 1.4.2009, London.

The Britons found the questions in the poll interesting also for other reasons, which were connected with identity and Islam:

*'The interest in religion, the concern and anxieties about it have increased a lot in the last ten years, largely because of Muslim immigration, the rise of Islamism, of radical Islamism, which has a violent side. And the general awareness that religion can be a murderous force within our societies <...> Interest in religion is now much greater than it was. And so questions about what you believe in, how strongly you believe in it, are very common.'*¹

*'One of the things coming back in this country at the moment because of Islam and other stuff is the question of religion and Britishness. Where does religion fit into this?'*²

The British interviewees also noted that we do not actually know what people really believe. Some suggested that we would get more interesting results if we were able to compare the results internationally, to put the answers in context or in juxtaposition with other information.

*'If I had 5000 quid to spare, I could do a nice, interesting poll. There are lots of interesting questions, lots of interesting things to find out. How people believe, what they believe. What they mean when they say they believe something. <...> It is not done much because what you find out doesn't fit any templates. You know, it turns out the people say we believe in science but they have no idea what the science is. Or we don't believe in God but we believe in ghosts. You get really whacky results. A recent poll showed that something like 12 percent of self-described atheists pray. That's the kind of detail that makes it interesting and, of course, it really pisses off everybody who has got nice big theories.'*³

*'You could have, I'm just inventing, 70 percent of the country saying they are Catholic and then 40 percent saying, would you commit adultery, yes. Or people who claim they are evangelical Christians and then you ask basic questions about the Bible and they don't know the answers.'*⁴

One British religious affairs correspondent said that the job could be done without polling:

*'We would do it through trying to talk to as many people as possible and building contacts with various religious communities. <...> The covering religious beat is precisely that, what the people believe. What the Church or the religious hierarchy are telling you to believe is often very different from what the people do believe. You are only doing half the job if you are just reporting what the leadership dictates rather than the feeling of the laity.'*⁵

1 Interview with John Lloyd 11.3.2009, Oxford.

2 Interview with Andrew Brown 4.12.2008, Oxford.

3 Interview with Andrew Brown 4.12.2008, Oxford.

4 Interview with John Micklethwait, 17.4.2009, London.

5 Interview with Jerome Taylor 24.4.2009, London.

2.3 No churchy stories for reticent Britons

Powerful hymn

(One and half page feature story in a newspaper's weekend section)

*'By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered
and confidently waiting come what may.*

*She never forgets the feeling of 800 people singing after the shooting this hymn, written by
Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Gestapo prison in 1944.'*

*The story presents experiences and opinions of hymns. The interviewees include an opera singer,
an organist, a hymn poet, a composer and a priest. One of them says: 'The hymns belong
primarily to service. They are not for expressing someone's personal emotions or ambiance. The
hymns are meant to be shared. They unify. They are sober and always permeated by the Word.'*¹

The British interviewees almost unanimously stated that this story would not receive coverage in their papers. Stories like this would rather be found in Church papers. The three interviewees from the Times said that the piece would suit their weekly faith page but, otherwise, the excerpt was regarded as too 'esoteric' and 'churchy'—even by the religion specialists of the Telegraph, which claims to have the highest proportion of churchgoers among its readership. The British readers were considered to be too reticent, taciturn and reserved about spiritual issues to like this kind of writing.

*'I think that's more esoteric actually. It's a part of the British character, a part of the English character being fairly taciturn, reserved about matters of spirituality and stuff. So I think, I would more usually see that in the Church Times Alfa section than I would in a paper like ours.'*²

*'Hymns I guess, many times, are pretty interesting because our traditional readership, they tend to be in their 50s and 60s and a high proportion of churchgoers read the Telegraph. But I couldn't imagine a story like that getting into paper. It's just too...too churchy.'*³

Most Britons agreed that covering spiritual life and experiences is uncommon in British journalism

*'It's the sort of thing that religious people do because they talk about their experiences and their background—it's not something that non-religious people tend to do. So, occasionally, you get that sort of thing but there is a sort of British reticence about proclaiming conversion experiences and that sort of thing.'*⁴

Three things can help spirituality to get coverage in the papers: celebrities, quirkiness and Christmas.

'If you were to do, we asked 15 celebrities what their favourite hymns were, yeah, sure you would

1 Satu Kreivi-Palosaari, Virsi on voimakas tunteiden tulkki, *Viikko-Kaleva* 23.12.2007.

2 Interview with George Pitcher 25.3.2009, London.

3 Interview with Jonathan Wynne-Jones 15.4.2009, London.

4 Interview with Stephen Bates 16.3.2009, London.

*get that in the paper. Couldn't go something about real people.'*¹

*'Perhaps it may sound a bit coy but a quirky element of spirituality makes it much more interesting to read. That sounds like it could appear in a tablet like the Catholic Herald or in a religious newspaper essentially. But whether that appeals to the majority of our readers as well, I doubt it.'*²

*'About a decade ago, we had the Toronto blessing and those people were speaking in tongues and that kind of thing. When it happens we write about it but we don't manufacture it when it's not happening. And not just Christian communities; in other communities too, every now and then in a Hindu community, you get something happening. A statue started emitting milk, I think, a few years ago and we wrote quite a lot about it. We took it seriously.'*³

Easter and Christmas can change everything, even for the Economist, which would not print most of the stories used as examples in this study:

*I can sort of imagine us doing it as a Christmas piece. You know, what's the meaning of hymns. <...> We looked at the angels last year and you can just do sort of interesting, looking into more social, it's a Christmas tradition. There's a less newsy feel to it, so that may be.'*⁴

Finnish papers are no different in this respect. This particular example story would not have received such coverage in Kaleva where it was published, were it not the day before Christmas, said the editor-in-chief of the paper.⁵ Half of the Finnish interviewees also said that the story would be better placed in a religious paper and that they would feel uncomfortable about writing something like this. A staff writer specialized in religion from Helsingin Sanomat commented:

*I would rather like to read this in some other paper, in a Christian paper. It's so deep in the Lutheran faith; there is so much spiritual experience in it. Also those who are not religious or belong to some other religious community should be able to read our paper. This story takes as a given fact that God exists. The perspective is so strongly inside the faith that you get the feeling of reading a sermon. I can get a nice feeling from it but it doesn't fit our paper.'*⁶

The editor-in-chief from the same paper confirms:

*'That's nearly confessional and we don't do that type of journalism. If it was written in another way, not so religious, then doing hymns and what they mean to people would be quite normal journalism.'*⁷

Finnish regional papers maintain less distance from the Lutheran faith, which sometimes proves a headache to their journalists. A young, Mid-Finland reporter stated that one of the most difficult

1 Interview with Andrew Brown 4.12.2008, Oxford.

2 Interview with Jerome Taylor 24.4.2009, London.

3 Interview with Ruth Gledhill 12.6.2009, London.

4 Interview with John Micklethwait 17.4.2009, London.

5 Interview with Risto Uimonen, 29.12.2008, Espoo.

6 Interview with Anna-Stina Nykänen 5.1.2009, Helsinki.

7 Interview with Janne Virkkunen 7.1.2009, Helsinki.

stories for him ever was when he was sent to report on a family who were about to leave for Peru to work there as missionaries. They were going because the young mother had had a godly vision about the project:

*'I was struggling and struggling to decide how to present those irrational features. <...>Afterwards, the story was criticized by one guy, who was pretty secular if not atheist, who asked why we have this kind of Watchtower story in the paper. I had reported their religious experience seriously and there was talk about prophecies and stuff like that. I had let, at least I thought I had let, the source talk and left it to the readers to decide whether those people were all nuts or something else.'*¹

He thought that doing the same again might be easier now because he has already done the thinking once. Several interviewees from Finnish regional papers touched on similar problems when they referred to the annual gatherings of the traditional Christian revivalist movements. At these events, tens of thousands of people come together to listen to sermons and sing hymns for a few days during the summer holidays. The papers regularly report these happenings, particularly when they take place in their circulation area. The sheer size of the events is such that they can't be ignored. Still, the papers mostly avoid reporting on the spiritual content of those festivals.

The young regional paper's reporter quoted above said that religious talk is nearly taboo in the mainstream papers:

*'When we have a cultural event or rock concert here, we write about the artistic and musical content, but, when we have a religious event, we write about how many people attend and how much sales increase in nearby shops and how many tents there are and how many people are working at the festival. We make it into the technical-rational news and pay less attention to faith issues.'*²

He would be more interested in covering the sermons:

'I think it's too easy to call every chemistry and grocery store around the festival area and ask if they have sold out of condoms. We avoid faith too much. It would be great if one could tell what they are preaching there, what kind of opinions they have and what current themes are surfacing. The difficulty, of course, is that, in those religious speeches, the essential message is always pretty much the same. It's not easy to write a fresh headline: We are salvaged only through faith. But if one could find something current or show in a concrete way how it affects their life, then it would be interesting.'

The reason given for this avoidance was that non-religious people should also be able to find something interesting in the stories. The assumption is they are not the least interested in what is

1 Interview with Tero Karjalainen 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä.

2 Interview with Tero Karjalainen 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä.

preached at those festivals.

Says the young advocate of covering the sermons:

'Possibly the readers are so secular that they can't stand any religious talk in the paper but I think it's pretty dull.'

However, new age and other kinds of alternative spirituality have made their way into the media. In the last ten years, several British papers have started sections with names like Body and Soul, which look for the meaning of life through different belief systems and lifestyles.

These phenomena have interested the Finnish papers as well. Some Finnish interviewees felt that reporting on them has also lowered the bar for the coverage of traditional religiousness and spirituality, which has become more common than it used to be:

*'It has been surprisingly common lately. There was a period when it wasn't. Before I left for the Parliament in 1991, I noticed that all that sort of stories were given to me. They couldn't find people to do them. Maybe others were afraid that they would be labeled as believers or something. Then spirituality started kind of extending; all this new age stuff and other nonsense came and now it is suddenly sexy. All of the extremes seem to interest the papers. When the Nokia-mission started, it got huge hype. And the Juice hymn-singing in Konnevesi got enormous media coverage.'*¹

*'The mainstream media is taking a slightly more positive attitude towards religious and spiritual affairs. The total negation has disappeared that used to be there.'*²

1 Interview with Aino Suhola 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä.

2 Interview with Pekka Mervola 16.1.2009, Jyväskylä.

3 Religion as a social affair

3.1 Newsy news

Prisons and religion

(Extensive news story in a Sunday newspaper)

'Faith groups spreading the word on the wings: Religious organizations working in British jails claim spectacular success in cutting rates of reoffending. The government wants to expand their role – but critics believe that, with entire blocks now under the control of some faith groups, tensions within prison are bound to grow.'

*The paper is reporting that Christian organizations claim success in converting prisoners, and presents a former prisoner who found Jesus in jail, gave up drugs and started life afresh. But prison experts are concerned at the unequal treatment when a more comfortable existence is provided for those who are willing to submit to the evangelizing process. One of them says: 'These groups are targeting what is literally a captive audience and exploiting very vulnerable people when they are at their lowest.'*¹

This story got British and Finnish interviewees equally excited. Nearly everybody wanted to do the story; the reporters were certain to get it into the paper and editors said that they would definitely publish. Exceptions were the Mail on Sunday and the Financial Times. They would need even more drama or a stronger row to publish the story. Otherwise, the journalists thought that this was pretty big news, with immediate social and political implications.² For some of them, the most interesting aspect was the prospect that religion could have a real potential for good in a very public way. Two British and two Finnish journalists stressed that there is a reason to be happy if religion makes miserable lives better:

*'Does religion help prisoners not to reoffend? This is a very interesting question because we know that nothing else much helps. So I think that's an example of a good story that we should be doing. <...> And, if it is really the case, as some religious groups believe, that you can go into prison and change the heart of a murderer or thief so that he don't do it again, that's fantastic.'*³

At the same time, they found the critical viewpoint important. For most of the interviewees, both British and Finnish, the new life of the prisoners was not news but rather a cliché, something that religious groups have claimed for centuries, and that should be taken with a pinch of salt.

1 Jamie Doward, Prisons and religion, *The Observer*, 26.10.2008.

2 John Micklethwait, Janne Virkkunen.

3 Andrew Brown.

A Finnish priest and editor-in-chief commented:

*'It's so much used in propaganda, and many papers want to stay away from that. I mean here religious propaganda.'*¹

The journalists are generally wary of being used as mediators for the proselytizing message:

*'I can remember a young press officer saying to me: Do you believe it's your job to tell the good news of Jesus? And I said no, that's absolutely the last thing I'm supposed to do. I'm not here to proselytize for religion; it's your job, not my job. I think that there is a certain degree of religious opinion which thought that, because on their own terms, they are so self evidently good, the coverage should reflect that image of themselves and that, of course, is not what journalism should be about at all.'*²

In the example story on faith in prisons, the news for the majority of interviewees was the government's intention to expand the role of the religious organizations:

*'If the government wanted to expand the role of some proselytizing groups in prisons, I think in a country like Britain, it would be an explosive story. If you look at the controversy over something like faith schools, then that in the prisons would be something. If the government is expanding Christian proselytizing groups in prison, would it do the same for other faiths, particularly Islam, Judaism? There would be a massive outcry. I mean there are ministers and imams in our prisons now who do very good work but also there is a lot of fear about the spread of Islamic radicalism within prisons. So yeah, it would be a very interesting story and I think the readers would be interested as well.'*³

*'If something like that were happening in Finland, we would probably adopt kind of a critical attitude and ask what are the rights and freedoms of these people. That kind of criticism is just what we think is our job. And probably it would be easier to write from that point of view. <...>It's hard to imagine that we would have a story that said that religion works. We would certainly be skeptical about that. Or then we would start analyzing what is behind their success, what they can do right and how it could be adapted to non-religious social work. What on earth have they invented? Certainly it would be difficult to say, OK, let's give the job to them, faith solves the problem. I can't imagine that.'*⁴

In the end, what made this example fascinating and 'definitely a story' for the interviewees was the combination of controversial elements:

'You got in there a combination of government, crime and faith groups. You know, as a combination, it works well as a good story. And also it has got an element of surprise. Many people would read it and be kind of baffled. You know, the idea almost seems incongruous, the idea of this kind of

1 Tapani Ruokanen.

2 Stephen Bates.

3 Jerome Taylor.

4 Anna-Stina Nykänen.

*hardened criminals being softened by some religious cause.*¹

The critics who accuse journalism of marginalizing religion often say that religion appears in the news only when there are scandals in the church. Is it commonplace that faith makes the news and is seen as an important social or political issue? Most Finns answered no, whereas most Britons said yes:

*'I think we have in Finland a very homogeneous journalistic culture and also the way of treating religious affairs is very homogeneous. We push them into the background and regard them as less newsworthy. And we think that, basically, they don't belong to the papers at all.'*²

Two reasons were offered for the lack of religion news: the nature of religion and the slow pace at which things happen in it, in comparison to the rhythm and needs of the news media:

*'Now if you think of classical news, it usually tells you that something is happening somewhere. And, in religion, not much happens really. Religion is not newsworthy in this classical sense. It has more to do with culture and being a human. A newspaper is mostly about news and religion is not at the centre of news business. It can be at the centre in other kinds of writing, in the weekend section and that kind of stories. It is an integral part of our content; we have the Word of the day, a short excerpt from the Bible or a thought, every day in the paper.'*³

*'So, if you are running a newspaper, it's now 3.30. I'm thinking, what we're gonna do for the front page, in the leader columns, how the run of pages is going to work tomorrow. And it may be that today the story is: should the Church of England be aligned to the state or should we disestablish the Church of England? And the timetable for that story is somewhere between 15 and 200 years. And a daily newspaper or a 24 hours news channel or a blog have a need for news that works on an immediate basis.'*⁴

Still, the latter speaker thought that religion is absolutely newsworthy.

3.2 Sexy sex

Deny your faith or deny yourself
(A cover story of a weekly news magazine)

'Being a homosexual if not a sin but practicing homo sex is, says the Laestadian sect. A 22-year old had to make a hard choice: the community or love.'

The story consists of eight pages intimately featuring the life and thoughts of a young man who is struggling with his faith and homosexuality. He would like to stay in his faith community but, to

1 Jonathan Wynne-Jones

2 Risto Uimonen.

3 Pekka Mervola

4 James Harding

*do so, he would have to hide his sexual orientation and lie to his friends and family. Or renounce love.*¹

Both the British and Finnish interviewees noted that the churches' problems with homosexuality have been extensively covered in the press in recent years. The questions of same-sex marriage and homosexual priests divide Christian communities all over the world and impact on their external relations as well as their internal political battles:

*'In fact I wrote a book about it. We covered it from a sort of secular political perspective because that was where it had the widest impact on the stands of, particularly, the Anglican Church where there has been a particular crisis for five or six years. And, in the course of that, I wrote on a number of occasions about people wrestling with the sort of dilemmas you've been talking about.'*²

Many Britons said that these questions have actually received disproportionate coverage. One reason suggested was the journalistic tradition of covering institutions rather than religion in the broader sense:

*'Those are easy stories to cover in a sense. I think that's why the battle over gay priests is such a prominent story to write because it's about the established Church and it's about high profile battles between people. It's much harder to get at more informal aspect of belief which don't necessarily express themselves through the old structures of churches.'*³

The interviewees said it is common to personalize these issues by relating them directly to their effect on individuals. However, the example story was seen as exceptionally profound and nuanced:

*'It's a fascinating human interest story. It's got the battle that is still going on in the Church between those who say it's OK to be homosexual and to be a vicar and whatever, and the conservative evangelicals who say that's not acceptable. So you get a flavour of that. And then you see the person's inner turmoil and anguish stuff.'*⁴

*'Normally, the angle would be: why is he such an idiot as to believe this stuff at all, why can't he just step out into the bright. I think newspapers are bad at dealing with the tragedy and I think that religion, when it's interesting, is about dealing with tragedy.'*⁵

In both countries, some journalists had reservations about publishing this story because of the preferences of their readership. The young religious affairs correspondent of the Sunday Telegraph said that the example was a great human interest story but ended up doubting whether his editor would go along with it.

1 Elina Järvinen, Kiellä uskosi tai kiellä itsesi, *Suomen Kuvalehti* 14.12.2007.

2 Stephen Bates.

3 Alan Rusbridger.

4 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

5 Andrew Brown.

*'I'd definitely suggest it to my news editor. The only thing, it would be interesting to see what the Telegraph did. <...> With a bit of an older readership than, say, the Guardian, I think a lot of readers don't particularly like reading stories that have to do with sex. I don't know; that might be only my gut instinct.'*¹

The religion editor of the Telegraph confirmed that this gut instinct might be right:

*'I find it interesting. I think the original question regarding faith and one's own identity is an important part of being a priest. But I don't think that the Telegraph is likely to get anybody to work on that. The Telegraph has to be conscious that its readership is probably fairly conservative when it comes to social issues, as it would see matters of sexuality and so on. <...> We are increasingly thinking anyway that people, newspaper readers, are heartily sick of arguments about sexuality and gender and the Church.'*²

Journalist from Finnish regional papers said that this story might not have been covered in earlier years and could still be considered carefully because there is a large number of Laestadians among their readerships. They thought that it would also be difficult to find anybody who would be open about this kind of experience:

*'I think that could be our story now. Some years ago, it might not have got into the paper. And I think we would still need to discuss it.'*³

*'I'm afraid we would beware of Laestadians, be too careful and give the same coverage to some Laestadian guru in the story. The Laestadians and homosexuality, that combination would not easily get that coverage.'*⁴

However, the editors-in-chief confirmed that they would publish a story with this theme and that they have effectively done so.

All in all, some journalists noted that sex is selling a religion story far more often than preventing it from being sold:

*'I think that would undoubtedly be a story in this country because, after all, it's got sex in it and almost all religious stories that get printed have sex in one way or another.'*⁵

3.3 An improbable investigation

1 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

2 George Pitcher.

3 Aino Suhola.

4 Jarno Mällinen.

5 Andrew Brown.

Radical believers

(A two broadsheet page feature in a newspaper's Sunday section)

'The 1960's were as stormy for religious students as they were for leftists. Some of them campaigned for Biafra; others converted secondary school pupils and smuggled Bibles to the Soviet Union.'

The story is based on interviews with people who are now in established positions in the Church or elsewhere in society. Forty years ago, as young men, some of them were converting the youth and waiting for the end of the world. One of them says: 'Our message was: if you don't convert, you are going to hell. Anguish was a good thing. It made people turn to God.' He says he is not ashamed of the fundamentalism of his youth. He grew out of it along with age and his studies.¹

This was recognized by Finnish journalists as a story that had required a huge amount of work and a lot of expertise on religion and history. Few journalists would have a hunch about this kind of story being out there. The end product is the writer's own synthesis of the religious trends of that era. All of this makes it a rare story in Finnish journalism, though most of the interviewees found it interesting and thought that their papers would be happy to publish it:

'You would need a huge amount of understanding of both theology and history. It's not quite enough that you find those guys and make them talk.'²

'One reason is that journalists don't know this kind of people. <...> Journalists' knowledge of the Church and religion is not too good, on average. There are people who know a lot, but others don't and they are not eager to do religion. They feel they are in unknown waters. Religion is a sensible and difficult area and people don't want to go outside their comfort zone'.³

'It's not easy to study these kind of phenomena if you are not an insider.'⁴

The British interviewees were slightly puzzled by the story. Many of them doubted that this would be a story for their papers, though they were personally interested in it. One reason given for this was that papers put emphasis on contemporary religious trends rather than on history:

'We would certainly look if people were now trying to smuggle bibles to Saudi-Arabia.'⁵

'Sounds interesting. Sounds like it would take real investigative time to do something like that. I'm not sure many national newspapers would devote the time. It's a kind of pro-Church story, kind of Christian.'⁶

According to one interviewee, the British mainstream papers would simply not give space to people

1 Anna-Stina Nykänen, Radikaalit uskovaiset, *Helsingin Sanomat* 12.10.2009.

2 Jari Lindholm.

3 Pekka Mikkola.

4 Tapani Ruokanen.

5 John Micklethwait.

6 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

who had, in their youth, been preaching the end of the world:

*'They are not part of the same society as the kind of metropolitan reader at whom newspapers are aimed. <...> They just wouldn't give it space. It is not a matter of how the story would be treated if it were treated; it's if I went to the news desk and said, hey, this is an interesting feature, they say no.'*¹

A minority thought that it could be exciting news if a senior person of the Church revealed that he had smuggled Bibles in his youth:

*'That would be news for me if I hear senior people—did you say from the Church?—telling things like that. That would be news for me. So that's part of the reason. It's definitely not commonplace.'*²

A few commented that it would be interesting to know how the thinking of religious leaders has evolved over time or whether this kind of story could shed light on fundamentalism, where it stems from and where it takes people:

*'I don't think we have such a history from the 60's of religious radicalism. In the 60's, it was more the other way; in fact, we had a lot of clergy and people saying that God didn't exist, you know. It could be very liberal and not being fundamentalist. That would be amusing if some of them had in later life become fundamentalists but I don't think they have. <...> Especially in Islam, there is a lot of fundamentalism around. It would be very interesting in 15 or 20 years' time to see what happened to some fundamentalist Muslims who have been making the headlines here. I mean that's a story for the future.'*³

1 Andrew Brown.

2 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

3 Ruth Gledhill.

4 Critical of faith

4.1 My opinion but too harsh words

Irresponsible backwardness
(An editorial of a daily newspaper)

The editorial notes a statement by a Catholic cardinal made in a television documentary that the HIV virus can penetrate condoms. The editorial claims that this is against all scientific evidence and states that the Catholic Church is extremely reactionary, busy with witch quackery and irresponsibly consolidating superstitious beliefs about AIDS. This in unforgivable negligence, when at least 20 million people have died of AIDS.¹

Every interviewee said that this would be a subject for an editorial in their paper and that their paper would adopt the same stance as the example leader. However, the majority of Finns said that they and their papers would choose a more moderate style:

*'We aim to use relatively moderate language. <...> You should be able to say the same thing in a more sober style.'*²

*'The subject, yes, but I don't think Kaleva would use words like 'witch quackery' and 'extreme reactionism'. It wouldn't give such a radical judgement of religion. That's how it is here in the North. Better have enemies far away and permanent subscribers in the neighbourhood. We have more religious readers than papers in the South.'*³

Even a reporter from the very newspaper in which this editorial was published did not think his paper would use such harsh language:

*'The content yes, but those sorts of expressions are not usual in our editorials. If it is from our paper, it's a pretty rare example.'*⁴

Funnily, the journalists from some other papers did suggest that precisely this kind of editorial could be found in Helsingin Sanomat. A former leader writer of the paper, now the retiring editor-in-chief of Kaleva, said that one might read such a leader in Helsingin Sanomat, in the communist newspaper, Kansan Uutiset, or in the green party organ, Vihreä Lanka.

1 Vastuutonta taantumuksellisuutta, *Helsingin Sanomat* 14.10.2003.

2 Risto Uimonen.

3 Jarno Mällinen.

4 Paavo Tukkimäki.

Those who made no objections to the style were the editor-in-chief of Helsingin Sanomat and two openly religious journalists, the editor-in-chief of the weekly newsmagazine Suomen Kuvalehti, and a reporter from Keski-Suomi. The latter says:

*'I might write like that. I've become bolder as I've grown older. I think that was well written, I would be happy if I could do the same. It's courageous and justified and a little bit over the top and that's why readers will not just say amen but they will begin to think. One priest, actually it was Arto Köykkä, said that the best sermon is an unfinished sermon because the audience have to finish it themselves. You should always leave your readers some space to fill in or exaggerate a little so that they will be aroused to argue against you.'*¹

She also said that hard criticism of any Christian church is not commonplace in Finnish journalism:

'Religion is an area where we are terribly careful, especially in these leaders and editorials. We categorically avoid affronting any church or faith community. It's interesting because you can attack a political party. Maybe faith is so personal that we want to respect it more. But this editorial is critical of a church, of an institution and, there, I think it's OK to be harsh.'

The editor-in-chief of Suomen Kuvalehti, also an ordained priest, agreed:

*'I think the press has a pretty soft attitude. In the debates on women priests and homosexuals, it has been more critical but we have really pretty conforming publicity, altogether, in relation to our own churches and religious phenomena on the whole. There was much more criticism in the 1970's.'*²

Still, half of the Finns said that it is commonplace to criticize the Church with harsh words. The Catholic Church was seen as an easy target because there are so few Catholics in Finland, but the Finnish Lutheran Church has also been lambasted for its slow progress in safeguarding the equal rights of women priests and homosexuals.

A few noted that not all the Catholics are as stupid as this cardinal and that it would be worth trying to understand why the Catholic Church has adopted this kind of policy in respect to the use of condoms. Two British journalists also said that the Catholic Church is somewhat more subtle in its policies than the papers tend to reveal.

None of the Britons flinched from the wording of this editorial. They all said that this kind of harsh criticism is common in any British newspaper whenever the Church deserves it:

'We are fairly supportive of religion but when there is a blatant case of a religious leader saying something that is clearly outrageous then, you know, we never shy away from criticizing; we are not

1 Aino Suhola.

2 Tapani Ruokanen.

*biased. When Rowan Williams says something ridiculous, we criticize him in the paper. The Telegraph is not afraid to kind of challenge people. The thing that most recently can highlight this is the case of the British bishop who's living in Argentina and who was a holocaust denier. And the Pope was absolutely lambasted over that, and quite rightly, for failing to kind of check the people who he's trying to bring back to the Catholic Church. A massive mistake and we were quite outspoken.'*¹

*'Certainly, I guess, some of the more left-wing liberal newspapers would have perhaps a slightly more critical approach towards the Christian hierarchy, not necessarily Christianity but the various hierarchies that govern the different denominations. Having said that, most newspapers, even right-wing newspapers with quite a strong religious readership, also are pretty happy to give a proper bashing to the Anglican Church when they do something that is kind of controversial or divisive. I don't think papers are uncritical but some papers are more critical than the others.'*²

Even the editor-in-chief of the Economist and contributing editor of the Financial Times said that this harsh criticism would have a place in their papers, which are famously high-brow, sober publications:

*'If the Church enters politics, you can attack it. <...> And it was not just politics; he's trying to enter science as well.'*³

*'Do you mean, if it could be an editorial in the FT? Yes, it could be because, as the excerpt you read says, the stakes are very high. I mean, 20 million is a lot of people.'*⁴

4.2 The tradition of blunt criticism

Sex and blessing

(A column in a weekly news magazine)

The columnist writes about believers who are demanding the resignation of a priest because she has blessed the registered partnership of a lesbian couple.

'I can't take it any more. I'm disgusted. <...> I stop understanding these stone-hearted people going around with open charters from God. <...> What gives these sexual racists the right to judge, to deny even blessing, wishing well?'

*The writer also calls these people impudent and grotesquely righteous and says that their idea of man is frightening.'*⁵

All of the British interviewees said that this kind of strongly worded criticism of common believers

1 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

2 Jerome Taylor.

3 John Micklethwait.

4 John Lloyd.

5 Risto Lindstedt, Seksiä ja siunausta, *Suomen Kuvalehti* 3.2.2008.

is commonplace in the British press. Most Finns said that it's rare in Finland. The Finns also reacted strongly against the style of the example column:

*'I don't think this column would be valued in our paper. <...> It's so insolent and defamatory. You can express your opinion and disapproval in a less offensive way than saying you are disgusted. <...> When I meet people with whom I totally disagree, I'm also interested to find out why they think that way and what their logic is and how I could make them change their minds. But just to start spitting on them, that is out of the question.'*¹

*'I would very much hesitate to judge anybody. Even if I thought somebody's conviction was nuts and appalling, I wouldn't dare to go and say publicly that your conviction is nuts. I think the others would hesitate, too, when it's about personal faith. The example of the Catholic Church was a far easier one; it's easier to be bold about that than about somebody's personal conviction. Even when I can't in any way understand that conviction.'*²

One of the two regional newspapers' editors-in-chief said that he would not publish this. The other said that he would possibly publish it but did not think that any of his staff would write like this:

*'That's not far from obscene. The argumentation is as bad as that which it is criticizing. I don't think that anybody in Kaleva would come with a column using that kind of language. <...> It's about the journalistic culture of the paper, the common understanding of what is good and bad journalism. During my term as editor-in-chief, there has been a notion that too fierce criticism is counterproductive. It's not convincing. Criticism has to be skillful, intelligent, smart. However, hard criticism is not forbidden in Kaleva. I write pretty briskly myself. But I think that this criticism exceeds the limits of good taste.'*³

*'I wouldn't publish this as a column, I could publish it as a reader's letter. <...> It's not the role of the paper to adopt so strong a stance.'*⁴

The British journalists said that this is exactly what the papers do: take strong stances and express brisk criticism:

*'We don't believe that religious views have any more right to protection from criticism than any other views. <...> English, British journalism has a long tradition of blunt criticism.'*⁵

*'British newspapers are quite strongly polemical, more than most journalism cultures. That's because there are many national newspapers; they compete every day with each other and they have different political viewpoints. So they tend to, not be very extreme but they tend to be strongly worded in order to attract attention and attract readers. So, yes, it's quite common for very strong opinions to be voiced, on religion among everything else.'*⁶

1 Anna-Stina Nykänen.

2 Aino Suhola.

3 Risto Uimonen.

4 Pekka Mervola.

5 Stephen Bates.

6 John Lloyd.

*'Yes, to bash people who are religious, of course (it's commonplace) – if you look at the coverage of Sarah Palin. This would not come so much around gay marriage today but it would come in a very serious way around intelligent design and evolution and Darwin.'*¹

However, in this case, many Britons said that they wouldn't use this kind of style and language themselves. Some papers would not publish it either.

The editor of the Economist says:

*'We are supporters of gay marriage but we don't caricature people who oppose it. So the language doesn't sound like that that we would use. But the issue, yes.'*²

The religion editor of the right-wing Telegraph commented:

*'That version of that view wouldn't be expressed by us. I think it would probably be more temperate and considered and discreet. <...> I'm sympathetic with the substance but stylistically I have to take a different approach because it's taking account of those people I've referred to earlier, those Middle England, Church of England Anglicans and so on, who are either fed up with arguments about sexuality or same sex unions or civil partnership or something. Or frankly would blush at the whole issue, you know. So we got to take that into account with our readers.'*³

A young religious affairs correspondent from the left-wing Independent would not choose this style either, though he says that he agrees with the premises:

*'I doubt that being overtly offensive in a column is the right way to go about trying to change opinions. I mean, if you're a columnist and you're writing this because you believe they are wrong and you would like people to think differently, then I think there are much better ways of persuading them to do so. It's really not good enough just to say that religious people who are opposed to gay marriage or civil partnerships are wrong, full stop.'*⁴

The three journalists from the Guardian said that this kind of column could well be published in their paper:

*'We have been very critical of, frankly, the intolerance and bigotry that many so-called Christians show.'*⁵

'My view is you have to respect atheists as well. I can understand the Dawkins position, that says religion is a cause of terrible harm in the world and you know we come back to the last question of faith based politics. If you have a president who stops all stem cell research because he has a religious belief about the embryo, I can perfectly understand people getting extremely angry about it or getting extremely angry about the Catholic Church's attitude to condoms in Africa. So I

1 James Harding.

2 John Micklethwait.

3 George Pitcher.

4 Jerome Taylor.

5 Stephen Bates.

wouldn't want to, if somebody wanted to write a column for the Guardian, extremely hostile to the people who hold this kind of beliefs, I wouldn't try and stop that.¹

The Mail on Sunday could publish it too, said a reporter from that paper, who often covers religion and used to work as a religious affairs correspondent for the Daily Telegraph:

*'You see that sort of view expressed; you see both views expressed in people's columns. You see pro-gay views and anti-gay and they can both appear in our paper. We are probably pretty relaxed about the gay themes in the Mail on Sunday. I suppose what people don't like is political correctness. <...> So it's a matter of toleration on both points. But columnists can write what they like.'*²

4.3 It doesn't make sense, does it?

There is no God

(An episode in a current TV show of the public broadcaster)

The introductory text in the programme information states: 'Belief in God still affects our everyday life and legislation. Why is an incoherent, racist and illogical book, written by an ancient tribe from desert, still today used as a guideline? The high status of religion must be abolished'.

*The core dogma of Christianity is described in the programme as follows: 'Father (God) is angry with his children. He can forgive them only if he first kills his own son. This doesn't make any sense, does it?'*³

The name of the Finnish TV show, of which the example was an episode, could be translated as 'Politically Incorrect Tuomas Enbuske', where Tuomas Enbuske is the name of the presenter. According to the Britons, airing this kind of thinking is not considered politically incorrect in the British media.

*'Again, it comes from that tradition of being very strongly polemical, putting your point of view, having the right to say what you want. I think almost no paper would regard that as politically incorrect.'*⁴

It is rather a commonplace story in British journalism, the interviewees said. Richard Dawkins gets a lot of coverage for his atheist ideas every time he publishes a book. Moreover, in the last couple of years, there has been whole series of books, for example from Christopher Hitchens and Sam

1 Alan Rusbridger.

2 Jonathan Peter.

3 Jumalaa ei ole, episode of the TV show, Epäkorrektia Tuomas Enbuske, Yle 1, 22.12.2008.

4 John Lloyd.

Harris, arguing that religion is not only stupid but also harmful to humanity and, in most cases, to the individual too.

These books have been covered in the Finnish press as well, but, according to the Finnish interviewees, a thorough questioning of the rationality and status of religion is still rare in the media.¹ Both the Finnish and British journalists noted that this discourse is far more prevalent on the Internet; for example, on the papers' own comment websites. According to a Finnish leader writer, the papers neither question nor promote Christianity because faith is seen as a matter of personal, private choice:

*'It's not the task of the paper to choose religious conviction on behalf of its readers.'*²

A few other journalists said that the example story could be rejected by their papers because it was too insulting. Even a reporter from Helsingin Sanomat, which is considered to be the most critical of religion among the Finnish papers, said that this would be too much:

*'However anticlerical we are, I don't think we would do that, at least not from those premises and with that emphasis. <...> This country is still not ready for that, and maybe it doesn't ever need to be ready for that because I think it's offending feelings that you maybe should not offend. <...> Though I must say that I have sometimes been wondering the same things; say, the dogma of conciliation is pretty weird.'*³

He said that a simple survival instinct warns against a radical questioning of the Christian faith:

'This country is still so religiously homogeneous. So, you are really asking for trouble if you do something like that. If we did that kind of story, there might even be a drop in circulation at that point. It would not need to be taken as a criterion, but still.'

However, none of the four editors-in-chief said they would reject the story on this basis. One of them, himself a priest, said that militant atheism should be covered as well as religions:

'In a way, it's all true (in this example story). And sometimes it does believers of all faiths really good to hear something like this. <...> A journalist always has to think how to respect his or her reader and, on the other hand, how to be honest and fearless. There is no simple recipe which would say you have to always reveal everything or protect people. You have to look for the right balance again and again in every particular case. Sometimes, it can be more efficient to be a little

1 This is compatible with the observations of the Finnish sociologist, Titus Hjelm. The atheist Freethinkers are the most vocal local critics of religion in Finland, with mainstream Lutheranism as their main target. Their argument is that all religious belief is irrational and, thus, folly. However, this discourse very rarely surfaces in the media. Less well-known religions have proven an easier, more acceptable target. Titus Hjelm, *News of the Unholy* in Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen, Knut Lundby and Raimo Salokangas (eds.), *Implications of the Sacred*, Nordicom 2007, p. 70.

2 Pekka Mikkola.

3 Paavo Tukkimäki.

*more polite and cool. If you want to make the reader feel the truth. Which is, of course, in a way, the purpose of journalism. We are, the core of journalism is the search of truth; that's our goal. Though it doesn't always look like that. It's the ideal.'*¹

What made the example insulting, some interviewees said, was the refusal of the author to understand religiosity, to see religion as religious people see it. Commented a Finnish reporter assigned to cover religion, a theologian himself:

*'The message of the Bible, as we see it today, is the negation of what was said in that example. Our way to interpret it is something quite different.'*²

Some of the British as well as many of the Finnish journalists said that it was unintelligent to read the Bible literally and talk about religion as if all religious people were fundamentalists. The religion editor of the Telegraph, also a priest, said that he would not print the example story for this reason:

*'It's Richard Dawkins at his worst. It's him choosing to suggest that I believe the Bible is inerrant and infallible and the divinely inspired word of God that should direct all our actions. And, of course, I do not, and nor do the vast majority of the Christians who I know, believe that. But he chooses to say we do believe that to make that sound like a ridiculous proposition that he then proceeds to try to knock down to defeat us. I think a lot of that is driven by that sort of militant, aggressive secularism that I was referring to before, whose agenda is to drive religion out of the public sphere. And one of the weapons for doing that is to try to make it look ridiculous and dangerous, neither of which I think it is. Elements of it are, of course.'*³

The former religious affairs correspondent of the Guardian said that questioning the rationality and status of Christianity is common in the British papers, but in a more intelligent way:

*'Yes it is, but in articles contributed by people with a certain degree of expertise rather than people with no expertise whatsoever. They have to have some locus and some standing in the subject or related subject to be covered. Someone walking in off the street and saying, religion is rubbish, no.'*⁴

The religious affairs correspondent of the Times ended up being the only one who said that questioning the grounds of Christianity is uncommon in British journalism:

*'We take the existence of Christianity in Britain as a given. We don't, any more than we would question the rationality of Islam or any religion. <...> You certainly wouldn't start to criticize faith in the resurrection or anything like that, because believers have the right to hold their beliefs.'*⁵

Some young journalists from both countries said they would be interested in writing about the status

1 Tapani Ruokanen.

2 Paavo Tukkimäki.

3 George Pitcher.

4 Stephen Bates.

5 Ruth Gledhill.

of the Church but dropping the rationality. Since religion is not based on verifiable evidence but on faith, discussing the rationality of religion is uninteresting, if not impossible. Some of them added that there is really nothing new in that criticism; it has been there since the enlightenment, for hundreds of years already, as part of philosophy and literature.

*'I guess the interesting one is that the high status of religion must be abolished. What I might do is a story about the people who are calling for this. Is there an increase in secularism, is there an increase in attempts to abolish religion from the public sphere?'*¹

Among the Finnish journalists, the one most in favour of this kind of radical questioning was the priest-editor-in-chief:

*'I think it would be good thing if we could sometimes do that in an intelligent way because it would make everybody think many things over. It's very rare because you would need a lot of courage and a lot of intelligence and knowledge, all that together.'*²

A positive British reaction came from a young, recently assigned religious affairs correspondent from the Independent:

*'I think it would be worth doing. As long as the piece is not just being controversial for the sake of being controversial. It needs to be a sort of rational, scientific, historical approach to the creation of religious texts. That would be interesting and worth doing.'*³

4.4 To mock or not to mock?

Should there be something sacred that journalists do not mock? Should we respect religious feelings? These general questions also provoked slightly different answers from the Finns and Britons. Many of the Finns tended to think that the media should avoid insulting people in general and their religious feelings in particular—but not at any price. Journalists should be free to criticize anything, including religion, when it does harm. However, mockery and ridicule were not regarded as good journalism.

'It's not our business to mock. It's not constructive. That does not mean that you can't be critical; it's another thing, utterly and totally. <...> We should avoid offending religious feelings, whatever they are, if they are not somehow impossible from the perspective of society. Female priests are an

1 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

2 Tapani Ruokanen.

3 Jerome Taylor.

*example of that. From the perspective of society, it's now impossible that a woman cannot be a priest. We must be able to write that the Lutheran Church should get that right, but we should not mock those who think differently and purposely insult them. <...> We also must be able to say when religion is clearly destructive or invokes behaviour that is destructive for individuals or communities. Religion is not kind of a protected area where you can do anything. It's not a problem in Finland but there are places in the world where it is. In a way, we can be discreet in the Finnish media because we don't have such deep problems.'*¹

*'It's difficult to start criticizing anybody's faith. Maybe we could look at the consequences, whether it harms other people. But people may believe what they want. Who am I to tell anybody?'*²

*'The basic answer from a journalist should be that nothing is so sacred that we cannot criticize it. But I would say, after having written columns and editorials for so long and having been editor-in-chief, that in real life, though it has not been particularly spoken out, it's a generally accepted rule that everybody may decide about his or her own faith and we will respect that. We won't criticize individuals. If we criticize, we criticize those who have the power to make bigger decisions, that means the institutions.'*³

*'To purposely provoke and insult, that's not essentially the task of the media in this area. But you can have a matter-of-fact discussion about any religious issue even though somebody might be offended. And some people will definitely be offended. Once you put the word 'God' in the paper, someone is offended.'*⁴

One editor-in-chief estimated that religious feelings should be respected more than, for example, political conviction:

*'Political conviction, it's about acting in the society and can be scrutinized, but religious conviction is something so intimate that we must be respectful of it.'*⁵

Not everyone agreed:

*'Publicly embarrassing ordinary people is that kind of thing; ordinary people with their names and faces should of course be protected. But what does mocking mean otherwise? Can we mock religious convictions? I don't know. I don't think it's funny but why couldn't we do that if we can mock political convictions? The intensity of the feelings can be just the same. Or some other world views, like environmental values. I don't see why religion should be a special case. Religious feelings are certainly strong but not dramatically stronger than any other feelings related to convictions.'*⁶

The Britons were more relaxed about mockery. They noted that the Pope had recently been caricatured with a condom in his head in the Times, and jokes about paedophile priests are printed,

1 Pekka Mervola.

2 Elina Järvinen.

3 Risto Uimonen.

4 Paavo Tukkimäki.

5 Janne Virkkunen.

6 Jari Lindholm.

though not everybody thinks they are funny. Generally, the papers want to be more gentle towards the ordinary believers than their leaders:

*'I think those who have extreme beliefs, people who are making statements that are dangerous, misleading, for example, the one you quoted earlier, they need to be ridiculed, they need to be attacked. <...> It's very commonplace to mock Christians and I think, in a way, it's a worrying development but, at the same time, I don't think that religion should be exempt or be given any special privilege to be free of criticism. That would be a dangerous precedent to set up. So I think they should be open to criticism. But mocking belief on the pages of a newspaper is a bit distasteful and intolerant. Religion can be seen as a very easy target.'*¹

*'I do a reasonable amount of mockery myself but I think—I think there should be some ways, be more mockery but it should be better informed. My rule about mockery is really that the people you're mocking should recognize themselves.'*²

*'I think it is very important. I think the rule is, the religions don't have any rights, the individuals do. So, the freedom of expression.'*³

The strongest advocacy for mockery came from a Northern Finnish regional paper staff writer who has, every now and then, satirized religion in his weekly supplement pieces; for example, writing about communion in the format of a restaurant critic. The piece was not appreciated by all of the readers and not even by all of his colleagues. A late sub-editor had even stopped printing to prevent the publishing of the communion story. Fortunately/unfortunately, the weekly supplement is always printed first and it was already finished.

*'Religion definitely shouldn't be spared from mockery. Mocking, I think, is an essential element of satire and satire is a form of criticism. Forbidding mockery would restrain the possibilities for criticism. And there is no way to unequivocally define what is and what is not mockery. <...> I discussed this communion piece with a priest I happen to know. He said that stories that are purposely defamatory, should be banned. How would anyone know whether the writer has been mocking on purpose? I did not know that about myself; how could one know about others?'*⁴

4.5 Islam – lambasted or spared?

These questions inspired the interviewees also to reflect on the treatment of Islam. Many British journalists noted that Muslims are criticized and mocked in papers far more harshly than Christians.

1 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

2 Andrew Brown.

3 John Micklethwait.

4 Jarno Mällinen.

*'It's not common to have a rude and a very radical critique of Christianity. It's more common to have it of Islam.'*¹

*'Islam is continuously and routinely lampooned by the sway of columnists. The same level of criticism is rarely leveled at Christians, perhaps primarily because lots of readers might get offended and stop buying newspapers. But, yes, in the post 9/11 climate, particularly Islam has been a kind of free foray.'*²

*'I've lost track of the columns I've read where somebody talks about the creation of Islam and they say it was written by a tribal chieftain, semi-illiterate chieftain orphan who married, had sex with twelve years olds and OKed the massacre of Jews. OK, in a sense they are historically correct facts about Mohamed, we think. Is there a same approach to Christianity? Probably not; you don't get the same number of columns taking a highly critical approach to the foundations of Christianity. You know, it's there but not as much as of other religions and one religion in particular.'*³

The Telegraph religion editor criticized especially the British tabloids:

*'Very often, they give the impression in some areas of British journalism that Mr. Rasha, my corner newsagent, will be keeping a sub-machine gun under his counter which he'll bring out when the call to a new caliphate is put out by the British Council of Muslims. And it's just not true and it is quite dangerous actually. I get quite chilled sometimes that the Muslims could be the new Jews, because, bubbling under in British society is this resentment, fear and growing fundamentalism—and there is a contention out there, and they post on the website where I write. They honestly believe that they are subjects of White Anglo-Saxon genocide, that the Muslims are moving in this country to push them out. And from that kind of paranoia there is fed dangerous fundamentalism that can lead to some dreadful and unjustified reaction of extremism. And we need to be careful about that. I think journalism has an important role there. Some newspapers do whip up, sort of play to those baser instincts in society and therefore encourage that hysteria.'*⁴

One Finnish journalist also noted that, after 9/11, Islam has been constantly connected with terrorism, even when there were no grounds for doing so. He said that there is very little knowledge about Islam among Finnish journalists—and no interest in learning more:

*'I think that an average journalist has pretty much the same view as a man in the street, which is that Muslims are nuts—that isn't it a wacky religion. Of course it shows in the stories.'*⁵

Two Finnish editors-in-chief were more concerned about the possible self-censorship around Islam after the Mohamed cartoon controversy. The Finnish newspapers did not publish any of the cartoons and the editors seemed to have some scruples about that decision:

'One could ask why we decided not to publish. It could have been the other way round. It belongs to the freedom of speech that a Dane can draw a caricature of Mohamed and a Danish paper can

1 John Lloyd.

2 Jerome Taylor.

3 Jerome Taylor.

4 George Pitcher.

5 Jari Lindholm.

*publish them. We could have supported this right by publishing, too. <...> One can ask whether it was sensible from the freedom of speech perspective but we thought it would be better not to aggravate the situation which was bad enough already. We kind of gave in to those who were burning flags and cars and embassies; we yielded to their will. It was not necessarily a very smart decision from us but that's what we decided at that moment.'*¹

*'When we are covering Islam and the Koran we must not get Finlandized and treat them more delicately than other religions because of a threat of revenge. That's a big issue. <...> It doesn't matter if we are dealing with Islam or Catholicism or Lutheranism, they should all be treated in the same way, according to same principles. There should not be different scale for one. That would be wrong.'*²

The same Northern Finnish regional paper reporter, who defended mockery and satire, made a different point here, too. He said that we should take account of which religion we are mocking:

*'We live in a thoroughly Christian culture among our own people. We know Christian customs and traditions and language. The majority of Finns are some sort of Christians, so there we are on our own ground, and not attacking a small, fearful, oppressed immigrant group. <...> In these Finnish circumstances, the fear of bloody revenge that the publishing of some Mohamed caricatures could summon up is less important than the fact that there are still so few Muslims here and probably they don't feel as at home and safe as we do in this society. If we, the majority, then start mocking their faith, it might hurt them far more than mocking Christianity by Christians hurts Christians.'*³

1 Risto Uimonen.

2 Janne Virkkunen.

3 Jarmo Mällinen.

5 Lines and policies

5.1 Religious or anti-religious correspondents

Thank God for a faith in bet-hedging
(A newspaper column)

The starting point of the column is the atheist bus campaign, with the slogan 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'. The writer reveals about herself: 'Although my own Catholic faith is more than just lapsed (it never took hold in the first place), I love being a Catholic. I love the exoticism and the familiarity of it. <...> I'm having my son christened, partly so that he can inherit these cultural riches, partly because of my own agnosticism. The fact that God probably doesn't exist leaves open the possibility that he might. Like the millions of doubters who nonetheless observe the sacraments of birth, marriage and death in Church each year, I see no harm in playing it safe. It's muddle-headed, I know—and what of it?'¹

Only a few of the interviewees had written about their own faith or lack of it in a newspaper. In Britain, the roles of reporter and commentator are strictly separated. Among the British interviewees, there were two journalists who felt that it was actually their job to write about their own religious views. They were the editors of the belief websites of the Telegraph and the Guardian, who also give direction to discussions by blogging on those sites.

The reporters are not in a position to do so, nor do they want to, because, in their opinion, this would compromise their impartiality. If they unveiled their own convictions, their decisions or stories would be read and interpreted as biased by their belief or non-belief:

*'I don't want to display my convictions. Like I said before, I don't want people to try use what I say as a reason for suggesting that I'm coming to a story with particular agenda.'*²

Some of the British interviewees said that they might refer to their own background in their religion stories to make them more transparent:

'After I stopped writing about religious affairs, I wrote in a humanist magazine that, actually, covering religion for the period I did helped me lose my faith rather than reinforced it. <...> I thought it would compromise my integrity and impartiality if I was writing such a highly personalized piece while I was actually covering the subject. I made no secret of my faith background because I thought that was relevant to how I reported so that people knew where I was coming from. <...> I thought that, in some circumstances, it was relevant to say that I was from a

1 Jemima Lewis, Thank heaven for a British faith in bet-hedging in The Sunday Telegraph 26.10.2008.

2 Jonathan Wynne-Jones.

*Catholic background, for instance.*¹

*'I might refer to it. I wouldn't, in an article in FT, make a major issue about it. I might say, as an atheist, I don't appreciate or I don't understand religious belief. I wrote something about the Pentecostalism in Uganda and I said there that I just could not understand how people were so fervently believing and praying and admiring their pastor. I couldn't understand their feelings. I mean, I could see that it was happening, but I couldn't understand what they felt, why they believe in something which I thought was essentially ridiculous. But it was a way of saying, these are my limitations. It is not to say that I think it's rubbish. It's just that I'm limited in my understanding of this.'*²

In Finland, it has become normal for reporters also to write comment pieces around the subjects that they are covering. However, most of the Finnish interviewees had not written anything about their own faith. The editors and leader writers wanted to keep their own beliefs even more private than the reporters:

*'To be honest, one reason is that, if I revealed my convictions, especially if I disclosed that I feel strongly about something, my stories would ever after be read through that prism. Like, that's the guy who thinks that way.'*³

*'I want to maintain such a position that I'm not seen as connected to any religious, political or other faction. On the other hand, I have openly stated that I'm the son of a priest. That's not a problem, but I have not claimed to be either deeply religious or anti-religious.'*⁴

The readers seem to think that they can read between the lines whether a journalist who is covering religious affairs has a faith or not. Obviously, this is not always true. One of the Finnish reporters, a theologian by education and a committed Christian, had been repeatedly called an atheist, denier of the God and totally ignorant in the reader feedback. He had not stated his own belief, partly because he belonged to the old school tradition, where the mere use of the word 'I' was banned.⁵

Both the British and Finnish journalists felt that it would be easier for a journalist to unveil his or her personal disbelief than belief:

*If somebody has religious sentiments, he might be shy about it. If you go and write about it in a paper, you can expect some scorn.*⁶

What kind of convictions and attitudes would best suit religion correspondents and other journalists covering religion? Some decades ago, the title in Britain was church correspondent. The

1 Stephen Bates.

2 John Lloyd.

3 Pekka Mikkola.

4 Pekka Mervola.

5 Paavo Tukkimäki.

6 Jarno Mällinen.

interviewees described church correspondents as committed Christian men, often priests themselves, who looked at religion almost exclusively through the prism of Anglicanism. Also in Finland, the people interested in covering religion were often religious themselves. On the other hand, the journalists in Western countries are said to be less religious than the population on average and the press is criticized for being overly secular.

In the comments of the interviewees, both religiousness and anti-religiousness were seen as potential defects in a journalist:

*'We have a postulate in journalism that journalists should not bow to any gods. So there's a kind of dissonance when God has authority over a journalist's work. Ideally, journalism should be independent of political power, religious power, secular power and economic power. No lobby is supposed to lead us. Now, if some colleague suddenly is under spiritual guidance in his work, we will shun that, I think.'*¹

*'I guess most journalists would define themselves as, if not atheist then at least secular, and they have a kind of arrogant attitude towards religiousness. As a result, they may not have any interest in religion and religiousness and, if they have to cover it, it's pretty amateurish. There is no particular understanding or deeper interest in religion.'*²

*'I think a lot of Guardian writers and readers are blinded by a lack of faith and being quite hostile to people who have faith, in a world in which the people who have faith often agree with them on virtually everything else. I think the Church of England is, by and large, a force for good, engaging in all kinds of causes on poverty and international development in which the Guardian is passionately involved and intensely in favour of promoting debate about them. But, in the eyes of some writers, they can't see beyond the issue of God and so they feel that is a big dividing line.'*³

*'The argument which a number of people are now making is that journalists, certainly in this country but probably throughout the west, are badly trained in understanding and covering religious issues. That we tend to be irreligious ourselves. If we are religious, it's very mild and we have a view of life which assumes that religion is irrational, old-fashioned, sometimes extreme and usually unwelcome.'*⁴

The journalist above did not suggest, though, that journalists covering religion should be religious themselves:

'No, I don't think that. That would mean that, if you were not a politician, you cannot cover politics and, if you weren't a soldier, you cannot cover defence issues. I don't think at all you have to be what you cover. Therefore, you don't need to be religious. It possibly helps but what you need is a sympathetic understanding. By sympathetic, I don't mean that you have to agree with or so on but you have to understand the motives of the people who are religious. You have to understand how

1 Risto Uimonen.

2 Jari Lindholm.

3 Alan Rusbridger.

4 John Lloyd.

they see the world in their own terms rather than assume that it is mumbo jumbo, that it is nonsense or that it is merely a set of prejudices or it is old-fashioned.

A more optimistic British editor-in-chief commented:

*'Most people think that the reporting of religion is difficult because, essentially, newspapers, modern media organizations, are full of atheists who believe that religious organizations and religious people are nuts and there is a skepticism in everything they write and that there is a sort of sneering quality in the way in which they treat religion. Actually, that is not true. There are many people of faith and belief inside newspapers and even those people who are not, know a good story when they see one. And stories about religion have everything in them.'*¹

The interviewees thought that the worst weakness for a journalist covering religious affairs would be a total ignorance of religion combined with a reluctance to understand it. This was not regarded as rare:

*'For some reason, the persistence in finding out details, which is otherwise valued in journalism, is not applied to religion. Like religion was just some kind of fussing. You can say something approximate about it and that's enough.'*²

I asked all of the interviewees to describe their own religiousness or relation to religion. Four out of the twelve Finnish interviewees said that they could be described as believers. All of the Finns except three were members of the Lutheran church. Many said that they were not religious but no one called him/herself atheist. Some of those who said that they were not religious themselves thought that religions had many valuable features. One of the interviewees put it this way:

'I have religious sentiments, so I'm in no way an atheist. But you certainly couldn't say I'm a believer and I'm pretty estranged from the religious practice. But somehow I think that it has a big value, firstly on the cultural level. Though there is much to criticize, too. <...> So my relationship with religion is a bit contradictory.'

Among the thirteen British interviewees, there was one Anglican priest and two other journalists who claimed to be believers. Several had a religious family background, often in Catholicism, but were not very religious themselves. One claimed to be a reformed Jew, one named himself agnostic and two said that they were atheists but both stressed they were not anti-religion. There were also irreligious journalists who believed in believing, in the benefits of religion for social cohesion and cultural identity.

How does the personal religiosity or non-religiosity of the journalists affect their coverage of

1 James Harding.

2 Jari Lindholm.

religion? I asked the interviewees what influence their faith or lack of it had on their journalism.

The Britons gave four basic answers:

*'I brought to the job a background and upbringing in a particular religious belief and Catholic practice, so that gave me an insight and understanding of peoples' belief systems or at least a particular sort of belief system. <...> The religious tradition and heritage in this country is very pervasive, even though we are a very secular country in many ways these days. It affects the established institutions of this country, it's behind a huge amount of great art in this country and much of the architectural history and, if you don't appreciate that and the general history of the country and what happened to it and how religion and religious disputes shaped our history and development of our institutions, then you really can't do the job properly. So my religious upbringing and background were extremely helpful from that point of view and also helped me to, I think, understand and sympathize with the religious beliefs of a lot, not all, the people I was reporting about.'*¹

*'I hope my lack of faith makes me approach religion the same way I would approach any other subject as a journalist. Which I hope would be thorough, objective and impartial. I don't think religion should be treated any differently from any other subject. The story on faith or prison reform should be approached in the same way and, if your faith gets in the way when you report that, then you are slightly failing to do your job properly.'*²

*'I think agnosticism is quite a good position for a paper like this. I mean, if you are holding a ring between members of staff, some of whom have faith and some of whom are passionately anti-faith, and that is probably true of the readers, as well. <...> You know, I find the subject absorbing and interesting enough to start a special faith site but don't want to impose my own views or think that one side has the benefit of having all the right arguments.'*³

*'I'm in the position of running a secular paper. <...> The Economist stands for a set of things which I accept, I can only.'*⁴

The Finnish answers varied hugely. Three out of the four editors-in-chief said that their own religiousness or non-religiousness did not influence their decisions about covering religion:

*'It has no influence, really. Because I think I should not be looking at these things from my own perspective but from the reader's perspective.'*⁵

A committed Lutheran journalist commented:

'I have tried to keep it that way so that it would not influence. Things are as they are. News is news. If there is an important issue and interesting phenomenon, you write about it.'

Two committed Christian reporters said that they would be happy to write more about religion and

1 Stephen Bates.

2 Jerome Taylor.

3 Alan Rusbridger.

4 John Micklethwait.

5 Risto Uimonen.

also report individual experiences of faith:

*'I try on my part to keep this discussion alive in the media and bring in these elements. <...> Spirituality is an area where it's good for people to process feelings and thoughts.'*¹

A 'not especially religious' member of the Lutheran Church commented:

*'I definitely want to defend the right of not particularly religious laypersons like myself to speak about these things. They should not be left for the fundamentalists only. I feel it's important that the media is covering these issues.'*²

A priest said:

*'My faith is more of an existential kind and it affects maybe more the matters of justice and truth and other ethical issues in this work. The essential core of my faith is the feel of constantly facing the one on whom I'm dependent and that one is seeing into the most secret. That gives me a mission to try to tell about things as they are and to make the society transparent in order to prevent cheating and lying and wrongdoing. It does not influence my work so that I would like to protect the Church or preach the word.'*³

A journalist with a 'complicated relationship to religion' said:

*'When I'm doing a story like this latest one (about Lutherans who want to marry in church and have their children christened though they are not religious or have no deeper interest in faith), I was really pondering how to avoid advocating anything. For example, I wanted to take care that those people presented in the story were not held to account. I thought it was important that I let them be just like they are, have faith in rituals. For them, it's important to marry in church but that's it. I wanted to avoid implying that there would be something wrong with that.'*⁴

A journalist with no faith but with a university degree in comparative religion stated:

*'I think it's easier for me to operate in a field where Islam is strongly present, because I'm not negative about that religion. <...> It must be quite a constraint if you are very negative about religion and you need to write about these things. For instance, those journalist now waiting on the border of Gaza and trying to understand that mess, if they basically think that both Islam and Judaism are crazy religions, can you expect good stories?'*⁵

Academic media research seems to operate from the premise that the qualities of individual journalists have no significance in journalism. Still, stories do not write themselves. Capable, hardworking journalists can give their personal flavour to their paper, like Ruth Gledhill to the Times and Anna-Stina Nykänen to Helsingin Sanomat. Both made a big difference from the

1 Aino Suhola.

2 Anna-Stina Nykanen.

3 Tapani Ruokanen.

4 Elina Jarvinen.

5 Jari Lindholm.

moment they started to write about religion.

In the Times, the predecessors of Ruth Gledhill were priests who covered religion through the Church of England prism. She felt that they had a deferential, hands-off approach. Religion appeared on the back pages; it was not hard news. Gledhill was trained in hard news journalism as a news reporter for the Daily Mail and brought the news approach to religion reporting when she was appointed religious affairs correspondent of the Times in 1989. As a result, religion stories moved to the front of the paper.¹

Anna-Stina Nykänen set a new line in Helsingin Sanomat when she started writing about religion at the beginning of the 1990's. The paper had covered the Church as an institution, but otherwise religion was ignored:

*'I thought religion was an odd, non-covered field and I had, of course, no clue that there had been a time when it was kind of a forbidden area. <...> When I had started writing in the Sunday section, a Swedish journalist contacted our editor-in-chief and asked why Helsingin Sanomat had changed its policy regarding the treatment of religion. The editor asked me to do this interview because obviously he had not made any such policy change. He had necessarily not even thought about religion coverage; maybe it was not important to him at all.'*²

5.2 Supportive and secular papers

Whatever individual journalists believe and however different they might be, they are of course not independent from the culture surrounding them. So far, I have been trying to describe the general conventions restricting religion coverage in these two countries but there are also differences between the individual papers.

In every interview, I first asked the journalists to describe their paper's policy regarding covering religion. Almost all of them initially said that there is no policy, at any rate no stated policy, let alone written guidelines. Everyday editorial practices show where the limits are and what is considered to be a good story.

1 Ruth Gledhill, speech at the RIJS seminar, 4.2.2009, Oxford.

2 Anna-Stina Nykänen.

The following profiles are based on the information obtained from the whole body of the interviews with the addition of some academic findings.

5.2.1 The Daily Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph

The Daily Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph are right-wing, conservative papers, which are supportive of Christianity in general and the Church of England in particular. Religion is among the top issues on their news agenda.

The Daily Telegraph has a higher percentage of regular Church of England goers than any other daily newspaper. The tastes of this readership are taken into account. Even those readers who are not religious themselves are thought to be respectful of it, either out of good manners or because of the benefits of religion for social cohesion and cultural identity. The paper avoids writing about sex and gender issues, as it thinks that its readers are fed up with rows over women priests and same sex marriage and even generally shy about sex. The editors are circumspect about showing the Church in a bad light but, when its leaders say something controversial or outrageous, the paper does not shy away from criticizing them briskly.

At present, the Sunday Telegraph is particularly interested in stories about churches closing, Christians being persecuted, religious freedom and generally defending Christianity against marginalization in British society. In a multicultural society, the Telegraph is also trying to broaden its remit and look at religion more widely. On its website write also Hindu, Muslim and Jewish bloggers. The religion editor, George Pitcher, commented:

*'What I'm trying to do, I'm trying to be rather more pluralistic about it, but nevertheless I think that's starting from a stand of the position of the Telegraph that has seen this traditionally as a Christian country, as a country that has an established church, a church that co-exists with the state and monarch who is the head of the both, the church and the state. And, therefore, the Telegraph is going to start from that position. And it has to be said it has often had quite a Roman Catholic input as well. The owners of the Telegraph are Roman Catholic.'*¹

1 George Pitcher.

5.2.2 The Times

The Times is a socially liberal, right-wing newspaper which seeks to gain a competitive edge via its comprehensive religion coverage. According to the editor-in-chief, James Harding, religion is one of the most important areas of life that the Times covers. He says that the paper wants to treat religion in an explanatory way, engage in arguments between institutions and people and do so without being either evangelical or intrinsically skeptical. It would publish commentary pieces both from famous atheists and from people of faith.

The paper has an extremely active, full-time religious affairs correspondents who concentrates on news stories and blogging, as well as a weekly faith page with a faith editor and two other journalists working on it. The Times does not often question religious faith but it criticizes religious persons if they try to influence political or any other debate in the public sphere on the basis of beliefs that defy common sense. Recently, the Times published a cartoon of the Pope with a condom on his head. The editor-in-chief, James Harding, commented:

*'We take our religious coverage very seriously because our readers, whether they are Christians or Muslims or Jews or Hindus or Buddhists or for that matter, nonbelievers, feel very strongly about religion. <...> What you want to do is to say, religion is an enormously important part of life in this country and life around the world. In much the same way, I would say, take the big institutions of life, the army, the health service, the education system. <...> You don't have to believe in, you don't have to be for or against the army to realize it's important.'*¹

5.2.3 The Guardian

The Guardian is a liberal leftist newspaper which has a reputation for aggressive secularism and is said to have a faction of hard-line atheists who would like to see religion abolished and the Church of England disestablished. Nonetheless, it is one of the five British daily newspapers which have a religious affairs correspondent and it covers religion no less than the other papers. On its Comment is Free website, it has a new lively Belief section which is dedicated to faith. According to the editor-in-chief, Alan Rusbridger, the objective of the Guardian is to cover faith far more broadly than the structures of churches within England, looking at the impact that faiths are having around the world.

1 James Harding.

The Guardian has made a serious effort to increase the inclusive treatment and understanding of British Islam. Lately, it assigned a Muslim woman as its religious affairs correspondent. However, getting it right has turned out to be a complicated task, as it is unclear which groupings can represent wider Muslim opinion in the UK and to whom should be given a voice. Moreover, the liberal and secular ideals of the paper easily collide with Muslim traditions which make respectful reporting difficult.

The media scholar, Elizabeth Poole, writes in her book about media presentations of British Muslims:

*'The Guardian, as champion of the racialized Other in British society, contested widely held views most frequently. However, this research has shown us its exclusive form liberalism did not always extend to Muslims because its secular approach, derived from Enlightenment's separation of public and private spheres, marginalizes religion to the private realm. Its liberal approach to human rights further rendered 'Islamic' practices irrational and barbaric.'*¹

5.2.4 The Daily Mail and the Mail on Sunday

The Daily Mail and its sister paper, the Mail on Sunday, are mid-market tabloids with a far bigger readership than any other paper included in this study. They do not regard religion as a core element of their coverage but, over the last few years, have been increasingly interested in stories about the secularization and marginalization of Christianity. The stories start from the basis of personalities and human interest. They involve people rather than ideas. The papers are not interested in 'churchy' stories about theology, doctrine or disputes.

The Mail on Sunday reporter, Jonathan Petre, gave examples of the stories:

*'So there have been stories about old people's home in Brighton where the council made the residents answer questions about their sexuality four times a year. Then, there was a Christian foster mother who was struck off because a Muslim girl in her care converted to Christianity. I think I had one about Christian hotel owners being sued by a gay couple because they didn't allow them to share a bed in a double room in a hotel.'*²

1 Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, L.B. Tauris & Co, London 2002, p.248.

2 Jonathan Petre.

The Mail is putting across similar cases as the Telegraph but in a more populist, jingoistic way. Muslim immigration and equality legislation, which protects minority groups like homosexuals, are often portrayed as a threat to Christianity.

5.2.5 The Independent

The Independent has a tradition of being a liberal secular newspaper. It has appointed a religious affairs correspondent recently. The editor-in-chief, Roger Alton, says that he wants to counter aggressive secularism and include religion stories in the paper because religion is interesting at any level, and because the major world events in the ten last years are entirely connected with religion.¹ The Independent would be interested also in nice little intimate stories, quirky spirituality and especially in Islam.

The recently assigned, part-time religious affairs correspondent, Jerome Taylor, qualified for the job by doing stories on Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Judaism when working as a domestic news reporter. He commented:

*'I felt that was under covered. And, in Britain, we have every single religion you can possibly think of here. That's an incredibly exciting place to be a religion correspondent and it shouldn't just be the Anglican church and Catholic church that we are interested in.'*²

5.2.6 The Financial Times

The Financial Times does not cover religion as much as the other British newspapers. It is mainly concerned with economics, business, financial issues and foreign affairs. The paper does not have a special religion correspondent but other people write on particular religious issues, mostly for the FT's weekend edition. Nevertheless, religion comes into quite a lot of news. As many current conflicts are incomprehensible without understanding the religious views and feelings behind them, there is, according to the contributing editor John Lloyd, an argument within the paper that it should be more aware and write more about the religious motivations of terrorists, governments, legislation and politicians.

1 Roger Alton.

2 Jerome Taylor.

5.2.7 The Economist

The Economist is a famously sober weekly news magazine read in the US as well as the UK. It is a secular paper which advocates the division of church and state and has been suspicious of putting religion into school. The Economist does not have any policy of covering religion, says the editor-in-chief, John Micklethwait: 'We just write about it when it's interesting'. According to Micklethwait, it is becoming increasingly interesting, as religion seems to be thriving in many parts of the world.¹

The Economist has one journalist who is specialized in religion. There is now more room for it, after the paper introduced an international section. The Catholic Church, for example, did not fit well into either the European or US section.

5.2.8 Suomen Kuvalehti

Suomen Kuvalehti is a weekly news magazine with a conservative, intellectual image. It has been nicknamed 'Kuivalehti', which could be translated as the 'Grave Magazine'. The editor-in-chief, Tapani Ruokanen, is an ordained priest but the magazine is engaged in secular journalism without any special policy with regard to religion. The editor-in-chief is said not to interfere with religion stories. According to him, religion is treated as any other phenomenon in society, in a neutral and analytical way but, contrary to many newspapers, the magazine does not shy away from writing about faith issues. For instance, it recently published an interview with an evangelical preacher, Kalevi Lehtinen.

*'Suomen Kuvalehti is certainly one manifestation of the Finnish mode of life and defender of it, and it suits our role that we are not allergic to people of Church and faith.'*²

1 John Micklethwait.

2 Tapani Ruokanen.

5.2.9 Helsingin Sanomat

Helsingin Sanomat is an influential national daily newspaper with a circulation of 400,000 in a country of 5 million people. It is maliciously called 'Pravda' by those who are unhappy with its stances and dominant position. Helsingin Sanomat is a liberal paper, with a long tradition of advocating the division between church and state. An academic study found that religion stories were framed within conflicts more often in Helsingin Sanomat than in the other Finnish papers, partly, because HS is more internationally orientated than any other Finnish paper and has a well-resourced foreign news section.¹

The paper has a reputation for being strongly anti-religious, although, since the 1990's, it has been covering religion in an increasingly pluralistic way. Individual experience of faith is still not covered. The editor-in-chief, Janne Virkkunen, notes that religion plays a big role even in the modern, secular society and says that the paper covers all religions and churches according to secular news values. Actually, Helsingin Sanomat is the only Finnish paper in this study which has two reporters assigned to cover religion along with their other duties, one in the domestic news and the other in the Sunday section of the paper.

*'I don't want stories about miraculous salvation through faith, that kind of religion porn. <...> That is not our job. Our job is to explain religions and differences between religions in order to make the world more comprehensible.'*²

*'People complain that we, for example, prefer to report the most radical interpretations of theologian research and, by doing that, we spoil their Christmas and Easter. <...> The feedback is that many good Christians regard Hesari as the number one enemy of the Church and all the journalists are seen as atheist social democrats. That's what I have been repeatedly called, and said to know nothing about religion.'*³

5.2.10 Keskisuomalainen

Keskisuomalainen is a Middle Finland regional paper with moderate conservative views and an affirmative attitude towards Christianity. The new editor-in-chief, Pekka Mervola, says that he will preserve the positive approach to religion but has no special policy with regard to reporting it.

¹ Rahkonen p. 19.

² Janne Virkkunen

³ Paavo Tukkimäki.

According to Mervola, religion does not normally come into the news but is present in the other parts of the paper; for example, the weekend section.¹

In a study conducted by the Finnish Church research centre, Keskisuomalainen was found to be the most religious of the five major papers included in the research, as measured both by the number and content of the stories.² The paper publishes a daily sermon piece and dedicates a broad sheet page to faith issues four times a year. It also actively covers religious events in the region. However, the negative aspects of religion are criticized in the paper, says Mervola. The reporters said that they felt free to cover negative stories as well but they are not prevalent in the paper.

5.2.11 Kaleva

Kaleva, a Northern Finnish regional paper, stems from the same liberal and secular tradition as Helsingin Sanomat. However, its readership is supposedly the most religious in Finland, the region being a stronghold of the ultra-conservative Laestadian movement. The retiring editor-in-chief, Risto Uimonen, says that the paper wants to serve its Laestadian readers by reporting prominently their annual gatherings and giving good coverage to Christmas and Easter features.³ Otherwise, the paper keeps to the premise that religion is a private matter. Everybody has the right to decide about his or her own faith and it is not the business of a newspaper to interfere in this. On the other hand, the Church is comprehensively covered, as it is seen as a remarkable public actor in society. As a result, Kaleva has far fewer religious stories⁴ and more criticism of religion on its pages than Keskisuomalainen, even though there is a feeling among the journalists that the paper should beware of angering the Laestadians.

In spite of its generally secular tone, Kaleva has made attempts to give voice to the religious thinking prevalent in the area. That has been a tricky field. After the paper published a commentary by a Laestadian priest arguing that, according to the Bible, practising homosexuality is a sin, two complaints were filed to the Finnish press complaints commission concerning alleged incitement against a sexual minority. According to the Commission's ruling, Kaleva did not break the ethical

1 Pekka Mervola.

2 Rahkonen p.19.

3 Risto Uimonen.

4 Rahkonen p.19.

code of Finnish journalists.¹

1 Decision by the Finnish press complaints commission, Julkisen sanan neuvoston päätös 3836A+B/SL/07, 19.3.2008.

6 Discussion

6.1 God is back in the news

There was a surprising result for me in this study. Leading journalists from the most secular and internationally-oriented papers, particularly in the UK but also in Finland, strongly felt that religion coverage is becoming far more important in journalism. The most important reason for this is that, after 9/11, militant Islamism and its violent forms have simply forced religion onto the news agenda. As a result, journalists have been sensitized to news that has its roots in religion. They now regard religion as underlying many old crises, which have earlier been covered without any serious attempt to understand the religiosity involved; for example, in Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

John Lloyd, contributing editor of the Financial Times, cites his experience as a young reporter in Northern Ireland:

*'The deeply-held beliefs of both Catholics and Protestants shaped the way in which they fought each other very fundamentally. Actually, I think many journalists didn't understand that. <...> The distrust the two sides felt towards each other came very substantially from what they had heard in their churches and chapels and justified itself, either consciously or unconsciously, according to a religious framework which they had learnt either from their families or their ministers and priests.'*¹

Now faith is more generally seen as a phenomenon which has the power to shape people's minds and actions, and which therefore should be covered in greater depth.

Says the editor-in-chief of the reputedly secular Guardian, Alan Rusbridger:

*'Twenty years ago, we all thought that faith was in decline and suddenly it has emerged in the world as an incredibly important factor and force. I'm interested in the reason why that has happened. And I think, probably, as a paper, we don't do enough to, I think we are not alive enough to see faith as a force in Britain as well.'*²

To get a full picture of the world, papers should stop 'ghettoizing' religion on their God pages, claims the editor-in-chief of the Economist, John Micklethwait:

1 Interview with John Lloyd, 11.3.2009, Oxford.

2 Interview with Alan Rusbridger 23.6.2009, London.

*'The underlying problem is not, oh, we have to have religious people writing about religion. The sort of religion people have written about in journalism has tended to be that you have a columnist once a week who writes something spiritual. And that to me is not interesting. The interesting thing is, there is leagues of phenomena happening around the world which have religion in them and you can look at that without any religious prejudice at al. <...> That is not something over there; it's right in the middle. Whether people like it or not.'*¹

In Britain, immigration also compels journalists to learn more about new Britons' religious thinking and explain it to their audiences. However, the real story of British Islam is hard to get even for those who sincerely try, says Alan Rusbridger:

'Most newspapers don't have many Muslims on their staff. They don't have people with enough language skills. And they are quite closed communities anyway, who feel very defensive. So I feel this is an important story for future community cohesion and identity. I think, by and large, the British papers don't do very good job of getting at what is going on there.'

Another reason for increasing the coverage is the thriving of religion in many parts of the world: Africa, India, Latin America and China. Says the youngest interviewee, Jerome Taylor, 26, a newly assigned religious affairs correspondent for the Independent:

*'It's very easy to forget that, outside Western Europe, religion plays an absolutely key fundamental part in people's lives and, if you want to understand the people, you need to understand their religious beliefs.'*²

6.2 Where has He been?

Many of the leading journalists in senior editorial positions—not only religion specialists speaking for their own beat—said that faith is undercovered. Why has journalism not been more interested in it? Both Britain and Finland are highly secularized countries, in which Christianity has been declining in power, popularity and prestige for a long time.³ Along with the modernization process, the influence of religion has decreased in western life generally. More thoroughly than from many other fields of life, God has been ousted from politics. The idea was already embedded in the reformation, in Martin Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms, which separated secular and spiritual power into their own spheres.

1 Interview with John Micklethwait 17.4.2009, London.

2 Interview with Jerome Taylor 24.4.2009, London.

3 Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2002, p.3.

Some politicians might still be deeply religious but they are not allowed to bring religious contemplations into politics. There are certainly ideological but also practical reasons for this. It is difficult enough to negotiate about the common good without negotiating about God at the same time. If God were given authority in the decision-making, the result would be a massive fight over the right to interpret God's will.

Also in the US, where religious interest groups have an influence in politics, they must present their case in secular terms. Hence, creationism is presented as 'creation science' and the case against abortion is made in terms of the inalienable rights of the individual. Divorce and homosexuality are damned as socially dysfunctional. The sociologist, Steve Bruce, says that religious interest groups can be effective in contemporary civil society only when they accept the privatization of their distinctive religious beliefs and move on to secular ground.¹

The field of international relations has been even more secular. Religion was officially banished from western diplomacy in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Europe's wars of religion had been so long-lasting and bloody that the continent's rulers devised an elaborate set of rules to keep religion out of warfare. Since then, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge suggest, religion has been simply ignored in the foreign policy of western powers.² As a consequence, religion has not appeared much in traditional news journalism, which concentrates on domestic policies and international relations.

In a way, journalists have been taking part in a peace-keeping project, preventing world views from clashing in mainstream publicity. The surfacing fight between believers and atheists is 'good business if you write about religion', writes the Guardian's Belief website editor, Andrew Brown, 'but the world seems a happier place when religious affairs is a boring backwater'.³

A remarkable aspect of the (non-)coverage of religion has been the legacy of the 1960's, the decade when the young generation—the generation of today's retiring journalists—attacked conservative values, including religion. Stormy debates, harsh criticism and blasphemous commentary took over the media:

1 Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2002), p. 21.

2 John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is back: How the global revival of faith is changing the world*. The Penguin Press 2009, p. 358.

3 Andrew Brown, Atheism, still less popular than donkeys, *Guardian.co.uk/commentisfree*, 24.10.2008.

*'The media's relationship with religion is becoming more neutral now, but it has been very complex. In the 1970's, it was fashionable to have an extremely negative attitude towards the Church and religion; there was a socialist revolution in the making. As a result, we had a whole generation of journalists who could not deal with religion in any natural way, without bias, without fighting against it. <...> Now that we have a new generation of journalists, these subjects can be treated more naturally. We can discuss religion without getting terribly emotional.'*¹

After that era, religion was left alone. It seemed that religion would inevitably retreat from the public into the purely private space and it nearly died out in national newspapers in the 1970's and 80's. After the fierce years of the 1960's, religion was seen as broadly sorted, as Mark Thompson, the director-general of the BBC stated in a lecture. What was left was dull and safe; not much to talk about.²

6.3 Differences between the two countries

The Finnish editors-in-chief partly stick to this thinking. All four said, at some point in their interviews, that religion is not sufficiently important or central in Finnish political and social life to be worth the space and time given to it by some of the example stories. Some compared faith to sexuality. Both are private and not the business of newspapers. The British editors-in-chief, on the contrary, stressed the importance of religion in their reporting. Many British journalists stated that their papers' interest in religion reflects the interest of their readers.

Do Finnish readers feel less strongly about religion or show less interest in it? The mental landscape is largely similar. Slightly more Finns consider themselves religious than Britons. In Britain, a slightly bigger proportion name themselves atheist than in Finland.³ In the UK, the Anglican Church and, in Finland, the Lutheran Church continue their traditional co-existence with the state. Both churches are moderate and inclusive, but torn by internal differences about women's ordination and homosexuality. These are issues which non-religious people also feel strongly about. Religion in schools divides opinions in both countries, as well. The interest in religion stories is by no means restricted to those readers who are religious themselves.

1 Interview with Tapani Ruokanen 15.1.2009, Helsinki.

2 Mark Thompson: Faith and The Media. Speech at Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor Lecture 2008 series: Faith and Life in Britain Today. Westminster, London.

3 World values survey 2005.

The most obvious distinction is the multicultural, multi-faith nature of British society compared to the Finnish homogeneity. It turned out in the interviews that one of the major challenges for the British journalists was to find out what Muslim citizens and immigrants believe in, how strongly they believe in it and what it means for society, whereas the Finnish journalists tended to think that they know what their compatriots believe, that those beliefs do not have much influence on society and that there is nothing very interesting to discover there.

All in all, the difference in the actual coverage of religion is probably less than the outspoken attitudes of the editors-in-chief would lead one to think. Various Finnish reporters pointed out that there has been a factual change in the coverage of religion in the Finnish papers. However, the coverage probably depends more on the personal interests and activities of individual journalists, as religion is not as high on the news agenda as it is in the UK.

Anna-Stina Nykänen from Helsingin Sanomat summarizes the developments during the last 20 years:

*'Aspects of privacy are covered more in general. Absolutely, we started writing about sexuality before we started writing about faith. Faith was considered even more intimate. And when we started writing about religion, we started from the marginal, exotic issues like the Orthodox Church. <...> I think we are now writing about questions of dogma, what different affiliations think, religious trends and also about everyday religiousness. In the 1990's, when it became fashionable to be interested in spirituality, we even got carried away a little. However, we might still be a bit wary about writing about religion. And we are still lacking solid criticism of the Church and religion. So we are still a little shy in that area. <...> Now religion has become a part of international politics. You can't understand international politics and wars without understanding faith. <...> The spirituality first was typically a subject for female journalists; now it's a domain of hard news journalism and now men have to be able to tell what Islam really is.'*¹

Concluding from the comments around the example stories, the Finns and Britons have strikingly different attitudes towards the criticism of faith. The Finns stated that it is uncommon to criticize ordinary believers harshly or to question thoroughly the rationality and status of Christianity, whereas the Britons said that both are commonplace in British journalism. The Finns might be more cautious about religious feelings specifically, but part of this caution boils down to a general difference in journalistic culture, which might be due to the very different structure of the British and Finnish press.

Britain has a highly competitive national press and the papers have profiled readerships. To appeal

1 Interview with Anna-Stina Nykänen, 5.1.2009, Helsinki.

to their readers, the papers tend to have political leanings, to be opinionated and polemical. In Finland, there is one strongly dominant national quality paper and also the regional papers often have a monopoly in their core circulation areas. Most of them have long abandoned their old party affiliations and prefer to adopt centrist, moderate tones in order not to alienate any major reader groups in their region. Religion is not lambasted, but neither is anything else.

For the same reason—fierce daily competition—the British papers cannot afford to miss interesting stories, which religion obviously provides. On the other hand, British journalists seem to maintain a greater distance from intimate religiosity and purely religious discourse than their Finnish colleagues. However, concluding from the chapters above, the basic conventions which rule the treatment of religion are common to both countries, although they are followed to a different degree. Religion must be kept apart from politics, personal belief is not a subject for newspapers and faith is not to be criticized unless someone is imposing it on the political decision making.

6.4 More religion, no proselytizing

At the beginning of this paper, I posed two questions: Are we journalists reluctant to recognize the significance of religious faith and unwilling to understand and explain to our audiences what believers really think and how their beliefs shape their life and actions? On the other hand, do we leave religious ideas unquestioned and beyond criticism?

To a certain extent, the answer to both questions is yes—and more so in Finland than in the UK. The American media scholar, Stewart Hoover, has observed a sense of timidity and reticence rather than self-assurance when papers are dealing with religion.¹ This seems to be true in this case, too. Many journalists simply feel uneasy when writing about religious faith. This unease is not necessarily connected with anti-religious sentiments. More often, it stems from the profession's ideals of rational argument and verifiable facts as being the core of good journalism:

'In journalism, we have put faith and spiritual issues in their own box. It's a difficult area because there are no right or wrong answers, no authority is better than another. <...> You can't argue

1 Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and journalism in American discourse*, Thousand Oaks, Sage 1998.

*about God on rational grounds. Maybe that is why it's a difficult theme for journalists.'*¹

*'It's so difficult to argue about faith. You can always have an argument about politics; you can contradict. But about faith issues, you can't debate rationally, discussion is pretty much impossible. This is the difficulty I think.'*²

*'It's a bottomless swamp, when people start quoting the Bible and interpreting it. <...> Those things are so abstract and just in people's heads. The papers prefer concrete or at least somehow unambiguous issues.'*³

Journalism essentially operates in the realm of reason, based on evidence and assuming that any true statement can be objectively verified. Religion, in the realm of spirit, is based on faith and assumes that truth is the word of God.⁴ However, this is not an obstacle to coverage, nor should it prevent criticism. We cannot observe God, but we can observe faith and its consequences and cover them like any other phenomenon in the world. As on any beat, self-assurance comes with experience and practice. The majority of the interviewees ended up by saying that there should be more, better coverage of religion. What would that mean? What kind of stories did they want to write and read?

The British and Finnish interviewees working in the national press shared one common wish. They wanted to find out what motivates religious belief and how it affects the lives and actions of individuals, as well as the cultures and policies of nations. Several interviewees suggested that we do not necessarily know even the religiousness in our home countries. Rather than sit in the office assuming things, we should get out and go to see what people are thinking and what they are doing—Anglican churchgoers in Middle England, Muslims in Luton and Pentecostals in small Finnish towns. These are the people and places that journalists from the national media rarely visit. At the same time, journalists do not wish to end up advocating faith or forwarding religious propaganda. When asked what kind of stories they did not want to see in the papers, especially the Finns put 'proselytizing' stories at the top of the list.

The media reflects the dominant discourse on religion but they also help to create and recreate it. Would an increased, deeper coverage of religion make the world a more religious place? Not necessarily. The more the newspapers cover faith, the more it comes under scrutiny, too. Journalism always concentrates on the defects, problems and fractures between the ideal and reality. At the end

1 Interview with Risto Uimonen, 29.12.2008, Espoo.

2 Interview with Elina Järvinen 30.12.2008, Helsinki.

3 Interview with Jarno Mällinen 12.1.2009, Oulu.

4 Kevin Marsh, Ariel 7.10.2008.

of the day, more information and a greater understanding hardly strengthen the power of religion over people. More probably, it gives people a better grasp of religion.

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Last but not least, thank you Juho, Iikka and Nuutti for sharing with me this exciting year in a foreign country.

Interviewed journalists

Roger Alton (editor-in-chief, the Independent)
Stephen Bates (staff writer, former religious affairs correspondent, the Guardian)
Andrew Brown (editor of the belief website, the Guardian)
Ian Brunskill (faith editor, the Times)
Ruth Gledhill (religious affairs correspondent, the Times)
James Harding (editor-in-chief, the Times)
John Lloyd (contributing editor, the Financial Times)
John Micklethwait (editor-in-chief, the Economist)
Jonathan Petre (news reporter, Mail on Sunday, former religion correspondent for the Sunday Telegraph)
George Pitcher (religion editor, the Daily Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph)
Alan Rusbridger (editor-in-chief, the Guardian)
Jerome Taylor (religious affairs correspondent, the Independent)
Jonathan Wynne-Jones (religious affairs correspondent, the Sunday Telegraph)

Elina Järvinen (staff writer, Suomen Kuvalehti)
Tero Karjalainen (staff writer, culture section, Keskisuomalainen)
Jari Lindholm (staff writer, Suomen Kuvalehti)
Pekka Mervola (editor-in-chief, Keskisuomalainen)
Pekka Mikkola (editorial writer, Kaleva)
Jarno Mällinen (staff writer, weekly supplement Peto, Kaleva)
Anna-Stina Nykänen (staff writer, Helsingin Sanomat)
Tapani Ruokanen (editor-in-chief, Suomen Kuvalehti)
Aino Suhola (special editor, Keskisuomalainen)
Paavo Tukkimäki (staff writer, domestic news section, Helsingin Sanomat)
Risto Uimonen (editor-in-chief, Kaleva)
Janne Virkkunen (editor-in-chief, Helsingin Sanomat)

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