

Religion, media, and democracy in the Nordic countries

*A scoping review of empirical research
2011–2024*

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of empirical research at the intersection between religion, democracy, and media in the Nordic countries. Based on a scoping review of 46 studies published between January 2011 and June 2024, we identify how scholarly attention has concentrated on Islam and Muslim minorities, often in the context of mediatised conflict, securitisation, or cultural tension. The studies commonly focus on practices through which mainstream media underplays religious complexity and reproduces tensions between democratic ideals, such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech. While some studies address non-institutional actors and new media platforms, these remain relatively underexplored in Nordic literature engaging in the intersection of religion, media, and democracy. This scoping review highlights gaps in current scholarship and calls for broader engagement with how religion modulates and structures democratic participation, as well as closer attention to emerging media environments and non-institutional religiosity.

KEYWORDS: Nordic, religion, democracy, media, scoping review

Introduction

The presence, visibility, or mediatisation of religion in the public media spheres of the Nordic countries is a highly complex and heterogeneous area of scholarly inquiry. From a historical perspective, the Nordic countries are often considered similar in terms of our welfare societies, media ecologies, and, with specific pertinence to this review, in connection with Evangelical Lutheran state church traditions as well as with more recent trajectories concerning secularisation of postmodern societies, where the Nordic countries are often considered as being highly secular compared with the rest of Europe and the world. Muslims are a growing minority, with a strong presence in contemporary media debates on religious diversity in the Nordic countries (Furseth, 2015, 2017a; Taira, 2019b; Zuckerman, 2008).

Due to these developments, the status of and perspectives about religion are rapidly evolving. The relative decline of majority Evangelical Lutheran churches relates to immigration as well as to disaffiliation and the growing number of people who choose to remain outside any faith community (Furseth et al., 2017). Adding in developments regarding the political mobilisation of civilisationist (Brubaker, 2017) religious identities, perspectives on multiculturalism, and the role of women or values related to the family in societies make evaluating the position that religion has in the Nordic democracies and media environments a multifaceted endeavour where the results are not often in a form that would allow a straightforward provision of an overview.

A few research projects and publications in recent years have taken up this challenge, and outcomes include comprehensive contributions that delve into questions and data relating to religion in the Nordic public spheres (the NOREL study, Furseth, 2017b), media dynamics and conflicts around religion in Scandinavia (Lundby, 2019), and religion in Nordic newspapers (*TEMENOS* special issue, Taira, 2019a), to name a few. In addition to these encompassing publications, the subfield of research on religion and media is active within the context of the Nordic countries, sustaining lively scholarly theorisation and discussion thereof with regard to, for example, positions on the mediatisation of religion (e.g., Hjarvard, 2008; Hjarvard & Løvheim, 2012; Løvheim & Lynch, 2011).

Despite the growing interest in the intersections of religion, media, and democracy in the Nordic countries, there is currently no consolidated mapping of this interdisciplinary field. As these themes gain relevance in public discourse and policymaking, an overview of the empirical research is essential for identifying knowledge gaps, bringing together diverse findings and insights, and setting an agenda for future research. As such, this scoping review endeavours to bring together individual empirical research relating to religion and the media in the Nordic countries, to map the state of this subfield, and to identify areas where further research could be especially warranted. Additionally, and as per the question at the centre of this special issue, research focusing on the mediated realities in terms of religion and democracy in the Nordic countries have not been previously systematically examined.

We operationalised the research aim – to map and to review research that explores the intersection between religion, democracy, media, and the Nordics – into the exploratory research question that allows us to effectively scope and map the empirical literature:

- What scientific understanding can we gather from publications between 2011 and 2024 about the intersection of religion and democratic society in the context of Nordic media sphere?

Before engaging with the data collection to produce a corpus for answering this question, we first defined the initial key concepts that served as the basis for pinning down the keywords to be used in search queries.

Methods and data

The findings presented in this article are based on a scoping review of the existing literature conducted in 2024, with 20 June 2024 as the cut-off point for collecting recently published research. According to Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2019), scoping reviews have substantial unrealised potential in social sciences. A scoping review is a tool for determining the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic, giving indication of the volume of literature available as well as an overview of its focus. Where systematic reviews endeavour to answer specific research questions through systematic evaluations of existing knowledge, scoping reviews are particularly useful for examining emerging research topics and for conducting an overview of a topic that is diffusely distributed among fields that might not systematically communicate with each other.

The purpose of a scoping review is to map the available research on a given theme and offer insight into how (e.g., specific academic discipline as well as data, methodology, topics, or concepts, depending on the chosen perspective) this research has been conducted (Munn et al., 2018; Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2019; Severin-Nielsen, 2023). In this scoping review, we also seek to extract some of the main findings in the research covered, contributing to an understanding of what the current state-of-the-art research suggests about how media, religion, and democracy are intertwined, and what specific insights are made available to form the foundation for further analysis.

Data collection and inclusion criteria

As the first step, we searched for scientific publications from 1 January 2011 to 20 June 2024 in Scopus, Google Scholar, and the University of Helsinki database. We used four categories of keywords (including their inflected and derivative forms) and only included results where at least one keyword from each category was present. The categories consist of the following keywords:

- Category 1: religion (relig*)
- Category 2: media (media*) OR journalism (journali*)
- Category 3: democracy (democra*) OR politics (politi*)

- Category 4: Nordic OR Sweden (Swed*) OR Finland (Finla*; Finn*) OR Norway (Norw*) OR Denmark (Denma*; Dan*) OR Iceland (Iceland*)

Concerning the inclusion of research from categories 1 (religion) and 2 (media), we relied on authors' definitions and conceptualisations of how these fields are delineated and what they encompass. In practice, this means that when these dimensions are addressed in the included keywords or the concluding discussions, the articles are included in the scoping review. For category 3 (democracy), a similar approach could not be adopted. In this body of literature (as in many others), democracy is commonly addressed in a broad sense, for example, as a contextual factor indicating the societal conditions and institutional arrangements linked to the setting where the research is conducted, or to emphasise the societal, rather than specifically democracy-related, significance of the findings. Classifying contributions that only connect to democracy in this manner as democracy-pertinent literature would entail, in practice, abandoning category 3 as an independent inclusion criterion.

For this reason, we required democracy to be addressed as one of the focal points: an object of analysis tied to specific processes or principles like participation, contestation, or accountability. This is in line with Robert Dahl's seminal definition of democracy: procedurally as a system of governance emphasising institutional accountability, competitive elections, and civic participation, and substantively as a system that upholds pluralism, equality, and the rule of law (Dahl, 1956/2006). To ensure such focus would be consistently present in the research included in this scoping review, we proceeded to manually exclude works where democracy primarily features as a contextual consideration. As a practical means of avoiding unintentional exclusion of scholarship that connects religion and media to parliamentary politics and the democratic political arena in the Dahlian sense, we introduced an additional keyword search for "politics" (politi*) in this category. As a result, this review consistently covers democracy-pertinent literature, including studies where the term "democracy" may not feature prominently or where its conceptual dimension is not fully pursued.

This keyword search yielded 114 hits in Scopus. To ensure this search reliably found the scientific publications we were looking for, we also ran the search with the same parameters for the academic journals *Religions*, *Nordicom Review*, *TEMENOS - Nordic Journal for the Study of Religions*, and *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*. Finally, we ran searches in Google Scholar and in the University of Helsinki's publication database Helka with similar and slightly altered keywords. This manual search yielded 22 additional publications for further inspection. This iterative data collection process resulted in an initial corpus of 136 texts.

As the first step, we read the 136 abstracts for the purpose of including all texts that deal with the thematic subject matter: the role of religion and media from the perspective of democracy in Nordic countries. A total of 96 texts were determined to fit within this thematic scope. These full-text PDFs were uploaded to Atlas.ti CADQAS software, where we could proceed to apply our formal exclusion criteria. We familiarised ourselves with the introductions, findings, and concluding sections of these publications, in order to further tighten our sample and to categorise the publications thematically.

As one of the key criteria for this literature review was the presence of empirical analysis, 34 of the 96 studies were excluded on the basis that they focused on conceptual or theoretical issues, had an essayistic form, or were strictly meta-analyses. In addition to this implementation of our exclusion criteria, we excluded 18 more publications that did not, upon further inspection, adhere to the criterion of incorporating religion, democracy, media, and the Nordic countries as central analytical themes. Of these eighteen, ten were excluded for only mentioning democracy-related issues as part of contextualisation, without addressing them in the research questions, analysis, or conclusions; four publications were excluded for similarly lacking focus on media content, culture, or institutions; one was excluded because religion did not feature among the focal points; and another one was excluded for lacking a clear connection to the Nordic countries. Two publications were further excluded due to accessibility issues that couldn't be resolved (e.g., by getting the pre-print versions directly from the authors). Applying the exclusion criteria in this manner resulted in the removal of 52 publications. Finally, two more publications were added to the corpus based on suggestions received during the review process, amounting to a final corpus of 46 publications.

Results

Of the 46 empirical studies included in this review, approximately two thirds have been published in scholarly journals located at the nexus of media studies, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, politics, and conflict studies. The rest have been published in international, edited book volumes focusing on similar disciplines and topics. The time span of publishing extends over the 14-year period, with a larger density of publications ($n = 30$) clustering around the second half of the time period (2018–2024). This appears to reflect the societal phenomena just before and during the time period, particularly related to an upsurge in immigration to Nordic countries and political responses that followed the European “refugee crisis” of 2015. In what follows, we go through some general attributes of the study corpus, depicting the recurring themes and topics per our coding of the review material.

In terms of geographical distribution, studies focusing on Norwegians or the Norwegian society were most prevalent ($n = 21$), with a Swedish focus being second most common ($n = 16$), Danish the third ($n = 14$), and Finnish as the least frequent ($n = 3$). No studies centring on Iceland were present in the final corpus. As five articles analyse two or more countries, the combined country code frequency ($n = 54$) is greater than the corpus size ($n = 46$). Regarding the distribution of religious emphasis on the studied empirical analyses – which religions were at the centre of analysis in each study – significant variation was lacking, as the majority of the studies focused on themes relating to Islam ($n = 36$), or to a lesser extent, Evangelical Lutheran Christianity ($n = 14$). Finally, Judaism ($n = 4$), Revivalist Christianity ($n = 2$), Orthodox Christianity ($n = 1$), and religiosity (non-denominational) ($n = 4$) were examined in a total of 11 studies.

The sources of empirical data in the corpus are in line with the distinct mediatisation of phenomena involving religion and democracy as researched in the Nordic context, with the data commonly sourced from print journalism ($n = 24$), social media ($n = 13$), or television and radio ($n = 9$). Micro-level interactions were also frequently examined with interviews and ethnographic data ($n = 12$). Less prevalent sources of data analysed in the corpus include religious publications ($n = 5$), other online sources (such as countermedia, blogs, and fast messaging apps) ($n = 5$), and surveys ($n = 3$). These findings are presented in Table 1, which provides an overview of the corpus composition.

Table 1 Overview of the scoping review corpus ($n = 46$)

Attributes		Number of publications
Publication year	2011–2017	15
	2018–2024	31
Countries studied	Norway	21
	Sweden	16
	Denmark	14
	Finland	3
Data source	Press	25
	Social media	13
	Interview and/or ethnography	12
	Radio	5
	Religious publication	5
	Other online source (countermedia, blogs, fast messaging apps)	5
	Television	4
	Survey	3
Religion focus	Islam	36
	Evangelical Lutheranism	14
	Religiosity (non-denominational)	4
	Judaism	4
	Revivalist Christianity	2
	Orthodox Christianity	1
Media interest	Traditional media	29
	Digital media	17
	Television and radio	9
	Political communication	6
	Public sphere	6
	Public service media	5
Democracy relevance	Minority relations	35
	Nationalism	21
	Security and threat	18
	Democratic ideals	13
	Conflict case	11
	Extremist mobilisation and terrorism	9
	Populism	7
	Public officials	5
	Citizenship	5

Media interest was notated along the lines of the specific media data studied in most cases; for example, press-derived data (journalistic material from mainstream media sources) was coded as traditional media, and studies utilising social media or other Internet data were coded as referring to digital media. In individual studies' datasets that were not gathered primarily from media sources (interviews, ethnographic data, and surveys), we assigned media codes in order to accurately map the various media perspectives in our corpus.

Media perspectives regarding interview, survey, or ethnographic data centred on traditional media ($n = 6$), digital media ($n = 5$), the public sphere ($n = 5$), and television ($n = 2$). Two additional, more specific media codes were utilised (in terms of both analyses relying on media data and interview, survey, or ethnography data) to specify media-related viewpoints further: political communication (media appearances, social media use of politicians and so on; $n = 6$) and public service media (discussion on the content or role of public broadcasting in Nordic countries; $n = 5$).

Finally, given the focus of this special issue, particular attention was given to the themes and subthemes related to democracy in the corpus. To accurately depict the studies gathered here, we inductively and iteratively generated eight codes for marking key elements of democracy relevance, which were assigned to publications in the corpus based on the thematic subject matter present in research questions and conclusions. These codes were distributed as follows: minority relations ($n = 35$), nationalism ($n = 21$), security and threat ($n = 18$), democratic ideals ($n = 13$), conflict case ($n = 11$), extremist mobilisation and terrorism ($n = 9$), populism ($n = 7$), citizenship ($n = 5$), and government officials ($n = 5$).

In what follows, we take an in-depth look at four thematic clusters that formed around the most prominent democracy codes: minority relations, nationalism, security and threat, and democratic ideals. We have chosen this manner of presentation to showcase the most recurring dimensions relating to empirical analyses on media, religion, and democracy in the Nordic countries. Through examining these publications, we endeavour to identify potential research gaps regarding contemporary Nordic democratic societies and religious dimensions, undercurrents, and conflicts thereof.

Minority relations

The most frequently used democracy-related coding in our data-driven categorisation of the research corpus was minority relations ($n = 35$), appearing in as many as 78 per cent of the studies included in this review. As the name suggests, the minority relations code was applied to studies that focus on the relationships and dynamics between different population groupings, and analysis was mostly directed at how these dynamics were presented, reproduced, or perhaps critiqued through different mediums and in public discourse.

All reviewed studies focusing on topics such as conflict case, citizenship, democracy relevance, survey, television, and public service media discuss minority relations to a meaningful extent. Minority relations were analysed with research

data collected across a range of media outlets and platforms, from print journalism ($n = 20$) to social media ($n = 8$) and television and radio ($n = 8$). In terms of media perspectives taken in interviews ($n = 8$), ethnographic analyses ($n = 5$), or surveys ($n = 3$), both traditional and digital media, as well as a more general public sphere perspective, were relatively evenly spread between publications.

Of the 35 studies discussing minority relations, there were six cases where Islam did not have a significant role in the research questions or conclusions. Notably, ethnic categorisation of immigrants (mostly assumed to have migrated from the African continent or the Middle East) was commonly not differentiated from religious categorisation. As a result, when Islam and Muslims were studied, the research typically focused on migrant communities, with Islam often functioning as a marker of non-autochthonous culture. This cultural difference was also the backdrop against which the ethnic dynamics and conflicts – latent, chronic, as well as acute – were examined. This convergence was thus negotiated in media data, interviews, and so on, and subsequently in the analyses and discussions in these studies themselves.

Conflict was one of the most prevalent contexts for addressing minority relations in the reviewed studies. We decided to distinguish between general cultural tension related to ethnic relations (that was present in most of the studies linked to the minority relations code) from studies that covered one or several specific conflict cases ($n = 11$). In the case studies, violent conflicts and their aftermaths were investigated from a perspective of Islam's contested position as a religion inherently marked by conflict, extremism, and terrorism (see, e.g., Bødker & Ngomba, 2018; Larsson & Mattsson, 2024; Sumiala & Harju, 2019; Toft, 2024). These studies uncovered relatively complex ways in which mainstream media, social media users, or politicians frame Islam in relation to conflict, and how those framings might not always amount to primarily derogative representations. Additionally, a few studies show the mechanisms relating to how sociocultural incidents (often in some form of public debate) centring on ethnic and/or religious prejudice lead to distrust or tension (see, e.g., Jensdotter & Lövheim, 2020; Simonsen et al., 2019). Finally, several studies addressing specific conflicts investigated the minority experiences and perspectives (see, e.g., Hjarvard & Rosenfeldt, 2017; Jakku, 2018) amidst these conflicts.

Among publications in the corpus that discuss Islam, only a minority ($n = 8$) do so without a significant link to minority relations. Instead, they address various ways in which Islam and Muslims are denigrated in social or sub-cultural print media for specific societal or in-group purposes. These studies explore, for example, Islamophobic social media entries (Døving & Emberland, 2021; Farkas et al., 2018) and media strategies of the far-right (e.g., Steiner, 2014). Interestingly, ten of the thirteen publications investigating Evangelical Lutheran Christianity also focus on Islam. Established mainstream Christianity is thus mostly examined through its relationship with Islam, Muslims, or migrant citizens and communities, giving the impression that Evangelical Lutheran Christianity does not, by itself, noticeably factor into tension or phenomena regarding Nordic democracies in the media.

There are 35 publications included the minority relations cluster (Abdel-Fadil, 2017, 2018; Abdelhady & Malmberg, 2019; Alghasi, 2019; Andreassen, 2012; Bangstad, 2013; Bødker & Ngomba, 2018; Demker, 2023; Døving, 2016; Ezzati, 2021; Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Helseth, 2018; Hjarvard & Rosenfeldt, 2017, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Jakku, 2018; Jensdotter & Lövheim, 2020; Johnsen & Johansen, 2021; Kühle & Langholm Larsen, 2021; Larsson & Mattsson, 2024; Lillevik, 2020; Lundby, 2019; Lundby & Thorbjørnsrud, 2012; Lundby, Hjarvard et al., 2017; Lövheim, 2017, 2019; Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2018; Lövheim et al., 2018; Repstad, 2018; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2019; Sumiala & Harju, 2019; Thomas & Selimovic, 2015; Toft, 2024; van Es, 2021).

Nationalism

Unlike most of the thematic subject matter in the corpus, the contributions focusing on nationalism ($n = 21$) do not form easily identifiable thematic clusters. Instead, this category of scholarship is most evenly spread between different types of publications, finding its way into multiple clusters with the widest thematic overlaps with Islam ($n = 17$) and minority relations ($n = 13$). The three publications that do not address either of these two themes delve into the geopolitics of disinformation dissemination concerning alleged transgressions against the Russian Orthodox community in Finland (Teivainen, 2014), politicisation and banalisation of religious issues in Scandinavian news-framing practices (Grishaeva, 2019), and the role of anti-elitism and the notions of the “pure” people as an amalgamation between the editorials by the radical right and the “Evangelical suprematist” publications in Sweden (Lundström, 2023).

Interestingly, all research that approaches religion and the Nordic countries with the political communication media angle ($n = 6$) in our corpus also focuses on nationalism. These publications examine sources of religiously framed conflict between the autochthonous population and the Muslim Other, such as mainstream politicians’ rhetoric of threats to gender equality (Andreassen, 2012), anti-immigration parties’ mobilisation rhetoric (Hellström & Hervik, 2014), or more diffuse types of hybrid media interplay contributing to proliferation of “banalised” understandings of religion and national identity (Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2023).

The nationalism cluster also often investigates less formal online contexts. For instance, through social media ethnography, researchers have identified civilisationist practices for contesting the essence of Christianity and the affordances in the social media for discursively “hijacking” religion in support of collective self-understanding and national identity (Abdel-Fadil, 2018), the documentation of the algorithmic violence by Facebook pages dedicated to “fake Islamist” propaganda to provoke anti-Muslim reactions and the potential avenues for countering this phenomenon (Farkas et al., 2018), and how mediated violence conducted by a Muslim perpetrator polarises Twitter discussions between essentialised and more nuanced understandings of the role of Islam in the Nordic context (Sumiala & Harju, 2019).

There are 21 publications included the nationalism cluster (Abdel-Fadil, 2018, 2023; Alghasi, 2019; Andreassen, 2012; Christensen, 2019; Demker, 2023; Ezzati, 2021; Farkas et al., 2018; Grishaeva, 2019; Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Jensdotter & Lövheim, 2020; Johnsen & Johansen, 2021; Larsson & Mattsson, 2024; Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2023; Lövheim et al., 2018; Lundby, Hjarvard et al., 2017; Lundström, 2023; Steiner, 2014; Sumiala & Harju, 2019; Teivainen, 2014; Toft, 2024).

Security and threat

One of the key clusters of research contribution emerges around questions related to security and threat ($n = 18$). This cluster significantly overlaps with Islam ($n = 16$) – only one article is not focusing on Islam or Muslims – and is also often associated with terrorism ($n = 5$) and extremist mobilisation ($n = 4$). These publications address the threats from two complementary angles: One further examines the implicit threats linked to Islamic culture and the Muslim Other as perceived among the autochthonous population or in a range of media outlets, and the other on more tangible safety concerns revolving around Islamist and (less commonly) domestic right-wing extremism.

The analysis of implicit threats elucidates the prevalence of conflict-oriented and securitising news-framing practices and their role in exacerbating ethnic inequalities and strife (Jacobsen et al., 2012). More specific approaches include analyses on the unique challenges in halal's marketing potential created by fear-mongering newspaper coverage about "covert Islamisation" (Thomas & Selimovic, 2015), mosque-building as a source of cross-cultural encounters drawing from intense emotional registers where the public Muslim presence can be portrayed as "re-territorialisation of Islam" (Simonsen et al., 2019), and the undue focus on radicalisation leading to securitising and dehumanising repertoires observed in the context of mainstream coverage of the 2015 "refugee crisis" (Abdelhady & Malmberg, 2019).

In addition to analysing securitisation as a process, several contributions assess more active forms of agency that may undermine a national sense of safety. This scholarship encompasses online conspiracy talk as the far-right's tool for sense-making, community-seeking, and mainstreaming of fear-mongering repertoires (Døving & Emberland, 2021); countermedia curation of coverage that links Muslim communities to negative affects and the production of "sticky" media objects to be injected into journalistic output (Abdel-Fadil, 2023); security officials' talking points about Islam on social media that serve to polarise public debate by juxtaposing Islam and conflict with liberal values and "Christian Norwegian-hood" (Lundby & Thorbjørnsrud, 2012); as well as the challenges and backlashes to Muslim communities as a result of publicly condemning terrorism associated with Islamist ideologies as un-Islamic (van Es, 2021).

There are 18 publications included the security and threat cluster (Abdel-Fadil, 2018, 2023; Abdelhady & Malmberg, 2019; Bødker & Ngomba, 2018; Christensen, 2019; Døving & Emberland, 2021; Ezzati, 2021; Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Lundby & Thorbjørnsrud, 2012; Lundby,

Hjarvard et al., 2017; Simonsen et al., 2019; Steiner, 2014; Sumiala & Harju, 2019; Thomas & Selimovic, 2015; Toft, 2024; Valaskivi, Jääskeläinen et al., 2023; van Es, 2021).

Democratic ideals

We employed the democratic ideals code for denoting scholarship that concentrates on human rights, religious freedom, freedom of speech, gender equality, as well as societal and interpersonal ideals considered as ethical (e.g., upholding multiculturalism or inclusivity). Unsurprisingly, democratic ideals were most often discussed in relation to minority relations ($n = 12$) and Islam ($n = 11$), usually in contexts where human rights and religious freedom (of the Muslim population) were conflicted with the (non-Muslim) majority population's understandings of acceptable cultural conduct or acceptable representations of cultural identity. Additionally, these studies state that religious freedom as well as other ethical, humanistic ideals were often depicted as conflicting with the freedom of speech in the analysed media content (see, e.g., Alghasi, 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Larsson & Mattsson, 2024; Lövheim, 2017).

This cluster includes several publications that examine public controversies – including their mediation and mediatisation – and pinpoint certain “dual standards” or general ambiguousness, stating that media coverage upholds certain ideals whilst simultaneously circulating or reproducing Islamophobic content (e.g., Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2018) in the media framings themselves. Various studies point out the systematically negative framings of Islam in the media.

In terms of media outlets and platforms, democratic ideals were typically studied in our sample through press data ($n = 8$). In studies relying on interview data ($n = 2$) or survey data ($n = 2$), both traditional media ($n = 2$) and the public sphere ($n = 2$) were the most prevalent themes discussed. As an established societal institution and arguably the main component of a public sphere that functions as an arena of societal power as well as negotiations and critiques of that power (see Habermas, 1992; Taylor, 1992), print journalism participates in value talk as part of its journalistic duty to the citizenry (e.g., Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2018, on public service media). With a citizenry composed of both autochthonous citizens and a Muslim population with immigrant backgrounds, as well as people located on opposing sides of the political field, a few studies conclude that print journalism is depicted as being duty-bound to navigate controversial cultural topics (Lövheim et al., 2018) while defusing potentially polarising conflicts.

At the very least, studies depicting these dynamics appear to hold an implicit understanding that print media (especially in Nordic societies widely considered as socially democratic) should lean towards tolerance and understanding in cases regarding minorities and minority rights (e.g., Bangstad, 2013). Media analyses that investigate the representations of democratic ideals discuss navigating these values in traditional media, often concluding that the Muslim population is not genuinely represented in these discussions and is instead depicted through stereotyping and as devoid of full democratic agency (see, e.g., Axner, 2013; Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Helseth, 2018).

There are 13 publications included the democratic ideals cluster (Axner, 2013; Bangstad, 2013; Demker, 2023; Døving, 2016; Ezzati, 2021; Helseth, 2018; Jakku, 2018; Jensdotter & Lövheim, 2020; Larsson & Mattsson, 2024; Lillevik, 2020; Lövheim, 2017; Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2018; Lövheim et al., 2018).

Concluding discussion

Empirical research focusing on the intersection of democracy, religion, and the media environment in the Nordic countries prioritises topics relating to Islam, often focusing on high-profile controversies or mediated conflicts. This scholarship commonly addresses how Islam interfaces with several facets of the autochthonous culture in the Nordic countries – with a particular focus on how these mediated social and political encounters reinforce tensions, conflicts, and negative stereotypes. This reflects both the priorities of public debate and the logics of media coverage. A focus on Islam dominates the analyses reviewed, with 78 per cent of publications ($n = 36$) including Islam among key research questions, conclusions, or data collection rationales. Several of the remaining publications ($n = 10$) do include some references to Islam or Muslims as well, although not on the level of main research aims. It thus appears that conversations in Nordic media or in studies examining that media often have Islam in mind when religion (and specifically, the intersection between societal perspectives and religion) is brought into focus. Future research would benefit from an added focus on the integrative roles of religion in democratic life, such as civic participation or ethical deliberation, and could be facilitated by linking democratic theory to empirical data when identifying and examining the “problem-space” of democracy, especially where related to religion and media.

The meta-analysis of our corpus indicates that the civic or popular responses to Muslim immigration – particularly the question of whether “Islam is a threat to *our* native cultures” – is an increasingly complex and contested debate in the public sphere (see, e.g., Hjarvard & Rosenfeldt, 2018). Considering, as Hjarvard and Rosenfeldt pointed out, that the boundaries between religion and culture are often indeterminate, their conflation in the empirical material analysed may be carried on into the analysis in the studies reviewed, unless the conflation itself is taken as an object for critical inquiry. In our corpus, Døving (2016) focused on representations and experiences of Jews, who are, on the one hand, protected as a minority group in Norway, but on the other, whose customs (such as kosher rules and circumcision) are still commonly branded as harking back to ancient, barbaric times, similarly to practices such as halal, hijab, and arranged marriage. The mediation of religious practice, including intergroup comparisons, emerges as an area with considerable potential for further research.

Several articles in the corpus elucidate how a range of Nordic media environments – particularly mainstream print journalism, other news content, and content disseminated by public service media – rarely differentiate Islam as a range of (assumed) religious vocation or practice from Islam as a marker of migrant background or culture. In the empirical material analysed, “Islam” and

“Muslims” thus function mainly as categorisations that are utilised to simplify the heterogeneous field of actors and citizens in Nordic societies. Many articles underline that, particularly in public debate, the range of affiliations to Islam and their cultural functions are often overshadowed by its role as a marker of migrant culture perceived as the Other. Thus, oftentimes a Muslim identity attributed to either specific or ambiguous groups of people becomes, in effect, a shorthand identifier for a community with immigrant background.

This conflation points to two types of lacunae in the scholarship addressing religion, media, and the democratic society in the Nordic countries. The first one calls for a systematic assessment of the extent to which societal tensions linked to behaviour, custom, or practices of community organisation may originate in religious belief or practice – as opposed to being brought about by immigrant background. Secondly, the existing scholarship invites further critical and conceptual engagement with what may be achieved or lost by linking those phenomena to religion that may not be stemming from religious practice per se – especially in cases where religiously framed identities largely operate on the level of civilisationist belonging (Brubaker, 2017), driving populist or even Christianist (Ryan, 2021) mobilisation.

We identified the hybrid mediation of religious (or “religion-like”) belief and practice as a research area warranting further investigation, especially where the pertinent claims and narratives directly engage with or reinterpret democratic values and ideals. Lundström (2023) has analysed political thought in Swedish revivalist newspapers and introduced the concept of evangelical supremacy that underlines the tie-ins between Christian revivalist and the political ideology of radical nationalism. As populist rhetoric, disinformation and extremist or “alt” actors often stem from Christian ideations – whether revivalist, Lutheran, non-denominational, or “civilisational” (Brubaker, 2017; see also Valaskivi, Sumiala et al., 2023) – the emergence of new forms of allegiances between revivalist Christianity, populism, and radical right point to an interesting, topical, and understudied area of inquiry that merits further study. Considering the relative dominance of qualitative case studies in the corpus, particularly discourse and content analyses, such future research would benefit from integrating longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods approaches that remain comparatively rare in the corpus.

The mainstream media’s portrayals of migrants and Islam often reflect a double-standard dynamic that juxtaposes inclusivity and equality with freedom of speech – a tension we illustrated in the section on democratic ideals. The invocation of such ideals across a range of media spaces frequently rests on a foundational categorisation of Islam as a “non-native religion” to Nordic societies. By contrast, if conservative Christian faith were similarly scrutinised through the lens of democratic ideals, the narrative would likely shift from grappling with xenophobia to confronting different kinds of perceived threats to ostensibly secular Nordic cultural norms and ways of life. Considering the rise of right-wing populism over the past decade – and its notable appropriation of religious symbols and sentiments – mainstream media’s ambivalent, favourable,

or critical portrayals of what might be called “civilisational Christianity” constitute a pressing and timely object for media analyses. Moreover, in light of recent experiences with terrorism and the Israel–Palestine conflict, and their translocal repercussions in the Nordic media sphere, investigation into the impact of conflictual and assuaging value-talk in the representations of migrant religiosity (Ezzati, 2021) presents a promising avenue for future research.

Some publications further address the intersection of religion, media, and democratic society in a manner that points to research areas that remain underexplored and merit closer attention. For instance, Valaskivi, Jääskeläinen, Huhtamäki, and Sumiala (2023) investigated conspiratorial content circulating online by delving into “conspiratorial populist imagination” amidst loosely structured online communities made of Christian revivalist groups as well as non-denominational actors of the conspiratorial “cultic milieu” (Campbell, 2002) or believers in a good–evil duality at work in society.

At first glance, social media is at least somewhat represented in our study corpus, as 13 of the 46 articles use material gathered from social media as (at least as a part of) the utilised datasets. However, the investigation of democratic themes regarding media platforms that have rapidly taken over a large part of the cultural and political space (TikTok, Instagram, X, and instant messaging applications such as Signal and Telegram) in Nordic societies are largely absent in our corpus. Only four articles (Sumiala & Harju, 2019; Kühle & Langholm Larsen, 2021; Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2023; Valaskivi, Jääskeläinen et al., 2023) venture further than Facebook in looking at how issues relating to religion and democracy manifest in these emerging yet highly popular and relevant digital platforms. There appears to be an urgent need for gathering data on, for example, how younger generations interact with societal questions pertaining to religious and political matters, as many young users cannot arguably be located discussing these matters on Facebook or in the comments sections of online newspapers. This way, studying religion, media, and democracy in the Nordic countries might take a well-justified step away from institutionalised broadcasters of information (television and the press, which seem to be most enthusiastically researched here) towards a more fast-paced public arena where public opinion is less diluted by journalistic practices. Such questions related to the perceived volatility of contemporary democratic systems could incentivise an even more politics-centred approach into looking at how religious issues are discussed and perhaps contested in our societies.

Meanwhile, despite lacking data from these new social media platforms, many of the studies investigate emergent, and hence complex and ambiguous, societal developments as they are forming. This commonly results in more exploratory analyses where specific new findings (“What do we know about X?”) may be difficult to pinpoint. This calls for future research that builds on these exploratory approaches by operationalising more focused sets of research questions for the analysis of larger empirical datasets, perhaps even some Big Data approaches, which are absent in this corpus. As the public roles of religion and the legitimacy of democratic institutions are being renegotiated around the

globe – including across the Nordic countries – building on existing research through more systematic and comparative approaches offers valuable potential for deepening our understanding of these dynamics.

Taken together, what do we know about religion, media, and democracy in the Nordic countries based on this scoping review? First, the body of Nordic scholarship addressing each of these three encompassing thematic areas tends to focus on Islam and Muslim minorities, often articulating how media output contributes to public controversies, securitisation, or cultural tension. Second, mainstream media – especially legacy journalism – plays a key role in framing religious actors and discourses yet rarely captures their own agency or internal diversity in depth. Third, democratic ideals such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech are often placed in tension with each other, particularly in the media-driven public debate. Finally, while emerging digital platforms and non-institutional religious actors are beginning to receive scholarly attention, systematic research into how these spaces mediate religious expression and democratic engagement remains limited.

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