The public role of religion has been a recurrent topic of debate in the sociology of religion. This debate gained momentum with José Casanova’s book *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) in which he claimed that a worldwide deprivatization of religion was taking place. Only a few years later, Peter L. Berger (1999) argued that large parts of the world were characterized by desecularization, even if Europe continued to be secular. In 2006, Jürgen Habermas labelled modern, Western societies as postsecular (Habermas, 2006). The question that forms the title of Titus Hjelm’s (2015) book *Is God back?* is indeed pertinent in debates on the public sphere in Nordic countries.

During the past decades, new interfaith infrastructures have emerged in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland that enable a great variety of faith communities to participate as civil society actors in the public sphere. Whereas the Nordic Lutheran majority churches previously had hegemonic positions in the public sphere as it related to religious issues, new channels of communication have developed that change the ways in which faith and worldview communities act in the public sphere. The emergence of the new religious infrastructure also seems to have implications for the type of religion that is present in the public sphere. This chapter will map these developments and attempt to explain them.

In the following, we outline the Nordic religious landscapes and the theoretical perspectives that are used. The development of the Nordic interfaith infrastructure is then described, including some critical issues that this development has raised. We then conclude with a discussion of various explanations for the institutional changes that are outlined.

11.1 Nordic Religious Landscapes

A recent study of the public role of religion in the five Nordic countries since 1980 showed both changes and continuity as they relate to the role of religion in the state, politics, media and civil society (see Furseth, 2015; Furseth, forthcoming). The Nordic religious landscapes are changing, with a relative decline in the Christian religion and growth in religions outside Christianity, especially Islam. Sweden, Norway

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43 NOREL was a Nordcorp project, funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS), KIFO Institute for church, religion and worldview research and Uppsala University.
and Denmark are becoming more religiously diverse than Finland and Iceland. The amount of people outside any faith community is also steadily growing. The relationship between the Nordic welfare states and religion is undergoing transformations, with separations and looser ties between the states and the Lutheran majority churches, except in Denmark. Despite this development, the Nordic states continue to be involved in religion in various ways (Käärianen, 2011; Kühle, 2011; Kühle et al., forthcoming; Petursson, 2011; Pettersson, 2011; Schmidt, 2015). In the political sphere, there has been an increase in the invocation of religion in parliamentary debates during the past decades, especially in Denmark, and a tendency to link religion to a growing number of political issues (Lindberg, 2013, 2014, 2015; Lövheim et al., forthcoming). There is also a slight increase in the coverage of religion in the press, albeit not as much as expected, and a growing mediatization of religion that has affected the ways in which religion has been framed in the news media and in the popular media (see Gresaker, 2013; Lundby, this volume; Lundby et al., forthcoming; Lövheim and Lundby 2013).

The focus in this chapter is one segment of civil society, namely the faith and worldview (secular humanist) communities. According to Casanova (1994), the deprivatization of religion has to do with a growing tendency among churches and other religious institutions to reject their assigned space in the private sphere and participate as civil society actors in public debates on what is common good in society and how the state should act on specific issues. In Habermas’ (2008) outline of post-secular society, he also addresses ‘religious voices’ in the public sphere. An important empirical question, then, is: How has the new interfaith infrastructure changed the ways in which faith communities in Nordic countries participate in the public sphere?

Why are faith communities of interest in a study of the Nordic public sphere? As noted in the Introduction, the Nordic countries are neo-corporatist in the sense that they are thoroughly organized with state involvement on several levels, including the area of religion. All the countries have some form of official registration of faith communities, even if registration practices vary by country (and faith communities outside the majority churches are free to remain non-registered). Many faith communities receive public funding. An important question is whether the Lutheran majority churches should be seen as part of civil society in situations when they are more or less semi-autonomous from the state. The Nordic countries are often lumped together as examples of state–church systems. However, Denmark is now the only country with a traditional state church. In fact, religion and state were separated in Finland in the early nineteenth century, and the formal separation between the Lutheran majority church and state took place in Sweden in 2000. There is a growing separation in Norway, and very loose ties in Iceland. Nevertheless, the Lutheran majority churches continue to have ties to the state in various areas. At the same time, they tend to behave much in the same way as other faith communities both at national and local levels, for example, in their statements on public policies. The Lutheran majority churches, except the Danish one, will therefore be viewed as part of civil society here.
11.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Until the 1980s, secularization theories dominated the sociology of religion. There are numerous secularization theories, but Casanova (1994, p. 11–39) divided classical Weberian secularization theory into three theses that will be used here. The first fundamental thesis states that modernization implies the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from the religious sphere. The second thesis states that the consequence of differentiation is the decline and the eventual disappearance of religion, and the third thesis claims that another consequence is the privatization and marginalization of religion in the modern world.

In Jürgen Habermas’ (1989 [1962]) book on the public sphere, he largely followed Weber’s idea that modernization implied differentiation. While religion provided overall sets of values in pre-modern times, these values were fragmented in modern times. For the public sphere to be emancipatory, it must be separated from the economy and religion, and religion did not play any role in the development of the bourgeois public sphere. Later, Habermas argued that discourses can include talk about the truth and the rightfulness of religion, but religion would not serve emancipated communicative action in any fundamental way (Habermas 1982, 1984). In Habermas’ early work, secularization implied differentiation, religious decline and privatization.

Several scholars objected to Habermas’ view of religion as anathema to rational critical discourse. The argument was that Habermas interpreted religion as ‘a monolithic and reified phenomenon’ (Dillon, 1999, pp. 290–291) and ignored the various philosophical influences upon it (Fiorenza, 1992, p. 74). His polarization of reason and religion prevented an understanding of reasoned debates within various religious traditions of doctrine, interpretations and scripture. Critics also focused on Habermas’ view of the public because he normatively excluded religious voices and overlooked the fact that religion often seemed to constitute part of the public (Calhoun, 1992; Casanova, 1994; Herbert, 1996; Zaret, 1992).

The ‘return of public religion’ as an approach in sociology actually appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Robert N. Bellah’s claim that in order to survive, all societies must have a civil religion (Bellah, 1967, 1975; Bellah & Hammond, 1980). In the mid-1980s, Philip E. Hammond (1985) raised the question if the secularization thesis was viable at a time when new religious movements grew and there was an Islamic revolution and conservative Christians who sought political power. A decade later, neo-secularization theorist José Casanova (1994) argued that there was support for the core thesis in secularization theory and that an irreversible historical process of religious differentiation had taken place in the West. There was also support for one of the sub-theses, namely that there was a continuing religious decline at the individual level, especially in Europe. However, he questioned if institutional differentiation necessarily led to the third sub-thesis, the marginalization and privatization of religion. Based on historical sociological studies of public religion in Spain, Poland,
Brazil and the United States, Casanova concluded that since the 1980s a widespread process of ‘deprivatization’ of modern religion had taken place throughout the world.

Habermas’ (2006, 2008) work on post-secularity further stimulated the debate on religion in contemporary society. His concern was not just to understand the public presence of religion but the ways in which secular and religious people can co-exist under conditions of post-secularity (Habermas, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013; Habermas & Ratzinger, 2007; Habermas et al., 2013). Religious and secular actors must be willing to learn from each other as they enter into dialogue. In order for mutual learning to take place, religious statements made in the public sphere must be transformed into general language, and secular actors must be willing to understand religion and not treat religious statements as irrational (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2007; Habermas et al., 2013; Holst & Molander, 2015).

Critics have focused on several aspects of Habermas’ theory of postsecular society (see Calhoun et al., 2013). One issue is his understanding of religion as ‘the totalizing trait of a mode of believing that infuses the very pores of daily life’ (Habermas, 2006, p. 8), which shows that religion becomes severed from practical reason, social context and everyday experiences. Another issue is Habermas’ notion that the constitutional state should ‘act considerately toward all those cultural sources – including religion – out of which civil solidarity and norm consciousness are nourished’ (Habermas, 2006, p. 27). Scholars have pointed out that states are seldom neutral to religion but that they often prefer the religion they know best (Barbalet et al., 2012; Fox, 2007).

More recently, Habermas has admitted that his concept of post-secularity is ‘ideas that are still in flux’ (Habermas, 2013, p. 347). The question is what the term actually means. In Habermas’ attempt at clarification in 2008, post-secularity seems to imply three different but interrelated phenomena: 1) the mere co-existence of religious and secular communities within the constitutional state, 2) the role of churches and religious organizations as ‘communities of interpretation’ in the public arena and 3), the citizen’s ‘consciousness of the phenomenon of the public presence of religion’ (Habermas, 2008, p. 19–20). Post-secularity does not imply a re-sacralization of modern society or that individuals and societies undergo revivals and become more religious, as noted by Casanova (2013, p. 28–34). It seems that Habermas tends to emphasize the understanding of post-secularity as a certain form of consciousness (Habermas, 2008, p. 21, 2013, p. 348). However, this definition raises questions about its usefulness in empirical studies and shows the endemic problems of relating philosophical studies to their empirical basis (Lima, 2013, p. 57).

Inspired by the work of Casanova, Berger and Habermas, there has been a greater focus on the role of religion in the public sphere (Ferrari and Pastorelli, 2012; Lefebvre and Beaman, 2014; Nynäs et al., 2012; Woodhead and Catto, 2012). One way of studying this broad topic empirically is to focus on civil society. There are two theoretical reasons and one empirical reason why a study on civil society is particularly useful. One is that Habermas (1989) located the public sphere between the state and civil society. Later, he included churches and religious organization alongside inter-
est groups and social movements as typical civil society actors who express demands and translate them into political issues and arguments that are debated (Habermas, 2008). Another reason is that Casanova (1994, p. 228–229) saw the participation of civil society religious organizations in public debates where they addressed issues of common good and public policies as signs of deprivatization. A focus on civil society is helpful in assessing if these theories are useful in the case of Nordic countries. The empirical reason is that it is of interest to know how the emergence of the new interfaith infrastructure changes the ways in which the faith and worldview communities participate in the Nordic public sphere.

11.3 Studying the Presence of Religion In the Public Sphere

Faith communities are organizations with a wide variety of aims and functions. They are sites of religious fellowship and worship, ritual performances, teaching, social gatherings, welfare services and so forth. Many faith communities also tend to coordinate their interests by forming various bilateral and multilateral umbrella organizations, where some are intrafaith (one religious tradition) and others are interfaith (several traditions). The following will provide an overview of the development of interfaith initiatives and organizations in the five Nordic countries before some critical issues relating to their role as civil society actors are addressed.

Before doing so, two issues will be clarified. One has to do with the kind of public communication the faith communities conduct in the public sphere. Due to the differentiation of the public sphere, media scholar Terje Rasmussen (2008, pp. 78–81, 2013, p. 100–101) suggests that it is useful to distinguish between two dimensions related to the topics, style and participants involved that serve different democratic functions. The ‘presentational dimension’ has to do with the deliberation over shared issues by central figures who serve as the voice of a group of people. It presents a public agenda and its ideal is rational discourse based on reasoning and argumentation. This dimension is central in the work of Habermas. For example, the mass media have a presentational dimension, as they generalize communication, apply recognizable genres and refer to a limited number of issues. The ‘representational dimension’ refers to the variety of topics, styles and groups that participate that often reflect everyday life and culture. The Internet and social media serve this dimension more than the presentational one, as there is little generalization of themes and styles.

The terminology to describe relations among different religious groups varies between interreligious (often used among Catholics) and interfaith (often used among Protestants in referring to interactions between two religious groups, such as Christians and Jews) (Halafoff 2011, p. 128). We use the term interfaith here, as we discuss both bilateral interactions, such as Christian-Muslim dialogue, and multilateral interactions between several groups.
Another issue is to determine when religion is present in the public sphere. German sociologist Jens Köhrsen argues that in order for religion to be present in the public sphere, it is not enough that religious actors communicate in the public sphere, but the content of their communication must be religious in the sense that they refer to ‘a supernatural, transcendent reality’ (Köhrsen, 2012, p. 280). Such a restrictive view of what is considered the presence of religion may lead one to miss several communications that indicate such a presence. A religious group that speaks for the rights of religious minorities to practice their religion in state institutions by using human rights language would, for example, fall outside his definition of the presence of religion in the public sphere. Swedish media scholars Mia Lövheim and Marta Axner (2008) drew on Köhrsen and developed a fourfold typology that distinguished between: 1) religious actors who perform religious communication, 2) religious actors who perform non-religious communication, 3) non-religious actors who perform religious communication and 4) non-religious actors who perform secular communication (Lövheim & Axner, 2008, p. 39–40). The benefit of their typology is that it shows the variety of ways in which religion may appear in the public. As this article discusses the public role of faith and worldview communities, the approach here is to draw on Lövheim & Axner’s typology and view religion to be present in the public sphere when 1) religious actors address religious issues, as when Muslim communities demand the right to open Muslim schools, 2) religious actors address non-religious issues, as when the majority churches oppose restrictive refugee policies and 3) non-religious actors address religious issues. An example of the latter is when secular citizens debate the use of religious symbolism in public. By relying on a relatively wide approach to determining when religion is present in the public sphere, there is a possibility of detecting a variety of issues that faith and worldview communities address.

11.4 A Growing Nordic Interfaith Infrastructure

The academic debate on the role of religion in the public sphere includes a broad range of issues. The approach here is to focus on the faith and worldview communities and determine if they have a greater public visibility than they previously had. While the Nordic Lutheran majority churches tended to have hegemony in the public sphere concerning religious issues, what new channels of communication have developed during the past three decades? More specifically, what interfaith initiatives and

45 This section is based on a study conducted by Lars Ahlin, Kimmo Ketola, Annette Leis-Peters, Bjarni Randver Sigurvinsson and Inger Furseth (see Furseth et al., forthcoming).
organizations have emerged at the national level in the Nordic countries? And what are some of the issues these organizations have promoted?

The growth in interfaith initiatives in the Nordic countries is part of a larger international trend. Some have grown out of the older Christian ecumenical movements and some are new. While the first interfaith initiative on an international level took place in Chicago in 1893 with *The World Parliament of Religions*, European national and local interfaith initiatives began to appear in the 1970s and have experienced rapid growth since the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York in 2001 (Eck, 2001, p. 366–370; Dinham et al., 2009; Grier, 2012, 2013; Grier & Forteza, 2013; Halafoff, 2011, 2013; Haynes & Hennig, 2013; Pearce, 2012; Weller, 2009). In addition, numerous multilateral and bilateral initiatives, groups and organizations exist in all the countries, especially at local levels, but they are not discussed here.

### 11.4.1 The Pioneers – the Christian Umbrella and Ecumenical Organizations

The idea of joining forces to represent a cluster of faith communities in the Nordic countries emerged first in various Christian minority churches, while the majority churches often joined later. The formation of ecumenical organizations began in Norway (1902, Norwegian Dissenter Council), followed by Finland (1917, Finnish Ecumenical Council) and Sweden (1918, The Free Church Cooperation Committee). The development came somewhat later to Denmark (1933, The Council of Evangelical Free Churches) and Iceland (1979, Ecumenical Committee of Christian Associations in Iceland), perhaps because the amount of minority churches was smaller in the latter two countries.

Common features for the early bodies were focus on formal religious doctrine and identities and top-down national structures where the participants, mostly clergy, participated as representatives of their churches. Their goals varied, as some functioned as interest organizations, in particular for the minority churches. Others aimed at dialogue and understanding across different Christian traditions, and yet others focused on peace and social justice. Many combined all these goals. The Christian minority churches were the first religious body to initiate cooperation and dialogue, even if they only included other Christian churches. The organizational models they formed seem to have been models for other religious umbrella organizations and interfaith bodies that developed later.

### 11.4.2 Umbrella and Worldview Organizations

The formation of umbrella and worldview organizations outside Christianity developed in two waves, the first during the 1930s–1950s, and the second during the 1970s–1990s. The first group to establish an umbrella organization was the Jews. The first organization for secular humanists came in Finland (1937, Federation of Freethinkers
in Finland) and Norway (1956, Norwegian Humanist Association). The latter is the largest in Nordic countries with more than 80,000 members in 2015. Secular humanist associations did not appear until 1979 in Sweden (Swedish Humanist Association), 2008 in Denmark (Humanist Society) and 2013 in Iceland.

Jews have a long history in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. The first Jewish congregation was approved according to a Danish royal resolution in 1682, and the first rabbi was hired in Copenhagen in 1687. Jewish congregations were established in Sweden in the 18th century and in Norway and Finland in the nineteenth century. Jewish umbrella organizations emerged in Finland and Sweden in the 1940s–1950s. The fact that no Jewish umbrella organizations exist in Denmark and Norway may be related to the German occupation of these two countries during WWII, when Jews were sent to German concentration camps and murdered, leaving their congregations extremely small during the postwar years.

The second wave of umbrella organizations appeared first in Sweden in the 1970s, in Norway in the 1990s and even later in the other countries. The members of these organizations consisted primarily of religious minorities of immigrant descent and native converts. The largest organizations were the Islamic umbrella organizations. In 1974, United Islamic Associations in Sweden was formed, and in 2015 it consisted of five organizations. The other countries only have one or two Islamic umbrella organizations. The Islamic Council of Norway was formed in 1992, while it took more than a decade until the Finnish Islamic Council and the Confederation of Muslims (Denmark) were established.

During the second wave, Buddhists also formed umbrella organizations, albeit much smaller than the Islamic organizations. The first came in Norway (1979, the Buddhist Association), followed by Sweden (1993, Sweden's Buddhist Cooperation Council) and Finland (2009, Finnish Buddhist Union). Although holistic spirituality is often perceived to be a relatively unorganized field, the Holistic Society (Holistisk Forbund) was formed in Norway in 2002. It was a somewhat different initiative, as the members were individuals and not faith or worldview communities.

The formation of these umbrella and worldview organizations reflects the presence and history of faith and worldview communities outside Christianity in the different countries. These organizations have largely used the organizational models provided by the ecumenical movements by forming top-down, national structures. During the past decades, they have organized dialogue initiatives, promoted understanding across ethnic and religious differences within their own ranks and represented their religious and worldview traditions in multi-faith organizations. They have also functioned as interest organizations that have lobbied the state and local governments on particular issues.

It is no surprise that the first second-wave organizations emerged in Sweden, which has the highest immigration rates in the Nordic region. The fact that they appeared earlier in Norway and are larger and stronger than in Denmark and Finland may be related to the public funding of faith and worldview communities in Norway,
which is the most generous in the Nordic countries. In contrast, such communities receive little public funding in Denmark. A contrast is Iceland with far fewer such organizations than the other countries, which reflects the low immigration rates and higher religious homogeneity here.

11.4.3 Interfaith Organizations

Most Nordic interfaith initiatives and organizations emerged in the 1990s, although some appeared earlier. The early initiatives tended to come from the Lutheran majority churches and were bilateral. The first multilateral organization at a national level was established in Norway in 1996, while similar bodies came after the turn of the century in the other countries. The only country without a multilateral interfaith body is Denmark, although there are several bilateral bodies there.

In 1996, a Norwegian group called Action for Religious Freedom in School protested the Christian emphasis in the teachings on religion in public schools. Their initiative led to the formation of The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL) (Eidsvåg et al., 2004; Leirvik, 1993; Sender & Jenssen, 2013). The council consisted of one member each from most faith and worldview communities, including the secular humanists and the holistic society. STL has addressed national and local governments on important issues for religious and worldview minorities, such as equal treatment in public institutions. It has formed a leadership forum and arranged interfaith seminars and meetings.

Finnish multilateral dialogue gained more attention immediately after 9/11 2001, when President Tarja Halonen invited Christian, Jewish and Islamic leaders to a joint meeting. Soon thereafter, the Forum of Religious Leaders was formed (see Illman, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2010.) In 2011, another interfaith organization was founded, the Cooperation Forum for Religions in Finland, which also consisted of members from the three monotheistic religions. The forum aimed at fostering peace, interfaith dialogue, equal treatment, mutual respect and cooperation and promoted action against extremism. It has attempted to influence political decision making on issues such as religious education and the rights of minority children.

Interfaith organizations came later in Iceland. Based on an initiative from the Bishop’s office in the Church of Iceland, The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue was formed in 2006. The forum was multilateral and has arranged bimonthly meetings with religious leaders and an annual seminar. It has addressed the government on issues agreed upon by all members.

Although Sweden was early with the formation of umbrella organizations, the multilateral Swedish Interreligious Council was not formed until 2010. Since then, the council has functioned as a forum for religious leaders and has promoted interfaith activities. It has addressed issues such as freedom of religion and the role of religion in peace building and has spoken against anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, religious vio-
ence and violence against religion. So far, the council has had weak organization with little funding and hardly any infrastructure and has met only twice annually. The interfaith initiatives in Denmark did not emerge until the late 1990s, and they are bilateral. One example is the Christian Muslim Forum for Dialogue (2006). The Church of Denmark has also developed bilateral cooperation with the Buddhists, the Hindus and the holistic spirituality community.

11.4.4 Presentational Communications on a Variety of Issues

In many ways, the formation of ecumenical, worldview, umbrella and interfaith organizations demonstrates the incorporation of religious minorities in the corporative structures of each country. New religious minorities largely form organizations in similar ways as the older minorities did decades earlier. They also show the emergence of an interfaith infrastructure, where representatives from various faith communities, such as mosques or Buddhist temples, come together to form joint organizations.

These organizations address a variety of issues. First, most of them raise issues that concern their members, where they make statements in the media and lobby the state and local governments to promote their cause. One issue that has been particularly important for the minority churches and that has been addressed by some of the early Christian bodies is public support for private Christian schools. Other issues that typically concern interfaith organizations are equal treatment in public institutions, religious education in public schools and the rights of minority children.

Second, all these organizations address dialogue and understanding across different religious traditions. Several umbrella and worldview organizations promote understanding across ethnic and religious differences among their members. Representatives from the different bodies also participate in leadership forums and interfaith seminars, meetings and other initiatives to promote mutual understanding. Third is the question of issues relating to general social ethics, such as peace and social justice, issues that Köhrsen (2012) and Lövheim and Axner (2008) typically characterize as non-religious. Some of the ecumenical organizations and interfaith organizations raise these issues. One example is the Cooperation Forum for Religions in Finland that aims at promoting peace, equal treatment, mutual respect, cooperation and work against extremism. Another example is the Swedish Inter-religious Council that emphasizes freedom of religion, peace building, anti-Semitism, fighting Islamophobia and fighting violence. Altogether, these bodies undertake communications on typical religious issues and a variety of social and ethical issues.

Most of these organizations are top-down structures with a centralized leadership structure, and the members are representatives of various faith and worldview communities or umbrella organizations. The predominant dimension of their public communication seems to be ‘presentational’ (Rasmussen, 2008, p. 78–81, 2013, p. 100–101). The organizations deliberate over common issues via their leaders, who
serve as the voices of people from a certain religious tradition or all traditions. Some organizations have a policy of only issuing statements on topics supported by all the members. This approach implies that there are lengthy debates before statements are made and that they are careful to issue statements only on a limited number of topics. A common feature for these organizations is that they present public agendas where they use recognizable genres to issue statements and participate in public debates. It is reasonable to argue that the presentational dimension of their communications in the public sphere serves different democratic functions. First, they channel certain demands directed at political decision makers that often become the object of public debate. Second, they make statements and participate in public debates on more general social and ethical issues relating to the common good of society.

The formalized and centralized structures have several benefits, such as securing funding and building an organizational apparatus to run the activities. It is also helpful in dealing with state and local governments, as the governments will know whom to contact. In the case of Norway, for example, ecumenical, worldview, umbrella and interfaith organizations are contacted by the government to voice their views on new legal proposals that will potentially affect them. This organizational model is also helpful when organizations participate in public debates or contact state and local governments to lobby (Furseth et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, there are potential weaknesses related to this form of organization, such as the tendency to focus on formal religious doctrines that exclude smaller minorities (Wuthnow, 2007, pp. 286–314). For example, both ecumenical organizations and umbrella organizations primarily tend to include relatively like-minded members. In Sweden, Shia and Sunni Muslims have formed separate organizations. The secular humanists are included only in the STL in Norway and are excluded from similar organizations in the other countries. In many ways, these organizations manifest inclusion and exclusion among various faith communities.

There are also national differences in the development of the interfaith infrastructure. As noted, all the countries have multilateral interfaith bodies at the national level, except Denmark, where bilateral organizations and initiatives dominate. The main explanation for this difference is related to the particular relationship between church and state in Denmark. The Danish state is the head of the Church of Denmark, which leaves Denmark as the only Nordic country with a state church system. In the other countries, processes of separation between church and state and internal democratization in the majority churches have taken place. A result is that these churches have internal democratic bodies that represent them when dealing with the state, local governments and other organizations (Kühle et al., forthcoming). Due to the close ties to the state and the lack of internal democratization, the Church of Denmark lacks bodies to represent it in other bodies at a national level. This is possible at a local level, where parish clergy may represent the Church of Denmark in a local interfaith initiative. The issue of representation continues to be a hindrance for the Church of Denmark in engaging in national ecumenical and interfaith bodies.
11.5 Critical Issues

The various ecumenical, worldview, umbrella and interfaith organizations participate in the public sphere in various ways that fall under Casanova’s category of deprivatization of religion (Casanova, 1994, p. 228–229). However, there are some critical issues that may challenge their functions as voices in public debates about the common good. Some of these will be briefly mentioned in this section.

One issue is representation. In many cases, national and local stakeholders look to interfaith organizations and councils as partners in dialogue and consultation (Griera, 2013; Weller, 2009). The question is who the interfaith organizations and councils represent. Which faith communities are included and which are excluded in these bodies? As shown above, some faith communities are excluded on the basis of doctrine. An additional question is how representative the religious leaders are who meet on behalf of their faith community in various umbrella and interfaith organizations. While some are democratically elected, others are appointed.

Another question is whether interfaith dialogue is primarily an elite phenomenon (Griera, 2013; Weller, 2009). Interfaith bodies at the national level usually but not always reflect the formal leadership of the faith and worldview communities, which tends to be male. There are some exceptions: The majority churches in all Nordic countries have women bishops, and Lena Larsen was the leader of the Islamic Council Norway during 2000–2003, which is unique from an international perspective. Despite these exceptions, there is an underrepresentation of women and young people in the leadership of these organizations (Furseth et al., 2015; Grung, 2013).

These questions are related to the role of faith communities in civil society. Is it reasonable to assume that interfaith bodies contribute to democratization if they are not based on democratic procedures? It may be that democratic procedures tend to favour men, and a more activist form of selection will ensure broader representation, as proposed by Norwegian theologian Anne Hege Grung (2013). However, this hardly solves the democratic problem of representation in these organizations.

11.5.1 The Role of Public Stakeholders

Another issue is the role of the state and public stakeholders (Hennig & Haynes, 2013). Studies have shown that state and local governments have engaged with and facilitated interfaith initiatives (Amir-Moazami, 2011; Griera, 2013; Halafoff, 2011, 2013; Weller, 2009). There seems to be a growing political interest in these organizations in Nordic countries as well.

Who takes the initiative to form interfaith structures and organizations, faith communities or public stakeholders? Our study suggests that the first initiatives tend to come from the faith and worldview communities. The majority churches are particularly active in all the countries in establishing bilateral bodies and in some cases,
multilateral bodies. For example, several forms of interfaith dialogue in Sweden result from initiatives by the Church of Sweden. In other cases, the faith and worldview communities outside the majority churches take the initiative, which was the case with the formation of the STL in Norway.

Nevertheless, the state and other public stakeholders also play a role in the interfaith field. Several studies show that the state and local governments ‘partner with’ faith communities and interfaith organizations for various purposes (Amir-Moazami, 2011; Beckford, 2010; Griera, 2013; Halafoff, 2011, 2013; Hennig & Haynes, 2013; Weller, 2009). In Nordic countries, state and local governments are involved in various ways, from demonstrations of public support, facilitation and funding to active participation. Some Nordic states are, for example, present at interfaith events, which was the case in Iceland in 2006 when the President of Iceland gave an address at the founding meeting of the Forum for Interfaith Dialogue.

In other instances, the state takes the initiative. One example is from Norway, where the government played an active role during the Muhammad cartoon crisis in 2006, as they involved imams and the Islamic Council Norway to avoid riots (Grung, 2013, p. 220; Grung and Leirvik, 2012; Leirvik, 2013, p. 194–195, 2014, p. 153–154, Rogstad, 2007, p. 47). Swedish studies show that the municipalities in some cases initiate the formation of interfaith bodies at the municipal level (Nordin, 2014; Leis-Peters, Middlemiss, Lé Mon & Nordin, 2015). Once these bodies are formed, the state and local governments tend to play a role in facilitating their activities, such as providing buildings, funding and in some cases administrative support.

What motives do public stakeholders have in interfaith initiatives? One possible motive is to mobilize religious leaders to find compromises to prevent conflict and extremism (Engelstad et al., 1999; Halafoff, 2011, p. 134–135; Wuthnow, 2005, p. 293). Another motive might be to govern religion by controlling religious minorities, especially Muslims, and transforming them into moderate and liberal citizens (Beckford, 2010; Amir-Moazami, 2011; Griera, 2012; Haynes & Hennig, 2013; Martikainen, 2013b). This raises the question of the proximity between religious and state actors in the interfaith field. Do the interfaith bodies tie the faith and worldview communities closer to the state? If so, what consequences and dilemmas do closer ties imply? A recurrent conflict between the state and the faith communities in the Nordic countries is the question of whether state laws on gender equality should be implemented in the faith communities, even in the case when the faith community in question has religious doctrines against female leadership, such as the Roman Catholic Church. Another conflict is when faith communities provide welfare services and simultaneously openly critique the public policies that cut such services and thereby create the need for private welfare services (Martikainen, 2013b). There are several examples of the dilemmas that close ties between religious and state actors may pose.
11.6 Public Participation by Religious Actors

So far, this chapter has outlined the emergence of a new interfaith infrastructure in the Nordic countries during the past decades. How has this development changed the ways in which faith and worldview communities participate in the public sphere? First, this infrastructure seems to facilitate the public participation of a variety of small and large faith and worldview communities. Interfaith cooperation enables faith communities to pool their resources and use them for common purposes. Smaller churches, mosques and temples often lack individual and organizational resources to participate in the public arena. By forming bilateral cooperation, umbrella organizations and interfaith bodies, they pool their existing resources and sometimes access additional public resources. This is the case in Norway, where umbrella organizations and the national interfaith body (STL) receive sufficient public funding to employ full-time general secretaries. In contrast, Swedish umbrella organizations access far less public funding for their activities.

Second, the formation of bilateral cooperation, umbrella organizations and interfaith bodies seems to have increased the public participation of faith and worldview communities during the past decades. Small faith communities will often refrain from participating in public debates due to a lack of expert knowledge. While they usually do not have people with extensive knowledge on various religious, social, ethical and political issues, the umbrella organizations and the interfaith bodies often do. This will frequently lead to more statements on a growing number of issues. While faith communities traditionally tended to focus on typical ‘religious issues’, such as religious education, abortion and sexual ethics, the umbrella organizations and interfaith bodies have broadened the range of issues they address to include refugee policies, peaceful co-existence, the environment, human rights and social justice.

Third, the interfaith bodies seem to increase the chances of faith and worldview communities being heard. The fact that they represent large groups of members is crucial when they jointly take political initiatives, lobby national and local governments and promote their issues by making public statements. Many umbrella and worldview organizations and interfaith bodies also voice their views on legal proposals. In some instances, national and local governments contact them concerning specific issues or events.

Nevertheless, several issues may challenge the democratic potential of these organizations, such as the procedures to select representatives, the underrepresentation of women and youth and the tendency to include like-minded faith communities and exclude others due to theological or ideological differences. On the one hand, the interfaith bodies are manifestations of how Nordic faith communities are incorporated into the larger society. On the other hand, they exclude smaller and less powerful religious minorities.
11.7 Deprivatization of Religion

Altogether, the emergence of the interfaith infrastructure in Nordic countries shows signs of the deprivatization of religion at the level of civil society, meaning that the faith and worldview communities are more visible in public than they used to be just a few decades ago. The implication is the weakening of one of the sub-theses in secularization theory, namely the privatization of religion. These trends correspond to other studies of Western countries (Ferrari & Pastorelli, 2012; Lefebvre & Beaman, 2014; Woodhead & Catto, 2012).

Why has there been an emerging interfaith infrastructure in the Nordic countries during the past decades? These forms of institutional changes can be described as path dependency (Pierson, 2004), aggregate effects (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) or a combination of both (Thelen, 2011). Path dependency refers to a situation where stability is the norm but where sudden ruptures appear that lead to new paths (Pierson, 2004). One rupture came with immigration and the establishment of new religious minorities. The larger amount of minority faith communities in Sweden, Norway and Denmark than in Finland and Iceland is due to higher immigration rates. With the establishment of the new faith communities came the potential for religious tension, and the faith and worldview communities took the initiative to form various bodies in order to secure communication and mutual understanding. The low number of interfaith bodies in Iceland is related to the low immigration rates and high religious homogeneity there.

The formation of umbrella and worldview organizations and interfaith bodies was also related to the process whereby religious and worldview minorities began to demand equal treatment. These demands had to do with religious education in public schools, the right to wear religious symbols in public and equal treatment in the workplace and public institutions. There was simultaneously a growing awareness of the right to equal treatment, freedom of speech and other human rights issues. The Nordic countries’ contact with global laws on human rights strengthened the awareness of minority rights (Lövheim et al., forthcoming). The result was that the privileges of the majority churches were no longer perceived as legitimate as they once had been (Gustafsson, 1985). All these changes created pressure on the established political arrangements concerning religion. The transformations in the religion–state relations can therefore be understood in terms of path dependency. Other ruptures were the religious individualization and subjectivity and the growth of people who remained outside any faith community, which also contributed to the pressure on the established religion and state arrangements.

The changes can also be explained as a form of aggregate effects, where certain parts of the arrangements are maintained, while new elements are introduced at the same time. Continuous smaller changes contribute to transforming existing institutions, which are layered (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). The emergence of the interfaith infrastructure can also be understood as aggregate effects. At the time when many new
faith communities were formed, the majority churches and other faith and worldview minorities, such as Jews and secular humanists, had already established ecumenical, worldview and umbrella organizations, which provided models for the new organizations. Once they were founded, they became incorporated into already established arrangements of how to conduct dialogue and interfaith cooperation, make demands and have contact with national and local governments. All these smaller changes contributed to the growth of an interfaith infrastructure in the Nordic countries.

The changes in the relationship between religion and the state, particularly in Sweden, Norway and Iceland, can also be understood as aggregate effects. The pressures for change in these countries were not entirely external, as outlined above, but internal as well. During the twentieth century, the majority churches in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland had formed an internal bureaucracy and democratic structures at different levels. The formation of the general synods in these countries is of great significance, as it helped to establish these churches as more autonomous actors in relation to the Nordic states. The democratization processes also created an internal pressure on the state–church relationships. Because the churches were organized according to democratic procedures, they no longer felt that the state should have a say in internal affairs. The exception is the development in Denmark, where the internal democratization process in the Danish Folk Church has been much slower than in the other majority churches. This fact might explain the lack of internal pressure in this church to change church–state relations. We have previously seen how the weaker interfaith infrastructure in Denmark is also related to the organization of the Church of Denmark, which inhibits representation. However, the growth in bilateral initiatives between the Church of Denmark and other faith communities suggests that Denmark is slowly following the other Nordic countries in this area.

Does the emergence of the new religious infrastructure and the growing public role of faith and worldview communities have implications for the type of religion that is present in the public sphere? In other words, what does the public presence of religion do to religion itself? In Nordic parliamentary debates and major newspapers, religion tends to become a controversial issue. Whereas conservative Christianity used to be ‘the bad guy’ in both of these arenas, Islam has increasingly been given this role. In contrast, religion is a feel-good matter in lifestyle magazines (Lundby et al., forthcoming; Lövheim et al., forthcoming). Many organizations discussed here have a focus on dialogue with the aim of creating mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence. In order to make public statements, they engage in internal debates to reach consensus or compromise or both. These organizational features will lead to gravitation towards the centre. In order to make joint public statements, they will tend to leave aside controversial aspects of their own religions and avoid conflictual topics, such as gender and sexual equality, international affairs and proselytism. Instead, they stress the shared aspects of different religions, for example, religion as a good in society and a matter of human rights, perhaps with an emphasis on the positive moral and therapeutic effects religion is supposed to have on individuals and society.
In this sense, these organizations will tend to present a positive form of religion that resembles the lifestyle magazines rather than the more conflictual and negative form of religion that appears in political deliberations and the press.

References


References


