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Spiritual Nontroversies - Framing Conflicts and Controversies of Religion and Spirituality in Danish News Media

Henrik Reintoft Christensen

Abstract

This article analyzes two Danish news stories in order to discuss the reasons that spirituality seems to be less newsworthy than religion. Drawing on Anderson's concept of imagined communities, and Luhmann's account of the mass media in a modern functionally differentiated society, I argue that spirituality seldom registers as controversial in the news stories. It lacks the scale necessary to be selected as newsworthy. Additionally, it is not a natural source of systemic irritation for many subsystems, probably only for the systems of religion and science. The two cases involves media controversies on news production on mindfulness in the health system and on the use of animal telepathy in the majority church.

Keywords: religion and news – religion and advertisement – religion and spirituality – religious controversy – clairvoyance – mindfulness

Introduction

In a special issue on mass media and unconventional religion in *Review of Religious Research* from 1997, James Richardson and Barend van Driel examine journalists' attitudes towards new religious movements. Their opening is highly relevant for this special issue: "Deviant religious groups have been the source of conflict and controversy throughout American history, as well as in other societies" (Richardson & van Driel 1997, 116). Twenty years later, this is still true, but their "thesis that the major media are not always neutral institutions simply disseminating facts about societal events and trends" is more questionable (ibid. 117). I will argue that major (and other) media are *never* neutral institutions simply disseminating facts. In this article, I will examine the coverage of spirituality in two recent but quite different cases from Denmark. The first controversy involves mindfulness and a discussion whether articles on mindfulness are independent journalism or sponsored advertisements. The second controversy examines a church event in which a clairvoyant was invited to talk about communicating with deceased animals. The aim of the article is to discuss the reasons why the spiritual elements in both cases were not part of the controversies – why they were not observed as controversial. In order to discuss this, the article first approaches the relationship between religion and news from an historical perspective drawing primarily on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community. The following section introduces Niklas Luhmann's description of the mass media, and his distinction between news and advertisements. Then it elaborates on the distinction between religion and holistic spirituality drawing on the works of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. The third section

examines the two cases, identifying the spiritual elements in them and their role (or lack of) in these mediated controversies. Finally, the last section is used to discuss why spirituality, at least in a Danish context, seems to be less prone to controversy than religion. I argue in other words that there may be a systemic bias in news reporting on religion, that is blind to holistic spirituality. It is too individual even when dozens of people gather, and it is not distinct enough to be controversial. On the other hand, an institutional religion like a Lutheran state church has the scale, the distinctive theological boundaries, and the history to make the news.

The Imagined and Functionally Differentiated Society

Mass media journalism emerges in a specific historical and socio-cultural context that has enabled it to observe society in certain ways but leaves it blind in others. Benedict Anderson's seminal work on the rise of nationalism and his concept of imagined communities can help us understand the historical circumstances behind the development of the press. He argues that nationalism is a natural consequence of the collapse of religion and dynasticism on the one hand and a transformation of the perception of time on the other. As the sacred canopy crumbled due to the reformation, Christianity was unable to sustain a universal fellowship among believers (Anderson 1983, 12-22). With the subsequent political and democratic revolutions, the dynastic system in Europe became replaced with a new type of regime. The old regimes were top-down regimes with power concentrated at the center and with relatively porous peripheries. The new democratic regimes on the other hand were bottom-up regimes that demanded a clearer distinction between peripheries. At the same time that religion and dynasties changed, communication changed as well. Drawing on Elizabeth Eisenstein, who showed how important the printing press was for the Protestant reformation, Anderson argues that the printing press was also important for the emergence of the nation as a concept and for nationalism. Apart from the Bible (and science), fiction and news were among the things most printed and the latter were pivotal for the shaping of each nation.

Anderson write that newspapers are "one-day best-sellers" that create a certain sense of time through "the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper as fiction" (Anderson 1983, 35). In this way, news media and popular culture mediated and stabilised the new nation states to such a degree that they became the logical unit of thinking about the social. Anderson is primarily interested in the emergence of nationalism and the idea of the nation, but the role he ascribes to the production and consumption of news is important in this context. Religion had been an important vehicle for thinking about the social, and in this way, news not only heralds the shaping of a new conception of community it does so through some of the same functions as religion. Stewart Hoover writes that "media and religion have come together in fundamental ways. They occupy the same space, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity" (Hoover 2006, 9). In many ways, the sacred canopy of pre-modern society has been replaced by a media (news) canopy that establishes itself as a new type of plausibility structure.

Niklas Luhmann argues that mass media and news reporting serve a special function in society. In his theory of society, he argues that the primary distinction between modern and pre-modern society is the functional differentiation into a number

of autonomous subsystems. Every subsystem organises its communication around a specific code in order to carry out a specific function, and it observes the world through this unique logic. The independence of each subsystem from the other subsystems is a huge advantage because “[each] subsystem can tolerate an open and fluctuating environment as long as other subsystems fulfil their function” (Luhmann 1982, 237). Modern society is volatile and able to adapt quite quickly. However this also means that “subsystems, therefore, are structurally required to process information about their environment” (Luhmann 1982, 237). A highly significant source of information in modern society is the mass media.

The function of the mass media is the creation of, and adaptation to, irritation. Irritation is often a result of systemic observation. Subsystems are sensitive about being observed. Because each system has its own unique logic, through which it observes itself and its environment, it is easily irritated when other logics observe it, for instance, when religious groups feel misrepresented in the news because of the clash between the logics of journalistic and religious observations. Luhmann argues that there are a number of different mass media genres (or programmes using the system theoretical terminology). He is primarily interested in three of these but is open to the existence of more. They are news, advertising and entertainment. News are structurally related to the political subsystem and advertising to the subsystem of economy.

News observes society and make society observable to others. However, it is never an accurate representation of society because it is the mass media logic of what counts as information that determines what is observed and reported. “When information is offered in the mode of news and reporting, people assume and believe, that it is relevant, that it is true [...] But the mass media are only interested in things that are true under severely limiting condition” (Luhmann 2000, 26-27). Even as this assumption of truth is important for news production, news do not follow true/untrue as a guiding principle. Instead, they follow the code information/ non-information. They use a set of criteria to determine and consequently select something as information to be served (truthfully) to society (Luhmann 2000, 36). Taking his point of departure in Galtung and Ruge’s (1973) work on news criteria, he argues that some of the most important selectors are surprise, conflict, quantities, local relevance, violations of norms, moral judgment, and a human angle (Luhmann 2000, 28-35). Luhmann is not a media scholar, but his lists is similar to the one Vincent Campbell makes based on his reading of news criteria research (Campbell 2004, 118-122). At an institutional level, different news organizations have different criteria for defining something as surprise, conflict etc. and therefore for selecting it as information.

Advertising also creates its own reality, but compared to news it openly declares its motives. Where news implicitly function on a condition of truthfulness or objectivity, “advertising seeks to manipulate, it works insincerely and assumes that that is taken for granted (Luhmann 2000, 44). There is no need for fact finding in advertisement. We know that a mass produced good is not exclusive or that we will not really be happier from buying it. Although advertising declares its motives openly, it often conceals its methods. The people targeted by advertisements “are made to believe that they are free to make a decision, as well as that they want something of their own accord that they did not actually want at all” (Luhmann 2000, 45). Additionally, he distinguishes between advertising, which people realize is advertising, and advertising not recognised as such,

and he finds it interesting that the term sponsorship has lost its original meaning of supporting a good cause and now “serves the purpose of advertising” (ibid. 46). In the case of mindfulness, it is this conflation of advertising and good cause that is at the heart of the controversy, not spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality in European and Nordic News

Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira examine the portrayal of religion (including popular beliefs) in the UK media. The fictional representations in television and entertainment “of the psychic and clairvoyant [...] was generally depicted as benign and useful, though at times fraudulent, a place where people sought answers to questions about their loved ones” (Knott et al 2013: 131). The same goes the coverage in the popular press where experts are used to explain why people hold these beliefs not to dismiss them. They refer particularly to coverage of the continued prevalence of superstitious beliefs in the Daily Mail. “[The] key message being that the real danger was not superstition itself but untreated anxiety and stress” (Knott et al 2013: 134). However, this coverage in the Daily Mail is “a rare rehearsal of an area of popular belief and practice that is generally ignored by the media despite its actual prevalence” (Knott et al 2013: 135). They find an increase in coverage of popular beliefs, but not that these beliefs are controversial. In fact, they argue that they are “rarely the subject of analysis or discussion” (Knott et al 2013: 135).

In a Nordic context, there are a number of studies, which point in the same direction as the British study. It is evident that holistic spirituality is not easily selected as news worthy in the large national dailies but present in weekly entertainment magazines (Furseth 2018; Gresaker 2013; Niemelä and Christensen 2013). Kati Niemelä and Henrik Christensen have studied the coverage of religion in select broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in the five Nordic countries in 1988, 1998, and 2008. Apart from the established religions, they operate with a category of non-institutional religion, and show that this category is covered much less than other religion categories. The share of the coverage is stable during their chosen period. In 2008, between 1 pct. (Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland) and 4 pct. (Norway) of the articles on religion, include references to non-institutional religion (Niemelä and Christensen 2013:15). The article focuses on the coverage of Christianity and Islam, and do not comment on the coverage of non-institutional religion. Mia Lövheim and Knut Lundby examine the Norwegian part of the same data and find the limited coverage of non-institutional religion surprising “given the rise of new forms of spirituality and alternative religiosity” (Lövheim and Lundby 2013: 35). Apart from this, they do not address non-institutional religion either. Fortunately, there are some case studies on popular beliefs in Nordic media. Cora Alexa Døving and Siv Ellen Kraft have studied the representations of religion and popular beliefs in the Norwegian media including newspapers (Kraft 2011; Døving and Kraft 2013). In their book, they devote two chapters to the coverage of popular beliefs: one on princess Märtha-Louise’s belief in angels and one on an 80-year-old healer from northern Norway. The royal princess became the center of attention when she established an ‘Angel School’ in 2007 that would teach people to communicate with angels. This was highly controversial and covered in the news for months. The debate reignited in 2011 when she published a book on angels. However uncommon the belief in angels is, Kraft argues that it is the royal dimension that makes it controversial as the

controversy is centered on her symbolic functions in relation to Norwegianity and Christianity (Kraft 2011: 114). Supporting the argument that the controversy owes to her royalty, Kraft refers to two other cases covered in the media in which popular beliefs are not controversial. The coverage of a woman who combines crystal healing, channeling and coaching has been sympathetic describing her as a creative, innovative, and successful businesswoman. The other case is an old healer who used telephone healing to help the Minister for Health whose baby suffered from colic. Although the newspapers initially framed this as a controversy, two points are worth noting. First, there was an overwhelming support among politicians from all parties, the population in general, and from journalists (Døving and Kraft 2013: 54). The support made it difficult for skeptical scientists to be heard in the debate (Døving and Kraft 2013: 68). Additionally, the healer was already known as a sympathetic figure in the media as a healer who offered his services for free. The authors conclude that newspapers, television and radio with their sympathetic coverage help spread popular medicine (Døving and Kraft 2013: 72). Second, the controversial aspect was not healing in itself but the fact that it was the minister of health who used it. In that regard, it is similar to the angel case. It seems as if popular beliefs become controversial when they are held not by ordinary people, but by the elite (a royal princess or a minister) or as part of an established institution (the monarchy or a public office). Additionally, Døving and Kraft note that economy might be important in religious/spiritual controversy. It was heavily criticized how expensive it was to be enrolled in the angel school (Kraft 2011: 111; Døving and Kraft 2013: 39); whereas the healer performs healing for free (Kraft 2011: 117; 69f). On the other hand, the economy is not a problem in the coverage of the business-woman using healing and channeling (Kraft 2011: 116).

At least in the Nordic countries news media are not interested in spirituality. On the other hand, religion (and especially Islam) is of greater interest and often represented as controversial. There are number of factors that makes religion observable as news worthy conflicts. Following Anderson, the historical circumstances in Europe (the Reformation; the wars of religion; the peace of Westphalia; the historical process of secularization) mean that religion was relegated to the private sphere and any attempts to use religion in public is wrong and dangerous. Such strict secularist attitudes can still be found for instance in France but also in a country as Denmark where many politicians, pastors and journalists remind the public that it is a secular country with privatized religion (Rasmussen 2007). Additionally, the notion that religion is archaic and in many ways opposed to some of the enlightenment values that journalism (or science) subscribes to is also a factor that makes public religion controversial (Sjøvaag 2010; Stensaas 2005). A common criticism of Islam is for instance that it has not been through a Reformation like the Christian one, and that the Islamic world has not been through an enlightenment period like Europe. It is not only Islam that is seen this way, but also various Christian groups and denominations. On the one hand, it is a rights conflict between religion and secular legal/political rights. Ali Hussain for instance argues that the Danish Muhammad caricatures was a conflict between religious sensitivity and freedom of speech (Hussain 2007; Kunelius et al 2007; Berkowich & Eko 2009). A third reason for negative coverage is the religiously motivated violence and terrorism. Although Dolnik and Gunaratna argue that religiously motivated terrorism is not

different from other (secular, political) types of terrorism, the term terrorism is often connected to religion.

As the aim of the article is to discuss if holistic spirituality is less prone to negative news coverage than religion, it is necessary to be able to distinguish between the two. One of the problems in defining spirituality (and religion) is the fact that it is a very amorphous concept with unclear boundaries. Spirituality can be used to describe beliefs and practices that are natural parts of a traditional religiosity. It can describe popular beliefs and practices belonging to a holistic domain the way Heelas and Woodhead conceptualizes it (Woodhead & Heelas 2000; Heelas et al. 2005). Finally, it might describe purely secular and humanist beliefs and practices (Jespers 2011; la Cour et al 2012). Another problem is supply and demand. Suppliers of holistic beliefs can be spiritual without the audience realizing it (cf. Ahlin 2015). In the present context, spirituality describes the holistic domain even if only the suppliers recognize it as spiritual. It excludes the kinds of spirituality that can be found in traditional religion (Catholic spirituality) or in secular humanism (being a decent person, experiences in art and music). The mindfulness controversy has been chosen because it revolves around the distinction between news and advertising. The clairvoyance controversy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark is an obvious religious conflict, or to be more precise an ecclesiastical controversy within the church. The material for both cases are part of other projects. The mindfulness case is part of a project examining the mindfulness network among practitioners and teachers in a research setting (a university), a spiritual/holistic (a retreat), and the health system (a hospital) respectively. The articles on MBSR-mindfulness disseminated through the science-news webpage *videnskab.dk* are part of this material. The clairvoyance case is part of a project on news coverage of pastors of the majority church who are examined for preaching against the principles of doctrine. This includes news material on a pastor rejecting belief in a Creator god (2003-8), a pastor rejecting belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus (2014), a pastor believing in reincarnation (2015), and the present case (2017). The material used for the present study has been analyzed using Carol Bacchi's what's-the-problem-represented-to-be approach (Bacchi 2009). This is one approach among others in the study of social problems. It focuses on the way problems and solutions are constructed, as well as who/ what causes them, and who are responsible for solving them. The approach is similar to the frame analysis approach found in the study of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000).

Nontroversy and Mindfulness in a blind spot

In Denmark, there has been an increased interest in the ideas of Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR), the last 10 to 15 years. Kabat-Zinn is originally trained as a molecular biologist, but he has simultaneously been a student of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn. He established a stress reduction program at the University of Massachusetts in 1979, and has since explored the clinical uses of mindfulness in relation to healing, chronic pain, and stress related suffering (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 1055). According to the University of Massachusetts Medical School webpage:

MBSR spans a confluence of epistemologies and practices from two very distinct and until recently, divergent lineages, both committed to

empirical investigation, albeit utilizing very different methodologies: that of science, medicine, and psychology, on the one hand, and that of Buddhist meditative traditions and their teachings and practices, known collectively as the Dharma, on the other. One reason MBSR proved viable in mainstream clinical settings is that the Dharma is in essence universal. Mindfulness, often being spoken of as "the heart of Buddhist meditation," and being primarily about the systematic training and refinement of attention and awareness, compassion and wisdom, is a manifestation of its universal applicability.

(<https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/about-mbsr/history-of-mbsr/> accessed January 12 2018)

The webpage clearly identifies MBSR as something new, i.e. the combination of the two divergent lineages: western science and eastern religion. In his book, *Full Catastrophe Living* (2013), he emphasizes the absence of a belief system, but also that there is a religious framework behind mindfulness.

Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing. In fact, one of the major strengths of MBSR and all other specialized mindfulness-based programs such as mindfulness-based Cognitive therapy (MBCT) is that they are not dependent on any belief system or ideology. Their potential benefits are therefore accessible for anyone to test for himself or herself. Yet it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions. We will touch on the ramifications of this conjunction in the afterword (Kabat-Zinn 2013, lxii).

Mindfulness stands on its own, Kabat-Zinn argues. However, if we turn to the afterword we learn that if you want to benefit the most from mindfulness, it is impossible to ignore dharma as the underlying framework.

For many years, I was hesitant to use it [dharma] at all, and there is certainly no need for it in the teaching of MBSR, nor do we ever use it in that context. Still, it is necessary in the training of MBSR teachers, because, as Thich Nhat Hanh saw, MBSR is deeply rooted in dharma. If prospective MBSR teachers think that mindfulness is just another cognitive-behavioral "technique" developed within the intellectual framework of Western clinical psychology, they would be sorely mistaken (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 602f).

Here Kabat-Zinn touches upon the distinction between the suppliers and customers of mindfulness. It does not matter if the customers do not recognize it as such, but you cannot teach MBSR without knowing its origin. He is not only concerned that mindfulness would be dismissed because of a controversial origin. He was also concerned how the health care sector would respond to it.

MBSR was meant from the beginning to be an experiment to see whether mainstream America and American medicine and health care would be receptive to this transformative and liberative dharma perspective, if

framed in a universal vocabulary and within an easily accessible and commonsensical format and idiom (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 603).

In other words, it is not unreasonable to characterize MBSR as a practice, which at least the teachers and providers know, has a religious origin, and can be observed from a spiritual perspective. Nevertheless, this could be one of those cases where the suppliers may be prone to interpret the service as more spiritual than the customers. But what about the media? In the following case, I examine the way mindfulness has been represented at the Danish science news portal, *Videnskab.dk* (“Science.dk”), which is an important source of science news for the mainstream news media.

In May 2017, the science news portal was involved in a controversy with the magazine *Journalisten* (“the Journalist”).¹ The magazine found it very critical that the science news portal did not clearly declare if news articles funded or not. In this specific case, they criticized a number of articles (not only on mindfulness) because journalists were paid by an organization to write articles on research funded by that organization. A number of these science news articles later found their way into the national newspapers without any declarations of interest.

“Paid content on *Videnskab.dk* confuses experts and readers” is the title of the critical article in *Journalisten*. It states that *videnskab.dk* is paid by a foundation to have journalists write articles on research funded by the foundation. The journalist has found 32 articles that are declared to be “published with the support of the *Tryg*-foundation”. The journalist has asked a media lawyer to examine the 32 articles and he concludes that they are advertisements. Another source, the science editor of a national newspaper, who holds a PhD in Science dissemination, states that she has never seen this kind of “native advertising”, i.e. advertising where a foundation and an editorial team make a financial agreement to cover the work of the foundation journalistically” (ibid.). Based on some of the online reader responses, she argues that *Videnskab.dk* as a portal for disseminating science news has a credibility problem. The *Journalisten* journalist invites the editor in chief of *videnskab.dk* to comment and she cannot see any problems in the arrangement they have made with the foundation. The articles are not advertisements. “To me advertisement sounds like you want to sell something. This is a non-profit foundation that do not sell anything, but fund research, and has an interest in telling the world about the research they fund”. Additionally, she emphasizes their editorial freedom. “We have the final say. And, our journalists must also talk to other sources than the researcher who got the funding”. Nevertheless, *videnskab.dk* decides to change the way they declare interests as a result of the case. However, they maintain that a non-profit organization sponsoring the common good has nothing to sell and no other interest than fund research.

What does this have to do with religion or spirituality? Nothing and that is the point. One of the articles mentioned in this case and published with support from the *Tryg*-foundation is an article on the benefits of mindfulness.² In a study of 119 Danes with *bodily distress syndrome*, we learn that the positive effect of mindfulness happened

¹ The Danish Union of Journalists publishes *The Journalist*. The journal “writes independently about media, journalism, and communication”. The aim of the journal is to be “informative, critical, and to initiate public debate” (<http://journalisten.dk/side/om-os>).

² <https://videnskab.dk/krop-sundhed/mindfulness-kan-oge-livskvaliteten-hos-syge-personer> [“Mindfulness can enhance the quality of life of ill persons”].

sooner than in the control group doing other therapies. In a fact box, we learn that “Mindfulness is a modern movement with roots in yoga and Buddhism”. The journalist writing the article has interviewed another source, a researcher who have studied the positive benefits of mindfulness too. “Mindfulness comes from the holistic sphere, and it may sound very fresh and alternative, but that is not the case anymore because mindfulness has been established as an evidence based treatment. There is scientific evidence behind because many studies all point in that direction”.

This is not the only article on mindfulness on *Videnskab.dk*. In total there are 21 articles and 15 of them have positive terms like strengthens, helps, works, or revolutionizes in their title (the rest have more neutral titles). Furthermore, 14 of the 21 articles have found their way into the national newspapers. Not all 14 articles are among the sponsored articles, but the financial support is never mentioned in the newspaper articles, which means that even if *Videnskab.dk* think they have declared the support properly, the newspapers have either ignored it or not seen it. This controversy touches upon the distinction Luhmann makes between news and advertisements. It shows that drawing the line between them can be difficult. The editor in chief does not think that the foundation’s motivation to tell the world of the research they fund can be seen as selling (information) or buying (visibility, attention) but is simply the result of selecting relevant information based on their news criteria.

More relevant in the present context, could be the fact that although we do have a controversy, and even a controversy about not declaring your work, it is interesting that no one has displayed an interest in the spiritual dimension of mindfulness. It is not impossible that spirituality could have been a news worthy element and added to the controversy taking the negative stance towards religion in Denmark into consideration. However, the media do not select mindfulness as information and consequently do not observe it as controversial. Most articles in the national dailies that come out of the articles on *Videnskab.dk* deal with the benefits of mindfulness. For instance, “mindfulness helps people with cancer” (*Videnskab.dk* May 12 2012 published in *BT* June 3 2012; *Jyllands-Posten* June 10 2012; *Politiken* July 21 2012). Or “mindfulness increases women’s sex drive” (*Videnskab.dk* October 21 2016 published in *Ekstrabladet* October 22 2016). Or the newest article “Chronic pain becomes bearable using mindfulness” (*Videnskab.dk* January 2 2017 published in *BT* January 28 2017; *Jyllands-Posten* March 26 2017).

Nevertheless, it must be noted that there are critical articles on mindfulness on *Videnskab.dk* and in the news. An article from 2012 focuses on the use of mindfulness in companies in order to relieve stress. Critics point out that it would be better to do something about the causes of stress than providing tools to manage stress. A management researcher argues that “mindfulness can be a kind of opium to the people”. Under the subheading “Mindfulness makes us happier”, the journalist writing the article discredits this referring to a professor in psychology who is a “dedicated mindfulness advocate”. The professor finds no disadvantages with mindfulness, “on the contrary, they [people who practice mindfulness] are happier, less stressed and more productive than people who do not practice” mindfulness. Another critic argues that prescribing mindfulness to people who are well is problematic. It signals that that they are not as well as they could be, and that they could perform better if they practiced mindfulness. Even these criticisms are not directed at mindfulness as a spiritual practice but at the

circumstances under which it is practiced. Overall, most of the coverage is positive. The controversies that can be found is a media critique of blurred lines between news and advertisement or a management critique of using mindfulness as a tool to help cope with a problem instead of doing something about the causes of the problem. Many of these articles mentions the alternative, or the religious roots of mindfulness, but there is no religious or spiritual dimension to the controversy in Denmark even though Kabat-Zinn originally cloaked the religious roots in a secular vocabulary in order not to be seen as controversial. The spiritual dimension has not been observed and selected as controversial. In this case, there was an opportunity to add a spiritual dimension to the controversy, but it did not happen. In that regard, I would argue that this is a case of spiritual nontroversty.

The Animal Telepathy Controversy

The second case, the horse *telepathy case*, is an obvious case of religious controversy. One of the summaries printed in *Kristeligt Dagblad* (The Christian daily) provides us with background information of the whole case.

The horse telepathy case. On June 1, there was a lecture on animal clairvoyance in Gislinge church, including telepathy with deceased animals. After the lecture, the pastor, Dorte Thaulov, told that she believes in animal telepathy. This caused a debate in the media and the diocese, and Bishop Peter Fischer-Møller, exempted Dorte Thaulov from duty for a short while. Subsequently the discussion in the media focused on the role of bishops in controversial theological cases, but Dorte Thaulov could resume her duties at Gislinge church after a conversation with the bishop. The case spurred a general interest in the role of pets in Christianity and facilitated a debate on the extent to which the church can and should include telepathic communication with animals (*Kristeligt Dagblad* June 18).

Nevertheless, it is relevant to add some more some information to this short background. The pastor and the parish council invited a local clairvoyant who has the ability to communicate with living and dead animals to give a talk at the vicarage. More people than anticipated showed up and the pastor decided to relocate the arrangement from the vicarage to the church itself.

In the flyer advertising the arrangement, the clairvoyant asked people to bring pictures of their pets if they wanted her to try to contact them. During her presentation, she selected a couple of people in the audience and contacted their animals. Many local and national media organizations cover the story, and some of them even participated in the event. The national broadcasting company TV2 participated and published a news story on their website the following day with the title: “125 participated in animal clairvoyance in local village church: - Offhand I would say I have a problem with it” (TV2 June 2). It is the pastor’s immediate supervisor, the dean, who has a problem with the arrangement. He finds it objectionable that the event took place in the church “if it is true that an animal telepath thinks she can communicate with deceased animals. It is not part of our church tradition” (*ibid.*). The pastor herself is satisfied with the turnout and the arrangement:

I am not reluctant [when it comes to dealing with alternative spirituality] and I am very much into telepathy myself. We do talk about life after death in the church. Moreover, at the arrangement we talked about questions like “Will I ever see my dog again? A lot of people seek out the alternative world, and that is possible to do from within the church” (ibid.).

The telepath contributes to the news story stating that she was “happy when the pastor called and invited [her]. I knew it would be controversial taking place in the church. I hope I can help bridge the gap between Christianity and the spiritual world” (ibid.). During the event, she chose to contact two deceased horses, and the following days, a number of news stories focus on the communication with them. In an interview with the pastor a few days after the event, the journalist asks if she believes in that type of clairvoyance with dead animals that took place in the church.

I definitely believe this. I know it is true. I have experienced it myself and I have a small gift myself but I would not say that I am as gifted as the animal telepath, Ditte Young. I am a rational and grounded person, which you have to be if you are a pastor. Moreover, this telepathy thing, it is not something ethereal, it is very down to earth (Kristeligt Dagblad June 7).

The bishop decides to exempt her from duty until he has had the opportunity to talk to her and learn more about her beliefs. They meet and issue a joint press release afterwards. The bishop gives an account of the case and of what he has learned from their conversation. He then decides to reinstate the pastor under “increased supervision” for the rest of 2017. The pastor is reinstated because the bishop has been convinced that she does not believe in or advocate the ability to communicate with dead animals. However, it is under supervision due to “uncertainty of her teachings based on her previous statements” (bishop Fischer-Møller, press release June 15).

In our conversation, Dorte Thaulov expressed that her and the parish council’s idea behind the event was people’s communication with living animals. It was emphasized, for instance by means of the legend of how Francis of Assisi preached to the birds, that even as communication with animals is peripheral to what the church and Christianity should be engaged with, then people’s different abilities to communicate with animals is not contrary to the doctrines of the church (bishop Fischer-Møller, press release June 15)

The following day is the day with most coverage during the case. The press release does not end the debate, however, but focuses it on the Christian stance towards animal telepathy, and on the supervision of bishops in controversial cases (Kristeligt Dagblad June 15; Kristeligt Dagblad June 17). A week after the press release, the bishop find reason to defend his decision to reinstate the pastor and he published an open letter to his critics in the Christian daily.

Six of the seven national dailies print one or more articles on the event and a total of 43 articles are published in the national dailies.³ The tabloid *Ekstrabladet* is the first national newspaper to publish an article on June 3, and the Christian Daily returns to the case during new year, identifying it as one of the most important ecclesiastical events in 2017 (Kristeligt Dagblad December 27; Kristeligt Dagblad December 29).

As the initial news coverage from TV2 shows, the case is framed as a controversy right from the beginning. It is also clear that holistic spirituality is an important part of the reason for the controversy. However, the most controversial element seems to be the decision to let the arrangement take place in a church. There is surprisingly little focus on spirituality as controversial in itself. It is not clairvoyance that is debated but the compatibility of such beliefs and practices with Lutheran Protestant theology. It is a religious and not a spiritual controversy. Animal telepathy as a practice is not in and of itself controversial in the news. In fact, the Christian Daily hires *Statistics Denmark* to do a survey on attitudes towards communicating with the dead, and 49 pct. answer that it should be possible to serve as a pastor in the church even if you believe in clairvoyance and telepathy. 25 pct. rejects this and the remaining 26 pct. do not know. This survey is published as a news story from the Danish News Agency, *Ritzau*, which characterizes it as a “Top News Story”, and it is the front-page story on the Christian Daily (Ritzau June 19; Kristeligt Dagblad June 19). This particular story on the population’s acceptance of clairvoyance uses two university researchers as expert sources and three sources from church-related organizations. One of the researchers argue that the Danish population is highly individualist, which influences their approach to religion. “When you mix your own beliefs it is not difficult to accept that pastors may also hold beliefs other than those normally found in Christianity” (Kristeligt Dagblad June 19). The other expert argues that there has always been tensions between the official confessionally based theology and the unofficial folk religiosity. The general use of experts is similar to the way they are used in the British media as mentioned by Knott et al. They do not dismiss these beliefs, but explain them. The sources from church organizations on the other hand, they reject telepathy and clairvoyance, saying that the church will lose respect that the pastor is “intellectually lazy” including such beliefs in Christianity, and that it is “pure folly”. However, they also argue that it is an opportunity for the church to reach out to the lay people and tell them about the church. “The church in Denmark has always been at its best in the wake of discussions of what true faith is” (ibid.). Consequently, the fact that much of the controversy is centered on the fact that it took place inside the church, and on how the bishop and the church reacts to the event, I would argue that it is a controversy about theological boundaries, and not so much about spirituality.

Several newspapers report that the clairvoyant communicated with a deceased horse. TV2 and Jyllands-Posten report that the horse showed itself to the clairvoyant as a prince and communicated to her that it could not understand why it had been put down (TV2 June 2; Jyllands-Posten June 4). There is no controversy around this or spiritual practices in general. No articles follow up on this practice or the beliefs of the invited clairvoyant telepath. She disappears from the story right after the event. There are no interviews with her, and no one follows up with stories on animal telepathy outside the

³ Apart from the national dailies, the local dailies publish 85 articles, and it is also an event that is covered in both of the national broadcasting corporations, DR (Denmark’s Radio) and TV2 and especially the local television channel TV Øst.

church. Several sources argue that this would not have been such a controversy if just the arrangement had taken place at the local village hall or even at the vicarage as originally planned. It is a case of spiritual nontroversy, at the same time it is a case of ecclesiastical controversy.

Conclusion: Spiritual Nontroversies

Using these Danish cases, this article has explored the systemic features in the media representations of religion and holistic spirituality. There are a number of reasons why holistic spirituality may be less controversial in the Danish news than religion. It may be too individualist to create controversy. We have a single clairvoyant who provides a specific service to those who has that need. It lacks the scale necessary for it to be selected as news worthy. In some ways, MBSR-based mindfulness has the scale. There is a center for MBSR-based mindfulness. The center educates new mindfulness teachers and teaches individuals to practice mindfulness. There is even an international dimension to this institutionalization. When the Danish center is doing a mindfulness retreat, it is often done in cooperation with the Massachusetts Medical School. However, holistic spirituality is eclectic and not very confrontational. It is not a problem if a certain practice works for some and not for others. In that sense, it seems difficult to mobilize journalists to look for a story or turn it into an actual story if they have looked. Following Kraft, economy can be part of the controversy. It is in the mindfulness case, which deal with funding and (economic) independence of journalism. However, there is nothing on the economic aspects of practicing mindfulness, which is what Kraft addressed in the two Norwegian cases. In the animal telepathy case, there are no articles that examine the financial aspects of offering such clairvoyant practices to people. The economic dimension has not been observed or selected by the journalists.

From the systems theoretical point of views, “the functions of the mass media consists in the constant generation and processing of irritation and neither in increasing knowledge nor in socializing or educating people in conformity to norms” (Luhmann 2000, 98). The clairvoyance case is a religious controversy. The church is irritated because there is a foreign object that needs to be addressed. The irritation is focused on how compatible animal telepathy is with doctrine. Most media did not select the story because they were interested in transcendent reality, but only concerned with observing and selecting a good story. However, the audience might be concerned with transcendence and ecclesiastical issues. Consequently, it is no surprise that the Christian Daily publishes 80% of all the articles on the case. The case is simply perceived as relevant information to their audience in contrast to most other newspapers. The local newspapers also find it relevant, but for different and more local reasons.

The mindfulness case is not selected as a spiritual controversy because there is no obvious systemic irritation. There are two systems that are more prone to irritation from spirituality than other systems and that is the system of religion as in the clairvoyance case and the health system. In fact, it is probably not the health system, but the structural coupling between the health and the science system. From a health system perspective, the code is sick/well, where the science system code is true/false. Conventional medicine (as science) can be quite irritated of alternative therapy especially if they offer insufficiently documented treatment. On the other hand, if a treatment works and its effects are verified scientifically, it does not matter if the treatment is spiritual or

religious. In the mindfulness case, the journalists have observed how actors from the health system use mindfulness, and decided that this was not a controversial angle. Instead, the selected controversy focuses on the distinction between news and advertisement. Where the first controversy is a mass media controversy on the credibility and legitimacy of news, the second controversy is an ecclesiastical controversy on the credibility and legitimacy of Christianity. In both cases, journalists could have selected spirituality as controversial in itself, but they did not.

Religion is probably more prone to media controversies than spirituality because it is larger in scope. Religion almost by definition includes some kind of community however imagined or real. Additionally, religions often have comprehensive doctrines and violating them is often easier to observe than violating spiritual doctrines (if such a concept even makes sense). If this is also the case in other contexts with different state-church relations, a less secular population, and with less intensive debates on the role of Islam is an open question.

When spirituality is observed in mass media, it is often in various kinds of entertainment. Knott et al showed that many representations of popular beliefs were found in fiction and popular culture. Spirituality is reduced to entertainment for the consumer reading the clairvoyant column in a women's magazine or watching the ghost hunting show on television no matter how important it was for a person to write the clairvoyant or decide to get help and participate in a ghost hunting show in the first place.

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