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# Beyond Cinematic Stereotypes

## Using Religion to Imagine Gender Differently

### ABSTRACT

In films, religious characters are often gendered in quite traditional ways, but there are some notable exceptions. This article discusses two Scandinavian films that partly break the mold. The analysis illustrates how in films varied forms of religion are gendered quite differently, and explores the ways in which religious themes can open up for alternative male and female characters. Different ways of understanding the representations are discussed and related to views on the place and role of religion in the contemporary Scandinavian context. The article draws on the mediatization of religion theory as a theoretical framework, but also highlights the challenges that complex images of gender and religion pose to this theory.

### KEYWORDS

scandinavian cinema, religion, spirituality, gender, mediatization, agency

### BIOGRAPHY

Sofia Sjö is a researcher and lecturer in Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University. She received her doctorate in Comparative Religion from Åbo Akademi University in 2007. Her research interests include: religion and film, religion and media, digital religion, religion and gender, religion and youth.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender and film has long been an interest of mine, as has been the relationship between religion and film. I have also occasionally combined these interests and discussed the gendering of religious characters and themes in films.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I want to further explore questions of religion and gender in film, with the focus on Scandinavian films, a favorite area of research of mine. Finding

1 Sjö 2007a; Sjö 2013a, Sjö 2015a; Sjö/Häger 2015.

Scandinavian productions worth exploring from a religion and gender perspective is not difficult. Religion is a fairly common theme in contemporary Scandinavian cinema, and many of the films present memorable characters. Although religious characters in Scandinavian films are often gendered in quite traditional ways, there are also some notable exceptions. It is these very exceptions that I want to focus on here. I argue that, although it is common to represent a religious character or characters in religious settings in quite stereotypical ways – underlining in a sense the view that religions affirm traditional, unequal gender roles – religion or religious themes can also be used to gender characters differently by, for example, opening up spaces of agency and challenging simplistic ideas of gender. This is not a novel idea, but I find it to be an aspect worthy of more attention as it allows for a more complex view on the relationship between religion and film.

Here, I approach both religion and gender in film from a constructivist perspective, as I am interested in how both gender and religion are “done” in films. Building on research into gender and popular culture,<sup>2</sup> I explore how elements of religion are introduced, imagined and reimagined with the help of film language, narrative structures and genre conventions. I focus mainly on the construction of femininity and masculinity and argue that notions of gender are primarily developed when male and female characters are associated with each other or characters of the same gender are contrasted with each other. Bringing the questions of religion and gender together, I discuss how the construction of both gender and religion is interlocked in the films and analyze how religion is used to shape characters and characters are used to shape religion. Finally, I explore how these filmic processes and representations can be understood in the Scandinavian socio-religious context and what challenges to the theory of the mediatization of religion they highlight.

Although I treat religion and gender as separate entities for the sake of the analysis here, I argue, as do many others,<sup>3</sup> that gender and religion (and for that matter gender and film) must be understood as being interrelated. Religion is deeply gendered, in film as well as in real life. Ideas about gender shape religious structures, beliefs and behaviors and can be argued to influence ideas about gender in society at large as well. However, saying that religion is gendered is not saying that there is just one way to understand the relationship between gender and religion. There are more common ways of gendering religion in Scandinavian films, but also some fascinating alternatives. I will focus on the alternatives below, but also highlight some more common features.

2 Inness 2004; Buikema/Van der Tuin 2007; Gledhill 2012.

3 See for example King/Beattie 2005; Aune/Sharma/Vincett 2007.

Why is it relevant how religion and gender are constructed in films? With Christopher Partridge, I argue that “popular culture is both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture, in that it contributes to the formation of worldviews and in doing so, influences what people accept as plausible”.<sup>4</sup> This means that it is generally important to analyze popular culture and how popular culture, such as films, constructs both religion and gender. Popular culture is not a direct reflection of our culture, neither does it affect us in a straightforward manner, but it is a part of our symbolic world and ties into how we understand the world.

Popular culture also allows us to identify and further comprehend central issues in a culture or, as Andrew Nestingen puts it, “popular texts continually mediate socially significant conflicts through narration, music, and image”.<sup>5</sup> Studying contemporary film narratives is thus one way of highlighting modes of thought regarding religion and gender in present-day culture. In addition, as popular cultural users we are more likely to turn to popular culture and popular cultural imaginings when relating to or reflecting on issues we have only sparse knowledge of.<sup>6</sup> Since in Scandinavia a large number of people do not have much direct contact with religion or religious institutions, film images are likely to be used to fill in the gaps and form an understanding of how religion is gendered and genders. Thus to understand contemporary views on religion, film, too, needs to be explored.

Religion and media scholars in the Nordic countries in particular have lately focused on the theory of the mediatization of religion in a number of studies.<sup>7</sup> This theoretical perspective also frames this study, as I argue, in line with Hjarvard’s thinking,<sup>8</sup> that media such as film structures and shapes how religion is represented, given space and comprehended today. In addition, media of course also plays a central part in how gender is understood. Classical film narratives usually represent men as active and women as passive, in line with a conventional understanding of gender and gender roles, and even though this structure is sometimes challenged today, female heroes are still often represented with a lot more focus on their physical appearance, their feelings of guilt and their exclusivity – they are often represented as exceptions to the rule – than male heroes.<sup>9</sup> Gender has not been a central topic in Hjarvard’s mediatization theory but has been discussed in other studies that have aimed to expand

4 Partridge 2004, 123.

5 Nestingen 2008, 9.

6 Lynch 2005.

7 See Hjarvard/Lövheim 2012.

8 Hjarvard 2011; Hjarvard 2012.

9 See for example Inness 2004.

the theory's perspective.<sup>10</sup> These studies have, among other things, highlighted the role of gender in mediatization of religion and the need to look at gender when exploring religion in media. This study, too, aims to bring new insight to mediatization theory by questioning a too simplistic understanding of media logics, particularly when one focuses on gender.

Next I will analyze how religion and gender are “done” in two Scandinavian films that have both inspired a great deal of discussion in their local contexts: *SÅ SOM I HIMMELEN* (*AS IT IS IN HEAVEN*, Kay Pollak, SE/DK 2004) and *KAUTOKEINO-OPPRØRET* (*THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION*, Nils Gaup, NO/DK/SE 2008). I conclude the article with a discussion of what the way in which religion and gender are done in the films suggests about social attitudes to and understandings of the relationship between gender and religion today, particularly in a Scandinavian context, the possible challenges to the theory of the mediatization of religion that the representations entail, and further questions worth exploring.

## AS IT IS IN HEAVEN – A SAVIOR CHALLENGING THE GENDER MOLD?

Kay Pollak's *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) represents the director's return to the director's chair after an absence of almost two decades. It has been discussed in a number of articles, many of them focusing on gender and/or religion.<sup>11</sup> Discussing the film in yet one more article can feel redundant. However, the enormous commercial success of this film even now, more than ten years after its making, makes it difficult to ignore, and a more thorough discussion of the different religious themes in the film and their different gender structures is still needed.

*AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) tells the story of the famous conductor Daniel, who after a breakdown returns to his home village, becomes the cantor of the local church and inspires the transformation of many of the people in the village through his work with the church choir. A study of how viewers perceive religion in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004)<sup>12</sup> has identified the following three main religious themes of the film: religious hypocrisy, spirituality and a Christ figure. Each of these themes can be related to gender and each is gendered very differently.

Starting with religious hypocrisy, this theme is tied to one of the central characters in the film, the pastor Stig. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> Stig is a good example of how religion in Scandinavian films is often constructed as a problem that is almost always tied to masculinity and masculine religiosity. Stig is the pastor in the village where most of the story takes place. He welcomes Dan-

10 Lövheim 2013; Sjö 2015a.

11 See Hammer 2006; Wallengren 2006; Sjö 2013b; Sjö 2015a.

12 Sjö 2013b.

13 Sjö 2015a.

iel to the village with the Bible in his hand, telling Daniel how he always gives newcomers to the village a Bible. In this scene, there is an obvious distance between Daniel and Stig. They are placed at different ends of the room and their conversation is filmed in a shot/reverse-shot sequence. Medium close-ups highlight their facial expressions and gestures, showing the stiffness of Stig and the reserved uncertainty of Daniel. Daniel does not refuse the Bible, but he does not actually take it in his hand, either; instead Stig places it on a piece of furniture. The distance between Daniel and Stig is made even clearer in the following scene, when the third central male character appears, Conny. Conny brutally bullied Daniel when they were children, and now he is known to beat his wife. Conny brings Stig a hare that has just been shot, a hare that Daniel had admired in an earlier scene, when it was still alive. In this scene, Stig and Conny are placed closely together in the same frame, which directly links them to each other. Daniel is placed either outside the frame or at a distance from Stig and Conny, and his facial expression highlights his discomfort.

While Daniel is represented as a lover of nature and a peaceful man – several scenes show him in a natural setting smiling broadly at the world around him – Stig is associated with the violent Conny, whose behavior he knows about, but has never tried to restrain. For Stig, as for many other male pastors and bishops in Nordic films,<sup>14</sup> what is important is the status that their position affords them. In several close-ups and medium close-ups Stig's facial expressions indicate his judgmental attitude. Through most of the film, no matter where he is, Stig is shown wearing his clerical collar, highlighting his role as pastor and religious leader. Yet his church is fairly empty and very often, Stig literally preaches to the choir, since there are not many other people attending the services. Stig does not think very highly of the choir and is surprised when Daniel asks for the job of cantor and choir director. He quickly becomes suspicious of Daniel, even though, or rather because, many of the choir members, including Stig's wife, seem to be inspired and moved by Daniel. Finally, Stig has Daniel fired, which leads to the choir marching out of the church and Stig's suffering a mental breakdown, lamenting his lost purpose and status.

Through Stig, the Lutheran Church as an institution is constructed as removed from its members and uninterested in serving their needs. In addition, Stig focuses a lot of attention on questions of sin and, like other male pastors in Nordic cinema, too,<sup>15</sup> struggles with his sexuality, something that even further constructs this church as a limiting, repressive and uninviting space. Stig's struggles with his sexuality also undermine his masculinity. Often in films, particularly for male characters, problems with sexuality seem to be linked with problems

14 Sjö 2015a.

15 Sjö 2015a.

with identity and questions of status and position. The contrasts that are established between Stig and Daniel as well as several female choir members – where Stig’s focus is on rules and power, Daniel and the female main characters express the need for community and love – further highlight how the church as an uninviting space is largely gendered as masculine. The opposite is true of the second religious theme in the film, spirituality.

The focus on spirituality in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) has been discussed in several studies.<sup>16</sup> Lars Johansson<sup>17</sup> has compared the film to the idea of a spiritual revolution presented by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead.<sup>18</sup> The film represents the idea that institutional religion is negative, but that spirituality in the sense of a turn to the self and a belief in the human spirit is something positive. The connection of the human spirit to the religious sphere is underlined visually in the film by a focus on angels and, as I will discuss below, the central role of the Christ figure in the film. This spirituality rejects the institutional church and Stig’s talk of sin and punishment and instead highlights the positive aspects of body and sexuality.

While Daniel is clearly central to the form of spirituality developed in the film – his teachings and actions inspire processes of change – three female characters are even more closely tied to this theme, with the film thus gendering a positive spirituality as largely feminine. One of them, Lena, is represented as a nature child, tying femininity to nature, the body and sexuality,<sup>19</sup> a fairly traditional way of presenting femininity in films. Lena is a young woman who always seems to have a smile for everyone. She is one of the first to approach Daniel and invites him to come and listen to the choir. She feels that the choir should be open to everyone and wants everyone to feel welcome. However, she, too, has a troubled past. Some in the village consider her a slut, and she has been badly hurt in an earlier relationship. Lena becomes Daniel’s love interest, and she enables Daniel to open up and let go of his restraints. Visually Lena is associated with angels on several occasions – she is shown wearing angel wings, or is framed by images of angels and tells the story of how one of the angels in a painting in the old school where Daniel lives is in fact she (her grandfather painted the extra angel when Lena was to start school).

A second central female character related to the theme of spirituality is Stig’s wife, Inger. At first, Inger is represented as a fairly typical pastor’s wife. She tries her best to support her husband and dutifully attends services, but as she is working with Daniel and the choir, it becomes clear that Inger feels that something is missing in her life and slowly she begins to change, expressing more of

16 See for example Johansson 2005; Sjö 2012; 2013b.

17 Johansson 2005.

18 Heelas/Woodhead 2005.

19 Wallengren 2006.

her emotions. She is often filmed in close-ups or medium close-ups that highlight her facial features and her emotional development. As with many other female characters in films, her transformation is largely related to questions of body and sexuality and who she is as a sexual being. Inger also formulates some of the central ideas of the film. In a key scene, set at the parsonage late in the evening in low-lit rooms that metaphorically express the shadows in Inger and Stig's marriage, Inger tells her husband that she is tired of his incessant talk of sin. According to Inger there is no such thing as sin. For one night she manages to convince her husband to let go of his restraints and give in to a night of passion, but the next morning, Stig again turns away from his wife and asks for divine forgiveness. When Stig fires Daniel, Inger exposes Stig's hypocrisy and finally leaves her husband. The spiritual turn in the film is directly characterized through Inger's development, illustrating how it leads to conflict but also to freedom and a new kind of community in the form of the loving community the choir grows into.

And finally, there is Gabriella, Conny's abused wife. In many ways, Gabriella is the classical woman as victim. Everyone in the village knows that Conny beats his wife, but no one seems interested or able to do something about it. The exception is Lena, but she is physically unable to stand up to Conny. Daniel tries to stop Conny on several occasions, but instead is severely beaten himself. However, being a choir member entails a change for Gabriella as well. In what might be considered the strongest scene of the film, a scene bathed in light, Gabriella sings a song that Daniel has written for her. The song is performed at a concert for the village and Conny is in the audience. In the song Gabriella states that her life is her own and she wants to live it freely. The scene cuts between Gabriella on stage and Conny in the audience. Conny, as can be expected, reacts badly to the song, abusing Gabriella again after the concert, but in the end Gabriella leaves him and also reports him to the police. Thus, for Gabriella, too, the spirituality awakened by Daniel's ideas and the choir leads to a profound transformation: she breaks with her role as victim and instead takes control of her own life. Again, this is a process in which the community in the form of the choir plays a role, as does the savior character in the film, Daniel.

The central female characters in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) are all fairly common female film characters – the pastor's wife, the victim, the sexualized woman – but taken together they offer fascinatingly different female voices, placed at the center of the film. On one hand, one might argue that because the film has a male lead and the female characters are all related to this character and partly dependent on him, they lose some of their agency. On the other hand, the savior figure in the film also depends on the three women and they change him as much as he changes them.



So what is it that turns Daniel into a Christ figure? Daniel's Christ-like appearance and his role as savior or messiah have been discussed in a number of publications.<sup>20</sup> In line with the traditional savior storyline,<sup>21</sup> Daniel comes to a community in need, suffers with them, transforms them through his beliefs and actions, is unjustly accused and finally dies, but not without leaving something of himself behind. Several scenes visually and thematically associate the story of Christ. In one central scene, Daniel steps into the river and lowers himself into the water. Previously Daniel did not dare to enter the water, so the scene illustrates a change. But the scene acquires a symbolic function when Daniel surfaces with outstretched arms, associating the idea of a baptism. It is worth pointing out that Daniel baptizes himself, which ties in with the theme of spirituality with its focus on the self and distrust of organized religion.

Right after his baptism, Daniel is attacked by Conny, who beats him bloody. The three central female characters are shown caring for the badly bruised Daniel and cleaning his bloody body with white linens. This scene brings to mind iconographic traditions of women with the dead Christ and the women at Christ's grave. The connection to Christian art is particularly obvious via a long shot that captures all characters within the same frame and is further underlined in the *mise-en-scène* that brings to mind scenes of classic Christian paintings with *pietà* motifs. Conny's assault of Daniel is one of the reasons why Gabriella finally manages to break with her husband. Daniel's readiness to repeatedly protect Gabriella with his body, despite the gruesome consequences, inspires her to believe in her self-worth and right to a better life. This is also Daniel's central message: everyone has an individual voice and the right to this voice and when they come together, amazing things can happen. But this is a lesson Daniel also learns for himself through his work with the choir as he slowly opens up and dares to love and trust others.

Thus Daniel is not a flawless savior. At the beginning, he appears to be uncomfortable around people, somewhat rude and impatient. However, over time, and in particular with Lena's support, he becomes a much more open and caring person for whom every voice in the choir is essential. The way that emotions are shown to play a key part in his life – he expresses a range of emotions, from joy to anxiety – turns Daniel into a somewhat unusual male character. In contrast to Conny, who is also very emotional, but whose emotional outbursts consist of anger and jealousy, over time Daniel learns to show love and affection. And in contrast to Stig, Daniel shows no interest in his standing and image in the community or any desire to return to his old life of fame. In the end, what matters are love, community and the right for everyone to be themselves.

20 Johansson 2005; Larsson 2005; Hedling 2006; Sjö 2013b.

21 See for example Malone 1997.

Through all of these aspects, Daniel challenges conventional norms of masculinity. Yet, is this different gendering of this male character due to the fact that he is portrayed as a savior figure, or is it a more general challenge of ideas of masculinity? As I have illustrated elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> there are male saviors for whom more “feminine” values such as love and relationship are essential and seem to aid them in their struggles. Yet in many other films, male saviors are represented in more conventional ways, with relationships an obstacle for their mission, and force and power the primary means of saving the world. Thus the savior character as such is not always a character that is gendered in alternative ways, but there are several cases in which this specific mythic structure seems to open up for a different understanding of maleness or femaleness, and I would argue that this is the case with Daniel.

However, there are problems with this argument that need to be addressed. Regarding strong female characters and female messiahs in films, it has often been argued that they tend to become less of a provocative alternative because they are often the only strong women in the film and tend to die in the end.<sup>23</sup> So if there is only one male character who breaks the mold of conventional representations of masculinity, and this character dies in the end, what does this suggest about the pervasive power of traditional gender norms? Daniel, too, dies in the end, but he does leave a large group of followers behind, both men and women, so perhaps there is space for his type of masculinity even after he is gone.

## THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION – SPIRITUALITY AS A DOOR TO AGENCY?

Although *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) was not as big a commercial success as *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004), it is interesting because it caused some debate in the Nordic countries. This film is directed by the Norwegian director Nils Gaup, known in particular for having made *OFELAS* (*PATHFINDER*, Nils Gaup, NO 1987), the first film ever in the Sami language, which also became a “pathfinder” for later Nordic films with its focus on narrative, individualism and genre.<sup>24</sup> *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) can be described as a genre film, more specifically it is a “northern”, a western set in the north of Scandinavia. Like many westerns, it tells the story of the struggles between natives and settlers, in this case the Sami and Norwegian and Swedish merchants. But in contrast to many westerns it is based on historical events, a Sami rebellion in Kautokeino in the north of

22 Sjö 2007a; 2007b; 2011.

23 Tasker 1993; Inness 1999; Inness 2004; Sjö 2007a.

24 Nestingen 2008.

Norway in 1852. And in further contrast to many westerns it is not a story about strong men trying to make their way in a dangerous world, but about a young woman fighting against injustice.

THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) sparked a great deal of interest in Norway and in the north of Sweden and Finland, where many Sami live. The Sami are native to northern Europe, and like many native minority groups, they have been suppressed and mistreated. THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) illustrates this very well and so the film sparked a long-overdue debate about the Sami's current situation and their treatment in the past. Here, however, I will focus on how religion and gender are "done" in the film.

The two central characters in the film are the young Sami woman Elen and the old male pastor Stockfleth. As a character, Stockfleth is similar to Stig in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004), with the exception that Stockfleth has a lot more power to control others and cause harm. When the Sami, inspired by the preacher Laestadius and led by Elen, break with the merchants in Kautokeino and thus also with the Lutheran Church, which, through its pastors, supports the merchants, a new pastor, Stockfleth, is sent to Kautokeino. From the first scenes, Stockfleth is constructed as a problematic personality, while at the same time his role as a religious figure is underlined. He is always dressed in black robes and other religious insignia that highlight his position as pastor, but also give him a threatening look. When he first arrives in Kautokeino, he is filmed from behind as he walks through the community. His face is not shown until he enters a small house where a group of Sami are holding a religious meeting. Elen's grandmother is frightened by Stockfleth's sudden appearance and his dark look and immediately identifies him as a man of evil, upon which Stockfleth strikes her. As in other scenes, Stockfleth is filmed from a low angle so that he towers over the Sami, indicating his position of power over them. After his first violent reaction, Stockfleth tries to excuse himself and invites the Sami to come to the church, but the scene is set for a struggle.

Through Stockfleth the official church is constructed as a problematic space that is not concerned about the needs of the Sami and instead chooses to support the merchants and their abuse of the Sami. The church is constructed as an institution that preaches love and care, but turns a blind eye to real suffering. Through Stockfleth's actions the church is even shown to break the law, for Samis are arrested for minor misdemeanors and held prisoner without trial. Since all the pastors are male and represented as traditional male leaders and "bad guys", the church is constructed as a masculine space where female voices are silenced.

The film, like westerns in general, works a great deal with contrasts, for example in the representation of Elen and Stockfleth.<sup>25</sup> Elen is a young Sami woman, while Stockfleth is an elderly Norwegian man. While Stockfleth's faith is constructed as restrictive and focused on rules and control, Elen's faith is constructed as supportive of individuals and directed at solving their problems. A major problem for the Sami is alcoholism. The Sami men get drunk at the bar run by the merchants and are forced to sell off their reindeer, their main livelihood, to cover the bill. While the men squander the family income, the women are left alone to take care of the reindeer and fend for their families. Building on Laestadius' teachings, the religious group led by Elen preaches temperance and inspires the men to stop drinking.

THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) constructs masculinity as problematic in many different ways. Male characters, particularly Norwegian and Swedish characters, are represented as mostly interested in money and power, while the Sami men are represented as weak individuals, unable to say no to alcohol. All the male characters also easily turn to violence and abuse in order to solve their problems. By contrast, the Sami women are represented as strong, caring and community oriented. One of the central scenes that highlight this construction of femininity shows Elen alone in the mountains, fending off wolves that threaten the reindeer. An extreme long shot highlights Elen's exposed position, alone in the wilderness, whereas close-ups underline her determination and strength, as she scares away the predators.

Central for the Sami is their faith. Though the Sami are represented as Christian, their faith has a number of particular aspects. As Cato Christensen and Siv Ellen Kraft<sup>26</sup> have illustrated, the Sami's faith is represented as very much tied to nature. In some scenes, Elen is shown leading religious meetings outdoors, with the stunning nature of northern Norway as a backdrop, captured and highlighted in panning shots. In particular, the film underlines the importance for the Sami of reindeer, which have a strong symbolic function in traditional Sami faith. One example is the scene where Elen scares away the wolves, but the role of the reindeer throughout the film and the pain shown by the Sami when reindeer are slaughtered to pay off debts also highlight the symbolic importance of this animal.

What also makes the faith of the Sami exceptional is that they are represented as Laestadians. Laestadianism is a Nordic Lutheran revival movement inspired by Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), a Swedish Lutheran pastor who is also briefly portrayed in the film. Laestadianism has traditionally had a strong impact on northern Scandinavia. In the film, as already indicated above, Laes-

25 Sjö/Häger 2015.

26 Christensen/Kraft 2011.

tadius' preaching of temperance inspires Elen, and Laestadius' words also have a profound effect on Elen's husband, who stops drinking and joins in the services led by Elen. Overall the movement inspired by Laestadius' words and led by Elen in Kautokeino is portrayed as very loving and caring. The members are shown to be close to each other and to help each other out. Interestingly, this positive representation of Laestadianism contrasts with the way in which members of the movement are usually portrayed in Nordic films and other media as hypocrites or prone to violence, much more similar to Stockfleth or Stig. In general, both in media and in society at large, the movement has been prone to prejudice due in part to its very traditional lifestyle choices.<sup>27</sup> In *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) its followers' image is very different, illustrating perhaps the filmmaker's interest in highlighting the essentiality of the movement for the Sami community at the time and in showing respect for it today.<sup>28</sup>

Although the Sami appear to be Laestadians in the film, it is worth highlighting the way in which the movement is constructed. At first the characters are inspired by Laestadius and are shown reading his texts, but the scenes with the Sami are focused not on preaching but rather on community and nature. This gives the movement a more spiritual tone. The Sami's break with the Lutheran church also highlights the movement's difference from what is represented as the traditional church and traditional Christianity. For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note how the movement and the religious space it creates are gendered. Since the community is led by a woman, a space is created for women, and with its focus on family and community the movement can be argued to be gendered as feminine. However, the fact that men also have a place in this community and are shown to be changed by the community means that this is a space where masculinity, too, is imagined somewhat differently.

The Sami community and the movement led by Elen are represented as an ideal, but that ideal is not allowed to last. After first breaking free and creating something new, Elen and her community reach a new low when Stockfleth and his compatriots retaliate, causing the Sami to rebel, with murder and executions following as a consequence. In the end, the church is partly redeemed through the figure of a young bishop who sees the struggles of the Sami and through a pastor who prays for the Sami who are to be executed toward the end of the film. Despite the tragic end, in the final scene, set a couple of decades later and showing Elen talking to her now grown-up son, the film alludes to the idea that the Sami's plight is honest and just and that faith can play a part in the struggle against oppression and open up spaces for agency and alternative gender ideals.

27 Sjö/Häger 2015.

28 Christensen/Kraft 2011.

## CONCLUSION: WHOSE RELIGION?

Although there are many Nordic films and films from other contexts that imagine gender and religion in very conservative ways and often represent religious people as following more traditional gender norms, the two films discussed above illustrate that religion, variously constructed, can also be represented as a space where alternative ways of imagining gender and gender norms are possible. How is one to interpret this? Are these films only exceptions to the rule or do they actually tell us something essential about contemporary views on religion and religion's relationship with gender? What do the representations propose about how media shape religion and views on religion today? How do representations of this kind possibly challenge the notion of the mediatization of religion?

Although I would argue that the films discussed above are somewhat unusual in the way they imagine and construct some aspects of religion and how these aspects are gendered, there are other films that also fit this model, and thus the films chosen for analysis here are not simply an exception to the rule. In the Scandinavian context, for example, a number of comedies have pastors as central characters and represent them in ways that often go against convention and gender norms. In these films, male pastors are represented as very unusual heroes: as lost and struggling individuals who are trying to find their way in life. The genre here is essential, for the comedy format as such allows for breaking conventions. Nonetheless, the fact that a religious setting is used is noteworthy as it does indicate that this context can be thought of as a space for alternative images.

Even if religion is not commonly used to imagine gender in alternative ways, it does happen, and these films highlight some noteworthy aspects relating to religion, gender and media, at least for the Scandinavian context. Of course, these films do not represent the official Lutheran stand on gender and religion. They are made neither for nor by the Lutheran Church, and many aspects of how religion is gendered in the films do not fully reflect reality. With a large percentage of female pastors and women in other church leadership positions, the Nordic Lutheran churches are far less male dominated than many Nordic films would suggest. In the Nordic countries religion is increasingly becoming a feminine sphere, in line with a process that has also been identified elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Since *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) is set in the past, its portrayal of the church as male dominated is more natural, but interestingly, that depiction is also fairly common in films set in current times, which do not then reflect the gender structures of the Nordic Lutheran churches today.

29 Trzebiatowska/Bruce 2012.

That films do not directly reflect reality is hardly news, but what the films do represent and what this suggests about attitudes to religion is still noteworthy. With their constructions of femininity and masculinity, the films propose that the Lutheran church represents rather traditional gender norms. However, the films discussed here also indicate the idea that the religious sphere might open up alternative gender norms as well. There are different ways of understanding this diversity of gender norms. One can tie it to a lot of research on religion and gender, for as many studies have illustrated, different religious traditions allow for many different roles for both women and men<sup>30</sup> and this could be argued to be reflected in the films. One cannot deny that many religious traditions promote rather traditional gender norms, but these traditional norms can also be considered alternative in contemporary society and as such make religion a space that challenges secular gender norms.

However, the films' use of religious settings to gender characters somewhat differently may also stem from the fact that in the contemporary Scandinavian context religion is understood as a largely non-restricted sphere without a set authority; we are each allowed to imagine religion as we like. In the Scandinavian context religion is generally not understood as a central sphere or a general space, and the marginality of the space and its possible liminality might open it up to being a transformative arena.<sup>31</sup> If one is not in the center, one is in a sense not only expected but also allowed to be different, and this might inspire alternative ideas of gender, too.

With regard to how religion is constructed and gendered in the films discussed above, it must also be noted that the form of religion that is associated with alternative ways of gendering characters is focused on community, and on community that puts the individual at the center. As has been pointed out elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> it is not surprising that one can find this form of religion in Scandinavian films and that it is constructed as beneficial and inspiring of change because it fits well with ideas of the individualization of religion in which community can also play a part as long as it is a community that focuses on the individual. It is worth noting that this form of religion is also perceived as allowing for alternative gender roles, as I have shown above.

Though films always suggest something about the contexts in which they are made, here we are dealing with images of religion and gender shaped by media and media logics, in this case the logics driving filmmaking. When we discuss religion and gender in films, as I see it, the theory of the mediatization of religion can be very useful. One way of understanding the gendered construction of religion in *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) is by taking into account the genre

30 Palmer 1994; King/Beattie 2005.

31 Sjö 2015b.

32 Sjö 2012; Sjö/Danielsson 2013.



conventions and media logics related to westerns, drama and film narratives more generally. Film narratives often build on contrast, which can be developed through characterization, including the different ways of representing a character's religious life or their gender. This logic can be seen behind how Stig and Daniel are gendered contrastively as men in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) and the different ways in which the religious worlds related to them are constructed. By gendering the characters differently and by relating them to quite different religious ideas and worlds, the film highlights the conflict between them and creates a tension that can help guide the story.

Yet the mediatization of religion theory does not explain everything and must not be used to explain away everything. The theory can be challenged, for example, by the use of religion to gender characters in alternative ways. Instead of saying that only religion is shaped by the needs of media, one can also argue that filmmakers are inspired by ideas of religion and thus guided in their media production to think gender differently. At this point, it is unclear what is influencing what, and the simplified idea that media always clearly sets the agenda is problematized. Furthermore, this underlines the problem with some notions of media logics that are used in the theory of a mediatization of religion. The talk of media "logics" suggests that media always works in a set way, but this is far from the case.

The ways in which religion sometimes opens up for alternative ways of imagining gender does not overthrow the mediatization of religion thesis, but it does underline the complexity of the relationship between religion and media and questions who sets the agenda for how we understand religion. For those with no personal relationship to official religious groups, media can play a central role in how religion as well as religion and gender are understood. The open character of religion today together with the, to some extent, liminal place of religion in Scandinavian society allow for many types of representation, and representations that may inspire many and complex images of religion. Media such as film might then to some extent set the agenda, but this is by no means a simple process and leaves space for alternative voices and recognizes the shaping influence of many different factors on media.

We need more research on the processes of mediatization, but this research also needs to look at gender and be open to questioning crude ideas of how different media work. In this article the focus has been on the Scandinavian context, but research on other contexts is also necessary. How are religious spheres gendered in other films and how is religion used to gender characters in certain ways? What do films from other contexts suggest about current ideas of and attitudes toward religion and gender? Future research will hopefully add more voices to the discussion and deepen our understanding of the interrelation of film, religion and gender.



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