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Does it matter how Finnish media write about traditions?

Finnish media are generally seen as liberal. Religion is often in the news in Finland, but mostly mentioned in the context of conflicts, confrontations, and malpractices. Among the most popular online news services in Finland are Helsingin Sanomat, Ilta-Sanomat, and YLE. Helsingin Sanomat is the main newspaper of the capital region, Ilta-Sanomat the most popular tabloid and online news media, whereas YLE (Yleisradio) is a public broadcasting service. The EARS Dashboard gives an insight into how these three news services have covered religion in the first half of 2020.

The Evangelical-Lutheran roots of Finnish society

Helsingin Sanomat has a fairly positive take on the Church of Finland. It is described as the basis of the Nordic welfare state and 'Lutheran contrition' as the root of the Finnish sense of responsibility. The newspaper also paints an image of a modern and liberal church, arguing that the church is not as old-fashioned as one might think.

On the other hand, government-owned YLE writes about the church quite critically. YLE thoroughly investigates malpractices within the church and often brings up controversial LGBTQ+ issues and the decline of church membership. This does paint a picture of a somewhat quarrelsome and dying church. At the same time, YLE frequently writes about minor practical matters such as church renovations.

The mystical Orthodox Church

While the Orthodox Church with its 60,000 members (1.1% of the Finnish population) is also an established church, it gets a very different treatment in the media. The Orthodox Church in Russia is criticised for being conservative and nationalistic, but the Finnish Orthodox Church, which is under the patriarchate of Constantinople, is seen differently. It is associated with aesthetics, mysticism, and spirituality. In comparison with the Lutheran church, it is seen as more spiritual.

Regarding issues such as gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights, the Orthodox Church is very conservative. However, it is not targeted in the media with these issues, unlike the Church of Finland. The Orthodox Church in Finland has, however, had disputes between the leaders of the Church, which were brought to the public's attention during the spring of 2020.

Islam – both threat and victim

Finland has a significant Muslim minority of around 150,000 people. Still, however, most of the news on Islam covers conflicts abroad. However, there surely are some attempts to describe the life of Muslims in Finland from the viewpoint of lived religion. Ramadan and Id-ul Fitr were covered in all three sources, with the presumption that they are not familiar to most Finns, as the celebrations were quite broadly explained.

Otherwise, Islam still seems to be seen either as a threat or a victim. In 2020, the main discussion revolved around the Al-Hol refugee camp. Especially YLE was generating sympathy towards the Finnish women and children in the camp, whereas other media speculated more on the topic of whether the women would continue to spread extremist views if they were to return. Ilta-Sanomat has a clear negative stance, whereas Helsingin Sanomat seems to try to give a balanced view. Islam also made the news as the victim of hate speech, when it was the target of movements critical of immigration.

Why does it matter?

News media have much power to create or break stereotypes. Looking at half a year of Finnish press already reveals biases and stereotypes. This could be due to several reasons. The pace of modern newsrooms is hectic, and may lead to superficial reporting of complex issues. This can lead to unintentionally fortifying existing stereotypes. It could also be the case that journalists either lack a general understanding of religions or have biased views concerning different religions.

For a significant number of people, religion is an important part of their world view and daily life. Religion can affect political decision making, educational choices, the number of children in a family, or social integration. Without understanding these underlying developments behind current events, the image that journalism paints of our world will be left incomplete.

Pietari Hannikainen