Diversification, Mainstreaming, Commercialization, and Domestication – New Religious Movements and Trends in Finland

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Introduction: A Brief Overview of Religion in Finland

It has become almost a truism to state that the general religious climate of much of the Western world, and Western Europe in particular, remains marked by a general decline of institutional, organized religion as evidenced by the steady, long-term decrease in the memberships of most long-established institutional churches, increasingly widespread disinterest in traditional church teachings and practices, progressively weakening mechanisms of religious socialization, and a general privatization of religion and religious life. It has also been argued that, as a consequence of these developments, people’s religious literacy has weakened, leading to the position of “non-belief” becoming the increasingly common “default position” for growing numbers of people (Brown and Lynch 2012: 336–340).

However, concurrently with significant evidence supporting general claims about an ongoing general “un-churching” or “de-Christianization” of Western European populations (Brown and Lynch 2012: 338), there is also ample evidence of a growing visibility and presence of religion and religious actors and voices in the public sphere. In relation to this development, as some sociologists of religion have argued, Western European societies now appear to be undergoing processes of “de-differentiation” (e.g., Davie 2007: 224–236), or even “de-secularization” (e.g. Woodhead 2012: 3–12), resulting in a gradual blurring of previously clearly marketed boundaries between “religious” and “secular” societal and cultural spheres. These (in many ways still insufficiently empirically substantiated) developments also constitute part and parcel of more recently emergent debates on the “post-secular” (e.g., Nynäs et al. 2012; Gorski et al. 2012).

Similar to other Nordic countries, Finland has not remained unaffected by the abovementioned processes of religious change that have come to mark the contemporary Western European religious landscape. Membership rates in the institutional Evangelical Lutheran Church (the national “folk” church that still retains many important structural connections to the state and is
henceforth referred to as the “Church”) have seen steady long-term decline over many decades. Similar trends have been thoroughly documented with respect to other common sociological indicators of religiosity, such as frequency of Church attendance and adherence to Church beliefs, particularly among the young (Mikkola, Niemelä and Petterson 2007: 80–83; 94–95; Gallup Ecclesiastica 2011). But although the Church is facing mounting challenges, it has nevertheless thus far, albeit with increasing difficulty, managed to retain its dominant position on the Finnish religious scene. It should also be noted that, since the early 1990s in particular, the Church has actively begun to rethink its societal and cultural position and started to transform itself into a more independent service- and civil-society oriented actor (Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola 2005: 172).

Generally speaking, as is widely agreed among Finnish scholars of religion, Finnish religiosity has slowly but surely become more privatized (Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola 2005: 168). But in spite of this, compared to Europe in general, Finns nevertheless still score quite high on most conventional sociological indicators of religiosity. For example, on January the 31st of 2012, 77.2 percent of the Finnish population still remained members of the Church. To take another example, a 2004 survey of the religiosity of young Finnish adults in the Helsinki metropolitan area revealed that 69 percent of respondents identified as “spiritual” while 45 percent identified as “religious,” and 50 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “God exists” while an additional 30 percent reported believing in a “higher power.” Conversely, only 14 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “only one religion is true” (Ketola 2007: 31–32). Thus, while Church-religiosity is clearly on the decline, quantitatively measured, Finns still display quite high degrees of private religiosity. This leads Kimmo Ketola to argue that recent surveys of the religiosity of Finns “give striking support to the overall picture of silent religious transformation” (Ketola 2007: 31). Other available quantitative data on the religiosity of Finns, such as that derived from the 2005 World Values Survey, as well as additional surveys conducted by the Church Research Institute in Finland reveal that approximately one in seven Finns report having practiced something they would regard as “meditation” or a “method of spiritual development” at some point in their lives. As Ketola asserts, recent survey data on the religiosity of Finns therefore clearly point to “an ever more inclusive and relativistic attitude towards religious matters” (Ketola 2007: 33).

Though Finland still remains notably religiously homogenous when compared to most other European countries, the Finnish religious landscape has nevertheless been slowly diversifying. More recently, growing religious pluralism can be attributed to the growth of the Muslim population in Finland,