Royal Angels in the News: The Case of Märtha Louise, Astarte Education and the Norwegian News Press

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In August 2007, “Astarte Education” welcomed its first students for a three year course focusing on healing, readings and angels, organized and taught by Norwegian princess Märtha Louise and co-partner Elisabeth Samnøy. Norway’s largest celebrity magazine (Se og Hør) revealed their plans on 24th of July, thus initiating one of the most profiled media-stories of the year and probably the most profiled New Age story in Norwegian media ever.

An attempt to make sense of the fuss, the scope and the proportions of the case, this chapter also seeks to throw light on the status of New Age spiritualities in the Norwegian news media. Scandals say something about the normality from which they deviate. This particular scandal speaks to at least three related concerns. It implies, first, the existence of a hierarchy of more or less valuable religion, and related notions of what religion is and should be. It speaks, secondly, to a link between national identity and religion. The controversial status of New Age is not unique to the Norwegian news press, but was in this case shaped by the royal dimension and perceived threats to national dignity. Third, this case speaks to a gap between New Age representations in the news media and in the popular media. The latter offers extensive quantities of New Age-related ideas and practices, usually presented as facts or entertainment. The news media, in contrast, commonly represents them as strange, exotic and marginal.

Märtha’s angels were debated across the Norwegian media-scape, including tv, radio, newspapers and social media. In this chapter I draw primarily on the printed news press between 2007 and 2013. I am concerned with the role played by journalists, on the one hand, and on the debates they help create, on the other. The latter includes the articulation of issues which are usually mute and taken for granted, including the relationship between the monarchy, church and Norwegian-ness, and boundaries between the state church and alternative spiritualities.

In theoretical terms, I draw upon perspectives from critical discourse analysis, particularly as developed in regard to news studies, and with a focus on news values and discourses connected to the construction of “bad religion.”
News Values and the Royal Context

The combination “princess–angel school” registered on most if not all recognized “news values” – factors assumed to impact the selection of news, and through which certain “facts” are judged more newsworthy than others (Bednarek and Caple 2012). Negativity, conflict, impact and novelty are commonly referred to as the primary news values, along with prominence and proximity/nearness – culturally and/or geographically. New Age rarely makes headlines in the Norwegian news. It was the royal status of Märtha rather than the content of her religiosity that placed it in the news, and made other prominent people (politicians, celebrities, scholars and church leaders) debate it publicly. As a princess, moreover, Märtha belongs not only to the a-level of Norwegian celebrities, but to the symbolic and cultural core of Norwegian-ness.

The proximity dimension of royalty implies that its members are followed closely, and evaluated according to their ability to live up to their roles. Christianity belongs to this level of prescribed performances. The Norwegian monarchy has lost its status as a divine arrangement with the king as God’s representative on earth, but it is hardly a secular institution. Rather, the relationship between the Norwegian State Church and the monarchy has traditionally been one of mutual legitimation (Lundby 2006: 44). The King is subjected to a so-called confessional duty (bekjennelsesplikt), meaning that he is obliged, by law, to be a Lutheran Protestant. He is referred to in the constitution as sacred and chose, like his father before him, to undergo a ritual blessing in connection with his initiation as king. He was, until a constitutional amendment in 2012, the formal head of the Norwegian state church. He is still the formal head of state government, and along with his family participates regularly in high profile ceremonial and symbolic events.

It is not, this context considered, surprising then that Märtha’s angel school was met with interest by the press. More or less anything the royal family does is considered newsworthy; here one of its members departed from what has thus far been the religious backbone of the monarchy. The proportions of the media response were nevertheless surprising. Religion is not, scholars have claimed, important to the national identity of Norwegians (Brekke 2010).1 The news media, moreover, takes pride in adhering to secular premises, including a principle of equal treatment of different religions. One could thus expect a moderate scandal, comparable to excessive spending, infidelity or

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1 A value survey from 2008 indicates that Christianity is not important to national identity (Brekke 2010).