

**Secularisation, sacralisation – or both?**

Religious change in Norway based on data from 1991 to 2008

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Summary...

Recently Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) put forward the hypothesis that a silent revolution is taking place where (traditional) religion is giving way to what they call “Spirituality of life”.

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## Introduction

In 1991 a multi-nation survey on religion was conducted by the ISSP-institute<sup>11</sup>. Since then new perspectives on secularisation have been introduced in the sociology of religion, often under the heading of re-sacralisation theory. It appears that the religious landscape of Western Europe has been experiencing a double transformation during the recent decades. One can both observe religious decline in relation to the waning of church attendance and church affiliation, and at the same time a rise in post-traditional forms of religiosity. Some scholars will argue that both secularisation and sacralisation can take place at the same time – within different forms of religion (Beckford 2003, Demerath 2001). In this article I will use data from the Norwegian part of the ISSP survey on religion from 1991, 1998 and 2008 to analyze and discuss the hypothesis of a double transformation of religion.

Religion has been the main topic of the ISSP surveys in the years 1991, 1998 and 2008. This makes it possible to discuss religious change over time. Norway is one of a few European countries that have taken part in all the three surveys. The other Scandinavian countries joined The International Social Survey Program at a later stage; Sweden in 1992, Denmark in 1996, and finally Finland in 1999. This article is based on Norwegian data and focus on changes in the religious field but also in society at large.

Norway shares many features with the other Nordic countries, and more generally with all the economically-developed countries. Norway today can be characterised as a society with a high standard of living and low levels of confrontation with respect to class, language etc. Since September 11 2001, however, tensions among different religious groups have increased. in certain parts of the country. Scandinavians used to be more tolerant against all kinds of groups than in other European countries but nowadays xenophobic and stereotype attitudes are quite visible.

The religious trends towards the end of the twentieth century Norway can be characterised by increasing religious diversity and weaker ties to the religious institutions, combined with a

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growing private religiosity (Furseth 2006). A growing part of the population has been moving away from the national Church, whereas new religious groups, Christian and well as non-Christian, with more active members have appeared. It must be kept in mind that a high percentage still remains members and take part in the Church's rites of passage. Religious beliefs also find relatively widespread support in the population. Norway today is characterized by contradictory tendencies: one distinct state church, a rapid advance of secularization accompanied by some growth of revivalism, but also innovation of novel beliefs and world views.

### **Theories about religious change**

During the last decades new theories about religious change have appeared in the sociology of religion literature. The once so hegemonic secularization theory is no longer alone on the scene. Alongside with the secularisation theory we find different theories related to what one might call a "sacralisation" process.

I will discuss three different theories related to religious change. The first is the traditional secularization thesis – or rather a strong version of it that still has some advocates among sociologists of religion. This thesis predicts a steady decline of religion both on the societal and the individual level. Steve Bruce and Roy Wallis are prominent examples of this perspective (Wallis and Bruce 1992, Bruce 1996, Bruce 1999).

The second theory to be discussed is Jose Casanovas theory about the de-privatisation of religion. In his book from 1994 *Public religions in the modern world* Casanova claims that religion is back on the public scene because religious leaders refuse to accept a marginalised position in society. The third theory that I will touch upon is the so called spiritual revolution thesis, put forward by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in their book from 2004.

According to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), the growth of "spirituality" in the West is related to a massive subjective turn in modern culture, a turn away from life lived in terms of external roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived according to reference to one's own subjective experiences. This cultural shift is also a shift from traditional religion to spirituality. The former subordinates subjective life to the "higher" authority of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth, whilst the latter invokes the sacred in the cultivation of a unique

subjective life. Spirituality sacralises subjective life and the inner experiences of the individual. (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:3).

In this article I will present data that can shed some light on these different and competing theories.

The spirituality type of religiosity is associated with various New Age ideas and practices that are reported to be on the rise (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Some New Agers have little interest in social questions while some seem to be only concerned with their own spiritual journeys. The social consequences of the so called spiritual revolution are thus difficult to predict. There is as yet no broad agreement in the research community as to what indicators we should use to measure the phenomenon “spirituality” in the population. Heelas and Woodhead (2004) have used a set of indicators in small-scale surveys in Kendal, England, but no one has yet to construct batteries of questions to use in a national survey.

In many parts of Europe traditional religion has been declining while at the same time alternative spirituality has been on the rise. According to Grace Davie (2002) these two developments are interrelated. Her analyses of religion in Europe shows that churches` decline leads to an upswing in individual religiosity, especially in extra-church religiosity such as occultism, astrology, New Age, and so on. The argument seems to be that when churches loose power and influence people feel free to pick up ideas and practices from other religious traditions – and to combine them in different ways.

### **Empirical results**

The last 20 years has been a time of dramatic structural changes in the Norwegian society. Some of these changes are closely related to modernisation and secularization. We therefore have to take these macro-level changes into account when we discuss changes in individual religiosity.

Firstly, major changes have taken place in the work force. Norway is one of the European countries with the highest rates of women in the work force. This tendency is even more remarkable now than it was 20 years ago. In 1991 around 70 % of women between 25 and 66

were working. In 2008 this figure has risen to ca 80 %. In total women constitute 47 % of the work force compared to men's 53 %.

There has also been a move away from the primary sector and the industry sector towards the third sector. In 2008 more than 80 % of the work force was engaged in the service sector. Both the primary and the secondary sectors have declined and more and more people now work in the service sector. The change from the primary sector to the industry sector is usually seen as having a secularisation effect. It is a more open question how the change from the industry sector to the service sector influences religious life.

Thirdly, the urbanisation process has been strong since the 1990s and even before that. Today about 60 % of all Norwegians live in towns and up to 80 % are living in urban areas. Only 20 % are living in densely populated areas. This figure has gone down from 26 % in 1991, according to official statistics.

Another important structural change is the tendency that society is becoming more and more multicultural. The immigrant population has doubled during the last 20 years. Finally, the amount of people having higher education is also nearly doubled since 1990. The figures have gone up from 15 % to 28 % during the period from 1991 to 2008. All these structural changes have probably affected the level of religiosity in the population.

According to the traditional secularisation argument most of these structural changes are generally seen as having a secularisation effect.

Is, however, the population really becoming less religious or are the changes we find merely a reflection of society going thru certain structural changes? In order to find out if secularisation is really taking place on the individual level and not primarily on the societal level, we have to make controls for these structural changes when analysing the data statistically.

If we find that there is a secularization process even after control for structural changes in society, the results can be seen as support for a strong version of the secularisation theory.

What we actually find in the analyses is that none of the reported changes from 1991 to 2008 are really affected by the control for structural variables such as urbanisation and change in the level of higher education in the population.

### **Changes related to religious beliefs**

- Table Belief in God in here -

The first indicator of religiosity that we will discuss is belief in God. If we treat the question in the ISSP-survey as a belief/non-belief-scale we find that there is a gradual and significant change in the amount of people who believe and who do not believe in God over the years. There is however not significant changes in each and every category of the variable. The group believing in god as a higher power remains more or less constant over time. The item “I believe in god as some kind of higher power” can be seen as an indicator of alternative religiosity, but another plausible interpretation is that it represents some kind of diffuse folk religiosity. Those believing without doubts have not changed significantly from 1998 to 2008, even if the figures in the diagram point in this direction. In spite of this stability the over-all tendency is quite clear and point in the direction of a lower level of belief. On the basis of the analyses of the item belief in God we have to conclude that there is a secularization process going on, but the speed of this process seems to have lowered down a bit compared to the situation in the 1990s. This preliminary finding is supported by other results from the survey, for example belief in other Christian dogmas.

- Table Belief in Christian dogmas in here -

When we compare 1991-data with data from 2008 we find that there is also a significant change in the amount of people believing in a personal God. This holds true even after controlling for the process of urbanisation and for the spread of higher education. The change is however not significant when we compare the data from 1998 with data from 2008. The general tendency remains the same when looking at belief in other Christian dogmas. But again the changes were more visible during the nineties than they are after the turn of the millennium.

### **Changes in religious behaviour**

When it comes to religious behaviour the decline is still quite clear. Even if it is difficult to compare the items measuring belief with those measuring behaviour, we get the impression that religious behaviour in general remains at a lower level than religious behaviour. This is probably one of the key characteristics of religious life in Scandinavia. We could call this



phenomenon “Believing without practising”, to reshape a phrase by Grace Davie (Davie 1990). Formally eight out of ten Norwegians belongs to the Lutheran Church of Norway. This does not however mean that everybody has a strong and positive feeling vis-a-vis the church.

- Table Religious behaviour in here -

Not all the items related to religious behaviour are pointing downwards. The habit of lighting a candle by the grave of a beloved person is a tradition that is on the rise in Norway. The modern tradition of lighting a candle at the place of death became popular when the prime minister of Sweden Olof Palme was murdered on the street back in 1986. Later this tradition of lighting a candle at places of death really got popular in Norway when the Norwegian king Olav died during the outburst of the first American lead war against Saddam Hussein in the winter of 1991. The tradition has spread into many countries and becoming an almost world-wide phenomenon especially after the violent death of Princess Diana.

This item is of special interest because it is an example of a religious practice not sanctioned by the official church representatives, but still spreading at the grassroots-level. The increase in this particular kind of practice do not however compensate for the general trend towards decline. It is worth noting that this item is not included in the international module of questions but put into the Norwegian questionnaire after the death of the former king Olaf back in 1991 and has since then remained in the survey.

### **Alternative religiosity**

One could argue that Norway is a case of special interest when the topic is alternative religion. During the last couple of years Norway has become internationally known for having a princess that is deeply involved with alternative religiosity. In the summer of 2007 Princess Martha Louise publicly emerged as a clairvoyant, and told the media that she had psychic powers and could teach people to communicate with angels (<http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article1901846.ece>). She has even started her own alternative medical school named Astarte Education, after one of the oldest goddesses in the Middle East. The training program is billed as a means of “getting in touch with your own truths through readings, healing, crystals and hands-on treatment”. The princess, who still

officially represents the Royal Family at various events, is educated as a physiotherapist, later trained as a Rosen therapist and has also studied at an academy for holistic medicine.

The ISSP survey is heavily dominated by items related to the Christianity. Items related to non-traditional religion has also been a part of the survey but unfortunately these items have changed somewhat over the years so they are difficult to compare. The only questions that can be used in a longitudinal study are the ones related to a mystical experience (1991 and 1998) together with the question about belief in reincarnation (1998 and 2008). A comparison of these two questions indicates an increase in the interest for non-traditional religiosity. The 2008-survey also includes other questions related to alternative religiosity.

This makes it possible to address the thesis of Heelas and Woodhead. Instead of looking at changes within alternative religion we may look at the relationship between alternative religiosity and social-structural factors such as age, gender, education and so on. Such an analyses reveals that alternative spirituality is related to social factors such as being a woman, being young, living in a town and having higher education. This indicates that alternative religious people constitute some kind of avant-garde in society. This could mean that this group is likely to influence society more than their numerical size indicates. Even if we do not have panel data to underline this point the results can be seen as supporting the thesis by Heelas/Woodhead about a new kind of spirituality being on the rise. Another interesting result is that this new kind of spirituality is negatively related to Christian beliefs and to Church socialisation.

- Table Alternative religiosity in here -

### **Deprivatisation of religion?**

The third thesis I will touch upon is the thesis about de-privatisation – that religion is back on the public scene. At first glance the data do not support this thesis. Comparing the 2008-data with data from 1991 we find that people to a lesser extent than before accept that religion and politics are combined directly. This conclusion can however be put into question when taking into account some of the other results from the 2008 data set. Data from ISSP 2008 indicate that people have a rather nuanced view of religion in the public domain. For example people

tend to accept that religious leaders take part in TV-debates related to moral and political questions. This does not necessarily mean that people in general want religious leaders to have influence over political decisions. Norwegians also to a large extent accept the system of a state church. This is probably due to this being a long tradition and is also seen as a way to integrate religious groups into society and to hold back on fundamentalism. The data also show that about half of the population accepts religious symbols and religious clothing in private health institutions. Less people tend to accept this in public institutions. These attitudes are clearly related to variables measuring religious tolerance and liberal views about society. To some extent these data can be seen as underpinning the thesis of Jose Casanova about religion becoming de-privatised and being seen as acceptable in the public sphere – especially the civil part of it – to a lesser extent in the political arena.

## **Conclusion**

The period from 1991 to 2008 has been characterised by a decline in church attendance but also innovation of novel beliefs and world views. Religiously Norway is characterized by contradictory tendencies: one distinct state church, a rapid advance of secularization accompanied by some growth of revivalism.

In a way all three thesis can be supported by the data. The secularisation thesis is most strongly supported. But this conclusion has something to do with the number of items being related to traditional Christian religion and the opportunities to go against it.

To processes going on at the same time

Secularisation related to traditional Christian religious topics and at the same time  
sacralisation

Both processes seem to affect the younger generations in particular – again according to the Norwegian data material.

Maybe the picture will become clearer when we have access to the integrated data-file including data from more than 20 European countries.

...The correlations we find do however make sense taking into account the theoretical outline of the typology of Woodhead and Heelas. Even if the empirical analyses look promising,

future research should put more emphasis on working out suitable instruments in order to measure the three religious types.

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Table 1. Belief in God 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

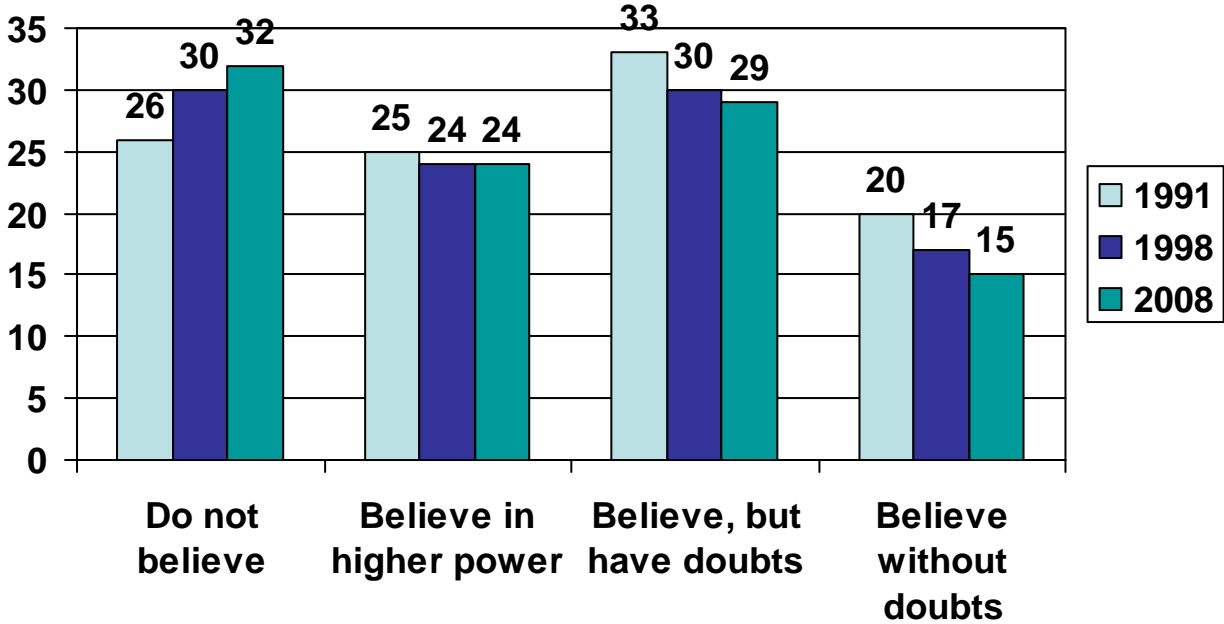


Table 2. Belief in a Personal God 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

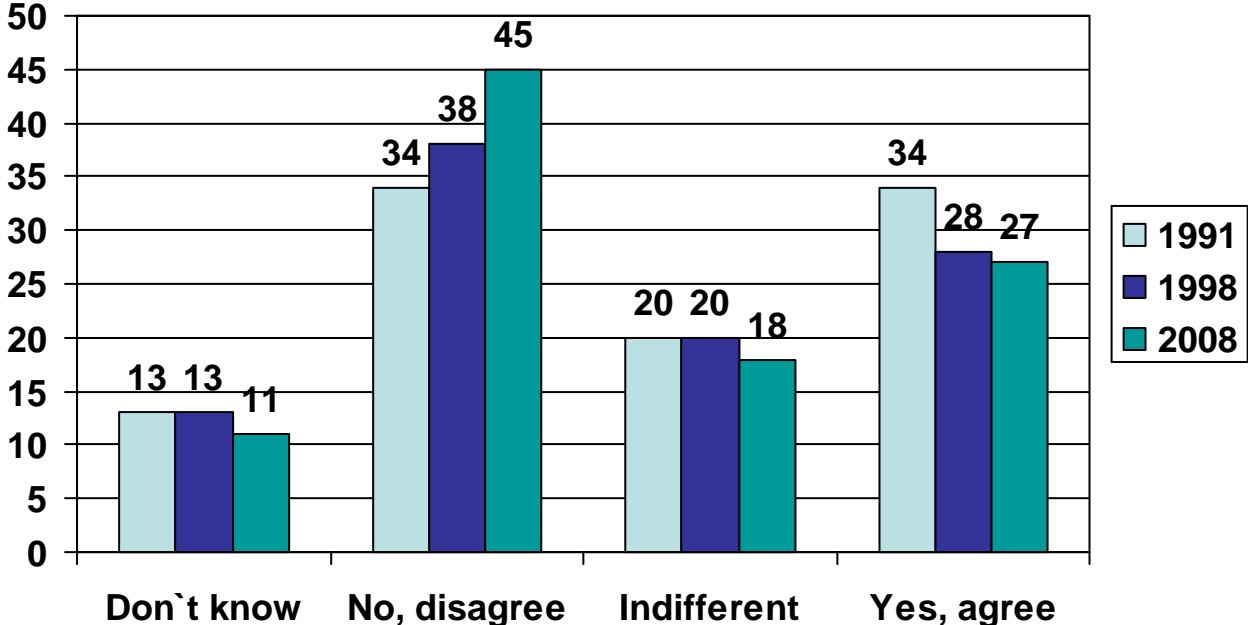


Table 3: Beliefs in other Christian dogmas 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

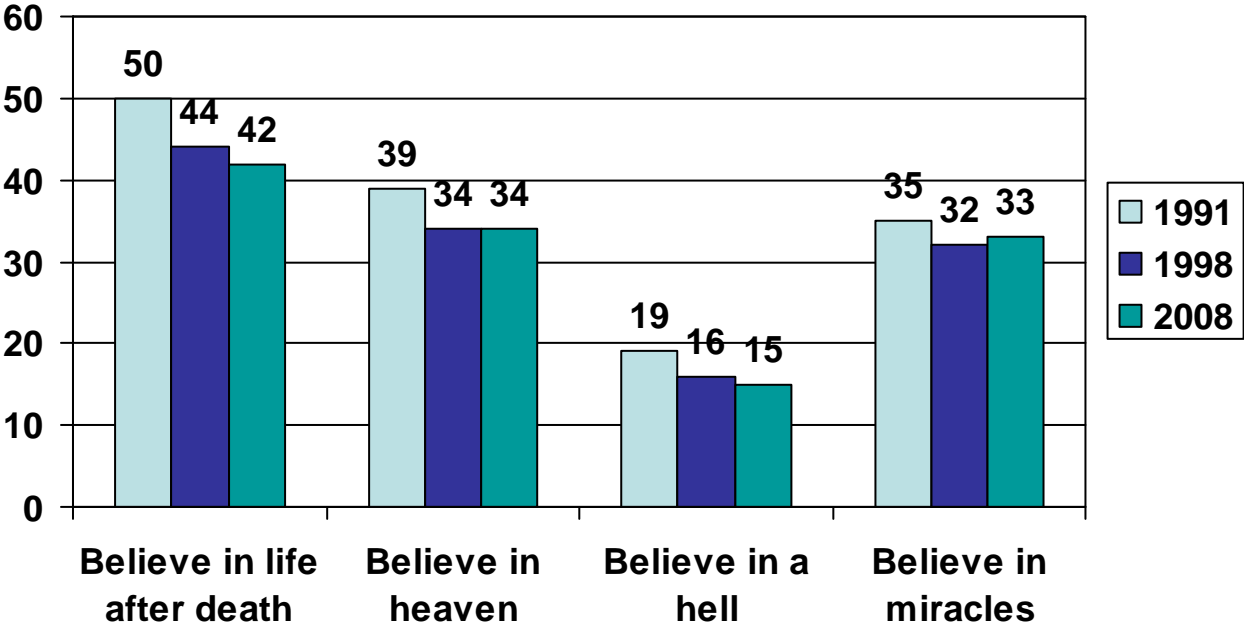


Table 4: Religious behaviour 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

Table 5: Alternative religiosity 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

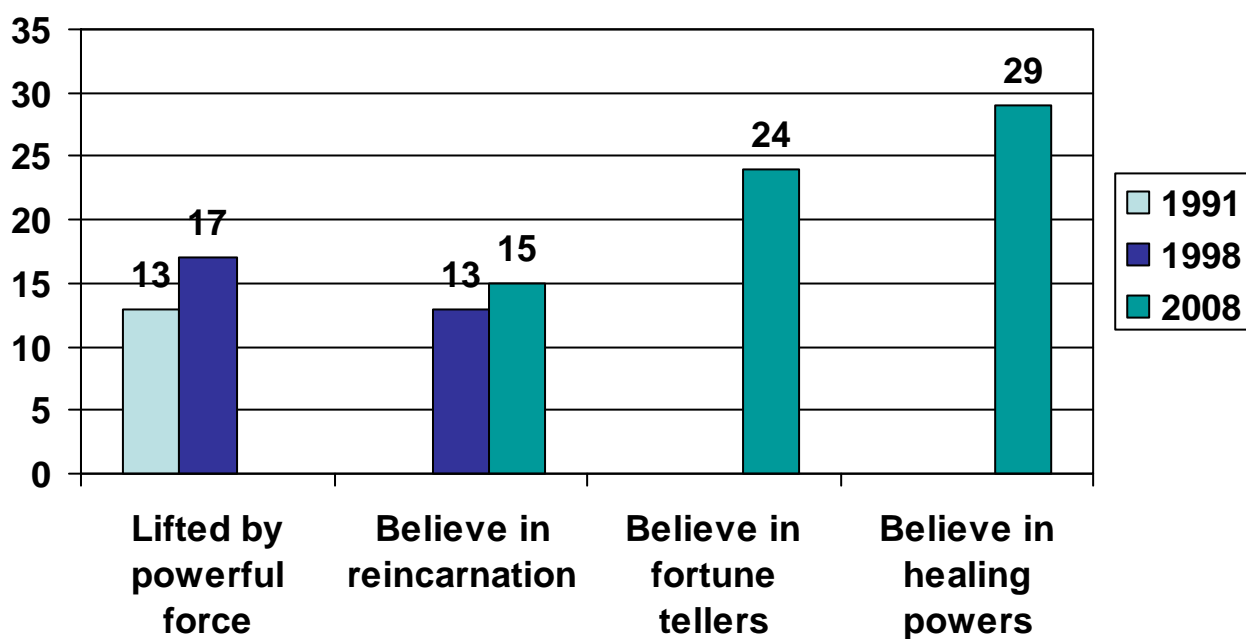


Table 6: Religious versus spiritual 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

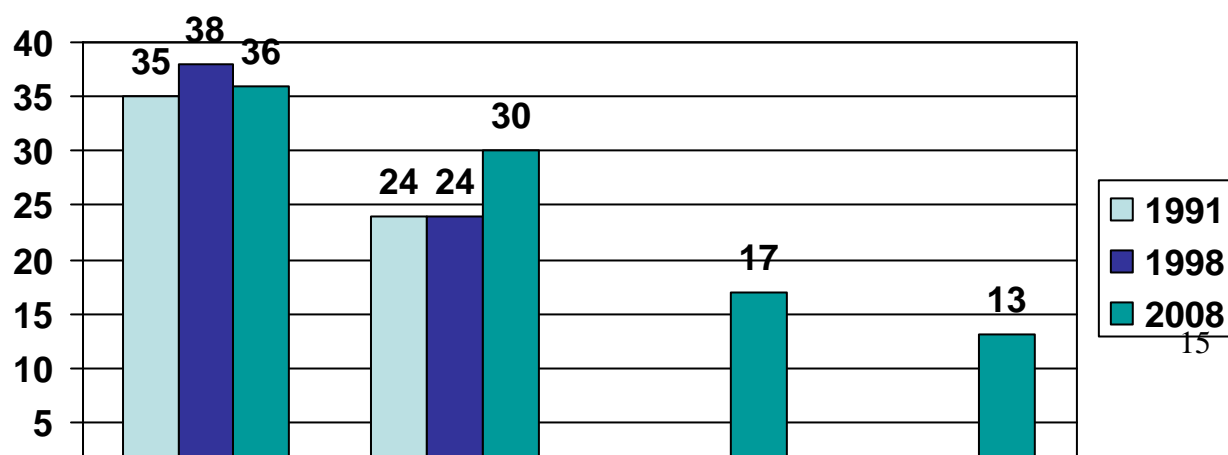


Table 7: Religion in the public sphere 1991-2008. Source: ISSP Norway.

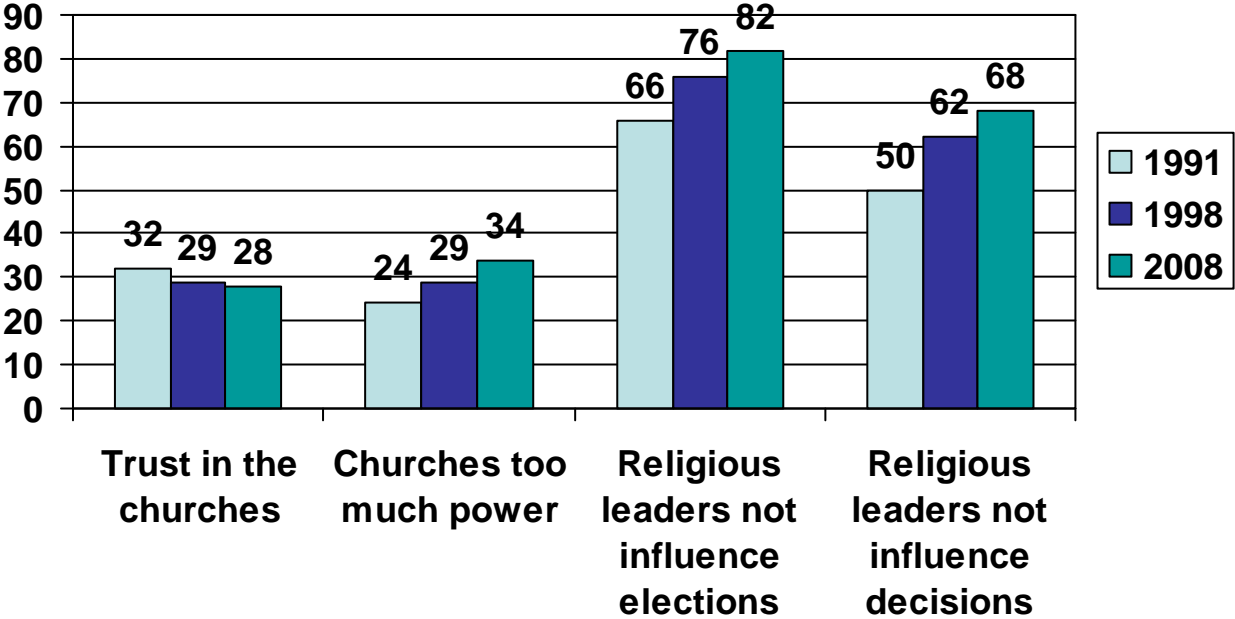
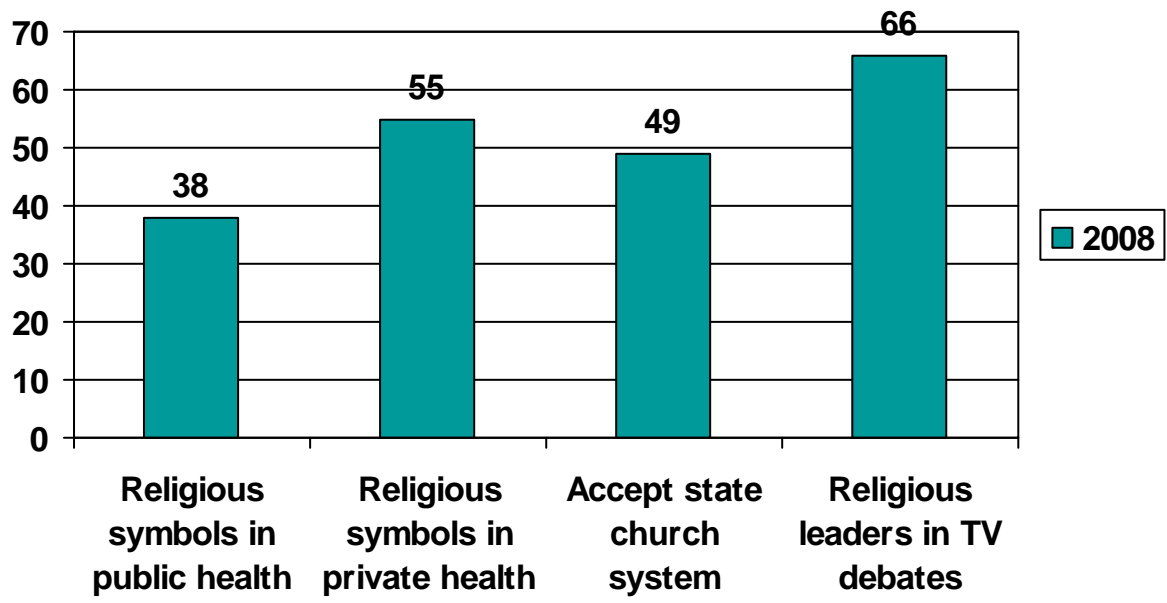


Table 8: Views on public religion. Source: ISSP Norway.





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