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From Subordinates to Superheroes? Comics in Christian Magazines for Children and Youth in Norway

Irene Trysnes

How do religious organizations use comics to communicate religion to children and youth? This chapter examines comics in two different Norwegian religious magazines for children: *Blåveisens* (Hepatica) and *Barnas* (*The Children's*). These magazines contribute to religious education in the form of Bible teaching, storytelling, and entertainment, and both have existed for about 150 years. The magazines use popular cultural elements, such as comics, in their religious education. The form of the comics, either a short story or a single strip, shapes the religious message and the way the religious narratives are presented.

For a long time, religious journals for children and adolescents have served as an important part of religious socializing. These journals covered topics like central stories from the Bible, communication of the values of children's upbringing, entertaining articles, often told stories about life in the mission fields, and encouraging the young readers to be obedient to their parents and to God. I will analyze two religious journals for children and adolescents from Norway focusing on how the use of comics has developed over time in these magazines and further contributed to a mediatization process. The following research questions are answered in this chapter: *What is the function of comics in two Norwegian religious magazines for children and what do the comics communicate?* The methodological entrance to the field is document analysis, which is a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" (Bowen 2009). In this study I have used content analysis to organize the comics into different categories.

Christian Children's Magazines in Norway: A Historical Overview

From the 1500s to 2012, Norway had a Lutheran state church and therefore, as the other Scandinavian countries, has strong “collective cultural-religious traditions, with majority churches encompassing between two-thirds and three-quarters of the population” (Lundby and Repstad 2018, 20). In later years, the Norwegian religious landscape has become more diverse with greater focus on aesthetization and sensual expressions (Repstad and Trysnes 2013). In the 1800s, Norway was characterized by the formation and growth of many organizations, both religious and non-religious, for various purposes (Gundersen 1996, 64–5). Many of these were mission organizations, several of which were organized into local associations focused on “the others” both in regard to inner and outer missions: “Missionary Unions became a place where laymen, both men and women, could express religious commitment” (Stensvold 2005, 317, author’s translation). The Christian organizations quickly grew, and over time, several of these organizations developed extensive outreach networks aimed at children and adolescents, in which the focus was mainly teaching of the Christian faith.

The creation of organizations and associations, especially for children and adolescents, created a need for adapted teaching materials, which were very limited at that time. In fact, it was not until the 1800s that Norwegian authors started writing books for children, which was relatively late in comparison to the rest of Europe. In Germany, for example, there were picture books for teaching the alphabet to children as early as the 1500s, and the first children’s magazines were published during the 1700s. Around the mid-1800s, several children’s magazines were published in Norway, both of a religious and non-religious nature. The *Billed-Magazin for Børn* (*Picture Magazine for Children*) from 1838 to 1839 is considered to be one of the first, and in 1847, the *Missionsblad for Børn* (*Mission Magazine for Children*) was first published in Stavanger, Norway. Toward the end of the 1800s, ten different children’s and adolescents’ magazines were published (Helleve 2012, 11). Most Christian children’s magazines have their background in Christian associations and mission organizations. Many of the magazines originating from the 1800s had an extensive use of imported texts and illustrations, often from the United States or Great Britain.

While children’s books consisted mostly of a continuous story written by one author, children’s magazines were periodical publications with several authors and a varied genre of storytelling, fiction, and entertainment content. Økland

(1981, 90) points out that the magazines also differed from the book format by forming a greater intimacy with the reader. The intimacy with the readers is also underlined by Dilliane (2016), who further argues that the periodical format has a relational character for a variety of affects and emotions.

For example, the reader received the magazine in the mail and had the opportunity to correspond with the editorial staff. The nonreligious children's magazines not only focused on entertainment and exciting stories but also on socially oriented stories with clear value sharing. Many contained a mixture of religious and secular narratives in their early years. The Christian children's magazines, however, differed from these, in that they had a clear focus on the dissemination of religious content.

The main role of the Christian children's magazines was religious socialization. The material in the children's magazines also followed a relatively "regular pattern." The front pages had an appealing illustration, sometimes with a theme. Inside the magazines, the exhorting and serious articles were often printed first, while the entertainment pieces were added toward the end, often on the last page (Økland 1981, 92). The comics were used both for entertainment purposes and to mediate religious content. Økland points out that the children's magazines "played against the two power poles in the child's life, home/family on one side and school/church on the other" (Økland 1981, 129, author's translation).

Understanding Comics in Religious Magazines: Theoretical Perspectives

The interaction between religion and popular culture has been described by multiple concepts. De Groot (2008, 2017) uses the metaphor "liquid religion" to describe how religious organizations adapt to the secular sphere and become more fluid. The notion "liquid religion" mainly refers to how religion becomes visible in new and more "liquid" ways outside the different congregations. In this chapter I use the metaphor to understand how "liquid modernity" influence the aforementioned religious magazines.

Hjarvard (2012) uses the term *mediatization of religion* and describes this as a "general process through which a variety of social fields become dependent on the media" (Hjarvard 2012, 24). Lundby (2018) points out how the terms mediatization and mediation both are interconnected but at the same time also refers to different processes. The concept of mediatization is more concerned

with historical changes and “the mediatized conditions for social interaction following these historical changes,” while the concept of mediation “concerns the ways in which the use of particular media in communication practices may influence the form and content of the message and its reception” (Lundby 2018, 5–6).

Hjarvard (2012) developed a three-point typology that describes the relationship between media and religious life:

1. Religious media. These media are owned and operated by religious organizations, and they have the option to control the content in the magazines.
2. Religion in the media. These are journalistic representations of religion in various media. Here, the religious actors have less control over the message.
3. Banal religion. This refers to the use of religious representations, symbols, and narratives used in new contexts and often for entertainment purposes. Banal religion has been criticized for being a negatively charged term. In this chapter, the term is referred to in relation to representations of religiosity that have a popular cultural character. These may be images or symbols that have a religious undertone and may be open to a multitude of interpretations.

It is especially concepts of religious media and banal religion that are of interest regarding how religious organizations use comics. Wessley (2017) has conducted an overview of the history and development of comics. He argues that comics have various functions that work together. They seek to entertain an audience; several comics were created for moral purposes, comics may have a propagandistic function and finally they may function as system-criticism (Wessley 2017, 32–9). Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015) argue that comics may have a transformative function by reframing religion in popular cultural productions (36).

Furthermore, it is important to contextualize the comics in the religious magazines by looking at changes in the views toward children and childhood over the past years. The tendency has been to move away from focusing on the child as a subordinate who must show respect for authority and to consider the child as more of an equal deserving of respect. The actual magazine content around childhood has also changed. Allison James, the English researcher in the field of childhood, claims that the views toward children and childhood have changed from seeing children as “human becoming” to “human beings,” thus focusing more on children as full-fledged people with their own wills and needs (James, Jenks, and Prout 1999). Childhood researchers point out that the perception of

children has changed in Western societies, viewing them as subjects with their own wills and needs, who are adapted and shaped by the environment (Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010). Karin Hake's (2006) study on children's television programs in Norway from 1960 to 2005 points to the same tendency. While children's television shows in the 1960s and 1970s were designed on adults' terms, often with a clear training and educational focus, an important change took place following the 1980s, when the child increasingly became the focus and emerged as the protagonist of the stories. Hake points out that today's television has changed from a strong focus on education and learning to more of an entertainment focus, and the term "edutainment" is often used nowadays to refer to children's programs. Thus, the sharp distinction between learning and entertainment is eliminated, and learning is presented within an entertainment context. Religious education, and further religious comics, can be characterized as part of this edutainment trend, that is, a mixture of entertainment and the dissemination of faith (Lövheim 2007; Mikkola, Niemelä, and Petterson 2007).

Research on comics in the Nordic countries is relatively new, but it is an emerging field. Strømberg (2016) has made an overview of studies of comics in the Nordic countries and finds that over half of the studies are conducted within the field of language or literature studies, and that there are few studies from the field of sociology and theology (149). In the Norwegian context, there are also few studies on religious literature for children, and even less concerning periodicals. Religious literature has often been regarded as inferior and has generally had a low status in the research communities (Birkeland and Storås 1993, 11). Christian children's magazines thus became an additional low-status category (11). These were magazines with high-publication numbers (*Barnas* had 122,000 subscribers at its highest in 1979) that were read by many, and therefore their content was also of great sociological and historical interest.

One of the relevant works in this field is Ying Toijer Nilsson's study titled *Christianity in Children's and Youth's Literature* (1976). Astrid Ramsfjell (2005) wrote a doctoral dissertation on children's bibles. She also conducted a study of *Church books* for four-year-olds (Fireårsbøkene) in the Church of Norway from 1972 to 1997 and points to two main trends. First, there has been a toning down of adults as authority figures, which has led to the view of children's independence. Second, there has been a shift from focusing on sin and salvation to creation theology, which is linked to a more optimistic human perspective (142). Trysnes (2013) studied Christian songbooks for children, in which she focused on the changes in song lyrics, song themes, song styles, and musical genres. One finding was that songs thematizing the kind and obedient child had

been abandoned. The child portrayed in the new Christian songs for children is active and independent. Also, the more negative aspects of Christianity, such as the devil, sin, and perdition, are no longer present in the new songs.

Åse Marie Ommundsen (1998) wrote a master's thesis about the views on children in Christian children's magazines from 1875 to 1910, which was later published in the report series "The Establishment of Norwegian Childhood" (1996, author's translation). Ommundsen studied a period in which many of the magazines were established, and her findings are interesting to compare with the later development of Christian children's magazines. One of the magazines she analyzed from this period was *Blåveisens*, which makes her study highly relevant to this chapter. Ommundsen (1998) points out that during the period she was studying, few changes occurred. *Blåveisens* did not develop to any significant extent; it remained dominated by moral narratives in which there was a continuation of stories, songs, devotional letters, Bible verses, and prize assignments (36). In the period she studied, the magazine had a clearly dualistic understanding of reality: "Everything that does not belong to God belongs to the devil, either on the side of the good or the wicked. Either one is a complete, unhappy, sinful and evil pagan, or happily saved on the way to heaven" (53). This clear division of the world also corresponds with Ramsfjell's (2005) findings in the moral narratives, which she divides into two categories: "the disobedient who will be punished" and "the pious who will be rewarded" (138). Einar Økland (1981) did a historical study of Norwegian children's magazines, in which he points out that the ideals of religious and secular upbringing generally go hand in hand with the various magazines. The aforementioned studies and theoretical perspectives form the backdrop for the following presentation of comics in Christian children's magazines.

Christian Children's Magazines: Selection and Development

I have chosen two journals adapted to children and adolescents for the purpose of obtaining a certain theological spread and also due to the number of copies in circulation. *Barnas*, formerly known as *Barnas sondagsskoleblad* (Children's Sunday School Magazine), is the oldest Christian children's magazine that still exists in Norway. It was started by the Lutheran priest Honoratius Halling in 1854 under the name of the *Børnebiblioteket* (Children's Library) and was often distributed free of charge at Sunday schools "as a prize for the most diligent

students" (Hagen 1974, 73). In 1875, the magazine had a print run of 15,000. From 1865 to 1882, it was edited by H. E. Hansen. The magazine changed its name to *Barnas sondagsskoleblad* in 1935 (Harberg 1989, 46–7). Today, *Barnas* has a circulation of approximately twenty-three thousand and is the largest Christian children's magazine in Norway. It is distributed free of charge at many Sunday schools, but children can also subscribe to it and have it mailed to their home.

The other magazine is *Blåveisens*, which started in 1882, with Jens Marius Giverholt as editor. Giverholt, a theologian, was born in Bergen in 1848, and he wrote for children and taught Sunday school. In the beginning, the *Blåveisens* magazine had the subtitle: "A magazine for Sunday school and the home." Giverholt was the editor of *Blåveisens* until his death in 1916 (Ommundsen 1998, 35). In 1917, the magazine was taken over by the Norwegian Lutheran Mission, which ran it by that name until 2001. In 2001, the name changed to *Blink* (Flash), and in 2006, it once again changed to *Superblink* (Superflash). There was also a profile change, and the magazine became part of a larger club concept consisting of three elements: website, magazine, and CDs, with a target group of children aged five to thirteen. It has recently been replaced by a new platform called *Intro*.

Both magazines are part of the periodical genre, which is a mixed genre. It is characterized by multimodal texts, diverse voices, and different authors. Therefore, it is difficult to define. Furthermore, each number of a periodical functions both as part of a series and as a free-standing unit. "It is both open-ended and end-stopped" (Beetham 1989, 99). The periodicals also invite the reader to make his or her selection of texts as it is unusual to read a periodical "from cover to cover." Instead, readers can "construct their own texts" (Beetham 1989, 98).

Both magazines started out with a focus on religious education. In the earliest years, the focus was on raising well-behaved and obedient Christian children who would do the right thing, follow Jesus, and actively proclaim the gospel to others. Punishment and reward appear as a clear dichotomy in the religious dissemination, in which the punishment as an extreme consequence of disobedience was portrayed as eternal destruction, but mostly it was linked to something unpleasant for the child in this life if he or she lied, stole, and so on. In contrast, reward was linked to the promise of eternal life and a more subjective experience of happiness when the child chose the acceptable and right action. Up until the 1960s, the magazines were dominated by moral narratives with a clear religious didactic message. *Blåveisens* turned out to be focusing more on missionary stories and was also the most conservative one being part of a

mission organization, which in 2007, broke its ties with the Church of Norway due to their acceptance of gay and lesbian priests. *Barnas* has a more liberal profile and is part of the Norwegian Sunday Association, with members from different Lutheran churches and organizations.

Due to the extent of this work, I chose to concentrate my reading on only one complete year of issues from every decade, focusing on content analysis. I have taken a “sampling” of the magazines from other years and read some single editions from the period. I have created an overview of the types of comics topics I found in the magazines and divided them into the following five categories. The categories are inspired by Wessely’s (2017) different function of comics:

1. Moral comics—focus on obedience and the religious socialization of the child.
2. Mission comics—emphasize stories of missionaries spreading Christianity, often to the countries in Africa and Asia.
3. Bible comics—different Bible stories presented as comics.
4. Comics with animals—feature animals as the main characters, focusing on taking care of animals or nature.
5. Entertainment comics—without a specific religious content, with the purpose of being funny, entertaining children, and so on.

This categorization is a result of the analysis of all the comics present in the magazines and emphasize on how the comics communicate various themes in the magazines. However, the categories will sometimes overlap. For instance, comics with animals may also function as animals telling Bible stories. Other times they focus on taking care of animals. Some themes also disappear and are replaced with others during time. One may also argue that the overall function of comics is to entertain. Even so, the use of Bible and moral stories in comics is quite different from telling jokes through a comic strip.

Comics in the Magazines

Moral Comics

Moral narratives are generally dominant in the early editions of both magazines. In the 1930s, the magazine *Blåveisens* had only four pages, and moral narratives made up two or three of these. Many of these narratives are very dramatic and harsh, for instance that disobedience can lead to death, but some of the stories feature typical storytelling that addresses everyday events. Some of those stories

can be characterized as a precursor to comics, combining pictures with a text line underneath. One such example is the short piece “What Will Mom Say,” from 1933.

Here, we find the picture of a girl cutting her little brother’s hair. The text addresses the reader, asking: “What will Mom say when she sees stairs and streets in her little boy’s beautiful locks of hair? Poor mother! Poor little boy! Else (the girl’s name, author) will probably regret what she has done when she sees the result. What will Mom say? Shh, here she comes.”

The text is aimed at the youngest readers and is concerned with teaching them to do the right thing. It clearly encourages children to put themselves in the mother’s place and to imagine themselves as the little girl who will regret what she has done. It depicts a familiar situation that many people can recognize and has a somewhat humorous undertone. This story is less serious than most others from this period, probably because it is intended for very young readers, as stated in its headline.

Many similar examples of “early comics” are tragic and, for instance, concern children who die. They are also characterized by exhorting words at the end. One example is the little story “The Last Tear”:

There was a little girl who laid on her bed and fighting death. In her hand, she held a handkerchief with which she wiped her sweat and tears away. Suddenly, she gave her mother the handkerchief and said, “Take it mother.” The mother replied, “Do you not want it anymore?” The child answered, “No, mother, I do not need it anymore because I have cried my last tear.” Then she closed her eyes and died. Her mother wiped away her little girl’s last tear. It has been a long time since the first teardrop fell, and since then there has been a flood of tears. But there is a country without tears! Can you grasp it? In that country everyone is happy. To that country everyone is invited. We can all join the big party in heaven! (*Blåveisens* 1933, author’s translation)

Such stories are very different from today’s narratives for children, and thus they might appear brutal and oppressive. Their basis is obedience ideology, and they are written from a pronounced religious perspective that Hjarvard refers to collectively as *religious media*.

The most “dramatic” moral comics disappeared in the 1960s. Some of the reasons for this may be that child mortality was falling, living standards were increasing, and the perception of children was changing in Western society. These types of comics were replaced by mission comics, also dramatic and with similar themes, but more distant and about “the others out there.” One example

is how the front matter has a picture of a sun and a hepatica shining over a white boy standing and a white girl kneeling. On the other side, there are pictures of the “heathen children” who are not (yet) under the same protection. In the 1980s, there were also moral comics, but often of a more positive characteristic. They were about doing the right thing, with less focus on punishment and more on forgiveness. During this period, there was more focus on the child, and seemingly, the authoritarian parenting was softening. In the 1990s, the moral narratives in the comics were replaced with more open narratives lacking of a moralizing end.

The themes of the narratives also changed their character in the 1980s and 1990s. The magazines contained more dramatic Bible stories, fairy tales, and stories from other countries that portray good values and no element of punishment. The new comics of the past twenty years that feature the theme of upbringing focus on positive values, and they often also concern children who teach adults something. The stories are short, often with an open ending that invites the reader to reflect on different solutions to the problem. They also allow for a wider range of emotional expression for children; while the previous focus was on children being good and gentle, they are now allowed to express anger and frustration. The children are often portrayed with friends and shown as active, happy children talking about a religious theme. The aforementioned notion of *mediatization* may be one way to describe how religious content is presented using popular cultural elements (Hjarvard 2012).

The comic below is one example of how the Bible story of the “Man Healed at the Pool of Bethesda” is told, with children in a swimming pool as the context. This comic strip is called “The Thomas Church Tower Agent Club” and has appeared as a serial since 2010 in *Barnas* (Figure 2.1). The tower agent club is a theme in the magazine, and “tower agents” are also part of the Church of Norway’s Christian faith education. It focuses on active children solving different mysteries and codes, wrapped in the narrative of being “special agents” searching for “secret divine powers” and “secret symbols,” with the Christian message as the underlying framework. The tower agents’ comics are one of many examples of how Bible stories are “recreated” and told through young children as main characters. As the example above illustrates, the comic has a subordinated function. Telling the biblical story is the main focus.

In the comic we meet the children Lukas, Martin, Linnea, and Sukai and it starts with Lukas saying:

“Yoho!” Jumping into the pool.

“So nice,” says Sukai.



Figure 2.1 The Tower Agent Club. *The Norwegian Sunday School, The Tower Agent Club.* 2022, *Barnas* no. 1, p. 14.

"Agreed," replies Martin.

"Do you remember the story of Bethesda?" says Linnea.

"The one where Jesus healed the paralyzed man?" replies Lukas.

Linnea: "Yes, and how the water sometimes got stirred?"

Martin: "Just like this!"

Linnea: "For a long time there were no traces of the pond, so a lot of people doubted that the history was true. But as late at the 19th Century some archeologists found it! In the middle of Jerusalem just like the evangelist John writes.

Lukas: That's so cool! It says in the Bible those who seek will find."

The stirring in the water is symbolized with the boy Lucas stirring in the swimming pool. The comic function as the medium for telling an old bible story. The context is western and modern, but the comic only function as a tool to spread the biblical message, and can also be interpreted in terms of religious media (Hjarvard 2012).

Mission Comics

As mentioned earlier, *Blåveisens* was a mission magazine published by an organization that conducted extensive missionary activities abroad. The purpose was two-sided. The magazine was part of sharing the organization's missionary activities and was also aimed at influencing the religious beliefs of Norwegian boys and girls. The magazine was an important vehicle for children and young people to get involved in missionary work outside of the country. In the earliest magazines, only the mission stories had illustrations. These were often dramatic, portraying idolatry, fighting wild animals, and so on, and characterized by exoticism and focusing on differences between the "heathens" and the Christians.

One typical mission comic is called "The Savage Kid," a serial in *Blåveisens* (1959). It is about a little boy called Gbesimi and describes how he seeks help from a missionary after he hears him preaching the gospel of Jesus. The story follows the traditional path of a conversion story and focuses on how the stray, little, naked African boy gets help from the white missionary.

The same types of comics are also found in *Barnas* during the same period, and when there are illustrations or comics in the magazines, it is the mission stories that are featured. The reason these stories are often illustrated may have to do with their exotic character. We meet "Indian tribes," "snake tamers in India," "African slaves and wizards in the jungle," "Eskimo children," and so

on. While Blåveisens missionary material was taken from the organization's actual missionaries, Barnas collected narratives from various continents and mission organizations, stories that are thrilling and at times frightening, and are related to the adventure genre where the missionaries function as "superheroes" (Ahmed and Lund 2016). The stories often play on the differences between people, where the white missionaries are great heroes, but some also have elements of mutual identification and understanding. For example, a story is about how children from all countries play the same games, illustrated by Inuit children playing ball: "Those who are the most serious and best at playing games are often the best disciples and the best children" (*Børnevennen* 7, 1869). We can find examples of such attempts to engender cultural understanding even in the nineteenth century.

Both magazines present different mission comics that deal with children in other countries. In the early missionary tales, the male missionary is the protagonist. The native people of Africa or Asia are often presented as a group, and a few are mentioned by name. Those who are named are those who are converted, as well as the chiefs or sorcerers who oppose the missionary. In the 1960s, there are examples of missionary stories in which the child is at the center and teaches the adults, and these stories are even more common in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, the focus flipped from adults to children both "out there" and back home.

Images of other cultures as dangerous or uncivilized largely have disappeared by the 1990s. In the 1980s, there were some comics focusing on non-Christian children who were in pain and suffering, but this appears less and less. In the 2000s, the magazines are more concerned with how culture is understood, and they present children as equal to adults. Today, the child is at the center of the story, while in the former comics, the focus was on the adult missionaries. There is also less of an emphasis on mission in the latest magazines. The communication of the Christian message to Norwegian children in a positive and appealing way is clearly the main focus.

Bible Comics

Bible comics focus on narrating bible stories through comics and have a central role in both magazines, often as regular slots. In the early magazines of the nineteenth century, they are often featured prominently, for example, on the first page. They rarely fill the entire magazine, and as mentioned, the moral stories take up much more space until the 1960s. Devotionals are gradually

reduced to a smaller slot, while the recounting of Bible stories generally takes up more space. The Sunday schools' traditional "word for the day" is also found in the early editions of both magazines. These appeared in the late 1800s as more or less fixed elements. The words for the day are Bible verses that the children are expected to learn by heart. In the early issues, illustrated Bible verses are found in several issues. One example is Jesus and the children from No. 5 1868.

In the 1950s, more Bible stories and devotional material appeared in *Barnas*. The front page often had a picture from a Bible story from the New Testament with headings such as "Jesus as a role model," "Jesus as the Lord victorious," and so on. The magazine also had Bible reading plans and a review of the famous Bible stories. From the 1970s, some of the Bible stories were presented as comics, and the number of Bible stories presented as comics has continued to grow to the present. In the last ten years, almost every Bible story in *Barnas* is presented as a comic. The Bible stories often focus on stories about children, with Jesus performing miracles or focusing on other "superheroes" from the Bible.

The comic below is the story of God calling Samuel (Figure 2.2). It combines old and new interpretations, focusing on Samuel's mother Hannah and the high

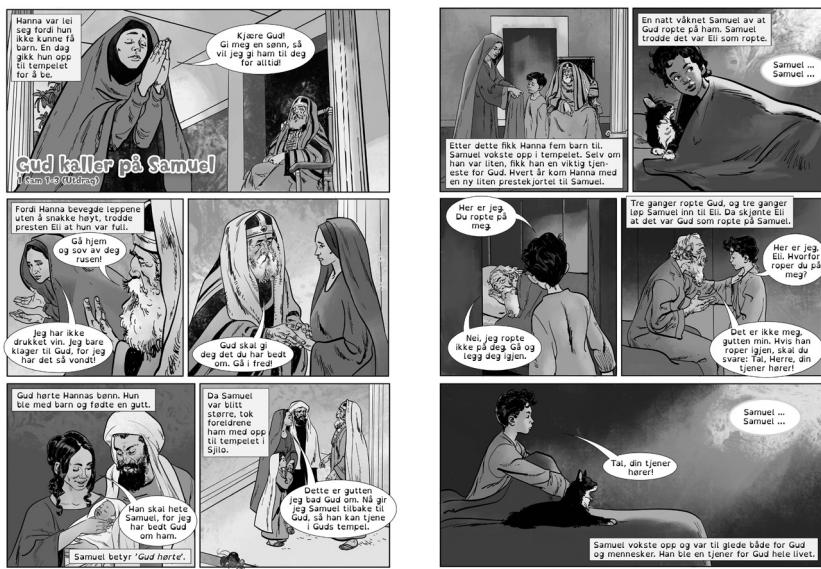


Figure 2.2 The calling of Samuel. *The Norwegian Sunday School*, The calling of Samuel. 2022, *Barnas* no. 1, p. 5.

priest Eli, wearing traditional clothes, while Samuel wears pajamas and has a cat in his bed. The text says that Hannah gave Samuel to the temple “when he was older,” not when she had “stopped breastfeeding him,” as is written in the Bible (1. Sam. 22–23).

The Bible comics in both magazines can be interpreted as religious media, using media to convey religious texts. The content of the stories becomes more “freely” interpreted as we move toward the present time.

Animal Comics

The *Børnevennen* No. 10 of 1869 features a story about the “animal tormenter.” Narratives that deal with nature and the care of all living beings, both humans and animals, are common in this time and quite prevalent until the 1950s. Also, in the early magazines, there are illustrations of animals both for entertainment and information. In the 1960s, however, there are fewer of these types of stories. Eventually, they are replaced by more realistic stories that thematize the environment or pertain to factual matters, but especially by stories about poverty and charity toward people. The story of the animal tormenter follows the previously mentioned example narrative pattern. It is about little Edmund, who “was cruel enough to torment and afflict all the animals he could get his hands on.” His father catches him attacking the bird and tells the boy that his cruel treatment will cause him to face the consequence on God’s Day of Judgment. The father will also punish him if he finds him doing this again. However, Edmund does not stop his cruelty toward animals. One time, he torments some little puppies and must climb up a ladder to escape an attack from the puppies’ mother. The ladder is in bad condition and Edmund clings helplessly to it. He fears for his life in this state and imagines all the animals he has tormented and killed, finally crying out to God for forgiveness, and is finally rescued from the ladder by a farm boy. After this, Edmund never hurts animals again. The story ends with a Bible verse: “There shall be no merciful judgment upon those who do not show mercy” (Jas 2:13). However, tales of kindness to animals and nature do not have a large role in the magazines; we find them mostly around 1900 up until the Second World War, after which they resurface with an environmental protection profile or a focus on friendship and God’s love in the 1990s. In 2022, there is a fixed comic column in *Barnas* called “Gulliver in Paradise Bay” (Figure 2.3). The comic tries to explain the story of Hannah giving Samuel to the priest, but to God.



Figure 2.3 Gulliver in a paradise bay. *The Norwegian Sunday School, Gulliver in paradise bay. 2022, Barnas no. 1, p. 2.*

- Would you give me away? asks Gulliver.
- I don't need to, replies the mother fish.
- What do you mean? says Gulliver.
- The earth and every living creature already belong to God. It is God that created us, and we are his creatures, the mother fish says.
- Good, because I'd rather be with you, says Gulliver.

The conversation with Gulliver and his mother is an interesting example of how the former Bible comic with “Bible figures” is “explained” by animal figures in another comic with a moral message (Wessely 2017). As the Bible stories, mentioned before, it both can be interpreted as mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2012) and what is suggested as a “liquidizing comic” (de Groot 2016) that attempts to transfer and adjust the Bible stories in our current context.

Humorous Comics

Entertaining materials and contests were early features in the magazines; however, these were mainly featured in the Christmas or other holiday editions. In the beginning, humorous comics were primarily comprised of Biblical riddles or questions, but later we also find, comics telling jokes without biblical references.

In the oldest magazines, we can also find examples of questions and contests, but to a much lesser extent. These types of segments were always placed on the magazine’s final page, and as early as in *Blåveisens* no. 3 in 1883, there appears a “prize-winning riddle.” The entertainment content increased after the Second World War, and in 2014, it accounted for over one-third of Blåveisens slots and almost half of *Barnas*. One example of humorous comics is “The fury league” from *Blåveisens* in 2001, which is about sheep telling jokes. This might be an example of “banal religion” (Hjarvard 2012). The only biblical reference here is to the sheep (e.g., Jesus as the shepherd and his followers as sheep).

From Subordination to Superchildren with “Superpowers”

Initially, I briefly described how the view of children and childhood has changed over the years and how this has been reflected in religious comics. For example, the kind and obedient child has been replaced by the independent and active child. As in society in general, there has been a development from the view of children from human “becomings” to human beings in the comics. This

corresponds with the gradual change over the years in the religious landscape of Norway (Repstad 2005, 2013; Trysnes 2012). Especially the animal comics and entertainment comics can be interpreted as examples of a religious liquidation process within the religious magazines (de Groot 2008, 2017) in which religious comics are influenced and shaped by secular environments.

The focus on religion has changed in its characterization through edutainment, that is, a mixture of entertainment and dissemination of faith. (Lövheim 2007; Mikkola, Niemelä, and Petterson 2007). These changes can also be observed in Christian children's songs (Trysnes 2013). The magazine comics have also changed from the thematizing of moral education to a general focus on edutainment. The content of the comics is chosen both to convey the Christian message, while, at the same time, serving an entertainment purpose (Wessely 2017) that is mediaized in the "liquid religious" comic book universe (de Groot 2008; Hjarvard 2012). The comics in the magazines, and those in general, now adapt to the secular culture and downplay the typical "religions of difference" (Woodhead and Heelas 2000) elements, such as sinfulness, missionary stories of other cultures, God's judgment, and try to reframe religious messages using elements of popular culture (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 2015). The comics are mediaized; shaped and influenced by popular culture, but they also have a focus on communication moral values (Wessely 2017) and a religious message as *religious media* (Hjarvard 2012). The comics present religion in a form that does not appear offensive and that is wrapped in popular cultural symbols. In this context, the comics can also be linked to how children now are placed at the center, not as sinners or subordinates, but more as secret agents connected to divine superpowers or as superheroes (Ahmed and Lund 2016).

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