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## Chapter 6

# Nationalizing Christianity and Hijacking Religion on Facebook

**Abstract:** *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* (YWC) is a Facebook group that was established in November 2013 to campaign for the right of a television news anchor to wear a cross pendant. YWC with its more than 100,000 likes, swiftly became a locus for discussing religion in society in general. A range of participants, with various agendas and modes of interaction are drawn to YWC: conservative Christians, nationalists, humanists, fervent secularists, and ardent atheists – ‘hijacking religion’ in multiple ways. Among those positive to Christianity, it is for the most part construed as either a religion of ‘identity’ or ‘compassion’. This chapter builds on ethnographic research and focuses on the generic positions, repetitive patterns of communication, writing styles, and modes of enacting the conflict(s). There is a particular emphasis on how people’s emotions, narratives, and worldviews shape the way they engage with mediatized conflict and play into the internal group dynamics.

**Keywords:** mediatized conflict, hijacking religion, Christianity, social media, nationalism

## 6.1 Introduction

A Norwegian TV news anchor called Siv Kristin Sællmann wore a bejewelled cross pendant while presenting the news in the autumn of 2013. Little did Sællmann know that this deed would spark a huge controversy about religion and public service media (PSM), or that more than 120,000 people would ‘like’ a Facebook group that supports her right to adorn herself with the cross while reading the news.

The Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter abbreviated to YWC) was created as a campaign group, but swiftly developed into a multifaceted online space where conservative Christians and other concerned citizens continue to discuss religion. YWC provides both a window into what PSM audiences think about the NRK news anchor neutrality

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<sup>1</sup> *Ja til å bære korset når og hvor jeg vil* in Norwegian.

policy and their varying opinions about what religion's position in society ought to be. There is a clear tendency that the YWC participants' specific stance on the initial cross controversy correlates with a parallel stance on religion in society. For instance, those who advocate for the visibility of the cross on PSM, also rally for the increased visibility of religion in general – and vice versa (Abdel-Fadil, 2017). It is also clear that antipathies towards a particular religion may serve to conflate positions on religion and immigration, a tendency that is not exclusive to YWC (see chapters 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, 12).

Wearing a cross was swiftly deemed a breach of NRK neutrality policy for news anchors. The policy prohibits the use of all religious and political symbols, a fact that is often neglected by many participants in YWC. Thus, the NRK cross-verdict only served to fuel the discussions in YWC. At the peak of the conflict in November and December of 2013, YWC had more than 120,000 likes. The number of likes has since fluctuated up and down as people have joined and left the group in protest. Among those actively expressing their opinions in YWC, I have identified five main clusters of participants: conservative Christians (CC), nationalists (N), humanists (H), fervent secularists (FS), and ardent atheists (AA). Some individuals may be betwixt and between clusters. The categorizations are based on my analysis of statements and interaction patterns and function as analytical tools.

In this chapter, I will illustrate how participants from these clusters typically engage with conflict(s) and with one another in YWC. As will be elucidated, at the very core of the performance of conflict(s) are struggles over religion. I will focus on constructions of and contestations of Christianity in particular. Before delving into the empirical examples, I situate the study by sharing a few reflections on methodology.

### 6.1.1 Methodology

This is an online ethnography of YWC, i. e. it is an in-depth and longitudinal research of YWC as an online environment. Since observation is the main method, I am able to also focus on participants' conduct and interactions with one another, and not only on the words they utter. Due to the overwhelming amount of YWC data, the study is delineated in time. The time period under study runs from November 2013 when the page was created to December 2013, covering a six-week period during which activity on the page reached its peak. Data collection was conducted in 2015 and comprises all posts, comments, and replies during these six weeks. I observed, logged, and coded all verbal interactions, repetitive communication patterns, positions, and roles in the group. In ethnographic

research, data collection and analysis is a highly immersive process which does not abide by the ‘data saturation’ principle. Instead, ‘more of the same’ type of data is highly valued and seen as an opportunity to subject initial patterns discovered in the data to further rounds of coding, to deepen the analysis. The advantage of this approach became clear when I stumbled across a small cluster of ardent atheists a couple of months into the analysis. I subsequently discovered that this group left a huge mark on the debates they threw themselves into.

In order to systematize my data, I kept a field diary, which includes: 1) a ‘methods log’ of methodological challenges and solutions, 2) ‘observations notes’ which includes preliminary analysis and reflections, and 3) a ‘coding log’ containing tweaks and adjustments of substantive codes. I coded the data within four main parent codes – themes, roles, styles, and arguments – using the qualitative analysis software program Nvivo. I will write in ethnographic present.

Tricia Wang’s adaptation of Clifford Geertz’ iconic notion of ‘thick descriptions’ is a good fit for what I do:

Thick Data is data brought to light using qualitative, ethnographic research methods that uncover people’s emotions, stories, and models of their world (Wang 2016).

I was particularly interested in how people’s emotions, narratives, and world-views shape the way they engage with mediatized conflict (see Chapter 3) and the internal group dynamics of YWC. The longer I observed variations of interactions and bursts of emotion in YWC, the more I realized that the term ‘flaming’ is not very useful as an analytical category unless it signifies something more specific or elaborate than simply passionately stirring up a debate. My understanding of the term ‘flaming’ deepened during the ethnographical study.

Quotes in this chapter are reconstructions based on generic positions, repetitive patterns of communication, writing styles, and modes of enacting the conflict(s). The decision to reconstruct rather than quote verbatim is based on 1) my interest in generic narratives and typical group dynamics, for which reconstructions suffice, and 2) ensuring the anonymity of those who participated in the debates. This methodological choice is available to me, because generic narratives are ubiquitous in YWC.

Critics may view reconstructions as tampering with the data. Yet, the idea that verbatim quotes are pure, or unspoiled by the researcher’s selective choices and subjectivities is an illusion. Reconstruction is already in much of what ethnographers do. Most notably, those of us who translate quotes from one language to another are very much involved in reconstructing narratives, and adapting words, stylistic choices, and arguments in ways that we best believe

represent that individual's worldview in another language. But, we also reconstruct when we omit ughs, spelling mistakes, punctuation mishaps, or cut and paste from various parts of an interview or dialogue in order to provide a more succinct slice of data. Speaking of which, I have, save for a couple of examples, not included any spelling mistakes or CAPSLOCK, extreme punctuation!!!!!! or emoticons (in this case, mostly smileys, crosses, hearts, and angry faces) in my reconstructed quotations. This is because I have not systematically coded and analysed the patterns in which such visual embellishments occur.

Quotes are twinned with pseudonyms and the first letters of the cluster that I code such a statement within, for instance 'CC' for 'conservative Christian'. At times it is difficult to determine which cluster a statement belongs to. Therefore, some quotes are assigned a double label such as 'N/CC'. The frequency with which each pseudonym appears in a reconstructed exchange is intentional, and aimed at giving the reader a taste of the different sizes of the clusters, their gender compositions and how many people from one cluster are typically active in a debate.

Technologically, Facebook is structured in a way that gives rise to a particular set of media dynamics. Pinned posts are not always read, and the same question or comment may be made repeatedly without any regard for what the person(s) just before may have said. Typically, users' responses cross each other, partially due to the Facebook structure 'reply to reply', which can be chaotic in terms of who is replying to what – and whom – especially when hundreds or thousands of comments are involved. Users who are not seasoned Facebook users will be unaware of the difference between replying to a comment and replying to a reply, contributing to random placement of their replies. There is also a time lag, and when many people are responding to a post, comments may be delayed before appearing, creating a mismatch with regards to which reply a comment belongs to. This slight chaos may help explain why many comments go largely unnoticed in the maze of Facebook comments. This chapter gives the reader a unique insight into typical types of exchanges and the internal dynamics of YWC, and what the various types of participants are fighting for and believe in.

## 6.2 Various Enactments of Conflict in YWC

### 6.2.1 Protesting the Cross Ban

Olga/CC: Norway is a Christian nation. We cannot accept that the cross is banned here. It makes no sense. This is Norway. We are Christian.

Rudolf/CC: I'm outraged! How can they ban the cross? It is a very important symbol of our Christian identity.

Christian/N: Muslims can't just come here and demand that we have a cross ban in Norway. We have to protect our heritage from immigrants. What will they demand next? Erasing the cross from the Norwegian flag?

Heidi/H: Holy moly! There is a lot of anger in this group because of this misunderstanding. I repeat: There is no cross ban in Norway.

Magdalene/CC: I refuse to abide by this ridiculous verdict. I shall wear my cross with pride, and nobody can stop me.

Laila/CC: I can't believe that I am not allowed to wear the cross anymore in Norway. What is the world coming to?

Rita/N: If they don't like the cross they should go home.

Heidi/H: Take a deep breath. Unless you are an NRK news anchor, you can wear a cross pendant anytime and anywhere you like.

Conservative Christians and nationalists are the largest clusters and contain both women and men, with no noteworthy gender imbalance. Their enactment of the conflict can be said to dominate the page, and hence conservative Christians and nationalists play an active role in shaping the conflict(s). Conservative Christians, nationalists, fervent secularists, and ardent atheists often employ the language of 'speaking out' and 'speaking the truth' (Abdel-Fadil 2016). They also claim to be the silent majority or the real voice of the people, which is a characteristic of other mediatized conflicts too (Figenschou et al. 2015). Particularly among the conservative Christians and the nationalists, the idea that YWC provides a platform to say what needs to be said, but is often dismissed by politicians, journalists, etc., circulates. Conservative Christians (and at times nationalists) claim to speak *for* the Christian nation. This starting point is significant in terms of affect, and shapes much of their emotive engagement with the mediatized conflict. Papacharissi (2015) speaks of 'affective publics' which is an apt description of how participants in YWC respond to the postulate that there is general cross ban in Norway. Such claims mobilize strong emotional responses. Similarly, nationalists evoke emotive engagement based on fear of loss of nationhood. Yet such claims do not stand uncontested. Humanists, ardent atheists, and fervent secularists ferociously battle against this reading of their nation and national identity.

The quotes illustrate how the various clusters of debaters perform the conflict *for* each other, but do not always interact *with* each other in a way that involves 'listening' to other perspectives. Trigger themes, emotional cues, and emotive reactions fuel the dynamics of mediatized conflict and push the buttons of

individual debaters (Abdel-Fadil 2016). Conservative Christians typically reinforce the idea that there is a cross ban or proclaim that they plan to defy the (alleged) cross ban just seconds after humanists have pointed out that there is in fact no general cross ban in Norway. The idea that there is a general cross ban in Norway is emotional ammunition for many conservative Christians, causing them to react and repeat this postulate as if it were true. The sense of a threatened Christian identity and a fear of the extinction of Christianity are tangible. The focus becomes on preserving Christianity in Norway. Nationalists tend to spur emotions and amplify the conflicts, by transforming the conflict into one about the nation. They typically contribute to an escalation of the conflict by engaging in spiralling argumentation and by evoking a series of worst-case scenarios well suited to trigger emotive reactions from conservative Christians, declaring that the cross will be obliterated from everything including the Norwegian flag itself (*ibid.*). Both conservative Christians and nationalists can be said to adhere to 'Christianity of identity'.

Notably, nationalists lament Muslims and immigrants taking over Norway and tend to direct their emotive triggers towards fellow nationalists and the conservative Christians in an attempt to fuel their fury and entice them into buying into the narrative of threatened nationhood. Stylistically the nationalists can be said to erupt into the 'enraged fan' level of negative emotion in their outbursts (Michailidou and Trenz 2015).

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, the humanists perform the role of mediators. Humanists, unlike the majority of other debaters, generally do not get entangled in highly emotionally charged renditions of the conflict. Instead, humanists attempt to defuse tensions, debunk myths, and create space for a constructive debate – although they do at times display signs of exasperation with other debaters' efforts to trigger one another. Unlike other clusters, humanists are a small cluster, in which a handful of women are extraordinarily active. Humanists leave a mark on practically all of the selected debates, displaying what appears to be a tireless dedication to remediate the conflicts in a reconciliatory manner. A couple of the humanists copy and paste the same lengthy answer time and time again, but others tailor their responses to each exchange. Notably, humanists primarily address conservative Christians, presumably in the hope of disrupting the partial overlap between conservative Christians' and nationalists' narratives. Humanists promote Christianity as compassion as a counter-narrative to Christianity as identity.

## 6.2.2 Saving Christianity and the Nation

Torggrim/CC: We must protect our Christian heritage before it is lost forever.

Rita/N: Wake up!!!! Protect Christianity in Norway before it's too late. Muslims and immigrants are taking over. Politicians are giving away our country. WAKE UP before it's too late.

Georg/N: For me personally, Christianity is not important. But, Christianity is part of Norwegian heritage and we cannot deny that.

Sonia/CC: I wear my cross with pride and I don't think anybody has the right to tell me not to wear the cross. This is Norway. Norway is a Christian country.

Georg/N: Christianity is the cornerstone of Norway. Nobody, not Muslims, atheists, or secularists can change that.

Olga/CC: I will wear my cross wherever I please and there ain't nothing anyone can do to stop me!

Rudolf/CC: If we do not wake up now – and protect our Christian heritage – there may not be any traces of Christianity left.

Christian/N: Protect Norway before it's too late. Muslims and immigrants are taking over. Politicians are GIVING AWAY our country.

Therese/CC: Muslims are not to blame, it is the secularists and atheists who have de-Christianized Norway.

Frida/CC: Are we really not allowed to wear the cross anymore in Norway? I haven't had any bad experiences and I wear my cross every single day.

Oskar/AA: Most Norwegians are far too rational to believe in Christianity or religion. You're trying to sink the nation with your stupidity.

Oskar/AA: In order to believe in god, you have to close your eyes to facts and have half a brain. You Christians are delusional.

Rudolf/CC: Your passionate anger about this proves that deep down you know that He exists.

This exchange illustrates how protecting Christianity is often conflated with protecting the nation, particularly for the nationalists but also to a certain degree for the conservative Christians. It also provides a glance at how the participants take turns in blaming a variety of others, which in fact is a recurring dynamic in mediated conflicts in general (Abdel-Fadil 2016; Eskjær et al. 2015).

An overwhelming majority of conservative Christians (and nationalists) appear to either fuel or express no resistance to the postulate that there is a general cross ban in Norway. Yet, the occasional conservative Christian interjects with a sincere question (and some confusion) inquiring whether there is in fact a ban and if others experience negative incidents. Such lone comments rarely provoke

a response. Nationalists produce a significant number of emotive comments that appear to be designed to either heat up or derail conversations, by transforming the conflict into one about immigrants/Muslims threatening the nation. Likewise, ardent atheists, a tiny, exclusively male cluster, specialize at stirring up emotions among conservative Christians.

Conservative Christians' main concern is the preservation of Christianity. They rally for more visibility of Christianity in public spaces, and often equate the nation with themselves. The sense that wearing the cross is an act of defiance, and a brave act of standing one's ground, is a claim repeated by several conservative Christians, and lends authority to the postulate that there is a cross ban. Conservative Christians in their own rendition exhibit resolution and agency when both wearing the cross, and when arguing passionately for the right to wear the cross. These are considered heroic acts of taking a stand against injustice and hence very important steps towards preserving Christianity from complete extinction.

At times conservative Christians express an unveiled disdain for the ardent atheists and fervent secularists. Other times they see the aggressive attacks from the ardent atheists as a sign of a believer in denial, which may well be the worst possible insult to ardent atheists. Yet I do not believe that the intention of the conservative Christians in those instances is to cause offence. Based on my analysis of a number of such exchanges (and the context they appear in) I believe that such projections are sincere, if somewhat bizarre.

Nationalists repeatedly mention how they do not consider themselves Christian, but that Christianity goes hand in hand with 'Norwegianness'. Nationalists focus extensively on the preservation of 'Norwegian heritage'. In their own rendition, conservative Christians and nationalists see themselves as representing the majority of Norwegians, and consider Norway as a 'Christian nation' founded on 'Christian cultural heritage'. Christianity thus becomes a religion of identity even for nationalists who do not believe in God.

Ardent atheists, much like the humanists, are only a small group of individuals. But unlike the humanists who have managed to engage with practically all the debates, ardent atheists only leave a mark (albeit a significant one) on a tiny fraction of debates. Ardent atheists appear to only sporadically visit the Facebook group, while humanists comment on practically all the debates. It is invariably the ardent atheists who pair their narrative with 'flaming' behaviour and exploit the full potential of emotive cues. Ardent atheists are unique in that they enter a debate, bellow antagonistic commentary or insults, and then disappear into thin air. The conduct of ardent atheists is distinct from the behaviour of all other types of participants, and warrants being described as 'flaming' behav-



our. This is also the only cluster composed nearly exclusively of men. The fiery debates ardent atheists ignite rage on long after they're gone.

### 6.2.3 Religion of the Nation

Olga/CC: Norway is Christian. But, atheists and secularists are willing to deny our Christian heritage.

Jenny/FS: Norway ain't Christian! It is a secular state.

Rudolf/CC: We religious people of different faiths need to stick together. We have common interests in preserving religion in society, unlike secularists and atheists who would be happy to see religion disappear altogether.

Alfred /CC: Secularists and leftists think they own the country. But, they don't. Christianity is the state religion and most Norwegians are Christian.

Jenny/FS: Actually Christianity is not the state religion any more and the stats don't back up the argument that most Norwegians identify as Christian.

Christian/N: Muslims threaten Norway's Christian heritage.

Niklas/FS: Hell no. The majority of Norwegians don't believe in anything! And stop this racist spew. Muslims and immigrants have nothing to do with the NRK verdict on the cross.

Rita/N: I don't consider myself Christian, but Christianity is part of our Norwegian heritage. We can't stand by while foreigners take over Norway and push away Christianity.

Niklas/FS: Racist pricks!

Thor/AA: Clinging on to archaic, violent, make-believe gods is not gonna save Norway. It is you who need saving. From your own stupidity.

Geir/AA/FS: You lot are holding Norway back. It is a good thing you are not actually a majority.

Georg/N: Christianity is a Norwegian religion.

Thor/AA: This goes to show you how ignorant you are. Christianity is not made in Norway, you dimwit. Neither do most Norwegians consider themselves Christians.

Magdalene/CC: They've banned the cross, Christmas celebrations. What will they ban next? Alcohol? Pork???? This nonsense has to STOP!!!!.

When conservative Christians talk about the Christian nation and how the majority of Norwegians are Christians, ardent atheists and fervent secularists protest, and often refer to recent statistics on the matter to back up their claim. Fervent secularists are a much smaller cluster than the nationalists and conservative Christians, but appear similarly gender-balanced.

Sometimes comments can fit into more than one analytical category as exemplified in this reconstructed exchange. For instance, the generic argument that Norway isn't Christian can be classified as fervent secularist or ardent atheist. Much like how there may be overlap between some conservative Christians and nationalists, or humanists and conservative Christians.

Ardent atheists are primarily concerned with protecting the nation from the stupidity of religion. They talk to all Christians but specifically target conservative Christians. The uniqueness of the ardent atheists lies in their mode of performance: they often participate briefly in a debate, by dispensing an antagonistic atheist agenda and decrying all believers as a bunch of imbeciles, before disappearing. This suggests that the ardent atheists may be more intent on performing the conflict in a manner that leaves a mark on the debate and the other media users than actually engaging in an exchange of positions over time. Their main point of departure is that all religions are bad, and believing in God is irrational.

Nationalists in the Facebook group talk among themselves in a way that fuels and intensifies the existing conflict, but also in a way that tries to tempt conservative Christians with their worldview by transforming the conflict into one about protecting the nation from its demise and introducing new conflicts, between Muslims and Christians, and foreigners and Norwegians. Muslims (and to a lesser extent immigrants) are singled out as the archenemy of the nation.

Indifference characterizes nationalists' personal affiliation to religion. To nationalists, Christianity is good because it is 'Norwegian', and by default everything Norwegian is good. The presumed 'Norwegianess' of Christianity is contested and also ridiculed by others in YWC. The postulate that Christianity as 'Norwegian' is dismantled by those who see Norway as a secular, atheist, or a multi-confessional nation. Fervent secularists, ardent atheists, humanists, and even conservative Christians may be critical of this claim and mock the territorial claims of 'Christianity being made in Norway'.

#### 6.2.4 Defining Christianity

Rita/CC: Muslims are a threat to Christianity.

Henrik/CC: To me Christianity is about compassion. It is about spreading the love and treating your fellow human with compassion. You cannot single out Muslims and say that this doesn't apply to them. That is not how Christianity works.

Therese/CC: It makes me sick to my stomach that some people in here use Christianity as an excuse to spread hatred and scapegoat Muslims and immigrants. I can't think of anything less Christian.

Tina/HC: To me Christianity is about compassion. For all humankind.

Ingrid/CC: As Christians we are supposed to love one another as part of God's grace.

Jacob/CC: I don't think that Muslims are our enemy. On the contrary we share many of the same values and concerns. Muslims are not the problem. Atheists and secularists are. They're the ones who want to do away with religion all together.

Georg/CC/N: Muslims threaten our Christian values, demanding special rights and forbidding our Christian traditions like Christmas celebrations.

Heidi/H/: What happened to 'love thy neighbour'? Did you miss that Sunday school class?

Jonathon/FS: This is seriously the most conspiratorial, nonsensical racist spew I have ever read. If anybody is ruining Norway it is you lot of fucking imbeciles. For instance you 'Anders Nordson' you spew out a lot of unintelligent xenophobic bullshit and expect us to take you seriously.

Nancy/CC: Muslims are fellow believers. We have no fight to pick with Muslims or vice versa.

Thor/AA: Christianity is peaceful, my ass. You've got blood on your hands. That cross you are so passionate about represents centuries of violence and ignorance.

Edvard/AA: Religions are dumb and nonsensical. Christianity is a far cry from enlightenment. You are all delusional.

Magdalene/CC: I wear the cross I inherited from my grandmother with pride.

Teodor/N: Muslims are cockroaches infesting our society. We must get rid of them immediately before it is too late.

Wilhelm/N: Immigrants and Muslims are violent criminals, who want to rape our women, yet you keep letting them in. They want to force their intolerant sharia law on Norwegians.

Edvard/AA: YOU are a threat to HUMANITY!!

Magdalene/CC/N: It just makes no sense. Muslims cannot come here and prance around in their hijabs and what not, and we're expected to cover up our crosses. MADNESS!

Selma/FS: You call yourself Christian but you are all raging racists. I have had it with you lot. There is no hope for you.

Tina/HC: Christianity is about being compassionate towards everyone. Twisting Christianity to spread an anti-Islamic message is profoundly un-Christian.

The range of positions that may be expressed in a simple short exchange such as the one above is – remarkable. The exchange illustrates the typical dynamics of debates, how the various participants' comments at times get posted in a zigzag pattern. Only an alert or cautious reader will realize who is answering whom,

and about what. In addition, some participants turn a blind eye to what others think and dedicate their undivided attention to hammering their own perspective. The result is a somewhat confusing collection of perspectives that appear in random order. The example of a conservative Christian recounting how wearing her grandmother's cross is of personal significance is a very typical comment. Such comments act as both an affirmation of faith, and signal an affective value to the cross itself (including through who it belonged to previously). Here, the personalized relationship to religion is evident in that the cross becomes a source of everyday comfort. Still, the comment appears random and unrelated to the other comments next to which it appears – which is also a typical characteristic of the group dynamics.

There is an obvious tension between Christianity as a religion of identity, and Christianity as a religion of compassion (see chapter 10).<sup>2</sup> Some conservative Christians' approach to Christianity overlaps with nationalists' in the sense that they too adhere to Christianity as a religion of identity – and link its significance and preservation to the nation. In such instances, the main difference between conservative Christians and nationalists is that the conservative Christians avow a personalized faith thereby embracing both a national and a personal Jesus – whilst the nationalists stay clear of any personal faith-based commitment to Christianity. Humanists, especially those with a Christian leaning, share common ground with conservative Christians. Still, some conservative Christians have overlapping ideas with nationalists. Christians of various leanings make multiple claims about Christianity. Their performance of the conflict unravels tensions within those who believe that Christianity – however they define it – is worthy of preservation. As a result, YWC functions as a space for negotiating what the essence of Christianity is, or ought to be, and why.

For a subset of conservative Christians, the 'religiousness' of Muslims is singled out as a positive shared experience and pitted against the secularization of Norway. For those conservative Christians, Muslims are considered an ally in their efforts to prevent Norway from becoming entirely secularized. Most of the conservative Christians are summoned to perform the conflict(s) based on their fear of extinction of Christianity. A sub-strand of the conservative Christians fear for all religions, and move to protect religion in the public sphere, because they worry that religion will have to make way for either an entirely atheist or an entirely secular outlook. In this sense the conservative Christians are divided in

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<sup>2</sup> Ádám and Bozóki (2016, 146) operate with a seemingly similar distinction between 'National Christianity' and 'Christianity as a religion of love', but do not go into great detail about what this means.

their fears. While the majority of conservative Christians in this online milieu fear the possible extinction of Christianity, some conservative Christians fear for the death of religion.

Ardent atheists repeatedly claim that Christianity is irrational and violent, as are all religions. But it is Christianity and particularly conservative Christians that are the target of the ardent atheists' wrath. And conservative Christians take the bait. The conflict lines erupt and conservative Christians continue to fall into the trap of intensified conflict performance, long after the ardent atheists have left the 'room'.

## 6.3 Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict(s) in YWC

### 6.3.1 Who Talks to Whom?

Fervent secularists talk mainly to nationalists (and the conservative Christians who resemble them) and try to fire them up – but often become unhinged in the process. Nationalists primarily talk to conservative Christians, and attempt to entice them with their 'us vs. them' worldview. Ardent atheists exclusively address the conservative Christians and repeatedly tell them what pinheads they are. While ardent atheists allegedly hate all religions in equal measure, in practice they single out Christians as their primary target of disdain, but reserve their most impassioned performances for very conservative Christians. Conservative Christians for their part talk to all the other clusters – mainly because they respond to how they are being portrayed, attacked, or befriended by others. They may at times respond to atheists, humanists, and nationalists, but their primary audience appears to be fellow Christians, who they hope will be seduced into joining their cause of preserving Christianity.

While several of the clusters are gender-balanced, there are two exceptions with highly distinct forms of interaction. Firstly, the predominantly male cluster of ardent atheists who only pick a few small corners of the online debates to repeatedly lash out at conservative Christians – before making a run for it. Secondly, the handful of humanist women who are highly prolific and leave a unique reconciliatory mark on nearly all the selected debates, exhibiting a prolonged commitment to the mediator role. Humanists also primarily address the conservative Christians (and the odd nationalist). They debunk myths and attempt to soothe and engage in dialogue with the conservative Christians, in contrast to the diametrically opposite 'drop a bomb and run' approach of ardent atheists.

Still, some of the Facebook users are far less concerned with what other participants write, and mostly focus on what they themselves *feel*. As I have written about in detail elsewhere, affect is abundant in the Facebook discussions and a recurring component of mediatized conflicts in general (Abdel-Fadil 2016). As illustrated in this chapter, all of the participants display emotions in the modes in which they engage with both the conflicts and one another. Nationalists, fervent secularists, and ardent atheists voice their anger. Such venting appears to simultaneously function as a form of entertainment – particularly for ardent atheists who mostly direct their rage at the conservative Christian participants. Conservative Christians predominantly express anger, intermingled with fear. Humanists convey exasperation, albeit in a patient manner, but their aim is to stir up feelings of compassion among fellow debaters.

### 6.3.2 Contesting the Essence of Christianity

A striking feature of the debates in the Facebook group is the detailed negotiation of what Christianity is all about, and of the symbolic meaning it holds in the various participants' eyes. Christianity is interpreted, brokered, and adhered to in a multitude of ways. For instance, some of the conservative Christians convey the personal meaning Christianity holds for them through their emotional attachment to a particular cross pendant that brings them closer to God. Nationalists see Christianity as a signifier of Norwegian nationhood and identity – but their understanding of religiosity is void of personal faith. Ardent atheists consider Christianity the cradle of ignorance and irrationality. Fervent secularists regard Christianity a threat to a healthy state and society. Humanists view Christianity as a (non-exclusive) source of positive values on which a compassionate and just society can be modelled upon. In most clusters there is a tangible internal cohesion when it comes to the big issues. The participants within a cluster may well have different degrees of embracing and expressing a stance, but their core beliefs are similar. For example among nationalists, 'Muslims should go home' is a much milder version of 'Muslims are cockroaches and infesting our land', but they are de facto variations of the same standpoint, namely: 'Muslims do not belong in Norway'.

Conflicts in YWC are enacted in a way that pits Christians not only against Muslims, atheists, and secularists, but ultimately pits Christians against Christians. Those who self-identify as Christians in YWC perform the conflicts in diametrically opposite ways based on their adherence to Christianity as either a religion of identity – or – compassion. One of the central tropes of 'Christianity as identity' is 'Christian heritage', coupled with Muslims and immigrants being per-

ceived as a threat. It is a narrative of identity preservation and defence. Adhering to Christianity as compassion entails making an effort to put an end to the vilifying of Muslims and immigrants and is reminiscent of what Woodhead and Heelas call (2000, 71–72) ‘religions of humanity’, in which ‘compassion’ is a central trope. Humanists, both those who explicitly identify and don’t identify as Christian, are united by the idea that Christianity as a religion dictates compassion to all humankind, and that compassion is a core Christian value. A strand of conservative Christians join forces with humanists in this reading of Christianity. Rather than animosity, these conservative Christians feel an affinity with pious Muslims who are believed to share a common moral outlook. To these conservative Christians (and humanists), attacking Muslims in the name of Christianity is seen as the antithesis of the foundational values of Christianity. This is a narrative of faith and love.

Similar findings surface in the book *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, which collects case studies in several European countries (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). The term ‘hijack religion’ is used to connote how Christianity is increasingly infused with particular traits that serve specific ideological goals. A core finding is that when populists hijack religion, they focus only on ‘belonging’, rendering ‘belief’ superfluous. Moreover, populist religion revolves around the tropes ‘restoration’ and ‘battle’, and is adamant about the preservation of Christian heritage from the threat of extinction or foreign takeover (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, 2). In this way, Christianity is viewed as an identity but divorced from both faith and Christian values, which are deemed either too leftist or too conservative (Roy 2016a, 91). Populists are only interested in ‘Christianity in its cultural form’ argues Peace (2016, 104). According to Roy (2016b, 186) Christianity is predominantly expressed in terms of national identity and its proponents ‘are Christian largely to the extent that they reject Islam’. Roy (ibid., 190) makes the intriguing argument that while populists speak of identity, churches speak of faith. Based on the European case studies of populism, Roy (ibid.) argues that Christianity functions as a marker of identity, and serves as a platform to ‘distinguish between good “us” and bad “them”’. Roy goes on to assert that: ‘when evoking the Christian identities of their nations populist leaders tend to refer to symbols such as the cross, rather than theological dogma’ (ibid., 186). Taken together then, the conclusion from *Saving the People* seems to be that the more one identifies with Christianity as culture, the less likely it is that one will identify with Christian values or faith.

This argument is a good fit for the nationalists in YWC, but does not necessarily hold true for the bulk of the conservative Christians. What characterizes them is precisely the entanglement of Christianity as identity and Christianity as faith. Conservative Christians may well be more interested in symbols than

dogma, but they most certainly also articulate genuine expressions of ‘belief’. Therein lies a potential theological tension with the faith-based Christianity of compassion (see chapter 10). Still, the conservative Christians who embrace Christianity as identity in YWC seem to do so wholeheartedly. In contrast, several active members of Norway’s newly established conservative Christian Party (*Partiet De Kristne*) have expressed a combination of anxiety about the survival of Christianity and remorse about adopting a selective love that only extends to particular neighbours (Brekke n.d.). In this sense several members of the Christian Party appear to be betwixt and between Christianity as identity and Christianity as compassion. This discrepancy may perhaps be related to politicians being better versed in reflexive conversations than ‘ordinary people’ online, or it might be a result of methodology and the medium of expression, or a combination. Certainly Christianity of identity is pitted against Christianity as compassion in YWC, but not by a single individual who claims to adhere to both. Rather, scores of ‘others’ criticize nationalists and conservative Christians who adhere to Christianity as identity for replacing the core value of ‘love thy neighbour’ with ‘hate thy neighbour’.

### 6.3.3 Sacred Values

Religion in itself is a trigger theme that pushes participants into affective modes of enacting conflicts. For many of the participants a number of the themes of discussion very close to the heart. Participants are at times protecting their foundational worldview or values they consider sacred. This raises the emotional stakes in the conflict, and renders its enactment important at both the personal and symbolic level. To the nationalists it is Norway as a nation that is held sacred and must be protected from contamination. Conservative Christians consider Christianity/Christian heritage sacred, and strive to preserve Christianity from extinction. To fervent secularists it is anti-racism which is at stake. They fiercely oppose building a xenophobic sense of belonging. For humanists, human compassion and knowledge are both held sacred. Forming informed decisions that benefit humankind and promote compassion is the overarching goal. To the ardent atheists, it is ultimately rationality and their own perceived superiority for being non-believers which trumps all other concerns, and is the sacred value worth fighting for. Fervent secularists unleash their anger on both conservative Christians and nationalists, but it is xenophobia and not religion per se that winds them up. Against this backdrop, it seems evident that many parallel conversations take place, fuelled with competing and at times diametrically opposite concerns.



Sacred values can also be used for leverage. For instance, ardent atheists repeatedly exclaim that Christianity is nonsense and Christians are imbeciles. While I do not question the sincerity of such attacks, I think the point not to be missed is that these are highly intentional efforts to cause rupture and attack the core beliefs and sacred values of conservative Christians. Baumgartner's (2013) analysis of blasphemy as a 'profound offence' and a form of 'inter-subjective violence' appears highly fitting for the both the intent and the effect ardent atheists have on conservative Christians. Baumgartner (2013, 58) describes how 'blasphemy functions as a tool to produce and enforce negative stereotypes of followers of a particular religion'. Crucially, ardent atheists enact the conflict in that particular way precisely *because* it is a profound offence and does psychological harm to the conservative Christians. I would add two observations. First, dispensing 'profound offenses' may in itself be a form of entertainment. Sometimes people are drawn to conflict because its enactment is a cherished pastime (Abdel-Fadil, 2017). Second, a value need not be religious for it to be held sacred or attacked in a blasphemous way. For instance, the fervent secularists go ballistic about racist and overly religious content precisely because it constitutes a 'profound offence' to what they hold sacred, namely an anti-racist, unequivocally secular state.

### 6.3.4 Who Hijacks Religion?

Will the populists' hijacking of religion receive legitimacy from Christianity's various churches or 'rightful owners'? and who ultimately owns the 'copyright' of religion? asks Roy (2016b, 190). These types of questions latch onto longstanding discussions about the authority of religion, the legitimacy of lay interpretations, and the societal role of religion. In YWC, it seems evident that both 'Christianity' and 'religion' can be hijacked and infused with the sacred values of a spectrum of people who have vested interests in particular readings of religion. For instance, I would argue that ardent atheists also hijack 'religion', imbuing the concept with all shades of bad. For the ardent atheists religion is equated to imbecility. Humanists paint Christianity as a religion of compassion. For most conservative Christians the fear of extinction dictates their religious outlook, placing them within a religion of identity understanding of Christianity – where Christianity is simultaneously seen as the true path to salvation, and superior to other religions. Against this backdrop, I do not think it is accurate to state that Christianity has been *exclusively* hijacked by a very conservative agenda or an exclusivist approach to religion only. The concept 'hijacking religion' can be critiqued for erroneously connoting that religion can be stripped of its

‘true’ meaning or purest form. Yet, particularly in the case of the mediation of very specific or absolutist definitions of religions I believe ‘hijacking religion’ is analytically useful. In employing ‘hijacking religion’ in a broader conceptual sense one may elucidate how various understandings of religions are often infused with a range of political agendas, that may range from ‘leave me be’ to fantasies of ‘world domination’.

This online ethnography of YWC complements previous quantitative and qualitative approaches to mediatized conflicts. The strength of this study lies in its methodology. In delving into the particular specifics and thick descriptions of YWC, it becomes possible to draw new conclusions, that may be generalizable and may nuance – and add to – our body of knowledge about how media users engage with conflicts about religion. In this chapter, I have highlighted how various clusters of YWC participants behave and express their emotions in a multitude of ways, and I illustrate how these enactments and interactions, in turn, play into the mediatized conflict(s) about religion. The stubborn ethnographic determination to analyse huge chunks of data from one particular community may yield surprising and very valuable results, such as the unearthing of an entirely new cluster of participants, in this case – the ardent atheists – who left a significant mark on YWC. This discovery may serve to widen scholarly understandings of the spectrum of worldviews that may entangle with one another, even in highly particular milieus such as YWC, and may thus balance out viewing online spaces as mere ‘filter bubbles’. It also points to the importance of observing and analysing online *behaviours* and emotive responses within a group. Similarly, this chapter sheds light on how the participants’ gender may play into the intensity and type of enactment of conflict, and – the emotional labour involved. As evidenced by the case of YWC, gender may also be constitutive of an entire cluster, and at times a small cluster of women can do the work of an entire army of men. Together these findings, nuance and add a layer of empirical detail to claims that men participate ‘more’ in online debates about contentious issues (see chapter 2 & 16). Future qualitative studies must therefore pay close attention to – and flesh out – gender-specific ways of engaging with mediatized conflicts about religion. Similarly, future studies ought to take into consideration that a range of social actors, be they secular, atheists, secular religious, or radically religious may seek to hijack both their own religion, and the religion of their selected ‘other(s)’ in an attempt of political gain and as part their enactment of conflict. Rather than consider ‘hijacking religion’ unique to nationalists and conservative Christians, it may be more fruitful to view the ‘hijacking of religion’ as a more universal phenomenon and an integral part of the performance of mediatized conflicts about religion, across the globe.

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