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Introduction: Religion and Media in Cultural Conflicts

Abstract: The overall question that is raised in this book is: how do the media influence public engagement with contested issues about religion? Here is an introduction to the media dynamics and the key concepts on religion and cultural conflicts, as well as to the Scandinavian context of the study, and this is to be expanded upon in the following chapters. The approaches to be applied in the case studies of this research are briefly presented before summarizing the three sections of the book comprising its 18 chapters.

Keywords: religion, media dynamics, cultural conflicts, Scandinavia

Religion has become a matter of intensified public concern, as well as a vehicle for diverging opinions in public discussions. These controversies pre-eminently play out across mass media and social media. How do the various media influence public engagement with contested issues about religion? This is the overarching question to which we aim to find answers in this book. The idea is to examine how religion in public spaces becomes thematized and is enacted through media, and is then further articulated in social interaction – either face-to-face or in continued exchange in the various forms of media, including social media. In this way, the media are primarily objects of conflict, but are also possible resources with which to manage tensions.

Public Cultural Conflicts

The chapters in this book focus on cultural conflicts in which religion is regarded as playing a key role. The cultural aspects of such conflicts include the interactions, interpretations, and identifications with religion. Culture and cultural conflicts play out in the social patterns, activities, and attitudes that include individual media use, as well as political and religious engagement. The book addresses how their conflictual interactions with, interpretations of, and identifications with religion play into public arenas. We are not studying the nature of private beliefs, scepticism, and religious practices as such, but we observe how individual beliefs and practices may imply controversy when they are enacted in public
spaces, or even as performed conflict. Our approach to the study of contested religion is laid out in Chapter 4.

That conflicts are ‘public’ means that they are brought into ‘a visible and open forum of some kind in which the population participates’ in order that common ‘understandings, identities, values and interests’ are contested (Livingstone 2005, 9). Such a ‘visible and open forum’ is a public arena. We explore the public aspects of contested religion in selected public arenas. We do not enter the debates on the ‘public sphere’ (Gripsrud et al. 2010) from a theoretical perspective. Rather, we examine concrete public settings in which people engage with media material on religion. We have selected public service media, local contexts for civic participation, and classrooms in public schools as the environments for case studies.

Several terms characterize the contestation of religion in such arenas. Conflict denotes open antagonism between stakeholders that may change the balance of power between them. Tensions refers to implicit or latent antagonisms, in contrast to open conflict. A controversy is primarily a dispute over the role of religion in culture. However, the use of these terms may not be fully uniform throughout the book. We aim to capture the various ways that religion is being contested under the pressure of contemporary media dynamics.

We are concerned with the conflicts and tensions that are amplified, framed, and co-structured by various media and are played out in public arenas (Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær 2015). The media shape and share cultural conflicts about religion, demanding responses which involve negotiations of values, beliefs, and policies. We study media representations of religion, but primarily from the perspective of the interactions and interpretations that these generate in various settings.

The media feed into, and influence, activities in most public arenas (see Chapter 3) – and the media themselves become public spaces. Various media, be they news media or entertainment media, mass media or social media, become sites for explicit or implicit contestation over religion (see Chapter 4). The media offer resources for people’s engagement with contentious public aspects of religion in different public arenas.

The Scandinavian Setting

The processes above are challenges in most modern, diverse societies. We study these contestations as they play out in the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, seeking to understand how the media shape public engagement with controversies about religion. Although the empirical material in the book is
drawn from Scandinavia, the findings and reflections should be relevant to other parts of the world. Scandinavia offers an analytical prism through which to understand how intersecting social, political, and cultural circumstances can exacerbate, or alleviate, conflicts over religion in various media settings.

The particular Scandinavian setting is introduced in Chapter 1. The strong traditions of welfare and solidarity in these three Scandinavian societies are being challenged by globalization and neoliberal policies. There are increased tensions over ethno-religious diversity and there is heightened controversy over religion and secularity. Religion, and especially Islam, has become a contentious subject in political and public discussions, discussions in which right-wing populist parties play an active role, including the politicizing of the Christian heritage. Since Islam has a fairly recent presence in the Scandinavian religious landscape, which has been shaped by 500 years of Lutheran Christianity, the risk is to overemphasize its role. Muslims are, however, only small minorities in each country, and even within these small populations there is great religious diversity. Citizens with Muslim backgrounds vary in their adherence to religion as much as other nationals do. Practicing Muslims may attend mosques and register with Islamic communities, while the secular, ‘cultural Muslims’ and atheists among those who emigrate from Muslim countries avoid organized religion.

While controversy around Islam is the most visible aspect, there are also other highly contested issues on religion. Atheist and secularist organizations challenge the previous church hegemony and morality. Scandinavia demonstrates challenges that occur as a result of the growing diversity in societies that are built on a model of religious, cultural, and social homogeneity. The controversies indicate that these formerly rather homogenous societies are trying to adapt their symbols, institutions, and public services to a more diverse cultural and religious situation. These tensions easily become intensified in a globalized and mediatized world.

Mediatization

Mediatization is the process in modern societies through which the extensive role of the various media transforms the patterns of social interaction and the workings of social institutions (Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013; Lundby 2014). This also applies to communication on religion. Understanding these dynamics is necessary in order to grasp the cultural conflicts over religion. These dynamics are explored in greater detail in Chapter 3, but will be discussed briefly here.

The study of ‘mediatization’ differs from the study of ‘mediation’. The study of mediation concerns the ways in which the use of particular media in communica-
tion practices may influence the form and content of the message and its reception, for instance, the way in which a news story may frame Islam and influence the audience’s interpretation. The study of ‘mediatization’ usually focuses on two aspects: The historical changes brought about in different fields or institutional contexts of a society following the growing presence of various media in society, and the mediatized conditions for social interaction following these historical changes. An example of mediatization is the diminishing authority of religious institutions, given the conditions for communication that are set by the manifold nature of media (Hjarvard, 2018). Conceptually speaking, ‘mediation’ and ‘mediatization’ denote different processes, but these processes are interconnected.

Media are not just disseminators of messages. They have become integral parts of the communication and interaction in all of the fields of contemporary culture (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Mediatization theory ‘tries to capture long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other’ (Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2010, 223). With our focus on cultural conflicts, it is particularly important to pay attention to the dynamics of mediatized conflicts (Eskjær, Hjarvard, and Mortensen 2015; Cottle 2006) (see Chapter 3).

In contemporary societies, religion, as a social and cultural process, has become increasingly interconnected with mediatization processes (Lövheim 2014). The chapters in this book therefore approach religion as a contested and mediatized social phenomenon. Following Hjarvard (2012) we distinguish between various forms of mediatized religion, namely, ‘religious’ media that are controlled by religious organizations; journalism on religion, as represented by the secular press, and ‘banal religion’, or the bricolage of religious symbols and elements in popular cultural media (Hjarvard 2012; Lövheim and Axner 2015). A discussion about the usefulness and possible development of these forms of mediatized religion is introduced in Chapter 4.

‘The media’ are constantly changing, with the continuous launches of technologies with new affordances and new constellations in the media industries, and this encourages new user patterns. The studies presented in this book focus on media producers, but primarily on the roles that media users play through their interpretations and interactions with the representations that they approach – and in the ways in which these user patterns work back into the formation of religion. Mediatization of religion implies that public practices and expressions of religion are transformed through their interplay with various media. We study mediatization processes during conflicts over religion in discussions over public service broadcasts (see Chapters 5–8), in dialogue and discussions in multicultural local civic settings (Chapters 9–12), and in classroom teaching on religion and ethics (Chapters 13–15). The case studies are complemented by a cross-national, comparative
survey which is presented in Chapter 2. Concluding notes on mediatization in general, and on the mediatization of religion, in particular, following the case studies, are to be found in the third part of the book.

**Approaches**

The book is written by a team of researchers with backgrounds in religious studies, sociology of religion, media and communication studies and media sociology, anthropology, and political science. There is thus an interdisciplinary perspective behind the work. We have applied a variety of methods, primarily case study approaches with qualitative methods, for instance, interviews and observation. Online ethnography is applied in the studies of social media practices. The attitude patterns reported in Chapter 2 are based on statistical analyses of representative national surveys, with the regression analysis being documented in the Appendix.

The cases studied in each part of the book (see below) are selected for comparative analyses across the three Scandinavian countries. The comparisons are conceptually driven, with cases taken from comparable contexts. They illustrate how religion is contested within the media dynamics in the particular settings under study. Not all of the three countries are included in each setting. Still, we claim that the studies offer insight into how the various media influence public engagement with contested issues about religion.

**Content of the Book**

The first part of the book, on Contexts, opens with a chapter on the characteristics of Scandinavia, touching upon its history, cultural foundations, and political and media systems. Chapter 2 outlines the tendencies and variations in attitudes among Scandinavians as well as the role of religion in public settings, and this is based on national surveys that we commissioned. After the survey findings two more theoretical chapters follow. Chapter 3 considers the media dynamics that are at work in contesting religion, while Chapter 4 presents the approach that we apply in analysing religion as a contested phenomenon.

Part two introduces the actual Controversies in the series of case studies. This is the most extensive part of the book. Here, we try to answer three questions, each to be studied in one specific setting. First, how do public service media provide space for, or control, the visibility of the actors, perspectives, and issues that are related to conflicts around religion in the public realm? (Chapter 5). This question is re-
searched with one selected case study from each of the Scandinavian countries and with emphasis on different outlets within the public service cross-media platforms. Chapter 6 examines the Facebook group that was set up in protest when a Norwegian national broadcaster stopped a news anchor from wearing a cross pendant. Chapter 7 considers the careful framing by producers of Rebellion from the Ghetto, a Danish TV documentary, and the reactions to it in both online and offline debates. Chapter 8 looks at the conflicting ideals in the coverage of Islam in a weekly radio programme on Swedish public service radio.

Second, we move to questions on how contested, mediatized religion is handled in local civic settings in Denmark and Norway. Chapter 9 provides initial perspectives, theorizes mediatization, and considers cultural conflicts in such contexts. This is followed by a study of the ways in which local Christian publications react to national policies on asylum seekers (Chapter 10). Next is a study of how newly arrived Muslims enter interreligious dialogue initiatives as part of their tactics to counter mass media portrayals of their minority group and to perform ‘belonging to the Norwegian nation’ (Chapter 11). This section ends with a piece on the ways in which metropolitan Muslim converts handle negative media frames, trying to construct dual identities (Chapter 12).

The third question is: how do teachers and pupils in classroom situations in public schools engage with the conflicts around religion that are thematized and made visible in mediatized representations? Following perspectives on mediatized religious education in upper secondary schools in Norway and Sweden (Chapter 13), this section of the book presents a case study of teachers’ efforts to curb boredom in classes on religion and ethics through entertainment (Chapter 14), and a report and reflection on media influence on religious education classes on Islam (Chapter 15).

The final part of the book, Crosscurrents, first comments on gender, diversity, and the mediatized conflicts of religion across the case studies in the book (Chapter 16), and this is followed by a discussion of the interaction dynamics in the cases as they contribute to the theory on the mediatization of religion (Chapter 17). This concluding part of the book closes with two entries that are written by distinguished international scholars who have been following this research at a distance. Lynn Schofield Clark, a media and communication scholar from the USA, and Marie Gillespie, a sociologist from the UK, put the findings in the previous chapters into a global context, in Chapter 18, ‘From Scandinavia to the World’, before Birgit Meyer, a German anthropologist and scholar of religion who is based in the Netherlands, provides an afterword.

Through these chapters various intersecting aspects of the processes of negotiating controversies about religion in Scandinavian mediatized public settings are illuminated. By analysing media use and social interaction through public
service media, in schools, local civic settings, and on online platforms, this book contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which media shape and amplify cultural conflicts about religion, and how public interactions in response to these processes incite negotiations relating to values, beliefs, and policies in societies that are undergoing crucial social and cultural transformations.

Bibliography
