

***Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments.
A Comparative Scandinavian Study (CoMRel)***

A SAMKUL project, the Research Council of Norway (no. 236920/F10)

CoMRel

Popular presentation of results and activities per 30 September 2016

By project manager Knut Lundby 21 September 2016

This project studies the intertwined role of media and religion in conflicts and tensions in Norway, Denmark and Sweden under the acronym CoMRel (Co for Conflict, M for Media and Rel for Religion). This is researched in sub-projects in public spaces where people engage in conflicts over religious symbols, items and claims that are made visible through the media. The actual conflicts to a great extent revolve on the role of Islam in the Scandinavian countries.

Islam is perceived as a threat to national culture by approximately half of the Scandinavian respondents, according to a CoMRel survey in 2015. At the same time a large majority in all three countries expressed that hostile attitudes towards foreigners should not be accepted. More than half of the respondents discuss news on religious extremism with others at least once a month.

The first subproject concerns contested media voices in the main public service broadcasters in Scandinavia. In Norway, the debate that followed on Facebook when a news anchor was prohibited from wearing a cross while presenting the news, is being studied. The site Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose still has many followers. The various roles and views presented on the site are analysed. The sentiment that 'Norwegian Christian culture' is under threat dominates the discussions but there are a number of other roles and positions, including mediators who advocate for a pluralistic society.

In Denmark the TV-satire show Still Veiled and the following public discussions are studied. The programme addresses various stereotypes and prejudices that flourish in the ongoing Danish public discourse about Islam, integration and national identity. Contrary to news and current affairs programming satire can engage with controversial issues and ask difficult questions without needing to come up with clear answers. Another TV-programme, the documentary Rebellion From the Ghetto, portrays minority youth in relation to the cultural and religious norms of their parents. The researchers study how these stories are taken up in the public discussion on religion.

The Swedish research partners analyse the content of and the discussions about two programmes: a dialogue on TV between representatives from different religions and a current affairs program on People and Faith in radio. The latter aspires to represent cultural and religious diversity, counter prejudices and stereotypes and include new and unexpected voices. The coverage of Islam, however, relate mostly to Middle East politics and religious extremism. The dialogue roundtable caught surprisingly limited public interest.

The second subproject focuses on local interfaith organizations and networks in Kristiansand and Groruddalen in Oslo, Norway, and on media's role in the localities in a broader sense. To be able to proactively handle and counter the tensions around which the initiatives are set up, interfaith fora need to be wary of media representations of (ethno-religious) conflicts to serve in their role as peace-keepers and conflict-preventers. Especially Muslims and the religion of Islam seem to create delicate focal points.

Almost all accept crosses on buildings in the public space, but there are more varied views on Muslim symbols. However, Muslim symbols are accepted when people see them while being interviewed, a study in two Norwegian cities shows. Another study in Kristiansand shows that the strict governmental immigration policy does not find support in local Christian congregations and organizations.

The third subproject enters classrooms in public schools with pupils from varied religious backgrounds. It explores the social interaction related to religion and conflict during the last year of upper secondary school. In the teaching on Islam, conflict, violence and extremism is addressed almost continuously, with reference to stories from the media. The treatment of Islam often becomes fragmented, and connected to episodes from news and entertainment media. These findings from Norway are compared to a school in Sweden. The main tendency is the same. The use of computers in the classroom encourages teachers to try entertain the pupils with examples from the media, to keep their attention during teaching on religion and ethics.

Researchers from CoMRel launched and run the blog Religion: Going Public <http://religiongoingpublic.com>

An agreement has been made with the publisher deGruyter in Berlin for a book to present the main CoMRel findings, to come out in the spring of 2018. The working title is: Contesting Religion: The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia.

The CoMRel project is informed by the theory on the mediatization of religion, and of mediatized conflict. This concerns how culture and social relations are changed by the intensification of mediated communication in contemporary society, including the moulding of religious imaginations and interactions.