

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

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Religion has become a matter of intensified public concern, and a vehicle for diverging opinions in public discussions. How do various media condition public engagement with contested issues about religion? This is the overarching question for the CoMRel project (Co for Conflict, M for Media, Rel for Religion).

A book manuscript with findings from the project was submitted to the publisher by the end of September 2017. The volume has contributions from 17 researchers. The book will be out as paperback, and Open Access for free, in April/May 2018 from De Gruyter in Berlin and Boston. The title is *Contesting Religion. The Media Dynamics of Cultural Conflicts in Scandinavia*.

There are case studies from Norway, Denmark and Sweden, with comparisons within three different environments: public service media, local contexts for civic participation, and classrooms in public schools.

Public service broadcasting has a strong position in Scandinavia, extended to the Internet. The Norwegian case is a study of the debate that followed on Facebook when a news anchor was prohibited from wearing a cross while presenting the news. The sentiment that 'Norwegian Christian culture' is under threat dominates the discussions but there are a range of participants, with various agendas: conservative Christians, nationalists, humanists, fervent secularists, and ardent atheists – 'hijacking religion' in multiple ways.

The Danish case study of the TV documentary *Rebellion from the Ghetto* focuses the inclusion of minority voices and how framings of religion influence the discussion. By consciously downplaying the role of 'religion' and framing conflicts in terms of personal experiences and universal themes, the documentary managed to set the scene for a debate in which young Muslims' various experiences were given authority.

The Swedish researchers analyse how the radio programme *Människor och tro* (People and belief) enables and structures the actors and issues that become heard in debate, particularly with regard to Islam. The programme aims to present an alternative to the dominant negative media discourses. Despite these efforts, the programme tends to reconstruct, rather than challenge, the dominant frames of Islam as a problem for society and for the relations of power between the majority and minority voices in public debates.

The research on conflicts over religion in civic settings brings studies on how local Christian publications relate to national debates on asylum seekers, and on minority tactics applied by young Muslims faced with negative media framing of

Islam. The former study indicate that local Christian groups welcome and support arriving refugees and asylum seekers. The other study investigates dynamics of minority–majority religious interaction in two localities in Norway with a strong Muslim presence. Newly arrived Muslims enter interreligious dialogue initiatives as part of their tactic to counter mass media portrayals of their minority group and perform belonging to the Norwegian nation

The third field under study is upper secondary school interactions on religion and ethics. The researchers explore how a media-saturated classroom intensifies and broadens dynamics of academic boredom. Media materials primarily chosen for their entertaining and attention-grabbing qualities make up a substantive part of the observed lessons. Focusing on conflicts and controversies around religion, these media materials are used to catch and keep the attention of the students, in competition with a multitude of options provided by laptops with Internet access. In the observed classrooms, this use of conflict and entertainment-oriented media materials result in the reproduction and reinforcement of stereotypical and exotic representations of religion. In the teaching on Islam, by constantly addressing the news coverage with the intention of nuancing and correcting problematic representations, the result may in some instances be to reinforce and confirm the association of Islam with terrorism, conflict, and controversy established by the media.

Islam is perceived as a threat to national culture by approximately half of the Scandinavian respondents, according to a CoMRel survey from 2015. At the same time a large majority in all three countries expressed that hostile attitudes towards foreigners should not be accepted.

Despite a general awareness among media producers and teachers to overcome the negative media framing of Islam and Muslims, the case studies show that the frame is difficult to overcome: the dominant images of Muslims and Islam are continuously reproduced and remediated in all of the Scandinavian settings.

CoMRel is informed by theories on the mediatization of religion, and of mediatized conflict. This concerns how culture and social relations are shaped by the intensification of mediated communication in contemporary society.

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