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Afterword: Media Dynamics of Religious Diversity

Abstract: In this afterword I reflect on the development of the concept of mediatization in light of increasing diversity and contestations of religion and sketch some directions for further research on the dynamics of co-existence across religious and other differences.

Keywords: mediatization, media dynamics, religious diversity, co-existence

Focusing on contestations around the public presence and representation of religion in the increasingly diverse and at the same time strongly secularized societies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, the starting point of this volume is the hypothesis that ‘public practices and expressions of religion are transformed through their interplay with various media’ (Introduction, 6). In so doing, it builds upon the debate around the mediatization of religion (and society) in which many of the contributors participated over the past decade. Obviously these debates generated a productive and convivial scholarly discursive community that proved to be able, under the competent and generous guidance of Knut Lundby, to pull off a joint interactive research project across countries and disciplines. Responding to the Research Council of Norway’s call to study processes of social change from the angle of ideas and communication practices, this volume identifies the media–religion–society nexus as a privileged entry point into the dynamics of the co-existence of actors with increasingly diverse religious backgrounds and different attitudes towards religion in modern European societies.

Importantly, as the volume shows (see especially Chapter 4), understanding current transformations and contestations depends on a clear grasp of how past modes of organizing and representing the role and place of religion in society have repercussions on current representations of and attitudes towards religious diversity, especially with regard to Islam. The three Scandinavian societies have in common characteristics – such as the longstanding dominance of the Lutheran state church, strong traditions of welfare and egalitarian values, and a widely shared secular attitude – that resonate in the ways in which diversity is addressed on the levels of politics, policy, and everyday life. The volume offers not only a well-integrated comparative study of the complex, transforming relations between media, religion, and society in times of high diversity in Scandi-

navia that can serve for further comparison with other regions in Europe. It also provides a stimulating conceptual intervention that seeks to reflect on and push further the theory of mediatization in light of the current challenges with regard to transformations related to diversity as they occur in the contexts of public service media, local civic settings, and schools.

The Mediatization of Religion

The rise of the notion of mediatization and the debates fuelled by it would deserve a study of its own. My concern here is more modest. In my understanding, scholars such as Lundby, Stig Hjarvard, and Mia Lövheim launched the theory of the mediatization of religion as an intervention into debates about religion and modernity in the social sciences. Arguing against a simplistic understanding of secularization as the disappearance of religion, in a foundational piece Hjarvard called attention to the process ‘through which core elements of a social and cultural activity (for example, politics, teaching, religion and so on) assume media form’ (2008, 13). The various subsystems into which modern Scandinavian societies were differentiated were subsumed under the logic of the media. This implied that the authority with regard to the public representation of religion rested no longer within the Lutheran (state) churches; instead the church, as the prime religious institution, became subject to modes of framing and reporting employed in the mass media. Tellingly, Hjarvard paid most attention to the process of mass media taking over functions that had so far been accommodated by the Christian churches, and to the rise of ‘banal religion’ as a secular functional surrogate for Christian belief. The central argument, as Hjarvard put it in another important piece, was that ‘the media have taken over many of *the cultural and social functions of the institutional religions* and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging’ (2011, 119, emphasis added). This argument made a lot of sense with regard to Christianity as a major exponent of institutional religion in the Nordic countries. Mediatization theory clearly owes its initial explanatory strength to offering an alternative perspective on the decline of belief, church attendance, and church membership by calling for seeing these changes through the lens of the media rather than the lens of religion. But what about other ‘institutional religions’ associated with migrants and refugees, in particular Islam? In the initial articulations of mediatization theory, even though issues such as the conflicts around the Muhammad cartoons were mentioned, religious diversity was not yet addressed conceptually. How suitable is this theory, albeit in its initial articulation, for understanding the stakes in current contestations about religious diversity in

today's highly differentiated media environments? How, in other words, to move from what one could call 'Mediatization.1' to a follow-up version, 'Mediatization.2' – taking into account the diversification of the media (especially regarding the rise of social media) and the plurality and pluriformity of the religious field?

I read this volume and the research on which it is based as a double-sided project. It not only assesses and showcases the merits of a media perspective for the analysis of concrete instances of contestations around religion, but also seeks to further develop mediatization theory so as to accommodate the current dynamics of diversity. The introductory chapters convey a broad (and soft) understanding of the mediatization of religion. Useful distinctions are made between forms of mediatized religion – “religious” media that are controlled by religious organizations; journalism on religion, as represented by the secular press, and “banal religion” (Introduction, 6) – and types of media dynamics – ‘amplification’, ‘framing and performative agency’, and ‘co-structuring’ (see Chapter 3). The fact that many contributions fruitfully work with these sets of categories – foregrounding in particular the amplification and framing undertaken by journalism on Islam – testifies to their heuristic value for analysing how media intervene in and shape the ways in which diversity is experienced and debated. In their concluding reflection, Mona Abdel-Fadil and Louise Liebmann (in Chapter 16) and Lundby (in Chapter 17) stress that the goal of the volume is not to assess whether the thesis of mediatization can be evidenced through the various empirical case studies. And yet, these studies offer intriguing insights that could to be taken up for further theoretical reflection. What I find particularly intriguing is that institutionalized religions as Christianity and Islam appear to be subject to fundamentally different mediatizations. Many of the case studies spotlight how dominant media frames repeatedly offer representations of Islam as a ‘bad religion’ which is implicitly contrasted with Christianity as a ‘good religion’. In my reading, the case studies propose that a conceptual shift is needed from the framework of the mediatization of religion towards the media dynamics of religious diversity.

Another remarkable finding of these case studies is the fact that the reporting about Islam in relation to various contested events tends to fall back on an old and resilient notion of religion as shaped by Lutheran Christianity that, as pointed out by Lövheim and Liv Ingeborg Lied, ‘has acted as a model for the ways in which Scandinavians perceive religion in general, and also its place in society’ (Chapter 4, 66). As a consequence, Islam and other religions associated with migrants and refugees are apprehended in relation to the normative ideal of Lutheran Christianity, rather than on their own terms. That this is the case on the level of public debate should, of course, not imply that this normative ideal

should guide our scholarly analysis. As Lövheim and Lied point out, ‘a more nuanced grasp of contemporary religion and its complexities’ (Chapter 4, 71) is needed. At stake is the relation between media, religion, and secularity. Secularity ‘produces’ a particular modern form of religion (e. g. Asad 2003), which serves as the normative backdrop against which the various religious manifestations in diverse societies are evaluated but into which they do not necessarily fit. Exactly for this reason, any analysis of contestations about religion and differences between religions needs to reflect thoroughly on the genealogy of the prime notion of religion mobilized in these contestations, as Lövheim and Lied also point out. The point here is that the resilience of a Protestant model of religion in a secular setting, which forms the implicit subtext of dominant media frames, has repercussions for the ways in which Islam is mediatized. This does not seem to be analogous to the mediatization of Christianity. Rather than mixing Islamic forms into a cocktail of ‘banal’ religion for public use, Islam is primarily reported about against the backdrop of an understanding of a normative Christian ideal from which it deviates. The mediatization of Islam in public journalism in mass media tends to yield a stereotype framing of Islam as being problematic. It does not lend itself easily to being ‘banalized’, as the frequent contestations about the representation of Muslims and signs referring to Islam show. Media clearly have the power to shape and control the terms of public debate (as the idea of co-structuring suggests), but they do so by echoing a particular configuration of the relation between state and religion as it existed prior to the onset of the mediatization of Christianity. As a follow-up to this research project, it would be interesting to undertake a systematic comparison of the mediatization of Christianity and the mediatization of Islam, and other religious traditions. In this context, it would also be important to pursue further the differences with regard to dynamics of mediatization in dominant mass media and social media in relation to Christianity and Islam (as pointed out by David Herbert in Chapter 9)

In sum, placing this volume in the history of the study of mediatization in the Nordic network, it seems to me that mediatized religion no longer primarily features as a symptom of secularization in the sense of taking over cultural and social functions formerly provided by the church. Mediatization, as the case studies spotlight, (re)produces above all the dominant normative frame into which old and new religions have to fit in a secular society. The implications of this shift, which is documented in many of the case studies, still await being spelled out in full on the conceptual level of ‘Mediatization.2’.

Studying Diversity

Conducting research on the relation between religion and media myself, over the past decade I have engaged in stimulating conversations with the scholarly community that produced this volume. Notwithstanding certain reservations with regard to the scope of the theory of mediatization (Meyer 2013), I appreciate the intellectual energy that is unleashed in the search for patterns in the transforming relations between media, religion, and society. As the rich case studies show, both media and religion are umbrella terms that encompass highly diverse phenomena and need to be unpacked. While the term media refers to different kinds of mass media and social media, the term religion points to a pluralistic environment in which practitioners of various religious traditions – most prominently Lutheran Christianity and Islam – co-exist with New Age spiritualists, staunch atheists, and people who emphasize the civilizational value of Christianity. The volume convincingly points at the crucial role played by media in influencing current contestations around newly visible and relatively unfamiliar manifestations of religion. The case studies, though focusing on Scandinavia, certainly speak to the dynamics of diversity as it plays out in, for instance, Germany and the Netherlands. I very much applaud the focus on neighbourhoods and schools as concrete sites in which people with different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds co-exist and live and struggle with each other. I am much intrigued by the point raised by Herbert that ‘more diverse neighbourhoods, with an established history of migration and with many immigrants from different backgrounds, seem to work in favour of civic integration’, because in these settings binary categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’, though reiterated on the level of mass media, do not hold (Chapter 9, 166–167). In my view, more comparative research, on a European level, is needed to explore the dynamics of such micro-fields in which difference is articulated, contested, accommodated, and maybe even overcome or relativized.

Another intriguing issue concerns the ‘nationalization’ of Christianity which, as pointed out by Abdel-Fadil in Chapter 6, is mobilized in an exclusivist manner that emphasizes the importance of Christian symbols, such as the cross, as expressions of a core national identity threatened by diversity. This resonates with a broader post-secular re-apprehension of Christianity as cultural heritage. This stance is also articulated in public debates about how to preserve the material remains of ‘unchurching’, such as abandoned church buildings, sacred places, and (holy) objects (Knott, Krech and Meyer 2016). Even people with a secular mindset are hesitant to simply do away with these traces of the Christian past.

Understanding the dynamics of diversity and the modalities of co-existence is the prime challenge we face as scholars in the social and cultural sciences at this moment. To advance our understanding, I suggest to forge connections between scholars of mediatization of religion and scholars working on ‘superdiversity’ and ‘new diversities’ (e.g. Vertovec 2015) and the ‘culturalization of citizenship’ (e.g. Duyvendak, Geschiere, Tonkens 2016). In September 2016 I started the collaborative research project *Religious Matters in an Entangled World* (www.religiousmatters.nl), which approaches contestations arising about religion by focusing on concrete religious items such as buildings, images, objects, food, bodies, and texts. Of course, the items may be analysed as religious media in a framework of mediation so as to assess their value within a particular religious grouping, but at the same time they certainly are subject to constant mediatization. As prime operators in shaping publics and making communities, media are key to framing commotions around the material presence of religion into contested matters in broader society. The volume offers much food for thought and I will certainly follow the work of my Scandinavian colleagues with keen interest and look forward to future conversation and collaboration.

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