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## Chapter 4

# Approaching Contested Religion

**Abstract:** Religion has become a matter of intensified public concern in contemporary Scandinavia, and the various media are the main arena in which Scandinavians encounter such controversies. Historically-rooted understandings of religion that are based on the Lutheran Church as both a public utility and cultural resource, and the secular state as the regulator of religious freedom and equality, have become re-articulated in newly emerging frames such as the politicization, culturalization and securitization of religion. This chapter presents the current volume's overall approach to religion in contemporary Scandinavia as a mediatized and contested social phenomenon. The chapter advocates a perspective from which ongoing contestations and negotiations among a larger spectrum of actors are explored through an application of both substantive and moderate social constructionist approaches to religion. The various applications and interplays of these approaches to religion may fruitfully contribute to the further development of the theory of the mediatization of religion.

**Keywords:** mediatized religion, contested religion, social constructionist approach, substantive definition, public sphere

In April 2016, the Swedish politician Yasri Kahn was interviewed on TV4 by a female reporter. At the end of the interview, he refrained from shaking her hand with reference to his values and upbringing, since such physical contact between men and women was considered to be 'very intimate'.<sup>1</sup> Kahn is a practicing Muslim and was, at the time, nominated for the national board of the Swedish Green Party. During the weeks that followed, the 'handshake affair' dominated both the Swedish media and political debate. At the core of the debate was the question of whether Kahn's refusal to shake hands with a woman could be seen as being an expression of gender discrimination and therefore incompatible with democratic values, or whether a liberal, pluralistic society should be able to tolerate a variety of ways of greeting and showing respect for other people. Khan referred to his action as a 'personal choice', but his Muslim faith and his position as a

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<sup>1</sup> Yasri Kahn, 'Nu lämnar jag alla mina uppdrag för Miljöpartiet' *Nyheter24*, 20 April, 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <http://nyheter24.se/debatt/840404-yasri-khan-nu-lamnar-jag-alla-mina-uppdrag-i-miljopartiet>

leading politician quickly turned the discussion into a debate about the boundaries of the expression of religious beliefs in the public sphere.

This case illustrates how, during the first decades of the new millennium, religion has become a contested topic in public debates in Scandinavia, and how the media orchestrate tensions around the place of religion in the public realm. As the Swedish example aptly shows, it is when religious organizations or individuals ‘assume, or try to assume, a public character, function, or role’ (Casanova 2003, 111) that religion also becomes a matter of intensified public concern. In such cases, religion becomes a site for tensions between the values that are based on secular–humanistic ideals, such as gender equality, plurality, and freedom of religion, and religion as a carrier of cultural values in the Scandinavian countries.

This book explores how the media condition engagement with contested issues regarding the legitimate expressions of religion in Scandinavian public settings. The aim of this chapter is to discuss how such contestations can be approached, against the backdrop of theories about the public role of religion and on the mediatization of religion. On the basis of these discussions, the chapter presents an approach to analysing religion as a contested and mediatized social phenomenon.

## 4.1 State Church and Secularity: Models for Understanding Religion

The relationship of the Scandinavian populations to religion is shaped by a strong historical connection between the Lutheran Church and the state (see Chapter 1; Furseth 2018). The British sociologist Grace Davie (2015, 135) has argued that Scandinavian populations refer to the church as a ‘public utility’. This notion seeks to capture the seemingly paradoxical situation that is expressed in our survey (see Chapter 2) of the low levels of religious self-identification combined with a strong cultural affiliation to Lutheran Christianity. As ‘public utilities’, churches are expected to perform public functions and social roles that are related to a religious faith that is recognized to some extent, but which is not actively practiced by the larger population (*ibid.*).

The notion of the church as a public utility can also be useful for understanding how Lutheran Christianity has acted as a model for the ways in which Scandinavians perceive religion in general, and also its place in society. Secularity, in the sense of a separation of state administration and the legal and political systems from the influence of religious dogmas and authorities,

and of religion as personal faith that is expressed in private life and within particular religious communities, is a strong feature of modern Scandinavian societies (Furseth 2018; Lövheim et al. 2018). As described in Chapter 1, the state is, nevertheless, involved in regulation and the financial support of religion, belief, and worldview organizations (see Chapter 11), as well as in approving the curriculum for religious education (see Chapters 13 and 15). This model of a secular state that supports the Lutheran majority churches as public utilities still persists, despite being challenged by religious diversity and critiqued by humanist-atheist groups. This model further implies that Scandinavians typically rely on the state to legally balance religious freedom and the equality of all citizens with regard to private expressions of faith, as well as its public manifestations (Kühle et al. 2018).

## 4.2 Religion in Public Space: A Contested Issue

The conception of the Lutheran state church as a public utility, religious faith as expressed in personal life and certain organizational forms, and the secular state as a guarantee for religious freedom and equality, have become normative models that shape attitudes to, and controversies around, the growing religious diversity in Scandinavia. Our survey (see Chapter 2) shows that attitudes to religious diversity in public spaces are complex and that opinions differ depending on the various levels of public visibility and forms of religion (see Beckford 2015). A large majority, 70 percent, of Scandinavians agree that all religions should be respected, and more than 50 percent strongly or partially agree that all religious groups should be entitled to the same rights in society. It seems, however, as if this acceptance towards religious beliefs primarily refers to religion as an individual right or as a part of civil society. Previous studies show that a majority of Scandinavians are more sceptical towards the expression of religious arguments and symbols, for example, in politics (Lövheim et al. 2018). Our survey confirms this, since most Scandinavians accept the public visibility of religious symbols, such as a cross, church tower, and even signs showing the location of a mosque and minarets, but oppose the right of religious leaders to express their views in public. Expressions of Christianity are also more accepted than those relating to Islam, both among public servants and in public settings, including public service media.

### 4.3 Politicization, Culturalization, and Securitization of Religion

Recent studies show that references to religion have become more diversified and debates about religion have increased in Scandinavian media in the past decades (Niemelä and Christensen 2013; Lövheim and Linderman 2015; Døving and Kraft 2013). However, these debates tend to cluster around two issues in particular. The first concerns tensions between religious diversity and what are perceived as core social values, such as the rights of women, LGBTQ persons, and children. In the media, these issues have become linked emblematically to Islam and, to some extent, to conservative Christianity through topics such as the hijab, circumcision, and the rights of young people to choose life partners. The second issue concerns the legitimacy of various religious expressions, where some expressions become portrayed as being ‘bad’ or as ‘pseudo’ forms of religion. Such claims are typically made about Islam, but also about religious expressions in the New Age spectrum, particularly when religious and economic interests are assumed to overlap, and when key national traditions or institutions are challenged. Debates in the Norwegian context about the so-called ‘Angel School’ (Astarte Education/Soulspring) that was initiated by the Norwegian Princess, Märtha Louise, is an example of this (Døving and Kraft 2013).

These debates show how historical models of the role of religion in society have become re-articulated in response to new challenges. They are expressed in the increasing tendency to politicize religion in parliamentary debates, which started in the late 1990s (Lindberg 2014; Ivanescu 2010). In these debates, it is primarily the right-wing nationalist and populist parties that criticize Islam as a threat to security and to national identity, and thus mobilize Christianity in defence of cultural values. This use of religion to drive a political discussion about national values and identity can be seen as part of what Brubaker (2017) terms a shift from a nationalist to a ‘civilizationist’ position among nationalist–populist parties in Western Europe. Here, the traditional opposition between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ is combined with an opposition between ‘the nation’ and those groups that are characterized as threatening the nation, re-conceived in civilizational terms. While Islam becomes framed as a threat towards national culture, Christianity is framed as a cultural and civilizational identity, connected to modern, progressive, and liberal values, primarily those regarding gender and sexual identity. In this process, Christianity is selectively embraced ‘not as a religion but as a civilizational identity, a matter of belonging rather than believing’ (Brubaker 2017, 14). In a similar way, liberalism and secularism are selectively embraced and are used to legitimize ‘our’ way of life in opposition to Islam. Brubaker ar-

gues that the combination of Christianity and secular liberalism to construct and defend national identity is distinctive in Northern European debates (*ibid.*).

This use of religion to imagine the characteristics, as well as the boundaries, of national identity and values is also connected to a securitization of European public discourse, in which Islam, and Muslims in general, are framed as a potential threat to national security. This discourse has become established in the media following the 9/11 attack in New York (Flood 2012), and it is reinforced through frequent reports that connect Islam to social problems and political violence (see Knott et al. 2013; Niemelä and Christensen 2013; Hjelm 2015). Securitization, as a media discourse, is also shaped by a country's history of involvement in international conflicts and political debates on immigration and integration. In the contemporary Scandinavian situation, with experiences of migration and terror attacks in major cities, such frames become reactivated and mobilized, and contribute to negative portrayals of Islam as a threat to national security and culture in the media, as well as in political debates.

## 4.4 Media – A Major Site for Encountering Religion

In the Scandinavian countries religion can be seen as a mediatized phenomenon, in the sense that the various mass media have become the primary source of information about religious issues, rather than religious organizations (Lundby et al. 2018). This is one of the main arguments in the theory of mediatization as applied to religion (Hjarvard 2012, 2013; see Chapter 3). Hjarvard argues that in this process religious symbols also become disembedded from their traditional context, and they are circulated and reinterpreted according to the purpose of various media actors.

Our survey confirms that when asked about encounters with religion and belief, Scandinavians most frequently choose television and newspapers. Next in ranking come family, friends, and school or work. As the table below shows, the Internet and social media are less frequent sites; somewhat more than 10 percent encounter religion through these media. Churches and other religious sites are the least frequent options.

**Table 4.1** Contexts for the encounter with, or information about, questions related to religion and belief. Percentages. From CoMRel survey, April 2015.

	Denmark		Norway		Sweden	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
In the family	26 %	74 %	30 %	70 %	38 %	62 %
Among friends	24 %	76 %	25 %	75 %	34 %	66 %
School or workplace	16 %	84 %	16 %	84 %	24 %	76 %
Through TV	33 %	67 %	36 %	64 %	40 %	60 %
Magazines (paper or digital)	29 %	71 %	35 %	65 %	37 %	63 %
Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.)	10 %	90 %	14 %	86 %	17 %	83 %
Other websites	11 %	89 %	13 %	87 %	13 %	87 %
Radio	18 %	82 %	20 %	80 %	22 %	78 %
Church, mosque, other religious place	7 %	93 %	8 %	92 %	8 %	92 %
N	1006		1099		999	

The mediatization of religion, then, interacts with, and enhances, the processes of social and cultural change in which the meaning and legitimacy of religious beliefs, to a greater extent than before, become a matter for negotiation and contestation. This underlines a second aspect of mediatization, namely, that mediated accounts of religion provide a ‘horizon’ for communication and interaction about religion (Lundby 2013, 199). Such interactions take place between actors with varying interests, such as media producers, religious and belief organizations, but also political parties, enterprises, and individuals. This situation increases the possibility of tension between various, and perhaps conflicting, interests and values relating to the public role of religion. A further implication is that the processes of ‘managing and producing consensus’ in line with views that are consensually accepted by a particular audience, become more important (Clark 2012, 113).

## 4.5 Forms of Mediatized Religion

Stig Hjarvard (2012) has described three main forms of mediatized religion in contemporary society, and these are defined by the extent to which religious actors and the logics of various media genres shape the public visibility of religion:

- *Religious media* refers to media organizations and productions that are primarily controlled and performed by religious actors
- *Journalism on religion* refers to the ways that secular media, primarily news media, bring religion to the political public sphere
- *Banal religion* concerns the ways that various forms of entertainment media make religion visible in the cultural public sphere

Hjarvard's approach to mediatization starts from an institutional level and emphasizes the 'structuring influence of the media' for social interaction and meaning making (2014, 127). The implications of mediatization for changes in the significance of religion in society is a question of continuous debate (see Lövheim 2014). On the one hand, mediatization can contribute to secularization, in the sense that the public and collective role of religion as a social institution is weakened. On the other hand, new ways in which various forms of media increasingly make religion visible in late modern society can also be interpreted as a re-enchantment of the media, as increased agency for religious actors, and as the production of new tools for religious creativity in media audiences. Studies of religious change in contemporary society show that, in order to grasp this spectrum of the various outcomes of mediatization for individual and collective forms of religion, the theory needs to be based on an understanding of religion that recognizes new varieties of institutionalized forms and aspects that go beyond cognitive belief (Lövheim 2011; Lied 2012). A salient part of this criticism concerns the way that the concept of 'banal religion' might reinforce the hierarchies of religious expressions in society in regard to what qualifies as 'proper' or 'pseudo-' religion (Axelson 2015; Kraft 2017).

These debates show that a more nuanced grasp of contemporary religion and its complexities, as well as a more dynamic approach to the interplay between media development and religious change, is needed. This implies events where increased engagement with religion can lead to changes within media forms and genres (Lövheim and Axner 2014, 43). Siv Ellen Kraft (2017) argues that phenomena that are categorized as 'banal religion' are New Age plots and storylines that are taken over by the media, rather than the media production of religion. Another example is how the increasing use of religion in debating political issues in editorials and columns contributes to the challenging of a strict secularist discourse that separates religion and politics in the media (Lövheim 2017). By using and discussing various forms of mediatized religion, this book is part of an ongoing process in developing the theory of a mediatization of religion (Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012; Lundby 2013).

## 4.6 A Combined Analytical Approach

In a review of current research on the increased visibility of religion in western societies, Titus Hjelm (2015, 8) points to the risks of confusing visibility and debate over religion – as portrayed in, for example, the media – with an increasing importance of religion among individuals, or of religious organizations in society. The mediatization of religion implies that the contemporary media supply people with symbolic resources for individual meaning making, as well as for collective conflicts relating to religion. In this book, our focus is to study *interactions* with representations of religion in the media among various publics, how various media enable and structure these interactions, and how these interactions relate to a larger debate about the place of religion in Scandinavian societies. It is, however, not to evaluate how mediatized religion affects individual beliefs or particular religious organizations.

Our focus on interactions with the public and mediatized expressions of religion requires an approach to religion that is able to capture an interplay between previously established, institutionalized forms of religion and challenges to the meaning and legitimacy of these forms that increased mediatization brings, in the form of contestation and negotiation among a larger spectrum of actors. As discussed in the previous section, a definition of religion that privileges certain historical institutional forms of, primarily, Christianity, is too narrow to account for this interplay alone. Likewise, a ‘culturalist’ ethnographically inspired approach to religion as any form of meaning making that ‘moves beyond the mundane to the level of particular significance’ (Hoover 2006, 23) makes it difficult to differentiate between various forms of meaning making, and to account for how institutional forms of religion inform such interactions (Hjarvard 2011; Lövheim 2014).

A way to meet the analytical challenge of analysing how the mediatized visibility of religion informs interactions in various public settings that are explored in this book, is to combine two interrelated approaches to religion. Previous studies of changes in the public visibility of religion on an institutional level in the Scandinavian countries have used the classical, substantive definition of religion that is offered by Michael Hill (see Furseth 2018):

The set of beliefs which postulate and seek to regulate the distinction between an empirical reality and a related and significant supra-empirical segment of reality; the language and symbols which are used in relation to this distinction; and the activities and institutions which are connected with its regulation. (Hill 1973, 42–43)

This kind of definition specifies religion to be a particular form of meaning making that is expressed in beliefs, language, and symbols that concern a ‘supra-empirical segment of reality’. Furthermore, it specifies that religion is expressed in social ‘activities and institutions’, such as churches, mosques, prayer, or the wearing of a hijab. For the present discussion, this kind of definition serves the purpose of identifying when certain institutionalized forms of religion emerge in the public debate, and how these become reinforced or challenged in these interactions. As the following case studies show, media producers and audiences in mediated contestations of religion in Scandinavia often refer to particular discursive and social forms of religion, such as fundamentalism, Islam, or the Lutheran Church. A substantive definition is useful in identifying such forms through words, symbols, images, and claims that refer to a transcendent or supra-empirical dimension. Furthermore, such a definition is useful in identifying actors that claim to represent, or become associated with, particular social forms of religion, such as Christian, Muslim or interfaith organizations (see Chapters 11 and 12).

The substantive approach to religion is, however, less useful for analysing how religion becomes contested in social interactions. References to Christian values or Muslim practices in political debates or in populist arguments for a civilizationist position can take a substantive form, as in explicit references to particular organized forms of religion, such as the Islamic extremist group ISIS or the symbol of the Christian cross. ‘Common sense’ references to religion that circulate in conversations at the workplace or among friends and family can also refer to substantive elements albeit in a more implicit or general form. However, the meaning of these references cannot be decided solely on the basis of a substantive definition of religion. As the survey findings indicate, Scandinavian respondents may discuss mediatized representations of Islam as a way of articulating sentiments of a threat to national culture, rather than a concern with beliefs in transcendent beings, or the meaning of certain practices.

Several studies in this book analyse such situations, where symbols, traditions, practices, and artefacts *are given* meaning as being ‘religious’ through various uses, contestations, and negotiations, and how social identities and relations are formed from such interactions. In order to analyse such interactions, a definition that focuses on the substance of religion must be combined with an approach that focuses on the meaning and role given to religion, when this term is used in a particular situation of social interaction.

Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, in their introduction to the book *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, argue that religion needs to be studied as ‘practices of mediation’ that ‘claim to mediate the transcendental, spiritual, or supernatural and make these accessible for believers’ (2006, 7). By emphasizing the

practices of mediation this brings into focus that the meaning and legitimacy of certain forms of religion is an outcome of how – through different material forms and practices – it is mediated. This approach thus makes mediation an intrinsic part of what constitutes religion.

Approaching religion as an intrinsically mediated phenomenon has many parallels to James Beckford's social constructionist<sup>2</sup> approach to religion (2003: 3). Beckford starts from the deregulation of religion in advanced industrial societies, where religion has come 'adrift from its former points of anchorage but is no less potentially powerful as a result' (Beckford 1989, 170). His conclusion is not that historical, institutionalized forms of religion lose significance in this situation, but that such expressions of religion remain a 'potent cultural resource or form which may act as the vehicle of change, challenge or conservation' (ibid.). However, the meaning and function of such expressions of religion in society have become more contested, and therefore less predictable. Fitting with the focus in this book on how religious meaning and authority, through mediatization, become contested, Beckford argues that questions about what religion is, and about its place in society, become a "site" where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents' (2003, 13; see Hjelm 2015, 10).

This kind of social constructionist approach underlines that the meanings of religious beliefs and practices, the ways in which they claim to mediate the transcendent and regulate social relations, is subject to change through processes of social interaction. Previously institutionalized or 'sedimented' meanings associated with religion in a society constitute 'authoritative guides not only to usage of the term but also to social action' (Beckford 2003, 4). Nevertheless, new ways of using such forms, and disputes about their proper use and meaning, also mean that they are changing. In this way, the meaning of religion is not fixed, but is constructed in particular social settings, in negotiations between various meanings and interests that are articulated by religious authorities, actors in media, voluntary organizations, teachers, and politicians. The task of researching religion from such an approach thus becomes to 'analyse the processes whereby the meaning of religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted,

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<sup>2</sup> The terms social 'constructionism' and 'constructivism' for conceptualizing human construction of meaning in modern society are used in various ways in literature. In choosing the term 'social constructionist' we emphasize the importance of social interaction and material aspects for the construction of meaning rather than focusing on individual cognitive processes (see Hjelm 2014:6–7). Couldry and Hepp (2017:21) uses the term 'social constructivism' but argues in a similar manner for the significance of social and material aspects in order to understand the role of the media in the social construction of reality.

challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast, and so on' (ibid., 3). The emphasis on relations of power and material conditions in particular situations of social interaction also means that the strength of various constructions, in terms of their implications for structuring individual perceptions and actions, varies and needs to be part of the analysis.

## 4.7 Studying Contested and Mediatized Religion

The case studies in this book approach religion through the combined analytical approach outlined in this chapter in various ways depending on the authors' disciplinary perspective, empirical material, and level of analysis. In this way, the book as a whole captures various aspects of how religious expressions in public spaces become thematized and enacted through the media as objects of conflict, or as resources to handle social and cultural tensions.

The following chapters analyse how particular religious organizations and practices become represented in the media, and situations where symbols connected to a certain religious tradition, such as the Muslim hijab or the Christian cross, become the subject of contestation in social interactions. Chapters 7, 8, and 10, discuss questions as to how particular media affordances in public service media and local newspapers influence the ways in which religion is represented in the public realm; this includes the representation of religion through certain frames, the selection of actors for representing various claims, and the strategies that are used to present alternative images of religion.

In other chapters, the combined analytical approach to religion is used to study settings in which mass mediated representations of religion become objects of contestation, negotiation, and reinterpretation in situations of social interaction, such as social media (Chapter 6), classrooms (Chapters 14 and 15), and local civic settings (Chapters 11 and 12). Here, the authors analyse assumptions and discussions *about* religion and religious people, and social relations and positions formed *on the basis of various understandings of religion*, for example, where 'religion' is used to articulate 'common' values among and differences between various social groups in society.

The interplay between a substantive and a social constructionist approach to 'religion' that is proposed here can, through these various applications, be fruitful in developing the theory of the mediatization of religion. It aligns with the discussion around how to relate an institutional and a social constructionist tradition in mediatization theory through a common focus on social interaction and media's role in the communicative construction of socio-cultural reality (see Lundby 2013, 196, 200; Couldry and Hepp 2017). The social constructionist per-

spective emphasizes that forms of mediatized religion – such as journalism on religion, religious media, and banal religion – need to be approached as continuous and always (re-)situated processes. While recognizing media as an important agent in the shaping of such expressions of religion, it shifts attention to the process of the continuous reshaping and reinterpretation of such expressions – in which a variety of actors take part – as they circulate and are engaged in new environments. By focusing on how religion is given meaning in social interaction, we can also refine the theory on the mediatization of religion in relation to the role that media users play in the communication dynamic.

Finally, an analysis of mediatized religion that combines a substantive and a social constructionist approach may contribute to the discussion about the visibility and significance of religion in the public sphere. The heightened visibility of religion in the media means that religion becomes ‘more visible, present and hence available for mobilization, contestation and criticism in the public sphere’ (Herbert 2011, 627). Approaching religion through a combined focus on institutional forms and the contestation of these in mediatized situations of social interaction can enable a better understanding of when, how, and with what implications such processes unfold in contemporary Scandinavia.

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## Part II: **Controversies**

