

Audun Toft, Maximilian Broberg

Chapter 13

Perspectives: Mediatized Religious Education

Abstract: This chapter presents two empirical case studies of religious education (RE) in Norway and in Sweden. In addition to introducing the *Upper Secondary School* section of the present volume, the chapter explores how media materials and discourses are being extensively used in a similar fashion as part of RE in both countries. Media materials and discourses serve to both contextualize the content of the subject and to legitimize RE by showing why religion is relevant for contemporary Norwegian and Swedish society; thus, they form an important part of the RE lessons. Applying a mediatization perspective, we argue that this use of media impacts both the choice of topics addressed and the way they are presented, as it inserts various media dynamics into the pedagogical practice of religious education.

Keywords: mediatization, religious education, representations of religion, media materials

As participation in institutionalized religious practice is on the decline in the Scandinavian countries, the media seem to fortify their role as the main source of information about religion (Lövheim and Bromander 2012, 16–24). The claim that what most people know about religion, they know from the media is often made (Hjarvard 2008; Lundby and Gresaker 2015). Our survey, presented in Chapter 2, supports this claim. TV and the newspapers are rated highest as the context in which people encounter questions related to religion and belief. When it comes to young people, the focus of this essay, we have to take into account another such context, and that is the school.¹ Non-confessional religious education (RE) is mandatory in both Norway and Sweden, and although not a major subject, youth still regularly encounter religion throughout primary and secondary school.

However, school is not just a source of information about religion; it is a site where religion is contested. As schools are primarily regarded as public institu-

¹ This is not reflected in the survey. Most respondents are over 18 years old, and are thus not in school.

tions, the role of religion in school is a controversial topic in both Norway and Sweden, and is often a matter of public debate. RE is also constantly changing to accommodate the growing diversity of contemporary Scandinavian society. On an institutional level, RE can be seen as a social arena where young people engage with religion, and as a site where the meaning of religion, and various representations of religion, are contested and negotiated.

This section of the book explores RE in upper secondary schools, through data from two empirical studies, one in Norway and one in Sweden. The purpose of the present essay is twofold. First, we will describe some aspects of the school systems in Norway and Sweden, and how RE is organized in the respective countries. This chapter will also function as an introduction to the other chapters in this *Upper Secondary School* section of this book. Secondly, we will account for some of the findings from the two studies, in which we examine the use of media within the context of RE. We approach this study with an institutional mediatization perspective. Regarding RE as a site for contestation of religion, we look at how media materials and media representations are used and engaged with in the pedagogical practice of teaching and learning about religion. Mediatization theory states that in modern society, the media are established as an institution in their own right, and other institutions come to depend on the media in their everyday practices and communication (Schrott 2009; Hjarvard 2013). This may alter institutional practices, as dynamics inherent in the operations of the media thus influence the interactions within the said institution. The integration and presence of media may thus come to condition, but not determine the encounters between actors in everyday life (see Chapters 3 and 4).

The research's focus is on the use of media in RE. Here, we employ a broad conception of media that includes media technology, platforms, materials, and discourses.² We examine how representations of religion and topics related to religion, in the form of media discourses and materials produced by and for the mass media, play a role in the lessons observed. We argue that media representations form an integral and consistent part of the practice of RE as a way to relate the content of the subject to contemporary society. This, however, has some ramifications for how religion is engaged with, as various media dynamics come to influence the classroom practice.

² See Chapter 14 for a detailed description.

13.1 The Swedish and Norwegian Context – Religion and School

Religious education is organized in a great variety of ways across Europe (e. g. Kuyk et al. 2007; Davis and Miroshnikova 2012). The national context seems to be one of the most important factors in how each country does RE (Schreiner 2014), and the specific relationship between church and state seems to be particularly influential in RE's organization (Loobuyck and Franken 2014, 169). The historically close ties between state, schools, and church in Norway and Sweden appear to have led to a similar process of transforming RE from denominational teaching in the state religion into a non-denominational school subject (Ferrari 2014, 29). Both countries have organized RE as an *integrative* subject,³ meaning that children with different religious and non-religious backgrounds are taught together about different religions (Alberts 2007). RE is viewed as a regular school subject and is mandatory for all students throughout primary and lower secondary school, as well as for students in most of the upper secondary school programs.⁴ One of the rationales behind this kind of RE is that knowledge about religions is an important competency in multicultural and multi-religious societies. This trend can also be seen in the recommendations from the European Council to its member states regarding the inclusion of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education (Jackson 2014).

The school systems in Norway and Sweden are an important part of the context here. Both countries see education as a key part of their welfare state systems, in which the state should provide citizens with equal opportunities for free education, regardless of gender, geographical, social, or economic background (Alberts 2007, 215). This means that the state plays a very active role in the educational system. The parliament and the government are responsible for education, and providing national curricula, aims, and guidelines for schools, as well as bearing most expenses, even for independent schools.⁵ In Norway, only about 4 percent of students in primary and lower secondary schools and 9 percent of the students in upper secondary schools attend independent schools, while the corresponding

³ As opposed to *separative* RE, where children are divided according to religious background, and taught accordingly (Alberts 2010, 276).

⁴ In Norway, this means that RE is mandatory for all students in the programs that are preparatory for higher education; vocational education does not have RE. In Sweden, RE is a mandatory subject for all upper secondary school programs, including vocational ones.

⁵ In Norway, independent schools have a limit on tuition fees of 15 %, the remaining 85 % being financed by the state. In Sweden, independent schools are completely financed by the state.

numbers in Sweden are higher at 15 percent and 26 percent respectively. These schools are required to provide education equivalent to that of the state schools. The educational systems of both countries are organized as comprehensive schools, in which the first nine years in Sweden and ten years in Norway are mandatory for all citizens, with a legal right after that to three years of upper secondary education. It is not until upper secondary school that the students choose separate programs and are allowed to choose what courses to take (Wiborg 2009). All these aspects of the educational systems of both countries could be said to constitute many of the ‘dynamics’ that condition much of the RE practice – dynamics, we argue, that are fundamentally different from the dynamics of the media. The case studies of this chapter are conducted on RE in upper secondary school and, although similar in many ways, Norway and Sweden differ a bit in their organization of RE at this level.

13.1.1 Norway

RE in Norwegian upper secondary school is mandatory for every student enrolled in programs qualifying for higher education. This subject is called ‘Religion and Ethics’ and is placed in the last year of upper secondary school, meaning that most of the students are about 18 years old. Religion and Ethics consists of four main subject areas: 1) Religion and the criticism of religion, 2) Islam and an elective religion,⁶ 3) Christianity, and 4) Philosophy, ethics and views on life/humanism. The subject matter is thus not very broad in as far as learning about different religions. Christianity is given priority in relation to the amount of time, due to its historical and cultural role in Norway.⁷ Islam is singled out as being especially important. Religion and Ethics is non-confessional and relies on an analytical approach that is based on methods from religious studies (Andreassen 2016, 118).

The subject is defined as being both knowledge-based and value-forming, and respect and tolerance are emphasized. Mutual tolerance across differences in religion and ‘views on life’ is explicitly identified as a ‘necessity for peaceful

⁶ The schools choose one religion in addition to Christianity, Islam, and the humanist life-stance (which in Norway is treated as being equivalent to belonging to a religious tradition).

⁷ The role of Christianity in RE in Norway is much debated, although mainly at the primary and lower secondary level. In 2006, Norway was found by the European Court of Human Rights to be in violation of the European Convention of Human Rights (Protocol 1, Article 2) guaranteeing parents the right to decide on children’s religious upbringing, by favouring Christianity without sufficient opt-out options.

co-existence in a multicultural and multi-religious society' (UDIR 2006, 1). The national curriculum states that religious, philosophical and ethical questions are 'important for each individual, and for society as a whole, both as the basis for who we are, and as a source of conflict' (ibid., 1). So, although the curricular aims of the subject are mainly focused on cognitive knowledge (ibid., 5), such as familiarity with holy texts, doctrines of faith, history, and traditions, the relevance of religion to contemporary Norwegian society is given as one of the main reasons in regard to the purpose of Religion and Ethics.

13.1.2 Sweden

Similarly to the Norwegian case, Swedish RE is a mandatory, non-confessional, integrative subject. The subject, *Religionskunskap*, is called Religion in the official English translation that is published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2011a), and it has four broad themes as its framework. The first is 'Christianity, other religions and worldviews', in which the so-called 'world religions' are taught in terms of historical events and contemporary expressions, both nationally and globally. The second theme is 'views on gods and humanity', which focuses on the huge variety in doctrines and practices, both between and within religions, with a particular focus on gender, socio-economic factors, ethnicity, and sexuality. Third is 'religion and science', which delves into contemporary debates on the relations between the religious and scientific worldviews. Finally, there is 'ethical theories and models', which includes both secular normative ethics and ethical arguments that are based in the various religious traditions.

Just as in the Norwegian case, Sweden's Religion subject is explicitly based in the academic discipline of religious studies, which clearly separates it from its roots as a subject that was meant to teach about the national evangelical Lutheran church. Although the syllabus of the subject does not contain any explicit references to tolerance or multiculturalism, these arguments are clearly present in the national curriculum, which stresses that the school teaches respect and compassion, especially in relation to the internationalization of Swedish society (Skolverket 2011b).

13.2 The Two Cases

13.2.1 The Norwegian Case

The Norwegian part of this project is a case study with fieldwork conducted throughout the school year of 2015–2016.⁸ The fieldwork was carried out in an upper secondary school in the Eastern part of Norway. With a little less than 1,000 students, it is a fairly large school by Norwegian standards. The school offers several programs and in 2015 had about 10 classes of around 30 students each, in all three years. Between 15 percent and 25 percent of the students in each class have a foreign background. Starting in September 2015, six RE teachers were interviewed and their teaching observed in eight different Religion and Ethics classes. Although the use of media materials was the primary research focus of the Norwegian study, the researchers also had individual research questions.⁹ Fifty sessions were observed in total.

13.2.2 The Swedish Case

The Swedish case study was conducted within the broader framework of the *Teaching Religion in Late Modern Sweden* project,¹⁰ in which Broberg is engaged as a PhD student. The project involves about 20 schools, and in order to make a comparison with the Norwegian case as relevant as possible, the school that was most similar to the Norwegian school was selected as the Swedish case study.

The selected school is thus a public upper secondary school on the outskirts of Stockholm. The school has about 2,000 students and an above-average number of them have a foreign background¹¹ (Skolverket 2015). While the Norwegian school supplies the students with laptops,¹² the Swedish school supplies their students with tablets, which were brought to, and to some extent used, in the

8 The field work was conducted by PhD candidate Audun Toft and Professor Liv Ingeborg Lied.

9 Toft's primary focus was the use of media representations of Islam in the classroom. The main body of observational data is thus from lessons about Islam. In total, Toft observed 45 sessions; 34 of these were about Islam. Lied's focus was related to the use of popular media in RE, and between November 2015 and March 2016 she observed five sessions.

10 The Swedish research team consisted of Associate Professor Anders Sjöborg, Lecturer Malin Löfstedt, PhD candidate Maximilian Broberg, and master's student Johan Dynewall, all situated at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University.

11 33% compared to the national average of 25%.

12 See Chapter 14.

majority of the lessons observed. Four Religion teachers and a total of 18 lessons were observed at the school during the school year 2015–2016.

13.2.3 Observations and Interviews

The main body of data was gathered by direct observation, with the researchers present in the classroom, most often sitting in the back row among the students. Data gathering were carried out by taking hand-written field notes, with no audio or video material being recorded. The students were informed about the project before the observation started. Outside the lessons, the researchers also followed the teachers during breaks and to meetings with the RE team. The data thus includes field notes from conversations and observations with RE teachers, and others, gathered in informal settings.¹³ The teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews were conducted later, after observations had started, so as to include questions about specific observations. The interviews were between 45 and 75 minutes in length. As the Norwegian and Swedish interview guides were different, due to their different aims, the Swedish study included email interviews based on the Norwegian interview guides to make for easier comparison.

13.3 Findings Across Cases

Regardless of the national differences, the material collected in both case studies are, to a great extent, comparable, and in several aspects they are strikingly similar. Though comparing cases from different countries has its problems (Bråten 2013), the similarities in media use are worth exploring in more detail.

In both the Norwegian and the Swedish cases we observed that different media consistently formed an integrated part of various classroom practices. Both schools make extensive use of media technology and media platforms. However, the Norwegian students made much more use of their laptops than the Swedish students did of their tablets, which resulted in different media practices. The profound impact that the use of laptops had in the Norwegian case will be discussed further in Chapter 14.

¹³ This aspect of the fieldwork is more prominent in the Norwegian study, but to some extent it is also present in the Swedish study, particularly in the form of informal conversations before and after observations and interviews.

However, media materials and media discourses were used very similarly across the cases. In both of the schools we observed active and extensive media use in the practice of teaching and learning about religion. We will focus on two aspects of this: 1) how media materials are being used as pedagogical artefacts¹⁴, and 2) how events, debates, and discourses in the news media influence the choice of the topics that are addressed and discussed in the RE lessons. Two examples from our observations will illustrate these aspects:

13.3.1 Observation 1 (Norway) – Anne Lise’s Class, 2 November 2015 – Media Materials as Pedagogical Artefacts

Anne Lise¹⁵ lets the students into the classroom. It takes some time for the class to come to order. Anne Lise turns her computer on and says, ‘We are still on Islam. Today we will start with a song. Everyone grab one of these.’ She passes Xeroxed copies of the song’s lyrics to the students. The song is ‘Tusen tegninger’ (A thousand drawings) by the rap duo Karpe Diem.¹⁶ As the students recognize this they cheer, and several of them express how much they like the song. Anne Lise tries to catch everyone’s attention as she starts playing a YouTube clip of the music video. ‘Just put away your PCs,’ she says, ‘Everyone! Put the PCs away.’

Once the clip starts, the students settle down and concentrate on the song. Several of them sing along. As the song fades out, the class is silent and Anne Lise tells everyone to turn the page of lyrics over. ‘There are some questions written on the back. So use the lyrics to underline every reference you find to religion. Discuss the rest of the questions in groups. Spend a couple of minutes before we discuss it together.’

Here, we can see how the RE lesson was structured around a music video. The video is employed as a source with which to show what it is like to be a Muslim with an immigrant background in Norway, and it is transformed into a pedagogical artefact on which further questions and discussions are based. Such

14 By ‘pedagogical artefact’ we here mean tools used for educational purposes to amplify pedagogical activities in the classroom, see Chapter 14.

15 All names are changed to provide informant anonymity.

16 The artists behind the duo Karpe Diem are both born in Norway, with immigrant parents. Magdi is Muslim (his mother is from Norway and his father emigrated from Egypt); Chirac is Hindu and has parents of Indian origin. The song ‘Tusen tegninger’ is based on Magdi’s experiences.

media use in education is nothing new, but the extent to which media materials are brought into, and made part of, the pedagogical practice is striking. This sort of media use is prominent in our observations. Articles and op-eds from newspapers, feature films, documentaries, TV series, talk shows, debates, video clips of stand-up comedy, as well as news broadcasts, both from web papers and from public service broadcasting, are only some of the many examples of media materials observed that are used as pedagogical artefacts in RE lessons.

13.3.2 Observation 2 (Sweden) – Anna’s Class, 25 April 2016 – Media Discourses Set the Agenda

This is the second lesson about Islam and, after a brief discussion about what the students can remember from the previous lesson, the teacher brings up a Power Point about the early history of Islam and starts to lecture about the life of Muhammad. The first 20 minutes of this lesson are spent on this. Anna finishes the lecture and states:

We won’t linger too long on history, but it tells us something about the role of Islam in the world. What is often forgotten when writing history in the Western world is how much of our culture that can be traced to Islam and to this time. Before we move on, if you’ve read the newspapers or watched the news this last week, you’ll have seen that several things related to Islam and The Green Party have happened.¹⁷

A student says, ‘Khan wouldn’t shake hands.’ Anna replies, ‘Exactly, pretty inflated in the media. The Green Party says that men and women should shake hands, and the prime minister says, “You ought to shake hands with both men and women.” My question is this: is this self-evident?’ One student immediately exclaims, ‘This is just the West crying about people not falling into line.’

This was followed by a long debate that took up the remaining 40 minutes of the lesson. The students brought up many different angles: the potential tension between freedom of religion and the rights of women; whether a representative of a political party can be religious; if gendered ways of greeting are necessarily a bad thing, and much more.

Approaching the end of the lesson, Anna says: ‘Could it be that this is blown out of proportion by the media?’ Most of the students agree that perhaps this is

¹⁷ This refers to the so called ‘handshake affair’, when a Swedish politician refrained from shaking hands with a female reporter as a result of his Islamic faith. The incident received extensive media coverage, culminating in the politician’s resignation. See Chapter 4 for further details.

not really that big a question after all, as most politicians shake hands, and the fact that one individual refuses is not at all a big deal.

In this example, a recent event that was heavily covered and debated in the Swedish news media was brought up by the teacher, and it was used as starting point for classroom discussion. The ensuing debate touches upon several issues concerning the role of religion in contemporary society, and a wide range of viewpoints are expressed by the students. Still, the media event remains the main point of reference throughout the lesson, setting the premises of the discussion.

Similar observations can be found in other classes. Events, debates, and discourses covered in the news media are frequently brought into the classroom, both by the teachers and the students. In several instances, these are also made to be the main focus of whole lessons. Some other examples from our observations were the terror attacks in Paris (November 2015), a newspaper debate about apostasy, the conditions for EU immigrants and refugees in Sweden, a newspaper series about sharia in Norway, and concerns about the veiling of women, a topic of recurring media coverage that inspired several different class discussions.

As these examples show, media, in various forms, play an important role in the RE lessons observed. One of the things that struck both teams of researchers as worth noting was the amount of time spent on media materials and on discussing recent events and debates that had been represented through the media. This frequently displaced the topics and content from the textbook and the curriculum. Moreover, these media representations of religion often influenced and conditioned the ways both the teachers and students engaged with topics of religion in the first place. We would like to explore the interplay between media, be it news media, entertainment, or social media, and the practice of teaching religion in more detail.

13.3.3 Showing the Relevance of Religion

When asked why she had decided to devote a 2.5-hour RE session (17 November 2015) to address the Paris terror attacks (13 November 2015) with a basis in a documentary about radicalization,¹⁸ Charlotte said: ‘I realize ... that I take time away from other topics. But what gives the whole subject legitimacy is that this is real. It’s around us.’ Here, she expresses one of the major concerns that are voiced by both the Norwegian and the Swedish teachers: namely, the

¹⁸ *Jihad: A Story of The Others* by Deeyah Khan (2015).

question about what gives RE legitimacy as a school subject in the first place. One of the main arguments in favour of RE is that knowledge about religious and non-religious worldviews is a prerequisite for a well-functioning multicultural and multireligious society.¹⁹ The main reason given for learning about religion is thus instrumental; its importance is to be found in its relevance to contemporary society in Norway and Sweden respectively.

The importance of showing the relevance of religion is made even more urgent by what the teachers perceive to be the students' lack of experience with religion. The majority of the Norwegian and Swedish students are described by the teachers as non-religious, and they struggle to see why religious education concerns them.²⁰ Showing why the content of RE is relevant thus becomes one of the major challenges that the teachers face. It is interesting to see that the teachers, independently of each other, relate relevance directly to media coverage. Consider the following example, from an interview with one of the Norwegian teachers:

Interviewer: Do you use various media material?

Guro: I try to do that. And that is one of the challenges with religious education. It's to show that this is actually relevant and *aktuelt*²¹ for our society today. Not just something that is historical. ... And therefore I think that religious education can have that function, to encounter things they are interested in, and that they see around them and in the media.

The same views are expressed by most of the teachers interviewed. It is through media that the relevance of religion can be shown. Media materials are needed to give access to 'what goes on around us', to 'what is real', to 'the world around us', and similar expressions that were used by the teachers. Not only are the media the primary source of information about what happens in society, but media materials, in the form of products produced by media professionals, are especially well suited for this task. Anna describes the advantages of showing interviews in class: 'I can't just stand there and tell them about everything. ... When you see someone saying it, it becomes a little more real.' The teachers expressed a strong dependence on media materials, ones produced by and for the mass media, when teaching about religion. Reality is primarily seen as being ac-

¹⁹ Explicitly stated in the Norwegian curriculum (UDIR 2006, 1).

²⁰ Several studies confirm that religion seems to be of little importance to a majority of Scandinavian youths (Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Lippe 2008), although there are regional differences.

²¹ The Scandinavian word *aktuelt* is difficult to translate, but is the word mostly used in this context. *Aktuelt* implies that something is at once important, relevant, and current.

cessible through the media, resulting in media materials being viewed, and used, as necessary components of RE. Media materials thus become an integral, and indispensable, part of the pedagogical practice.

13.3.4 Facts vs. Reality

The expressed importance of constantly having to legitimize the relevance of the subject by using media materials points to what seems to be a perceived tension within the subject itself. This is the tension between what is seen to be the intention of RE, and the actual content of the subject, as specified in the learning outcomes of the curriculum. Throughout the interviews, the teachers made sharp distinctions between the content of the subject, ‘the facts’, and the world around us, ‘reality’.²² This distinction is also frequently communicated to the students during lessons, often through phrases like ‘we need to go through the facts before we can talk about the things you hear about’. There is a strong focus on knowledge in the RE curricula in both Norway and Sweden. In both cases, we observed that the curricular aims, centred on knowledge, structured the lessons and were constantly communicated to the students.²³ The facts are also what the students will eventually be evaluated and graded on. The teachers, throughout the interviews, stressed the importance of the facts and the subject-specific knowledge. However, a mention of facts is most often followed by contrasting them with reality, with reference to events or debates that are represented through the various media. This consistent pairing of, or complementary distinction between, facts and reality is worth exploring in more detail. Facts are presented as: 1) necessary, to gain an adequate understanding of reality (and also as the basis for grading the students), but they are also, 2) boring, or at least not seen to be as interesting or relevant in their own right. We can see this in a typical presentation in a lesson about Islam:

We are going to spend all next week talking about Islamism, extremism, and political Islam, and all the things you read and hear about the IS and so on, but first we will have to go through some basics.’ (Beatrice, observation, 19 April 2016)

²² We created these categories based on the wording of the teachers, both in the classrooms and in the interviews. The terms vary, but a distinction between ‘facts/knowledge/subject-specific/school stuff’, on the one hand, and ‘reality/society/surroundings/the world/current events and debates’, on the other, is discernible throughout the material. We use the terms ‘facts’ and ‘reality’ as shorthand for these.

²³ In most of the lessons, the curricular aims for the day are written on the blackboard or are shown on a screen, and they are referred to frequently.

The same notion is voiced in several interviews, for example, by Christine, concerning how she usually structures her lessons on Islam:

I try to avoid the 'facts-trap' i.e. that the whole session is centred on the general traits of the religions. ... When it comes to the lesson series on Islam we usually, after having talked our way through the general stage ('the facts-trap'), work our way towards lived religion. In this way we can delve into the questions that the students often find interesting. (Email interview, 19 May 2016)

Where the facts are necessary, but boring, 'reality' (represented through the media) is: a) interesting, but, b) superficial. The majority of the teachers emphasized that the students really want to talk about current events and debates that are related to contemporary society. The teachers have different views on whether students find RE an interesting subject, but they agree that it is the link to what is going on in society that makes it interesting and relevant.

I think that the fact that the course focuses so much on what happens in the world and that it helps you understand what is going on in society, is one of the reasons why the students are so interested in the subject. Should you let the media control the lessons? Instinctively perhaps it feels like 'no' should be the answer, but, yes, I think so. If the school shouldn't help the students understand the reality they live in, then who should? (Christine, email interview, 19 May 2016)

Again, we see that the teachers report a dependence on media representations in order to adequately teach about religion at all. This is not an unconditional dependence; the teachers will choose which representations to use, and these will be re-mediated in the classroom according to the pedagogical aims of the lessons. Still, the media representations are seen as being necessary to legitimize the relevance of the subject, since the facts alone are not enough. This dependence is mutual, as the media are frequently seen as superficial, and even biased,²⁴ in their presentation of reality. The students need scholarly facts in order to understand the mediated reality. However, as we have seen, the facts are often hurried through, and most time is spent on various media representations.

13.3.5 Media Dynamics in RE

The strong media presence in the RE classroom has consequences for the way religion is being represented and talked about. Integrating media materials

²⁴ This is prominent when it comes to Islam. See Chapter 15 for a discussion on how perceived biased and negative media coverage of Islam impacts on the Norwegian lessons.

and discourses into the pedagogical practice brings various media dynamics into play (see Chapter 3). This does not mean that the media determine the way religion is being represented, but rather that media have been institutionalized in the practice of RE in such a way that the conditions for teaching and learning about religion are altered. Dynamics specific to the media become relevant in the interplay with the dynamics of RE.

One way in which media dynamics influence the RE lessons is in the choice of which topics should be addressed in class. The agenda-setting power of the media is well documented and much researched (McCombs 2014). Through media coverage, the public gains cues as to the salience of particular topics, and several studies attest to the correspondence between news coverage and public opinion (e.g. Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11). This is also relevant to the RE lessons, where we observed a close correlation between media coverage and the topics covered in the lessons. Kari put it like this: ‘To me the media control the lessons in the way that what it says, what I get in my newspaper, which has anything to do with what we are doing, I will use that.’ However, the choice of topics cannot be said to be completely determined by the media. The teachers discern between reliable and non-reliable media sources,²⁵ and make judgements on the relevance and suitability of topics before using them in the lessons. Teachers thus show clear signs of having the ability to ‘access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate’ (Aufderhide 1993, quoted by Hobbs 1998, 16) media content in various forms. This kind of competency has been described as ‘media literacy’ (Hobbs 1998), and it is vital for teachers in their selection of material. Despite this, media coverage still seems to be one of the main criteria when choosing what to address in class. As we have seen, this is primarily because the media give access to reality, but, here, the media take on an ambivalent role for the teachers. The media function simultaneously as *sources* of information about current events and as *arenas* in which events can take place. The lines between these are blurred. The complex duality between media that are seen as reporting on stories because they are important, and stories being important because they are reported in the media, is quite noticeable in the observations. This conflation of reality and media coverage will, in many instances, also run deeper. Beatrice says:

In a way I might prioritize Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. ... Because of what happens globally, it is so easy to connect to the situation in various countries. ... This thing about

²⁵ Most favour the public broadcasting services, as well as the established non-tabloid newspapers, like *Aftenposten* and *Dagens Nyheter*, as well as international news channels like the BBC.

Hinduism and Buddhism, it does not really feel like – it feels quite out of date right now. (Interview, 5 November 2015)

In this example, as in several others, media coverage is equated directly with what is going on in the world. Even though several teachers expressed that they know that the sort of stories being covered in the media depends on specific criteria, the access to the sides of reality that are not being covered in the media is limited,²⁶ and this has an impact on the way religion is being taught. The most obvious example, in both cases, is the way the Eastern religions are seen, and presented, as being less relevant than Islam, and, to some degree, Christianity.

In addition to the impact on *what* is being addressed in the lessons, the use of media materials also influences *how* topics are being represented. When, for instance, a debate about the veiling of women in Islam, staged and moderated by *Aftenposten*, becomes the object of several lessons,²⁷ then *Aftenposten* takes on the simultaneous roles of transmitter of opinions, editor, gatekeeper, and commentator, thus setting the premises for the debate. The media have performative agency, present framings, and employ genre-specific criteria for presentation, according to what sort of media materials are being used (see Chapter 3). Dynamics involved in the production of media materials for use in the mass media, such as the selection of content, framings, formatting, genre, narrative structures, etc., then become part of the constituent conditions of RE. One of the more obvious effects of this situation is that material concerning conflict becomes privileged over other material. Conflict is one of the more well-documented criteria for news-worthiness and coverage (e.g. Ihlen and Allern 2008), and our observations confirm a strong focus on conflict and controversies related to religion. This will be examined in more detail in Chapters 14 and 15.

13.4 Mediatized RE

Looking through the lenses of institutional mediatization theory, it is fair to describe the religious education that was observed as mediatized. By this, we mean that the use of media is not only an integral part of the normal practice of RE, but also that the teachers see media use as a necessary component of the subject. It may well be that this is also the case with other school subjects, but our material

²⁶ The teachers also use field trips and talk about bringing in guest speakers. However, this is time-consuming and impractical. The immediate availability of media representations is an important part of their influence in the classroom.

²⁷ Using Xeroxed copies of op-eds from the newspaper as pedagogical artefacts.

points to several factors that are particular to religion. The place of religion in school is contested and controversial, both in Norway and in Sweden. It is through its relevance to contemporary Scandinavian society that the subject is most often legitimized. The defined learning outcomes of the subject, with strong emphasis on knowledge about doctrines of faiths, traditions, rituals, texts, and history, are not seen as being well suited to addressing the contemporary context without supplements in the form of media representations.

As media materials and discourses become integrated into pedagogical practice, media dynamics become relevant to how teachers and students engage with the representations of religion. Ideally, the media materials and media discourses are supplemented and put into context by the facts and content of the curriculum, and vice versa. However, this demands a certain degree of media literacy on the part of the teacher in order to fulfil the role of RE as a nuanced and relevant site in which young people can learn about, discuss, and engage with religion.

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