

ECREA Temporary Working Group “MEDIA AND RELIGION”

OBJECTIVES:

The aim of this Temporary Working Group is to bring the study of media and religion into productive conversation with media and communication studies carried out in the European context. The goal is twofold. Firstly, to invite media and communication scholars interested in religion to a closer dialogue with each other, and secondly, to deepen the theoretical and empirical knowledge and understanding on “religious issues” as they relate to the media, particularly in the context of Europe.

In order to encourage dynamic and multilayered dialogue between scholars, the Temporary Working Group holds a broad definition of religion. Religion is approached here as “a system of symbols that provides its believers with a coherent understanding or valuation of life, a meaningful, ordered world in which interaction and interdependence are enabled” (Morgan 2008, 5). This type of definition, thus, enables Temporary Working Group to grasp both institutional and established religions as well as non-institutional expressions of spirituality and their mediation.

There is a growing body of scholarly work on the role of the media in the rise of religious movements such as political Islam, Hindu nationalism and Christian fundamentalism, but also on studies that emphasize religion, religious dimensions and spirituality in popular media culture. The steady increase in the study of religion and media since the 1990s has emerged with the proliferation of internet and digitalization of media entangled with globalization, increased mobility of people, and the crisis of the nation-state. All these developments invite deeper analyses on the influences of the internet on religious authority; meaning-making and participation (see e.g. Woodhead et al. 2009; Brugger & Karayanni 2007; Lövheim 2005).

One of the fundamental issues requiring special attention in the European context, concerns the growing presence of religion in the (late) modern, media-driven public sphere(s). The emergence of the secular public sphere and the public decline of religion has been seen as dependent on each other. Scholarship now has to include space for religiously grounded positions in the modern public sphere. Earlier monolithic theories of secularization seem no longer to provide adequate means for approaching and conceptualizing some of the key characteristics of contemporary public sphere (Salvatore 2007; Salvatore & Levine 2005). The debate on post-secularization points to this direction (see e.g. Habermas 2006).

Moreover, also the non-institutional approach to religion; i.e. the role of myths and rituals shaping public sphere, through symbolic communication, media events and ceremonies (cf. Dayan & Katz, 1992; Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005), need to be studied in a scholarly frame that takes seriously religious and spiritual characteristics

played out in contexts such as the media and how they shape citizens' world views. To follow Mihai Coman's and Eric Rothenbuhler's (2005, 10) argumentation:

“Mythical structures and narrative logics will continue to have influence alongside cause-effect analyses. Choices will be based on values and faith as often as on instrumental reasoning. No field of the social sciences can come to terms with the objects of its study without concepts and methods appropriate to that reality”.

The NordForsk network on the *Mediatization of Religion and Culture* has been one of the European forums facilitating media and religion research. In the United Kingdom the large research programme on *Religion and Society* includes a media dimension. Substantial research on religion, media and the public sphere has also been conducted among European social and cultural anthropologists (see e.g. Meyer & Moors 2006; Salvatore 2007).

Much of what people know today about religion is learned and experienced in and via the media (Stolow 2005; Hoover & Lundby 1997; Sumiala-Seppänen, Lundby & Salokangas 2006). However, how that interplay between media and religion is acted out in different European contexts needs further research. This Temporary Working Group aims to fill in this gap by focusing on the following topics:

- To further develop theoretical discussion about the changing relationship between media, religion and the public sphere in different European contexts. What kind of similarities and differences can be found on the dynamics between media and religion in the Northern countries, West, East, Central and Southern Europe? How do Protestant, Catholic, Islamic and Orthodox religious landscapes shape different public spheres?
- To encourage more nuanced empirical research on media and religion(s). Studies on established and institutionalized religions such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism are encouraged in line with studies of different media genres (news, entertainment), popular culture and religion. Moreover, studies on non-institutional religiosity and spirituality in the media are invited; how the media take religious and/or religion-like roles and functions (symbolic, mythical and ritual) in different European landscapes.
- To articulate a more developed understanding of religion as a mediated practice. How does mediation/mediatization shape the specific modes in which religions go public?
- To encourage multilayered analysis on media and religion by inviting other fields of media and communication research (i.e. cultural studies, political communication, media geography, media anthropology) into a productive conversation with media and religion studies.

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