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RELIgIOUS SOCIALIZATION IN A MEDIA AGE

Abstract

Recent studies in the Nordic countries show that among younger generations the media is a more frequent arena than family and church for contacts with religious ideas and values. This situation challenges understandings of religious socialization as a process situated in and controlled by religious institutions as well as continuity of religious values, ideas and identity as the outcome of the process. This article argues for a development of conceptual tools to account for religious socialization as a process shaped by the dynamic between tradition and transformation, knowledge and skills, and religious and other institutions for symbolic communication in society. Drawing on recent discussions of the concepts of religious literacy and media literacy, the article proposes an inclusion of «religious media literacy» as a significant part of a future research agenda for understanding religious socialization in contemporary times.

Keywords: religious socialization, religious literacy, media literacy, digital media, religious media literacy

Introduction

This article focuses on how arenas for religious socialization are changing in contemporary times, and what this means for the way we analyze this process. As pointed out by Furseth and Repstad (2006: 114) in their introduction to the concept of religious socialization there is a premise of continuity and control in socialization theory, meaning that through this process individuals largely adopt ways of thinking and acting that are transmitted and controlled by the expectations of others, and eventually come to comply with these expectations. Empirical studies of socialization have also placed a high value on the role of parents in the process of religious socialization.

The life situation of young people today calls for a rethinking of these premises. Studies of youth and religion in the Nordic countries have shown that, for the majority of young people, contacts with traditional arenas for religious socialization such as families and religious institutions are receding while new arenas such as the media and school are becoming more significant (Lövheim and Bromander 2012; Lundby 2010; Hoeg 2010; Pettersson 2006). As Jim Beckford points out in the foreword to Religion and Youth (2010) this calls for a shift away from a tendency to «confine studies of youth and religion to formal processes of religious socialization» (2010: xxiv) with
particular reference to forms of socialization taking place within religious institutions. Furthermore, these studies show how young people today rather than being passive recipients of religious socialization in formal as well as more informal settings, such as the family, have become active participants who exercise a high degree of «critical autonomy» in decisions about religious beliefs and actions. These changes challenge premises of continuity and control with regard to the roles of participants in the process of religious socialization. In this article I will draw on recent findings from a Swedish study of religion in the life of young people as a foundation from which to discuss how our research agenda for studying religious socialization can be developed to better account for these changes. One of my key arguments in this article will be that a working understanding of religious socialization in contemporary society must be able to incorporate changes in the forms in which values and ideas are transferred between generations, as well as of the content of these values and ideas.

If we look at Wikipedia¹, the online, peer-produced and -reviewed dictionary and probably the text resource most frequently used by our students today, socialization is described as «the lifelong process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs and ideologies, providing an individual with the skills and habits necessary for participating within his or her own society» (Wikipedia 2012; Clausen 1968: 5).

This definition incorporates continuity through the focus on inheritance, but also includes a more outwardly directed, active element of dissemination, which indicates more of a dynamic two way process than a one-way transferring of knowledge and values. That norms and values are shared and communicated between the actors involved in the process is, in my view, a crucial element of religious socialization in contemporary society (Sherkat 2003: 151). Furthermore, norms and values are shared and acquired through ideologies – but also through «skills and habits» about how to use or practice these ideas. Finally, the emphasis in this definition on a «lifelong process» and the function of socialization for participation in society points in the direction of socialization as a process of transformation along with developments in society and culture.

It is important not to forget, whilst standing in the rapid change of present times, that religious socialization has probably always been a dynamic process shaped by social and cultural transformation in wider society. Let me give an example from my own family history. My mother’s father Johan Pettersson, born in 1906, grew up in the north-easter part of Sweden as the son of a blacksmith and a seamstress. After the early death of his father he and his two siblings had to start work in order to help support the family, which reduced their opportunities for schooling. However, my grandfather and his sister and brother continued their education through correspondence classes offered by Hermods, a Swedish institute for correspondence studies founded in 1898, alongside their work in the local sawmill industry. My grandfather earned his undergraduate degree through correspondence courses and, with the help from a scholarship at the Christian cultural center the Sigtuna foundation, continued studies in theology at Uppsala University, eventually becoming both a priest and the headmaster of a folk high school (folkhögskola), headed by the evangelical revivalist movement EFS (Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen) in Mellansel.
My grandfather’s story shows a strong urge for learning shared with several others in his generation. However, as he himself emphasized, it is also shaped by his religious background – the evangelical revival movement EFS was, as were several similar movements founded at the end of the 19th century a place where lay men and women were inspired to read and critically reflect on religious texts, as well as communicate their ideas to others in testimonies, sermons, reflections, psalms and prayers expressed at meetings or in magazines, tracts and books (Gelfgren 2003). The foundation of folk high schools for educating and training religious leaders, schoolteachers and other vocations is part of this mission. Thus, my grandfather’s story illustrates religious socialization as a process of inheriting, but also of participation in the dissemination of values and ideas to future generations, that is located at the intersection of new ideas, forms of communication and religious, educational and cultural institutions emerging in contemporary society.

Arenas for religious socialization in contemporary Sweden

For sociologists of religion it is a well-known fact that the conditions for religious socialization have changed in Northern Europe and Scandinavia during the latter part of the 20th century. Sweden is no exception. The findings of the study «Religion as a resource? Existential issues and values in the lives of young Swedes», which Jonas Bromander, head of the Church of Sweden research department, and I conducted in the fall of 2008 provide the most recent Swedish results with which to illustrate this situation (Lövheim and Bromander 2012). The study consisted of a postal survey of a representative sample of 1316 young men and women between 16–24 years old living in Sweden.

The findings show clearly how the numbers of these young people reached by traditional socialization agents such as family and church is small: 13 percent of the total sample state that they were brought up in a religious home. Seven percent attend activities in religious organizations at least once a month. 21 percent of the respondents self-identified as believers and 12 percent as religious. Finally, 21 percent of the respondents stated that religious tradition had a strong or very strong impact on their view of life (Bromander 2012). Starting from patterns in the respondent’s answers to these questions we constructed three groups where «organized religious» consisted of respondents with a religious upbringing, active participation and a primary self-identification as «believers» (around 9 percent of all respondents). The «individually religious» had a lesser degree of religious upbringing and current activity, and self-identified primarily as «believers» or «seekers» (24 percent). The last and largest group, the «non-religious» (67 percent) had none or a very low degree of religious upbringing and current activity and self-identified primarily as «atheists» (see Lövheim 2012a).

Besides these questions the survey also contained some new questions chosen to probe more implicit aspects of religion in young peoples’ everyday lives. One of these questions was «where have you most recently encountered questions of faith and religion during the last six months?» with the options of family, school or work, friends,
church, television, newspapers, books and the internet. The chart below, based on the total sample of respondents, shows that television, friends and school were the most frequent arenas, while the traditional socialization agents such as family and church were less frequent (Bromander 2012: 69).

![Figure 1: Percentages for contacts with issues of faith and religion at least once during the last six months, all respondents](image)

As pointed out by Anders Sjöborg (2012) in his analysis of these findings, two interesting conclusions can be drawn. First of all, even though the traditional arenas for socialization play a marginal role for introducing religious ideas and values to young people today, the majority (86 percent) do still come into contact with issues of faith and religion in their everyday life – albeit mostly in other ways. Secondly, that the arenas for this contact differ between groups of young people – mostly with regard to religious background and activity. The second chart shows differences between the groups of «organized religious», «individually religious» and «non-religious».

Here, we see that the first group encounters religion through all the alternatives provided more than other groups. This is, however, most pronounced with regard to church, friends, family and the internet. Television, school and newspapers are the arenas that are primarily shared by all groups (Sjöborg 2012: 115–116).
These findings open many intriguing questions to explore further, but for the purposes of my argument here they clearly show how the process of religious socialization is changing in contemporary Sweden. The social institutions that were previously primarily responsible for this process – church and family – are losing ground to media, school, and friends as the prime arenas for communicating religious ideas and values. However, it is important to underline that the family and religious organizations still play a strong role in religious socialization, albeit for a small minority of the young. There are notable differences in contacts with religion in everyday life as well as in habits and values between youth with more or less of this religious socialization in the study.

Approaching the situation

How, then, should we understand the implications of this situation for religious socialization? There is little doubt that this poses significant challenges for researchers of sociology of religion – for example considering the application of our body of knowledge in theories and methods. Arguably, in a Nordic context, we have continued to spend much energy researching the traditional agents of socialization – church and family – but largely left the new socialization arenas like school and media to researchers in sub areas of educational research and media and religion studies. I would like to suggest that what we are seeing is not necessarily the ruin of religious socialization, but rather the emergence of a different form. Rather than lamenting the decline of traditional arenas for transferring knowledge and practices of religion, we need to focus on understanding better and critically analyzing new patterns, practices and expressions of religious socialization, its potentials as well as challenges.
Literacy and religious literacy

If, as the results from the «Religion as a resource?» study show, religious socialization, for the majority of young people, to a larger extent than before takes place in other arenas than religious homes or institutions we need to understand processes of communicating knowledge, values and norms in these arenas. Following the new political and social interest in religion in contemporary society (Toft et al. 2011) a discussion of «religious literacy» has emerged (Dinham and Jones 2010). The centrality of learning the ideas, values and norms of a certain community in the process of socialization shows its connection to the concept of literacy. Furthermore, recent discussions about «religious literacy», primarily in areas of public policy and education, show its close relation to and relevance for understanding and handling changes in religious socialization in our times: what does a situation where transfer of knowledge and values about religion to new generations largely takes place outside of religious institutions mean for the ability to understand, use and critically reflect on religion within one’s own culture as well as in encounters with understandings of religion in other cultures and institutions?

A literary review shows that literacy is a contested concept with several definitions, ranging from the everyday «ability to read and write» to very broad definitions including mastery of all the symbol systems of a particular culture, such as gestures, practice etc. Recent work by Adam Dinham and Stephen Jones (2010), David Carr (2007) and Elaine Graham (2012), identifies several paradigms of religious literacy, which reveal the diffuse character of the concept and the different and sometimes conflicting interests from various disciplinary contexts that inform its use. The first originates in philosophical scholarship, with a clear liberal stance stressing the benefits of exposure to information about a variety of worldviews and of individual choice and equal opportunities. The second is based within confessional education and oriented towards the formation of religious character and identity. A third paradigm originates from political policy, emphasizing the role of religious literacy for «community cohesion» and mutual understanding between faith communities and others in wider society, and finally a «culturalist» or sociocultural understanding of religious literacy that stresses its embedding in a system of particular experiences, practices and social relations.

The working definition of religious literacy proposed by Dinham and Jones (2010: 6) stresses knowledge of religious faith, but also skills and readiness to acknowledge the legitimacy of religious faith in public discourse, and ability to develop an understanding of others’ religion. Building religious literacy today is a challenge, they argue, for reasons that connect to challenges for religious socialization such as increased diversity and disinterest or lack of knowledge due to younger generations’ lack of contact with religious communities.

This definition thus incorporates several aspects of literacy: a descriptive aspect concerning what religious literacy is, by referring to knowledge of religion, but also an aspect that concerns what religious literacy does: or the consequences of using this understanding for certain purposes: here, to acknowledge the legitimacy of religion and to develop an understanding of others religion. This can be seen as a normative
aspect of the definition, meaning that religious literacy should lead to a certain outcome. It is also possible to see it as a hypothesis pointing to one possible outcome of acquiring religious literacy that has to be confirmed by empirical studies in various contexts.

Given the use of religious literacy in applied contexts such as education and political policy work it is important to be aware of the two aspects of religious literacy: the descriptive aspect and normative or hypothetical aspect. This is an important analytical differentiation, but the discussion on the concept of literacy also makes clear that boundaries between the descriptive and the normative is often blurred in applications of literacy as well as several other concepts, including religion, in research.

These aspects are taken up in the discussion of the concept in the tradition of critical and New Literacy Studies (Collins 1995: 80). This discussion start out from a critique of a universalist understanding of literacy as a general, uniform set of techniques with certain implications for individual thinking and social forms, often based in a division between orality and literacy and full and restricted literacy. Based on an analysis of the implications of universalist ideas of literacy in processes of differentiating, forming and governing identities and cultures according to gender, class and ethnicity, an understanding of multiple literacies as historically and culturally situated and variable practices with texts has emerged. Here, literacy is seen as a process of social and individual identity formation acquired under particular conditions, through participation in certain groups and institutions. Gee defines literacy as «mastery (of fluent performance) of a secondary Discourse» (1996: 153), which we in contrast to our primary Discourse, acquired within the family, are recruited to through participation in school, workplaces, religious and political organizations etc.

Despite the problems inherent in the concept, bringing literacy into the discussion of religious socialization in our times is interesting in several ways. Firstly, it brings a focus on individual agency and ability rather than passive reception in the process of acquiring the ideas and values necessary for participating within culture and society. Gee’s understanding of literacy as «coordination» between various discourses is part of this aspect. Secondly, the critique against inherent ideological or normative dimensions can raise awareness about the risk of equating religious values and knowledge with certain forms of text and culture, often the ones read and used within the educated, middleclass, male and middle age culture of established religious institutions, rather than the less well articulated and nuanced forms expressed in today’s media and popular culture (Lynch 2005). Thirdly, the understanding of literacy as shaped by ideology and power relations in a particular context opens up for a discussion of its connection to the wider social and political discourse and structures of power in a society (Carr 2007: 665; Graham 2012: 23; Woodhead 2011).

Media literacy
As the findings of the «Religion as a resource?» study indicates the media emerges as a crucial arena for approaching religious socialization and literacy in our times. I am
not the first to call for a research agenda for religious literacy that takes account of the media. As Elaine Graham (2012) asks: «if the promotion of religious literacy is entering the consciousness of public institutions and service providers, it may be that the media and popular culture are as influential as more formal sectors such as education» (2012: 230).

Taking this challenge seriously implies a theoretical as well as empirical task. In Graham’s (2012) discussion of a research agenda for religious media literacy, she points to an analysis of the role of public service media in the construction of religion and the religious in public discourse, drawing on Stig Hjarvard’s (2008a, 2008b) thesis of the mediatization of religion, which describes how the media increasingly come to mould religious ideas, experiences and interactions in late-modern society as the prime institution for communication of opinions, values and community as well as through its immersion in all forms of social interaction. Furthermore, Graham calls for a focus on religious literacy in the consumption of religious material in factual as well as entertainment media, in line with the «culturalist» turn toward studies of media use in everyday life in the area of media, religion and culture (Hoover 2006). She also raises the important question of increasing differences in religious literacy between small, well informed and mobilized religious minorities and a majority of «disaffiliated non-believers» with «little or no first-hand understanding of religious belief or practice» in the public discourse of religion (Graham 2012: 228).

These are important questions, but in order to pursue them further we need to complement the analytical concepts for studying religious media literacy. As I have argued elsewhere (Lövheim 2011) the narrow conceptualization of religion in Hjarvard’s thesis of the mediatization of religion limits its possibilities to analyze the variety of religious forms and expressions in contemporary society, in particular with regard to how religious actors take an active part in the communication of religion in arenas outside of religious institutions (for an overview of various uses and development of the concept, see Lövheim and Lynch 2011; Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012). Here the concept of «media literacy» becomes an interesting concept to understand what people do with media messages, and for analyzing the consequences of this for religious literacy and religious socialization.

Media literacy is a no less debated concept than literacy, formed in discussions between media studies and educational studies. A commonly used definition, emerging out of the US Media Literacy National Leadership Conference in 1993, is «the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms» (Aufderheide 1993, quoted by Hobbs 1998: 16). The understanding of media in the analysis of media messages in education formulated in this context (Hobbs 1998: 17–18) is a good starting point for sociologists of religion seeking to understand the media as an arena for socialization. Here, media messages are approached as constructed and produced within certain economic, social, political, historical and aesthetic contexts. This means that media representations play an important role in forming understandings of social reality. However, the process of interpreting and making meaning out of media messages should be approached as an interaction between the reader, the text, and cul-
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ture. Finally, it stresses that various media have unique «languages» or characteristics in terms of forms, genres and symbol systems.

These points, simple as they may seem, problematize common understandings of media within religious studies and by religious practitioners as either neutral channels for the transmission of religious ideas and values, or as powerful agents that - without much differentiation between forms or genres - ruin authentic religious experience and community (Hoover and Lundby 1997; Stout 2002; Davie 2000).

The four components of media literacy – access, analysis, evaluation and communication – emphasize literacy as a dynamic learning process in the interplay between knowledge, analysis and application of skills. Following Sonia Livingstone (2004: 5–7) access refers to an understanding of conditions for provision of media technology as well as content but also – drawing on the findings of audience studies - how the social context of media usage forms engagement and learning from media messages. Analysis concerns skills to interpret representation, or the ways in which various media through framing, genres and aesthetics etc present a certain version of reality. If this dimension concerns knowledge and awareness about internal media routines and criteria, the third component of evaluation points to the need to see media messages in relation to the broader social, cultural, economic, political and historical context in which they are produced – such as juridical regulations, political policy and market pressures. Finally, communication or content-creation refers to pedagogic but also ideological arguments of furthering self-expression and cultural participation through the use of media among «ordinary people» as well as media professionals.

New media literacy – potentials and perils

The last two decades has made it impossible to talk about media literacy without taking into account the increasing involvement of digital media in personal as well as public dimensions of our daily lives. In studies of media literacy, the challenge of new information and communication technologies to earlier understandings of media literacy has been an issue of considerable discussion. At the heart of these discussions is the question «what is new?». Most researchers agree on what is technologically new with digital media, such as hypertextuality, the convergence of textual, audio and visual forms, and the immediacy and interactivity of communication (Liewrow and Livingstone 2006). The debates rather concern the age-old question for media studies about if new communication technology, devices, forms and genres also bring about new forms of interaction, relations, identities and knowledge production (Livingstone 2004: 9).

There is an apparent risk of technological determinism in the most enthusiastic and radical accounts of how the characteristics of new, digital media affect media literacy. Going back to the dimensions of access, analysis, evaluation and communication, most observers agree that digital media means enhanced access to information for individual users as well as new possibilities to participate in communication through content creation. These characteristics also challenge the more linear, hierarchical character of
print and audiovisual media production and the rules, regulations and standards of quality developed around them (Livingstone 2004: 6–7; Bruns 2006).

Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2007: 7) argue that new media literacies are new primarily in terms of «ethos» or «mindset», meaning that they mobilize different kinds of priorities and sensibilities than previous forms of literacy. The «digital insiders», for whom constant connection to the internet is as much an arena for social interaction, identity performance, reflection and relaxation as the physical world, develop a new «cyberspatial-post-industrial» mindset with a different understanding of the world, value, production, identity, authority, space and social relations than among previous generations. The ethos of new media literacy is characterized by «active collaboration and participation, leveraging collective intelligence via practices like eliciting user annotations, distributing and willfully sharing expertise, decentering authorship, mobilizing information for relatedness, hybridization…» (2007: 20).

Such descriptions of new media literacy emphasize the production of ideas and values through participation, collaboration, sharing and relating. Authority and expertise is distributed among many rather than attached to a certain position or institution, and quality and relevance assured through constant, interactive peer-review rather than controlled though certain institutions or fixed, formal procedures and regulations.

A prime example of this process is the online dictionary Wikipedia, which I used to find a working definition of socialization in the introduction of this article, or the collective writing of fan-fiction in which everyone interested can participate in a collective process of producing, disseminating and assessing knowledge by adding and correcting information. Another example is the collective building and quality assessment of knowledge that takes place in social network and video-sharing sites, such as Facebook and YouTube. Here, access to and evaluation of knowledge is collectively practiced through «tagging», «liking», «sharing» and other forms of user annotations that categorizes and manages information on the web. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) argue that trust is the key operating principle in this development and that it should not be seen as relativistic. The point is not that «anyone’s opinion is as good as anyone else» but that «anyone’s opinion may stand until it is overwritten» by someone with a better argument (2007: 18).

These descriptions are seductive in how they conjure an image of a democratic, user generated and shaped body of knowledge open to everyone regardless of social position. However, it is important, keeping in mind the critique of earlier «new literacy studies» referred to above, to approach these descriptions of new media literacies as normative and value laden too – they are, for example, increasingly used as commercial buzz words for new applications and devices, and the practices of tagging, liking etc also generates information that become used by advertisers (Miller 2008). Thus, it is more fruitful to think about these characteristics along the lines of hypotheses, which – as discussed above - present potentials as well as restrictions for individual and collective action, but that needs to be subject to empirical studies.

As pointed out by Sonia Livingstone (2004) in her discussion of the implications of new information and communication technology, much can be learnt from the skills-based approach inherent in the common definition of media literacy, expressed in the
components of access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation, but it is not sufficient for understanding these new forms of literacy. The challenges Livingstone identifies concern primarily the components of analysis and evaluation. New genres developing in digital culture challenge previous analytic repertoires for decoding media messages, such as authorial voice, genre, and narrative structure. The fluid and dispersed character of knowledge production and assessment in digital media makes the process of evaluation more complicated, in terms of criteria for quality as well as identifying the broader social, cultural, economic, political and historical context in which media content is produced. These challenges highlight the risks of a skill-based definition of literacy when approaching new, digital media environments. As argued by Livingstone the focus on new possibilities for individual access and content-creation may hide how digital technology not only enables but also structures the representation of reality and of knowledge. Furthermore, a skills-based approach tends to prioritize the abilities of the individual over the social context in which also these new literacies are embedded. Lankshear and Knobel’s (2007: 4) discussion of the potentials of new media literacies rests, for example, on a definition of literacy with a strong focus on participation and coordination. But who is participating in these processes, and in what ways? Studies throughout the short history of research about social interaction and knowledge production online indicate that in many cases a small minority of all users, members etc of these sites take an active part in the the collective development of knowledge, norms and values. Furthermore, differences between for example young men and women’s uses of digital technology point to the continued significance of users’ social position and cultural capital in the physical world (Mazzarella 2005). Livingstone (2004: 11) also points to how the talk about empowering individual users through new media technology have a backside of moving responsibility for media content and use from governments to the market or to individual self-governance. Thus, these challenges for media literacy are the most crucial to a democratic agenda where individuals become not just consumers of media but also participating and critical citizens.

New media literacy and religious socialization

What, then, do the characteristics of new media literacy and the potentials and challenges they imply mean for the future of religious socialization? Digital media and their implications for religious life has been a growing research area since 1995 (Campbell forthcoming). While the first wave of studies largely focused on speculations about how the promises (and perils) of new computer technology and cyberspace culture would radically change religious experience, identity and community, later empirical studies have come to conclude that online religious identities and practice is closely intertwined with offline conditions and relations (Campbell and Lövheim 2011).

When discussing the significance of the internet for religious socialization it is, therefore, important to keep in mind what was shown in the findings from the «Religion as a resource?» study (Lövheim and Bromander 2012) above: the respondents of
this study do not rank the internet as their prime arena for contacts with faith and religion in everyday life. Television, rather, with its character of «push» medium for information and entertainment, emerge as the main arena. A study conducted in 2008 among Swedish users of the then most popular social network site Lunarstorm showed clearly that the majority did not use the internet often for religious purposes, and that when they did it was mainly for school work rather than personal interest or discussion. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of those turning to the internet for religious purposes where also already engaged in religious organizations (Lövheim 2008; Hoover et al. 2004).

Thus, even though digital media content, mostly in the forms communicated through social network sites such as Facebook, video-, photo-, and textsharing sites such as YouTube, personal blogs and twitter, and games, is becoming more significant arenas where younger generations (and increasingly their parents and grandparents) get information as well as feedback, comments and evaluations about most things in everyday life – including religion, the collected finding from studies so far does not support the thesis that digital technology and culture radically change religion, but rather reflect and enhance more general trends of transformations of religion in present times. As pointed out by Heidi Campbell (2012) key traits of how religion functions online such as networked community, storied or narrative identities, shifting positions of authority, convergent practice, and multiple, intersecting sites of social interaction exemplifies several key social and cultural changes at work in religion more generally. Against this background it seems relevant to call for a shift of focus in studies of religion and the internet, from how new digital technology may change religion to how individuals and groups make use of digital technology to «access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate» religious ideas, values and practices in their everyday life – which is precisely the topic of media literacy.

One example of how new media literacy connect with religious socialization is the use of «Digital Storytelling» within religious communities. The tradition of gathering individuals in story circles to produce their own short stories through digital media technology was started in 1993 by Joe Lambert (2006). In a Nordic context Birgit Hertz Kaare and Knut Lundbye (2008) have studied the use of digital storytelling in confirmation classes in Norway. In the US, Lynn Schofield Clark (Clark and Dierberg forthcoming) and Mary Hess (2011) have used this technique to encourage young people’s articulation of and reflection on their own and other’s faith, and studied the production of digital stories as collective arenas for the construction of religious values and identities. Looking at the experiences of using new media technology for faith formation among young people described in these studies through the lens of media literacy bring out some interesting points:

With regard to access and content creation, the use of digital technology can enable young people to take a more active part in the process of communicating religious ideas and values in religious communities. In terms of religious literacy, this might enhance knowledge about one’s own religious tradition. The findings from Clark and Hess also suggest that such experiences have the potential of enhancing dialog across religious affiliations or faith borders.
One further aspect is how the dissemination of personal faith stories through digital technology can contribute to a broader variety of articulations of religious identities, such as the stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been marginalized in religious communities throughout history. As Hess (forthcoming) argues in relation to young women’s situation, digital stories can thus become ways of finding one’s voice within a tradition, but also to become an active agent in transforming this tradition.

Digital storytelling begins with expressing faith as a personal story, but continues into a process of sharing it in a communal setting – first in the story circle of other participants, and then to known and unknown audiences online. This process can also involve aspects of analysis and evaluation that actualizes the connection of the personal story to a wider social, cultural, political and historical context. In terms of religious socialization, this addresses the question of continuity of values and ideas, and whether the practicing of new media literacy can also include the forming of community. Kaare and Lundby (2008: 117) argue that the experience of digital storytelling they studied connected the young participants to the collective identity and larger story shared in the congregation, which points in this direction. Heidi Campbell (2012) in her research of religious communities online emphasizes, first of all, that these often serve as «supplement, not substitute» for offline involvement. Using the example of cyberchurches, she argues in line with the findings of digital storytelling, that these can serve a «place of socialization between public and private forums» to build and sustain personal connections with others online as well as staying integrated within the larger religious community (2012: 70).

The importance of treating these implications of new media literacy applied to religious socialization as potentials or hypotheses rather than as given characteristics of this phenomenon becomes clear when looking at young people’s engagement with religious ideas and values in online arenas outside of religious communities. Social network sites and blogs provide such new arenas in which people of various backgrounds participate through sharing and collaboratively reflecting on, criticizing, and developing religious ideas and values. In these encounters it is obvious how the conditions of interaction through digital technology – primarily the combination of anonymity, temporality and diversity in knowledge, experiences and motifs among participants - can contribute to public performance of intolerance and hatred as well as expressions of tolerance and humanity (Wesch 2008). The tendency of polarization and stereotypes was obvious in my own early studies of young people’s discussions of religion in web communities (Lövheim 2007), but is also evident to anyone following a debate on Islam in Western society in blogs or comments to an online published article. This paradoxical nature of interaction through digital media highlights the vulnerability of the collaborative process of communicating knowledge and values in digital arenas. As pointed out above, the creative, generous and communal character of this process as described by Lankshear and Knobel (2007: 20) requires certain conditions, such as active participation and the development of a common discourse in order to ensure the key dimension of trust.
In case study of young female bloggers writing about Islam (Lövheim 2012b) I have suggested that these new arenas can be seen as «ethical spaces»; a new form of public arenas for collaborative reflection on values, norms and identities generated by the blurring of public and private spheres and issues in contemporary media culture. Even though the issues taken up in these blogs are often personal, they still constitute public spaces. First, they are collaborative in that they are formed in interactions between bloggers and readers. Secondly, they often involve the voicing of issues of common concerns through references to wider social norms and cultural ideals. Thirdly, they are performative in that the reflections and interactions that take place in them thus contribute to expand, differentiate and negotiate values of what is ‘good’, ‘right’ and ‘true’ in wider society.

These examples relates to the challenge to religious literacy described by Graham (2012: 228) of encounters between people with very different experiences of religion in the public discourse. These examples also show that we clearly need more empirical work on when and how the characteristics of new media literacy can fulfill the hypothesis about religious literacy as the ability to not only understand one’s own religious culture, but also to recognize the legitimacy of other religious and secular world-views.

Conclusions

Recent studies in the Nordic countries indicate that among younger generations, the media is a more frequent arena than family and church for encounters with religious ideas and values. In the beginning I addressed the concern about how to, as scholars, approach the implications of this situation for understanding religious socialization in our times. My purpose with this article has been to point out how this situation calls for an understanding of religious socialization that addresses the dynamic between inheritance or tradition and transformation, between knowledge and skills, and between religious and other institutions for symbolic communication in society.

In order to reach such an understanding, I have argued for an inclusion of «religious media literacy» in our research agenda for approaching these issues. Religious literacy as a concept incorporate a descriptive part concerning knowledge about religion, but also hypotheses about the outcome of this knowledge such as ability to communicate one’s own religious values, to critically reflect on religion and to recognize the legitimacy of others (Dinham and Jones 2010). These abilities should be seen as hypotheses that must be subject to further empirical enquiry, but they underline that the acquisition of knowledge about the ideas, values and norms of religion in todays society is a process taking place in and shaped by several contexts where actors with different pre-requisites, premises and purposes interact. Drawing on the components of the concept media literacy, religious media literacy can be understood as having knowledge about the process through which religion is communicated through various media forms in contemporary society and to develop an ability to analyze and evaluate various outcomes and implications of this process. For researchers this means to develop concepts and theories to understand the mediation of religious content through a variety of
media forms, as well as mediatization as the long term implications of how the logics of these forms may shape both content about and interaction around religion. On an empirical level the challenge is to analyze how people in various ways use the media and interpret media messages in their encounters with religion, and to critically evaluate the outcome of these processes by relating them to previous research and theories about the transformations as well as continuities of religion in the contemporary world.

This approach becomes even more momentous with the current digital media saturation in daily life. New media technology and new media literacy with its characteristics of transformation, fluidity, access and active participation accentuates religious socialization as a dynamic, evolving process, involving several participants and where the ideas, values and practices that are communicated are shaped and developed by these interactions. These characteristics present a challenge for models of socialization that place a strong emphasize on the continuity of religious ideas and values between older to younger generations, and the roles of authorities based in tradition or formal position in relation to new or younger participants. The fluid and temporal character of the ideas and values can also challenge ideas of the outcome of socialization as recruitment into a community of fellow believers.

However, as pointed out in the beginning, religious socialization has always been characterized by an intrinsic dynamic between tradition and transformation – today as in the end of the 19th century with the development of new arenas for reading and reflecting on religious texts for lay people outside of established religious, state and educational institutions by the religious revival movements. In our times, such interactions and arenas have started to take place in and through the media, and the variety and diversity they express is in accordance with the interest in a wider range of «lived» or «vernacular» as well as official models of religion in contemporary research (Graham 2012: 234; Ammerman 2007). As argued by Campbell (2012: 71), online religious interactions shows that «rather than living in a single static religious community, people in contemporary society live in religious networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized». In this situation, we need to be open to as well as critically examine a variety of religious literacies and forms of religious socialization. In opening up these questions, religious media literacy as a concept can be a valuable contribution to our analytical tool kit to understand the characteristics and implications of religious socialization for the formation of individual and collective forms of religion in our times.

Notes

1 Even though Wikipedia is not usually considered a correct source of references in academic publications my reason for using it here is to illustrate the emergence of new arenas for disseminating religious knowledge discussed later on in the article. The reference used by the author of the article on Wikipedia is Clausen (1968).

2 For a more detailed account of the collection and analysis of data in this study see Bromander 2012.
References


