

Mia Lövheim

## **(Re)Making a Difference: Religion, Mediatisation and Gender**

2015

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19421>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Lövheim, Mia: (Re)Making a Difference: Religion, Mediatisation and Gender. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Thinking Methods in Media and Religion, Jg. 1 (2015), Nr. 1, S. 45–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19421>.

### **Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:**

[https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs\\_jrfm/article/view/9](https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/9)

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# (Re)Making a Difference

## Religion, Mediatisation and Gender

### ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses how mediatisation as a theory can be used to analyse two commercial videos, one promoting the organisation Catholics Come Home and the other Coca Cola. A core question in the current debate on mediatisation and religion concerns if and how mediatisation changes not only the social forms of communication about religion but also the meaning of religion in society. The issue in focus for the analysis is whether these videos mirror attributes and roles traditionally associated with men and women within religious institutions or offer an alternative to these. By using gender as a lens, we can see that mediatisation challenges religious institutions to adapt their narratives and symbols to commercial media culture, but that also within this new setting some traditional female gender norms seem to remain or even become reinforced.

### KEYWORDS

mediatisation, gender, commercial videos, religious media, banal religion, hybrid event

### BIOGRAPHY

Mia Lövheim is professor of Sociology of Religion at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research has focused on religious and gender identity among youth, particularly in online discussion groups and blogs, and on religion in the lives of youth. More recently she has studied representations of religion in the Swedish daily press, within the projects *The Role of Religion in the Public Sphere: A Comparative Study of the Five Nordic Countries* (NOREL), *The Resurgence of Religion?! A Study of Religion and Modernity in Sweden with the Daily Press as Case* and the comparative Scandinavian project *Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments* (CoMRel). She is a steering group member of the Linneaus Center of Excellence and research programme *The Impact of Religion: Challenges to Society, Law and Democracy at Uppsala University*. She has been the coordinator of the *Nordic Network for Media and Religion* and is currently Vice-President of the *International Society for Media, Religion and Culture* (ISMRC). Her recent publications include *Mediatization and Religion. Nordic Perspectives* (edited with S. Hjarvard), 2012 and *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*, editor, 2013.

We live in a media-saturated world, and the communication of religion is no exception to this experience. Mediated images and texts have become part of the very fabric with which we construct a sense of meaning and of our place in the world. Current research among Swedish youth<sup>1</sup> shows that the media, primarily television, is the main arena where religion is encountered in everyday life. What this shift in places and forms of experiencing religion means for the role that religion might play in the lives of individuals as well as in society at large is one of the most demanding questions in current research in studies of religion and society.

Video films produced and screened in order to present a particular product have for several decades been a common form of visual communication in contemporary society and culture. However, the use of this genre to communicate religious messages is still unusual enough to trigger curiosity and perhaps criticism. Does religion, with its connotations of tradition and transcendent beings and values, really go together with commercial messages and modern media technology? And what happens to the message and values of religion when it takes the form of a short, visual video-film screened in a setting outside the religious community?

## MEDIATISATION AND RELIGION

The questions raised above lie at the heart of the theory and debate about the mediation of religion, which during the latest decade has become a strong current in the international research field of media, religion and culture.<sup>2</sup> A basic definition of mediation is as the process by which mediation, conceived as the performance of social and cultural activities through technical media, increasingly has come to saturate everyday life and thus become “part of the very fabric” of society and culture.<sup>3</sup> I will in the following present three approaches to mediation and religion and reflect on how they can be used to analyse the commercial videos that are the topic of this special issue. A core question in the current debate on mediation and religion is whether and how mediation changes not only the social forms for communication about religion but also the meaning of religion in society. In this article, I will address this question via the topic of gender. Previous studies of religion in film and television have shown that gender is an important dimension for analysing how this kind of mediation might challenge traditional views of the roles of men and women within religion by introducing new topics and questions.<sup>4</sup>

Stig Hjarvard, professor at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication at the University of Copenhagen, initiated the use of mediation theory for

1 Lövheim 2010.

2 Lövheim 2014.

3 Hepp/Hjarvard/Lundby 2010.

4 Lövheim 2013.

the study of religion.<sup>5</sup> Following the characterisation of various approaches to media-tisation, Hjarvard's approach can be characterised as primarily "institutional".<sup>6</sup> This means it focuses on the implications of the increasing independence of media as an institution in society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with regard to not only other institutions, such as the political, legal and economic systems, but also the increasing integration of the media's logic or ways of working into all other forms of social interaction. Hjarvard refers to media's logic as "the institutional, aesthetic and technological *modus operandi* of the media" and discusses how this affects patterns of distribution of symbolic resources as well as enabling and structuring human communication.<sup>7</sup> Religion, like the media, is approached as a social institution, characterised by belief in a supernatural agency and governed by a particular set of formal and informal rules, and serving certain social functions in society.

Hjarvard argues that mediatisation over time changes religion in three primary ways:

- Media become the primary source of information about religious and spiritual issues in society.
- Media transform religious content by moulding it according to genres of journalism, entertainment and fiction.
- Media become the main social and cultural environments for moral and spiritual guidance and sense of community.

The consequence is that mediatisation undermines the authority of religious institutions and contributes to individualised forms of religion. Religion does not disappear from society, but the social forms of religion that thrive in late-modern society are primarily individualised, bricolage-like forms that are dependent on other institutions, such as public media organisations or commercial companies, for maintaining their service and legitimacy.

Hjarvard has presented three varieties of mediatised religion, which differ with regard to the control exercised by religious actors over the form of media, and thus the degree to which the general tendencies of mediatisation affect religion.<sup>8</sup>

- *Religious media*: refers to media organisations and practices primarily controlled and performed by religious actors, such as Christian dailies, Islamic satellite television or the Web portal <http://www.catholicscomehome.org/>.
- *Journalism on religion*: refers to how primarily news media bring religion into the political public sphere. In this genre, religious symbols and actors are mainly used as sources and have to accommodate to criteria such as news value.

5 Hjarvard 2011.

6 Couldry/Hepp 2013.

7 Hjarvard 2011, 123.

8 Hjarvard 2012.

- *Banal religion*: this form of mediatised religion primarily refers to how entertainment media make religion visible in the cultural public sphere. Hjarvard defines banal religion as texts and practices of institutionalised religion merged with elements from folk religion and popular conceptions, emotions, and practices referring to a supernatural or spiritual dimension of life.

Hjarvard's mediatisation approach has been criticised for not sufficiently taking into account the cultural and national context in which the various forms of mediatised religion appear and for accentuating the difference between religion and media as social and cultural institutions too strongly.<sup>9</sup> As argued by Meyer,<sup>10</sup> new forms of mediatisation change religious values and forms, but these changes must be studied as an outcome of the interplay between newly introduced and previous forms of communication – such as teachings, practices and social relationships – in a particular religious context as well as a particular media form. Furthermore, religion does not necessarily lose its significance in society and for individuals by becoming mediatised, and religious actors might make use of the media's affordances to communicate their message in contemporary society. One conclusion from these debates is that the institutional perspective on mediatisation that Hjarvard presents seems most valid for studies of the category “journalism on religion,” and mostly so in highly modernised and secularised countries with a previously dominant Christian church, as in Northern or Western Europe. However, for studies of “banal religion” or “religious media”, the theory is less useful. I wish to present two approaches to mediatisation from this debate that are more relevant to the media cases that are the topic of this issue.

The German media scholar Andreas Hepp's theory of “cultures of mediatization” is an example of a “social-constructivist” approach to the study of mediatisation.<sup>11</sup> Cultures of mediatisation are those “whose primary meaning resources are mediated through technical communication media, and which are ‘moulded’ by these processes in specifically different ways”.<sup>12</sup> Religion, as such a culture, becomes a form of “deterritorialized communitization”, characterised by “a mediatized construction of tradition”.<sup>13</sup> The primary sources for religious beliefs and belonging are mediated through technical communication media, which implies a certain “pressure” on communication and thus also on the potential for action. How particular technical communication media shape communication and human agency is, however, the outcome of relationships between various actors within a specific context.

Hepp identifies the popular-religious spiritual sphere and fundamentalist movements as forms of mediatised religion in that they to a high degree articulate reli-

9 Lövheim/Lynch 2011.

10 Meyer 2013.

11 Couldry/Hepp 2013.

12 Hepp 2013, 70.

13 Hepp 2013, 120.

gious beliefs and belonging within the framework of a mediatised common culture. His empirical analysis (with Victoria Krönert) of the Catholic World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne<sup>14</sup> shows how mediatisation creates new conditions even for established religious institutions like the Catholic Church. The World Youth Day is described as a “hybrid event” in which elements of locally based traditional religion blend with aspects of “popular media events” shaped by consumer culture. Mediatisation is thus conceived of as the interplay between aspects of religious tradition and of contemporary media culture in the production, representation and appropriation of the event, involving various social actors – Catholic Church officials, media companies and individual participants.

The American media scholar Lynn Schofield Clark has applied and adjusted Hjarvard’s theory of the mediatisation of religion in an analysis of the circulation and reception of a wedding video uploaded on YouTube.<sup>15</sup> Here, she focuses on how digital and mobile media are contributing to social change by enabling new forms of participation, remediation and bricolage of, for example, religious symbols and rituals. She suggests a definition of mediatization as “...the process by which collective uses of communication media extend the development of independent media industries and their circulation of narratives, contribute to new forms of action and interaction in the social world and give shape to how we think of humanity and our place in the world”.<sup>16</sup> A further application of mediatisation theory to the study of film is Line Nybro Petersen’s<sup>17</sup> analysis of how Danish female fans use *THE TWILIGHT SAGA* (2008, 2009, 2010) as a new space for negotiating religious and gender conventions. In line with Schofield Clark’s definition, she argues that mediatisation means a new possibility for audiences to become active participants in media narratives, but also offers a space in which ordinary life experiences can become re-constructed by being connected to spiritual and supernatural themes charged with strong emotional feelings.

These approaches present an understanding of mediatisation as the interplay between new forms of media technology and genres, the institutional and cultural context of religious symbols and practices that are mediated, and the position and intentions of individual actors. Thus, they allow for an understanding of mediatisation of religion as a process in which technical communication media *augments* certain processes of religious change – in particular a re-construction of tradition and a personalisation of religiosity.

14 Hepp/Krönert 2010.

15 Clark 2011.

16 Clark 2011, 170.

17 Peterson 2013.

## MEDIATISED RELIGION AND GENDER

In the following, I will provide a brief analysis of two examples of commercial videos that draw on religious symbols and settings. I will use a basic form of narrative analysis<sup>18</sup> and discuss how the events, conventions and characters depicted in the videos can be analysed starting from the approach to mediatisation outlined above. My particular focus in the analysis of the videos will be on issues of gender. If mediatisation can be seen as a process enhancing changes in not only social interaction but also the meaning of, for example, religious narratives and symbols occurring in society and culture, then my question is in what way these videos mirror attributes and roles traditionally associated with men and women within religious institutions or offer an alternative to these. I understand a feminist media analysis<sup>19</sup> to be concerned, first, with problematising stereotypical views of gender in media texts and cultures, secondly, with highlighting and critically analysing social, cultural and religious structures that assign women and men different positions, value, and agency and, finally, with looking for signs of alternative representations and empowerment in the representations and practices studied. It is, however, important to note that in this analysis of commercial videos we are dealing with media texts but not with their reception. Thus, my analysis will concern the level of representations of religion and gender in the videos and possible changes or ambiguities in these that can be attributed to the process of mediatisation.

### (RE)MAKING A DIFFERENCE: THE VIDEOS

Of the three commercial videos selected for this journal issue, I will focus on the video presenting the organisation Catholics Come Home<sup>20</sup> and on the advertisement for Coca Cola.<sup>21</sup> The first of these videos, CATHOLICS COME HOME, is a presentation of Catholics across the world practising their religion, or conducting various forms of outreach work as doctors, teachers, volunteer workers and scientists, or living a happy, nuclear family life. Images and the voice-over in conjunction present the Catholic Church as connected to tradition, family values, and as a safe haven in an unruly world. The second video on Coca Cola features a short scene where a young man is getting dressed on a sunny beach while being watched by a young woman walking by and sipping a can of Coca Cola Light. The videos are further described in the introduction to this special issue.

Using Hjarvard's categorisation of various forms of mediatised religion discussed above, the video promoting the Catholic organisation can be categorised as an ex-

18 Hodkinson 2013, 70.

19 Gill 2007.

20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IX7YXj7MltE> [accessed 07 June 2015].

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6mygZNXUL8> [accessed 07 June 2015].

ample of “religious media” in that it is produced by a religious institution that uses the language and form of short, commercial videos to articulate its message in a mediated society. The video promoting Coca Cola can be seen as an example of the category of “banal religion” in mixing elements from established religious traditions, such as the priest’s collar and the sign of the cross, with popular religious elements and a tacit understanding of what is “religious” – such as the allusion to sexual moral teachings within Catholicism.

A narrative analysis focuses on the conventions and characters that are used to construct a story within media texts such as films, advertisements and documentaries. A further important element is the order in which events are presented. A standard plot structure in narratives consists of a state of equilibrium that is disrupted in some way and eventually reinstated in a slightly different form.<sup>22</sup> A first thing that characterises both of the videos is how they aim at *making a difference*. Both of them use religion to make an effect of presenting something different – meaning unexpected – that is happening, which is then connected to the “product”: Coca Cola or the Catholic Church. In the Coca Cola video, religious symbols such as the sign of the cross and representatives of religious authorities such as the priest are used to evoke connotations of something set apart from and different from the pleasures and practices of the ordinary world. We can see this idea of religion, or rather a religious approach to the world, as something different played out in how the videos portray the “unexpected” behaviour of the man in the Coca Cola commercial, as will be discussed below. Difference is also a strong theme in the video promoting the Catholic Church, but here the Church is presented as offering something different in the sense of better or other than what the voice-over depicts as the “unruly” secular world. A second aspect in narrative analysis concerns the range of character types the story uses. Both the video promoting the organisation Catholics Come Home and the Coca Cola commercial involve various gendered characters.

A strong feature in the CATHOLICS COME HOME commercial are the themes of inclusion and equality. The video uses words and images that express and emphasise the Catholic Church as “one family”. The voice over declares: “we are young and old... men and women, sinners and saints...” while images of people of various age, ethnicity, nationality and gender are displayed on the screen. However, it is also very clear that this pluralist and inclusive family is represented by traditional gender roles and values. Women are depicted as teachers and mothers, and men as scientists and doctors. It is also obvious in the images that men represent what the voice over refers to as the “unbroken line of shepherds guiding the Church with love and truth”. The video reinforces the traditional Catholic gender roles, particularly with visual elements, presenting the Catholic Church as a “safe haven” and women’s role as con-

22 Todorov 1987.



nected to “marriage and family” as core elements of the “consistent” and “true” values the Church offers in an “unruly” world.

The Coca Cola commercial’s opening scene of an attractive man getting dressed after a swim is presumably shot through the gaze of the young woman encountering this sight while walking on a sunny beach. In this, the video reverses the conventional “male gaze” in films that subjects women to a heterosexual male’s desire and control.<sup>23</sup> This is accomplished by the camera’s focus on the woman’s sexual desire, represented by her yearning eyes, her movements including the eager consumption of the drink, and the inciting music. The unexpected twist at the end of the commercial takes place when the attractive man on the beach turns out to be a priest, as signalled by his white priest’s collar. The man/priest approaches the girl, but instead of responding to the attraction signalled by her with the expected kiss, he offers her a blessing by making the sign of the cross on her forehead. As he walks away, the girl is shown left with the can of Coca Cola and an expression of confusion. This disruption or twist in the narrative is constructed through a combination of unconventional and conventional themes, where the commercial plays not only with heterosexual gender conventions – the attraction between men and women – but also with the convention or tacit understanding of Christian people as conservative and restrained in terms of sexual morals.

## MEDIATISATION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE: (RE)MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

According to Hjarvard’s theory of the mediatisation of religion, instances of “banal religion”, such as commercial videos, challenge the power of religious institutions and belief systems to define and control the meaning of religious symbols as these become used and circulated in new contexts and for other purposes. In line with this theory, we could interpret these videos as an example of how religion changes in contemporary society from institution and dogma to a more personalised, bricolage form of religion where symbols and practices can be used for purposes such as promoting popular drinks.

However, as the discussion about the theory has shown, mediatisation of religion is a complex process in which the cultural and religious context in which a media text is situated also plays a part. Of the approaches presented above, Hepp and Krönert’s analysis of the Catholic World Youth Day represents an interesting point of departure for interpreting the commercial CATHOLICS COME HOME. In Hjarvard’s presentation, “religious media” represents a category where religious institutions gradually come to adapt to the media logic, which leads to individualisation and the weakening of the normative, collective aspects of religion. Hepp and Krönert’s social interaction

23 Mulvey 1975, 6–18.

perspective allows a more sophisticated analysis of how religious institutions, here the Catholic Church, play a part in this process. CATHOLICS COME HOME can be seen as a type of “hybrid event” similar to the World Youth Day, where elements of traditional Catholic faith are mixed with aspects of “popular media events” shaped by consumer culture. Hepp and Krönert<sup>24</sup> conclude in their analysis that the use of Pope Benedict XVI as a “brand symbol” in this event was crucial for linking these different aspects into one media event that “worked” for all of the participants. In the Catholics Come Home commercial, it is interesting to see how the voice-over in particular, but also some of the images, seeks to present an “individualistic” and “pluralistic” message of inclusiveness and variety attuned to the value of individual choice in late modern culture. At the same time, the message, conveyed not least by the images, presents the Church as something different – the “consistent” and “true” haven in an unruly world. Here, the representation of gender plays a key part. Following the French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger<sup>25</sup>, it is this combined focus on the individual and on religion as a “chain of memory” that make, for example, pilgrimage such an attractive and lasting religious practice in highly modernised societies. In a similar way as Hepp and Krönert conclude, we can see in this video how the outcome of this process of mediatisation for religion incorporates not only increased pluralism and individualisation of belief, but also aspects of controlling and preserving religious values by establishing a form of “deterritorial religious community” in which individual, collective and traditional aspects are merged – through media technology.

The American anthropologist Elizabeth Bird argues that TV drama presents an “open-ended religiosity” that draws on an assumption of faith “although leaving vague the question of exactly in what”.<sup>26</sup> As discussed above, Clark and Nybro Petersen argue that mediatisation, primarily the genres of entertainment films and videos circulated on You Tube, can open spaces for the circulation of alternative narratives on religion. The “open-ended” character of religion as presented in these forms of media allows viewers to engage with religious themes in new ways and to negotiate and re-construct gender norms and values that they encounter in everyday life.

The Coca Cola commercial can be seen as such a space that allows play with religious and gender conventions in a way other than in “religious media”, as represented by the commercial for Catholics Come Home. Media scholar Diane Winston discusses how a traditional gendered, religious dichotomy between the pious woman as the “Madonna” and the worldly woman as the “whore” is challenged when female characters are portrayed as both spiritual leaders and sexually active beings, such as the character Grace Hanadarko in SAVING GRACE (Nancy Miller, US 2007–2010) or Kara in the series BATTLESTAR GALACTICA (Glen A. Larson/Ronald D. Moore, US 2003–2009).<sup>27</sup>

24 Hepp/Krönert 2010, 274.

25 Hervieu-Léger 2010.

26 Bird 2009, 25.

27 Butler/Winston 2009.

Post-feminist media analysis studies emphasise the potential for resistance and empowerment within this play with stereotypes of femininity such as sexual attraction and fashion. However, despite these signs of a blurring and perhaps challenging of traditional female and male attributes, other traditional norms of femininity remain, such as beauty and heterosexual (male) attraction. As Winston points out, without these conventional female attributes of attraction “the package would be a harder sell”.<sup>28</sup> This insight shows that an analysis of the potential for alternative representations of gender and religion in entertainment media needs to take into consideration the interplay between commercial interests and media logics. As argued by British media scholar Rosalind Gill,<sup>29</sup> the ideals of individual choice and sexual competence as connected to consumption and self-regulation in, for example, in the TV-series *SEX AND THE CITY* (1998–2004) introduce new gender regimes rather than represent a potential for women’s agency.

## CONCLUSION

The Catholics Come Home and Coca Cola commercials illustrate the ambiguity of mediatisation as a process changing traditional or conventional understandings of religion.

In this article, I have presented two approaches to the mediatisation of religion that represent an important complement to the emphasis on the structuring influence of the media in Stig Hjarvard’s original presentation of the theory. These approaches allow an analysis of mediatisation as a process where the impact of a particular media technology and genre on religion is related to an analysis of how religious actors, institutions such as the Catholic Church but also individual users, negotiate and make use of the media to communicate their messages. Both commercials show how mediatisation challenges the control of religious institutions over narratives and symbols. In a mediated world, religious institutions adapt to the forms and rules for communication and interaction used by media institutions, and media institutions as well as commercial companies use religious symbols in order to communicate other values than might have been intended by religious institutions. Both of the commercials show that this situation holds a potential for changing traditional religious teachings, values and positions. The Catholic Church needs to incorporate the values of individual choice and plurality into their image of the Church, and the practice and value of sexual abstinence for a higher good in religious teachings is used to play with gender conventions to create attention for a popular drink.

By using gender as a lens for an analysis of the potentials for religious change in mediatisation, we can also see how, despite the reduced control of religious institu-

28 Winston 2013, 165.

29 Gill 2007, 249.

tions over their narratives and symbols, some values and norms seem to remain and even become reinforced. Both of the commercial videos show how women in particular are characterised through roles and attributes that reinforce their position in the family or in caring professions or as dependent on male attention for their value. Furthermore, we have seen how such characteristics of women can be used to reinstate a conventional model of the relationship between men and women or the position of the Catholic Church in society: the man/priest in the Coca Cola commercial remains in control of his own and the girl's sexuality, and the women in CATHOLICS COME HOME become symbols of the "consistent" and "true" character of the Catholic Church. This underlines that mediatisation of religion as a theory also needs to take into consideration the logics of commercial interests, as well as relations of power between different groups in society.

This article has attempted to show how mediatisation as a theory can be developed to understand the role of religion in contemporary society. A focus on gender sharpens our understanding of how mediatisation interacts with other transformations regarding the way religion is articulated and practised in society. To analyse further how these complex interactions between media as technology and institution, religious institutions and individual actors, and cultural values and norms contribute to the re-making of religion in contemporary society is an intriguing challenge ahead of us.

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