The Politics of Affect: the Glue of Religious and Identity Conflicts in Social Media

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Abstract

Affect theory often overlooks decades of anthropological, feminist, queer, and post-colonial scholarship on emotion. I build on this extensive scholarship of emotion and use my online ethnography of a Facebook group that promotes the public visibility of Christianity as a springboard to build a conceptual framework of the politics of affect. I address three theoretical gaps: 1) the lack of distinction between different emotions, 2) how affect is often performed for someone, and 3) the varying intensities of emotion. I delve into the intricate ways in which emotions fuel identities, world-views, and their contestations, and how fake news may come to be perceived as affectively factual. This article deepens our understanding of the role of affect in polemic and mediatized conflicts. The role of emotion in religious conflicts and identity politics is not simply analytically useful, but is, at times, the very fabric of which political ideas are made.

Keywords

mediatized conflict – social media – Facebook – affect – politics of affect – anthropology of emotion – identity – nationalism

Introduction

The public sphere pulsates vibrantly with debates about religion, even in the corners of the world where religious observance is in decline (Furseth, 2017; Meyer, 2008). Mediatized conflicts about religion pierce through our everyday

lives and shape our conversations at home, in school, at work, and on social media (Liebmann, 2018; Toft, 2018; Lied & Toft, 2018; Repstad, 2018; Herbert, 2018). Controversies, tensions, and conflicts mark much of the global media coverage of religion (Axner, 2015; Poole, 2002; Roosvall, 2016; Knott et al., 2014; Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012; Figenschou, 2013). Although scholars, journalists and members of the public have discussed the content of conflicts attributed to religion, less attention has been paid to affect or to the intensities of feeling generated among differing collectivities when religion becomes a focal point in public controversies. This article seeks to address this gap.

The politics of affect framework, I present here, develops out of my online ethnography of the controversial Norwegian Facebook group Yes to Wearing the Cross Wherever and Whenever I Please (hereafter YWC). YWC is a special interest group originally created in support for a news anchor who was found to be in breach of Norwegian public service media's neutrality policy, due to wearing a cross pendant while reading the news in 2013. The 'cross-ban case', as it was called, gained much media attention, not least because YWC swiftly overflowed with anti-Muslim and anti-immigration sentiments. My insistence on analysing huge amounts of data from a single Facebook group, rather than spreading my study thin, has provided me with a unique in-depth understanding of the role of affect in mediatized conflicts of religion. Here, I single out the aspects that add to the current body of knowledge about how social media users enact and affectively perform mediatized conflicts about religion. I draw on insights from scholarship on emotion and more recent theories of affect, and use 'affect' and 'emotion' interchangeably, a stance I will substantiate below.

The humanities and social sciences have experienced an 'affective turn' (Koivunen, 2001). Despite this scholarly interest, affect remains somewhat under-theorized (Skoggard and Waterson, 2015). With no overarching theory of affect, definitions of the concept vary a great deal and range from grounded to abstract conceptualizations (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995; Massumi, 1995; Skoggard & Waterson, 2015; Ahmed, 2014; Gregg & Siegworth, 2010; Gibbs, 2011; Berlant, 2011; Mazzarella, 2009; Rudnyckij, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015). As Sedgwick & Frank (1995) have argued, a disquieting amount of affect theory has been developed on the basis of one affect, or very few. Other times, affect is treated as a general category, making for a fuzzy analytical tool (Greenwald & Berlant, 2012). As pointed out by Skoggard and Waterson (2015, p. 113), some definitions of 'affect' are opaque to the point that they may be prove difficult to think with.

Sadly, few of the recent theories of affect build on the decades of grounded, anthropological, postcolonial, feminist, and queer scholarship on *emotion*, much of it conducted by female scholars of colour (Abu-Lughod, 1986;

Lutz & White, 1986; Rosaldo, 1984; Joseph, 1999; Ahmed, 2014).¹ These seminal studies demonstrate that emotions are an integral part of everyday politics, and that affect is inseparable from social and political interactions.

In this article, I develop a conceptual framework of the politics of affect by building on and further developing insights from both humanistic theories of affect and the decades of scholarship on emotion. I aim to address three theoretical gaps in particular: 1) the lack of distinction between different emotions, 2) the ways in which affect is performed with an audience in mind, and 3) the varying intensities of emotion.

My approach to 'affect' is shaped by my training in social anthropology and my research in the interdisciplinary fields of 'religion, media, and culture' and gender studies, as well as my experience in the field of counselling. I also approach affect through a lifetime of inhabiting a body of mixed ethnicities, a body which has, in and of itself, triggered a series of politicized, emotive reactions to my very being. Following Sara Ahmed (2014), I am interested in both 'the making of emotions' and in 'what emotions *do*'. I am particularly interested in the performativity of affect. As Ahmed (2014), Gibbs (2011), Papacharissi (2015), and Berlant (in Berlant & Greenwald, 2012) all argue, we do in fact 'feel our way' into political thoughts, religious orientations, and identity formation. Building on these studies, I believe we need to deepen our scholarly understanding of the role of affect in politics. If affect is what political subjectivity is made of, then, we must seek to understand how affect is performed in the religious and identity conflicts that play out in social media, and we must pay attention to what *different* emotions *do*.

For example, which emotions give a sense of belonging to certain collectives and which emotions are wielded in opposition to others or to create distance? Emotions are 'intentional' in the sense that they are *about* something or someone – emotions are thus 'inter-relational' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 7). As aptly described by Ahmed (2014), emotions are also relational in the sense that they indicate a 'towardness' or 'awayness' to or from an object, nation, religion, or people. It is precisely the ways in which emotions fuel identities, worldviews, and their contestations, that is at the heart of what I call the politics of affect.

Objects can 'become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11). Certainly, some objects are more contentious than others, and thus have more potential for being infused with affects. 'Emblematic symbols' (Lövheim & Lied, 2018) tend to stand for a nation, religion, or worldview and thus trigger a more intensified range of emotional

¹ At times the work is nodded to or acknowledged, but rarely built on. Ahmed's work is a notable exception.

responses. In this sense, emblematic symbols are perhaps the best illustration of what Ahmed (2014) considers 'sticky symbols'. The tensions and contestations that a 'sticky object' like the cross can create lie, in its ability to trigger emotions. Thus, emotions can move through an object (Ahmed 2014, p. 11). However, this does not necessarily mean that the *same* emotions are travelling through the object. 'Feelings not only heighten tension, they are also in tension' (Ahmed 2014, p. 10). Thus, the very same artefact may trigger diametrically different emotions in people. As my study shows, the cross may trigger such diverse feelings as anger, pride, sadness, or indifference, depending on the ideological leanings of the 'feeler'. Understanding how and why objects come to be saturated with affect is at the core of this article.

I focus on how social media actors perform conflict about religion in affective ways. My main concern is with the social and connective aspects of emotionality when constructing religious conflict online. Rather than delve into the empirical detail of my own online ethnography of YWC, I use my ethnography as a springboard to explore a variety of concepts that together build a conceptual framework on the politics of affect. My goal is to present an overarching argument, not just about mediatized religious conflicts, but about affect in social media in general. I will sprinkle the conceptual discussion with brief empirical examples, but my main task in this article is conceptual.

Emotion is often an integral part of mediatized conflict (Cottle, 2006; Hjarvard et al., 2015; Abdel-Fadil, 2016), and affective performances of conflict are key to keeping a conflict alive. Both media and media users enact and perform conflict(s) in ways that intensify, transform, or multiply the conflict(s) (Hjarvard et al., 2015, p. 6). Controversies that successfully latch onto themes designed to trigger emotions seem to escalate and burn longer (Landsverk, 2015). Affective modes of performing conflict are emotive responses to these "trigger themes" (Abdel-Fadil, 2016). Trigger themes have gained scholarly attention (Hjarvard et al., 2015; Averbek-Lietz et al, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2015; Michailidou & Trenz, 2015; Figenschou 2015), but outrage is typically the emotion discussed. Less attention has been paid to loss and other emotions, or to how feelings such as anger and loss may interact (Abdel-Fadil, 2016).

I will now briefly introduce my ethnographic case, to give a backdrop for the conceptual exploration to come. YWC is a Facebook group that came into existence because of a mediatized conflict about religion, which began when a Norwegian PSM news anchor breached neutrality regulations when wearing a cross pendant on set. YWC is a huge Facebook group with an overwhelming amount of activity. It has more than 100 000 likes, an incredibly high number when we consider that Norway's population is just over 5.2 million. While not all of these likers are active debaters in YWC, the number does give

a solid indication of how many people this religious controversy was able to mobilize.

YWC is an excellent empirical example of how conflicts intensify and multiply, and is bursting with emotion. YWC was created for a highly specific cause, but it fed off an array of emotive cues and trigger themes pertaining to identity politics. In other work on YWC (Abdel-Fadil, 2016; 2017; 2018; forthcoming), I have demonstrated that the conflict(s) in YWC are primarily performed by five clusters of participants: conservative Christians, nationalists, humanists, fortified secularists, and ardent atheists. “Conservative Christians” are anxious that ‘Christian heritage’ will be erased from Norwegian society. Conservative Christians call on other Christians to join them in preserving Christianity before is too late. “Nationalists” focus more on ‘Norwegian heritage’ being under attack by Muslims and immigrants, and want to ‘save Norway’. “Humanists” tend to try to steer the debate into a more reconciliatory direction, and attempt to combat the scapegoating of Muslims and immigrants. They try to turn down the volume on all emotional cues² that are not founded on compassion. “Fortified secularists” see no other outcome than Norway being a fully secular and tolerant nation. They ferociously battle against what they perceive as xenophobic and Islamophobic ideas. “Ardent atheists” vigorously protest against Norway being defined as a Christian nation. They care a lot about their own superior rationality and hate religion with a vengeance. These clusters are my analytical constructions, derived from the analysis of the various modes of performing conflict found within data from YWC.

YWC exemplifies the emotive ways in which social media audiences engage with mediatized conflicts. As Papacharissi (2015, p. 16) argues, social media ‘facilitate³ emotional engagement’ and serve to ‘activate ties’, ‘mobilize’, and create ‘networked publics’ or collectivities. Social media is one of the main spaces through which people perform their identity in relation to others, so it becomes a key location for the formation and strengthening of what Papacharissi (2015) has termed ‘affective publics.’ In order to understand religious controversies, scholars need to recognize that there is always an imagined or real audience for one’s performance of affect. We could learn a great deal about how a controversy intensifies and interacts with other realms (such as political actions) if we could better understand why and under what conditions people perform affect.

2 I borrow the term ‘emotional cues’ from Figenschou et al (2015: 131). My understanding and use of the term ‘emotional cues’ also draws on the concept ‘emotionally charged phrases’ as employed by Michailidou & Trenz (2015).

3 Italics added/ my emphasis.

Building a Conceptual Framework for the Politics of Affect

Emotion vs. Affect: Same, Same, Different, Different?

Some scholars argue for a strict distinction between affect and emotion. In Papacharissi's words:

it is essential not to confuse affect with emotion and feeling. While affect contains a particular energy, mood, or movement and may lead to a particular feeling, and possibly the subsequent expression of emotion, it both precedes and sustains or possibly annuls feeling and emotion. (...) Affect captures the intensity of drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction. (2015, p. 21)

I too believe feelings range from an incomprehensible sensation or mood to a labelled (or mis-labelled) emotion. What I am not persuaded by is that one is affect and the other is emotion. In my opinion, the spectrum from inkling to identifiable feeling all constitute similar, gradual, and muddled emotive states that are difficult to distinguish neatly from one another.

Another distinction made in recent affect theory builds on Massumi (1995) and views affect as transcending the individual and being inherently social and connective. For instance, Rudnyckij (2010, p. 161) distinguishes between 'affect' as social and 'emotion' as a solitary experience. As such, affect is perceived as transindividual. While I agree that affect is social, I, like Skoggard & Waterston (2015), do not believe that the solitary and the social facets of emotion are entirely separable. Thus, I use the terms 'emotion' and 'affect' interchangeably, referring to an entity that cannot be neatly separated from thought or connectivity or other individuals and collectivities. In doing so, I build on the insights of a long line of anthropologists before me (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Lutz & White, 1986; Rosaldo, 1984; Wikan, 1984; Joseph, 1999).

Emotions have been at the centre of anthropological, feminist, queer and postcolonial theorizing for decades, and these theories both differ from and overlap with newer attempts at writing up a theory of affect. Historically, emotions were juxtaposed against rational thought, and classified as both feminine and belonging to the private sphere. Rosaldo's (1984) seminal work critiqued this divide and proposed understanding 'emotion' as 'embodied thought'. While many of today's scholars may well be critical of a full on division between emotion and thought, residues of this divide still filter through to contemporary theories and popular conceptions. Stating that emotions are primordial and of little relevance to public or political parts of life entails overlooking decades

of feminist and gender scholarship that has aptly demonstrated the deep-rooted link between emotions and politics (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Lutz & White, 1986; Rosaldo, 1984; Koivunen, 2001;⁴ van Zoonen, 2005, pp. 16–7). As Skoggard & Waterston point out:

Feminist activists and scholars have also long understood that the personal is the political and vice-versa, an understanding that refuses to relegate the private self in relation to others, or the affective or the experiential, to a secondary role but sees these as central features and products of larger social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics and conditions. (2015, p. 113)

Today, most scholars writing about affect and emotion view rationality and affect as interrelated. There is an increasing scholarly consensus that politics and emotions are interlinked. I would argue that the role of emotion in identity politics is not simply analytically useful, but is at times the very fabric of which political ideas are *made of* (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant & Greenwald, 2012). However, as Bangstad (2017) argues, affect is at times approached as if it is somehow more relevant to one corner of the political spectrum, such as the far right. The same point can be argued for certain religious worldviews. Some worldviews are cast as inherently more emotional than others. Conservative religious perspectives may be cast as more emotional than, say, an atheist outlook, yet this need not be the case. In the YWC context, heightened emotion is used to denounce opponents. For instance, in YWC the emotional despair which conservative Christians express is deemed irrational by other debaters. I believe these types of claims are a faint copy of the idea that rationality and emotion are mutually exclusive. Typically, people perceive views in conflict with their own formative or core views as ‘irrational’, and display a high level of emotionality when professing this view. They are emotionally invested precisely because this stance is key to their political subjectivity. I will explore the concept of ‘collective affect’ further in the next section.

Affective Media?

How can scholars make sense of the palpable abundance of emotion in social media? Peterson suggests that we speak of ‘affective media’ in an attempt to capture affect’s connective and social aspect:

4 Koivunen (2001:7) builds on a keynote by Rosi Braidotti delivered to the 4th European Feminist Research Conference in Bologna in 2000.

YouTube [is] an affective medium in which subjects are suspended in emotions, sensations, modes of embodiment and discourse. Subjects are shaped by this affective space and their connections to others, but they still have agency to offer their own interpretations of their cultural surroundings. (2016, p. 4)

Peterson's understanding of YouTube as an affective space is reminiscent of my own findings on Facebook (Abdel-Fadil, 2017) and Papacharissi's (2015) analysis of Twitter. One could also argue that social media become affective media because of the affective labour that users spill into them, a concept I shall return to below. The concept of 'affective media' points to how media are socially and affectively consumed, highlights the connective parts of affect, and points to how emotions are shared through enactments of conflicts. To me, however, Papacharissi's (2015) concept of 'affective publics' better captures *who* is affective, and may steer analysis away from more technologically deterministic understandings of media itself being affective, rather than filled to the brim with the affect of its users. Peterson focuses on connective emotions is timely, but I find Skoggard & Waterston's concept of 'collective affect' better-suited to portray the multitude of modes in which users' emotions connect to one another:

Affect is something deeply interior but that also has outward manifestations. (...) The principles of collective affect may not be equivalent to those applied to individuals. Yet collectivities can and do have affect. The feelings that swell, the passion of the group, the vibrant intensity of the collective can be found in political rallies, religious gatherings, music concerts, family get-togethers, sports events, and mass celebrations. The organizing principle of mass celebrations can be any number of constructed identities—national, religious, gender, ethnic or racial, sexual orientation—or might be based on a common experience of oppression, violence, or struggle; of joy; or of memory of actual or imagined events. (2015, p. 4)

A collective can be bursting with heightened emotions about a particular object or specific ideas but the individuals involved may not necessarily experience the *same* emotions or even the same intensity of feeling. Yet the heightened level of affective engagement is both palpable and contagious (Ahmed, 2014; Skoggard & Waterston, 2015).

The interrelations and connectivities between individual and collective expressions of self and emotion are key components of a politics of affect. In ywc, emotive religious expressions of personal selfhood are often conflated

with collective understandings of religious nationhood. Ballooning emotions are often sparked by identity concerns, and can be viewed as emotive reactions to what Berlant calls 'politically orchestrated collective emotion' (Berlant & Greenwald, 2012, p. 72). The (at times intentional) swelling of emotion is of particular importance to understanding the inner dynamics of religious controversies as performed online. Our analysis must therefore take into consideration that multiple feelings are in motion at the same time. Emotions ignite, shift, intensify, and die out as a result of the ways in which other performers enact the conflict. These enactments direct, trigger, and manipulate feelings into a variety of emotional states that in turn influence the controversy itself.

A Spectrum of Affect

Social media users draw attention and amplify, prolong, intensify or multiply mediatized conflict(s) by using an abundance of emotional cues (Eskjær et al., 2015). Particular emotions, such as anger, may be more frequently called upon than others, but there may be more complex emotional entanglements and a larger spectrum of emotions in play.

Affect theory has been critiqued for being surprisingly unspecific about the range of emotions that may be deemed 'affect', or for only dealing with one or two types of emotion (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Probyn, 2010; Skoggard & Waterston, 2015). Probyn (2010, p. 136) writes that 'current treatises on affect tend to lack feeling'. Thankfully, this critique does not apply across the board. Still, it is somewhat unsettling that a theory of affect would treat all emotions as one, or see no need to distinguish between, say, sorrow and joy.

In ywc, vastly different emotions are in play, and to group them all into 'affect' takes away from the complexity of various users' engagement and their highly differentiated affective performance of religious conflicts online (Abdel-Fadil, 2016; 2017; 2018). By paying greater attention to *which* emotions are in circulation and how they are performed, it is possible to make a more sophisticated analysis of just what emotions *do*. Various emotions are triggered in relation to religion and religious identity. I am interested in understanding both the triggering processes and how different affective performances affect others and in turn, trigger emotive responses, thus propelling conflicts forward. This, I believe, is key to understanding how emotions *work*. Among the emotions I observed driving the conflicts and affective performances in ywc were indignation, pride, disgust, anger, fear, loss, exasperation, sadness, empathy, outrage, and compassion. Emotions and emotional intensity are 'contagious', in the sense that they swell and draw people into feeling *more intensely*. Yet it matters *which* emotion is being boosted. At times, people feel very different feelings but equally intensely. A national flag can trigger a whole range

of feelings at various levels of intensity. Different people may intensely feel disgust or pride or indifference or anger or love, depending on the way they construe nationalism as an ideology.

The use of emotional cues is an integral part of performing conflict. These cues are tailored to trigger a range of emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, empathy, pride, compassion, and joy (Abdel-Fadil, 2016). In YWC, when conservative Christians proclaim that they will get a tattoo of a cross and then add 'what will they do then, cut off my arm?', the drama of such narrations includes emotional cues (for example: unfairness, religious prosecution), which trigger emotional responses (such as: 'This is outrageous!' or 'I too shall fight back').

Emotive performances of conflict may overshadow other, more subtle expressions of feeling. In my research into YWC, I found that there was a danger of over-focusing on anger. It is important to acknowledge that anger can be the substitutive expression of other emotions such as fear, or as part of a more complex emotional entanglement. But anger is also an emotion that is easily detectable. Even in written form, anger screams at you. In YWC, compassion is an emotion that marks the collective emotive performance of conflict for one cluster of participants, the humanists, and certain conservative Christians, but runs the risk of being overlooked due to the much more persistent and noisy collective rage of other participants (Abdel-Fadil, 2018). Distinguishing between various types of emotions is therefore essential to an analysis of affect.

Performing Conflict for Someone

The common scholarly metaphor of 'performing conflict' suggests agency, active participation, and a certain sense of drama in the enactment of conflict. However, one perhaps under-studied aspect of performance in previous research is an analysis of *who* social media users are performing *for*. This gap may be related to the methodologies of previous studies. One of the strengths of conducting an online ethnography on YWC is that I can observe how Facebook users *behave* toward one another in great detail. I am able to analyse how large clusters of participants perform the conflict in distinct ways for particular sets of others. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that ardent atheists perform affect primarily for the conservative Christians, while the conservative Christians perform for one another (Abdel-Fadil, 2018).

The level of affect is evident not only in the content of an argument or how one behaves towards other debaters, but also in tone, writing style, vocabulary, and spelling mistakes. Tone can be reconciliatory, adversary, indifferent, educational, or ironic. In writing style, debaters may ramble, lecture, insult, reason, joke, or send messages of love. Social media users may employ religious vocabulary, swear, or repeat particular adjectives or catch phrases, which in

turn may be indicative of a particular emotional state. Incomplete words and sentences twinned with frequent spelling mistakes suggest not only that the text was typed in haste, but also in affect. Users may type in all CAPSLOCK, use extreme punctuation!!!!!! or insert emoticons. For participants of YWC, emoticons usually come in the form of smileys, crosses, hearts, sad faces and angry faces.

All performances are for an audience, imagined or real. Actors throw out emotive cues and trigger themes directed at specific co-debaters, in an attempt to drive conflicts in a specific direction. Thus analysing who (and what) the performance is *for* goes right to the crux of what makes 'affective media', 'affective publics' and 'collective affect' both affective and social. Shared sentiments of moral rightness, sympathy, or oppression may bind a collective, trigger affective performances, and lie at the heart of shaping political subjectivities.

Often, debaters may exhibit certain emotive states in order to achieve particular outcomes, such as the intensification or derailing of a debate. Debaters may fine-tune their emotive performance to build mutual understanding or seek reconciliation. Their intent may be to let off steam, provoke, insult, entertain, debate factually, or promote reconciliation. Affective performances induce others into particular emotional states and emotionally charged responses that drive or subdue the conflict. Thus, the emotional performance of conflict *for* others lies at the heart of 'governing through affect', to borrow from Rudnyckj (2010). Emotional enactments of conflicts are an effective way of governing others and steering controversies in a particular direction, and are thus an integral part of how the politics of affect take hold of mediatized controversies about religion.

Affective Labour

Behind each affective performance of conflict lies a certain level of 'affective labour'. I use this term to capture a spectrum of feelings that are poured into the enactment of conflict. My definition is broader than Peterson's (2016), who, building on Massumi (1995), refers to affective labour as the positive feelings of satisfaction and ease that may infuse religious use of social media. Enacting religious conflicts online entails varying degrees of emotional commitment and a range of emotions. For 'affective labour' to be a useful concept to think with, it must also include variants of disruptive and negative emotions directed at others. Apart from throwing out a spectrum of emotional cues to 'govern through affect', social media users share their love, hatred, indifference, and ambivalent feelings towards others in more or less affectively laborious ways. Grasping why people perform conflicts in particular ways is central to understanding the politics of affect.

Situated and feminist methodologies in the study of media and religion, along the lines suggested by Clark & Chiou (2013), are likely to nuance our findings about the role of affect and sharpen our understanding of affective labour in mediatized conflicts about religion. As my own study of YWC has demonstrated, affective labour is at times highly gendered, a point I shall return to. Analysing affective labour is particularly important when coupled with statistically informed scholarly discussions about whether or not men and women engage in gendered mediatized conflicts about religion (Abdel-Fadil & Liebmann, 2018; Lövheim et al., 2018). Statistical studies that demonstrate that men more frequently participate in contentious debates about religion or politics, online or offline, tell us nothing about the gendered affective labour involved in the enactment of conflicts (Abdel-Fadil, 2018; Abdel-Fadil & Liebmann, 2018).

By way of illustration, in YWC, the inner circle of humanists consists of a small cluster of highly committed women who participate much more frequently and intensely than all other participants in the enactment of conflicts. These women tailor their answers to nearly every debate they participate in: they tirelessly attempt to debunk myths, fact check, and steer debates in a more reconciliatory direction. They repeatedly and patiently explain that there is no cross ban in Norway despite incessant claims to the contrary, and they try to deter others from scapegoating Muslims and immigrants. Thus, humanists pour an enormous amount of emotional labour into their attempts at deescalating feelings such as anger, outrage, loss, and fear, in order to appease offense and move towards conflict resolution. Compassion appears to be one of the main emotions that drives humanists' enactment of conflict in YWC, but along the way, they may exhibit a range of emotions such as exasperation, sadness, and even anger. Humanists direct their performance of conflict towards conservative Christians in particular, and their overarching aim is reconciliation and a less polemic debate. Despite the small number of humanists, they are all over my data and thus enact the conflict with an unparalleled and rather spectacular level of affective labour.

YWC provides another interesting case of affective labour in the form of a tiny cluster of male ardent atheists. Their emotional style of enacting conflict is that of an 'enraged fan', to borrow from Michaeliou & Trenz (2015), and outrage seems to drive them. While ardent atheists turn up the volume on their rage and maximize their display of affect, they do so with rather minimal labour, triggering an eruption of negative feelings with minimal effort. Ardent atheists only participate in a tiny corner of debates, and when they do they either spit out short sentences such as 'If you believe in god you are an imbecile'

or they sloppily copy and paste a previous rant of their own without bothering to update or adapt it. Yet because they target, insult, and ridicule conservative Christians' entire worldview and belief in God, ardent atheists are highly efficient in terms of setting the debates on fire and triggering the conservative Christians into an affective defence of their core beliefs and identity. In this sense, the affective labour of the male ardent atheists cannot be ignored. The goal of ardent atheists is to create more friction, the diametric opposite of the humanists, and ardent atheists seem to gleefully consider their performance of conflict a form of entertainment.

In order to get a more nuanced understanding of gendered participation in mediatized conflicts about religion and politics, one must qualitatively examine the extent to which women may be enacting conflicts in more *intense* ways than men and identify patterns of affective labour. This is important not only because more nuanced, qualitative and gendered readings bring more complexity to an analysis in their own right, but also because affective labour is a significant part of the build-up of a politics of affect and the emotive enactment of mediatized conflicts about religion.

Sharing Is Caring

In the web of emotional triggers, emotionally charged responses and affective performances of conflicts about religion, how can we make sense of the sometimes volcanic eruptions of emotions? Put simply, why do trigger themes work?

Trigger themes get people to respond in emotionally charged ways precisely because they pertain to phenomena that people care deeply about, and which may be inseparable from their identities (Ahmed, 2014; Abdel-Fadil, 2016). As Baumgartner argues, 'religion and religious symbols, texts, figures, practices, and so forth can be understood as objects of caring or even as grounds of volitional necessities' (2013, p. 59). The ardent atheists in YWC attempt to dismantle the very foundation of the conservative Christian's existence, by repeatedly thundering phrases like 'god is a figment of your imagination' at them. Some objects are so saturated with affect that they are to live or die for.

Those who engage in online debates about religion tend to care deeply about religion per se, or about the role religion ought to have in society. At times, actors are emotionally invested because their entire worldview or values they hold sacred are seen as being under attack (Clark and Hinzo, 2019; Abdel-Fadil, 2018). Some conflicts are heightened by personal and symbolic investments in the sacrality of a perspective, which in turn fosters emotionally charged responses and enactments of conflicts.

Caring need not correlate with a positive emotion. Having a strong antipathy for something is also a form of caring deeply. For instance, the ardent atheists in YWC care about religion in the sense that they want to do away with it all together. In contrast, conservative Christians care that Christianity has a prominent place in the public sphere, but are divided on religious pluralism. Caring entails being *emotive* about a topic or a controversy, but the emotion itself can range from aversion to unbridled enthusiasm. It is the caring which gives vibrant life to a mediatized conflict.

Religious Emotion & Profound Offence

Caring deeply about a religious controversy may for some entail a spectrum of affect that includes 'religious emotion', a sociological concept (Riis and Woodhead, 2010; Petersen, 2012). Religious emotion is social, both in the sense of being *about* something or someone and in the sense of being intensified by collectives of people who either share the emotion or the intensity of *feeling one's way* into politics. The notion is useful because it connotes an intensified emotional attachment to 'sacred sites, landscapes, artefacts, and beings', or what Ahmed (2014) would simply call 'objects'. More importantly, people often express their *belonging* through the heightened and intense emotion they feel for objects or worldviews (Ahmed, 2014; Petersen, 2012). Displaying religious emotion is perceived as performing one's core identity.

Emblematic symbols such as the cross or the hijab or a national flag are typical examples of objects likely to be imbued with this type of intensified religious emotion. Religious emotion connects and binds people together in heightened, collective affect. This intensified emotion is key to the construction of religious identities, shared worldviews, and moral outlooks. It both binds and separates. It shapes perceptions of who we are, but also who we are *not*.

Religious emotion rides on a sense of shared emotions, values, righteousness and ontological security about sticky objects. In YWC, conservative Christians find a place to experience being part of a collective of connected conservative Christian selves, who share a love or passion for, and are willing to 'protect', the same objects. Religious emotion may fuel intricate processes of othering and provide the moral justification for turning *against* others in an attempt to 'save oneself' from a perceived threat of demise. In YWC, nationalists and conservative Christians trigger one another by proposing that Muslims/immigrants pose a threat to 'Norwegian/Christian cultural heritage'.

Michailidou & Trenz (2015) speak of 'enraged fans', whose outrage and emotional turmoil fuel the enactment of mediatized conflicts. Being an enraged fan is an aggressive and antagonistic defence of all things sacred. Examples

in ywc include fervent secularists opposing racist enactments of conflict, or ardent atheists fuming at conservative Christians for believing in 'a fairy in the sky'. Both nationalists and conservative Christians ferociously defend and intensely affectively perform *for* their beloved sacred objects.

Enraged fandom can thus be understood as the display of religious emotion for sticky objects that are felt to be core to one's identity. However, it is important to not get stuck on the emotion of anger or outrage. As my analysis of ywc demonstrates, many more emotions can be in play than first meet the eye (Abdel-Fadil, 2016). In Ahmed's (2014) words: 'Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death' (p. 12). The extensive use of emotional cues and trigger themes serve to strengthen the intensification of religious emotion towards or away from sticky objects. More importantly, religious emotion can purposefully be ignited and become 'politically orchestrated collective emotion' (Berlant & Greenwald, 2012, p. 72) through affective performances, targeting different audiences, who in turn, respond emotively. Therein lies the significance of religious emotion for understanding the politics of affect.

When a sticky object is not imbued with the appropriate affective response, level of admiration, or respect its 'followers' deem necessary, feelings intensify. Caring deeply about sticky objects leads to intensified religious emotion, and makes for an affective performance of both the conflict and the self.

However, holding something sacred and caring intensely about it may go hand in hand with certain vulnerabilities (Lagerkvist, 2017; Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming). At times, such affective attachments go hand in hand with what Berlant (2006) calls 'cruel optimism.' The loss of a cherished object or sentiment is suffered as an insurmountable loss, often akin to losing oneself.⁵ As we saw above, Ahmed (2014) speaks of this type of loss as 'a living death'. Baumgartner (2013) speaks of blasphemy as psychological violence, and argues that many people who care deeply about their religion experience a 'mental injury' or 'profound offense' (p. 56) when it is ridiculed or dragged through the mud. He also discusses the possibility that some social actors may *intentionally* inflict harm on others. When ardent atheists in ywc state that the cross is a symbol of ignorance, war and bloodshed, they inflict a mental wound upon conservative Christians, provoking deep disgust, shame, hurt, fear, or grief (Baumgartner 2013, p. 51).

This is another reminder of how important it is to differentiate between emotions when analysing performances of conflict. In ywc, ardent atheists

5 I discuss narratives of suffering in much greater detail in Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming.

intentionally inflict harm on conservative Christians by defaming their sacred values and artefacts. What Baumgartner does not discuss is that certain actors may take *pleasure* in inflicting harm, either because they find it entertaining or because they themselves care deeply about the opposite stance, in this case an atheist outlook. The transition to enraged fan applies to the ardent atheists when they perform the conflict in a spiteful manner. The intentionality of inflicting harm upon others through the intense display of negative emotions towards all they hold sacred adds another layer to the politics of affect. Enactments of conflict that intentionally perform blasphemy and cause profound offense are thus cruel displays of power, with the intent of both harming others and directing the outcome of the conflict(s).

Spoofs or Not? the Birth of Affective Facts

The vulnerabilities that go hand in hand with harbouring intense feelings of attachment towards a worldview, identity, or emblematic object also manifest themselves when the profound offence comes from a humoristic 'attack' (Baumgartner, 2013). 'The Danish Cartoons' (in the Nordic countries often referred to as 'The Mohammed Cartoons') are perhaps the most obvious example of how emotions can move through caricatures and instil feelings of pain and hurt. Baumgartner (2013) argues that the Danish Cartoons inflict psychological violence because they attack that which is sacred to devout and pious Muslims. Strong emotions of disgust can also move through the Danish Cartoons to both religious and non-religious audiences, who consider themselves allies of devout Muslims who are perceived as being under distasteful attack. Again, this points to the importance of being aware of *who* (and what) the affective performance is for, and the importance of paying attention to *which* emotions are in motion.

When emotions are heightened in a collective and a group of individuals believe that their emblematic symbols are facing an imminent threat, they get scared, and this fear spills into the way that they perform conflicts online. It is essential to understand that the fear, while possibly unfounded, *feels* very *real* to those who project their fear onto sticky objects (Ahmed, 2014; Massumi, 2010). The inability to tell fact from fiction or reality from a spoof may be incomprehensible for an outsider or for someone who does not harbour religious feelings towards said emblematic symbols. A politics of affect must take seriously that for people highly invested in a worldview or identity, what *seems* real, *is* real. That is, we must understand that when conservative Christians in YWC repeatedly lament the loss of the right to wear a cross in Norway, this is an example of what Massumi (2010) calls an 'affective fact'. The cross-ban becomes real because it *feels* real:

Threat does have an actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. This actual reality is affective. Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, looming present as the affective fact of the matter. (2010, p. 54)

Intensified emotions of fear both trigger and connect people into this 'affective reality', which is how YWC comes to be a prime site for the re-circulation of the affective fact that there is a general cross ban in Norway. The affective reality of conservative Christians and nationalists in YWC who *feel* like victims,⁶ in turn, triggers affective performances from others who vehemently disagree with this understanding of reality. The inability to perceive something like the alleged cross ban as fictitious ties into a deep-set emotional engagement and the fear of losing one's core sense of self.

These fears can transpire into spin offs, such as the idea that the Norwegian flag will have to be redesigned without the characteristic cross in the middle, which in turn trigger other performers and thrust the conflict in new directions. In YWC, the intensity with which conservative Christians and nationalists *felt* their reality at times prevented them from spotting irony or satire. Even when the satirical content was really ridiculous or the post explicitly marked as 'satire', this seemed to have little influence on the way it was interpreted by certain participants. It would seem that intense affect can deter humour, too. When some YWC participants posted links to satirical content about the Norwegian flag soon being all red (aka a socialist flag), or exchanging the cross for a red onion, these scenarios were interpreted as realistic by those with the strongest affective attachments to the cross or the flag. Perhaps the best example of this tendency was the satirical piece posted in YWC which claimed that the cross in the Norwegian flag was to be substituted for a C portrayed like the crescent, a symbol often associated with Islam. This attempt at performing critique in a lighter, more humoristic mode, while intended to ridicule Islamophobic anxieties, ended up being taken for real news and came to constitute a new affective fact, proof of how Muslims were plaguing Norway.

This heightened level of emotionality contributes to a situation in which satire is taken at face value and perceived of as within the realm of affective reality. Even if people repeatedly point out that a stance is false, this makes no difference to the affective fact that has already seeped into the consciousness

6 In a forthcoming article, I expand on how the analysis shifts considerably if we take seriously that for some of the most vested performers of conflict, their political subjectivities are deeply entrenched in affective realities.

of the most fearful. Satire about themes that one harbours religious emotions for may simply hit a blind spot. This is not to say that I expect everyone to laugh at the same thing, or feel their way into the *same* opinion about a satirical joke, particularly when the topic is so close to heart. Some participants who use satire or irony to argue a political stance may care deeply about their worldview, but consider humorous exchanges a valid mode of enacting the conflict. For others, myself included, humour is a coping mechanism. However, not everyone enacting a conflict enjoys satire, or finds topics like nationalism or religion suitable for ridicule. Satire can inflict psychological violence, and satirical content can simply transpire into affective facts. Both of these outcomes are contingent upon heightened emotional attachment to that which is being ridiculed.

Whether or not one has the ability to spot satire, let alone appreciate it, may have a great deal to do with a person's worldview and personal taste in humour. One's level of media literacy and the measures one takes to check sources will also play a role. That said, for a number of conservative Christians, the PSM prohibition of religious symbols in news bulletins may be equally outrageous and unbelievable to their worldview as a number of the spoofs, a point of departure I elaborate on elsewhere (Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming).⁷ Islamophobic arguments can reach absurd levels (Clark & Gillespie, 2018): for example, a photograph of empty bus seats was shared in a Norwegian anti-immigration Facebook group, and subsequently mistaken for 'a swarm of burka-clad women' who were allegedly taking over Norway.⁸ At times, it would seem that if the religious emotion is intense enough, little else matters.

Concluding Remarks on the Stickiness of the Politics of Affect

Differentiating between emotion as solitary and affect as social seems to be a futile exercise. No emotion can be disconnected from all else. Thus, scholars

⁷ See footnote 6.

⁸ See for instance (in Norwegian):

<http://www.opplysningskontoret.org/nrk-fjerner-kors/>.

<https://www.facebook.com/Vi-som-vil-erstatte-korset-i-flagget-med-en-rødløk-1380156782230351/>.

<http://radikalportal.no/2013/11/26/nar-korsdebatt-blir-til-flaggdebatt/>.

http://renekleveland.blogg.no/1384215226_dette_blir_norges_nye.html.

working on affect ought to acknowledge that both emotion and affect are social and entail some kind of connectivity. Rather than speak of affective media, I suggest building on the concept of collective affect and focusing on how enacting religious conflict in social media, invariably entails performing *for* someone. Trigger themes and emotional cues that draw upon emblematic symbols, sticky objects, religious narratives, or identities, are likely to intensify the affective performance of conflicts. The intense affective performance of conflict for different sets of others may at times attempt to drown out or silence opposing views. Yet, since social media are precisely *social*, the very voices one is attempting to silence may be triggered into responding with equally intense, if different, emotions, escalating the conflict(s) further. Affective performances of conflict attempt to direct co-debaters and the conflicts themselves in particular directions, through an intentional intensification of emotion meant to inflict harm on, or to dismantle the power of, others with whom the performer disagrees. Thus, affective performances are often attempts at shifting the balance of power, and reclaiming an object, such as an identity, nation, or religion.

The analysis of affect ought to deal with the range of emotions, rather than lumping all feelings into an indistinct category, and must allow for shifting and intermingled emotions. Future research must pay attention to how affect plays out in spectacularly different ways, contingent on a person's positionality. It is of utmost importance to keep an eye out for affective labour and its gendered expressions. We must also pay attention to what differing emotions *do*. Caring deeply about an object not only divides but also brings people together in heightened emotion. Social media are prime locations for what Berlant calls the 'political orchestrating of collective emotion', and the performance of individual and collective identities (Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, having religious emotions or holding certain values sacred to one's sense of self, makes one susceptible to profound offense and may cause intense eruptions of emotions and even blind spots or spur the emergence of affective facts. Together, all of these concepts make up a politics of affect, as played out in multiple media-tized conflicts.

One cannot fully understand the construction of political subjectivities without a more sophisticated analysis of this politics of affect. Fusing the anthropology of emotion with theories of affect refines our analysis. The empirically grounded conceptual framework of the politics of affect, as formulated in this article, provides a new, sharpened lens, with which to detect and make sense of the multitude of ways in which affect and differing kinds of emotions play into conflicts about religion and identity in social media.

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