

**MEDIA POWER AND RELIGIONS**  
**The Challenge facing Intercultural Learning**

*Theme 1: The Presentation of Religions in Public Media*

**1.9 Media in Religious Conflict – Experiences from Northern Ireland**

***Abstract:***

Notwithstanding a peace process that has been in place since the mid-1990s, Northern Ireland remains a divided society and is becoming increasingly diverse in ethnic, cultural and religious terms. Sectarianism continues to be a serious concern and there has been a significant rise in racist incidents over recent years.

All institutions in Northern Ireland have had to find ways of responding to the region's long-term inter-community conflict. This has certainly been an issue for the religious communities, for the media in its various forms and also for education. All of these – religion, the media and education – have, in fact, at some time been accused from various quarters of provoking or perpetuating conflict and also of failing to deal with it responsibly. At the same time some have argued that these institutions have played a positive part in promoting mutual understanding and contributing to the peace process.

Northern Ireland has a long history of controversy over media representations of the conflict, and this has been extended from the press and the traditional broadcast media to the digital age of satellite television and the internet. Despite attempts to introduce curricula which encourage and inform mutual understanding and respect, education continues to be separate for most children according to perceptions of religious identity; traditional approaches to religious education have failed to prepare most young people for life in an intercultural world. Within the Christian traditions a wary conservatism continues to restrain many people from appreciation of 'the other'.

This paper will examine some of the interfaces between these issues, including a focus on the potential of the media to contribute positively to inter-religious understanding. Can the media perform a Socratic function that might help people to deal more effectively with human difference and cultural/religious diversity? Can the media support religious educators in the role of promoting and improving religious literacy? Are there any values that religions, educators and those who work in the media might share for the public good? Some responses will be attempted to these questions, in part based on the views of some of those currently active in the media, religion and education in Northern Ireland. Conclusions will be offered in which these experiences relating to one particular region may be seen to have relevance to the challenges facing other societies and their own intercultural and inter-religious realities.