

Religion in Peace and Conflict Master Programme

Interview with Mella Köjs

Mella Köjs is a former RPC programme administrator who has agreed to share her experience of working with the programme



A: When did you start working with RPC?

M: I started working with RPC in May 2013 as a course administrator and it was just part of my work to do it.

A: What was the biggest challenge for you then?

M: I started in May and already in August, the new term started. At that time it was about 15-16 students. I did not know much about the programme. However, I immediately noticed that handling students wasn't easy. How to admit and register them? How to get a student account for a student without a Swedish personal number? I remember, for example, that there was a girl from Columbia. And.. she never got a letter from us, because the post office in Columbia didn't work very well. So, it took us some time and energy to resolve the situation, but she came to Uppsala for the campus week.

A: What about the campus weeks then?

M: For example, the first campus week was a bit different back then. The idea was to meet many people who work in the field. They were invited to talk about how to work in peace and conflict organizations, NGOs, etc. And it did not work very well. So we decided to find a new concept that was better suited to the programme and we try to improve it year by year. Now I know that campus weeks are very popular.

A: What did you like the most about working with the programme?

M: First of all, the students. I love RPC students! They are so wonderful and so grown-up. They really listen. I like the way we now have more structures in the programme, for example deadlines with closing forums, etc. I enjoyed working with the webpage, it gives us an opportunity to add more information that could not be included in the syllabus and it is a great way to "sell" the programme.

A: Some RPC students have joked that you are almost as fast as Alexa/Siri [virtual assistants] in answering e-mails [smiles]

M: [laughs] It does not take very much time to answer emails! At first, I had to look for answers to questions, but years after I knew the answers, so I could just type them in.

A: So you've gradually become a kind of RPC Google.

M: Yes, I guess so [laughs]

A: They say that RPC students differ from Masters students in other programmes. What is so unique about them in your opinion?

M: Among them, many people are very interested in the field. Some of them have been working for many years. They are really interesting to interact with. I don't know why they are so nice, but they are!

A: What do you think is so special about the programme? Why is it becoming more and more popular?

M: I think it is the theme "religion in peace and conflict", it is, sad to say, a popular topic today. The programme is also quite unique. Another thing - it is based on the Internet, people like it. I think people see it is a possible option since you can study from home and you don't have to move to Uppsala. We know many students who have recommended our programme to their friends, which is the best advertisement you can have. I hope that my work of sending emails and working on the webpage also helps to some extent.

(Continued on next page)

A: You are the one who started building the RPC alumni network. Why do you think this is important for the programme and the students?

M: Well, we had many questions from students who asked, “Do you have an alumni network?” And we didn’t have it. I thought about it. Well, they want to stay in touch. Some students said that they were in contact with each other. Therefore, we wanted the students to feel that after two years not everything was gone. We wanted them to have something to remember, to stay in touch. They don’t leave us, and we don’t leave them. It was more like this.

A: How can you encourage our students to join the alumni network in the future?

M: We try to develop our activities so people can meet. We have new ideas. It was one of the last things I started and didn’t finish because I left. Many alumni associations are actually supported by alumni. Maybe we would also need some volunteers to do that. It takes time to build up. It is not a matter of one year. The programme is different, it is changing, and it has developed a lot. Then we also have to adapt as an alumni network. I hope that Emma with others will continue where I left.

A: What do you miss most about RPC?

M: [laughing] I do miss students a lot and my work with teachers. RPC was also a kind of my child. I worked a lot with it. It needed some extra love. I like the idea that I started something and saw that I could improve it. I say ‘I’ but I mean ‘We’, I could not have done it without Håkan, Kajsa, Brian, and Nisse. And, of course the students of the programme!

‘What is Mella doing today?’ - I don’t know if people want to know what I am doing now but I tell you anyway. I work at CIRCUS (Centre for Integrated Research on Culture and Society), we are a small department and we work with interdisciplinary research. I like my new job, and this is the department that has just started. I have been here from the very beginning, which I like, because I can ‘put my own colors on it.’ I like challenges! Our webpage: www.uu.se/circus

The RPC team would like to express its gratitude to Mella Köjs for her work and commitment. Good luck with the new position!

Faculty of Theology

The Faculty of Theology is **one of the four original faculties** (Theology, Law, Medicine and the Humanities) and its history begins with the founding of Uppsala University in 1477. Traditionally, faculties are usually divided into several thematic institutions, but the Faculty of Theology, like the Faculty of Law, has **only one institution**. In Sweden, only Uppsala University has an independent Faculty of Theology.

Since the foundation, it has been devoted to **theological research and teaching**. It was not until 1831 that it began to educate future ministers to serve in the Church of Sweden. At the end of the 18th century, about 40% of all university students were future priests.

In the second half of the 20th century, a close connection with the Church of Sweden gradually weakened. Today, the faculty is **independent of any churches**. Nowadays, students of the Department of Theology become not only priests in the Church of Sweden, but also, to a large extent, teachers, librarians, journalists, researchers, employees of non-governmental and governmental organizations and so on.

The faculty is constantly **interacting with the outside world** and is characterized by a wide range of knowledge. It has both subject-specific and multi - and **interdisciplinary research** at the intersection of religion and society at basic and advanced level with professional relevance.

The faculty has approximately 2,200 registered students and about 100 active researchers, professors and lecturers, making it **Sweden's largest unit for Religious Science Research and education**.

Short Facts

Founded

1477

2,200

registered students

100

active researchers

75

freestanding courses

9

Master programs

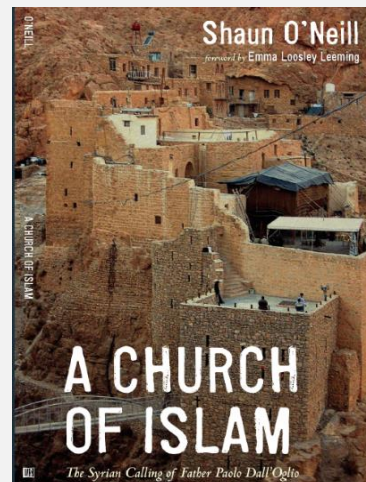
The oldest faculty
of Uppsala University

Sweden's largest unit
in Religious Studies

“A Church of Islam”

We are proud to interview our graduate Shaun O'Neill, who has published his book “A Church of Islam” based on his Master’s thesis.

Amazon¹ describes the content of this book as follows: “Father Paolo a Jesuit from Italy came across the ruins of an abandoned monastery in the Syrian Desert. It was to be the start of a forward-thinking Catholic religious community called Al-Khalil that would celebrate hospitality and friendship as its guiding pillars, bringing together Christians and Muslims from across the region during troubled times. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio and the interfaith dialogue he promoted in the monastic outpost of Deir Mar Musa near Damascus would attract people from all walks of life. The outbreak of war in 2011, powerful governmental and religious opposition, and the mysterious disappearance of the politically outspoken Father Paolo”



A: You graduated last year in 2018. When did you publish your book?

S: The book was published just a couple of months ago – August 2019.

A: Did you know when you were writing your Master's thesis that you wanted to publish a book, or did it come later?

S: No, I didn't know. I didn't think about it at all. It's actually an interesting process. I wrote my thesis and then during the defense one of the teachers asked if I had ever thought about publishing it, and I answered: “Not really.” Then I sent it to the Oregon-based publisher Wipf and Stock and two-three weeks later they responded with a yes! So it was very quick compared to other people's experiences when it can take a very long time. For me it was almost too easy, you know! It felt surreal that way.

A: What was the process like in a nutshell?

S: I had to fill out the proposal, submit an application form, and I also had to submit the entire thesis and a letter of recommendation from the university. After that, it only took a few weeks for me to receive a reply. Then, throughout the whole process, they were quite supportive. They gave me a lot of artistic freedom, maybe too much! I also set a deadline for myself. When you have something like that, you have to set a deadline, otherwise it can last for years. I was aware of the importance of getting it out there while Syria was still very much in the news.

A: Did you need to rework your text, to make it less academic?

S: I had to rework it significantly. Actually, I heard from the publisher in the summer of 2018, just a few months after I wrote my thesis and got the master's [degree], when they initially asked me: “how long time do you need to change it?” and I said: “give me a couple of months.” After a couple of months I realized that there was no chance I could do it in time. In total, it took me about nine months to reword it that included incorporating elements of creative non-fiction to draw the reader into Dall'Oglio's world. I wanted to change it a bit to make it less academic, more readable and attractive but I didn't want to dumb it down either. That was tricky and the changes required a lot of work. This extra time also gave me a chance to travel to Iraq to interview people from a sister monastery of Mar Musa in Sulaymaniyah. In honesty the whole process was probably one of the most difficult things I have ever done. It was quite a solitary, isolating process that requires self-discipline (not one of my strong points). The book took a year and a half of my life and I was heavily invested in it – I still am. But, I think it is worth it. This experience definitely did change me positively, but now I want as many people to read this amazing tale as possible so I work on promotion. It's an overwhelmingly positive good news Catholic story at a time when the Church is besieged by scandal. It's a tale of moral leadership and all the dilemmas involved in fighting injustice.

A: Why did you choose this topic and how did you come up with this catchy and provocative title?

S: It is provocative and I kind of like that! I met a Franciscan monk in Ireland during the summer who loved the title – he said laughing “the more people you can annoy with a title - the better!” I went to Syria just before the war in 2011 and met Fr. Paolo who I wrote about. Afterwards, I got interested in his story and his life. I scratched the surface and realized that there were many contacts out there, people who wanted to talk and cooperate, to tell Paolo's intriguing story. I felt like an investigative reporter and I suppose I was in some way, The title “a Church of Islam” actually comes from Dall'Oglio's own book called “Lover of Islam, believer in Jesus” and he referenced a Church of Islam and interfaith dialogue quite a lot in it.

A: Who did you write this book for?

S: For people who are interested in religious studies, for theologians, but also for lay people interested in the Middle East, moral leadership and dilemmas. I hope that it even might be included in some religious studies curricula (hello, Uppsala!). I wrote it as a eulogy to a forgotten, more innocent Syria, and it also a tribute to the brave work of the entire Community of Al-Khalil across Syria and Iraq.

A: What would you advise our students and alumni who might think about publishing their Master's thesis in the form of a book or article?

S: I would say, write something that you are passionate about! Do everything you need to do, leave no stone unturned. It is a very exhausting process, but it is quite rewarding when you see the final product. In terms of publishers.. I regret that I didn't send it around to a few more publishers. It would have been interesting in terms of getting a general comparison. So I would say: send it to a few different publishers and see what happens and don't be afraid to extend deadlines if you feel you need the time to change it.

¹ https://www.amazon.com/Church-Islam-Syrian-Calling-DallOglio/dp/1532667272/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=church+of+islam&qid=1572353658&sr=8-1