Section 2. Journalism

RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND MEDIA RELATIONS

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Abstract

Religious conflicts and media relations face special challenges in the age of modern information technology. Religious beliefs often hold a sacred and central place in the lives of individuals; they shape their identity, values, and purpose. Consequently, when freedom of expression touches on religious sensitivities, conflicts can arise.

A religious crisis is often created by intentional or unintentional statements that question or offend deeply held religious beliefs. Therefore, the role of the media in regulating this process is very important, and it plays a key role in the world political and religious field.

While freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it also carries with it a responsibility to balance individual freedoms among different communities.

Keywords: *religion, media landscape, conflicts, narrative, discussions, interventions, freedom of expression, sensitive*

> *"I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty."*
> **— Mahatma Gandhi**

Introduction

Our **field of study** is the media and its role in the process of covering religious conflicts, specifically examining how religious conflicts are portrayed in the media and the tangible outcomes it generates for the parties involved in the conflict. To ensure the depth and interest of our research, we employed a qualitative research method, utilizing a historical and comparative approach. This approach enables us to make logical and objective assessments. Our **primary objective** is to scrutinize the coverage of religious crises and explore the media's role in the resolution of these conflicts.

Based on the materials we studied, we **concluded** that the media wield significant influence over the processes of religious

conflicts. However, our research has also revealed that the media landscape is not always free from bias, and certain outlets may exhibit prejudice against specific religious groups. A comprehensive study of religious conflicts must begin with an examination of historical contexts and an investigation into the causes of religious tensions.

In our paper, we outlined the features of modern forms of religion in the global information society and **concluded** that religion and religiosity have not lost their relevance today. On the contrary, they have experienced a rebirth and are confronting new opportunities and challenges. Consequently, the media has also encountered new challenges, necessitating the delivery of balanced, stereotype-free, and objective facts to the audience when covering religious crises and conflicts.

Our research has shown that achieving a delicate balance between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities demands a nuanced approach. Governments, civil society, and religious institutions play pivotal roles in fostering an environment where both rights can coexist harmoniously. The rapid development of information technology leads to the transformation of religious systems. Despite the theory of secularization, religion and religiosity do not lose their changes over time, and the means of delivering religious messages are also evolving. The emergence of new religious movements is observed, accompanied by the growth of religious fundamentalism and terrorism. In the context of new information technologies, religious conflicts are instantly reflected anywhere in the world. Evidently, the rapid development of information technology has logically influenced global religious processes as well. The theory of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929) has become even more relevant today, with his assertion that "religious traditions and religious communities have acquired a new, previously unexpected political significance. The importance of religion for political purposes has increased throughout the world" (Jürgen Habermas, Zeit der Übergänge (2001), p. 174 f). Religion and religiosity received new impulses with the advent of the information age. Conclusions drawn about the classical theory of secularization turned out to be hasty. The increased

influence of Islam has become noticeable, and conservative, traditional Orthodox movements have also grown globally in the religious arena. Religious concepts and values, adapted to the mass culture created on the basis of mass telecommunications, have become commodities with profitable sales.

In the era of global information, human religious consciousness has become syncretic and eclectic, encompassing various religious elements from all eras and peoples, including legends, fairy tales, myths, films, etc.

Based on the research and the study of the features of modern forms of religion in the global information society, we can conclude that today religion and religiosity have not lost their relevance; on the contrary, they have been reborn and are facing new opportunities and challenges.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, serving as a cornerstone of democratic societies. It enables people to express their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs without fear of censorship or repression. While this right is crucial for open dialogue and building a harmonious society, it becomes increasingly difficult and complex when it intersects with religious beliefs. Religious conflict, often arising from the clash between freedom of expression and pure religious principles, poses a significant challenge to society, with individuals attempting to strike a delicate balance between individual freedom and religious sensibility. Freedom of expression, rooted in democratic values and human dignity, empowers people to engage in robust public discourse, question authority, challenge prevailing norms, and contribute to the collective search for truth. This freedom encompasses not only spoken and written words but also artistic expression, dissent, and the right to hold and convey dissenting opinions. Protecting freedom of expression is critical for creativity, innovation, and the advancement of society through the exchange of ideas and the exploration of new perspectives.

The media plays a crucial role in informing the public, with news outlets not only disseminating information but also participating in shaping particular narratives and discourses. This role becomes especially important during conflicts, including religious

conflicts, as narratives about the conflict can play a decisive role in how people perceive the conflict, its causes, and consequences (Wolfsfeld, G. "Media and the Path to Peace," Cambridge University Press, 2014 – https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489105).

The media exhibits diversity in its coverage of religious conflicts. During religious crises, some media outlets aim to contain tensions and promote religious tolerance, while others spread provocative statements. Instances of disseminating unconfirmed information are also frequent, leading to serious confusion and even violence.

Achieving the delicate balance between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities requires a nuanced approach. Governments, civil society, and religious institutions play essential roles in fostering an environment where both rights can coexist harmoniously.

Freedom of expression stands as a cornerstone of democratic societies, allowing individuals to express their opinions and views without fear of censorship or reprisal. In Western democracies, this right is enshrined as a fundamental principle that promotes open discourse, critical thinking, and societal progress. However, insulting religious sentiments in the name of freedom can create tension and call into question the essence of multicultural coexistence.

Covering religious conflicts poses risks and dangers for journalists. In many cases, they disseminate useful information but may also propagate the perspective of only one side, leading to professional and moral pressures (Boudana, S. (2015). 'Le spectateur engagé': French war correspondents' conceptions of detachment and commitment. Journal of European Studies, 45(2): 137–151). Indeed, journalists covering religious conflicts, especially if they are members of one of the conflicting parties, face professional and moral dilemmas. In times of conflict, willingly or unwittingly, they become part of the conflict and must grapple with conflicting values (Zandberg, E., Neiger, M. (2005). Between the nation and the profession: Journalists as members of contradicting communities. Media, Culture & Society, 27(1): 131–141). On one hand, their professional role demands maintaining autonomy and neutrality, while on the other hand, their community attachment makes it difficult to remain impartial to the conflict (Nygren, G., et al. (2018). Journalism in the crossfire: Media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014. Journalism Studies, 19(7): 1059–1078). In other words, journalists find themselves "in the crossfire" as they attempt to balance professional autonomy with political pressures and public expectations.

In times of religious conflicts, journalists' sentiments may often override professional objectivity, leading them to align with their religious community. This tendency is widespread, especially when a particular religion or denomination gains dominance, making it challenging for individual journalists to detach from prevailing attitudes within their community. Societies affected by religious conflict subject journalists to various external and internal pressures, both overt and hidden, compelling them to resort to self-censorship. This pressure hinders them from covering certain events or prompts them to cover them cautiously to avoid harm to themselves and others (Jungblut, M., Hoxha, A., (2017). Conceptualizing journalistic self-censorship in post-conflict societies: A qualitative perspective on the journalistic perception of news production in Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Media, War & Conflict, 10(2): 222–238).

Various pressures, whether from the government, media owners, or other actors, continue to limit journalists' autonomy even in post-conflict situations when violence subsides. Censorship or self-censorship persists, and journalists find themselves under ongoing influence (Nygren, G., et al. (2018). Journalism in the crossfire: Media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014. Journalism Studies, 19(7): 1059–1078). It's essential to hold the media accountable for spreading false stories about specific religious groups.

Media coverage of religious conflicts often involves biases. The term "extremist" is frequently associated with Muslims, while Christian extremists are largely silent. Additionally, the media tends to portray a narrative of the "good Christian" and the "bad Muslim." In stories about Muslims, terrorists' religion or ethnicity is frequently highlighted, whereas, in the case of Christians, this information is omitted. For instance, the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik is not typically characterized as a Christian terrorist by the me-

dia, despite identifying himself as a Christian. Most articles refer to Breivik simply as a "mass killer" (Norway's far-right mass killer Breivik sues state over prison isolation – https://www. aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/19/norways-far-right-mass-killer-breivik-sues-state-over-prison-isolation), contributing to the formation of a public opinion that tends to associate terrorism predominantly with Muslims.

Several articles characterize Anders Behring Breivik as a Christian terrorist (Hannah Strømmen. "Christian Terror in Europe? The Bible in Anders Behring Breivik's Manifesto," Journal of the Bible and its Reception. https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2017–2006). However, to counter this perspective, the American scientist and religious scholar Stephen Prothero argued that Christians condemned Breivik, explaining his actions as political rather than religious. It's important to note that terrorism is often employed to achieve political goals.

As an illustration of media biases, the 1995 Srebrenica massacre can be cited (Smith R.J. "Srebrenica massacre – https://www.britannica.com/event/Srebrenica-massacre). The media widely describes the event as the killing of 8,000 "Muslim" men and boys by "Serbs," without referring to the Serbian military and political leaders accused of war crimes as Christian terrorists.

In considering the delicate balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility, it is crucial for European nations to protect both freedom of speech and religious rights. Collaborative efforts can significantly contribute to achieving a more balanced approach, promoting harmonious coexistence among different religious communities.

References

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