

## Section 2. Journalism

DOI:10.29013/ESR-24-9.10-7-11



### MEDIA “SINS” IN COVERING RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

**Giorgi Abazadze**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Akaki Tsereteli State university, Georgia

---

**Cite:** Abazadze G. (2024). Media “sins” in covering religious conflicts. *European Science Review 2024, No 9–10*. <https://doi.org/10.29013/ESR-24-9.10-7-11>

---

#### Abstract

The pursuit of neutrality in journalism is crucial to maintaining the credibility and integrity of the media. Maintaining a neutral position helps to fairly represent all sides of the story, allowing the audience to formulate their own informed opinions without media bias. However, the presence of assessment tones – where journalists express personal judgments or subjective assessments in their coverage – can undermine this objectivity. Such tones can not only color the information presented, but also lead to polarization of viewers’ opinions, which is especially harmful in a politically sensitive environment. Random bias in covering events in the media can come from various sources, including institutional influences.

Coverage of conflicts, including religious conflicts, is a risk and a threat to journalists. However, in many cases journalists disseminate only useful information and propaganda from one side, which also leads to professional and moral pressure. Journalists often represent one of the conflicting parties, which adds to their moral and professional dilemmas.

**Keywords:** *sins of the media; coverage of religious conflict; Difficulties in maintaining neutrality; propaganda; Journalists in the “crossfire”*

Coverage of religious conflicts is a risk and a threat to journalists. However, in many cases they disseminate only useful information and propaganda from one side, which also leads to professional and moral pressure (Boudana, 2015). Journalists willfully or involuntarily become part of the conflict. (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005). The professional role of journalists requires maintaining neutrality, but at the same time they represent a particular religious community, so this factor complicates impartiality in covering

religious conflict. (Nygren, 2018). It should be said that journalists are “in cross-fire” because they try to balance professional autonomy with political leadership and public pressure.

In times of religious conflicts, journalists cannot be mistaken for subjectivity. This is the most difficult process, because in religious conflicts, media representatives have both internal and hidden as well as overt pressures, external or internal and hidden and overt pressures that force them to use

self-censorship. This pressure prevents them from reporting certain events or they report without harming themselves and others (Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017). Pressure prevents journalists from fulfilling their professional duties. It should be noted that when violence ends, even in post-conflict situations, self-censorship or censorship does not immediately disappear for journalists.

The media often “sin” when covering religious conflicts; Not very rarely does the term “extremist” refer to Muslims and for the most part remain silent on Christian extremists.

Moreover, we often find in the media articles about “good Christian” and “bad Muslim.” In the case of Muslims, stories are told by naming terrorists’ religion or ethnicity, and in the case of Christians, without naming them. For example, the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik does not characterize the media as a Christian terrorist, although he considers himself a Christian. In most articles, Breivik is referred to as a “mass murderer” (Aljazeera, 2023), not a Christian terrorist. Consequently, the media has formed a public opinion that terrorists are predominantly Muslims.

Several articles have been published in world media in which Breivik is characterized as a Christian terrorist (Strømmen, 2017). To refute this, the American scholar Stephen Protero wrote that Christians denounced Breivik; The scientist interpreted his action as a political act, not a religious one. However, it has been forgotten that terrorism is often used to achieve political goals.

As proof of the “sins” of the media, we can cite another example – the 1995 Srebrenica massacre (Smith, 2023). The event is widely described in the media as “the killing of 8.000 ‘Muslim’ men and boys by ‘Serbs’”; Serbian political and military leaders accused of war crimes are not referred to by the media as Christian terrorists. It is impossible to bypass the religious coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian war in our work.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is caused by several factors: religious, ethnic, national and historical. However, in our work we will focus only on religious factors. It is interesting to what extent religion affects the identity, politics and attitudes of the actors involved in this conflict.

First, several religious factors related to Islam and Judaism are important – “extreme religious Zionists” in Israel are very strict when it comes to any concessions with the Arabs. Also, Islamist groups in Palestine and the Islamic world as a whole support the need to liberate “holy” territories and places for religious reasons, and preach violence and hatred against the Jewish nation and Israel. At the same time, tensions are exacerbated by religion-based stories about the hidden religious agenda of the other side that extends to the extremist media.

It should be noted that the situation was very tense by the widespread rumor that there was a “Jewish plan” – the destruction of the Al-Aqsa mosque and the construction of a Jewish temple on its waste.

It is interesting to find an article published in 2021 where a journalist quotes the words of one of the Jews: “I have no such intention, because God will do this.” “God will extinguish the Al-Aqsa mosque and build a third temple on earth instead.” “Everything, including al-Aqsa, belongs to the Jews, because God created the world only for His holy people, the Jews” (World, Middle East, 2021). No less provocative and irritating are other articles on this issue; Among them is an article published in April 2023 (Muslim-Mirror, 2023) discussing the insult of the “Al-Aqsa Mosque” and the plan to demolish it. The journalist is clearly on the side, he does not simply tell the story, but exacerbates facts with words such as “merciless”, “cruel”, etc. – “Israeli police destroyed doors and windows to enter al-Aqsa and mercilessly attacked the pilgrim. He then reminds the reader that: “The Al-Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic place where, for decades, according to long-term international agreements, unwanted visits, prayers and rituals by non-Muslims are prohibited.” However, the Palestinians “Al- The Aqsa Mosque is only allowed for a while, which is why they fear that the foundation will lay for the division of the mosque between Muslims and Jews, just as the Ibrahim mosque was split in Hebron in the 1990s. However, Israel’s control of East Jerusalem, including the Old City, violates several principles of international law that stipulates that the occupying state does not have sovereign-

ty over the territory it occupies and cannot afford any permanence there. Make changes. Israeli soldiers broke batons, and rifles during Ramadan in the prayer hall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, causing outrage around the world. The author concludes the article with the words: “Faced with Jewish barbarism, Palestinians remain the most oppressed and brave fighters in human history” (Muslim-Mirror, 2023). With these words, the author seems to be calling for a fight against the Palestinians. It can be said that such provocative conversations in the media really reach their goal, because Palestine and Israel are in a state of war today; One of the main motives of the conflict is religious.

According to Hamas, an “al-Aqsa storm” has begun – an attack on Israel to protect a holy place; They targeted hundreds of soldiers and civilians. Interestingly, only Muslims have the right to pray in the building under the agreement of the status quo that was originally reached more than a century ago (Raine, Lau, Poole, & Meyer, 2023). In the Muslim world, many fear that the right to be the only pilgrim was violated and the mosque itself was in danger.

The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the Arab and Islamic world contributes to the growth of religious radicalism; All of this leads a large proportion of young people to bigotry and religion-inspired politics. Of course, religious beliefs often hold a sacred and central place in the lives of individuals; Shapes their identity, values and purpose. However, when freedom of expression concerns religious sensitivities, conflicts may arise. Conflict often arises when expressions, willful or unintentional, question or offend deep religious beliefs.

The 2015 Charlie Hebdo incident is a stark example of tensions between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities. The publication of a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad in a satirical journal sparked outrage in the Muslim world, leading to tragic consequences. The incident highlighted the need for societies that share respect for religious beliefs and the protection of the right to freedom of expression (Liparteliani, 2023).

Achieving a delicate balance between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities requires a nuanced approach. Governments,

civil society, and religious institutions play an important role in promoting an environment where both rights coexist harmoniously.

Incidents in Copenhagen and Stockholm, where far-right groups and individuals demonstrably burned the Holy Book of Islam – the Quran, have sparked a global debate over the delicate balance between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities (Liparteliani, 2023). An Iraqi Christian refugee living in Sweden in Stockholm burned a copy of the Quran outside the central mosque. This fact led to such a noise that it became necessary to evacuate the embassy staff after protesters stormed the building.

Two far-right activists in Copenhagen destroyed a copy of the Quran in front of the Iraqi embassy. After these incidents, Denmark and Sweden began to discuss the prohibition of religious protests accompanied by the burning of the Qur’an or any other religious text;

The Danish Foreign Ministry said – Although the protection of freedom of expression is crucial, such protests are beneficial to extremists and pose a threat to overall security and prosperity (Liparteliani, 2023).

Around these incidents, a debate began about the balance between freedom of speech and respect for religious minorities. Both countries are looking for legal means to intervene in some circumstances; Among them – in protests with the embassies. However, it was emphasized that any amendment should be made within the framework of freedom of expression protected by the Constitution.

The debate has sparked strong reactions throughout the Islamic world – diplomatic protests, condemnation of decisions, etc.;

There are conflicting opinions around granting permission for demonstrations of a religious nature.

Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democratic societies that allow people to express their opinions and views without fear of censorship or retaliation. In Western democracies, this right is reinforced as a fundamental principle that promotes open discourse, critical thinking, and the progress of society. However, insulting religious sentiments in the name of freedom leads to tension and the essence of multicultural coexistence is questioned.

The burning of religious texts, especially of such a sacred book as the Qurania, is obviously a highly provocative act, and it is highly likely to have dire consequences.

The incident in Copenhagen and Stockholm was followed by major protests and demonstrations in Islamic countries. They believed that allowing the fact of burning the Quran in itself implies implicit support for the event by the authorities and contributes to the strengthening of Islamophobia.

The geopolitical consequences of the Qur'an's burning demonstrations were deep, which appeared in Turkey's response – President Erdogan made the decision not to discuss the issue of Sweden's membership in NATO because of the encouragement of Islamophobia; Therefore, religious conflicts can have dire consequences on international relations. These incidents have shown us that religious conflicts affect the diplomatic alliance and global cooperation.

Although freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it is accompanied by a responsibility to balance individual freedoms among different communities. When issuing permits for offensive demonstrations of religious symbols, the expected results should be taken into account on a national and international scale. The government should assess both the right to expression and the potential damage that may result from it. The hardest consequences of provocative demonstrations should be taken into account.

Officials in Sweden and Denmark view the burning demonstrations of the Qur'an as legitimate, arguing that freedom of expression allowed protesters to do so.

This fundamental democratic principle allows people to express their views, even if they are controversial or offensive to some.

The Scandinavian perspective emphasizes the importance of protecting this right and that the stocks do not necessarily reflect the position of the government. However, the challenge lies in reconciling the legal right to express opinions with the potential consequences that may arise as a result of provocative actions (Liparteliani, 2023). Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Krystersson admits that the decision made by Stockholm police to allow the Qur'an burning rally is legal; However, it is advisable to understand the potential

risks of these types of demonstrations in the future.

The Prime Minister's statement shows that there are numerous applications for such promotions, indicating a growing trend that could put the country in serious danger. Despite expressing concern, Cristerson does not have specific strategies set to prevent these threats, and there has been no revision of the strategy for issuing permits for such actions (Liparteliani, 2023).

EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell also praises the issue condemning the Qur'an burning demonstrations as a blatant provocation and believes that religious hatred and intolerance are unacceptable to the EU. Borrell emphasizes the EU's commitment to promoting freedom of speech by recognizing ethical considerations (Liparteliani, 2023).

The tragic incidents of the attack on the offices of the French satirical magazine "Charlie Hebdo" in 2015 sparked a global debate over the delicate balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility. The editorial board's decision to publish the caricatures of Muhammad became the subject of judgment. Although the editorial board argued that their actions were in line with European standards of freedom of speech, the fact led to potential existential threats (Liparteliani, 2023).

The publication of caricatures of Muhammad on the pages of "Charlie Hebdo" caused the indignation of the world Muslim community. A section of society claimed that these caricatures insulted a significant part of the population for whom Muhammad is a saint. The conflict between the magazine's right to freedom of expression and perceived disrespect for religious beliefs highlighted the challenge to various cultural and religious sensitivities within democratic values (Liparteliani, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

When discussing the delicate balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility, it is crucial that European nations take care of both freedom of speech and religious rights. Joint efforts can balance processes much more; Promote harmonious coexistence between different religious

communities. Achieving a delicate balance between freedom of expression and religious sensitivities requires a nuanced approach. Governments, civil society, and religious institutions play an important role in promoting an environment where both rights

coexist harmoniously. The study of historical angles allows journalists to understand how religious narratives, political events, and socio-economic factors have been combined to create the current landscape of religious conflicts.

## References

- Boudana, S. (2015). *Le spectateur engagé*: French war correspondents' conceptions of detachment and commitment. *Journal of European Studies*, – 151 p.
- Zandberg, E., & Neiger, M. (2005). Between the nation and the profession: Journalists as members of contradicting communities. *Media, Culture & Society*, – 135 p.
- Nygren, G. (2018). Journalism in the crossfire: Media coverage of the war in Ukraine in 2014. *Journalism Studies* – 19(7). – 1061 p.
- 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). – 225 p.
- Aljazeera. (2023). Norway's far-right mass killer Breivik sues state over prison isolation. *aljazeera*. Retrieved from
- Strømmen, H. (2017). Christian Terror in Europe? The Bible in Anders Behring Breivik's Manifesto. *Journal of the Bible and its Reception*. Retrieved from: URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2017-2006>
- Smith, R. (2023, 19 10). Srebrenica massacre. Retrieved from: URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Srebrenica-massacre>
- MuslimMirror. (2023). Israeli attack on Al Aqsa Mosque: Latest move to demolish the masjid and built Solomon's Temple. *MuslimMirror*. Retrieved from: URL: <https://muslim-mirror.com/eng/israeli-attack-on-al-aqsa-mosque-latest-move-to-demolish-the-masjid-and-built-solomons-temple>
- Raine, A., Lau, C., Poole, A., & Meyer, M. (2023). Why the al-Aqsa mosque continues to be a flashpoint of tensions. *CNN*. Retrieved from: URL: [https://edition.cnn.com/middle-east/live-news/al-aqsa-storm-militants-infiltrate-israel-after-gaza-rockets-10-07-intl-hnk/h\\_39194feb91b8fd11e64aec8eb17d5f7](https://edition.cnn.com/middle-east/live-news/al-aqsa-storm-militants-infiltrate-israel-after-gaza-rockets-10-07-intl-hnk/h_39194feb91b8fd11e64aec8eb17d5f7)
- World, Middle East. (2021). Do Israeli Jews really seek to demolish Al-Aqsa Mosque? *World, Middle East*. Retrieved from: URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/do-israeli-jews-really-seek-to-demolish-al-aqsa-mosque/2171703>
- Liparteliani, Z. (2023). The effect of "Charlie Hebdo"? Media criticism. Extracted: URL: <https://t.ly/nHAJW>

submitted 15.10.2024;  
accepted for publication 29.10.2024;  
published 26.11.2024  
© Abazadze G.  
Contact: abazadze58@gmail.com