Representation of Islam and Christianity in the Swiss Media*

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Abstract
What is the role of the media in multi-religious societies? Are they aggravating latent tensions between religions or rather helping to promote mutual understanding? These are the key research questions addressed in this paper. The discussion in this paper refers to narration and framing as two theoretical approaches from communication science. The empirical findings of a media content analysis in Switzerland show strong differences between Islam and Christianity: While Christianity and its denominations are mainly presented in positive frames and positive narratives (e.g. “good mother”), the image of Islam is rather negative. Islam receives relatively high media attention, but the focus is not on Islam in Switzerland, but on Islam abroad. A number of qualitative interviews with journalists and representatives of religious organisations show that this negative image is not caused by anti-muslim attitudes, but rather the outcome of journalistic routines. The paper discusses these findings against the background of the research questions and concludes with some recommendations for journalists and representatives of religious organizations.

Keywords
media coverage of religion, representations of Islam and Christianity, media content analysis, journalism, framing, narration

1. Introduction

The mass media play an important role for the public image of Islam and other religions in western societies. Therefore, the Swiss National Research programme 58 “Religions, the State, and Society” has supported a number of...
research projects analysing the role of religions in the public sphere of media and politics. These projects were focusing on very different topics like the protection of religious minorities in a direct democracy, the role of religious difference as a problem in political discourse, the role of religious communities for plebiscites, the controversies concerning visible symbols of religious identity and the depiction of religion and religious communities on television.1

This article summarizes the key findings of one project2 that combined several research methods (a media content analysis of news formats in newspapers, radio and TV plus interviews with journalists and representatives of religious organisations) in order to find out how different religions are represented differently in the media and to identify potential causes and effects of these media representations.

2. Narration and Framing

We were relying on two related, but different theoretical backgrounds for the content analysis, theories on narration and on framing. This section focuses on narration theory and the related empirical findings. Framing is discussed in the following section.

Myths are one element of narration theory that offer an interesting concept allowing us to explain better what kind of picture the media draws of religions. Myth is not a new concept, but one that has existed since the dawn of mankind. Nevertheless, it is not yet very established in the communication sciences.

Stories are seen as something of great force (Bilandzic/Kinnebrock 2006: 102f). It is a universal phenomenon that humans put their cultural histories, ideologies, norms and values into stories and pass them on from generation to generation. Narration is a way to pass on what is deemed to be important. Stories also help ordering social life, and, through them, societies constitute common ways of living. “Communities are woven together by narratives that mediate their common understanding of good and evil” (Christians et al. 1993: 14).

The same function can be ascribed to journalism. News do not offer just facts, but also reassurance and familiarity in shared community experience (Mead 1925/1926). News as narration provides the recipient with meaning in

1 See for an overview on these projects and their abstracts: http://www.nfp58.ch/e_projekte_religion.cfm.
2 See: http://www.nfp58.ch/e_projekte_religion.cfm?projekt=112.
a way that is easily accessible and understandable. Dahlgren (1992: 14) writes: “Storytelling, in other words, is a key link which unites journalism and popular culture. It could be posited that storytelling has an epistemological status, that is, that narrative is a way of knowing the world”. Here is a link to religion: the origin of the world is a central subject for religions. Religious faith touches upon the basic existential questions and is supposed to give meaning and orientation to life. Therefore, the media can be expected to use stories to provide society with explanations concerning the mysteries of the world, but also to substantiate their beliefs, to teach about their faith and history. As has become obvious, news are culturally determined stories, and not just when dealing with religious topics (Lünenborg 2005: 154). “Consciously or unconsciously, however, journalists take their place among the generations of storytellers who tell and retell the myths of humankind.” (Lule 2001: 19). “Like myth tellers from every age, journalists can draw from the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world” (Lule 2001: 18). Journalists do not invent new stories. “They’ve got the stories already in their mind and borrow from shared narratives. Sometimes stories change, but the story doesn’t change into something totally new” (Lule 2001: 29, Bird/Dardenne 1988: 72).

What do these stories look like, which are universally shared and used by journalists and repeated again and again? Although scientists around the world agree that these stories exist, almost none of them have tried to identify them. Lule (2001) made an attempt and identified seven master myths, which stand for the basic stories shared across cultural boundaries. Although Lule admits that the list is subjective, he is convinced that the following myths appear frequently in the news.

For reasons of space we focus here on those five myths by Lule that refer to at least one archetype. Archetypes can be described in this context as agents with stereotypical features. Archetypes are defining elements of many, but not all myths. Myths exist in various cultures and historical phases and show strong differences on the detail level, but share some common features on a more general level. We do not discuss Lules two myths without archetypes (“the other world”, “the flood”).

The hero is an archetype which is found in every society in nearly identical form. “The hero is born into humble circumstances. The hero initiates a quest or journey. The hero faces battles or trials, and wins a decisive victory. The hero returns triumphant” (Lule 2001: 82). Heros give their life for something greater. They are courageous and are presented as a positive example. The people celebrate and acclaim them (Lule 2001: 81-103).

The archetype of the good mother (according to Lule) offers comfort and safety, she is friendly and amiable. “She is often acclaimed above all others,
blessed among women. The myth nurtures and nourishes and offers people a model of goodness in times when goodness may seem in short supply” (Lule 2001: 23f). The Good Mother cares about the others and takes herself a back seat. This archetype shows that individuals can make a difference to the world. (Lule 2001: 104-121).

The archetype of the victim is described by Lule (2001: 54) as follows: the “[...] innocent victim — guilty only of coincidence, bad timing, the unfortunate fate of being in the wrong place at the wrong time — is somehow killed in a hijacking, airline crash, fire, robbery, flood, or explosion. Then, through the words of the widow or others left behind, the news elevates and transforms the victim into a hero, a person whose life story is gathered and told, whose passing is marked and mourned.” The Victims therefore represents an innocent person, who unexpectedly became a victim. Victims leave behind bereaved loved ones who telling the media about the victim’s life. In their destiny people look for something good, for meaning; they see in it a sacrifice. The archetype of the victim shows that life has a meaning (Lule 2001: 41-59).

The archetype of the scapegoat tells what happens to those who ignore social norms and values. “Myths of the scapegoat ridicule and degrade. They vilify and shun. People — and societies — seem to need scapegoats to blame and abuse” (Lule 2001: 69). The scapegoat represents evil and guilt. Scapegoats act irrationally, without thinking. They are blamed for mistakes which affecting a whole group, firm or society, and concrete sanctions are demanded (Lule 2001: 60-80).

Another figure representing an archetype is the trickster. Lule describes tricksters as follows: “The myth of the trickster often portrays a crude and stupid figure, half animal and half human. He is senseless and unreflective and brings on himself and others all manners of suffering. He is a subject of mockery, contempt and ridicule” (Lule 2001: 24). In this analysis, the trickster archetype was further differentiated into two basically different characters: the rebel and the villain. The villain can be characterized comparable to a trickster as an aggressive, stupid person who is hurting others. On the other side the rebel, comparable to Robin Hood, is a person who engages in illegal activities, who spoofs the authorities, but doesn’t harm anyone.

Lule (2001) presents an example for every myth and every archetype. However, his qualitative study is based on the whole coverage of an event, which means that he tries to identify the myths over the whole media lifespan of an issue and not just in a single article. In our research, we decided to focus on single articles and identify master myths and corresponding figures archetypes on that level.
In addition to narration theory, we were using framing as a complementary theoretical approach from communication science. What are “frames”? Frames are “interpretative packages” (Gamson/Modigliani 1989) that provide information on the evaluation of a media issue (Entman 1993). Dahinden (2006:193f) describes the function of frames as follows: “they structure information in form of abstract, not content related interpretation patterns, which reduce complexity and lead the selection of new information” (Dahinden 2006: 193f, own translation). For the content analysis the following seven generic frames were defined in a top-down process: conflict, terrorism, morality, religion, personalization, economy, and science/progress. This frame typology is similar to the one by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and operationalised by a number of questions that ask for explicit key words of these frames in media items, that have be answered by the coders (e.g., conflict frame: Does the story reflect disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries?).

3. Research Questions

The project was investigating the following three research questions:

1. How are the various religions presented in the mass media? What are the differences between the media representation of the Islam and Christianity?
2. How are religious organizations (e.g. Christian denominations, Muslim communities etc.) working together with the media? Are there any explicit media and public relations strategies?
3. How are the media working together with religious organizations? Are there any specific routines and strategies concerning the coverage of religion in the media?

The first research question was investigated by means of a quantitative content analysis of a selected number of mass media formats. The second and third research questions focus on the relationship between the two key agents (representatives of religious organizations and journalists). Qualitative interviews were conducted with both groups in order to get some insights into the specific views and perspectives on this relationship. The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to obtain some background information on the production process of religion(s) as a media issue.
4. Media Content Analysis: Methodology

The first research question on the media representation of religions was investigated by means of a media content analysis with the following methodological features. The sampling included 11 news media outlets (1 TV station, 2 radio stations and 8 newspapers) and their coverage of religious issues during one year (December 2007 to November 2008). In a first step, a total of 3742 articles and radio/tv items were analyzed that contained at least one religious word. If the media piece explicitly addressed the issue of religion, at least as a minor topic (meaning 30% of the article was on religion or it contained one main religious agent), it was included in a more detailed analysis. Some additional information about the methodology is given below in the sections on theories and empirical findings and can also be found in a separate publication (Koch 2009).

5. Results

How are the various religions presented in the mass media? What are the differences between the media representation of the Islam and Christianity? We will first present our findings on the different archetypes in the narrations, and next on the framing. The findings on the archetypes are found in table 1. It shows that the religions are presented in very different archetypes. The categorization of the religions in this table follows the naming in the media which differentiates between religions on the highest level of abstraction (e.g. Islam) and the related subgroups (e.g. Shiites).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>Narrative archetypes</th>
<th>scape-goat (guilty one)</th>
<th>hero</th>
<th>villain</th>
<th>trickster (rebel)</th>
<th>good mother</th>
<th>victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity (N=180)</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholicism (N=519)</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestantism (N=129)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam (N=245)</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia Islam (N=31)</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism (N=92)</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism (N=96)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sects (N=71)</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In comparison with the other religions, Christianity and its denominations (Catholics, Protestants, etc.) are most often represented with the positive archetype of a “good mother”. This is also true for Buddhism, which is complemented with additional positive archetypes (“hero, trickster”). For Judaism, the archetype of the “victim” remains key in the media.

In contrast to these positive images, Islam and its denominations are more often represented in negative archetypes (“guilty one, villain”), which is comparable to the representation of the heterogeneous group of “sects”. One explanation for this negative representation of Islam is the given focus on foreign news, that is to say, on Islam abroad with its numerous negative news events (e.g. civil wars, suicide attacks etc.) and the relative neglect of the domestic and peaceful Islam in Switzerland.

Next we present the findings on framing. The empirical results showed that the dominant frames were ethics, conflict and personalization. Rather surprisingly, a religious frame in a narrower sense, with explicit references to religious activities and convictions was very rare (24.3% on average for all religions). This last point was also confirmed in a detailed analysis of the various religions: only Christianity and its denominations were presented relative often in this religious frame (41.5%). This result contrasts with Islam (15.8% media items with religious frame). In other words: Islam was rather presented as a political group, without further information about the ideological, ritual or subjective dimensions of this religion.

6. Explanatory Factors: The Role of Representatives of Religious Organisations and Journalists

How can the findings of this content analysis be explained? What is the role of representatives of religious organisations and journalist in the production process of religion(s) as a media issue? How are religious organizations (e.g. Christian denominations, Muslim communities etc.) working together with the media? And also the other way round: Are there any specific routines and strategies of the media concerning their coverage of religion? In order to get some answers on these questions, we conducted qualitative interviews with both groups that should help to get some insights into the specific views and perspectives on this relationship from both sides.

Concerning the religious organisations, we interviewed a total of 21 representatives that were in charge of media relations. The number of interview partners per religion represented roughly its distribution in the Swiss population. Therefore, the majority of the interview partners were representatives of two large Christian denominations (5 Catholics, 6 Protestants) and 3 interview
partners were in charge of media relations in Muslim organizations. The results of these interviews showed that only the two large Christian denominations had explicit public relations strategies and also the necessary resources (finances, employees etc.). All other religious organizations lacked the resources for professional public relations. This is also true for the several Muslim communities in Switzerland that are faced with additional challenges: there are several Muslim organizations at the national level that compete with each other. Furthermore, due to the migration background of most Muslims, there is only a very limited number of representatives who are able to give a media interview in one of the national languages without any language problems.

Concerning the media, we interviewed a total of 35 journalists working in TV, radio and newspapers. These journalists were working for the largest media outlets (those also analysed in the content analysis), and were producing newspaper articles and radio/tv items on religious issues at least from time to time. The results can be summarized as follows: religion is not treated in a different, specialized way, but is just one media issue among others. The journalists agreed that religion does not receive extensive media coverage, but is rather a neglected issue. One reason for this neglect of religion in the media is the fact that most religious “events” (e.g. ceremonies) have little news value such as conflict, surprise, prominence, etc. Another reason is the lack of knowledge and specialization of journalists with regard to one or several religions (Dahinden/Wyss 2009).

7. Discussion, Recommendations and Further Research

The empirical findings can be summarized in five points. We will discuss them on the background of additional information and similar studies and give some recommendations for future research.

First, the size of media coverage of religions does not match to the quantitative distribution of religions in Switzerland. According to the Federal Office of Statistics (Baumann/Stolz 2007: 40) Switzerland is still a predominantly Christian society with 74.9% of the population belonging to one of the two large Christian denominations (41.8% Roman Catholics and 33% Protestants), while only 4.3% of its population is Muslim. Media coverage on Catholicism is slightly underrepresented in comparison to the population (33.5% of media items with explicit reference) and Protestantism is strongly underrepresented (only 10% media presence). But Islam receives relatively high media attention in comparison to its number in the Swiss population. With 30.7% of media items explicitly referring to Islam, Islam is strongly over-represented.
Second, the geographical focus of the media attention differs between Christianity and Islam: The coverage of Swiss media is on Christianity in Switzerland, while coverage on Islam pays most attention to Muslims abroad. Related to that, Islam remains primarily a confrontation with the “Other” or the “Foreigner”. Therefore, reporting on Islamic issues usually focuses on problems, controversy and often also on politics.

Thirdly, the journalistic reports (television journalism and news journalism in the print media) differ between Christianity and Islam. While Christianity and its denominations are mainly presented in positive frames and positive narratives (e.g. “good mother”), the image of Islam is rather negative. Islam and its subgroups are more often presented as negative archetypes (“guilty one, villain”) than other religions.

Fourthly, the media under review provide some knowledge about Christianity, but rarely show an in-depth exploration of Islam, despite the multifaceted nature of this religion.

Fifthly, Muslim agents are rarely people taken from civil society, but mainly religious and political agents who are presented in a mostly passive role. Thus, as is the case in reporting on ethnic minorities, television reports tend to be about Muslims, that is to say, Muslims are rarely allowed to speak for themselves. This fact is not exactly conducive to their social integration.

Sixthly, (and a possible explanation of the points above): the interviews with the journalist showed that religion is not covered extensively in the media, but is rather a neglected issue. The knowledge about religions (including Christianity) is relatively limited, and the situation is even worse for immigration religions like Islam. In addition, the interviews with the Muslim representatives showed a lack of resources and organisational infrastructure for media relations.

How do these results match with the findings of other studies? Most of the studies with media content analysis focus on one religious group, the majority on Islam. Media in the United States (Awass 1996), Australia (Manning 2006), the United Kingdom (Poole 2000, 2006, Richardson 2006), the Netherlands (D’Haenens / Bink 2005), Denmark (Hussain 2000), Germany (Thof ern 1996, Hafez 2002), Switzerland (Schranz/Imhof 2002, Abdel Aziz 2005, Reichmuth 2006) and other countries have been analyzed for their coverage of Islam and news stories related to it — most of them after September 11, 2001, however, sometimes also looking at coverage from before 2001. What is common in all these studies is a noticeable increase in coverage after the attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. Furthermore the research shows that Islam is usually a topic in the foreign news section of the media. Coverage of Islam is usually strongly tied to political issues. Islam is mostly seen in connection with conflicts, terrorism, war and other forms of violence. Everyday life of
Muslims, cultural or historical aspects of their faith is hardly part of the coverage. Background information is rare, except for the analyzed Dutch media. If Islam is dealt with in domestic news, it usually touches on subjects such as integration of migrants, ethnic relations, fundamental questions concerning questions on religion and faith, education, crime and extremism. In sum, there is a general agreement of our results with the content analysis from other countries.

Without wanting to make any normative demands on media professionals or religious representatives, the following additional recommendations could possibly bring about change to the current (re)presentation of Islam in Swiss media (Jecker 2011).

• Efforts are needed from both sides (religion and media) in order to strengthen and improve the representation of religions in the Swiss media. A key area of action is training and education of the (semi-)professionals on both sides.

• While the two large Christian denominations are well organized in their media relations, the representatives of Muslim organizations need at least minimal training for their public and media relations.

• Journalists need some education on basic and also specialized knowledge about Islam and other religions (including Christianity). In addition, they need quick and simple access to representatives of religious organizations: this could be provided by a representative address list.

• While the media coverage on Christianity can rely on a shared and well-known cultural background knowledge the media coverage on Islam follows different mechanisms similar to those found in reporting about immigrants, and thus results in routine negativism. These mechanisms are not caused by explicit anti-Muslim strategies or xenophobic intentions, but rather by unconscious routine behaviour. Overcoming these routines requires a conscious learning effort and more reflexivity by the media.

• Islam is currently often presented as an exotic and political conflict issue. This representation could be given another dimension if other news factors such as cultural proximity, personalization and predictability (e.g. routine coverage of religious rituals) were given more attention. These news factors are not linked to conflicts and often used for the media coverage of Christianity.

• The suggested changes in the selection of news factors should result in a different media representation, with a stronger emphasis on the daily life of (Swiss) Muslims, which is currently only a marginal topic.

• Against this background, we recommend that all religious groups that are not satisfied with the quantity and / or quality of their media presence
should be motivated and encouraged to present themselves and their culture (values, positions on contested issue, lifestyle etc.) in the media. Rather than being a passive object of the media, religious groups should actively develop their media relations in order to have a say in their media representation.

Due to the limitations of the current studies, further research is needed. The limitations of the results presented in this paper are the following: We were focusing on the mass media representation in one country (Switzerland) during a limited period of time. Still, our findings show strong parallels with studies in other Western countries which cover longer and other periods. However, further research is needed on the role of different media (online media, social media etc.) for the exchange within and between various religions. In addition, further internationally comparative research is needed with countries with a majority population of Muslims (e.g. Turkey, Egypt). These comparative studies could shed some light on the question whether these results are limited to the specific situation of Christianity as majority religion and Islam as minority religion or whether these findings can be considered as a specific example of the more general conflict between any majority religion vs. any minority religion. On that background, the given focus of most communication studies on the media representation of Islam should be overcome and complemented by the integration of additional religions in the empirical analysis (e.g. Judaism, Buddhism, Atheism) in different majority and minority situations.

References


cus, 19(3), 87-102.


