

The conflict between religion and media has deep roots

*A recent report into the place of religion in public life presented a gloomy picture of the relationship between media and religion. Whilst media misrepresentations usually concern Muslims, the most vocal complainers are Christians. **Abby Day** argues the reason for this may lie in more fundamental, ancient and even ontological concerns.*



Image: Flickr, Tom

Recent attention to mainstream media reveals that relations between religion and media appear to be breaking down. A **two-year investigation** into the role of religion in public life reported that virtually everyone involved expressed concern about how religion and belief is portrayed by the media. That's perhaps not surprising, considering that most who participated voluntarily in the investigation probably did so because they were concerned.

That concern is being further explored by a new **All Party Parliamentary Group on religious literacy in the media**, led by Bolton MP Yasmin Qureshi. Their stated objectives are: 'to work for greater religious literacy in both media and politics; to foster a better understanding and representation of religion in media coverage of news and culture, noting the priority of religion as a prime motivator of individuals and communities; to encourage more diversity in media representation of religion; to work towards a Seventh Public Purpose for the BBC in Charter Renewal: to promote religious literacy'.

Religious representation in the media

There are a number of failings with how religion is represented in the mainstream media, many well documented. The media needs to be held to account, for example, for incorrect stories about particular religious groups. The Independent Press Standards Organisation needs to be tougher and make sure that corrections and retractions are given weight equal to the original erroneous article.



The unfair treatment of Muslims by certain journalists is another failing of the media. In particular that media attention to religion often consists of stories about 'extremist' Muslims, ignoring the high levels of Christian extremism that could also be described as such.

The story of good Christian/bad Muslim is told both by expression and omission, by naming, or not naming, the religion or ethnicity of terrorists. For example, Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik is not described by the media as a Christian terrorist, although he **self-identified as a Christian and would-be protector of European Christianity**. The American religious scholar Stephen Prothero points out that **Christians swiftly denounced him**, describing his actions as political and not religious, a generosity not extended to Muslims who murder for political-religious reasons.

The **massacre at Srebrenica** in 1995 is another example. This is widely described by media as the killing of 8,000 'Muslim' men and boys by 'Serbs', without noting their religion as Christians. The Serb military and political leaders charged with war crimes are not referred to as Christian terrorists. That is apparently not 'the story'.

The decision of how to shape a 'story' is driven by underlying cultural norms. Here the unspoken story, that seems to be a national trope, is "Muslims are bad and Christians are good" and the 'nation' – or white Englishness – must be protected. It was interesting that The Mirror noted David Cameron repeated for the second year in his annual Christmas message that **Britain was a 'Christian country'**.

It is somewhat surprising then that Christians who are generally treated favourably by the media and privileged in the public sphere (from the representation of Bishops in the House of Lords, to Church of England run state schools and the broadcast of Sunday morning church services on the BBC), are so quick and professionally slick in defending themselves, arguing that they are a badly neglected and misunderstood section of society.

Indeed while media misrepresentations most often concern Muslims, the most vocal complainers are Christians. Stuart and Ahmed **conducted** a detailed media analysis of three best-selling British daily newspapers: the left-leaning *Guardian*, right-leaning *Daily Telegraph*, and right-leaning tabloid, *Daily Mail*. Their analysis covered reports of 'claims' against a public or private organization by individuals on religious grounds. They found that between 2000 and 2010, Christians comprised 67 per cent of reported claims covered by the media, Muslims 31 percent, and the other main religious groups less than 10 percent. Christians also participated in most (96 percent) of the discrimination claims.

Deeper conflict

With Christianity so dominant and relatively accepted by the media, a look to more fundamental, ancient and even ontological concerns can help explain the Christian anxiety with the media.

First, I suggest from my experience both as a former journalist and, currently, as a sociology of religion scholar, that **each side would claim it speaks 'the truth'**. Media and religion are institutions largely composed of ardent, hard-working people who believe in what they do. 'Belief' is understood here as something deeper and more significant than just signing up to a series of statements about the existence of gods or press regulations but believing in gods or press standards means trusting those sources and acting in specific ways because of that belief.

In practice, both religious and media people often fail to do that. Their failures do not prevent them from clinging to their idea that the truth they speak is sacred, especially when they understand 'sacred' as something that is, as Veikko Anttonen has argued, **'non-negotiable'**. When two different groups of people each claim that their truth is non-negotiable, problems are inevitable. What is needed is a form of religious literacy that Adam Dinham describes as focusing less on an exchange of facts and more on a **better quality of conversation**.



To complicate the conversation further, I suggest, is a belief held by both journalists and religious people that they have the true 'story', as if the 'story' is already out there, pre-packaged and simply awaiting uncovering. In practice, the 'truth' is composed of multiple stories. Media and religion will choose, and create, one. It's what's called 'an angle'.

The second area of potential conflict between religion and media pertains to 'the source'. My **multi-dimensional analysis of religion** concluded that it is more often the 'source' rather than the 'content' that divides religious and non-religious people. Journalists will often call upon 'experts' to comment on a story because they believe that knowledge can and is created through education, training and practice. Such experts are typically schooled in universities or academies of some kind. Religious people may view those secular sources with suspicion and deride the research that backs the experts' claims.

The final area of conflict is, I suggest, the claim to legitimate authority. Not only does media and religion tell their chosen story, they explain why the events happened. Media professionals see themselves as legitimate commentators on what happens and why. Particularly when events are surprising or disturbing, journalists, columnists and leader writers rush to offer explanations and, taking a quasi-religious role, try to shape chaos into order. Such matters are traditionally seen as the province of the religious leader, acting with a prophetic voice.

The media calls this process 'analysis'; religions call it '**theodicy**'. How can people explain why terrorists kill innocent people in the name of religion? A humanistic explanation will focus on human-oriented details such as mental health, ideology or social conditions by way of explanation. A religious (or at least monotheistic) explanation may try to explain why an all-powerful, all-loving God would permit such things to happen, and consider what a proper religious response would be. This **may include** praying, reaching out to others on inter-faith networks and, ultimately, converting people from Islam to Christianity.

The differences and areas of conflict between religion and the media appear irreconcilable. They could, however, be improved when each side recognises the other's equally defensible claim.

About the author



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