

Religion, Media and Perspectivism

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My lecture on March 1 will draw on the social psychology of inter-group dynamics and on the social theory of conflict communication to examine the role of news media in constructing group images of the self and of the other. It will be illustrated by some of the crises that have occurred between Muslims and Christians during the opening decade of the new millennium, and which have negatively affected each's images of the other.

First, I will argue that media contribute to the social construction of religion, and hence that they, in their coverage of events and portrayal of religion, have the power to "allow" a religion to "become [what it is] in every day social life" (Hart, Turner, & Knupp 1980, p.257). Religious beliefs and practices are viewed within the social understanding of these religions, which is highly mediated by the media. Furthermore, believers from both faiths, in their interaction - whether constructive or otherwise - are dependant at least partially on media for the formation of their understanding of their own religion as well as of the religion of the other group, and for their perception of how the other group interacts with and views them.

We might even go so far as to say that religion and media are converging these days, as media technologies provide convenient outlets for religious preachers and groups to spread their faith and enable religious communities to elaborate and present their side of the story. In short, for many Muslims and Christians, the religious "other" is mediated and constructed by the media. This has been happening on a global scale since 9/11 and prior to that date on a local level in countries like Iraq (after 2003), Lebanon (since the civil war of 1975-1994), Nigeria (Hackett 2003), and other countries. Furthermore, some crises have been largely instigated by the media, as was the case with the Danish Cartoons.

Second, I will explore the implications of the idea that religion and religious events are popular 'commodities' from which popular cultural products are created by

both Arab and international media. The popularity of media products based on Islam has increased with the rise of the Arab media and the greater interest in Islam following 9/11. This is partially attributed to the religious identity of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and the statements made by Osama bin Ladin. In addition, the dualistic view of the world promoted by members of both religious communities, including the then president George W. Bush on the eve of his attack on Afghanistan and later on Iraq, lent religious overtones to the wars, and helped to give a religious framework to political and economic war.

The selection of news items is intrinsically biased towards drama, negativity and conflict. If news media portrayals of shared experiences and interactions between different religious groups and individuals impact the ways in which these experiences are understood and shaped by members of the larger communities, it is not surprising that even our understandings of interdependency are affected. We all deal with a "perceived" or "constructed" other, and the media coverage of events suggests ways in which the interests of our own group are either threatened or protected by members of the other group.

Third, I will suggest that, for media to play a positive role in developing understanding rather than deepening division amongst members of different communities, they have to downplay ideology and adopt the principle of perspectivism, in which each group's perceived identity and point of view is equally represented. Perspectivism focuses mainly on the existence of various legitimate perspectives on the same issues. If members of religious groups are communicating and constructing their images through the media, special attention has to be paid to media messages regarding the self and the other and how groups relate and interact. The image projected by the media is clearly ideological and close to the cultural expectations of its social context. No conflict communication would

be doable if all parties do not admit and appreciate others' perspectives on the same issues.

In an attempt to increase appreciation and understanding of the media's role in mediating inter-group relations and understanding, I shall then invite consideration of the few media outlets (such as *The Guardian* newspaper) which seem to provide wider, more numerous and more representative perspectives on reported events. In intergroup conflict and communication, individuals represent their respective groups in situations where "the individual's identity is supplanted by issues of group identity" (Folger, Poole & Stutman 2005, p.6-7). There is a perceived connectedness and a real connectedness that are strengthened and constructed through the media amongst members of the same community. Perspectivism can help us to realise that members of different groups are also connected, and depend on each other for their survival, security and welfare as well as for the very way in which they define themselves and see their differences from others.

References

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