

Religion and Media in the Era of Information Technology

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In the last few decades we have witnessed a growing close knit working among scholars of Religion and Media personnel and media of one kind or another. From sacred books and archaic languages to cassette-sermons, video clippings and the internet, humanity is marching from progress to progress. Thanks to media we are in a better position to make our lessons and sessions more appealing to today's information savvy generation. In India a country suffused with religions and media there is an urgency to promote various studies on media and religion.

Today, the whole world is changing rapidly. In the name of religion even war and killing too is carried out. Terror and tension are created in an increasing measure and therefore a more conscious dialogue among believers and journalists and everyone connected with media has to take place. How can media and religion together promote tolerance, peace, harmony and compassion?

Dignity and respect for the human person

Will Media succeed in taking full care of the people aspects? Religion touches upon the finer issues of human aspects. It is worth recalling that it was only during 1932-1936 while conducting of the Hawthorne experiment at Western Electric Company, Chicago that those management thinkers for the first time got a feel of the human aspect. They were mystified with findings of the experiment. The purpose of the experiment was to study the effect of changes in light intensity and noise level on productivity of workers. The electrical assembly shop had been divided into two parts, one reference group and the other an experimental group. It was observed that whether they increased or decreased the variable parameters, productivity always went up. It was confirmed without any doubt that "treating workers as meaningful human beings instead of a cog in the production system was the reason behind continuous increase in productivity."

A short journey into Japan will reveal another interesting fact. During the World War II (1939-1945) the economy of Japan was totally shattered and atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought a deadly blow to the economy. Will Japan revive its economy? Japan stunned the whole world with the spectacular rise of Japanese industry in 1960s and 1970s. What was the secret behind such astounding progress? To the amazement of researchers from all over the world and particularly from the US who went to Japan to study the top secret of such amazing progress, it was evident that the humble “quality circle” was doing “miracles at ground root level.” What is a quality circle? A quality circle is a group of 8 to 10 workers from the same work area, who meet periodically on voluntary basis to discuss, analyze and solve problems and issues related to their work area. They make use of seven tools of quality circles: brainstorming, histogram, charts etc. to formalize ideas and thoughts of group members. The Japanese people believe that Human Resource is their best Resource. At the core of the quality circles in Japan there was the firm belief of managements in Japan. The Managements in Japan were well aware that their employees to be intelligent and capable human beings, who know their jobs and work areas the best. What made the people to do wonders in their work areas? They enjoyed respect and their human dignity was upheld. This was the secret of their success mantra.

Factual, fair and balanced reporting

In the context of rapid increase in media report on religion, it is necessary that journalists focus on factual fair and balanced reporting. At times more harm than good is achieved through some reporting. Instead of reproducing stereotypes, prejudices and hate speech media can assert its role in informing and forming its audience. The focus has to be on getting the facts right. It is journalists and editors responsibility to shun stirring up tensions, stimulating confrontation and intolerance. To arrive at a factual, fair and balanced writing and reporting one has to have an objective knowledge of religion and thorough information on journalistic skills. What makes a religion really a religion? What is the core belief of the followers of a particular religion? What are the main religious practices? What news gathering tools are most commonly used? What professional norms guide editors and journalists

when reporting on religion? What makes exceptional coverage? Journalists need to pay extra attention to what type of journalistic work fuels intolerance.

Most people engaged in Media are aware that they have the responsibility to represent different social groups accurately and fairly in order to establish good relationships with people with wide range of identities. Training and Formation of journalists is a must. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI had reminded the means of communication the need to respect the common good and human dignity and to commit themselves to let the walls of hostility that still divides humanity.”¹

Can media take up the challenge of letting religions to lead the way to wise solution of problems? “The religions in reality are not the problem but part of the solution” is what Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for interreligious Dialogue, has affirmed. Media personnel can communicate to the world the increased interest in dialogue between believers of various religions.

Focus on real audience

The best service media can offer to the public is informing the public about the issues and events as they occur and interpreting reality in such a way that provides a platform for a constructive public dialogue about matters of public concern. Journalistic practice contributes to the way media represents religion. Impediments to good reporting on religion are: lack of sufficient knowledge - reinforcement stereotypes in media comes from inadequate knowledge of religion. Shortage of in-house training, pitiable financial state of the media, over-loading of reporters, not having sufficient time to prepare reports are other factors that lower the quality of reporting. The Spiritual manipulation of mass media² is a very thought **provoking** write up and in a humoristic way the facts are highlighted in the article. Religion and media³, an impossible pair **was another** interesting title of an article in Italian which I read with added curiosity. It began with: ‘in my Journal there is no God’. The journalists and workers of information gathered together at Losanna for a Convention. They had also an interesting round table conference around the theme the presence or better the absence of religious questions from the “normal” or “general” sources of information.

Ethical and Value based reporting

When reporting on religion, journalists should be encouraged to apply universal ideas of truth, goodness, beauty, accurateness, responsibility, trustworthiness and fairness. Worthy, responsible, reliable and ethical media contributes to promoting dialogue, peace and harmony in the world. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church in no. 164 affirms: “The principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, *the common good* indicates ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily’”.⁴ The well prepared media presentations can offer better space for people of different religions to understand each other and to move ahead with dialogue, peace and harmony.

Communication strategies for Religion

A delicate and committing task for the leaders of religions is to determine what communication strategies will turn out to be fruitful to offer an objective and awe-inspiring presentation of religions? It is indeed a very delicate and committing task to find the languages to speak to the society and to facilitate web communication.

Today we need to promote a constructive critical approach to media-related assumptions bearing in mind that media and religion are two distinctive fields in their subject matter and approach. Richard Fox in his book *Critical Reflections on Religion and Media in Contemporary Bali* affirms that “more nuanced attention to problems of media will have serious implications for how we think about the study of religions, past and present.”⁵

Courses on Media and Religion are becoming more and more part of University syllabus. Media uses time and again religion to build the image of a leader. We need to be alert to when and how religious messages are created, produced and disseminated through the media. Media plays a significant role in the construction of a religious leader’s image. We are living in a world of obvious media omnipresence

text messages and tweets, daily discussion points, movie trailers, and 24 hour talking heads transmissions of our speedily receding present seem to be all around us. Precisely for this reason, we need to be awake and alert to understand how our media present, represent, produce, shape and remake what we comprehend “religion” to be.

A careful study of different cultures, social groups and individuals is a must to explore how each of these understand, mediate and revise what “religion” is. Internet blogs, websites, radio shows, the printing press and book publications can all be studied from this perspective. The fundamental question is how religion is plotted, imagined and reshaped in and through various historical and contemporary settings and persons.

Media and Religion in an active dialogue

Media personnel can use a dialogue –oriented approach to religion, strengthen network of relationships, contextualize facts, study and explore documents, learn national and international codes of ethic, interview believers of different religions, sieve facts from opinions and consider opinion as relevant. Editors and others experts in media can play a significant role to enhance media performance.

RAI is Italy’s public national broadcaster. “Rai Italia is the international television service of Rai Internazionale, a subsidiary of RAI Italy’s public national broadcaster. Rai Italia operates a television network that broadcasts around the world via 3 localized feeds. Programming features a mix of news, discussion-based programmes, drama and documentaries as well as sports coverage.”⁶ RAI has the good habit of inviting members of religious and ethnic groups and experts on various topics to come to the newsroom. Another praiseworthy initiative of RAI is how it boosts the morale of the public in moments of public stress and pain by broadcasting of Films and presenting the lives of great personalities.

Towards a more responsible presentation of Religion

Religious leaders can offer professional advice and supply information to media personnel. A more responsible presentation of religion demands that the media

personnel take pains to understand religions well. It requires not only a theoretical knowledge but also constant contacts with believers of different religions. Why do we have so many stereotypes presented in media? Where do they come from? Studies have confirmed that these stereotypes appeal to common mass media values that are not necessarily compatible with a responsible portrayal of religion. Edward Caudill, professor of journalism, writes about how stories are presented under the guise of adhering to core journalistic values of fairness and ‘presenting both sides’⁷. How can media rouse the interest of its viewers? How can newspapers collect a larger readership? The viewership of Television shows and the readership of Newspapers can be increased with stories with a high potential for conflict and drama. Such stories help to generate profit and to retain readership but fail to present a realistic understanding of religion.

Some Journalists have affirmed that they understand Christianity because of its popularity. ⁸ “Michael Wakelin, former head of Religion and Ethics for the BBC, describes how journalists often assume that they understand Christianity simply because of its popularity. As a result, reporters are often more willing to ‘take swipes’ at Christianity in newspaper and television reports, while other religions are treated with more caution⁹.”

Conclusion

The finer human aspects are an expression of a nurtured spirituality. A responsible media representation of religion will certainly arouse awe and wonder the genuine attitudes that a believer assumes in his/her encounter with the divine. Media and religion can inform, enrich and enhance each other. **Many Universities around the world are already offering courses on media and religion. Some are developing inclusive journalism curricula that better prepare students to face the challenges in the present world. A few are organizing more post graduate training for media and religious personnel.** Each and every person and educational institutions in particular have to work with commitment to foster a lively and lovely dialogue between media and religion.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going and quickly all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it has to be with religion and media, once they both enter into a dynamic dialogue and engage in a responsible representation they can offer to the Human Family a taste for what is the real essence and beauty of religion and media.

(Footnotes)

- 1 Zenit.org 21 maggio 2005 (accessed on 16/11/2015)
- 2 <http://it.paperblog.com/la-manipolazione-spirituale-dei-mass-media-1272278/> (accessed on 17/10/2015).
- 3 <http://riforma.it/it/articolo/2015/04/10/religioni-e-media-una-coppia-impossibile>
- 4 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html (accessed on 13/1/2016).
- 5 <http://www.brill.com/critical-reflections-religion-and-media-contemporary-bali>
- 6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rai_Italia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rai_Italia (accessed on 10/12/2015).
- 7 [3] Caudill, E. (2010). Intelligently designed: creationism's news appeal. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(1), 84-99.
- 8 Cf. Media Portrayals of Religion: Christianity, <http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/religion/media-portrayals-religion-christianity> (accessed on -6 December 2015).
- 9 Bailey, M. (2010). Media, religion and culture: an interview with Michael Wakelin. *Journal of Media Practice*, 11(2), 185-189.