Religion in the Media: A Linguistic Analysis

By S. Al-Azami (2016)

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At a time when religious discourse is very much at the forefront of research in the field of media studies, Al-Azami's book *Religion in the Media: A Linguistic Analysis* is a welcome addition which – through a linguistic prism – addresses a variety of concerns frequently voiced regarding the uncomfortable relationship between media and religion and the problems currently besetting it. Inspiration for the book arose from a conspicuous desire to establish convergence and complementarity between Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and audience-response research, particularly through conducting linguistic analyses in tandem with testing audience response to media representations of religion. Noting the impossibility of covering all religions in his investigation, Al-Azami decided to study the three Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – justifying this by the contention that the three religions share beliefs, concepts and history to a significant extent (for instance, history of human creation and life after death). While Christianity was settled on for being the religion of the overwhelming majority of the population in the United Kingdom, the author's choice of Islam and Judaism was primarily based on the account that these two religions received significant media attention as a result of (a) the large-scale immigration in the aftermath of World War II, (b) the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East in current world politics, and (c) the rise of terror attacks in Western countries (p. 7).

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Al-Azami analysed media representations of the three religions in the UK media by looking at multi-platform genres of news media, documentaries, fictional drama episodes and readers' comments on online versions of certain newspapers. Following linguistic analyses, he carried out an audience-response study to examine how followers of the three religions and those with no religion react to the representations manifested in the analysed material. The book also contains interesting reflections on the intricacies of face-to-face reactions vis-à-vis online comments where individuals can use pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

The arc of Al-Azami's initial chapter may be sketched very generally as divided into two segments that provide the inquiry's conceptual framework: an introductory part which the author uses to embark on the motif of researching religion in the media from a linguistic perspective, and the remainder of the chapter which engages with previous literature to situate Al-Azami's study within a wider politico-religious context. Before venturing into the treatment of his data, Al-Azami introduces the scope of the study and its terminologies but also sets forth the contour of how he intends to approach the three pillars of his study – *Language*, *Media* and *Religion*. To substantiate his argument to come, this chapter prepares the reader to take up the media bias question by providing a brief list of studies that problematise media representations and establish evidence of the excruciating connection between media and religion.

Chapter 2 establishes bona fide links between discourse analysis and media representation of religions as an ultra-modern area in academic research. The author firstly relates to Faircloughian CDA, drawing on Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2003) and Van Dijk's (2001) works in the area. He then turns to present the readers with the second analytical framework that uses Halliday and Hasan's (1976) concept of *Register* composed of *field*, *tenor* and *mode*. In this chapter, the author analyses six newspaper articles from the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*, two on each of the studied religions (i.e. Christianity, Judaism and Islam) encompassing both news reporting and opinion columns. The author then analyses two documentaries – one on Islam and one on Christianity – appearing on Channel 4 and the BBC, and a documentary on the Jewish community in Manchester broadcast on ITV. Finally, Al-Azami analyses one fictional drama on each religion – two episodes of a BBC drama on MI5 representing Christianity and Islam, and an episode of the adult American cartoon series *Family Guy* broadcast on the BBC. However, it is worth pointing out that the ITV documentary on the Jewish community is focused on the Jewish lifestyle rather than the religion itself, and thus the inability to find a documentary on Judaism as a religion becomes an easily identifiable lacuna in the book. In a sense, the

inclusion of a variety of media formats turns out to be both a strength and a weakness.

The highly engaging analyses in this chapter present heterogeneous stocks of knowledge drawing on Fairclough's conceptualisation of internal and external relations. On the one hand, the author analyses vocabulary and grammar within the text with an eye on semasiology of words in terms of action, representation and identification. On another level, he shifts attention to external elements more associated with the social effects and personal beliefs of text producers. The author also puts an interesting spin on the conceptualisation of *Register*, using the analytical tools of *field* 'the subject matter of the text ... [and] the activities involved'; *tenor* 'the roles of participants in an interaction and ... its relative status of power'; and *mode* as 'the channel of communication' (p. 41). However, much of the CDA part of analysis in this chapter focuses on the lexico-grammatical component of journalistic language without addressing some of the visible argumentation fallacies that could have been explored further.

Expectedly and in conformity with relevant previous investigations, Al-Azami's fine-grained analyses reveal negative attitudes towards the three studied religions. Nonetheless, his thesis provides additional evidence to relevant narratives insofar as it elucidates how the three religions are not demonised in the same way. The analyses in this chapter uncovers that 'Islam was getting the most negative press followed by Christianity and Judaism' (p. 202). The author convincingly argues that Islam and Muslims were stereotyped through criticisms of their religiosity in matters such as gender segregation, women's rights and clothing, and interpretation of Quranic verses, let alone associating the religion itself with terrorism. Christianity and Christians, meanwhile, are stereotyped as demonising homosexuals and being anti-Jewish. Finally, the Jewish culture – not Judaism as a religion – receives negative attitudes due to the concept of 'Promised Land', which the author argues has no archaeological evidence from a secular point of view. In this context, the author notes 'a lot of sympathy [with Jews] in terms of the rise of anti-Semitism and Christian demonization of Jews as "Christ Killers"' (p. 203). Through its elaborate analyses of various media genres, this chapter does much of what the title of the book promises; it produces a comprehensive reading of the contemporary intertwinements of religion, language and power as mediated by the media.

Chapter 3 nicely complements the preceding one and builds on its data through taking the news articles and documentaries to the audience in order to elicit their reactions to the way the three religions are represented. For this purpose, Al-Azami conducts separate and mixed focus group

meetings as well as an online questionnaire with 106 participants in four major cities in England: London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. In this context, the author shares his experience facing the challenge of a 'lack of Jewish participation'. He reveals, in a relatively despondent tone, that he has left no stone unturned in the effort to bring more Jewish perspective. In order to do this, he has changed his methodological approach by adding an online questionnaire which provides responses from fifteen Jewish participants.

Responses from all the participants obtained in the interviews as well as the questionnaire forms are scrutinised using Stuart Hall's (1980) *Encoding/Decoding* model which, despite criticism by some (e.g. Philo 2008), Al-Azami believes is appropriate for religious audiences, who he claims 'are the most likely to be less influenced by the media and have their personal interpretive frameworks while decoding media portrayals of their own as well as other religions' (p. 203). In addition to the *Encoding/Decoding* model, Al-Azami incorporates linguistic analyses on the language used by the audience while reacting to the representations.

The author formulates a number of hypotheses about the different kinds of participants that his analyses aim to test. He expects that people with no religion tend to agree with most of the media representations of religions, while followers of a religion will tend to disagree with most of the media representations of religions, but will neither entirely agree nor fully disagree with the media representations of other religions. He also predicts that Christians and Jews will tend to agree with most of the media representations about Islam due to a lack of knowledge about Islam. Finally, he anticipates that language in the comments section of online versions of newspaper articles tends to be much more aggressive than in focus group discussions, and that articles on Islam and Muslims are subject to the most aggressive language, followed by articles on Christianity and Judaism (pp. 126–9).

Though with some exceptions, the findings from the audience-response analyses in the penultimate chapter reveal that most of Al-Azami's hypotheses are proved correct, it becomes evident that religious communities decode media representations according to their own interpretive frameworks, suggesting that media messages have less influence on their construction of public knowledge. In Al-Azami's terms, 'the dominant hegemonic code is far from being obvious' (p. 203). The author also contends that even some of the non-religious participants do not follow the dominant position on the negative portrayal of religions uncritically. In this chapter, although Al-Azami tends to comment on the respondents'

linguistic styles occasionally, were his focus a bit more linguistically oriented, it might become an exemplar for similar investigations.

While the book is highly context specific (focusing on UK media), the analytical pathways and consideration of the contemporary politicisation of religion are relevant to multifarious contexts and regional settings. The final chapter summarises all findings and attempts to establish a cogent argument. It also recapitulates the main contributions of the book and offers some forward-looking proposals as to how media reporting of religion can manufacture a more unified society. Everyone interested in the enigma of media portrayals of religion, which are increasingly regarded as promoting xenophobia, chauvinism and intolerance, will find this book fascinating to read. The book compels us to come to terms with the urgent need for diffusion of responsible reporting on issues of sensitivity. For as we become better and more free societies, our freedom of expression should lead us to reliability and moral obligation. Al-Azami rightly points out that 'there needs to be fairness, sensitivity, and responsibility in its [media] depictions because representations may have far-reaching consequences' (p. 216).

Besides adding its voice to the chorus of those championing tolerance and interfaith dialogue, one of the great virtues of this book, which primarily lies beyond the world of academia, is the effort made to encourage interactions between people from different faiths and people of no faith through administering mixed focus group meetings. This notwithstanding, there are a few aspects that warrant more attention. Voices from the Jewish community are somewhat absent from the book, and choosing a documentary which focuses on the Jewish lifestyle rather than Judaism itself remains an obvious setback. This shortcoming, albeit acknowledged in the conclusion, prevents the incorporation of more critical reflection on the depictions of one of the three religions the study pledges to scrutinise. However, when considered as an effort to demonstrate 'the value of linguistic and audience analysis for understanding the evolving and complex relationship between religion and the media' (quoted from the back cover of the book), this book, particularly with Al-Azami's pellucid prose style, is interesting to read. Thorough in its analysis and emancipatory in its stance, this book will appeal to students of Discourse Analysis, Media Studies and Religious Studies.

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