

Article

Confession and Confusion: Misinformation about Religion in the Journalistic Sphere

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Abstract: The media often limit religious coverage to reporting on statements, appointments, opinions, and activities, ignoring in-depth treatment and emphasizing negative news. Media, rather than helping to combat prejudice and promote understanding between communities, have contributed to fuelling intolerance towards religious communities. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the presence and treatment of religious issues. Through a combination of content analysis focused on Catalan media publications between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021, and a focus group with 12 journalists specialized in religious coverage for Catalan newspapers, this research sheds light on the prevailing trends, seeking to answer what is the space of religious content, which can include both content messages produced by religious communities that refer to their own or other faiths and/or content that discusses issues related to religions or religious groups. Occupies in the media agenda, how this content is addressed, and which are the perceptions of journalists regarding the coverage of religious issues. Moreover, we seek to unveil potential actions needed to improve it. The results of this study suggest that there is a tendency to publish limited religious content in the media, potentially shaping perceptions of religion. Furthermore, when religious topics are covered, they focus on Catholicism and Islam, marginalizing other faiths. What is more, stereotypes and misconceptions persist, which could be due to their continued priority to cover scandalous or negative events related to religion.



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1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Media Coverage of Religious Matters

The space of the religious content—messages produced by religious communities that refer to their own or other faiths and/or content that discusses issues related to religions or religious groups [1–3]—has been decreasing its presence in the Spanish media [4,5]. Rather than being a widely covered subject in the media, religion is being treated as an additional element to political, social, and cultural issues [4]. Some researchers argue that media is limited to reporting on issues related to statements, appointments, opinions, and activities carried out by religious communities [6] such as current events, but lack an in-depth analysis and treatment of religious occurrences and their relevance in society [7]. Other authors warn that the media no longer cover religious information in depth, but rather report on negative news: good deeds are overshadowed by “bad news”, focusing on everything that means or generates controversy [6]. In a similar vein, Rodrigues De Mendonça and Rodríguez Díaz [5] argue that religion often appears in the media linked to acts carried out in the name of religion because they are conflictive events.

There is evidence of how the presence of religious content in the media has decreased, while the space given to banal content has increased, especially when it comes to entertainment [8–10]. Moreover, when it comes to religious phenomena, the frontier between

information and spectacle is increasingly blurred [11]. “Religion with politics makes news. Stories of religious conflicts and violence make news. Stories of religious ‘good works’ do not make news”, notes Hoover [12] (p. 29). Media organizations are constantly striving to expand their audience base, which is crucial for attracting advertisers and increasing revenues [13]. As a result, media organizations tend to produce and disseminate news content that aligns with the interests of their audiences [13–16]. In essence, stories involving religious controversy or violence are more likely to attract audiences and serve the economic interests of media outlets, while stories highlighting positive religious actions may not receive the same level of attention. Moreover, Hoover [12] argues that journalists tend to report on religion according to certain shared assumptions: what makes something “news” is its unexpectedness, so religions make the news when they do things that contradict the assumptions about them. Often, then, “journalism uses religious conflict, and the potential for conflict, as a way of attracting viewers and selling newspapers” [12] (p. 30).

Addressing the issues related to the religious sphere is a challenging task for journalists. Religion supposes a complex reality [4] that constitutes an area of specialized journalism [17]. For this reason, working with religious information requires not only specific knowledge but also sufficient sensitivity to provide a critical and integrative perspective [18]. Huertas-Bailén and Terrón-Blanco [18] warn that, in Spain, the challenge for journalists is also affected by the growing religious diversity of its society and the existence of a communication strategy that prioritizes information related to the Catholic Church. Even though Catholicism currently has a lesser influence and presence in society [19], Spanish culture continues to be impregnated with characteristics and traditions linked to Catholicism [20], and this historical inertia translates into the media [21].

Catholicism acquired special value and media visibility in Spain during the pontificate of John Paul II, who considered the media as allies and not rivals [7]. Further research indicates that the Spanish media have also shown special interest in Benedict XVI’s resignation [22], the canonizations of John XXII and John Paul II [23], the media’s relationship with recent popes [24], the communicative milestones of the pontificates of Benedict XVI and Francis [25], and Easter celebrations [26]. The Spanish media’s treatment of the religious phenomenon, especially Catholicism, is addressed by multiple academic research focused on the behavior of the press [4,6,27–31] and the radio broadcasters [32–34].

There is academic consensus on the role of the media in promoting and maintaining hegemony, and in this line, how Catholicism persists in the Spanish media prominently [35]. This affects the media treatment of other religious communities [5] since, on many occasions, the media attention given to minority faiths is usually portrayed in relation to Catholicism [28]. This translates into the media not reflecting the diversity of modern societies [36].

In Spain, the media’s treatment of Islam is perhaps one of the most widely researched areas. We can highlight the work carried out by the Observatory of Islamophobia in the Media, which monitors and analyses the media treatment of Islam in the Spanish written and digital press, specifically, in *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón*, *20 Minutos*, *El País* and *Eldiario.es*. The organization reported 15% of news pieces with active Islamophobia for the first quarter of 2020, 21% for the third quarter, and 26% for the fourth quarter. Passive Islamophobic pieces accounted for 24% in the first quarter, 15% in the third quarter, and 20% in the fourth quarter [37]. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the report *Disinformation, religious minorities and Hate Speech*, made by the Spanish fact-checking portal Maldita.es [38], with the support of Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia, which analyzed the disinformation identified between 2017 and June 2020 about religious minorities in Spain. The report reveals 141 religion-related hoaxes, of which 70.54% were related to Islam or Muslim culture. According to this research, out of the 91 hoaxes disproved by the fact-checking portal in the aforementioned period, 30 were related to violence and terrorism. The research concludes that misinformation about the Muslim community and terrorism is related to the language used by the media.

There is a variety of research that argues that in Europe, most of the media, instead of helping to combat prejudice and generate cross-community understanding, have contributed to fuel intolerance and racism [39]. Specifically, in Spain, Bravo López [40], who studied the work of Spanish writer César Vidal, concludes that Islam is perceived in the media as a threat used to legitimize discriminatory measures against the Muslim population living in the country. Sánchez González and Padilla Castillo [11] argue that in Spain, the topic of Islam is often addressed in news programs with reductionist news that can foster Islamophobia. For this reason, they insist on the need for more ethical and truthful religious journalism. Huertas-Bailén and Terrón-Blanco [18] point out that news reports have fallen into the criminalization of Islam with the radicalization of jihadism, while few journalistic products treat the Muslim community as victims, except when it comes to the treatment of Hamas and Palestinians, who are generally portrayed as victims, as anti-Semitism and criticism of the Israeli government usually weighs heavily in the representation of this middle-eastern conflict, as has been addressed by numerous previous research [41–44]. Along these lines, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist rhetoric is also a relevant phenomenon that has been observed in the media for decades [45], which has strongly intensified since 2023 [46,47].

It is clear that the public image of major social institutions, including religion, depends to a large extent on their media representation, which becomes more important as societies increase their religious diversity [48]. The media play a key role in shaping public opinion, especially in areas that are not directly known or experienced by the public [49], such as religion.

Previous research indicates that individuals often seek information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and perspectives, regardless of the biases that may be contained in them. This tendency is exacerbated by the challenge of navigating complexity, particularly among those with deeply conservative viewpoints that are resistant to change [50,51]. Online platforms and social media employ algorithmic recommendations to tailor content to each user's preferences [52–54], thereby reinforcing the inclination to consume content that reaffirms one's worldview, contributing to the phenomenon commonly referred to as the "bubble effect" [55]. Moreover, previous research has shown that false information spreads more rapidly and extensively on platforms like Twitter (nowadays, X) compared to true information [56,57], as such content often triggers psychological responses, with one of the common aspects of misleading headlines being the use of emotional provocation to elicit shock, fear, anger, and moral indignation [51].

Narratives containing disinformation have a virializing potential, as has been found in previous studies [58]. These narratives are strategically crafted to evoke emotions such as fear and hatred [59] and, ultimately, a political potential that translates into unconditional receptivity on the part of the people receiving the disinformation. Disinformation serves to foster the profitability and monetization of online platforms, while benefiting their producers with audience and visibility, becoming a strategy of the business model of each platform that operates by using models of economy of action, through strategies to attract the users' attention, the primary capital in technological capitalism [60]. The digital sphere has provided a strong impetus for the spread of hatred and intolerance, a point on which both Palestinian and Israeli leaders agree [61].

1.2. The Influence of Media in the Construction of Reality

Media has an effect on the construction of reality as explained by the theories of agenda setting and framing, which coincide with the fact that it is relevant to investigate the structure and content of media publications to understand how they are influencing the audience's perception of a certain topic. The agenda-setting theory argues that the media do not indicate to audiences how they have to think, but what they have to think about by assigning relevance and space to certain topics [62,63]. Therefore, through gatekeeping, the process of selecting, writing, editing, and positioning information [64], the media can influence the audience's perception of relevant issues [65], and, over time, these issues

may become the most relevant to citizens. In this paper, we seek to analyze how religious content is being portrayed in the Catalan media.

2. Methodology

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the presence and treatment of religious issues in the media. Considering that this study is carried out within the framework of the Chair of Religious Freedom and Conscience of Catalonia, it focuses specifically on the information related to the attacks on freedom of religion and conscience that take place in this region. Focusing the study on these issues expands existing research on how the media focus their attention on reporting, which links religion to controversy [6] or conflictual events [5]. To address this issue, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the space that attacks on religious freedom have in the media agenda?

RQ2: What kind of attacks on religious freedom does the media cover?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of journalists regarding the coverage of religious issues and the actions necessary to improve it?

To address these questions, we carried out a content analysis focused on the publications made by the Catalan media between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021. Content analysis applies to diverse messages, covering all types of discourse, oral and written, spontaneous and premeditated [66]. It facilitates the examination of any text containing narratives about the subject under investigation [67], allowing it to unveil the underlying significance of each message [68]. In this research, qualitative content analysis was used to verify the presence of different religions or beliefs and the type of act in the material under study [68]. Data collection was carried out manually by entering a series of keywords in the browser of each website. 58 keywords related to different aspects of 13 religious denominations present in Catalonia were used. Publications that did not address an attack on freedom of religion and conscience in Catalonia were dismissed. The remaining 89 publications were classified into cases that describe attacks against religious communities or religious persons. Each of the identified cases was categorized in the following way:

- **Religion or belief involved** (including the religious confessions present in Catalonia according to the General Directorate of Religious Affairs). Atheism and agnosticism; Buddhism; Seventh Day Adventist Church; Catholic Church; Evangelical Church; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; Eastern Churches; Baha'i Faith; Hinduism; Islam; Judaism; Sikhism; Taoism; Jehovah's Witnesses; Religion in general.
- **Type of fact.** Acts contrary to the right to publicly express one's own beliefs or freedom of expression; Acts of offense to religious feelings and actions that interrupt or hinder the celebration of religious events; Acts of rejection of the opening, transfer, or expansion of centers of worship; Acts or situations of discrimination for religious reasons or religious affiliation; Attacks on the physical or moral integrity of people; Attacks or damage on places of worship, buildings of religious communities, or religious images; Hate speech and incitement to violence; Freedom to organize independently of religious entities (freedoms of association, assembly, and expression for religious reasons).
- **Level of sensationalism.** Indicator to determine the level or degree of attention drawn to the headline of each news item collected. This indicator makes it possible to check what levels of attention the registered cases are reported. Optimal attentional response is essential to avoid bias in the interpretation of such cases. When the attentional response generated by a headline is excessively high, there is a tendency for bias or misinterpretation of the underlying case or news story [69]. To categorize the levels of sensationalism in headlines, they are based on three levels: (0) No sensationalism; (1) Moderate sensationalism; and (3) High sensationalism. Concerning the criteria for classifying sensationalism, it is high/elevated when the headline presents 2 or more of the following characteristics:
 - It manifests unpleasant contingents attractively or seductively.

- It explicitly mentions the name and surname(s) of a public figure (including physical persons and entities)—only coded when it was used as the active subject of the attack on religious freedom and conscience.
 - Can express contingents between commas.
 - Mentions popular and/or ideological concepts.
 - Presents question marks and exclamation marks.
 - Can present satirical comparisons or analogies.
 - Mentions sarcastic statements (including cynicism).
 - The level will be moderate when the headline completes only 1 of the above characteristics.
- **Bias based on causal attributions.** Indicator that reports whether there is a causal inference attributed to the headline of each news item. Causal inferences are deterministic and require formal justifications that cannot be included in a headline. Unjustified causal inferences generate an increase in bias, and irrational and impulsive thinking, a tendency based on the cognitive theory of causal illusions [70]. In this case, only those news items that commit this inference are identified dichotomously and, therefore, the values and categories are dichotomous: (0) No; and (1) Yes.

As part of this research, we also conducted a focus group with 12 journalists specialized in the coverage of religious topics. The methodological approach of the focus groups allows for exploring the meanings and perceptions of the participants, offering a deeper understanding of the analyzed topic [71]. Focus group participants were deliberately selected to include journalists from various media outlets. Participant profiles were anonymized to preserve the identity of the participants (Table 1). At the moment of conducting the research, these participants were working at *Catalunya Religió* (specialized), *Agència Flama* (specialized), *Ràdio Estel* (specialized), *Diari Ara* (generalist), *Religió Digital–Foc Nou* (specialized), *EFE* (generalist), *ElNacional.cat* (generalist), and *Catalunya Cristiana* (specialized). The criteria for selecting the participants were that all of them were professionally dedicated to informing about religious events.

Table 1. Codification of participants and respective media outlets.

Media Outlet	Participants.
<i>Flama Agency</i>	Person 1 (P1)
<i>EFE</i>	Person 2 (P2)
<i>Catalunya Cristiana</i>	Person 3 (P3)
<i>Catalunya Ràdio</i>	Person 4 (P4)
	Person 5 (P5)
<i>Catalunya Religió</i>	Person 6 (P6)
	Person 7 (P7)
	Person 8 (P8)
<i>Diari Ara</i>	Person 9 (P9)
<i>ElNacional.cat</i>	Person 10 (P10)
<i>Ràdio Estel</i>	Person 11(P11)
<i>Religió Digital/Foc Nou</i>	Person 12 (P12)

To carry out the focus group, we prepared a script of questions for guidance, which consisted of the following questions:

1. What is your perspective on the media coverage of religious issues?
2. Do you find it difficult to communicate on religious issues in non-specialist media?
3. What makes news about religious events relevant for non-specialized media?
4. How do citizens value interest in religious events, and how do you think this interest could be encouraged?
5. How can the media help to dismantle stereotypes about religious denominations?
6. Do they find it difficult to find or maintain contact with representatives of religious communities?

7. How could the media collaborate to bring citizens closer to the recognition of the right to religious freedom and knowledge of the religious diversity present in Catalonia?

The transcription of the focus group was conducted in two phases. Initially, an automatic transcription was generated using the Transkriptor software version 2.3. Subsequently, a manual correction process was undertaken to address any inaccuracies and incorporate missing elements. The transcript of the focus group was manually analyzed in order to capture the participants' opinions on the issues of interest to the research: the participants' perceptions of the coverage of religious issues and the actions needed to improve this coverage. The statements were recorded in a table that facilitated the interpretation of the results. Future studies could consider extending this study through methodological triangulation, incorporating qualitative analysis to interpret the texts studied. This would provide a more detailed picture of how the media might contribute to disinformation on religious issues.

3. Limitations

Despite the fact that this research innovates in studying the Catalan case regarding religious media coverage, we believe it is of high importance to replicate this study in different regions of Spain and Europe. Extending our research beyond Catalonia will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand and facilitate comparisons between geographical and cultural contexts.

It is also important to note that the percentages of sensationalism and bias based on casual attributions alone are not conclusive and cannot be extrapolated to determine whether sensationalism and causal attributions have had a negative impact on other variables. Such analyses require the use of statistical inference using probability models. Therefore, a more in-depth analysis should be done in this regard.

4. Results

4.1. Content Analysis on Religious Issues

A total of 80 cases of violations of religious freedom in Catalonia were identified from the media studied in this research between 2020 and 2021. Regarding the religion involved in the cases, Islamic denomination was predominant (58%), followed by Catholicism (20%) and Judaism (16%) (Table 2). Hate speech and incitement to violence were the most common topics (30%), although acts of discrimination and rejection (26%) and material damage or attacks on places of worship (19%) were also reported (Table 3). An example of each type of case covered by the Catalan media is given below.

Table 2. Type of religion or confession.

Religions/Faiths	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Islam	46	58
Catholicism	16	20
Judaism	13	16
Others *	5	6

* Notes: Includes 1 case of atheism, 1 case of Sikhism, 2 cases of Jehovah's Witnesses, and one case involving both Islam and Judaism. Percentage margin of error: $\pm 1\%$ (due to rounding).

Table 3. Type of attacks.

Attacks	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Attacks or material damage to centers of worship	15	19
Hate speech and incitement to violence	24	30
Offences against religions	12	15
Discriminatory and rejective acts	21	26
Violation of freedom of religious expression	8	10

Notes: Percentage risk of error: $\pm 1\%$ (by rounding).

- Attacks or material damage on the centers of worship: Under the headline “L’Ajuntament de Calafell denuncia pintades a l’església de Sant Miquel”¹, on 5 January 2021, *Diari Més* reports that the Calafell Town Council has reported that one or more individuals have painted graffiti on the façade of the church of Sant Miquel in Segur de Calafell.
- Hate speech and incitement to violence: Under the headline “Banderas nazis y saludos fascistas al final de un acto de Vox en Barcelona”², on 6 December 2022, *El Periódico* reports that the president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, has landed in Barcelona to hold an act in defense of the Constitution. It indicates that the event had a ‘neo-Nazi presence’ as a neo-Nazi flag of the far-right National Identity Front-National Socialist Workers’ Party (FNI-PNSOE) that could be seen. It is also reported that at the end of the event, a group of supporters made the fascist salute in the center of the square.
- Act of offense to religious feelings: Under the headline “Vox es refereix a Ripoll com a ‘bressol del gihadisme’”³, on 2 February 2021, *Diari de Girona* reports that Vox has taken advantage of a visit to Ripoll to link the municipality with terrorism and immigration with the “totalitarianism of Islam”.
- Discriminatory and rejective acts: Under the headline “Un estudi detecta pràctiques islamòfobes al sistema educatiu català”⁴, on 23 February 2021, *Terrasa Digital* reports that the report “Trajectòries educatives del jovent musulmà: racisme i islamofòbia del sistema educatiu català” reveals that in the educational system of Montornès del Vallès and Terrassa Muslim students detect Islamophobic practices, specifically, they are assumed to be underachievers and can only aspire to low educational expectations.
- Violation of freedom of religious expression: Under the headline “Una jove denuncia que li han negat un lloc de feina pel qual havia estat seleccionada per negar-se a treure’s el hijab”⁵, on 23 March 2022, *Diari de Rubí* reports that a young Muslim woman from Rubí denounced that she has suffered an Islamophobic incident at the company Zeta Espacial, which has denied the facts. Specifically, she indicates that the young woman passed a selection process for a commercial job in the company, which a few days later informed her that, as it was a secular company, she had to remove her hijab to enter the workplace. According to the newspaper, the young woman refused and was therefore not hired.

Although the majority of the cases studied, 58%, did not display sensationalist headlines according to the established criteria, 42% of them did incorporate sensationalist content, which could affect the attention of the consuming public (Table 4). Concerning causal attributions, 69% of the cases were found to lack this bias. However, 31% of the recordings incurred this error.

Table 4. Levels of sensationalism and causal attributions.

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sensationalist Headlines	42%	58%
Casual Attributions	31%	69%

4.2. Focus Group Journalists

4.2.1. Coverage of Religious Topics

Participants noted a general lack of emphasis on religious content in the media. They felt that, despite its cultural and social importance, religion remains marginalized in journalistic discourse. A journalist from *Catalunya Religió* explained that “the religious fact is not very reflected in the programming or even in the collective imagination of a journalist” (P5). For participants, the absence of a dedicated section on religious issues underlines this lack of presence, which reflects broader trends in media prioritization. “Generalist media include sports, culture, economics, and politics, but there is no section for religion”, a journalist from *Catalunya Religió* pointed out (P8), adding that “before this

difficulty, the more topical value should be given to what is done with a routine that goes unnoticed as a religious community”.

Meanwhile, a journalist from *ElNacional.cat* (P10) indicated that “the media are going through a terrible crisis” because they used to cover religious events, but now they do not. In this sense, the participants agreed that the general media are less interested in religion than they used to be, which facilitates the existence of specialized media. In the same vein, a journalist from *Catalunya Religió* (P7) raised the possible existence of “a certain ideological prejudice or conception of the religious world that makes the religious world, especially the Catholic world in Catalonia, is seen in a more negative way than it should”. However, a journalist from *ElNacional.cat* (P10), who also noted that Catholicism is the biggest religious community in Catalonia, observed that a very “antique” tradition and culture of reporting on churches and their events has emerged, meaning that there is still a historical inertia of reporting in a very traditional way about these issues. A journalist at the *Flama Agency* (P1) argued that “it has improved considerably over the years”.

Participants also observed a tendency within the media to prioritize coverage of religious events only when they are linked to scandals or sensational events. P10 pointed out that “it is only interesting to cover religious facts when they are linked to scandals or curious situations”. This framing [72] of specific religious narratives within the media perpetuates stereotypes and strengthens negative perceptions of religious institutions and communities. A journalist from *Ràdio Estel* (P11) argued that stereotypes are created because the media lack specialization and the desire to deal with religious issues.

In this sense, P11 said that the media in which he works is a hybrid media, and values of religious fact are transmitted through generalist radio. “Religious fact is not only the approach to spirituality or the approach to God but everything related to religion”, he argued. Meanwhile, a journalist from *Catalunya Cristiana* (P3) considered that the media face difficulties due to “the lack of journalists specialized in the religious field in the general media”. For a journalist working for the *EFE* agency (P2), secularisation also seems to be a difficulty, since most journalists are not familiar with the world of the Church and this makes it “much more difficult to convince an Editor-in-Chief to publish a religious story”. A journalist for *Religión Digital* (P12) contributes to the discussion by pointing out a major challenge: the lack of interest in religious issues, which he describes as “zero, almost nonexistent”. P1 attributes this lack of interest to prevailing prejudices surrounding the concept of religion.

For this reason, according to P1, to deal with religious events, general media tend not only to explain news of a spiritual nature but also those of a social nature. As an example, he points out that in the *Flama Agency*, the most consulted news are the appointments of ecclesiastical posts (prelates, rectors, bishops. . .), explaining that “this type of news is also interesting for people who are not oriented towards the Church”. However, a journalist from *Catalunya Religió* (P8) stressed the continued relevance of religious issues in the daily lives of the population. She noted that while sensational stories may attract attention, there is a wider range of issues of interest to the general population. In the same vein, another journalist from *Catalunya Religió* (P6) pointed out that “there is an interest in the substance of the question” because “when a para-religious element appears, that is, something that has to do with the meaning of life, a certain collective interest is quickly activated”.

In this regard, P8 stressed that despite the media’s tendency towards sensationalism, there remains a genuine interest in religious issues among the population, underscoring the importance of comprehensive coverage beyond sensational stories. For another journalist of *Catalunya Religió* (P5), “the responsibility of the media is to avoid a certain question of usefulness”, but we must also bear in mind that they “must be useful in explaining these concepts, about which today’s generations are completely illiterate, and in preventing and overcoming prejudices”.

4.2.2. Required Actions

To adequately address the representation of religious issues in media coverage, participants stressed the critical need to improve communication and information-sharing channels between journalists and religious institutions. P10 called for better explanation and dissemination of information to bridge the gap between specialized and non-specialized media: "The best solution to these difficulties in communicating on religious issues in non-specialised media is information, communication and better explanation". P1, for his part, stressed the need to show the positive contributions of religious institutions to society, and the importance of the media covering church news broadly and positively, thus countering negative stereotypes: "We must try to publish the positive things that the Church is doing because it has a great social mission (...) it is a task for every journalist to cover Church news". In this sense, P2 highlighted the influence of journalists' dispositions on reporting and called for a shared responsibility between the media and religious institutions to overcome ideological biases. "The responsibility is shared between the media and the Church", he argued. The journalist added that generalist media such as *EFE* Agency find it difficult to talk about religion, a problem linked to the fact that they are subject to the "dictatorship of politics and economics". According to him, a political event is more important for the generalist media than the deaths caused by the COVID-19 epidemic.

According to P4, to stimulate interest in religious issues, the information "must be related to current events". This statement is complemented by another journalist's statement (P5) that "journalistically, we must give voice to all this, to this horizon of possibilities, to this sense of context and life options". For P8, another alternative is to make "a very clear translation of concepts that are important to religious communities", that is to say, "to break the prejudice that, in certain generalist programs, one cannot speak of certain profound things". Furthermore, for P6 you have to work with language. According to him, "the religious structure gives linguistically incomprehensible answers". Concerning the Church, P2 pointed out that "it has not adapted its language to current events" and that "it does not address the issues that concern society, or it does so in an unconventional way". For him, this is a problem of communication. As an example of good practice in this sense, Sister Lucía Caram, a contemplative Dominican nun and Christian activist, was mentioned, who communicates using current language and addresses current issues. In this sense, P3 explained that "through witnesses like Sister Lucía or others, we can give a message that unites our society". P1 also mentioned the need to use "simple, clear language" and to "adapt the language" of the Church. P5 agreed on the need to pay more attention to language. For her, there is not always a model of peace journalism, since many journalists play an important role in creating prejudices within the religious sphere.

Focus group participants agreed that journalism has a fundamental role to play in breaking down ingrained stereotypes about different religious communities. However, they recognized that this process faces certain difficulties. P8 pointed out that these stereotypes are inherent and therefore require a commitment not only from information professionals but also from members of religious communities. In addition to the example of Sister Lucía Caram, P8 mentioned Sister Victoria Molins, stressing the importance of recognizing the humanity of these people beyond their religious role. She also stressed the need for self-criticism and training in the media, since breaking down prejudices requires a deep understanding of how the media work and how they can influence public perception. While journalism can be a powerful tool in challenging stereotypes, a collaborative and thoughtful approach is essential to effectively address these challenges. In this sense, P4 pointed out that these religious profiles are those that "prestige the religious fact" and can therefore help to bring religious issues closer to society. For this reason, he considered that the promotion of these profiles "is a good way to reach the public and a way to break down the initial prejudice and open the door to an interest that can go beyond the topic at hand".

Regarding the need for greater cooperation between journalists and religious communities, journalists explained that it is more difficult to communicate with smaller religious communities than with majority religious communities. P3 pointed out that they try to

foster relations with these minority religious communities through meetings that they coordinate. In this sense, he warned that it is essential for journalism to normalize relations with religious communities. In the same vein, P1 pointed out that some religious denominations are not interested in being present in the media. This is “a real shame because they do a great job”. P6, for his part, added that religions, especially minority religions, do not seek visibility.

Finally, the focus group participants stressed the need for more time to adequately cover religious issues. P5 pointed out that this lack of time is not only due to the demands of journalistic work but also existing prejudices against journalists on the part of both the media and the religious communities themselves. In this sense, she suggested that the concept of slow journalism, which implies deeper engagement and extended temporality, could be a viable solution to address this difficulty. P2 expressed similar views, pointing to the lack of interlocutors in religious communities, especially the minority ones. To address this issue, he proposed the creation of communication offices in these communities, which he said would be useful to establish direct channels of communication with journalists. In this sense, he also highlighted the link between the lack of time and precariousness in the journalistic profession.

5. Conclusions

Regarding the space given to religion in the media, this research provides evidence to support the idea that the Catalan case reflects a phenomenon observed in previous studies, where topics related to religion and confessions are underrepresented in the Spanish media [4,5]. The participants in the focus groups agreed that religion has a reduced presence in media programming and news coverage, which they attributed to factors such as the lack of news coverage of what happens in religious communities, the absence of a specific religion section in the media, and the prioritization of other topics (such as sports, culture, economics, and politics). The under-representation of religious news in the Catalan media can also be associated with a trend that is occurring in several regions, namely the secularisation of society [2]. This neglect of religious events by the media can affect the way societies perceive the relevance of religions since it is not taken into account in the public agenda [63]. This takes on particular meaning and relevance when considering the agenda-setting theory, which posits that media, through the process of selection, writing, editing, and positioning of information [64], can influence public perception of what topics are significant [65].

In terms of how religious news is typically communicated, this research found a notable disparity in media coverage, with Islam and Catholicism emerging as the dominant focal points, while other religious denominations are often marginalized. These findings are consistent with previous research projects that have highlighted the role of the media in promoting and maintaining hegemony. These projects point out that Catholicism, in particular, has a significant presence and visibility in the Spanish media landscape [7,35], and that this prominence tends to overshadow the representation of other religious communities [5]. This leads to disproportionate media attention [28], which does not accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of modern societies [36].

This research also shows that the approach adopted by journalists when covering religious topics [72] can influence the proliferation of stereotypes and the reinforcement of misconceptions about different faiths. The results of both focus group and content analysis indicated that the media tend to cover religious news when they have a scandalous component linked to negative events within a religious community, or when the events are controversial [6]. In addition, the content analysis indicated that, when reporting on issues related to religion, many media outlets incorporate sensationalist content (34%) and incur causal attributions (31%), which could affect the attention of the public towards such topics. Ultimately, this can lead to a distorted image of religious reality, as well as the perpetuation and feeding of negative stereotypes. It can even be understood as a form of generating disinformation, as only part of the reality is portrayed, which constitutes a form

of misleading information, although this research has not found that there is an intention to harm communities [73].

The research also highlights the urgent need for better communication between journalists and religious institutions to improve media coverage of religious issues. In particular, it highlights the need for greater cooperation between the media and minority religious communities, which could be addressed through the creation of communication offices within these communities. In addition, the research shows that journalists are seen as key actors in countering religious stereotypes, although previous research shows that rather than helping to combat prejudice and engender understanding between communities, they have sometimes helped to fuel intolerance and racism [39].

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Notes

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