Chapter 4
Religious Sphere in Canada: Public Manifestations and Media Representations

Mahmoud Eid
University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

Canadian demographic trends indicate that the number of religious adherents from various faith groups is on the rise. Despite successful integration of some religions into mainstream Canadian society, discrimination against some faith groups persists. Christianity is the dominant religion in Canada, the minorities being Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The mainstream media are considered a main driver of social cohesion in Canada because they construct ideologies and define communities. They are a key lever in shaping debate about religion in the public sphere; however, debates exist on how religion is portrayed in the media. Despite the vast religious diversity in Canada, media organizations commonly ignore religious minorities, deeming them insignificant, unfavourable, and sometimes invisible. This chapter reviews and compares research findings on Canadian media depictions of these faith groups over the past few decades. Canadians of various faith groups have expressed a wide array of sentiments toward their representations in the media. Vast differences in media depictions exist; however, dominant discourses and representations prevail for each faith group: Christians are the normal group; Muslims are in discord with Western societies; Jews require sympathy; Buddhists are peaceful; Hindus are friendly; and Sikhs are extremists. It is suggested here that considerable research needs to be conducted on Canadian mainstream media patterns of coverage and portrayals of interfaith activities within Canadian society.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5035-0.ch004
INTRODUCTION

The Canadian religious mosaic has become increasingly multifaceted. Media portrayals of faith groups strongly influence their functioning in society, predict general understandings of the role of religion in the public sphere, and encourage social cohesion (e.g., Harb, 2008; Li, 2010). Hence, the inequalities found in Canadian media representations of faith groups are considered one of the most controversial aspects related to this topic, attracting extensive scholarly debate (e.g., Newman & Smith, 2007; Tatarnic, 2005). Various Canadian national news outlets have been scrutinized for their limited depiction of minority religious populations (Ojo, 2006). In fact, some scholars argue that the Canadian media demonstrate inherently racist behaviour, discriminating against minority groups through the proliferation of elite discourses that limit and distort the representation of minorities (Hirji, 2003). This is considered troublesome, as Canada’s immigration patterns suggest a commitment to diversity (Wiseman, 2009). Therefore, if faith groups are not covered equally in the media, a gap between the way in which Canadian laws address minorities—as full-fledged, equal citizens—and how the media represent them becomes apparent.

The media contextualize, frame, and develop social definitions that construct reality; however, media representations are frequently taken for granted (Byng, 2010). The media not only represent our society and the interactions within it, but they can also communicate messages with regards to hegemonic power relations, values, beliefs, and information about our world in ways that serve dominant ideologies (Mahtani, 2009). Thus, representations within news media tend to reinforce prejudices (Janzen, 2008). Since both the audience and the news have limited time and space, “framing” is inevitable. Framing is a process commonly employed by the media as a method of determining what content to present and how it will be presented. This procedure involves the discernment of discourse adaptation and discussion techniques that shape the inherent nature of the images, texts, and narratives portrayed in the media (Egan, 2007). Framing is almost always problematic due to the high probability of journalists’ personal biases skewing the frame, and the resulting lack of diversity in those frames (Haskell, 2007). The Canadian mediascape is characterized by a heavy concentration of corporate ownership and convergence, which inherently impacts the framing of media content (e.g., Jiwani & Dakrouy, 2009; Wittebols, 1992). Therefore, media content is comprised of frames and filters that work to satisfy the expectations of the dominant forces that lead the organizations’ hierarchies.

This chapter reviews the existing research on religion and Canadian media and compares the media depictions of various faith groups in Canada—Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs—demonstrating the resulting sentiments (opinions, attitudes, and behaviours) from such representations and how they affect these faith groups’ integration into the Canadian society.

RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE IN CANADA

The Canadian population entails a wide array of religions that continue to evolve. The 2001 census indicates that the Canadian population consists of 76.6% Christians, 2% Muslims, 1.1% Jews, 1% Buddhists, 1% Hindus, and 0.9% Sikhs. Some of the main Canadian cit-
Related Content

Networked Protests: A Review of Social Movement Literature and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement
Emily Stacey (2015). *International Journal of Civic Engagement and Social Change* (pp. 36-51).
[www.igi-global.com/article/networked-protests/146229?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/networked-protests/146229?camid=4v1a)

Digitalization in Cinema in Turkey: A Meta-Analysis
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/digitalization-in-cinema-in-turkey/216241?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/digitalization-in-cinema-in-turkey/216241?camid=4v1a)

Nature of Tweets in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Elections

Applications of the Indigenous and Modern Career Counselling in Education
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/applications-of-the-indigenous-and-modern-career-counselling-in-education/221457?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/applications-of-the-indigenous-and-modern-career-counselling-in-education/221457?camid=4v1a)