

‘Hyperzichtbaar of nauwelijks zichtbaar? Religie in de media’

Summary first public event NGG Working Group Religion and Media, 19 May 2021

Introduction

The NGG working group Religion and Media has organized its first public event on the 19th of May, 2021 in the form of an online roundtable with various speakers who work or have worked in journalism. The roundtable was in Dutch and was titled: *Hyperzichtbaar of nauwelijks zichtbaar? Religie in de media* (In English: Hypervisible or barely visible? Religion in media). Prior to this event, we, as members of the working group, had come together in multiple sessions where we talked about the subject of religion and media. As most of us are involved in the academic study of religion, the main topics that were brought up and discussed in our meetings revolved around the ways research on religion is presented in Dutch newspapers. A few members felt that they could not get adequate attention for their research in newspapers, due to a tendency in Dutch media to be selective on which religion-related news is “worthy” and which is not. Topics such as violence in connection to religion or news regarding specific religions seem to be over-represented or hyper visible. These conclusions led us to come up with possible ways the working group can help to improve the current situation. The primary goals we formulated for the the working group, is that we should aim to first of all, provide opportunities where we can bring together researchers interested in and working on the theme of religion and media. Secondly, as a working group we could improve and further establish the relationship between scholars affiliated with the study of religion and journalists (and other people working in media). For the latter, the online roundtable was organized last spring.

Roundtable

The idea for the roundtable was to explore the current situation with regard to religion in the Dutch media landscape in order to see how the working group could position itself better. We decided, therefore, to invite several journalists who work on and write about religion the Netherlands in various media outlets: Tayfun Balcik (journalist *De Kanttekening*), Marije van Beek (*Trouw*), Arnold de Groot (*NRC*), Bas Soetenhorst (*Het Parool*). In preparation, the working group had formulated a few questions for our speakers. Ernst van den Hemel was the moderator this afternoon: He introduced the speakers and led the conversation with our speakers and later on the questions from the audience.

After the speakers were introduced and given the opportunity to talk a little more about their

interest in the topic of religion in media, they gave us an idea on how the process of religion in the news looked like with the newspapers they are affiliated with. Newspaper Trouw for example, is known for being one of the few Dutch newspapers that dedicates a lot of space – relatively – to religion. For Marije van Beek, who herself has a background in Religious Studies, that provides ample opportunities to write enough background information in relation to actual events or discussions on religion.

The input of the other speakers gave the impression that this was a rather exceptional position as a journalist writing about religion. For them, religion usually only comes into play when it arises as a controversy or as an ad hoc issue, and even then, there is little space given by editorial boards to write about it much. In addition, it became clear from the conversation that in the rare case religion *is* discussed extensively in newspapers, Islam and Muslims play a predominant role, often in a negative sense. The media storm around Lale Gül, a young Turkish-Dutch woman who wrote a controversial book about her Islamic upbringing, demonstrated that there is a certain frame in place when Islam is discussed in media and that it is rare to find newspaper content that offered more nuanced views on the case of Lale Gül and the relation to Islam. This is something Tayfun could affirm, as he worked on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in newspapers and could share from his personal experiences how the Dutch media discourse about Islam has impacted his sense of self over the years. In a similar sense, some participants of the roundtable felt that other religion-related news was also generally negative and sensational in tone, rather than nuanced and well-informed. One example that was mentioned was the recent media storm on the coronavirus in the Bible Belt, where religion was often framed in a negative sense as the main cause of the low vaccination rate among church-goers, the high level of distrust and conspiracy theories, et cetera.

Nearing the end of the meeting, the conversation moved towards a more practical tone: what can we as scholars and journalists do to make a positive impact? One thing that was mentioned, was the lack of (cultural) diversity of editorial boards. The lack of diversity in media, but also in other fields, is part of a larger public debate in the Netherlands that is particularly taking off in the recent years. Finally, the people in the online audience got the chance to ask some questions and engage with our speakers. A few of these questions revolved around the connection between scholars of religion with media. Some felt that there is a particular disconnect in this relation. It is possible that scholars are “too” nuanced, or not opinionated enough to be heard on the topic of religion? If that is the case, what is the cause of this and how can we tackle that? Even though we could not formulate concrete answers to this question, it became obvious that the urgency for scholars to actively think about the ways they position themselves

and their research in contemporary public discussions and media discourse. In addition, “external” factors might be just as important: the stories of the speakers made it clear that the decision to write (or not write) about religion is strongly influenced by current affairs, for example because of a controversy around the call to prayers in mosques, or the low vaccination rates in the Bible Belt.

Future plans

Overall, the session generated lots of attention and interest, which indicated to us as members of the working group that there is an urgency and need to discuss the topic of religion and media in this setting more. Since this session was short and exploratory in nature, it left us with many interesting “loose ends” that we could explore further in other events, for example including more and different media outlets in our activities, or come up with more concrete ways of working together with journalists.

For more information on the NGG and the working group, please check our website:

www.godsdienstwetenschap.nl.