



critical media project

Topic Overview: Religion

have you ever wondered...

...why some religions appear more frequently in media than others?

...why different religions have the stereotypes they do?

...why people of faith in media aren't always like the people of faith you know in your own life?

...why certain religions are portrayed in a more negative light than others in Western media?

key concepts

- Religions are collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are embedded in political, social and cultural life.
- Religion is often a significant part of identity and identity formation.
- Religions both influence and are influenced by social and historical contexts.
- Religions are often used within the media to create certain types of characters, tell certain kinds of stories, and promote certain value systems.
- Religious traditions and expressions are often represented inaccurately by the media; a single religion often contains a great deal of diversity in how it is conceived and practiced, but is often presented as a single set of beliefs, practices and representations.

keywords

identity, representation, ideology, religion, discrimination, stereotype, bias, prejudice, Islamophobia, anti-semitism

the big picture

Broadly speaking, a religion is a specific set of beliefs and rituals practiced by a group of people. A religion generally provides a moral code for its believers to follow. Participating in a religion can be a private and personal experience, as well as a social, community-based practice. For those who observe, religion can give a strong sense of

identity, purpose, belonging, and meaning. Religious identities and involvement can vary greatly between religions as well as within a single religion.

Many believe religions grew from a need to tell a story of creation and explain the meaning of life and/or the nature of existence. As different cultures in separate parts of the world developed, so did unique religions, beliefs, and traditions. There are many major world religions, but only a select few are regularly represented in Western media, and some are represented in more positive ways than others.

religion in everyday life

Can you remember the first time you understood someone to be different because of his or her religion? Was there a time when religion played a prominent role in your life (whether something happened to you directly, or you observed it happening to someone else)?

Depending on where you grew up, your family background, and what people you've encountered, you will have your own experience or idea of what religion is, what it means, and whether it's important.

For some, religion can play a prominent role in everyday life. You may have noticed people in your day-to-day life dressed differently from you. Maybe you've seen a woman with her head covered in a Hijab, a man wearing a yarmulke, a woman wearing a cross or rosary, or a man wearing a turban. The communal aspects of religion can also be a part of everyday traditions. You also may have participated in religious traditions that are different from your own--you might have been invited to a First Communion or a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, or you may have attended a wedding ceremony that followed an unfamiliar religious tradition. Perhaps you haven't experienced any of these examples in your own life, but have seen them portrayed in the media.

Religion is often associated with national, regional, or ethnic identity. According to Pew Research, over 40% of the world's countries have an official state religion, which offers tangible benefits to the followers of that religion, such as legal status and property ownership. In many of these countries, minority religious groups are restricted or banned. However, even in countries with no official religion, it is often the case that one or two religions are dominant, whether that is in terms of the number of people who practice it, or in terms of cultural influence. For example, the United States has no official religion, but Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter are recognized as official holidays, when other religious holidays, such as Ramadan and Yom Kippur, are not.

Given how religion is associated with both identity and difference, it can be a reason that people experience prejudice and bias. You may have been called a name, been given a look, or treated differently than peers of a different religion. You may even have

been the victim of assault or other forms of violence. While the media isn't the only source of information about religion, inaccurate or stereotypical portrayals of different religions can contribute to religious bias.

why it all matters... food for thought

Because religion can be so intricately linked to community and culture, many of us do not have an opportunity to meet people of different religions on a daily basis. Therefore, the representations we see in the media are often the only exposure we have to some religious groups and identities. Given that many of the messages that we receive about religion come to us through the media, it's important for us to ask questions about how media representations treat different religious groups-- and religion as a concept overall.

As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into how different religions are portrayed...and ask questions. When we think critically about religion in the media, we might start by asking:

- How are different religious groups represented in entertainment, advertising, and news media?
- How are certain news stories covered or stories told based on the religion of those involved?
- What specific images, words, dress, and sounds contribute to our understanding of how a specific religion or religious individual is portrayed?
- How do media portrayals of certain religions change in relation to other facets of identity, such as race, or gender?
- Does the media make assumptions about what certain religious groups do for work and for fun? Does it assume that certain religions are more peaceful or generous than others, or that others are more likely to commit certain crimes?
- What impact do these representations and assumption have on the opportunities and possibilities for individuals of different religions in their personal and professional lives?
- Do some religious groups experience social, political, and economic inequities more than others?

select sources:

Pew Research Center, [Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially](#) (October 3, 2017)