

■ INTRODUCTION

Religion as a Safe Harbour or an Imminent Threat – Religious Stereotypes as Presented in the Media in the 20th Century (Part 2)

The Corona pandemic, which is currently causing the world to hold its breath – or, more pertinently, taking its breath away – is unquestionably fertile ground for nurturing conspiracy theories. Turbulent times certainly compel people to reassess their views regarding the world around us, everyday life, and society in general. In times of crisis, a demonstrable susceptibility for »alternative truths« also tends to develop in secular postmodern societies; an openness that is typically not made available through the mainstream media, in accordance with the firm convictions of their purveyors against the setting of their proffered interpretation of life. »Demonstrations against hygiene measures«, spurning the government's restrictive, protective measures aimed at fighting the pandemic on the basis that they involve a substantial restriction of fundamental civil rights, have come to unify a very diverse range of protagonists. This includes those who are convinced that the Corona crisis was always a strategically wanted event, that it represents an orchestrated performance, perhaps even a conspiracy, to benefit the fiscal and digital technological interests of certain stakeholders and the pharmaceutical industry. Lurking within these conspiracy theories, old stereotypes are finding a new impetus, reaching as far as the supposed »global Jewish conspiracy«. Anti-Semitic models for explaining the world are finding their way both openly and covertly into a colourful music scene, extending their wide-ranging influence to an ever-increasing audience via social media. The search for people to blame, for a convincing interpretation or a clandestine strategy, simply plays into the hands of those who want to bring everything down to the simplest of terms; it opens the Pandora's Box of easily identified, well-known stereotypes.

This current issue seems to fit very well into our current environment. The issue represents the second half of conference contributions, presented under the title of »Religion as a Safe Harbour or a Threat – Religious Stereotypes in the Media Through the 20th Century«. The Conference was generously supported by the Lower Saxony Ministry for Science and Culture within the scope of the »Pro Niedersachsen« [*Pro Lower Saxony*] program, and was held from 14–16 November 2018, at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg. The conference was a collaborative project incorporating: the Institute for Protestant Theology and Religious Education, the Department for Intercultural Jewish Studies and the Department for Research into Historical Stereotypes (each located within the CvO University in Oldenburg), together with the editors of the CCH/KZG publication, and the Jewish community in Oldenburg. The conference organisers

also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony, which subsidised the publication of both issues of this journal presenting the conference subjects. Unfortunately, publication has been delayed as a result of the Corona crisis.

The aim of the conference was to promote discussion of research approaches into historical stereotypes, incorporating perspectives from religious studies and theology. In the light of the productive discussions following each lecture, this goal can confidently be considered a success, especially when taking into consideration the interdisciplinary nature and the diversity of the faculties represented at the conference as a marker for academic outcomes. By focussing on the communication of religious stereotypes in the media, the question of the construction of »reality« and, at the same time, its exploitation in political contexts, were raised by those presenting lectures and explored further in very deep discussions among participants. Reference to the three monotheistic religions and consideration of their internal differentiation offered new insights and raised further questions, which undoubtedly suggests that further cooperation in this field would appear to be most worthwhile.

In their conference report, Lakeberg and Hans-Christian Petersen are committed to the following research desiderata, aspects of research that deserve further attention that arose from the conference: »[...] the question of the characteristics of religious stereotypes and their relationship to national stereotypes; the importance of religious stereotypes within processes for the construction of identity; the impact of religious stereotypes in our modern society, where the significance of the factor of »religion« is steadily decreasing; and the effect of religious stereotypes within the context of Islamophobia.«¹

Looking back on the conference and in the light of the current situation, we are so very grateful as conference organisers that the issue of religious stereotypes, which have been so frequently applied and exploited within media reality over past decades, could be the subject of discussion in an interdisciplinary research context such as this.

The article written by Hallgeir Elstad and Per Arne Krumsvik picks up an interesting topic covering the history of Free Churches in Norway, an area that has seen comparably little academic research. The authors reconstruct the relationship of the Salvation Army to the Norwegian State Church's religious resistance during the time of Nazi occupation (1940–45). Initially, the Salvation Army participated in the religious resistance; however, it clearly distanced itself from the actions of this movement from 1942 onwards. The article seeks to explore and clarify the reasons behind this far-reaching decision of non-solidarity based on newly researched source material. Two particular motivations were identified

1 Tagungsbericht: Religion als Hafen oder Bedrohung – Religiöse Stereotypen in der medialen Vermittlung des 20. Jahrhunderts, 14.–16.11.2018 Oldenburg, in: H-Soz-Kult, 01.03.2019, URL: www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8136.

for decisions made by the leading personality, Joachim Myklebust: his profound anti-Communism and – in line with research into Free Churches in Germany – the »apolitical« image of this minority church. These would prove to be effective methods for ensuring the church was able to survive the German occupation unscathed.

The conclusion contains a detailed review of what is now the third volume of the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe, published by Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa, which certainly fills a previous gap in research into religious communities and Free Churches.

Gerhard Besier, the founding editor of our journal, has also written a heartfelt obituary for a member of our editorial circle, Manfred Stolpe, honouring his valued contributions to our contemporary church history and paying tribute to this significant and distinctive political personality. We will always remember Manfred Stolpe with gratitude and respect.

Andrea Strübind, Whitsuntide 2020 in Oldenburg