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The Face of the Other (Faith) as a Threat

How Images Shape Our Perception

Abstract

According to Emmanuel Lévinas, the face of the other is the starting point of ethics. The following article therefore examines in which form of media representation Christians meet with the other or, more precisely, with "the faith of the other". Across the photo reporting of migration, war, and terror, it will be shown that de-subjectifying images dominate and that the face of the other is absent. The same applies to religious websites and social media, where biblical quotations and idyllic landscape images predominate and people – or people's faces – who could be a challenge to one's own faith hardly appear. This affects the perception of "the own" and "the foreign", and it does so in an even more negative way because the competence to interpret images is not particularly well-developed in most people.

Keywords

Media Representation, Pictorial Turn, Migration, Filter Bubbles

Biography

Claudia Paganini studied philosophy and theology at the University of Innsbruck and the University of Vienna. After completing a doctorate in cultural philosophy in 2005, she turned to media ethics for her habilitation. Since April 2021 she has been professor for media ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy.

Faith and Face: Preliminary Observations

Religious faith is both individual and private, because even within a single religious community no two people will believe in a Supreme Being and the tenets of the related faith in exactly the same way. A philosopher, and with particular regard to the philosophy of mind, might explain this uniqueness in light of the fact that mental states, and thus states of faith, can only be experienced in a first-person perspective, while they can be but partly

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understood from a third person perspective. A theologian would probably argue by focusing more strongly on spirituality: the basis for faith – at least in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is the personal encounter or relationship with God, which will never be the same for any two people, just as two people will never have the same relationship with a third human being. The faith of the other is always different from my own.

In this article, however, the faith of the other is understood in the sense of an explicitly defined, distinct denomination as seen from a Western Christian perspective. I will ask in what context and in what way Christians meet with "the faith of the other", and, more specifically, in which form of media representation, through which images conveyed in the media, this encounter takes place. I focus even more narrowly on the face of the other because – following Emmanuel Lévinas and in the context of what can be called the philosophy of vulnerability – the face is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary philosophy.[1]

For Lévinas, the other, and not the self, is the starting point of ethics, which he describes as the questioning of one's own spontaneity through the presence of the other.[2] It is in and through the other that we experience ourselves and the world. The encounter with the other is *the* significant experience or *the* significant event par excellence and cannot be reduced to the simple acquisition of additional knowledge. Only when the other is experienced as other and is not judged or condemned can ethics arise. The other appears to the self as a face. In the face of the other, the self feels the strangeness of the world and of humankind. The face transcends every idea we can have or make of the other. By experiencing the other solely in their appearance, the self perceives the other in their difference.[3] This difference questions the self. The appearance of the other through the face means that the other calls on me and – through their nakedness, through their need – invites me to respond.[4] And it is in the appearance of the other through their face, that the self beholds not only a singular human being, but also humanity as a whole. The face thus has the character of an appeal which urges the self to assume responsibility for the other. This responsibility is borne by the

1 Lohwasser, 2019, 57–72.
2 Lévinas 2012, 224.
3 Wimmer 2007, 167.
4 Lévinas 2012, 224.

self; no one else can take this responsibility away from the self, no god, no other human being, no technology.

Against the background of the various normative approaches with their legitimate claims, it is clear that the reference to the face of the other cannot be the one and only solution to moral philosophical reasoning. Nevertheless, it can and should be a starting point for ethics, especially with regard to motivation – why should I even bother to seek the (however defined) good? If this is so, it seems obvious to ask whether, where, and in what way the face of the other (faith) appears in the images we are confronted with every day, in particular with regard to media representations.

Where Do We Meet Images of the Other Faith in the Media?

The first issue to address is where or in which images people of other denominations or faiths appear, and where they are absent. From a Western Christian perspective, we encounter images of people representing other denominations or faiths especially when migration, war, and terror are being reported. In the narrower religious context by contrast – i. e. when faith communities introduce themselves in the media, when prayers and other spiritual offerings are being shared, etc. – very few images only show faces or even people. We will return to this question in the section below entitled "Pictures on Religious Websites and in Social Media".

Pictures of Migration, War, and Terror

Let me start with an example. Figure 1 is a photograph of two men, one of whom is a policeman, the other a dark-skinned young man with short black hair, full beard, strong upper body, and aggressive body language. The eyes of the latter are fixed on the former with a threatening look; his face is much too close to the policeman, as if he might strike him at any moment.

This picture was posted on Facebook in May 2018 by the right-wing group German Meme Defence Force and subtitled with the sarcastic words, "14-year-old refugee bravely confronts a Nazi deportation police officer." Within a short time, the post had been shared around 8,400 times, mainly by German users, but also by users in Austria, Sweden, and Hungary. Soon after, it appeared on Twitter, where a user commented on the page of the equally right-wing Junge Alternative Essen, "The sympathetic young pro-

Fig. 1: Several right-wing groups deliberately miscontextualise the picture of Vito Pirbazari taken while filming the Netflix series DOGS OF BERLIN, https://is.gd/xRQmvi [accessed 4 January 2022].

tection seeker will win in the long run because he has the German government on his side." The Austrian FPÖ local group Oggau commented similarly: "The future of Germany explained by exactly one picture."

A good part of the users seemed to agree that this picture is yet more proof of the aggressive behaviour of refugees, more precisely of young male Muslim refugees, who pose a massive threat to Christian Europe. But for those who think along these lines, this photograph presents three particular challenges. The first problem is relatively banal. Contrary to what the original posting suggests, what we see here is not a confrontation between a refugee and a policeman documented by a photographer; it is a picture taken during the filming of the Netflix series DOGS OF BERLIN (DE 2018). The "policeman" is a member of the special investigation team of the Berlin police, whereas the "Afghan refugee" is a well-paid German actor named Vito Pirbazari. The photo, which has provoked hundreds of outraged comments, is therefore a fake, or rather, strictly speaking, it was made fake by the text, which provided it with a specific hermeneutic framing and deliberately miscontextualised it.[5] The second problem is the naïve assumption that a photograph is an actual eye-witness, that it represents what really happened. And finally, problem number three is related to the idea of the refugee, the idea of flight, both constructs that fulfil certain socio-political functions.

We start with the problem of eye-witnessing, an issue that predated the invention of photography. Reflections on the ontological and epistemological status of images can be found across cultural history. The change of

5 Paganini 2019, 110–115.

mode from drawing to photograph did not initially bring any fundamentally new arguments, for the authenticity of hand-drawn illustrations – as they were to be found in magazines from the 1830s onwards – had already been judged according to the same criteria – namely, eye-witnessing and the intention to report truthfully. The fact that the two visual modes were regarded as epistemically equal at the time of the advent of photography is reflected inter alia by the fact that for several decades photographs and drawings could stand alongside one another without any difficulty, often even "illustrating" the same article.[6]

However, the more photography replaced hand-drawn illustration, the more the debate shifted. Rudolf Arnheim was focusing exclusively on the photograph when he postulated in 1978 that an image was authentic precisely when it depicted reality – posed or unposed – and true when it expressed the essence of the matter represented. Similar media-ontological considerations can be found in André Bazin, who speaks of the objectivity of photography, and also in Roland Barthes, who appraises the photograph as empirical art and a perfect analogon of reality.[7] At the beginning of the 1990s, photography received even more philosophical attention. Almost simultaneously, Gottfried Boehm and William J.T. Mitchell developed the concept of the "iconic"[8] or "pictorial turn".[9] Both were arguing in line with the "linguistic turn": Boehm took up Wittgenstein's concept of the language game and the family resemblance of concepts as he sought to derive his programme of the self-sufficiency of the image from the pictoriality of language; Mitchell orientated himself more strongly on Charles S. Peirce and argued for a substitution of the primacy of language by the symbolic. Boehm and Mitchell were not alone in calling for a radical relationship between language and image.

Instead of going into detail, here I content myself with noting that the "iconic turn" is probably the reason that in recent years photography has been increasingly reflected upon not only in its aesthetic dimensions but also in its ontological, epistemological, and ethical ones. As far as the last of these is concerned, first and foremost the manifold possibilities for deception, either conscious – by deliberate technical manipulation – or un-

6 Bucher 2016, 280–317.

7 Blunck 2016, 96–106.

8 Boehm 1994, 11–38.

9 Mitchell 1994, 11–34.

conscious – by a lack of contextualisation, an unsuitable choice of extracts, etc. – constitute a media-ethical problem. Additionally, the question of representation or non-representation demands consideration. While most recipients are well aware that a report in words reflects the author's opinion and therefore requires a critically reflective and questioning approach, the recipient's similar competency with regard to images cannot be nearly so readily assumed.

As was also the case for the early realistic interpretations of photography, it is often overlooked that a photograph does not refer to reality directly; the spectator must first establish this reference semio-pragmatically. The similarity between the photograph and the world is therefore not the result of simple reproduction but a product of interpretation, for the photograph evokes ideas and thoughts in the spectator that would otherwise be evoked by the object. Only those who are aware of this do not run the risk of naïvely taking photographic material disseminated on the Internet as proof that something happened in exactly this or that way. When we then turn to a photo's particular context, further difficulties can arise. In the case of images of migration, war, and terror, where people of other denominations or faiths figure with particular frequency, the production of stereotypes requires our attention.

The images we are confronted with in online newspapers and on social media every day do not offer (neutral) documentation. They bear witness to how a society thinks – for example, about refugees. In this instance they contribute to the emergence or consolidation of a certain idea of the refugee, providing an interpretation scheme for social phenomena and thus instigating and steering a construction process during which a refugee is codified – regardless of the concrete character and story of the particular person. The result is a "banal racism"[10] that is manifested as the border between "us" and "them" created by that construction process increasingly penetrates everyday life and finally takes possession of people's perception and thinking such that the self-created demarcation line ultimately appears as a given parameter and not as a constructed instance in need of explanation.

Typical of this construction process are de-subjectifying images such as overcrowded rubber dinghies or crowds of people seeking to scale border fences or heading in caravans towards an uncertain destination (fig. 2). This type of photograph automatically reminds the viewer of natural forces and

10 Terkessidis 2004.

Fig. 2: Pictures of masses of people running against border fences have a de-subjectifying effect on the spectator, https://is.gd/imUBAh [accessed 4 January 2022].

catastrophes, of chaos, disorder, and violence, and these chains of associations are reinforced by typical verbal comments and headlines such as "migration wave" or "flood of refugees" or by metaphors such as "invasion" or "onslaught", borrowed from the context of war. Images and words thus construct migrants as a homogenous and threatening mass, so that it is completely clear to the recipient that the term "refugee crisis" refers exclusively to the excessive stress on their homeland provoked by the current refugee situation, and not to the crisis of people who have had to leave behind their belongings, their families, and their respective histories. This instance is but one example of the above-mentioned construction process.

Depending on the circles or filter bubbles in which we move on the Internet, this general attribution process can additionally be connoted negatively or positively. To give a negative example: members of right-wing populist groups who come across postings by acquaintances with xenophobic convictions will most likely be confronted with photo material explicitly focusing on the topoi of danger and burden.[11] These images, often borrowed from completely different contexts, as in the example given above, clearly

11 Wengeler 2003, 132–133.

symbolise aggression and destruction and are accompanied by such terms as "immigrant criminality", intentionally invented to reinforce negative attributions. Thus, they contribute to the fact – one example is New Year's Eve in 2015 in Cologne – that problems such as (sexual) violence are located away from the sphere of the "us". The "us" is stylised as *the* place of non-violence, as an oasis for women's sexual self-determination. However, this is obviously not the case when one looks at the statistics on sexual assaults in our (own) German families.

But the topoi that have been created to counterbalance these aggressive master narratives are not unproblematic either. Demarcated against the topos of burden – peculiar in that in the absence of quantitatively ascertainable criteria, the limits of the "bearable burden" remain ambiguous and invariably portrayed as already reached or even exceeded – the topos of benefit has emerged. In place of images of uncontrollable masses of people, migrants are shown as eagerly absorbed in their work or standing next to their happy bosses, smiling into the camera. Refugees are good for our economy, they help make up for the lack of apprentices – this is the message behind the photographs. But even the humanitarian topos, whose images wish to evoke compassion and claim responsibility for migrants, has its dark side. The outside perspective on the refugee as a vulnerable victim tends to reduce individual human beings – who very likely see themselves as active subjects consciously taking steps to improve their situation – to passive recipients of aid, and thus silences them.

Perspectivisation is a considerable problem in the case of figurative speech about refugees, for the vast majority of the images of flight regularly reproduced in Western media embody the outside perspective. Additionally, there are hardly any migrants on the producer side. A similar problem of perspective is central in war reporting, where "embedded journalists" reflect the events through their pictures primarily from the perspective of the shooters and not from that of those who are hit.[12] At the same time, the images of suffering, of those who are injured or even dead, create a strange complicity of photographer and viewer, both of whom watch and do not intervene. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, American writer Susan Sontag even goes so far as to claim that only those who are ready to help should be allowed to look at pictures exposing extreme suffering.[13]

12 Chimelli 2008, 37.

13 Sontag 2004.

Fig. 3: Nick Út's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph is said to have contributed significantly to the massive growth of opposition to the Vietnam War, https://is.gd/QpQ6B3 [accessed 4 January 2022].

That said, the effects of war photography as such are highly controversial. Does war photography merely serve to maximise economic profit or does it help raise the public's awareness of the horror of war and thus possibly even contribute to reducing the duration of wars? As an example of the second option, the German media ethicist Christina Schicha cites Nick Út's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of children fleeing from a napalm attack, which contributed significantly to the massive growth of opposition to the Vietnam War (fig. 3).[14] In both instances, however, the person depicted is instrumentalised to a certain degree and what is unique and individual is profanised through its depiction. Viewed from this angle, photography can be attributed a special form of violence, in that it appropriates human destinies and preserves them in unchangeable images.

In war photography, people of religious denominations or faiths that are not those of the majority of the recipients often appear as sufferers and sometimes as perpetrators of violence, not infrequently inhabiting bloodthirsty poses, such as holding a victim's severed skull in their hands. The latter is also the case with images of terror. Both types of representation tend to kindle fear in the audience. In the case of the media-staged cruel

14 Schicha 2021, 93; Stepan 2000.

perpetrator, this is not surprising. But the images of victims, too, can cause pressure and anxiety, for whenever we feel we do not have the resources to respond to a challenging situation, tension arises, and ultimately a feeling of threat. Therefore, paradoxically, danger can seem to emanate even from the other (believer) who is a victim. In addition, images in themselves tend to simplify complex issues, a process reinforced by the emotional activation of the brain which misleads viewers into uncritically adopting stereotypes and master narratives, as has been shown above with regard to migration contexts.

As far as the coverage of terror is concerned, the main function of the media is not to inform but to comfort. As Clément Chéroux has pointed out in connection with the images of 9/11, the almost endless repetition of a multitude of very similar images is a way of overcoming trauma.[15] The shock of the catastrophe is processed by quickly integrating the inconceivable into a comprehensible story that makes sense, thus satisfying a need for orientation by means of a constant supply of information and the suggestion that ultimately everything is under control.[16] But media reporting and the associated mediation rituals do not only provide security in chaotic situations. They also ensure that the audience is moved emotionally and thus they awaken feelings of community. They set in motion collectivisation processes, through which the collective can better stabilise itself and the outbreak of panic can be avoided. However, these collectivisation processes also lead to a stronger perception of the boundary between the "us" and the "them" and reinforce the growing desire to separate oneself as a group from the outside. It is therefore not surprising that people with other religious convictions quickly become part of this outside and are hence perceived as a danger once more.

Pictures on Religious Websites and in Social Media

On the Internet people talk explicitly about faith, about their own or other people's religious convictions: Facebook and Twitter pages proclaim divine messages; on dating platforms users can make contact with singles who belong to the same religion; on Instagram accounts and YouTube channels

15 Chéroux 2011, 37.

16 Weichert 2011, 188–192.

Fig. 4: It is impossible to tell whether Jana intends to manipulate her audience or whether she herself is being instrumentalised by the agents behind her page, https://is.gd/OdDw8Q [accessed 4 January 2022].

in place of cosmetics or sporting goods, religious influencers advertise their faith and their own religious communities. A closer look at these posts establishes that only a few of the many ways of speaking of God as cultivated in the theological-philosophical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are to be found here. Classical philosophical approaches such as the *via negationis*, the *via eminentiae*, or the *via analogiae* hardly ever occur, and if they do, then in a vaguely allusive, unreflected way. The same can be said of other ways of speaking, such as the mythical, the dialectical according to Karl Barth, or the paradoxical according to Søren Kierkegaard. Instead, one finds an abundance of quotations and metaphors from the Bible and the Koran, usually backed by expressive images of nature. Additionally, and in contrast to Web 1.0, the need for an informative or even theological discourse is only marginally met by social media (the so called Web 2.0), which essentially communicates the poster's own religious experiences or seeks to motivate others to believe.

From the point of view of media ethics, this raises the question of the authenticity of such religious "speech". In addition to politically motivated fear production, fake news, interest-driven PR communication, hidden advertising, strategic military influence on public opinion, acting under someone else's identity, etc., in Web 2.0 we are also dealing with religious manipulation, in the form of the deliberate use of psychological techniques to influence users emotionally, to steer and eventually control them. It is not necessarily simple to establish from an outside perspective whether it is the 20-year-old beautiful influencer herself, with her mane of blond curls, who intends to manipulate her audience or whether she is being instrumentalised by the agents behind her page (fig. 4). What can be said, though, is that highly emotional professions of faith are often followed immediately by

an invitation to enter personal data, to fill out a membership application, or to make intensive financial contributions to a community.

As far as the referential intention is concerned, we are confronted with two types of players: those who intend to refer to God, but exclusively in order to optimise their own advantage – e.g. their position in the community as a response to the number of their "converts" – and those who do not want to refer to God but merely use the term "God" as an instrument of manipulative strategic communication. In both cases the value of any religious conviction triggered by psychological manipulation is questionable as is uncertain how such a conviction can grow and mature. Finally, we would require empirical evidence to establish whether the believers recruited in such a (questionable) way will be respected by the community as independent personalities or whether manipulation and control continue to permeate everyday interactions. This need for evidence also applies to the question whether and under which circumstances withdrawal from the community will be permitted.

But let us turn to cases of religious speech in social media where we cannot assume a manipulative intention and we have reason to suppose that we are simply dealing with believers who wish to share their own religious beliefs and spiritual experiences with others. As mentioned above, this goal mainly happens through biblical or Koranic quotations and metaphors, usually in combination with images. As far as quotations from the Bible are concerned, these are almost consistently taken out of context, badly translated, or paraphrased so strongly that the act of quoting equals distortion.

Difficulties can also arise with regard to the metaphorical speech about God, in particular whether such metaphors about God can convey cognitive content and if so, of what kind. Whereas in the tradition of logical empiricism metaphors were often regarded as mere rhetorical ornaments without cognitive content, panmetaphoricists argue that all religious speech is metaphorical.[17] If we follow our everyday intuition with regard to metaphors, we have good reason, I believe, to advocate for a moderate position that assumes a cognitive as well as an explanatory function of metaphors. To give an example, I can conclude from the metaphor "God is our father" that God takes interest in my life, that I can turn to God with confidence and need not fear God. By enabling such a conclusion, the metaphorical assertion becomes part of the space of reasons, for it can be argued with them.

17 Gäbe 2019, 216–218.

At the same time, however, the metaphor expresses a content that cannot (or can only with difficulty) be expressed in literal speech. The degree of "absoluteness" of this irreducibility is one of the central points in the debate on God-metaphors in philosophy of religion and is not discussed here.

Relevant here, from the point of view of media ethics, is, however, the question whether the viewer can be assumed to have sufficient interpretive competence. This concern relates not just to the biblical or Koranic quotations and metaphors, but also to the images with which the religious texts are combined. In addition to the challenges already described above, here we also face the specific problem that these images are not neutral but instead provide an interpretation scheme within which the quotations and metaphors are perceived and decoded. It is striking that religious content is consistently transmitted through pictures of aesthetic solitary natural landscapes, suggesting an individualistic and noncommittal interpretation. A personal experience of nature is transmitted pictorially; the faces of other people – or indeed of people with a different faith – hardly ever appear. The experience of God offered in the text thus runs the risk of being interpreted as private, as something individuals consume, just like their Netflix subscriptions. What falls by the wayside, so to speak, are the faces and faiths of others, and consequently also all aspects of community and social responsibility for others, whether they belong to one's own confession or not.

The problem of a slanted interpretation is exacerbated by these nature metaphors occurring *en masse*, which turns them into "master narratives", narratives that dominate media discourse without being singularly appropriate on an argumentative level, more appropriate than other interpretations of religion, human nature, or the world. Although the mechanism behind the viral spread of master narratives in social media has not yet been sufficiently explored, the first empirical studies suffice to show that their dynamics are self-reinforcing and difficult to break.[18] One way of possibly achieving interpretative diversity in religious speech could therefore involve deliberate invention and the spreading of alternative narratives – such as images of people interacting with each other, helping each other, and ideally not all of them would be young, healthy, wealthy, good-looking, and white.

Finally, a peripheral locale of religious speech should be mentioned – satirical sites. Such sites might comment critically on world events by assuming the first-person perspective of God. On Facebook, for instance,

18 Hochman 2020, 1043–1061.

Fig. 5: One form of religious speech is satire as we find it on Facebook, where "God" has around 3.9 million followers, https://www.facebook.com/TheGoodLordAbove/.

one finds a god with around 3.9 million followers who explicitly describes himself as a comedian and who clearly took a stand against the actions of the then president Donald Trump in a post from 4 January 2020 – "Thou shalt not start World War 3 just to win an election because you are terrified of going to prison" (fig. 5).[19] What place should satire have in religion? Where are the boundaries with blasphemy, how much ironic criticism are believers required to tolerate? Does ironic distance make ideological dialogue easier, or by scandalising people does it only push them further into their filter bubbles and thus encourage radicalisation? This said, most of the postings do not contain images at all, only brief cynical statements. Some of them provide images of migration and war, particularly when the users are called upon not to be indifferent to the suffering of the people affected. In general, however, as noted above, these images primarily express the neediness of (vulnerable) others from an – albeit well-intentioned – external perspective.

Conclusion

The images with which we are confronted in the media every day and which shape our idea of people representing other denominations or faiths present a multitude of dilemmas. They can perpetuate problematic constructs, they may profane what is unique, and they are sometimes violent[20] in that they

19 God@TheGoodLordAbove, 2020.

20 Lévinas 2002, 320–321.

appropriate human destinies and irreducibly freeze them into unchangeable pictorial representations. They establish the complicity of photographer and viewer, reduce complexity, or do not allow other "faces" to appear. But these problems form only half the story for what these images show often becomes visible only through and because of them. Pictures open windows to other worlds, they are processed by the brain more effectively than words and sentences, they are better remembered, they set free emotions and attitudes, they motivate more strongly than abstract imperatives. Therefore, a ban on pictures – similar to the ones religions have repeatedly pronounced – would be counter-constructive. Just as images serve stereotypes and breed misinterpretations, they also have a positive potential that should not be underestimated. How this potential can be activated still needs to be clarified, but first and foremost the viewer's image competence must be improved and then changes must be made to existing production conditions, with those whose fate, life, and faith are recorded photographically given the opportunity to participate in shaping them.

If we are to counteract the current tendency for people of other faiths and denominations either not to appear at all in religious figurative speech or to be portrayed as a threat – as demonstrated in the context of migration, war, and terror – it is surely worthwhile to return to Emmanuel Lévinas and his reflections on the face of the other. Perhaps we so seldom see the face of the other when believers of other denominations are being portrayed because the face always conveys an appeal. It appeals to the viewer to seek to understand the other, to consider them as persons in their own right, and to take responsibility for their well-being. When we do not see faces, we can more easily ignore demands upon ourselves or banish them from our minds; we can continue exactly as before and hold on to our own stereotypes. Therefore, the increased appearance of the "faces of the other (faiths)" might be an important step in breaking down – at least to some extent – the boundaries between "us" and "them" or even in engaging in interreligious dialogue.

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Filmography

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