Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder, and Baldassare Scolari

"Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" Women!

Encountering Media Ethics and Religion in Theory and in the Classroom

Abstract

The article presents a theoretical and methodological framework for a cultural studies–oriented approach to the complex relationship between media ethics and religion. On the basis of several concrete examples, the article sheds light on the centrality of religious worldviews, symbols, figures, and narratives within different media practices in which moral norms, principles, and values are reproduced, rediscovered, discussed, legitimated, and contested. Moreover, the article highlights how the examination of concrete media content can be implemented in teaching in order to stimulate and increase students' capacity to understand, analyze, and evaluate the normative function and power of the media, especially in the contemporary digitalized and globalized world.

Keywords

Media Ethics, Religion, Cultural Studies, Teaching, Spaces of Communication, Values, Norms

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The research field of media ethics has been influenced by a wide range of disciplines: media philosophy, media sociology, ethics of technology, communication, and media studies, to name only the most prominent.[1] A similar diversity of disciplines is reflected in the research field of the study of religion. Both areas of research embrace diverse schools of thought, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and thematic focusses. In this contribution, we present a theoretical and methodological reflection that approaches the complex relationship between media ethics and religion from the perspective of cultural studies. If we understand religion as an important element within cultural practices of meaning production and exchange, a cultural studies approach to media ethics and religion promises to be a productive endeavor. Our approach addresses the context of media actors and media sources, scrutinizes power relations in representation processes, and explores the responsibilities and loyalties of media actors in the spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution.

The contribution has two parts. The first section presents the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual framework of cultural studies and shows how it can be fruitful for an examination of the relationship between religion and the media, with a focus on media ethics. This section focuses also on how the media define religion as well on the role religious signs, figures, and narratives play in the media. The second section addresses the teaching of media ethics in schools and universities. Using a case study, it considers how ethical reasoning might be taught. Careful analysis of specific media

1 See Schicha/Brosda 2010; Heesen 2016; Funiok 2011; Leschke 2001.

content and its spaces of production, distribution, and perception allows for reflection on the values and norms that content transmits. This section also shows how such an examination of media content broaches the responsibilities of both producer and audience, guiding students towards a critical understanding of media, its sociopolitical impact, and their personal use of it.

A Cultural Studies Approach to Media Ethics and Religion

Culture and Cultural Studies

Culture can be described as a way of life or a lifestyle. People and communities express cultural belonging and its limits in everyday practices like how they dress or what they eat. We all use linguistic codes and systems of representation – written language, spoken language, language of the body, visual language and so on – to express who we are and who we are not, to understand others and the world that surrounds us. Culture can thus be described as a system of practices by which we express and exchange meanings. These meanings regulate and organize our conduct, since "they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed",[2] as Stuart Hall, the founder of British cultural studies, stated. Cultural practices are therefore related to specific normative/regulative systems used by individuals and groups to defend their values, which are expressed in actions or regulated forms of action, or so-called norms.[3] In some cultures it is polite to take off one's shoes when entering a private house, while in other cultures shoes should not be removed. The value of politeness can be associated with a variety of situations and sometimes with contradictory behaviors.

Culture can therefore be understood as an ongoing process of interpretation during which people exchange, share, and even argue about how people, objects, and events are to be understood and classified. As Stuart Hall observes, "the question of meaning arises in relation to all the different moments or practices in our 'cultural circuit' – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct".[4] In each moment of the cultural cir-

2 Hall 2013, xx.

3 More about the differences for values and norms can be found in Kettner 2011, 219–231.

4 Hall 2013, xx.

cuit, people are *doing* something to provide meaning. Representation can be added here, as a further moment in the cultural circuit. People perceive the world, have an idea of the world, and express their ideas by means of signs. These meaning-making processes belong to the basic human activities that define culture as a set of practices.

Representation is pivotal because it connects meaning with symbolic expressions like language and images with cultural practices. Hall describes this interface between cultural practices and representations as follows: "The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'."[5] Meaning needs to be communicated. Language and images are examples of symbolic expressions that communicate meaning. Representation includes two processes: the first contains mental representations that are individual and part of human imaginings and ideas and are produced by sensual perception and intellectual examination of the world. Meaning takes place in the tension between the world and these mental representations. Shared meanings are shared mental representations, shared by signs as the second process. Whole systems of signs enable humans to communicate complex ideas – language and images, for example, but also sounds or material artefacts. Sign systems retroactively influence human mental imaginings and concepts. This circuit of meaning is inexhaustible, with no beginning and no end.

For example, every person imagines the concept "woman" differently. Our attribution of a certain meaning to the term "women" is influenced by our hermeneutic horizons, the contexts we are living in that shape our personality. As the collage in figure 1 shows, signs for "women" are manifold.

Difference and plurality are integral to representation. There is no single meaning, for different perspectives and contexts have their own truths. From this plurality of symbols and signs, of models of women's representation, a series of questions arises: How is the mental representation of women expressed? Which system of signs refers to the idea of women? Who are the main media actors who determine which representation of "women" circulates in the public sphere? How far do the media define what "woman" means? Indeed, who has the power to define meaning?

This example indicates that power relations are central in meaning-making processes and need to be taken into account in a media-ethical analysis.

5 Hall 2013, 5.

Fig. 1: The collage shows images and signs that refer to the concept of women.

As "signifying institutions", the media provide means by which social groups produce and exchange ideas of their own values, opinions, and practices and also those of other groups.[6] Media order and inventorize the repertoire of images and ideas and thereby create normative and evaluative classifications and hierarchies. In the media, different opinions are reorganized into the "mystical unity of consensus".[7] Media do not merely reflect this consensus, they also actively produce it. The production of consensus is only possible through conflict and closure. Media representations are always embedded within existing discursive formations. According to Hall, "These discursive formations […] define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and 'true' in that context; and what sorts of persons or 'subjects' embody its characteristics."[8] Meanings are constituted in an ongoing discursive process, in a social interaction into which every member of a language community is born and which forms the basis for the interiorization of subjective worlds of meaning. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault highlighted, power relations are shaped by communication "which transmit information via a language,

6 Marchart 2003, 12.
7 Hall 1979, 339.
8 Hall 2013, xxii.

a sign system or another medium".[9] If power imbalances are internalized and the actors even identify with them, they become effective. Self-policing preserves power structures and hierarchies and prevents them from being questioned. But a critical media-ethical analysis will question those power relations. Its political agenda is to prevent unquestioned representation processes that reinforce injustice. We can return to the issue of the representation of women and ask whether the depicted women agreed to their representation or how a specific representation of a woman influences the idea of how a women should look. It is the task of media ethics to challenge the conflation of, in this case, the representation of the woman (signifier) and the woman in the world (signified).

Media Ethics

Ethics is a two-sided approach to morality, for it is both scientific and philosophical. There are three important dimensions to ethical reflection. First, moral judgements can only be made of human actions because people, unlike animals, can usually choose how they want to act. Secondly, people need to have free will if their actions are to be judged, Thus, for example, we cannot pass moral judgement on the actions of animals, for they cannot decide on the basis of free will how to act – a dog's barking is not to be ethically judged, but the owner's ability to control the animal is.

The third dimension concerns the central task of descriptive ethics in examining ideas of the highest good, that is, ideas of the good that consider it an absolute, indispensable, and indisputable value. The highest good is something that one agrees is worth achieving, an idea that guides individuals and groups in their actions. To give an example: in the contemporary world there is broad consensus that vulnerable persons should be protected and supported by a society.[10] Ethics of care, a concept originally elaborated by Carol Gilligan focusses on differences in the moral development of girls and boys. It defines correct moral behavior less in terms of the wellbeing of the individual and more in light of networks and the well-being of of all those who are part of such groupings.[11]

9 Foucault 2013, 252. Translated by the authors.

10 We are aware that the idea that protecting vulnerable people is a highest good is already subjective. A neo-liberal understanding of good conduct might look different, with each person responsible for their own success or failure.

11 Gilligan 2003.

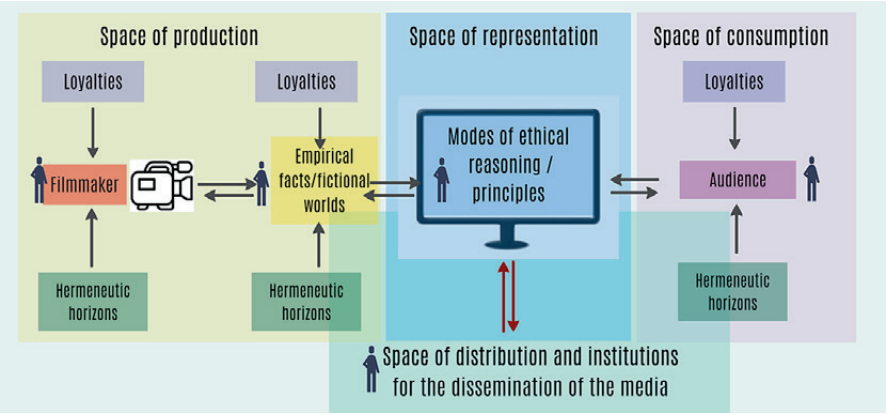

Fig. 2: The four spaces of media communication: spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution/institutions for the dissemination of the media.

Media ethics belongs to the field of applied ethics. It examines media practices and the normative principles and orientations that regulate them, formulates normative instructions for the various media actors and institutions, and critically judges the media actor's moral behavior in the different fields or spaces of the media.[12] Media ethics also assesses the normative dimension of communication between people by means of the media. According to media ethicist Jessica Heesen, "The core business of media ethics concerns the interaction of human communication partners mediated by media. The area of particular relevance to media ethics therefore relates to mediatised human communication."[13] The human communication of the media actors takes place in four different media spaces or spaces of communication, those of production, representation, consumption, and distribution. In each of these interrelated spaces, media actors perform actions, make decisions, and communicate with media actors in other spaces (fig. 2), only between the spaces of production and consumption is no immediate communication.[14]

Media professionals are located in the space of production, which is where the media – for example, newspaper articles, advertisings, fiction films, and documentaries– are made. More than one actor is usually in-

12 Heesen 2016, 3; Veith/Bohrmann/Reichelt 2018.

13 Heesen 2016, 2. Translated by the authors.

14 The interface between religion and the spaces of communication is explored in detail in Mäder 2020, 48–62.

volved in the media production process. For example, the production of audio-visual media involves actors both behind and in front of the camera and often also in the production office. In this space people decide what stories are told with what kind of means. For both documentary media and fiction film, social actors behind and in front of the camera, who may be non-professional or professional depending on the film genre, make myriad decisions about how to depict the story. Thus producers and directors of documentaries select the social actors for their particular case and decide which statements are included in the film; they determine how a scene is shot, from which angle the (social) actors are filmed, and how the narrative is edited. The (social) actors in front of the camera influence this decision process too. An actor interprets a character in collaboration with the director, and the social actor's relation with the filmmaker is often a key factor in how a documentary's narrative evolves. Filmmakers and (social) actors' mutual relationship defines how the empirical facts of a documentary or the fictional world of a feature film are presented.[15] Thus the actual (re) presentation is affected not only by the dialogue and action, but also by the setting in which the film is shot, how the costumes look, and what props are used. The filmic staging and editing, the encoded story in the space of representation, is what the audience receives and decodes.[16]

As was noted above in the context of mental representations and the system of signs, the space of representation is central to meaning-making processes and the relation between ideas about the world and the interpretation of the historical world. Also, in this space actions formed as narratives, both fictional and documentary, define how the story evolves. Here someone tells a story that can be scrutinized. Some individuals or groups of people are more eligible to define which narratives are told and how the stories are shaped. Some human beings are granted a voice, while some do not appear at all or are depicted by others. Therefore, in the space of representation, the media actors themselves apply modes of ethical reasoning.

15 There are documentaries without social actors, for example nature films. But even there, nature is not objectively depicted. The narrative always has a specific aim, which determines for whom it is produced and what story the producers want to tell. Often nature itself becomes a social actor that represents a paradise-like version of a perfect world, as in films produced by National Geographic or in BBC Wildlife documentaries. See Aufderheide 2007, 117–124.

16 The model of encoding and decoding refers to the model elaborated by Stuart Hall in the 1980s in the context of television productions. See Hall 2006, 233–246.

A revealing example is provided by the Bechdel test, which considers female stereotypes in fiction films and was first proposed by graphic novel Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*.[17] To pass the Bechdel test three questions must be answered in the affirmative: Are there at least two female protagonists? Do they talk to each other? Are they talking about something other than a male character? It is striking how many films and series fail this test. That result is confirmed by a scientific study undertaken by Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film in San Diego, about the under-representation of women in cinema and television.[18] Lauzen concludes that the proportion of female protagonists dropped from 40 percent in 2019 to 29 per cent in 2020.[19] The Bechdel test and the investigation of the representation of women form just one indicator of the unequal distribution of media presence and the part played by privilege in meaning-making processes. For race and ethnicity, other criteria included in Lauzen's study, the results are similar.

The space of consumption is where the film is received. Film reception is understood as an active process in which the audience decides not only what they watch but also how they judge it. Being a spectator in the digital age allows preferences to be easily communicated both to the online community and to algorithms that ensure similar content or media format pops up for that spectator again. Preferences turn into persistent "filter bubbles". The audience therefore is left with the responsibility to think critically about what it likes and dislikes and also to pursue strategies to engage less convenient content.[20]

And finally, in the space of distribution media actors make decisions about how and where media are distributed. In the case of pornography or violent or discriminative representations, the institutions which distribute such content – for example social media platforms – can be held liable for protecting underage consumers. The extent to which social media platforms like Instagram are responsible for the content provided by their users is currently much debated. Thus, for example, stereotypical and hegemonic representations of "beautiful bodies" have been shown to affect the physical and mental well-being of young people, leading to eating disorders like

17 Fischer 2015.

18 Lauzen 2021.

19 Also remarkable is the fact that the presence of male characters aged sixty or more is almost twice more likely than the presence of female characters of the same age (10 % versus 6 %).

20 See Zuboff 2019.

bulimia and anorexia.[21] Yet within social media groups, likes and emojis motivate members to deprive themselves of sustenance, while algorithms endorse such damaging behavior by revealing to those members more sites with similar content.

The media actors in the spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution follow a variety of goals through a variety of strategies. They are connected, however, from an ethical point of view by their responsibility for their actions that might impact others well-being. For this reason in particular, the concept of responsibility is central in media-ethical discussions. It has been elaborated by the media ethicist Rüdiger Funiok, who breaks down the question of responsibility into six sub-questions: Who is responsible? For which action is that person responsible? What are the consequences of the action? Who is affected by the action? To which authority or instance (personal conscience, the public) does the acting person have to answer for the action? Why does the acting person have to answer for the action (values, norms, criteria)?[22] Through these various aspects of responsibility, moral agency in all its complexity can be ethically analyzed. The question of the authority to which the actor must answer is particularly challenging. Social actors may hold fundamentally different ideas about what is good or bad, feel a certain loyalty towards certain groups, and follow specific agendas.

Loyalties particularly influence the ethical decision-making process and moral reasoning, as the theologian and social ethicist Ralph B. Potter noted. Building on the work of social ethicist Walter Georg Muelder (1907–2004), Potter sought to span the gap between guidelines and appropriate action.[23] His "Potter Box" is a tool that allows differentiation between four elements of a moral argument: (1) the empirical facts, (2) the hermeneutic horizons of the parties, (3) the parties' loyalties, and (4) the modes of ethical reasoning.[24] Disagreement about the correct moral decision may form in any or all these aspects.

In the following section moral reasoning is considered in light of a poster produced by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in March 2021, at the time of the veil-ban referendum (fig. 3).[25]

21 Morris/Katzman 2003, 287–289.

22 Funiok 2011, 68–74.

23 Potter 1972, 102.

24 For a detailed discussion of the Potter Box see Mäder 2020, 266–269; Christians/Fackler/McKee/Kreshel 2020, 4–13.

25 Unknown author 2021.

Fig. 3: Poster issued by the Swiss People's Party's at the time of an initiative to ban veiling.

Religion, Moral Reasoning, and a Political Poster

Different moral arguments can lead to either the rejection of the poster or its appreciation.

We can understand where moral dispute can arise in relation to this poster by posing four questions related to the four elements of the Potter Box.

(1) What is depicted on the poster? The poster shows a person wearing a black veil. The eyes are endowed with feminine attributes in the form of long lashes and their almond shape. The person wears a niqab, a veil that covers the head and all but the eyes on the face. We can assume that a Muslim woman is depicted. Her facial expression tells us that she is angry. The red background highlights her emotional attitude. So far so good. But can we see more? We might wonder if her emotional attitude is connected to the poster's text: "Stop extremism! Veil ban, yes." But the decoding of the empirical facts might be contested. Should extremism be stopped because veiled women are angry or are angry veiled women a signifier for extremism? The application of different values in answering this first, empirical, question may produce a moral dispute – does the response focus on perceptions of the woman's emotions or on veiled women as an expression of extremism?

(2) How might the image on the poster be interpreted? Let us accept that she is angry. Additional text and context might help us understand the reasons for her expression. But is she angry because she did not agree to be depicted on this poster? Or is she angry because Switzerland is going to vote on banning the veil. Or, and this is most likely, is the poster-producer's intention to suggest that niqab-wearing women are extremists, even terrorists, and a threat to Switzerland? Whether the woman is angry about being used for a political campaign or about the suggested connection between

veiled women and terrorism provides the woman with different messages and meanings. For this question the disagreement is about how the facts should be interpreted and is thus related to the hermeneutic horizon of the disputants. We are concerned here with the way in which a statement or event is decoded. Interpretation is connected to the cultural, educational, or political context of the person who is interpreting. Some people will already feel threatened by the idea of a woman wearing a headscarf because they experience it as alien to their lifestyle and what they consider their own cultural (or national) values and identities. For others, a woman in a headscarf represents a legitimate part of what they consider a cosmopolitan lifestyle in a globalized world. These two interpretative options are not the only possible interpretations, but they exemplify how images that are read as religious narratives and symbols can trigger affirmation or rejection. Contradictory opinions about religion often emerge on the basis of belonging and identity processes that are referenced with the third question.[26]

(3) Who is loyal to whom? The image can generate different relationships of loyalty that are a result of worldviews, political convictions, social milieus, and the experiences of individuals and groups. In the act of reception, some people will identify with the right-wing referendum committee, while others will relate to the woman wearing a niqab. Such expressions of loyalty depend on the interpretation of the image or, more precisely, the articulation of signs within the image by means of existing cultural frames. A quantitative study shows that religious spectators generally respond more positively than non-religious spectators to the depiction of religion in documentaries. And that the reverse also holds: less religious people are more critical of the positive depiction of religious actors.[27]

(4) Which modes of ethical reasoning are used to assess the moral values expressed by the image? This final question relates to the principles by which people decide what is correct or incorrect conduct. Ethical reasoning seems the most challenging dimension because it asks about an ethical classification that is more abstract than the first three questions. It involves defining preferences or hierarchies of concepts to determine the

26 A detailed discussion how images of religion define groups or how individuals identify with specific depictions of religion can be found in Fritz/Höpflinger/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati/Knauss 2018, 153–192.

27 The study also showed that audiences have greater empathy for a Mormon protagonist than for a Muslim even when both are depicted positively. See Mäder/Soto-Sanfiel 2019, 98–114.

ethical reasoning that is most important for a society or individual – in this instance posing freedom of expression against presumptions generated by cultural-religious background. For some people the moral argument about freedom of speech is more important and permits the public disseminatation of any kind of opinion. For others, the connection of a people by type to corrupt and illegal activities is morally contemptible. The Swiss voted in favor of the veil ban in the 2021 referendum, suggesting that the poster's producers had indeed given visual form to the population's latent fear of "the foreign". Since March 2021 covering one's face in public spaces, for example by wearing a niqab, is illegal in Switzerland.[28] Ironically the result of the referendum was presented at a press conference by Minister of Justice Karin Keller-Suter wearing a face mask that covered all but her eyes. She wore the face mask as a response to the pandemic. Whose face is covered and for what reason is a key element of ethical reasoning around this issue. Our example also shows the extent of the power of the media and its actors to define what religion is and which values are communicated by means of religious signs, symbols, and narratives.[29]

Religious Media and Religion in the Media

As we have seen, media ethics can be defined as the critical investigation and discussion of media practices on four levels of action (representation, production, consumption/reception, and distribution). We turn now to specific practices of interest to a cultural studies–oriented investigation of the relationship between media ethics and religion. An approach to this relationship may focus in first place on the media practices of religious individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. It would emphasize the intentionality of the agents and center on questions such as: How do religious agents use the media to express, represent, and disseminate their values, worldviews, and moral principles? How do religious agents consume and receive the media? In fact, the study of religion has always been a study of media as well, because religious action is and always was essentially a communicative act through a range of media. People have always used different

28 Bondolfi 2021.

29 For an introduction to this topic see, for example, Fritz/Höpflinger/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati/Knauss 2018.

media – the body, ritual objects, images, spoken and written language, for example – not only to convey religious views and beliefs but also to interpret and understand the world around them religiously. The mediatization of religion is thus not a new phenomenon that started with the "new media" but an essential aspect of religion itself.[30] However, the emergence of new media and media practices in the modern and contemporary world has led to a major transformation in how religious actors use and receive media and in the cultural and social roles played by religion in general. As Mia Lövhheim and Gordon Lynch observe, mediatization – understood here specifically as "a meta-process shaping modern society along with individualization, globalization and commercialization" – entails the transformation of three aspects of religion:

> First, the media become the primary source of information about religious issues in society. Second, the media are not only distributors of religious information and experiences, they also produce religious experiences through shaping these according to the demand of popular media genres. Religious symbols, practices and beliefs thus become raw material for media's own purposes and narratives. Third, through their position in society, media become social and cultural environments that take over many of the functions of institutionalised religions such as providing moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community.[31]

The last point is particularly interesting in relation to our subject. If the media are taking over many of the functions of institutionalized religion, including providing moral guidance, then a critical study of the relationship between media ethics and religion should not only examine the phenomena of religious media production, distribution, and consumption/reception, but also address the role that religious symbols, motives, figures, and narratives play in media representation, including when producers, distributors, and receivers are not explicitly and intentionally acting religiously. This approach bases on an understanding of religion, according to which "religion must be conceived in an open way, as social stakeholder in the form of institutions, organisations, and communities as well as a communication system of worldviews and practices involving individuals and

30 Funiok 2010.

31 Lövheim/Lynch 2011.

Fig. 4: Film still First Reformed (Paul Schrader, USA 2017), 01:06:56.

communities".[32] In other words, the relationship between media and religion is embedded in a cultural environment and not just in specific religious traditions. The medial dimensions of religion and the associated meanings interact constantly with individuals and collectives as well as with social actors and systems such as politics, economy, art, and education. While some theories of religion may assume that religion takes place within the sphere of activity of religious institutions and organizations, religious communication is not contained within the limits of religious institutions and communities. Media representations of religion wander through various social and cultural spheres and times, where they are adapted and changed. This recognition marks a conscious departure from the assumption that religious institutions are largely responsible for the theoretical determination of religion and that the loss of power by these institutions causes a direct loss of religion. The point here is not to question the validity of theories of secularization, but to examine other forms of religious presence in culture.

We can illustrate the breadth of religious communication with an example. Figure 4 shows a church notice board displaying the question, "Will God forgive us?" We can read the question in light of its syntax, so independently of its location or context: a subject (God) is linked to an action (forgive) and an object (us). The question mark indicates that it is not a statement but a query; it exists in an extra-linguistic situation in which someone asks a question of an unspecified number of people. Although the sentence does not specify what we have done that needs forgiveness, it is likely that most

32 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 17.

recipients will have an inkling of the intended reason: "Will God forgive us *our sins*?" Here, however, the recipient has left the purely formal level of syntactic analysis and has already begun to interpret. The recipient refers back to their own experiences and memories to determine more than what the sentence explicitly says. They recall that the terms "God", "forgive", and "us" often appear together with the words "our sins". In other words, they interpret the sentence according to conventions of language use that they have learned throughout their life.

But who is the author of the sentence? And who are the addressees? Which "we" and which "God" are meant? To answer these questions, the recipient must consider the pragmatic and hermeneutic context in which the sentence is embedded. Much can be learned by analyzing the image or the internal context of the sentence. The medium of the sentences is a sign belonging to "First Reformed Church". One can therefore assume that a Reformed pastor or another person with connection to the Reformed church placed the inscription on the board and that the question is addressed to a local Reformed church community in the Anglo-Saxon world. We can therefore also assume that the sentence refers to a Christian, more specifically Reformed, understanding of God and sin. One could go further and hypothesize that given the usual function of church signs, the phrase may introduce the theme of a worship service or some other form of religious gathering. In addition, the fact that the sentence is on a church sign could be interpreted as an indication that the question is not intended to be answered directly, but rather is posed in order to stimulate thinking about sinfulness and forgiveness. But it could also be understood as an accusation packaged in the form of a rhetorical question, as a moral judgement. Knowledge of the medium provides only partial information about the intended function of the sentence's display.

To confirm or reject such presumptions we can turn to the context in which the image appears and is embedded. The recipient must consider where, when, by whom, for whom, and why the sentence was placed on the church notice board. But the recipient is seeing the panel not directly on site, but mediated in a picture, and therefore needs to know also where, when, by whom, for whom and why the picture was taken. Specifically, in this instance the recipient has to interpret the image as part of the cinematic language employed in Paul Schrader's First Reformed (US 2017). The cinematic narrative gives us information about the meaning of the sentence on the church sign: it was put up by the protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller. The

story relays that the protagonist interprets and denounces the human actions responsible for climate change and environmental pollution as sinful.

First Reformed tells the story of former military chaplain, Ernst Toller, who now ministers at the First Reformed Church in the small town of Snowbridge, in upstate New York. Toller lost a son in the Iraq war and feels guilty for not stopping him from going to war. In the voice-over Toller shares with the viewer the thoughts that he writes in his diary. His desperation and hopelessness become clear. An encounter with a married couple, Mary and Michael Mensana, sets the story in motion. Michael explains to the pastor his belief that because of climate change, it is morally wrong to have children. However, Mary is pregnant and wants to keep the child. Pastor Toller tries to change the climate activist's mind by pointing out that the choice of an abortion does not rest solely with him; the decision is also Mary's. And he criticizes Michael's hopelessness and despair as an expression of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death" that can be overcome by the leap of faith that is only possible when the individual is aware of their own limitations and thereby leaves behind rationality and engages in an experience of transcendence.[33] This reasoning does not seem to convince Michael, as he takes his own life a few days later. Driven by feelings of guilt, Toller increasingly adopts Michael's position and begins to interpret the ecological catastrophe theologically, as a result of sinful actions. Before Michael's suicide, Toller learns from Mary that Michael has hidden an explosive belt in the basement. He later takes it home, along with Michael's laptop and documents. The pastor soon comes into conflict with Edward Balq, an entrepreneur who is financing the renovation of the First Reformed Church. Balq criticizes the pastor for allowing the climate activist's funeral to be staged as a political event in a polluted area – the church choir sing Neil Young's protest song "Who's Gonna Stand Up and Save the Earth" from the 2014 *Storytone* album. While trawling through Michael's computer, Toller learns that Balq Industries is ranked fifth in the hundred that make up the "World's Top Polluters". The viewer's suspicion that Toller is planning a suicide assassination of Balq is confirmed towards the end of the film when he puts on the explosive belt just before the inauguration of the newly renovated church.

The consequences of human actions during the Anthropocene are addressed in First Reformed by using symbols, motifs, and rhetorical patterns that are an integral part of Christian language. Catastrophe is looming on

33 As for the concept of "leap of faith" see Evans 2006, 3–29.

two levels: the destruction of nature by humans and Toller's self-destruction through excessive alcohol consumption are the two poles of the same metaphor for sinful behavior. To symbolize the corruption of God's creation, the film refers to the Last Supper – Toller breaks the bread and then dips it in the whiskey. It is difficult to say whether Schrader uses Christian signs, symbols and narrative patterns to metaphorically illuminate the present ecological crisis or whether, on the contrary, the thematization of the ecological macro-crisis serves only as background and pretext for the protagonist's existential crisis and to relate his attempt to master or process that crisis. Both interpretations are probably correct: the macro and micro crises are the subject of the story, so to speak, and should illuminate each other. The reference to the rhetoric of sin and forgiveness creates the frame of meaning within which the actions of the protagonist and the actions of humankind in general illuminate each other.

To what extent is such a medium relevant for the media-ethical examination of religion? First Reformed is a cultural artifact that takes up religious signs and uses them aesthetically and narratively, but can it be directly interpreted as religious? In his famous work *Transcendental Style in Cinema* (1972), Paul Schrader expressed his love and fascination for films and directors who he believed capable of expressing the transcendent through certain stylistic and dramaturgical features. The fact that First Reformed contains many elements of a cinematic style that Schrader himself described as "transcendental" can certainly be interpreted as an indication of a religious intent.[34] However, this does not mean that the film is necessarily received as a religious film and even less is it the case that it is intended exclusively for a religious audience. The recipient does not have to be a believer or a member of a religious institution to understand the film and to feel addressed by it. As soon as one focuses on the diffusion and reception of the film, the relevant question is not so much whether the religious semiotics and narrative used in it are also interpreted religiously, but rather what they do or how they relate to a specific cultural and discursive formation. First Reformed clearly addresses the anxiety of the contemporary public concerning the climate crisis and uses religious signs, figures, and narrative patterns to problematize the way individuals and communities deal with that crisis. As a discursive practice within the discursive formulation of the climate crisis debate, the film uses religious language to highlight the moral implications

34 See Schrader 2018; Scolari 2021.

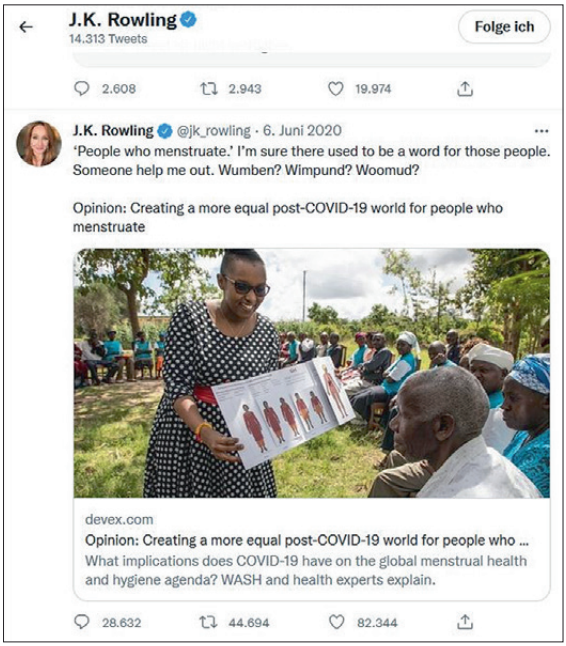

Fig. 5: Tweet by J. K. Rowling criticizing the use of the term "people who menstruate" rather than "women". Screenshot.

of the debate: Who is responsible for the climate crisis? And how should we deal with this responsibility? The film's performative force – that is, its ability to appeal to the public and to demand a moral positioning – lies in the fact that it does not present religious worldviews as the solution to the climate change problem, but rather uses religious language to frame the problem in one certain way rather than another.

"People who Menstruate" – Or, On the Need to Teach Media Ethics

Why Teach Media Ethics?

On 6 June 2020, British author J. K. Rowling posted a tweet in which she criticized the definition "people who menstruate" as a synonym for women in a campaign by Devex, a connective media platform for the global development community (fig. 5). Her tweet stated, "'People who menstruate?'

Fig. 6: Reaction to J. K. Rowling's tweet, pointing out that "women" does not mean the same as "people who menstruate". Screenshot.

I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?"

Reactions to this tweet were immediate, and even though there were positive responses, many were not at all sympathetic. Rowling was labelled "transphobic" or a "TERF" (Trans-exclusionary radical feminist), while other tweets highlighted that the ability to menstruate is not exclusively female (fig. 6)

The heated discussion on Twitter led to other statements by Rowling, who tried to explain why she – as a long-standing feminist – thinks it important not to erase the concept of sex in light of the continuing worldwide suppression of female and trans people by male power and violence.[35] GLAAD, an American organization that highlights defamatory coverage of LGBTQIA+ people, also took up the discussion on social media, stating, "JK Rowling continues to align herself with an ideology which willfully distorts facts about gender identity and people who are trans. In 2020, there is no excuse

35 J. K. Rowling on 7 June 2020 on Twitter, https://bit.ly/3NT8Exk [accessed 10 January 2021].

for targeting trans people."[36] Even though Rowling published an essay on 10 June 2020 on her home page presenting her reasons for her position and expressing her sympathy for trans people,[37] the public debate continued.

Because of Rowling's celebrity, journalists from all over the world picked up the controversy immediately and made it known to people who were not necessarily active on social media. Whether these articles were descriptive or provided commentary, this media coverage always contained a specific moral or political standpoint: "Where J. K. Rowling's Transphobia Comes from"[38] or "Feminists Like J.K: Rowling Struggle with the Transgender Movement, but They Should Not Be Silenced".[39]

The debate soon was used as a teaser for political or ideological discussions on gender, sex, and LGBTQIA+. Actors from the Harry Potter films felt forced to take up a public stance, and publishing houses, intellectuals, and politicians joined the debate with various objectives: some tried to save their own reputations, others explained gender concepts or warned of a cancel culture.

Since 6 June 2020 media coverage of the *Harry Potter*-author has usually been linked to transphobia, gender debates, or radical feminism even when that debate is not relevant to the story at hand.

Why have we chosen to recount here the story of a well-known author whose public statement was interpreted variously by a range of (social) media users and producers? Because it is a perfect vehicle for teaching media ethics!

If we accept art historian Hans Belting's proposal that "We live with images. We comprehend the world with images",[40] media ethics should be a vital discipline, taught as early as in secondary school. In a mediatized world – for Belting "image" is not just a picture on the wall but also encompasses mental and virtual images – it is essential we can read and evaluate media content critically. Understanding how media devices function is not the same as being media literate. As highlighted above, different norms regulate form and content according to the media format, its technical specifi-

36 GLAAD on 7 June 2020 on Twitter, https://bit.ly/3LJ5P04 [accessed 10 January 2021].

37 J. K. Rowling, 10 June 2020, on her home page jkrowling.com, https://bit.ly/3uqGNx7 [accessed 10 January 2021].

38 Robertson 2020.

39 Goward 2020.

40 Belting 2011, 9.

cations, and the target audience. The same content may be considered and valued in absolutely different ways.

Teaching media ethics is about instruction in how to critically engage mediated acts in their specific contexts of production, distribution, and reception, and in how to recognize that these mediated acts impact individuals and society by transmitting specific norms and values. It is not about passing categorical verdicts or practicing censorship, but about reflecting on the ethical dimensions of media content as a cultural product. Thus, a discourse on the ethics of media necessarily includes an analysis of values and responsibilities. As the discussion above has made evident, questions about who shows what, why, how, when, and to whom, or about what perceivers expect from specific media formats must be posed in exploring the production values of content and form and in understanding the perceivers' expectations and reactions. Furthermore, today we are all potential producers of media content, for we use social or digital media as a platform for communicating our opinions, to comment on diverse issues, or to search for knowledge and orientation. So, how we communicate through social media and other media and how that communication shapes our perceptions of the world also need critical examination.

The field of media ethics is broad and complex and contains a range of possible starting points, which makes case studies all the more useful. Media ethics, a so-called applied ethics, is essentially practical, because it is about rethinking and evaluating mediatized norms, roles, and institutions that regulate our everyday lives, and about adjusting idealized moral principles for daily practice.[41] Using a case study such as the "Rowling controversy", we can highlight the diverse dimensions of a media ethics' approach and instruct students in how to think critically and express their evaluations cogently.

"What Do We See?" – Reading the Representation

The first step in approaching J. K. Rowling's tweet in response to a global hygiene campaign is to look at it in detail, in other words to undertake a close reading of the image and the language. In the original tweet, Rowling comments on the title of an article. Image and text in the original tweet are not obviously linked: the image depicts a campaigner showing a flipbook to

41 See Schicha/Brosda 2010, 11; Ward 2021, 3–7.

a mixed-sex audience sitting in a circle somewhere outdoors. The setting looks very basic and rural, all those depicted are people of color. The actual text refers to the title of an article that highlights the importance of the campaign. The campaign itself is not the subject of Rowling's comment; she reacts to the use of the term "people who menstruate" with a satirical suggestion of alternative expressions for "people who menstruate" – "Wumben", "Wimpund", and "Woomud".

An analysis of the tweet's representation immediately raises several ethical questions: Why does Rowling not directly criticize the use of the inclusive term "people who menstruate"? What is the effect of the satire? How do comment and image interplay? Do the suggested terms raise specific connotations? Say "Wumben" aloud and we have a sound like "dumb"; "Wimpund" may be linked to "wimp", and "Woomud" to "mud" – a term Rowling deploys in her *Harry Potter* series when those with magical powers speak in a derogatory way of wizards and witches with a non-magic family background as "mudbloods". Is Rowling – on a meta level – criticizing a global development organization for promoting inclusive language in a highly heteronormative and exclusive society, where the patriarchal hierarchy and traditional gender roles are omnipresent, and diversity is still in its infancy? The image of the campaign give raise to such an assumption for it clearly refers to a rural and traditional African community.

This close reading of the actual representation is a first step in a hermeneutical approach to a cultural product that presupposes the interpreter's awareness of their own cultural imprint and expectations. Academic engagement with a tweet, a widely accessible source, may heighten sensibilities for critical readings of representations of every kind and for the interpreter's own handling of sources. This initial approach may lead to a subjective interpretation and possibly to a positioning in relation to the representation and the related debates. To advance an argument or position themselves in an existing debate, the students need to know more about the context of a representation such as the Rowling tweet. So, the question that should determine the next step should be, Who produced the artifact we are discussing?

"Who Published What?" – The Producer's Background

The producer of the tweet is, as we have noted, J. K. Rowling. She is the author of the *Harry Potter* series. She knows how to write; she is a professional. She is involved with several charity organizations that focus on alle-

Fig. 7: Rowling's tweet from 19 December 2019 in which she supported Maya Forstater's view on sex. Screenshot.

viating social deprivation for children, single-parent families, and women.[42] Rowling's philanthropic focus may be explained by her past experiences, for she was herself a single parent. Since her success as an author has given her a public voice, she has advocated for female empowerment and gender equality. To publish her opinions, she has used different media, such as interviews with magazines or newspapers as well as speeches or social media. She was fully aware of what she was doing when she posted the tweet. To establish whether the reaction was unexpected, we can turn to the responses to Rowling's earlier posts or likes.

In December 2019 Rowling had voiced her support for a female researcher who had lost her job due to her gender critical views.[43] In her tweet Rowling had stated, "Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who'll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is

42 Rowling established the Volant Trust, https://www.volanttrust.org/about-us/; co-founded Lumos, https://www.wearelumos.org/; and is president of Gingerbread, https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/.

43 Gallagher 2019.

Fig. 8: Comment on Rowling's tweet wherein she supports Maya Forstater. Screenshot.

real?" (fig. 7). This tweet insisting that sex is a biological fact had sparked harsh criticism, and not only from trans-community activists. Rowling was accused of being transphobic and of denying trans people's rights. The discussion thus changed focus, from a genuine tweet on the essence of gender, sex, and gender inequality to a heated debate on transphobia, trans people's rights, and radical (and thus discriminatory) feminism. Some comments explicitly referred to the power of a person like Rowling in the public space and highlighted the responsibility that comes with that power (fig. 8).

Rowling would therefore have been prepared for a heated discussion when she posted her tweet on 6 June 2020. Again, in reaction to expressions of outrage, to the so-called shitstorm that followed, she generated several clarifying tweets. This did not stop the accusations, so she published an essay on the issue on her website, avoiding the limitations of Twitter as a concise message service.

A scholar of media ethics might ask about the impact of her feminist background on this controversy. Why did she react to this specific headline with a satirical tweet? Why did she feel that inclusive language threatened women's position within society? What kind of (feminist) perspective does

her tweet express? What values did the tweet communicate? What role did Rowling's renown play here? Why did she choose Twitter as the medium in which to publish her critique?

When we contextualize the representation within the producer's background, new questions arise concerning responsibilities and values. Furthermore, a specific position within the debate may be gained by following the producer's argumentation and by evaluating its consistency. Also, the choice of Twitter as means of communication becomes important when we try to contextualize the representation and to evaluate its meaning and the values and norms it communicates.

"Twitter, the Megaphone of a Global Community?!" – The Ways of Distribution

Rowling's tweet was immediately commented upon by a multitude of Twitter-users and organizations, and, somewhat later, through other channels by journalists and intellectuals. A tweet about inclusive language became a morally charged public discussion about social inclusion, equality, and power structures.

To choose Twitter to criticize inclusive language is to likely trigger discussion, because this microblogging service aims to provoke immediate reactions. Twitter is used to spread global or regional news, promote specific devices or articles or companies, and to communicate informally. The limitation to 280 characters for a tweet forces the user to write in a compact form. An explanation of an earlier statement may require several tweets. Pointed or even polemic statements are thus common, provided not only by "private" users (in the sense of non-economic or non-marketing tweets), but also by "public persons" like politicians, news anchors, scientists, intellectuals, organizations' agents, or celebrities from the entertainment industry. On Twitter the lines between the private and the public persona often blur. Donald Trump – to just name one prominent agent – used Twitter to provide users with his political views and agenda and with his personal opinions.[44] Twitter became a prominent political media during Trump's presidency, used not just by Trump,[45] but also by protesters and political

44 See e. g. Keith 2016; Ecker/Jetter/Lewandowsky 2020; Gambino 2021.

45 Andrews 2020.

communities, for whom Twitter was a means to spread news and opinions and to organize gatherings and demonstrations.

In the space of social media much is allowed and restrictions are few. The Twitter regulative system[46] specifies a code of conduct, but in practice, the administrators need the help of the users to find a potential breach of the rules – more than 330 million people are users. Unless the system's administrators detect a violation of the rules, nothing will happen.

In Rowling's case, using Twitter meant reaching her 14 million followers. Many of them probably follow her because they like her books; others, because they know her philanthropic work; some, because she is famous – the motives are many. In addressing a subject that is the object of much controversial discussion, Rowling must have calculated on high user activity. Furthermore, issues related to trans identities, gender norms, and LGBTQIA+ tend to reach a relatively young, social media-savvy audience. Why did she want to launch this discussion on Twitter? Why not write a novel or an essay?

From a media ethics perspective, the question is not whether Rowling, particularly when so famous, should be allowed to post this kind of statement on a social media channel such as Twitter; it is rather about why she chose to do so and whom she reached. The moment in which she posted the statement should also be assessed. Did she do so as part of a marketing strategy three months before she published the next installment in her Cormoran Strike crime novel series?[47] We should also note that Rowling chose her website and not Twitter as the location for her explanation. Did the user comments and critical media reaction to her tweet force her to write an emotionally charged essay, which in turn required her to change media?

Analyzing the media a producer uses to distribute a specific message requires us to think about the target audience, the range of influence of the specific media, as well the limitations of the media's form. On a meta level one can also revisit the impact and power of social media.

46 Twitter rules and policies can be found at https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies.

47 Interestingly, in the Cormoran Strike novel *Troubled Blood*, one villain dresses as a woman to deceive his victims. But he is not, as the novel highlights, a trans person, but a master of deceit. We can muse about that characterization.

"Just Shut Up" – The Perception Level

With Twitter as the medium, reactions to Rowling's tweet were pointed and often subjective, and at the debate's climax the comments became threatening and transgressing.[48] It was no longer a matter of contradicting or convincing; the debate became personal and very emotional. There were resonances with the witch hunts of the early modern period, when the wrong word in the wrong ear could lead to public accusation and execution. It is striking that even professionals such as journalists now approached Rowling and her complete work from a particular perspective. Several reviews of the next Cormoran Strike novel made reference to Rowling's tweet and the assumption that she is transphobic.[49] Up to today, the media coverage of Rowling – independent of its political slant – has continued to tend to link the author with trigger terms such as trans community, radical feminist, and denier of gender theory, even if the news being covered has absolutely nothing to do with these issues. The discussion Rowling launched will probably adhere to her for a long time yet.

Crucially, we must note that the discussion was never about the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive language, as Rowling's tweet suggested, but focused only on the author's potential transphobia. The limitations and fast dissemination of social media make it a space almost impossible to control, particularly when the debate is around such a controversial issue. As Judith Butler noted in an interview, "The quickness of social media allows for forms of vitriol that do not exactly support thoughtful debate. We need to cherish the longer forms."[50] The rules of conversation, which involve listening (here reading) attentively, thinking about the argument, and replying constructively, obviously do not work in this context. The speed of the response is crucial here. Several hashtags that libeled or threatened the author were created and are still active.

Negative user comments ranged from declarations of delusion to accusations of ignorance to the issuing of threats; positive comments supported Rowling's concept of femaleness by biology or by decision. This was not a conversation as usually understood: it was not about trying to understand the other person's opinion but about denouncing that opinion. Rowling her-

48 The picture is easily acquired by following the thread on Twitter.

49 See e. g. Kolirin 2020; Haynes 2020.

50 Ferber 2020.

self has pointed out this character. Freedom of speech and opinion, as it is intended in the Twitter policies, looks different one might think. Some journals and magazines have at least used the tweet as a starting point for careful analysis and commentary on gender, sex, and transition, on trans people's rights and gender hierarchies. They have tried to show the complexity of the issue and both sides of the discussion. Famous voices subsequently condemned the type of public outrage that leads to a sort of censorship, applied to someone who does not agree with a public statement. As we have seen, the consequences of this Twitter debate did not remain in this specific space, for it also touched other areas of social life: people dissociated themselves from Rowling or from the concepts she defended; schools renamed houses in order to distance them from the author; and Rowling does not appear in the anniversary documentary Harry Potter 20th Anniversary: Return to Hogwarts (Casey Patterson / Joe Pearlman / Eran Creevy / Giorgio Testi, UK/US 2021), available for streaming since 1 January 2022.

An analysis of the tweet and how it was perceived makes evident that conversations on social media follow other rules than in real life, for there is much room for misunderstanding and the response time is brief. We are able to see the effect of social media on the formation of opinion and also how "news bubbles" can discard any opinion that does not correspond with the views of a specific community. We need to ask questions such as, How would I react to a tweet like this? Why would I react? What are my responsibilities as a user or perceiver? And on a meta level: Is a fruitful and respectful discussion on social media possible? What would be its premises? What are we to make of cancel culture and what does freedom of speech encompass?

Media ethics is hardly a dry theoretical topic. When it is addressed in the classroom, students are encouraged to think critically and to rethink media practices, to take on responsibility as receivers, and also as potential producers, not only in an academic context but also in everyday life. It is important school pupils and university students understand how and why values and norms are established, legitimized, and challenged through media transmission. Media ethics provides theoretical and methodological tools that can be deployed in the scholarly investigation of media representations, knowledge that can then be transferred to everyday situations.

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