

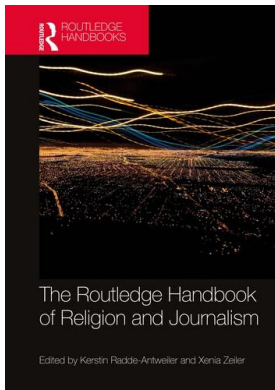
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9

ASIAN MASS MEDIA

A pillar of religious authority?

Yoel Cohen

Introduction

Since the Reformation some five hundred years ago, religious authority has been transformed through, amongst other factors, the developments in printing and in modern journalism and mass media like radio and television and in digital media including news websites. The media age has changed the very nature of religious authority and power. In complex industrial societies, religion has increased emphasis upon personal choice and moral dictums and spiritual issues. It has led to an increased exchange of religious views mediated through print and electronic media and technology. In the process, religious authority and power has taken a new shape without giving a precise meaning and definition. But while in Western countries the debate around religious authority has focused upon the challenges to it by the mass media, in Asia, the relationship between mass media and religious authority has taken a different shape. Whereas in Western countries there is a gap between journalists and religious beliefs and behavior (Hoover 2016), you can find a greater religious identity among journalists from Asian countries.

When speaking about relationships between journalism and religious authority, first, there is a need to define *authority* (Radde-Antweiler and Grünenthal 2018, 369). *Religious authority* will be defined here in terms of religious institutions' authority figures – including imams, priests and monks – and how media perceive them (Campbell 2007). The chapter seeks to discuss the extent to which the media in Asia legitimize or delegitimize religious leaders. It thus contributes to our understanding of the complexity of the relationship between journalism and religion in Asia at large, as, with the exception of Islam, research on journalistic media and religion in Asia, with reference to the specific question of religious authority, has been sporadic and fewer than research on journalistic media and in the context of the USA and other Western countries. For example, Yao, Stout and Liu (2011) examine Chinese media coverage of religion and Yao and Liu (2018) relate to religious authority including Falun Gong. Min-Soo (2003, 2013) does so in the Korean context.

Some research on Journalism and digital media has been carried out in the Indian context. Kumar (2003, 2018) surveyed the coverage of religion and spirituality – including an analysis of content in Indian newspapers, television and online websites – and its impact on religious authority, notably on Hinduism. Agrawal (2015, 2017) examined the impact of

religious programming on the religious identity of Hindu and Muslim television viewers in India. Agrawal and Khan (2015) discuss how Hindu beliefs provide an unclear direction of influences of religious or *dharma* television. Thakur and Vaze (2013) review the early years of digital media and Patrick offers a more recent discussion of religion in Asian digital space (Patrick 2015). Patrick also examined Internet usage and religious identity among multi-religious Chennai college students (Patrick 2014), Mitra (2019) the impact of digital media among diaspora Hindus, and Shah the impact of journalism and digital media on religious authority in Jainism (Shah 2015).

Against the background of satellite broadcasting in the 1990s and the digital revolution in the Arab world, as well as interest in Islam in the aftermath of 9/11, a considerable amount of the research on journalistic media and religion in Asia has focused on Islam. Advancing beyond Rugh's early study of the Arab press in the Seventies (1987), Mellor, Ayish, Dajani and Rinnawi (2011), Kraidy and Khalil (2009), Gunter and Dickinson (2013) and Hammond (2007) produced up-to-date studies surveying Arab media industries. Farouqui (2009) examined media representations of Indian Muslims in the wake of global Islamic radicalism. Pintak (2011, 2013), Mellor (2005) and Ewart and O'Donnell (2018) discuss the role of journalism in Islam. Maestri and Profanter (2017) address the changing role of Arab women in the media. Cohen and Hetsroni (2019) conducted a tri-national analysis of religion on television, comparing the USA (Christian content on television) with Turkey (Islamic content) and Israel (Jewish content). Focusing upon the digital revolution, Ejaz (2019) surveys the impact upon Muslims in Asia. Taking this question further, Eickelman and Anderson (2003) discuss its impact within different Muslim countries, and Bunt (2003, 2009) looks at how Muslim religious authority has been altered as a result. In addition, many research articles on aspects of Islam and the media have been published. In Israel, the growth of the ultra-orthodox religious press was examined by Baumel (2002). The media and religion question was addressed by Cohen (Cohen, 2005, 2012) including the specific question of how religious authority has been challenged by digital media (Cohen 2011a, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Journalism and religious authority in Asia: overview from the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019)

For a broader discussion of the relationship between journalistic media in Asia and religious authority, it is instructive to examine the trust among journalists in religious leaders and more generally, the question of whether religious considerations influence journalists. The *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019) gathered data from 67 countries worldwide including countries inside Asia, which covered a broad range of questions about newsgathering. By using a common questionnaire distributed to journalists in all countries surveyed, it has been possible to produce a more precise picture about these questions. Among Asian countries in the project were Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Oman, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Turkey and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The survey data, among other things, also provide data about the relationship of media and religious authority. Overall, the survey showed considerable diversity between Asian countries reflecting, as suggested at the beginning of the chapter, that no single pattern emerges in the continent. For example, countries where Islam is the dominant faith show that the impact of religious authority is far greater than in some other non-Islamic countries. The survey claims that on a scale of 5 to 1 (5 – complete trust; 4 – a great deal of trust; 3 – some trust; 2 – little

trust, 1 – no trust at all), it is possible to identify a pattern of the relationship of journalists to religious authority. On the question of the level of trust of journalists in religious leaders, the data varied from UAE (3.65), to Bhutan (3.39), Indonesia (3.20), Singapore (3.10), Oman (3.04) and Philippines (2.88) (see Table 9.1).

When compared to other non-religious sources of authority such as governmental officials and politicians in the Asian countries surveyed, the level of trust in religious leaders was significantly higher with the exceptions of India, South Korea and Turkey. Therefore, although the figures for trust in religious leaders varied considerably from Asian country to Asian country, overall relatively religious leaders had considerable influence.

By comparison, the level of trust in religious leaders in Asian countries is much more than trust in religious leaders in Western countries surveyed in the project. Trust in religious leaders in Western countries never reached the intermediate 3.00 of “some trust.” The figures in West Europe moved between “some trust” and “little trust” – from a high of UK (2.50), to Germany (2.30), Sweden (2.29), Ireland (2.20), Netherlands and Belgium (2.14 each), Austria (2.13), Spain (2.02), Switzerland (1.92), Denmark (1.87) and Greece (1.80).

Yet a related question in the survey – religious considerations as a source of influence on journalists in Asia – was the same or even higher than the question of the level of journalists’ trust in religious leaders. Thus, in India and Turkey “religious considerations” were even higher than “trust in religious leaders”: 2.56 (India) and 2.28 (Turkey). More generally, the importance of religion and religious belief in Asian journalists’ perceptions was found in the survey to be higher than journalists’ perceptions of religious authority. The data was even higher than the specific question of trust in religious leaders: for example, in Indonesia (4.48), Malaysia (4.42) and Bangladesh (3.59), countries with very large Muslim populations.

In terms of whether or not the journalist had a basic religious belief, in all Asian countries surveyed the majority of journalists reported a religion or denomination and in many of the countries very few reported no religion or no denomination. In India 41% of journalists, 37% in Turkey and 34% in Singapore reported no religion. The figure went down further to Bhutan (13%), Malaysia (12%), Israel (11%), Bangladesh (5%) and Indonesia (1%) (see Table 9.1). This contrasted with some other regions in the world. With the exception of Ireland, in all West Europe countries, for example, the majority of journalists in each country reported no religion or denomination. For example, 74% of journalists in Spain, 70% of journalists in Belgium, 61% in the UK and 51% in Switzerland reported no religion or denomination.

In terms of religious belief itself, the dominant religion among journalists in Asia who were surveyed was Islam – with the exception of Bhutan, India, Israel and Singapore. Thus, 99% of journalists in UAE, 82% in Indonesia, 79% in Bangladesh, 55% in Turkey and 53% in Malaysia replied that they were Muslim. By contrast, in India 46% of journalists were Hindu, in Israel 75% of journalists were Jewish, in Singapore 22% were Christian Protestant and in Bhutan 78% were Buddhist. So the dominance of Islam, which has a long record of obedience to religious authority, is significant in assessing the impact of religious authority (see Table 9.1).

Given the picture painted in this survey, this chapter now compares three contrasting cases: first, Islamic countries, where religious authority was given most importance, second India as one of the countries where it was given least importance and as a third case study, Israel provides an example of a country with a clear Jewish character, yet one that aspires to be mostly secular in orientation. The following case studies discuss the tensions within the three cases and their impact upon religious authority.

Table 9.1 Religious identity and Asian journalists (from Worlds of Journalism Study 2019)

	<i>Trust in religion leaders</i>	<i>Religious considerations</i>	<i>Is religion important?</i>	<i>No religion or denomination</i>
	<i>Mean*</i>	<i>Mean**</i>	<i>Mean***</i>	
Bangladesh	2.34	2.69	3.59	5.3%
Bhutan	3.39	3.62	4.11	12.8%
India	1.90	2.56	2.53	41.3%
Indonesia	3.20	3.02	4.48	1.2%
Israel	2.13	2.13	2.67	10.8%
Malaysia	3.50	3.72	4.22	12.1%
Oman	3.04	–	–	–
Philippines	2.88	2.78	–	–
Singapore	3.10	3.11	3.07	34.4%
South Korea	2.55	2.18	–	–
Turkey	2.06	2.28	2.84	36.6%
UAE	3.65	3.38	4.14	0%

Source: *Worlds of Journalism Study*, 2019.

MEAN* 5 = complete trust; 4 = a great deal of trust; 3 = some trust; 2 = little trust; 1 = no trust at all.
MEAN** 5 = extremely influential; 4 = very influential; 3 = somewhat influential; 2 = little influential; 1 = not influential.

MEAN*** 5 = extremely important; 4 = very important; 3 = somewhat important; 2 = little important; 1 = unimportant.

Religious authority and journalism in Islamic countries: a first case study

Authority is a central pillar in Islam. However, within the religion its various branches relate to Islamic authority in varying degrees. Strictest is the Shia stream, where the imam is the recognized religious leader, enjoying divine appointment, with the task of interpreting the Koran and the will of Allah. By contrast, in Sunni – the largest branch of Islam – the imam is a lay leader, who offers inspiration but his opinions are not binding.

The media has had a mixed relationship to Islam. The transfer of knowledge, *‘ilm*, is a prime motif in the religion and is a reminder of its role in Islamic religious missionary work. Indeed, authors have articulated a theory of mass media in reference to Islam – proximate to the social responsibility model – which both empowers the mass media in an Islamic society to advance Islamic goals and limits the media from publishing matter regarded as damaging Islamic goals. Ayish and Sadig (1997) articulate three principles of Islamic communication: first, the need for truthfulness and refraining from telling lies – not only in speech but even in thought. Second, recognition of another’s human dignity – including his right to privacy and a right to good reputation. Third, communication should be gracious or characterized by nice speech and wisdom. These standards exist in the mass media in strictly religious Muslim countries but in other more modern ones like Lebanon an Arabist or Western approach exists.

Yet by the 14th century, against the background of the first printing press in Europe by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany, Islamic leaders became concerned that knowledge could

be distorted and challenge authority. For example, Islamic leaders in Turkey placed a ban on any printing – a ban, which lasted three centuries until the 18th century.

Given that Islamic clerics enjoy a high status in Muslim society, the extent to which religious authority there is challenged is less than in some other societies, such as in Western societies. For example, in a survey of 1,200 respondents in Tehran carried out in 2002, Abdollahyan (2008) compared exposure to media (globality) with local religious leaders (locality). He concluded that the more respondents were exposed to television the more they followed religious leaders. He found that those who use media 5–12 hours a day had a greater tendency to follow religious authorities in practicing religious commands than those whose media use ranged between 1 and 4 hours a day (Abdollahyan 2008). Not dissimilar, Rawan (2001), surveying 420 persons in Pakistani villages about the credibility of which opinion leaders were the best for objectively evaluating reality, found that after the khan and malek (community leaders) and relatives, the mullah was in second place (26.6%). This compared with radio (14.2%), television (13.8%), newspapers (7.8%) and teachers (0.5%).

Yet, in strictly religious Muslim countries, the mass media is regarded by suspicion. For example, in Saudi Arabia the media has been monitored and controlled by Saudi ulama (clerics) and by the so-called *Committee for Propagating Virtue and Preventing Vice*. It was a recognition of the impact of Saudi media on public perceptions of Islam as well as the country having the two most important holy places in the faith, Mecca and Medina. While many Saudi journalists are themselves religious (Mellor 2018), this had not prevented tension between the worlds of Islam and of mass media in the country – partly due to supervision of the Saudi media by branches of the country's police charged with ensuring religious observation. Since 9/11 and the political change in Saudi Arabia since 2018, the clerical hold over the Saudi media had weakened. On another level, social media, while itself opening up this control, have itself been adopted by religious leaders, making them, e.g., important bloggers.

In other Islamic countries – including Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey – the influence of religious authority persons is incrementally less. The appearance of religion in popular programming in Turkey, for example, reflects the tension between secularism as fostered in the Ataturk era and the Sunni Islam, which characterizes the contemporary Erdogan era. Before the 2004 Turkish elections, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power, the State Directorate of Religious Affairs had the mandate to ensure that religion, in general, and fundamentalist Islam, in particular, would be kept out of the public sphere – including in Turkish television. This changed in the last decade – partly in response to public demands and partly as tacit adherence to governmental expectations. There has been an increase of religion content in state broadcasting as well as in commercial stations. For instance, religious themes are now featured on Turkish television during the month of Ramadan. Turkish newspapers normalized the wearing a female headscarf (*hijab*) which used to be outcast in Ataturk times. Turkish filmmakers have loosened their secular approach in order to receive money from governmental funds that would sustain their productions.

The important role of religion and religious authority figures can be recognized by the space it occupies in different Islamic media. For example, Rawan, examining three months in 1995 of the Friday issue of the Iranian daily *Kayhan* and the Pakistani daily *Jumhuri Islami*, found that religion ranked in top place in the former ahead of such other categories as politics, relations with the USA, crime and education/science and was in second place in the latter (Rawan 2001).

The *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019) showed that in Muslim countries journalists' trust in religious leaders is high – ranging between 3 (some trust) and 4 (a great deal of trust). Thus,

journalists in the UAE rated their trust in religious leaders as 3.65, Malaysia 3.50, Indonesia as 3.20 and Oman 3.04. But Turkey was much less, 2.28 (2 = little influence, 3 = somewhat influence). The extent to which religious considerations are important for journalists in Muslim countries is “high.” This ranges from a mean of 3.38 in the UAE, to 3.72 in Malaysia and 3.02 in Indonesia. 79.4% of journalists in Bangladesh, 54.9% in Turkey and 52.4% in Malaysia reported being Muslim. In Indonesia, 87.5% of journalists reported that their religious beliefs were “extremely important” and “very important,” as did 77% of journalists in Malaysia, 63.9% in the UAE, 54.6% in Bangladesh and 42% in Turkey (see Table 9.1).

The tension between professional journalists – 90% of journalists in the Arab world, surveyed by Pintak (2011), were declared Muslims – and religious authority exists throughout the Islamic world. These journalists are more inclined to be critical of religious leaders than the broader population. Arab media are facing pressure from those in Muslim authority: About one-third of the journalists singled out pressure from religious groups as among the most significant challenges to Arab journalism. Three-quarters of Arab journalists think that Muslim clerics should stay out of politics and that clerics should not influence how people vote, in contrast to less than half of the public. And while just 11% of the public think it is permissible for national laws to contradict Sharia law, 60% of Arab journalists believe civil law takes precedence over religious law. This finding reflects that notwithstanding that Muslim journalists are far closer to religious beliefs – and therefore less critical of religious authority – than their colleagues in Western countries, that nevertheless a gap also exists inside Islamic countries between journalists’ attitudes to religious authority and those of the broader public.

Inevitably, there were differences between those journalists who are secular and those who are religious. In a study of Pakistani journalists, Pintak (2013) found that while only 20% of religious Pakistani journalists said they should be allowed to contradict Sharia, 43% of secular journalists said so. Yet just over 50% of religious Pakistani journalists agreed that religious leaders were meeting the moral needs of society.

Apart from journalistic media, more broadly, the Internet has also both challenged traditional forms of Islamic religious authority as well as opening up vistas for creating an international virtual community – whose participants include off-line *ulama* who have adapted their outreach work to the era of the Internet. The Koran and Sumah (or Way of the Prophet), and Hadith (the collection of sayings of the Islamic oral tradition) are online with accompanying commentaries and study aids. Fatwas (or Islamic legal decrees) are online, including on such websites like *Fatwa On-line* and *dar Alifta*.

Key functions in the Islamic faith performed previously off-line may be done also online. They start from the initiation process for a potential convert to Islam to prepare for the ceremony of professing the Muslim faith. There is basic data about off-line mosques and the times of the five daily prayer services. For the Sunni stream there are the possibilities of online prayer services with prayers streamed through the Net, with the exception of the Friday midday service. There are online compasses to direct prayer toward Mecca. Day-by-day needs for the religious Muslim are available online. This includes information about Halal food products and banking in accordance with Islamic law. Charity – Muslims are required to donate 2.5% of their earnings to the poor, via Wakf or family trusts – may be transacted online. While the obligation to do the Haj to Mecca once in a Muslim’s life cannot be done online, related matters such as acquiring the ritual Ihram garments to wear for the Haj, maps of Mecca and travel arrangements in and to Mecca can be done online (Marin 2015).

Islamic voices – both orthodox but also expressing alternative views to traditional Islamic thinking – are online. Anderson (2003) identified a number of *new interpreters* of Islam. First,

the technical application of technology to Islam: younger Muslims, some motivated more by profit than religion have revolutionized the context in which Islam is mediated. Second, on-line activists with an alternative, informal Islamic agenda: Examples include women's rights in Islam and homosexual communities (which are forbidden in Islamic orthodoxy). The *new interpreters* have been followed by official Islamic authorities, which had functioned previously off-line, finally recognizing the new media reality. Religious institutions, including educational ones (Rahimi 2018), have adapted. But while the contexts have changed, it has been questioned whether the basic Islamic message itself has changed as a result (Echchaibi 2008).

Religious authority and journalism in Israel: a second case study

In contrast to many Islamic countries, Israel appears to be between religiosity and secularism. In the Jewish state, there is much Jewish symbolism. But as a secular democratic state which identifies with the West, individual religious Orthodox communities seek to preserve their own religious identity.

Trust by Israeli journalists in religious leaders was inclined, according to the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019), toward the low side of 2.13 (2 – little trust, 3 – some trust), not dissimilar from Turkish journalists' trust in religious authority in Turkey (2.06). The extent to which Israeli journalists took into account religious considerations in their work was also 2.13 (3 – somewhat important, 2 – less important), not dissimilar from journalists in South Korea (2.18) and Turkey (2.28) but much higher than journalists in West Europe.

Basic religious beliefs do exist – but are considerably less than their colleagues in most Islamic countries surveyed by the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019). On a 1–5 scale, Israeli journalists had a mean of 2.7 in rating the importance of their religious beliefs. In Israel, 10.8% of journalists reported that they had no religious beliefs (which was much less than Indian journalists, of whom 41.3% reported no religion, and 37% in Turkey); 22.2% said that their religion or religious beliefs are “extremely important” and another 7.5% said that they were “very important” and 18.3% said these were “important.” However, 33% of Israeli journalists said religion or religious beliefs were “unimportant” (see Table 9.1).

Authority and power in Judaism in Israel draws upon first, Judaism's teachings and second, the authority which rabbinical heads of Orthodox Jewry in contemporary Israel enjoy. Bible-based rules are respected in Orthodox as well as Conservative Judaism, but is the basis of selective application in Reform Judaism.

Rabbinic teaching on mass communication draws upon edicts, which originate in the Bible. Most innovative is Judaism's prohibition in social gossip (*loshon hara*) (Book of Leviticus 19:17) which has been interpreted as embracing the disclosure of any information not publicly known about a person. This is not only negative information about a person but even information which is not negative about a person (Feldman 2015). Other Jewish rulings relate to copyright, journalistic objectivity and the non-functioning of the electronic media on the Sabbath – the day of rest (Cohen 2012).

In Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi Judaism (who number 10% of Israel's Jewish population), the influence of religious hierarchies – notably rabbis – is paramount in the Haredi communities, whether in the Lithuanian Haredi stream where the rabbi's role is to interpret *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) or in the Hassidic Haredi stream in which the *admor*, the spiritual head, fulfils a father figure role in the community and his influence is wide-ranging. The *admor* is also consulted on a range of social and family matters. Haredim declined to have contact with the secular society for fear that impure aspects of modern society will influence their religious style of life.

Orthodox rabbis showed wide dissatisfaction with the coverage of the general Israeli media. In a survey of Israeli rabbis and mass media, carried out by Cohen (2011b), 95% of orthodox rabbis said that the press damage religious values “to some extent,” “to a large extent” or “to a very great extent.” Haredi rabbis were more inclined (64%) than modern orthodox (32%) to say that the press damage religion “to a very great extent” (Cohen 2011b, 97). Yet, even 39% of modern Orthodox rabbis agreed that the press damage religious values “to a large extent” (Cohen 2011b, 97). In the case of television there was a significant increase in modern orthodox rabbis (56%) saying that television damages religious values “to a very great extent” (Cohen 2012, 97). Similar findings were found for radio, the theatre, cinema and the Internet. The qualifications about mass media among Orthodox rabbis are also shared with non-Orthodox rabbis. Of all the types of media (press, radio, television, cinema, theatre and the Internet), the non-Orthodox were most critical of the Internet. Forty-seven percent of non-Orthodox rabbis said that the Internet damaged religious values “to some extent,” “to a large extent” or “to a great extent” (Cohen 2011b, 108). By contrast with rabbis, most journalists do not perceive the media as damaging religious values. Slightly fewer journalists say so in the case of television and the Internet as opposed to press and radio; 58% and 53% of journalists say that television and the Internet, respectively, do “not damage religious values at all” or “to a small extent” and 67% and 73% are inclined to say that newspapers and radio, respectively, do “not damage religious values at all” or “to a small extent” (Cohen 2016, 57–58). No less noteworthy is that 28% (same figures for television and the Internet) of journalists felt that television and the Internet damage religious values to “a large extent” (Cohen 2016, 57–58).

Haredi rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees (*pesuk din*) against exposure to mass media – which is regarded by Israel’s Haredim as a threat to *Torah* values. The bans on press, radio, television and the Internet have been successful in varying degrees. Weakest has been Haredi bans on computers and the Internet.

In order to preserve the cultural ghetto, leaders of the Agudat Yisroel Haredi political party established their own daily newspaper, *Hamodia*. Founded in 1950 by the Gerar Rebbe, *Hamodia* was intended to give Haredim a source of news under rabbinic supervision. Three other Haredi daily newspapers have since been established. But over the last thirty-five years an alternative Haredi media has also evolved inside Israel – comprising independent weekly magazines, Haredi news websites and Haredi radio stations – which have in effect challenged the rules of Haredi rabbis from within the community. The openness of the weekly magazines is characterized by the fact that, unlike the daily institutionalized Haredi papers each of which focuses upon their own political party sponsor, the weekly magazines report the activities of all *Knesset* (Israel Parliament) members irrespective of the specific Haredi party or stream to which they belong. While they do respect the code of not publishing immoral matter which may upset Haredi Jewish sensitivities, the independent Haredi weeklies introduced a new level of press freedom in an otherwise highly hierarchical media environment. Two Haredi radio stations are geared to provide the religious orthodox population with a station reflecting their interests. These are not strictly under the supervision of the rabbis. But like the commercial weeklies they do consult rabbis.

For the Haredi rabbinical leadership, the invention of the Internet posed dilemmas to maintain the community’s religious self-identity. It illustrates the challenge posed by new media for religious authority. In 2000, just a few years after the Internet entered Western lifestyles, the Haredi rabbinical leadership imposed a prohibition on the Internet as a moral threat to the sanctity of Israel. The ban followed upon a special rabbinical court (*bet din*)

established inside the Haredi community to deal with the threat from the spread of computers. In part, the ban was directed at children whose religious studies had been distracted with computers, using both the Internet and data bases. Gatherings and conferences have been held in different Haredi communities in Israel and abroad to generate consciousness over the Internet's perceived danger. There have even been instances of so-called *modesty squads* demonstrating outside netcafes used by Haredim to surf.

Even a handful of Haredi news websites exist, notably *Kikar Shabbat* and *B'Hadrei Haredim*, which operate independently from rabbinic supervision. They report criticism – sometimes vehemently – of the positions and behavior of Haredi leaders. In some cases, the names of those sponsoring the sites, and those editing them, have been hidden from the public. In light of the rabbinical ban on the Internet, some Haredi leaders refuse to be interviewed by the sites. One website, *Kikar Shabbat*, even carries pictures of faces of women.

Yet despite the rabbinical ban, digital media is used by a considerable body of Haredi Jews today. Forty-three percent of Haredim were connected to the Internet by 2016–2017 (Israel Democracy Institute 2018). One of the major results of the loss of Haredi rabbinical hegemony, on the one hand, has been that today many Haredim seek higher education and many Haredi housewives go out to work. Indeed, the Haredi printed press have become a stage for discussion among the Haredi community about such issues as work employment for Haredim. On the other hand, the daily Haredi newspapers published by the Haredi rabbinical establishment has become a channel used to campaign against Haredim leaving the yeshiva portals or interrupting *Torah* learning (Cohen 2013, 2017).

The independent Haredi press, notably weekly magazines, is not formally under the control of the rabbis, it is accurate to say that the rabbis have lost the battle inside their community. Yet, the basic feature of the cultural ghetto exists. The traditional off-line frameworks of Jewish life – the synagogue, the yeshiva and the Jewish home – remain paramount for Haredi Jews no less today. A criterion in Jewish law-making is that law pronouncements require to be acceptable to the community, otherwise this will bring into question the very legitimacy of the law-making body itself. Today, even Haredi rabbis require to address issues deeply and profoundly with people rather than giving directives from above. This may explain why rabbis came to terms with computers and with the Internet – in, albeit, a controlled environment.

In contrast to Haredi rabbis, the rabbis of the modern orthodox (*dati leumi*) stream (which numbers 15%–20% of the Israeli Jewish population) have not issued legal rulings against exposure to newspapers, radio and television – reflecting their broader philosophy of seeking to create a synthesis between Judaism and modernity (Cohen 2012). The Modern Orthodox, with one foot among the secular Israeli population, is exposed to the wider media such as television and the Internet. These could be seen as religiously endangered were it not for the balancing effects of the religious education inside this community.

For traditional-non-strictly observant or secular Jews, the question has been raised whether media are agents of religious identity. Hoover has argued that the media today have become important framers of religious faith (Hoover 2016). Theoretically, the media's potential as platforms for the negotiation of religious identity has become acute with the Internet, by enabling the Jewish surfer – including Jews who are uncommitted or are unaffiliated to a community structure – to gather information relating to his own beliefs, thereby strengthening his belief system. But a closer examination suggests that the non-strictly religious do not actively surf the Net for religion-related matter (Cohen 2012, 230) and in the case of television there is little religion-related content (Cohen and Hetsroni 2019). All this suggests

that the media's role as a framer of religious identity and agent of spirituality in Israel is only partly true and revisits the question of the extent to which religious authority in Judaism has been challenged – or not.

Religious authority and journalism in India: a third case study

By contrast to both Islam and Israel, India was shown in the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019) to be one of the Asian countries where religious authority enjoys a low regard among journalists. And in contrast to the earlier cases studies of Islam and Judaism in which there is the single supreme authority in monotheistic religions, Hindu religious traditions have multiple gods and goddesses in different areas of individual and family life – each enjoying specific authority and power. Hinduism is largely ingrained in re-birth and reincarnation of all forms of living beings. In examining the question of religious authority and the media in Asia, it is instructive to examine the case of India, for example, given its size and centrality in the region.

In contemporary India – Hinduism has about one billion followers in India or 80% of the country's population – religion has long been an ingredient of media content. This is despite that specialist religious reporters are absent in the Indian media – in contrast to, for example, media structures in Western structures – and religion is therefore covered by general reporters, who may not possess the background knowledge or network of contacts to cover the subject. In India, the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2019) found that the level of journalists' trust in religious leaders is low, 1.90 (3 = somewhat, 2 = little trust, and 1 = no trust at all). But in terms of religious considerations as being a source of influence upon journalists this was higher, 2.56. The importance for Indian journalists of religious belief was in the middle of the scale of 1–5; 30.8% said that religion was “important,” 28.9% that it was “somewhat important” and 17.8% that it had “little importance,” and 41.3% of Indian journalists reported no denomination and 45.5% were Hindu (see Table 9.1).

Religion is a prime theme in 35 religious television channels in India, mostly comprising Hindu channels. With most journalists from the Hindu upper caste (Yadav, Chamaria and Kumar 2006), Hinduism is the dominant faith also in terms of media coverage on religion. Surveying 315 Indian journalists who work for English and Hindu daily papers and television news, Yadav, Chamaria and Kumar (2006, 7a) found that while the Hindu upper-caste accounts for only 8% of the Indian population, its share was as high as 71% among journalists. Further, while Muslims comprise over 13% of the Indian population, Yadav, Chamaria and Kumar (2006, 7a) found that only 4% were present in the top media posts they surveyed. For example, key newspapers like *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* discuss Hindu spirituality in their columns – even if the press is broadly secular and partly opposes fundamentalist Hindu groups in their conflict with religious minorities such as Islam. In an analysis of religion content in Indian daily newspapers and television, Kumar (2018) found that much of the content was conflict orientated, such as Hindu-Muslim rivalries. A second major theme was coverage of Hindu ritual practices and celebrations (Kumar 2003, 2018). Religious authority itself was notably less present. This questions theories like Galtung and Ruge (1965) which gives prominence to elitism – or those in authority – as criteria in the construction of news.

Agrawal (2015, 178) found that only 13% of Indians used digital media for religious purposes (in contrast to 81% for entertainment, 36% for news and 35% professional information). Broken down, only 13.5% of Hindus watched television for religious purposes or to gather religious information (in contrast to 52% and 47% of Muslim and Christian viewers,

respectively), 20% of Hindus did agree that digital media helps understanding of religion and 16% of Hindus replied that it even provided religious experience (Agrawal 2015, 180).

Thakur (2009) has argued that religious authority in India is strengthened through religious media. Surveying viewers of Swami Ramdev Baba's prime time television dealing with Yoga – broadcast on the *Aastha TV* channel, the first 24-hour Hindu religious channel – Thakur found that viewers of the Swami program became more religious than before. Over 81% felt a need for a spiritual guru and 70% reported becoming more religious (Thakur 2009, 53). Moreover, the longer they viewed the program the more the felt-need for a guru was reported: 84% who watched the program for five years and 81% who had watched the program two to three years stated that they needed a guru, in contrast to 78% who had watched the program for only a year (Thakur 2009, 53). Yet the overall impact of Hindu media upon religious identity in the country appears limited. Examining the influence of religious telecasts in India, Agrawal (2017, 121), drawing upon a survey of 300 Hindu speaking viewers (89.6% or 448 of which were Hindu), found that only 15% of Hindus replied that belief in *dharma* had become very strong as a result of their exposure to the broadcast in contrast to 59.6% who replied “somewhat” or “a little” and 25.4% “not at all”; 25% in the Agrawal study said that digital media does not provide religious gain and moreover, 41% continued to rely on off-line religious leaders (Agrawal 2017, 121).

Conclusion

The widely held view (Horsfield 2016) that religious authority has been challenged and weakened by developments in journalism and by technological developments in mass communication is uncertain. While it appears true in Western society, where the schism between the journalistic media and religion has undoubtedly placed religious authority in the defensive, similar developments have not occurred as prominently in Asian contexts. Indeed, in many Asian countries – notably Islamic ones – the media, rather than challenging religious authority, have become a pillar strengthening it. In contrast to their Western colleagues, Asian journalists seem more sensitive to religious thinking and themselves are more often believers – providing a specific channel for religious thinking through popular mass media. This is true even in some Islamic countries like Turkey where Islam's impact is not as prominent. Moreover, even in non-Islamic countries such as India and Israel, as shown here, the tension between journalists and those in religious authority is far lower than in Western societies.

But while in the West these changes currently challenge religious authority, the Asian case has taken a different path as online religious leaders, gurus, saints and even citizen journalists use online pulpits to sermonize. If anything, this strengthens rather than weakens those holding offline religious authority positions – who themselves have learnt the ropes of using new media in pastoral theology. So rather than observing a widening of a gap between the journalistic pen and the clerical cloth, in Asia we can observe that journalistic discourses about religion have become more diffused, diversified and voluminous.

Yet even in Asia, certain distance is discernable between some journalists and Muslim clerics, as Pintak (2011, 2013) found. Therefore, also in Asia we find a debate not dissimilar from that in the West. But if in the West, the debate about the legitimacy of religious authority is characterized as a challenge by secular parties including journalistic media, in Asia and in Muslim countries, in particular, tension over religious authority may be more accurately defined as emanating from non-institutional religious voices, like journalists themselves, and institutional forces comprising the religious establishment within the region.

Journalism and religion academic research has so far given limited attention to regions beyond the West, such as Asia. So, there is a need for further research to draw a differentiated picture of the relationship between journalism and religious authority in Asia. As journalism develops yet further, the impact of media change in the journalism and religious authority axis necessarily requires to be monitored. This is true even in the West itself; Silk (1995) and Underwood (2008) argued that journalists in the USA are less secular than are claimed to be. Given the emergence of religion as a significant force worldwide, the phenomenon of the contemporary decline in religiosity may not necessarily be long term as even those in the West pursue spirituality and meaning, if in albeit non-institutional settings. So the Asian model described here – of a religious non-institutional tension-cum-proximity – may in the future become copied elsewhere, even in the West.

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Further readings

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An earlier version was printed in *Religion & Social Communication*, 11(1), 2013. This is a wide-ranging study of how Television impacts upon religious beliefs of Hindus and Muslims in India.
- Cohen, Y., 2012. *God, Jews & the Media: Religion & Israel's Media*. New York: Routledge.
The book provides a comprehensive guide to the interface of religion and mass media in the Israeli Jewish context.
- Pintak, L., 2011. *The New Arab Journalist*. London: Tauris.
An important study drawing upon a survey of journalists in different Muslim countries, regarding journalists' attitudes to Islam.
Research on media and religion in the Asian context has been carried out at the Bangkok-based Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication, St John's University, which publishes *Religion and Social Communication*.

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