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News as Religion: Practices of Mediation in a Catholic Community in South India

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religion and news media through a case study of *Deepika*, a Malayalam-language daily published in the South Indian state of Kerala. We “thickly describe” the practices of mediation and meaning-making processes of this newspaper’s editors and readers, most of whom are “Syrian Catholics.” Our analysis shows that news functions as, or very similar to, religion for *Deepika*’s partakers. We thus argue that the newspaper and religion are inseparable for a devout Syrian Catholic, and they concurrently mediate the communal and spiritual longings of the believers.

Introduction

Draped in a priestly attire, the editor-in-chief of *Deepika*—a daily based in the South Indian state of Kerala—flipped the pages of the newspaper, even as he glanced in away at a monitor displaying a collage of newsroom images captured by closed-circuit cameras. The editor's room was well-furnished and spacious, with a light smell of Christmas incense wafting in the air. The varnished walls sported framed sepia and black-and-white photographs of prominent Catholic bishops and priests of Kerala as well as the founding fathers of *Deepika*, the oldest extant Malayalam-language newspaper. A few minutes into the conversation, the editor-in-chief Bobby Alex Mannamplackal informed us, proudly yet politely: “Although I was trained in journalism at Louisiana State University, I returned to Kerala after the bishop asked me to assume the responsibilities of the newspaper. I am a priest.”

What does it mean to be a priest *and* the editor-in-chief of a community newspaper? What meaning-making practices do editors and readers orient toward the print newspaper? How does religion enter into the everyday lives of people through a material medium such as a print newspaper? What meanings do people derive from the church-oriented newspaper and how do those meanings link to their faith? Using the case of *Deepika*, we seek to answer these questions by approaching religion and media as being historically and socially constituted—religion and media “as we know it”—and, at the same time, as hinting at something we have yet to know (Houtman and Meyer, 2012). As Zito (2008b) noted, when we open the question of “media” and “religion” to being understood as an original moment of definition, the act of defining itself can be recognized as a social act of some importance, one that shapes the ongoing embodiment of mediated and religious life. We thus slightly distance ourselves from disciplinary and

preconceived labels of “media” and “religion,” considering them more loosely as a combination of practices (Peterson, 2011; Couldry, 2004). An advantage of this stance, as we hope to demonstrate in this essay, is that we better understand the complex relationship between news media and religion as it plays out in the everyday life of a believer, subject to historical, social, and cultural factors at a given point of time.

In an endeavor to make visible some of the characteristics of this relationship, this study is guided by the concept of “mediation” (Zito, 2008a), used in the theoretical sense of the term, as the ongoing production of social life. Mediation works from the premise that social practice constantly takes place amidst producing or engaging with the material world. We therefore consider print newspapers as objects or “things” (Brown, 2001; Appadurai, 1988) to investigate how people, specifically *Deepika*’s readers and editors, structure their social life around the newspaper.

To examine the practices of mediation and meaning-making processes at play, this study adopts an ethnography-inspired approach (Barton, 2012; Bloome and Green, 1992), as part of which we spent three months conducting fieldwork in Kerala. We focus on Koovappally village and Kottayam city in Kerala. These research sites were chosen because *Deepika* is headquartered in Kottayam, and Koovappally is one of the villages with a dominant Catholic population. As such, this study is part of a larger project on Malayalam-language media and Christianity. We examine *Deepika* partly because it is the most widely circulated “Christian daily” in Kerala. Our fieldwork for this study involved keeping careful observation notes and conducting semi-structured interviews in the Malayalam language with *Deepika*’s editors and readers, most of whom are “Syrian Catholics” (The label “Syrian” is used as they practiced their mass in the Aramaic language, which originated in ancient Syria). In all, we observed and interviewed four

editors and 22 readers. The editors were primarily selected based on their length of service in *Deepika*. For identifying readers for interviews, we frequented public spaces, such as teashops, where people occasionally read and discussed the newspaper. Another set of readers was chosen based on our social connections and immersion in the research site. The authors obtained approval from Institutional Review Board before commencing fieldwork.

This project follows a humanistic, interdisciplinary mode of inquiry: whereas the first author is a religious studies scholar, the second author is trained in communication and South Asian Studies. The first author has been *Deepika*'s regular reader for more than two decades and belongs to the Syrian Catholic community. The second author had never read *Deepika* before embarking on this project, bringing an "outsider" perspective on the subject. The study's topical, theoretical, and geographical focus is thus informed by the authors' background and their shared commitment to produce knowledge that reflects the diversity of human experience in relation to media.

Kerala as a Cradle of Christianity and the Press in India

Known for its leftwing political parties, Kerala is long dominated by communist culture and ethos. It is also a religiously diverse state where Christians constitute 19 percent of the population, while at the national level those identifying with this faith is only 2.3 percent (Thomas, 2018). Kerala is home to the oldest Christian community in India called Syrian Christians. According to the oral traditions of Syrian Christians, the apostle Saint Thomas arrived at Kerala's Malabar Coast in 52 A.D. to propagate Christian faith. He reportedly proselytized 32 higher caste families, to which Syrian Christians tout their ancestry (Vishwanathan, 1993). By the time the Portuguese "rediscovered" the Syrian Church of Malabar in the sixteenth century, bishops and Christian immigrants from the Arabian Gulf had already

become part of the church in a region notable for its pepper and cardamom trade. The Portuguese attempted to control the Syrian Church of Malabar by imposing the Roman Catholic liturgy, resulting in the bifurcation of the community. The Christian community in Kerala was further subdivided after the arrival of various missionary groups from Europe. However, a shared goal of all these mission groups was to increase the circulation of the Bible and educate the natives in Western instruction. This aim, the missionaries learned, could be achieved only through establishing printing presses.

European Christian missionaries set up the earliest presses in Kerala in the early 1800s (Ahmed, 1986). In the following decades, Carmelite missionaries arrived from London and encouraged native men to become missionaries and lead the Catholic church of Kerala. By recruiting native missionaries, Carmelites challenged the hegemony of European missionaries. In 1855, Carmelites formed a congregation called Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, which helped develop Kerala's literary public sphere and founded *Nazrani Deepika*. To portray *Nazrani Deepika* as a secular publication, the word *Nazrani* ("Nazarene" or Syrian Christians) was dropped from the newspaper's name in 1939. However, *Deepika*'s readership remained limited to Syrian Catholics who were largely prosperous traders and land-owning farmers. After India's independence in 1947, *Deepika* opposed Kerala's newly elected Communist government to defend the "rights" of these farmers to cultivate paddy in reserved forests (Aykara & Mathew, 2012). Partly because of its focus on community and agricultural issues, *Deepika* garnered enough advertisements to find a place among the ten Malayalam dailies listed in the Audit Bureau of Circulations, which scrutinizes the circulation figures of its members to invite advertisers (Jeffrey, 2009). *Deepika* was also the first Malayalam newspaper to start a digital edition, in 1997.

According to Jeffrey (2010), in the second half of the twentieth century, India witnessed a “newspaper revolution” fueled by a range of factors, including the new printing technologies, an accelerated growth of literacy, more diffuse political environments that created a hunger for news, and new capitalist investments from a young generation of newspaper owners who invested in marketing and advertising through an aggressive strategy of localization (Bhaskaran et al., 2020; Ninan, 2007; Orsini, 2013). Despite the so-called newspaper revolution, community dailies including *Deepika* lost the circulation war to more commercial publications (Nair, 1997). *Deepika*’s subscriptions and advertisements continue to nosedive, even though Malayalam print newspapers are generally thriving. *Deepika* survives on support from its Syrian Catholic base, the largest Christian community in Kerala numbering about 2.4 million.

On the Practices of Mediation

Within the discipline of communication, the concept of mediation stems from Jesus Martin-Barbero’s (1987) influential work in which he asked scholars to move “from media to mediations,” that is from a functionalist media-centered analyses to the exploration of everyday practices of media appropriation through which social actors enact resistance and resilience to domination and hegemony (Mattoni and Trere, 2014). Although this conception of mediation is useful, for the purpose of our study, we follow Zito (2008a) who traced the indexical root of mediation to the work of the Marxist-Bakhtin circle in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. As a communist government stronghold for several decades, Kerala presents an apropos cultural and political environment for the application of the Marxist-Bakhtin conception of mediation and its offshoots (e.g., Zito, 2008b) over other theorizations of mediation (e.g., Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012; Hepp, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2013).

A proponent of the Marxist-Bakhtin school, Volosinov (1973) noted that “the existence of the sign is nothing but the materialization of [that] communication,” indicating that in a dialectical model of construction of social reality, people are engaged in producing the material world around them, even as they are, in turn, produced by it (Berger, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Morgan, 1998; Zito, 2008b). This notion was later carried forward to Clifford Geertz’s (1977) cultural anthropology as well as to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. The latter recommended viewing culture as that which “mediates the interaction between the material and the mental, the economic and the socio-political” (Mendieta, 2006).

This agentic sense of world is the chief feature of the antipositivist mission of critical theory and of the turn toward practice in the social sciences in general. By emphasizing historical and cultural conditions, these approaches considered the world as dynamic. This notion was also extended to inanimate beings, as Appadurai (1988) argued that commodities, like people, have social lives. It is therefore possible to use a commodity, or a thing, or a newspaper as an optic to get insights into the social life of a community. This is because the meanings that people attribute to things necessarily derive from “human transactions and motivations, particularly from how those things are used and circulated” (Appadurai, p. 36). Along similar lines, Zito (2008a) stationed an analytic between what she called “embodied actors” and the “things” of the world, grasping their mutual constitution as a process of mediation.

In order to study this mutual constitution of actors and things—that is, to operationalize the concept of mediation—we build on Meyer & Moors (2006) to offer the notion of “practices of mediation,” suggesting that we look at actors’ relation to a thing as a set of disparate yet interconnected practices, which are observable. At the same time, we must situate these observable practices within their historical and cultural frames. Admittedly, such a view is not

limited to religious contexts, nor it is new, for it derives from practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Schatzki, 1999; Reckwitz, 2002). One advantage of the practice-based approach is that it overcomes to a large extent the theoretical divide between *structure*, the approaches that treat social actors as merely carrying out their roles as components in a larger system, and *agency*, the representation of social actors as relatively free agents inventing culture as they pursue their highly individual choices in a social environment (Peterson, 2010).

In addition, as Couldry (2004) noted, the practice-based approach is suggestive for how we might understand the relation of “media-oriented practices to social practice as a whole” (p. 122). In our study, this translates to our original interest in deciphering the connections between news media and religion. Thus, examining the practices of mediation in Kerala’s Syrian Catholic community will entail asking two concrete and related questions: What type of things do editors and readers *do* in relation to the newspaper? What types of things do editors and readers *say* in relation to the newspaper? Because in this essay we are interested in what Aupers (2012) called “spiritualization of commodities” rather than commodification of spirituality as evidence for secularization or the political economy of religious products (Alex, 2020; Thomas, 2009), we draw on observations of and interviews with dedicated readers of *Deepika*, besides the editors. In the two narrative sections that follow, we immerse into the research setting to read the theoretical constructions about what people do against the conceptual lexicon and practices of the people involved in our field study (Malinowski, 1922).

The Life of a Community Print Newspaper in Koovappally

In November 2017, when we first met Rosamma, she was mopping the verandah of her ancestral home in the village of Koovappally, Kottayam. Her husband, Tony, sat on a chair in front of their house, overlooking the rubber plantations. Tony was reading out aloud to his wife a

think-piece in *Deepika*. Now in their sixties and with their children residing away from home, the couple spent most of their time at home, cooking, cleaning, talking to relatives over telephone, and reading biblical scriptures and *Deepika*, the only newspaper they subscribed to. Because power supply and internet connection are erratic in this village, the couple did not access the newspaper online. More important, the couple had not “socialized” with the Internet, as they had with the tactile form of news, which they consumed since the time they started to read, as Rosamma remarked: “We are reading *Deepika* from the time of our fathers, for the last 85 years, if we count them as well. It’s our habit to read *Deepika*. We don’t want to change.”

This seemingly un-reflexive response from Rosamma embeds in it the complexities of the term “habit” in reading the newspaper. Rosamma and Tony’s *sheelam* (“habit”) of reading *Deepika* was not merely an outcome of choice, but it was formed over decades, carried over from one generation to the other. The practice of reading *Deepika* was rooted strongly in social and kinship relations, which still mattered to the couple. Therefore, when we noted Tony’s practice of reading the newspaper aloud every morning in front of his house, he was carrying out a social act. According to Thevenot (2001), practice brings into view activities which are “situated, corporeal, and shaped by habits without reflection” (p. 56). Tony’s practice of newspaper reading is situated within particular social spaces (such as the front yard) and interacts with corporeal objects like a chair and print newspaper. Habit, thus, describes this sense of actions performed automatically and unreflectively, which seem to actors to be natural and necessary—rather than cultural and symbolic—modes of behavior (Peterson, 2010).

Tony and Rosamma were rubber cultivators and today own a plantation in Koovappally. For the couple, the weekdays were non-distinguishable because of what Tony called “lack of a particular activity.” On Sundays, however, they attended service at St. Joseph’s Church, after

which they conversed with friends, relatives, and neighbors in the church precinct. We were introduced to Martin, another avid reader of *Deepika*, in one of these post-church service conversations. Martin, 64, was a member of the Koovappally church Board and occasionally discussed *Deepika*'s news stories with Tony. We soon learned, through our field visits, that discussing the newspaper in the evening at a local *chaayakada* ("teashop") was Martin's favorite pastime. These teashop discussions were initiated with people in the neighborhood who read several Malayalam-language newspapers. On one such discussion, which we attended, a Syrian Catholic community member named Joseph asserted that *Deepika* was "just a church circular" and that the newspaper "carried only news of the priest," adding that, "by the way, it did not publish any news on the Catholic priest who was involved in the land scam." Although many of these assertions were true, Martin was not pleased with Joseph's criticism and promptly left the teashop. At first, we were a little surprised at Martin's impulsive behavior because he otherwise maintained a calm demeanor in his conversations with others and us. The next day when we met Martin at his house, he was his usual, jovial self. Yet, he cared to comment on the previous day's incident, as he explained in detail:

I believe that as Catholics we should subscribe to *Deepika*. If our newspaper grows, then only our community will grow. These days Hindus and Muslims have stopped subscribing to *Malayala Manorama* and read their own community newspaper. *Deepika* is the only source to know about our Catholic community. So, we should follow other community's example and buy *Deepika*. Hindus support *Mathrubhumi*, and Muslims support *Madhyamam*. Our people look lowly upon *Deepika* and consider it inferior. Our people are ahead in criticizing the priests and spreading gossip about them, which in turn tarnishes our community.

If 2% of the priests and nuns are bad, that is highlighted, and the good ones also suffer. No one cares about the positive side and merits of the priests. Christians are the most unorganized group in Kerala, and they are failing their own community. We don't have that communal feeling, which other communities have. We are followers of Christ, and so we are cold-blooded and don't fight to defend ourselves. Our religion glorifies pain and suffering.

Martin was indeed disheartened after Joseph's critical remark about the newspaper and the priest, but the former did not express his emotions at the teashop. We can use the teashop incident and Martin's subsequent explanation to momentarily estrange ourselves from the term "religion" in order to consider it, in the tradition of semiotics, as a sign that points to the signified, which in the present case will imply activities and meanings. For Martin, religion in this case partly meant avoiding confrontation and undergoing "pain and suffering." The associated activity that he performed was to quietly leave the teashop. We can therefore argue that, as signs, religion and the newspaper in and of themselves did not mean anything for Martin, insofar as they *mediated* his embrace of pain and suffering, however trivial or deep they may be. The teashop incident shows that a material medium, such as the newspaper, was necessary to delve into the interiors of Martin, to excavate the meanings he attached to his religion. This follows the line of argument by Volosinov (1973) and Geertz (1977) that "an imagined subjective interiority can be accessed only via the exteriority of mediated materiality" (Zito, 2008b).

In comparison, Joseph exhibited a different set of meanings with the newspaper. He worked as an India correspondent for an English-language newspaper based in the Middle East. When we interviewed him at the teashop a few days after the incident, he shared his thoughts on

Deepika. Joseph subscribed to *Malayala Manorama* and did not see a need to read *Deepika*. He remarked, “I don’t think Catholics should only read *Deepika*. It’s an individual choice,” adding that, “Priests ask Catholics to read *Deepika* because it’s a source of income for them. I have many things to say regarding that, but I don’t want to say all that.” Such views were common among the people of Koovappally village. For example, *Deepika* recently invited public and media criticism after it published a Syrian Catholic bishop’s unsubstantiated claims that Muslims of Kerala lure people from other religious groups to become drug addicts (Samayam, 2021).

Paradoxically, *Deepika* was nothing less than the Bible for a devout reader. Maria, a teacher at a primary school, read several newspapers, but she “felt strange” if she did not read *Deepika*. She therefore read the newspaper early morning, in the quiet of her room, before going to school where she read other Malayalam- and English-language publications in the library. When we interviewed Maria over a cup of milky tea at her home, she remarked that “What I like about *Deepika* is that it has more news on communal harmony. The newspaper doesn’t attack or speak ill of other communities. Some of the editorials on communal harmony have influenced me profoundly.” As with Martin, who longed for “communal feeling” and discovered some of it inside the pages of *Deepika*, Maria, too, relied on reading the newspaper to experience, among other things, “communal harmony.” Through different practices of mediation, which ranged from discussing the newspaper publicly at a teashop to reading the newspaper silently in a study room, *Deepika* entered into the cultural lives of its devoted readers in Koovappally.

The Making of a Community Print Newspaper in Kottayam City

Although Kottayam city (the capital of Kottayam District) is only about 25 miles from Koovappally, buses take a couple of hours due to frequent stops. *Deepika*’s main office, a three-stored building, is located in the heart of Kottayam city, amid the hustle-bustle of auto-

rickshaws, buses, and cars. The interior of the building, though, is quiet. It is in this building, in one of its rooms, that Serji spent 14 hours every day for the past two decades. A senior editor and in his sixties, Serji had been working with *Deepika* for about 40 years now. He comes to his office at eight in the morning and stays till 10 at night. After meeting with the editor-in-chief in the morning to discuss the stories for the day, Serji spends the remainder of the day reading Malayalam books and biblical literature, in between answering questions by telephone for the newspaper staff. Serji did not possess a journalism degree as that was not a common area of study in universities at that time. He completed his bachelors from a Syrian Catholic institute in Kerala called St. Berchmans College before enrolling in a postgraduate diploma program in the neighboring state of Karnataka. He returned to Kerala in 1982 to join *Deepika* as a copy editor. When we saw him at his office one late afternoon in December 2017, he was searching for a document among the pile of printed materials on his work desk. On his desk, Serji also kept a paperweight in the form of a figurine of Mother Mary. Claiming to speak on behalf of the newspaper staff, he explained:

We believe in God. We never propagate atheism. We think every religious community should be given equal treatment. But since our readers and subscribers are from the Catholic community, we naturally include their news stories more. So Christian, Catholic news and outlook are reflected more in the newspaper. But we have no ban on news from other communities.

Serji's comment asserts how a "Christian" perspective is reflected in—or *mediated* through—the newspaper. However, his comment also begs two questions: (a) What did this Christian perspective mean to Serji and other editors, and (b) what were the newsroom practices that this perspective engendered or facilitated? Before we explore these questions, it is

instructive to note that *Deepika*'s news staff in Kottayam consisted exclusively of men, who were predominantly Syrian Catholic. The editor-in-chief also served as a priest, a rather uncommon practice in the newspaper industry. The organization of news staff based rigidly on religion and gender ensured that the newspaper followed the "Christian perspective," although this outlook was not spelled out in any rulebook, and the staff learned these through osmosis in the newsroom. While it may be reasonable to assume that the meanings of the Christian perspective or values varied at the individual level, we did discover a pattern based on our limited newsroom observations, which the editor-in-chief permitted. During our conversation with all four senior editors in Kottayam city, including Serji and the editor-in-chief, we noticed that they referred to the Malayalam word *aatmeeyatha* ("spirituality") when asked about the larger goal of their work as well as religion—a word also used by several of *Deepika*'s readers during the interviews. Considering the work of the editors as imparting "spirituality" in the newspaper, and by extension in people, we can argue that the editors' practices of mediation perform the same function as religion. For religions, in one way or the other, claim to mediate the "transcendental, spiritual, or supernatural and make these accessible for believers" (Meyer & Moors, 2006, p. 7). In other words, we can consider both the newspaper and religion as signs, which are pointing to the same signifier: spirituality. This is particularly true in societies where religion has come to play a dominant role in public life and, more specifically, in the case of *Deepika* whose editor-in-chief doubled up as a priest. We may thus dismiss the binary opposition of religion and media, as Vries (2001) recommended, because for religion to articulate its message and meaning, it depends on mediation, and hence certain mediums, such as print newspapers, are required to render the invisible accessible (Meyer & Moors, 2006).

Even if the editors regarded *aatmeeyatha* as the final answer to settle our first question, it is possible to get an overview of their practices (our second question) through interviews. Mathew, the third senior editor we interviewed, believed that an awareness of religious scriptures and knowledge of literary works in the Malayalam language were essential to ensure that the message was disseminated to people in the “right” words. Mathew, too, did not have a formal journalism degree. He received his bachelors in mathematics from Newman College Thodupuzha, a Syrian Catholic institution in Kerala. He had spent more than four decades working for *Deepika* and had co-authored a book documenting the institutional history of the newspaper. Now a central figure in the newsroom, he spent part of his afternoon reading major literary works in Malayalam and consulting a dictionary. This practice helped him in copy editing, which he liked and occasionally performed during the absence of regular copy editors. With regard to reporting, Mathew claimed that his “motto was to observe moral restraint.” He claimed that it was acceptable to publish news a few days late, to maintain accuracy, rather than publish “breaking news that is wrong.” He further mentioned that, “We want to protect the institutional interest of the church. We cannot support nor cover abortion, divorce, incest, and extra-marital affairs. We follow high moral grounds.” Thus, protecting the “institutional interest of church” explained why *Deepika* did not report on the priest involved in the land scam, an accusation that Joseph raised. Moreover, Mathew recounted that he rarely had to pronounce any guidelines to his newspaper staff, who organically internalized the acceptable norms and practices of mediation.

Conclusion

According to Zito (2017), scholars have studied the relationship between media and religion mainly in two ways: (a) how religion is represented in the news media, and (b) how

religious people use media, particularly in religions that are evangelizing such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and lately, Hinduism. However, there also exists a third way to explore the connections between media and religion—as Zito noted and as illuminated in our study—which is the manner news media themselves function *as*, or very similar to, religion. This third way demands us to inquire what religion and media do for people. Based on our case study of *Deepika*, we discovered that, for a devout Syrian Catholic, the newspaper and religion were inseparable, and they both mediated the communal and spiritual longings of the people.

Both the newspaper and religion told stories and filled the rather empty time of the readers with new activities, leading to the formation of social practices, from public discussions in teashops to consulting dictionaries in private. From the standpoint of the mediation of social life, religion and media can thus be seen to function in surprisingly intimate ways and to form even more potent forms of social practice when deliberately intertwined (Zito, 2008a). Our “thick description” of the practices of mediation highlights a need to move from a persistent focus on mass media text and its reception (important though these are) to a focus on cultural processes of mediation, that is, as Meyer & Moors (2006) articulated, on how the media operate as intermediaries in processes of communication, affirming existing links and forging new ones between people and material forms. The shift to cultural processes of mediation, or what Hoover (2002) termed the “culturalist turn” more generally, is important in order to broach new questions that advance media and religion scholarship.

By embracing ideas from religious studies, communication studies, and “area studies,” our study brings to news media scholarship a fresh, interdisciplinary approach to examine ways in which religious practices are manifested in material and embodied terms. As such, interdisciplinary collaboration in a humanistic frame is more of an exception than a norm in

news media research, including in the relatively emergent field of media and religion within the communication discipline (Stout, 2013; Stout & Buddenbaum, 2002; 2008). Our study, then, speaks to this deficit in a modest attempt to make media scholarship more open and international. The humanistic approach we adopt here is important to study the role of media not only in analogous religious communities in Kerala, such as Latin Catholic, Syro-Malankara Catholic, Jacobite, and Pentecostal Christians, but also in other Indian states. Last, there is a need for more serious engagement in field-based studies, particularly on non-English speaking populations in the Global South, to open up avenues for (re)interpreting what media and religion mean to people on the ground.

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