

# Hate speech from the perspective of the mediatization of religion in the post-secular age. A few remarks for discussion

## *Discursos de odio desde la perspectiva de la mediatización de la religión en la era postsecular. Algunas consideraciones a debate*

Rafał Leśniczak  | r.lesniczak@uksw.edu.pl  
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Poland

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### Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to systematize the following issues concerning the problem of hate speech from the perspective of the processes of the mediatization of religion in the post-secular era: the differences between constructive criticism and hate speech in the media; the implementation of hate speech in the mediatized forms of religion (doctrine, religious practices, the image of religious leaders and members of religious communities) and the importance of the mediatization processes in the spread of hate speech in the field of religion. In the study, the method of analysis as well as critical literature research and literature review methods have been applied.

**Keywords:** doctrine, hate speech, mediatization, post-secular age, religion.

### Resumen

*El propósito de este trabajo es sistematizar las siguientes cuestiones relativas al problema de los discursos del odio desde la perspectiva de los procesos de mediatización de la religión en la era postsecular: las diferencias entre la crítica constructiva y el discurso del odio en los medios; la implementación del discurso del odio en las formas de religión mediatizadas (doctrina, prácticas religiosas, imagen de líderes religiosos y miembros de comunidades religiosas), así como la importancia de los procesos de mediatización en la difusión del discurso del odio en el ámbito de la religión. En el estudio se ha aplicado el método de análisis, así como métodos de investigación de literatura crítica y revisión de literatura.*

**Palabras clave:** doctrina, discurso de odio, mediatización, era postsecular, religión.

### Summary

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Western European societies live in what is called the post-secular era, and they are referred to as "post-secular societies". The phenomenon of post-secularism is a return to religious values and religious thinking in the public discourse, science and art (Casanova, 2012, p. 27-46). The post-secular era appears in the context of secularism and secularization from the 20th and early 21st centuries. As Mariano Fazio noted, secularism expresses the unlimited autonomy of what is human and negates human references to any transcendent instance (Fazio, 1998, p. 35). When it comes to secularization, the Argentinian scholar treats it as an affirmation of the relative autonomy of the temporal, asserting the interrelation of the temporal and the eternal, the contingent and the Absolute (*ibidem*).

The process of progressing secularization in Western European countries over the last decades is confirmed by numerical data. As Phil Zuckerman notes, "not only is church attendance way down, but so is religious belief" (Zuckerman, 2004, p. 50). In Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1851, 60 percent of the adult population attended church; in 1995 that was down to 11 percent. In 1899, in the Netherlands 98 percent of citizens claimed to belong to a particular church. In 2001, only 40 percent did so (*op.cit.*, 51). Basically, the number of catholics per priest is increasing in European countries. In the 40 years between 1969 and 2009, the above figures in Portugal went from 1718 to 2508, in Ireland from 685 to 1078, in Hungary from 1663 to 2617 (Pickel, Pollack, and Müller, 2016, p. 235). According to Pew Research Center from 2018, in most Western European countries, non-practicing Christians are largest group, for example in Denmark they account for 55% of the population, in Finland 68%, in United Kingdom 55%, in Austria 52% (Pew Research Center, 2018). The World Values Survey Wave 7 report (2017-2022) indicates low attend religious services, apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, for example, the category "never, practically never" is represented by as much as 40.5% of the population in Germany, 61.2% in the Netherlands %, in Great Britain – 55.4% (Haerpfer, *et al.*, 2022, p. 504-505).

Tony Blair's statement about the necessity of understanding religious faith as a prerequisite for realizing what the modern world is, or Jürgen Habermas' and Nicolas Sarkozy's theses about rejecting dialogue with religion as a cultural and intellectual fault, can be taken as signs confirming the presence of the post-secular age (Habermas, Blair, & Debray, 2008, p. 16; PKU News, 3.06.2011). According to Habermas, the category of post-secular society implies secular Western societies in which secularization processes coexist with individuals' religious sensitivity to transcendence (Kobyliński, 2014, p. 110). The principled features of the post-secular society include the detachment of the system of law and customs from the transcendent dimension as well as social integration based on the rational acceptability of laws and political decisions (Cooke, 2007, p. 224). The relationship mentioned above has its point of reference in the criterion of truth, science being its only source, treated as the sole authority in the social monopoly on the world's knowledge. In the post-secularists' view, modern religious consciousness, accepting the premises of a constitutional state based on the secular morality, should adapt to science understood as described above (Habermas, 2002, p. 66). One of the essential consequences of such a state of affairs is that the role of religion is reduced to the private sphere of human life, a personal belief without any decisive influence on the shape of the public sphere but, nevertheless, with some potential for integrating the society (Warchala, 2013, p. 76).

Postsecularism, which accepts religious and moral pluralism, is an inclusive attitude that incorporates into the debate on the role of religion in the public sphere such topics as the validity of the correspondence theory of truth (*Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*), as well as the relevance of selected features of secularism (Rudas, 2020, p. 259-261). The post-secular context highlights the change in the social understanding of religion, as it becomes reoriented towards the privatization and deinstitutionalization of religion. The cultural and social background described above indicates a significant shift in the understanding and positioning of religion in the public sphere. In the era of the ubiquitous presence of the media and the progressive processes of mediatization, religion is becoming a participant in the public debate (Meyer, and Moors, 2005). However, it does not have a dominant position in the societies of liberal democracy, but individual areas of social life are emancipating from its influence.

## 2. Methodology

The purpose of this paper is systematization the following three issues relating to hate speech from the perspective of the mediatization of religion in the post-secular era: indication of differences between constructive criticism and hate speech in the media; the implementation of hate speech in the mediatized forms of religion (doctrine, religious practices, the image of religious leaders and members of religious communities); the importance of the processes of mediatization in the spread of hate speech in the realm of religion. In the study, the method of critical literature research and literature review methods have been applied. Reference was made to the results of such social science researchers as, among others, J. Casanova, N. Couldry, A. Hepp, G. Evolvi, C. George, N. González Gaitano, M. Wiesenbergl. In the undertaken analysis, a hypothesis about significant differences between constructive criticism and hate speech was adopted; as well as the implementation of hate speech at the level of religious doctrine, at the level of religious practices and at the level of identity and image of religious leaders/members of religious communities. It was assumed that mediatization processes are a catalyst for media hate. The conceptual grid adopted in the research includes two key terms for the analyzes undertaken, i.e. hate speech and mediatization.

Recommendation No. 97(20) of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, dated 30/10/1997, states that hate speech is a form of verbal or nonverbal communication that promotes racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, develops a climate of intolerance, and incites racial hatred, violence and discrimination. It includes activities that can reinforce fears and tensions between groups of different racial, ethnic, national, religious or social backgrounds (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers). Kevin Boyle notes that hate speech includes the promotion of hatred and discrimination against groups based on skin color, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or another status (Boyle, 2001, p. 495). The issue of hate speech is considered in two important orders: jurisprudential and moral (Howard, 2019, p. 93-109). It is analyzed in democratic societies in the context of the right to freedom of expression, the limits of freedom of speech, and freedom from discrimination (Boyle, 2019, p. 490). As Erica Howard notes, the freedom of expression of those participating in public debate on religion should not be restricted except in two circumstances: when hate or violence is incited and there is an imminent danger that violence will occur, and also when hate speech stops people from professing or manifesting their own religion (Howard, 2017).

Many concepts of mediatization are being recognized in the literature. Analysis undertaken here has included the findings of respected Polish, Scandinavian and German media researchers, e.g., Ewa Nowak-Teter, Marta Kołodziejska, Stig Hjarvard, Winfried Schulz, Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz and others.

Winfried Schulz describes mediatization as a process of social change in which the media play a pivotal role, with four key concepts: extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation (Schulz, 2004, p. 88). New media technologies extend the natural boundaries of human communication capabilities; they help overcome spatial and temporal distances, partially or entirely replace social activities and social institutions, thus changing their nature; they dissolve the boundaries between media and non-media activities, permeating the spheres of private and social life (e.g., in the dimensions of professional work, economics, culture, politics and the public sphere); they induce social change by imposing the logic of their own functioning on various entities and organizations (from the world of politics, sports, entertainment, among others) (Schulz, 2004, p. 88-90; Krotz, 2001, p. 213-265). Friedrich Krotz views mediatization as a metaprocess at the same level as individualization and globalization, which is always closely linked to time and cultural context (Krotz, 2007, p. 39).

Within contemporary research on the mediatization of religion from the perspective of digital media development, we must recognize two key concepts: institutional mediatization and constructionist mediatization (Kołodziejska, 2022, p. 142). The former approach assumes that mediatization as a process implies a vital role of the media logic to which all institutions and spheres of social life are subordinated. The media, in turn, are seen as autonomous institutions, significantly interconnected with the functioning of other institutions (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 110). Contemporary research on the mediatization of religion includes for instance the use by ecclesial institutions of digital media that guarantee their presence in the public space; the change in the way churches communicate with the faithful; the transformation of religious authority; the hyper-mediatization of sacred space; and the impact of mediatization processes on state-church relations (Evolvi, 2022, p. 19-21; Kołodziejska, 2022, p. 143). As Ewa Nowak-Teter points out, the constructivist approach to the research on mediatization, on the other hand, essentially focuses on everyday communication carried

out mainly through digital media and on the cultural and social changes already induced by these practices, that is, on the construction of reality through the media (Nowak-Teter, 2019, p. 3). In this view, the essence of mediatization lies in the change in communication forms and practices that contribute to social change (Kołodziejska, 2022, p. 144). Given that mediatization is a concept used in the critical analysis of the interdependence between changes in the media and communication on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other hand, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp have made an effort to integrate these two dimensions (Couldry, & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). The quantitative approach is used when the increasing temporal, spatial and social scope of mediated communication is observed. In contrast, the qualitative approach is more helpful in seeking the specifics of certain media roles in socio-cultural transformation (Nowak-Teter, 2019, p. 3).

### 3. Results

The terminological distinction between constructive criticism and hate speech can be linked to the mode of argumentation. On the one hand, there is justification, providing grounds, which, in terms of content-relatedness to the thesis, is substantive, i.e., factual, and the arguments used are intersubjectively verifiable and non-personal. On the other hand, there are forms of non-substantive argumentation, which use morally reprehensible ploys and express content that is offensive to the recipient (Budzyńska-Daca, & Kwosek, 2012, p. 12-13). The former mode of argumentation is used in constructive criticism, while the latter is a type of hate speech that is mainly manifested by using insults or vulgarisms.

The great monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) are religions of the holy book, respectively: the Old and New Testaments, the Torah and the Quran. These books are the word of God and contain guidance for living in compliance with the professed faith (Corrigan *et al.*, 2016). Constructive criticism implies, among other things, discourse on various forms of interpretation of the wording of these books, moral, dogmatic or worship-related principles. There is a substantive debate among religious scholars on the image of God in Islam, the understanding of his transcendence, rationality or relationship with the created human being (Aminrazavi, 2001, p. 95-111). Analogous discussions are held among Jewish and Christian theologians (Gerstenberger, 2021; Keel, & Uehlinger, 1998).

In the media, one can find various forms of hatred against the founders and prophets of the world's major monotheistic religions. In 2005, caricatures of the prophet Muhammad with a bomb instead of a turban by Kurt Westergaard were published in "Jyllands-Posten" (Müller, and Özcan, 2007, p. 287-291). In the following years, cartoons of the prophet of Islam appeared in the satirical weekly "Charlie Hebdo", triggering a wave of protests in Muslim countries and retaliation on 7.01.2015 in the form of a terrorist attack that killed 12 people from the editorial office of the French weekly (Mondon, & Winter, 2017, p. 31-45). Media discrimination against leaders and members of religious communities is verified through the analysis of program content and the media agenda (Pratt, & Woodlock, 2016, p. 1-18; Kraner, 2021, p. 731-766; Owiredu, 2009).

The freedom of religious practices of members of a particular religion stems from the freedom of conscience and worship, one of the fundamental human rights enshrined in, among other things, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as in the constitutions of states (Lindkvist, 2017). From the legal perspective, it can be determined whether that freedom is violated or respected. Various forms of hate speech directed at the faithful, arising from their participation in worship or visits to holy places (cemeteries, temples, religious memorials) are a significant problem. There are forms of "media attack" solely because they manifest their faith or belonging to a particular religious association (Christianophobia, Judeophobia/antisemitism, Islamophobia) (Judaken, 2018, p. 1-17).

Important areas of religion explored in the social sciences include religious doctrine, religious practices (observances) and the identity and image of religious leaders/members of religious communities (Chakim, 2022, p. 217-236).

Norberto González Gaitano noted, in the context of his research on public opinion about the Church, that the institution is neither a political nor a democratic community (González Gaitano, 2016, p. 179). This Spanish media scholar distinguishes three levels that public opinion, and therefore the media, should distinguish when discussing the ecclesial institution: the level of faith, the level of government and the level of the contingent (González Gaitano, 2016, p. 184-189). Issues of the dogmas of the faith, or the religious doctrine in the broadest

sense, are fundamentally related to the acceptance, understanding, and proper communication thereof, including by the media. There is no room for changing the essential, fundamental dogmatic content. Issues of governance and hierarchy are the internal matters of religious associations. Other issues, such as traditions and customs, are subject to interpretation, debate, reformulation or change.

An example of hate speech in the media aimed at Jews, Christians and Muslims is the market presence of various types of press, whose editorial line involves systematic ridicule or insulting of the religious feelings of believers. Let us mention here the caricatures of Muhammad (Goolam, 2006, p. 333-350), Jesus (Leiken, 2011, p. 34) or Yahweh (Stoegner *et al.*, 2021) in French "Charlie Hebdo", Hungarian "Népszava", or Polish anticlerical weekly "Nie" (Płonkowski, 2012, p. 109-110).

The media image of religious leaders reflects their identity to varying degrees. Important reasons for this include the profile of the medium (right-wing, left-wing, liberal), the institutional communication of the leader's own identity and initiatives to the public, and the public relations activities of religious leaders (Coman, & Coman, 2017, p. 129-143). Various forms of interpretation of the image in the media are a consequence of the freedom of speech.

Looking at this issue from the perspective of the attack on religious beliefs, Cherian George stressed that blasphemy laws should be considered the oldest and most enduring regulations on hate speech. In most countries of liberal democracy, they have been abolished. However, harsh penalties for blasphemy exist in the legislation of many countries, e.g., in Greece for hate speech against the Orthodox Church or in Malaysia against Sunni Islam (George, 2014; George, 2016, p. 34). This raises the question of the proportionality of the punishment, the rational limits of the privileged position of certain religious leaders and selected religious doctrines. It is also worth noting that at the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation unsuccessfully lobbied for classifying defamation of religion as a legitimate reason for restricting the freedom of expression, which would align international law with national blasphemy prohibitions (George, 2014).

Anna Leszczuk-Fiedziukiewicz took up the issue of the tabloidization of blasphemy and, in this context, formulated questions about the limits of artistic freedom and the offense of religious feelings. The researcher analyzed the attitude of the media in Poland after 1989 from the perspective of the famous premiere of the plays "Golgota Picnic" and "Klątwa" (Curse) (Leszczuk-Fiedziukiewicz, 2019, p. 219-223). She noted that the media messages are biased, reflecting the editorial line, which applies to both opponents of the plays and the artists. The media build conflict and are driven by stereotyping processes, accompanied by the topoi of war, metaphors and parabolae (Leszczuk-Fiedziukiewicz, 2019, p. 223).

The mediatization of religion contributes to the accelerated spread of content focusing on actions taken by religious institutions and religious associations, as well as externalized expressions of hate speech against them. By way of example, let us remind the ethnicity-based hostile reaction of far-right and nationalist groups in Germany against the refugees who arrived in Western Europe during the 2015 migration crisis and the press titles that supported the hate speech of circles associated with Alternative für Deutschland (Hambauer, & Mays, 2018, p. 133-154). Alessandro Sola, when examining the impact of the refugee crisis and the Angela Merkel government's asylum policy on the German population's fear of immigration, noted an increase in Germans' fear of refugees by about 22% compared to the time before the migration crisis. Sola pointed out that the abovementioned concerns about immigration are positively correlated with political support for the relatively new right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (Sola, February 2018). German media experts provide evidence for the post-2015 rise of negative anti-refugee sentiment on the German social media towards migrants and the intensification of hate speech, with a subsequent increase in crime as a consequence of the hatred disseminated through media (Müller, & Schwarz, 2021, p. 2131-2167). Mediatization processes contribute to changes in interpersonal relations and behaviors in the sphere of religion. In turn, public opinion polls in Poland show a systematic decline in Poles' support for accepting refugees, especially from countries affected by armed conflict (Badora, 2016, p. nr 69).

The progressive processes of privatization and individualization with regard to religion foster a sense of anonymity, especially on social media. This, in turn, leads to the unveiling of attitudes characterized by hate speech against religious leaders or religious minorities (Herz, & Molnár, 2012).

Media researchers reveal the increasing processes of developing a media agenda in which specific manipulative techniques are aimed at attacking religious institutions, discrediting religious leaders, and instrumentalizing religion for other purposes, such as politics (Kraner, 2021, p. 731-766). There is the institutional promotion of the logic of dislike/hatred towards religion, which is most often declarative on the publisher's part.

There are countries where, until recently, the percentage of those who practiced religion was high. Still, due to secularization and the moral and financial scandals associated with religious leaders, it has fallen sharply. The perception and media image of religious authorities is also changing. Jozef Baniak pointed out that the Catholic Church in Poland after 1989 has been systematically losing its high social prestige, as well as its moral authority (Baniak, 2012, p. 46). A similar situation has been observed in Ireland and the United States. The media diligently monitor the dynamically changing position of churches and religious associations. Their functioning is present in the daily media agenda. Sometimes the attitude of criticism turns into an aggressive form of media hatred (Filibeli, & Ertuna, 2021, p. 2236-2259).

Attractive events for the media are those with associated negativism and personalization (Elmelund-Præstekær, and Mølgaard-Svensson, 2014, p. 365-384), so the acts of hate speech are not going to be “faceless” media events. They will refer to specific religious leaders — mentioned by name (Synowiec-Jaje, 2018, p. 49-65). The media are guided by the factors of informational selection in shaping their own agenda.

Given the dynamics of the mediatization processes of religion, Andreas Hepp’s perspective of deep mediatization may be a pertinent and useful one to help understand the contemporary changes in the relationship between the media and religion. This German media scholar has emphasized that our practices and making meaning in various domains of the social world are closely linked to mediated communication practices. The specific feature of deep mediatization is its cross-media, multifaceted and reflexive nature (Hepp, 2017, p. 13). Among the most pronounced trends and possible consequences of the changing media environment in the era of deep mediatization are: media diversification, the culture of connectivity, ubiquity, and the pace of innovation and datafication (Hepp, 2017, p. 13). News about religion are important not only for the confessional media but also for the secular opinion media, as confirmed by media agenda surveys in various countries (Meyer, & Moors, 2005). Religious institutions generally recognize the need for a culture of connectivity and are joining in public relations activities (Wiesenberg, 2020). Crossmediality in the area of informing the media about religion can be seen in the use of different media to pass information. Recognizing the religion-related message in its entirety (in the textual, visual, information and opinion layers) requires reaching into various sources. The media coverage of significant religious events should also be analyzed in this manner, such as Pope Benedict XVI’s lecture delivered in Regensburg on 12.09.2006, which sparked a protest of Muslim political and religious leaders (González Gaitano, 2010, p. 26-40).

#### 4. Discussion

The undertaken analysis proved the existing differences between constructive criticism and hate speech in the media. These differences are caused by the use of a different method of argumentation (substantive vs. non-substantive). In mediatized forms of religion, hate speech is carried out at various levels: at the level of religious doctrine, at the level of religious practices, and at the level of identity and image of religious leaders/members of religious communities. The progressing processes of mediatization contribute to the increase in the presence of content containing hate in the media.

The processes of mediatization affect the spread of hate speech in the media. Through them, hate speech overcomes temporal and spatial boundaries and penetrates the sphere of religious life, causing a change in public opinion about religious associations and leaders. The media impose a view of religion according to the logic of the media institution itself, through the lens of the processes of celebrityization, privatization and individualization. Celebrityization, also present in religion, results in the tabloidization of the media, manifesting itself in the content and form. The presence of sensationalist and controversial topics can promote the inclusion of religion-related hate speech in the media agenda, contributing to commercial success (Całek, 2013, p. 311-312). On the other hand, privatization in the area of religion re-evaluates the individuals’ role at the expense of the religious institution, resulting in the former’s essential, often dominant influence in shaping the media agenda. Finally, individualization, manifested in the pursuit of self-fulfillment and autonomy of some media creators and users without respect for the principles of journalistic deontology, increases the likelihood of implementing hate speech in the mediatized forms of religion (Asad, 2009, p. 21-30).

The influence of the media on the sphere of religion is not incidental. Still, it is a constant practice of media institutions to include issues concerning churches and religious associations in their own agenda. Thus, the processes of the mediatization of religion highlight the fulfillment by the journalistic environments of the informational and opinion-making function.

Religious leaders, often playing the roles of political actors involved in political and social life, become a particular object of media interest, which can provoke hate speech directed at them in the public space (Ozzano, 2014, p. 590-612).

In the context of the risk of media-disseminated hate speech, understanding the theoretical perspective of mediatization by contemporary researchers (W. Schulz, S. Hjarvard, F. Krotz, A. Hepp) is not only helpful in understanding the phenomenon of hate speech based on religious intolerance, but also in finding proper references for journalistic deontology, based on truth and objectivity. Therefore, it is a correct intuition to promote quality journalism and media education among the media audiences particularly interested in religion.

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#### Brief CV of the author

Rafał Leśniczak has a post-doctoral degree (Habilitation degree) in social sciences in the discipline of social communication and media science (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University 2020), associate professor at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University. He is the author of over 80 scientific publications. His research interests focus on political communication, processes of personalization and mediatization, and public relations.

#### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.