

Representation of Religion and Religious Issues in Zimbabwean Mass Media

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Key Terms: ethnocentricism, cultural diversity, media representation, religious issues, religious tolerance, stereotyping, Zimbabwe.

Abstract

The fact that the mass media has power in constructing and shaping reality is hardly disputable. Through its representation of issues and people, the mass media can influence what people think about and how people think about other people and issues. The media is a medium for raising awareness and understanding about various social issues including religion. However, in Zimbabwe, like many other parts of the world, the media's depiction of religion and religious issues has been controversial. While some people believe the media promotes an understanding of diverse religious groups, concerns have been raised that the media subtly promotes certain religious ideologies while shunting others to the sidelines. By doing so, the media has been accused of sowing seeds of suspicion and misunderstanding between different social groups. Employing textual analysis and informed by the framing theory, this paper analyses the representation of religion and religious issues in the Zimbabwean media. There are many key questions addressed in this paper: How does Zimbabwe's media represent the country's various religions and religious groups? What effect does such representation have on public opinions and perceptions? This paper argues that through several commissions and

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omissions, the media in Zimbabwe represents the country's different religions and religious groups in a manner that negates Zimbabwe's religious and cultural diversity.

Introduction

Zimbabwe is a secular nation that has had diverse religious faiths since it attained its independence from Britain in 1980. Section 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of worship when it states that: 'Except with his own consent or by way of parental discipline, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience, that is to say freedom to change his religion or belief through worship, teaching practice and observance' (Government of Zimbabwe, p:14). This freedom has ensured the existence of religious pluralism in the country. The clearest manifestation of this pluralism has been the increasing plethora of diverse religious groups and denominations which coexist alongside one another. However, the fullness and richness of this diversity is not reflected in the country's print or electronic media. Because the media, including the sole broadcaster (the state –owned) Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), lacks a coherent policy on religious matters, Christianity has eclipsed all other religions in the media while a 'token invitation' has been extended to the rest (TP, 2004). This paper discusses the representation of religion and religious issues in Zimbabwe in order to assess the mass media's potential to promote religious harmony and tolerance in the country. This paper also seeks to initiate debate on the mass media's role in representing religion and religious issues in a multicultural context. Reference is also made to both the press and the electronic media.

The Media Situation in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's media essentially consists of the government owned print media, a coterie of privately owned newspapers and one state owned broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC)^j. State owned Zimbabwe newspapers (Zimpapers Pvt Ltd 1980) dominate the press market. They also run the only two daily newspapers in the

country: *The Herald*, published in the capital of Harare, and *The Chronicle*, based in the country's second largest city Bulawayo. ZBC also owns a number of weekly newspapers and magazines including *Kwayedza* and *Umthunywa*, both of which are published in the country's dominant vernacular languages of Shona and Ndebele, respectivelyⁱⁱ. Zimpapers's flagship, *The Herald* is distributed nationally while *The Chronicle* is distributed primarily in the regions of Matabeleland and Midlands (Chari, 2006). The government also runs eleven provincial newspapers which are produced by the Community Newspapers Publishing Company, a company owned by the state of New Zianaⁱⁱⁱ.

On the other hand, the privately owned press has been shrinking since the closure of *The Daily News* and its sister publications: *The Daily News on Sunday* (closed in 2003), *The Tribune* (closed in 2005), *The Weekly Times* (closed in 2005), *The Sunday Mirror* and *The Daily Mirror* (folded in 2007)^{iv}. The only notable privately owned newspapers are weekly publications. These include *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Standard* (both of which were owned by the Zimbabwean media mogul Trevor Ncube, who also owns *The Mail and Guardian* (SA), *The Financial Gazette*) and a few provincial weekly newspapers and magazines.^v After these newspapers ceased publication, Zimbabwe's media space has been shrinking and consequently, an over-reliance on state owned media for news, opinions and information has arose. Over the years, radio and television's geographical coverage has shrunk tremendously, resulting in remote parts of the country, such as Beit-Bridge, Victoria Falls, Plumtree, not receiving signals due to antiquated transmission equipment.

Mass Media and the Public Sphere

The mass media is regarded as a public sphere or a market place of ideas; a platform where different views are freely exchanged. In his book *The Transformation of The Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that the mass media plays an important role in extending the forum for public debate from small circles in coffee houses and salons, to the greater

masses and other interest groups and hence, in broadening public opinion (Herbamas, 1989). In public democratic societies, it used to be assumed that before public action was taken, there would be a rational discussion between citizens. The mass media was viewed as having a facilitative role in this process. It was viewed as the connective tissue that brings together governors and citizens. This conception of the public sphere implies that everyone has access to the media and that no one is left out. As noted by McQuail, "all points of view or sectors are regarded as in principle of the same value...every voice has the same chance of being expressed whatever the size of the group or the number of followers" (McQuail, 1987, p 27). If the media conformed to McQuail's view, it would follow that all religions and cultures in society would have fair and equal access to the radio, television and print media. However, as illustrated in the following accounts, this does not appear to be the case.

Beside its role in the public sphere, the mass media has a role as a mediator. This role implies that "the media lie between us receivers or consumers and that part of potential experience which is outside our direct perception or contact; that they stand between ourselves and other institutions with which we have dealings" (McQuail, 1987; p 52). Therefore, the media plays a crucial role in mediating issues because our perception of people and issues is usually derived from the media. McQuail adds that "our perception of groups to which we do not belong or cannot observe is partly shaped by the mass media" (Ibid; p 52). The mediation of religious affairs is dramatised by Hoover when he notes that:

In the media age, religion can no longer control its own symbols. In times past, clerical authority could more or less dictate where, when, and how religious ideas, symbols, and claims would surface. Today, the pope can't control the way Madonna or Sinead O'Connor use or abuse religious symbols. Muslim clerics can't stop popular culture from portraying Islam in ways they don't approve of. No one can control what the news media will cover and how they will cover it. What once was a bright line drawn around religion, shielding it from

secular scrutiny, has long since been dissolved by universal, instantaneous, and increasingly visual experience (Hoover, 2003, p 1).

Thus, religions can no longer control their stories, their idioms and the way they are viewed as they fall increasingly further under the media's subjective interpretations. The many metaphors the media dramatizes the extent to which mediated reality is dependent on the media's whimsical interpretations. The media is regarded as many things including "a window on experience", "an interpreter", " a platform", "a signpost", "a mirror" and "a filter" (MacQuail, 1994). These images connote that what we call reality is something constructed or manufactured. The media also plays the role of the agenda-setter.

Agenda-Setting and Framing

Agenda setting is a process in which the media carefully selects which issues to focus on to influence public opinion. Cohen demonstrates the centrality of agenda-setting when he states, "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about"(Dearing and Rogers, 1996. Cohen (1963 cited by Dearing and Rogers, *Ibid* p.1). A second level of agenda-setting is framing: it shows that the media can influence the way audiences interpret certain messages. Entman asserts that: "To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993:52).

This paper argues that the media plays a pivotal role in influencing what people think about different religious faiths and those who subscribe to them. This paper also borrows from the social construction theory of the media which argues that reality is a social construct. Thus, the media circulates knowledge and shapes opinions about people and issues. Moreover, this paper concurs with Tuchman's

view that “the mass media necessarily legitimate the status quo” and Enzensberger (1974) who characterizes the media as the “conscious industry” (cited in Tuchman, 1989; 156). Therefore, the mass media plays an important role in shaping people’s opinions about other people’s religious faiths, beliefs and practices. This paper further argues that the mass media limits “frames within which public issues are debated and so narrow the available political alternatives” (Tuchman Ibid: 156). Furthermore, the media influences opinion about other people’s religions by carefully selecting issues and events that fit into their frames and leaving out those that do not.

Media Policy and Religious Issues

Zimbabwean media coverage of religious issues does not fully reflect Zimbabwe’s diverse religious faiths. Christianity is given the most media coverage, while other religious are marginalized. Some neglected religions include the African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, Judaism, Bhudaism, and Bahai. Christian programmes and music dominate national television programming. Seven days a week, national television begins with a Christian sermon. Sunday’s religious programming is also dominated by Christian broadcasts. Additionally, there are numerous advertisements on ZBC-TV, especially during the main news at eight in the evening. The number of Christian broadcasts on Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC-TV) increases daily without a corresponding increase in broadcasts from other faiths. Therefore, the impression produced by this situation is that the country is a Christian nation; however, this is not the case. All of the other faiths appear to have been symbolically annihilated from the media. This annihilation has caused non-Christians to feel like religious orphans. This view is enforced by a letter which appeared in the editorial pages of a 2004 private weekly newspaper which stated:

ZBH has remained pro-Christian to the extent that Christianity has become the official religion of our national broadcaster. Its broadcasting stations have equated religion to Christianity; religious

music has become synonymous with Christian music; talk shows are all Bible based unless a token invitation is extended to other religions: moderators of infotainment programmes, cultural and religious talk are biased towards Christianity, or they are hostile towards, or offensive to other religions, or religious convictions. There is no other religious programme on any of the radio and TV stations that are single-faith based as one would with programmes such as Psalmody, Gospel Hour, Prime Gospel Show and many Talk Shows on all radio stations except Power FM (TP, Financial Gazette ,16.12.04).

The state broadcaster's tendency to be biased towards one faith persists because there are not policies on religious matters. Thus, without religious policies, the state broadcaster, Disc Jockeys (DJs), presenters, producers and other personnel have equated religion with Christianity. A former minister of the Ministry of Information and Publicity (the parent ministry of the state broadcaster) acknowledges this policy vacuum and the need to have a broadcasting policy on religious programming. He states that:

We in the ministry firmly believe that God's house is broad and with many denominations. We believe religion is wider than Christianity. We believe life is nourished by the word but fed by other pursuits and interests, including secular ones. The national screen must reflect this diversity. It creates room for everyone, including yourselves (Mangwana, 2007, p2).

The absence of a guiding framework on religious issues in the media, particularly in broadcasting, means that journalists at the state broadcaster are permitted to make their own decisions on religious programming. Experience has shown that without policy, individual journalists, most of whom are Christians or sympathetic to Christianity, will fill the airwaves with Christian programmes while ignoring other faiths.

A key informant reported that sometimes, in advance, a single Christian organisation or denomination buys a period of broadcasting time for up to a year. Thus, when other religious organisations

approach the state broadcaster to buy airtime for their programmes, they are told that the airtime allocated for religious programmes has been exhausted. The crowding out of other faiths by dominant religions does not augur well for a society that yearns for religious co-existence, tolerance and diversity because those who subscribe to the marginalised religions are left feeling like religious orphans.

A similar observation has been made by Viney (2001). He found that on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Christianity dominated the airwaves at the expense of other religions. Moreover, members of religions other than Christianity “do not feel that they too have a stake in religious broadcasting in the UK” because they are marginalized. Thus, Viney concludes that on the BBC, religious broadcasting is viewed as principally a Christian affair where other “groups are invited as occasional guests”(Viney, 2001, p 55). This scenario not only makes the term religious broadcasting sound like nonsense, but it also turns the notion of public broadcasting and the concept of the public sphere on their head.

Religious Programming on Zimbabwe Television

Here, Table 1 shows the distribution of religious programmes on ZBC-TV^{vi}.

Table 1: Showing Religious Programmes on ZBC TV (First Quarter, 2007)

Day	Programme Name	Time Slot	Duration	Format	Religion
Sunday	Egea Ministries	0630-0700	30 min	sermon	Christianity
	The Bible Speaks	10:00-11:00	1hr	sermon	Christianity
	Celebrate Life	11:30-12:00	30min	sermon	Christianity
	Winning Ways	12:00-12:30	30min	sermon	Christianity
	Prime Gospel Show	21:30-22:30	1hr	musical	Christianity
	Gospel Sermons- BBN Believers	0455-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity

Day	Programme Name	Time Slot	Duration	Format	Religion
Monday	Gospel Sermon	0455-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity
Tuesday	Gospel Sermon	0455-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity
Wednesday	Gospel sermon	04555-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity
Thursday	Gospel sermon	0455-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity
Friday	Ithambo	22:30-23.00	30min	magazine	African Traditional Religion,
	Gospel Sermon	0455-0555	1hr	sermon	Christianity
Saturday	Christianity and Tradition	06:30-07:00	30min	Discussion	African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, Judaism

Source:[]

Representation of Religious Issues

In the Zimbabwean press and electronic media, religious issues are often regarded as soft news. Consequently, they are often lumped together with subjects that lack immediacy such as sports, entertainment, misadventures, movie releases, music reviews and other human interest stories. The defining feature of soft news is that other than a reporter's curiosity, there is no precipitating event that triggers the story. Religious stories rarely make it to the front pages of Zimbabwean newspapers. Generally, religious news can only become a cover story if there is a bizarre element to it as was the case with stories that have bedeviled the local Anglican Church since 2004 including those that tell of a pastor being accused of rape, church funds being embezzled or squabbles occurring over church leadership. The focus of religious issues is extremely important for it determines whether a story

will make be printed or aired. Thus, one finds that religious issues are usually pushed to the backburner unless they involve controversy or a big name.

Sensationalism and Religious Issues

A key element to religious reports in the Zimbabwean press and electronic media is sensationalism. Millband notes that the mass media contributes to the “fostering of a climate of conformity by containing dissent...[and by accentuating]...news, which falls outside the consensus or...by treating dissenting views as irrelevant eccentricities which serious people, may discuss as a consequence”(1969 cited by Tuchman, 1989:156). Whenever religious issues or personalities appear in the media, they are highly sensationalised. Sensationalism, also known as sunshine journalism or yellow journalism, is media coverage that seeks to excite the audience’s vulgar tastes by preying upon their curiosity. It thrives on gossip, rumours, hearsay, hype and misleading information. Reporting that uses sensationalism is extremely controversial and loud. Moreover, the purpose of it is to grab the attention of the audience. In extreme cases, the media completely disregards facts when utilizes sensationalism. Major concerns about the use of sensationalism include that it:

- removes focus from more important issues;
- may promote misperceptions for the audience or the involved parties; or
- may exacerbate existing problems by making them appear as if they are out of control, as one was to say, “the world is on fire”

In some situations, sensationalism encourages certain social behaviors. In the Zimbabwean media, religious issues and undesirable personalities are preyed upon to boost copy sales, television ratings and advertising revenue. Newspapers and magazines use religious personalities as bait to grab a readers’ attention in a manner that obfuscates issues. Examples of this can be found in the following news headlines from the Zimbabwean press:

- Clergyman accused of sexual abuse (*The Sunday Mail*, 10.12.06)
- The tale of a woman who rose from the dead (*Parade Magazine* 2000,)
- Guruve-home of the bizarre....Now woman 'turns' into man (*The Sunday Mail*, 04.06.06)
- Church members clash over grave shrine (*The Herald*, 01.07.06)
- Defrocked pastor loses alimony (*The Sunday Mail*, 23.07.01)
- Self-styled prophet jailed (*The Sunday Mail*, 02.07.06)

A common denominator in the above headlines is that they all have the potential to grab one's attention because they revolve around a particular personality and they all contain a bizarre element. Selection subjects and headlines for stories are motivated by the media's desire to tickle the audience, rather than a desire to inform them.

In the news, business names make news and as Brooks et al (1988; 5) observe, "the bizarre makes news, too". While focusing on news stories that tickle the audience appears perfectly acceptable, doing so may befuddle important issues especially if doing so becomes an obsession. Important issues may elude the audience because preoccupied by mundane and trivial news. When too much attention is given to personalities and events, important tenets of a person's religion may be glossed over or belittled. This is especially true when the negative deeds of the personality in question are considered to be representative of an entire group. Obsession with the negative aspects of a religious faith instills cognitive dissonance among followers and potential followers of the religion.

Societal harmony can be jeopardized because of the way the media handles conflicts within religious denominations and between different religious faiths. There are many cases in which religious issues have been blown out of proportion. For example, the arrest and trial of religious personalities, including the former president, Reverend Canaan Banana, Prophet Boniface Muponda, Prophet Lawrence Katsiru, Pastor Lawrence Haisa and others ,have attracted phenomenal

media attention. Moreover, news reports on religious personalities have sometimes bordered on entertainment rather than informational. An example of this was the coverage of the trial of Godfrey Nzira, a leader of the Johane Masowe Apostolic Faith group who had been convicted of nine counts of rape.^{vii}

On 18 March 2003, *The Daily News* published a story whose headline read “Nzira supporters run amok”. The paper reported that about 2000 female “supporters of the Nzira went haywire” beating up court officials, policemen on duty and smashed doors “after their leader had been convicted”. The magistrate who presided over the rape case was reported to have “escaped death by a whisker”. One magistrate was reported to have lost her shoe in the melee. Sanity was only restored after officers in the Zimbabwe Prison Service (ZPS) fired warning shots into the air. This story had all the ingredients of a short drama. It created the impression that members of this particular religious group are inherently violent, fanatical, and irrational. However, it should be noted that the story itself does not say much about the rape case or Katsiru. Consequently, readers were forced to view him through descriptions of his supporters.

This biased representation is similar to what another religious group called the *Mukaera or Mudzimu Unoera*, a sect based in Guruve, Mashonaland West province, was subjected to when most of the media portrayed it as a mythical sect^{viii}. In *The Herald Online* (Port Elizabeth), Micheal Hartnack refers to the Mudzimu Unoera (Mukakera) religious group as “a classic example of how dangerous cults emerge in communities under cataclysmic stress” (*The Herald Online* 06.02.06).

Parade magazine, a popular monthly and privately owned magazine which specializes on human interest stories, reported that the Mukaera village where the religious group is based “is not just a village for anyone”. The magazine reported that “Devout followers of the Mukaera have vowed to follow the church’s teachings to the letter” to suggest that there are religious groups whose members do not intend to

follow teachings of their faith to the letter (*Parade*, April 1999, p 51). The Mudzimu Unoera church members are described by the magazine as living a life stranger than fiction. The magazine dwells more on what the group does not do rather than what it does do. For instance it states:

They don't keep any domestic animals. They do not grow crops ('not even one bed of tomatoes'). Their children do not go to school. They do not go to clinics. They do not eat pork, mice, nor do they smoke or drink (*Parade* *ibid*, p51).

The fact that this group's members are described more in terms of what they do not do rather than what they do is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, designed to undermine their faith and religious practices. They are depicted as behaving in a way that is out of the ordinary or stranger than fiction. Thus, readers are unable to understand this religion better because the press tends to mystify, rather than furnish, information about the religion. Therefore, readers are unlikely to be educated about this religious faith. If anything, they are likely to be left wondering about and even becoming suspicious of the people who follow the religion.

Television's coverage of religious groups is equally controversial. For instance, a broadcast made on 7 February 2007 of the ZTV current affairs programme, *Behind the Camera*, portrayed the Mudzimu Unoera religious group in a prejudicial manner. Throughout the programme, the religious group and its "Tritnoy" language were repeatedly referred to as very strange.^{ix} Part of the programme's script read:

This week we speak a different and strange language known as Tritnoy. We urge you to exercise religious tolerance for the next 20 or so minutes...Mashonaland Central is a province is well known for its good soils, rains and agricultural produce. People say if you get a farm in that province you are likely to become a successful farmer as long as you work very hard of course. Of late the province has been in the news for reasons which have nothing to with its good soils. Tucked

away in Guruve is a village called Chatiza. In this village is a church (denomination) or rather cult known as Mudzimu Unoera. The cult claims the Lord Jesus Christ kept his promise and came back in the form of a girl they call Baby Jesus who speaks a strange language called Tritnoy. She sang the national anthem for the Behind the camera team in the language...Strange isn't it. Well not everyone thinks it is a strange language. There are people who speak that language in Guruve who are convinced it is what the mighty Lord gave them. Formed in 1932 under the leadership of Emmanuel Mudyiwa the cult initially used a different and equally strange language. Father to Baby Jesus, Mr Eniwas Nyanhete whose religious or is it cult name is Father or Baba Josefa from the Biblical Joseph whose wife gave birth to Jesus Christ, says the founder of his church was his father.

Although the presenter advised the audience to "exercise religious tolerance for the next 20 minutes or so," his statements were ironic for he displayed a gross intolerance for the religious group in question. Whether this was deliberate is another matter. When confronted with presentations and portrayals such as the one mentioned above, audiences are less likely to be curious about the religious group in question and to want to learn about said group. Moreover, audiences are even less likely to sympathise or seek affiliation with a group when it is framed in a negative manner.

Makamure notes that "papers have to be forgiven because they have to make their news titillating and marketable" (1999;17). This comment suggests that the media's desire to make a profit is another driving force behind sensationalism because it forces important details about other people's religious beliefs to be lost.

The Apostolic church (*Vapostori*), which is one of the country's several Independent African churches, has also been the focus of popular jokes, sarcasm and a soft target of negative representation. For instance, a Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio programme once reported that a member of the apostolic group, Majero, and his entire family fled their homestead and went into hiding

during a countrywide immunisation programme. This incident was reported to have occurred when Ministry of Health and Child Welfare officials visited Karoi, in Mashonaland West province in 1999 (Cited in *Parade Magazine*, January 1999).

However, the media also quoted him refuting the report and dismissing it as a fabrication that was created by the media (*Parade*, January 1999, and p 10). When *Parade Magazine* later sought an interview with him, he agreed on the condition that his name not be mentioned “because reporters misinform” (Ibid. p.11). Although the magazine assured him that his name would not be revealed, they placed his name in an article that appeared the magazine’s January 1999 edition. In the article, Majero is described as “a Karoi enterprising farmer with a heavy load on his shoulders”, a “super daddy” enjoying “his macho status”. The use of sarcasm to belittle religious personalities not only creates contemptuous feelings towards those personalities, but it also creates the same negative feelings about the beliefs of the person in question. Such media representations do not bode well for religious tolerance in a country where the Constitution guarantees citizens the right to worship freely.

Religious Ethnocentrism and the Media

In addition to the general defacement of certain religions and religious groups, the Zimbabwean media is responsible for cultivating implicit and explicit religious ethnocentrism. Milligan (undated, p4) defines ethnocentrism as the tendency of people to “view their particular culture as being better, or even the only truly worthy of existence”. Gil-White (undated, p2) concurs with Milligan and describes ethnocentrism as the act of “passing negative moral judgment on how ethnic others organize their lives”. Moreover, Cunningham et al (2004 p1333) describe ethnocentrism as the tendency “to form and maintain negative evaluations and hostility toward multiple groups that are not one’s own”. Ethnocentrism is undesirable in society because it encourages people to be intolerant is a hindrance to cultural diversity

and multiculturalism. Hence, individuals will judge other groups in relation to their particular ethnic group or culture, especially in relation to language, behaviour, customs and religion.

In Zimbabwe, the media indulges in various levels of implicit and explicit religious ethnocentricity. It has a tendency to portray some religious faiths and groups as mysterious, inferior to Christianity or simply evil. For example, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is often equated with witchcraft. An example of this comparison is found in a story published in *Parade Magazine* in December 2000. In the story, traditional healers who gathered in Harare in 2000 to exhibit their wares were described by the magazine as witches and wizards. The headline for the story was “Big Indaba for witches” (*Parade*, December 2000, p 3). This article is in stark contrast with the article the same edition of the magazine published on the Christian pastor, Larry Ekanem. The magazine describes Ekanem as “The Anointed Man of God” who performs miracles (*Parade*, December 200, p 7). In addition to describing the Christian pastor in a glorious manner, the magazine denigrates African Traditional Religion by insinuating that Zimbabwe faces daunting economic and political challenges because its people have embraced practices like totems and thus, have alienated themselves from God. The pastor is quoted as having said:

Zimbabwe is a blessed nation in Africa, look at the weather, its strategic position on the continent, its wealth and peace. You see, when tradition contradicts the divine plan of God people suffer, the totem system here in Zimbabwe for example, some people take certain animals as their totems and end up bowing to their symbols in praise to the extent of subjugating themselves to the totems. Some even go to the extent of adopting the characteristics of these animals; in short, they end up worshipping them, now where does that leave God? (*Parade*, *Ibid*; p7-11).

The fact that the reporter of the article gives his interviewee a long leash to disparage other people’s religion displays that the media is insensitive and intolerant of cultural differences. Moreover, it does

not bode well for religious co-existence and cultural diversity. This paper argues that religious ethnocentricity, or the tendency of some people to view their religion as the only legitimate religion, does not only apply to different faiths, but it is even found within specific religions. One such religion is Christianity where some denominations are regarded as more legitimate than others.

This attitude manifests itself in situations where the media subtly or blatantly treats certain religious groups within the Christian faith as inferior to others or as spiritually questionable. For instance, the media tends to depict African Independent Churches as suspicious and their spiritual leaders are often described as self-styled prophets or bogus prophets. On the other hand, spiritual leaders of other Christian denominations are described as acclaimed or renowned prophets. These labels are given without justification. Moreover, the labels are assigned with the intention of legitimizing some Christian denominations, while de-legitimizing others and thereby creating negative perceptions about those who are portrayed poorly.

A poignant case of religious chauvinism was demonstrated in the July/August 1997 (Number 33) issue of the Catholic News Magazine which disparaged the Universal Church of the Kingdom God (UCKG), a Brazilian Pentecostal church with branches in 90 countries including the United States of America, Europe and Asia, whose operations have surrounded with controversy in some African countries (BBC, 2005, Reuters, 2005).^x The Catholic magazine published a satirical piece, a cartoon and a commentary insinuating that members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God were money mongers, bent on ripping off unsuspecting members of the public (Catholic News Magazine, 1997).

The Catholic news magazine described the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God as a “money club” or a “business” driven by the desire to make money, rather than spiritual salvation. This commentary chastises those who patronise the church for behaving like “cry babies” and lacking foresight. The Magazine reported:

God has given us brains to think and hands to work with. If we don't use them don't come crying. Rather learn your lesson.

The cartoon is even more telling for it depicts an immaculately dressed pastor laying his hand on a female member of the church saying, "Give me a tenth of your money in your pockets and God will stop all your suffering". Beside the pastor is a basket full of people's sorrows including unemployment, stress, demons, epilepsy, and impotence. In the second picture the pastor is at home praying with his wife, with his Bible in hand, and there is a brand new car parked at the house. The pastor tells his wife "They are still gullible. I bought another car" and his wife says, "I am proud of you, my husband. Let's read the Bible and praise the Lord" (Catholic Magazine, 1997).

The Catholic magazine makes unjustified judgments about another Christian church organization with a tone that borders on defamation. Moreover, the article raises serious ethical questions. What exacerbates the ethical culpability of the Catholic magazine is that there is a Christian Church casting aspersions on another Christian denomination by passing moral judgments on it. Additionally, it is a publication of another Christian organisation. It could be argued that such writings hardly promote tolerance among different religious groups and are bound to provoke religious conflicts.

Stereotypical Representation of Religious Groups

A stereotype is an exaggerated belief, image or distorted truth about a person or group; a generalization that allows groups little to no differences or social variations (Greater Rochester Diversity Council, 2005). Stereotypes are often used in a negative and prejudicial sense to justify certain discriminatory behaviours. The production of stereotypes is usually based on simplifications, exaggerations, distortions, generalizations, and the presentation of cultural attributes as "natural". Lester notes that "a stereotype imposes a grid mold on the

subject and encourages respected mechanical usage” (1996; p9). Prejudices differ from stereotypes in the sense that they are abstracts or general misconception or attitudes towards individuals or groups of people or culture. Lester notes that “prejudice, discrimination and stereotype make a lethal combination” (Lester, *Ibid* p10).

Stereotypes make people see things through a narrow, self-serving prism rather than liberating them from their prejudices. In the Zimbabwean media and popular culture, religious stereotypes operate at both the inter-faith and intra-faith level. Although inter-faith sentiments are not overtly expressed, the media sometimes exhibits subtle religious prejudices. The pervasive ignorance of religious traditions such as the African tradition, Islam, Judaism, Islam, Baha’i faith causes them to be stereotypically represented in the media. For example, African Traditional Religion is usually portrayed as shrouded in mystery, backward, barbaric, satanic and belonging to the backwaters of history. Such characterizations mystify religions and may discourage people from openly associating with members of such religious groups.

The African traditional healer, also known as the *N’anga* (African Doctor), is a major object of parody and a prime source of humour in radio and television dramas. Usually male, he is portrayed as a pathological liar and a cheat who is determined to manipulate unsuspecting clients into giving him their hard-earned money. Thus, he is portrayed as dirty, a conman, and a trickster. The African doctor is usually represented as a poor person who speaks half-truths and who does not properly measure his prescriptions. In the media and in dramas, the African doctor is placed in the same category as the false prophet who speaks in tongues but hardly communicates anything to his subjects because his language is from the underworld. When the prophet speaks, he does so to confuse rather than to help. Thus, the apostolic prophets of the Johanne Masowe or Johanne Marange groups are lumped into the same category as African doctor.

Moreover, the media tends to represent African Independent Churches and the African Traditional Religion as backwards and anti-modern. An example of such representations can be found in *The Standard*, a privately owned weekly, in its story headlined, “*Vapositioni* in Climb Down Over Immunisation’” (22.05.10). The story reported that the country’s various *Vapositioni* sects agreed to take part in the ongoing government led child immunisation against measles programme after mounting stiff resistance.^{xi} The religious groups were represented as rigid, uncooperative and as derailing progress. The newspaper reported that “resistance had become deep rooted among members of the Johanne Marange sect in particular”. Even though such stereotyping may be unconscious, it could be argued that it promotes negative perceptions about these religious groups. In order to promote tolerance and harmony, the media should avoid dismissing other religious perspectives.

African Independent Churches, especially the apostolic sects, are often grouped together in the media. Although there are differences between the churches, the media implies that that they are all polygamists, adverse to western medicine, have shaved heads, wear white robes and do not send their children to school. Truthfully, the media has not bothered to conduct deeper research to try to understand the religious practices and differences of the groups. Instead, they have preferred to find solace in sweeping generalizations and hyperbole. An example of such a generalization is found in a story published by Parade Magazine (October 2001 edition) where led by E.P. Mwazha, an inaccurate photograph of the African Apostolic Church was used in a news article to wrongly attribute certain practices of the Jonanne Marange to the African Apostolic Church. This error prompted the leaders of the African Apostolic Church to write to the magazine a complaint stating that:

It appears the writer did not do enough research concerning the article. Johane Marange sect is different from that of Johane Masowe. What the article portrays about African independent churches is a blanket cover

which is unfortunate and unfair...Giving a blanket cover to all African Independent churches creates problems as some who do not practice why you portrayed get tarnished. The African Apostolic Church of Zimbabwe does not practice polygamy. Its members practise monogamous marriages. On the question of education the African Apostolic Church of Zimbabwe encourages its members to be highly educated (Parade, December 2001, p4).

The magazine went on to acknowledge its error and apologised for using the photo in its issue but, the damage had already been done and the stereotype were formed. Whatever the reason for the distortion was, the point remains that the media in Zimbabwe habitually indulges in contemptuous and gross generalizations of Independent African Churches. These generalizations do not bode well for religious tolerance and diversity. In spite of the fact that stereotypes are based on incorrect judgments, they play a crucial role in molding public opinion and make most people less inclined to reconsider their attitudes towards other religious faiths. It is possible that religious faiths ostracized by the media may find it difficult to attract new members or sympathizers for few people would have the courage to stand up and defend their positions. Chitando (2002:76) notes about how Independent African Churches and their members are subjected to negative reports in Zimbabwe's mainstream media. He notes that:

Within the mainstream media, members of these churches have generally been the subject of scorn and derision. Due to the dominance of mainline churches and the aggressive nature of evangelical/pentecostal churches when it comes to media technologies, independent churches have not had equal access to the media in the country. On the whole, their followers are portrayed as uneducated, and their religious beliefs as an uncritical mixture of traditional spirituality and Christianity. In the early eighties the popular musician (who turned to gospel music in the late 1990s) Zacks Manatsa portrayed the Apostles as bearded, tea-loving, patriarchal figures in his song 'Tea Hobvu' (*Strong Tea*).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the representation of religious issues in Zimbabwe's mass media. Moreover, it has shown that the representation of religious issues in the Zimbabwean mass media is far from satisfactory. Both electronic and print media are culpable for this situation for they both have failed to provide equal and fair access to all the religious faiths of the country. This paper has also argued that the mass media promotes religious intolerance within and between the country's different religious faiths practiced. Through outright or subtle biases, negative reporting, sensationalism, stereotyping, ethnocentricity and various acts of omission and commission, the media in Zimbabwe has the potential to promote intolerance and misunderstandings within and between religious faiths. This paper has also considered that even within the same religious faith, the media can legitimize some church denominations while de-legitimizing others. At an inter-faith level, it has also been argued that because of the religious backgrounds of media owners, journalists tend to represent other religious beliefs and faiths, such as African Traditional Religion, in a condescending manner. The observations made in this paper may suggest that the whole notion of media independence and objectivity is a myth and needs to be rethought. Moreover, this paper confirms observations made by earlier scholars, such as Gaye Tuchman (1978), who note that media reality is a social construct and that news is always someone's view of reality. This study does not wish to throw away the baby with the bath water, and sees opportunities for the media to improve societal differences in an increasingly multicultural and fast globalizing world.

The paper therefore canvases for appropriate training and education for media personnel so that they can better appreciate the essence of cultural diversity. As noted by the Commission on Human Rights (1991), most of the problems associated with ethnocentrism lie in education and training. It would be helpful for journalists to be taught about the cultures of other people from a very early stage in their schooling. Journalism education should go beyond teaching prospective

journalists how to craft good introductions or how to meticulously handle a microphone. Trainees should be exposed to the diverse histories, cultures and religions of the world to break down cultural and religious walls that are often created by their own cultures. Adopting responsible and ethical reporting may also help people avoid the kind of reporting that has the potential to sow the seeds of suspicion about different religious faiths. Media houses should insist that there not only be sound ethical codes of conduct, but that there also be in-depth research conducted on how to keep the news fair and balanced. We are living at a period of history in which the Earth is a common homeland for a rapidly increasing, integrated human race. Thus, the media must acknowledge and accept cultural differences. Because acceptance of others must be promoted, media practitioners should be more sensitive to and accord time to all religious faiths and denominations. Behaving accordingly will allow people to recognize that diversity does not undermine democracy but rather, it deepens it.

End Notes

ⁱ ZBC has five radio channels and two television channels.

ⁱⁱ Kwayedza (Shona) and Umthunywa (Ndebele) are vernacular terms which mean dawn.

ⁱⁱⁱ Formerly ZIANA, the company was restructured following the appointment of Jonathan Moyo as Minister of Information and Publicity.

^{iv} The Daily News and its sister paper The Daily News on Sunday were closed after failing to comply with the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in September 2003.

^v There are also a number of publications which are published outside the country and are circulated in major towns and cities in and around the country. These include The Zimbabwean (UK) The Sunday Times, The Mail and Guardian, The Star (SA) and a host of other publications.

^{vi} It is worth noting that television programmes particularly news and current affairs do not appear on the programme schedule and as a result cannot be captured since they are impromptu or transient. Be that as it may we feel that the table should give a general idea on the skewed nature of religious programming on ZBC. There is therefore scope for a more systematic and comprehensive longitudinal studies on religious on the state broadcaster.

^{vii} Johane Masowe is an African Independent Church that has been subject to negative musical and press reportage. In the 1980s Zex a prominent popular musician caused uproar in the country after lampooning the religious group through his song 'Tea Hobvu' (White Tea). The song was interpreted as portraying male members of the religious group as gluttonous and self-fish patriarchies who do not care much about their families.

^{viii} The group has received widespread and negative publicity in newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Also, see below.

^{ix} Tritony is the language spoken by members of the Mudzimu.Unoera group and was portrayed as funny on the ZTV programme.

^x For example, in 2005 the church was banned by the Zambian government for allegedly engaging in 'satanic activities. For more details see, BBC and Reuters stories on <http://wwwn.org/articles/19707?&place=southern-african§ion=other-groups> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4485222.stm>

^{xi} Some Vaposition groups do not believe in western medicine as a result they refuse to send their children to hospital or participate in government immunization programmes.

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