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Aid Workers or Evangelists, Charity or Conspiracy: Framing of Missionary Activity as a Function of International Political Alliances

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In 2001, Christian aid workers were arrested by the Taliban in Afghanistan on charges of proselytizing. A year later, Baptist hospital workers were gunned down in Yemen. In one case, the country was an enemy of the United States; in the other, the country was an ally. The way in which the proselytizing and the national government was portrayed changed from one set of news coverage to the other, suggesting that political interests, not religious ones, drive this coverage.

The 21st century began by confronting humanity in a horrific way with religion’s power to shape and control societies and their interactions. No history of the early 21st century will be able to start anywhere but New York City on September 11, 2001. The largest terrorist attack in history had religious values at its core—values both inciting the clash and being co-opted for other, nonreligious political purposes.

Much has already been written about the role and abuse of Islam in the September 11th attacks and other terrorist activity in recent years. But such analysis often overlooks the ways in which religion is invoked in American society as an antidote to perceived Islamic aggression. In this article I seek to examine one small part of that phenomenon. I examine how both Christian and Islamic religious activity are cast in the press in light of changing political contexts. In other words, the same religious activity may be cast as positive or negative depending on the political expedience of the moment; I look at how political alliances shade the coverage of events in which religion plays a central role.

Specifically I look at coverage of two events involving Christian proselytizing in fundamentalist Islamic countries, first in Afghanistan and then in Yemen. In one case, the country was a political enemy of the United States; in the other, the country was a political ally. The way in which the proselytizing and the Islamic reaction was portrayed changed from one set of news coverage to the other, suggesting that political interests, not religious ones, drive the values of the dominant hegemony, at least in the United States, and that religion is legitimized or delegitimized relative to the dominant political interests.

**GRAMSCI’S HEGEMONY AND RELIGION**

One important model for understanding the interaction of religion and power in society comes from a logical extension of neo-Marxist critical theory. As the 20th century progressed, Marx’s prescription for the collapse of capitalism clearly had not occurred as he had predicted. Communist intellectuals then had to explain how the masses could be
kept in check in a system that did not function in their own best interest. One of the most influential models in this vein came from Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist official eventually jailed by Mussolini’s Fascists. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony provided a useful analytical tool for understanding the production of power in society.

Gramsci was particularly interested in political power, and he looked at how various institutions in society allied themselves with the centers of power. Religion is clearly an important source of power, and Gramsci dealt with it to some extent. But his atheistic presuppositions may have gotten the better of him. Like Marx, he generally assumed that religion was an opiate of the masses that would eventually fall away as society was “rationalized.”

The current rise of fundamentalism as a religious and political force worldwide—in all religions, not just Islam—raises interesting problems for Gramsci’s model. How can religion be a pacifying force, as in Durkheim’s civil religion, while also providing a mode of protest against the institutions of state? Is religion to be identified with the dominant hegemony? Or does it provide the means for an effective counterhegemony? Gramsci briefly suggested that it functioned both ways, sometimes in collusion with the government, sometimes in protest.

Gramsci’s classic historical example was the Reformation. The Catholic Church was closely allied with the dominant political power—functionally it was the political power of the Holy Roman Empire. The Reformation, then, was a counterhegemonic movement, and the term Protestant was aptly chosen. Catholic personalities such as Pope Leo X were the traditional intellectuals; Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were the progressive organic intellectuals of their time (Gramsci, 1985, p. 223).

This more complex view of religion is outside classic Marxism, although it finds some support in the writings of Engels. Otto Maduro (1977) suggested that Gramsci and his commentators thus created a new Marxist perspective with four key elements:

1. Religion is not a mere passive effect of the social relations of production; it is an active element of social dynamics, both conditioning and conditioned by social processes.
2. Religion is not always a subordinate element within social processes; it may often play an important role in the birth and consolidation of a particular social structure.
3. Religion is not necessarily a functional, reproductive or conservative factor in society; it is often one of the main (and sometimes the only) available channel to bring about a social revolution.
4. The scientific study of religion is not an easy task; it requires a many-sided empirical approach whose results cannot be either substituted or anticipated by theoretical constructs. (p. 366)

This framework has been used to explain the revolutionary character of some forms of religion, such as liberation theology within the South American Catholic Church. This article, on the other hand, uses this model to explore the functioning of the dominant hegemonic powers when confronted with a religious activity that challenges the dominant state ideology. It examines how the view of religion varies in the press as the needs of the state change. In other words, religion appears on both sides of the struggle for legitimacy, but the media tend to give legitimacy to those forms of religion that are conservative rather than radical in nature.
THE PRESS AND HEGEMONY

Most analyses of the press in a hegemonic framework closely identify the press with the state and as a major manufacturer of hegemonic consensus. Stuart Hall (1982), for instance, wrote that “the media become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the ‘production of consent’—shaping the consensus while reflecting it—which orients them within the field of force of the dominant social interests represented within the state” (p. 82). The press, like religion, finds itself on both sides of the hegemonic fence, as Daniel Hallin (1994) pointed out clearly:

The media … play the role of maintaining the dominant political ideology: they propagate it, celebrate it, interpret the world in its terms, and, at times, alter it to adapt to the demands of legitimation in a changing world. At the same time, the concept of hegemony is employed to explain the “behavior” of the media, the process of cultural production itself. The media are themselves subject to the hegemonic process. (p.59)

If the press is most closely associated with the state, then it would be expected to be supportive of traditional religious movements and critical of religious movements that are counterhegemonic in nature. This theory explains how the press (as well as state and culture) can accept freedom of religion as a general principle while being antagonistic to particular forms of religion, such as fundamentalism or cultism.

In the cases under consideration, religion is a central factor on both sides of the conflict. But the press legitimizes—at least implicitly—some forms of religion while delegitimizing others. A key determining factor seems to be the stance of the state toward the religious elements in question. By implication, the depiction of religion in the news reflects the orientation of political elites in relation to the religious group involved; by contrast, political orientation is not determined by religious or theological orientation. As George Marsden pointed out, oppositional forms of religion such as fundamentalism are not primarily distinguished by theological dogma, which they may share with more moderate religious groups, but by their political stance (see Cohen, 1990, pp. 22–23). In other words, politics is the driving force in American news, not religion.

METHODOLOGY: FRAMING ANALYSIS

To explore how the coverage of religion changes as the political stance of the state changes, this article compares and contrasts newspaper coverage of the 2001 incident involving foreign aid workers in Afghanistan and the 2002 killing of three Baptist hospital workers in Yemen. The cases are suitable for comparison because in each one Christians were accused of proselytizing in fundamentalist Islamic countries. Missionaries have been attacked in other countries in recent years as well, but these two particular cases are especially comparable because of the predominance of conservative, fundamentalist Islam in the countries. They also differ on a key variable: In the Afghan case, the government was an enemy of U.S. government; in the Yemeni case, the government was an ally of the U.S. government. This difference provides an opportunity to test the hypothesis that the framing of similar events will vary depending on the political environment.
This analysis uses articles from the *New York Times* as its basis. The *Times* was chosen because it tends to provide more extensive international coverage than most American newspapers and because it remains an influential opinion leader among the national media. Although the *Times* alone is not necessarily representative of all American newspapers or media, it does provide a particularly important case study for examination. During the period from August 7 to November 17, 2001, 33 articles appeared on the workers in Afghanistan, although 10 of these were just brief updates. The case in Yemen concluded much more quickly. In the period from December 31, 2002, to January 9, 2003, 8 articles appeared in the *Times*.

Framing analysis provides the interpretive technique to evaluate the presentation of the cases. According to this approach, ideology is communicated not only in the choice of subjects (agenda setting) but in how those subjects are presented. Particular perspectives on stories achieve persuasive power with the audience to the extent that they resonate with other factors in the readers’ environment—direct experience of the subject, other media coverage, the views of opinion leaders (Snow & Benford, 1988). This qualitative method, a form of rhetorical analysis, attempts to expose the bias in how stories are told by evaluating the themes and language used to present them.

Two key sets of frames emerge from the stories, and I address each in turn. First, frames define the activity of the Christian workers themselves. Second, frames define the character of the national governments involved. Comparing and contrasting the ways in which these frames relate to each other exposes the flow of power and its influence on the frames being used.

**CASE OVERVIEW**

**Afghanistan**

The first case erupted August 7, 2001, when Taliban officials in Afghanistan announced that 24 aid workers associated with Shelter Now International, a relief agency run by a German Christian aid agency called Vision for Asia, had been arrested on charges of spreading Christianity. Another 64 Afghan men were also arrested for having received religious instruction from the aid workers. Eight of the workers were foreigners, including two Americans, two Australians, and four Germans. Over the next month, their plight became an international political incident as the Taliban insisted on trying the workers, not merely expelling them. Under the Taliban’s Sharia Islamic law, the eight could have been sentenced to death.

The workers’ plight became even more uncertain when the events of September 11th unfolded. It was immediately evident that the United States would almost certainly attack the Taliban. The Taliban specifically linked the treatment of the prisoners to any military action that might be taken by the United States. Shortly after hostilities with Afghanistan began, however, anti-Taliban forces successfully overran the location where the prisoners were being kept, and American military helicopters whisked the eight to safety in Pakistan.

The fate of the 16 Afghan workers who were arrested at the same time was not reported. The 64 men arrested for having received instruction were sent to Islamic religious schools.

**Yemen**

The second case unfolded much more quickly. On December 30, 2002, a lone gunman smuggled a semiautomatic rifle into a Baptist hospital in the remote town of Jibla, Yemen.
He killed three American hospital workers and seriously injured a fourth before surrendering to Yemeni officials. The *New York Times* immediately linked the case to several other attacks on Christian missionaries in Muslim countries, including the arrest of the aid workers in Afghanistan (Sachs, 2002). In the next few days, Yemeni officials arrested as many as 30 suspected Islamic militants, linking the hospital killings to the assassination of a prominent local politician a few days earlier. The motive for the hospital attack was reportedly resentment of the fact that the hospital workers were preaching Christianity (MacFarquhar, 2002).

Ironically, the Southern Baptist hospital was about to be turned over to Yemeni operation. The day after the shootings was to be the last day when the Baptists would see patients until new local administrators would take over.

**CONTRASTING FRAMES**

**The Missionaries**

Perhaps the most striking difference in the framing of these two cases is in the language used to refer to the Christian workers. From the very first story, personnel of Shelter Now International were identified as “aid workers” (“Afghans to Keep,” 2001). Occasionally, usually in headlines, they were identified as “Christian aid workers.” By contrast, the hospital workers in Yemen were referred to as “missionaries” throughout the coverage.

The choice of language reflected different frames being employed. The first frame dissociated the workers from religious involvement, thereby implying their innocence in the face of Taliban claims. The second frame perhaps more accurately depicted the activity of the workers in Yemen.

The “aid workers” frame was not merely a media fiction. After the arrests, a Vision for Asia spokesperson immediately denied that the workers had engaged in proselytizing, perhaps with good reason given the potential penalties for evangelism. But *New York Times* coverage seemed to support this view long into the coverage, even after evidence appeared suggesting that the workers had indeed engaged in evangelism. The coverage pursued the frame of “aid workers, not proselytizers” by denigrating the evidence against them and minimizing the importance of the charges.

Taliban evidence of proselytizing took two forms: materials gathered from the Shelter Now compounds and confessions from the workers themselves. *Times* coverage tended to discount both. First, the Taliban presented a variety of books, videos, audiocassettes, and computer software about the life of Jesus. The books included Bibles in Farsi and Pashto (the local languages) and a book titled *Sharing Your Faith With a Muslim* (Bearak, 2001c). The existence of these items was initially reported in a single sentence in a 1,704-word article that focused much more attention on strictness of Islamic law under the Taliban.

Second, confessions were taken from some of the workers, admitting to at least some of the charges against them, reported in the *Times* in a way that clearly minimized the significance of the confessions:

“We gave two copies of one book about Jesus to one family. We have not given anything else, no other books or material to anyone else. We sang alone one song about God, not about Jesus. They did not sing with us. We drank green tea.”
The women did show the family a CD-ROM about the life of Jesus. It went on for about an hour, then suddenly stopped. “We had a problem with the computer,” the women explained. (Bearak, 2001d, p. 12)

Eventually it became clear that although the workers may not have initiated evangelistic conversations, they were quick to speak with Afghans who expressed interest in their faith (Bearak, 2001c).

The aid workers frame, however distorted, gained resonance because it contrasted the “innocent” aid workers with “evil” Taliban. I consider the frame used to depict the Taliban in more detail later in this article.

In contrast to the “aid workers” in Afghanistan, in the Yemen case the hospital workers were consistently identified as “missionaries” and their work as “charity.” Of interest, the workers’ approach to evangelism was essentially the same as that of the Afghan aid workers. The president of the International Mission Board, which runs Southern Baptist missions, said that the missionaries promoted Christianity by example, not actively seeking to convert people in areas where that activity was prohibited by government authorities (Sachs, 2002).

“Open evangelism to me is standing on the street corner selling Bibles,” said Al Lindholm, the Baptists’ chief representative in Yemen, who started his career here as a maintenance supervisor at the hospital 21 years ago.

“Do we evangelize?” he said. “No. Are we asked questions about our faith almost daily? Yes, and we answer them as honestly as we know how.”(Fisher, 2003c, p.A15)

In other words, there was no appreciable difference in the activities of the Christian aid workers in Afghanistan and those of the Baptist hospital workers in Yemen. And yet in one case the workers were clearly identified as missionaries, whereas in the other the evangelistic nature of the work was obscured.

The differences in the frames used to describe the workers derive not from the activities they engaged in but from external factors. An important clue to the determining factors can be found in the frames used to describe the national governments in Afghanistan and Yemen—governments that shared both important similarities and crucial differences.

The Governments

The Taliban government in Afghanistan had a strong frame already applied to it before the aid workers arrest case developed. The Taliban had already been defined as extremist and violent, even evil. This fact is important because it meant that the aid workers were presumed to be innocent, if only because their accusers were illegitimate. Furthermore, the existing frame provided resonance for readers as the aid workers case unfolded. Readers could accept the workers as oppressed, unjustly accused, and unfairly treated because the Taliban had already been projected as engaging in those sorts of behaviors.

The second sentence of the first story in the New York Times portrayed the Taliban as radical and violent: “The Taliban … have decreed that promoting any religion other than Islam is punishable by death, and say the Afghans have implicated the aid workers” (“Afghans to Keep,” 2001, p. A3). Of interest, the Taliban had apparently made this decree
prior to the arrest of the workers—no official death threat was ever made against the workers. The frame was in part a creation of the media, juxtaposing a threat that had not been specifically applied by the Taliban.

The same article noted that even listening to evangelistic messages was taboo for the Taliban: “The Taliban have also arrested 64 Afghan men who they said had received instructions in Christianity from Shelter Now workers. The men have been sent to Islamic religious schools after confessing to their ‘crimes and anti-Islamic activities’” (“Afghans to Keep,” 2001, p. A3). This aspect of the frame described the Taliban as cruel even to its own people.

Throughout the coverage, news reports took every opportunity to depict the Taliban as radical and illegitimate. The Taliban were shown as paranoid, viewing the aid workers’ activity as part of a “larger conspiracy by Western aid groups to convert Afghan Muslims” (“Taliban Suspect Christian Plot,” 2001, p. A6). In another story, the workers were reported to have been “under the surveillance of the Taliban’s whip-wielding religious police from the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice”; the same story reported that “spectators at soccer matches had been ordered to restrict their cheers to the chant ‘God is great!’” (Bearak, 2001c, p. A1).

Central to the delegitimization of the Taliban was a denigration of their brand of Sharia, Islamic law. The law was depicted as a hodgepodge of strict regulations, and the leader of the Taliban as a strange character at best:

“There doesn’t appear to be a well-defined legal system here, at least for this case,” said David T. Donahue, the exasperated American envoy. “We’ve been told that once the investigation is complete, it will be turned over to Mullah Omar, the supreme leader.”

If the reclusive, one-eyed Mullah Muhammad Omar is indeed the last word, he might consult his own Edict No. 14, a July 31 decree concerning the behavior of foreign nationals. It regards “inviting Afghansto any religion apart from Islam” as a less serious offense than “taking photographs of living creatures” or “eating the meat of the pig.” Punishment is 3 to 10 days in prison and then expulsion. (Bearak, 2001c, p. A1)

The condition of the law was depicted as a relatively moot point in any event, as its application was dependent on decisions of the chief justice of the Supreme Court, a mullah who “suggested in a sermon today that his mind was made up and the verdict was guilty” (Bearak, 2001b, p. A6). In any event, evidence was apparently irrelevant, and the Taliban seemed unable to distinguish religious and nonreligious evidence:

There were versions of the Holy Scriptures in English, Dari and Pashto.

“Bibles, Bibles, Bibles,” Muhammad said, laying the books down on a carpeted floor.

There were lesson plans for Christian teachings with chapters with headings like Heaven, the Gates of Hell, Temptation and How to Recognize and Expel Demons.

“Bibles, Bibles, Bibles,” Muhammad repeated.

There was a book about the paintings of Raphael and a grammar text.

“Bibles, Bibles, Bibles,” he said again. (Bearak, 2001d, p. 12)
The courtroom itself was described in another article, emphasizing the connection of religion and violence: “Behind him hung a framed prayer mat, and above that the names Allah and Muhammad were written in ornate Arabic script. Two long swords and a strap used for whippings also decorated the pale yellow wall” (Bearak, 2001a, p. 3).

Outside the courtroom and beyond the aid workers’ case, the Taliban were depicted as capricious and cruel. The laws were enforced by the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice:

This brigade of enforcers patrol the streets of Afghanistan’s major cities in Toyota pickup trucks, whipping women whose pantaloons fail to cover their ankles or whose fingernails are decorated with forbidden polish. Men are jailed for having hair too long or beards too short. (Bearak, 2001d, p. 12) An editorial further described the Taliban:

“The Taliban troops are like gangsters,” a colleague told me when I first arrived. “Tough guys.” But there is often a particular dandyism in them; many wear black eyeliner (part of the descendant-of-Muhammad costume), and their hair is long and curly. I once saw one buying Prell shampoo at the bazaar. They carry themselves like supermodels. (Sifton, 2001, p. 48)

Of interest, another editorial on August 29, 2001, made the delegitimization of the Taliban explicit. In an article titled “Teaching the Taliban About Human Rights,” Karl F. Inderfurth (2001) of the Institute for Global Engagement said:

The Taliban of Afghanistan, whose name comes from talib, “religious student,” seem to have declared war on religion. … The Taliban continue their war on other religions—which is a distortion of Islam. … Although convincing the Taliban to become more tolerant and respectful of their own people, including women and girls, would not answer all the concerns of the international community about this movement, it would be a welcome beginning. (p. A23)

Not coincidentally, Inderfurth was assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs from 1997 to 2001. The connection between the press and the American state also becomes explicit in this article.

In summary, the Taliban were consistently viewed as illegitimate, unjust, irrational, and even violent. In that context, the aid workers could only be depicted as innocent victims, perhaps misguided, but nevertheless good people with the best intentions caught in a situation beyond their control.

The framing of the Taliban is more interesting when compared to the framing of the Yemeni government. Although there were important differences between the two governments, the differences in press coverage were more striking when the less obvious similarities between the Taliban and the Yemeni government were noted.

Like Afghanistan, Yemen has been a site of rising Islamic fundamentalism, specifically with connections to Al Qaeda. In fact, the current president Ali Abdullah Saleh made alliances with fundamentalist militants in a civil war a decade ago. Until 2002, thousands of Yemenis went through religious schools that were feeders for Al Qaeda training camps. Yemen was also the site of attacks on the destroyer USS Cole and on a French supertanker,
both attacks linked to Al Qaeda (MacFarquhar, 2002). Although the Yemeni government has cooperated with the United States in the war on terror since September 11th, some officials in Washington were reported as still being unsure of the country’s true commitment to fighting extremism (Fisher, 2003a).

As in Afghanistan, it is officially illegal in Yemen to proselytize. Until the mid1980s, the Jibla hospital had its own chapel where Yemenis could come to hear Bible stories and sing songs. But the missionaries opted to close the chapel when they were told that they could continue it but any Yemenis who came would be arrested (Fisher, 2003c).

The similarities between Afghanistan and Yemen end there, but they raise the possibility that Yemen could be framed like Afghanistan, as an oppressive, fundamentalist country with links to international terrorism. However, in contrast to the framing of the Taliban, the framing of the Yemeni government during the case under study was overwhelmingly positive.

Some of the positive frame comes from genuine goodwill shown by the Yemeni government and people toward the Baptist hospital and the missionaries. Unlike the Taliban, the Yemeni government did not enforce its official ban on proselytizing as long as the evangelism occurred in informal settings. Furthermore, the government actually provided guards for the hospital compound, protecting it because of the ready availability of guns and the high incidence of terrorist activity in the country. A hospital administrator reported after the attack that many in Jibla expressed their anger and sorrow at the attack, even helping dig the graves of two missionaries who were buried on the hospital grounds (MacFarquhar, 2002).

But another key reason for the difference in framing can be traced to the stance of the U.S. government toward Yemen. Unlike Afghanistan, which was pariah, Yemen has publicly joined the war on terrorism. Perhaps the most visible act was allowing an American unmanned Predator drone to carry out an attack that killed two Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen (Fisher, 2003b). The favorable existing frame allowed the government of Yemen to be depicted in a positive light, even when the circumstances might be framed differently. It also allowed the missionaries to be depicted more accurately as missionaries, as their “innocence” did not need to be established.

To maintain the positive framing of the government while explaining the anti-Christian, anti-Western motives behind the killing, missionary sources and newspaper stories depicted the gunman as more or less a loner connected at most to a small group of militants. The son-in-law of one of the victims said, “We know this isn’t something from the people that he worked with. This wasn’t the Yemenis. This was one man” (McFadden, 2002, p. A11). Yemeni investigators drew the circle a bit larger, connecting the hospital gunman to the killing of a prominent secular politician a few days earlier; both killings were said to have been inspired by a 26-year-old mosque preacher, Ahmed Ali Jarallah. Jarallah reportedly condemned the Baptist hospital for spreading Christianity. He also reportedly criticized President Saleh “for bringing democracy, a system he described as atheistic” (Fisher, 2003b, p. A12).

To extend the frame a bit, as in Afghanistan, fundamentalist Muslims were depicted as cruel, irrational people. The gunman killed his 2-months-pregnant wife’s doctor, the very doctor who was treating her to figure out why she kept miscarrying (Fisher, 2003c). Jarallah was quoted as alleging that the hospital staff “stuff the Holy Koran into toilets of mosques” (Fisher, 2003a, p. A14).

In summary, the Taliban and the government of Yemen were framed in very different ways. In part this was due to genuine differences in how the governments treated the missionaries in their midst. But it was also due to differences in their official stances toward
the United States. Preexisting frames made it possible for the missionary frames to gain resonance.

CONCLUSION

In summary, two key sets of frames appear in these cases. In each, a frame was applied to Christian workers and a frame was applied to the government. Although the activity of the Christian workers in Afghanistan and Yemen were very similar, the frames used to describe them diverged dramatically. The frames used to describe the national governments also differed significantly, even though many similarities existed between the two governments. Some of the divergence in coverage, although not all, can be traced to the relationship between the national governments and the United States. The presentations of their work by Shelter Now International and by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board certainly influenced the coverage frames, as did legitimate differences in the behavior of the Taliban and Yemeni governments. Yet the success of the frames and their persistence occurred because they had preexisting resonance rooted in the political stances of the United States toward the governments involved.

The enmity between the Taliban and the United States made it easy for the press to depict the aid workers as innocent and the Taliban as evil—the frames resonated with other frames already current in the media. By contrast, the positive relationship between the Yemeni government and the United States meant that a much more sympathetic frame was employed for the government than for the missionaries. It would have been difficult for the New York Times to change its stance on the Shelter Now International workers once journalists became aware of the organization’s dissembling. The Taliban was already wearing the black hat; the aid workers could only wear the white ones. The Yemeni government, by contrast, had become an ally of the United States, allowing it to be depicted as a “good guy.”

This suggests that the coverage of the religious issue—Christian proselytizing in Islamic countries—was driven more by political considerations than by the religious content of the stories. The political stance of the United States fostered the adoption and persistence of particular evaluative frames even when the behaviors involved contradicted those explanations.

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