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God save us from the Islam clichés

Christian Christensen

Christian party sweeps German poll – The Guardian

Christians celebrate landslide victory – The Times

Christian ‘clean’ party sweeping board in Germany – The Daily Telegraph

Germany’s Christian leader moves to reassure East – The Guardian

German elections landslide for pro-Christians... – The Independent

If these headlines had been printed in major British newspapers following the 2005 German election, they would have seemed a little strange. They should, because I made them up. Well, not exactly. The headlines *were* written following a major national election, but it wasn’t the recent one in Germany, and they did not contain the words “German” or “Christian”. They were printed after the Turkish general election of 2002. Here are the actual headlines as they appeared on November 4 and 5 that year:

Islamic party sweeps Turkish poll – The Guardian

Islamists celebrate landslide victory – The Times

Islamic ‘clean’ party sweeping board in Turkey – The Daily Telegraph

Turkey’s Islamic leader moves to reassure West – The Guardian

Turkish elections landslide for pro-Islamists... – The Independent

It is illuminating to note how a headline can seem absurd when applied to a Western nation, yet the same headline is deemed acceptable (to editors, at least) when applied to a country such as Turkey. *The Guardian’s* “Turkey’s Islamic leader moves to reassure West” is my particular favourite, because it manages to be terrible on so many different levels. (In case you are wondering, the headline referred to the then Turkish Prime Minister-elect, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and not an actual imam or other religious leader.) Can we imagine, with any degree of seriousness, Angela Merkel, the leader of the *Christian Democrats* in Germany, being described as “Germany’s

Christian leader” moving to “reassure the Middle East” following her defeat of Gerhard Schroeder? My suspicion is that we cannot, and the reason why such a headline is deemed acceptable when referring to Islam is that many journalists and editors – not all, but many – still utilise a simplistic, context-free conceptual framework when reporting on Muslim nations such as Turkey.

Despite the fact that those Turkish elections were three years ago, not much has changed since. As the date for the start of membership negotiations between Turkey and the EU approached, an increasing number of British journalists found themselves booked on flights to Istanbul and Ankara with a remit to “catch the mood” in Turkey. Columnists wrote earnest opinion pieces supporting or opposing Turkish membership; reporters grabbed confused Istanbul residents as they passed in the streets and asked whether they wanted to be “part of Europe”, the confusion resulting from the fact that Istanbulites were under the impression that they already did, in fact, live in Europe; and, worst of all, reporters were given free rein to break out the cliché book and start talking about “the meeting of East and West, Europe and Asia, the Orient and the Occident”. If no Orientalist headlines came to mind, however, there was always this reliable old chestnut:

Turkish delight: Talks on EU membership will be long, hard and necessary – The Times, 18/12/2004

Turkish delight as EU beckons – Channel4.com, 17/12/2004

Franco-German tryst promises Turkish delight – The Guardian, 5/12/2002

Turkish delight at Afghanistan role – The Guardian, 23/11/2001

Turkish delight at Eurovision win – BBC online, 24/5/2003

Turkish delight for investors – The Scotsman, 14/5/2005

I don’t mean to pick on *The Guardian*, because the quality of its coverage of Turkey tends to be well above average, but, to my mind, incorporating the term “Turkish delight” into the headline of a story on Turkish peacekeeping in lawless, war-ravaged Afghanistan might not have been the best idea. Still, when “good” news hits Turkey, how can an editor resist?

Last year, I published in the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* a study on the coverage of the 2002 Turkish elections in the UK and U.S. press. For my paper, I examined articles about the Turkish elections in a number of newspapers from both sides of the Atlantic – from the UK, I looked at pieces from the *Guardian/ObsERVER*, *Times/Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Telegraph* and *Independent*. The results were striking: in both the UK and the U.S. press, the coverage of politics in Turkey was marked by a distinct lack of context.

Parties, particularly the victorious AKP party, were described as ‘Islamist’ or ‘Islamic’ with very little discussion of what those terms actually mean in political practice. Similarly, many newspapers fell back on tired clichés and dichotomies when discussing Turkey: East-West, modern-traditional, European-Asian, and so on. Again, while making for good copy, these “dichotomies”, many of which are questionable to begin with, do little for the reader other than perpetuate a number of outdated, rather xenophobic images. Because newspapers referred to the fact that the Turkish administration was an offshoot of earlier religious parties, it followed that the Westward “orientation” of the new AKP government was open to question. The not-so-subtle implication of this questioning was: if it chose to shun the West, would the new “Islamist” Turkish government begin to look to the East?

Revealing clothes

The problem is that many journalists who covered the 2002 Turkish elections, and who covered the hand-wringing over Turkey’s possible membership into the EU in late 2005, tend to see anti-westernism, anti-modernism and religious piety as the “default mode” of all Muslims. If it’s a predominantly Muslim nation, then it must be veils, no alcohol, traditionalism, prayer beads and mosques. The very possibility that there exists something between total secularism and Iranian-style fundamentalism in Muslim nations seems to have been lost in many of the reports from Turkey. I have lost count of the number of times people go to Istanbul and express surprise at how “open” and non-fundamentalist the city is. A visiting student from Holland, for example, remarked that she was amazed to see how “modern” and “revealing” were the clothes of the female students at my university. I can’t blame these people for being surprised, since the vast majority of images of Turkey and other Muslim nations which they see in the news tend to be mired in religiousness. More often than not, the Muslim world is presented to the western news consumer as one in which the individual is subservient to the hegemony of Islam.

The irony, of course, is that we have a man sitting in the White House who claims that God – a God who apparently addresses the President as “George” on a regular basis – ordered him to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. With this in mind, let’s imagine that the current Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had claimed Allah to be his favourite political

philosopher – as Bush claimed in 2000 that Jesus Christ was his – that Allah speaks to him on a regular, first-name basis, and that Allah had ordered him not to allow the U.S. to use Turkish air bases during the lead-up to the war in Iraq. How would western journalists have reacted? With the amused, superior detachment they exhibited during their coverage of the God-Bush-Iraq conversation? Or, would they be pounding their keyboards, writing pieces on how Turkey was in the grip of an Islamic fundamentalist and how it could only be a question of time before Sharia law is introduced in Ankara, Izmir and Istanbul?

As someone who lived in Istanbul, I continue to be struck by the sheer volume of religious imagery channels such as BBC World – the international news channel I watch most – manages to squeeze into many of its reports from Turkey. Sometimes, the imagery has absolutely nothing to do with the story, yet viewers are treated to a fairly routine supply of mosques, hundreds of men kneeling in prayer, some veiled women, some dubious looking men with prayer beads, and then, for the three viewers who are still not 100 per cent sure if Turkey is a Muslim or Catholic country, a few more mosques. This brings me back to the critique offered at the start of this piece: that much of the reporting by western journalists on events in Muslim nations tends to favour spicy, yet hollow, dichotomy over staid, yet illuminating, context. On this subject, the Canadian scholar Sina Ali Muscati wrote:

...in spite of constant media attention, Arab-Islamic people remain one of the least understood cultural groups. This, in part, is a consequence of insufficient attempts by the media to convey understanding. While facts may certainly exist regarding Arab/Muslims, they get their importance from how they are interpreted... Unfortunately, however, our knowledge of this culture seems to remain tied to past and present confrontation and domination.

This point is crucial: it is not a *lack* of coverage that makes Muslim nations misunderstood, it is how the information gathered by journalists is presented to, and then interpreted by, readers, viewers and listeners. In the case of coverage of Turkey, audiences are treated to very black-and-white views of the country. A while back, I remember watching a BBC World report, in the programme *Europe Direct*, in which Turkey's future membership of the EU was discussed. In the report, two images of the nation were presented to viewers: "modern" Turkey, symbolised by a "Western" urban-dwelling woman who did not wear a veil, drank alcohol and exercised at an upscale gym; and "traditional" Turkey, symbolised by an impoverished, veiled woman, who lived in squalor, whose children were

crippled by illness and who required help from the local mosque in order to make ends meet. So this was Turkey: super-rich Euro-trash driving SUVs, or pathetic fundamentalists living in rat-infested hovels.

On the surface, the two views of Turkey presented to viewers and readers – modern European versus backward Islamic – do not really require much explanation. Most people consuming the news probably live in modern European countries or the like, and have been fed a steady stream of Orientalist discourse about the “Islamic world”. “Modern Europe” is presented as free, democratic, egalitarian, modern, and law-abiding. “Backward Islamic”, on the other hand, is framed as totalitarian, anti-democratic and threatening. And ne’er the twain shall meet. But what lies between these two extremes? It is where, I suggest, you will find the meat-and-two-veg of Turkish politics and Turkish society. For many news consumers in non-Muslim nations, the phrase “mental empty space”, coined by author and scholar Dubravka Ugresic, is a good way for this “in-between” area to be described. Ugresic used this term when discussing how western Europeans had, and continue to have, no conception of what existed on the fringes of their own continent. People knew that countries such as Slovenia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Macedonia and Serbia existed, of course, but had no clue as to their languages, cultures or politics. They were, for all intents and purposes, “mental empty spaces”.

The old stereotypes

The same, I feel, can be said for the relationship between religion and day-to-day politics, and life, in countries such as Turkey. Because our, and I include myself here, understanding of countries with predominantly Muslim populations tends to be soaked in the religious – due in large part to mediated images – it is difficult to grasp the possibility that religion is *not* the defining factor in every socio-political or cultural event to take place in those same nations. Having spent my formative years, from 1979 until 1992, in the UK, I am struck by the similarities between how people during the 1980s viewed Catholics from Ulster and how people in this decade view Muslims. In both cases, the assumption was that “religious affiliation”, for want of a better phrase, trumped all other affiliations. In Britain and the United States, the popular line was that if you were a Catholic, you probably supported the IRA. Today, if you are a Muslim, the popular line is that you are probably anti-western or fundamentalist. This is not to say that journalism was and is

responsible for these views, but rather that de-contextualised coverage did and does little to throw cold water on old stereotypes. Without nuance and explanation, we are stuck on the hard edges of absolutism.

Of course, just as countless of my academic colleagues have been accused over the years, I also could be accused of examining the minutiae of journalistic practice – headlines, pictures, selected articles – and extrapolating well beyond the bounds of reason. But I do not feel that this is the case, in large part because the content of many of the television and newspaper stories I have examined, in research and in private, rarely go beyond the black-and-white, and because reports from Muslim nations continue to use religious imagery – the mosque, the praying men, the veiled woman – and unexplained terminology such as “Islamist” and “fundamentalist”. Unless they are related directly to the story, I suggest that we drop the mosque, the veiled women, the Turkish delight and the cryptic religious terminology. Editors who won’t show pictures of Catholic churches when covering the German elections, or use the word “sauerkraut” for stories on the German military, should consider why they won’t – and apply those standards equally.

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