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## Narrative Framing of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in British Religious News

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### Abstract

This paper examines how religious news organizations in the UK covered the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. Using narrative framing theory, this paper examines all coverage from 2015 and 2016 published in BBC Religion (a part of *BBC News*), *The Muslim News*, and *Christian Today* to examine shared and disparate narratives regarding Syrian refugees migrating to the UK. Four major frames emerged from our analysis of the media coverage in religious and mainstream publications: a humanizing frame, saviour frame, dehumanizing frame, and, redemption frame. The publications differed in their use of these frames as well as the use of sources, news values, and tone of coverage. We discuss each of these frames as well as the implications of the differing coverage.

*NOTE: This is the ACCEPTED version of the manuscript and hence may not reflect all changes in the final version.*

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## Introduction

In the UK, a large part of religion news coverage has focused on Islam, though the tone of stories on this topic has largely been negative (Knott, Poole, & Taira, 2013). Readers have often criticized mainstream UK media coverage of religion as insufficient and biased (Taira, Poole, & Knott, 2012). Partly in response to these perceptions of bias and inaccurate coverage, several alternative religious publications have appeared in the UK. Notable among these are *Christian Today*, which is an evangelical publication, and *The Muslim News*, which caters to the British Muslim population. Both publications carry news and features and offer a religious perspective on current events of the world.

One of the major religion-oriented issues impacting Europe in recent years has been the Syrian refugee crisis. Historically, the mainstream media have covered refugees in stereotypical ways, often portraying them as criminals and deviants who are different from the majority white population (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016). European countries are witnessing a record influx of Muslim immigrants, and mainstream media coverage has highlighted conflict in the immigration process, which has added to negative perceptions about refugees (Pew Research Center, 2017). Since religious media act as alternative voices, this paper focuses on the coverage of refugees in *The Muslim News* and *Christian Today*. We use narrative theory to examine the coverage of the Syrian migration crisis in these publications between September 2015 and September 2016 and to compare the themes that emerge in these outlets with mainstream media coverage. We use online religion coverage in *BBC News*, a news source aimed at mainstream audiences, as an example of mainstream coverage.

Our analysis indicates four frames that emerge from the alternative publications: a humanizing frame, saviour frame, dehumanizing frame, and redemption frame. The humanizing frame constructs refugees as victims who are fleeing violence and war. Instead of portraying them as security threats, the publications encourage their readers to embrace their faith, cast aside partisan bias, and help them. In the saviour frame, the reporters/writers of the article portray themselves as heroes and create a contrast between heroes – typically those organizations or nations who help refugees – and villains – typically those who withhold their support. In the dehumanizing frame, refugees are seen as unclean and a potential danger for residents. The last frame we find is the redemption frame, which pits a voiceless group, in this case Syrian refugees, against power institutions such as the government and religious leaders.

In the coverage of Syrian refugees, we use the term *refugee* intentionally in order to acknowledge the involuntary nature of resettlement and the armed conflict faced by those who flee (Martinez, 2015). *Migrants*, by contrast, enter countries voluntarily through the receiving country's immigration policies. In the coverage of this phenomenon, many journalists use the term *migrant* – and hence stories using this term will be analyzed as well – but for the purposes of this paper, the authors will refer to the group as *refugees*.

### **Media Representations of Refugees**

The migration crisis has been well documented in UK media – although, as will be discussed, less so in the UK religious press. Popular images and description have illustrated scenes of refugee camps, crowded train stations, and people sleeping in tents,

pleading with police, or trying to cross barbed-wire fences. The most graphic images have focused on those who died in the process of the journey. The UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) reported that media coverage in the UK emphasized threat themes over humanitarian themes in coverage of refugees in 2014 and 2015 (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016). But much of the coverage of refugees has focused less on the refugees themselves and more on the politicians arguing about migration – in particular, media tend to emphasize anti-immigrant rhetoric by candidates (Nguyen, 2015) A report from the Ethical Journalism Network argued that media professionals in the UK tend to provide too little context for their coverage of refugees (Nguyen, 2015).

In the midst of crisis situations like the Syrian migration, people rely on media for timely and comprehensive coverage of such issues (McCombs, 2004; Noll, 2003). Media narratives socially construct the world around us and help shape policy and public opinion (Schudson, 2003). This makes the coverage of Syrian refugees of substantial import, in that such media reporting has the potential to affect the lives of thousands and thousands of vulnerable refugees. Coverage of Syrian refugees has fallen in line with traditional media narratives regarding refugees (Fürsich, 2010). Media have largely cast refugees in a negative light and shown them to be a dangerous force for a country.

Scholarship on media coverage of refugees falls within the broader scholarly concerns of orientalism, that is, the othering of groups and individuals in order to make them seem out of touch with majority groups and perspectives (Said, 1979). Such representations are “constitutive of culture, meaning and knowledge about ourselves and the world around us” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 115). Such representations do not simply mirror

culture but simultaneously “create reality and normalize a specific worldview” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 115). Refugee groups are often portrayed in an “us versus them” frame that is largely “informed vis-a-vis the development of a mediated national identity” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 113). And scholarship has argued that media creation of a national identity is at times dependent on the exclusion of minority groups (Fürsich, 2010). Hence, media scholarship on refugee reporting tends to be skeptical about the ability of media to portray cultural diversity, as is true in research about “others” more broadly.

Media portrayals of refugees tend to be limiting. The portrayals of refugees tend to only occur if they are part of a human interest story or if a refugee is accused of something negative (Gemi, Ulasiuk, & Triandafyllidou, 2013). The media tend to prefer themes with “negative denotations and connotations with regard to how migrants are presented” (Rasinger, 2010, p. 1028); refugees are, then, often seen to be a “threat the ‘natives’ need protecting from” (p. 1028). Syrian refugee coverage tends to fall in line with these traditional roles, but in addition, media portrayals have tended to emphasize male depictions of Syrians (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016). Syrian refugees are typically depicted as “cowards,” “rapists,” or “terrorists” (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016).

These poor depictions of refugees stem from three obstacles. First, the typical work routines of journalists largely privilege majority groups. Second, the national media tend to cater to the interests of their national audience. Finally, Western media tends to portray the interests of foreign policy and national elites in their coverage (Fürsich, 2010).

## **Religion and the News**

In Syria, 74% of the population is Sunni Muslim, 13% is Shia Muslim, and about 10% is Christian; the remainder are part of smaller faith traditions (US Department of State, 2006). Religion reporting has its challenges, both in content and structure, and so it is worth considering the degree to which the majority religious traditions of the Syrian refugees might have a role to play in their poor coverage.

**In the United States and the United Kingdom,** mainstream religion news has traditionally emphasized a nonsectarian role in its content, yet religion news does tend to cover news from a protestant normative perspective (Silk, 1998; Underwood, 2010). Content analyses have tended to show that historically protestant countries tend to portray protestant countries in an understandably positive light (Silk, 1998). Muslim groups tend to be depicted negatively, particularly when contrasted with a Christian group (Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, & Keel, 2011). The negative depictions of Muslims tend to be characterized by one-dimensional portrayals, an emphasis on conflict-driven stories, and an overrepresentation relative to their population (Dahinden et al., 2011). Muslims are often linked to crime, violence, and terrorism (Broos & Van den Bulck, 2012). Yet it is worth noting that during times of religious tension, reporting on Muslims has tended to portray Muslims more positively, with journalism working as a peacemaker in society (Narayana & Kapur, 2011). Elizabeth Poole has extensively researched British newspaper coverage of Islam in the United Kingdom (Poole, 2000, 2006). Her research has found that there are a limited number of frames used to represent British Muslims in the press and that the term “Muslim” often implies a foreigner (Poole, 2002).

Reporting on religion has also suffered from structural constraints. Religion

reporting has traditionally been a minor part of overall news coverage. Religion news is often relegated to a separate section of mainstream news outlets, rather than integrated into daily news coverage (Mason, 1995). As budgets have been cut, fewer and fewer stories remain, and it becomes incumbent on non-religion reporters to recognize the religious features of their stories (Mason, 2010; Marshall, Gilbert, & Green, 2009). Moreover, since journalists do not have formal knowledge of various religions, they often learn on the job, and their stories often lack details. The lack of resources and literacy in religion causes journalists to use similar sources and to rely on second-hand sources, which are often inaccurate and yield stereotypical information (Stout, 2012). News reporting on religion has developed significantly over the years, in part from an increased connection with the audience that comes from religion news geared specifically to specific traditions, such as *Christian Today* and *The Muslim News*. In many ways, the increased interaction with and participation from news audiences has enhanced religious discourse (Stout, 2012).

### **Alternative Voices in Religion News**

During the 20th century, journalism was divided into two distinct strains – the secular and the sacred (Stout, 2012). While mainstream publications followed the news norms of objectivity, balance, and fairness in covering religion news, religious denominations emerged as powerful alternative voices in response to the secular press's critical tone and unfair coverage (Stout, 2012). Religious news media aimed to provide a spiritual perspective on events around the world. They also covered news overlooked by the



mainstream media, especially news that pertained to their particular religion.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, Muslim media in the UK emerged as an alternative to mainstream media, which often ignore their voices. Muslim media portray the ways in which British Muslims see themselves and would like others to see them (Moll, 2007). Muslim representations were mostly absent from the mainstream media in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Meer, Dwyer, & Modood, 2010). As a result, several Muslim media publications developed during this time with the chief aim of combating the growing hostile coverage of Muslims in the mainstream media, prompted by events such as the release of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and the Gulf War in the 1990s (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Both of these events led the mainstream press to cover Muslims as fundamentalists, which only later was contrasted with moderate Islam. Thus, these religious publications wanted to help Muslim readers gain an understanding of current events so they could explain to others (Ahmed, 2005). These publications also aimed to cater to a newly immigrated Muslim population in the UK that spoke English but was not as proficient in reading and writing the language.

The need for Muslim media became greater in the post-September 11 era, which also marked an uptick in the terrorism activities conducted by Al Qaeda; this led to an increase in negative media coverage of Muslims, which perpetuated negative stereotypes and justified attacks against them (Bunglawala, 2002). As Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Kofman (2005, p. 515) point out, "In the post 11 September period there has been a certain conflation of the criminal male, the Muslim and the fraudulent refugee and a growing legitimization of the suspension of their human rights." In the wake of the

September 11 attacks, Muslim media focused on in-depth and alternative analysis of the attacks to counter the cynicism and mistrust of Muslims that was evident in mainstream coverage of the attacks (Bunglawala, 2002). Muslim media carried the voices of spokespersons from the community who condemned the attacks, expressed sympathy for the victims, and clarified the Islamic perspective on such acts (Bunglawala, 2002; Poole, 2002). In addition to the September 11 attacks, which affected the image of Muslims worldwide, in the UK Muslims were subject to additional questions of identity and belonging on account of their religion. As Meer, Dwyer, and Modood (2010) point out, Muslim women were at the center of controversy in the UK because of their practice of wearing face veils in public. The British press covered this debate through the lens of security, integration, national identity, and citizenship, implying that Muslims should try to assimilate into mainstream British culture by discarding cultural practices that are typical of their religion.

Given these monolithic representations of Muslims in the mainstream press, the need for alternate publications is ever increasing (for an exception see Munnik, 2017). Today, the religious press discusses current events as well as social and religious issues. As Ahmed (2005, p.110) describes, they cover

faith or belief topics, explanations of the Quran, how to guides on certain practices in Islam and reminders of special dates in the Islamic calendar. Social and cultural matters relating to Muslims in Britain and more immediate problems in the community.

In doing so, they cater to readers who approach them primarily to make themselves aware

of Muslim current affairs. These publications use sources and topics often ignored by mainstream media and reflect the diversity of opinions within the Muslim population, which is often portrayed as a monolithic bloc in mainstream media coverage.

According to Ahmed (2005), the functions and influences of Muslim media include: belonging and identity; knowledge and learning; and “community.” In addition to their need to know about current events, readers of these publications subscribe to them in order to feel part of the larger Muslim community (also called the global *ummah*) and to strengthen their Muslim identity. As Ahmed’s (2005) survey of British Muslims revealed, there is a distinction between being part of the British community and the global *ummah*, which according to some respondents offered a stronger identity than the local or national community. Thus, these readers are fueled by a desire to know about other Muslims globally and how they live their lives. Coverage in *The Muslim News* caters to this demand by including issues such as racism, education, and employment that affect the daily lives of Muslims in the country. By highlighting these experiences as part of the reality of living in Britain as Muslims, *The Muslim News* helps their readers build a shared identity with Muslims around the world who are facing the same issues.

Like *The Muslim News*, evangelical magazines emerged as an alternative to mainstream media, which tended to portray evangelical Christians as a monolithic force. These publications encourage dialogue and discussion about spiritual, lifestyle, and policy issues. They help readers form their personal identity and also influence their voting decisions. “The content is focused on providing biblical commentary for use in personal studies, personal testimonies on how God changes lives, and explanations about how a

particular news event or trend should be understood when viewed through a Christian worldview” (Waters, 2012, p. 552). However, since these publications aim to appeal to a large audience, their tone is conversational, and the textual material of news articles is often accompanied by photographs, illustrations, and other visual aids.

Despite these common themes, Christian publications can vary in their tone of coverage. In his analysis of the depiction of UK Muslims in British Christian print media, Faimau (2016) found that these publications used five major themes to discuss Muslims, but they often differed in the tone of these themes. These themes included: multiculturalism, Muslim schools, stereotyping, Muslim–Christian relations, and reciprocity. Multiculturalism discussed the process of integrating Muslims into British society and raised questions of identity, loyalty, and the Islamization of British society. Muslim schools were discussed in some of these publications in the context of the role they play in assimilating Muslims into British society, and also for the role they play in building communities. The stereotypes used in these publications were both negative and positive – on one hand, they were sympathetic and showed Muslims in a positive light, but on the other hand, they were negative and focused on Muslims committing crimes against Christians. The discourse of Muslim–Christian relationship was again two-sided; some publications promoted theological debates between the two religions, while others called for dialogues. Lastly, the reciprocity discourse asserted that for Muslims to be accepted in the West, Muslim-majority countries in the East should not persecute their minority Christian populations. Thus, Faimau (2016) found that within the UK Christian press, there was a diversity of voices and opinions toward Muslims.

### **Theoretical Framework: Narrative Theory**

As a mediator for public discourse, the news socially constructs a world that influences how people view groups, institutions, and ideas (Schudson, 2003). The media provide “a site on which various social groups, institutions and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gurevitch & Levy, 1985, p. 19). In this sense, media narratives provide the tools for humanity to make sense of itself (Schudson, 2003). This study will use the lens of narrative theory in order to examine coverage of refugees in the British religious press.

Using narrative to explore the coverage of refugees enables analysis to lead a “critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy and desirable guide to thought and action” (Fisher, 1985) and helps reveal the foundational assumptions about the nature of humanity (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Narratives serve to make sense of events, and plot-oriented narratives link individual events in meaningful ways (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Journalists play an important role in the creation of narratives by observing events and developing plotlines (Riessman, 1993). Most importantly, narrative theory circumscribes attention to what society sees as appropriate and reasonable (Cooper & Berdayes, 1998). Narrative research explores the elements of a frame: settings, characters, heroes, and villains.

### **Methodology: Narrative Framing**

Narrative framing serves as a partner methodology to narrative theory in that it locates

“structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts” (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 139). This approach applies the dynamic nature of frames as a way to understand new information and structure connections between broad concepts and content (Reese & Lewis, 2009). There are two essential paths to framing analysis: a “how” path and a “what” path. Most useful for this research is the “what” path, which is concerned with the content of the frame and how the frame gets built (Reese, 2001). An important step in framing analysis is identifying the framing devices. We started by reading through all coverage of refugees from three news sources in order to identify the framing devices. We then discussed how these corresponded and connected to those to the broader narrative frames. We then reread the content with those narrative frames in mind in order to more accurately discuss how they operated in coverage of refugees.

Three news sources were chosen in order to determine how the British religious press covered refugees. We chose *The Muslim News*, *Christian Today*, and *BBC News* as the media outlets to analyze for this study. The methodology of comparing religious outlets with a mainstream outlet was similar to that used in previous studies; Nickels, Thomas, Hickman, and Silvestri (2012), for instance, compared religious outlets with mainstream media in order to analyze variations in coverage. The religious outlets were chosen because they cater to different political orientations, audiences, and points of view, and the coverage in these niche newspapers offers a contrast with the coverage in the national mainstream press. *The Muslim News* was chosen because previous studies (see for example Nickels et al., 2012; Rigoni, 2005) have identified this as a major outlet in the UK for news focused on the Muslim community. *Christian Today* was chosen

because it is a popular UK-based religious publication that provides news from a Christian perspective. *BBC News* was chosen as a mainstream source of news. We used *BBC News* because, according to the Digital News report published by the Reuters Institute in 2017, it is “used relatively equally by those on the left, centre, and the right and provides a common set of facts with a combined online/offline weekly reach of 77%” (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017, p. 20). According to the same report, two-thirds of its users (70%) think it is “best for” accurate and reliable news. For these reasons, it can be seen as a reliable example of mainstream news in the UK.

This study analyzed all articles related to refugees published between September 2015 and September 2016. We created a sample of these articles by doing a search for the terms “Syrian refugees,” “Syrian migrants,” “migrants,” and “refugees” for the period specified. This brought up seven stories for *The Muslim News*, 157 from *BBC News* and five from *Christian Today*. The large sample size from *BBC News* was read in its entirety, but in order to allow for the close examination of language required in critical discourse analysis (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013), the authors identified six particular stories to examine with more depth. These stories were identified based on the length and depth of the article – to favor a focus more in line with content produced in *The Muslim News* and *Christian Today* – as well as on their typicality as piece of the overall sample.

Once the two researchers had gathered the sample, they conducted an in-depth reading of the articles and followed the method of critical discourse analysis to determine how language was used to depict Muslims in the media. Critical discourse analysis involves the close examination of language in texts, as, for example, in showing how

particular linguistic phenomena (word choice, sentence structure, metaphor, implicature, argumentation strategy, etc.) can be used to represent a particular stance (Baker et al., 2013, p. 20). Critical discourse analysis combines textual analysis with consideration of the context in which the text was written and who wrote it. We considered both aspects while conducting our analysis – the context relates to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the media producers are religious media outlets and the mainstream media. Thus, in our analysis, we considered the norms and values that govern news production in the religious and secular press, while examining the news articles. As Baker et al. (2013) have pointed out, critical discourse analysis often carries the biases of the authors with respect to their own experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds, and these biases could affect the analyses. We addressed the issue of bias by being self-aware while conducting our analyses (Baker et al., 2013) and by challenging each other's views, but our results are not generalizable, and there could be multiple interpretations of the data analyzed in this paper.

While literature denotes the fact that even mainstream news is still, in a sense, religious (Silk, 1998; Underwood, 2012; Knott et al., 2013), we wanted to make sure that we did not mistake frames among the specialized religious press in Britain for British media frames more broadly. So, in discussing these frames, we will discuss how they connected, how they differed, and where they were most likely to appear. Doing so not only provides a sense for how refugees were covered in the British religious press but also reveals something about how the British religious press operates in the building of narrative frames. In the next section, we will discuss the structure of the religious press in Britain by dissecting the organizational structure of the three news sources chosen. Using



that information, we will then denote the frames that appeared in the coverage of refugees.

## **The British Religious Press**

### ***Christian Today***

*Christian Today* was founded in 2004 as a non-denominational Christian, online-only news magazine. It is based in London. According to the publication's website, it aims to produce "daily news, comment and analysis covering the global church and religious affairs, politics, theology, culture and spiritual encouragement" and to be "objective and fair in our reporting, rather than sensationalist or polarizing" (About Us, 2017). *Christian Today* gets approximately 3 million unique visits a month. Publication works much like a regular news organization, with a dedicated editorial team.

In terms of content, the magazine offers a range of topics, including news stories, opinions, and features. It is Western-focused, with sections for the "UK" and "US" offered in the toolbar, even before "Church" and "Society." Analysis pieces offer stories from around the world, with Biblical insights added to each story.

The publication is active on social media via Twitter and Facebook feeds. The Twitter account has nearly 47,000 followers and the Facebook page has about 5.9 million subscribers. It uses its social media sites like mainstream media organizations, mainly to publicize its magazine content and promote events that align with the publication's vision.

### ***The Muslim News***

*The Muslim News* ranks among the most important channels for propagating the views of Muslims in the UK (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). This news magazine was established in February 1989 and appears both online and in print versions. The print version appears on the last Friday of each month; the digital version is updated daily. In 2010, its circulation was 140,000, and many free copies were distributed at mosques and Islamic centers in the UK. According to Gilliat-Ray (2010), “it was founded with the explicit objective of offering British Muslims a newspaper reflecting their concerns and interests” and to provide this community a platform to “lobby and campaign on a range of issues” (p. 237).

In accordance with this aim, the paper publishes news on wide variety of national and international issues from an Islamic perspective. The content also helps readers gain religious knowledge. The website is divided into several topics. The “Latest News” section provides updates on Muslims around the world – from South Asia to Russia, and Europe – and on various topics such as racism, the United Nations, and the environment. Most of these news items are sourced from the AA News Broadcasting System wire service and other newspapers in the area. The “Newspaper” section, published once a month, contains stories written by *Muslim News* reporters. The “Islamophobia” section carries both straight news stories from wire services as well as first-person experiences of Muslims who have experienced discrimination on the basis of their religion. The “Human Rights” section again carries news sourced from other news agencies and reports on incidents of persecution of Muslims from around the world.

Three sections, namely, “Press Releases,” “Awards,” and “Videos,” focus exclusively on *The Muslim News’* annual awards. In order to better represent the Muslim

community in UK, *The Muslim News* started its “Awards for Excellence” in 2000. These awards recognize the achievements and contributions made by members of the Muslim community around the world. As Gilliat-Ray (2010, p. 237) has pointed out, this award demonstrates the deep involvement of this publication in the lives of British Muslims and is one of the factors that has made it a “key British Muslim institution.”

Interestingly, the social media outreach of this publication is limited. The awards are exclusively promoted by the Twitter handle, @TheMuslimNews, while the personal Twitter account of the editor, Ahmed Versi, is used to publicize the articles published in the news magazine.

### ***BBC News***

The *BBC News* website does not have a separate section for news devoted primarily to religion. Its stories referencing religion appear in various sections of the main website. BBC does have a separate religion and ethics website, which combines ethical dilemmas that affect people with information about the world’s religions. Unlike *The Muslim News* and *Christian Today*, this website does not focus on newsworthy events. The aim is to write articles that answer common questions about religions, inform people about religious holidays, or take an in-depth look at religious issues. The tone of most articles is conversational, and the content is aimed at a mainstream audience, particularly people who are not looking for newsworthy religion news. Many articles adopt an irreverent, pop-culture approach but provide interesting, well-written information. For example, an article titled “Could you hack it as a medieval monk?” talks about the austere lifestyle of Benedictine monks. Other interactive articles include those that give readers information

about the history and structure of religious houses of worship, including churches and synagogues. Experts, including religious scholars, historians, and representatives of prominent religious organizations, write much of the content. Most articles are interactive and have multimedia elements such as videos. The religion and ethics website does not conduct social media outreach.

## **The Framing of Syrian Refugees**

### ***Humanizing Frame***

In this frame, the refugees were quoted and featured in a largely positive light. If there are migration problems being addressed in the story, the blame is shifted away from refugees. Often these stories emphasize the lack of assistance provided by the United States and the United Kingdom for refugees, in contrast to countries like Germany and Canada. In photographs accompanying the stories, the refugees appear in vulnerable conditions or are pictured smiling and dressed in western clothes.

This frame appeared in *The Muslim News*, though it appeared less frequently in *BBC News* and did not appear in *Christian Today*. For example, in a piece in *The Muslim News* about the intake of refugees, the headline “UK’s Syrian refugee intake branded pitiful” set the tone of the article, which portrayed countries refusing to take in refugees as inhuman and lacking compassion. The article quoted several sources that criticized Britain for refusing to accept more than 20,000 refugees and compared it with other countries such as Germany, which has accepted nearly a million refugees to date. The article quoted Labour Leader Harriet Harman calling passionately for immediate action:

Is being British to be narrow, inward looking, fearful of the outside world, or is it about being strong and confident and proud to reach out to those seeking refuge on our shores? It must be the latter. (Buaras, 2015)

The article quoted other world leaders, who called the British decision “appalling” and “in stark contrast to that of Germany, which had effectively accepted 10,000 refugees in a single day and France, which is taking 24,000 refugees over the next two years” (Buaras, 2015). The piece criticized rich Gulf States – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – and called them “shameful” for refusing to take in a single refugee. The article mentioned that these countries have cited costs and cultural differences as reasons for refusing refugees, and, though they have contributed food, funds, shelter, and clothing for refugees, their efforts fall far short of other countries such as the US. The article, however, contrasted the efforts of these Muslim-majority nations by describing the charitable efforts of British Muslims who “have led the way in helping the refugees across Europe and in neighbouring Middle East countries” (Buaras, 2015). The article was accompanied by a picture of refugees – women, men, and a child – all wearing life vests and sitting on a boat presumably heading toward European shores, which further served to humanize refugees.

In another article titled “UK failing its refugee obligations,” *The Muslim News* made its stand clear about the use of the word “migrant”:

Just to clarify for the BBC and others distorting the differences, migrants are people who have left their country voluntarily to make a new life in a new land. They make a conscious choice to leave their homeland. In contrast, refugees are those

who are forced to flee their own countries out of fear for their lives and liberty.

(“UK failing its refugee obligations,” 2015)

In clarifying its interpretation of the word “refugee,” *The Muslim News* further acted to humanize the Syrians.

### ***Saviour Frame***

The saviour frame appeared in *The Muslim News* and *BBC News*, and in this frame, the protagonist was most often the reporter/writer. Often, the writer discussed their encounter with refugees and their positive, and occasionally negative, experiences. This hero protagonist was constructed vis-à-vis the development of their antagonist. The antagonists were typically those not doing enough to help refugees.

In *The Muslims News* in particular, the antagonist was often the government of the United Kingdom – a result of taking so few refugees and offering so little support. There is some structural reasoning for the protagonist being the writer as opposed to a refugee character – the potential challenge of a language barrier. Syrian refugees do not always speak English, and this leaves religion reporters in a difficult situation as they do not often have a translator. Particularly at a smaller publication like *The Muslim News*, journalists are unlikely to be able to gather information directly from the refugee.

For example, in a *BBC News* piece, the action began with and was motivated by the journalist. In this case, in a written piece accompanying a video, *BBC News* made reference to Martin’s experiences of the Syrian refugee crisis. Martin was the journalist in the accompanying video.

Martin went to visit a camp in the French town of Calais where thousands of migrants are staying, in the hope that they can come to the UK, even though they do not have permission to cross the border. While Martin was in the camp, he spoke to Safid, an 11 year old boy who traveled over 5000 miles to try to reach the UK from Afghanistan. ("Migrant Crisis," 2015)

In this story, Safid was not the hero; he was a bystander. Martin was the hero, working to share Safid's story with the world and give him a voice even though he came from a voiceless group.

### ***Dehumanizing Frame***

This frame represents the mirror image to the first. While *BBC News* and *The Muslim News* shared the use of the first two frames discussed above, which were used to humanize and legitimize the experience of Syrian refugees, *Christian Today* in contrast reported on refugees with some suspicion and hostility. This appears in part through the very structure of their reporting on Syrian refugees. In this sample, all reporting on the refugees was done second-hand, relying on news reports from other sources, with *Christian Today* providing the analysis. They at times sourced fringe, far-right sources, such as WND.com, and at other times sourced the UK-based wire service Reuters. But throughout their sourcing, refugees were represented as existing outside the boundaries of British identity. For example, in one story from *Christian Today*, Muslim refugees were described as a "horde" who "left their dirt in Austria" and treated the country's Christian residents with "vileness" (Torres, 2015). The refugees were attributed with leaving behind "an orgy of garbage and feces of unparalleled dimensions" (Torres, 2015). The article

sourced the German news source *Unzen Suriert* as saying that, furthermore, the refugees called the Christian women of Austria “Christian whores.” This is an explicit orientalist frame that dehumanizes the refugees by likening them to barbarians (e.g. “hoard”) and treating them as unclean (e.g. leaving their “dirt” and “garbage and feces”). It works to “other” the refugees by placing them outside the boundaries of acceptable practice.

In fact, the only time in the sample refugees were treated with compassion was when they converted to Christianity. In two stories of conversion, this conversion came simultaneously with a disdain for Islam. For example, in a quote from a pastor, one article argued that the reason for the conversion “is the same for many: they are disappointed with Islam” (Taylor, 2016). In another story, an ISIS militant snuck into a refugee camp with the intention of killing Christian volunteers but converted after witnessing “the love of Christians” (Taylor, 2015) and argued that Islam had brainwashed him as to what Christianity represented.

Finally, the Syrian refugees here were also depicted as dangerous. In one piece, the article argues based on a single anonymous source that ISIS militants were operating in the refugee camps.

The Muslim gangs come as refugees, but they have agendas. They're like mafia. ...  
The camps are dangerous because they have IS, Iraqi militias and Syrian militias.  
It's another place for gangs. They're killing inside the camps, and they're buying and selling ladies and even girls. (Taylor, 2015)

In all of these stories about refugees, the reporting is second-hand, anonymous, or offered without any attribution. It goes without saying that this represents a breach of journalistic



practice but is likely what its conservative Christian audience is expecting to read – that refugees are not a fit for life in the United Kingdom.

### ***Redemption Frame***

The first two frames – humanizing and saviour – operated with an underlying plot narrative serving as their foundation. This narrative pits a voiceless group against an unforgiving, suspicious government. In the plotline presented throughout *The Muslim News* and *BBC News*, Syrian refugees were this voiceless group, one not even quoted by the news media, and yet were the subject of suspicion and even disdain by the powerful British government. This draws a parallel to the story in the Torah of the Israelites in Egypt, who were mistrusted by the Pharaoh, mistreated by the people of Egypt, and eventually enslaved. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus and his followers were distrusted and mistreated by the Pharisees (local religious authorities) and the Romans (local civic authorities). Both cases are echoed in the framing of the refugees in these texts.

These stories carried an implication of judgment, leveling the blame on governments not living up to their “humanitarian duties” (“UK failing its refugee obligations,” 2015), while their lack of help was seen as nearly “shameful” (Buaras, 2015).

For months, Britain and the rest of the EU have been playing a dangerous game by denying that those fleeing from Syria and other countries in conflict are refugees.

Up to one million are expected to apply for asylum alone in Germany this year. Yet countries in the world’s largest trading bloc have been accused of abrogating their humanitarian duties by either deliberately describing the mass exodus as migrants

or burying their heads in the sands to wish the problems go away. (“UK failing its refugee obligations,” 2015)

In one *Muslim News* story, the author mentioned that UK’s assistance for Syrians has been “branded pitiful” (Buaras, 2015). The headline hid the actor and begged the question of “who branded their assistance ‘pitiful?’” While the author later linked it to the Labour party leader Harriet Harman, it was also the implicit position of the journalist as well – casting judgment for the mistreatment of a vulnerable group.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to address two predominant concerns: the structure of religious media in the United Kingdom and how that structure operated in the narrative of the Syrian refugee crisis. Amid the closing of religion bureaus across the UK and the diminishing of the religion-news beat more broadly, the reality is that there is less religion news coverage at established media entities like the BBC. This makes smaller, niche journalism entities such as *The Muslim News* and *Christian Today* all the more important, in that they are filling a gap left by larger news organizations.

These smaller media entities also are not playing by the ground rules set by such news organizations, and commitments to independence have less pull. We saw this in the coverage of refugees, in that both *Christian Today* and *The Muslim News* suffered from a lack of transparency in sourcing on the coverage of refugees; this proved to be remarkably troubling in the case of *Christian Today*. The lack of sourcing, second-hand sourcing, and anonymous sourcing resulted in the publication of stories not seen elsewhere in reporting

on refugees. Rather than providing more information or perspective on the refugee crisis, *Christian Today* largely perpetuated an orientalist discourse and served to instill moral panic through their coverage. *The Muslim News* very clearly advocated for the UK – and the western world more broadly – to accept more refugees from Syria and did so through pieces published from advocacy organizations that were not reported by journalists at *The Muslim News*. While *BBC News* certainly told the story of Syrian refugees in a compelling manner, this level of advocacy did not exist, in part because of the traditional journalistic norms of such large media organizations. Original reporting was not a value exercised in the religious news organizations. *Christian Today* in particular clearly worked to instill fear of Syrian refugees. There is also little concern about quoting news stories from foreign news sources, such as American website *WND* and German website *Unzen Suriert*. Favorable coverage was reserved for refugees who converted to Christianity. *The Muslim News*, in contrast, provided favorable coverage to UK Muslim charities such as Muslim Aid and Muslim Hands, but their coverage was at least sourced transparently.

Traditionally, news media cover refugees using a limited number of frames. These are typically negative frames that emphasize the danger posed by refugees or, in some cases, positive frames that largely emphasize the plight of refugees (Fürsich, 2010). Both sets of frames were seen in media coverage of Syrian refugees. Coverage of Syrian refugees was overwhelmingly positive in *BBC News* and *The Muslim News*, with discussions of their potential threat largely dismissed in stories.

Four predominant narrative frames appear in the news stories on Syrian refugees. First, there was a humanizing frame that sought to rehabilitate the image of refugees in

contrast to traditional media coverage. In other words, the coverage emphasized the human nature of the refugees by showing them in Western clothes and discussing near-universal concerns, such as family. This frame appeared seldomly in *BBC News* but was plentiful in *The Muslim News*. It did not appear at all in *Christian Today*. Second, there was a saviour frame in which the journalist served as the “hero” of the narrative and which placed refugees in the role of bystander or victim. Third, there was a dehumanizing frame that served to “other” refugees and instill fear of their camps. Finally, there was a redemption narrative frame underlying the news coverage of the refugees that focused on the injustice of treatment of refugees. This narrative even appeared in *Christian Today*, although the source of the injustice was often Islam, not the government.

*The Muslim News* and *Christian Today* in the UK report narratives regarding refugees that are in stark contrast to each other and to prior research on mainstream media publications, as well as to what was found here from *BBC News*. Furthermore, given the declining religion news in mainstream media, it may also be that there are issues overlooked in the mainstream media that are of high value to religious audiences. Very few articles in *BBC News* discussed the Syrian migration, but it was much more thoroughly covered in *The Muslim News*. Issues like the Syrian migration are material to invested religious audiences. Their coverage is, then, of value not just to the specific religious traditions their publication is geared toward but to the broader news-consuming audience as well.

Yet it is worth noting that overall, very little coverage has been devoted to covering this issue in any of the news publications. It is worth questioning why that would be. From

a structural standpoint, it would largely stem from a lack of resources: *BBC News* has few resources they can devote to in-depth religion coverage; simultaneously, both *The Muslim News* and *Christian Today* rely heavily on secondary sources for the coverage they do have. In-depth and routine coverage of the refugee crisis would likely require sending reporters to the refugee camps, which neither publication is likely able to do financially. Furthermore, the reporting conducted at the religious publications is designed to appeal to religious sentiments – charity in the case of *The Muslim News* and religious indignation in the case of *Christian Today* – and is likely conducted as a method to change the situation.

As news media structures gear themselves increasingly toward audiences and particular niches, there will be more news sources like *Christian Today* and *The Muslim News* that will serve as primary purveyors of truth for such situations. Future research should consider the role the audience plays in such reporting. In reporting crisis situations like the Syrian refugee crisis, to what degree are publications merely reporting what their audience hopes to read?

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