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## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND CONVERSATIONS IN AMERICAN AND ISRAELI PRIME-TIME TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

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This comparative content analysis examines the extent to which religion finds expression in mainstream TV programming. The appearance of religious practices, the level of fulfillment they bring, and the extent to which they accord with religious law along with the tone of conversation about religion were coded in 154 hours of prime-time network programming from the USA and 112 hours of prime-time programming aired by the major TV stations in Israel. The results indicate a very infrequent presence of religion in the programming in the two countries: once in two hours in Israel and once in three hours in the USA, but while in US programming more than three quarters of the religious practices brought fulfillment to their participants and more than 90% of the practices adhered fully or partly to religious rules, in Israeli shows only one quarter of the practices brought fulfillment and just half of them adhered fully or partly to religious rules. Conversation about religion appeared just as infrequently as practices did, but its tone was mainly positive in both countries.

Keywords: religion, religious practice, Israeli television, American television, content analysis



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This bi-national comparative study examines the extent to which religious practices and conversations about religion find expression in prime-time TV programming in different cultures. Beyond the mapping of religious practices as they appear on American and Israeli TV, we aim to discover whether the on-screen representation of taking part in religious practices brings about spiritual fulfillment to the characters; whether the on-screen presentation follows or deviates from religious customs; and whether verbal references to religious are positive or negative in tone.

It is significant to know how religion is presented in popular programming and to what extent this presentation differs across countries because even though commercial broadcasting rarely uses a didactic tone, it does build the image of religious tradition by representing certain customs and avoiding the presentation of others (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Over the years, popular shows have been often tainted with accusations about profanity (Fore, 1987; Meyer & Moors, 2006), but there is not a lot of scientific evidence that this is indeed the case, especially when it is known that many religious and non-religious viewers are interested in religious narratives (Gerbner, 1987; Hamilton & Rubin, 1992; Kataria & Regner, 2011). Obviously, producers use their series to project certain values (Chesebro, 2003). In light of that we want to learn what "the television religious meta-content" (as coined by Gerbner, Gross, Hoover, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1984) is like. Content analyses like ours define basic themes, values and messages of television. By doing this they not only serve as a starting point for effect studies but also draw a map of popular culture (Greenberg, 1980). Thus, the current investigation may inform us more about the popular image of religion.

### **Religious TV broadcasting in the USA and ISRAEL**

Most research on media and religion has been undertaken in the US context (Chesebro, 1991; Clarke, 2005; Gerbner et al., 1984; Hamilton & Rubin, 1992; Hoover, 2006; Skill & Robinson, 1994; Skill, Robinson, Lyons, & Larson, 1994). Israel and the USA provide a constructive case for comparison from a number of perspectives. First, from a theological perspective, differences in Christianity and Judaism influence television content. Both Judaism and Christianity have happier festivals – in the case of Judaism thanksgiving festivals like Passover, Tabernacles, Hanuka and Purim, and Christmas in the case of Christianity. There are also holy days in both faiths focused on penitence rather than joy, which raise questions of how such themes may be communicated pictorially. These include Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av in the case of Judaism and Holy Week and Easter in Christianity. Both religions include in their res-

pective calendars periods of sorrow like the Three Weeks and the Omer in the former and Lent in the latter. While joyful festivals are widely covered, periods of penitence are less communicable. Yet, sociologically speaking, Judaism obliges the believer to exhibit more commitment in daily life since prayers are more frequent and eating-related laws are more severe (Neusner, 2000; Rahner, 1978).

The case for comparing the United States and Israel is also rooted in their political structures. Israel proves a contrasting case to the US because while in the United States church and state are completely separated, in Israel synagogue and state are interwoven. The synagogue-state relationship in Israel itself has been the subject of wide research attention (Sharansky, 2000). The centrality of religion in Israeli public life was reflected in the fact that 22% of all reporting about religion in the Israeli media was on the front page or at the beginning of broadcast programmes (Cohen, 2005). Much less attention in the research on state-religion relations inside Israel has been given to semi-official actors like the media, even though Israeli TV stations are required by law to offer some religious programming (Cohen, 2012).

This brings us to the final justification of our comparison – examining whether differences in broadcasting models impact the programming content. As the commercial model is predominant in US broadcasting, religious programming has always been aired almost entirely by non-public stations. Furthermore, although mainline Christian Protestant groups have held licenses to operate channels that spread their gospel since the early 1950s, even though evangelical churches have had their own televangelical channels since the 1980s, and despite the fact that some independent channels like the *Family Channel* and the *PAX* network have also carried considerable Christian-religious fare without commitment to a specific church – the more successful programs with religious topics have been aired in the national commercial networks (Gerbner, 1987). Shows such as *Touched by an Angel* (CBS, 1994–2003) about angels who help the Lord, *Seventh Heaven* (WB, 1996–2007) a family drama about the moral challenges of a modern minister, his wife and children, and *Father Dowling Mysteries* (NBC, 1989–1991) about a priest who works part-time as a private eye, topped the ratings chart. Common in all of these shows was an attempt to sneak in religious themes through popular formats in mainstream channels (Hoover, 2006).

Israel, by contrast, has a combined public-private broadcasting model that is not solely subject to market forces. Yet, here, too, the exposure to public broadcasting, which operates one station (*Channel 1*) that produces special programs on religious matters, is negligible (Cohen, 2012). Attempts to intro-

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duce religious stations have been rare and not very successful: One cable channel *Techelet* operated for just a few months in 2003 because there were not enough subscribers. The second attempt, *Channel 20*, has been broadcasting since 2014 with low ratings programming that shifted quickly from religion to news and current affairs from a right wing perspective (Alpher, 2015). As in the US, the wider exposure of religion in the Israeli broadcast fare comes from programs aired in the two major commercial networks (*Channel 2* and *Channel 10*). The terms of their franchise obligates them to broadcast 48 hours per year of programming about religion. A regulatory body, the members of whom are appointed by the government ascertains that the broadcasters respect the terms of the franchise. Shows such as *A Touch Away* (Channel 2, 2006, Romeo and Juliet set at an Ultra-Orthodox surroundings) and *Srugim* (Channel 10, 2008–2012, personal relationships among twenty-something modern-orthodox) gained significant popularity – projecting religious Jewish customs into the Israeli prime-time fare (Cohen, 2012).

### Previous research

Just a handful of studies on religious content on television have been carried out so far, mostly in the USA. The earliest report by Chesebro (1991) coded what he termed "value categories" in programming from the 1970s and 1980s and found that theology was present in just 6% of the programs – far less frequently than individualism (50%) or authority (24%). The rate doubled in the late 1990s, but still lagged significantly behind individualism (42%) and authority (23%). Clarke (2005) found that religious characters do not appear frequently on US network TV programming, and that much more religious content is found on independent stations like PAX that focus on family values. Skill et al. (1994) found that the religious side of characters was not typically presented on television, and when it was presented it was rarely a central theme. Another study by Skill and Robinson (1994) examined the image of Christian clergy in fictional TV programs and found that they are infrequently depicted, but that when they are portrayed they are often engaged in non-religious or even unlawful activities. This portrayal echoed real-life sexual scandals involving Catholic clergy that often appear in the news. No study about religious content on mainstream American TV appeared in the last decade. This leaves Clarke's conclusion that religion (mainly Christian) is just a marginal theme in popular broadcasting as the latest relevant research, and emphasizes the need for an update study.

Religious content on Israeli television has received very little attention from social scientists. Rivlin (2009) conducted a

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semiotic analysis of Jewish identity on American and Israeli TV, and concluded that Jewish identity was expressed in secular Israeli programs only to a limited extent. Burg (2015) looked at the depiction of modern Orthodox characters in two dramatic series (*Srugim*, and *Other life*) – and concluded that the representation in the first show that was written and directed by religious people is more accurate but not entirely true to reality. The only quantitative study that examined religious content on Israeli TV coded newscasts and found a relatively high share of stories about religion – 19% of the items – but the high figure may stem from the central place of religion in the local political discourse (Cohen, 2005). No systematic empirical analysis of religious content in non-news Israeli programming, of the type we do, exists.

It is noteworthy that the potential audience for TV programs with religious themes is not necessarily religious. A poll from 2005 found that 40% of the Jewish public were either 'very interested' or 'somewhat interested' in the inclusion of Jewish values and traditions in commercial programming and an additional quarter of the viewers were 'interested to a certain extent'. A similar percent thought that there are 'not enough' programs with religious content in the main commercial stations. When asked whether they would watch such programming, 22% of the respondents replied definitely and 45% of them thought that they would and that they do not mind seeing such content across various genres and formats (Second Authority for Television and Radio, 2006). These figures are striking since the share of religious people in Israel is far smaller and because they tend to watch TV less frequently than the public at large (Hetsroni & Lowenstein, 2013). To be true, it also reflects the block of traditional but non-strictly religious Jews in the Israeli public who, while having a fundamental belief in the existence of God, are nevertheless selective in observance of religious customs and laws, in part seeing these less in terms of religious commands and more in cultural terms.

In a survey of Christian conservatives in the US, Hamilton and Rubin (1992) found that religious conservatives were less inclined than non-conservatives to see television as 'important to them', citing the inclusion of sexual-related content as a major reason. According to Abelman's study, 65% of the religious television viewers are church members. They are not 'born again' as a result of being exposed to religious programming, but rather have their faith reinforced and strengthened through viewing (Abelman, 1990). A similar conclusion was reported by Gerbner et al. (1984). Hoover (1988), by contrast, drawing upon a qualitative survey of members of the *700 Club*, found that viewers of religious TV were less observant compared to conservative evangelists.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

If religion in traditional societies was based upon authority vested in religious bodies, in complex industrial societies there is increased emphasis upon personal choice in moral and religious matters with religious and spiritual issues increasingly mediated through electronic technologies (Gerbner, 1987; Gerbner et al., 1984; Hoover, 2006). While the church and the synagogue still play an important role for religious and traditional people in the USA and Israel respectively, it has been shown that many people draw their religious identity also from the media (Hoover, 2006). Indeed, Schultze (1990) argues that religious values and beliefs are expressed in 'secular' programming as we have seen in shows such as *Touched by an Angel* in the USA and *A Touch Away* in Israel. What are the implications for the theology itself if a non-strictly religious group of persons draws a theologically selective – indeed diluted view – of religion, constructed by the producers, i.e. the 'priests' of Hollywood. By speaking in terms understood by the broader, non-strictly religious public, do the media achieve what formal religious leaders fail to? Deacy (2013) and Moore (1994) noted how Christmas came into its own because of, rather than in spite of, its material and commercialised theology.

As the last analysis of religious content in popular American programming was conducted a decade ago (Clarke, 2005), the timeliness of our study is clear. While recent technologies such as DVD, video on demand and online streaming offer options of watching TV not by viewing scheduled broadcast programmes, the major networks still draw more viewers than their competitors and much of the content that is available for viewing through new technologies consists of shows aired also by the networks, creating a "wall to wall *Law & Order*" programming universe (Doyle, 2010, p. 434). The commercial, competitive, nature of US tv ratings raises the question of whether religious programming – like other categories of programming – is "diluted" to draw viewers. If the media focus on certain aspects of a religion, ignoring other less striking ones, it has implications for religious identity itself because the image constructed will be different from the original image of the religious object in ancient tradition and folklore.

While in the US programs are aired almost solely because of their commercial value, the charter of Israeli commercial stations obliges them to air shows that are not necessarily commercially optimal but that deal with topics that are ranked high in public interest, religion among them (Cohen, 2012). Furthermore, as Israel defines itself as a Jewish state (Smooha, 2002), the religious content in local broadcasts is likely to be focused on Judaism and be more voluminous as well as richer

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than in the US, where state and religion are separated by law. Thus, the image constructed, for example, of less media attractive aspects of a religion, e.g. its fast days, is not truly reflective of the original image it enjoyed in ancient texts. A study of religious holy days in the Israeli press found that in quantitative terms the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, a 24 hour-long fast, received much less coverage than other festivals, including the minor but popular one of Hanuka, which is not even mentioned in the Bible (Cohen, 2018). In the past, Israeli stations used to broadcast imported programs from the US, but such imports are now almost entirely absent from the prime-time lineup of the major networks (Tokatly, 2000).

The contrasting cases of the United States and Israel juxtapose religions, media systems and cultures. It would not be surprising if Israeli programming contained a higher share of religious content than American programming. Yet, in light of the dearth of relevant comparative research, we decided to posit research questions rather than phrase directional hypotheses. Questions to be addressed are:

- RQ1: Which are the most popular religious practices in prime-time programming and are there differences in the distribution of practices between the USA and Israel?
- RQ2: Does religious practice bring about spiritual fulfillment to the main character and are there differences between the USA and Israel in this realm?
- RQ3: Does religious practice, as depicted on TV, accord with traditional religious rules and are there differences between the USA and Israel regarding the extent of adherence to these rules?
- RQ4: Are conversations about religion in TV programs positive or negative in tone, and are there differences between the USA and Israel pertaining to this?

## METHOD

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Content showing religious practices and conversations on prime-time shows aired by the four major American networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX) and the two most watched TV stations in Israel (Channel 2 and Channel 10) was analyzed.

## Sample

A random sample of two weeks of broadcasting was selected from each American TV network (one week in November 2013 and one week in February 2014) and four weeks of broadcasts from the two Israeli stations (two weeks from November 2013 and two weeks from February 2014). In both countries, only

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prime-time programming – i.e. shows aired between 20:00 and 23:00 in the USA (with the exception of FOX where the prime-time slot terminates an hour earlier) and programs aired between 21:00 and 23:00 in Israel – were sampled. The sample did not include newscasts and was based upon the constructed week method in which daily hours are randomly picked up from different weeks – until programming for a day of broadcasting is accumulated. This sampling method overcomes problems of representativeness that might be caused by "special-day schedule" (see *National Television Violence Study*, 1998). In total, the sample comprised 154 hours of American programming (42 hours from ABC, 42 hours from NBC, 42 hours from CBS, and 28 hours from Fox) and 112 hours of Israeli programming (56 hours from Channel 2 and 56 hours from Channel 10).

## Coding book

The coding unit for the first three research questions was an *overt religious practice*. The list included the following categories and sub-categories: *life cycle ceremonies* (wedding, funeral or memorial ceremonies, circumcision, baptism, first communion); *religious meals* (festive religious meal, religious meal not on a religious holiday, fasting); *prayers and services* (prayer, confession, study of Holy Scriptures); and *other*. This classification is based on research about Judeo-Christian religious practices (Neusner, 2000; Rahner, 1978). A similar coding scheme was used by Skill et al. (1994) in their analysis of religious behavior on American TV two decades ago.

Any identified religious practice (131 overall) was coded also for *religious or spiritual fulfillment experienced by the main character/s who take part in the practice* (yes/no) determined by positive or negative adjectives uttered by the character/s when describing the experience i.e. "going to church on Sunday makes me a whole person, a better creature, a human being" and for its *adherence to religious rules* (full/partial/none). For example, a Jewish wedding scene that included a Rabbi, traditional Ketubah (wedding oath) in Aramaic language and blessings was coded as fully adhering. Another wedding scene where the Ketubah was translated into Hebrew with some rephrasing and the blessings were augmented by a secular poem was classified as partially adhering. A third scene where the Rabbi was replaced by a rock star and the Ketubah and blessings were absent was coded as entirely not adhering.

Finally, we also identified 117 *conversations regarding religion* throughout the programming, treated them as a unit of analysis and classified their *tone* as positive/negative/neutral or non-existent. This coding was also based on positive and negative adjectives heard in the conversation i.e. "If our fathers did not observe Shabbat year after year, we would not have been alive this year".

## Reliability

The coding was done by a team of 25 students who have an academic background in religious studies and who completed a research methods course. None of the coders was privy to the specific goals of the study. Ten of the coders were Israeli and coded only Israeli programs. The remainder of the coders were American and coded only American shows. Each coder worked alone and analyzed 10 to 20 hours of programming. The coders were trained in a group for six hours and on an individual basis for an additional two hours. The deployment of a large number of coders – necessary because of the large size of the sample – did not result in loss of reliability. Indeed as Fleiss (1971) argues, the greater the number of coders (if properly trained and working independently) the more accurate the coding is because the results may be more reliably attributed to a "pool of coders" (as a population), and the potential for measurement error by any singular coder is smaller.

Each category was analyzed twice by different coders. Cohen's Kappa statistic was computed to measure agreement between coders and coding reliability. Its value for any pair of coders ranged from 0.75 to 0.82 across the categories ( $\kappa = 0.81$  for identifying the religious practice;  $\kappa = 0.80$  for joy brought by taking part in religious practice;  $\kappa = 0.75$  for adherence of the practice to religious rules;  $\kappa = 0.82$  for the valence of conversation about religion). Cases of disagreement between coders were presented at a tandem discussion and, if remained undecided after the discussion, were resolved by the authors (who eventually had to resolve only three cases of coders' disagreement).

## RESULTS

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The coding yielded 131 religious practices (77 shown in Israeli programs and 54 shown in American programs) and 117 instances of religion being mentioned in conversations (64 times in Israeli programs and 53 times in American programs).

The rate in which any religious practice appears in our sample of prime-time programming is approximately once in three hours in the USA and twice as much in Israel. This difference in proportion is statistically significant  $\{Z = 5.4, P < 0.001\}$ . The rate in which any conversation regarding religion appears on prime-time programming is slightly more than once in two hours in Israel and approximately once in three hours in the USA. This difference of proportion is also significant  $\{Z = 3.7, P < 0.001\}$ . From these tests we conclude that even though in both countries religious practices and conversations about religion occur infrequently in the prime-time programming of the major networks, in Israel the occurrence is still considerably more prevalent than in the US.

## Answering the research questions

The *first research question* asked is: What are the most popular religious practices that appear in prime-time programming and are there cultural differences in popularity? Table 1 presents the distribution of different religious practices categories (life-cycle ceremonies, religious meals, prayers and services, other) and the breakdown into sub-categories in the two countries.

TABLE 1  
Categories and sub-categories of religious practices by country

Category	Sub-category	Israel (%, N = 77)	USA (%, N = 54)
Life cycle ceremonies	Wedding	3	3
	Funeral	12	3
	Divorce	-	-
	Circumcision/baptism	1.5	-
	First communion/Bar-mitzvah	-	-
	<i>Total</i>	16.5	6
Prayers and services	Prayer	9	16
	Confession	-	6
	Study of the holy scriptures	9	-
	<i>Total</i>	18	22
Meals and holidays	Holiday meal	6	-
	Religious meal – not on holiday	3	-
	Fasting	-	-
	Holiday customs (excluding meals)	41	55
	<i>Total</i>	50	55
Other		15.5	17

Religious holy days and meals occupy the lion's share of religious practices (55% in the USA; 50% in Israel). The share of prayers, while not particularly high (16% in the USA; 9% in Israel), is still larger than what Skill et al.'s study of the portrayal of religion on fictional network TV programming (1994) found. Life cycle ceremonies are considerably more prevalent in Israeli shows (16.5%) than in American programs (6%). The relatively small number of cases in some of the sub-categories does not enable statistical analysis at this level. The overall distribution of practices categories was examined across countries. No significant differences were found  $\{\chi^2(3) = 4.5, P > 0.05\}$ . This means that in total both the USA and Israel produce a rather similar picture of religious practices in prime-time programming.

In examining the *second research question* regarding spiritual and religious fulfillment expressed by taking part in religious practice, we compare the percent of religious practices coded as bringing fulfillment to the major participants in US programs (77%) with the percent of religious practices coded as bringing fulfillment to the major participants in Israeli shows

(27%). This difference is significant  $\{\chi^2(1) = 38.5, P < 0.001\}$  with notable effect ( $\lambda = 0.491$ ). While only one out of four religious practices in the Israeli sample brought fulfillment to the main character(s) who take(s) part in it, American programming features such fulfillment in three out of four practices.

In examining the *third research question* – the extent to which the depiction of religion on television accorded accurately with religious rules of observance (Christian *dogma* or Jewish religious law, *halakhah*) or not – we found that the portrayal of religion on US television was much more accurate than that shown on Israeli TV. Only 6.5% of the religious practices shown in the US sample of programming were completely inaccurate as opposed to 44% in the Israeli sample. By contrast, 48.5% of the practices shown in the US sample were completely accurate in religious terms while in the Israeli sample only 38.5% of the practices met this criterion (see Table 2).

➔ TABLE 2  
Religious practices' adherence to religious rules by country

Adherence to religious rules	Israel (%, N = 77)	USA (%, N = 54)
Full	38.5	48.5
Partial	17.5	45.0
Not at all	44.0	6.5

The results in this case created an ordinal scale (full adherence-partial adherence-no adherence). Therefore, the difference between the two countries was assessed by the Mann-Whitney Test. The results showed a significant cultural difference  $\{Z = 2.35, P = 0.02\}$  with a small to medium effect ( $r = 0.20$ ).

In examining the *fourth research question* – the tone in conversations about religion that appeared throughout the programming – the tone was found to be much more positive in the US sample (81%) than in the Israeli sample (51%). There was a greater inclination in the Israeli sample towards neutrality. Yet, overall, there was a low inclination shared by both the Israeli and US samples towards a negative tone in conversations about religion (see Table 3).

➔ TABLE 3  
Tone of conversation about religion by country

Tone of conversation about religion	Israel (%, N = 77)	USA (%, N = 54)
Positive	51	81
Neutral	38	4
Negative	11	15

Since in this case as well the distribution created an ordinal scale (positive-neutral-negative), the difference between the two countries was assessed by the Mann-Whitney Test. The results indicate a significant difference  $\{Z = 2.73, P = 0.006\}$

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with a small to medium effect ( $r = 0.24$ ). Overall, the tone in conversations regarding religion is more positive in American TV than it is in Israeli TV. This result is not dissimilar from the Skill et al. (1994) finding that the portrayal of religion on US TV was more inclined to be positive, but albeit to a lesser extent than in our study.

## **DISCUSSION**

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The fact that we have found only 131 religious practices and only 117 conversations about religion in 266 hours of prime-time programming points to the marginality of religious themes in popular TV shows. While the rate in which religion appears in American programming (once in three hours) is just half of the rate in which it appears in Israeli shows – the preoccupation with religion in both countries is meager. Sex, for instance, appears in every hour in Israel and in every 45 minutes in the States, while violence occupies no less than two minutes in every broadcasting hour in US network primetime programming (Hetsroni, 2011).

This marginality is not radically different from what was found in the few studies that examined the presentation of religion in American prime-time programming (*cf.* Chesebro, 2003; Skill et al., 1994). This may reflect long-term difficulty in conveying, or reluctance to feature religion on the small screen, which is not restricted to fictional programming. A content analysis of US TV news magazines, carried out by the Garrett-Medill Center for Religion and the News Media (1999) found that only 3% of the items were about religion. This trend may be explained in a number of ways. First, religion typically falls short in contrast to such criteria of newsworthiness as social conflict, and celebrities and people of high status. Second, religion usually lacks the element of surprise and wonder that is crucial for the development of narrative (regardless of whether the format is fiction or non-fiction). Not even one of the religion-related practices and conversations in our sample served as a major plotline axis or as a narrative cliff-hanger. Third, the creative personnel of TV programs are often secular and devoid of religious beliefs. All in all, the bottom line is that the programming offered does not fully meet the wishes of a considerable segment of the population (40% in Israel – see Second Authority for Television and Radio, 2006) to include Jewish traditions and customs in the shows.

It is instructive to note that in recent years in order to widen the representation of religion on Israeli TV – Israel's modern religious community has encouraged professional training in film in the hope that they will be absorbed into local television channels (Cohen, 2012). Yet, even the use of such

manpower cannot solve the problem that Judeo-Christian beliefs, which often draw upon the sub-conscious, do not translate easily into manageable dramatic format. Given that in the monotheistic tradition God is infinite, it is difficult to translate this very intangibility into terms which can be portrayed in the visual media. Indeed, Chesebro (2003) argues that the low frequency of theology in US television reflects the greater attention which Americans give to material aspects of everyday life. Regardless of the reason, as Greenberg (1980, p. XII) commented: "if something is absent from television, then the absence stamps the 'thing' as without much value in society given the judged importance of television among the American public" – creating a momentum of little interest in religion. This may also be the case to some extent with Israel. While it is not essentially entirely out of the question in the post-network era that those viewers who want to see religious content may obtain it from less mainstream venues, the cases of Israel and the USA do not indicate high viewership for specialty religious channels (Cohen, 2012; Doyle, 2010).

Yet, our study also shows that while the presentation of religious practice in popular programs is rare, it is also positive in tone. While the picture is more unequivocal in the USA, where over 80% of the conversations about religion are positive, in contrast to Israel, where the share of positive conversations is only slightly more than half, in both countries negative conversations constitute a minority (15% or less of the conversations). The American findings are similar to the results of a previous study (Skill et al., 1994) and are in line with the general bias in favor of positive messages in popular programming (Chesebro, 2003). The cultural difference may partly be explained by the fact that the Israeli programs tend to feature funerals four times more often than they feature weddings whereas in the USA the two ceremonies enjoy an equally small share (3%), but it may also reflect a fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity in the external framing of holy days (which are most often featured in the programs). The most important (and most often depicted) Christian holidays such as *Christmas* and *Easter* are characterized by highly positive mood behaviors such as giving gifts, tree decoration and shopping (Deacy, 2013; Snyder, 1977), whereas some of the most significant Jewish holy days are characterized by fasting and spiritual introspection respectively about one's behaviour. While this difference may also explain why in American programming fulfillment from participating in religious activities is three times more frequent than it is in Israeli programming, it would be difficult and maybe even inadequate to explain this difference in the pop-

ular image of religion as resulting from a less positive tone for Judaism or a more positive one for Christianity in religious traditions. Judaism has a plethora of major and minor holy days – including thanksgiving holy days like *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), as well as others like *Hanuka* and *Purim* – which radiate happiness and rejoicing. Even fasting on *Yom Kippur* (not identified in terms of its joyfulness) is a positively uplifting religious experience, producing elevated spiritual fulfillment. Television's incapability to convey religion accurately reflects the medium's limitations to communicate ideas. Whereas those aspects of religion symbolized with material objects (the ram's horn or *shofar* on Rosh Hashonah, the *menora* on Hanukkah, the festival *Seder* at Pesach, and the *sukka* at Sukkot, the *baptism gown*, and the *Easter basket*) might be portrayed visually, the more spiritual aspects are not suitable for a medium dominated by the visual. In the pre-television era, by contrast, radio was more suitable for communicating such ideas orally and the Internet drawing upon the convergence of the visual, the voice, and the text might also be more suitable than television for conveying religion and spirituality.

Israel's prime-time programming does feature a double intake of religious practices in comparison with the American prime-time lineup. Two reasons for that may be offered: the first is the stricter regulation of Israeli commercial broadcasting that obligates the local networks to include religion-related stories in the programs (Cohen, 2012); the second is the Jewish character of Israel – a country where there is no constitutional division between state and religion unlike the United States (Smootha, 2002). Interestingly, adherence of religious practices to religious rules was more frequent in the American programs than in the Israeli shows. The reason might be that *halakhah* (Jewish Law) is very complicated and forbidding. Therefore, many practices, including those involving observant Jews, deviate – at least to some extent – from the strictest reading of Jewish religious rules. For example, despite the biblical prohibition to have in one's possession leavened products such as bread during the Passover festival notwithstanding, observant Jews overwhelmingly do not in practice physically dispose of such products but rather sell them symbolically to a Gentile prior to the eve of the Passover festival only to buy them back, or 'repossess them', after the termination of the festival.

In light of the fact that two thirds of the Americans believe in Christ's resurrection and three-fourths believe in God (Harris Poll, 2013), and a similar share of Israeli Jews define themselves as "not-atheists" (Arian & Kaiser-Sugarman, 2009),

it is surprising that in popular programming there are not more stories with religious content. Future studies may ask viewers if they wish to see more of such stories and whether the presentation of religion in the programming does not change over the years – as the limited comparison of our data with figures from two decades ago suggests (Cf. Skill et al., 1994).

From a cultivation standpoint, the incomplete presentation of religion in popular programming contributes to the construction of a rather distorted image of religion amongst viewers who are not highly observant or knowledgeable about religion (Gerbner et al., 1984). To such people, television serves as a major source of information about religion and a strong factor in determining its image (Hoover, 2006). From watching television they learn that religious life is often fulfilling but also quite superficial, as some of the more profound religious experiences like fasting and believing are left off-screen and preference is given to festive celebrations. If the media's construction of events is determined by news values and public interest rather than a mystical order recording divine events and miracles not subject to rational analysis, a gap necessarily exists between the media's view and the traditional view. After all, the media are not supposed to be conveyers of religion, about distant religious stories and events occurring in the past, but are about the present.

Finally, this study, though pioneering in comparing two countries with different religious traditions, necessarily has its limitations. While it is cross-cultural, it covers only two cultures which are quite distinct from one another, but both are predominated by monotheistic religions. The few works that examined the presentation of religion in other monotheistic cultures (e.g. Britain) yielded rather similar findings about the marginality of the theme (Deller, 2012), but it would be instructive to compare the presentation of religion on television in these countries with its presentation in non-monotheistic countries (e.g. Japan, Korea).

While religions may traverse thousands of years, customs do change over time. Christmas tree decoration, for instance, became popular only in the second half of the 19th century (Snyder, 1977). Changes in population composition due to immigration may change the popularity of religions in society and may have an impact on the storylines that the TV industry chooses to feature in order to appeal to large audiences. If so, it may be asked, what are the implications of this difference for religious identity and for theology as a whole in the modern era? Therefore, the presentation of religion on the small screen may change in the future and should be monitored more often than it has been until now.

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## Vjerske prakse i razgovori o religiji u elitnim terminima američke i izraelske televizije

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Ova usporedna analiza sadržaja istražuje u kojoj je mjeri religija prisutna u matičnom (mainstream) televizijskom programiranju. Pojava vjerskih praksi, razina ispunjenja koju donose i njihova usklađenost s vjerskim zakonima, kao i ton kojim se razgovora o religiji, kodirani su unutar 154 sata elitnih programskih termina u SAD-u, odnosno unutar 112 sati udarnog termina koji emitiraju glavne televizijske kuće u Izraelu. Rezultati pokazuju vrlo malu prisutnost religije u TV-programima dviju zemalja: jednom u dva sata u Izraelu i jednom u tri sata u SAD-u. Ali dok je religijskim programskim sadržajima u SAD-u ispunjenje postiglo više od tri četvrtine sudionika i više od 90 % emisija potpuno je ili djelomično poštovalo religijska pravila, u Izraelu je samo jedna četvrtina sudionika doživjela ispunjenje, a samo polovica emisija potpuno je ili djelomično slijedila vjerska pravila. Razgovor o religiji bio je podjednako malo zastupljen kao i same vjerske prakse, ali je ton razgovora bio uglavnom pozitivan u obje zemlje.

Ključne riječi: religija, vjerska praksa, izraelska televizija, američka televizija, analiza sadržaja



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