

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN INTERPRETING MEDIA
PORTRAYALS OF MUSLIMS

By

JILL ANNE FAGAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ART IN COMMUNICATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Edward R. Murrow School of Communication

AUGUST 2006

To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of JILL ANNE FAGAN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A huge thanks goes out to Jola Drzewiecka, for reading this beast about seven hundred times. Also, thanks to Susan Ross and Rick Busselle for being on the committee. Definitely thanks to my family (Mom, Dad, Jacqueline, Nick, Cody, Alicia, and Baby Nick) and to my all friends (but especially Rakhee and Will) for listening to all the woes of thesis writing. In addition, thanks to all my participants – you guys rock.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN INTERPRETING MEDIA
PORTRAYALS OF MUSLIMS

Abstract

By Jill Anne Fagan, M.A.
Washington State University
August 2006

Chair: Jolanta Drzewiecka

This study examines how interpretive communities of fundamentalist Christians use media interpretations of Islam. The analysis focused on the way in which the text becomes relevant to the viewers and what role their identities as fundamentalist Christians play in their interpretations of media texts.

Three research questions are asked: (1) What are the discursive strategies through which meanings are made relevant? (2) How do fundamentalist Christians position themselves in relation to Islam through their interpretations? (3) How are fundamentalist Christian identities relevant to interpretations of the media text? Four groups of fundamentalist Christians viewed a documentary about Islam in their own homes. Their conversations were recorded and analyzed for emergent themes. The analysis identified six themes (“the violence that’s required in the Koran,” “the works versus faith dichotomy,” “too close to the truth,” “Mohammed is revered as a god,” “Islam really does make women very secondary,” and “no witnesses”) and two discourses (comparison to Christianity and comparison to other false religions) that answered the three research questions. In addition, this study poses that participants use polysemic resistive readings to interpret the documentary so that it fits into their worldview.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
The Democratic Processes of Mediated Communication: Interpretive Communities.....	3
Meaning and Polysemy.....	5
Relevance.....	7
Identity and Ideology.....	10
3. METHODS.....	13
4. ANALYSIS.....	17
Analysis of Documentary.....	17
Findings.....	21
Major Themes: How Participants Expressed Themselves.....	21
The Violence That’s Required in the Koran.....	21
The Works Versus Faith Dichotomy.....	23
Too Close to the Truth.....	26
Mohammed is Revered as a God.....	28
Islam Really Does Make Women Secondary.....	29
No Witnesses.....	30
Discourses Discovered: How Participants Talk About Islam.....	31
Participants’ General Attitude About the Documentary: It Makes Me Feel More Negatively.....	34
5. DISCUSSION.....	37
6. CONCLUSION.....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	40

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who suffer because of the current war in the Middle East: soldiers, civilians, and residents alike.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Communication between the Westernized world and the Middle East has always been complicated due to differences in religion, history, and political and economic relations (Lawrence, 2003). The relations have been fraught with cultural misunderstandings, outright racism, and belief in both cultural and religious stereotypes. In an attempt to grasp this problem on a more specific level, I chose to study how religious identities play into the constructions of Islam in the West. Given the predominant religious framing, it is imperative that we understand how religious identities are relevant to Western interpretations of the Middle East. In this project, I investigated the way fundamentalist Christians use media to interpret and position themselves against Islam, other Christians, and non-Christians. I specifically focused on how fundamentalist Christians negotiate their identities within religious interpretive communities to create polysemic resistive readings of media.

I chose to focus on interpretations of media portrayals of Islam because of its past and current presence in the United States. September 11, 2001 was a “liminal moment” in American history: “a situation of intense communal emotion, heightened social relations, a reflexive condition in which society looks at itself and asks not just what it is, but what it should be” (Peri, 1997, p. 437). The perpetrators of this act were quickly identified as “Islamic terrorists,” and in many media outlets, Islam came under attack.

I chose to study Christians, in general, because of the relationship between these two religions that began with the Crusades and continued throughout history into the present (Gormly, 2004). More specifically, I have a lot of personal experience with

fundamentalist Christians and I wanted to use this opportunity to further explore what I know and how I know it. Hence, this study is, in part, a product of self-reflexive examination and engagement with an interpretive community.

While some studies have examined the representations of Islam in the media (Gormly, 2004; Gunn, 2004; Hairman & Lucaites, 2002; Wilkins and Downing, 2002), there are no studies that examine the connection between interpretations, identities, and interpretive communities. Christian leaders have portrayed Islam as “the other” and evil, but how do fundamentalist Christians as interpretive communities position themselves in relation to Islam and its representations in media? Therefore, the goal of this study is to understand how religious identities are relevant to the way in which fundamentalist Christians, notably members of local Christ Church and Trinity Reformed Church, interpreted a documentary entitled *Christianity and Islam*. The documentary was written and produced by Christians with the express purpose of being viewed by Christians to help them understand Islam and give them the tools to speak with Muslims. On a broader level, this study aims to contribute to the line of work examining how social groups, as interpretive communities, make media meanings relevant and how relevancy plays a part in the construction of those meanings (Aden, et al, 1995; Cohen, 1991; Jensen, 1996; Lind, 1996; Lindlof, 1988; Mastro, 2003; Rockler, 2002; Stout, 2004).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Democratic Processes of Mediated Communication: Interpretive Communities

This study builds on the body of literature which examines the connections between viewers, their identities, interpretation processes, and possibilities of progressive media interpretations. This literature poses that there is no monolithic audience, rather, there are interpretive communities: groups of people who take part together in mediated communication (Cohen, 1991). It is not necessary for members of an interpretive community to be physically together to create the community (Stout, 2004). Mediated communication actually “creates” the community (Lindlof, 1988). These communities frame the way people interpret texts (Aden, et al, 1995). Stout defines interpretive communities as “units of analysis designed to uncover localized processes of meaning-making” (Stout, 2004, p. 65).

Recipients of mass communication are characterized by their “discursive modes of interpreting media content” (Jensen, 1990, p. 130). Interpretation takes place at a social level. Texts can be interpreted within the context of a community in order to be understood before meaning can be made from the text. Outside of the context created by a culture or community, meaning does not exist (Lindlof, 1988).

Interpretive communities give individuals contexts within which to interpret media texts (Lindlof, 1988). For example any person who came to visit the baseball field from the movie *Field of Dreams* (Aden, et al, 1995) was part of an interpretive community, whether they came to visit it as an individual or in a family group or with a group of friends. This lends credence to Lindlof’s idea that “each interpretive community

functions as a sort of overlay of information structure on the structures of kinship and social organization” (Lindlof, 1988, p. 93), meaning an individual comes into an interpretive community as a member of a family and a member of a social group, but the interpretive community operates on top of these social structures. These social structures inform the way individuals proceed within the interpretive community.

An interpretive community concept proposes that meanings of a mediated text (such as a television program) are important when social action requires a practical application of that media content (Lindlof, 1988). Social action is any sort of act which is done by a group of people, such as the groups of Mormons in Las Vegas viewing media. Practical application may involve interpreting media throughout a city: billboards, television, radio, etc, as was the case with members of the Mormon Church in Las Vegas (Stout, 2004). Stout explained that members of the church functioned as an interpretive community as they viewed and heard media found all over the city. They used what they had been taught by church leaders (the dominant social group) to make their interpretations of the media, but claimed church views as their own (Stout, 2004).

Interaction between community members is another crucial factor which seems to “create and reinforce a shared understanding of the nature of the ‘community’ and ‘its’ ways of responding to the mediated text” (Aden, et al, 1995, p. 2). The interaction between the community members helps to determine what is practical and helps to define what is relevant to the community, not individuals within the community.

The meanings that people construct are a form of social empowerment (Cohen, 1994). Subordinated groups can view and interpret the same media as the dominant group views and interprets, but the subordinated group can then create its own

meaning(s) that subverts the meanings the dominant group attempts to force on the subordinate group. The resistive reading produced by subordinated group empowers them with the capability to deliberately create and choose between potentials of identities, meanings, actions, and knowledge, which creates social empowerment (Cohen, 1994).

Interpretive communities can contribute to social empowerment, however, they can also act hegemonically (Peri, 1997). This happens when the dominant social group attempts to create a single meaning from an event or story and attempts to impose this interpretation on all social groups involved. Some subgroups accent this meaning and some subgroups create their own resistive readings (Peri 1997). Hence, interpretation is a form of “social action” (Jensen, 1995, p. 91). When the dominant social group uses their social power to make interpretations for all other social groups, this action has lasting consequences for all social groups involved (Jensen, 1995).

Interpretive communities are an intersection of interest, identity, and viewing of the text. Viewers come to the text using their identity and interest (family, church group, work organization) to interpret the text. Interpretive communities can act hegemonically and also contribute to social empowerment, depending on the identities and interests of its members.

Meaning and Polysemy

Viewers do more than accept meanings embedded in texts – they interpret what they see and hear and construct meanings because humans get joy out of interpretation (Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1987). Viewers are able to construct their own meanings because texts can be polysemic - “capable of bearing multiple meanings because of the varying

intertextual relationships they carry and because of the varying constructions (or interests) of receivers” (Condit, 1989, p. 104). However, meanings are plural but not limitless (Ceccarelli, 1998). Viewers create their own meanings, and there is more than one meaning for any given text, but the number of meanings that can be created from a text are not boundless.

Openness and polysemy do not imply that any meaning can be constructed. Distinct interpretations of the text exist based upon the content of the text (Ceccarelli, 1998). Polysemy indicates a different interpretation in the denotative meaning of the text; however there are, at times, differences in the value of the interpretations. This is called polyvalence, which is “the condition where there is shared understanding of the denotations of the text, but disagreement about the valuation of those denotations” (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 398). Polysemy is about interpretation, while polyvalence is about judgment. Polysemy indicates entirely different readings of the text – the meanings are different. In polyvalence, the text is interpreted in the same way - it is taken to have the same meaning from all viewers. However, the value of that meaning is different for each group. Oftentimes, oppositional meanings found in a text involve polyvalence. Additionally, meanings are made through the lens of ideology and worldview; there is no meaning outside of ideology. Meaning is created from a variety of sources: needs, beliefs, attitudes (ideology), social groups, cultural groups, and language (Lindlof, 1988).

Ceccarelli (1998) identified three specific types of polysemy: strategic ambiguity, resistive readings, and hermeneutic depth. Strategic ambiguity indicates that the audience itself does not create a meaning in opposition to the dominant ideology, but is given what the dominant group perceives is an oppositional reading. Audiences create

their own oppositional reading through resistive readings that the text is open to.

Hermeneutic depth focuses on developing a reading of the text that encompasses all possible interpretations of the text (Ceccarelli, 1998). This study is concerned with discovering what type of polysemy, if any, is used in media interpretations of Islam.

Polysemy is a property of the text (Ceccarelli, 1998). In some cases, as with strategic ambiguity, a text is made to be intentionally polysemous. The authors of the text supply the other “reading” of the text for the audience. In other cases, as with resistive readings, the text is polysemous because it is an “open” text - the very nature of the text lends itself to having different interpretations, such as television texts (Fiske, 1968).

It is the polysemic nature of a text that equips the audience with the tools of opposition and enables audiences to create resistive meanings (Jensen, 1995). However, “resistance is always resistance by someone, to something, for a purpose, in a context” (Jensen, 1995, p. 76). The implications of the polysemy must be assessed within a social context. In this study, the social context is the politics of fundamentalist Christianity, as well as the relationship between Christianity and Islam. This context delimits possible polysemic interpretations by interpretive communities.

Relevance

Although individuals become interpretive communities in the process of viewing media text, their identities are relevant to how they interpret the meanings in the text. People make meaning based on what they find relevant to their sociocultural position (Cohen, 1991). Relevance refers to the applicability of certain issues to how a group interprets messages (Cohen, 1991). In other words, relevant moments are determined by

social issues that are important to a viewer as well as any limitations the text has polysemically (Cohen, 1991). If identity is the way people position themselves in relation to others (Hall, 1990), then relevance is a reflection of social group positioning.

Cohen (1991) demonstrated that gay and straight audience members chose meanings that were relevant to their social group, social standing, and social allegiances. Identification with a cultural group, whether that group is based on sexual orientation, race, or religion, is what makes certain themes within texts relevant. Lind argues that “the interpretation of a text is not a function of simple demographic variables such as race, class, gender, and so forth. Rather, it is *identification with a cultural subgroup* that is important because social positions structure and restrict access to various codes and discourse” (1996, p. 54).

Lind (1996) found that social positions determined different ways groups interpreted the news, and that certain issues important to each social position determined what was relevant to each group (1996). Lind explained that “because individuals are formed by the discourses they have experienced, relevance is a social concept” (1996, p. 55).

Rockler (2002) concluded that “relevancy influences the degree to which audience members interpret texts oppositionally” (p. 414). If a particular point is relevant to an audience member, its accuracy suddenly becomes increasingly important. If a relevant point is not accurate in the mind of the viewer, this causes the viewer to interpret the text oppositionally.

Rockler analyzed how participants interpret comic strips through “vocabularies that are particular to members of socioeconomic, cultural, professional, or other kinds of

groups (p. 400).” These vocabularies allow audience members to pick out what portions of the text are “reality,” while at the same time, letting the audience “deflect” what does not fit into that reality (Rockler, 2002). The vocabularies are also ideological because they are “a way of thinking...about the world” (Hall, 1990, p. 99).

Relevance is crucial to text interpretation:

Thus, the concept of relevance is a vital element in understanding the ‘moment’ that is the intersection of audience and text, in understanding how the viewer creates or makes meaning from a text, and in understanding the importance of different discourses in constructing that meaning (Lind, p. 55).

Relevance explains when and how the viewers and the text connect. “Relevant moments of meaning involve the spectators’ social allegiance and the semiotic boundaries of the text” (Cohen, 1991, p. 444). Allegiance to a religious group helps determine what is relevant to a member. However, the text also has an important impact on the topics that are discussed. “Thus when locating moments of relevancy, it is necessary to consider the viewers’ statements in the context of their ongoing conversation” (Cohen, 1991, p. 444). Discourse is socially produced talk (Cohen, 1991), thus viewers’ responses to each other’s comments help locate those moments of relevancy. And relevancy is the juncture at which viewer and text make contact.

Therefore, the following research question guides this inquiry.

RQ: What are the discursive strategies through which relevant meanings/interpretations are made?

Identity & Ideology

Identity is the way in which a person positions him- or herself in relation to another through performance of a self (Hall, 1990). Identities are not fixed or stagnant,

but constantly undergoing transformations: “identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall, 1990, p. 394). The process of identity is socially, culturally, and historically contingent (Durham, 2004; Hall, 1990). Although structural factors do not guarantee how individuals will identify, they do constrain identity choices. Hence, when apartheid collapsed, Afrikaners began to discursively redefine the collective identity that was perceived to be in need of rehabilitation (Steyn, 2004). And when faced with challenges aimed at their religious identity, Las Vegas Mormons redefined media found throughout the city so that the media fit into their religious worldview (Stout, 2004).

Identities, such as fundamentalist Christian, are both “arbitrary” and “strategic” (Hall, 1990, p. 397). Identities are arbitrary in the sense that there is no necessary or essential position. However, identities are strategic in that people position themselves within the dominant order to maximize the benefits afforded by their race, class, and religion (Hall, 1990). Not only do individuals position themselves to their own advantage, but groups position themselves to maximize their own advantage (Mastro, 2003).

History shows political frictions and clashes of cultures between the West and Islam (Lawrence, 2003). The West, whether historically represented by Western Europe or more currently represented by the United States, views Islam and the Middle East as an enemy, whether it be the early Crusades of Catholic Church (Lawrence, 2003) or the demonization of Islam following September 11 (Gunn, 2004). Islam, as an archetypal, oriental-ized other, was and is under constant criticism by Western leaders, both religious and political (Gormly, 2004).

Media coverage of 9/11 only served to heighten emotion (Anker, 2005) and demonize the terrorists (Gunn, 2004). The media are a “major factor” in shaping citizens’ responses to liminal moments (Peri, 1997, p. 435). From the moment those commercial airliners hit the Trade Center and the Pentagon, “images of violence and catastrophe have seared the collective mind” (Gunn, 2004, p. 1). American media used melodrama to create a discourse about 9/11 and to shape American collective identity (Anker, 2005). The media continued to feature speeches by President Bush as he framed America as the innocent victim of fanatical, irrational evil forces: “thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror” (Bush speech, 2001). Both the media and political leaders clearly separated good and evil, manufacturing United States Americans as victims and the Islamic extremists not only as terrorists, but as fair representatives of the rest of the Islamic world.

Christians attempt to define themselves by positioning themselves in opposition to Islam, especially since 9/11 (Gormly, 2004). However, the five basic tenets of Islam and the ten commandments of Christianity are strikingly similar. The Crusades of the Catholic Church and the *jihads* of radical Islam are analogous (Lawrence, 2003).

In relation to Christianity, the term “fundamentalist” was used to refer to “the movement to preserve the fundamental truths of Christianity, such as the transcendent and inerrant authority of the Scriptures” (Bolce and De Maio, 1999, p. 30). It took on a specifically negative connotation in 1925 due to media portrayals (Bolce and De Maio, 1999). Fundamentalist Christians are often portrayed in the media as racist and having a tendency to impose their views on others (Kerr, 2003). Many fundamentalist religious groups are given damaging portrayals in the media (Press and Cole, 1995; Stout, 2004).

As a group, fundamentalist Christians specifically are reported in the media in a “consistent, mildly negative matter,” (Kerr, 2003. p. 1). Fundamentalist Christians are an example of a group that functions in a close-minded manner. Given this previous research about media portrayals of fundamentalist Christians, it becomes important to understand how fundamentalist Christians use and interact with media portrayals of other religions. These additional research questions were investigated.

RQ: How do fundamentalist Christians position themselves in relation to Islam through their interpretations? How are fundamentalist Christian identities relevant to interpretations of the media text?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This project utilizes a method developed by Cohen (1991) to study moments in which viewers make a specific discourse relevant to them in an interpretation of a mediated text. The main elements of this method are showing a mediated text to different groups of people and audiotaping their conversations. The conversations “simply suggest some of the ways that cultural subjectivities...are made relevant in meaning” (Cohen, 1991, p. 444). In this study, groups of conservative Christians viewed “*Christianity and Islam: The Tenets of Islam.*” This is a documentary produced by a Christian group. Its express purpose is to educate Christians about Islam so they can, in turn, go out and talk to Muslims, the implication being that they convert the Muslims to Christianity. As with all other groups, there are many different sects, or denominations, of Christianity. This documentary was made by one specific denomination and I thought it would be useful to look at how a different group of Christians viewed it.

In qualitative research, the goal is not to generalize to the larger population, “but rather to create a discursive text of audience members speaking about a media text, and analyze that text rhetorically and/or ideologically” (Rockler, 2002, p. 406). Hence, most studies use a limited number of participants and employ in depth qualitative interpretation of their responses. Rockler’s (2002) study used five groups of three to five group members to study the relevance of race in newspaper cartoons, resulting in 21 participants. Rockler’s (2001) study used just ten people to study polysemy. Press and Cole’s (1995) study on pro-life women used groups of two to five women, resulting in 41 participants. Stout’s (2004) study on Mormons in Las Vegas included 17 participants.

I gathered four groups of people who attend either Christ Church or Trinity Reformed Church. Group size ranged from three to five, with one group of three, one group of four, and two groups of five, resulting in a total of 17 participants. Participants were found through community, a network of friends, and membership in one of the two churches. Christ Church and Trinity Reformed Church were chosen because of their conservative, fundamentalist ideologies. Trinity Reformed Church is a sister church of Christ Church, hence they have very similar church missions and constitutions. While the participants do not necessarily represent every member of both churches, this type of qualitative study can adequately encapsulate human life (Durham, 2004): it is an in-depth look at how the identities of the 17 members of these churches are relevant to their interpretations of representations of Islam.

These churches are well known in the Moscow-Pullman community. Many of the church leaders are involved in conflicts with other community members. Conflicts range from social issues (like slavery) to regulatory issues (like zoning). Webster's Dictionary defines fundamentalism as "a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles." Christ Church's "Book of Confessions" states "we hold that no one rejecting the truths proclaimed in these creeds can be right with God." This statement indicates that Christ Church is indeed fundamental – if a person does not literally uphold beliefs proclaimed in an ancient creed written many years ago, they cannot be "right with God." Trinity Reformed's introduction to their "Confessions" states, "This confession of faith does represent the doctrinal understanding of the eldership of Christ Church, and it is our intention that the teaching and preaching at

Christ Church reflect this understanding also.” Thus Trinity Reformed upholds the doctrines of Christ Church.

A specific contact for each group was given a DVD of the documentary, an audio recorder, and a blank tape. The groups were instructed to watch the documentary and “let your comments and/or conversation flow naturally as you watch the show” (Cohen, 1991, p. 444) and for approximately 20-30 minutes after the documentary is over. The group members were audiotaped during and immediately following the viewing of an episode of “*Christianity and Islam: The Tenets of Islam.*” After the discussion, the contact person handed out a short questionnaire verifying the viewers’ church membership/attendance.

The discussions were transcribed and examined for talk about the viewers’ religious cultural identities and perceived cultural identities of Muslims. I attempted to discover how and if religious beliefs and identities are relevant to interpretations of Islam. These interpretations were studied by conducting a critical discourse analysis of the transcriptions of the groups’ discourses – transcripts were examined for emergent themes (Press and Cole, 1995; Stout, 2004), typologies were constructed, and theoretical propositions were developed regarding what has been discovered in the discourse (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Discourse is the process through which meanings are interpreted and made relevant socially. However, specific social group ideologies do not guarantee specific meanings (Hall, 1985). Therefore, relevancy is not guaranteed either. Discourse helps individuals within a social group determine what is relevant to the individual within the group ideology. The relationship of the viewer, as an individual within the social group, to the meaning is not “deterministic,” but flexible (Fiske, 1991). There are two

important aspects of discourse: the social aspect and the interpretive aspect.

Interpretation takes place as the social group discusses the media content. Media is interpreted *through* discourse - this is how meanings created socially are unpacked. As groups talk, a discourse, a social way of thinking about a topic, is created.

The Human Instrument

It should be noted that I used to be a regular attendee of both Christ Church and Trinity Reformed Church and remain in close contact with both the pastor of Christ Church and many of the members of both churches. It is reasonable to question how this connection to these churches might influence my ability to be objective about comments made by participants, attribution of additional meaning to a statement made by a participant, or blind spots in my data analysis. I recognized and carefully considered these potential problems.

I have been dealing with these issues since I entered graduate school. Graduate level education requires critical thinking and self-reflexivity. My personal beliefs have been challenged; I have had to thoroughly think through what exactly I believe and why I believe it. Thinking through all of this has led me to actually attend another church. I achieved a certain amount of distance regarding Christ Church and Trinity Reformed Church which allowed me to analyze the data that comes from participants attending these churches in an informed way, but from a critical distance.

My prior membership and knowledge of the church gave me some interpretive advantages. There are certain terms and references that I was able to pick up on due to my fundamentalist Christian background that another researcher might miss. I am in a critical “in between” stage, in which I see and understand how my participants are

thinking and drawing conclusions because I used to think exactly as they do. However, because I now think differently, I am recognizing their thought processes, not thinking like them. This gave me an advantage when I analyzed the data. I understood key terms and phrases, certain doctrinal issues, and some underlying meanings that were not fully expressed. At the same time, there are possible patterns of communication or themes that I may have not been able to see because I was focused on those key terms and doctrinal issues.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Analysis of Documentary

“*Christianity and Islam: The Tenets of Islam*” is the first part of a four-part series. It describes Islam in very positive terms and compares it to Christianity in an affirming manner. It encourages Christians to deal with Muslims in an understanding way. The documentary describes the five pillars of Islam, and uses interviews with several different Muslims to verify the information. It focuses on the parallels between Islam and Christianity.

The documentary starts with an introduction by Dr. Timothy George, who is the “host” of *Christianity and Islam*. Dr. George is a professor at the Beeson Divinity School. Dr. George informs viewers that the point of this documentary is for Christians to better learn how to share Christ with Muslims: “Only through understanding can this be achieved.” Dr. George tells viewers they should be able to understand who Muslims are, what they believe, and how to share Christ with Muslims by the conclusion.

Islam and Christianity are compared throughout the documentary to help Christians truly understand Islam. One example presents a comparison of fundamentalist beliefs of both Christians and Muslims. Dr. George goes on to describe a hypothetical person who is supposed to sound like a “conservative Christian”: this person believes in the virgin birth of Christ, heaven and hell, creation, is pro-life, believes God’s will always prevails, is a teetotaler, and has a strong view of women in household and church. Then Dr. George points out that a “devout Muslim” believes all these things, too.

The documentary then shows two interviews with Muslim women who talk extensively about veiling. One woman, Deena Abdul Azeez, states that veils tell the world “we want to be remembered for our good thoughts and intelligence, not for our appearance.” These women point out that veiling goes back to Judaism and early Christianity. Basically, both women defend and praise the veil.

The documentary then moves into the Five Pillars of Islam, what Dr. George calls “a body of beliefs and practices.” Dr. George uses this language to further relate Islam to Christianity. It is a way of telling Christians that Muslims have specific beliefs and practices that all Muslims take part in, much like Christians do.

The first pillar is called *shahada*, or “declaration of faith.” This is the basic declaration one has to make when becoming a Muslim: “I bear witness that there is only one God and Mohammed is the last prophet.” Dr. George calls this the “gateway to Islam.” Islam is a religion without a priesthood or initiation rites, therefore saying this declaration in front of four witnesses is all a person has to do in order to become a Muslim. Dr. George then uses a verse in Deuteronomy that tells Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart.” He is attempting to compare Christianity and Islam so that viewers can have a proper understanding of Islam.

Next, the documentary covers the history of Mohammed, from his birth to his death. It specifies that Muslims do not believe Mohammed is a god, but think he is merely a prophet: “Mohammed is but a messenger, like the messengers who have passed away before him,” (Koran). Dr. George then lists four possible responses that Christians can have to Mohammed and Islam: (1) inspired by demonic forces – by Satan himself; (2) claim common ground and help Muslims find Jesus; (3) recognize differences

This documentary was written, produced, and made by a group of Christians in an attempt to show Islam in a positive light. The Christians who made this documentary were not fundamentalist. They dealt with issues in a more modern, evangelical fashion.

As I watched the documentary, I constantly found myself thinking about certain opinions I would have had about the documentary a few years ago, and comparing what I would have thought to what I currently think. I am currently open to the fact that as a Christian (and I still consider myself a Christian), I do not have all the answers. Several years ago I would have passed judgment on this documentary: in my mind, there would have been no room for the possibility of finding common ground with Muslims. I would have balked at the idea of comparing the two. I would have said this documentary was made by “happy, clappy Christians” who want to relativize all religions into one. And I would have made the point that there is only one right way: mine. As I transcribed the four sessions, I discovered what I would have thought several years ago is what some of my participants vocalized now. I am open-minded now. When I watch the documentary, I recognized the value in things I did not necessarily agree with, and I am comfortable with the fact that what I think might be wrong. Even though, for the most part, I could have predicted what my participants would say, I wanted to understand the processes of identity and positioning and how viewing media texts is intertwined with those processes. I wanted to know how meaning is made and what part identity plays in that procedure. One of the only ways to really get at those issues is to analyze how people talk and what they say. Thus, it was important for me to study others that think like I thought.

Television is an “open” text, allowing for a broad range of interpretations and meanings (Fiske, 1986). It is an ideal text for resistive readings because of its openness.

Participants used resistive readings to interpret the documentary. They spoke about what they perceived as the intended reading, and then proceeded to give their own interpretations.

Findings

Six major themes and two major discourses were discovered in the data. Both themes and discourses were emergent. The two discourses are the main over-arching way participants discussed the documentary. The two discourses are “comparison to Christianity” and “comparison to other ‘false’ religions.” Each of the six themes fits into one of the two discourses. These six themes demonstrate the discursive strategies participants use to make relevant meanings.

Major Themes: How Participants Expressed Themselves

There are six major themes used within each of these discourses. A major theme is an idea that was discussed in two or more of the groups of participants. The six themes are named after direct phrases that participants used: (1) “the violence that’s required in the Koran,” (2) “the works versus faith dichotomy,” (3) “too close to the truth,” (4) “Mohammed is revered as a god,” (5) “Islam really does make women very secondary,” and (6) “no witnesses.”

These six themes demonstrate how fundamentalist Christians position themselves in relation to Islam and how their own identities are relevant to their interpretations. The text becomes relevant to the participants as they use their fundamentalist Christian identities to position themselves in opposition to Muslims. Participants use each theme to demonstrate a contrast between Christianity and Islam. The themes draw a line in the sand, so to speak. Participants employ these themes in order to position themselves

against Islam so they can justify their own religion. These six themes answer the first research question, telling us what specific discursive strategies fundamentalist Christians use to make relevant meanings and interpretations.

The Violence That's Required in the Koran

The participants operated on the basis of an overarching presumption that Islam and the Koran promote violence, even though the documentary said nothing about this aspect of Islam.

But then the other thing was the violence that's required in the Koran, you know. Conversion by the sword. Those are the people that pray five times a day for a period of their life, I would think (Group 1, p. 5).

The documentary explained that prayer five times a day towards Mecca is the second pillar of faith for Muslims. If one is a Muslim, one prays five times a day towards Mecca. It is not something practiced by any specific sect; it is one of the pillars of the religion. One of the participants stated that Muslims who pray five times a day must be the violent Muslims, essentially equating being a faithful Muslim to being a violent Muslim. She took a basic pillar of faith, much like one of the Ten Commandments from her own religion, and said that those who practice it are fanatic. She takes basic information from the documentary and expands it to fit into her own worldview (Press and Cole, 1995).

--But we have to realize there are extremists in every religion and just because they're the guys, like in the name of Mohammed, crash the planes into the towers and there are people in France burning cars or whatever, so then we get this idea that that must the religion is that they have this like angry attitude towards us whereas, you know, probably the majority of them don't, if they honestly believe what they claim, but maybe they...

--Except for the fact that in the Koran it does say if you kill an infidel you'll end up in heaven.

--Right, it's like our message isn't slaying people with a real sword, it's slaying them with the sword of Christ, you know, with the Word. It's not uh...violent thing by any means (Group 2, ps. 10, 11).

The first person addresses the notion of stereotypes and makes some interesting comparisons. This person begins by saying that just because a few members of a religion crash a plane into some buildings, it does not necessarily follow that all Muslims are plane crashers. However, by the end of her statement, she begins to doubt her own statement by following it up with "if they honestly believe what they claim."

The second participant stated that the Koran demands and praises the killing of infidels. This statement is made in response to the first statement defending Islam. This statement functions as a mechanism used by this participant to tear down Islam. In Western culture, violence is verbally shunned, but culturally encouraged. This participant uses the idea that violence is bad to draw the conclusion that Islam is wrong because it promotes violence.

The third participant actually contrasts Islam and Christianity: "our message isn't slaying people with a real sword...It's not uh...violent by any means." The implication is that Islam is violent – Muslims actually slay people with a literal sword, and Christianity without violence is superior to Islam which requires violence. This participant does not directly say that Islam wields a literal sword, thus an alternative interpretation of the third statement could be that it was comparing Christianity and Islam, not contrasting them. This participant could have been attempting to defend Islam. This is a juncture where my personal knowledge of the group is leading my interpretation of their statements. This participant is contrasting the two religions. He is attempting to

build Christianity up and tear Islam down by implying that violence is an inherent trait of Islam, Muslims “slay” people with a literal sword.

This quote sets the two religions in a direct opposition. The Christian “message” is not violence, the Bible does not promote violence, but the Koran does. This quote follows a pattern which can be found throughout all the data: there is a positive statement, a challenge to that statement, and then another statement affirming the challenge.

Relevance is created through opposition (Rockler, 2002) set up between Islam and Christianity in regards to violence. Therefore, as soon as one participant says something in defense of Islam, another participant counters it with a negative statement about Islam, which in turn puts Christianity in an optimistic light. It is this perceived opposition of Christianity and Islam in regards to violence that constitutes a moment of relevancy.

This discursive strategy allows participants to make Islam the other, while at the same time further legitimize their own beliefs.

Though the documentary did not address violence in Islamic society, participants made it a theme throughout their discussion of the documentary. They built upon what the documentary said, in addition to their previous knowledge, until the idea fit into their own worldview. Participants used representations of Muslims from other sources to inform their ideas of Islamic violence. Since 9/11, Muslims have been portrayed as violent and fanatical in the media (Anker, 2005). In a sense, violence has become a short-hand for Islam, as demonstrated in this theme.

The Works Versus Faith Dichotomy

This theme appeared in all four group discussions. It is based on the claim made by fundamentalist Christians that Christianity is centered upon the death of Jesus Christ

on the cross. Because He was the perfect, sinless Son of God, His death on the cross is an act of grace by God. Jesus acted as a sacrifice for all of mankind. Salvation as a Christian can only come through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8,9) and what His death on the cross means. Being “saved by works” means that a person can do good things and be a nice person and go to Heaven because of that. However, if humans were good enough to get into Heaven on their own, they would not need Christ’s death. Therefore, the issue of just being a good person and doing good things and following all the right rules is important to Christians because they believe it takes faith in Christ’s death to be saved.

--It makes it [the documentary] seem like Muslims are saved through works, but we know we are saved through Christ’s blood...

--This is just, I mean, from a Christian perspective things you always hear about Islam. And I think you always get the same things over and over and kind of the same responses to it by um kind of the uh you know works versus faith dichotomy (Group 3, p. 2).

Participants use their identities as Christians to position themselves against Muslims and the issues they make relevant are a reflection of the positioning (Hall, 1990). Part of their Christian identity is that they are “saved through Christ’s blood,” and they position themselves against Muslims who are “saved through works.” The first participant sets up the dichotomy as being an either-or situation, thereby successfully setting Islam against Christianity.

It is important to fundamentalist Christians to be saved by Christ’s blood because Christians believe in the doctrine of original sin: when Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden and sinned that first time, he sinned for all humans to come. Therefore, humans are not good enough on their own to save themselves; they need God’s mercy and Christ’s righteousness. This makes it impossible to be “saved by works” in the mind of a Christian. No good work a person does will save him because he is sinful to begin with.

This is a juxtaposition of doctrines. This participant uses a doctrine central to Christianity to define what is truth, and juxtaposes it against what he perceives as a doctrine in opposition to the Christian one, essentially saying that if it does not fit into the fundamental Christian worldview, it is wrong.

The second participant claims that the works versus faith dichotomy is how Christians generally hear about Islam. He does not specify the source of the information. The way Christians directly place their core belief about Christ's death on the cross against Islamic doctrine becomes a point of relevancy for participants.

Christians also use this dichotomy within a Mormon comparison discourse:

Well and what you were saying is true of Mormons, too. They value children and they value life, as Islam does. They have great family values. They have a good work ethic and good morals. They're [Muslims] good, moral people, according to this. That would work if we were mostly good people. But man is sinful (Group 1, p. 5).

This participant explains that because people are not good, just being a good person is not enough. Neither Islam nor Mormonism can work because they have no contingency plan for man's ultimate sinfulness. The participant is clinging to her identity as a Christian to define "truth" within her worldview as defined by church doctrine (Press and Cole, 1995). This participant's identity functions as a filter, allowing her to recognize that Mormons and Muslims have good family values, etc. However, part of her identity as a fundamentalist Christian is the basic Christian doctrine of original sin. Without that doctrine, there is no need for Christ's death on the cross, effectively eliminating Christianity. Thus, the "good family values" goes through the filter and comes out as not being enough because "that would work if we were mostly good people. But man is sinful."

This theme establishes an opposition on the basis of the doctrine “salvation through faith alone.” In this theme, church doctrine is used to inform their interpretation of the documentary. Participants use their identities as defined by this doctrine to position themselves against Islam, and juxtapose two opposing doctrines in order to define what is truth; they use their identities to determine “Truth.”

Too Close to the Truth

In this theme, participants expressed their own discomfort with how close the documentary makes it appear Christianity and Islam are by stating that Islam is too close to the “Truth.”

--Right, I guess it’s interesting, I guess how you were saying the whole demonic thing, it just seems like...I’m not necessarily like “oh every Muslim is a demon.” It just seems like so close to the truth, you know I mean like, SO close to the truth, that like it’s the most believable lie. It just like, it makes sense, like everything is so close that it’s hard to actually cut away and see (Group 2, p. 6, 7).

Specific vocabularies and key words allow viewers to select what reality they want out of a text and ignore what does not fit into that “reality” (Rockler, 2002). In this instance, the “reality” participants have created is that Christianity is the “truth,” while Islam is not, but it is “close” to the “truth.” The word “truth” functions synonymously with the Bible or the Word of God. When fundamentalist Christians use the word truth, they are evoking the ideas of Scripture as inerrant and that if something does not fit into Christian doctrine, it is false. By saying that Islam is “SO close to the truth,” this participant evokes the idea that Islam almost fits into Christian doctrine, but not quite.

Islam is close to the “truth” because it shares many elements with Christianity: monotheism, tithing, praying, worshipping, sharing many of the same prophets and much of the same history. However, it is missing a key element: the deity of Christ and the

function of His death on the cross, which then puts it at a comfortable distance from the truth. Relevance is found within this specific vocabulary of “the truth” (Rockler, 2002). It is within this reality of Christianity as truth that participants are able to position themselves against Islam, making its apparent closeness to the truth relevant because that is what they can relate to.

The truth itself serves as a reminder of God as being infallible and His Word in the form of the Bible as representing that.

What about the idea that they don’t need evangelism? That Christianity does evangelism because human nature draws away from the Word and Jesus, and yet, Islam is maybe one of the best counterfeits out there. And so people are naturally drawn to something where they’re not, uh, where they’re able to escape Jesus and still satisfy their need for religious belief or whatever or religious practices (Group 4, p. 9).

The documentary says nothing explicitly about converting Muslims, but it is implied all throughout the video. In general, Christians are always encouraged to evangelize in all they do. A conversation is never just a conversation, it is an “opportunity to bring someone to the Lord.” Thus, while the documentary never says “Go out and use this information to evangelize Muslims,” it does say “We can use this information to find common ground with a Muslim and start a conversation.” The implication is that the conversation may lead to a conversion. The moment of relevance occurs when the viewer and the text connect (Cohen, 1991), and this participant uses the implied encouragement to evangelize to connect with the text, making it the “moment of relevance.”

In this passage, the participant is justifying the popularity of Islam with its “counterfeit” truth. People are drawn to Islam because it is religious “truth” without any consequences. Press and Cole (1995) researched how pro-life women use facts and

statistics about abortion and twist them to fit into their worldview. This participant is using the statistics about the speed with which Islam is gaining popularity to set up fundamentalist Christianity as superior because it does not provide an easy escape. There has to be a reason why it is popular, but that reason must fit into this participant's worldview in order to be relevant to him (Cohen, 1991). In this case, it is his Christian worldview that this fact must fit into. There must be a logical explanation for Islam outpacing Christianity, even though Islam is false. So, this participant has created an explanation that fits into his fundamentalist Christian worldview.

In this theme, participants use the word "truth" as a key vocabulary – a way for them to determine what does and does not fit into their "reality" (Rockler, 2002). They identify Islam as "counterfeit" but popular because it is not actually true, but just close to it. This explanation helps participants fit certain facts about Islam into their worldview.

Mohammed is Revered as a God

Many participants struggled with the idea that Mohammed is important to Islam, yet Muslims do not claim him as a deity. They felt that Mohammed was revered as a god, even if Muslims said he was not.

--That brings up another really interesting thing they were talking about... Mohammed as the prophet. Like they have to believe, it's like they keep emphasizing Mohammed as the prophet, like "follow the ways of Mohammed," even though he wasn't uh deity of any sort. Like, they even said that. You know, it's like, he's just a man, a prophet and it seems weird that like it keeps setting Mohammed as this like, you...

--All-powerful...

--Yeah, individual, that deifies him in a sense. Why would you follow just a man? That's part of it. I mean, we follow the way of Christ because He was fully God and fully man. It's, you know, it's...

--We follow a God still (Group 2, ps. 15, 16).

Once again, Islam is set up as being “wrong” because Muslims claim to follow someone who is not a god, yet they treat him as a god. This inconsistency is pointed out and is then followed up with a direct comparison to Christianity in an attempt to make Christianity seem consistent. Christians do not claim Christ is not a god and then treat him like one. They embrace his deity and structure their doctrine around it. Participants are claiming Christianity is superior because their prophet is also a god.

In this case, participants claim Christianity is superior and more consistent, connecting to the text using “Mohammed as the prophet.” They take the statements made about Mohammed from the documentary and expand upon them. The documentary stated that Muslims do not believe Mohammed is a god. Participants took this statement and used their own previous knowledge about Islam to draw the conclusion that Muslims revere him as a god, in the same way Christians revere Jesus, making this the specific moment of relevance. Once again they use church doctrine alongside their personal experiences as Christians to define in their minds what Islam is.

Islam Really Does Make Women Secondary

Every group talked about the way in which Muslims treat women.

Anyway, that would have been the only stereotype I would have had was women being somewhat in an odd state of subjection. But then of course, there are a lot of Christians who are saying you know certain Christians would say women need to wear head-coverings at the church service and not pray at the church service and things like that. But, um, that could be construed by people who are not Christians as...a woman-hating sort of thing, too. (Group 3, p. 6)

In this passage, the participant talks about a preconceived notion she holds about Islam, but then compares it to what non-Christians may say about the subjection of Christian women. It is a strategy she uses to help make Islam relevant to her. Gender was touched upon in the documentary. The documentary used two female Muslims to

talk about veiling and Muslim culture. In this discussion, it was this participant that spontaneously brought up the treatment of women. I believe it is because it is an area in which she can directly relate to Islam. One of the common criticisms of Christianity and the Bible is that women are treated secondarily. In some mainstream churches, women are now pastors and elders, etc. However, fundamentalist Christians have very conservative views about the roles of women in the household, in the work place, and in church. Neither Christ Church nor Trinity Reformed Church has female pastors or elders. Women never pray as part of the church service or read from the Bible. The only part women take in corporate worship in either of these churches is with music.

It might be possible to interpret this participant's comment as presenting Christianity as women-hating, as well. However, she specifically says "But that could be construed by people who are not Christians..." That phrase "people who are not Christians," demonstrates that she believes those outside of Christianity do not understand the true nature of Christianity. They are outside of Christianity, and therefore, cannot understand what happens inside of it. This participant is creating an "us versus them" situation, in which she treats people outside of Christianity as "them." She is not positioning herself and her group as dominant, but as a subgroup that has traditions those outside the group do not understand. She is resisting the dominant group through her statement.

This is an example of how interpretive communities act hegemonically (Peri, 1997). Within this interpretive community, the predominant view of women is anti-feminist, anti-liberated. Because this participant is within this interpretive community, she takes on its view of women. While she sees, understands, and talks about the

subjection of Muslim women in a patriarchal society, she does not feel that she is in any sort of state of subjection because of the religious beliefs she holds. She points out how others may see Christian women in some sort of subjected state, but she does not view herself that way. However, she does view Muslim women in “an odd state of subjection.” Therefore, Islam is interpreted as a “woman-hating sort of thing.”

What’s crazy, too, is that like the...Jamin’s folks...sells Arabian horses. And this Islamic lady wanted to buy one, but can’t even buy a horse unless her 12-year-old brother accompanies her and okay it. Or some guy...okay? And so she’s an adult, capable of making her own decisions, she can’t even go to the store unless he okay it. One of the guys has to okay it (Group 4, p. 13).

In this passage, the participant uses an example he heard from another source to verify that Muslim women are oppressed. It was this participant that stated “Islam really does make women secondary.” He uses an extreme example, stating a 12-year-old boy is making decisions for an adult woman. He calls this oppression “crazy.” However, he does not use this example of women and compare it to Christianity as the female participants did. This topic is relevant to this participant in a different way because he is not a woman. It is relevant to him in the sense that he sees how “crazy” his perceived treatment of Muslim women is, but it is not relevant to him in that he can relate to being treated that way.

This theme, because of its gendered nuances, is unique. Male and female participants, though all fundamentalist Christians, connect with the text of the documentary differently because of their different genders. Participants use a combination of media stereotypes and personal experiences to connect with the text.

No Witnesses

Using this theme, participants generally employed a mocking strategy. They mocked Mormonism for its different doctrine and compared it to Islam to make Islam seem less valid.

- It's hard to believe because Mohammed was the only one who ever saw God and wrote His word. People just had to believe this one guy.
- Yeah, even when Jesus rose, he was seen by like, 500 people. It wasn't just one guy, you-have-to-take-my-word-for-it kind of thing.
- Yeah...Moses showed the Israelites the tablets (Group 1, pg. 6).
- I lost those gold tablets...yeah.
- That's what I was thinking... "I can't show you those golden tablets."
- "But they're in the woods somewhere." (Group 1, p. 6)

This conversation is in reference to the fact that Joseph Smith (the first prophet and founder of Mormonism) claims to have lost the golden tablets the Angel Moroni gave him with the extra Scriptures written on them. Therefore, Joseph Smith was the only one to have seen the tablets. This mocking tone is taken to convey how ridiculous participants think this idea is.

This is a common pattern within this discourse: first a participant points out a "weakness" of Islam, then another participant immediately compares this "weakness" to a counterpart "strength" in Christianity. Participants are making meaning out of what they find relevant within the Islamic cultural group (Cohen, 1991). They perceive these weaknesses only in relation to how the weaknesses are different from Christianity. Because they are in an interpretive community of other Christians, opposing religious beliefs and doctrines are relevant (Lindloff, 1988).

I bet they wonder like how, I mean obviously they all believe it, but like where are the witnesses? What...as far as I am sure he is a real person. I am just kind of wondering...(Group 2, p. 14).

In this passage, you can see the participant attempting to connect with the text by relating to Muslims and what they might think. The moment of relevance happens as the

participant tries to understand Islam by asking a question – free from sarcasm, free from mocking. This participant wants to understand this concept of believing without seeing because so much of his own religion is based on believing without seeing.

This theme is always talked about in comparison to other religions. It is an attempt to set up Christianity as legitimate. Participants are trying to prove that Christianity is true and other religions are not. However, moments of relevance can also be found in participants actually attempting to understand this aspect of Islam, in an effort to better understand their own faith.

Discourses Discovered: How Participants Talk about Islam

The analysis identified two major discourses participants used: comparison to Christianity and comparison to “false” religions. The six themes run throughout the two discourses. These two discourses answer the last two research questions, helping us understand how fundamentalist Christian identities are relevant to interpretations of media texts and how they position themselves in relation to Islam through these interpretations.

In the first discourse, participants use what they know as conservative, fundamentalist Christians to help themselves understand the basics of Islam. People tend to interpret facts within their worldviews in order to understand them (Press and Cole, 1995). It is part of the identity-creating process (Hall, 1990). People also interpret media within their worldviews to make what they learn relevant within that worldview, as demonstrated in the following comment made by a participant.

A lot of people always ask Christians ‘How can you believe in a God that would go and do all this stuff?’ But that’s not what the ultimate message is...It’s weird because they think our God is like like people who say that think our God is all cruel and evil...But then their people [Muslims] go out and do that same thing

and they all become like little gods that do that kind of thing where our God doesn't do that. (Group 2, p. 5)

In this passage, the participant is comparing what “people” say about the Christian God to what can be said about Muslims. There is no room within her worldview for her God to be “cruel and evil,” therefore, those not affiliated with her God are the “cruel and evil” ones. In turn, she evokes the predominant stereotype of Muslims as violent and claims that Muslims are “cruel and evil.” It is strategic in that by positioning Muslims as cruel and evil, her God is no longer the cruel and evil one.

This participant says Muslims “do that same thing and they all become like little gods that do that kind of thing...” She is accusing Muslims of cruelty: they “do that same thing” that the Christian God is accused of. She then says they “become like little gods,” which means that they attempt to take future into their own hands, using cruelty, while her God “doesn't do that,” which implies that her God is not cruel. This is all part of a strategy she uses in the discourse. She projects what others think of the Christian God onto Muslims by accusing them of all that her God is accused of, thus proving her God is not cruel.

I just thought the things I think about when Islam comes to mind not necessarily the first thing but the things that I don't think this covered and that I, not, you know that not, that have been emphasized to me but seem to be a striking difference between something that's godly and something that's ungodly is their hatred of women...seeming hatred of women. You know, disrespect (Group 1, p.5).

This participant compares the way Islam treats women and the way Christianity treats women, calling Islamic treatment “ungodly” and Christian treatment “godly.” She puts her criticism of Islam in spiritual, moral terms using the theme of “Islam Really Does Make Women Secondary.”

She calls it a “striking difference” and says Muslims show “hatred for women” and “disrespect.” She does not explicitly say Christianity is the opposite, but she implies it with her statement that Christianity’s treatment of women is godly. Therefore, Christianity loves women and treats them with respect. She strategically positions Islam and Christianity against each other in order to show that Christianity is right and true.

This discourse really gets at the heart of second research question, “How do fundamentalist Christians position themselves in relation to Islam through their interpretations?” By comparing Christianity and Islam, they are able to position themselves as loving, respectful, not cruel, and not evil. In general, participants used this discourse to position fundamentalist Christianity as the only truth and to definitively reject Islam.

The second discourse defines Islam as a false religion to the fundamentalist Christian participants. Using this discourse, participants consistently compare Islam to religions they don’t consider legitimate. Mainly they compare Islam to Mormonism, but they use Jehovah’s Witnesses in one comparison evoked by the participants. In another comparison, one participant stated that,

I would say [Muslims are] remarkably similar to Mormons. Just like the origin; they had a prophet, he came up with this book and started getting kicked out of a lot of places. Then he died and there was a guy who took over. (Group 3, p. 7)

Here, this participant uses his knowledge of Mormonism and Islam to position himself within a “legitimate” religion. This positioning is used to help maintain an on-going identity as a Christian, and to legitimize his own religion (Hall, 1990).

The same participant says

Mormonism separates itself I think really quickly. “Yeah, Jesus, huh? Did I tell you about this planet you are going to get? They just jump off the deep end really fast... (Group 3, p. 12)

Here, the participant mocks Mormonism for its different doctrine, in an attempt to compare it to Islam in order to make Islam seem less valid. Participants feel as though there is enough history and background to legitimize their religious claims:

People have old Books of Mormon and passages are different. As far as um Scripture goes, the Bible, yeah, has archeological references that sort of makes it seem as though it hasn't changed a whole lotta times (Group 1, p. 9).

Therefore, they mock “false” religions to position themselves as a justifiable religion by contrast. This is part of maintaining an on-going identity as a Christian (Hall, 1990). They use mockery to legitimize their identity.

Well and what you were saying is true of Mormons, too. They value children and they value life, as Islam does. They have great family values. They have a good work ethic and good morals. They're [Muslims] good, moral people, according to this. That would work if we were mostly good people. But man is sinful (Group 1, p. 5).

In this passage (quoted earlier), the participant is comparing Mormonism and Islam in the context of the “works versus faith dichotomy.” After comparing the two, she follows it up with a statement about Christian doctrine, essentially saying that Mormonism and Islam will not work because they are not Christianity. The doctrine of original sin, as stated earlier, is a central doctrine to Christianity, and therefore an important part of fundamentalist Christian identity. This participant uses this doctrine to maintain her identity by positioning both Islam and Mormonism as false.

This discourse specifically answers the third research question, “How are fundamentalist Christian identities relevant to interpretations of the media text?”

Fundamentalist Christians use the act of interpretation to maintain their identities as fundamentalist Christians.

Participants' General Attitude Towards the Documentary: "It Makes Me Feel More Negatively"

In general, when asked to describe how they felt about the documentary, people described their feelings as "negative." One participant in group three attributed it to the fact that "it [the documentary] goes through the five pillars of Islam, but it leaves Christ out" (Group 3, p. 2). Another participant in group three said "Before [viewing the documentary] I would have been negative toward it [Islam], and I am still negative" (Group 3, p. 5).

This is the form of polysemy called resistive reading (Ceccarelli, 1998). "*Christianity and Islam*" is a Christian-produced documentary, and is an attempt to make Christians feel more positive about the similarities between Islam and Christianity. It is meant to be used as a tool for evangelism: a way to bring Muslims to Christ. All four groups in this study recognized that there is an intended "positive" reading; however, they produced their own meaning in opposition to the intended reading.

Some participants recognized that the documentary made them feel "positive" in the moment, but they knew there were more negative things about Islam not included in the documentary. This theme is part of the idea of finding the moment of relevance in the text through opposition by making Islam "false" and "wrong" through interpretation. Even though the documentary is only positive, participants create opposition through a polysemic resistive reading. Participants are not resisting the evangelism of Muslims, but

rather, they are resisting the idea that Islam and Christianity are in “reality” so parallel to each other.

Cohen (1994) raised the issue of understanding mass media messages as a form of social power. By “understanding,” Cohen means the “ability to discuss programs as art or construction” (p. 3). As we can see, all the participants were able to discuss the constructions they understood from the documentary. Cohen defines social empowerment as “the ability and power to consciously create and choose among different ‘possibilities’ of knowledge, meaning, identities, and behavior” (p. 5). Participants were socially empowered through the viewing of this documentary: they used polysemic resistive readings to make their own meanings in the text that fit into their worldview of fundamentalist Christianity.

However, not only were they socially empowered, but they were given a voice and a platform from which to speak. The platform was created at the intersection of viewing the text and membership within a religious community. This community gave them the freedom to speak their mind in the presence of those who think as they do.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

One of the reasons this study was undertaken was to understand the way in which fundamentalist Christians position themselves against Islam, in hopes of getting a microcosmic glimpse of the “Middle East versus the West” problem. However, among other discoveries, I found that fundamentalist Christians used Islam as a distant “other” in order to position themselves against non-Christians, which is, essentially, a “the West versus the West” problem. Participants, in an attempt to clarify and justify their own position as fundamentalist Christians, claim that those outside of fundamentalist Christianity say it is similar to Islam because they are not fundamentalist Christians. Islam became the mechanism through which the fissures and fractures in Western culture were made visible.

There are several examples of this process. The first example is the female participant who talks about Muslim women being in an “odd state of subjection.” On some level, she understands that she sounds inconsistent by pointing out that Muslim women are oppressed because she knows many people say women who attend Christ Church are oppressed. So she points out that “people who are not Christian” would say she is also in a “woman-hating” situation. By specifically pointing to “people who are not Christian,” she puts those people in an “other” group, disqualifying what they say or think because they are not in her group. Thus, as a fundamentalist Christian, she is not positioning herself within the dominant, but positioning herself and her group as a subgroup in opposition to the dominant.

Another example is the participant who talks about Islam being a good “counterfeit” truth that gives people the feeling of religion but without consequence. He says “human nature draws away from the Word and Jesus.” This phrase also positions fundamentalist Christians against a dominant group – human nature. This participant uses his identity as a fundamentalist Christian to create an “other” out of human nature.

Meanings of mediated texts become important when social action requires practical application in understanding these groups as interpretive communities, (Lind, 1988). The viewing of this documentary was the social action, but because of their strongly-held religious beliefs, this required practical application. Pointing out the inconsistencies of Islam was the practical application. This idea can be applied to all the themes. This social action requires that the members of the interpretive community make a practical application of what they learned in the documentary so that it passes through their identity filter and comes out fitting into their worldview.

The first research question, “What are the discursive strategies through which relevant meanings are made?” was answered by the six themes discovered in the data. Participants used these themes to find relevance within the text. Each theme addresses a specific difference between Islam and Christianity and participants used specific key words to position the two religions against each other, with Christianity ending up in the more positive light each time.

In the first theme, titled “the violence that’s required in the Koran,” participants used media stereotypes in addition to what they learned in the documentary to inform their interpretations. This was a strategy used to make the reading of the text relevant by legitimizing their own religion and tearing down Islam. The second theme is titled “the

works versus faith dichotomy.” Participants use their identities as found in church doctrine to define Truth. In the third theme, participants use the specific word “Truth” to define reality, as this theme is called “too close to the Truth.” The fourth theme, called “Mohammed is revered as a god,” addresses the issue of Islam’s inconsistency as the moment of relevance. The fifth theme is called “Islam really does make women very secondary.” In this case, the way Islam and Christianity treat women is addressed and is the moment when the participants connect with the text because “people” often accuse Christians of treating women as lesser people, as well. The sixth and final theme is an attempt to set Christianity up as the only legitimate religion: the “no witnesses” theme.

The second research question, “How do fundamentalist Christians position themselves in relation to Islam through their interpretations?” was answered by the first discourse, Islam compared to Christianity. Through this discourse, I discovered participants position Islam and Christianity, looking at their similarities, yet determining that Christianity is truth, while Islam is deceit.

The third and final research question, “How are fundamentalist Christian identities relevant to the interpretation of media text?” was answered by the second discourse, Islam compared to other false religions. Fundamentalist Christians used their identities as a filter, with all information passing through the filter and coming out of the filter fitting into their worldview.

A moment of relevance happens when the viewer connects with the text. Participants created moments of relevance in many different ways. Some participants used media images they had of Islam to connect with the text because the text did not match their preconceived notions about Islam due to the media images they had in their

heads. Other participants used their identities as filters: the information passed through their identity filter and came out fitting into their fundamentalist Christian worldview, and once the information fit into their worldview, they could find relevance and connect with the documentary. Participants also used the key vocabularies (Rockler, 2002) to choose the “reality” in the documentary and dismiss what did not fit into that reality.

Previous literature talks about what makes a relevant meaning, and this study shows specifically how a relevant meaning is made. It demonstrates several different strategies viewers use to connect to a text, from using previous knowledge to using an identity. It explores in detail the vocabularies and tactics fundamentalist Christians use to position themselves against a hostile dominant culture group.

This project was like putting myself under a microscope. I was plagued by a lot of self-doubt. “Did I betray people I have known since I was in junior high? What would they think if they read my thesis? How would they feel if they knew I said they were hegemonized?” I feel like I am letting deep-seated secrets loose into the world. This project made me step back and think about my “faith” by analyzing other’s “faith.” I still identify as a Christian, but no longer as a fundamentalist Christian. Personally, I am sure much of my theology could be considered “fundamental,” but I feel no need to impose that theology on others, which makes me the opposite of fundamental.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Religious interpretive communities are hegemonized. Members of these religious communities have been taught to think a certain way by a dominant group within the religious organization and they later espouse these ideas as their own as they interpret media. In my study, members of religious interpretive communities socially interpreted a documentary on Islam. The participants have been, in this sense, hegemonized. It is important to investigate how this hegemony affects how participants interpret the text. By unpacking the way they talked about their interpretations, we were able to better understand the way this particular form of hegemony functions.

This study is also concerned with discovering what type of polysemy, if any, was used by fundamentalist Christians in media interpretations of Islam. In this case, participants used resistive readings to make what they saw on the documentary fit into their worldview. In addition to fitting what they saw into their worldview, I found that their identities as fundamentalist Christians are the filter through which everything passes. As ideas and points of view and other worldviews pass through this filter of identity, they get cleaned up and ready to fit into the identity of fundamentalist Christians. This filter helped determine relevance in that it pinpointed where the viewers connected with the text.

Relevance is a social concept because “individuals are formed by the discourses they have experienced” (Lind, p. 5, 1995). This study supports this notion. Participants discussed, as a group, how this document made sense to them and what they thought about it. Out of this socially produced talk – discourse – came what was relevant to the

participants as a religious interpretive community. Theoretically, this leads me to wonder not just what other social aspects are important to relevance (family, race, ethnicity), but how these aspects affect relevance.

There were several limitations within this study. The first limitation is the amount of participants. While many studies included the same number of or fewer participants than I did, I believe the more participants, the more opinions, the richer the data. I also think this study would have benefited from some sort of comparison between fundamentalist Christians and other denominations of Christianity or even other religions. Because the documentary was produced by a specific denomination of Christians and then viewed by fundamentalist Christians, comparison with another denomination's interpretations and moments of relevance would be enough data for another study.

This limitation is also an idea for further research: comparing different denominations of Christians or other religions seems to be the next logical step after this study. Hegemony and religious interpretive communities is also another area that could be researched. Religious interpretive communities are by nature hegemonized, and researching the nuances of that could be beneficial to this body of research. Attempting to look at how identities are important to positioning within media representations of specific groups is worth looking into, as well. This study scratches the tip of the iceberg in terms of how identity plays a role in media interpretations and the way in which polysemy adds to it and how it is all made relevant to the viewer. There are several different directions future research could go in.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aden, R. C., Rahoi, R. L., & Beck, C. S. (1995). "Dreams are born on places like this": The process of interpretive community formation at the Field of Dreams site. *Communication Quarterly*, 43, 368-403.
- Anker, E. (2005). Villains, victims, and heroes: Melodrama, media, and September 11. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 22-37.
- Bolce, Louis, and De Maio, Gerald. (1999). Religious outlook, culture war politics, and antipathy toward Christian fundamentalists. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 63 (1, Spring), 29-61.
- Ceccarelli, L. (1998). Polysemy: multiple meanings in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84, 395-415.
- Cohen, J. R. (1991). The "relevance" of cultural identity in audiences' interpretations of mass media. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8, 442-454.
- Cohen, J. R. (1994). Critical viewing and participatory democracy. *Journal of Communication*, 44, 98.
- Condit, C. M. (1989). The rhetorical limits of polysemy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6, 103-122.
- Durham, M. G. (2004). Constructing the "new ethnicities": Media, sexuality, and diaspora identity in the lives of South Asian immigrant girls. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21, 140-161
- Fiske, J. (1986). Television: Polysemy and Popularity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 391-408.

- Fiske, J. (1991). For cultural interpretation: A study of the culture of homelessness. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8, 455-474.
- Gormly, Eric (2004). Peering beneath the veil: An ethnographic content analysis of Islam as portrayed on The 700 Club following the September 11th attacks. *Journal of Media and Religion*. 3 (4), 219-238.
- Gunn, J. (2004). The rhetoric of exorcism: George W. Bush and the return of political demonology. *Western Journal of Communication*, 68, 1-15
- Hall, S (1985) Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2, 91-114.
- Hall, S (1994/1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In Williams, P. & Chrisman, L. (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory* (pp. 392-403). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jensen, K. B. (1990). *Television Futures: A social action methodology for studying interpretive communities*, 7, 129-146.
- Jensen, K. B. (1995). *Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Jensen, K. B. (1996). After convergence: Constituents of a social semiotics of mass media reception. In Hay, J., Grossberg, L., Wartella, E. (Eds.), *The audience and its landscape* (pp.63-74). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Jung, E. & Hecht, M. L. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, 52, 265-283.

- Kerr Peter A. (2003). The framing of Fundamentalist Christians: Network Television News. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2(4), 203-235.
- Lawrence, B. B. (2003). Christians, Muslims, terrorists: The crescent and the cross since 11 September 2001. *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 72, 435-450.
- Lind, R. A. (1996). Diverse interpretations: The “relevance” of race in the construction of meaning in, and the evaluation of, a television news story. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 7, 53-74.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1988). Media audiences as interpretive communities. *Communication Yearbook*, 11, 81-107.
- Mastro, D. E. (2003). A social identity approach to understanding the impact of television messages. *Communication Monograph*, 70, 98-113.
- Pearson, J. C. & VanHorn, S. B. (2004), Communication and gender identity: A retrospective analysis. *Communication Quarterly*, 52, 284-299.
- Peri, Y. (1997). The Rabin myth and the press: Reconstruction of the Israeli collective identity. *European Journal of Communication*, 12, 435-458.
- Press, A. L. & Cole, E. R. (1995). Reconciling faith and fact: Pro-life women discuss media, science, and the abortion debate. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12, 380-402.
- Rockler, N. R. (2001). A wall on the lesbian continuum: Polysemy and Fried Green Tomatoes. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 24, 90-107.
- Rockler, N. R. (2002). Race, whiteness, “lightness,” and relevance: African American and European American interpretations of Jump Start and The Boondocks. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19, 398-418.

- Steyn, M. E. (2004). Rehabilitating a whiteness disgraced: Afrikaner white talk in post-apartheid South Africa. *Communication Quarterly*, 52, 143-163.
- Stout, D. A. (2004). Secularization and the religious audience: A study of Mormons and Las Vegas media. *Mass Communication & Society*, 7, 61-75.
- Wilkins, Karin, and Downing, John. (2002). Mediating terrorism: Text and protest in interpretations of The Siege. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 19 (4, December), 419-437.