Reconciling Conservatives and Liberals: Mission impossible?

How to Effectively Communicate Religious Messages in Public Discourse – Lessons Learned from the Slovak Referendum on Family

Terézia RONČÁKOVÁ,
Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia

Abstract

It is quite obvious that cultural and ethical questions have a potential to stir public discourse in countries which claim to be a part of the Western civilization. The ongoing public discourse on these questions has been tagged as 'culture war'. The conflict itself appears irreconcilable and concerns have been raised as to whether a dialogue between the two opposing parties is useful or even possible. The author of the study seeks answers to this question against the backdrop of communication of religious message on marriage, family and homosexuality. Drawing on her previously published studies on media discourse prior to the Slovak referendum on family, as well as previous researches into the key argumentation bases (including 'human nature' and 'manipulation'), the author examines the question using a method of in-depth interviews with the most influential journalists. The study focuses on how to effectively communicate religious messages in public discourse and presents the findings about the misunderstanding on both sides of the dispute. The study also suggests possible solutions. The author affirms that dialogue can make the form of discussion more enjoyable, however it does not lead to resolution of the differences. The study suggests that the ability of communicators to discern between political and non-political advocacy of ideas critical as the former require tougher forms, while the latter softer forms of communication. When used in incompatible contexts, these messages may backfire.

Keywords

Cultural war, Same-sex marriages, Religious message, Public discourse, Referendum on family.

Résumé

Les questions éthique-culturelles appartiennent sans doute parmi les sujets qui déclenchent le discours social dans les pays de la civilisation occidentale. Ce discours public a déjà obtenu l'étiquette „guerre culturelle". Les partis discutant apparaissent irréconciliablement et il y a des inquiétudes si le dialogue est possible et utile. Dans la présente étude, l'auteur examine ce problème sur un exemple du message religieux sur le mariage, la famille et l'homosexualité. Elle renoue avec son analyse précédente du discours médial devant le référendum slovaque sur la famille et avec des lignes principales de l'argumentation (de la nature et de la manipulation). Elle examine aussi avec la méthode des interviews profonds avec les journalistes influencent l'opinion publique. L'auteur demande comment peut-on efficacement défendre les messages religieux dans un discours public. Elle présente les causes de l'incompréhension mutuelle et les solutions possibles de ce conflit. Elle affirme que le dialogue peut améliorer la forme du débat, mais il ne conduit pas a de vraies solutions. Elle propose de distinguer le niveaux politique et non politique, parce que le niveaux politique exige des formes plus sévères que le niveau non politique, tandis que dans le mauvais contexte, ils peuvent être contre-productif.

Mots-clés

La guerre culturelle, les mariages homosexuels, les messages religieux, le discours public, le référendum sur la famille.

1. Introduction

Questions which are likely to stir public discourse in Western countries often have an underlying moral charge and sometimes they are tagged as 'culture

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

war' (Putna, 2012). In the secular – or even post-secular – Western societies over¬loaded by media and virtual realities, people often tend to experience their lives as a permanent non-conscious 'spectacle and performance' (Abercrombie&Longhurst, 1998). Therefore it not a surprise that one of the key players involved in the heated public debate is the Church (and other institutions communicating principled or ideologically motivated religious messages). The main battlefield of this conflict today is the media. Thus, the question of the media transmission of religious/principled/ideological messages comes into play, and has been of some interest to both popular writers and scholars alike for quite some time.

One of the most graphic examples of such conflict was the media discourse in Slovakia prior to the 'referendum on family'[1] held in February 2015. These questions have dominated the media for a period of several weeks. The core source of tension was a dispute over the requirement for public acceptance of homosexual lifestyle as opposed to a life based on Christian moral principles. Several secondary questions such as the essence of marriage and moral education of children were also discussed.

As part of our extensive research we attempted to identify the most representative argumentation bases for this public debate, which can be also described as classical topoi, i.e. common foundations of understanding shared within a given cultural environment. These bases are the key drivers of interest of the public in the given topic as well as the cause of the emotionally charged debates. These bases represent something that can be described as fundamental cultural beliefs (Gaitano discerns between shared and learned beliefs, 2007), or, stated differently, 'neuralgic points' of the given cultural environment, from which the opposing arguments arise, triggering a dispute between the opposing parties. This study focuses on these argumentation foundations, therefore it is – to a considerable extent – independent from the content of those questions as such, or the author's positions on specific questions. By taking this perspective, the study focuses on the essence of the transmission of religious (principled or ideologically motivated) messages in today's post-secular media society.

Based on an analysis of the argumentation categories identified within the given public discourse (and discussed in our earlier studies, e.g. Rončáková, 2015) we arrived at two following key argumentation bases:

- manipulation; and
- human nature.

Both parties to the dispute over the status of homosexuals in the society, privileges of homosexual couples, and interference of the state to education of children, referred mainly to manipulation (one side reproached the Church for manipulating believers – the other reproached the elites and media for manipulating the public); and human nature (one side regarded it as something innate and instinctive – the other as an integral part of God's plan).

Interestingly, this aspect of the conflict or polarization was so significant in the discourse, that it became one of the key argumentation bases of the public discourse. The reference to the polarization of the society (perceived as something negative or harmful) picked up momentum as the date of the referendum approached. Within the scope of journalists' testimonies subject to our research, the share of this argumentation basis reached 14% and ranked fifth from among the arguments used in the debates. It was the argument immediately following the three most widely used formulas, i.e. 'homosexuality and homosexual lifestyle is good', 'homosexuals are oppressed' and 'the Church manipulates'. The argument of hatred ended up fourth ('depriving homosexual lifestyle of social acceptance is an expression of hatred comparable to Nazism'). Such antagonism embedded in these opinions was also examined by Sekerák (2015) who tested the concept of agonistic democracy on the Slovak public discourse prior to referendum.

1. The referendum was initiated by the Alliance for Family backed by the Slovak Catholic Church. Voters were asked three questions: (1) Do you agree that only a bond between one man and one woman can be called marriage?; (2) Do you agree that same-sex couples or groups should not be allowed to adopt and raise children?; (3) Do you agree that schools cannot require children to participate in education pertaining to sexual behaviour or euthanasia if the children or their parents don't agree? The fourth question on whether registered partners are supposed to have equal rights as married couples was not included on the basis of rejection by the Constitutional Court. Referendum was invalid due to low turnout of voters, with only 21.4% of voters casting their vote; for a valid referendum, the voter turnout needs to be at least 50% of voters. Both general and media discourse prior to the referendum was fierce, heated and very emotive.

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the core issues of the dispute – the concepts of manipulation and human nature – were subject to a thorough analysis. Since the focus of our previous research was 'media discourse', the author decided to explore the topic further by conducting in-depth interviews with several high-profile journalists engaged in the referendum debate – either through published columns or opinionated commentaries. The subject matter of our research were the reasons for such polarization, differences in the perception of manipulation and human nature, underlying philosophical concepts, as well as possible solutions, or desired changes in communication style as perceived by both sides, in order to attain a more reasonable discussion with a positive effect on the society.

Nine research interviews have been conducted in an effort to embrace a complete spectrum of opinions. Respondents included influential journalists and the idea was to provide room evenly from both opinion sides. The group of 'opponents of the referendum' included the following four journalists:

• Peter Tkačenko, commentator of Hospodárske noviny;

• Michal Havran, chief editor of a liberal website Jetotak.sk and presenter of a television discussion broadcasted on the state-owned RTVS (Rozhlas a televízia Slovenska);

• Veronika Folentová, editor of an independent daily, Denník N;

• Peter Kováč, at the time of the referendum served as editor of Hospodárske noviny (currently at SME daily).

The group of 'proponents of referendum' interviewed as part of this research included the following four journalists:

• Linda Vasiľová, deputy chief editor of Katolícke noviny;

• František Múčka, deputy chief editor of Týždeň; editor of the conservative website Postoy.sk,

• Rastislav Dluhý, priest and chief editor of Slovo medzi nami magazine published by redemptorists;

• Peter Skladaný, correspondent of conservative portals Posledný križiak, Konzervatívny výber, active blogger.

The only journalist who could not be assigned to any of the above groups and ended up in a special 'in between' category, was the editor of Denník N, Tomáš Galis, whose opinions were based on conservative tenets, however in an attempt to reconcile those with the liberals, he eventually decided not to support the referendum, nor to cast his vote.

For the sake of simplicity, the below study uses a rather ambiguous term 'liberal' to denote the critics of the referendum; the term 'conservative' will be used to denote a supporter of the referendum. It should be noted that these terms do not relate to any other opinions of the respondents on economic policies or political attitudes, and they solely represent their underlying philosophical beliefs: for liberals, the measure of all things is man as such; conservatives refer to God's authority and the authority of the Church as a custodian of the deposit of faith through tradition.

3. Findings

3.1. Cause of misunderstanding

Our first question was aimed at the root cause of such a severe discord over the question of homosexuality, family, sexual education – and more broadly, on the moral tenets of the society – as well as the underlying source of misunderstanding or split between the two opposing camps. Thus, the following five key fundamental causes of misunderstanding were identified:

- lack of honesty;
- personal deficiencies;
- communication deficiencies;
- understanding of Christianity,
- perceived threat.

Lack of honesty

The initial trigger of the divide in such a serious public debate appears to be the ability of both parties to add credibility to their declared motives. In the case of referendum on family, these motives do not seem to be honest on the part of initiators of the referendum. Such notion was supported by all respondents from both camps.

The conservatives focused only on family and moral principles for the society and even though this was not an invented argument and the conservative movement has a genuine interest to support it, the

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

proponents of the referendum were reluctant to admit their true motive – to perform a nation-wide survey and get a sense of the strength of the conservative camp in the society. It is the composition of forces which the conservative camp regards as key in their effort. Such approach has a lot to do with the initiators' background which will be discussed further below.

The liberal camp can also be reproached – for hiding their pursued goals, or, more specifically, the ideological principles that are necessarily associated with those goals. Respondents have agreed that one of the hidden ideological principles embraced by the opponents to the referendum was an extension of the concept of human rights. This is because liberal camp believes that these rights are "normal rights which expand freedom". Therefore, if a same-sex partnership is a human right, then it makes no sense to provide sophisticated arguments about whether they should or should not be accepted, acknowledged or sanctified by the society. In addition, the opponents were not clear about whether they 'only' asked for same-sex partnerships or marriages, adoptions of their own biological children or other claims as well – or, for example, whether artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood is next on their agenda ,or whether the concept of conscientious objection would have any effect at all in these cases, etc.

Personal deficiencies

Dishonesty in arguments is closely related to personal mindset of communicators. Even our respondents admitted they were often unaware of their own motives and arguments as these may be deeply embedded in their unconsciousness, emotions, injured personalities. It was interesting to observe how liberal journalists saw the conservatives as personally immature and unstable; the conservatives thought the same of their opponents.

Liberal journalists concurred that the main driver of the proponents of the referendum was their – more or less acknowledged – internal disgust over the sexual practices of homosexuals. "It is a theological and at the same time aesthetic issue," remarked one of the conservative respondents. Liberal journalists reported that "[conservatives] are appalled by homosexuals," and this was something they were reluctant to affirm publically, or maybe they even tried to hide their own feeling from themselves. Drawing such a picture of conservative communicators in the public discourse is not far from ascribing "hateful emotions", internal instability and internal self-obstruction to conservatives.

One respondent from the conservative camp described this disgust of his liberal colleagues over the proponents of referendum as a sign of 'pride'. On the other hand, he argued that it is liberals who engage in internal fight against their own disgust over "certain kinds of attitudes" (i.e. religious attitudes). At the same time, they are neither ready to tolerate nor accept it as a valid opinion; for them, it is simply something "weird" which does not even deserve anything but mockery. According to one conservative journalist, the reason for such approach taken by his liberal colleagues is that they are "injured by their own personal story". In a situation where the matter of morals is discussed publicly, they become confronted with the high ideal and "feel that the discourse interferes with the how they view their own lives and perceive any such public debate as intrusion into their identity". Their reaction is therefore an expression of cognitive dissonance and act of self-justification. This is not only true for journalists – and some other louder communicators in the public discourse, too – but also for common people and voters. One of the respondents remarked: "In a situation of eroded family life, it is difficult to talk about a normal family any more. People are injured by divorces, incomplete families, frequent change of partners, complicated education in the so-called patchwork families, and all sorts of social traumas – so they would not spontaneously utter that family is a good thing."

Quite a remarkable phenomenon could be observed in respect of the mutual diagnosis. Liberal journalists approached conservatives with disrespect by describing them as immature weaklings, internally unbalanced personalities, and so forth; conservatives, on the other hand, showed some effort to understand their opponents' behaviour through the concept of "personal injury" which might – at least to a certain extent – understand or even justify their positions.

Communication deficiencies

Communication deficiencies mostly pertain to the forms of communication. The essential element at work here was the language which was pointed out as a problem by several critics, specifically related to incomprehensible language used by the Church which

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

appeared to be unable to translate its own messages into a comprehensible present-day language. This is an extensively elaborated problem addressed by many scholars (e.g. Contreras, 2009; Rončáková, 2009a, 2009b; 2010, Mlacek, 2012; Dluhý, 2013; Draguła, 2014), which cannot be examined here in more detail.

Except for language, conservatives were reproached for insufficient professionalism, lack of personal charm, lack of natural authority and absence of strategic thinking. Referendum communicators were perceived as weak in their ability to put forward valid arguments, which were regarded incompetent an unpersuasive. The absence of strategy could be seen not only in the preparation phase of the pre-referendum communication (selection of key messages, etc.) but also in a more profound discussion on whether referendum is an appropriate instrument. As mentioned by one of the conservative respondents, "we did not approach the subject responsibly. Only time will tell if the referendum was a good idea... We were not bound to take part in it under the obligation of obedience to the Church."

While conservative participants of the referendum discourse were reproached for certain deficiencies, the liberal ones were reproached for being unfair in their communication. According to our respondents (from both camps) they often exaggerated, used unnecessarily strong rhetoric or 'killer-phrases'. One of the conservative respondents described their communication approach as 'hurtful', which the conservatives could not and did not want to keep up with. Conservative journalists – in their own words – did not wish to emulate "[the liberals'] biased or non-journalistic manners of discussing and expressing arguments". This has led to an "uneven battle" and the conservative camp – or for that matter Church media – have found themselves in a classical communication trap: unable to set the agenda, they were relegated to defend themselves and out of concerns that such a defence might backfire, they decided to remain silent.

Understanding of Christianity

Another root cause for mutual misunderstanding identified by both conservative and liberal journalists is the crisis of Christianity. Some of them see it as a crisis of faith, others as a crisis of Christian thought.

The believing journalists strongly emphasized arguments revolving around the "loss of faith", hence the loss of sense of discerning between right and wrong, loss of the ability to make sacrifices for the benefit of a lifelong family obligation. "Family is God's invention; it is a matter of a believer, a person open to transcendence, to God's view and plan," remarked one of the respondents. At the same time, the inability to accept God's authority was perceived by conservative respondents with awe and they described it as "beclouding of common sense". This was often mentioned with reference to the understanding of human nature which will be discussed further below.

On the other hand, liberal journalists voiced concerns about the distortion of Christianity, its reduction and inability to use its full potential. According to one respondent, the intellectual level of today's priests – preachers and theologians – in Slovakia is comparable to 'a special school for mentally retarded' and the Church's main intention is to get people under control, with a 'primitive family theology' detached from the essence of the biblical message.

Perception of threat

The understanding of Christianity is the source of the perceived threat. Those concerned over the loss of faith in our society are worried about the morality; those who reproach the Church for reducing Christianity and for her effort to control people, on the other hand, voice concerns about the loss of freedom.

According to a conservative journalist, our society finds itself in the state of "moral pathology". He expressed his concerns about the decadence, displacement and disintegration of culture. Conservatives often ask rhetoric questions such as "where are we all heading..." As noted specifically by one of the respondents, "we live in times when unprecedented things happen and we don't know how to respond".

Liberal journalists do not understand this concern about the disruption of the moral code of the society. Such concern is completely alien to them and they do not find it appropriate to take such concerns into account. In our interviews, we often heard reactions expressing surprise: "What's all the fuss about? What's wrong?" Religious perception of morality is alien to them and they do not see any threat. On the contrary, they regard religious interpre-

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

tation of morality as unacceptable and, indeed, as infringement of privacy and personal rights, especially if it's a nonbeliever. They regard the imposition of faith-based social rules on all the society unacceptable.

3.2. Manipulation

Content-focused analysis of the media pre-referendum research, which forms the basis for this study, points to manipulation, or, more precisely, aversion to manipulation. That was one of the key common denominators of the arguments used in the discourse. While liberals voiced concerns of manipulation by the Church, conservatives blamed the elites and media (and their harmonic cooperation) for manipulating the public. Therefore our respondents were asked about the details of such manipulation and its causes. Conservative journalists more or less unequivocally agreed on the unfair media campaign prior to the referendum; liberals did not understand such reproaches against media but strongly perceived manipulation on the part of the Church.

State of media

Our conservative respondents unanimously confirmed perceived a symbiosis of media and the liberal elites, however, at the same time, unanimously rejected the "theories of evil background" as expressed by one of them. They searched for reasons revolving around natural propensity of people who work in media environment. In their opinion, a certain kind of self-censorship was at play here. It seems that journalists create their own communities with a network of friendships and relations, and people active in those small circles tend to reaffirm each other's standpoints. One respondent with a 20-years' experience of working for a secular daily and a member of those circles made clear that it is sort of a "pseudo-free cohesion". In his opinion not all journalists fully share liberal views however – as a matter of self-preservation – they make themselves subject to self-censorship. "Those are the ones searching [the truth] but I believe that the limits they place on themselves get increasingly narrow over time," says a journalist who quite recently switched to a Church medium recently. As mentioned by another respondent, the current Slovak media have explicitly "anti-Christian background" and are "liberal to the bone".

Liberal journalists refuted such notions and argued that their own path to media industry or specific editorial board was "an accident" thereby rejecting any self-censorship except for self-censorship which they regarded as part of a natural process of team-building of editorial boards. They refused any bias or prejudice and see the only problem in the lack of proper and willing communicators on the part of the Church, or, more specifically, the conservative part of the society. As mentioned by the editor of a liberal daily, when conducting a survey, "we had a huge problem to find someone in favour [of the referendum] and who would be willing to share his or her ideas". Thus, conservatives should not be surprised that they were given "less room when they did not want to speak out".

One possible explanation of this phenomenon was provided by a conservative journalist who did not think that a clear liberal bias of the media is something negative (lack of objectivity, journalistically unfair approach), but he rather took this as a fact. According him media may decide to take one of the three approaches to their own function:

- discussion;
- mirror; or
- one view.

The first two try to provide room for various parties and promote a constructive debate; the second type of media attempt to reflect the reality of the current society and faithfully reflect the proportions of various streams, and the third present their own specific viewpoint. "Referendum showed that not even big dailies aspire to be part of the categories (1) or (2); they all are category (3)." And he added: "In my view, this finding is one of the positive outcomes of this referendum – the cards are on the table".

State of the Church

According to our respondents, manipulative practices of the Church consisted mainly in the misleading use of facts, providing those facts without a context, exaggeration and spreading of fear, especially by presenting conspiracies. The term "conspiracy" was repeatedly mentioned during our interviews by all liberal journalists and their attitude to this phenomenon was strongly negative. They regarded it as very dangerous: "Conspiracy-thinking

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

is becoming a part of religious feeling and that's an absurd construct of Catholic activists." As mentioned by one of the respondents, believers should not be surprised that they are being mocked or ignored as a result of their exaggerated and distorted constructs – the situation is similar "to the one in which a healthy society attempts to eliminate fascist or racist elements from its mainstream". The alarming or exaggerated news of extreme forms of sexual education in Western Europe is a typical example. One respondent referred to a piece of news according to which one German father had been allegedly condemned on the grounds of his rejection of sexual education of his own children. "But this was not so. He had also accumulated other different misdemeanours and the German legal system allows the offender to either pay the penalty or stay in prison for two days." Once you hear the true story behind such news, you do the sensible thing and regard other similar reports as 'hoax'.

According to liberal journalists, another form of trying to create a "state of alarm" is the use of "hatred emotions" which contradict facts. The pre-referendum campaign video can serve as an example. A gay couple enter the house of a happy foster family to pick up a small boy. The boy asks them: '... And where's mom?' According to one journalist, "this infuriated a lot of people and, in my view, this was the turning point which has eventually led the defeat of the conservatives". The journalist described the video as a high-level "perversity" with an openly fascist connotation: "Watch out, Jews can steal your children...!" Such emotional and untruthful pseudo-arguments were regarded by liberal journalists as very unfair.

Lions are coming?

Quite naturally, differences in the understanding of manipulation have led to differences in the perception of threats. Whereas conservatives mostly feared the 'lions' , liberals did not share their feelings nor comprehended them.

In that respect, conservatives mostly speak of "restriction of conscience". They say Christians are being persecuted on the grounds of their actions which are in accordance with their conscience – e.g. for not providing accommodation to a gay couple in their own hotel, or refusing to bake a wedding cake for two gays, for wearing a cross at work or allegedly 'homophobic' remarks at work, etc. According to our conservative respondents, fears of such restrictions on conscience are reasonable because "we do not see an end of this".

On the other hand, liberal journalists regard these cases as random. "This is not a trend, nor any sign of anything, it's just the current state of legislation and a reflection of the mentality of the society." According to the liberals, this can easily change with new elections or through various forms of civic activism impacting the social climate. The dependence of these phenomena on the social context is crucial – therefore specific cases from other countries cannot be compared to the situation here in Slovakia.

Likewise, liberal journalists did not share the conservatives' concerns about undemocratic pressure of liberal elites that would infiltrate into the decision-making roles and impose their standards based on their own appetite. One respondent did not see any problem in that because "key things have always been pushed through by a small group of enlightened people". Liberal journalists did not share conservative concerns that the laws and other standards would gradually erode the morality of the society and weaken the underlying foundations of the society. As noted by one of the respondents, "morality is not formed by laws. You still have the option for conscientious objection and this will remain so". "The strength of the family clearly cannot be weakened by a mere change in definition and the strength of personal moral actions by some kind of sexual education. When people wish to establish a family, they'll have it, and that's it. Fears of a creeping decadence from the West – that's just rubbish."

3.3. Human nature

We identified radical differences in the perception of what is 'natural' in the pre-referendum media discourse as one of the key argumentation discrepancies. The key underlying root cause of this argumentation discord is the attitude on God's plan – i.e. an attitude based on faith or absence of faith.

God's plan

When asked about the definition of human nature, one liberal journalist identified the 'natural' with the term 'nature' as opposed to 'civilization', i.e. as something 'animal'. He argued that human beings

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

– just because they are human – abandon their animal instincts and strive for more noble manners. When confronted with the fact that in the eyes of believers, those noble manners are 'natural' because they stem from God's plan 'written in the heart' of man who is the only creature endowed with reason, he was very surprised. "Well, if that is so, then the dispute on what is natural between the conservatives and liberals is one big lexical misunderstanding," he remarked.

God's plan written in the heart and God's plan with man as a guideline for a happy and fulfilling life (albeit associated with suffering and self-denial) is received by liberal journalists as a "matter of faith", which has no place in the public discourse. "I have a problem with the underlying religious understanding as such, which is not necessarily shared by the whole society, as well as a daring usurpation of the right to interpret God's intentions. God's morality is not an argument, and not even a reasonable underlying basis for creating laws," concluded one respondent. God's plan should be completely left out of the public discourse which should focus only on rational arguments. "And then, the debate will be soon over...," he remarked.

Another frequent liberal objection against God's plan is its interpretation. As concluded by one liberal journalist, he "feels a strong aversion to those who 'know'... How do they know...?" In his view, God's plan cannot be known and the current "static theology" which looks like an authorized interpretation book is nothing but an updated version of "Christian paganism". In his view, revelation develops. Just as something had been 'natural' before, e.g. women used to be impure, slaves used to be inferior beings, some groups of population used to be deprived of their voting rights, today, we see reassessment of what is 'natural' and also reassessment of other traditional beliefs. Liberal journalists believe that "the Church would eventually retreat in the matters related to homosexual relations".

Conversely, conservative journalists regard faith as the underlying source and as the "only thing that's left" for us to work from. While conceding that "in a democratic environment we cannot impose revelation upon the society," they are astonished that the society has lost its ability to 'feel' what is right. In the atmosphere of loss of faith "there's nothing we can do but bet everything on one card: speak about God first and then argue, show why it's worth the effort, why it's better, that it leads to happiness..." That's because "God's plan is our genuine self, it's that what is better in us, in our identity". Such approach is viewed by conservatives as the most efficient way to enter a public debate: "First, declare faith as the basis of thought, and then work from there to arrive at a factual plane of discourse." If the partners in a dialogue are unable to accept faith as a starting point, communication is practically impossible... Even though several conservative journalists explored ways how to argue "without God", thus putting their religious faith "aside", and not "talking God" to people who do not understand, they finally arrived at a conclusion that faith as a starting point is something they cannot avoid.

Authority

According to conservative journalists, one of the root causes of general misunderstanding in the matter of human nature is a radically different perception of authority. As concluded by one of the respondents, "whereas one side to the dispute accepts the authority of God, the other only accepts the authority of one's own self – and that's where the clash starts". The same respondent remarked that today's world is plagued by the inability to accept God's authority – and a belief that it is "me who governs the winds".

Liberal journalists generally state the same: the authority of God which they do not believe in, is completely alien to them – they believe in themselves. "Man is the owner of one's own self. You are your own god," concluded one of the respondents. He also thinks that this is also true for many (or most) of those who regard themselves Christians. "If you commit adultery, you do not believe. You do not believe your God because you do not repent," he stated as a typical example he sees in his believing friends.

Role of state

Naturally, the attitude on the authority of man is the key driver behind the attitudes on the authority of the state. Conservative journalists affirmed their belief that the state does not have that authority and in general, it should not be trusted. For instance, on the case of sexual education, they endorse a clear authority of parents to educate their own children which they find superior to the authority of the state to interfere into such education. In this case, they regard

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

the interference of the state in the worldview questions a dangerous experiment. "Let's take a lesson. Let's do not experiment!" – these kinds of warnings have echoed during our interviews.

Liberal journalists unanimously affirmed their trust in state. "The state is the carrier of European civilization. It listens to the voices of experts, it knows better what to do – what's best for all," remarked one respondent. The state protects people against their own ignorance and immaturity. In the case of sexual education it protects children from the backwardness of their parents. In fact, it helps exercise their rights. Liberal journalists were convinced that the state does not thereby endorse any ideology, nor does it attempt to persuade; the state only brings in expertise and facts.

Insensibility

With respect to the above contradictory attitudes on God's authority and God's plan with man, conservative journalists were often surprised or even "astonished by the erosion of the understanding of human nature" and expressed fears of decadence or even the threat of "doom of civilization".

Conservative journalists generally agreed that in today's world, people "simply do not see, do not understand..." and are immune to rational arguments and facts; they often drew historic parallels in the West and often raised concerns as to "where we are all heading". "Things cannot be clearer – I am astonished that arguments do not work," remarked one journalist. He thinks that liberals' dullness or insensibility to the concept of 'Natural Law' is not pretended or played. He believes that the opponents honestly do not feel it and that they genuinely "believe that what they say is true". "And that's a devil's work," he concludes. Another respondent also supported this notion: "They do not simply pretend. They truly do not see – indeed, they just don't get it". Why is that? "One way to look at it is that in the midst of a raging war, natural human sensitivity to what is right and wrong is stifled for a period of time".

Most conservative journalists expressed concerns about a phase of self-destruction, but also expressed some hope that at a certain point in time, the society will have to "recover". As remarked by one of them, "we have to learn how to identify these initial signals". He thinks that the redefinition of the value of man is one of those signals. The default approach to life today is "maximization of personal happiness". However according to him, it becomes increasingly clear that maximization of personal happiness can have bad consequences. He supported this notion by referring to a study on premarital cohabitation: "It was assumed that couples that have gone through 'trial' cohabitation would be more stable and faithful. In fact, the opposite is true – and since they already share household, property, bills, it is difficult for them to break up; even though their relationship does not work any more, they keep it, have children, but eventually, when they find out this cannot work, the consequences are bad and even worse for their children..." Thus, to accept and internalize the fact that maximizing personal happiness may have bad consequences is the key: understanding this notion can be the starting point of a "recovery".

References to 'feelings' were repeatedly used during interviews by conservative journalists. This is not an accident: conservative journalists explicitly defended the role of feelings in public discourse. "We have been told to suppress our emotions or to be ashamed of using them as an argument. This is not right. If we want to lead the dialogue effectively we should not let them take our feelings or religion from us," concluded one of the respondents. In that respect, the general feeling that homosexual cohabitation is 'disgusting' or 'bad taste' is a plausible and relevant argument in public discussion. Within the "legalistic state" we live in, someone leads us to believe that we need to prove "that the grass is green" – and "this is kind-of sick".

3.4. Common ground

Based on the diagnoses presented above, suggestions or concepts were sought together with respondents as to "how the dialogue could work". The following paragraph seeks answers to the question as to how principled or ideologically motivated messages should be effectively transmitted in public discourse.

Soft forms

During our interviews, liberal journalists called for "soft forms" of Church communication. They were embarrassed by 'forcing', imposition. "People of faith have many opportunities how to offer their views and how to serve or edify the society," says one

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

respondent. Liberal journalists find religion as something long-term, as a continuous offer, inspiration, motivation...

Conservative journalists were split into two groups – the proponents of softer forms and those who did not find such approach effective. The first group placed emphasis on "missionary effort" and "evangelization", i.e. explicit spreading of key Christian message, by communicating that "God created us and loves us". "We should all be followers of Jesus – and not to condemn but understand or evangelize. In that respect, it is questionable whether the idea to hold a referendum was a good one," remarked one of the journalists.

Conservative journalists regard the "undecided silent majority" as primary the target group for evangelization. "We have to win these people for their own good," said one respondent. Other respondents estimated that this group accounts for 80% of population (i.e. people who did not take part in the referendum). The question how to approach this 80% group should be the primary concern of the Slovak church.

Journalists from the entire spectrum agreed that the church should refrain from spiritual violence and offer an ideal (e.g. celibacy in the case of homosexuals). The key part of such non-violent offer should be an expression of interest in the human beings. Specifically, for homosexuals – and as stated by one of the conservative respondents – the "Church seems lost in this topic and does not know what to do, she does not reflect on the topic – and anything that is neglected will eventually break out. Homosexuals feel disregarded and therefore they perceived the referendum as a battle against them. The fault is with the Church."

Honesty

One of the things journalists disliked most in the pre-referendum discourse was dishonesty on both sided, falsehood, and use of fake arguments. "It's not just getting rid of the mantras, but also putting the masks down – that's what helps," remarked one respondent. Honesty would clear off the debate and might actually help find some common ground.

However, journalists also pointed out that "parties are too polarized", or that this was a "clash of two different worldviews". Thus, they questioned whether any reconciliation is possible – some tended to agree, others disagreed. "Considering the fact that their views are 'completely out of sync with the reality', I doubt we can understand each other", concluded one conservative journalist. On the other hand, his colleague explicitly declared his "trust in dialogue", generosity of both sides. Of course, empathy is the key. "We as believers should appreciate intuition of nonbelievers," he added. Others consider "human normalcy, ability to reassess one's views and willingness to tackle one's own fears" as the key to dialogue. As mentioned by another respondent, "even if the communicators did not retreat from their positions, at least, they might have tried to lead the discussion in a more decent manner, get to know each other, relieve tension..."

No consensus

Some respondents raised concerns as to whether such "getting to know each other" may lead to some reasonable result. "We can understand each other, but that's not a solution. It's the positions on specific questions – that's what it's all about," declared one of the conservative journalists. According to him, taking common good as a plausible goal of the public discourse, is rather naive. "Public discourse is something people would engage in to achieve some common good." There are two situations where the debate on these questions may eventually end:

- interaction (with minimum conversion); or
- two irreconcilable camps.

One respondent, who considered the second option more realistic and the right path conservatives should take, remarked: "Stronger camp will prevail," and "showing strength" is part of that strategy. Even some fuss about it can be useful, what's important is that it has the potential to torpedo the other party's attempts to accomplish a change.

Thus, some journalists find reconciliation impossible; for them, the only outstanding question is the mode of operation "from the trenches". Such mode depends on how deeply they trust in dialogue – those who trust in dialogue more usually prefer a policy of 'open-arms' and kindness; those who do not believe in a dialogue usually prefer the policy of "showing strength" through mass-scale action, such as demonstrations, rallies or petitions.

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

4. Discussion and conclusion

The in-depth interviews with journalists active in the 'culture-war' arena sought answers to the question how to communicate principled or ideologically motivated religious messages in public discourse to make such communication effective and meaningful in order to resolve the given problem of the society.

Several key concepts were identified, covering the following three areas:

- dialogue;
- faith; and
- communication partner.

4.1. Dialogue

The research shows that in the worldview debate, the opinion camps are clearly in an antagonistic relation. Each camp regards members of the other side as personally displaced, approaching them with some level of empathy – ranging from attempting to understand or excuse their behaviour, to clearly articulating contempt or disdain.

Both parties perceive "the others" as potentially dangerous. One camp is filled with fears of conspiracies and discrimination of minorities; the other of loss of the moral code or decadence of societies and doom of civilization.

Interestingly enough, references to fascism were used by both camps. Liberals saw these in discrimination of sexual minorities which – in their view - echoed anti-Jewish legislation and concentration camps; conservatives pointed to Hitler and drew parallels with the current mass hysteria and stifling of common sense, attacks against normalcy, humaneness, and described the current situation as a "state of war".

Under the circumstances explained above, it should be concluded that the solution is not a dialogue, although a dialogue is useful to keep the discussion as decent as possible. The effort to understand the other party is plausible because it alleviates passions, however, consensus or agreement is impossible. In the words of some respondents, "it's all about positions" and communicating persuasive arguments aimed at people from among the "silent majority".

Two questions ensue from the above findings:

- What means should be used to approach the silent majority; and

- How to communicate most effectively "from the trenches".

4.2. Faith

The root cause of the irreconcilable dispute described is the faith, or, more specifically, Christian faith. It is not just faith in God but faith in the Church, which mediates and interprets God's will.

Faith seems to be the root cause, the breaking point, the cornerstone of what the parties regard as moral and good. For believers, the creative intention of God is the key: they believe that God's plan is a plan for all creatures including humans to live their lives in happiness. Nonbelievers have no such basis to derive their view from, and thus, for them, the question of what is good or what leads to happiness, is arbitrary.

All respondents – both believers and nonbelievers – agree that moral doctrines derived from faith cannot be imposed on those who do not believe in those doctrines. Believers see solution in the spreading of faith and then arrive at the implications for moral life. They find the opposite approach counterproductive. They regard evangelization as one of the solutions. All respondents emphasized the need for 'softer forms' of such spreading of faith – by inspiration, personal stories, testimonies, and unselfish service to the society.

At the same time, believers were convinced that faith as a basis for discerning right and wrong cannot be put aside. One cannot successfully limit oneself to the use of secondary arguments. If the first and key argument is faith in God and its rules of 'how the world goes', one has to declare this pre-understanding at the beginning as a basis for discussion. Subsequent lines of argumentation can only be added later, if the partner accepts the opponent's faith as a basis for discussion.

Two questions ensue from the presented findings:

- if there exists nothing that can be imposed upon the others based on one's faith, what does it mean for the legislative activities of Christians;
- to what extent is it possible for nonbelievers accept the basis of faith of their partners so that communication does not end but begins at that point.

4.3. Communication partner

M. Sekerák (2015) argues that the referendum discourse in Slovakia was not a democratically

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

beneficial agonism (struggle) but irreconcilable antagonism. Whereas in the case of agonism, different attitudes evolve, in antagonism, they remain static. Our study supports Sekerák's conclusions. The moral attitudes in the 'culture wars' within Western civilization are antagonistic.

According to some scholars, such an antagonistic discourse (e.g. Ch. Mouffe, 1999, who coined the concept of agonistic democracy) is harmful for democracy (and the society). Communicating parties regard themselves as 'enemies' and each party attempts to eliminate the other. It might seem that such a diagnosis of the public discourse necessarily ends up in a deadlock. However, our research also points to some ways of resolution, on the basis of discerning the recipients of the messages.[1] Antagonistic communication assumes that the recipient of the communication message has a solid, completely opposite opinion. However, such description only fits a small part of the society. Several respondents have pointed to the 'silent majority' or the '80%-group' and suggested that communicators should focus on this part of population.

This might be a challenge for both 'culture war' camps, however, it was explicitly mentioned only by conservative respondents. They were also aware that it is not a simple task to approach this group, since their experience is more-or-less detached from Christian morality, and they are often allergic to moralization or ideals in general. Thus, rallies or other mass-scale demonstrations only fulfil their political function (they show strength to the governing power and push politicians not to pass legislation rejected by a considerable mass of their own voters). However, with respect to the "silent majority", such rallies may be counterproductive.

Therefore, two planes of communication should be discerned:

- political – between liberals and conservatives; and
- non-political – between liberals/conservatives and common people.

On the first plane, ideas are brought up to raise awareness, while on the second plane, communicators try to reach out to people's convictions. It seems that these two require different instruments of communi-cation: the political plane requires tough forms ('showing strength'), but non-political plane requires soft forms (persuasive arguments to discern between right and wrong). Ambition to engage in the latter is often cherished by conservatives committed to the idea of the 'good of people'. However, the search of suitable forms of communication remains to be one of the key challenges faced by future communicators of religious/ ideological/worldview messages.

[1]. The antagonistic paradigm can be explored further by asking a (not quite illogical) question as to which of the antagonistic moral attitudes is harmful or beneficial for the society. If such a question can be answered before the future scholars pick it up as part of their historic research, then it is reasonable to search for an answer.

Bibliography

- Abercrombie, N., Longhurst, B. (1998), Audiences. London: Sage.
- Contreras, D. (2009), Il linguaggio giornalistico: caratteristiche e limiti. In J. M. La Porte (Ed.), Introduzione alla Comunicazione Istituzionale della Chiesa. Roma: Edusc, pp. 109-129.
- Dluhý, R. (2013), Media Effects, of Basic Christian Message Presented on Television. Revista Română De Journalism şi Comunicare. VIII (2-3), pp. 69-79.
- Draguła, A. (2014), Język między wiarą a niewiarą. In T. Rončáková, D. Lysý (Eds.), Božie posolstvo – ľudský jazyk. Možnosti a hranice médií [God's Message – Human Language. Potential and Limits of Media]. Ružomberok: Verbum, pp. 29-43.
- González Gaitano, N. (2008), Lineamenti metodologici per l´esame della rappresentazione delle radici della socialità che hanno origine nella famiglia. In N. González Gaitano (Ed.), Famiglia e Media. Il detto e il non detto. Roma: Edusc, pp. 9-33.
- Mlacek, J. (2012), Štylistické otázky náboženskej komunikácie [Stylistic Questions of Religious Communi-cation]. Ružomberok: Verbum.
- Mouffe, Ch. (1999), Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? Social Research. 66 (3), pp. 745-758.
- Palko, V. (2012), Levy prichádzajú. Prečo Európa a Amerika smerujú k novej tyranii. [Lions are Coming. Why Is Europe and America Heading to a New Tyranny]. Prešov: Michal Vaško Publishing.
- Putna, M. C. (2012), Křesťanství a homosexualita: Pokusy o integraci [Christianity and Homosexuality: Attempts for Integration]. Praha: Torst.
- Rončáková, T. (2009a), Prienik náboženského a publicistického štýlu I. Keď chce cirkev hovoriť mediálnym jazykom [Intersection of Religious and Journalistic Style I. When the Church Speaks Media Language]. Ružomberok: Philosophical Faculty of the Catholic University in Ružomberok.
- Rončáková, T. (2009b), Prienik náboženského a publicistického štýlu II. Ako cirkev hovorí mediálnym jazykom [Intersection of Religious and Journalistic Style II. How the Church Speaks Media Language]. Ružomberok: Philosophical Faculty of the Catholic University in Ružomberok.
- Rončáková, T. (2010), Prienik náboženského a publicistického štýlu III. Môže cirkev hovoriť mediálnym jazykom? [Intersection of Religious and Journalistic Style III. Can the Church Speak Media Language] Prague: Paolines.
- Rončáková, T. (2015), Referendový mediálny diskurz na Slovensku: memento novej evanjelizácie [Media Discourse on

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

Referendum in Slovakia: A Memento for New Evangelization]. Nové horizonty, IX (2), pp. 61-69.
- Sekerák, M. (2016), „Homoloby“ ve „vatikánské gubernii“: Agonistická demokracie v praxi? Politické dimenze současné diskuse o homosexualitě na Slovensku. [‘Homolobby’ at the ‘Vatican Governorate’: Agonistic Democracy at Work? Political Dimensions of the Current Debate on Homosexuality in Slovakia]. Manuscript in Review (Auspicia XII).

Doc. Terézia RONČÁKOVÁ, PhD.,
Assistant professor (docent), Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia.

Address: Hrabovská cesta 1, 034 01 Ružomberok, Slovakia.

E-mail: terezia.roncakova@ku.sk.

Revista română de JURNALISM și COMUNICARE

BDD-A24669 © 2015 Facultatea de Jurnalism şi Ştiinţele Comunicării; Editura Tritonic
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)