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Pastoral Reflection on Depictions of Contemporary Religious Subcultures in Online Discussions: An Analysis of Stereotypes (A Case Study from Slovakia)

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Abstract: In terms of ethnic and religious characteristics, the majority of the Slovak population identifies with Slovak nationality and Christianity. Recent quantitative and qualitative research on the value orientations of Slovaks has revealed negative stereotypical and dismissive attitudes towards "difference", which is often perceived as "non-Slovak" or "not ours". In this social, cultural, and religious context, the question arises as to what understanding and tolerance of religious expressions can be expected in the current, often conflict-ridden society and what pastoral challenges arise from this. The aim of the research was to identify whom participants in online discussions consider to be the most "different" from themselves, which specific attributes of other religious subcultures (i.e., those other than the majority Christian) the discussants consider the most "different", and how they evaluate this "difference". The research method used was critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on identifying and addressing social issues by analysing how these problems are presented in language—in our case, in written online comments within selected online discussions. The research confirms that the attitude of participants in online discussions towards the differences of other religious groups in the context of Slovakia is often accompanied by suspicion and majority negativism. The research findings point to the need for in-depth research focusing on the meaning and practical possibilities of reducing the social distance of the majority population concerning religious and ethnic minorities.

Keywords: religious subcultures; online discussions; critical discourse analysis (CDA); pastoral reflection; social distance; semantic and behavioural perspective; stereotypes

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1. Introduction

Due to the increasing individualism in thinking or experiencing, we are encountering more and more instances in the 21st century where people's attitudes are in mutual conflict (Sawicki 2012). It seems that interpersonal attitudes and opinions are increasingly at odds with other elements of the social environment (e.g., prevailing norms or the religious practices of others), which creates an even greater degree of mutual conflict. This is accompanied by various means of social categorization, such as intolerance, xenophobia, or discrimination. Stereotypical expressions, which this study focuses on more closely, are no exception. Experts characterize these stereotypes as relatively stable (simplified, recurring) patterns that often persist even when new findings do not confirm or even contradict them (Burton and Jirák 2003, p. 196–97; Hinton 2000).

In the social, cultural, and religious context of the aforementioned conflicts and contradictions, the question naturally arises: what kind of understanding and tolerance of religious expressions can be expected in today's (often conflict-ridden) society?

The authors of this study pose a similar question in the context of Slovakia, a small post-communist country in the heart of Europe with approximately five and a half million inhabitants. Slovakia shares many historical and cultural traits with its neighbouring

countries, yet it also exhibits distinctive characteristics that shape its societal dynamics. Historically, the country has been particularly influenced by the socialist era under forty years of Soviet dominance. This historical mosaic has contributed to a unique national identity that blends Eastern European traditions with Western influences. In recent decades, Slovakia has undergone significant transformation, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system and integrating into the European Union in 2004. Despite these advancements, Slovakia has faced challenges related to ethnic and cultural diversity. Issues of nationalism and xenophobia have surfaced, particularly in response to migration and global geopolitical shifts. The recent influx of refugees and migrants, alongside geopolitical tensions such as the war in Ukraine, has intensified debates about national identity and cultural preservation.

In Slovakia, Christianity is the dominant religion (Grešková 2013; M. Vašečka 2013). According to various findings, Slovaks consider Christianity to be something traditional, generally positive, and deeply rooted in their history (Grešková 2013; M. Vašečka 2013; Hargašová 1996; Bútora et al. 2009). Members of Christian churches make up 68.5% of the population (Aktuality.sk 2022); following in terms of population size are ethnic minorities, primarily Hungarians (7.75%) and Roma (3%), as well as two significantly smaller religious minorities, Muslims (0.07%) and Jews (0.04%) (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2021; Press Agency Sita 2023b).

Citizens of the Slovak Republic (further SR) belonging to national minorities or ethnic groups are guaranteed, under conditions established by law, not only "the right to learn the state language but also the right to education in their language, the right to use their language in official communication, and the right to participate in addressing matters concerning national minorities and ethnic groups" (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic n.d.). The status of local national minorities is also comprehensively regulated by the Constitution of the SR; Articles 33 and 34 in the fourth section of the Constitution, among other things, guarantee that belonging to any national minority or ethnic subculture shall not be detrimental to anyone (Constitution of the Slovak Republic n.d.). Despite this, experts agree on the long-term weakening of the position of religious and ethnic groups by the state (Reuters 2016; Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for National Minorities 2012; and others), with many political decisions (e.g., measures aimed at migration) being partly considered as "a legacy of communism" (Reginášová 2017, p. 204).

Present research within this study focused on examining Slovak attitudes towards the "difference" of non-Christian religious groups and was conducted within Slovak online discussions ongoing in eight selected online discussion groups. The research method used within this study was the so-called "Critical Discourse Analysis" (further CDA). Using CDA, our goal was to determine the following: (a) which members of minority religious subcultures participants in online discussions perceive as the most "different" from themselves; (b) which specific attributes of minority religious subcultures the discussants consider the most "different" from themselves; and (c) how the discussants evaluate this "difference". This study attempts to answer questions of what attitudes Slovaks—participants in online discussions—display towards the "difference" of minority religious groups and their sympathizers, and what life sentiments are formed in this context.

The research is framed by two perspectives, which, according to Professor J. Krejčí, identify every sociocultural phenomenon occurring in society. The sociocultural phenomenon we are studying—"difference"—can be described, according to the author, based on two perspectives: (a) the semantic perspective, i.e., the phenomenon under study carries a meaning that participants express through language, which participants in a specific social environment understand and accept; and (b) the behavioural perspective, i.e., the phenomenon under study manifests in human behaviour (Krejčí 1993). Both perspectives place the research findings within specific realities, considering the possibilities of pastoral care that might counteract the tensions arising in the discourse about differences within online discussion groups.

1.1. Case Study from Slovakia: Contextual Realities

In this study, the primary basis for the research is recent quantitative and qualitative studies on the value orientations of Slovaks, in which several experts have revealed negative stereotypical and dismissive perceptions of "difference", which is understood as "non-Slovak" or possibly "not ours". Among many experts, sociologist M. Vašečka also evaluates such perceptions of "difference" among Slovaks, noting that Slovakia resists "foreign elements" and aims to shape everyone "in its image" (M. Vašečka 2013, p. 38). According to this sociologist, minorities in Slovakia are subject to what is termed the "racist paradox" from the majority society; the majority calls for their integration, and this offer is marked by assimilatory pressures in social and even media discourse to have everyone be "like Slovaks". In other words, while minorities may achieve civic–political and socio-economic integration, which generally happens, they often fail at the level of cultural integration (M. Vašečka 2009).

M. Hargašová from the Slovak "Institute of Information and Prognoses" also notes potential conflicts between the majority and minorities in Slovakia. She notes that shortly after Slovakia acceded to the European Union in May 2004, the opening of Slovakia's borders aroused serious concerns among Slovaks. Slovaks expressed fear that our territory would become a "transit station for refugees (. . .) and a destination for those who wish to settle here permanently" (Hargašová 1996, p. 68). Research by S. Letavajová later confirms that the reasons for migrants coming to Slovakia were primarily studies, family ties, and asylum requests; furthermore, "by the end of 2017, the total number of foreigners with residence permits was only 1.92% of the total population of Slovakia, i.e., 104,451 people" (Letavajová 2019, p. 139). According to experts, the territorial (partly also economic) imperative persists in Slovakia to this day. Among Slovaks, this sentiment is expressed in the word combination of "we don't want foreigners and we won't give up what is ours" (Hargašová 1996, p. 68; Letavajová 2019; and others).

Regarding what has been said, it is now appropriate to clarify the concept and significance of the term "stereotype". The term stereotype refers to highly stable beliefs, almost independent of people's personal experiences. Stereotypes, as "relatively stable schemas, often persist even when new findings do not confirm or even contradict them" (Burton and Jirák 2003, pp. 196–97). Hinton observes that negative stereotypes about others arise from efforts to maintain a positive social identity and self-presentation. It is interesting that identification with one's subculture does not automatically create negative stereotypes (expected behaviour) about "different" subcultures. The determining factor is the type of foreign subculture (Hinton 2000). These observations have prompted the academic community in Slovakia to conduct research based on understanding social stereotypes and their social consequences.

According to R. Sedláková, the process of stereotyping begins with "the use of derogatory labels to designate groups considered 'different', and continues with justifying such assessed differences and symbolic distance" (Sedláková 2008, p. 201). This is true even though stereotypes do not always stem from personal experience. A similar observation is made by G. W. Allport, who notes that stereotypes are often used to justify and rationalize generally negative attitudes or behaviours that may not reflect personal experience with "difference" (Allport 1954). In short, we can see that stereotypes contribute to viewing the world in two opposing terms—on one side, there is "us", and there is "them" on the other hand. Both attitudes focus on the question of "what does" and "what is" the other subculture compared to "what does" and "what is" our subculture. However, according to J. Plichtová and T. Z. Podolinská, this perspective also carries its own emotion (usually negative in stereotypes) and encompasses the behaviour that results from this viewpoint (Radio and Television of Slovakia 2017). Similarly, M. Pickering notes that the emotional delineation of "difference" occurs "to ensure the unification of collective identity and to separate the privileged from the subordinate" (Pickering 2001, p. 49).

1.2. Muslim and Jewish Subculture in Slovakia

In the following section, we will focus on presenting two religious minorities present in Slovakia: The Jewish and Muslim minorities (Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for National Minorities 2012; Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2021).

The Jewish religious community in Slovakia struggles with a long-standing low number of adherents, which is a situation determined by the tragic events of the Second World War. The Holocaust reduced Slovakia's Jewish population by 95 per cent (The Official Website of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic n.d.), representing 70,000 Jewish victims (Press Agency Sita 2023b), even though Slovakia had previously been one of the important centres of Central European Jewry (The Official Website of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic n.d.).

Even today, Jews in Slovakia represent a minority religious subculture, comprising consistently less than one-tenth of one per cent of the Slovak population (The Official Website of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic n.d.); i.e., between 2000 and 4000 Jews (Press Agency Sita 2023b). Many members of the Jewish community do not practice their faith publicly because "they feel safer when not declaring their Jewish identity publicly". Others are descendants of "mixed marriages, know about their Jewish ancestors, but their Jewish identity ends there" (The Official Website of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic n.d.).

Since the beginning of democracy in Slovakia (i.e., after the fall of forty years of communism in 1989), the majority's attitude towards Judaism has been studied minimally and primarily only as a specific type of racial, ethnic, or religious intolerance and racism (Bútora et al. 2009). In the context of research on Judaism and Jews, not only has the low number of studies and methodological uniformity been problematic, but also "political correctness and the insincerity of respondents, which prevented the acquisition of truthful and valid data" (M. Vašečka 2004). Sociologist M. Vašečka (2006) further points out the issue of inadequate knowledge of recent history, which influences the evaluation of Slovak respondents on the studied indicators (M. Vašečka 2006, p. 300). According to M. Vašečka, research on Slovaks' attitudes towards Jews is still considered to be of little importance or even marginal (M. Vašečka 2004).

Even in terms of the quantity and quality of research focused on the Slovak majority's attitudes towards Muslims, whose number is 3862 (i.e., 0.07 per cent of the population), the situation is not more positive. Based on recent studies, negative attitudes and stereotypes towards Muslims among Slovaks are stronger than elsewhere in Europe (Redakcia SME 2023). Slovakia is also the only country in the European Union that does not recognize Islam as an official religion (European Commission 2021), and Muslims do not have a Muslim cemetery (United States Department of State: Office of International Religious Freedom 2020) or a mosque; repeated debates about permitting the construction of Muslim mosques in our territory occur regularly: in 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, etc. (Jakubová 2020; Debnár 2017; TASR 2017; Sudor 2010; Redakcia SME 2005; and others). Negative attitudes towards Muslims (and towards Islam) are often supported by the media, which predominantly report negatively about Muslims.

Just like with Judaism, the attitude of the Slovak majority towards Arabs, Islam, and Muslims has been little studied since the fall of communism in 1989. Today, experts in Slovakia categorize Muslims based on their country of origin into two main groups: so-called native Muslims and Slovak converts (whose number is estimated to be between 150 and 400). Current research also confirms that the Muslim minority in Slovakia is mostly composed of men who are students, entrepreneurs, or traders—educated and financially stable individuals with relatively high social status, capable of taking care of themselves and their families (Štefančik and Lenč 2012, pp. 104–21; Letavajová 2019, p. 142; and others).

It is important to understand that conflicts and mutual tensions between the majority and minority subcultures do not exist in a vacuum, i.e., they are part of societal processes happening within offline and similarly online environments. For the majority of society, as

well as for religious minorities, it is crucial to pay increased attention not only to existing initiatives focusing on personal contacts and cooperation at specific levels but also to reflect its pastoral dimension. Analysing how religious subcultures are verbally presented in offline environments and also in online settings (i.e., semantic perspective) becomes increasingly essential. Additionally, understanding how these presentations can shape public opinion and people's behaviour (i.e., behavioural perspective) is important (Krejčí 1993).

2. Methodology

The research methodology outlines the principles and processes guiding the study. It focuses specifically on examining the attitudes of the Slovak majority towards perceived "difference" in minority religious subcultures as expressed through online discussions.

2.1. Research Goal and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research was to identify, analyse, and evaluate the most prevalent opinions expressed by participants in online discussions regarding religious individuals and groups. The study aimed to uncover the most frequently mentioned "differences" identified in the comments of these participants.

The qualitative research tried to answer three main research questions:

(Q1) Which minority religious subcultures are considered by online discussion participants to be the most "different" from themselves?
(Q2) What specific attributes of minority religious subcultures are perceived by online discussion participants as the most "different" from themselves?
(Q3) How do participants in online discussions evaluate previously identified "differences"?

2.2. Research Design

This study examines "difference" as a sociological concept that influences the structure of society. As J. Krejčí explains, the characteristics of "difference" can be recognized, studied, and assessed through a "semantic perspective" (interpreting difference via language) and a "behavioural perspective" (interpreting difference through actions) (Krejčí 1993).

The present study adopts a qualitative research design, primarily employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore users' statements used in online discussions concerning religious subcultures in Slovakia. The research design is framed around the understanding that language within these discussions is not just a means of communication but also a tool for social action that can reveal and reinforce social differences, stereotypes, or ideological beliefs (Fairclough 1995, 2003; Wodak 2014; van Dijk 2001; and others).

The research was conducted through 422 online discussions within eight selected online discussion groups. Focusing on online discussions allows us to examine real discourses between actual participants, providing a rich context for analysis.

2.3. Research Method: Meaning and Advantages

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on identifying and addressing social problems by analysing how these issues are represented through variable statements, i.e., language, expressed in written online texts. In CDA, language is seen as a form of social action that shapes and is shaped by other social practices, such as dominance, discrimination, stereotyping, reinforcing ideological beliefs, and spreading hate (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). N. Fairclough also argues that language is a fundamental part of social life, serving as both action and representation (Fairclough 2003). Therefore, critical analysis involves examining the obvious and also hidden ways in which dominance, discrimination, stereotyping, reinforcing ideological beliefs, or spreading hate is expressed in language (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak 2014).

As previously indicated, online discourse, as a form of social action, can both shape and influence our social world (Wodak 2014). An important point is that there is a close relationship between language within discourse and other social practices (Fairclough 2003); that is, discourse reflects, reinforces, and challenges social practices and plays a role

in disseminating cultural, economic, and political perspectives in everyday life (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002). Thus, discursive practices contribute to the formation of social identities and relationships, and in doing so, they can reshape society (Fairclough 1995). This makes discourse a tool not only for advancing the interests of certain groups but also for stereotyping, reinforcing ideological beliefs, spreading hate, and other similar functions.

Finally, CDA aims to expose how reality is represented, highlighting issues of inequality and advocating for more balanced, equitable, and inclusive relations in society, which are reinforced through discourse (Fairclough 1995). By critically examining discourse in social interactions (for example, within social media discussions), CDA reveals how such discussions contribute to imbalance, exclusivity, or inequality. This understanding may call for significant social changes and, at the very least, lead to some social adjustments. Ultimately, CDA seeks to promote critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992). In the context of pastoral care, which frames this study, CDA can reveal how perceptions of "difference" to religious minorities are presented in society and how these presentations influence the mutual perceptions of individuals and groups.

2.4. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from eight selected online discussion forums known for active participation and diverse viewpoints on religious matters in Slovakia.

The examined forums are as follows:

- Diskusné fórum [eng. Discussion forum] (https://www.diskusneforum.sk/) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Humanisti Slovenska [eng. Humanists of Slovakia] (https://www.humanisti.sk/) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Lipka Fórum [eng. Lipka Forum] (https://www.dzio.sk/lipka) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Najforum.sk [eng. Najforum.sk] (http://www.forum.jukosoft.sk/) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Spovednica [eng. Confessional] (https://www.spovednica.sk/) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- YouTube channel–Večer pod lampou [eng. YouTube channel–Evening under the lamp] (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuvt8ytoYfo) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Server pre motorkárov–chat [eng. Server for bikers–chat] (http://motoride.sk/) accessed on 1 June 2023;
- Vykecajsa.sk–chat [eng. Talk to each other.sk–chat] (http://vykecajsa.sk/chat/) accessed on 1 June 2023.

Eight online discussion forums were chosen based on their relevance to the research topic and the frequency of discussions related to religion. The discussions were monitored over a year (June 2023–June 2024), ensuring a broad range of comments and viewpoints were captured. Data collection consisted of written comments and posts from these discussions, focusing on topics of religious "difference". For detailed analysis based on their relevance to the research purpose and research questions, a total of 422 comments were selected.

2.5. Research Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the online discussions and specific comments for analysis, meaning the material and participants were chosen "on purpose", not randomly (Palinkas et al. 2015; Heath 2023). This method allowed the researchers to focus on discussions to provide insights into the participants' perceptions and evaluations of religious "differences". The selection criteria included the relevance of the discussion to the research topic and the frequency of discussions related to religion.

The sample size of 422 comments across eight selected online discussion groups was sufficient for identifying recurring themes and patterns in the discourse, providing a valuable understanding of how religious differences are perceived and evaluated in online spaces.

2.6. Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the data were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), following the framework established by N. Fairclough (1995, 2003) and further developed by scholars such as R. Wodak (2014) and T. A. van Dijk (2001).

The analysis involved several stages:

(a) Textual analysis—The first stage focused on researching the language used in the comments, including word choice, opinion structure, and stereotyping strategies. The goal was to identify how language is used to express and reinforce perceptions of religious differences.
(b) Discursive analysis—The second stage involved analysing the broader discursive practices within the online discussions. It examined and analysed online discourses as a specific space for open discussion about religion and religious differences.
(c) Social practice and pastoral analysis—The third stage of the study looked at how the identified discourses might reflect broader negative social practices, specifically stereotypes (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). This stage introduced the possible implications of the discourses for social relations and social action, including pastoral views on research findings.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

All 422 researched online discussions were publicly accessible, and no identifying information was collected or analysed. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research on online communities, ensuring that the privacy and anonymity of participants were maintained.

Additionally, the analysis was conducted with sensitivity to the potential impact of the findings, particularly regarding the portrayal of religious groups and individuals. The researchers tried to avoid interpretations that could reinforce negative stereotypes or contribute to social tensions.

3. Results

The qualitative research on the attitudes of online discussants towards the "difference" of minority groups in Slovakia is focused on answering three key research questions.

3.1. Which Minority Religious Subcultures Do Participants in Online Discussions Consider to Be the Most "Different" from Themselves? (O1)

Based on 422 online discussions within eight selected discussion forums, it can be concluded that Arabs/Muslims are perceived as the most "different" from online discussion participants. The second most frequently identified subculture considered to be "different" from the majority of Slovaks is Jews. A surprising finding of the study is the third identified group, which is not related to religious minorities but rather to an ethnic subculture: the Roma.

According to the most recent census in 2021, the number of Roma in Slovakia is reported to be 3% of the population (i.e., 156,000 people) (Press Agency Sita 2023a). However, the actual number is significantly higher. The "Atlas of Roma Communities", published in 2019, cites a threefold higher number of Slovak Roma, up to 440,000 citizens. Thus, the census data primarily reflect how many people self-identified as Roma; this is a self-declared figure, not the real number of Roma in Slovakia (Gehrerová and Kerekeš 2022). The frequent mention of Roma in online discussions can be attributed not only to their notable presence in the Slovak population but also to a wide range of long-standing stereotypical attitudes held by the majority population towards the Roma group (Mann 1992; Červeňák 2000; Krivý 2001; I. Vašečka 2001; Vašečka et al. 2002; Dudeková 2012; Lajčáková et al. 2017; Kozubik et al. 2020; and others), which we more explain in the Section 4.

3.2. What Specific Attributes of Minority Religious Subcultures Do Participants in Online Discussions Perceive as the Most "Different" from Themselves? (O2)

Based on the analysed online discussions, it can be concluded that participants perceive Arabs/Muslims as the most "different" from themselves. In online discussions are Arabs/Muslims often evaluated as follows:

- "Extremists" and "religious fanatics"—Online discussants describe Islam as a "hateful religion that is a source of violent acts by people without rational and critical thinking". For example, one user commented, "Islam teaches hatred and violence; it's no wonder so many terrorist attacks are committed by Muslims". Another added, "They blindly follow their faith without questioning it, which makes them dangerous";
- People living in strictly closed communities—Muslims are seen as significantly unadaptable to the majority, with this issue being considered as the "biggest problem of immigration" by the discussants. For instance, one commenter claimed, "Muslims refuse to integrate, they stick to their communities, and that's why they can never fully become part of European society". Another argued, "They want their schools, their laws—how can we coexist with such closed-off people?";
- Sources of violence and unrest in European cities—As more Muslim immigrants arrive, discussants argue that Muslims "bring with them cultural and religious values that clash with Western norms, leading to tensions, unrest, and even violence". One post read, "Just look at Paris or London—places with high Muslim populations that are now plagued with crime and riots". Another said, "They don't respect our way of life and this leads to conflict";
- "Biggest foreigners"—Muslims are perceived as "not only culturally and religiously, but also humanly distant from Slovaks". One participant remarked, "They aren't just different because of their religion, but in the way they behave and think—they're nothing like us". Another added, "We have nothing in common with them, and that fact makes Muslims considered as strangers in our country";
- Oppressors of women—Among discussants, there are often inflammatory remarks about women who wear the burqa, claiming that "the burqa is a symbol of their subjugation and suppression of freedom". For example, one discussant stated, "How can they claim to respect women when they force them to cover up like that? It's oppressive and backward". Another said, "The burqa is just a tool to keep women in their place—Islam treats women like property";
- People who alienate and moralize others—"Muslims are very strictly oriented towards their faith, and as a result, they often moralize and are critical, or even violent, towards those who do not share their beliefs". A participant wrote, "They look down on anyone who isn't Muslim and try to impose their values on others. If you don't agree with them, you're the enemy". Alternatively, some express the view that "The religious practices of Muslims and their unwillingness to adapt to the majority make them seem foreign, strange, and separate them from the rest of us";
- People rejecting modernization—Muslims are perceived as resistant to modernization, primarily due to their adherence to traditional laws and strict religious practices that do not conform to contemporary dialogue. One comment read, "They live by rules from the Middle Ages. How can we expect them to fit into the modern world?" Another observed, "Their resistance to change makes it hard for them to blend into modern European society".

In the online discussions, participants perceive Jews as the second most "different" from themselves. Jews' "difference" from the majority of Slovaks is evaluated as follows:

- Desiring power and world governance—Discussants negatively view the political and power connections between Israel and the USA. There are also negative connotations associated with the belief that Jews "have always had and continue to have significant influence" on politics and government decisions in many European countries, including Slovakia. For example, one user commented, "Jews have always been pulling the strings behind the scenes. Just look at how much influence they have in American pol-

itics, and by extension, in Europe". Another wrote, "They control everything—media, politics, banking—nothing happens without their say";

- Prioritizing their interests—Discussants express the belief that Jews always prioritize their interests, which are often seen as conflicting with the interests of the majority society. One post read, "For Jews, it's always about what benefits them. They don't care about what's best for the country, only for their people". Another stated, "Jews only look out for themselves and don't care how their actions affect the rest of us";
- "Distant and different from Slovaks"—Jews are perceived as "different from us" or "other than us" (i.e., Slovaks). One discussant claimed, "Jews have always kept to themselves—they live in their world and don't mix with the rest of us". Another wrote, "We have very little in common with them culturally or religiously, which makes them distant and foreign for us";
- Religiously rigorous "scrupulous" individuals—Jews are viewed as people with extremely sensitive morality and those who "see sin everywhere". A participant remarked, "Their religion is so strict and they seem obsessed with following every tiny rule—it's like they're afraid of sin in everything they do". Another stated, "They take their religion too seriously";
- Rich but greedy and stingy—There is a belief that Jews "have controlled finance and the banking sector for ages", which is associated with the view that they are "greedy" and "stingy." For example, one comment read, "It's no secret that Jews have been running the banks for centuries. They're rich but will do anything to avoid spending money on others". Another added, "They're notorious for hoarding wealth and are stingy to sharing it with anyone (except of yourself)";
- "Invisible" in society—Jews are considered closed off and isolated from the rest of society. One discussant stated, "It's like they have their separate society that we're not part of";
- Conflicted—Discussants negatively assess the current military situation and the inability of Israel to resolve the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip. One participant wrote, "Israel is constantly at war, and they seem incapable of finding a peaceful solution. Their actions in Gaza just fuel more violence". Another remarked, "They've had decades to resolve the conflict, but it's like they don't even want peace".

3.3. How Do Participants in Online Discussions Evaluate Previously Identified "Differences"? (O3)

The primary finding is the low level of differentiation among discussants between the terms "Arab" and "Muslim"; in other words, for the discussants, these terms refer to the same group of so-called "religious fanatics" who adhere to a "hateful religion" in a backward and outdated manner and live in strictly closed communities, unwilling to adapt to the majority (i.e., to the host country's culture). Participants in online discussions evaluate these "differences" by labelling Arabs/Muslims as their "greatest foreigners", meaning "they are not only culturally and religiously but also humanly the most distant" to Slovaks.

As we have just suggested, Arabs/Muslims are primarily associated with Islam, which is perceived as a "potential risk for Europe". Consequently, discussants are generally suspicious of Arabs. Emotions in discussion groups rise primarily in connection with terms like "extremism" and "terrorism", as the global impact of violence (which discussants associate primarily with Islam) ultimately affects the lives of ordinary people. Emotional expressions reveal fear and a sense of threat to personal safety. It seems that in discussion groups, this subjective perception of safety threats also predominantly shapes the negative attitudes of discussants towards Arabs/Muslims.

Further negative connotations are attached to Arabs/Muslims and Islam in connection with recent historical events in Slovakia, particularly as the country encounters Islamic influence through immigration. From the perspective of the discussants, this tension appears as a "long-standing unresolved conflict" characterized by illegal migration, the

risk of weapon use, and the ongoing threat of global conflict. In this context, discussants also refer to the views of Slovak experts who highlight the potential rise of extremism associated with Islam (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic 2024; Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR 2023; Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic 2019; Hykisch 2001; Děd 2011; Grešková 2003; Hofreiter 2002; Macháčková and Dojčár 2002; Slezák 1999; and others).

The discussions also reflect perceptions of Arabs/Muslims and Islam as sources of violence and unrest in European cities. These discussions include "witnesses of events" who describe "crime and problems of nighttime life in European metropolises". According to the discussants, the growing Islamization of these cities, often reported in the media, is directly linked to Arabs/Muslims as sources of violence and unrest. Moreover, discussants believe that the media increasingly features "the use of religious language", suggesting that issues related to Islam and its influence are subjects of intense media coverage. It appears that the "media portrayal of Islam" and the frequent public discourse about Islam "everywhere people look" are bothersome to the discussants; their attitudes indicate feelings of their personal threat and threat to the national identity as well as the value system of the majority.

Participants in the studied online discussions exhibit a somewhat more neutral stance towards Jews compared to Arabs/Muslims. Opinions emerge more prominently in the context of alleged Jewish mentality and particularly Jewish religion. The former suggests that online discussants believe Jews, by nature of their mentality and character, are people who seek power and global dominance. For instance, discussants negatively assess the political and power links between Israel and the USA, and there are also negative connotations associated with the belief that Jews "have always had and still have significant influence" on politics and government decisions in many European countries, including Slovakia.

Additional perceptions that contribute to the belief that Jews are "different" from the majority Slovaks include the view that Jews always prioritize their interests, which are seen as conflicting with the interests of the majority society. According to the discussants, Jews are perceived as excessively wealthy, greedy, and stingy due to their historical control over finances and the banking sector. Furthermore, they are also labelled as contentious, which is linked to negative evaluations of the current military situation and the perception of Israel's inability to resolve the conflict in the Gaza Strip definitively.

Opinions about the "difference" in Jewish mentality are accompanied by beliefs about the "difference" in Jewish religion. Jews, due to their religious beliefs, are associated with "scrupulousness", meaning people with "excessively sensitive morals" (Educalingo Dictionary n.d.). According to discussants, Jews are not only seen as religiously scrupulous but also as individuals who "see sin everywhere". According to discussants, the presented rigour and belief in their "own super-spirituality" render Jews a "less visible subculture" in society, i.e., Jews are perceived as "closed off and isolated from the rest of society".

Given the low number of Jews in Slovakia (0.04%) (Press Agency Sita 2023b), the openly negative attitudes of discussants towards Judaism were surprising. According to P. Salner, Chairman of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities, or based on research by T. Gyárfášová, many Slovaks today are unaware that they have met a Jew because most young Jews today are openly secularized. They show occasional interest in Judaism more in terms of culture and traditions than in religion (Salner, n.d.; Gyárfášová 2008). In other words, as Slovak Judaism shifts away from orthodox Judaism towards a more moderate "secularized" form, young Slovaks (including many discussants in the studied online forums) encounter peers who view Judaism more as a cultural matter (Kernová n.d.; Salner, n.d.; Gyárfášová 2008; Botík 2007; Bárkány and Dojč 1991; Vago 2000; and others). Together with these experts, we believe that the stereotypical view of Jewish religion has other roots, as any negativity from the studied Slovaks towards Jews cannot be attributed to the "religious element".

4. Discussion

The research was guided by two recommended perspectives: the semantic perspective, which views "difference" as a carrier of meaning that participants in a specific social environment understand, accept, and express through language, and the behavioural perspective, which regards "difference" as a phenomenon manifested in human behaviour (Krejčí 1993). In the context of both perspectives, the research method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) proved to be useful. It helped reveal how language can reinforce or weaken social cohesion, thereby influencing the mutual perception of individuals and groups.

Using the CDA method in a pastoral context, the semantic perspective emphasizes that "difference" is not merely an abstract concept but is deeply rooted in sociocultural contexts, where participants assign meaning to this phenomenon and understand it in the context of their faith/non-faith and experiences. In pastoral care, this perspective can manifest in how individuals and communities perceive those who are "different", whether based on race, religion, or other characteristics. Pastors and spiritual leaders can use this perspective to promote inclusivity and to help individuals and communities understand and embrace "difference" as part of God's creation.

The "behavioural perspective" also provides a necessary and practical view of how perceptions of "difference" can influence individual behaviour within society. This perspective suggests that stereotypes are not merely intellectual attitudes but are also manifested in specific actions and behaviours that can be either inclusive or exclusive. Spiritual leaders who recognize this dynamic can work deliberately to shape behaviour that condemns stereotypes and, conversely, promote behaviour that reflects love and acceptance, which is central to pastoral care for individuals and the entire society.

Finally, as the theory about CDA emphasizes, discourse is not merely a reflection of social practices but actively contributes to their formation, which is especially important in a pastoral context. As N. Fairclough points out, language plays a crucial role in social life by initiating human action (Fairclough 2003). Therefore, in pastoral care, it is essential to critically examine how language reflects dominance, xenophobia, or the spread of prejudice and stereotypes (i.e., the significance perspective) (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak 2014; Krejčí 1993). Moreover, since these discursive practices and tensions emerge in online discussion environments, there is an assumption of their presence in offline reality as well. Hence, there is a significant need to shape offline social relationships and also those in online spaces (i.e., the behavioural perspective) (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002; Krejčí 1993).

In the context of the research findings, the following can be stated:

The research findings (O1) identified stereotypical views of online discussants, particularly concerning the physiological and cultural differences between the majority and two religious groups present in Slovakia—Muslims and Jews.

Participants in the online discussions (O2) perceive Arabs/Muslims as the most "different" from themselves, associating them with potential extremism, non-conformity to the majority, and issues related to immigration. Muslims are also described as oppressors of women and hostile to modernization. Participants in the online discussions (O3) evaluate these identified "differences" of Arabs/Muslims very negatively, referring to members of this minority as "religious fanatics" who practice a "hateful religion" and live in strictly closed communities, being unadaptable to the host culture. These differences lead to labelling Arabs/Muslims as the "biggest foreigners", culturally, religiously, and personally the most distant from Slovaks.

Discussions about Arabs/Muslims reflect a sense of threat stemming from the perception of Islam as a potential risk to Europe, particularly concerning extremism and terrorism. The negative perception of Arabs/Muslims in the research sample is amplified by current events in Slovakia, where immigration is bringing Islamic influence into the country. Discussants frequently mention risks associated with illegal migration, the use of weapons, and the potential for global conflict. These concerns are intensified by the media portrayal of Islam, which contributes to the alleged "increasing crime in European cities" and thus fosters a sense of threat. This feeling of threat extends to national identity and the

value system of the majority; that is, discussants express dissatisfaction with the frequent public discourse on Islam, which further strengthens their negative attitudes.

In online discussions (O2), Jews are perceived as the second most "different" subculture. They are often stereotyped as power-hungry and seeking global dominance, with close political and power connections to the USA. Discussants express the belief that Jews have tendencies towards power ambitions and controlling global affairs, which is reflected in their more negative evaluations. Specifically, the perceived political and economic influence of Jews in Slovakia and worldwide is a point of contention. Discussants also attribute greed, stinginess, and a preference for their interests, which are allegedly at odds with the interests of the majority society, to Jews. The negative perception of Jews in the studied discussion groups also extends to their role in the development of the conflict in the Gaza Strip, contributing to an overall sense of their difference and alienation from the majority of Slovak society.

Participants in online discussions (O3) tend to view Jews somewhat more neutrally or even less negatively compared to Arabs/Muslims. However, certain recurring stereotypes about alleged Jewish mentality and Judaism persist in researched discussions. Judaism is perceived as a strict and rigid religion, which may be related to the relatively low visibility of Jews in society (Salner, n.d.; Gyárfášová 2008). Experts also point out that despite the low number of Jews in Slovakia, stereotypes about Jews have persisted over time. These expert opinions suggest that negative attitudes towards Jews may not be directly related to their religion but rather to historically rooted perceptions of their (often negative) influence on society. Historically, Slovak stereotypes have depicted Jews as usurers, innkeepers, misers, and enemies of Christians, among other negative traits (Kernová n.d.; Salner, n.d.; Gyárfášová 2008; Bárkány and Dojč 1991; Vago 2000; Botík 2007; and others).

Surprisingly, the third most frequently identified "different" subculture in the research does not relate to religious minorities but to the ethnicity of Roma. The frequent appearance of Roma in online discussions can be attributed to their notable presence in the Slovak population (Gehrerová and Kerekeš 2022) and, especially, to a wide range of stereotypical attitudes held by the majority population towards the Roma group. According to Slovak sociologist V. Krivý, who examined stereotypes and value orientations of the Slovak public in both the early and late 1990s, research pointed to a long-term strengthening of Slovaks' antagonistic attitudes towards the Roma (Krivý 2001). Current trends suggest that among the majority of Slovaks, Roma are predominantly perceived as a group of people who "do not want to work and annoy those living next to them" (Denník 2017). They are often blamed for relying on state financial assistance and are perceived as subsisting on public funds (Kozubik et al. 2020). Other negative attitudes towards the Roma include beliefs about their laziness; their inability to adapt to Slovak culture; and their cultural, social, and mental differences (Mann 1992; Červeňák 2000; Krivý 2001; I. Vašečka 2001; Vašečka et al. 2002; Lajčáková et al. 2017; and others). Moreover, according to Krivý, intolerance towards the Roma among the Slovak majority has deep-rooted stereotypical origins (Krivý 2001). Dudeková also discusses Roma in the context of "reaffirming stereotypes," where the perceived truth and reality of the stereotype are reinforced by the notion that it is a "collective experience." This suggests that such stereotypes have continuity with the past (Dudeková 2012).

Based on our research findings, it is unfortunate that we can identify predominantly negative or even conflicting attitudes between the majority and minority citizens. We believe that the negative statements made by participants in online discussions about Arabs/Muslims and Jews indicate not only social distance. The research confirmed that among the participants in online discussions, there are also stereotypical and hateful attitudes related to the physical, cultural, and religious differences between Muslims and Jews compared to the local population. Furthermore, the attitudes of online discussion participants towards the differences in Arabs/Muslims and Jews living in Slovakia are marked by suspicion and prevalent negativity.

Additionally, we considered responses to negative comments as an important part of the sample. For instance, in response to negative comments about Jews, we observed instances where users offered factual information based on personal experiences to challenge the prejudiced views. On the other hand, many more responses to negative comments reinforced stereotypes or developed new biases.

The identified social distance and the identification of expressions of stereotyping within the researched online discussions are somewhat surprising. Religious minorities such as Jews and Muslims in Slovakia are, in fact, small but relatively stable religious subcultures in terms of membership. In this context, pastoral care not only aims to guide individuals in faith and religious practice but also to support them in finding meaning, reconciliation, and tolerance towards differences. In the context of religious subcultures that face stereotyping in online discussions, pastoral care must include educating believers about the importance of respect and love for others, regardless of their religious affiliation.

There is one more point to see. Faith, according to the Gospel of Matthew, is not the absence of fear and doubt but the courage to trust in God's will, even amidst uncertainty (Matthew 14, pp. 22–33). Fear, seen as a natural human response, often obstructs this trust. In the context of our research, this psychological understanding of fear helps explain the pervasive language of fear in discussions about Muslims and Jews, reflecting societal anxieties. As M. Vašečka (2009) observes, minorities may achieve socio-political integration but struggle with cultural integration. Hargašová (1996) highlights this fear of cultural "otherness," which persists even today despite Slovakia's low percentage of migrants (Letavajová 2019). Thus, viewing fear as a psychological barrier, the pastoral response must focus on fostering faith-based approaches that emphasize openness and trust over exclusionary attitudes.

In the context of earlier research findings, including those from our study, we are increasingly convinced that pastoral activity can help bridge social distances and strengthen community relationships based on mutual understanding and acceptance of diversity as a gift rather than a threat.

We believe this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of religious differences in online discussions. On the other hand, we must emphasize the importance of distinguishing between real-world concerns and stereotypes when conducting critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a research method. We recognize that narratives such as the threat of Islamic terrorism reflect real-world issues, but they are often generalized to all Muslims, leading to harmful stereotypes. For instance, online discussions frequently conflate the actions of a few individuals with the entire Muslim population, as evidenced by comments like, "Islam teaches hatred and violence; it's no wonder so many terrorist attacks are committed by Muslims," and "Just look at Paris or London—places with high Muslim populations that are now plagued with crime and riots." These statements illustrate how legitimate security concerns are generalized into broader stereotypes, unfairly targeting all Muslims and perpetuating prejudice.

Similarly, stereotypes about Jews often involve similar generalizations. For example, comments such as, "Jews have always been pulling the strings behind the scenes," and "It's no secret that Jews have been running the banks for centuries," show how longstanding conspiracy theories continue to build a negative portrayal of Jews. These stereotypes persist and contribute to the generalization of perceptions of both Muslims and Jews in contemporary society. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between genuine issues and the oversimplified narratives that reinforce harmful stereotypes in online discourse.

Similarly, it is important to acknowledge research limitations. Within the topic of this study, recent political changes, such as the war in Ukraine and new migration patterns across Europe, have not been examined within the Slovak academic context. Although these factors are significant, their specific impact on Slovak society concerning our findings remains outside the scope of our current research.

When considering future research, online discussions appear to be a valuable source for critical discourse analysis (CDA) due to their accessibility and broad reach (McGee

1990). While these discussions may not provide a precise reflection of real-life events, they offer a diverse perception of them within the online public and wider society. Many people regard online discussions and their content as "a part of the truth" (Eu vs. Disinfo n.d.). Consequently, the influence of such information can be significant enough to prompt audiences to take specific actions on certain issues (The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency 2021), though some users may not be fully aware of this impact (Bateman and Jackson 2024). It is crucial to emphasize that the influence of media, including online discussions, on various areas and actions is substantial and long-term (Green et al. 2005; Kahai and Cooper 2003; De Choudhury et al. 2009; and others). In this context, equipping individuals with media literacy skills is vital to mitigating polarization and harmful influences, empowering them to critically navigate complex social and digital environments (Višňovský et al. 2023; Kondrla et al. 2023; Vrabec 2016; Gálik and Gáliková Tolnaiová 2015; and so on).

Moreover, we consider it significant to ensure that administrators are present in online discussions to contribute to actively monitoring online content and to maintain discussions in line with principles of respect and inclusion. These administrators should be responsible for promptly removing offensive, stereotypical, or hateful posts that not only reinforce negative attitudes towards religious minorities but also contribute to polarization and exacerbate social tensions. Effective content moderation is crucial for creating a safe digital environment where constructive and meaningful discussions can be provided. At the same time, such activities support healthy dialogue that fosters understanding between different subcultures.

In light of this, pastoral care plays an important role in guiding individuals to safely engage the information they consume. Thus, beyond its traditional focus on faith and spiritual growth, pastoral care must also address the ethical dimensions of media consumption. Similarly, it should encourage believers to cultivate discernment and critical thinking when confronted with media content that may be manipulative or biased. After all, in the context of social conflicts and expressions of dominance, discrimination, stereotyping, or hate in online discussions, pastoral care should emphasize the importance of truth, compassion, and respect for all individuals. By fostering these values, pastoral care can support the development of a more just and inclusive society.

5. Conclusions

Experts pointed out that Slovaks often resist "foreign elements" and aim to form others to fit their image (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic 2024; Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR 2023; Letavajová 2019; Grešková 2013; M. Vašečka 2009, 2013; Děd 2011; Bútora et al. 2009; Grešková 2003; Macháčková and Dojčár 2002; Hykisch 2001; Hargašová 1996; and others). These consistent findings across multiple studies motivated us to explore Slovak attitudes towards "difference" more deeply, specifically focusing on how participants in online discussions perceive and evaluate religious groups that differ from the Slovak (mostly Christian) majority.

In the context of the research findings, the following can be stated: based on 422 online discussions within eight selected online discussion groups, it can be observed that the very first, immediate association linked with the terms "Arab"/"Muslim" or "Jew" is explicitly tied by most discussants to what is perceived as "foreign", "unacceptable", or "physiognomically different" from the perspective of Slovaks. This semantic perspective brings several connotations, and naturally, there is an expectation that these associations manifest, particularly in negative ways, in human behaviour (i.e., behavioural perspective).

According to participants in the online discussions (7), Arabs/Muslims are perceived as "different" due to beliefs about their "extremism" and "religious fanaticism", their closed-off nature and lack of adaptability to the majority, their supposed oppression of women, and their role as sources of violence and unrest in European cities. Additionally, they are seen as the "greatest foreigners", being culturally, religiously, and humanly distant

from Slovaks. To a slightly lesser extent, Arabs/Muslims are also criticized in online discussions for being alienating, moralizing towards others, or rejecting modernization.

Participants in the online discussions (7) perceive Jews as "different" due to their alleged global political and power ambitions, their preference for their own interests over those of the majority society, and their perceived distance and difference from Slovaks. Jews are viewed as religiously rigorous and overly concerned with sin, as well as being perceived as wealthy but greedy and stingy and closed off and isolated from the rest of society. Additionally, the online discussions also include criticisms related to the current military situation in Gaza, with blame being placed on Israel.

Additionally, although the discussions touched on various topics related to Arabs/Muslims or Jews, in most cases, the understanding was framed in a dichotomy: acceptable (Slovaks, Western countries) versus unacceptable (Arabs, Muslims, and Jewish individuals). This included explicit evaluations of "the good" versus "the bad". It is therefore possible to conclude that such identified and analysed perceptions may be a reason for the negative opinions and attitudes (semantic perspective) and also the actions exhibited by the participants towards these individuals and minority subcultures (behavioural perspective).

The present study aimed not only to uncover the researched attitudes but also to reflect on the pastoral dimension of the findings that call for positive steps within specific settings where pastoral care engages with contemporary religious subcultures, such as congregational settings, community outreach programs, online faith forums, interfaith dialogue initiatives, and so on.

Given the significant role of pastoral care in addressing conflicts and contradictions within society, this research also sought to offer insights that bridge sociocultural analysis with pastoral and media-related considerations. The ultimate goals were to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Slovaks—particularly those participating in online discussions—perceive religious minorities and highlight the broader social implications of these perceptions. This understanding could guide future efforts to reduce social distance between the majority population and religious (and possibly also ethnic) minorities in Slovakia, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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