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## RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND AMERICAN JOURNALISM

### A charge to public service

*Josh Good*

The world is a very religious place. Of 7.3 billion people on the planet, according to Pew Research Center, approximately 2.3 billion are Christians, 1.8 billion are Muslims, 1.1 billion are Hindus, 500 million are Buddhists, and 400 million practice folk religions, while only 1.2 billion are religiously unaffiliated (Hackett 2017).

But for Western sociologists and demographers in the second half of the 20th century, this reality was by no means expected. During those years, the so-called “secularization thesis” was firmly entrenched, insofar as the vast majority of social scientists believed post-Enlightenment modernity would lead almost inevitably to religious decline. The argument ran that, with greater prosperity, reliance on religious faith would no longer be compelling for more and more people. Larger homes, more disposable income, new technologies, and greater leisure opportunities would replace the “hold” that the church, temple, synagogue, mosque, or other houses of worship had on individuals and communities.

One of the US’ foremost sociologists, the late Peter Berger (1929–2017), firmly subscribed to this secularization thesis, arguing in much of his prolific early career that major increases in prosperity and productivity would lead to religious decline. But over time, as he continued to look carefully at worldwide data about wealth, poverty, and institutional changes, quite a different pattern emerged: Global poverty in fact fell, sharply—but religious practice did not. Berger reflected on the world and himself:

As it turns out, the world is massively religious. In some areas of the world, it’s more religious than ever. The [secularization] theory is wrong. Now, to conclude that the theory is wrong is the beginning of a new process of thinking. I came to the conclusion some years ago that to replace secularization theory—to explain religion in the modern world—we need the theory of *pluralism*. Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity. It necessarily produces pluralism, by which I mean the coexistence in the same society of different worldviews and value systems. And that changes the status of religion.

*(Thuswaldner 2014)*

Of course, in some sense this “desecularization of the world” thesis is still being tested; none of us knows with certainty the future, and global trends are still unfolding. Not all the changes

are continuous: In the US, for example, religiosity appears recently to be on a downturn, with church attendance falling from its steady six-decade average of 70% between 1937 and 1998, to just under 50% in the first two decades of the 21st century (Hamid 2021).

Elsewhere in the world, different economic through-lines are renewing the wealth-and-poverty dynamics in ways that are nothing short of stunning. For example, since 1970, extreme poverty—that is, the number of people living on less than \$1.60 per day—has decreased in today's dollars by nearly 70% (Pinkovskiy and Sala-i-Martin 2009). It is a transformational achievement. And yet while over two billion of the poorest people in the world are no longer living at starvation-levels, many of the countries in which those men, women, and children live have still not yet developed the essential systems needed to protect basic property rights and shared commitment to the rule of law (Brooks 2016). When violence is unpredictable, often coming from the very officials tasked with public protection, how can children and families know their well-being is secure? (Haugen 2019). While religiosity can flourish in such settings—as the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes—the threat of violence in many lands also undermines a sense of religious stability and coherence.

If the story of religiosity in developing societies is still being written, some early trends nonetheless seem to be emerging. For example, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as Paul Freston and Philip Jenkins have demonstrated, democratization and increasing per capita income appear to be quite correlated with increases, not decreases, in religiosity (Freston 2008; Jenkins 2011). Brian Grim has also compellingly documented that growth in religious freedom frequently correlates with increases in political stability, economic development, and women's empowerment (Grim and Connor 2015). And though Jason Klocek takes issue with some of these claims, arguing that local institutional conditions always impact potential gains in political and economic freedom, it is increasingly clear that religion worldwide is on the rise, at least according to the most recent data (Klocek 2020).

While this volume assesses religious literacy in the context of that larger global story, this chapter takes a close look at some of the ways journalists in the US have understood and written about global religion, and even more particularly how journalists have covered religion *within* American life. That story has of course recently been uniquely impacted by the outsized role that white evangelicals have played in conservative politics, including the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump to the American presidency—a complex story to be sure. White evangelicalism is especially important in the American context given the size and political significance of this ethno-religious demographic in the electorate. Coverage of evangelicalism specifically, and of religion in general, has reflected at various turns journalists' bias—whether conscious or unconscious—and ignorance, but also strides toward more accurate reporting.

As with the globe, it is possible to discern some clear trends in American religious life. In recent decades, for example, growing secularization has become more firmly entrenched in the modern academy, the country's entertainment industry, and other centers of cultural power. Surveys of religious belief from both Gallup and Pew track “the rise of the nones,” that is, those of “no religion” or “none in particular.” This demographic is growing most swiftly among Millennials, those born 1980–1996, and Gen Z, those born 1997–2013 (Lipka 2015). But in spite of that uptick the country is still remarkably religious (Pew Research Center 2015): 70.6% of Americans continue to self-identify as Christian—even if that group may not be in church every Sunday. 25.4% of Americans self-identify as evangelicals, 20.8% as Catholics, 14.7% as Mainline Protestants, and 6.5% as African American Christians, among others. Adding to the mix of American Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and those of other faiths, the US is exceptionally religious. As Berger intimated, American life is still very much a vibrant picture of religious diversity—not across-the-board secularization.

Yet for journalists who cover culture, technology, politics, and other aspects of life in the US, an apparent disconnect abides. As we will see, the very professionals perhaps best positioned to serve as de facto illuminators of cross-cultural religious literacy, enabling mutually respectful engagement of difference (as the editors of this *Handbook* define covenantal pluralism), are not always well-informed in their stories about American religiosity.

### A “knowledge class” problem

In Western liberal democracies, divides have unfortunately become common—and the US is a case in point. Contemporary Americans are divided along racial lines, as a wave of 2020 protests on the heels of police brutality clearly demonstrated, in many ways continuing the protests of the civil rights era against the Jim Crow laws. Americans are also divided along class lines, with working-class Americans without a college degree voting and forging different family structures than white-collar educated elites (Murray 2012). Divergences in recent voting patterns suggest a chasm between urban and rural Americans, too. And beyond the better-known red state vs. blue state distinctions, Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, Scott Winship, and other scholars have recently shown that family formation, class, and social capital often correlate with religious activity—and that religion may play a more important role for believers in forging character and strengthening trust than many analysts are inclined to think (Putnam 2016).

That’s because the distinctions around religious life hold an almost special quality—like spectacles, they give their adherents a kind of prism for understanding many of the other cultural divides. Religion is a kind of explanatory framework; for the devout, it is one’s (primary) identity, and therefore—theoretically, anyway—more important than material or political considerations.

However, many journalists misunderstand how these divides and correlations are, for many, shaped by religion. Recent years have seen a bumper crop of reporting or other scholarship attempting to understand or connect Americans’ religious views with broader political and sociological trends. Elite journalists, challenged to recognize their biases, work hard at getting beyond the “Acela corridor”—Amtrak’s fast train between Boston and Washington, D.C., via New York City—where they spend nearly all their working days. James and Deb Fallows of *The Atlantic*, for example, recently traveled the country with the express interest in breaking out of their own bubble, to correct some of their self-perceived misunderstandings about the country through firsthand encounters with residents from blue-collar, rural, Midwest, and western towns. They learned a great deal, writing up their experiences both in the magazine and in a book (Fallows 2018). Similarly, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks spent two years diving deep into “Trump country” after misreading—along with hundreds of other pundits—the 2016 election. He sought to uncover the “why” beneath that populist, unanticipated result (at least for elites), and like a few other curious journalists, he hit the road almost as an act of penance (Brooks 2020).

But if these journalist-trends are novel, industry realities mean that most media platforms don’t have the budgets to fund reporting outside of the major news hubs—and in the current economic climate, local news media organizations are rapidly shrinking. There is also the nature of newsroom assignments: Reporters are spurred by fast-paced editors who typically prefer regular deadlines and lowest-common-denominator pieces comprehensible to both non-religious and religious readers; that means most articles are written “for all,” rather than for a particular people-group. Moreover, the country’s top journalism schools are non-religious—to take just the top seven, as of 2021, they are Northwestern University, University of Southern California, New York University, University of Missouri, Emerson, Boston University, and Stanford. This means many

graduating reporters begin their careers with an understanding of reality rooted in the prevailing paradigm of secular higher education (which until recently, again as Berger argued, has generally failed to adequately address religion as an impactful factor in the world). Given diminishing ad revenue, contemporary journalists are often expected to bring their own social-media followings and publish quickly, routinely scored by digital tools measuring the number of reader-views and reader comments (Marshall 2016). As a result, despite America's religious diversity, broad stories with broad appeal are valued more than particular pieces catering to distinct religious audiences—let alone mutually respectful engagement that invites rather than waters down the substance of religious beliefs.

That makes a journalist tasked to cover religion somewhat like a fish out of water. *Washington Post* columnist and frequent *National Public Radio* commentator E.J. Dionne tells a wonderful story demonstrating this point. Once while covering a papal tour in the US, while traveling with the Vatican's entourage, fellow Associated Press (AP) journalist Victor Simpson turned to E.J. "and said, in mock alarm, 'What are we going to write about? There's nothing but religion here'" (Dionne 2005).

It's a laugh-line, but it has a funny way of resurging. Take what the Washington Editor-in-chief of *Real Clear Politics*, Carl Cannon, said after meeting with Saddleback Church evangelical pastor Rick Warren, alongside a group of prominent journalists in 2005:

Rick said something—it was a throwaway line—but he said, "You know, I'd sold 18 million books before I got my first review in an American newspaper." And people gasped. And the woman who was sitting next to me—I won't say her name, she's a very prominent reporter—leaned over and whispered in my ear and she said, "That is all you need know about bias in American journalism." 18 million books and nobody ever reviewed his book in a newspaper.

(Cannon and Burge 2020)

Is there a deeper reality at work when it comes to religion and elite US journalists? Some suggest it's a kind of federalism dynamic, in which the country is increasingly becoming "many Americas:" Secular New England and Pacific Northwest, the Bible Belt, Middle America, Blue California, Red Texas, and so forth. Perhaps reporters, broadcast journalists, and columnists can't report religious realities in a way that pleases *all* constituencies.

But a larger factor seems to be a lack of religious literacy and a lack of religious education among many elite journalists. On closer look, for example, many of the geographic stereotypes contain real nuance—e.g., vibrant faith communities within Seattle and Portland, oft-dubbed the twin capitals of secularism.

Some examples straight from leading American newspapers prove the point. Recall, for instance, the death of Pope John Paul II, on April 2, 2005. That week, *New York Times* reporter Ian Fisher was assigned to cover the papal funeral, and Fisher wrote a piece describing the funeral processional, stating that the body of the 84-year-old pontiff was

dressed in white and red vestments, his head covered with a white bishop's miter, and propped up on three dark gold pillows. Tucked under his left arm was the silver staff, called the crow's ear, that he had carried in public.

(Fisher 2005)

If you grew up serving in the Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, or Lutheran altar guild, this story's error might not be hard to catch. But read it again: A *crow's ear*? The correct term is a "crosier," sometimes spelled crozier—and it's the staff carried by Catholic or other high church clerics,

symbolizing the Good Shepherd. But Fisher and his well-compensated team of *New York Times* news editors missed it completely.

Similar cases abound. The same day, for instance, the deck-line in a piece by a *BBC* reporter stated that as mourners gathered near the pope's funeral procession, "Karma light nuns" convened near the site. Not *Carmelite* nuns, mind you—"Karma light" (Ashford 2009).

It's not just a problem of covering the Catholic papacy overseas. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson tells this story about the early days of the presidential campaign of George W. Bush, on which he worked:

In the heat of the 2000 election, then-Governor George W. Bush of Texas made an off-the-cuff statement that we ought to take the log out of our own eye before calling attention to the speck in the eye of our neighbor. *The New York Times* reported the remark as a minor gaff—what it termed "an interesting variation on the saying about the pot and the kettle." The reporter—actually a fine and balanced journalist—did not recognize the biblical reference. Neither did his editors—[albeit] taken directly from the Sermon on the Mount.

(Gerson 2009)

Of course, that gaffe likely isn't one that would be made by the 70.6% of Americans who self-identify today as Christian—though perhaps a decline in church attendance these last two decades is a contributing factor. It was the *journalist* who missed the reference. Biblical literacy is predominantly waning in the knowledge class, primarily because familiarity with basic religious concepts is rarely valued in Silicon Valley, in the academy, on television and in mainstream media institutions. And this trend is broadly visible when one looks at our generation's leading journalists.

The late founder of Faith Angle Forum, Mike Cromartie (1950–2017), often told a memorable story about a frantic call he took on February 1, 1993, from *Washington Post* reporter Michael Weisskopf. In a column that day, Weisskopf described those who follow television evangelical-type preachers as "poor, uneducated, and easy to command" (Weisskopf 1993). Immediately, the paper received a flood of criticism, and Weisskopf was eager that same day for background about evangelical Protestants: Just how large was their number, what did they want, and what's their engagement in American life? Cromartie recommended a book highlighting a few examples of wide-ranging evangelical cultural contributions, noting there were nearly 81 million US evangelicals at the time. Weisskopf was stunned by that figure, which is today even larger. The next morning, *The Post* issued a correction and an apology.

Several years later, this so-called "God gap" was even wider between mainstream reporters and Southern Baptists, according to Mindy Belz of *World Magazine*, a Christian magazine, who recalls a similar encounter with Cromartie:

A *New York Times* reporter called to ask Mike about a sex-and-culture debate, raging among Southern Baptists. When Mike cited Ephesians to help the reporter understand the Baptist position, she interrupted: "What was that book you just mentioned? Who's the author? Who's the publisher?"

(Belz 2017)

Increasingly, Cromartie sensed that mainstream reporters might benefit from a kind of basic, remedial religion-education. "I began to get a lot of questions from really smart journalists that were really dumb," he told Belz.

For journalists, Pentecostals, often described as a sub-set of evangelicals, are perhaps even harder than other religious communities to understand. A 1996 *Washington Post* piece relays for readers a story of a Pentecostal anti-abortion rally outside the US Capitol. At one point, a speaker said, “Let’s pray now, all of us, that God will slay everyone in the Capitol.” What he meant, of course, was that God might divinely strike Members with a more charitable view of the rights of the unborn. But only the quote made the paper, leaving readers on their own to discern the meaning when reading the piece: Was this Pentecostal pastor advocating the murder of the entire Congress? (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Of course, more recently this example could seem far more threatening after the insurrection at the US Capitol advanced by Trump-supporters, QAnon adherents, and thousands of religiously motivated protestors on January 6, 2021 (Green 2021).

Journalists covering stories with a religious dynamic are often quite unfamiliar with denominational splits or attitudes about social responsibility versus the afterlife—as when a reporter confused the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” in a 2005 *New York Times* story. That piece labeled the scholars in the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, a scientific, Christian research organization, as “fundamentalist” in its beliefs. But the organization’s staff uniformly rejected the term—and strongly pressed its case. The *Times*’ retraction read:

A front page article on Sunday about the Discovery Institute, which promotes the concept known as intelligent design to explain the origins of life, referred incorrectly to the religious affiliation of the Institute’s fellows. Most are conservative Christians, including Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants—not fundamentalist Christians.

*(Wilgoren 2005)*

Similarly, when that same year the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) hosted the Islamist Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province, the *New York Times* called IGE organizers “right-wing”—even as American politically right-wing organizations called IGE “blood-thirsty bigots” for hosting a freely elected Islamist. Sometimes religious activity of any kind is categorized by elite journalists as right-wing, regardless of its goals.

The disconnect can almost be humorous. One journalist penned a piece at *The Federalist* entitled, “Will Someone Explain Christianity to the *New York Times*?” (Hemingway 2014). One example was a 2014 article about a traveling group of war-weary tourists in Jerusalem, in which *Times* reporter Matthew Kalman referred to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as “the site where many Christians believe Jesus is buried.” Of course, the writer argues, that little verb—the difference between “is” buried rather than “was” buried—doesn’t sit as nicely with the world’s 2.3 billion Christians as it apparently slipped by most the *New York Times* online and traditional print audience of 5.8 million subscribers.

Former *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Roy Peter Clark, today a writing coach and teacher at The Poynter Institute, put the matter succinctly, and more bluntly:

I’m now taking seriously the theory that we mainstream journalists are different from mainstream America. We’re alienated, and my blind spots all too easily blot out [religious] Americans. Unfortunately, that makes me less of a citizen—and less of a journalist.

*(quoted in Marshall, Gilbert, and Ahmanson 2008)*

### **Bridging the divide**

But none of this is written in stone. Among the various disconnects in American life—class, race, urban-rural, and political—how might elite American journalists bridge the existing gap with

mainstream US religion? The question matters because broadcast media, cable news outlets, public radio, and top newspapers tend to establish what's newsworthy, for tens if not hundreds of millions of American readers, viewers, and listeners.

The real work of repairing this consequential breach requires constructive, iterative work from multiple actors—including executives, not just journalists. That's because it's media executives who sign off on hires and structure and oversee department leads. It's executives who work closely with advertisers and investors to make the economics of journalism possible. Readers can voice criticism, offer their preferences, or express appreciation for factual reporting or columns, but it's executives and managers who make changes and set outlet policy.

Of course, the outlets themselves are changing, due in part to the forces of polarization in American political and cultural life that are hollowing out the political center, which has in turn substantially depleted the “broad middle” of contemporary journalism. As a result, niche outlets have quickly emerged on cable news channels, XM radio, and social media—often funded by hard-hitting donors wanting to capitalize on partisan winds that demonize their opponents. Artificial intelligence news feeds reinforce reader-biases, creating larger and larger echo-chambers that reinforce circular beliefs.

For example, in January 2021, 27% of white evangelicals in the US said they believed the QAnon conspiracy's claims about President Trump secretly battling a global cabal of sex traffickers were “completely or mostly accurate”; 62% said they believed there was widespread voter fraud in 2020; and 49% agreed that “antifa was responsible for the US Capitol insurrection” (Cox 2021). Over time, a narrowing of the “broad middle” begins to threaten not only a sense of shared facts but also the survival of established, mainstream outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Washington Post*.

Sectarian outlets do choose to cater to various tribes, including religious tribes—and when 70.6% of the US is Christian (even nominally Christian), there is money to be made and this corner of the market is far from flat. To name a few, religious outlets that run parallel to mainstream print or broadcast publications include *The 700 Club*, *EWTN*, *Christianity Today*, *Crux*, *World Magazine*, *Catholic Herald*, *Belief Net*, *The Lutheran Reporter*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and many other faith-based outlets. But catering to a discrete denomination or a religious audience tends to garner far smaller levels of readership or viewership, as evidenced by far higher audience engagement levels at mainstream outlets such as *ABC*, *CBS*, *NBC*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *PBS*.

To bridge the God-gap, it's these larger outlets that need to better “get” religion. And there are numerous paths: One tack is simply to hire one or more dedicated religion reporters. If this tack has become more common in the last two decades, bringing informed religion writers to shine light on faith elements in a larger cultural or political story, at the very least religious readers typically find such stories thought-provoking, and an outlet can sometimes expand its subscription base.

*The Washington Post* was an early adopter of this strategy, publicly advertising an opportunity in 2002 for a new, dedicated, full-time Religion Reporter. It was not a seamless endeavor. Its own public advertisement demonstrated discomfort with the landscape, partly out of uncertainty about what was lawful or unlawful to advertise. Could it explicitly seek out a person of faith? In an effort to steer clear of a lawsuit for hiring impropriety, the job description said quite clearly that the prospective religion reporter “need not be religious, nor be an expert in religion”—that it was open and available to all applicants.

Yet, would a similar new position for a dedicated, full-time political reporter tasked with covering, say, a presidential campaign really be made available to someone with “no expertise in politics?” That disjunct seemed out of place. Nonetheless, by remaining committed to the



position, *The Post* found and hired an inaugural religion reporter, and employs three such reporters today.

Perhaps an even more promising trend than hiring one or more full-time religion reporters is the fervor of an *executive* who embraces the importance of religion and works to help journalists throughout the entire publication transcend their own bias. Occasionally, a particular media executive genuinely appreciates religion, and knows its power, not merely from a singular divinity school class, but from his or her own upbringing. For example, current *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet said this just after President Trump's election:

I want to make sure that we are much more creative about beats out in the country so that we understand that anger and disconnectedness that people feel. I use religion as an example because I was raised Catholic in New Orleans. I think that the New York-based and Washington-based media powerhouses don't quite get religion. I mean, we have a fabulous religion writer—but she's all alone. We don't get religion. We don't get the role of religion in people's lives. And I think we can do much, much better. I think there are things we can be more creative about, to understand the country.

(Baquet 2016)

That's a compelling insight, and as Baquet and other executives at leading US papers have proven in the last two decades, religion coverage can substantially improve, starting with the expertise of those whose names appear on the bylines. A takeaway from not only the Trump years but also the national-populist elections in Hungary, Poland, England, Italy, and elsewhere is that we need to better listen to one another. Media executives serve their readers more effectively with accurate religion coverage than by stereotypes or convenient shorthand.

And progress has been even more visible in recent years. At the *New York Times* religion desk, for instance, bringing on Elizabeth Dias in 2018, and Ruth Graham in 2020, has elevated its coverage of American values, religion, and public life, bringing it closer to the standard set by Baquet in 2016. Similarly, at *The Washington Post*, Michelle Boorstein (hired in 2006) and Sarah Pulliam Bailey (hired in 2015) and have helped diverse readers better understand the practices of evangelicals, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and other notable traditions in American life. At *Wall Street Journal*, a regular "Houses of Worship" column written since 2001 by Naomi Schaefer Riley and others has also brought to life the diversity of American religiosity. Kelsey Dallas (2014) at *Deseret News* is another talented, curious religion reporter with a commanding sense of American religious diversity. And in addition to a wide cohort of *Religion News Service* journalists, Emma Green (hired 2012) at *The Atlantic* is one of the most serious, best-informed religion writers in the country. Each of these journalists was hired because media executives prioritized religion.

Columnists, reporters, and broadcast journalists are also adapting to other ways in which contemporary journalism is itself changing. *The Atlantic*, for example, can today reach as many as 90 million unique visitors per month, but it has fewer than one million paying subscribers. Reporters at *Religion News Service* routinely write religion stories picked up by an array of outlets—and those placements substantially impact readership levels. So if religion is to receive the more accurate coverage it deserves, the question comes back to (1) how media executives choose to prioritize—or ignore—existing religion threads in contemporary public life, and (2) how they challenge line-managers to strengthen the religious literacy and coverage of their *mainstream* reporters.

That latter challenge is a larger one, as some leaders of large-scale media companies have perceived quite clearly. For instance, Bill Burleigh, the current board chair for the Ethics and



Public Policy Center, spent more than 50 years at E.W. Scripps Howard Company—including as president and subsequently as board chairman. Burleigh argues

the prevailing ethos among most of our editors is that the public square is the province of the secular and not a place for religious life and for religious messages to be seen or heard ... As a result, lots of editors still automatically think religion is out of place in a public newspaper.

(quoted in Marshall, Gilbert, and Ahmanson 2008, 150)

If this bias is real, it won't be overcome by hiring one or even several religion reporters, precisely because the scope of religion for many Americans extends far beyond the walls of a house of worship. For most believers who take their faith seriously, religion impacts all facets and dimensions of life: Stem cells, race, vaccines, polarization, education, poverty, the environment, and even US engagement in the world. Drawing out those connections is difficult, but journalists who can shed early cultural biases and learn deeper the motivations, including religious motivations, of those they are covering can write better stories—which in turn build up and strengthen healthy pluralism, rather than diminishing it.

Part of this involves challenging journalists to listen more deeply. Terry Mattingly suggests, “we must strive to get inside the daily lives and stories of the people we cover,” a tack that requires humility, ongoing learning, and time (Mattingly 2009). When more time is spent between a journalist and her subject, confidence is built—and a more substantial quote emerges. Two-way respect, between a source and a journalist, also helps readers experience more of the breadth of pluralist diversity, including not only varieties in race, gender, or LGBTQ hires, but also “viewpoint diversity.”

Put more directly, people don't live in a religious box; but they do bring their religion to all the boxes of life, from vocation to viewpoint. As *RealClearPolitics*' Carl Cannon describes,

if you don't know anything about religion and you're covering politics—to me that doesn't compute, because you need to know about religion if you're going to cover politics. Our newsrooms may be secular, but the American people are not secular.

(Cannon and Burge 2020)

Moreover, we should recognize that journalists can and do sometimes expand their view of religion, in the course of their intrinsic work. This means that advocates or educators who encourage deeper religious literacy among journalists can look for opportunities to support such growth where it is a natural outflow of existing assignments. One wonderful example is Mark Pinsky, raised in a Conservative Jewish home in New Jersey. After getting his degree at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, he decided to uproot and move to Orlando in order to immerse himself in the lives of a peculiar demographic he was covering: Evangelicals. He did so, and wrote a 2006 book about the experience, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*. After years of diligent observing, Pinsky says he discovered evangelical Americans “no longer as caricatures or abstractions,” but as real individuals who opened his mind in ways that had enduring value (Pinsky 2006).

Another is *Washington Post* columnist and frequent *NPR* commentator E.J. Dionne, referenced earlier for his 2005 quip about the novelty of covering “nothing but religion” at the Vatican. As a Harvard College undergraduate, he took a divinity school course from Professor Harvey Cox, “Eschatology and Politics,” which convinced him that religion plays a powerful role in shaping public life. But for years that interest grew dormant. Decades later, while trave-

ling in and outside the US, as a journalist he witnessed firsthand the power of Catholicism in wide-ranging minority and low-income communities. In studying US labor disputes, he saw at work “all the principles of *Rerum Novarum*, the great encyclical about labor fights and equality back in 1891” (Dionne 2021). In recent years he has returned to Harvard as a visiting professor, teaching a divinity school course about Catholicism and social justice, entitled “Religion, Values, and the Future of Democracy.”

If E.J.’s reporting experience led him to return to an early regard for faith, other columnists have been taken by far more dramatic surprise. In 2008 *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof, for example, was shocked to uncover the quiet, laborious work of missionaries in sub-Saharan Africa. As he describes, any “fair reckoning” with their consequential work, which was “almost entirely unknown beyond that village,” ought in itself to motivate elites to cease “the fashionable mocking” of Christian evangelicals (Kristof 2008).

Similarly, Matthew Parris, an atheist writing that same year in *The London Times*, published a provocative column entitled, “As an Atheist, I Truly Believe Africa Needs God.” Like Kristof, Parris had visited nine African countries and wrote based on firsthand observation:

I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects, and international aid efforts. . . . In Africa, Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation, [striking] deep into the whole structure of rural African thought.

(Parris 2008)

Parris demonstrates that a journalist who is curious can, in fact, move from religious illiteracy to religious literacy—sometimes quite sharply or unexpectedly. And since contemporary reader engagement, measured by algorithms and data-tracking software, ranks columns by their readership, reader *demand* can today also influence journalism in a way it could not, just a generation ago. It is strangely reassuring, for example, that a majority of the top 10 Associated Press stories selected each year as the “most impactful article of the year” typically have some sort of religion hook. If the secularization thesis has been largely debunked at the street-level, journalists in both the US and elsewhere are likely to keep encountering religiosity in the lives of those they cover.

And while typically smaller in scale than mainstream news publications, several educational and programmatic innovations show demonstrable promise. Religion News Service (RNS), for example, is a news agency of 28 correspondents, founded in 1934 by journalist Louis Minsky as an affiliate of National Conference of Christians and Jews. In partnership with the Religion News Association, which hosts a large annual conference open to reporters of all backgrounds, RNS augments existing coverage by reporting directly on religious, moral, spiritual, and ethical issues and then distributing press releases and articles to outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press. In 2021 RNS employed a network of 28 staff members and correspondents.

One RNS columnist is Mark Silk, who directs the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life, established in 1996 at Trinity College, a liberal arts campus in Hartford, CT. From 1997–2016 the Greenberg Center published *Religion in the News Magazine*, tracing examples of how religion was covered in wide-ranging media—and how matters of religious faith and conscience were impacting society.

Occasionally, journalists who observe a deficiency find their own opportunities to contribute. For instance, after ten years at *The Wall Street Journal*, Paul Glader partnered with Fieldstead and Co. and began leading The Media Project, which provides support for journalists who

write stories highlighting religious faith in world events. The program fosters an ecosystem by placing into fellowship positions new graduates of The King's College, the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute, and other feeder programs—reinforcing writing opportunities to report on faith communities outside the US.

Finally, other fellowship programs include the ICFJ Knight Fellows Program, supporting journalists based overseas; the prestigious Neiman Fellows Program at Harvard University; and a Charles Koch Foundation Fellowship, which—for approximately 40 journalists per cohort—underwrites up to 60% of one's salary, in partnership with each journalist's employer. In 2018, the Lilly Endowment partnered with the *Associated Press* and *Religion News Service* to expand the reach of religion reporting in US journalism. The Knight Foundation and Howards-Scripps Service have also underwritten a center aimed at fostering integrity in investigative journalism at the University of Maryland's Merrill School of Journalism. All these initiatives—particularly fellowships or other outside support introduced in the early years of a journalist's career—can substantially shape the trajectory of individual reporters and columnists, affecting the stories they generate for thousands of readers.

### Renewing the faith “angle”

What difference emerges when journalists more clearly understand the fact of religious diversity? How, if it all, does that shift help *tikkun olam*, or actively repair the world—in the context of large, enduring cultural and political challenges, and what norms ought to be kept in mind?

Covenantal pluralism is a viewpoint that takes seriously the fact that most citizens are deeply anchored in various faith traditions—including not only the better-known monotheistic traditions, but also secular humanism, or the philosophical commitments of Millennials and Gen Xers whose religion is “none.” Can citizens arrive at better solutions on education policy or criminal justice or foreign policy when religious views are honored, rather than ignored?

“Getting religion” is not a panacea, but when journalists more accurately grasp that wide-ranging faith perspectives are usually in play, a deeper story is typically told—bringing nuance and texture to complex issues (Seiple 2018). When religious dynamics in the lives of citizens and communities are relevant, journalists will tell richer stories if they can overcome their bias or in some cases their ignorance, bringing religious depth to their accounts. Almost always, with a well-written story buoyed by real religious traditions, readers become better equipped to engage a neighbor who does not vote or pray as they do. Though faith need not explicitly appear in every article, because its presence is often more frequently at work than many journalists describe, those who write in ways that respect its depth and nuance produce more accurate stories.

There is another path through which religious literacy among journalists can improve: Journalists themselves. Some readers may be inclined to believe that the vast majority of journalists are introverts—the “lone reporter,” staying late at the office to finish a long-form article, or hiding away in an isolated home office to write a column. But if there is a kernel of truth in this description—at some point, every journalist must sit at a laptop to write a story—firsthand experience suggests that far more journalists lead vocational lives that squarely resemble the precise opposite of a hidden-away introvert. Journalists talk. Even quiet reporters have their go-to sources, unique friendships, bosses, and patterns for quickly comparing notes or fact-checking a storyline with someone else before a story goes to press.

Social media, and especially Twitter, has also made journalism—and identifying storyboard-ing—leads for tomorrow's piece—a far more communal enterprise. Alongside the collegiality and competition of any newsroom, Twitter, Reddit, and other online-leads make contemporary

journalism less like rowing alone or playing a round of individual golf, and more like a team sport. Individual performance matters, but so much about journalism—promotions, professional associations, helping a junior colleague with a story idea, being correctable by editors and fact-checkers, even bringing to bear one's own social-media following—is communal, not individual. And as today's journalists are absorbed into a fast-changing industry that tracks reader-downloads and measures other interactions, any journalist's ecosystem and collegiality squarely impacts whether he or she succeeds.

This same dynamic shapes a program I direct, Faith Angle Forum, which helps mainstream journalists to better understand religion. Our advisory group consists of 15 columnists and reporters at the very top of their field—and whose political views span both political left and right. While most of this advisory core works in the nation's capital, the journalists who participate in our two-day educational forums typically work at leading papers in not only Washington but also New York City, Los Angeles, and other major metropolitan cities throughout the country. The initiative's goal, rather than convincing one journalist at a time to “get” religion, is to foster what James Davison Hunter describes as a “dense, overlapping network” of like-minded individuals working in the same direction over time (Hunter 2010). Participating journalists aren't asked to embrace the views of advisors or speakers; instead, the group can itself function as a network of peers, constantly inviting in new reporters, columnists, and broadcast journalists to join an engaged, energetic, unfinished conversation. New journalists are steadily invited to participate in a community that—with a podcast, monthly online offerings, and semi-annual conferences—models the kind of intellectually curious, humble approach to religion that can help deepen and benefit journalism as described in this chapter. As with covenantal pluralism, curiosity and deep listening are modeled in the context of face-to-face engagement with cutting-edge scholars and clerics.

The program hosts traditional two-day forums hundreds of miles from the Washington Beltway, where religion experts meet over sessions and extended meals with journalists—who are often surprised by what they encounter. Whether by considering carefully Mitt Romney's Mormonism during his presidential candidacy, or looking at the religious underpinnings of national populism around the globe, or the Islamic roots of the Islamic State's aggression in Syria and Iraq, or even ways faith plays into differing views about science and pandemic-vaccines, since 1999 Faith Angle has hosted 267 journalists and 65 religion scholars or clerics. Reporters or columnists will often write pieces afterwards about the presentations they heard, but the initiative's deeper goal is long-term: To help participating journalists gain a new perspective about the nature, impact, and scope of religion in the world—and to reflect that insight in their ongoing work. Since this view is in some sense more “caught” than taught, many conversations emphasize a sense of wonder and mystery, and not merely didactic learning, when it comes to the spiritual quality and challenges of contemporary life.

Finally, while most of this chapter has discussed American religiosity and the particular role of US evangelicals (especially during the Trump years), many of these observations also apply to world media attitudes about religiosity throughout the globe. When 55% of the planet currently lives in cities, respect for religion may in the 21st century become more important than ever—especially because diverse faith traditions are so proximate in cities. And if the lens of covenantal pluralism, which emphasizes rootedness, empathy, and mutual respect, squares with the needs of our time, it must also take seriously the wide-ranging inputs that shape individuals—including the media. Redeemer Church pastor Tim Keller of New York City commented recently that, in his experience in urban American life, “most Christians are just nowhere nearly as deeply immersed in scripture and in theology as they are in their respective social-media bubbles and News Feed bubbles.” Both liberal and conservative Christians, Keller argues, are living in polar-

ized cable news-loops “for 8–10 hours a day. They go to church once a week, but they’re just not immersed in the kind of biblical theological study that would nuance” their media-intake (Wehner 2019).

Whether cosmopolitan or otherwise, perhaps *minority status* is a useful way to think about religious identity in the world today—always existing alongside the shaping-identities of others. In a technological, interconnected age, our media consumption habits can either make us more polarized and disconnected, taking readers down the rabbit hole, or instead more covenantal-pluralist and curious, leading readers to better engagement and mutual understanding. Today’s media outlets worldwide hold massive cultural shaping power, because for so many of us they frame, inform, and expand the larger narrative. And against this backdrop we are wise to remember that the articles and columns we read are always written by ordinary men and women—each of whom is neither firmly fixed in their beliefs nor closed to compelling ideas.

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