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The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Eugene V. Gallagher, Chair) sponsors Spotlight on Teaching. It appears twice each year in Religious Studies News and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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Spotlight on Teaching is published by the American Academy of Religion
825 Houston Mill RD
Suite 300
Atlanta, GA 30329
Visit www.aarweb.org

May 2007 Published by the American Academy of Religion www.aarweb.org Vol. 22, No. 3

News, Media, and Teaching Religion

From the Editor’s Desk

IN HER ARTICLE “Americans get an ‘F’ in Religion” (Mar 7, 2007), Cathy Grossman of USA Today writes: “Sometimes dumb sounds cute: Sixty percent of Americans can’t name five of the Ten Commandments, and 50 percent of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married.” She was reporting on Stephen Prothero’s new book, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — And Doesn’t (HarperSanFrancisco: 2007).

Prothero argues that although religion plays a salient role in national and international events, Americans are not even conversant with their own religions history and traditions. His students, for instance, are regually stumped by questions such as “Name the Four Gospels” and “What is the Golden Rule?” — let alone “What is Ramadan?”

This isn’t news to most religion scholars in the United States. But what is interesting is that it’s newsworthy for Grossman, and, if dumb is cute, even amusing. If anything, Prothero’s point is that dumb is dangerous, and has truly terrible consequences. Juxtaposed with religious illiteracy, however, is a popular culture that is saturated with religious symbols, and a political establishment that readily deploys language laden with biblical references. Wading into this stupefying mixture of ignorance and bliss, duly amplified by digital networks beyond our wildest imagination, are religion professors in the classroom.

With the arrival of the electronic age, truly profound shifts have taken place in the way students learn. On the one hand, they consume a burgeoning diet of wireless data instantaneously delivered through their laptops, iPods, cell phones, and TiVos; on the other, this intensely saturated and limitless data stream of text, sound, and moving image provides little guidance on how to evaluate its reliability or significance. It is an irony that students, and most Americans, are oblivious not only to the history of religions, but also of world cultures and international affairs despite instant access to the knowledge of the world at their fingertips.

“News” itself often means little to students. In their experience, it occupies the same virtual space as the World Wide Web, CNN Headline News, reality TV, and video games. A disquieting example of the melding of the visual effects of prime-time news broadcasts and that of blockbuster movies is the fact that video stores in Canada reported a steep increase in rentals of terrorist movies after 9/11 (see p. vi).

Indeed, technology has advanced so fast that students can literally produce their own “news” or vlogs, and broadcast it via YouTube and MySpace. An emerging trend is lifelogging, namely, documenting every moment of one’s life using audio recorders, digital video cameras, GPS tracking systems, and other surveillance devices.

With the arrival of the electronic age, truly profound shifts have taken place in the way students learn.

Using the news to teach religion thus offers an opportunity to engage students to think critically about their own understanding of what constitutes news, and to develop their ability to distinguish between fact, fiction, argument, and interpretation, as well as to extend their horizons beyond narcissistic infotainment.

When students analyze how religion is reported in the news media, how this impacts public opinion, and how religious communities also generate and manipulate news media, they get involved with the study of religion more actively as seekers, and hopefully producers, of reliable knowledge.

Contributors to this issue of Spotlight describe various ways that they have used the news media as an entry point for students to appreciate the complexity of religion(s), and to acquire religious literacy.
N E I L POSTMAN prophetically remarked in 1985 in Amusing Ourselves to Death that “we face the rapid dissolution of the assumptions of an education organized around the slow-moving printed word, and the equally rapid emergence of a new education based on the speed-of-light electronic image.” Although Postman was mostly concerned about the effects of television on education, his observation applies equally well to the new forms of multimedia today. Whether we like it or not, most of today’s students are much less likely to get their “news” in print or on television, and are more likely to find it in online “newspapers” or other new media such as blogs, streaming video, YouTube, and podcasts. So if we want to meet students where they are, then we owe it to them to think carefully about the new pedagogical challenges that come with responsible analysis of “news” in the digital twenty-first century. For those of us who grew up in a very different environment, we may find ourselves in the awkward position of teaching these fully wired students about a world that for us is new and at times confusing, but which they simply take for granted.

At Ithaca College, I teach a number of different religious studies courses. No matter the course, I frequently utilize elements of the “news” in the classroom as a way of showing students the relevance of what may otherwise seem distant concepts. When Ted Haggard was indicted by his congregation for sexual misconduct, reports about this incident colored our discussions about how beliefs about biblical interpretation can shape some Christians’ assumptions about homosexuality. The international hubbub surrounding Madonna’s melodramatic “crucifixion” in concert invited class discussion about gender and pop culture critiques of Christianity, but also more practical consideration about how stories about religion get reported in news media, and why they do. The “appearance” of the Virgin Mary in chocolate droppings in a candy company in California gave rich dimension to our discussions of modern ve

of the modernist perspective for scholars of journalism, who have given up “the notion that [journalism] is clearly and unequivocally a search for truth.” Most journalists today, he says, openly “concede that a set of conventions influences or determines the selection and interpretation of fact in the press.” Thus, teaching students about the nature of the news means teaching them about the tricky relationship between facts and interpretation in a journalist’s creation of a news report. Religious studies has long been concerned with the problem of facts and interpretation, so bringing such concerns to the surface in the analysis of the news can have compelling collateral results in discussions about the formation of sacred texts assumed to be the product of “reporting.”

Critical analysis of news in the classroom also raises an interdisciplinary problem: Does my PhD in religious studies de facto qualify me as an instructor of journalistic technique, just because the topic in a given news article has to do with religion? I wonder how my colleagues in the School of Communications would feel if I told them that I am teaching students how to understand the rhetorical purposes of different types of journalistic writing. Of course, religious studies is typically an interdisciplinary endeavor, but the question remains how religion professors can be certain that they have attained the appropriate skill-set in another discipline to then instruct students about how to use it.

Nevertheless, I believe that struggling with the meaning of perspective in journalism can be an effective pedagogical tool. An ongoing, flexible assignment in my “Islam and Media” course is to have students bring in news articles dealing with Islam. The goal is to help them develop the tools with which to assess an author’s purpose, to consider how physical arrangement of image and text on the page (or the Web site) may affect interpretation of meaning, and to learn how content analysis can help to identify implicit biases. Because I am a scholar of religious studies, these techniques are all filtered through the examination of how religious belief can affect an author’s point of view, and how the journalistic description of religious cases distinctive issues. Precisely by peeling back the assumption of objectivity in journalism, we can reintroduce what Postman calls “perplexity,” the difficulty students encounter when they must “remem

ber,” “study,” and “apply” what they have learned to multiple contexts. For my Christianity course, I have students complete a series of brief exercises dubbed “Christianity in Culture Citing.” For each of the sets of ten students, I have different “citing” of Christianity in the culture around them, and write a brief summary about each, citing it appropriately, and critiquing it. I note that Christianity plays in the items’ formulation or function. Those students who select news items are surprisingly generous in their appraisal of what a legitimate “news” source may be — so generous that the assignment itself has shown me just how many students exhibit a false confidence about their ability to assess the reliability of news sources. In an age where we all may read Daniel Pipes’ or Pat Robertson’s online opinions as “news,” or may see The Onion as a legitimate source of public opinion, it seems imperative that we provide students with the skills to recognize different kinds and qualities of “reporting.” In my “Women and Religion” course, I require the students to read and critique a single news story in a bit more detail. For each “newsworthy” assignment, students must consider why the story they select about women and religion has been reported in mainstream media. I ask them questions such as: Why do you think this is made into mainstream news? What can you learn about the author that might enlighten your understanding of the author’s views and intentions in reporting this story? Why might this story about women’s role in religion sell papers or draw readers? This assignment has met with mixed success, primarily because I find that students have great difficulty assessing what a “mainstream” news source might be and will just as likely pull material from grass-roots magazines, local flyers, and the college paper as from national news outlets.

One could convincingly argue that the pedagogical problem of assessment of sources is nothing new and is merely aggravated today by the accessibility of online resources. However, it seems to me that what is new for our students is the sheer volume of “news” resources available combined with the trickling-down of the worst aspects of postmodern theory into American culture. For students who take the digital world for granted, we cannot responsibly consider the issues relating to the integration of news in the classroom without facing head-on what the term “news” means to them today and giving them the tools to understand how larger debates about meaning and authority affect reporting about religion. We can utilize the best of postmodern perspectives as an antidote to the worst of postmodern perspectives when we illustrate for our students, as Postman put it, that “Some ways of truth-telling are better than others.”

Rachel Wagner, Ithaca College

Ways of Truth-Telling in a Wired World

Rachel Wagner is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Ithaca College. She wrote a dissertation on the humanistic function of biblical forms in William Blake’s poetry. Her recent interests have centered on religion and popular culture. She has written pieces on an Islam and video games, on Harry Potter and The Matrix, and has appeared in a Warner Brothers documentary about the film series.

Bibliography


Deconstructing the Media in Virtual Classrooms

Claire Badaracco, Marquette University

SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING

Claire Badaracco is Professor of Communication in the College of Communication at Marquette University, Milwaukee. She is the editor of Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion (Baylor University Press: 2005) and has written three books about printing history. Currently, she teaches ethics, marketplace writing, and cultural identity, media and world religions.

The Covers of Time and Newsweek in December 2005, that Publisher Weekly dubbed the year of the religion book, were a seasonal chic. But in 2006, secular sentimentalities prevailed—religious images on postage stamps and the use of “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas” became a matter for media debate. Beyond the surface, higher-brow gloss magazines often wear their ideology on their sleeves. Recently, Harper’s addressed “Jesus without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson’s Bible and the Gospel of Thomas”; even National Geographic discussed The Secrets of Long Life among the Seventh-Day Adventists; the Atlantic Monthly questioned “Is God an Accident?” and examined Christianization of Hollywood from The Passion of the Christ to Narnia; Newsweek heralded The Da Vinci Code. September Jones published a special issue on “God and Country: Where the Christian Right is Leading Us.”

Is religion the definitive question of our age because we are at war in the biblical Holy Land, because fundamentalists attacked the United States, because Evangelicals are in the White House? Or is there something about the beginning of a new century, something deeper occurring in these media reports about the materialization of beliefs that will define our age for future historians? The phrase “agenda-setting” in the news media means that the media tells us not what to think about, but what to think. But today there has been a sea change — arguably, the media has assumed a quasi-clerical role if it tells us what our religious beliefs are saying about our identity as a people, a nation, and the role that faith plays in shaping our collective memories about what matters, what is possible, and whom to fear. The larger question remains: How do journalists stay “objective” about religion news? Many scholars have taken up this question in their research.

In a scholarly sense, the body of knowledge that constitutes the field of media and religion is interdisciplinary and integrates sociological, historical, and ethnographic methodologies through negotiated or negotiated lenses. From the standpoint of academic knowledge in fields of communication, religious studies, and political and popular culture. Leaders in the field such as Stewart Hoover, Lynn Clark, Rodney Stark, Diane Winston, John Schmalzbauer, Jolyn Mitchell, and many others, have demonstrated in important books not only how religion permeates the news, but how religions use media, and how believers congregate online or view films and hear music, all aspects of contemporary media that help express individual beliefs in public ways, and which contribute to how people see themselves — and how they see the Other.

Through my course in media and religion, my students learn that how the Other determines how they know themselves, and they use media to reach that critical understanding.

When I created an experimental class titled Religion, Culture, Identity, Media and World Religion, I used a broadband network to create a “linked” classroom, where a course on media and religion was co-taught with three instructors at three different Jesuit universities, with interdisciplinary expertise including religious studies, mass media, and sociology of religion. Our first collaborators included Loyola New Orleans (Catherine Westerhoff) and the University of Santa Clara (Paul Soukup). We no longer are limited to those Jesuit schools. I am interested in new, affordable opportunities for collaboration, and in short-term, or one-class, collaborations on varied assignments with other schools. This year, we are linked with Dublin City University (Collin Kenny), Middle Tennessee State University (Paul Wells), and the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala (David Young) to talk about how journalists are trained in religious denominations other than their own. They are required to go into their respective communities and interview religious leaders on two points: 1) how does that particular religion use mass media, and how do its believers use mass media, and 2) what image does the person think the mass media conveys to the public about their religious tradition or denomination. The regional teams report back to one another using a common course site discussion board. Comparing data, they distill the results into a compare-and-contrast/simi-larities-and-differences PowerPoint presentation of six to eight frames, uploaded onto a common course site where students at each site are required to read one another’s work in preparation for a linked discussion with the larger group via videoconference, one of a dozen during the semester.

For their final project at the Marquette site, students produce a digital ethnography: a triptych of interviews with religious leaders in three different faith traditions other than their own. Their line of questioning is to follow one theme, such as “Creation,” “The Face of God,” “ Initiation Rituals,” “Beauty.” “Sanctuary.” They condense and edit hours of videotape into one five-minute digital product, a Movie or Movie Maker, Adobe Editor, or Final Cut Pro.

I am less concerned with their production skills, however, and accept all levels of competence in this. I am very committed to their using the media to get out of their comfort zone, and into the churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues in the area, to talk with strangers, and to come away with the exhilaration of having met with someone whose appearance, ethnicity, clothes, or age is very different from their own. The videocamera is merely a bridge to conversation: the product is less important than the process through which they compose the digital ethnography.

The media use is an excuse, it forces them out of their shells, and many have reported that they loved it, that it made them talk with strangers about deeply held beliefs, an experience that causes them to understand “lived religion” in a new dimension.

In this, my eighth year of teaching media and religion classes in this way, I now periodically try to construct a bilingual or international class and routinely link with scholars and classes at state universities. In the final week of last semester, for example, we linked one day with the Venezuelan news desk of the Voice of America and Al Hurrah TV Iraq, and on another day, with a 28-year veteran of Vatican Radio. Students then were in a good situation to analyze how government propaganda differed from religious broadcasting, not only theoretically, but more specifically how the religious broadcasters used podcasting, communicated with channels domestically and abroad, and how the government veiled their identity.

The crux of the pedagogical question for me is how to balance intellectual inquiry with introspective reflection, and how those two elements permit a student to grow in self-knowledge, understanding, and awareness of their own individual faith. In a common course like this we frame their broader public understanding of the nation’s identity, especially as a constitutional democracy grounded in the First Amendment that articulates both freedom of the press and the separation of church and state.

I want my students to be able, finally, to assert critical distance from their own beliefs in order to deconstruct media culture in the sense that it homogenizes the idea of belief, or in a political context where it differentiates beliefs, or in the sense that the sitcom or popular-culture world normalizes nonbelief or “secular” values. Though I think this distinction still holds, unquestionably, the sea change alluded to in the lead to this article demonstrates how media has taken up the subject of religion in a deeper way. Similarly, these powers of critical thinking applied to deconstructing cliches of media or popular culture ought to admit the students into another avenue of inquiry, about the nature of deeper culture, about how thought leaders influence public opinion and popular belief through political rhetoric.

Along with growth in critical thinking skills, on religiously affiliated campuses, students in late adolescence have an innate resistance to inherited faith or “truth.” They need at this age to discover their own truth, and sometimes that leads them back home and into new levels of reflection about the meaning of the soul in the Eastern and Western traditions. The integration of technology and mass media in the class assignments and course structure creates a type of meta-discourse. Understanding how geographical differences result in differences among the same faith traditions helps them to see not only their own identity, but to develop the skills to encounter the Other, to deconstruct fear as an inheritance of mass media. When the students are made up of rituals, then certainly for mass media majors, understanding how media ritual functions in public belief is central to their education on a Jesuit campus.

Bibliography


This was the semester when Dolly the cloned sheep was first announced. This story led to many discussions of identity and experience. We immediately drifted into questions that would arise if persons were cloned, such as: If there is a clone of me, is it identical? This led to speculation about the role of experience in the development of identity. Although their comments may not have been deep, the exercise encouraged them. It gave them a way to begin to see the philosophical implications of events. Thus, if another entity has exactly the same structure at the cellular level, would it be the same, identical? Where does identity reside? Some time later, another scientist began cloning cats. No doubt many pet owners will be shocked to discover after replacing Fluffy for a cost of $25K that Fluffy 2 has her own personality formed by experience as well as nature; they have a visual replica of Fluffy but a numerically distinct individual.

I developed the idea of a news module for three reasons. The underlying reason is that since students in general undergraduate courses are fairly resistant to thinking seriously about philosophical topics these days, I am always finding ways to trick them into thinking and looking at things in a new way. In the end, a topic such as animal cloning extended speculatively to humans is very seductive. It has a certain science fiction quality, but also a certain fantasy level. Once you think of a person cloned as your duplicate, but a number of years younger — the clone will still begin as a baby — you will think about the influence of environment (parents, siblings, education, the outside world), and realize how much of your personality is the result of experience, not just genes. It is the old nature vs. nurture argument, updated in a sexy way for the twenty-first century.

Second, students love to talk and hate to do the assigned readings. Philosophy readings usually have a high-level vocabulary and contain difficult ideas. By their nature, newspapers are written to appeal to a broader audience. By asking them to select a news article of their choosing, I gave them more control over the subject matter. I recommended the New York Times, but did not require that newspaper.

Third, students seem to learn more from each other than from the professor, so I let them teach each other. While teachers may have all the answers, students will listen and hear with more attention when their peers speak. The same students who sit slack-jawed and bored with a professor’s presentation will accord each other complete attention. Furthermore, an oral presentation usually assures that students will put actual work into the assignment. While they may not be adverse to plagiarizing material for written assignments off the Internet, the embarrassment of not having anything to say in an oral presentation works in favor of some preparation. Let’s call it schadenfreude. The oddity is generally higher that they will do some work. Plus the basis of the presentation is directly from a published article.

The news module works as follows: each student is assigned a day to present. On that day, she or he brings a clipping. It might be from an Internet news source, but TV is not acceptable. They must be able to bring a copy of the original story. Preferably it is a hard news story which has been explained to them. Then the student reviews the facts and everyone joins in critiquing the situation. The teacher (so-called expert) is available if necessary to indicate contradictions, false assumptions, or areas that should be included but are being overlooked.

I also bring in articles that raise issues I find interesting to discuss. One was the case of extreme altruism demonstrated by Joyce Roosh who donated one of her kidneys to a stranger. She was a nurse in Indiana who worked as a transplant coordinator. The news article mentioned that she was married and had kids; it even raised questions such as: How would she feel if one of her own children later needed a kidney? Wasn’t she risking her life unnecessarily when she had a primary moral obligation to her family first? She said she didn’t live up when she first mentioned it. Eventually her family supported her decision. None of the best ethical problems has a complete and standard solution — one of the objectives of this exercise was to encourage students to examine many aspects of the problem, or even to see that there are many aspects.

I suppose the knock against philosophy is that students do not see its usefulness. They think it has no connection to the real world. However in ethics particularly there is a real-world application. One man who kills another in a fight over their son’s hockey-playing is a real-world event. So are events such as the president ordering secret wiretapping; the definition of graduate student teaching assistants as either employees or students; a local government’s claim to eminent domain of private property for private, not public, development. Many of the most interesting problems may have legal adjudications, but the moral questions remain. These problems relate to what society we want to live in. I often think if our legislators had taken more philosophy courses in college, they would move society in a more intelligent direction by reconsidering the laws and their ethical consequences.

The important features for a successful outcome in fully implementing news module for a course are: make it a constant exercise so the students are presenting every day throughout the semester; ask them to use a source which can be brought to class (a Web article can be printed out); and assign articles a few days in advance. Leave 5-10 minutes at the beginning or end of each class for discussion of the article. I also suggest specifically omitting articles on abortion or capital punishment or the right to die. These three questions are emotionally fraught and too overworked to yield much in the way of fresh judgments from students. The idea is to make them explore different situations, to see what kinds of issues might be involved that they did not think of initially, and not to elicit knee-jerk reactions. To ensure attention, you can always include an article in the final exam as an essay question. In this case you must provide a copy of the article with the test.

The news module works best in conjunction with a standard reading list. You might back it up with Kant, Aristotle, etc., and you can include other (non-Western) traditions. I also included Maimonides, Ethical Writings of Maimonides, translated by Raymond L. Weiss with Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Dover Publications, 1983); and Kwame Gyekye, An Essay on African Philosophical Thought (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). But students should be reading some solid philosophical texts so they can understand the type of questions philosophers are asking.

The goal is to connect the contemporary news article with the reflections of philosophers of the past. As the student reviews the facts and everyone joins in critiquing the situation. The teacher (so-called expert) is available if necessary to indicate contradictions, false assumptions, or areas that should be included but are being overlooked.

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The goal is to connect the contemporary news article with the reflections of philosophers of the past. For instance, to consider whether Nietzsche’s idea that a truly strong society would not punish its criminals or Aristotle’s idea that honor is the highest level a human can attain or Gyekye’s stress on the individual’s relation to society.

Newspapers give us actual situational ethics, while books give us theoretical frameworks. In the actual world, we can consider what type of ethics to apply and why it would be useful. The whole point of this exercise is to encourage students to see there is a need for ethics in the world. Ethics appears to be the area where religion and philosophy consider the same question: “How shall I lead a good life?”

In news accounts we see the best and the worst of ethical decisions; we can also sometimes see the consequences of actions, the results which are much more immediately than heaven or hell. **Pseudonym**
**Swimming in the Sea of News**

Whitney Bodman, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

With such a sea of news around us, and viral issues presented every day, it would be a shame to teach our courses — any courses — insulatd from our turbulent world. The news is not just an assortiment of clippings. It exists in a context.

How we choose the news

We choose the news we listen to and read, often on the basis of our own political, moral, and cultural commitments and beliefs. I read the New York Times religiously, and listen to NPR. I do not follow any blogs, conservative or liberal (except for Juan Cole). I do not listen to AM radio, which means that I am fairly ignorant of a tremendous volume of commentary whose perspective is far different from my own. I live in something of a cocoon of liberal-ism. Well, I do watch The Colbert Report. That has to count for something, I would imagine that most of us live in some sort of news cocoon, unaware of the arguments that sway much of society.

Given limitations of time, that is understand-able; but pedagogically, it is dangerous to be ignorant of sizable public discourse that weighs in on just about every aspect of the world we might be addressing in class. How we access those views is a gravuing question. That we should access those perspectives is self-evident. It is also given the academic privilege assigned to primary sources, not adequate to depend on other people’s creeds about what “those people” are saying.

This is one place where the students can give us some help. Can we ask them to find news sources representing different portions of the political spectrum on an issue? Can they then outline the argument of that stance?

One task for those who teach courses on Islam is to probe beneath the rhetoric about radical Islam to lift our threads of legitimate complaint and careful argument in an otherwise repellant fabric. Should we do no less with the discus-ant arguments we hear in our own media? Just as Islamists movements cannot be dis- missed as simply “crazy,” neither should the ultra-right or ultra-left movements in this country or the West be dismissed.


In Diana Eck’s “World Religious” class at Harvard, students have been asked to find and report on a Web site for each religion covered. Part of the challenge here is to assess the agen-da of the Web site. Often Web sites critical of a religion will be subtly disguised as one provid-ing reliable information. At other times, they will speak directly about aspects of our understanding. It may take more knowledge than students have to recognize the slant, but the exercise is useful nevertheless.

How we read the news

This is probably the issue we most naturally turn to as we use the news in class. We read critically, examining the particular vocabulary used, the absences in the report, its placement as an assessing part of the political or cultural context. How does the news represent the intelligensia vs. the working class? What criteria were used in the collection of interviews? Were they rural or urban, male or female, old or young? In other words, who speaks to the media? Whose voice gets heard, and whose voice is absent?

What kind of difference does that make in telling the story? I have made the news an integral dimension of my teaching. I include not only the news in the front section, but articles from the travel section and the arts and culture pages. To dis-cuss religion in a comparative context, it is use-ful to have a common household reading of, making a new life for herself in the U.S. Army with Hindu building a temple in Texas. It is equally useful for discussion to read an article from the travel section on visits to “Indo-India sacred caves.” This is not only relevant to an interest in religious practice, present and past, but it is also an opportunity to discuss how we “do” tourism, what we notice, what our stance is relative to the practitioners of a religion, or the heritage of a religion — in fact, what the stance of modern practitioners is to their own historic religious sites.

How they report the news

A recent meeting of the Islamic Society of North America featured a panel of Muslims who worked in the media. One young woman who was better for a Chicago newspaper said that just because she was a Muslim, she was assumed to be the resident expert on Islam in her office. She said that, understandably, reporters cover broad beats, investigating areas in which they seldom have much background knowledge and experience. They are under deadline pressures, so they grab the first person they can that looks credible and authentic, scribble a few quotable sentences, and since they don’t have time to survey the larger Muslim community, that is what becomes the authoritative news report. Reporters are not

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**“Authentic Material”: Ads, Pictures, and Krishna Utensils**

Rebecca J. Manring, Indiana University

Whitney Bodman is Assistant Professor of Comparative Religion at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is author of the forthcoming Poetics of Iblis: Qu’aniic Narrative as Theology (Hartford University Press), and is working on an introduction to the Qur’an for Christians. He has served as a pastor for 12 years and is active in Christian-Muslim and Christian-Jewish dialogue.

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By Lauran Patton

Swimming in the Sea of News

Whitney Bodman

With such a sea of news around us, and viral issues presented every day, it would be a shame to teach our courses—any courses—insulated from our turbulent world. The news is not just an assortment of clippings. It exists in a context.

How we choose the news

We choose the news we listen to and read, often on the basis of our own political, moral, and cultural commitments and beliefs. I read the New York Times religiously, and listen to NPR. I do not follow any blogs, conservative or liberal (except for Juan Cole). I do not listen to AM radio, which means that I am fairly ignorant of a tremendous volume of commentary whose perspective is far different from my own. I live in something of a cocoon of liberal-ism. Well, I do watch The Colbert Report. That has to count for something, I would imagine that most of us live in some sort of news cocoon, unaware of the arguments that sway much of society.

Given limitations of time, that is understand-able; but pedagogically, it is dangerous to be ignorant of sizable public discourse that weighs in on just about every aspect of the world we might be addressing in class. How we access those views is a gravuing question. That we should access those perspectives is self-evident. It is also given the academic privilege assigned to primary sources, not adequate to depend on other people’s creeds about what “those people” are saying.

This is one place where the students can give us some help. Can we ask them to find news sources representing different portions of the political spectrum on an issue? Can they then outline the argument of that stance?

One task for those who teach courses on Islam is to probe beneath the rhetoric about radical Islam to lift our threads of legitimate complaint and careful argument in an otherwise repellant fabric. Should we do no less with the discus-ant arguments we hear in our own media? Just as Islamists movements cannot be dis- missed as simply “crazy,” neither should the ultra-right or ultra-left movements in this country or the West be dismissed.


In Diana Eck’s “World Religious” class at Harvard, students have been asked to find and report on a Web site for each religion covered. Part of the challenge here is to assess the agen-da of the Web site. Often Web sites critical of a religion will be subtly disguised as one provid-ing reliable information. At other times, they will speak directly about aspects of our understanding. It may take more knowledge than students have to recognize the slant, but the exercise is useful nevertheless.

How we read the news

This is probably the issue we most naturally turn to as we use the news in class. We read critically, examining the particular vocabulary used, the absences in the report, its placement as an assessing part of the political or cultural context. How does the news represent the intelligensia vs. the working class? What criteria were used in the collection of interviews? Were they rural or urban, male or female, old or young? In other words, who speaks to the media? Whose voice gets heard, and whose voice is absent?

What kind of difference does that make in telling the story? I have made the news an integral dimension of my teaching. I include not only the news in the front section, but articles from the travel section and the arts and culture pages. To dis-cuss religion in a comparative context, it is use-ful to have a common household reading of, making a new life for herself in the U.S. Army with Hindu building a temple in Texas. It is equally useful for discussion to read an article from the travel section on visits to “Indo-India sacred caves.” This is not only relevant to an interest in religious practice, present and past, but it is also an opportunity to discuss how we “do” tourism, what we notice, what our stance is relative to the practitioners of a religion, or the heritage of a religion—in fact, what the stance of modern practitioners is to their own historic religious sites.

How they report the news

A recent meeting of the Islamic Society of North America featured a panel of Muslims who worked in the media. One young woman who was better for a Chicago newspaper said that just because she was a Muslim, she was assumed to be the resident expert on Islam in her office. She said that, understandably, reporters cover broad beats, investigating areas in which they seldom have much background knowledge and experience. They are under deadline pressures, so they grab the first person they can that looks credible and authentic, scribble a few quotable sentences, and since they don’t have time to survey the larger Muslim community, that is what becomes the authoritative news report. Reporters are not

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**“Authentic Material”: Ads, Pictures, and Krishna Utensils**

Rebecca J. Manring, Indiana University

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From there, I move to a detailed discussion of how to read a text. In class, working with a short hymn from the Rig Veda, for example, I model for them the critical reading skills they need to learn, and immediately ask them to practice in small groups, working through another Rig Veda hymn. My goal is for them to appreciate the emotional quality of many of the early hymns, the reciprocity of early Vedic ritual prac-tice, and their sheer literary beauty. We finish the poems with a few verses from Mandala X, so that students see the beginning of speculative thought. We move into discussion of what life must have been like for those early Indo-Aryans, and to the development of a formal priesthood. They learn that the Brahmins have continued in their role as religious custodians, and in some cases, sole religious authorities to the present day, though not always challenged.

Once students begin to use critical reading skills, I redirect their attention to contemporary mate-rials that pertain to some of the issues that we are interested in for that class. For example, India Today had an article in February 1994 issue that states the stereotype that only male brahmans can serve as priests. The article noted that starting with a small group of conservative Maharashtrian housewives, a numer-er of women have trained in Vedic prayer and ritual, and have been officiating at weddings and other ceremonies much to the consternation of some male priests. We then read recent scholarly research of such women, for instance, published by Laurie Patton.

See MARRING, esp
students’ perspectives of Islam and Muslims are often shaped by news and popular media. After 9/11, many North Americans turned to popular media outlets to “understand” Islam and the motivations of Muslims for their actions. Instead, these outlets seemed to merely confirm the existing stereotypes. Amazingly, Canadian video stores recorded a huge surge in rentals of movies featuring violent images of Muslims. These trends on Americans after the September 11th tragedy. The Siege (1998) was ranked third on the list of top selling DVDs. True Lies, a 1994 movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a U.S. agent battling an Islamic terrorist group called Crimson Jihad, ranked fifth. The Arab (read Muslim) characters in the films appeared brutal and backward. In contrast, Harry (Arnold Schwarzenegger) exemplified fair, superior, and civilized Western values. Air Force One, a 1997 movie about an Islamic terrorist’s hijacking of the American president’s plane, was rerun ten times more frequently than before the attacks.

The official spokesperson for Rogers Video, one of the largest video chains in Canada, claimed that people were perhaps trying to gain insight into the events and the minds of the terrorists, looking for similarities and even wondering if the attackers had received their ideas from a Hollywood plot. Viewers think of movies as if they are sources of accurate information!

Jack Shaheen, author of Red Hot Arabs (Interlink Publishing; 2001), examined 900 films and found that only 5 percent (approximately 50 movies) debunked the barbaric image of Islam. The most popular Arab movie was cute, romanticized cartoon characters: Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad. In terms of “the Muslim woman,” only a handful of movies depicted her as compassionate and heroic. In general, most films depict women either as silent, shapeless bundles under black gowns or as eroticized, enchained belly dancers. Therefore, when I teach my classes, many of my students still have a distorted, fixed idea and one that is often hard for students to grasp. But through the news and media, they become more conscious of their own Euro-American and Christian preconceptions of the Orient, which are repeatedly exemplified in images of old-school Arabs and Islamic terrorists. Teachers, as well as students, now live in a world that seems to offer immediate understanding and comprehension about the events of the world. But it also allows us to access perspectives around the globe, which forces students to realize that their viewpoints are shaped by the American cultural understanding of the Orient and the Muslim. Analysis of news media allows students to step outside of their own constructions and prejudices to better understand multiple perspectives. By incorporating analysis of news media into the curriculum, students have a better understanding of the subversive ways in which Orientalism continues to persist in American culture.

And it is also helpful, depending on the nature of the class, to invite reporters to come to class and talk about the way they go about fashioning a story. They are, after all, taken as public authorities. Students can ask them questions such as: What sources do they use? What kinds of questions do they ask? And perhaps most important, how is the story they write shaped by the policies of the business they work for and the particular public they serve?

Finally, there is the issue of how much involvement academics have in shaping news reporting. We religion scholars are generally absent. Most of us talk too long, see everything as complex and nuanced, and get back to reporters three days later with a message that they have to write on the fly and in hectic reporting machines. We do not and may not want to know how to write for the media. Nor do we care to train our students on how to do this. But if academics are going to complain about the media bias, then we ought to be a part of correcting that bias. A senior administrator told me that the only thing worse than having to write editorials was not having me write them!

What if we were to ask our students to write an editorial instead of a short paper? Editorials are a special breed of writing. They have to be written for a specific type of audience. They have to be short. It is a rigorous discipline to learn to say what you have to say in 750 words. It is much easier to write 2,000 words. It is equally difficult to know how to edit the ten that is informative, does not “flame,” and truly helps further the public conversation.

Then there is the question of whether to encourage students to send their editorial to the local paper. One has to consider the situation in which this might put the student. One possibility is to have an editorial written by the class as a whole, or perhaps two editorials reflecting different points of view. One might explore with a local paper beforehand if they would be willing to publish the students’ editorials.

In sum, I have found that there is no better way to have students ponder how their studies relate to the events of the day than to integrate media articles or comparable texts for them to review and analyze. Not only do they develop a commitment to enhancing public discourse, but they also learn how to include disparate voices that are productive for understanding.
SINCE ARRIVING in Haifa almost a decade ago, I have taught a course titled “Religion, Media, and Culture.” Originally, the course centered around American Protestants and TV in the 1950s: Responses to a New Medium (Palenque Macmillan, 2007). Her recent research focuses on religion, media, and culture in Israel.

Ratheris reflective of a market-segmented population with shows, channels, and Web tives solidary (Katz and Haas, 2001), but controlled with the aim of creating collectivity within and around it. But sanctuaries of religion or the framing of religious practices of community members. The categories of ritual and myth are also explored within the context of the media (Coulddy, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Students have explored how traditional life-cycle events are being reconstituted and reshaped as a result. For instance, Internet matchmaking for communities which once relied on the personal matchmaker of the army (even in the face of clear provocations by the largely national religious settlers) and the smooth execution of the withdrawal, this time those who were interested in hearing the settlers’ account were able to watch Channel 7’s Web site news program, which offered an alternative, competing narrative of settlers treated improperly, of indignities endured by a community of families being expelled from their homes by Jewish soldiers, etc. (www.israeltourismnews.com).

In both cases, viewers participated in a format (media event) — but the infrastructural frameworks differed so drastically that the cleavages in Israeli society were only emphasized as a result (on media events, see Dary, Katz). On alternative readings of media events, see Yadgar, 2002). As Roger Silverstone so perceptively suggested: “Our media allow us to frame, represent, and see the other and his or her world. They do not, by and large, in their distancing, invite us to engage with the other, nor accept the challenge of the other. In effect, they provide a sanctuary for everyday life by providing safety and identity within and around it. But sanctuaries insulate and isolate as well as protect” (Silverstone, 2002: 777). Nonetheless, through the course, students begin to question the limited frames that the media employ and not only in the case of religion, per se.

The negotiation of new media by religious communities has been a central concern of the course. As Israeli culture becomes more saturated, some religious leaders have responded with harsh condemnations of uncontrolled uses of new media (i.e., cell phones or Internet) by their communities. Beginning with the example of the Amish and their negotiations with the telephone (Umbreil, 1992), my students reexamine claims of technological determinism made both by scholars and religious communities, and analyze the process of negotiations that new media demand of their users and nonusers alike (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003).

In recent years, we have followed the creation of so-called “kosher cell phone” (a secular nomenclature) and the “kosher Internet,” (cell phones and Internet services marketed to the ultra-Orthodox community with rabbinic approval). Students track the coverage of these phenomena in the mainstream press, the changes in the industry’s approach to the ultra-Orthodox community (see, for example, the advertising campaigns directed to these communities specifically), the responses of leaders in official pronouncements, and the everyday practices of community members.

The categories of ritual and myth are also explored within the context of the media (Coulddy, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Students have explored how traditional life-cycle events are being reconstituted and reshaped as a result. For instance, Internet matchmaking for communities which once relied on the personal matchmaker of the matchmaker; Hasidic weddings that are sponsored by cell phone companies replete with advertising banners in the banquet hall; the gift of cell phones by illicit boyfriends to young women in order to bypass the traditional channels of familial authority (Hitaj and Ribah, 2007). These are just some of the research projects students have undertaken. Myth and remembrance as aspects of civil religion also emerge within the context of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination and commemoration, a formative event for the current generation of students (Peri, 1997; Vinitsky-Seroussi, 2001).

Most of the published research has focused upon different uses by the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel, but my students, who represent the whole spectrum of Israeli culture, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Catholic, Druze — write original research papers on diverse topics such as the use of cassette tapes to counter secular influences within the Druze communities, religious commer- cials on Saudi-sponsored television stations, the virtual Baal community, Internet use amongst Muslim women, the framing of the Ethiopian Jewish community in the mainstream newspapers, healer and televangelist Benny Hinn’s performances in Israel (see www.bennyhinn.org), new age magazines in Israel, etc.

At the end of the year, they present their research to their fellow students for feedback and comments before turning in the final paper. In ideal circumstances, the dialogue that emerges at this point in the course not only investigates the contents of religious media or the framing of religious phenomena by the secular media, but also points to broader, still unanswered questions concerning the nature and meaning of religion in the media age.

Teaching Religion, Media, and Culture in Haifa

Michele Rosenthal, University of Haifa

Bibliography


“Increase by 14% in the number of internet surfers to 2.5 million people.” The Marker December 22, 2003.


Religion Journalists and Religion News Services: Two resources are an important part of every religion journalist’s toolkit. Both research and write; both find new areas of interest for their audiences. Each can help reporters to keep their faith in the profession as they dig through piles of information to find the most useful and accurate facts for their stories.

India Today also recently published articles on the various waves of the yoga boom in the United States and on the search for spirituality among diaspora South Asians. Even such things as the food sections of the Sunday newspaper supplements from Kolkata during the holiday season are useful to discuss the familiar idea of preparing special food for the holidays. Reading this section makes it clear to students that some things may appear to be cross-cultural in broad general terms, but if they do closer readings, they can see how Indian holiday food differs from what they fix in their own homes. An article from the Times of India on new environmental protection laws that mandate removing all decorations from puja images before immersing them in local rivers leads to a discussion of what happens to these images at the end of festivals. It helps to declare how the form of divine presence is first invoked and later released, and also shows how contemporary concerns about the health of the watersways has led to an adaptation in the way these festivals culminate, giving us yet another example of religion as a living, changing entity.

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News stories of the squabbles over administration of the Mahabodhi Temple — the temple erected centuries ago at the reputed site of the Buddha’s enlightenment — in Bodh Gaya, a Hindu-majority town in one of the poorest states in India, can trigger discussion of who should be in charge there. A picture featuring a model of the Statue of Liberty alongside images of the goddess Kali Puja in Kolkata helps raise questions about the figures of the goddesses which are anything but fixed, and demonstrates that religious studies stories can adapt to fit into account contemporary world events.

In addition to articles, I also like to include advertisements for their visual impact. Ads can make very strong statements, and those placed in newspapers or magazines that appeal toские religious holidays tell us a great deal about how the devout embrace their religious beliefs. I ask students to talk about their first impressions when they encounter one of these advertisements. What do they think of what is being advertised? What do they think of what is being advertised?

One of my favorite examples of how religion is intertwined with culture is an article from the Hindustan Times of Kolkata published on March 15, 2004, just before India’s cricket match with Pakistan. It features a list of the Hindu priests worshipping at Kalighat Temple to ensure that “Goddess Kali will help them win against their arch-rivals.” Surrounded by fans holding Singaporean flags, the priests leave their temple in a symbol of solidarity with the team and pray for victory. This is an example of how religion and sport intersect in India, and how religious beliefs can influence the outcome of a sporting event.

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Religious Studies News

Reporting on Religion: A Journalist’s View

Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

You have more women having these milestone celebrations, but among those in some denominations, like the spirit-centered, evangelical denominations, there were more women ordained 50 years ago than there are now, scholars say.

Her interpretation helped me to write not just a story that noted the celebratory aspects of the anniversaries or the contrary reactions to them. It went deeper than that in an approachable way because I contacted a historian of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel — founded by Aimee Semple McPherson — who confirmed a significant decrease in the percentage of female clergy since its start in 1927.

But this story is the kind that is often a luxury in today’s journalism — an article that I worked on for weeks, in part because I contacted a number of denominations to gather statistics on how the percentage of women clergy had changed over the years.

In many cases, time does not permit me to reach scholars. Sometimes I start and finish a story within hours. Given the requirements of work at a wire service and other news outlets. So I formulate if I get the so-called two sides of a story by deadline. But I do get to speak with scholars, I’m grateful for the perspectives that help me write a better and more balanced story. There usually are really more than two sides to a story and academics help reporters discover them.

If a journalist contacts you, consider the order your particular expertise may make in what the reader eventually digests from that story. Make sure that you only write minutes but can tell them if they’re headed in the right direction or not. And if you’re not an expert on the topic they’re dealing with on that particular day, suggest colleagues who might be helpful — and tell them what you might be able to assist with on a future occasion.

Sometimes scholars recommend a book or a soon-to-be-published article, thinking they may be good resources for a journalist. They might not tell a reporter often wait a week for a book or an article to be sent because his or her deadline may not permit it. In this age of blogs and Web sites, immediacy has become an even bigger part of the news.

Scholars can also aid journalists before a story breaks. For example, talking with journalists before a big denominational meeting can give them perspectives they can use even as the news develops. When I wrote about little-known Frank Page’s surprise election to the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in June 2006, an interview beforehand helped me understand unusual it would be for him to win. When he garnered 50.48 percent of the vote — compared to about 24 percent for each of his two opponents — I was able to quote people with perspectives before and after the election. It represents a much higher percentage, that shows much more dissatisfaction out there than what the party in power is perceiving,” said David Key, director of Baptist Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, in an interview in Greensboro, North Carolina.

One of my favorite examples of a scholar’s assistance with a story relates to a project I did in 2002 on race relations and congregations. I was writing about churches that were intentionally attempting to be racially integrated. People have long spoken of how Sunday mornings are the most segregated time in the country, but sociologist Michael Emerson of Rice University could determine a specific statistic that exemplified that sentiment. At that time, he estimated that 5.4 percent of U.S. churches are racially integrated, which he defined as having no one group make up more than 80 percent of the congregation.

“ar you back historically, the leaders of denominations have been denouncing racism and separation for at least 100 years and the political news has been ignoring those pronouncements for at least 100 years,” he told me. “There’s a complete disconnect.”

My story included statistics I collected from various denominational offices and firsthand accounts of worship featuring a multicultural choir and an interracial baptism, but the stats from Emerson crystallized the story, specifically backing up its main point about how unusual such worship experiences remain.

I suspect there are times when academics open their doors or hear a reporter on the reporter’s lack of expertise come through in the words they read or hear. I notice when reporters refer to the “National Baptist Convention” and wonder if they mean the National Baptist Convention, USA, or the National Baptist Convention of America. Please don’t let such missteps, or missing pieces, prevent you from helping journalists when they call. They can’t know something for certain until they ask for them, or are told them by people in the know.

If you hear or read a story that could have been fertilized from your expertise, consider e-mailing or calling the reporter or editor to say that you could be an interview on an interview — or others — at a later date.

And if you’re new to the field, or at least new to the idea of being interviewed, please don’t let that stand in the way of having a conversation with a journalist. Reporters should gain insights from long-term experts as well as those with new research developments. It could be the beginning of a mutually beneficial conversation, one that grows as the professor gains publicity or an opportunity for reaction to his or her research.

For those of you who’ve already had the experience of being interviewed, I suspect some have felt frustration in having a conversation that lasted as much as an hour, only to find the reporter never quoted a word you said in his or her story.

But talking with scholars helps prevent me from putting mistakes in my stories even if I’m unable to credit them in the written text. Often, just sharing the gist of my article with an expert makes the difference in what I write and, sometimes, even influences whether I write a potential story or not. If I get a great quote that I can include in my story, that’s just made the conversation more worthwhile.

When a story appears in print or on the air that has fresh facts and a range of perspectives, both scholars and journalists can be satisfied that they’ve contributed to aiding the public’s understanding of the complexities of religion.