

AAR

IN THIS ISSUE

News, Media, and Teaching Religion

Ways of Truth-Telling in a Wired Worldii
Rachel Wagner, Ithaca College

Deconstructing the Media in Virtual Classroomsiii
Claire Badaracco, Marquette University

Dolly, Fluffy, and Teaching Ethics 101iv
Kiki Kennedy-Day, American University in Cairo

Swimming in the Sea of Newsv
Whitney Bodman, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Authentic Material”: Ads, Pictures, and Krishna Utensils.....v
Rebecca J. Manning, Indiana University

News, Popular Media, and Orientalist Islamvi
Rubina Ramji, Cape Breton University

Teaching Religion, Media, and Culture in Haifa.....vii
Michele Rosenthal, University of Haifa

Reporting on Religion: A Journalist’s Viewviii
Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

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.

Editor

*Tazim R. Kassam
Syracuse University*

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

spotlight on TEACHING

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



*Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching Editor*

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 regularly 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 suffused 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 primetime 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. 

Ways of Truth-Telling in a Wired World

Rachel Wagner, Ithaca College



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 Islam and video games, on Harry Potter and The Matrix, and has appeared in a Warner Brothers documentary about the film series.

NEIL 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 the “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 drippings in a candy company in California gave rich dimension to our discussions of modern veneration of Mary. Students generally respond enthusiastically to the integration of pertinent news reports into the traditional discus-

sion of religious experience. However, the integration of online news material into my courses has not been without its headaches.

Perhaps the most obvious issue I have addressed is the problem of defining “news” today and the hidden questions about authorship, authority, and the interpretation of “facts” that the analysis of news implies. In an informal poll in one of my courses, I found that only a handful of students think first of print sources when asked where they read the “news,” and predictably most responded that they get their news on the Internet. Although many expressed a vague sense that different news sources have different biases, they could not clearly articulate how one might recognize what these are. My students agreed with me that stories drawn (online or in print) from national papers like the *New York Times* or from broadcasting companies like CNN, PBS, and the BBC should be considered “news,” along with print and online versions of mainstream news magazines like *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, or *Newsweek*. But these are not the only sources that students consult for their news — they also get it from a host of Web sites, from discussion boards, even from personal e-mail. When asked if a blog could be considered “news,” my students expressed some uncertainty, arguing that it depends on the journalistic associations and training of the blogger. Although one student cringed while declaiming the objectivity of Fox News, none of them were certain *why* some news outlets should be viewed as more reliable than others. Whether we like it or not, using news in the classroom embroils us in the best and worst of postmodernist and deconstructionist debates about meaning and authority.

The pop trickle-down form of the postmodern celebration of personal perspective means that some students may confuse the right to express themselves with the need to think critically about the sources they consume. Gone is the modernist assumption, described by literary theorist Terry Eagleton as that perspective which “rises above its object to a point from which it can peer down and disinterestedly examine it.” Today's students simply assume that objectivity is never fully achievable. Accordingly, professorial critique of student analysis of news can embroil us in a pop form of quasi-Marxian self-indictment: Instructors have “the power” — thus our assessments of student news selection and responses to it can be viewed as a mere whim of academic hegemony. Foucault harshly critiques the role of “examination” in (modernist) schools, since it “combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish.” In a post-modern environment, the mere assessment of student writing can seem hazardous, a problem exacerbated by the use of the news in student assignments, since issues of authority and “truth” are so much at the surface.

Stewart Hoover's brilliant 1998 exploration of the state of religion reporting, *Religion in the News*, focuses mainly on how reporters select what to say about religion and how one determines what religious expertise looks like — but he also acknowledges the demise

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 journalism scholars 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 problem of perspective in religious 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 religion raises 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 “remember,” “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 Citings.” For each of these assignments, students must locate five different “citings” of Christianity in the culture around them, and write a brief summary about each, citing it appropriately, and critiquing the role that Christianity plays in the item's 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 some students may read Daniel Pipes' or Pat Robertson's online opinions as reliable “news,” or who

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 that students select 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* issue made it 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 grassroots magazines, local flyers, and the college paper as from national news outlets. They also struggle with the realization that news is not news from the beginning, but was selected, arranged, and interpreted by somebody with a particular purpose in mind, usually commercially driven.

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 post-modern 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 perspectivism as an antidote to the worst of postmodern perspectivism when we illustrate for our students, as Postman puts it, that “Some ways of truth-telling are better than others.”

Bibliography

- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Foucault, Michel. “The Means of Correct Training” from *Discipline and Punish*. Excerpted in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Hoover, Stewart. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking Penguin, Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1985. 

Deconstructing the Media in Virtual Classrooms

Claire Badaracco, Marquette University



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 media ethics; marketplace writing; and cultural identity, media and world religions.

THE COVERS of *Time* and *Newsweek* in December 2005, the year that *Publishers Weekly* dubbed the year of the religion book, were a seasonal cliché. But in 2006, secular sentimentalities precluded 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-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*; and *Mother Jones* produced 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 massification of beliefs that will define our age for future historians?

The phrase “agenda-setting” in the news 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 ethno-

graphic methodologies through negotiated or mediated points of view, 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, Jolyon 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 they see the Other determines how they know themselves, and they use media to reach that critical understanding.

When I created an experimental class titled “Cultural Identity, Media and World Religions,” 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 Wessinger) and the University of Santa Clara (Paul Soukup). We no longer are limited to other Jesuit schools. I am interested in new, future 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 (Colin Kenny), Middle Tennessee State University (Paul Wells), and the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala (David Young) to talk about how journalists are trained to treat religion in other countries.

For the midterm project in the “Media and Religion” class, students thousands of miles apart collaborate in virtual teams, gathering data about regional differences 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 media to communicate, 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/similarities-and-differences PowerPoint presentation of six to eight frames, uploaded onto the common course site. All students at each site are required to read one another’s work in preparation for a linked discussion with the larger group via video-conference, one of a dozen during the semester.

For their final project at the Marquette site, students produce a digital ethnograph: 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 videocam interviews into one five-minute digital product (using iMovie or Movie Maker, Adobe Editor, or Final Cut Pro).

“*Students produce a digital ethnograph: a triptych of interviews with religious leaders in three different faith traditions.*”

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 ethnograph. The media use is an excuse, it forces them out of their shells, and many have reported they love 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 Tibetan 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 and ethnic identity as it frames 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, those powers of critical thinking applied to deconstructing clichés 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 sometimes 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 situate not only their own identity, but to develop the skills to encounter the Other, to deconstruct fear as an inheritance of mass media. If religions 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

- Badaracco, Claire, ed. *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion*. Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005.
- Buddenbaum, Judith, and Debra Mason, eds. *Readings on Religion as News*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2000.
- Clark, Lynn. *From Angels to Aliens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Hoover, Stewart, and Lynn Clark, eds. *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media: Explorations in Media, Religion and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Lannstrom, Anna, ed. *The Stranger’s Religion: Fascination and Fear*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
- Mitchell, Jolyon, and Sophia Marriage. *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2003.
- Poe, Harry Lee. *Christianity in the Academy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Schmalzbauer, John. *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in American Journalism and Higher Education*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Dolly, Fluffy, and Teaching Ethics 101

Kiki Kennedy-Day, American University in Cairo



Kiki Kennedy-Day is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Arabic Studies, American University in Cairo. She is a specialist in teaching Arabic literature in English translation and classical Islamic philosophy. Currently Kennedy-Day is working on a translation of Ibn Sina's *al-Adhawiyyah fi al-macad* (On the Afterlife).

HOWARD,¹ a student with an interest in athletics and beer but not philosophy, brought in an article about a hockey dad who beat another hockey dad to death during their sons' practice. Howard presented the article and said that it was not totally outrageous, because everyone knows that hockey is a violent sport. He mentioned the high incidence of body blocks and stick attacks among pro players. It was the only time all semester I saw him animated during Ethics 101.

This is a required philosophy class for business majors at Bixby University, a blue-collar, East Coast school. In the late 1990s when the unethical Mike Milkin was the poster boy for financial scandal, the university decreed undergraduate business students take an ethics course. This was received in the spirit it was required — as a cod liver oil pill to grease the consciences of prospective capitalists, bankers, and stock brokers. The students tended to find the standard texts — Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Groundwork*, and something by Nietzsche — boring and opaque. Since the newspapers were full of sensationalist stories of financial pillaging, I decided to try to lure the students into the study of ethics through the stories.

Hence, I developed the idea of a news module. Every student was required to bring in a news story, to describe the facts, and to state the ethical problem it invoked.

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 x 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 odds are generally higher that they will do some work. Plus the basis of the presentation is directly from a published article.

“The goal is to connect the contemporary news article with the reflections of philosophers of the past.”

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 also 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 Roush 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 her life in the what-if mode. Roush later stated her husband was so upset he threw 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 sons' hockey-playing is a real-world event. So are events such as the president ordering secret wiretapping; the definition of graduate stu-

dent 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 too 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 deeper 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. 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 their society.

Newspapers give us actual situational ethics, while books give us theoretical frameworks. In the actual situations, 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 immediate than heaven or hell.

¹Pseudonym

**In the Next
Spotlight on Teaching:
*The Other within Christianity:
Diversifying Knowledge Production***

Swimming in the Sea of News

Whitney Bodman, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary



Whitney Bodman is Assistant Professor of Comparative Religion at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is author of *the forthcoming Poetics of Iblis: Qur'anic Narrative as Theology* (Harvard 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.

WITH SUCH a sea of news around us, and vital 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 liberalism. 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 understandable; but pedagogically, it is dangerous to be ignorant of sizeable public discourse that weighs in on just about every issue that we might be addressing in class. How we access those views is a gnawing 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 out threads of legitimate complaint and logical argument in an otherwise repellent fabric. Should we do no less with the discordant arguments we hear in our own media? Just as Islamist movements cannot be dismissed as simply "crazy," neither should the ultra-right or ultra-left movements in this country or the West be so dismissed.

It may be helpful to ask students where they get their news from — friends? RSS feeds? Blogs? *The Daily Show*? Online newsletters? Would it be too painful to ask students to lis-

ten to an hour of Rush Limbaugh? One of John Hagee's sermons from Cornerstone Church in San Antonio? Ann Coulter? *Democracy Now*? *Counterpunch*?

In Diana Eck's "World Religions" 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 agenda of the Web site. Often Web sites critical of a religion will be subtly disguised as one providing reliable information. At other times, they will represent a particular sect or alternative 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 the lead story or buried in the middle, the nature of the headline, which views are privileged and how, and so on. This is where training in critical reading can be fostered. We encourage our students to read critically, not only the news, but the texts we use in the course, and the materials they use to write their papers.

Perhaps the most difficult part of reading critically is noticing the absences. Not only is it important to identify different points of view, but also sociocultural placement. For instance, does the news represent the intelligentsia vs. the working class? What criteria were used in the selection of interviewees? 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 discuss religion in a comparative context, it is useful to share an article about a Muslim woman making a new life for herself in the U.S. Army with Hindus building a temple in Texas. It is equally useful for discussion to read an article from the travel section on visits to "India's sacred caves." This is not only relevant to an interest in Indian 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 a reporter 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

See **BODMAN** p.vi

"Authentic Material": Ads, Pictures, and Krishna Utensils

Rebecca J. Manring, Indiana University



Rebecca J. Manring, Associate Professor of India Studies and Religious Studies at Indiana University and teaches courses on women in South Asian religious traditions, Indian literatures (in translation), and Sanskrit. She was selected for, and participated in, IU's Freshman Learning Project in the summer of 2004. Her first book, *Reconstructing Tradition: Advaita Acarya and Gaudiya Vaisnavism at the Cusp of the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press), appeared in 2005.

TEACHING ANY Asian religion at a large public university carries great responsibilities. Students in their first years of study often have enough trouble adjusting to life on their own and making sense of the adult world. Many, at least here in Indiana, come from small and homogeneous towns, and don't even recognize Catholicism as Christian, let alone have any awareness of other religious traditions. When

they come to a class in Asian religions, their minds are boggled by the end of the first week of reading assignments. What can we do to help these students make sense of religious life in a part of the world that will always be foreign to most of them?

It is very difficult to teach any aspect of culture in isolation. One cannot teach religion without references to history, geography, politics, literature, and even language. But how can we as scholars steeped in our fields begin to give our young students, many of whom have never ventured beyond the next state, a sense of the value and richness of the legacy of so apparently distant and foreign a nation as, for example, India?

Professors spend hours picking out the best reading assignments they can find, and previewing audiovisual materials. There are now many films that were produced specially for classroom use to help give students a sense of the lives and concerns of followers of Asian religious traditions.

I suggest that we would do well to take some advice from our colleagues in modern language pedagogy who work to ensure that their students have as much "authentic material" as possible to work with. "Authentic material" in the foreign language classroom is material generated by and for native speakers, for instance, movies. These media were not created for the pedagogical purposes of university foreign language instructors, but they can be very useful. Such authentic materials can be anything from a restaurant menu to a popular new movie, an article in the newspaper, or a conversation about last night's

ball game. In each case, students have a topic of immediate interest imbedded within a specific locale, style, and linguistic register. This same pedagogy is transferable to the religious studies classroom.

When we introduce students to voices originating directly from the target culture or tradition, we can direct them away from the exoticization of "foreign" religions, and the closed-minded condemnation of the "Other" as pernicious. Luckily, English is widely used in South Asia, and so it is very easy to find materials our students can read. Indian newsmagazines such as *India Today* help to combat this problem. I have found that integrating them into my syllabi has been rewarding for both students and myself.

I do this by presenting students with materials and ideas they will find familiar, but at the same time materials that challenge their expectations and force them out of any of stereotyped thinking. My course reader contains photographs, articles, and even advertisements clipped from relatively current Indian newspapers and magazines. This collection allows me to introduce contemporary material to counter or confirm what primary textual and religious sources seem to say.

On the first day of class, we often brainstorm the notion of religion itself. Students will naturally begin by describing their own religion, which here in Indiana is usually some variety of Protestant Christianity. But it doesn't take much to prod them into broader patterns and more encompassing generalizations ("Do all religions involve deity?"; "Are all priests unmarried?"; etc.).

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 practice, 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 unchallenged.

Once students begin to use critical reading skills, I redirect their attention to contemporary materials that pertain to some of the issues that we are interested in for that class. For example, *India Today* had an article in its January 1994 issue that shatters the stereotype that only male brahmins can serve as priests. The article noted that starting with a small group of conservative Maharashtra housewives, an increasing number 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 **MANRING** p.viii

News, Popular Media, and Orientalist Islam

Rubina Ramji, Cape Breton University



Rubina Ramji is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. Her research focuses on understanding images of Islam in North American mass media and their effect on Muslim identity, especially second-generation Muslim youth in Canada. She is on the editorial board for the *Journal of Religion and Film* and was also a co-chair of the AAR's Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group.

WE LIVE IN AN AGE of instant information access and the ability to draw on this information from a global perspective. Although we expect our students to keep up with the issues of the world, most times they access this information in bits and pieces, without taking into consideration the contexts in which the information is being presented to the viewer or reader. Students entering classrooms need to be taught to think critically about the many images they absorb, especially images of Islam and Muslims.

In the past century, American television and film have reflected the country's relationship to the Orient. They have adopted narratives and visual conventions, as well as the cultural assumptions described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. Through visual media, the Orient has been depicted as mysterious, for instance, by the recurring figure of the veiled woman in films such as *Thief of Damascus* (1952), *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *Ishtar* (1987). Blockbuster films, newspapers, and video documentaries can be effectively used as "texts" in classrooms for the purpose of teaching students how to "read" these visual constructions of the Other's religion and culture.

Students' perspectives of Islam and Muslims are strongly 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 terrorist attacks 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 brutish 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 rented 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 *Reel Bad 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 Arabs were 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 garbs or as eroticized, enchantingly veiled belly dancers. Therefore, when I teach my course "Women in Islam," I am not surprised when my students voice these opinions. Showing these films provides an opportunity to counterbalance them with images, films, and writings from and by Muslim women themselves who talk about being a woman and being a Muslim.

Depending on their source and content, I use news media for a variety of purposes in my classes: to provide reliable information about Islam; to illustrate the different interpretations Muslims have about faith; and to analyze the impact of politics on the way we view the religion. I also use news media to make cultural comparisons that illustrate different national and cultural understandings of one event. The advantage of bringing current events into the classroom is that students realize how easy it is to stereotype without a solid understanding of the religion itself.

In my introductory classes on Islam, I use CNN's "The Hajj: A Journey of Faith" by Riz Khan to demonstrate how the show was televised for an American audience. I compare this with older documentaries on the Hajj. The contrast helps students see and analyze how dialogues, arguments, and ways of thinking develop over time. They also learn to see how they themselves take part in the representations they are witnessing.

For upper-level courses, I have students compare how a particular issue is explained and analyzed by different news media around the world. For instance, last year I used the banning of the hijab in French schools and government offices. Students read news coverage about it from around the world to understand how different newspapers covered the issue, whose voices were heard, and what role it played in the political arena of the country.

Political cartoons also are capable of transmitting scathing and yet witty perspectives about important events taking place in the world. My favorite cartoon shows two amorphous figures wearing *burqas* in Afghanistan. One turns to the other and says, "Let's go to the U.S. It sucks being a transvestite in this country." The controversy over the Danish cartoons in the Islamic world became a teaching tool in the classroom for students to investigate differing viewpoints on the representation of the prophet Muhammad, both secular and religious.

Students are surprised to learn that 65 percent of all the world's news is generated from America. This large percentage means America has the biggest share in controlling the news information that reaches the public. To illustrate this point, students examine the coverage of the Gulf War. They realize how much information was kept off American television

stations, and how this affected the way North Americans saw and justified the war and constructed the "enemy."

They see that news coverage in India voiced such concerns over the pro-war news coverage from Western media outlets. A few Indian journalists argued that technologies of death were being romanticized and sanitized by the use of such terms as "precision bombing," "surgical strikes," and "smart bombs." All these terms dehumanized the "enemy" and desensitized viewers. Even though there were journalists who were appalled by the racism, lies, and demonization that ran through the coverage, their voices were drowned out by the other news reporting.

News analyses of the Bosnian conflict illustrate how American ignorance of cultural history and geography, and dualistic thinking of good versus bad and us against them, played a significant role in the way groups within the Balkans were identified and discussed. Croats were consistently characterized as Catholic, Westernized, technologically advanced and sophisticated, and practicing Western-style democracy. Serbs, on the other hand, were routinely identified as Eastern Orthodox, Byzantine, and primitive remnants of the Ottoman empire.

Orientalist understanding of Islam from an American cultural perspective is a complex 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 oil-wealthy 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. RSN

BODMAN, from p.v

experts. They seek experts on short notice, whomever someone says is an expert — which is why it is vitally important that religion scholars provide reporters with good information and authoritative commentary.

The young journalist argued that it was more important to have Muslims — and by extension Buddhists, Hindus, Africans, people of different religions and cultures — in the newsroom to offer insider perspectives. The panelist pleaded for more Muslims to reject the temptation to become yet another Muslim engineer or doctor (the most common professions of Muslims in the United States after "student"), and get into a host of professions that shape public perspectives on Islam. Using the news in class is a way of encouraging students to become shapers of the news, rather than complainers about its bias.

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?

How we generate news

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 after they leave a message on our answering 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 me 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 wide and diverse 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 write a good letter to the editor, one 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 on a regular basis 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 religion. RSN

Teaching Religion, Media, and Culture in Haifa

Michele Rosenthal, University of Haifa



Michele Rosenthal is a lecturer at the Department of Communication in the University of Haifa. She is the author of *American Protestants and TV in the 1950s: Responses to a New Medium* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Her current research focuses on religion, media, and culture in Israel.

SINCE ARRIVING in Haifa almost a decade ago, I have taught a course titled "Religion, Media and Culture." Originally, the course centered around American Protestantism — an exotic Other for the average Israeli student who often knows little about Christianity in general, let alone Protestantism in all its rich variations. Over the years my syllabus has become more and more Israeli-centric, and not just as a result of my increasing acclimatization. Rather, throughout the 1990s the Israeli media underwent a series of structural and technological changes (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Peri, 2004).

From a country in which the newspaper reigned supreme, and government-sponsored radio and television (one channel) ruled the airwaves, Israel is now a multi-channelled, increasingly networked society (Koren-Dinur, 2006). The introduction of commercial, cable, and satellite television; the growth of community-based, pirate, and Internet-based radio stations; and the relatively rapid adoption of the Internet by the Jewish public have all contributed to these developments. While Israeli television and radio were once the monopoly of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, the contemporary media landscape is far more diverse, far more segmented, and far more "global" in nature (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Katz and Haas, 2001).

Electronic media is no longer produced or controlled with the aim of creating collective solidarity (Katz and Haas, 2001), but rather is reflective of a market-segmented population with shows, channels, and Web sites directed to particular markets rather than the amorphous Israeli collective. In this changed and changing context, those segments of the population that define themselves primarily in religious terms are increasingly creating and consuming their own media — audio cassettes, CDs, Web sites, alternative news on the radio and through webcasts, synagogue pamphlets, etc.

At the same time, the news has decreased in importance for my students. While their parents and grandparents may still listen to the news on the radio several times a day, read the newspaper, and watch the official government Channel One news at 9 PM (see www.iba.org.il), my students are more

likely to see news snippets on Web sites as they scroll down the corner of the screen (such as www.walla.co.il) in between browsing on chat sites, writing e-mail, or other more mundane entertainment. Where they once would have all cited the Channel One news television program as their primary source of information, now they are just as likely to note CNN or BBC or Al Jazeera, or one of the several Russian news programs.

Subsequently, my course has become increasingly devoted to understanding the ways in which religion is constructed in and through the media in different contexts and communities (Hoover, 2006). Students clip stories and editorials, tape newscasts, and download video to bring to class and analyze. Together we discuss how the mainstream (secular) media frames stories about religion and religious personas across the spectrum (see, for example, Helman and Levy 2001). Likewise, we look at stories written in the religious press (*Hamodiya*, *Yated Ne'eman*, *HaTzofe*, *Arutz 7*) to see how alternative, competing narratives are constructed.

For instance, the withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 offers an important example of this process. While in the past Israelis would have had to suffice with the government-sponsored news program which, as the hegemonic voice, emphasized the correct conduct 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.israelnationalnews.com).

In both cases, viewers participated in a formative media event — but the interpretative frameworks differed so drastically that the cleavages in Israeli society were only emphasized as a result (on media events, see Dayan and Katz, 1992; 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 to accept the challenge of the other. In effect, they provide a sanctuary for everyday life, a bounded space of safety and identity within and around it. But sanctuaries insulate and isolate as well as protect" (Silverstone, 2002: 777). Nonetheless, through this comparative process, 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 is also a central theme in the course. As Israeli culture becomes more media saturated, some religious leaders have responded with harsh condemnations of unregulated uses of new technologies (i.e., cell phones or Internet) by their communities. Beginning with the example of the Amish and their negotiations with the telephone (Umble, 1992), my students reexamine claims of technological deter-

minism 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 (Couldry, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Students have explored how traditional life-cycle events are being reconstituted and reshaped as they are increasingly mediated. For instance, Internet matchmaking for communities which once relied on the personal mediator 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 (Hijazi and Ribak, 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; Vinitzky-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 commercials on Saudi-sponsored television stations, the virtual Bahai 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.

Bibliography

- Caspi, D., and Y. Limor. *In/Outsiders: Mass Media in Israel*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1999.
- Caplan, K. "God's Voice: Audiotaped Sermons in Israeli Haredi Society," *Modern Judaism* 17 (1997): 253–279.
- Cohen, J. "Politics, Alienation and the Consolidation of Group Identity: The Case of Synagogue Pamphlets," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3 (2000): 247–275.
- Couldry, N. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Dayan, D., and Katz, E. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Grimes, R. L. "Ritual and the Media." In *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*, edited by S. Hoover and Lynn S. Clark. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Helman, S., and A. Levy. "Shas in the Israeli Newspapers." In *Shas: The Israeli Challenge*, edited by Yoav Peled. Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronoth, 2001 (Hebrew).
- Hoover, S. *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Katz, E., and H. Haas. "Twenty Years of Television in Israel: Are There Long-Term Effects on Values and Cultural Practices." In *Language and Communication in Israel*, edited by H. Herzog and E. Ben Rafael. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001.
- Koren-Dinur, R. "TIM Survey: Number of Internet Surfers in Israel continues to grow — to 3.9 million." *The Marker* November 28, 2006. Downloaded from www.themarker.com/tmcl/article.jhtml?ElementId=rkd20061128_694 (Hebrew).
- "Increase by 14% in the number of internet surfers to 2.5 million people." *The Marker* December 22, 2003.
- Oudshoorn N., and T. Pinch, eds. *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.
- Peri, Y. "The Media and Collective Memory of Yitzhak Rabin's Remembrance." *Journal of Communication* 49 (Summer 1999): 107–124.
- Peri, Y. *Telepopulism: Media and Politics in Israel*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Rothenbuhler, E. *Ritual Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998.
- Silverstone, R. "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life." *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 761–780.
- Umble, D. Z. "The Amish and the Telephone: Resistance and Reconstruction." In *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, edited by Roger Silverstone. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, V. "Commemorating Narratives of Violence: The Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day in Israeli Schools." *Qualitative Sociology* 24, no. 2 (2001): 245–268.
- Yadgar, Y. "A Disintegrating Ritual: The Reading of the Deri Verdict as a Media Event of Degradation." *Critical Studies in Media* 20, no. 2 (June 2003): 204–223. 

Reporting on Religion: A Journalist's View

Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service



Adelle M. Banks is senior correspondent at Religion News Service, a Washington-based wire service that covers religion and ethics. She has worked at the Orlando Sentinel, the Providence Journal and upstate New York newspapers in Syracuse and Binghamton. She was a third-place winner in the Religion Newswriter Association's Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year contest in 1997 and was a finalist in the same contest in 2004.

RELIGION JOURNALISTS and religion scholars have a common interest. Both research and write; both find aspects of religion fascinating or worthy of notice; and both share what is learned with others — through the printed page, via airwaves, or in the classroom.

As a religion reporter, I have come to rely on and respect the work of researchers. They are the experts I seek out to verify that I'm on the right track when I think I've spotted a trend. Sometimes they add analysis to my stories that others I've interviewed did not provide.

A recent example: I wrote a story in October 2006 timed to the 50th anniversaries of women's ordination in the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Though I spoke to ordained women, their advocates, and critics, it was the observation of Adair Lummis, Hartford Seminary expert on women clergy, that particularly helped shape my story.

She pointed out that in some of the other denominations — those more conservative than the mainline ones with the anniversaries — women had been ordained for longer but the percentage of female ordination was decreasing.

"You have more women having these milestone celebrations, but remember that in some denominations, like the spirit-centered, evangelical denominations, there were more women ordained 50 years ago than there are now," she said.

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. For example, 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'm fortunate if I get the so-called two sides of a story by deadline. But when 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 academicians help reporters discover them.

If a journalist contacts you, consider the difference your particular expertise may make in what the readers eventually digest from that story. It may be that you only have a few 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 areas 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 be, but a reporter often can't wait 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 how 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. "If he 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 was able to 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.

"If you go back historically, the leaders of denominations have been denouncing racism and separation for at least 100 years and the people in the pews have 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 academicians open the paper or hear a report and see a 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 meant 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 some facts until they ask for them, or are told them by people in the know.

If you read or hear a story that could have benefited from your expertise, consider e-mailing or calling the reporter or editor to say that you'd be open to an interview on its topic — 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 connection, with a reporter verifying facts and the professor gaining 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. RSN

Scholars: For tips on interacting with reporters, visit Religionsource, the AAR's premier referral service for journalists. Go to www.religionsource.org and click on "Scholars Only."

MANRING, from p.v

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 supplement 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 illustrate how the form of divine presence is first invoked and later released, and also shows how contemporary concerns about the health of the waterways has led to an adaptation in the way these festivals culminate, giving us yet another example of religion as a living, changing entity.

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 during Kali Puja in Kolkata helps raise questions about the figures of the goddess which are anything but fixed, and demonstrates that religious stories can adapt to take 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 and magazines during major 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 in their course reader. What does it mean to be able to buy Krishna kitchen utensils? Can we buy, for example, something like Mother Mary bread or Jesus brand dishwashing soap here in the United States? Why does Broline, a company that manufactures

antiseptic skin cream, take out half- and full-page newspaper advertisements during the Indian holiday season? The Broline ads sell nothing, but tell the story of Durga Puja or Diwali, and bear a rather sanitized depiction of a relevant demon. The name of the company appears only at the end of the ad, "Bijoya Greetings from Broline, part of Bengal's life and times."

One of my favorite examples of how religion is intertwined with culture is an article from the *Hindustan Times* of Kolkata published on March 13, 2004, just before India's cricket match with Pakistan. It features a large photo of priests worshipping at Kalighat Temple to ensure that "Goddess Kali will help them win against their arch rivals." Surrounded by fans holding signs wishing the team victory, the priests solemnly carry out their rituals. The reporter tells us, "Every cricket match is important but one against Pakistan calls for special prayers." The ordinariness of the fans with their posters makes a striking juxtaposition with the bare-chested, dhoti-clad priests seated on the ground with their ritual implements.

Glossy magazines like *India Perspectives* and the *India Magazine* are also fun to use with stu-

dents. I recently found a grocery bag filled with back issues of both magazines. Among other treasures was a 1987 article with beautiful photographs by Andreas Maleta called "The Holy Cow." One of the most consistent questions we all get from students of Hinduism is some variation on why is the cow sacred. Maleta's article was not a scholarly piece, but it answers that question by tracing the role of cattle from early Indo-European civilizations into modern India. This is the sort of accessible writing that gives students an insider's perspective on a belief that was at first glance simply incomprehensible.

I like to de-center religion to show that it is often not a separate category from people's everyday lives. As I read newspapers and magazines during my travels, I diligently search for pieces depicting ordinary people engaged in their own everyday religious lives. If those people happen to be young adults of about the same age as our undergraduates, so much the better. RSN