



The American Editor[®]

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS

JANUARY—FEBRUARY 2007

Covering religion



Online Journalism
What are editors
supposed to be doing?
Page 12

Cover

4 **Covering religion**

What if God were one of our readers
By Debra Mason and David Gibson

8 **Tools and training**

9 **Trends to watch in 2007**
By Diane Connolly

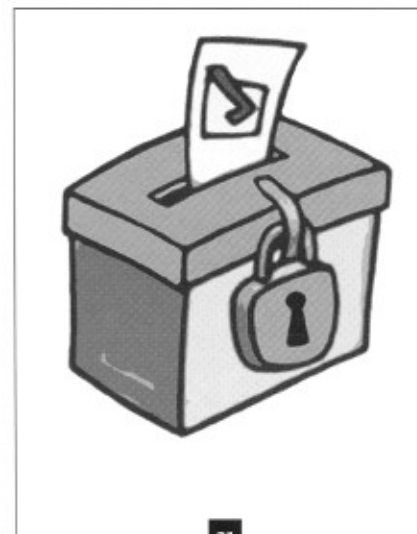
10 **Journalism law**
A mixed day for free speech
By Marcus Rutherford

12 **Online journalism**
What are editors supposed to be doing?
By Ellen Foley and Mike Levine

13 **Making journalism hyperlocal**
By Jeff Jarvis

14 **Creating a constructive culture**
By Robert Zaltsberg

21 **ASNE Board candidates**
A look at candidates for ASNE Board seats



Departments

Small newspapers 19
The Mini Cooper of journalism
By Don Nelson

Online journalism 20
The opportunity of multimedia reporting
By Michael D. Reszler

ASNE news 30
A calendar of events

Photography in focus 32
Photographing the invisible
By Brian Peterson

What if God were one of our readers?

A Divine readership survey

BY DEBRA MASON AND DAVID GIBSON

What would the Almighty — usually “God” on first reference — think of religion coverage in today’s newspapers? It’s a good question, and one that is easily answered. Just ask Him. Or Her.

Religion Newswriters Executive Director Debra Mason found the Prime Mover at a diner recently, a copy of the local paper in one hand and cup of coffee in the other. ...

RNA: First off, how do you prefer to be characterized — by the masculine or feminine pronoun?

GOD: I generally let the copy desk figure that one out. They always

know best.

RNA: Do I gather from your tone that you don’t think newspapers are covering you very well?

GOD: I would critique the coverage if I could find it. Luckily, the surveys have some answers. For example, fewer than 10 percent of U.S. dailies include some type of link on their online home page for religion. And many of those links only connect to directories of houses of worship — most of which are incomplete. On the

print side, content audits show religion news is less than 2 percent of the news covered. Of course, I say it’s all how you define “religion.” I mean, I am everywhere papers have beats —

sports, movies, business, health and science, you name it. Not just politics, although I get dragged in there a lot. Better politics than this whole war-making enterprise. Everybody says the world’s violence is fueled by religion. So why aren’t newspapers more keen to explain the topic?

RNA: Well, religion is controversial. We might get letters. ...

GOD: And controversy is suddenly a bad thing for



Mason is executive director of Religion Newswriters Association.

Religion Quiz

As an editor, how literate are you in religion? Do you know:

1. What is the largest U.S. religious denomination?
2. What percent of the U.S. population is Jewish?
3. How many dollars do Americans donate each year to religious causes?
4. What is the largest predominantly black U.S. denomination?
5. What percent of the world's Muslims are of Arab descent?
6. What is the world's largest religion?

Answers:

1. Nearly one-fourth of U.S. citizens say they are Roman Catholic, with Hispanics resulting in most of the church's recent growth. Protestants are more than half the population, with the Southern Baptist Convention the largest Protestant group, at about 16 million members.
2. The number of Jews (and Muslims) has become politicized, but social scientists say about 2 percent of U.S. citizens are Jewish.
3. Americans gave \$260 billion to nonprofits last year. Of that, more than one-third went to religious organizations. It's the largest single category of nonprofit donations.
4. Social scientists say the largest black denomination is the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., with more than 3.5 million members.
5. About 20 percent of the world's Muslims are of Arab decent. Most of the world's Muslims live in Africa or South Asia.
6. The world's largest religion is Christianity, with 2.1 billion people or 33 percent of the world's population. Muslims are the second largest, with 1.3 billion members or 22 percent of the population.

Sources:

<http://www.thearda.com>,
adherents.com and givingusa.org.

papers? It's weird. I think editors are afraid of me. Maybe it's all the wrath and dramatics in the Bible. Maybe they don't want to offend readers. That's silly. The bottom line — and you are a bottom line business, as we read every day — is that your client base wants this coverage, and they don't think papers are delivering. (Sorry, couldn't resist the pun.)

RNA: How so?

GOD: Listen, the Readership Institute showed that readers are incredibly dissatisfied with religion news — only pop music coverage scored worse. Religion is the Rodney Dangerfield of beats. (I'm glad he's up here now — I need help with my shtick.) Sometimes the beat gets slotted newside, sometimes in features. Then the news reporter has to write a feature or the feature writer has to do overnight coverage.

Either way, the beat doesn't get treated like other major topics, such as sports, business, science, etc. I talk to religion writers all the time — well, they talk, I listen — who are all alone in the newsroom covering the world's biggest beat. Worst of all, newsrooms hardly ever have a religion editor, an expert who oversees coverage and breaks in a newbie. So when a veteran reporter moves on (and no beat needs experience more than this one, and I speak from long experience) it's like abandoning Moses in the bullrushes. You pray the new religion reporter is a quick learner with a thick skin.

RNA: So you think religion can boost a paper's P&L statement?

GOD: Are you kidding? Newspapers must be the only industry in history that doesn't know how to make money off me. Forget the televangelists. All the newsweeklies know that when they put religion on their covers they sell more magazines. Religion-themed programming scores huge in the Nielsens. Religion stories are often among the most e-mailed stories on a paper's site. Ask the newsroom mailroom who gets the most mail. It's always the religion writer. Same with letters to the editor.

Or take Hollywood ... please. (Sorry. Henny Youngman is up here, too.) But seriously, you have a flood of movies with religious angles to them. You think topics like theology and religious history are non-starters? You ever hear of a little novel called "The Da Vinci Code"? Religious books and kitsch is a multi-billion dollar biz. More people donate money to religious causes than any other — nearly \$90 billion. Surveys show more people experience the arts through a house of worship than any other place.

Yet newspapers have turned off huge audiences by not taking religion seriously. At least a quarter to 40 percent of the U.S. population is evangelical, but studies show they have largely tuned out of mainstream media news coverage because they believe it is biased against them.

Also, religion stories are tailor-made for the visuals and graphics and all that digital bells and whistles stuff you modern folk like to do for the emerging — what is it again — "multimedia platform"? I'm still fine advertising on stone tablets, but that's me, er, Me.

OK, so advertisers don't like religion sections. They're a tough sell. But if you don't keep your readers, you won't have any advertisers.

From where I sit, there's a huge disconnect here between what newspapers are doing and what the rest of the world does with its time and money. But I'm rambling. I need an editor.

RNA: What bugs you most about religion coverage when newspapers do cover religion?

GOD: Where do I start? First, I never understand why reporters are always quoting folks who have set themselves up as my personal flacks. As if they were channeling me. I'm not that easy to nail down.

I actually think the folks in the pews have a better take on what I do for a living. Religion stories are the perfect way to explore the lives of your readers, without repeating the standard answers you hear from a talking head on cable news. Everybody is talking about how newspapers need to create communities

among their readers. Religious groups have been doing this since creation. I should know.

RNA: Why do you think journalists have a hard time reporting on religion?

GOD: Having a single religion reporter has been compared to having a lone writer cover all the sports. There are more religions than ever in the United States, and they need able veterans to be able to know enough about them to ask the right questions. What I'm saying is the most compelling and complex beat is often the first on the budget chopping block.

Although education, city hall, court and political beat reporters have public documents and open meetings to aid them in their jobs, nearly everything on the religion beat is private and closed. That makes getting those stories tougher and more time consuming for religion beat specialists.

Really, though, every journalist should know something about religion — or at least where to find help when writing about it. Plenty of training exists now, as well as online resources.

RNA: Could the problem be that journalists are biased against religion?

GOD: Ah, never question the conventional wisdom, huh? The fact is, newsrooms are full of churchgoing folk who engage in their faith deeply, perhaps more deeply than most, believe me. Surveys show that among religion reporters, 85 percent say religion is very important to them.

On the other hand, the largest study of journalists updated last year shows that although most journalists have some faith affiliation, about one-fourth report no religious preference — twice the percentage of the general population. So, maybe editors need to work harder to make sure religious perspectives are heard. Or the nonreligious. Look at all those best-sellers by atheists! That's a great religion story, even if it turns Me off. ...

Bottom line: I think newspapers don't understand religion, and we always fear what we don't understand.

RNA: So does anyone do cutting-edge religion coverage?

GOD: Sure. The Dallas Morning News has been winning awards for years. They have a Web site of the week, a popular staff-written blog and some of the best religion writers in the business. And it's easily found as a sub-link of the "news" section on their homepage. Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive recently launched "On Faith," a global online chat hosted by the Post's Sally Quinn. The Salt Lake Tribune and Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Little Rock, also take religion seriously, although it's harder to find online. For mid-sized papers, The Grand Rapids (Mich.) Press is great.

And you really ought to check out SacYouth.com, which is an unusual partnership between an alternative newspaper and the local religious community. Sacramento's News & Review President and CEO, Jeff von Kaenel, visited 72 worship services and met with religious leaders. They found a need for a site linking youth to service opportunities and activities. And bingo! This low budget site is the first of its kind in the nation involving a partnership with a newspaper — albeit an alternative one — and religious organizations.

Of course, in purely digital form there is Beliefnet.com. It's all religion, all the time, and includes much more than news stories. But it is a great place to get ideas for interactive and multimedia projects. It doubles as a reliable resource on religion.

I'd also give kudos to the Brits. Gotta say, for a supposedly secularized country, the BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/> has always taken religion seriously. Their content includes message boards, links to religious programming and news.

RNA: Finally, we have to ask the question that journalists everywhere are worried about: What is the future of daily newspapers?

GOD: God help you. Can we go on background? ♦

David Gibson is author of "The Rule of Benedict," about Pope Benedict XVI.

Trouble Spots

STYLEBOOK AND NOMENCLATURE

Many religious terms are not in the AP Stylebook or guidance is limited. Many names of religious groups are similar. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Presbyterian Church of America have vastly different beliefs. The RNA stylebook seeks to remedy this problem.

NUMBERS

Many faiths do not accurately track membership, and denominations all define "membership" differently. Always be cautious of numbers and never use one faith's estimate of another groups' numbers.

QUOTING SCRIPTURE

People quote different versions of the Bible or other scriptures. Be sure you are verifying the citation with the correct translation.

PUBLIC RECORDS

Unlike many other beats, religious congregations are not required to file IRS 990s or other government reports. Real estate and litigation-related court documents are among the few public records available on churches and congregations. Good religion reporting is time consuming because journalists need to build extensive source lists.

Adapted from "Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism's Best Beat" available from Religion Newswriters at RNA.org.

Tools and training

RELIGION | NEWSWRITERS provides resources to help journalists write about religion with accuracy, balance and insight. It offers national, regional and customized newsroom training through the Associated Press Managing Editor's NewsTrain, the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association and elsewhere. Online courses are coming soon. Visit its reference library, primer on religion reporting and religion blog aggregator at <http://www.RNA.org>.

ReligionLink

More than 5,000 journalists receive this free weekly reporting resource, which includes tips on significant stories in religion plus links to national and regional sources. Sign up at <http://www.ReligionLink.org>.

Religion Stylebook & Glossary

ReligionStylebook.org — This new stylebook is a free service of **RELIGION | NEWSWRITERS**.

University of Missouri School of Journalism

The school's Center for Religion, the Professions & the Public is the nation's only center offering newspapers audience/market research services for religion news, content audits of religion news, and college-level curriculum development in religion and journalism. <http://www.rpp.Missouri.edu>. Contact Amy White, 573-882-2770.

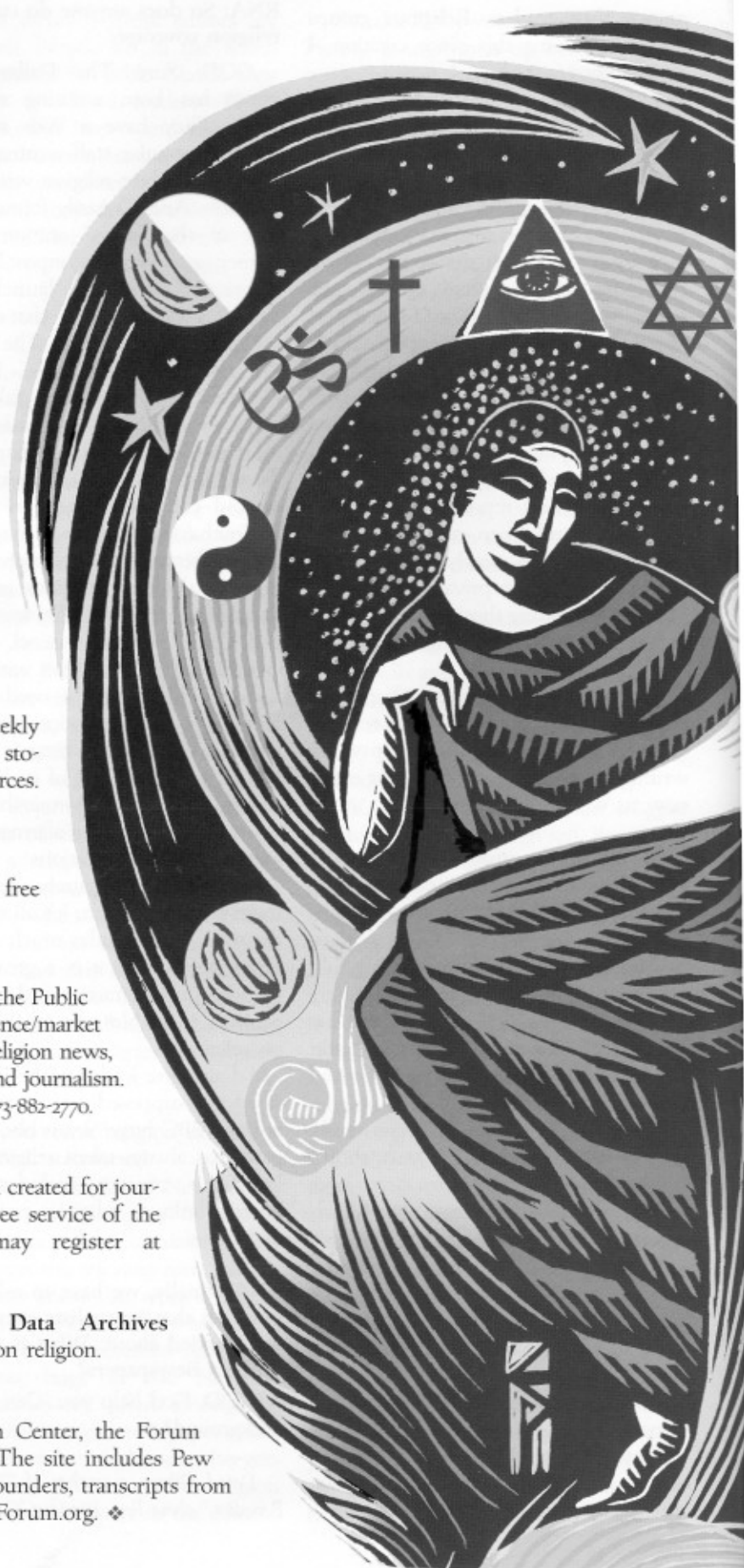
ReligionSource

A database of more than 5,000 scholars on religion created for journalists and searchable by name, topic or state. A free service of the American Academy of Religion. Journalists may register at <http://www.religionsource.org>.

Adherents.com and **American Religious Data Archives (TheARDA.com)** These sites specialize in statistics on religion.

The Pew Forum

Now under the umbrella of The Pew Research Center, the Forum focuses on national public policy and legal issues. The site includes Pew Research Center surveys on religion, lengthy backgrounders, transcripts from events and issues summaries. Visit <http://www.PewForum.org>. ♦



Trends to watch in 2007

BY DIANE CONNOLLY

Religion and ethics are at the heart of most of the country's deepest debates:

Right and wrong. Corruption and hypocrisy were at the top of voters' hit lists this fall. Next year, watch for renewed attention to the ethics of everything — what's right, and what's wrong, and what to do about it. That extends from politics and business to cheating in schools.

Rich and poor. The rich have gotten richer in America, the poor have gotten poorer, and much of the middle class is struggling. One in six children in America is hungry. A mother working 50 hours a week at minimum wage can't keep her family out of poverty. Hurricane Katrina put homelessness in the national spotlight. Many people lack health insurance. Surveys show that most Americans think the government should do more to help poor people. Watch for a new kind of "family values" to fuel discussion over specific public policies — national, state and local — aimed at the most vulnerable in society.

War and peace. The Iraq war has caused many people to speak out in ways they never have before — for it, against it, at rallies, as conscientious objectors, in the media. Watch for ways people's faith and ethics inspires action as the country confronts the murky questions over how to proceed.

Reading, writing and religion. Across the country, debate is moving from whether to teach about religion in public schools to how. The Bible is now a textbook in Georgia. More schools are offering

classes on world religions or specific religions. Science, history and health textbooks have become battlegrounds for different points of view.

End of life. As they age, baby boomers are reshaping attitudes about death, just as they have boldly reshaped every other life passage they've encountered. Developing trends in nursing home care, end-of-life ethics, euthanasia debates, and funerals will all reflect the values and religious beliefs of this group.

Abortion. 2007 will likely be a critical year in the clash over abortion rights. The U.S. Supreme Court, Congress and state legislatures are all considering restrictions on abortion. The religious views of justices, legislators and voters are key to the outcome.

Going green. Concerns about global warming and clean air and water have reached critical mass. People of all different faiths and large religious alliances are mobilizing with others to press for change on local, national and global levels.

Gay rights. The tug-of-war over same-sex marriage has resulted in a confusing series of court rulings and reversals, state votes, corporate benefits policies, adoption rules and more. Firmly held religious beliefs shape many people's views. Look for small stories about individuals that illuminate the larger debate.

We are the world. Americans are increasingly engaging in efforts to address world crises, such as genocide in Darfur, AIDS and poverty in Africa, the Israel-Palestinian conflict and international sex trafficking. Watch for ways ordinary people are connecting to international issues. ♦



Connolly is editor of ReligionLink (<http://www.ReligionLink.org>), a free, weekly Internet news resource.