Bridging the Gap
Religion and the News Media

by John Dart and Jimmy Allen
Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media
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When this study was first published in 1993, religious leaders were expressing dissatisfaction with news coverage of religion, and the complaints were grabbing the attention of media professionals like never before. From churches to temples, conservatives and liberals alike spoke of shoddy, simplistic reporting and anti-religious bias. They complained of the widespread underplaying — even downright avoidance — of religious influences in news events.

The most telling question asked was this: Why does an exceptionally religious country like the United States see so few of its religious perspectives and events conveyed adequately in the news?

We think our study answered parts of that riddle. We found, in general, that rather than exhibiting an overt bias or disinterest in religion stories, most news professionals were simply reluctant to go much beyond familiar-formula stories on religious celebrities, sectarian tragedies, sexual scandals and offbeat claims of supernatural activity. We determined that one primary obstacle to good religion reporting was the lack of expertise and experience in handling this complicated topic in a news framework.

We detected a lack of confidence, even fear, among news executives reluctant to commit serious resources to covering such a subtle, sensitive subject. Many journalists seemed to feel that covering the religious world wasn’t worth the trouble, given religion’s arcane terminology, endless numbers of sects and denominations, claims and myths nearly impossible to handle objectively, and touchy believers ready to pounce en masse on errors committed by print and broadcast journalists.

**A NEW CLIMATE FOR RELIGION**

Within the past seven years, a climate for change has developed around religious issues in American society and journalism.

First, religion and spirituality (a term many people find easier to use) have emerged as acceptable talking points in our predominantly secular public life. Holding religious beliefs and speaking of moral values no longer immediately stereotype one as a religious ideologue. Bestseller lists indicate that religion
in various forms has an allure defying easy explanation.

Second, by expanding the scope of religion news to include “ethics” and “values,” the news business has suggested to previously unimpressed readers and viewers that journalistic efforts now go beyond the customary reporting on organized religion.

Third, thanks to an improved economy, the press has been able to budget more money for religion coverage. Foundations have had the resources to fund innovative ventures and programs.

The results have been heartening — to a point.

- Many newspapers are now giving more space to religion news, not only in newly prominent sections each week but also on Page One. The growing number of religion writers and editors reflects that trend. The 1999-2000 First Amendment Center canvass of 300 newspapers, mostly with small- to mid-sized circulations, illustrates the depth of nationwide interest.

   Large metropolitan papers stepped up coverage, too. Whereas one or two full-time religion writers was the maximum on large papers in the winter of 1992-93, several papers such as The Dallas Morning News and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution now have at least three religion reporters. The Los Angeles Times by 1999 had five full-time specialists covering religion.

   A 1996 telephone poll of 227 religion news specialists found most (64%) saying that religion coverage had increased over the last five years at their news organization. Only 9% said it had declined, and 27% said it had stayed about the same.

   The response from newspapers that had researched reader interest in religion coverage was almost evenly split between those papers whose readers wanted about the same amount of coverage as they already were receiving (41) and those who wanted more (49). Only one newspaper reported that readers wanted less coverage.

   — Jimmy R. Allen

'Snapshot' shows gap closing

A multi-page mail survey on religion coverage, sent by the First Amendment Center in August 1999 to editors of 1,436 daily newspapers, confirms anecdotal observations that the gap between religion and the news media is closing.

Responses came from approximately 21% of all newspapers in the U.S., including nearly one half of newspapers of 100,000 circulation and greater. While not a scientific poll, the survey does provide a snapshot of religion coverage in the U.S. and reflects changes since the groundbreaking 1993 report Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media.

Since publication of the original report, at least nine of these newspapers have for the first time assigned a full-time editor to religion coverage, and 30 have assigned new part-time editors. The number of full-time religion reporters among these papers has increased from 57 to 92, with the number of part-time religion reporters increasing from 95 to 163.

Coverage of religion stories also has increased. Newspapers reporting one-to-10 religion stories a week increased from 188 to 248, and those reporting more than 10 stories a week increased from 14 to 31. The number reporting no religion stories in an average week declined from 74 to 14. While 190 newspapers say their coverage of religion has increased during this period and 83 remain about the same, only four say their coverage has “decreased somewhat.”

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earlier, according to research by the *American Journalism Review*. One note of encouragement was that religion news had received an average 100% increase in space by 1998-99.

- Television, starting nearly from scratch, has seen two significant developments in the past seven years: ABC-TV hired a full-time religion reporter in early 1994, and PBS launched “Religions & Ethics NewsWeekly” in the fall of 1997. Some local stations have had a reporter covering religion part-time.

  While TV budgetary constraints are admittedly a constant barrier to special-subject reporting, it has been nonetheless disappointing that the excellent journalistic examples set by ABC and PBS have not convinced more broadcast and cable executives to find their own suitable television formats for religion stories. Based on persistent anecdotal evidence, we fear that many news producers at major East Coast outlets resist allowing religious views on the television screen — even when religious motives and actions are at the core of a news event — because they 1) disagree strongly with certain social/moral stances of religious bodies, or 2) believe that viewers would cringe if presented with anything more than superficial treatment of religion in the news.

- Foundations, educational institutions and professional organizations have lent new support toward fostering more knowledgeable news coverage of religion, and signs are that additional support is to come. Lilly Endowment provided all the initial, multi-million-dollar funding for “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly,” and Lilly and others, notably Pew Charitable Trusts and the First Amendment Center, have demonstrated interest in furthering the continuing education of journalists interested in religion news.

  A variety of magazine articles, academic conferences and panel discussions, and special studies on religion in the news have kept the subject alive and timely for the last seven years. The Religion Newswriters Association has hired a part-time executive director for the first time in its long history. The American Academy of Religion has encouraged more and more religion scholars to make themselves and their analysis of events available to the news media.

**A benchmark for measuring progress**

This brief overview is intended to summarize developments since the First Amendment Center first published *Bridging the Gap* in 1993. The report’s second edition has been edited only to improve clarity, catch a few errors of fact and eliminate some dated references. It provides a benchmark for measuring progress by describing the situation that existed in the early 1990s. Moreover, many of the reasons cited for misunderstandings between organized religion and the news media, are unlikely to disappear.

  Of course, a certain degree of tension between journalists and religionists ought to exist, even after controversial developments are reported fully, fairly and accurately. The tension between news people who are working on deadline and people of faith who hold high expectations for perceptive reporting is healthy. The news media and religion — two of the nation’s primary beneficiaries of First Amendment freedoms — should continue to hold each other accountable.

  While our recommendations in 1993 called for greater cooperation by faith groups with news
organizations, the burden for visible change fell primarily on print news media to strengthen the scope and depth of their coverage and on broadcasters to take their first steps in that direction.

Data are lacking to tell us whether public dissatisfaction with religion news coverage has diminished in the last seven years. But we agree with another observer, Mark Silk, who wrote in 1998 that over the last few years “criticism has tailed off — probably because there’s more religion in the news media that at any time in recent memory.”

**Converging critiques**

The original publication of *Bridging the Gap* prompted numerous news stories for months after the report’s release in September 1993. Copies of the study were eventually distributed free to more than 25,000 people. The report’s critique of journalism’s failings and religion’s animosity coincided with conclusions cited in two journalism magazines appearing at about the same time:

- The Summer 1993 issue of *Nieman Reports*, the magazine produced by Harvard’s Nieman Foundation, featured 15 articles by scholars and practicing journalists under the title “God in the Newsroom.” Contributors included religion specialists Peter Steinfels, Gustav Niebuhr and Adelle Banks. That edition prompted more back-issue requests than any previous issue in the quarterly’s existence.
- The July/August 1993 cover story in *The Quill*, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, featured religion coverage. It asked: “Have Our Biases Fatally Wounded Our Coverage?” Yes, wrote author Terry Mattingly, then religion columnist for Scripps-Howard newspapers. He cited insufficient time and resources given to religion coverage, journalists’ ignorance of religion, their different worldviews, and examples of anti-religious prejudice.

Also in 1993, actress Shirley MacLaine chided the April convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors for what she called superficial reporting on faith. She suggested to editors that instead of limiting analyses of events to social, economic and cultural influences, they should also examine more of the “spiritual factors … as actually being the driving force behind so much human behavior.”

Journalists who were already convinced that religion was not getting its due in the news were emboldened seven years ago by this coincidental series of challenges.

**Television’s first initiatives**

In early 1994, ABC anchorman Peter Jennings, who said he had wanted a full-time religion reporter for years, hired Peggy Wehmeyer of Dallas to be just that. We had described Wehmeyer in *Bridging the Gap* as a 1980s pioneer in covering religion for local television, and her unprecedented hiring by the ABC network prompted numerous news stories. Despite the fact that Jennings speaks publicly about the need to report religious elements present in many news stories, however, ABC’s example has not been followed by other networks.

About the same time as Wehmeyer’s hiring, a handful of other local television reporters who covered religion at least half the time began to make themselves known in Salt Lake City, Tulsa and Huntsville, Ala., among other cities. In an unusual print-broadcast arrangement, *Tampa Tribune* religion writer Michelle Bearden began to provide
weekly on-camera religion news reports to the Tampa NBC affiliate.

Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment, known for its generous support of institutional religion, began increasing its backing of media efforts in 1993. With ongoing Lilly support, National Public Radio reporter Lynn Neary began covering the religious scene on that extensive network in the winter of 1993-94 and continues to do so.

Lilly was not done. Beginning in 1997, the foundation, whose religion division is headed by Craig Dykstra, was committing millions ($21 million by 1999) to “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly,” the half-hour PBS television program anchored by ex-NBC newsman Robert Abernethy. Begun under the auspices of New York City’s WNET, the program is now carried by about 225 PBS stations in various time slots.

(The climate at PBS toward quality religion programming changed for the better around 1995. Whereas PBS had been resistant to most religion programs at the time of the 1993 Bridging the Gap study, a turnaround was marked by the introduction of several well-conceived religion specials, including some hosted by television veteran Bill Moyers.)

After its first year and a half of programs, “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly” received generally good marks for its mix of hard-news items, special features and in-studio interviews. Andrew Walsh, writing in 1999 in the quarterly journal Religion in the News, judged that the PBS program was doing “a pretty good job,” though better in its handling of religion than of ethical issues.

“The show stands or falls on Abernethy, whose style is avuncular and who radiates a blend of curiosity, knowledgeable and professional skepticism,” Walsh wrote. “Not a bad formula for religion reporting.”

Viewers in the western two-thirds of the United States, however, recognized a predominant use of expert sources and story examples from eastern states, especially in states closest to the program’s Washington studios. That regional bias was overcome with an increase of funds during the program’s third season.

In January 1999 the 24-hour Cable News Network, having struggled with how to report on religion and other specialized subjects, announced that CNN would regularly pursue feature reporting in 10 significant areas, including “religion and spirituality.” Stories and news talk segments on religion were part of CNN’s millennium coverage, and the network has encouraged correspondents in Jerusalem, New Delhi and elsewhere to do non-political reporting on major religions, according to network CEO Tom Johnson.

“For the third year in a row, CNN this year (2000) is devoting a week to a level-headed examination of Islam,” said Johnson, referring to the unprecedented live and taped reports from Mecca during the Hajj. Granting that the network’s reporting on religion “is not all it should be,” Johnson added that CNN “will re-visit the idea” of having a correspondent dedicated to religion. (In 1998, CNN news executives had considered and decided against hiring a specialized religion correspondent.)

“We have much to do, and we will,” said Johnson.

“News Odyssey” is yet another professionally done religion news program. It’s produced each week by United Methodist Communications in Nashville for Odyssey cable network, the former VISN-ACTS interfaith network. However, Odyssey appears in relatively few cable franchise line-ups despite acquiring new partners in Hallmark and Henson Productions. Thus, relatively few people see the news show.

Because money plays such a major role in television,
further advances are likely to be difficult, according to Roy Larson, an ex-Chicago Sun-Times religion reporter now running a religion and news center. “With the audiences for network news way down and local station budgets very tight, it seems an unlikely time for television to expand religion coverage now,” he said.

THE PRESS SEES THE LIGHT

At metropolitan newspapers, the picture is brighter. The economic upturn of the mid-1990s allowed publishers to try new strategies to bolster reputation and readership. Business news wasn’t the only winner; editors cashed in on the rising interest in spirituality, too.

Some papers assigned reporter teams to tackle controversy in the world of religion — from a close look at gays and religion to misleading solicitations by religious relief agencies for overseas child sponsorship — giving those stories Page One play. The Pensacola (Fla.) News Journal won numerous national awards in 1998 for its exposure of financial and factual discrepancies connected with the so-called “Brownsville Revival” at a charismatic church in that city.

Religion beat reporters also won editors’ support for big-concept stories. In 1996, Newsday’s Bob Keeler, a newcomer to religion coverage, captured the first-ever Pulitzer given to a religion-beat reporter for his yearlong series on life in a Catholic parish. The San Francisco Chronicle and Portland Oregonian did not limit religion writers Don Lattin and Mark O’Keefe, respectively, to routine regional stories. Lattin went to several other countries to report on the new, multinational face of Mormonism and its consequences for the Utah-based church. In 1998, O’Keefe went abroad to examine the veracity and nature of reported religious persecution in a series that captured journalism prizes.

The conundrum at newspapers hoping to boost religion coverage has been whether to concentrate on major projects and Page One stories or to assemble a weekly set of impressive stories in large religion sections. A few papers strive for both. The Dallas Morning News set the pace in December 1994 by launching a six-page religion section. In recent years, three full-time religion reporters (complemented by freelancers) plus three full-time editors have handled both the section and paperwide religion coverage.

Another Texas newspaper, the Austin American-Statesman, decided like many other papers against starting a “super section” for religion. Weekly newsholes consume enormous resources and rarely pull in advertising dollars to justify the cost, noted editor Rich Oppel. More than a decade earlier, Oppel directed the Charlotte (N.C.) Observer’s Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the Jim Bakker scandal. He told Kim Sue Lia Perkes, religion writer at the American-Statesman, that the weekly hunger of big religion sections leads to too many “soft” features and too few front-page stories of great merit.


The three national newsmagazines nearly always enjoy good newsstand sales when the cover story deals with religion. Credit goes to people such as Newsweek’s Ken Woodward and U.S. News & World Report’s Jeff Sheler. But the long-term trend, unchanged during the 1990s, is that
little news on religion — aside from cover stories — appears in the newsmagazines.

For consumers who look to the Internet for news, an ambitious effort undertaken in 2000 was Beliefnet.com, a Web site including a great variety of news, columns, features and resources for religious practice. This was the brainchild of Steven Waldman, a former newsmagazine editor who first sought to launch it as a print magazine before turning to this challenging new arena for journalism.

Dr. Jimmy Allen, under First Amendment Center auspices, helped The Dallas Morning News and several other newspapers to meet and discuss with local religious leaders what should be done in expanding coverage of faith issues. A nationally known clergyman with print and television experience, Allen acted in effect as a broker between a city’s leading newspaper and a constituency most interested in improvements in religion coverage, consulting with news and faith leaders in San Antonio, Phoenix, Seattle and Cleveland.

So, does the expanding religion news coverage today in print and broadcast media meet quality standards? We think the content has improved in many areas. This is contested, however, by a 1998-99 content-analysis study of identifiable religion news by the Garrett-Medill Center for Religion and the News Media. The study reviewed religion stories in the three newsmagazines, USA TODAY, The New York Times, Chicago’s two major dailies and on three Chicago TV stations and the three New York-based television networks. Between 11 and 20 percent of these outlets had news with religious elements, but religion and spirituality per se were not usually their primary focus, the study said.

“While not overtly biased, the stories analyzed in the study generally failed to provide needed theological or historical context,” said a Northwestern University spokesperson upon the study’s release in February 2000. Roy Larson, who directs the Garrett-Medill Center added that: “Because so many Americans, while interested in religious questions, also are religiously illiterate or semi-literate, the stones cry out for ‘explanatory journalism.’”

Yet, specialized reporting of any length is still rare on television and sporadic in the newsmagazines, causing us to wonder if the findings were skewed by the small size of the sample.

**Strengthening the Bridge**

Although expanding coverage and a larger number of advocates for sophisticated religion reporting signal improvement, the inevitable turnover of religion-beat reporters and sympathetic editors/producers means that educational opportunities will remain a priority. Serious religion coverage has certainly gained respect in the last decade of the 20th century, but the “God beat” is not as
**Pilot projects promote enhanced religion coverage**

By Jimmy R. Allen

Studies such as Bridging the Gap have historically brought vital new facts to the attention of the public, provoked discussion and then been filed on shelves for future reference.

The First Amendment Center was eager to take this process a step farther. To achieve acceleration in bridging the gap, some practical application of the report's recommendations needed to be attempted and refined. Therefore, a strategy evolved to enlist several newspapers to join in a focused effort to improve the relationship between the news media and religious communities.

Several factors were considered in choosing the participants and sites for these pilot projects.

- We looked for newspapers that were already reporting news of religion. We wanted to accelerate progress rather than to criticize weakness.
- We sought newspapers whose executive leadership would initiate an invitation to the First Amendment Center and welcome the assistance.
- We wanted variation in cultural and religious demographics, as well as geographic diversity.

The projects, which subsequently evolved over a period of four years, were undertaken at The Dallas Morning News, the San Antonio Express-News, The Arizona Republic and The Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Key newspaper executives and religious leaders involved in initiating these projects varied from site to site. In Dallas, the project was undertaken by the Morning News publisher, executive editor and managing editor. In San Antonio, the managing editor (later to become executive editor) provided leadership. In Phoenix, the managing editor (later to become executive editor) and the executive editor (subsequently publisher) took on the project. In Cleveland, the project was not initiated by the newspaper but by the Interchurch Communications Council, comprised of representatives from the Greater Cleveland Council of Churches.

The strategy in the first three cities called for each newspaper to conduct a market study of its constituency to determine both the degree and nature of readers' interest in expanded religious news coverage. In the case of Cleveland, the First Amendment Center sponsored a market study conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at The University of Connecticut. Taken together, these four market studies revealed that in every area — from the Midwest to the Bible Belt to the Hispanic-influenced West — readers were universally interested in reading about religion and religious issues.

The religious leaders enlisted in each city provided input concerning the adequacy of current coverage and suggestions for improving it. Their participation gave news executives an opportunity to explain how newspapers work in the hope that better understanding would improve interaction between the two groups.

In each instance, care was taken to broaden the group of religious participants by enlisting representatives from the whole scope of the religious community. The size of this representation varied from 68 in Dallas to 25 in both San Antonio and Cleveland. In Phoenix, an additional meeting was structured for journalists to meet with Native American spiritual leaders. In Dallas, the newspaper set up a seminar for communications representatives from the various faith communities to teach them how to get their message out via the news media.

While the results of the four pilot projects varied, they were generally successful. Each project resulted in an enhanced or a new weekly religion section in the participating newspapers. Each considerably accelerated the mainstreaming of religious news stories into various sections of the newspaper, including the front page. The Dallas Morning News and The Cleveland Plain Dealer significantly expanded their staff of religion reporters, and the Dallas paper won several awards as the nationally recognized pacesetter in religious news reporting.

In two cases, the participating newspapers had difficulty securing support for the project from their off-site corporate decision-makers. A sweeping reorganization at one paper significantly diminished a proposed expansion of religion-news reporting. In a second case, disinterest at the corporate level prompted determination on the part of the newspaper's staff to move forward anyway. Despite the lack of additional financial resources, the effectiveness of their religion page and efforts to mainstream religion stories became the talk of their city.

Some lessons learned:

- The farther away decision-making is from the top executive leadership of the newspaper, the more difficult improvement of religion coverage becomes.
- The most difficult avenue toward improvement of the news media's coverage of religion is through efforts initiated by the religious community.
- The real challenge to minimizing the gap between the religious community and the news media is in maintaining occasions for creative dialogue through adequate briefings and regular interaction.
- The effort to bridge the gap between religion and the news media has immense potential for prompting community affirmation.
well-established as the education, science, health and business beats, to name a few.

It is encouraging, therefore, to note that the Religion Newswriters Association is stronger today than it was in 1993. Its new executive director — Debra Mason, a former religion writer now teaching journalism — has relieved the volunteer officers of many administrative chores. As a result, the only national body for those covering religion in the secular media has been more responsive to the membership. Growing from 150 members in 1995-96 to 250 by mid-1999 under the leadership of presidents Cecile Holmes of Houston and Gayle White of Atlanta, the organization currently is working to incorporate a related entity to receive grants for continuing education seminars.

Participant responses to special conferences and seminars have generally been strong over the past seven years. The Knight Center for Specialized Journalism, which holds short-term seminars on the University of Maryland campus, held its first weeklong religion seminar in December 1993, receiving more qualified applications than it could accept. The center, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, later sponsored a seminar on religion and politics.


Lilly Endowment and Pew Charitable Trusts have responded favorably to proposals for continuing education workshops for journalists and seminars which bring news people together with clergy and religious experts. The first institution to benefit from Lilly and Pew funding was the Garrett-Medill Center in Evanston, Ill., established in 1995 under the joint sponsorship of Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. In 1996, the foundations helped to establish the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn., founded by scholar-journalist Mark Silk, author of Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America.

In June 1999 Pew adopted a long-range strategy for funding programs (starting in 2000) with three aims: 1) To provide training opportunities “tailored to the special needs of those working outside the religion beat,” 2) To provide journalists “with resources that directly facilitate their coverage of religion and public life stories,” and 3) To encourage better coverage of religion “by identifying and disseminating best practices in print, radio and television journalism.”

“Since Bridging the Gap was published, there has been a phenomenal growth of interest in the beat,” said Diane Winston, a 1999 fellow at New York University’s Center for Media, Culture and History. After finishing research on a book about U.S. news coverage of religions other than Christianity and Judaism, the onetime religion writer joined Pew Trusts in 2000 to guide its religion and media grant programs.

One effort has recognized the international aspect of religion reporting. The first Religion and the Media 2000+ conference in 1998 drew dozens of news executives, religion writers and religious leaders to Rome to talk about back-home obstacles to good religion coverage, among other topics. Conceived by Gunther Lawrence, director of the New York-based Interreligious
Information Center, the conference combined discussions with an educational experience in a city of major religious importance. A second gathering was held in Jerusalem in March 2000, coordinated with Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, which has a graduate degree program in religion news.

A LAST NOTE OF CAUTION

The Rome meeting of Religion and Media 2000+ reminded participants that old habits (and biases) die hard in news coverage. Miami Herald publisher David Lawrence spoke strongly in his keynote address for bigger and better coverage of religion news. But he also told an embarrassing anecdote about his own paper’s lack of foresight only months earlier when reporters had been assigned to cover the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba. Two reporters with political expertise were assigned, and the paper’s lone religion writer, April Witt, was not even consulted — editors simply assuming that the visit was, first and foremost, a story with political implications.

Witt did write up an analysis of the Rome religion-media conference (omitting mention of the Herald’s Cuban gaffe). Her Sunday story led the Herald’s Viewpoint opinion section (July 12, 1998). Among many observations, Witt noted that news outfits and religious leaders alike must cooperate with each other to achieve good coverage.

(Ironically, a fact of journalistic life mentioned earlier — workplace turnovers — hit the Miami Herald only months later. David Lawrence resigned as publisher, and Witt moved to a different news beat.)

CONCLUSION

The voices for smart and sharp religion coverage must continue speaking to new generations of reporters and editors. Our purpose — as readers of Bridging the Gap know — is not to turn journalists into cheerleaders for religious belief and practice. For better and worse, religion has a resiliency and influence which are baffling and need to be described.

We think the gap between organized religion and professional journalism has narrowed considerably since 1993. Here’s why:

• An increased public comfort with expressions of religion along with an economic upturn combined to help newspapers expand religion coverage significantly. Greater numbers of journalists now have experience on the beat, and more editors have found that quality religion coverage can win prizes as well.
• Television has excellent examples of religion news treatment at ABC and in PBS’s “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly.” We are still hopeful about others taking chances.
• Support systems for educating journalists in the issues and language of religion will only increase in coming years with growing foundation support.

The heightened comfort level with spiritual trends and religious issues was probably a prerequisite for news media to venture further into this sensitive area of coverage. Now, as more news professionals learn how to capture those yearnings and disputes accurately in journalistic ways, we might see only a gully separating the worlds of religion and news media.
Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media 1993
Introduction

In a North Carolina backyard one night in 1976, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter disclosed to a small group of voters he was a born-again Christian.

The term “born-again” befuddled national political reporters unfamiliar with the term, and Carter’s comment made news: Virtually every daily paper and television station carried the wire-service accounts of the candidate’s acknowledgment of his religious faith.

In retrospect, Carter’s backyard witness is barely remembered as a tiny blip on the campaign screen many elections ago. But at the time, his words disturbed millions of Americans who, like the unknowing political reporters, wondered whether the former governor of Georgia was some sort of religious nut. They wondered: Did Carter think God spoke to him? Did he think that his born-again experience gave him a relationship with God that other believers did not have? Did it mean that he thought he was “saved” and that others who were not born again were “lost”?

For a few days it seemed that for the first time since 1960, when John F. Kennedy’s Roman Catholicism was constantly in the news, the religious conviction of a candidate might be an issue in a presidential campaign.

Carter’s simple candor in explaining what his faith meant to him defused the subject, as questioning campaign reporters discovered that some of their colleagues in the press also considered themselves, like Carter, to be born again. Within the week, the religious issue evaporated. Carter was elected. His candidacy was helped, no doubt, by the fact that there were millions of other born-again Christian voters who identified with and were proud of the president-to-be’s profession of faith.

The statement by Carter — and the media reaction to it — dramatizes the salient point made in this report by John Dart, a veteran journalist whose specialty is religion, and Jimmy Allen, a noted Baptist minister and communicator. The point is this: A chasm of misunderstanding and ignorance separates those who pursue careers in the secular news-media field and those whose careers are in the field of religion.

Dart and Allen conclude that society is ill served by the tension that is obvious between the news media and religion. Both the profession of journalism and the profession of religion suffer as a result of this distrust.

The report’s authors discovered two alien cultures, the media and religion — one rooted largely in a search for facts and the other grounded in a discovery of faith beyond fact. Each side, they report, misunderstands
the mission of the other. Reporting is often superficial and sometimes wrong. Reporters are often uncomfortable and sometimes uncertain about the complexities and conundrums involving denominational and sectarian differences and theological and ideological schisms.

The survey discloses that an anti-religious bias in the media is a myth.

It is easier, perhaps safer, for the media to ignore the ongoing story of religion, despite the fact that a large majority of newspaper readers and television viewers are people of faith. And so, too often, only when notability or notoriety or controversy require, invite or incite coverage, do the media respond.

Religious leaders, on the other side, see news coverage of religion as inadequate, in error or sensationalist. More people are interested in religion, they argue, than in many other subjects — the courts, the arts, sports, education — that the press routinely reports on. If journalists were as committed as they claim to providing news of interest to readers, there would be more journalistic specialists assigned by newspapers and television-news staffs to provide a consistent flow of news on the subject. Many in religion believe that the failure to provide coverage of their field has more to do with anti-religious prejudice than with ignorance.

Dart and Allen rely in this report on a survey commissioned by the First Amendment Center to document this negative attitude on the part of religious practitioners. Conducted by Dr. Robert Wyatt, the survey also discloses that an anti-religious bias in the media is a myth. Journalists fail their readers because they don’t know and won’t find out about the subject of religion, rather than because they are hostile to it, the survey reveals.

Data compiled by Dart, Allen and Wyatt provide valuable information that should serve to destroy another false impression about the media: that its members are basically irreligious. This erroneous view grew out of a limited, misused and misunderstood survey known as the Lichter-Rothman study, published in 1980. The false impression that study created has festered, as coverage of religion has continued to focus almost exclusively on conflict and controversy.

The Lichter-Rothman survey was based upon interviews with only 240 of the several thousands of journalists who work for seven major news agencies in two cities, Washington and New York. Because 86% of those 240 journalists told the researchers that they seldom or never attended religious services, the Lichter-Rothman survey has been read as finding that the national news media is irreligious — that religion means little or nothing to journalists across the nation.

In fact, there are news-media representatives in Washington and New York who are offended by the suggestion that their religious faith, or lack of it, is represented by the 240 Lichter-Rothman interviews. Other surveys prior to our First Amendment Center study have attacked Lichter-Rothman as flawed. The study clearly does not reflect the religiosity of media members across the United States. Dart and Allen report Wyatt’s finding that 72% of the journalists he surveyed stated that religion had meaning in their lives.

Because the misperception created by Lichter-Rothman is so widespread, it is hoped that this refutation by Dart and Allen will be widely circulated by
the secular news media. A misled public needs to know that journalists harbor no ill will toward religion. Indeed, like news readers and viewers, they too have religious beliefs and interests.

Jimmy Carter’s 1976 remarks are mentioned only briefly by Dart and Allen. Clearly, reporters at that time were ill-prepared to immediately deal with what the candidate had to say about his religion. No other candidates were asked about their religious faith — whether they believed in God, whether they were churchgoers, or whether they prayed. Many political journalists argue that religion is so personal that unless a candidate brings it up as Carter did, or unless the candidate’s critics raise the issue, as Kennedy’s did, the subject should be off limits. Still, as millions of news readers and viewers made clear in those past campaigns, they were interested in the religion of the candidates. If personal questions about marital infidelity, marijuana use, a daughter’s hypothetical abortion and the theoretical rape of a spouse are legitimate, surely questions about religion are also.

There is irony in the fact that two great societal institutions, religion and the news media, each protected by the same constitutional amendment and each committed in its own way to serving the public, are so at odds. Dart and Allen insist that, while the separate cultures of faith and fact may be irreconcilable, at the very least each should understand the other. At the optimum, they conclude, each can come to appreciate the service rendered by the other — to those who must know about the world around them and to those who have faith in a world to come.

The First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University is honored to have had John Dart and Jimmy Allen as scholars in our inaugural year. Theirs is the first to be released of three studies dealing with the alienation between the news media and institutions covered by the media. Other reports to be published by the end of 1993 will cover the news media and the medical profession, and the news media and the business community.

It was Reinhold Niebuhr who said, “The prophet stands under the judgment he preaches. If he does not know that, he is a false prophet.”

If priest, preacher and rabbi, as prophets, ignore that admonition, First Amendment protection for religious liberty will be in jeopardy. If the press, as prophet, ignores that admonition, press freedom will be no more secure.

— John Seigenthaler

September 1, 1993
Divided by seas of suspicion

An overview

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom . . . of the press . . .”

— First Amendment, Constitution of the United States of America

Americans who practice religion and Americans who practice journalism often perceive each other as perplexing and troublesome, an ironic situation since the activities of both are sheltered under the same constitutional amendment. It’s almost as if the two groups were separated by wind-blown waters as difficult to cross as the Red Sea. Small cadres of religion writers and religious publicists regularly traverse the waves, but they are hardly capable of parting the waters. And, from afar, otherwise dynamic communities of free expression impugn each other’s motives and watch in apprehension.

The news media’s coverage of religion — or the lack thereof — is at the heart of these serious tensions between faith communities and professional journalists. Many believers say they are routinely portrayed in a bad light. Other believers say the religious dimensions of news events are too often overlooked. Journalists, on the other hand, feel that “media bashing” has become commonplace simply because religionists do not like the changes taking place in contemporary U.S. culture.

This nine-month-long study of the sources of discontent between religion and the news media was conceived and supported by the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. This examination, the broadest to date, drew on the results of a survey answered in late 1992 and early ’93 by nearly 1,000 clergy and journalists, as well as more than 50 interviews, analysis of previous research in the field and published studies and reports.

The project was undertaken in keeping with the mission of The First Amendment Center, founded in 1991 to foster a better public understanding of and appreciation for First Amendment rights — including freedom of religion and freedom of the press. It is thus fitting that the center should seek to bridge the growing gap between U.S. journalists and religious communities by providing insights into possible causes and cures for the impasse.
Among the study’s findings

- An unhealthy distrust exists between religionists and journalists, even a fear of each other in many cases. Religious figures fear being misunderstood and misrepresented; journalists fear making mistakes and incurring religious wrath. The resulting apprehensions inhibit the free flow of information and only add to misunderstanding.

- Many clergy are convinced the news coverage of religion is biased, unfairly negative, and too sensational. Editors and writers strongly deny the accusation. But journalists acknowledge errors in stories and concede they are more likely to be the reporter’s, rather than the clergy’s, fault because of unfamiliarity with religion.

- It appears there is more ignorance about religion than bias in the average newsroom. Overt anti-religious sentiments are rare, but uninformed reporters are too often intellectually lazy about getting their facts straight when assigned to cover religion stories.

- The nation’s newspapers and broadcast outlets largely refuse to take religion seriously. A community paper that devotes hundreds of column inches annually to high-school football usually devotes much less space to covering religion’s role in the community — despite the fact that attendance at religious services greatly exceeds attendance at high-school sporting events over the course of a year.

- There are too few full-time religion reporters to provide the kind of in-depth coverage the subject deserves.

- The nation’s journalists are not largely irreligious, contrary to the much-quoted (and misquoted) Lichter-Rothman study of 1980. Religion-beat specialists are more religious than the general public, and 72% of newspaper editors nationwide say that religion is personally important to them. The problem lies, rather, in a secular press reporting on a highly secularized society in which faith and beliefs are muted, privatized and extremely diverse.

- Faith and fact are often the source of conflict between religionists and journalists. Clergy believe that the news media should inspire as well as report. But reporters and editors focus on keeping news stories factually based and fair; matters of opinion are assigned to the editorial and op-ed pages.

- Many clerics agree with journalists that the news media should be more aggressive in their reporting about religious leaders. They also agree that publicity-seeking clergy and religious personalities receive too much media attention.

- On television, time constraints and entertainment values often interfere with balanced, in-depth reporting on religion topics. In fact, religion news appears not to be taken seriously by the networks, as evidenced by the general lack of coverage.

Among our recommendations to journalists

- Take religion seriously in the newsroom. Television news especially tends to limit itself to stories with
colorful pageantry or dramatic religious strife; viewers and readers want more than glib, superficial coverage of this fascinating topic.

- Increase journalistic resources. There are too few religion writers to cover the majority of religion stories in the press, and television news only rarely employs religion specialists to help with its coverage of the subject.
- Provide journalists with opportunities for continuing education in the area of religion. Seminars and fellowships are two ways journalists can improve their understanding of such a complicated subject.

Among our recommendations to clergy
- Learn what journalists consider newsworthy, and communicate religious actions and events that fit that definition.
- Provide the news media with easy access to your informed viewpoint.
- Commit greater financial resources to an effective communications office within your institution.
- Take responsibility for correcting misinformation. Write or call the journalist or editor who gets the story wrong and request a clarification or retraction.

Among our recommendations to academics
- Provide the media greater access to religious experts and the latest scholarship. The American Academy of Religion and other religious academic societies need to move at once to establish a media-relations staff to alert journalists to story possibilities within the field.
- Undertake an in-depth study of news media treatment of Islam and Muslims. Such a study is long overdue.
- Prepare future clergy for dealing with the news media. Theological schools should offer courses that help students understand what journalists do, how newsworthiness is determined and the importance of deadlines.
- Encourage journalism majors to include at least one religion course within their liberal-arts requirements. An acquaintance with religion’s role in culture will enhance the broad education all journalists should have. Prospective religion-beat reporters should consider minoring in religious studies.
CHAPTER TWO

The climate of contemporary opinion

Millions of Americans are attuned to spiritual matters. Nine of 10 say they believe in God or a higher power, 8 of 10 say prayer is a regular part of their lives, 7 of 10 identify with a religious group, and 4 of 10 attend religious services in any given week. Many more people worship at weekend religious services than attend sports events, and they contribute nearly $40 billion yearly in support of their beliefs, according to a recent study by the nonprofit foundation Independent Sector. For most people, faith is a spiritual melody that gives meaning and definition to life.

Yet, many journalists are tone deaf. To them, religion in all its complexity is either a disturbing cacophony of sounds or innocuous background music easily tuned out. Reporters and editors are forced to sit up and listen only when aberrant religionists hit strident chords. Cases attracting coverage have involved believers at a Texas cult commune near Waco, outside a Pensacola abortion clinic, and on the lower levels of New York’s World Trade Center. The soap-opera scandals of televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart and charges of pedophilia against priests provide other notable examples.

Disagreements between religion and the press are not unique to our time. Pastor scandals, offbeat religious groups and — occasionally — pivotal events in church history have appeared regularly in the pages of America’s newspapers. Congregational clergyman Henry Ward Beecher won notice for his fierce opposition to slavery and his support of woman suffrage — and for the sensational charge of adultery brought against him that ended with disagreement of the jury after a long trial in 1875.

In 1895, the Los Angeles Times headlined the planned first service of a newly formed congregation as the start of “a new denomination,” certainly a premature call. Nevertheless, the Church of the Nazarene turned out to be the forerunner of that now-international denomination.

On April 18, 1906, the Times headlined a story about the Azusa Street Mission: “Weird Babel of Tongues: New Sect of Fanatics is Breaking Loose.” The tone of the article was deprecating. But it was also a very early account of the dawning of the modern Pentecostal movement, whose speaking in tongues and other claims of the miraculous ushered in a new stream of Christianity.

Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson traveled the country preaching and healing, then founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. When she disappeared in May 1926 while swimming in the
ocean, then reappeared in June with a bizarre story about being kidnapped — a story which led to a trial for fraud — the public and the press went wild.

In 1932, a minister urging the Virginia State Senate to pass a Sunday blue law condemned newspapers which opposed the bill, criticizing the press in words that have a familiar ring: “Preachers are abused in the papers, which seem to be on the other side of all questions of Christianity and religion, carping about preachers in politics.”

The publisher of *The Richmond News-Leader* hit back in terms no less contemporary, accusing a relatively few clergy of espousing their own views as the rule of conduct for all Americans. Denying that journalists were anti-Christian, the publisher said the American press should be measured by its own moral efforts “… to defend the underdog when he is right, to demand justice for the weak, to further the holy cause of education, and expose corruption in office…”

**Tension between truth and Truth**

Indeed, journalism and religion alike are filled with people who set themselves the task of bringing truth and compassion to the world. This calling has produced in the past the crusading newspaper editor and the thundering pulpit prophet. The right to free expression in the United States, protected from government interference by the First Amendment, benefits and protects both fields of endeavor.

Nevertheless, secular journalism and sacred religion suspiciously eye one another. Their traditional perspectives and goals seem to be at odds. Faith draws heavily on revelation and intuition; news reporting strives for verifiable information. Churches bring the “good news,” the press bears the bad news. As writer Jim Stentzel once put it, “In the press one turns over a rock to expose the dirt; in the pulpit one turns over the dirt to expose the Rock.”

Their relationship becomes troubled when one pillar of free expression thinks the other is acting arrogantly.

Speaking to a receptive convention of Southern Baptists in 1992, former Vice President Dan Quayle said the news media were part of a mocking triumvirate of the cultural elite. “As I discovered recently [alluding to reactions to his criticism of the unwed-motherhood plot in the ‘Murphy Brown’ television show], to appeal to our country’s enduring, basic moral values is to invite the scorn and laughter of the elite culture,” Quayle said.

“Talk about right and wrong, and they’ll try to mock us in newsrooms, sitcom studios and faculty lounges across America. However, in the heart of America, in homes and workplaces and churches, the message is heard,” he said. Referring to the “media elite,” Quayle said, “I wear their scorn as a badge of honor.”

Quayle’s speech is best understood within the broader context of Republican criticism of the press during the 1992 presidential campaign. But conservative religious figures have also felt themselves the objects of media scorn.

Charles Colson, the ex-Watergate figure who founded an evangelical prison ministry and was awarded the
Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, said in an interview that he finds “incredible hostility” between religion and the news media. Television and press commentators accuse conservative evangelicals of “wanting to impose our beliefs on others,” Colson said.

“That’s simply not the case. We’ve fought our positions but we are not seeking to bring about a theocratic state.” In a speech at the National Press Club on March 11, 1993, Colson said it was crucial for conservative evangelicals and the “media elite” to make peace. “So long as we see one another as mortal enemies, we will make little contribution to public harmony,” he said.

Cardinal John O’Connor of New York complained during Lent of 1991 that “Catholic bashing has been the in thing.” O’Connor said the press derided Catholics, like himself, “who dare to publicly uphold their faith.” The cardinal was criticized for defending the ban that prevented a group of gays and lesbians from participating in the St. Patrick’s Day parade. New York columnists Pete Hamill and Jimmy Breslin reviled the paraders, respectively, as “puking suburban yahoos” and “common drunks, choking with anger” at homosexuals in their midst. O’Connor echoed a common complaint heard from conservative religionists in this country: the kind of media slurs that Christianity endures would not be printed or broadcast if black, Jewish or other minority groups were the target.

News misrepresentation is especially frustrating for Muslims in this country, who feel that sensitive treatments of Islam in the news are outweighed by instances of sensational, error-filled coverage.

“Not only do the media and the society...follow this misguided path, but they also suppress and mock the truth,” wrote a scholar in The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences.

Islamic expert Edward W. Said of Columbia University wrote a decade ago, when the religious revolution in Iran first caught the Western world’s eye, that in the news media “there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés.”

Both Muslim and Jewish leaders in America have been particularly sensitive to overseas news of strife involving radical political activists that rally under religious banners. Distinctions between extremists and the faith’s majority are not made often enough, they say.

Domestically, the U.S. Jewish communities are alert to flare-ups of anti-Semitism, as in 1992’s news-making conflict between Hasidic Jews and blacks in New York City. A Roper poll done for the American Jewish Committee in late 1992 found that 60% of New Yorkers believed that “newspapers and television news … make race and ethnic relations worse than they really are.”

‘Greatest story ever missed’

Religious bodies, whose instincts spur them toward attempts to reconcile opposing forces, contend that the news media miss the spiritual dimensions during crisis situations and ignore religion’s influence in calmer times.

“We get far too little coverage of religion in our secular media and what we do get is largely incomplete, irrelevant or inadequate,” an editorial began in the liberal Protestant magazine, Christianity & Crisis. The editorial said newspapers and newsmagazines fail in many cases
because “they do not take seriously the religious forces that motivate much human activity.”

Under a headline, “Religion, the Greatest Story Ever Missed,” columnist Barbara Reynolds in USA TODAY wrote in 1990 that the role of religion was ignored in most stories about the democratization of Eastern Europe. Among other examples, she said, religious references by Czech President Vaclav Havel in his widely reported New Year’s Day address were missing from accounts in The New York Times, Washington Post and Newsweek. Reynolds also quoted Peggy Say, the much-interviewed sister of then-hostage Terry Anderson, despairing that nothing she said about her faith would show up in print. “They don’t want to hear anything about faith,” Say was quoted.

In his 1990 book Under God: Religion and American Politics, author Garry Wills refers to the “uneasy way journalists talk about religion,” adding that “some of the glibbist persons in the nation are oddly tongue-tied when the Bible is brought up. And editors seem to prefer inarticulacy on the subject.” In a Newsweek interview, Wills summed up: “Media people are ignorant of religion, afraid of it and try to stay away from it.”

Many news executives have maintained that they are open to good religion-news stories, but few devote to such stories the resources they give to covering education, medicine or sports. Sharply declining ad revenues during the recession of the early 1990s forced hiring freezes, the folding or merging of some newspapers and the reduction of news staffs, according to industry surveys. Religion, often on the perilous edge of news priorities, has suffered losses in terms of vacated religion beats and religion stories bypassed — perhaps because such stories frequently are not compelling hard news.

However, even short-handed news media will seize the opportunity to cover sex scandals, erring clergy, church conflicts over homosexuality and violence in the name of God. The aforementioned are all legitimate news stories, but frequently missing are newsworthy stories on more admirable people and deeds in religion. Complaints about bias and negative treatment in the news tend to draw a time-honored defense from the news media: that the media merely reflect society, for better or worse, and that they publish news, not publicity.

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Journalists ask:
Aren’t you blaming the messenger?
Religionists respond:
If the news media truly reflect society, then why isn’t the high regard of Americans for religion more evident in the news? Both institutional religion and unaffiliated people with religious perspectives are increasingly dependent on the secular media for news. Religious-run publishing and broadcasting today reach only a small part of their own constituency and a mere fraction of the wider public.
There once was a time when established religion — the Protestant churches and largest Catholic archdioceses — enjoyed at least lip-service loyalty from the press, if not ardent support in matters of public morals and faith. Sermons were often reported in the news columns. On Easter and Christmas, many newspapers would print appropriate Scripture on Page One or the editorial page — as if to say that truly Christian hearts beat inside foul-mouthed, boozing journalists typified by Ben Hecht’s *Front Page*.

Such coziness is now out of place in most newspapers. The press, once justifiably accused of boosterism or favoritism in relation to other powerful institutions in society, has increasingly kept itself at arm’s length from government, chambers of commerce, big business, the military — and churches. This independence has enhanced journalism’s overall credibility with the public.

Yet, the distancing between journalism and religion was inevitable as the two institutions reacted to revolutions around them. Newspapers, fewer in number, now take second place to television as a source of news for Americans, and emerging technology promises even more options for obtaining information. In religion, the established churches see their hegemony fade as conservative and charismatic churches attract followers to megachurches, and faiths other than Christianity and Judaism gain respected places.

Religious pluralism — its benefits aside — has diluted organized religion’s perceived clout. No denomination is so dominant in size or has sufficient internal unity to command media attention at will. In the mid-1960s, mainline Protestant denominations began losing membership. The Jewish community worried about escalating rates of intermarriage and about the disturbing numbers of young Jews joining sects and cults. The Catholic Church, while still growing, saw the beginning of the decline in numbers of priests and nuns, attendance at Mass and loyalty to church teachings concerning birth control and divorce. The reform-minded Second Vatican Council contributed to changed ways of thinking in the Catholic Church, from celebrating Mass in the vernacular to a new ecumenical attitude toward non-Catholics.

The push for minority rights and the sexual revolution in the late 1960s added to organized religion’s troubles. The troubles became turmoil when questions about equal rights for women and homosexuals were placed at the altar of religion: Shouldn’t these members of society also be allowed into the ordained ministry?
Higher divorce rates, unmarried couples living together, the Pill, abortion on demand and sexually explicit entertainment combined with other social challenges — such as court-ordered injunctions against school prayer — to erode and disperse religious authority. While strongly conservative religious groups such as the Southern Baptists flourished amid the confusion, dropouts from organized religion were numerous. According to sociologists of religion, whether members of congregations or unaffiliated, many people today have personally tailored beliefs and spiritual practices that may diverge widely from their family heritage. More than ever, their association with organized religion is on a voluntary, and often utilitarian, basis.

These trends have contributed to a growing secularization of U.S. culture, a development central to the straining of relations between religion and the news media. American cultural mores have long dictated that people not wear religion on their sleeves. “Most middle-class people feel that religious beliefs are intimate and that in our society we cause trouble by being too forthcoming about them,” said Peter Steinfels, religion editor for The New York Times, in an interview.

Moreover, as religious options increase, a common religious language fades for at least two reasons. First, the chance of offending religious sensibilities increases with religious pluralism. Second, biblical allusions and spiritual metaphors from a particular tradition may draw nothing but blank looks from listeners. Thus, whether it is the fear of offending or the fear of being thought obtuse, the common inclination is to keep one’s religious feelings private, except in gatherings of like-minded believers.

The U.S. Catholic bishops summed up today’s paradox in a pastoral letter on stewardship adopted in 1992. “Although religious faith is a strong force in the lives of many Americans, our country’s dominant secular culture often contradicts the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition,” the bishops said. “There is a strong tendency to privatize faith, to push it to the margins of society, confining it to people’s hearts or, at best, their homes, while excluding it from the marketplace of ideas where social policy is formed and men and women acquire their view of life and its meaning.”

Church-state separation, which keeps religion free of undue government restraint, is invoked (sometimes legitimately) by politicians as a reason for rejecting some religious proposals. But, astonishingly, some television-news reporters and producers, according to our interviews, occasionally have assumed wrongly that church-state separation also means that religious dealings in moral-political issues are inappropriate subjects in the news. This reasoning sounds more like a casual excuse for avoiding a sticky subject.

American cultural mores have long dictated that people not wear religion on their sleeves.

James Wall, editor of The Christian Century magazine, put his finger on the awkwardness that broadcasters and the press have in dealing with spiritual things. “Faith talk in the midst of a secular event sounds odd and is usually reported as naive, obsessive or irrelevant piety,” Wall wrote in The Christian Ministry, another magazine he edits.
He might have added: It may not be reported at all for those same reasons. Wall noted that those outside the faith “consider religious language an illegitimate mode of communication for modernity, and nowhere is this more evident than in the media, where reporters and analysts start with a secular bias.”

**Neutrality vs. secularism**

It is important to distinguish here between a benevolent secular approach to the news and a thoughtless secularism that slides easily into anti-religious treatment by the media. By a secular approach to religion news, we mean a dispassionate treatment of religious claims and movements that regards everyone fairly. The reporter’s stance is neutral, and fairness is usually achieved through the journalistic tool of attribution — “the pastor said,” “according to the biblical account,” etc. If an apparition of the Virgin Mary is reported by dozens of people or a widely known evangelist is claiming extraordinary healings, the writer reports what believers claim, as well as what skeptics say. The story is further strengthened by quotes from people — critics and supporters — who have studied such phenomena. To do less serves a diverse reading or viewing public poorly.

The justification, or starting point, for writing some of these stories is not the faith claim itself but the attention the phenomenon has attracted from followers or critics, the support or opposition it inspires in government agencies or well-known personalities — i.e., factors that give the events newsworthiness. Thus, a religious trend or movement is neither endorsed nor ridiculed but is either reported or ignored according to journalists’ judgment of whether news values are present.

On the other hand, the reportorial stance of the secularist puts religion at a distinct disadvantage. Secularism, or modernity, can take on aspects of a campaign for freedom from religious restraints. James Wall quoted theologian David Tracy on modernity: “a demand for freedom from oppressive authorities and freedom for autonomous, critical, rational thought.”

In the newsroom, such attitudes can be prejudicial toward religion. There are some journalists who see most people of faith as loyal to anachronistic doctrines, authoritarian organizations and supposedly immutable tradition. In that regard, of course, there are more than enough religious extremists and would-be prophets in the news to solidify newsroom stereotypes. Journalism is empirical in nature, as well as anti-authoritarian.

Reporters and editors value clarity, reason, facts and egalitarian ideals. Thus, news people may find the basis of religious knowledge too subjective, intuitive and unverifiable in ordinary ways.

Although a resulting prejudice may show up in news descriptions of religion, more often it seems that journalists with a secularist outlook tend to place religion into a corner of cultural existence, respecting it but not taking it seriously.

An undefined awkwardness is also at work, said Richard Harwood, writing in 1990 as ombudsman for The Washington Post. He once acknowledged that the press rarely makes sustained inquiry into the religious aspects of news events. “Perhaps there is an unwritten tradition of deference in the news business that keeps us out of the deep waters of faith, doctrine and spirituality,” Harwood said. “The better explanation may be that as ‘realists’ and ‘empiricists’ we look on religion as we look on love and hate — too much a part of us and the world to ignore but too elusive to explore.”

Understanding the discord between religion and journalism may lie in comprehending the different ways
the two vocations regard each other and how they operate in a secularized culture. In this study we found contrasts that may help to explain the division:

- The secular news media too often tune out religious activity as a sensitive, private subject too diverse and difficult to translate into news stories — or too routine and inconsequential, and therefore not newsworthy.
- The polling in this study supports prior surveys that documented the high level of religious beliefs and practices of most Americans. (The 1989 Religion News Service/Lilly Survey on religion news, for instance, indicated that newspaper readers rank religion news about as high as sports and entertainment news, and definitely higher than news of the arts and personal advice.)
- Unfortunately, organized religion too often seeks to promote its values and mission rather than to acquire more “media savvy” and demonstrate its newsworthiness.
- Finally, antagonism arises not simply because of a liberal-press/conservative-faith syndrome, but because journalists assimilate rapidly into the changing culture, whereas believers tend to fight assimilation, resisting challenges to moral and religious tradition.

Consumers of religion news

Editors usually feel that readers have little appetite for news of the religious realm. For a dozen years, editors have relied on a 1981 study published in the Newspaper Research Journal that found religion, among 18 categories of news, rated the least interesting not only by readers but also by journalists who were asked what they thought their readers found most interesting. Those results may have been flawed, according to a more recent study. At the least, they are outdated.

Stewart M. Hoover, professor of communications at the University of Colorado and author of the 1989 RNS/Lilly Survey, found that religion news usually ranks higher among readers when different questions are asked. More than 1,100 people surveyed nationwide for the Hoover study by Gallup pollsters ranked religion news in the middle of nine categories when asked about the importance of covering religion. It rated below education, health, business and food in importance, but was rated higher than entertainment, sports, arts and personal advice.

(The expected regional differences showed up: Religion news was seen as more important to cover in the religious South and less important on the Pacific Coast and in the New England states, two regions where church affiliation is the lowest in the country).

Asked what type of news they were most likely to read, respondents ranked religion about the same among
the nine categories. Religion news took a nosedive to last place, however, when people were asked if they were satisfied with coverage in the paper they most often read.

“The message is pretty clear,” Hoover said. “Readers do not feel that the newspapers they read do a very good job of covering religion.”

What type of religion stories do people like best? Hoover said that contrary to common wisdom (and the assumptions of many religious leaders), most readers were not interested in parochial or inspirational news. National religious decision-making and news dealing with ethical-social issues ranked ahead of local religious news, and following closely were religion in politics and national and global religious issues. Stories dealing with faith and inspiration were 12th among 16 types of religion news, he said.

**Dealing in Conflict**

Readers with strongly held ideological views no doubt account for volumes of criticism that the press receives. Editorial cartoonists and political columnists infuriate the newspaper reader on the opposite end of the political spectrum from themselves. Cartoonists especially overstate their views, and when they use religious symbols or imagery, they risk cries of blasphemy.

Cartoonist Steve Benson of *The Arizona Republic* has described the difference between editorial cartoonists and editorial writers: “Editors delicately craft editorials, setting forth premises, marshaling facts, exploring alternatives, arguing positions and finally arriving at conclusions. An editorial cartoon doesn’t bother with all that nonsense, but jumps immediately to the conclusion. Editorials are meant to persuade, while cartoons are intended to outrage, amuse, shock.”

Editorial cartoonists generally enjoy a long journalistic leash. Journalism tradition allows the editorial cartoonist to be the clever maverick, the Peck’s bad boy of daily journalism.

Nevertheless, many a newspaper has felt the wrath of groups such as the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which frequently reprints examples of editorial cartoons that it finds offensive to Catholicism.

*USA TODAY*, early in its history, ran an editorial cartoon that drew Catholic ire. Called “a misjudgment” by now-editor Peter Prichard, author of *The Making of McPaper*, the cartoon by David Seavey was a critical comment on a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that approved of a Minnesota law permitting taxpayers to take tax credits for tuition paid to private and parochial schools. The cartoon showed a high-court justice presenting a communion wafer, which had been dipped in a chalice called “tax break,” to a clergyman wearing a mortarboard labeled “church schools.”

Prichard, then the paper’s deputy editorial director, said he thought it was strong but made the point. Another editor, who was a practicing Catholic, was shown the cartoon and said he was not offended.

“Hundreds of letters of outrage poured in,” Prichard wrote. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights called it defamatory and viciously anti-Catholic.”

Editorial director John Seigenthaler, himself a Catholic, wrote to the league, saying that there was no...
attempt to demean Catholic beliefs. Later, when a study declared religious schools were doing a better job than public schools, the newspaper’s editorial board carried articles on the value of religious education. The League wrote Seigenthaler back, praising the paper for its commitment to balance, Prichard said.

In many ways, a newspaper’s editorial pages are balancing acts. To offer alternate opinions to the newspaper’s editorial columns and cartoonist, most papers print letters to the editor and an op-ed page featuring syndicated columnists, guest commentators and syndicated cartoons expressing both conservative and liberal views. Readers are supposed to get a sense that there is fairness. Many don’t. To represent the concerns of readers who feel the newspaper has made serious errors of judgment, some newspapers have appointed ombudsmen to write regular columns over the last two dozen years.

Editors say media accountability is also accomplished through news coverage of the news media. *Time* and *Newsweek* have covered the subject for years, and the *Los Angeles Times* has had reporters writing analytic series on news media performance since 1974. Several other major papers treat the news media as a news subject as well.

Is controversy virtually a required element for news? A journalist would ask it differently: Is the problem important and complex enough to have sparked divisions of opinion? If so, doesn’t the reader get more than a one-sided version of what’s happening and what’s at stake? But some news media analysts see controversy-laden stories in a less noble light.

“The calling card for entering the news is conflict, and any group that is able to create such situations typically gains access to media through the reports of hungry journalists,” wrote Quentin J. Schultze, professor of communications arts and sciences at Calvin College, in the *University of Detroit Law Review*.

The news reflects a professional preoccupation with power and authority, he said. “Like drama over the centuries, great news is fabricated out of the conflicts among contending forces and the competing claims of individuals and organizations. Journalistic accounts today are stories first, and information second,” he wrote. “They thrive on colorful characters, vivid settings and especially on sharp conflict.”

Indeed, the real workhorse in giving structure to a daily news story is conflict — “us versus them, veterans versus upstarts, good guys versus bad guys,” said Cullen Murphy, managing editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, in speaking to a group of Catholic theologians. “One result is that any contemplative tendencies that manage to survive in the media environment are largely engulfed by the pursuit of conflict. It is no accident that when Catholicism, theology and religion in general receive coverage in the press, some sort of real or perceived conflict is at the heart of the matter,” Murphy said.

Is religion news predominantly bad news? When conflict flares within religious denominations — over women’s ordination, gay rights, abortion, papal authority, etc. — clergy and other religious leaders have despaired at the “negative” image given to their denomination. Non-controversial actions and events in the same denomination undeniably tend to be passed over by most reporters as “not news,” perhaps because they lack elements that define news.

Wesley G. Pippert, an evangelical Christian who covered Washington and Israel for years with UPI wire service, said that seeking the truth of the matter — not whether a story will be seen as negative or positive — is most important. “If a story is so positive as to be flattery,
so be it; if the truth is so negative as to be condemnation, so be it,” Pippert wrote in An Ethics of News, A Reporter’s Search for Truth. “The news actually may not be as bad as people think it is,” he said.

Pippert said he once made an informal survey of the now-defunct Washington Star for a week, rating stories as to whether they were good news, bad news, or neutral. “The biggest category was the neutral, and the ‘good news’ stories outnumbered the ‘bad news,’ ” he said.

Reporters are understandably seen as hard-boiled, Pippert said. “The typical journalist encounters enough pretense, pseudo-piety, and blatant fraudulence — especially among politicians and the highly placed in our society — to become cynical and suspicious of every official and every idea. Cynicism may be the occupational disease of journalists, but they ought always to be skeptical: questioning, testing, reexamining their stories,” he said. “The reporter ought to follow the example of Joseph welcoming his brothers in Egypt. The writer of Genesis says succinctly (42:16) that he tested their words to see ‘whether there is truth in you.’ ”

**Questioners vs. Believers**

“The liberal press” is blamed by many traditional religionists for skewed reporting. When changes in society challenge religious values, these believers are angered by what they see as the news media’s failure to weigh in on the side of “the good.” In their view, both the message and the messenger are at fault.

Father Francis E. Butler of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Montgomery, Ala., expressed this sentiment in his response to our survey:

“The media [have] a liberal agenda; i.e., abortion, homosexuality, pro-pornography, etc., and authentic ministers of God’s Word are on opposite sides of the issues. As a nation we are becoming more and more pagan — divorced from God and driving each side further apart. I honestly don’t see any improvement any time soon. It takes faith and humble prayer to keep going against the powerful pagan media,” he said, noting that condoms and sex information are permitted in public schools but not Bible-reading and prayer.

Religion writers and other journalists staunchly affirm that they have no “agenda” of causes to promote. That was certainly not true early this century when partisanship was normal in the “yellow journalism” days of three, four or more competing newspapers in major cities. Today, the typical editor will nip in the bud a series of stories taking on the semblance of a personal campaign. Even on a normal news day, skeptical editors ask, “Is this really new? Haven’t we written about this before?”

The widely accepted notion of a liberal elite dominating the press and news broadcasting has been questioned by Calvin College’s Schultze, who has written extensively on religion in the news media. “Except for a few columnists and broadcast editorialists, journalists and other media professionals are intellectual and religious eunuchs,” Schultze has provocatively suggested. “In fact, a number of studies suggest rather convincingly that news is inherently conservative because it rarely challenges the underlying assumptions of the prevailing political and economic institutions in the United States,” he said.
Along the same lines, another communications scholar, Herbert J. Gans of Columbia University, maintains that contemporary journalism discourages excess or extremism. “For example, the news treats atheists as extremists and uses the same approach, if more gingerly, with religious fanatics,” Gans wrote in *Deciding What’s News*. “The news is scornful both of the overly academic scholar and the over-simplifying popularizer; it is kind neither to highbrows nor to lowbrows.”

It may be that, rather than blaming a liberal-conservative clash for tensions between media and religion, a better explanation lies in the tendency of the press to assimilate into the changing society, while believers guard against accepting change that goes against traditional morals and beliefs. Always on the lookout for newsworthy trends, journalists need to challenge their preconceptions and personal tastes in order to stay current and informed — indeed to survive in their craft.

By contrast, the devout seek to avoid the compromising assimilation to contemporary mores. Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist leaders worry about the faithful assimilating into Christian or secular ways, then abandoning their religious heritage. Religious scholars say that sectarian groups inculcate a sense of alienation from the world, not only as a hedge against assimilation but also as a means of control. To a lesser degree, the same is true with some mainstream faiths based on authoritarian premises. Moral conservatives are understandably irked by journalists’ “that’s-the-way-it-is” approach to society.

Yet, the legal right to an abortion is 20 years old, and the legal ban on state-directed school prayers is 30 years old. Unmarried couples living together and increased toleration of homosexuality have become so common that the press and TV networks do not treat them as if they were shocking developments. On the other hand, the rules that govern religious morality haven’t changed.

Journalists have a self-acknowledged obligation to stand back from society and from their personal beliefs when reporting the news. To the extent that the news media unthinkingly discount the validity of committed beliefs at odds with secular culture, coverage of religion sinks below journalism’s own standards of fairness and insightful perspective.

Ken Woodward has covered religion for *Newsweek* magazine since the 1960s and is often complimented for his perceptive work. Yet, he indicates that the newsroom atmosphere at major East Coast-based news media are unfavorable to religion as news. “The relationship [between religion and the news media] won’t improve until the [ignorant] bias of the editors in charge of all journalistic media is removed or moderated. Radical surgery needed,” Woodward said in a terse salvo on his survey form.

His likewise well-respected colleague at *Time* magazine, Richard Ostling, agrees. He wrote us that the religion field is difficult to cover by its nature, “and more so due to the secularized ignorance of news editors and perhaps the unexamined slant of particular reporters.”

“Religion coverage has never been particularly good in American newspapers because, I believe, most reporters and editors have only a slight interest in it or
don’t understand it,” Ray Moscowitz, a corporate executive with Nixon Newspapers of Peru, Ind., told us.

**RELIGION BEAT PERIPHERAL?**

One measure of how the press values religion news is whether a full-time specialist is retained to cover the beat and serve as a knowledgeable resource within the newspaper, wire service or newsmagazine.

“Most regular religion reporters do a credible job,” the editor of a small paper said on his questionnaire. “But among the general reporting corps are many who don’t understand faith or spiritual matters.”

On his questionnaire, Leroy Aarons, an editor in Sebastopol, Calif., wrote, “Religion coverage is considered expendable on most papers, depending on space and resources. It’s the first to go, last to expand. It’s too bad; religion is a major story.”

Indeed, the economic recession of the early 1990s has taken its toll of religion writing spots on news staffs. Some positions are left vacant for months, eventually to be filled by someone with no experience or training in religion.

“Editors are sending out signals that the religion beat is peripheral to decent coverage,” wrote Julia Duin in *Editor & Publisher* in late 1992. “Others treat religion as a beat not worth hiring a specialty writer for — it is a beat ‘anyone’ can do,” said Duin, a former *Houston Chronicle* religion writer.

A religion specialist for the Tribune community newspapers near Phoenix, Ariz., said that religion is inadequately covered because publishers and editors “are out of touch about its importance.” Lawn Griffiths, a veteran reporter with seven years’ experience covering religion, said “they regard it as quasi-news, unworthy of devoting much staff or resources to it. There’s a notion that ‘anybody can do religion’ because you are writing about what people believe.”

*USA TODAY* has not had a full-time religion writer for much of its existence. Patricia Edmonds, formerly with *The National Catholic Reporter*, occasionally covers religion news for *USA TODAY*’s front news section, but so do other general-assignment reporters. Cathy Lynn Grossman, of the paper’s Life section, now has responsibility for a part-time religion beat, said editor Peter S. Prichard.

“A good religion story to me is as interesting as a good science or health story,” Prichard said in an interview. “I think we’ve had more religion stories in the four years I’ve been editor.” Asked why *USA TODAY* does not have a full-time religion writer, Prichard said, “Our staff isn’t big enough.”

Without a full-time person assigned, however, coverage of religion tends to be uneven and superficial. At least two factors make this so: 1) Without someone to keep daily tabs on what is happening, the paper will seldom be first with hard-news developments or emerging trends. The newspaper will lose touch and credibility, anger readers and miss legitimate news stories. 2) As a result, religious leaders often will be reluctant to tell their stories or respond openly to a news staff that lacks a specialist who is religiously informed and trusted. Religious newsmakers are no different from other officials; it is always easier to deal with a reporter whose knowledge and credibility in a particular field are well established, even if the reporter is aggressive.

Religion-news specialists generally enjoy a good reputation at the national level with religious leaders — even while making it clear that they are not publicists in disguise. Clark Morphew, religion writer and columnist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for 13 years, said that he has
been impressed with the professionalism of colleagues on the beat elsewhere.

“These people are dedicated to the task, they find religion fascinating, and they see it as an essential part of a civilized society,” Morphew said. “But they don’t swallow religious swill, and they can spot a phony a mile away. Some religious leaders fear the press because religion writers ask questions nobody else would dare ask them,” he said.

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas said something similar in a Quill magazine article on religion news. Reporters lacking an acquaintance with religion, Thomas asserted, do not ask questions of religious leaders that might expose some “as being duplicitous in their dealings with the public. It’s not necessary for reporters to have faith in order to report on believers. But it is critical to understand what they believe and why they believe it.”

The varied beliefs, esoteric practices and frequent references to text or history make religion a difficult subject to know enough about. “I chide myself for lack of knowledge, and I read books and articles about religion all the time, but there is so much to learn!” said Lois Kaplan, who has covered religion at Florida’s Palm Beach Post.

“There are some darned good religion writers on larger papers in the country,” said one editor in a mid-size city on his questionnaire. “But coverage of religion generally is not commensurate with the importance it plays in people’s lives and in society.”

Downplaying religion’s importance in the face of contrary evidence amounts to a news-media bias, Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning of the Episcopal Church declared in a 1993 interview. “Those who have religion as a regular assignment do a good job,” said the bishop.

“If they send a reporter who doesn’t know the field, that’s ignorance,” he said. “It really disappoints me when I read articles that show the reporters have not done their homework or don’t check out assumptions they’ve made.”

WHEN DISDAIN MEETS DISINTEREST

An anti-religious bias or unfairness, if and when it exists, starts with the initial decisions by reporters and editors on whether to do certain stories or not.

“My own feeling is that most journalists in the mass media try to cover a story as fairly as they can,” said Wes Pippert, “but that their biases and prejudices are more at work in their selecting the stories and features they will cover.”

The real power of the press lies in its selection of stories, he said.

The same point was made by evangelical minister Glen D. McLaughlin of Front Royal, Va., in his written response to our survey. McLaughlin said that headline wording and a broadcaster’s tone of voice can slant a story, but that bias in print and broadcasting starts with “what is covered and what is not.”

The Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, said that evangelicals, Catholics and Mormons have taken a beating from the press concerning their outspoken stances on social and family values. “If a religious leader never mentions what he means by sin, he’ll never get in trouble with the press,” Falwell said.
“He can preach against promiscuity as long as he doesn’t define it as sex outside of marriage or between two people of the same sex. That gets the fur up on the media’s back.”

Editors do not want their religion reporters to be cheerleaders, and few are. By the same token, editors would acknowledge it is a mistake to assign a reporter who is hostile toward religion to a religion story. A news organization may not know if a reporter is unsuited to do the story, however. Because professionalism is supposed to overrule personal feelings in journalism, news executives are loath to plumb the motives of general-assignment writers who suggest a religion story.

STORIES THAT UPSET RELIGIONISTS

The Assemblies of God emerged unscarred from a media blitz a few years ago when the church body investigated, then attempted to discipline erring evangelist Jimmy Swaggart. “We fared well in print and broadcast media,” said Juleen Turnage, who heads public relations for the Pentecostal denomination. “There were no examples of bias or bad reporting.”

But the Assemblies reeled from a Dec. 11, 1990, article in The Wall Street Journal about the denomination. The writer (not a religion writer that the Journal had on its national staff at that time) “absolutely scorched the church,” Turnage said. “It’s probably been the most negative article I’ve seen in my experience with the church.”

The story had major inaccuracies: The U.S. membership was put at 4 million instead of 2.5 million. Donations were $1.1 billion the previous year, not $7 billion as reported. The writer said that “many new Assemblies churches are super sanctuaries that seat up to 10,000.” In fact, only one church seated that many, and Turnage said that the average-sized church then was 115 people.

The story also had numerous other observations that church officials said were misleading. “The author has overly magnified and dramatized a fringe theology of prosperity to make it sound like this is what the Assemblies of God is all about,” wrote one church-school official.

The theme of the story was that the one-time blue-collar denomination was changing into a church of the newly affluent and acquisitive. The undeniably flamboyant services conducted by the Reverend Tommy Barnett at his large Phoenix First Assembly of God led off the Page One article, and the Assemblies’ 10,000-seat church in Lakeland, Fla., was another highlight.

The Journal published nine letters to the editor after the Assemblies of God story was published, but issued no corrections because the reporter found that some official numbers were said to be too low, according to Managing Editor Paul E. Steiger. He said that headquarters officials suggested that the figure of 2.5 million members was too low, and the reporter obtained the higher figure from a researcher at the National Council of Churches. Likewise, Steiger said, a denominational official in the treasurer’s office said that the donations figure was radically underestimated, largely because some churches failed to give accurate reports to headquarters. Steiger said that Clyde Hawkins, an Assemblies administrator, gave the reporter the $7 billion figure as a result.
To the suggestion that the Journal article had a snickering tone, Steiger replied in a letter, “With examples like the one in the lead, where the pastor ended a sermon by literally flying out of sight amid a cloud of smoke, readers perhaps were supplying their own snickering.”

More recently, The Washington Post was flooded with protests over an unattributed sentence in an article on Feb. 6, 1993, that characterized followers of television evangelists as “largely poor, uneducated and easy to command.” The Post ran a correction the next day, saying there was “no factual basis” for the statement.

Robert G. Kaiser, the paper’s managing editor, said he and other editors failed to catch the “profoundly opinionated assertion” before publication. Michael Weisskopf, who wrote the article, said in another Post article that he made “an honest mistake, not born of any prejudice or malice for the religious right.”

Ironically, the offending article described the ability of evangelical TV and radio figures to marshal phone calls and letters to government leaders on moral issues. Some of the more than 500 Christians who called the Post were responding to Pat Robertson’s suggestion on his “700 Club” program that they do so. Others called of their own accord, and still others suggested a boycott of the Post in calls to a Christian radio program in Washington, according to the newspaper.

When a story explores an issue with moral implications, religiously attuned readers are quick to notice if the article was written without reference to religious sources or beliefs. For example, a USA TODAY cover story on assisted suicides, published Feb. 23, 1993, did not quote any recognizably religious source or make any reference, even in passing, to religious viewpoints. Few religious thinkers would claim that morality is the exclusive domain of religion. “But it is my hope that the secular media would see that the religious community has a voice to offer in the nation’s moral discourse,” said Episcopal Church Bishop Browning.

Evangelicals had reason to complain when Newsweek on March 1, 1993, wrote about what it called “the capital city of muscular Christianity,” Colorado Springs. At that time, the city had 53 evangelical organizations, including radio psychologist James Dobson’s Focus on the Family ministries. Newsweek focused on the relationship between the city’s evangelicals and the voter-approved statewide ban in 1992 on any laws specifically protecting the civil rights of homosexuals. The premise was reasonable, but the rendition was flawed. The reporting was imprecise, and the quotes weighed in on the side of those criticizing the evangelicals. Newsweek later published a letter from Will Perkins, a Colorado Springs resident who chaired the board of a political action group that favored the ban, in which he protested that the magazine incorrectly called him a lifelong Presbyterian and the founder of the political action group.
“Newsweek regrets the errors,” said the editor’s note following Perkins’ letter. However, another letter published by the magazine pointed out correctly that the article quoted three representatives of interest groups opposed to the evangelical influence in Colorado Springs but no one who represented the evangelical position.

Spokesman Paul Hetrick of Focus on the Family, the largest evangelical ministry in the city, said that he was interviewed by reporter Michael Meyer but was not quoted or asked about a research study on homosexual behavior purportedly made by the organization.

Psychologist James Dobson, who heads the ministry, cautioned readers of his March letter to supporters “not to believe anything the media [say] about Colorado Springs and the granting of special rights for homosexuals.” Although Dobson pointedly said that his ministry had never done original research on homosexuality, a study compiled by a Focus on the Family staff member apparently did summarize research findings from several medical journals.

Newsweek religion editor Ken Woodward said that the story submitted by Meyer went through several rewrites in efforts to modify an originally overstated story. Even so, Woodward conceded, “I think the piece is open to criticism and illustrates what can happen when a complicated issue is discussed in that amount of space.”

A MISFIT ON TELEVISION

Religion news finds no niche on TV and normally receives superficial treatment — a formula that too easily leads to blandness or mischaracterization. News broadcasters are no less assimilated into a secularizing culture than are press people. But news of religion encounters additional disadvantages; television’s growing emphasis on entertainment values and the ever-present time constraints.

“Its god is brevity,” said Bill Moyers of the medium. Lauded for his PBS specials on religious and philosophical subjects, Moyers noted that “even when it captures the emotional religious experience of its subjects, [television] can’t explain it historically, psychologically or analytically in ways that honor [religion’s] complexity and diversity.”

Those limitations do not give religion a fair shake, but is bias at work? “Overall, I think that television news tends to suffer from ignorance, not from bias,” Moyers said. “Religion just hasn’t figured in the lives of television people in New York.”

He has tried for three years to get the Public Broadcasting System to set aside funds for a 10 p.m. Sunday report on religious matters “without calling it that.” “If you say it’s going to be a discussion of religion,” Moyers said, “you get people who are offended by the parochialism of the very idea. I just don’t see any way to do it at the national level.”
Television flirts with the notion of talking about religion and politics during a presidential-election year. Yet, probing the religious ideas of political candidates is a touchy matter for television reporters, said Judy Woodruff, former chief Washington correspondent for the “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” on PBS, and now with CNN. Nonetheless, she agreed to interview Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential race for VISN interfaith cable television network.

Said Rosemary Bray, a former editor with *The New York Times Book Review*: “It was wonderful, but I don’t know if anyone saw it.”

Woodruff acknowledged that many political issues are related to religious ones. Yet, she said, “it is difficult in a secular news program to fit them in. We’re dealing with an audience of every conceivable religious background, although I don’t think that precludes dealing with the candidate’s religious faith. It may be prying. It’s a delicate thing, unless the candidate raises the issue himself.”

The newsmagazine-format programs such as “Nightline,” “Frontline,” “60 Minutes” and “20/20” have occasionally taken penetrating looks at charismatic religious figures and controversial new movements. The quality of such features has varied enormously, depending on whether the premise of the stories rang true, for television has no religion-news specialists, no one who approaches each story with a broad knowledge and a proven record of fairness on religious subjects.

The personal perspectives of television producers and reporters do affect much religion coverage, according to Brian Healy, the senior producer for “CBS Evening News” and a practicing Catholic. Speaking at a 1991 conference on news coverage of the Catholic Church, Healy said the church received sympathetic treatment in the past on stories in which the U.S. bishops condemned the nuclear arms race and the pursuit of wealth at any cost. Likewise, he said, CBS News gave good coverage to the Pope’s first visit to Poland, stories about Catholic homeless shelters in two U.S. cities and an endearing nun who won a hog-calling contest.

Otherwise, Healy said, the Catholic Church’s position against abortion “has earned it a less-than-positive feeling from many journalists. I think they approach it as a liberalization issue, a freedom issue, an issue of choice.” Speaking as a Catholic, he said, the news media “[do] not necessarily give the church as much due as they should on the roots or the causes for its position on abortion.”

He conceded that Catholic teachings on birth control, divorce and women’s rights also receive unsympathetic treatment on network television because of the personal opinions of journalists. On other issues in which Catholic stances are not central to the story — issues such as international affairs or world hunger — the church’s views tend to be overlooked, he said.

“The church isn’t perceived by a lot of my colleagues even as a player in a lot of subjects,” Healy said.

CNN falls short on religion news, admitted Ed Turner, executive vice president for news at the network.
“Along with the other major TV networks, we just don’t do it well,” he said in an interview. The round-the-clock news channel does not have a specialist in religion as it does in sports or business. “That would take a special kind of person,” Turner said. Even then, he added, “in these tough economic times, the religious reporter would be the first to be cut.”

At the National Council of Churches headquarters in New York, Roy Lloyd, associate director for electronic media, said in an interview that he could not recall any “deliberately malicious coverage” on television. “It’s more ignorance than anything else,” Lloyd said. By and large, TV news coverage is superficial and misses religion’s “incredible amount of nuances,” he said.

Religious television has limited possibilities because of its small audience. Christian cable-television networks have little of what can be called news programming, although Pat Robertson offers his commentary on trends and developments in the “700 Club” program. The top-rated “Hour of Power,” featuring the Reverend Robert Schuller, is — like much religious programming that appears in purchased time slots — the rebroadcast of a religious service.

Because of its interfaith and interdenominational scope, the VISN-ACTS cable network does offer possibilities for broad public acceptance. However, its ultimate success depends on improvements in the quality of programming and on the VISN-ACTS getting word to potential viewers that it exists.
Hiding their light under a basket normally makes no sense to religious leaders. In order to break into public consciousness, however, faith groups have to submit to news-media guidelines for shedding that light. That puts religious bodies in a curious position, according to Stewart Hoover of the University of Colorado. “On the one hand, they desire to maintain control over their own symbols and stories,” Hoover wrote. “On the other hand, many of them desire the validation and credibility conferred by publicity in the ‘marketplace of ideas.’”

The trouble is, they must surrender control over their stories — something they are reluctant to do. “Too much is on the line for them to easily and comfortably submit to press scrutiny,” Hoover said.

Yet, submit some do, albeit clumsily at times. Believers not only want their religious identification acknowledged in today’s world, but they quite naturally welcome affirmation of their outlook. “If the press affects public opinion at all, it apparently does so through the technique of reinforcement,” author and former UPI correspondent Wesley Pippert has written. “Researchers agree that the mass media do not generally change an individual’s existing political attitudes, values and beliefs, but reinforce those feelings.”

Does that also mean that readers and viewers ignore discomforting news about change or proposed change? Yes, said Elizabeth Thoman, executive director of the Center for Media and Values in Los Angeles. She said in an interview that many people screen out news at odds with their view of religious reality.

For instance, Sister Thoman belongs to a Catholic order that permits nuns to wear ordinary clothes rather than traditional habits. “Yet,” she said in an interview, “some people tell me they were unaware that many sisters don’t wear habits. It’s been 25 years! These are not stupid people, although I don’t know what they’ve been reading.”

Contrary to the fears of conservatives, Thoman said, stories about Catholic feminists (such as herself) trying to get the Catholic Church to change its mind on women’s ordination have made little impression on church members. The issue “never has a chance to penetrate because it’s easy to dismiss as not mattering,” she said. “Not much gets through unless they experience a change of mind outside the news media — only then do they welcome that information and retain it.”
Indeed, many clergy should ask themselves whether headline-making controversies in their denomination will necessarily cause the less informed or casual readers to react adversely to their church. Denominational outsiders may not be rushing to judgment after all.

A Catholic priest in the Washington, D.C., area commented in his questionnaire that “other religions seem to be treated fairly — but if there is an article concerning the Catholic Church or its clergy, it is always, without exception, bound to be negative to the extreme. Anti-Catholicism is one of the last forms of bigotry that enjoys popular support from the media.”

But Wayne S. Creach, a Southern Baptist pastor in Spokane, Wash., said that he felt all preachers are made to look suspect in the news media. “Why are the Catholics always made to look good, and others bad?” he implored.

Although journalism can be faulted for bias that arises from the perception that secular life is all that really matters, the news media complain that they are judged unfairly when news is viewed through stained-glass spectacles. Religious readers expect “publicity” in the form of news stories, said Mike Cosgrove, an editor at the Fairfield (Calif.) Daily Republic. He added that the same is true of business people.

“Unfortunately for these people, when a story does come out which explains all sides of an issue objectively, they get upset because some negative aspects of their group were revealed,” said Cosgrove. “The news media’s job is to report facts — not serve as a public relations firm.”

Few pastors say they want publicity instead of news. The complaint is usually over bad news, negative stories. As the Rev. Eugene Overstreet of Bakersfield, Calif., said, “I feel there is a minimal attempt on the part of media to present a positive image of Christianity. What I see are deliberate actions to degrade and destroy Christianity and biblical moral values for the family and for the individual.”

“Pshaw!” said Tom Bell, editor of The Chanute (Kan.) Tribune. “The media will never satisfy any segment of our society with our news coverage. We are expected to provide more positive and less negative news across the board.”

Both journalists and religionists recognize that some criticism is a diversionary tactic. Pastors who engage in “media-bashing” while facing charges over their conduct may be trying to deflect attention. For instance, Bishop Earl Paulk, leader of a large charismatic congregation outside Atlanta, criticized the news media for breaking the story of his minister-brother, who resigned amid charges of an affair with a former staff member.

“Unless something is done to properly monitor the media, the United States is becoming a police state,” the bishop was quoted as saying in November 1992. Later, Earl Paulk himself faced and denied accusations that he had a two-year extramarital affair with his former biographer, and two minister-nephews of the Paulks were accused by two women of improper sexual advances.

Journalists also get upset when religious critics complain about “the media” but do not distinguish the news media from motion pictures, television sitcoms and other entertainment media. Religion writers and clergy in the survey agreed overwhelmingly — 83% or more — that

Chapter Four
How believers view the news

Both journalists and religionists recognize that some criticism is a diversionary tactic.
“the entertainment media offend religious sensibilities more than the news media do.”

“The most damage is definitely done by entertainment media, not by the news media,” commented Tim Blagg of The Greenfield (Mass.) Recorder, who was among the 75% of editors who concurred with the statement. Eighty-seven percent of the clergy agreed, 57% of them strongly.

**Media savvy lacking**

Organized religion, journalists say, needs to embrace a bit of modernity by acquiring or hiring professional know-how for media relations. According to Tom Morton, an evangelical seminary graduate and a reporter who has covered religion for newspapers in Texas and Colorado, some religious organizations’ “media relations lag a generation behind, often due to inattention and ignorance.” Writing in Christianity Today, Morton prefaced his appeal for improvement by saying that there are legitimate accusations that the news media at times distort or ignore religion. “But if religion wants to be covered as part of the fabric of daily life, those who speak for it need better media savvy,” Morton said.

CNN’s Ed Turner said that religious spokespersons who are “articulate and have something to say” should make themselves easily available on the national and local levels when news happens. “The activists do this,” said Turner, who urged that potential news-making groups make their viewpoint known through news releases, telephone calls and letters. “Hand-wringing won’t do it,” he said.

It usually takes journalistic or public relations experience to distinguish between news and routine activities. No matter how potentially good, selfless or admirable the action or new program might be, some distinction or drama has to be present to qualify the announcement as news. For churches and other institutions that cherish such qualities as stability, permanence and unchanging practices, it may indeed be difficult to make news — except as long-standing practices are challenged or changed.

But certainly “church as usual” is almost never news. Unless it bears some superlative such as the “first,” “last,” “longest,” “shortest,” “smallest,” “biggest,” “best,” “worst” or whatever of its kind, an event or development must have other elements to capture news interest. Those could be power, money, celebrity, conflict or impact on great numbers of people that catch the journalists’ (and presumably the readers’) attention.

An editorial in The United Methodist Reporter exhorted fellow church people to tell the news media of heartrending stories: “We in the church have countless stories to tell, for example, of faith-motivated people overcoming obstacles and giving sacrificially to help others in need.”

Indeed, if those stories are truly unusual and touching, they are welcomed by editors and writers. In reality, even the religious press comes up with precious few such stories. The Methodist editorial then suggested a questionable tactic: “Most editors are likely to report our ‘good news’ if we remind them of their own professional commitment to provide a balanced, accurate picture of what is significant to human life, regardless of their own level of religious commitment.”
Unless one happens to know of a guilt-ridden editor somewhere, don’t try it. Most editors are not thinking about balancing “positive” and “negative” stories (those are non-journalistic words). If anything, editors look for a “light,” touching or humorous feature to offset a page loaded with “heavy” news.

The public-relations person trying to convince a journalist that his press release contains religion news worth more than a brief mention must meet the requirements of newsworthiness. Is the action or event being publicized a departure from the past? Is it news of a change that will directly affect many people? Is the religious body saying something new — and unexpected?

Divisive issues such as homosexuality received their usual attention from reporters at the 1992 annual meeting of Southern Baptists, said Pastor Clarence R. Brock of Yorktown, Ind., president of the Indiana Baptist Convention. But he asked the type of question posed by many clergy: “Why is it that five great seminaries, hunger relief, Baptist Men’s Aid following [Hurricane] Andrew and the greatest world missions program are not news?”

The answer may be that some reporters already had done a hurricane-relief story back home when it was timely and where the sources were primarily local ones. As for the other convention actions, most reporters would say either that there was nothing newsworthy or that it was not newsworthy enough to bump major stories in which readers had an interest.

**Answering the ‘So What?’ Question**

The question any publicist — religious or otherwise — must face in dealing with journalists is: “So what?” The National Council of Churches’ Roy Floyd said that the so-what question must be addressed each time religious groups hope to convince news people of a good news story. As tough as that sounds, the same question needs to be answered at the editing stages in the newsroom and, ultimately, by the consumer of news who wants to keep up with events but is scanning selectively.

“Religious organizations have to edit themselves and not try to push everything that comes down the pike,” he said.

Another must for good media relations is openness by and accessibility to the central figures or authorities involved in the news. As one unidentified editor noted on our survey form, religious leaders are notoriously “nowhere to be found” when the news is bad and the press needs a comment. If such figures were forthright in admitting their own foibles, there would be less tension with the press.

Catholic Bishop Anthony G. Bosco, bishop of Greensburg, Pa., and a former member of the U.S. bishops’ communications committee, said in an interview that he knows bishops “who would rather face a firing squad than talk to a reporter.” Bosco said that relations with the news media are much better when a professional runs the operation. “My communications director came from the secular media — she is seen as a peer by local journalists.”

It also helps if a knowledgeable religion writer works in the local media, such as seminary graduate Ann Rodgers-Melnick of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the bishop indicated. “I don’t have to go through Religion 101 with Ann,” Bosco said.

The largest denominations, for the most part, have found that cooperation with the media yields better results than obfuscation. Two decades ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops’ large annual meeting was closed to the press. The prelates still hold some private sessions today,
but most debates are open — indeed, are televised for a national Catholic hookup and piped into a separate press room for the convenience of reporters who want to stay near phones set up by the bishops’ office. Voluminous texts and summaries are supplied to reporters, and daily news conferences with bishops are held during the four-day meeting.

The bishops’ press-relations efforts resemble those of other large church bodies — all done to ease the flow of information and, of course, to give visibility to the institutions’ views for reporters’ news stories. Even at their most contentious conventions, the Southern Baptists, United Methodists and officials of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have been praised by religion writers not only for first-class pressrooms but also for integrity in dealing with the press despite some internal pressures to hedge on cooperation.

“Religious leaders have become more savvy through the years in providing press packets and background materials to enable reporters to get the facts,” said Peggy Shriver, a Presbyterian who is a staff associate at the National Council of Churches. A religion-and-television study sponsored by the National Council several years ago received “excellent” coverage, she said. “When our research breaks new ground and has hard data, news people are eager to get it,” Shriver said.

Of course, intelligent interaction with the press is based on an understanding of journalistic ethics and the boundaries that separate proper and improper approaches to the news media. One night during the bishops’ fall meeting each year, several prelates host a wine-and-cheese reception for accredited reporters. Most journalists have not raised questions about the propriety of attending the annual reception because the “freebie,” as journalists call it, is a low-level wooing of the press at which reporters hope to find previously inaccessible bishops.

But gifts, paid-for trips or other substantial favors would violate generally accepted ethics codes for journalists. The Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon for years has invited prominent journalists to attend, virtually cost-free, some of its conferences, often in exotic settings. Major news organizations insist that if they regard a meeting as newsworthy, they will pay for travel, lodging and food themselves.

Religious public relations professionals — like their PR counterparts at secular institutions — are sometimes caught between the conflicting interests of their bosses and the news media.

“When the institution is attempting to control the damage caused by a controversy and you are caught whitewashing things too much, everything else you do becomes suspect,” Shriver said. “If you expose too much, you are working somewhere else pretty soon.”

Religious publications are under similar pressures. Many editors in the religious press, however, argue for openness and candor. In 1990, as a string of sexually improper incidents involving evangelical ministers came to light, Christianity Today explained in an editorial that it had decided not to publish a story about one such individual because he was not a top-level leader and therefore not newsworthy. But editors said they were disturbed by the actions of the resigned minister’s organization, which begged for the story not to be published because the matter had been dealt with properly.

“Whether driven by naiveté or a baser desire to put a better ‘spin’ on a story, cover-ups are always wrong,” the magazine said. “They seldom survive the scrutiny of an information-hungry culture such as ours, and biblically, there is no justification for hiding
wrongdoing. The abrupt departure of any high-profile leader is going to be noticed by someone. And no matter how vaguely the official statement reads, or how closely the community guards the story, it will spread. More often than not, time only serves to allow distortion of the truth and add the cloud of a cover-up to the situation.”

Secular editors would add another reason to tell the story: As rumors spread, they might implicate the wrong people and misstate offenses. Failure by the affected organization to disclose information might cause speculation about innocent parties.

While religious public relations is reasonably good at the national level, it is often very thin at regional and local levels — both in professionalism and funding. Boards and committees making decisions about communications funding can be hesitant to publicize their own good works, as if routine media relations hurt the image of self-effacing faith. Others simply don’t know how, or are afraid of the press. There are evangelical ministries, for instance, which will field calls from the news media but rarely will initiate media contact. In what some term a “fortress mentality,” the media-wary ministry will rarely volunteer potential news through press releases or news conferences.

The most serious problems in experienced religious media relations offices relate to money. “The communications budget is usually the lowest funded and the first to get cut,” said Garlinda Burton of the United Methodist News Service, based in Nashville.

In the Los Angeles Episcopal Diocese, Ruth Nicastro, retiring after 17 years as its communications director, said that her job was primarily to edit the monthly newspaper for the far-flung Southern California parishes. “We always needed a person at least half-time to deal with the outside news media, but we’ve never had that,” said Nicastro.

**LOOKING FOR MODERATION, SOPHISTICATION**

Here are some observations gleaned from the First Amendment Center’s nine-month study of religion and the news media, organized according to major faith groupings. Those quoted were in general agreement about the inadequacy of religion coverage and the ignorance of many journalists assigned to do religion stories. However, points of view diverged when interviewees were asked about coverage of their own religion or denomination. All quotes are from interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

**JUDAISM:** Generally speaking, the news media’s sensitivity toward Jewish religion and culture — fostered by the vigilance and diplomacy of the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and other Jewish agencies — is the envy of conservative Catholic and evangelical
leaders, who believe they are mistreated by the news media in ways Jewish groups never are today. Indeed, Rabbi Harvey Fields of Los Angeles said that he has rarely encountered bias against Judaism in news coverage: “In that regard, people are being somewhat careful about stereotypes.”

Nevertheless, Fields, the senior rabbi at Wilshire Boulevard Temple and past president of the Southern California Interreligious Council, lamented what he called the low level of sophistication of typical reporters and their lack of story preparation.

“By and large, most of our newspapers across the country have cut out the religion reporters or have replaced them with someone who is a novice. I’ve had calls with questions from papers or TV that are so basic that all one needed to do beforehand was to read four paragraphs out of an encyclopedia,” he said. “The religion coverage also tends to group all Jews into the same bag and does not distinguish between the various theological movements. Very often what we get is a caricature of Jewish life reflecting either the peculiarities of our right or peculiarities of our left — not a balanced view,” Fields said.

On the other hand, “a lot of bias” toward Judaism is observed by Bunie Veeder, director of broadcasting for the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. She coordinates Jewish religious programs with the three major television networks. Veeder cited stories on relations between blacks and Jews. “Black and Jewish clergy are working quietly to bring about harmony” but those efforts are not reported, she said.

Meetings of news media officials and religious representatives often are thwarted because of the rapid turnover of TV executives, she said. “We had a meeting recently with Mike Gartner, head of NBC News, and suddenly he is gone and the groundwork is lost.”

On occasion, an anti-press complaint voiced in the Jewish communities is not “true criticism,” cautioned Gunther Lawrence, a longtime publicist for Jewish organizations. “It’s often the bruised ego of someone who believed that because he’s the head of an organization he should have been profiled in the paper or quoted more in a story,” said Lawrence.

In his opinion, grassroots Jewish organizations lack media savvy. “They are shocked when the media don’t cover their events, but they don’t know when something is not news,” he said.

But when bad news happens, the Jewish community — no different from other religious groups — is divided on whether to be candid with the press. “Jewish communities are split half-and-half on putting their dirty linen out for all to see,” said Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee.

“My main concern is that religion is one of the most underreported activities in America,” said Rudin, who directs AJC interreligious activities. Except for the big papers, religion news is mostly a calendar of events on Saturdays, he observed. When Hindu-Muslim violence erupts periodically in India, “what we usually do not get, with rare exceptions, is analysis.”

“We could use a thumbnail sketch of Hinduism. I imagine there are millions of Hindus in India who are appalled at these radical actions,” he said, “but you rarely read about them.”

Catholicism: The secular press gets its share of brickbats, but the religious press is no less immune to complaints, said Bishop Edward J. O’Donnell, administrator of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. “As editor of our diocesan paper years ago,” O’Donnell said, “I had
to deal with accusations that I was not supportive of the church or that the archdiocesan paper carried negative coverage.”

But he also sees a certain deviousness in the secular media: “They tend to gobble up the rebel priest to show that the church is not united in its positions.”

However, he distinguishes between the work of general-assignment reporters and religion specialists. Among the latter, he said he was impressed with Steinfels (The New York Times), Woodward (Newsweek) and, when she was at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Pam Schaeffer. “Most priests thought that Pam was against the church, but I don’t think so,” O’Donnell said.

Bishop Raymond Boland, current chairman of the U.S. bishops communications committee, said that he advises his colleagues, “You are going to give a bad impression if you only deal with the news media in a crisis; the press will think you’re hiding from them and, by the same token, the bishop will tend to think the press is out to get him.”

Boland said that his policy is to sit down with reporters and give them his telephone number and the right to call him day or night. “But the day you quote me out of context or misquote me,” he said he tells reporters, “you lose the privilege.” Boland said he once called up a paper about an editorial cartoon he found misguided. “An editor offered me a chance to write an op-ed piece.” While he didn’t have the time, the bishop added that direct communication is a better policy than simply grumbling privately about errors.

Another prelate who has served on the U.S. bishops’ communications committee and had worked earlier on a diocesan newspaper is Bishop Francis Quinn of Sacramento. “Personally, I have no complaint about the media on religious subjects. When we understand that they are under constraints of time and space, we see that they may not report things the way a priest would,” he said.

Trust is needed on both sides. “The media have to have freedom of speech, and the church has to have freedom from inaccuracy,” he said.

Julie Asher, national editor for Catholic News Service based in Washington, said that on the issue of abortion there are some reporters who choose as church spokesmen “those people who come across as fanatics, while for the opposite side they quote more reasonable people.”

Asher said change is needed among both journalists and church leaders. Reporters have to do a better job of recognizing their biases, she said, and those who aren’t doing their homework on religion should be required to keep abreast no less than a science or business reporter must. Church leaders have to realize that controversy in the church is news and that they shouldn’t shoot the messenger — they should see it as an opportunity to present their case and hope it gets reported accurately,” she said.

Evangelical Christianity: “I don’t accept the assumption that the press is after conservatives but not the liberals,” said Robert Dugan, the Washington-based director of public affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. But Dugan does complain about the frequent selection by television news discussion shows of “evangelical” representatives who are outspoken figures far to the right, such as Jerry Falwell and Operation Rescue’s Randall Terry.

“It is one of our great frustrations that they won’t pick a reasonably balanced evangelical spokesman,” he
said while admitting NAE’s handicap of not being “celebrity-oriented.”

Likewise, Mark Coppenger, public relations director for the Southern Baptist Convention, said he wishes the news media would seek out more than just the “radioactive people” on the extreme right or left of an issue. “There are measured voices on both sides,” he said.

Coppenger also echoed a frequent complaint in Southern Baptist and evangelical circles about the indiscriminate use of the words “fundamentalist” and “religious right.” During the 1980s, a leadership group that the press tended to call fundamentalist, because of its theological and tactical characteristics, gradually won control of the denomination’s seminaries, agencies and boards, and appeared to promote a moral-social agenda nearly identical to that of the politically oriented religious right. Reporters nearly always called the opposing forces “moderates” even though they were conservatives compared to people in mainline churches.

Coppenger urges reporters to adopt the use of “conservatives” instead of “fundamentalists,” since the latter has pejorative connotations.

The Associated Press wire service stylebook indeed advises writers to use “fundamentalist” only if the group applies the term to itself. Although some writers chose to describe the opponents as moderates and conservatives, others did not abandon the word “fundamentalist” entirely because they thought it was more descriptive in certain cases. Likewise, the phrase “religious right” implies a consistent, organized agenda of political action, but a person’s stance against abortion, or for prayer in schools, or on any one agenda issue, does not merit the label “religious right.”

“In journalism, as elsewhere, ‘labels’ for people should be the most accurate descriptive words available,” said Wilmer C. Fields, one of Coppenger’s predecessors in the Nashville offices of the Southern Baptists. Fields, who identified with the denomination’s moderates, could not fault reporters for using the word “fundamentalist” in the church struggle. “When they believe, think and act like classic fundamentalists, they should not be surprised to be called fundamentalists.”

In 28 years as a press representative for the Southern Baptists, Fields said he found the greatest omissions in religion coverage were personal stories “of people translating their faith into action.” As for journalists’ attitudes, Fields said, “The vast majority of secular news personnel tried to be balanced, factual and fair-minded, especially the religion reporters.”

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., said that “the people hired by the print media who do religion reporting are very, very fair.” What riles Mouw, he said, are opinion columns on op-ed pages that betray a liberal, East Coast bias or a far-right conservative bias. Also, he complained that serious religious scholarship gets little coverage in the news media, and when it does, “it’s mostly superficial and marginal stuff, at least from the point of view of academic scholars.”
Although some conservative Christians “charge journalists with an overt conspiracy to ignore the important role of religion in American life, no such conspiracy exists,” said J. Douglas Tarpley, who chairs the journalism school at Pat Robertson’s Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va. Rather, he said, the low percentage of religion stories in the overall news mix, the small numbers of religion-beat reporters and the lack of accurate, in-depth reporting on religious issues is due to a “non-religious bias” on the part of journalism’s gatekeepers.

“Even when journalists strive to treat the public dimension of religion objectively — or at least in a fair and even-handed manner — journalists are as vulnerable as anyone else to the limiting influences of our own world views,” he said. Instead of “media bashing,” he said that the evangelical community should consider making constructive suggestions.

**Mainline Protestantism:** The once-dominant mainline Protestant churches have made less news in recent decades, and with their declining memberships they are now perceived by media merely as several religious groups among many. “The trouble is,” James Wall has observed, “mainliners are quiet.”

The once-dominant mainline Protestant churches have made less news in recent decades.

Not only that, their religious beliefs tend to be less literal than those of conservative figures and more nuanced — factors making it more difficult for journalists to report clearly. The news media gravitate to Pat Robertson and anti-abortion activists, but the Rev. Lanny Arrowsmith, a mainline minister in Tarzana, Calif., told us on his survey questionnaire, “I have yet to see an interview of a ‘pro-choice’ clergy.” The high-profile, independent conservative pastors “in no way represent the average Christian,” added United Methodist pastor David A. Schrader of Elkhart, Ind., on his survey.

Mainline Protestants tend to criticize the news media more for missing religious dimensions of many news events and for the lack of in-depth religion stories. The Rev. James E. Hazelwood of Brooklyn, N.Y., related to us that, aside from bad news and “sweet and cute” feature stories, “rarely is there coverage of truly significant events that are life-changing or have substantial depth.”

When a newsworthy issue in a mainline denomination does attract press attention, however, congregations can be just as fearful of misinterpretation as more evangelical churches. An example: Religion writers picked as the top religion news story in 1991 a task-force report on human sexuality, which called on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to approve of sexual relations between unmarried couples and homosexual couples. The report later was voted down overwhelmingly by convention delegates.

“I had a problem with church folk who wanted to keep the report from the press,” said Marj Carpenter, then-manager of the Presbyterians’ news service office. They feared distortion, she said. “When they finally realized most of the press was doing a responsible job, they calmed down,” she said, adding that there was another benefit from the furor. “Since then, we have gotten a lot more press on every subject because the secular press found out we hadn’t died.”

“In this world, image is important; ours has been ‘poor’ lately,” the Rev. Paul L. Lubold of Pittsburgh, Pa.,
a mainline Protestant minister, told us. Lubold suggested that church bodies should improve their public relations by hiring more staff members trained in that profession.

**ISLAM:** The difficulties that American Muslims have had with Islam’s depiction in the U.S. news media deserve a separate, full-scale report. In fact, we include that among our recommendations. This report tried to identify the misunderstandings between the news media and organized religion, and their respective failings, in ways that might be seen as pertinent to any faith group.

Muslims justifiably worry that the terrorist activities of groups who call themselves Muslim have colored public opinion strongly against all followers of Islam. The term “Muslim terrorist” is a non sequitur, they say, because if you are truly Muslim, you could not be a terrorist. The combination of words, while attractive for its brevity, should be replaced by longer but more accurate identifications.

Salam al-Marayati, director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles, noted that radicals calling themselves Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Christian commit violent acts in various parts of the world, too. “These movements are equally fanatic and threatening, but extremism in the Muslim world receives disproportionate alarm,” he wrote in an article for USA TODAY.

Mohammed A. Siddiqi, a professor at Western Illinois University, said the overall coverage of Islam has included notably fair pieces in The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA TODAY and Newsweek. Siddiqi said the most upsetting mistakes occur with 1) the indiscriminate use of “fundamentalist” for any dedicated Muslim, and 2) the failure to distinguish between cultural practices that are national or regional in origin and not observed by Muslims in other countries.

The New York Times was guilty of the latter mistake in a story from France dated Jan. 11, 1993, about a Gambian woman jailed for mutilating the genitals of two baby daughters. The news article said female circumcision was an “age-old Muslim ritual” that “was originally applied in Muslim countries to control women.”

Two anthropologists at Princeton University, in a published letter to the editor, wrote: “Nothing in the sacred scriptures of Islam justifies this brutal operation, nor do most Muslims practice it. It is found in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where Islam has combined with local custom, as well as in non-Muslim societies elsewhere.” Abdellah Hammoudi and Lawrence Rosen, who wrote the letter, complimented a Times column by A.M. Rosenthal which had condemned the practice as mutilation.

The arrest of suspects in the New York World Trade Center bombing in 1993 led to exploration in the news media of their possible links to a radical Islamic group. Most national news media made it clear that the New Jersey mosque in question was an atypical Islamic center. Nevertheless, Yvonne Haddad, a history professor at the University of Massachusetts asked to comment on early press treatment of the story, said in an interview with USA TODAY, “The press needs to sell stories, and Islamic terrorism sells. There are some newspapers that do it more carefully than others, but it keeps being used.”
The bombing was a big story before any suspect was arrested, and reams of copy would have been written on whomever was thought to be connected to the blast. But Haddad correctly points to the faulty generalizations that are frequently made to explain Muslim behavior. “We don’t talk about Christianity as a religion of violence because there’s a crazy man in Waco,” she said, referring to the then-concurrent standoff between federal authorities and the Branch Davidian cult.

Obviously, distinctions between mainstream and unconventional groups are important to Muslims no less than to believers in other faiths; for that reason, among others, reporters must educate themselves to know what differentiates one group from another. For instance, most responsible journalists who cover Islam’s spread among African-Americans know that the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, an outspoken militant, leads a sectarian branch called the Nation of Islam. They also know that many black Muslims in the United States have moved away from sectarian Islam into orthodox practices and have been welcomed into Islamic gatherings by foreign-born Muslims.

**Buddhists:** The Buddhist communities in America — except in Hawaii where they make up more than a quarter of the population — have a disadvantage in media relations because so many of their religious leaders have difficulty with the English language. Thus, when a Vietnamese Buddhist group attempting to build a temple is confronted by vocal neighbors who go to the press with their complaints, news reporters should work hard to tell the Buddhists’ side of the story, said Alfred Bloom, dean of the Berkeley-based Institute for Buddhist Studies in California. Bloom, who was a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School in 1992-93, said, “It will take an effort by the media to tell both sides because many Buddhist leaders are not articulate in English.”

A member of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Japanese Buddhism, Bloom echoed a complaint also heard concerning the overseas coverage of that faith. “Buddhism gets a bad rap,” Bloom said, when foreign correspondents report that a Japanese belief, such as opposition to human organ transplants, is a tenet of Buddhism.

“Research by the writer would find that this is Japanese folk belief that has weaved its way into Japanese Buddhism,” he said. “It needs to be qualified as something peculiar to a particular country. A scholar should be interviewed as to what is common to Buddhism everywhere.”

Bloom said that the press has given a fair presentation in reporting on Buddhism in the United States. He cited positive articles by Don Lattin of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and by Joan Connell when she covered religion and ethics for the *San Jose Mercury News*, as well as articles in *The New York Times*.

In Los Angeles, however, the Venerable Havanpola Ratanasara, president of the American Buddhist Congress, a national group of 60 affiliated groups, said he has been disappointed recently in the lack of news media attention to Buddhism and interfaith activities.

“The *San Diego Union-Tribune* asked me about the Buddhist community’s feelings before and after the Rodney King beating trial, and I sometimes get calls from Chicago, New York and other places, but not from the Los Angeles news media,” said Ratanasara, who is also the longtime president of the Buddhist Sangha.
Council of Southern California. Moreover, Ratanasara declared that one of the greatest achievements after the Los Angeles rioting in the spring of 1992 was the creation of an interfaith coalition working toward rebuilding the city, but the program has received little attention from the news media.

“Something is lacking; I don’t know what it is,” he said.

**Non-believers:** Believe it or not, people who call themselves agnostics, atheists, secular humanists or some variation are not well-represented in news stories either. As author Herbert Gans has noted, the news media tend to treat atheists as extremists. Another problem faced by organized non-believers is similar to that of numerically small denominations — they don’t represent many dues-paying members. But those who say “none” for religion in national surveys represent nearly 10% of the population and as much as 20% in parts of the West Coast.

“Atheists have as much of an ideology as religious groups, and I think they frankly don’t get their viewpoint reported enough,” said Judith Buddenbaum, a professor at Colorado State University.

Some stories quote conservative Christians as critical of atheists and secular humanists but do not seek out a non-believer to reply, she said.

The 15-year-old Freedom from Religion Foundation, based in Madison, Wis., has pointed out in recent years how often survivors of catastrophes are quoted about God sparing them.

“It’s become cliché journalism, but it is also offensive to thinking people because it says that God spared me but killed everyone else,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, editor of the foundation’s newspaper. Like the American Atheists, based in Austin, Texas, the small (3,200 supporting members nationwide) foundation focuses on church-state separation issues and education about non-religious views.

Gaylor said that the news media have done a good job in reporting cases of child molestation and sexual abuse by clergy. “The press and electronic media can take bows on those stories,” she said. Nevertheless, she said, from the foundation’s viewpoint, organized religion receives an enormous amount of free publicity in newspapers.

Concurring is Paul Kurtz of Buffalo, N. Y., editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine and co-president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. “The skeptical position is expressed by many scientists and leading U.S. intellectuals, and that position is not really heard,” Kurtz said.

He has appeared on radio and television discussion shows about paranormal beliefs or other fringe movements, but as the token skeptic he is usually outnumbered, he said. The news media, Kurtz contended in an interview, “are fearful of attacking the sacred cows of society, and fearful of complaints or economic repercussions.”

**Fear of giving offense**

The journalist’s dread of wrathful readers and viewers is real, especially at a small publication. An editor for a small newspaper who responded to our questionnaire said that “the phone didn’t stop ringing for four weeks” after his paper reported on church leaders who had abused a counselor. Walter Friedenberg, retired editor of
The (Santa Fe) New Mexican, said, “The news is timid in covering religion for fear of offending readers.”

Journalists rarely admit to such fears, but they do worry about making mistakes. This theme, voiced by many analysts, was summarized neatly by Bill Moyers: “Mainstream journalists mostly ignore religion because they don’t understand it and because they are worried about misinterpreting it. They do know it’s a subjective series of subcultures for which there is no common language. It’s the Tower of Babel to a mainstream journalist — everybody’s speaking in tongues. So the problem is that religious people, whose vocabularies are totally subjective and whose experiences are uniquely personal, are the subjects of reportage by the uninitiated.

“I think that in our hearts most working journalists know that religion is a powerful force in American life. The problem with religion is not that journalists don’t think it has clout, but that they know that unlike organized labor, it is a disorganized phenomenon. By its very nature, religion in America is deeply pluralistic, sectional and particularistic.”

That makes religion coverage a particularly difficult task. The standard story elements of power and authority are often missing; or they tend to be intangible and elusive, and they require expertise for cogent description. The expertise not only has to be present on the news side, it has to be articulated well on the religious side.

This problem was perceptively posed by Kenneth Briggs, an ordained Methodist elder and former religion editor of The New York Times, in his contribution to the book Reporting Religion:

If religion is increasingly a subjective experience, ineffable, private, and non-translatable, then how is it to be captured by the busy reporter? If religion no longer provides the paradigms for understanding the meaning of life, then how important can it be? It becomes a secondary effect rather than a primary cause. These are questions that indirectly underlie the conscious grappling that goes on in the newsroom. We cannot figure out where religion belongs in a world in which the religious metaphors have been displaced at the center of public life, not by conspiratorial forces, as some would have us believe, but through the momentum of the secular mentality. [Italics added.] The religion reporter and the city editor cannot be expected to make up for this loss or to be less confused than anyone else who stops to think about the issue for a moment or two. Reporting does reflect the widespread quandary about the place of religion. It cannot by itself either put Humpty Dumpty back together again or pretend he never slipped off the wall in the first place.
Our national survey of journalists and clergy in the winter of 1992-93 measured a bone-chilling difference of opinion over whether news coverage is slanted against religion.

A national sampling of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers declared emphatically that news about religion is “unfairly negative” and “biased,” but the majority of editors and religion writers surveyed denied the characterization.

In questionnaires returned by more than half of nearly 1,700 clergy and journalists, other contrasting viewpoints stood out:

- Clergy think that religion reporting is “too sensational” and should include more inspiring stories of faith and hope. Journalists disagree strongly with the first point, but many are willing to concede the second.
- Nearly 8 of 10 journalists believe society has “benefited greatly from news of erring televangelists, child-molesting priests and harmful sects.” The clergy were not so sure: Although mainline Protestant ministers agreed by a 5-3 margin, Catholic priests were evenly divided and evangelical/fundamentalist pastors disagreed 5-3.
- Nearly 60% of the clergy said writers covering religion news should be “active in a religion,” but only 20% of journalists agreed with them. On this point, however, religion writers apparently are not saying they are inactive — only that religious activity should not be a requirement of the job. In fact, the survey revealed that three-quarters of the religion newswriters surveyed said faith is “very important” in their lives and fewer than 5% claimed to identify with no religion. About 72% of the editors said that religion was important in their lives, 35% calling it “very important” and another 37% saying it was “somewhat important.”

The latter findings should lay to rest the common perception that journalists are overwhelmingly irreligious skeptics, a depiction derived from studies of New York and Washington-based journalists — “the media elite” — by S. Robert Lichter and colleagues. Moreover, those who regularly cover religion appear to be more religious than the public at large. That should not be surprising. And it supports earlier appraisals of
religion writers’ religiosity by researchers Hynds and Buddenbaum. Details of previous research will be discussed later in this report.

At the same time, other survey answers and open-ended comments on the questionnaire show that newsroom discomfort with religion is still considered a problem by many journalists, regardless of how much religion may matter to them personally.

**Methodology**

The First Amendment Center survey was designed, analyzed and interpreted by Robert O. Wyatt, professor of journalism and director of the Office of Communication Research at Middle Tennessee State University. Five pages of questions and a cover letter were mailed to 988 clergy, 550 members of the Associated Press Managing Editors organization and 151 members of the Religion Newswriters Association.

The response rate was unusually high, apparently indicating strong feelings on the subject and the study’s timeliness. About 54% (529) of the clergy and 67% (99) of the religion writers returned usable questionnaires. The response rate was 48% (266) for the editors.

Virtually all active reporters on the Religion Newswriters Association roster were mailed questionnaires. The RNA includes writers specializing in religion coverage for the secular press (newspapers, newsmagazines, wire services and free-lance). No broadcasters are members. Most editors, whose names were chosen at random, were decision-making executives at newspapers in small to mid-size cities, whereas the religion writers were mostly working in mid-size to large cities.

The names of clergy were selected at random from rosters of six denominations: Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Assemblies of God and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Those choices were made in consultation with Dr. Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Some smaller religious groups, whose impact in the survey would have been statistically insignificant, were included in interviews for this study.

The ratio of Catholic to Protestant clergy was chosen to reflect the relative size of their constituencies in the United States. The five other denominations were chosen to approximate the liberal-conservative balance in non-Catholic Christianity. Then, the number of clergy selected from each denomination was weighted according to the relative membership of each church body, i.e., 304 Southern Baptist clergy compared to 178 United Methodist clergy. Twelve surveys to clergy were undeliverable due to wrong addresses.

In order to distinguish themselves according to theological/cultural/social perspectives, clergy as well as journalists were asked to circle the religious category “to which they belonged or most closely identified.” Their choices were:

- Roman Catholic - 25.9%
- Mainline Protestant - 42.8%
- Evangelical Christian - 25.8%
- Fundamentalist Christian - 4.8%
A dozen clergy either skipped the question or found the choices inadequate. One person checked “non-believer or humanist.”

**Details of the Findings**

The clergy tended to rate general news coverage (of all subjects) “fair to good” in five media: newspapers, newsmagazines and television at the national level, and newspapers and television at the local level. When asked about religion coverage by those same media, the rating was mostly fair to poor. Asked about coverage of “your religion” in those news media, the clergy ranked them closer to poor.

Survey research consultant Wyatt said the assessment followed a predictable trend in polling. “The closer it comes to home — to things you know something about — the less favorably you respond,” Wyatt said.

The ordained ministry is not the only profession unhappy with news coverage of their field. Medical doctors and business executives surveyed during the same time period about news media coverage indicated general agreement that coverage is biased and reporters often are not very knowledgeable, said Wyatt, who coordinated the three studies for the First Amendment Center. Some differences did emerge, however. “While doctors feel coverage has improved, executives feel that it has remained about the same, and clergy feel that it has declined in quality,” Wyatt said.

“It should surprise journalists also that the clergy rate their local newspaper only slightly better than local television in coverage of religion in general and of their own faith group,” Wyatt said.

Most clergy gave both local media “fair,” whereas the journalists ranked local TV “poor” and their own paper “fair to good.” Religion writers especially thought their newspapers did a much better job than television. Editors tended to fall somewhere between the writers’ and clergy’s opinions in these evaluations.

“On some of the questions, the editors took a halfway position between the contrasting views of religion writers and clergy,” Wyatt said.

Among the clergy, the mainline Protestants usually took more moderate positions, as might be expected because of their denominations’ liberal-to-moderate stances on religious and social issues. That ideological tendency was evident on the first of the survey’s 21 statements seeking agreement or disagreement (or neutral stance): “Most religion coverage today is biased against ministers and organized religion.”

About 58% of the mainline ministers agreed either strongly or somewhat with that statement. About 70% of the Catholic priests agreed, but 91% of the conservative Christians, identifying themselves as either evangelicals or fundamentalists, concurred. (Respondents could also choose to “neither agree nor disagree,” and on this question, 23% of the mainline clergy were undecided. Thus, although 58% does not seem like a high proportion of mainline clergy detecting bias in most religion coverage, only 19% disagreed — indicating that Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans were three times as likely to say most news coverage of religion was biased as would say it was unbiased.)

By contrast, about 62% of the journalists disagreed with the statement on bias, including “strong” disagreement by 37% of the religion writers and 42% of the editors. Twenty percent of the journalists were unsure. Only 18% of the journalists agreed that most religion coverage was biased — leaving the ratio at more than 3-to-1 denying that bias pervades religion reporting.
Comments by clergy on the questionnaires underscored their displeasure with religious news coverage.

“A ‘point of view’ comes through strongly, especially when it comes to moral issues such as abortion,” commented Father Warren L. Murphy of Fort Worth, Texas, who added, “One wonders whatever happened to objectivity.”

An evangelical pastor remarked, “I believe the media [are] looking for any opportunity they can find to discredit Christians.”

From the newspaper point of view, however, the primary problem “is the perception, on the part of conservative denominations, that anything short of cheerleading for them is somehow satanic,” said Dick Hodgson, an editor at the Hugo (Okla.) Daily News.

“I don’t see bias as a major problem in religion coverage,” commented Dave Zweifel, an editor at The Capital Times in Madison, Wis. “Rather, I see lack of coverage as the big problem.”

Similar differences between clergy and journalists appeared when they were asked whether most news of religion gives an “unfairly negative picture” of clergy, churches and faith. More than two-thirds of the clergy said yes; the same proportion of writers and editors said no. Three-quarters of the clergy agreed with the statement that most journalists “introduce their own selective perspective” in religion stories rather than reporting objectively. More than half of the journalists disagreed, though 28.5% agreed.

Sensationalism also taints religion coverage, said nearly 60% of the clergy. “The non-sensational religious news is not newsworthy, and the sensational is usually bad,” lamented the Rev. Wil Nuckolls of Fair Oaks, Calif.

Nearly 90% of the writers and editors disagreed with the idea that religion news was too sensational.

Given these differing viewpoints, have relations between the clergy and news reporters worsened over the last five years? Nearly 40% of both groups were unsure, but another 50% of the clergy said “yes,” whereas 43% of the journalists said “no.”

A Catholic priest complained that “the reporting of priests involved in sexual offenses has been more pornographic and explicit than anything I have ever read or heard in the media over the years.”

A Baptist minister in Oklahoma said, “I feel frustrated to be painted as out of touch with reality.”

Some editors also complained about religious-news coverage, especially those with strong religious beliefs. “The national media [are] ignoring the positive social contributions of evangelical Christianity while sensationalizing its eccentric figures,” commented Mike Sullivan, managing editor of The Daily Citizen in Urbana, Ohio.

A few clergy praised religion reporting. Lutheran minister Robert C. Seltz of Milford, Mich., lauded the work of David Crumm, religion writer for the Detroit Free Press. “He’s knowledgeable, thorough, fair, puts the best light on one’s comments, does great in-depth reports [including] a recent one on religion and racism in Detroit,” Seltz said. “He gives religion reporting a good name.”

Moreover, some editors in small cities claimed that their relations with local clergy have gone well, though some of the reasons are attributed to the Saturday church service.
page “ghetto” that many journalists and religionists consider patronizing.

“We not only publish a mountain of information about activities at local churches, we publish a weekly column by area ministers week after week,” said an editor at a paper with under 50,000 circulation.

**CONTENTIOUS ISSUES**

Aside from church announcements and light feature stories, however, many spot news and major-trend stories in religion have a contentious edge deriving from unsettling events, according to religion reporters. A full 80% of those writers agreed that “antagonism between the news media and religion is inevitable because news often deals with change, unsolved problems and divisive issues.” Nearly 55% of the editors concurred. The clergy were evenly split.

Many clerics don’t want church leadership to be handled with kid gloves. They agreed with journalists that “the news media should be more aggressive in their reporting about religious leaders.” About 71% of the priests and 80% of mainline ministers agreed, while only 58% of the conservative clergy agreed.

(The public also has said that religious leaders should be scrutinized by the news media. A 1985 Los Angeles Times poll asked people nationwide if the news media should be more or less critical in reporting about churches and their officials. About 16% said “more critical,” 54% said “continue as they are now,” while only 21% said “less critical.” In 1981, the Times poll used the word “aggressive” rather than “critical” in a similar question. Only 17% said news organizations should be “less aggressive,” and twice that percentage said the news media should be “more aggressive” in reporting on religious institutions.)

“For too long religious leaders were treated too gently,” said Marie Rohde, religion writer for *The Milwaukee Journal*. “We are now doing our jobs and reporting on them and their institutions just as we report on the rest of society.”

It may be understandable, therefore, that both religion writers and clergy tend to agree that most religion reporting does not give a positive view of clergy and religious institutions. But didn’t most writers (72%) heavily reject another survey suggestion that most religion news painted “an unfairly negative picture” of organized religion? Yes, but the key word there is “unfairly.” They know that a positive view may not emerge on balance, but they don’t think it’s an unfairly negative picture.

The journalists conceded on other points that all is not well in religion coverage. For instance, they agreed with the statement that “the biggest problem with religion reporting is that it only tells a small part of the whole story.” Clergy strongly concurred.

Ex-UPI reporter Wesley Pippert, in his book on journalism ethics, has expressed what most journalists concede. “The reading public must recognize that, given individual frailties and institutional flaws, a single story is unlikely to present the whole truth,” he wrote, suggesting that readers should rely on more than one source for news.

When news stories are inaccurate, the journalists and clergy both agreed that it is not usually the clergy’s fault for communicating poorly with reporters.
In the same vein, more writers and editors tended to agree than disagree with the following statements, which again won larger majorities among the clergy:

- Publicity-seeking clergy and religious personalities receive too much attention from the news media.
- The news media cover civil unrest and racial disturbances well but ignore or downplay religious efforts to reconcile factions and ease strife.
- Most reporters who cover religion are not well enough informed to cover religion news.
- Religion is often shortchanged in news coverage because journalists are skeptics or are not religious themselves.

It should be noted that the last two statements refer to journalists in general, not to those on a religion-news beat. Most religion reporters in the survey did not think that they themselves were so uninformed or irreligious. For example, about 70% of the religion writers agreed with a statement that those “who cover religion regularly have a good working knowledge of religion.” Editors tended to agree, but by a small margin.

Religious, but at arm’s length

Few of the religion writers and newspaper editors surveyed proved to be skeptics and non-believers, as noted earlier. The level of religion’s importance to these editors nearly matched the overall response of print and broadcast journalists (reporters as well as editors) in the Weaver-Wilhoit 1992 survey, which found 37.5% saying religion was very important and 34.3% saying somewhat important.

The much-cited Lichter-Rothman study in 1980 of media-elite journalists in the Northeast noted that exactly half the newsmen said “none” when asked: “What is your current religion?” But in our survey only 4% of the religion writers and 9% of the editors fell into the “none” category (a category which runs to about 10% in most polls of the general public).

No journalist called himself or herself a “fundamentalist Christian.” Religion writer self-identifications were as follows: Mainline Protestant 50%, Roman Catholic 21%, evangelical 14%, Jewish 5%, other 6%, non-believer/humanist 4%. Editors were: Mainline Protestant 52%, Roman Catholic 23%, evangelical 5%, Jewish 6%, other 5%, non-believer/humanist 9%.

Two researchers who independently surveyed religion writers in 1985 also found the percentage of writers claiming religious identification to be high. Ernest C. Hynds of the University of Georgia surveyed religion specialists at papers with at least 100,000 circulation and found that 78% indicated membership in a church, synagogue or other religious body. Less than 10% gave no religious identification.

Judith M. Buddenbaum of Colorado State University, who mailed questions to newspapers large and small, found only 10% claimed no religious affiliation. Of those who identified with a religious group, 35% said they were “very active” and 39% said “somewhat active.”
At the larger papers, the “very active” in their faith rose to 55%, she said. To reiterate: 75% of the religion writers in our 1992-93 survey said religion was “very important” in their lives, and 72% of the editors said religion was either very important or somewhat important to them.

However, it is one thing to say that faith is personally important and another to be interested in others’ beliefs or in religion in general. Anecdotal evidence from religion writers indicates that many editors and general-assignment reporters bear antipathy toward religion.

“It remains critical that most editors and reporters have little interest in, or knowledge of, religion,” said Terry Mattingly, formerly religion writer at the Rocky Mountain News. “You cannot cover a story that you do not know, or care that it exists.”

On the other hand, too much spiritual involvement can spell trouble. Through the years, reporters specializing in religion news have worried about personal beliefs and activities compromising their news judgment. Some religion writers are also ordained ministers who either have cut ties to their denominations or have made it clear that they work strictly as journalists. Many religion writers who are lay members consider it a conflict of interest if they serve on church boards or take a prominent part in denominational activity.

“[Religion] reporters themselves should not be heavily involved in a particular religion — the bias is usually obvious,” explained Michelle Bearden, former religion writer for the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times.

Thus, it may not be surprising that only 17% of the writers and the editors agreed with the statement that: “Reporters who cover religion regularly should be active in a religion.”

A common complaint on the beat is that some clergy who share the same faith expect special consideration. “They then assume I will use my position as a religion editor and reporter to promote Christianity, but of course I cannot do that (even though my faith is very important to me),” said one writer on her questionnaire.

Russell Chandler, who retired in 1991 after 17 years on the Los Angeles Times religion beat to write a series of books, said in an interview that he usually tried to deflect questions about his own faith when he interviewed people for news stories. He said that in a social setting or other circumstances he might not mind, but as a news professional it was not appropriate.

“What I would take umbrage with was the idea that you have to pass this test in order to be trusted with the information,” he said. “It also smacks of them wanting you to do them a favor because you are ‘one of us,’” Chandler said.

Occasionally, clerics try to lay some guilt on the religious journalist. Mary Beth Murphy, religion writer at the Milwaukee Sentinel and a Catholic parishioner, said the diocese was upset over a series of stories on a priest’s resignation amid parental complaints at a high-profile Catholic parish.

“The associate pastor wrote a letter to me at my home, saying how upset he was over the stories and
saying that, as a Catholic, I had failed in my duty,” she said in an interview. “He apologized after I explained that my job is to report as accurately and as balanced as possible, and that I’m not there to uphold or shield the church.”

**More education would help**

The Lichter-Rothman survey characterized the news media as better-educated than the public at large, implying that this was one more sign of the elitism that separated journalism from its audience. Yet a major criticism of religion coverage — at least from the clergy, who are also the most-quoted sources for religion news — is that journalists don’t know the subject well enough to do a credible job.

“Their reporting is often an insult to those who are fortunate to have a good education,” commented Pastor M. Ronald Farnell of Tampa, Fla.

As our survey results illustrated, educational requirements are higher for the ordained ministry than for journalism. Advanced degrees were held by 88% of the mainline ministers, 80% of the priests and 64% of the conservative clergy. By comparison, 36% of the religion writers in the survey had at least a master’s degree — twice the percentage of editors with advanced degrees. The minimum requirement in journalism is usually a bachelor’s degree, and 90% or better of the writers and editors reached that level. Yet, since many religion writers came into that news beat by chance rather than by plan, it is not surprising that nearly 60% of the religion writers surveyed said that they had no formal training in religious studies.

A full 76% of the religion writers said that studies in religion are helpful for covering the religion beat; another 14% said they are essential to the job. Only 10% of the religion writers said religious studies are not necessary. As noted before, the overwhelming majority of religion writers felt they and their colleagues “had a good working knowledge of religion” attained through education and/or experience. But most still believed formal studies could improve their skills.

“Politics is difficult to cover objectively because we have several parties with blurred lines of distinction,” said Doug Mendenhall, managing editor of *The Decatur (Ala.) Daily*. “Religious reporting is a hundredfold more difficult for the same reason, and because it is such an emotional issue for most people. It takes as much specialized knowledge as science and medical reporting.”

The religion beat in the secular press, sometimes vacant during a company’s hiring freeze and sometimes handled by a reporter who juggles it with other duties, is struggling for recognition as a necessary part of the news staff, writers say.

“We don’t send someone who doesn’t understand baseball to report on a game,” said Gayda Hollnagel, religion writer for the *La Crosse (Wis.) Tribune*. “Yet we constantly send ignorant or unskilled reporters to cover complicated religion stories. No wonder the clergy are frightened.”

**Religion’s influence waning?**

The perceived power and influence of religion in American life no doubt affects the weight given to the subject by news executives. Gallup pollsters have found in recent years that more people think religion is losing influence in America than think it’s gaining influence — the ratio was 55% to 36% in 1991. Our survey divided the question in two, asking first whether religion was gaining or losing influence in individual lives and, second, whether it was gaining or losing in public affairs.
Respondents could also say “neither gaining nor losing.” Many journalists were sanguine about religion influencing individual lives. About 46% said religion was gaining, compared to 31% judging it to be losing influence. But by a 2-1 margin, the clergy said faith is declining in personal influence (57%) rather than gaining (27%).

“The consumer-oriented and pleasure-seeking emphasis tends to redefine life in society and individuals’ lives apart from a God-centered or religiously based perspective,” said an urban-based Catholic priest in his 40s.

Consistent with assessments by religious scholars and church leaders, 75% of the clergy said religion was losing influence in public affairs while only 10% saw it gaining. News people agreed, but not so strongly. About 45% of the journalists said it was losing influence and 28% saw an increase.

Clergy were also pessimistic about religion’s influence, compared to the news media. Nearly 80% of the priests and ministers agreed with a statement that the news media have “a greater influence on the way people think and act today” than religion does. One-third of the religion writers and editors agreed, but one-half disagreed.

It’s hard to discount pastors’ discouragement with the state of institutional Christianity, since the clergy are close to the situation. But how do we explain journalists’ rosier view of religion in America? It may be that reporters and editors are out of touch. It may also be that journalists are thinking of the influence of religion in broader terms than church life. Otherwise, how to explain survey findings that 69% of the writers and editors believe religion is either gaining or maintaining the same level of influence on individual lives?

**Covering more than organized religion**

Several editors said news coverage of religion should not rely on official church pronouncements and decisions.

“Religion reporting should be for the whole readership and not serve as a newsletter for the faithful,” said Marion D. Gregory, an editor at The (Raleigh) News & Observer. “There is very little analytical coverage that looks at trends and movements within religions and denominations and how these trends influence or are reflected in society,” she said.

Another editor, who identified herself as a “humanist” but declined to give her name, said: “The number of people who believe in God but prefer not to belong to an organized religion is growing. But these people are not recognized in the media or are portrayed as wacky. We have not left behind our belief in a higher power, or God. The mainstream media — including my own — ignores us because the established religious community considers us sinners.”

Robert D. Utter, president and editor of The Westerly Sun in Rhode Island, said that religion news coverage is limited to church business and the aberrations within organized religion. “But when it comes to covering spirituality in America, the mass media fall down badly because so many journalists are spiritual skeptics,” Utter said. “They do not believe in a god. They discount all spiritual or psychic phenomena as impossible and ridiculous.”
Father Pete Byrne of Seattle suggested on his survey form that too much religion reporting focuses on the institutional church and not enough on moral issues of justice.

“War, exploitation, sexual harassment, narcotics, lack of educational opportunity and racial bias are religious issues,” the priest said. “The media should probably spend less time reporting on ‘religion’ and raise questions about the human issues that clergy and religion communities should be doing something about,” he said.
This study has benefited from journalism research focusing on religion news performance in the press or on television. Likewise, special studies on how the Catholic Church, evangelical Christians and other groups fare in the news have informed our own research. One corrective step is in order, however.

Religious critics of news media frequently cite the 1980 Lichter-Rothman survey of journalists in which the religious findings were incidental, but eye-catching. That has been lamentable, because the study has been quoted and misquoted to characterize the overwhelming majority of U.S. journalists as irreligious people, thus allegedly explaining the biased reporting of religion. Our survey and others done since 1980 emphatically show that this is not the case.

Misinterpretations of Lichter-Rothman show up repeatedly in religious circles — in fact, twice in the Jan. 11, 1993, issue of Christianity Today. The evangelical magazine, in an editorial critical of religious news coverage, observed: “Studies have shown that news journalists are among the least churched, least religiously informed groups in the United States.” A news article in the same issue about a meeting of Christian journalists said, “Surveys show that 86% of the journalists in a typical newsroom seldom or never attend a church or synagogue.”

The First Amendment Center survey sharply disputes this interpretation of the 1980 findings reported by S. Robert Lichter of George Washington University and Stanley Rothman of Smith College and shows they hold limited potential for explaining the problems engendered by inadequate or unfair religion-news coverage.

The Lichter-Rothman study was organized thus: In order to compare journalists’ answers on political, economic and social issues with those of corporate business executives, the two researchers interviewed 240 journalists in various positions at 10 top news media —three newspapers, three newsmagazines and four television networks based either in New York or Washington (The New York Times, Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, and news departments at CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS).

Several of their findings confirmed suspicions of religious critics. Half of the journalists said they had no religious affiliation, and 86% said they seldom or never attended religious services. (At that time, 68% of Americans said they were church or synagogue members, and 41% had attended a religious service in the last week.) Ninety percent of the journalists favored the right of women to decide on abortion. Exactly 75%
disagreed with a statement saying that homosexuality was wrong, and 54% did not regard adultery as wrong. Asked about extramarital affairs, only 15% “strongly agreed” that such acts were immoral.

“Thus, members of the media elite emerge as strong supporters of sexual freedom, and as natural opponents of groups like the Moral Majority,” said the political-scientist authors, joined by sociologist Linda S. Lichter, in their book The Media Elite. The authors aptly described the East Coast journalists as employees of “America’s most influential media outlets.” But they also strongly implied that they reflected a pervasive, countrywide “media elite.”

In contrast, our study found that 72% of the 266 editors responding nationwide said that religion was important in their lives, and three-fourths of the religion newswriters surveyed said that faith is “very important” in their lives. Only 9% of the editors and 4% of the religion writers said “none” for religion.

Two Indiana University journalism professors also disputed the pervasiveness of this “media elite” influence in their book The American Journalist, which was based on their national telephone survey in 1982-83 of more than 1,400 journalists at newspapers, broadcast outlets, newsmagazines and wire services. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit said it was “questionable” how much influence the prestigious news outlets exerted over hundreds of smaller news organizations around the country.

“Certainly with regard to local and regional news, the influence of these media ‘elites’ is likely to be minimal or nonexistent,” Weaver and Wilhoit wrote. “We also find a slight left-leaning tendency among our national sample of U.S. journalists, but it is much less pronounced than that found in Lichter and Rothman’s sample of Northeastern elite journalists.”

Weaver and Wilhoit did not ask the newspeople to name their present religion in 1982 — or in 1992 when they did a comparative survey. Fortunately, in 1992 they added this question: “How important is religion or religious belief to you?” The answers: 72% said it was important; very important, 37.5%; somewhat important, 34.3%; not very important, 17.5%, and not at all important, 10.7%. Gallup pollsters, posing a similar question in 1990, found that 58% of Americans said religion was “very important” in their lives.

Indeed, such figures confirm the general impression that newspeople tend to be less devout than the general public. Nevertheless, it may surprise some critics, who are aware that skepticism is considered a reporting virtue, that 72% of the journalists said that religion holds at least some importance in their lives — the same number we found in our study.

Time magazine religion writer Richard Ostling told us in an interview that he thought the Lichter-Rothman survey of 1980, with its figures showing 50% of New York and Washington newspeople claiming no religion, “fairly reflected the mindset in those news outlets — atmospherically it sounded right to me. It’s just that, when you go across the country, I think reporters and editors reflect the local communities.”

Columbia University sociologist Herbert J. Gans made a broad attack on the usefulness of the Lichter-Rothman survey in The Columbia Journalism Review. Gans
said the Lichter-Rothman study operated from an unstated, conservative political stance. By comparing journalists to corporate business managers and to Middle Americans, Gans said that Lichter and Rothman were able to justify their conclusion that journalists were irreligious and anti-bourgeois, cosmopolitan outsiders.

Gans contended that the news is mainly shaped by technical considerations such as space in the newspaper and time on broadcasts, deadlines, the number of competing stories and available reporters.

"While I found that journalists, like everyone else, have values, the two that matter most in the newsroom are getting the story and getting it better and faster than their prime competitors — both among their colleagues and at rival news media," Gans said. One trait in journalism that antagonizes people in authority, Gans added, is "neither liberal nor conservative but reformist, reflecting journalism’s long adherence to good-government Progressivism. Thus, when the news is about unusually high oil-company profits, or about corruption in antipoverty programs, the journalists are being neither conservative nor liberal in their news judgment but are expressing the reform values of their profession."

Lichter and his co-authors put it slightly differently. A fair number of journalists, they contended, “desire to exert moral power, as patrons of outsiders and victims with whom they identify, against traditional restrictions and institutional authority.” This motivation, they said, conflicts with another self-image of journalists, that of detached observers.

**THE LICHTER REPORT ON CATHOLICISM**

Lichter and colleagues conducted a substantial study released in 1991, “Media Coverage of the Catholic Church,” which was incorporated into a 1993 book *Anti-Catholicism in the Media, an Examination of Whether Elite News Organizations Are Biased Against the Church*. The study was not convincing in its sharpest criticisms, but it does articulate well what traditional Catholics dislike about news coverage of Catholic controversies.

In the case of religion writers, most are personally quite religious.

It was disappointing to see that the figures from the 1980 survey of the New York-Washington “media elite” were cited as background information. Though the authors did not claim that the lack of religious belief and practice was a key to understanding Catholicism’s bad press, the data was cited as if to offer an explanation. And many religious people have seized upon that as an explanation. However, the Catholic Church study by Lichter makes no note of the key role of religion writers in the stories analyzed by that study. In the case of religion writers, most are personally quite religious.

The study was funded by the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Lichter’s Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., looked at stories about the Catholic Church during three five-year periods between 1964 and 1988. The researchers studied every *Time* magazine article on the Catholic Church, all CBS Evening News broadcasts except for the ’60s (for which publicly accessible videotapes were unavailable), and a sampling of 10% and 20% of articles on that subject in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* respectively — 1,876 news items in all.
On contentious issues such as sexual morality and church authority, which the report said dominated the coverage, “the church came out on the losing side” in terms of sources quoted in opposing or supporting Catholic teachings. Those issues included birth control, clerical celibacy, academic freedom, and the role of women and minorities in the church. On stories about ecumenical relations and its anti-war position, the church often fared well, but favorable presentations of church doctrine and policies were outweighed by unfavorable news accounts, the report said.

“The result was a long-running media drama that pitted a hidebound institutional hierarchy against reformers from within and without,” said the report. “This portrayal was reinforced by the language used to describe the church. The descriptive terms most frequently applied to the church emphasized its conservative theology, authoritarian forms of control, and anachronistic approach to contemporary society.”

Of the four media outlets studied, CBS-TV focused most heavily on the Pope and least on social conflicts involving the church. “By contrast, Time magazine paid the most attention to dissidents and focused most heavily on conflict, featured the most frequent use of judgmental language, and printed a majority of opinions opposed to the church on every issue except ecumenism,” the report said.

Summarizing the report’s findings for the Los Angeles Times, Lichter alleged that changing journalistic styles affected the news picture of the church.

The more confrontational and negative tone of recent news coverage may have less to do with the media’s image of the church than with changes in journalism. Journalistic standards have shifted away from the goal of neutral, factual, dispassionate reportage to a more interpretive, critical and socially engaged approach. Because the political culture of major-media journalism is strongly secular and egalitarian, these tendencies have probably colored the tone of news coverage. Ultimately, journalists are less fact collectors than storytellers.

Over the years, plots have focused on bureaucratic infighting, political intrigues, styles of leadership, policy disputes and the battle for public opinion. Increasingly, the story line revolves around a beleaguered authority struggling to enforce its traditions and decrees on a reluctant constituency. When journalists reduce religion to politics, they tend to favor the dissidents, reformers and underdogs who engage their own political sympathies. The result is a picture that is not only one-sided but also one-dimensional. It is a tale filled with the sound and fury of partisan struggle but emptied of its spiritual significance. Reporters need not be believers to get religious stories right, but a nation of believers deserves better of its religious news.
REACTION PRO AND CON

Reaction to the report in Catholic circles was mixed. The study was proof that “there is anti-Catholic bias in the news media,” claimed a fund-raising letter of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Co-sponsor of the research project, the league is an independent organization that functions somewhat like the Jewish B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League. Thanks to the study, “we are finally able to objectively identify — and quantify — anti-Catholicism in America’s news media,” the letter said.

A spokesman for the other sponsor, the Knights of Columbus, was more cautious. The study reveals “not old-fashioned anti-Catholicism,” but rather the tendency of “some media to take sides in internal conflicts in the Catholic Church,” said Russell Shaw, public relations director for the Catholic fraternal order. Shaw for many years headed the news information office for the U.S. Catholic bishops in Washington.

“The U.S. media do an admirable job in many ways,” Shaw said. “But as ‘Media Coverage of the Catholic Church’ makes clear, when it comes to Catholicism, their ideological blinders prevent them from measuring up to their own professional standards.”

The Jesuit magazine America said that the secular media rely too heavily on alienated Catholics for comments, as did the National Catholic Register. “We can’t possibly hope to stop ‘Catholic bashing’ in the press until we Catholics stop passing them the ammunition,” the newspaper said.

However, some Catholic journalists advised against interpreting the Lichter report as proof of anti-Catholic bias. “Too many well-intentioned church people continue to insist the media are out to get them,” wrote Ed Wojcicki, editor of the Catholic Times, the diocesan paper of Springfield, Ill. “Negativity is not proof of bias,” Wojcicki said. “My own experience tells me that much media bashing is born of ignorance.”

Monsignor George G. Higgins, a national columnist widely published in the Catholic press, speculated that a follow-up study would find that coverage of Catholic news was no better or worse than the coverage of religion news in general, except for evangelicals, who he said had the most reason to complain. “I would also expect such a follow-up study to reveal that ignorance and a certain sense of secular elitism, rather than ‘hatred’ of religion, is the main cause of whatever bias can be demonstrated in the media’s coverage of religious news,” Higgins said.

The liberal Catholic magazine Commonweal criticized the study’s methods and premise. By the magazine’s count, only one of every 20 stories depicted the church as oppressive; in addition, bishops and priests were well-represented in presenting Catholic doctrine. “Forget that 30% of those 1,876 stories deal with non-controversial announcements and the accomplishments of outstanding Catholics or that a full half of them featured no debate over church positions,” said the Commonweal editorial.

Also, the magazine questioned “the assumption underlying the study [which] identifies ‘the church’ solely with certain official positions or attitudes.” Commonweal said that instances of bias, ignorance, stupidity and simple wrong-headedness — even Catholic

‘My own experience tells me that much media bashing is born of ignorance.’

Ed Wojcicki
bashing — do occur in news coverage of Catholicism. Yet, it said, “the overall picture turns out to be painted in subtle shades of gray rather than in the black-and-white of winning and losing sides.”

Kenneth Briggs, religion editor at The New York Times from 1974 to 1985, said the “categories are simplistic” in the report. Quoted in a Catholic News Service story, Briggs questioned the report’s “dividing up the territory between the official church” and those called “dissidents.”

Richard Ostling of Time told CNS he would hate to see it said that he personally or the magazine in general was anti-Catholic. “I doubt a fair-minded reader of our magazine could come to that conclusion,” he said.

Some religion writers have been disappointed that the report’s generalizations were made about U.S. news coverage of Catholicism based only on the output of several news organizations. “It’s a gross exaggeration to say that all the media are hostile to the Catholic point of view,” said Michael McManus, whose “Ethics and Religion” column appears in more than 100 newspapers. Known for his generally conservative but always personal views, McManus said he reviewed about 50 of his columns on the Catholic Church and found more positive than negative in the batch. McManus made the observation at the National Press Club conference called to discuss Lichter’s report.

The first speaker at that meeting, L. Brent Bozell, III, founding board chairman of the Media Research Center, Alexandria, Va., said that the report “systematically proved the anti-Catholic bias in the media” and that in the 1990s “hostility to the church is reaching fever pitch.” However, Bozell was in the minority during the discussion, according to an account in a national Catholic newspaper. “Other speakers suggested that, more often than not, sloppy reporting, a poor understanding of complex theological issues and the secular bias that creeps into any reporting on religion seemed more to blame than pure bigotry directed specifically at the Catholic Church,” wrote Greg Erlandson, editor of Our Sunday Visitor.

Richard Harwood, then ombudsman at The Washington Post, defended the press’ political news approach to covering the Catholic Church on issues such as abortion and sexual morality. “As journalists, we are under no obligation to give superior weight or credence to an institutional declaration of the Pope or the cardinals,” said Harwood.

But news pundits in the secular press scarcely have a right to pass judgment on doctrinal matters, said Reed Irvine, Chairman of Accuracy in Media.

Religious and ethnic groups always believe they are more poorly represented in the news than other groups.

Harwood disagreed: “I think that is naïve in an open society such as ours — a society in which secular and religious affairs ... have become inseparable.”

Lichter framed the challenge another way: “If journalism in general has become negativistic and adversarial, does that justify or legitimate negative coverage of a religious institution?” The perceived problem with the press might not be its secular approach to news but its secularist views, said Patrick Riley and Russell Shaw, editors of the book Anti-Catholicism in the Media. The two did not define the term
except to indicate that an ideological fervor was at work: “Secularist media sound the alarm when Catholic doctrine impacts on civil society, and especially when those responsible for teaching Catholic doctrine speak clearly, forcefully, and prophetically.” Whatever it is called, they said, “the mindset which is dominant today in elite American media has found a better way to undermine the Catholic Church than the old religiously inspired anti-Catholicism ever dreamed of. It has learned to be selective and reward Catholic dissent.”

**IS CRITICISM INEVITABLE?**

The general public may be less critical of religion-news coverage than of some other sensitive subjects, such as politics. A random sample of 1,889 adults nationwide was evenly divided in 1987 when asked, “Do you think TV and newspapers are often unfair to religious groups?” No, said 46%; yes, said 44%; 11% didn’t know, according to the survey sponsored by the Williamsburg Charter Foundation. By contrast, *Times Mirror* surveys in 1985 and 1986 on news coverage of political and social issues found that Americans thought, by 5-3 margins, that the media tended to be one-sided.

In the Williamsburg Charter Foundation survey, 62% of those surveyed who were evangelical and fundamentalist Christians said the news media were often unfair to religious groups. Similar levels of agreement also came from Protestant ministers (61%) and Catholic priests (60%) in smaller, separate surveys in which the error of margin was 10%. In other words, while the general public may have less at stake in news coverage of religion, the clergy have both special interests and special knowledge of the field.

Religious and ethnic groups always believe they are more poorly represented in the news than other groups, according to Al Gunther of the University of Wisconsin. Using results from a media image survey conducted for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Gunther showed that Republicans, Democrats, Roman Catholics, born-again Christians, African-Americans, Hispanics and labor union members all considered news media accounts concerning themselves to be biased. However, each said media coverage of other groups was quite fair.

Researchers have argued that if a reader charges distortion in the news, the primary determinants are the credibility of the news outlet and the skeptical nature of the consumer. Gunther dissented in his article for *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Rather, he said, it depends mostly on whether the news consumer has strong feelings on the subject. Gunther proposed that “people are ordinarily open to, and impartial toward, a wide latitude of media content, a useful posture for information seeking, but that a highly involved person protects a strongly held attitude by taking a critical or even slanted view of the content.”

Nevertheless, who would know better than Catholics or evangelicals if their church receives shabby treatment in the press? Why wouldn’t clergy, who are attentive consumers of news about their own religious tradition, be best able to identify unfair coverage? Are the critics always fair?

**AT ODDS WITH THE PRESS**

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, whose name was synonymous with a resurgent fundamentalism from 1979 through the 1980s, once aptly defined people in that feisty movement: “A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is mad.”

Even before fundamentalists re-emerged in the American political spotlight, the nation had reacquainted
itself with evangelicals such as Jimmy Carter, the Southern Baptist who won the presidential election in 1976. Innumerable news stories tried to deal with the term “born again,” a phrase describing the pivotal experience of conscious decision for Jesus as personal savior that seemed to mark the evangelical. Not all reporters and broadcasters succeeded.

NBC anchorman John Chancellor in 1976 showed a clip of Carter acknowledging that he was “born again,” then added in all seriousness, “By the way, we’ve checked this out. Being ‘born again’ is not a bizarre, mountaintop experience. It’s something common to many millions of Americans — particularly if you’re Baptist.”

(In a chapter he wrote for the book American Evangelicals and the Mass Media, Wesley Pippert related that 10 years later, when the story was recalled during a panel discussion celebrating Harvard’s 350th anniversary, Chancellor chuckled about his naiveté. Later during the panel, theologian Harvey Cox used the term “liberation theology.” Pippert said that Chancellor leaned over and asked in an audacious whisper, “What’s liberation theology?”)

Noting that some evangelicals complained of inadequate and negative coverage during that crucial period, graduate student Douglas C. Vinson of the University of Georgia studied stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* published from 1976 to 1982. Vinson conjectured before beginning his master’s thesis that half the stories on the evangelical movement would be unfavorable. He analyzed 53 stories in *Time* and 47 in *Newsweek*.

“This hypothesis was clearly not supported,” Vinson concluded. “More than half of the stories in *Time* (58%) and *Newsweek* (62%) were coded as neutral.”

Vinson rated 28% of *Newsweek*’s articles on evangelicals as unfavorable and 15% of *Time*’s as unfavorable. “By and large, both magazines seemed to make a real effort to avoid evangelical stereotypes,” Vinson said. “To be sure, there were stereotypical phrases sprinkled in some stories, e.g., “the rule of the righteous,” “Bible thumpers,” “the Doomsayers,” “the righteous right,” “rock-ribbed fundamentalist” and “Bible-belt believers,” but this type of labeling within the text of most of the stories seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. Only a handful of stories could be classified as catering to sensational or trivial interests,” he wrote. Headlines, photographs and photo captions showed “a less favorable attitude” than the actual story in many cases, he noted.

By the mid-1980s, the word “fundamentalist” carried negative connotations in common parlance and among the news media. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that only a small segment of the general public felt that news-media coverage of fundamentalists was biased or unfair. In a Los Angeles Times Poll on media bias surveying 2,405 adults nationwide, one question about news media fairness toward fundamentalists resulted in 28% saying the media were fair, 18% saying that the news media made them look better than they were and 23% saying the media made them look worse than they were. Nearly one-third of those surveyed didn’t know or declined to answer. In other words, of those with opinions, exactly twice as many felt that fundamentalists were treated fairly or favorably as felt the media made them look bad.

Then came the televangelist scandals, dubbed “Holy Wars” by some media. Charismatic TV preachers burst into the news in spring 1987 with the Jim Bakker sex-and-money scandal and a year later with Jimmy Swaggart’s tearful confession of sin. Falwell, Oral
Roberts and Republican presidential primary candidate Pat Robertson also drew plenty of press attention — as well as distorted coverage, charged some conservative Christian followers.

However, evangelical pollster George Barna found in June 1988 that most people in a nationally representative sample of 519 adults gave the news media “a passing grade” in its coverage of the TV evangelism scandals. Here’s how the coverage was rated (other than the ‘don’t knows’):

- 20% said completely fair and objective.
- 51% said usually fair and objective with some exceptions.
- 7% said usually not fair and objective.
- 8% said completely unfair and biased.

What about evangelicals among those surveyed? “There was no difference in the findings between the opinions of born-again Christians, who make up approximately 34% of the American population, and non-Christians,” Barna said in a news release from California-based Barna Research.

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with coverage can be found in groups of evangelical clergy and church members, as illustrated by two studies with small samplings of opinion. “Evangelicals complained of blatant bias, lack of understanding and interest, and a liberal slant,” said graduate student Karyn S. Campbell in her M.A. thesis at the University of South Carolina. Answers to her questionnaire, sent in 1988 to 100 evangelical pastors around the country and returned by 46, showed that “generally they felt the press was doing a mediocre job of covering evangelicals,” she concluded.

Similarly, the feeling that “religious people and groups are misunderstood by the press” was evident in a series of interviews at churches in 1988-89 by Stewart Hoover of the University of Colorado. Two of the six churches, of various affiliation, were aligned with the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination.

“The Assemblies members were the most critical of religion coverage, and the most convinced that its deficits were linked to the biases of news organizations,” Hoover said.

In all five interview sessions at two New Jersey congregations, at least one person mentioned the Lichter-Rothman study of media elites, he said. Assemblies members and pastors appeared to entertain the idea, Hoover said, that “a conspiracy somehow targets evangelicalism and Pentecostalism for particular scorn on the part of the media.”

Olasky: ‘anti-Christian bias’

The conspiracy notion is rejected by a sharp critic of the secular news media, Marvin Olasky, a journalism professor at the University of Texas.

The coverage that irks evangelicals is “the result of a materialist worldview hostile to Christianity,” Olasky wrote in Moody magazine. “Most journalists see leftist guerrillas, homosexual parades, and anti-Christian textbooks as the good news of our era, and they do not want to stand in the way of liberation. Until that worldview changes, there will be few improvements in our news coverage,” he said.

Olasky is the author of Prodigal Press, the Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media, published in 1988 by Crossway. The book appears to be the only one on this subject in the flourishing evangelical book market — a bit surprising since news-media bias has been called a major threat to conservative Christian culture. Other threats —
secular humanism, satanism and New Age beliefs — were excoriated in numerous books aimed at evangelical readers during the 1970s and ’80s.

In his book, Olasky chronicled the blatant sins of turn-of-the-century yellow journalism as well as errors of judgment by the modern journalistic community. He said modest reform from within was not the answer. Even a slightly more conscientious journalism would not be enough because it would still be dominated by professionals with an “anti-Christian bias,” Olasky contended. He called for reclaiming American journalism for a conservative Christian worldview.

Olasky asserted that reporters and editors make grievous errors of omission by failing to accept “spiritual reality as a necessary backdrop to stories.” Nothing happens by chance, he said, because God is sovereign, Satan is active in the world, redemption by Christ is real, and finally, God answers prayers, albeit not always in expected ways.

Olasky criticized, for example, secular news coverage of two big stories in 1986 — the relatively peaceful overthrow of Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos and a dispute in Tennessee by parents who protested the use of “anti-Christian” books in public schools. In the Philippines story, Olasky indicated that the secular press should have written about the religious prayers and activities of Filipinos during the turmoil, a phenomenon Olasky felt contributed to the relatively bloodless coup.

In the Tennessee story, Olasky said that Time, Newsweek and major newspapers made the parents look unreasonable. “[T]hey reported that the parents were objecting to the reading of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears,’ ‘Cinderella,’ ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ ‘Jack and Jill,’ and so on. In actuality, the parents were objecting to stories that preach the acceptability of lying, stealing, cheating and disobeying parents, preach that motherhood is an inferior activity, and so on. The parents also objected to children being instructed in the writing of witchcraft incantations or the use of New Age meditational exercises,” Olasky said.

Olasky’s suggested remedies are unusual. He advised that some believing journalists should stay with secular media. “A reporter who writes of fundamentalists with appropriate sarcasm will be praised; a reporter who quotes not only Darwinian scientists but creation scientists will be questioned,” he said. A skilled reporter who “refuses to play the game” will not necessarily be fired, although he probably won’t get many raises, he claimed.

In the long run, however, only news organizations owned and staffed by Christians will practice journalism consistent with biblical faith, Olasky said. He cited desktop publishing and cable television as two promising outlets at the start. How could such frankly fundamentalist media do more than “preach to the choir”? Olasky’s answer: Resort to Christian sensationalism!

Citing as precedents both the Bible and a Christian newspaper of the early 1800s, the Boston Recorder, Olasky said that stories of sin and depravity would attract a wide readership and teach the lessons of morality. Anticipating parental concerns about exposing their children to such material, Olasky wrote, “It is far better for them to...
realize in a Christian context than elsewhere that we are sinners in the hands of a righteous (and for that reason angry) God.” Previous efforts to create Christian newspapers have been futile, he said, because reporting only the elevating news and downplaying the depressing makes for dull reading. “The proper use of sensationalism could help Christians win back an audience of readers from those who purvey tragedy as amusement rather than education,” Olasky said.

A more measured critique of news media coverage of the evangelical world appeared in American Evangelicals and the Mass Media by one of many contributors, Michael Maus. Formerly with CBS and NBC radio network news and Minnesota Public Radio, Maus said that the news media cover evangelicals more in their role as behavers, than as believers — despite the influence of evangelical beliefs on the nation. Thus, Maus concluded, the misbehavior of prominent evangelicals will continue to be news as will “the political involvement of evangelicals and the conflicts it creates.” Maus saw problems on both sides: “Stereotyping by journalists and evangelicals has been counterproductive, leading most reporters to miss important trends and most evangelicals to fail to communicate their stories as effectively as possible to reporters and the general public.”

**ANALYSIS OF ABORTION COVERAGE**

One way to study charges of unfairness and bias is to select a particular issue and compare how various news organizations have handled the subject. Abortion rights, although not exclusively a religious issue, is a closely followed topic in religious communities and influences their evaluation of how journalists handle moral issues. It should be noted that religion writers have a limited role in abortion coverage; the stories involve writers specializing in medicine, politics and the courts, as well as general assignment reporters and feature writers.

David Shaw, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who has won the Pulitzer Prize for his critical reporting on the news media, concluded in a series published in the summer of 1990 that a bias against abortion opponents “often exists” in the major newspaper, television and newsmagazine coverage of the issue. Shaw looked at the coverage in the previous 18 months and conducted more than 100 interviews.

“Responsible journalists do try to be fair, and many charges of bias in abortion coverage are not valid,” Shaw wrote. “But careful examination of stories published and broadcast reveals scores of examples, large and small, that can only be characterized as unfair to the opponents of abortion, either in content, tone, choice of language or prominence of play.” He summarized these points thus:

- The news media consistently use language and images that frame the entire abortion debate in terms that implicitly favor abortion rights advocates.
- Abortion-rights advocates are often quoted more frequently and characterized more favorably than are abortion opponents.
- Events and issues favorable to abortion opponents are sometimes ignored or
given minimal attention by the media.

- Many news organizations have given more prominent play to stories on rallies and electoral and legislative victories by abortion-rights advocates than to stories on rallies and electoral and legislative victories by abortion-rights opponents.

- Columns of commentary favoring abortion rights outnumber those opposing abortion by a margin of more than 2-1 on the op-ed pages of most of the nation’s major daily newspapers.

- Newspaper editorial writers and columnists alike, long sensitive to violations of First Amendment rights and other civil liberties in cases involving minority and anti-war protests, have largely ignored these questions when Operation Rescue and other abortion opponents have raised them.

Shaw indicated that the personal outlooks of journalists are a factor. “Since most big-city journalists tend to be better paid, better educated and less religious than the general public, it’s not surprising that they also tend to favor abortion rights by a large margin. In fact, a 1985 Los Angeles Times Poll of journalists on newspapers of all sizes showed 82% in favor of abortion rights,” he wrote.

Five years before Shaw’s series, however, a writer analyzing television news coverage of the abortion issue concluded that the anti-abortion movement at that point (1985) had received more than a fair share of news coverage. The pro-life movement’s more radical edge was getting more attention after a spate of abortion clinic fire-bombings. Joanmarie Kalter’s two-part series in TV Guide focused on the favorable coverage she said the Religious Right was then receiving in television news.

The anti-abortion movement was not making significant headway legislatively in modifying abortion-rights laws, but Kalter said that pro-life advocates succeeded in making abortion not merely an issue of religion but one of politics and science. “Network news thus paid it more attention, and in so doing, took a decided tilt to their side,” Kalter said. She wrote that, when pro-life arguments were couched in Ten Commandment terms, the issue was largely ignored — receiving only about 33 minutes of total evening-news coverage in 1982 compared to almost 53 minutes in January 1985 alone. Kalter quoted right-to-life spokespersons as acknowledging improved news coverage in 1985.

The assessments by Kalter and Shaw of how the anti-abortion movement fared in the news media are not necessarily contradictory. Opponents of abortion apparently had a series of successes that were short-lived. Shaw, in looking at abortion coverage in the late 1980s and early 1990, saw an imbalance the other way.

And in March 1993, after the fatal shooting of Dr. David Gunn, who performed abortions in Florida, the National Right to Life Committee accused the broadcast news media of hitting “a new low in bias against the pro-life movement.” Nancy Myers, the committee’s communications director, directed all her complaints in the NRLC newsletter toward television news programs and talk shows. Myers said that articulate spokespersons for abortion rights were readily quoted but that leading pro-life figures were bypassed in favor of more radical,
less representative abortion opponents. “For pro-life reaction,” Myers said, “the media focused exclusively on men, mostly inarticulate and who represented little or no constituency, and shut out the mainstream pro-life groups.”

One of Kalter’s criticisms, written in 1985, still holds up for the 1990s. She faulted TV network news for giving the false impression that the abortion debate was represented best by the two heated extremes on the issue, rather than a gradation of views. Overall, she said, television news covered the complex subject badly — often naively accepting claims without corroboration — because of the medium’s shorthand style of reporting to save valuable air time. According to our own findings, these criticisms still apply in 1993.

RELIGION NEWS ON TELEVISION

Indeed, religion that presents itself as basically simple to understand, and colorful as well, has the best chance of breaking into television news, Kalter said.

“Television covers Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants more readily than others if only because, well, they’re easier,” she said. “To a personality-oriented medium, Catholics have a clear hierarchy: The Pope is their central authority. Compare that to the mainline Protestants — Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians and others — who work more democratically, in committees, or the Jews, a diverse group with no one leader.”

Kalter’s series for TV Guide, written before the televangelist scandals, said that many fundamentalist preachers were taken at their word on the size of their TV audiences. With simply stated beliefs and political aims, Jerry Falwell and others facilitated television news coverage, she said.

“In contrast, mainline Protestants believe the Bible to be written by people and so find it more difficult to sort revelation from cultural bias, or quote biblical remedies for complex contemporary problems,” she said. “Though intellectually sophisticated, that’s harder to express forcefully on television. And it can hardly compete in the star-oriented TV spotlight.”

Whether the issue is abortion, school prayer or other volatile subjects, “TV’s lack of attention to the broad currents of American faith allows some groups to capitalize while others are discounted,” she said.

Judith Buddenbaum of Colorado State University found that television coverage of religious subjects on network news programs was generally fair, but inadequate, in samples from 1976, 1981 and 1986. “True religion news is rare,” she said. “Fewer than one-fifth of the religion stories focused on religion. The rest mentioned religion as a minor element in an essentially secular context. Fully three-fourths of the stories concerned military conflict between religious factions or conflict between religion and secular political authority. Few stories explored primarily religious disputes within or among churches.”

Despite some meaningful stories, Buddenbaum concluded that religion news was not taken seriously by television networks. “Although no religious traditions were singled out for hostile coverage, juxtaposed images and information too often cast aspersions on both beliefs and believers,” she said.
‘SHAMEFULLY INADEQUATE’

Media reporter-critic Shaw of the *Los Angeles Times* took a long look at religion news coverage in the press in 1983. In a series of articles that drew from nearly 100 interviews, Shaw said that newspapers devote far less space to coverage of religion in one week than the average paper devotes to sports in one day. “It is clear that the newspapers that treat religion seriously and intelligently are still a tiny minority,” he wrote. About 15 or 20 religion writers in the country were “widely respected in their field,” Shaw said, but most journalists and religion officials he interviewed declared that the vast majority of papers “still do a shamefully inadequate job of covering religion.”

Spiritual leaders said that “the press too often misses (or misinterprets) substantive developments in religion while giving space to ‘religion’ stories that are sensational, superficial, scandalous or stereotypical,” Shaw said. When serious issues are covered, many tend to be denominational mergers, church power struggles and policy statements rather than how religion actually influences people’s daily lives, he said.

“These same criticisms are often leveled against the press in its coverage of other subjects, of course. Indeed, charges of superficiality, sensationalism and impersonal, institutionally oriented coverage are leveled against the press in its treatment of virtually everything,” Shaw wrote. “Moreover, it would be impossible for the press to provide either the quality or the quantity of religion coverage most people deeply interested in religion would like to see, just as it would be impossible for the press to fully satisfy those who want comprehensive coverage of the law, science, literature or any other field. A general-interest daily newspaper is not a journal of religion (or law or science or literature),” Shaw said.

Nevertheless, of all the fields a newspaper covers, Shaw suggested that the gap was “perhaps greatest in religion coverage” between what they were doing and what they should and could do, for three reasons:

- Most do so little, so poorly.
- Religion is so important to so many people.
- The press could be the best vehicle for furthering religious understanding and tolerance in our society.
Newspapers have chronicled religious activity in this country for three centuries, starting with the first issue of the first American newspaper, Publick Occurences, which noted on Sept. 25, 1690, that Christianized Indians in Plymouth set a day of thanksgiving for a good harvest. Although routine church announcements and sermon summaries often constituted the bland bulk of religion “news” over the years, prominent clergy were not shy about expressing themselves in print on matters of public controversy. And journalists duly recorded the church-related scandals and religious personalities that came and went over the years.

The journalistic world took more interest in religion news in the 1920s, when Time magazine — under the influence of its strongly religious founder — often featured religion stories on its cover. “As many lumps as Henry Luce takes, he had a brilliant insight in 1923 that religion was news,” said Richard Ostling of Time. “It’s extraordinary, though, that it took several decades for papers to upgrade the religion beat.”

Indeed, as a special assignment on newspapers, newsmagazines and wire services, the religion beat only started to proliferate in the post-World War II years, keeping pace with the rapid growth in church attendance and inter-denominational movements.

A group of reporters, many of them still known as “church editors,” formed the Religion Newswriters Association in 1949 to advance the standards of religion reporting. Two years later, the RNA had 45 members and was headed by George Dugan, The New York Times religion editor.

Dugan, who covered national church conventions and the 1948 founding in Amsterdam of the World Council of Churches for his paper, said that some churches were chafing over reduced listings of local activities. “We try to explain that the idea is to publish news — that we are not in the promotion business for specific churches,” he told Editor & Publisher magazine in 1951. Religion stories have to be “legitimate news” to compete with other news for space in the paper, said Dugan, who worked eight years for Religion News Service before going to the Times. Larger papers are realizing that religion, like education and science, should be covered by people who are competent reporters and knowledgeable about religion, he said.

The number of reporters assigned to the religion beat continued to grow during the tumultuous 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council brought changes to the Roman Catholic Church, “Death of God” theologians fascinated editors, and mainline churches supported anti-war protests, civil rights and women’s
rights — though not without internal struggles over the issues. By the beginning of the 1970s, churches were contending with the sexual revolution, proliferating sectarian groups and a young “Jesus Freak” movement of guitar-strumming evangelicals on the beaches and sidewalks.

Curious about who was writing most of these stories, the evangelical magazine Christianity Today found in a questionnaire returned by 180 religion writers that the typical religion specialist in 1971 was a religious person. “But he is greatly concerned about being fair and balanced in his presentation of all religions and about giving conflicting views a hearing,” wrote Russell Chandler, the magazine’s news editor who would join the Los Angeles Times three years later. Only 43% in the survey were full-time on the religion beat.

Cassels, Cornell and Others

One of the more influential religion writers of that period was United Press International’s Louis Cassels, who wrote both an opinion column and straight news stories. His column, “Of God and Man,” which was labeled “commentary,” was available to some 700 newspaper clients of UPI. In her master’s-thesis analysis of Cassels’ columns from 1959 to 1973, Janet Tronstad of the University of Wisconsin found that he did not ignore conflict in religion news and became increasingly bold in covering controversial issues. “He was, however, supportive of the existing Judeo-Christian groups and rarely criticized them,” wrote Tronstad.

Cassels himself, reflecting on his career in 1973, said the worst error he remembered making was repeating a historically discredited claim that Islam was spread forcibly by the sword during the religion’s early years of growth. “My error stemmed from plain ignorance rather than malice,” he said, adding that that did not mitigate the error. “A journalist who purports to write on a subject with a tone of authority has a responsibility to be sure he’s right,” Cassels said.

Cassels also regretted being slow to realize the significance of the youthful “Jesus movement” of the early 1970s and the tongues-speaking charismatic movements within the mainstream churches. “In journalism, as in life, sins of omission often outnumber sins of commission,” he said.

Associated Press religion writer George Cornell, reflecting in 1979 on his 28 years on the beat, said that religion news was gaining respect. Although he said some editors still gravitated toward frivolous stories, Cornell attributed the religion beat’s improvement to reporters who have “groomed themselves to become specialists in the field,” to newspapers that recognized religion news as worthwhile, and to “more cooperative religious bodies.”

“They used to be very standoffish in dealing with reporters,” Cornell said in an interview in The Quill magazine. “I think we’ve educated them to realize that if they play fair with us, we will try to be fair with them. We have gradually convinced them that we can be trusted.”

The informed coverage of religion reporting has had few better advocates than the patriarch of the religion beat, still active at AP in 1993. Cornell wrote in the

‘In journalism, as in life, sins of omission often outnumber sins of commission.’

Louis Cassels
book Reporting Religion: “Religion is a determining element in the human story, a powerful ingredient of the social mix. To disregard religion in chronicling that story prevents any intelligent perspective on conditions in this society or any other. Certainly no one can understand America, its history and present forces, without understanding the nature and history of its religious life. After all, that was mainly what brought settlers here in the first place. The news media have begun, slowly but surely, to record this provocative dimension of American life more completely and competently.”

Indeed, news space for religion has had a period of growth in the 1970s and 1980s. A survey of 30 newspapers in 1982 by the Department of Mass Communications at Middle Tennessee State University showed that the percentage of papers giving more than 100 column inches to religion news each week had more than doubled, from 27% to 59% over the previous decade. However, in a 1985 survey by Ernest Hynds of the University of Georgia, nearly 6 of 10 religion writers said the space for religion news in papers with a circulation of more than 100,000 still was not enough.

Progress in strengthening the religion beat’s acceptability in newsrooms has always been spotty. For every newspaper that decided to have a full-time religion writer for the first time in years, another could be found in which a religion section was scaled back or the beat was left vacant indefinitely.

“If you go into a newspaper office and ask for the religion editor, and the receptionist says, ‘I am,’ or if you ask around the newsroom and nobody knows who covers religion, you know you’re in trouble,” said Tom McAnally, the well-traveled director of the United Methodist News Service. “I’ve encountered that, and not just at small papers. At some papers, the job carries no status,” he said in an interview. Having a knowledgeable religion reporter is critical, McAnally said, because the news media already are facing animosity in religious circles. “The common view in the churches is that the media are out to embarrass the church. They say the media only carry negative news,” he said. “It’s not true, but people tend to remember the stories that were highly charged.”

If there is no religion-beat reporter, the stories written by generalists will gravitate toward the sweet or the sour — the naïve soft feature or the raging controversy. Either story is easier to do than the story that explores and explains significant changes in religious views and practices as well as the influence of religion in other parts of life.

“Religion coverage by religion specialists continues to be professional and superior, but coverage and editing by generalists who do not know the area remains highly in question,” according to Richard Walker, an Atlanta-based Reuters reporter who served part-time as that news service’s religion writer until his death in 1993.

Besides providing more nuanced and balanced coverage, most religion writers have shown willingness to take the heat, whether deserved or not. Daniel J. Lehmann, who covered religion for the Chicago Sun-Times, said that religious people often misunderstand the attempt of reporters to be neutral on hotly divided questions. “That neutrality often is seen as hostility by religious leaders and laity, [an attitude] which perpetuates mistrust,” Lehmann said.

Richard Dujardin, longtime religion writer for the Providence Journal in Rhode Island, said, “When reporters try to be fair, accurate and balanced, they become trusted over time.”
Some criticism is inevitable. Veteran reporter Jeff Sheler, who began a religion beat at *U.S. News & World Report* in 1990, said that he believes enmity arises sometimes from a religionist’s self-image as a possessor of truth. “From that certitude flows the impulse to perceive the journalists’ professional skepticism (his or her honest questioning of doctrine or deed) as a calculated attack on faith and the church,” Sheler said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Researcher Judith Buddenbaum, surveying religion writers in 1985, found that the most important consideration in handling the religion beat was an even-handed, non-judgmental and fair approach to stories. Knowledge of religion came in second, and good general reporting and writing skills were next highest in importance. Buddenbaum said that charges of anti-religious bias would be unfounded if directed at the religion specialists.

“Many have studied religion; others have learned about it through long experience on the job. Most also identify with a faith and are relatively active in it,” she said. “These journalists support religion news that is neutral and objective toward all faiths.

“When unfairness is charged,” she said, “it may be due to differing opinions on what religion news ought to be. Critics often seem to opt for a kind of religious news designed to uphold and promote a particular faith,” Buddenbaum said.

**WHO COVERS RELIGION STORIES?**

Bolstering the religion beat does not solve the whole problem, however. Even when a newspaper has one or two religion specialists, they write only a portion of the published stories in which religion is a major element. The specialists tend to handle most local stories that unfold within the field of religion — and sometimes national religious events, as well — depending on their paper’s wishes. When the story concerns the intersection of religion with politics, the courts, education, medicine or other beats, the story often is done by the reporter who heard about it first, or an editor may decide who gets the assignment. Most foreign news involving religion comes from staff correspondents or wire services. On the local staff, there usually is no prohibition against general assignment reporters, feature writers and columnists delving into the field when they come up with a story idea. Editors, however, are normally expected to insure that the non-specialist does not interfere with a story in progress or a story planned by the religion writer.

To illustrate the ratio of specialist-written stories to religion stories from other sources, First Amendment Center research assistant Mark Hough reviewed two months’ worth of religion stories (March and November 1992) appearing in *The New York Times, Atlanta Constitution, St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. Each paper employs at least one experienced religion writer.

The output of these religion writers, plus news service stories done by religion specialists, accounted for between 41% and 23% of the religion stories in the papers in those two months. In sheer number of religion stories, the *Constitution* topped the list with 139. But because the newspaper published so many wire stories and other staff-written stories on the subject, its two religion writers accounted for only 23% of that total. The St. Paul paper had the highest ratio (41%) of religion stories written by specialists, e.g., either by the
lone Pioneer Press religion writer or by news service religion writers. In actual number of religion stories, the Pioneer Press was second to the Constitution with 84 stories.

Here is a breakdown of the coverage:

The Atlanta Constitution, located in a region known for high church attendance, printed 139 stories in which religion was the main subject or source. Gayle White, the religion writer, wrote 17 stories. Celia Sibley, who writes church news features for religion sections in the main paper and in a suburban edition, had her byline on 15 stories. One story from Religion News Service was used.

The New York Times, which has no religion section and emphasizes in-depth stories, had 12 stories by Peter Steinfels and 11 by Ari Goldman in the newspaper’s total of 69 articles about religion. Included in the count for the two religion writers were interpretive columns by Steinfels and “Religion Notes” columns by Goldman, which run in alternate Saturday editions of the paper.

The St. Paul Pioneer Press had 26 religion stories by its specialist Clark Morphew, including seven of his “religion and ethics” columns. In addition, the newspaper printed nine stories by religion specialists from other publications, including three by Michael Hirsley, religion writer for the Chicago Tribune.

The San Francisco Chronicle printed 12 stories by religion writer Don Lattin in its total of 57 religion stories. In addition, the Chronicle used two stories by religion specialists from other papers — Steinfels of The New York Times and Gustav Niebuhr of The Washington Post.

November was the busiest month for all four papers, each of which sent a religion writer to cover the Catholic bishops’ meeting in Washington. Gayle White, who covered the bishops, also wrote numerous stories in Atlanta that month on sex scandals at a large charismatic Christian church. Lattin returned from the bishops’ meeting to San Francisco for two stories at the large joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Hopes of getting religion news a place on television have been dim.

As noted above, the amount of religion coverage tends to reflect the spiritual landscape of each news outlet. Buddenbaum documented that pattern in one of her studies, noting that Baptists were heavily reported in Richmond, Va., and that Lutherans receive similar attention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn. In New York City, where Catholics are in great numbers, she said that 29% of the Times’ religion stories were about that church, compared to about 17% at the other two papers.

Former religion writer Bruce Buursma told an evangelical magazine a decade ago that his stories about evangelical activities were welcomed by his editors in Louisville, Ky., and Dallas, Texas. Things changed after he joined the Chicago Tribune staff. “It’s more difficult in Chicago, because the city is dominated by the Catholic Church. Most of my editors don’t have a clear sense of how large the Protestant and evangelical communities are,” he said.

New directions in religion coverage

Hopes of getting religion news a place on television have been dim. But two exceptions, on PBS and at a local Dallas station, may point to possibilities elsewhere.

• Since 1991, Richard Ostling, religion editor at Time, has co-written and
appeared on seven 12-15 minute segments on religion news for the “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour.” Kate Olson, the producer, does 90% of the work involved, mainly with the video side of it, Ostling said. He and other specialists at the magazine have been encouraged by the parent Time-Warner Co. to work on broadcast media. Since 1979, Ostling has done brief, spot news analyses for syndication by CBS Radio twice weekly.

Topics for the “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” have included Jewish intermarriage, a career retrospective on Billy Graham, the spate of Catholic priests charged with child molestation and a profile of a black church in Baltimore.

“It’s the sign of a tremendous advance — I can’t tell you how wonderful it’s been,” he said.

During the 1980s, reporter Peggy Wehmeyer of Dallas’ Channel 8, WFII, had the distinction of being the nation’s only religion-beat reporter on local television. She began as a writer at the station. After listing for her editors good news stories with religious dimensions that were being ignored or missed, Wehmeyer was given a chance to report on them herself.

“I got burned out covering just religious activities,” she said in a 1993 interview, “but I love what I’m doing now — a social issues beat that includes religion. There are religious aspects in almost every issue.”

She advised that instead of considering a purely religion news beat on television, stations should call upon staff people who are sensitive to the religious aspects of some stories.

Wehmeyer said that she believes that a journalist’s faith need not be an obstacle to fair reporting. Her bigger concern, she said, is “to treat religion fairly.”

The lack of religious expertise on the staffs of television networks will be a continuing problem, warns Richard Griffiths, a producer for documentary/long-form stories at Cable News Network. “As well-meaning as they may be, secular reporters and producers have to reinvent the wheel each time,” Griffiths said. And if most television executives are not worried about that, they are at least worried about two other things — “the risk of boring viewers and the risk of offending them,” he said. Of course, the risk of offending audiences is higher when expertise and sensitivity are lacking. Griffiths made his remarks at an April 1993 conference on religion and the media in Indianapolis, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture.

At that same conference, two writers addressed a somewhat different problem in print journalism, where religion news specialists struggle to keep editors interested. Newsweek’s Ken Woodward suggested that the religion stories most favored by editors (and presumably by consumers of news) were those in which religion clashed or blended with other segments of culture, i.e., religion and politics, faith and medicine, church and
state, doctrine and science, etc. Another speaker, former religion writer Diane Winston, suggested that many religion specialists overlook the fascinating stories to be found in exploring belief systems, theology and religious philosophy.

In their responses to the First Amendment Center survey, some journalists called for more stories that show how religion affects people’s lives. “Religiously literate reporters should be given the space to write about the ‘small’ stories that occur daily in a religious context,” said Debra Nussbaum Cohen of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Sandi Dolbee at The San Diego Union-Tribune talked about “getting out into the trenches” to find out how faith, or a lack thereof, affects lives and dreams. Mark Hass, an editor at The Detroit News, advised: “Religion coverage needs to be more local, more specific to people’s lives.”

Religion writer Jim W. Jones of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, current president of the Religion Newswriters Association, said it is “a crucial time for those interested in serious coverage of religious affairs,” one which may call for new approaches.

One reporter who has expanded the traditional religion beat, Joan Connell, suggested that a distinction should be made between faith and religion. Formerly a “religion and ethics” reporter for the San Jose (Calif.) Mercury News, Connell now covers “religion, ethics and the moral dimensions of public policy” for Newhouse News Service, based in Washington, D.C.

Connell. “When religion news is focused on the institutional church, it is narrow, anemic and dry — and exactly the reason why so many readers find religion news pompous and boring. If religion news is to be relevant, writers and editors must go beyond the obvious,” she said. “An open mind, an open heart and an expressive writing style are the basic tools, along with a willingness to ask the really hard and relevant questions of the institutional church.”

Our study finds many of the suggestions to be promising. At the same time, we think that a redefined religion beat should continue to reflect the community (i.e., more church-related stories in the Bible Belt, more non-Christian religion stories on the West Coast).

The strengths of the religion writers should be considered in fashioning a broader religion beat. Simply dubbing the beat “religion and ethics” might be misleading if few perceptive stories on ethics result. Some of the best ethics stories will come from medical, science, legal affairs and business reporters, because they best know the context and sources in those fields. Editors need to be sure that religious ethicists are not automatically excluded as sources for ethics stories by medical or business writers, and, by the same token, that stories on ethical issues written by a religion reporter contain quotes from sources other than experts in the religious field.
In the newspaper comic strip “B.C.,” a caveman often seeks timeless insights from an unseen person across the sea. He relies on the tide to float a writing tablet back and forth. In one strip, the caveman writes: “I hear — over there — you have freedom of religion and freedom of the press. How is it working out?” After a long wait by the seashore, the caveman receives his answer: “The press is winning.”

Perhaps 80% of the clergy responding to the First Amendment Center survey would agree with cartoonist Johnny Hart on who has the greater influence. As noted earlier, the clergy said the news media have more influence on how people think and act than religion does. However, even if true, that situation may be only temporary.

Religion and spirituality in all their forms have a resiliency that defies prediction. Figures such as Pope John Paul II and Billy Graham consistently rank among the most-admired people in annual polls. Clergy, despite the scandals of recent years, are ranked second only to pharmacists for “honesty and ethical standards,” according to a 1992 Gallup survey measuring attitudes toward various professions. Despite trends towards secularization, clergy still rank ahead of doctors, dentists and college professors — and easily ahead of journalists.

Nevertheless, it would be a shame if press and pulpit were to eye one another as rivals for influence rather than as complementary stalwarts of free expression in American democracy. History indicates that a certain amount of friction between the two is healthy, inasmuch as neither group has a monopoly on honest conscience or foresight.

Toward better understanding, we make the following recommendations:

For the News Media

- Religion should be recognized as a fascinating, news-filled area of coverage that resonates with a high proportion of readers and viewers. Religion reporting can be as highly charged as political coverage and as complex as science, sports and business journalism. If, at a newspaper, two or more specialists are assigned to both the education and medicine beats, at least two reporters are needed to do a comparable job on the religion beat.
The religion beat can be enlivened by expanding it in name and concept. A number of religion writers from San Diego to Wichita now say their beat or column covers “religion and ethics.” The Detroit News religion section is called “Faith and Philosophy.” Peter Steinfels of The New York Times writes a column titled “Beliefs.”

The words “spiritual” or “spirituality” might be employed in some cases. (People turned off by organized religion often prefer such alternative words.) The bulk of the news may still be found in organized religion, but a talented, intelligent reporter may find a larger readership or audience by choosing a broader configuration for the beat.

Television should seek inventive ways to handle religion news. We cited earlier the part-time television work of Richard Ostling, Time’s religion editor, on the “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” and the efforts of Peggy Wehmeyer in Dallas to identify religion stories on her social-issues beat for a local station. We’re not convinced that CNN can’t find a niche for regularly scheduled religion news on that 24-hour news channel. On the major networks, religion news has its best chance in the newsmagazine format programs as issues and stories merit.

Religion should be a major news beat in the Bible Belt. Expanding the beat’s definition may not be necessary in cities of the South and Southwest where countless church steeples pierce the sky.

“You can still get into a traffic jam on Sunday morning in Dallas,” according to Dan Cattau, religion writer at The Dallas Morning News. While the Houston Chronicle has for years employed two full-time religion writers, at the News there is only one religion writer, while six reporters — counting part-timers — cover education, Cattau said.

At The Tennessean in Nashville, religion writer Ray Waddle, a Vanderbilt Divinity School graduate, is considered one of the top city-side reporters in terms of Page One stories, output and versatility. Saturday church notes are handled on a part-time basis by another Tennessean staffer.

Small newspapers should approach religion coverage creatively. In Pennsylvania, the Beaver County Times, with circulation under 50,000, abolished geographically based beats two years ago and replaced them with topical beats, including “faith.” Religion stories often appear on Page One or lead local news pages and include local-angle stories on national events. “Reader response has been tremendous in a community where religion was important all along,” said Dennis D. Dible, executive editor.

In Colorado, the Durango Herald (circulation under 25,000) recently added a part-time religion writer/editor selected for maturity and writing quality. “This will take some time, as the religious leadership isn’t used to talking to reporters,” said publisher Richard G. Ballantine. “But it will come, and readers will enjoy it.”

News outlets should use religion-beat reporters as in-house experts and error-catchers. Other reporters can consult religion writers for names of religious spokespersons, expert sources, proper terminology, accurate descriptions or even Bible verses in developing their stories. Many news outlets would save themselves embarrassment if editors would ask a religion writer to look over religion-related stories written by other reporters. In a day when computer terminals have
replaced typewriters, a story containing religious elements can be sent electronically to the religion specialist(s) for checking of factual accuracy and characterizations.

- **Fellowships and seminars are needed to give depth to religion coverage.** Fellowships for journalists have proliferated in recent years, including programs for health, science, Far East studies, politics and government reporting, but nothing comparable exists for religion. A number of religion writers landed on their beat by happenstance and, therefore, may not have had educational training in the field. Our survey showed that 76% of the religion writers felt that formal training in religious studies is either helpful or essential. Six of 10 religion writers said they had no such formal training.

  Ideally, a nine-month fellowship at a university boasting an excellent religious studies department would best serve journalists and news organizations. Structured along the lines of the John S. Knight Fellowships at Stanford — a program open to journalists of varying educational backgrounds — a nine-month fellowship for those pursuing religion-news writing or editing would allow the journalists to audit courses during two semesters, attend weekly seminars with off-campus guests and take occasional field trips.

  Alternately, a four-month fellowship might be modeled after one that ran for three years (1982-84) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, this competitive program hosted an average of five persons a year who audited courses and were required to write one research paper. The program, whose participants included four religion writers still on the beat, ended when a key faculty member became ill and was unable to keep it going.

  News-related foundations sponsoring short-term seminars should also be encouraged to include religion coverage in the lineup on a regular basis. For instance, the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism at the University of Maryland plans to conduct six intensive courses in 1993, concluding with a six-day seminar on “Religion in America” in December. Sponsored by the Knight Foundation, the seminars are aimed at “experienced reporters and editors,” according to director Howard Bray. Instruction by university faculty and other experts is free, along with lodging and meals; the applicant’s company pays travel costs.

  Workshops on religion reporting should be held periodically at the annual meetings of professional societies such as the Society of Professional Journalists, AP Managing Editors, Radio and Television News Directors Association, and others. As is done in other workshops on news-gathering techniques, these sessions should draw on experienced writers or editors. (A 1990 SPJ workshop on religion featured a priest-minister-rabbi panel and a moderator who had never covered religion regularly.)

- **A primer should be written for religion-beat newcomers and for editors thinking of strengthening the beat.** The pamphlet could be distributed by the Religion Newswriters Association, which usually hears of newcomers on the beat. Many are like Bruce Daniels of the Albuquerque Journal, who sought advice from the RNA in 1992.

  The Journal had decided not only to “breathe new life” into its Saturday religion page, but also to
ask Daniels to write stories “on the intersection of religious issues with politics, education, medical ethics, social needs — the works!” He said it began to look “very large and threatening as I prepare to get down to it.” Daniels asked what books he should read or have on a reference shelf, what seminars were available on religion reporting, what publications and writers were doing good work, and how to handle his own views as he strives to be “rigorously fair, open-minded and sympathetic in writing about the beliefs of others.”

These would be good subjects for a primer, along with lists of the most useful religious magazines, denominational sources, newsletters and a catch-all list of common errors to avoid.

- **A concise guide to religion for editors and general assignment reporters would be helpful.** A much more ambitious project than the primer, the guide would concentrate on the information most needed by journalists trying to put religion stories into contemporary perspective. Such a reference booklet would need to be concise, well-organized and indexed to make it appealing to journalists with little time to spare. Once produced to the satisfaction of journalists and religion experts, however, it could serve even broader purposes in religious education.

- **Examples of prize-winning religion stories should be published yearly.** Selected stories from the four contests thus far sponsored by the Religion Newswriters Association would be the best candidates. Examples of good writing/reporting in religion, as well as fair and insightful coverage, are sorely needed and could be sent, upon request, to interested persons in the ranks of editors, religion writers, journalism educators, religious public

relations and religious leadership. Again, distribution could be handled by the RNA in keeping with its motto: “To advance the professional standards of religion reporting in the secular press.”

- **An annual prize should be created to honor the best enterprise religion reporting in a series or special project.** While the RNA currently presents awards to individual journalists and to religion sections which produce outstanding “bodies of work,” there should be a means of commending and publicizing the dedication of print and broadcast newsrooms that commit time and effort to break a major religion story or to treat a complex religious development with insight and imagination. Such an award would recognize excellence in religion reporting even at those papers and broadcast outlets having only one — or no — religion specialist.

- **News organizations should review their guidelines concerning use of terms considered pejorative or inflammatory.** It cannot be stressed enough that religious communities are particularly sensitive to characterizing language. It would be best to use the words used by religionists themselves. But if terms are misleading — for image-enhancement reasons, perhaps — or if they are inadequate, then journalists should choose words that clarify and elicit understanding without being pejorative.

    Thus, “pro-life” is less precise than “anti-abortion.” And “pro-choice” also attempts to put a best face forward. Legalized abortion is the real issue, so that some news organizations attempt to talk about those who are for or against abortion rights. Editors’ decisions should be conditioned by whatever the terms mean in context.
The term “fundamentalist,” when applied indiscriminately, irks conservative Protestants and evangelicals, activist Muslims, and outspoken conservatives of other faiths. *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* has noted the word’s pejorative connotations “except when applied to groups that stress strict, literal interpretations of Scripture and separation from other Christians.” AP’s advice is to not use “fundamentalist” unless a group applies the word to itself. However, the word has remained in common usage in society as well as among the media to signify a certain belligerency toward theological and political opponents.

Despite the Christian origin of the term, R. Scott Appleby, director of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ study of fundamentalism, believes the term can be used in other faiths where ostensibly traditional beliefs are wedded with modern organizing techniques to combat secularism. Yet, any word used too conveniently is bound to be misused, and substitute expressions and descriptions are preferable if greater precision results.

It cannot be stressed enough that religious communities are particularly sensitive to characterizing language. Nonetheless, even minimal efforts to improve media relations require a professional approach.

Newly elected religious officials should receive special instruction. For several years, United Methodist clergy elected as bishops have been offered a two-day, eight-hour training session with a media consultant on how “to become articulate spokespersons and not afraid of the media,” said Thomas S. McAnally, director of the United Methodist News Service. The cost is $1,000, and the bishop or his conference pays half.

In the Episcopal Church, Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning said that after his election he took a two-day course with consultants on how to handle television interviews and talk shows.

For the religious communities

- Religious leaders should support improved media relations. Well aware of the limited reach of their own publications and broadcasting outlets, religious leaders should learn the basics of media relations and more. This means giving up control over what one is trying to say and emphasize, but that’s no different from what other institutions in society must do.

With so many different news vehicles, plus the occasional opportunity to speak at length on interview shows or to write op-ed opinion pieces, most leaders with an acquired sense of what makes news can reach untold numbers of interested people.

Not every religious organization has sufficient authority, constituency or uniqueness to be a frequent “newsmaker.”

Religious communications departments should be considered necessary.
Religious communications departments should be considered necessary, professional vehicles of outreach. This means adequate financial support, of course. The staff’s links with groups such as the Religious Public Relations Council and other religious communications associations should be encouraged as a way to heighten the professional acumen of media-relations staff members.

Although religious organizations have generally put top priority on good internal communications, the outreach to secular news media often has suffered. If there are good news stories or quotable clergy within that religious body, staff members have to be available to write news releases, make phone calls and otherwise provide timely and precise information to the news media. Busy reporters are often forced to utter the reverse of the Hollywood admonition: “Call us, we won’t call you.” When reporters do call — for comment, to check a rumor, etc. — someone needs to respond quickly because of deadline pressures.

• Religious leaders should be accessible to the press. Even if they have been “burned” occasionally in news stories, officials should recognize that being accessible to print and broadcast media will benefit them and their organizations in the long run.

“My advice is to be totally accessible,” said Jerry Falwell in an interview, his fifth interview that day. “And the paper wants a comment now, not tomorrow. When you don’t know the answer to the question or you are wrong, be the first person to say so. Some preachers do a good job of stiff-arming the media. In most cases, it’s a bad mistake for organized religion.”

Many newsmakers such as Falwell also offer to meet with editors or broadcast executives when they travel to another city. “I always ask three months in advance,” he said. “If they get to meet you face-to-face, they see you are not an ogre, and the mood changes.”

Religious leaders also need to understand that journalism’s agenda is different from their own. That difference puts a special burden on the religious communicator to clearly explain the content and complexity of stories and to emphasize to journalists why their perspectives may be flawed. If errors are made in a story, it is the absolute responsibility of the religious communicator to inform the reporter and ask for clarification or retraction.

• Informal meetings should be held between local religious leaders and news executives. Newspapers should be asked if a few religious leaders could observe an editorial meeting in which editors discuss which stories will run the next day and which ones will land on Page One. In addition, small meetings of a few local religious leaders with news executives would help to air concerns of the two groups. A newly appointed bishop or official should seek a series of get-acquainted lunch discussions. There is no guarantee of arranging such meetings, but it is worth asking.

Test your ideas on how much ‘good news’ and ‘bad news’ appears on typical days. Before the subject comes up in talks with journalists, try this method to evaluate the news on several given days. Tally whether a story on a local newscast or in the local newspaper is “positive,” “negative” or “neutral.” A number of stories, of course, may be construed as
“positive” from one point of view but “negative” from another perspective. The accusation that the news media dwell on “bad news” may be legitimate at times, but it is best to have a way to back that assertion up — or to back off, if it is not true.

Evaluate some stories for ways in which readers or viewers might misconstrue meaning. Were headlines or off-hand broadcaster comments misleading or neutral? Were you able to figure out what was said or written without jumping to the wrong conclusion? Do you think that other news consumers are less careful or less intelligent than yourself? Remember, just as sermons can be misinterpreted, misheard or only listened to intermittently, just so is the fate of news stories.

- **A special community-based seminar on news media and religion would help to clear the air.** Such a meeting could be organized by interfaith agencies with local newspaper and television representatives to discuss the fairness and adequacy of religion-news coverage and religious public relations. Ideally, the results of a local content-analysis study should be available so that people can discuss specific examples, rather than relying on impressions and limited recollections. If one or two ongoing, major stories are not selected for review, then perhaps committee members could divide up assignments such as clipping newspaper stories or taking notes during evening news programs. Otherwise, a religion-and-media seminar could be the opportunity to air complaints, compliments and rationales in order to start people talking to one another.

  Two such seminars took place in 1990 and 1991 in Kansas City, Mo., under the auspices of the Kansas City Press Club, Jesuit-run Rockhurst College, Ecumedia, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Christian-Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Group. Print samples of religion coverage, with attached critical remarks, were provided at the second meeting. The work of religion writer Helen Gray of *The Kansas City Star* was described as “uniformly fair and careful,” but the report indicated her stories appeared mostly in a weekly religion section. Religious leaders wanted to see more stories with religious dimensions in the regular news section. A contact for the Kansas City program is Bob Jacobi, Jr., Rockhurst College public information.

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**Religious leaders should be accessible to the press.**

- **If the news media don’t do a good job, say something!** “Part of the problem is that readers and viewers don’t demand very much,” said syndicated columnist Bill Tammeus of the *Star* at the Kansas City seminar on religion and media in 1990. When an inaccurate or unfair story upsets religious groups, the outcry can be loud, as in the case of a *Washington Post* story about the followers of TV evangelists. However, relatively few complaints are heard when more significant changes take place — the downsizing of a religion section or reduced coverage because of the lack of a religion writer. By comparison, when a newspaper drops a comic strip or a network cancels a television program, the complaint level is very high. If religious leaders do not convey disappointment and dissatisfaction in their own communities, news
executives will make the reasonable judgment that no one really cares that much.

**FOR THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY**

- **Greater access to religious experts and scholarship is needed.** News media access to university and seminary experts in the field of religion is rather limited, compared to other academic fields. After years of much talk and little action, the American Academy of Religion, the nation’s largest organization of religion scholars at universities and theological schools, should move with all possible speed toward establishing a media relations staff. If possible, this step should be taken in concert with the Society of Biblical Literature and other religion groups with which the Academy cooperates.

  Many religion writers have a favorite few professors to call for analysis of religious developments, but the AAR and most other religious academic societies have no media-contact person to suggest new names working in pertinent fields. Not only that, the potentially newsmaking findings in biblical research, sociology and psychology of religion, new-religious-movements research, theology, et al., rarely make their way to newsrooms because there are no public-relations intermediaries to cull the stories from journals and academic meetings. Such is not the case in scientific, medical, historical and other fields, which employ public-relations personnel.

- **An in-depth study of news media treatment of Islam and Muslims should be undertaken.** If there has been such a study, we are unaware of it. Most U.S. Muslims feel their faith is victimized by sensationalist and careless news media. The content of innumerable print and broadcast stories should be examined both for the misuse of certain words and for the overall tone and selected news angles. Such a study should be preceded by input from Muslims representing various ethnic traditions as well as Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and journalists.

- **Theological schools should prepare future clergy for dealing with the news media.** “Not only are most clergy ill-prepared to deal with media scrutiny in a crisis, most seem to have trouble just getting simple press releases to the right place at a newspaper,” said Ann Rodgers-Melnick of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. “I try to tutor the clergy I work with in concepts such as ‘on the record/off the record,’ but they should learn that before the need arises. If I taught such a course, part of it would include teaching seminarians what reporters do, deadlines and basic concepts of news judgment,” she said.

- **Journalism schools should encourage majors to include at least one religion course within their liberal arts requirements.** Whether such courses are in comparative religions, the Bible as literature, philosophy and ethics, or the history of one religious tradition, an acquaintance with religion’s role in culture is bound to enhance the broad education needed by journalists. In addition, a journalism major hoping to become a religion-beat reporter obviously should consider minoring in religious studies.

  A good example of what can be done is at California State University at Fullerton. A class called “Religion, the Media and Contemporary Culture,” taught by religious studies Prof. Benjamin Hubbard, is mostly taken by communications majors. In fact, journalism majors are advised that
they may take all 12 units of their upper-division electives, if they wish, in the religious studies department. “World Religions” and “Religion and Politics” are popular choices.

A FINAL WORD

Religion at its best broadens perspectives of time, ultimacy and meaning. It can stimulate the intellectual, reassure the fearful and, occasionally, surprise the blasé. It can inspire not only through preaching and ritual, but also through sublime architecture, moving music and the gesture of the helping hand. The unfortunate and the embittered are its special concerns. Faith allows for uncertainty, ambiguity and mystery, even as it seeks a fuller Truth.

Journalism at its best captures events with clarity and within context, slowing the pace of daily life so that the mind can register its component moments and, perhaps, understand their significance. Journalism pursues news passionately while reporting it dispassionately. It seeks to capture the drama and humor of life without sacrificing honesty and fairness. It too pursues truth.

The First Amendment guarantees all Americans the right to pursue Truth and truth. For that reason, if no other, religion and the press have a responsibility to bridge the gap that is widening between them. Faith groups who engage in media-bashing or who neglect effective communications with journalists risk diminishing their impact on the general public. They do a disservice to the nation by opting out of the broader discourse of moral issues. News-gathering organizations which discount the subtle but powerful influence of religion on the American psyche and on international events damage their own credibility with a public that instinctively feels the strong undertow of spirituality at work in the world.

There is much to be done. The authors sincerely hope this study will facilitate dialogue between the news media and religious communities so that information may pass freely and openly within this society, as envisioned by those whose legacy to all of us was the Bill of Rights.
To better understand the divisions that separate the clergy from the journalists who cover them, the First Amendment Center conducted a nationwide survey concerning attitudes toward news coverage and relationship between journalism and religion. Those questioned included clergy from six representative Christian denominations, journalists who cover religion and members of the Associated Press Managing Editors.

Central to this study were two key issues: how clergy and journalists evaluate the religion coverage of the national and local media, and how they respond to a number of controversial statements about how the press covers religion and how clergy deal with the news media. The survey was conducted by mail and produced more than 800 responses from the three groups (99 writers, 266 editors, 529 clergy).

**How clergy and journalists evaluate the news media**

Clergy believe that the national media do a good — though not excellent — job of covering general news, though their rating of local media drops closer to “fair.” Interestingly, they are happier with the overall coverage provided by local TV than with that provided by the local newspaper.

Where coverage of religion and of their specific denomination is concerned, however, clergy rate media in the fair-to-poor range. Here, however, they are marginally more favorable toward the local media than toward the national press and tend to prefer the local newspaper slightly over local TV.

On most counts, journalists give significantly higher marks to the media — particularly to the local newspaper — reflecting the heavy concentration of print journalists in the ranks of those surveyed.

Clergy who designate themselves as fundamentalists or evangelicals are generally far less happy with media coverage and the press, while mainline Protestants are most satisfied. Roman Catholic clergy fall in between. Since the preponderance of journalists in the survey are themselves mainline Protestants, a shared perspective is to be expected.
CLERGY, JOURNALISTS RESPOND TO CHARGES

There is, not surprisingly, a great gulf between clergy and journalists when each group is asked to respond to charges one makes against the other. The clergy agree that the news media are biased, while journalists disagree; the clergy agree that journalism is too sensational, but journalists feel otherwise; the clergy feel that the news media lack objectivity, but journalists are less certain; the clergy believe that journalism portrays religion negatively, but journalists dissent. While journalists feel that religion coverage has improved and relations between the groups are better, clergy feel the opposite.

Consequently, journalists are inclined to argue that society benefits greatly from reports of religious scandal, but clergy are ambivalent.

Although the clergy are critical of media bias and sensationalism, they also believe — paradoxically — that religion journalists should be religious themselves and should produce stories that inspire faith. Obviously the two groups share different conceptions of the nature of objectivity.

There are, however, areas in which there is less disagreement between the two groups. Both agree that the entertainment media are more offensive to religious sensibilities than journalism; both agree that religion reporting should become somewhat more aggressive; both agree that clergy whose names appear in the news are sometimes sensation-seekers. When errors appear in stories about religion, neither blames the clergy.

Many journalists may, however, not be as irreligious as clergy believe. More than 90% of the religion reporters and more than 70% of the APME editors said religion was very or somewhat important in their lives. Fewer than 10% of either group responded “not at all” when asked how important religion was to their lives. Thus, although a great gulf separates these groups, it may result more from a difference in professional perspective than from a fundamental disagreement on the role of religion in American life.

Robert O. Wyatt, who designed the media-religion survey, is professor of journalism and director of the Office of Communication Research at Middle Tennessee State University.
1993 Religion Journalism Survey
(Figures reflect percentages.)

How do you rate overall news coverage in...

The national television news program or channel you watch most often

The national newspaper you read most often (New York Times, USA TODAY, Christian Science Monitor, Wall Street Journal, etc.)

National TV

National Newspaper

The news magazine you read most often

The local television news program you watch most often

The local newspaper you read most often

News Magazines

Local TV

Local Newspapers
How do you rate general news coverage in ...

The national television news program or channel you watch most often

National TV

The national newspaper you read most often

National Newspaper

The news magazine you read most often

The local television news program you watch most often

Local TV

The local newspaper you read most often

Local Newspapers
How do you rate coverage of your religion in...

The national television news program or channel you watch most often

National TV

The national newspaper you read most often

National Newspaper

The news magazine you read most often

News Magazines

The local television news program you watch most often

Local TV

The local newspaper you read most often

Local Newspapers
### Do you agree or disagree with these statements about religion coverage in the news media?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion coverage is biased against ministers and organized religion.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonism between the news media and religion is inevitable.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion reporting is too sensational and emotional.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion stories should include more inspiring stories of faith and hope.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters covering religion are not well enough informed to cover religion news.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The entertainment media offend religious sensibilities more than the news media.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations between clergy and reporters have gotten worse over the past five years.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists covering religion are not objective.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion is shortchanged because reporters are skeptical or not religious themselves.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The coverage of religion has greatly improved in the last five years.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most religions reporting gives a positive view of clergy and religious institutions.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you agree or disagree with these statements about religion coverage in the news media?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>Editors</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The biggest problem with religion reporting is it only tell a small part of the story.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 11, Agree strongly: 42</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 10, Agree strongly: 42</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 27, Agree strongly: 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society has benefited greatly from news of erring clergy and harmful sects.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 18, Agree strongly: 27</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 20, Agree strongly: 20</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 28, Agree strongly: 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most religion news gives an unfairly negative picture of the clergy, churches and faith.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 27, Agree strongly: 27</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 24, Agree strongly: 24</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 34, Agree strongly: 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters who cover religion regularly should be active in religion.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 10, Agree strongly: 33</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 12, Agree strongly: 33</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 16, Agree strongly: 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media cover civil unrest but downplay religious efforts to ease strife.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 19, Agree strongly: 30</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 16, Agree strongly: 30</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 19, Agree strongly: 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media have greater influence than religion on how people think and act.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 16, Agree strongly: 34</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 11, Agree strongly: 34</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 11, Agree strongly: 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media should be more aggressive in their reporting about religious leaders.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 16, Agree strongly: 30</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 11, Agree strongly: 30</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 16, Agree strongly: 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity-seeking clergy receive too much attention from the news media.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 6, Agree strongly: 28</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 20, Agree strongly: 28</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 11, Agree strongly: 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters who cover religion regularly have a good working knowledge of religion.</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 21, Agree strongly: 28</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 13, Agree strongly: 28</td>
<td>Disagree strongly: 13, Agree strongly: 28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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he First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., is an independent operating program of The Freedom Forum. The Center was established on Dec. 15, 1991, the 200th anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution. The Center’s mission is to foster public understanding of and appreciation for First Amendment rights and values, which comprise freedom of religion, speech and the press, the right to petition the government and to assemble peacefully. The Center serves as a forum for dialogue and debate on free-expression and freedom-of-information issues.

The Freedom Forum is a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. The foundation pursues its priorities through conferences, educational activities, publishing, broadcasting, online services, fellowships, partnerships, training, research and other programs.

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