

Deities

& DEADLINES

SECOND EDITION



A PRIMER ON RELIGION NEWS COVERAGE

JOHN DART

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February 1998

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The Center's mission is to foster a greater public understanding of and appreciation for First Amendment rights and values, including freedom of religion, free speech and free press, and the right to assemble peaceably and to petition government.

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J O H N D A R T

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Publication No.: 95-F01
First Edition: February 1995
Second Edition: June 1998

Editor: Natilee Duning
Cover Illustration: Kevin Chadwick
Design: David Smith
Back cover photo: Peyton Hoge

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Acknowledgments

The author thanks the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, notably Chairman John Seigenthaler, for backing this first-ever guide-book for print and broadcast journalists new to religion reporting. Thanks also to Natilee Duning for judicious editing and to my wife, Gloria, for her support of my “free-time” work on this project.

By distributing *Deities & Deadlines* at minimal cost, the First Amendment Center and its parent organization The Freedom Forum, with help from the Religion Newswriters Association, have done journalism a great service. An unintended but beneficial side effect is that religionists who read the primer may be able to see that journalists do have a desire “to get it right” with sensitivity, sagacity and perspective.

Introduction

Welcome to the religion beat, whether your role is reporting or editing stories. Most news professionals find that covering religion for the secular news media is fascinating work, even though the assignment is complex enough to shake the self-assurance of seasoned journalists.

Religion presents a bewildering number of traditions, beliefs and practices. A newcomer may find that some of the easier stories occur at the points where religion intersects with politics, minority rights, sexual issues and the arts and entertainment—fields which are not so arcane. Such stories are popular with editors and readers/viewers because they bring together interesting combinations, i.e., faith in unexpected alliance with another perspective or religion clashing with some other venerable institution.

And, as happens on any specialty beat, many stories simply deal with people—their triumphs, failures and efforts to make a better world. You will be sharing this kind of story with other reporters, because religion expertise is not necessarily required to do a credible job in such cases.

There is, nevertheless, a *raison d'être* for the religion beat. For one thing, authority figures don't get any bigger than Yahweh, God, Allah, Shiva or Buddha. What some journalists affectionately call “the God beat” includes all those otherworldly realms where

many journalists, much less angels, fear to tread. Moreover, because deities, supernatural realms and miracles are unverifiable scientifically and journalistically, the reporter's task is to describe supernatural claims fairly and intelligently to believer and non-believer alike. Catholic visions of Mary, for example, as well as Pentecostal healings should be presented within a social and historical context, not just treated by the reporter as isolated "people" stories.

True, religion reporters must sometimes step cautiously through spiritual minefields. On the other hand, they also have the opportunity to use evocative language rarely available to most beat reporters; words like *holy*, *satanic*, *angelic*, *sin*, *karma* and *Apocalypse*, for instance, aren't likely to get past the front-page editor unless they're in a religion story. The contrasting elements of good and evil, the sacred and the mundane, fervent belief and mocking atheism—all are powerful, stimulating images for the journalistic bearer of good or bad tidings.

Yet another notable advantage for the religion writer: The religion beat encompasses a broader time frame than most other news assignments.

Dealing with the Ribbing

Don't be dismayed if you get some ribbing in the newsroom, such as being called "Rev" or "Bishop" or "Your Eminence." You'll no doubt hear that worn-out line about the religion writer having a "special source," a hotline to heaven.

Relax. Most of your kidding colleagues tire of the lines after a while—unless, of course, you start wearing a white clerical collar and black shirt to work or begin addressing top-level editors: "Verily, I say unto you"

The past matters.

No other news beat calls for so much use of historical background to explain current disputes. Sacred writings, myths and events of yesteryear—as variously interpreted—are central to some religion-news stories.

The future is crucial.

Aside from stories about the future of faith and organized religion, hopes of an afterlife persist and, within some groups, beliefs are at work about a coming (or returning) messiah.

Special note to news executives

Quality religion coverage should be especially appreciated by readers and viewers in coming years for two reasons.

First, the closing of one century and the opening of another may bring a rash of speculative religious movements, “spiritual-scientific” bestsellers and aberrant behavior. Specialists familiar with religious language and lore should be able to help newsrooms discern legitimate stories from publicity puffs and locate knowledgeable sources to analyze events calling for speedy explanation. Having in-house experts should give you the chance to be first with compelling stories instead of playing catch-up.

Second and more important for the long term, the news consumer may need, more than ever, objective reports on America’s religions, which are no longer confined to Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. The personal options for choosing, switching or blending religious paths are bewildering. It stands to reason that the perplexed will look for impartial, informed guides to religious trends when trying to sort out issues of religious morality or to address the ultimate questions. While it is fashionable to revel in America’s increasing variety of faith traditions and competing claims of truth, it is also in the best tradition of journalism to keep ’em honest—not only in financial and behavioral matters, but also in matters of intellectual and ethical honesty.

Beyond covering stories that obviously fall in your bailiwick, you may be striving to expand the boundaries of the religion beat—or hoping to live up to an editor’s grandiose description of the job. Some religion writers call the beat “religion and ethics.” Some include

the word “spirituality” or examine the moral dimensions of public policy.

In part, the redefinitions reflect a public perception that “religion” refers only to organized, doctrinaire religion, though few religion specialists limit themselves that way. Most religion writers make valid efforts

Dealing with religious hybrids

You should recognize that U.S. religious beliefs and practices seem to be taking less predictable directions at the turn of this century. It’s not just a West Coast phenomenon.

We have heard the testimonies of converts who tell of moving from one faith to another in their spiritual quest—sort of a serial monogamy for wanna-believers. But sociologists now also see individuals who consciously blend their brand of religion from various sources. Some people find it possible to attend Mass, do Yoga exercises, experiment with Buddhist meditation, attend charismatic music concerts and prod their secular Jewish spouse to celebrate Hanukkah and Passover—all without seeing any contradictions among these separate interests.

Religion reporters should also remember that curiosity about unconventional spiritual claims does not make the person who is exploring those claims a “follower” or “believer.” We are dealing with moving targets when describing religious constituencies.

to push beyond predictable news frameworks to produce more intriguing stories.

However, even those reporters on the cutting edge will be slowed down by the institutional stories, unless they know the landscape of organized religion. Most religion/ethics/spirituality news shows up on these institutional pathways and battlefields. Moreover, expertise about organized faith is the religion writer’s strong suit in the newsroom. Fellow reporters should be able to turn to you for information and sources on the religious elements in their stories. Editors should eventually be able to depend on your judgment as to

whether certain stories are old or new, meaningless or significant, phony or real.

The plethora of religious bodies, traditions and potential news sources can only be touched upon in this primer, of course. Our intent is to provide: 1) a running start on references, sources and coverage tips, and 2) answers to typical questions, such as how to deal with that halo colleagues suddenly see above your head.

A Quick Orientation

Where to begin? The following suggestions should give you, the new religion specialist, some specific ways to figure out your beat, meet fellow religion writers and fill in educational gaps.

SEE WHAT OTHER RELIGION SPECIALISTS ARE DOING.

- **Associated Press**, for years distinguished by the fine work of the late George Cornell, then of David Briggs, is still an indispensable tool for tracking spot news and trends.
- **Religion News Service (RNS)**, which continues to serve religious publications, also has a goodly number of secular clients. Not only a source for quality stories, features, columns and event calendars, RNS uses its Washington, D.C., location to advantage, covering government and court stories with religious implications at earlier stages and more often than other news organizations.
- **Time, Newsweek** and **U.S. News & World Report** each have talented religion specialists and set examples for tight, lively writing.
- The best newspapers usually have good religion specialists. If you don't have consistent access to, say, **The**

New York Times, check out its website and those of other major newspapers.

- Broadcast religion reporters, as of this printing, can look to **ABC network news** for the pieces by religion specialist Peggy Wehmeyer and special reports on religion by anchorman Peter Jennings, who has been alert to religion angles in the news. On **PBS**, ex-NBC newsman Bob Abernethy has been doing a half-hour *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* program. Both PBS and National Public Radio have taken a more interested approach to religion news and special reports.

CONTACT THE RELIGION NEWSWRITERS ASSOCIATION.

RNA's membership embraces the overwhelming majority of religion writers in the secular press (newspapers, wire services and newsmagazines). Broadcasters are also members. RNA has a six-times-a-year newsletter, annual contests (Feb. 1 deadline) and an annual meeting. Contacts, ideas and camaraderie are among the benefits. Its goal: To enhance the professional standards of reporting religion in the secular news media.

(Note: Writers working for the so-called "religious press" or denominational publications may not join RNA. Free-lancers may join if they regularly report religion news for the secular media.)

Contact: Debra Mason, RNA executive director, 614/891-0855.

LOOK FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES.

If your education did not include religious studies, don't feel bad. Some 60% of the religion writers in a First Amendment Center survey said that they had had no background in religious studies. Asked how important they thought formal training was to reporting

religion, however, only 10% said it was unnecessary, while 76% thought it would be helpful and 14% said it was essential.

Some religion writers have squeezed religious studies courses into their busy lives. Consider classes such as church history, contemporary theology and world religions at a seminary with interdenominational ties or at a university religious studies department.

Keep an eye out for short fellowships or week-long seminars on religion designed for journalists. The following institutions sponsor such programs:

- **The Knight Center for Specialized Journalism**, University of Maryland (301/405-2411).
- **The Center for Religion and News Media** in Evanston, Ill., (847/866-3960) linked to Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.
- **Trinity College's Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life**, Hartford, Conn. (860/297-2353). This center is particularly hoping to attract editors and news managers to its religion-in-the-news projects and regional conferences through the year 2000.

CHECK OUT AWARDS AND CONTESTS.

It wasn't until 1996 that a full-time religion writer captured a Pulitzer Prize (for "beat reporting") although there had been a couple of finalists before. *Newsday's* Bob Keeler won for his portrait of a progressive Catholic parish.

The Religion Newswriters Assn. runs five contests each year, and you need not be a member to enter. There are categories for writers at small and mid-sized papers, and for religion pages, in addition to the prestigious Templeton and Supple awards.

The richest prizes (e.g., \$10,000 for 1st place) are given annually by the Amy Foundation for writers who

“communicate biblical truth to a secular audience.” However, the ideological range in this competition tends to be decidedly conservative, and many winning entries in the past frankly have not been examples of good journalism.

DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

Presbyterians, Lutherans and Baptists—still can’t tell them apart after months on the beat?

Relax. As time goes on you’ll begin to understand the small doctrinal differences and variations in policies. And in the meantime, you can research such things if they come up in the context of a news story. But denominational differences are hardly issues anymore.

You will be reporting much more on conflicts between liberals and conservatives, or reformers and traditionalists, *within* denominations and *between* coalitions of religious activists. Nearly every denomination has members on opposite sides of issues such as abortion rights, church and state, homosexuality and other volatile matters.

Does this perspective make you a conflict-monger? No, these issues exist whether you write about them or not. Important matters, by their very nature, spark opposing stances and controversy. There is, after all, a positive side to reporting conflict: Journalism is at its best in quashing rumors, casting doubt on unsubstantiated claims, clarifying chaotic events and bringing forth new data and options in timely fashion.

Resist, however, the frequent device of quoting only the most vociferous, extreme positions left and right. While not ignoring snappy quotes, ask what views best represent the situation.

Contrary to journalistic lore, a torrent of letters and phone calls after a story is printed or broadcast is not necessarily a sign of a “great story” well done. A hot, sensitive topic, when presented fairly and completely, often draws little public response. But a story reported poorly, replete with technical mistakes, or one edited severely enough to destroy the story’s fairness: That’s the one that will draw fire—as it should.

Basic Resources

To paraphrase a New Testament line, we must cast a wide net to become fishers of news. Since some newsmaking groups lack even minimal public relations—perhaps because they are distrustful of the news media—one approach to information-gathering is to get on umpteen mailing and subscription lists. That’s one reason the newsroom mailbox for the religion specialist is typically overflowing, crammed with magazines, books, newsletters and news releases from national and local organizations. E-mail is rapidly following the same pattern.

If your company’s budget for subscriptions and book purchases is limited, try for whatever free items are considered appropriate under the terms of your organization’s journalistic code of ethics. Ironically, the bigger and richer the news outfit, the easier it is to get complimentary subscriptions. It’s tougher at the small news organizations.

As for expensive but essential reference books, see if your editorial library will purchase them.

BOOKS

In the beginning, the newcomer vows, “I’m gonna read everything I can about world religions, Christian history, contemporary U.S. religion, black churches ...”

Unless they are voracious readers, neophyte religion specialists should wait until experiences on the beat indicate which books will be most useful. Save the heavy reading for times when it is pertinent to stories you know you will be covering.

In the meantime, see if book publicists will send review copies of important new religious books. While you may only rarely write a review for your paper's book section, some publicists are willing to provide a free copy if the book might figure in a news story or be cited as reference material.

Here are some basic reference books that will be useful:

Believers and Beliefs

By Gayle Colquitt White. New York: Berkley Books, 1997.

Concise Dictionary of Religion

By Irving Hexhorn. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

Edited by Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1988. (New edition forthcoming.)

Teaching About Islam and Muslims

Edited by Shabbir Mansuri. Fountain Valley, Calif.: Council on Islamic Federation.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity

Edited by John McManners. New York: Oxford University Press (latest edition).

The Encyclopedia of American Religions

Edited by J. Gordon Melton. Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research (latest edition).

The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary

Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. New York: HarperCollins, rev. ed. 1997. A project of the Society of Biblical Literature.

The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion

Edited by Jonathan Z. Smith. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. A project of the American Academy of Religion

The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism

Edited by Richard P. McBrien. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

World Religions in America: An Introduction.

Edited by Jacob Neusner, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

Dealing with the extremes

Science, medical and political reporters get plenty of “wacky” callers and letters, but the religion specialist may get the most.

“Religious nut” is part of the cultural lexicon for good reason. To be fair, some “religious nuts” may seem weird only because they are inarticulate or because their beliefs are obscure. The religion reporter should not be so quick to dismiss them.

But let’s face it. Plenty of rambling callers and disjointed epistles will bombard you with predictions of Armageddon, warnings of satanic influence, and the popular “God said this message must be printed (or aired), and woe on you if it isn’t.”

Think about diplomatic or disarming rejoinders.

For instance, at the *Los Angeles Times* many years ago, a copy messenger was sent down to the front lobby to talk to someone who said he had an important story.

“You may not believe this, but I am the Messiah,” said the young visitor.

The quick-witted copy messenger replied, “You may not believe this, but you’re the third one today.”

BIBLES

For biblical references, your editorial library and/or you should have a concordance; i.e., a guide to finding biblical passages by key words.

- Of the various Bible translations, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV) are considered excellent. The most useful Bibles for writers are annotated versions such as *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, *The Oxford Study Bible* and *The Catholic Study Bible*. Your Bible should include the Apocrypha—writings which Catholicism counts as canonical

(part of Scripture) and which other churches consider instructive. Look also for a reference work that includes apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus' sayings that is often cited in New Testament scholarship.

- The King James Version is good if you need a translation in old English for effect, but to use the KJV consistently is to cast today's religion in an outdated stereotype. Avoid use of *The Living Bible* and other paraphrased versions.
- Bible dictionaries and commentaries are useful. *Harper's Biblical Commentary* and others employing numerous reputable contributors are helpful. The multi-volume *Anchor Bible* (Doubleday) is excellent but costly. For computer buffs, multiple versions of the Bible and biblical reference works are also available on CD-ROM.

Be advised, however, that biblical interpretation varies in part by how much scholars employ contemporary historical-critical methods. The more theologically conservative institutions frown on techniques that cast doubt on the accuracy, literalness and harmony of biblical books.

HANDBOOKS, YEARBOOKS & DIRECTORIES

Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches

Edited by Eileen Lindner. A product of the National Council of Churches (212/870-2252).

This is an indispensable annual sourcebook for denominations, other religious associations, seminaries and religious periodicals. It includes phone numbers, addresses, officials, etc. (Membership statistics should be double-checked with each body for more current

figures, but no other book assembles so many national statistics in one place.)

One prize-winning religion writer confessed that she was on the religion beat for seven months before she learned that all those denominational names and phone numbers she scrambled to get for each story were readily available in this reference.

Catholic Almanac

Edited by Felician A. Foy, O.F.M. Published by Our Sunday Visitor Books, Huntington, Ind. (800/348-2440)

Includes lots of lists: independent associations and movements, periodicals, bishop biographies, religious orders, historical sketches and informative glossaries, to name a few.

American Jewish Year Book

Edited by David Singer. Prepared by the American Jewish Committee, New York, N.Y. (212/751-4000).

Besides articles/studies on Jewish issues and world Jewry, this thick book has rundowns on Jewish religious and secular organizations, their officials and phone numbers plus population figures, holidays and periodicals.

National Evangelical Directory

Compiled and published every other year by the National Association of Evangelicals, Carol Stream, Ill. (630/665-0500).

Virtually every evangelical ministry, college, periodical, publisher, mission group, etc., is included.

Directory of Orthodox Parishes & Institutions in North America

Edited by Philip Tamoush for Orthodox People Together. Torrance, Calif.: Oakwood Publications, 1998. (800/747-9245).

Lists addresses, phone numbers for parishes in numerous ethnic traditions.

DEALING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

Veteran religion writers have been known to dread the approach of major religious holidays. What new can be said about Christmas or Passover?

National newsmagazines have taken a different course, however. Their issues nearest Christmas and Easter often feature a cover story on a timely religious topic, not always related specifically to those holidays. Newspaper specialists and broadcasters can and have done likewise, saving a feature about Bible research, churchgoing, prayer, religion and television, etc., and simply tying it to a special holiday.

Rather than rewriting something about how people observe the holiday, you can report on an issue troubling that faith group or on efforts to build a new worship center by leading with "As believers prepare to celebrate ..."

What holidays are must-do events? It depends partly on the religious demographics in your area. Here is an arbitrary list of holy forget-me-nots:

Christianity — Christmas, of course. Easter, the preceding Holy Week ("Easter week" includes the seven days that begin with Easter), and maybe the start of Lent. But don't forget, as Ash Wednesday approaches, that not all Christians are observing Lent. Eastern Orthodox Christians usually observe Lent and Easter later. Not only that, but many evangelical, Pentecostal and independent churches ignore Ash Wednesday, Lent, Palm Sunday and other liturgical occasions for historical and lingering cultural reasons. (In states near Mexico, don't forget the December 12 feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.)

Judaism — The High Holy Days (i.e., Rosh Hashanah, or the Jewish New Year, at the beginning and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, at the end of the 10-day period). Just as these High Holy Days occasion the most important synagogue rites, Passover in the spring is the most significant home observance. Hanukkah, as rabbis will tell you, is not a major holiday but has cultural importance due to its proximity to Christmas.

Islam — Muslims have two holidays each year, Eid al-Fitr that ends Ramadan and Eid al-Adha that occurs during the annual hajj, or pilgrimage, and commemorates Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son. The onset of Ramadan, the lunar month of daytime fasting, should also be noted.

Buddhism — Buddha's birthday is observed April 8 as Hanamatsuri by Japanese Buddhists and around May's full moon by other ethnic groups. The Vesak, or Wesak, festival in May is a triple observance for South and Southeast Asian Buddhists, marking Gautama Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death.

Others — The late fall observance of Divali, the Festival of Lamps, by Hindus and others of Indian heritage may be increasingly noteworthy as Hindu communities become more organized. Newsworthiness of other holidays observed by Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais and members of other faiths may depend on your area's demographics.

Religion News Service provides its subscribers with a useful guide to religious holidays—major and minor—along with a listing of the most important conferences at the first of each year and each month.

Directory of African American Religious Bodies

Edited by Wardell J. Payne at Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, D.C., 1995. (410/516-6947).

A wide range of black religious organizations, including non-Christian groups.

The Complete Guide to Buddhist America

Edited by Don Morreale, Boston: Shambhala, 1998.

There are also yearbooks and directories published by various denominations that may list churches, clergy and more. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has a useful annual yearbook (773/380-2958). The Mormon Church publishes a fact-filled almanac (801/240-2205).

Regional directories from dioceses, presbyteries, conferences or districts of Christian and Jewish religious bodies may include, among other things, all-important phone numbers of clergy and congregations.

SOURCES FOR EXPERTS

Many of the directories and handbooks listed above provide names and numbers for general religious sources, when all you may need is someone to speak for a specific institution. On the other hand, when you are looking for knowledgeable sources or for authorities in various fields of religious research, look first to the many faculty lists or handbooks available through your local and regional universities and seminaries.

Other national resources for locating religious expertise include:

The Public Religion Project

Directed by Martin Marty, this database of scholar sources that has been under development since 1997 (312/397-6400).

The American Academy of Religion

Based in Atlanta, the AAR welcomes calls for “non-partisan sources on religion” drawn from its large membership (404/727-7948).

Religious Research Association

Society for the Scientific Study of Religion

For sociologists of religion, call Stuart Wright at Lamar University in Texas (409/880-8547).

Profnet

Profnet has the widest range of academic sources by topic (800-PROFNET).

U.S. Catholic Bishops

Expert (and official) sources on Catholicism from the U.S. Catholic bishops’ large staff in Washington, D.C., are listed in the “1998 Source Book” (202/541-3200).

MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS, NEWSLETTERS

Magazines

Protestant

Christianity Today (708/260-6200) for evangelicals and *Christian Century* (312/427-5380) for mainline Protestants—both national magazines are based in the Chicago area. *Charisma* (407/333-0600) delivers news of the charismatics and Pentecostals. Among denominational magazines, you might consider *The Lutheran* (773/380-2540), *The United Methodist Reporter* (214/630-6495) and *Presbyterians Today* (502/569-5637).

Catholic

Aside from a diocesan paper or two in your area, check out *The National Catholic Reporter* (816/531-

0538), which covers national and global Catholic news from a liberal standpoint. *Our Sunday Visitor* (219/856-8400) or *The National Catholic Register* (203/288-5600) provide moderate-to-conservative perspectives. Among Catholic magazines, the Jesuit-run *America* (212/581-4640) and the liberal *Commonweal* (212/662-0800) are influential.

Jewish

Get a local Jewish newspaper (or two) to keep abreast of Jewish news. The national magazines include *Moment* (202/387-8888) and *Tikkun* (415/482-0805). Some writers also recommend the U.S. edition of the *Jerusalem Post*.

Other religions

Hinduism Today, with editorial offices in Hawaii (808/822-7032), is excellent for that religion. *Tricycle*, a quarterly edited in New York City, deals with American Buddhism (212/645-1143), and *The Minaret*, a monthly for Muslims, is produced in Los Angeles (213/384-4570). *Common Boundary*, a bimonthly that explores “spirituality, psychotherapy and creativity,” is edited in Bethesda, Md. (301/ 652-9495).

Research publications

The Review of Religious Research, a quarterly published by the Religious Research Assn. (call Stuart Wright at 409/880-8547), deals with contemporary sociological studies of religion. To keep abreast of developments in biblical studies and to find an occasional news story, check out the popularly written *Biblical Archaeology Review* and *Bible Review* (BR) from the same publisher (202/364-3300).

Newsletters and Congregational Bulletins

Whether they arrive electronically or via the U.S. Postal Service, there's no substitute for newsletters and/or congregational bulletins in tracking news from large churches and temples—and even from regional church headquarters. Despite their size, many of these institutions do not inform news outlets in a timely way about significant (or embarrassing) changes. Getting on a comp subscription list is an easy way to cover your bases with congregations and clergy who are potential newsmakers. It's an especially effective way to keep up with those pastors or rabbis who say things in writing to their members that they might not say to the broader public.

SURVEYS AND STATISTICS

Surveys

Opinion-poll findings on religious behavior and professed beliefs are indispensable for religious trend stories, yet they can't be treated as certainties. For example, the rather consistent range of Americans who say they have attended a religious service in the past seven days (40-42%) has been challenged by some religion sociologists as double the number actually attending services, based on samplings at churches. Some would put the true figure at about 30%. Whether they seek to sample religious or secular behavior or attitudes, opinion polls are a measure of what people say they do or believe, not of what they actually do or think. That caveat aside ...

- The ongoing interest of pollster George Gallup Jr. in religious issues makes his “Emerging Trends” newsletter valuable for filing away. It’s published monthly by the Princeton Religion Research Center, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542 (609/921-8112).
- Another poll-taker with strong religious interests is George Barna, whose office is in Oxnard, Calif. (805/658-8885). Ask to get on his mailing list for news releases and check into his “Barna Report” newsletter. Many of his paid clients are evangelical Christians. (Note his distinctive definitions of “evangelical” and “born-again.”)
- Among other poll organizations to watch is the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press (202/293-3126).
- For surveys and statistics on U.S. Catholics, consult Georgetown University-based CARA (202/687-8080). The research center produces a fact-filled quarterly newsletter.

Statistics

Yearbooks of some large Christian denominations are bulky; be selective except for those church bodies which are important in your geographical region.

A must-have for religion reporters: Easy-to-handle, yearly statistical summaries on the U.S. Catholic Church, available in news-release summaries from the *Official Catholic Directory’s* managing editor, who is based in Illinois (847/966-8278).

Stats on seminaries—Protestant, Catholic, liberal, conservative—are available from the Pittsburgh office of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (412/788-6505).

COMPUTER NETWORKS

Because the Internet is a communications medium still undergoing rapid change, this handbook does not attempt to act as a guide to websites nor does it provide e-mail addresses. To do so would consign this printed primer to immediate obsolescence. Moreover, religion specialists must evaluate cybersources for themselves in determining what is credible and useful and what is not.

This said, it is imperative for religion reporters to have an e-mail address at work. Sources for non-breaking news stories may answer e-mail queries more promptly than they return phone calls. Sources may also be more expansive via e-mail than they are in person or over the phone, and the e-mail itself serves as a written record of the quote.

**RELIGION WRITERS
ARE SECTS EXPERTS**

NEWS RELEASES & TIPS ON COVERAGE

Publicity releases yield few stories, considering the number of such efforts that land on the religion reporter's desk. But it is risky *not* to hear regularly from newsmaking denominations, major independent ministries and religious special-interest groups via mailed releases, faxes and/or e-mail. While most groups have computer websites, these may or may not be updated promptly. You need to be on the contact list when an institution is ready to put out that rare major announcement.

Here are some religious bodies likely to generate news, along with tips on covering them:

Catholic

Mixed in with the workaday releases are occasional major news reports from the U.S. Catholic Conference (the administrative arm of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops) in Washington, D.C. (202/541-3200) Look not only for releases from regional dioceses but also from important offices in those dioceses that might send you advisories or announcements directly without going through the diocese's official PR person. Eventually, you can decide what special-interest Catholic groups you want to hear from regularly—or they may decide for you!

Tips: It is not necessary to say *Roman* Catholic on first reference, but check with your editors. Eastern Rite Catholic parishes exist in some dioceses; they are ethnic traditions from Eastern Europe and the Middle East who profess loyalty to Rome but retain their own liturgical rites. Avoid jargon. Instead, find words understandable to non-Catholics. Instead of “men and women religious,” use “priests, brothers and sisters.” The “ordinary of a diocese” is the bishop or archbishop

who heads a diocese or archdiocese. “Vocation” refers to a calling or to the desire a Catholic may have to become a priest or nun; the “vocations director” heads the recruiting of such candidates.

Protestant

A steady flow of news releases emanates from the United Methodist Church (United Methodist News Service, 615/742-5470), the Southern Baptist Convention (Baptist Press, 615/244-2355), the Episcopal Church (212/922-5385), the Presbyterian Church, USA (502/569-5504), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (773/380-2958). The Associated Baptist Press tracks both Southern Baptists and more moderate Baptist bodies (904/262-6626).

African-American denominations usually do not have the resources to employ full-time press officers. The largest denomination, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., has national offices in Nashville (615/228-6292). The African Methodist Episcopal Church (you can use “AME Church” after giving its full name initially) is headquartered in Washington, D.C., (202/371-8700) and is the largest of the three black Methodist denominations. The largest Pentecostal African American denomination is the Church of God in Christ, based in Memphis, Tenn. (901/578-3800). Local districts of the Methodists and COGIC are led by bishops, who are good sources for local and national happenings. The same is true for the big-church Baptist pastors who are most influential in any Baptist denomination.

Evangelical ministries (“para-church” organizations—a term to avoid in stories, by the way) often are bigger newsmakers than denominations. Three of the largest are the Billy Graham Evangelistic Assn., Minneapolis (612/338-0500), Pat Robertson’s television and relief

ministries (757/226-2456) and Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization founded by Bill Bright that has a broader scope than its name implies (407/826-2100).

Don't forget the National Council of Churches (212/870-2252) and its delicate balance of some 30+ Episcopal, Protestant, Baptist and Eastern Orthodox members. At the local level, the interfaith councils—whose membership may include Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Bahai and Buddhist representatives—may be more important than the (all-Christian) ecumenical councils of churches.

Tips: “Protestant” as an umbrella term is okay when using a very broad-brush description contrasted to “Catholics” and “Eastern Orthodox.” Otherwise, keep in mind that Episcopalians and Baptists object to being lumped under the term “Protestant.”

It is getting increasingly difficult to use “mainline” to describe such denominations as the Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal and United Church of Christ. Some writers call those denominations “oldline,” “ecumenical,” “traditional” or “predominantly liberal-to-moderate” church bodies. Calling them “mainstream” is even worse, because that is such a relative term. Yet, in a context that distinguishes between “mainline” and “evangelical” churches, “mainline” may work.

“Evangelical,” in its broadest sense, can embrace Pentecostal, charismatic and fundamentalist churches. But “theologically conservative” or “conservative Christian” may also aptly apply in some circumstances. Be careful with the word “fundamentalist”—unless the church groups or persons so identified use it themselves—because of its pejorative connotation. “Fundamentalist in doctrine,” “fundamentalist-oriented,” “fundamentalist-like” or other such qualified terms may be appropriate. Handle “religious right” with care,

too, saving it for clearly activist, politically oriented, stoutly conservative religious groups.

Eastern Orthodox

Get on the mailing list of at least one Eastern Orthodox body, such as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (212-628-2590) or the Orthodox Church in America (516-922-0550). Eastern Orthodoxy rarely makes news, but this major branch of Christianity should not be forgotten.

Tips: “Eastern Orthodox” may serve as an umbrella term when used in the same sentence as references to Protestants and Catholics. More exactly, Eastern Orthodox churches, such as the Greek and Russian churches, are linked by their acknowledgment of the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople as the first among patriarchs. There are also Eastern Oriental churches, such as the Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopian churches. For all-encompassing references, one may speak of Eastern Christianity or the Eastern Christian churches.

Mormon

The Mormon Church, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, 801/240-2205), should be sending you news releases if you live in an area with a notable Mormon presence. According to some observers, its rapidly growing, rich and well-organized spread worldwide will transform the Utah-based church into a major world religion in the 21st century. But its conservative, hierarchal leadership and its public relations headquarters are not forthcoming about debates within the church. The PR office tends to promote an unblemished, tranquil image for the institution. Thus, reporters must establish other contacts, such as *Sunstone* magazine and its affiliated

symposiums (801/355-5926) for an intellectual critique of the church.

Founder Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon also have followings among small sectarian groups in the western United States and in one small denomination based in Independence, Mo.: the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. (Note the different style—no hyphen—associated with “Latter Day” in the RLDS Church, as it is commonly called.)

Tips: In some lengthy stories about the Mormon Church, it may be possible to use “Latter-day Saints” and “the LDS Church” as an alternative to “Mormons” and “Mormon Church,” but the latter is less confusing to the average reader.

As American religion becomes increasingly pluralistic and interfaith, fights over whether Mormons may be called “Christians” tend to be important primarily to other mission-oriented, religiously conservative churches, which regard the Mormon Church as a sect because of its admittedly distinctive beliefs and extra-biblical scriptures. The religion writer should stay noncommittal on this issue when using descriptive terms. For instance, the phrase “Christian speakers, including Lutherans, Catholics, Mormons and Methodists” would raise a red flag for some readers, but the alternative description, “speakers from various churches, such as Lutheran, Catholic, Mormon and Methodist,” would not.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Don’t expect to get many, if any, news releases from the headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Brooklyn, N.Y. (718/560-5600) This organization, unlike the Mormon Church, shuns mainstream society. If you can, build on the press contacts local organizers make when they seek publicity for regional assemblies open to the

public. Keep an ear out for ex-Witness groups to learn of occasional newsmaking changes or controversies.

Tips: The Witnesses have been involved in church-state issues in the past. Their refusal to accept blood transfusions sometimes raises medical and legal questions.

Christian Science

The Church of Christ, Scientist, has its “mother church” in Boston (617/450-3301), and all other congregations are considered branch churches. This metaphysical faith, founded by Mary Baker Eddy, is commonly called “Christian Science.” Its insistence on prayer over medical science as a means of healing makes it distinctive and the occasional subject of lawsuits. Few news announcements of substance are issued by headquarters; membership figures are never disclosed. The church’s Committee on Publication offices in Boston and around the country do respond to news-media queries, however.

Note: Two denominations of Religious Science, unrelated to Christian Science and based in the Los Angeles area, are not opposed to medical assistance. Religious Science churches also emphasize positive thinking and put a premium on motivational preaching.

Sects and Cults

In general, sects are usually understood to be variant versions of established religious bodies. Cults are commonly understood to be groups led by charismatic, demanding individuals who present idiosyncratic teachings despite occasional claims to having recovered the “pure tradition.”

Tips: Be cautious about applying the word “sect” or “cult” to any religious body, and only then with

credible attribution. “New religious movements,” “spiritual counter-culture groups,” “alternative religions” or some variation may work. Some groups are eager for publicity—though they are not usually candid—but most are uncooperative with the press. “Anti-cult” groups will quickly make themselves known whenever a big story, such as the 1997 Heaven’s Gate suicides in California, erupts. But more reasoned perspectives and even field studies of the group in question, or of similar groups, should be sought from professors in the field of sociology of religion. Sociologists often are sympathetic to the new, or alternate, religious movements as groups routinely mischaracterized by the news media, but many critics of offbeat sectarian groups speak from a conservative Christian standpoint and without research credentials.

Jewish

Reform and Conservative are the two largest denominations/branches/wings (any one of those three words is better than the misnomer “movements”) of organized Judaism in North America. Synagogues and rabbis affiliated with each branch maintain separate organizations. Reform: Union of American Hebrew Congregations (212/249-0100) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (212/684-4990). Conservative: United Synagogue (212/533-7800) and the Rabbinical Assembly (212/678-8060).

Orthodox Judaism in the United States is represented by many organizations. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (212/563-4000) is the largest synagogue-oriented body. The Chabad Lubavitcher movement of Hasidic rabbis, because of the appearance of its adherents and its aggressive public relations, receives news-media exposure out of all proportion to its size.

In Israel, by comparison, Orthodoxy is the dominant religious orientation, and its main conflicts are with secular Israelis and, lately, with American representatives of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Two relatively small Jewish religious groups are worth noting, although news about them is infrequent: the Reconstructionist movement of synagogues and rabbis, based in Philadelphia, and the Sephardic synagogues, which carry on Jewish traditions from medieval Spain and North Africa (as opposed to Ashkenazi traditions, which derive from central and eastern Europe).

Influential groups that combine religious, political and community concerns include the American Jewish Committee (212/751-4000, ext. 271), the American Jewish Congress (212/249-3672), the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (212/490-2525) and the Simon Weisenthal Center in Los Angeles (310/553-9036).

Tips: Unless you have an interest in Israeli politics, Jewish community news and ethnic issues, you may find it wise to limit yourself to stories primarily about Jewish religion. Your expertise will be greater in that area, and, let's face it, your beat will be big enough as it is.

Islamic

Organized Islam in North America has made considerable strides in the 1990s. Even so, maintaining contact with the principal Islamic centers in your locale may require periodic efforts. At the national level, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), based in Washington, D.C., sends out frequent news releases by fax and makes itself available by phone on various issues (202/659-2247). Also in Washington is the American Muslim Council (202/789-2262). The Muslim Public Affairs Council (213/383-3443), based in Los Angeles, has politically savvy views. The Council on

Islamic Education (714/839-2929) and Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (202/687-8375) both provide sources and comments helpful to journalists.

Two major umbrella organizations are the Islamic Society of North America, Plainfield, Ind., (317/839-8157) and the Islamic Circle of North America, Jamaica, N.Y. (718/658-1199).

The Chicago area is the base for both the Muslim American Society (312/667-7200—the often-renamed following of Warith Deen Mohammed, who has led many black Muslims into the Islamic mainstream—and for Minister Louis Farrakhan of the controversial Nation of Islam. Farrakhan's representatives are difficult to reach; you might channel inquiries through the group's newspaper, *The Final Call*. Imam W. D. Mohammed's ministry is easier to reach; its newspaper is *The Muslim Journal* (708/647-9600).

Tips: Because ready-made stories and announcements from Muslim groups are usually sparse, find good sources in academia as well as at the local Islamic center. A mix of articulate sources, Muslim and non-Muslim, is ideal. Muslims are justifiably sensitive about careless news-media characterizations that lump radical activists abroad together with ordinary Muslims.

Buddhism

Aside from mostly independent meditation centers and temples, one Buddhist organization built along church denomination lines is the San Francisco-based Buddhist Churches of America (415/776-5600), which represents the Jodo Shinshu sect of Japanese Buddhism. Another organized group is the lay-led, often controversial Sökkagakkai Buddhist movement based in Japan and directed in North America from Santa Monica, Calif. (310/451-8811).

Tips: Buddhism is often characterized as having two basic traditions, the Theravada (mostly in South and Southeast Asia) and Mahayana (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc.). Tibetan traditions (Vajrayana) are quite distinct but technically belong within the Mahayana framework. Zen Buddhism—with Mahayana roots—is best known in America because of Anglo converts and rigorous discipline.

H. H. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, technically has spiritual authority over only those in his Tibetan Buddhist sect, but his stature and celebrity have earned him broad respect in Buddhist and interfaith circles.

Hindu

Hinduism covers diverse traditions derived from the rich religious history and lore of India. Some umbrella organizations function in large metropolitan areas such as Washington, D.C., although permanent telephone listings often change. One Hindu group with a dozen temples in North America is Bochasanwasi Swaminarayan Sanstha, based in Flushing, N.Y. (718/539-5373). The Hindu organization best known to Americans is the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), familiarly known as the Hare Krishna movement (301/299-9707).

Tips: Some Hindu groups emphasize support for nationalist Hindu movements in India, such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Don't assume that any one Hindu temple or group is observing rites, holidays or practices common to all other Hindus. The regional and ethnic roots of Hindu sects ("sects" or "groups" is preferable to "denominations") and particular teachings of their gurus create pitfalls for the writer who wants to generalize about Hinduism.

OOPS! COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- It's "Reform" Judaism, not "Reformed" Judaism. (The confusion arises from Protestant circles, where you have the "Reformed" tradition to which Presbyterians and the Reformed Church in America belong.)
- Spelling: It's "Pentecostal," not "Pentacostal."
- Your news organization should consistently use "the Rev. Jane Jones," not "Rev. Jane Jones."
- Episcopalians say "We are nouns; don't use us as adjectives." That is, it is not an "Episcopalian" parish. It's an "Episcopal" parish.
- Southern Baptists don't send "delegates" to their annual meeting, they send "messengers." But if you can't get that by a city editor, try avoiding both terms by saying "Southern Baptists today voted ..."
- In controversy stories, identify which Lutheran denomination or which Presbyterian denomination you are describing.
- Watch that you (or copy editors) don't mix up the liberal United Church of Christ and the conservative Churches of Christ.
- Never use "Mohammedanism." That is an outdated term for Islam. And make it "Muslim," not "Moslem." Most news groups write "Koran," but "Quran" would match U.S. Muslim usage. Friday is not a "sabbath" for Muslims; they are expected to attend mid-day communal prayers, but it is not a day of rest. Using "veil" instead of "hijab" can be misleading. The Arabic term refers to a woman's head covering, which usually does not cover her face. Because of old American films, a veil brings to mind a transparent fabric in front of a woman's face.
- A preacher can say flatly, "Jesus said thus and thus," but a journalist should attribute his words to a source, such as one of the Gospels.
- Do not refer to "the Old Testament" in a story focused on Jews or Jewish studies; instead of that Christian name, use "the Bible," "Hebrew Bible" or "Hebrew Scriptures." "Old Testament" is fine in a story about Christians or Christian studies.
- The Jewish menorah has seven branches, or candles, but the nine-branch menorah is used for Hanukkah.
- Don't accept the casual use of "sects," "cults" and "brainwashing." These loaded words are often used unfairly. (See *Sects and Cults*, pp. 22-23.)

ISSUES

Contacts for ongoing controversies are not difficult to find, because advocacy groups seek out the news media. Nevertheless, here are some groups you and other reporters will encounter. (Note: The religion specialist shares these stories with many other reporters—court reporters, general assignment and feature writers, medical and education specialists, etc.)

Culture and morality wars

On conflicted issues in which the religious stakes are high, conservative groups that speak to a range of concerns include the Pat Robertson-founded Christian Coalition (757/424-2630), James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministries based in Colorado Springs (719/531-3400) and the American Family Assn., Tupelo, Miss. (601/844-5036). Liberal viewpoints are represented by the relatively new Interfaith Alliance (202/639-6370) and People for the American Way (202/467-4999).

Religious liberty and church-state separation

A centrist, unifying voice on religion in the public schools is the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University (615/321-9588), which also speaks to other First Amendment issues. Americans United for Separation of Church and State (301/589-3707) and the Baptist Joint Committee (202/544-4266) defend traditional church-state separation, along with the Washington offices of the American Jewish Congress and American Jewish Committee and Seventh-day Adventists.

Representing the other side in such issues are the American Center for Law and Justice, Virginia Beach, Va. (757/226-2489), The Rutherford Institute in Charlottesville, Va. (804/978-3888) and the Southern

Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville (615/244-2495). The National Association of Evangelicals' Washington office (202/789-1011) is also helpful.

Abortion

The pro-life office of the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington (202/541-3200) is active, as are the Christian Coalition and other theologically conservative groups. On abortion rights, contact the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (202/628-7700) or Catholics for a Free Choice in Washington (202/986-6093).

Homosexuality

Advocacy groups for homosexual rights, including the right to be ordained for the ministry, are found in many liberal-to-moderate denominations. The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (310/360-8640) is a worldwide denomination with a gay and lesbian orientation that is based in West Hollywood, Calif. Reform Judaism also includes congregations serving gay and lesbian Jews. Among "ex-gay" faith groups that claim that a homosexual orientation can be changed is Exodus International, San Rafael, Calif. (415/454-1017).

Humanism and non-belief

The history-rich Unitarian Universalist Association, based in Boston (617/742-2100), places importance on ethical education and the pursuit of faith and justice issues, but members' beliefs might be best described as free-thinking. Freedom From Religion, based in Madison, Wis. (608/256-8900) is quotable and initiates some news on church-state separation. The Council for Secular Humanism, Amherst, N.Y. , publishes *Free*

Inquiry magazine (716/636-1733). American Atheists are not the same since the disappearance of founder Madalyn Murray O’Hair, but successors attempt to carry on (512/458-1244).

Science and faith

Understanding relationships between science/medicine and religious progress are goals of The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Berkeley, Calif., (510/848-8152) and a series of Spirituality and Healing conferences (Harvard Medical School, Dept. of Continuing Education, 617/432-1562). These are among many programs supported by the John Templeton Foundation, Radnor, Pa., (610/687-8942), which can be followed in part through the Templeton-backed *Science and Spirit* magazine, Concord, N.H. (603/229-0953). No anti-evolutionists here.

To find critical analyses of pseudo-scientific movements, psychic phenomena and paranormal claims, which are sometimes cast in religious terms, get *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine or call its Buffalo-based publisher, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (716/636-1425). Another such source is the Skeptics Society of Altadena, Calif., publishers of the slick, thick journal *Skeptic* (626/794-3119).

Among defenders of “creation science” is the Creation Research Society, Kansas City, Mo. (816/746-5300).

For unconventional but popular spiritual ideas claiming a scientific base, one can always check out books appearing on the bestseller lists.

Media and religion

Conservative religious critics of the news and entertainment media sometimes draw data from studies by the Media Research Center in Alexandria, Va. (703/683-9733). The independent Catholic League For Religious and Civil Rights in New York City (212/371-3191) pounces on perceived examples of anti-Catholic bias in the media.

Other watchdogs of a different type: Scientifically questionable TV programs or films about psychic or paranormal claims may come under the scrutiny of the Council for Media Integrity (716/636-1425). The religiously supported Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles attempts to help people discern the subtle influences of commercials and entertainment media (213/931-4177).

Religious television networks include the interfaith Odyssey cable network (212/964-1663), Trinity Broadcasting Network (714/832-2950), CBN (757/226-2456) and the Eternal Word Television Network founded by Mother Angelica (205/956-9537). Planned for a 1998 launch is the family-fare PAXNET network with some religious content, put together by born-again Florida media executive Lowell "Bud" Paxson of Paxson Communications Corp. (561/659-4122).

World religions

Besides local interfaith councils and multi-faith study centers, two other resources are the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions (617/495-4495) and the Chicago-based Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (312/629-2990).

NATIONAL MEETINGS

Few editors are interested in sending you to a national meeting unless hard news will emerge and/or there are good local angles. If you can make a good case for going, however, you will find that other story ideas surface as you meet people and acquire background on issues that will later become newsworthy. Moreover, meeting newsmakers and sources face-to-face may get you better access the next time you telephone.

Catholics

The U.S. bishops' November meeting is usually held in Washington, D.C., home of the U.S. Catholic Conference (202/541-3200). The bishops' spring meeting, usually less newsworthy, moves each year to a different city. You may never find a Catholic bishop, even one from your own diocese, so accessible as between sessions of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Evangelicals/charismatics

Best bet is the meeting of the National Religious Broadcasters (Manassas, Va., 703/330-7000), usually in February, often but not always held in Washington, D.C. Consider also the Christian Booksellers Association (Colorado Springs, 719/576-7880). Big names in evangelical circles show up at both, and the convention exhibit areas are wonders to behold. The annual meeting of Southern Baptists (615/244-2355), who make up the largest non-Catholic denomination, has to be considered by newspapers in Bible Belt states. The Assemblies of God, based in Springfield, Mo. (417/862-5554), is the largest predominantly white Pentecostal denomination. The National Association of Evangelicals, Carol Stream, Ill. (708/665-0500), is worth considering each year, but it rarely produces major

news. The all-male Promise Keepers' 1997 rally in the nation's capital was a major news event, but the newsworthiness of its ongoing, regional stadium rallies may have to be judged on a case-by-case basis (303/964-7777).

The liberal-to-moderate church bodies

Hot issues, often over sexual matters, regularly determine coverage here. Consider the Episcopal Church (meets triennially; 212/867-8400), United Methodist Church (meets every four years; 615/742-5470), Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (meets annually; 502/569-5515) or Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (meets every other year; 773/380-2958). Also of interest are the black denominations' conventions; conduct interviews before such meetings to establish contacts and to be able to interpret the convention actions. The largest of these groups, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. (615/228-6292), is worth considering, as is the socially conscious African Methodist Episcopal Church (202/371-8700).

Academia

The largest annual gathering (8,000 or more scholars and graduate students) is the joint one of the American Academy of Religion (404/727-2340) and the Society of Biblical Literature. Not nearly as large, but with a higher percentage of papers about contemporary religion, is the joint meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association. (Contact Stuart Wright, Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas, 409/880-8547.). Both joint meetings are in the fall. Even if you don't plan to attend, look through the advance program books for potentially newsmaking papers or topics by scholars from your

area; you might be able to get an advance copy, do a quick interview and write it up without going to the meeting.

Judaism

Reform and Conservative Judaism represent the greatest number of U.S. Jews, but rabbis and congregational organizations of both branches hold separate national conventions. Keep track of the issues that may come to votes at rabbinical conventions. Annual meetings of groups such as the American Jewish Committee deal with broader Jewish concerns, including but not limited to religious issues.

Islam

Because Muslim mosques and associations are autonomous, national meetings may provide low yield in terms of hard news. However, they may lead to features and story ideas. One possibility: the national meeting of the Islamic Society of North America (317/839-8157).

Personal and Professional Considerations

Your admirers out there might try to flatter you sometime by declaring you are not only a journalist *but also* a missionary, or moralist or educator. It is a fact that some of your stories may inspire or deepen people's faith. But those results should be incidental byproducts of your journalistic efforts.

Follow professional guidelines in deciding what constitutes news—i.e., that which is timely, important, unexpected and compelling. Let the chips fall where they may. If you do, you will be true to your profession, and, coincidentally, give religion and your audience a fair shake.

Why reject the secondary self-images?

It should be obvious that being a *missionary*, even in supposedly innocuous ways, leads to trouble. Editors won't let you do it for long. If they do allow it because you are subtle in your writing and story choices, then you will eventually be trapped by the unrealistic expectations of your readers: They will feel betrayed if you print "bad news," scandal stories or the newsworthy opinions of opponents.

If your beat is called "religion and ethics," or if you write interpretive columns as well as straight news, then it will be tougher to avoid being the *moralist*. This

may be something you will work out with your editors. Let the journalistic instincts of fairness, accuracy, insight and perspective be your guides.

Thinking of oneself as an *educator* might seem admirable. After all, a good religion piece will contain background and context, and news developments offer many learning opportunities. The danger is that you will select stories because you feel the public needs to know more about the subject, regardless of its news value. Again, good editors would halt most of that, but a sly, determined agenda might slip around a busy, unsuspecting editor.

Finally, religion specialists should be neither cheerleaders nor cynical debunkers. It is as unethical for a non-believing writer to promote skepticism on the religion beat as it is for believer to fashion the assignment into a pulpit.

Keep an Arched Eyebrow at the Ready

- Don't let interviewees obfuscate with jargon and piety. They know how to talk in plain language at public meetings, to relatives at picnics or to someone next to them on an airplane flight; they should be asked to do it with you, too, even if you do understand the shorthand lingo. Remember, you will need some useable quotes back at the office.
- Don't accept figures for church membership or followers that seem to be pure guesses. Maybe there are other gauges for size: average attendance, number of congregations, mailing list, etc. Also, cumulative Gallup polls and other comprehensive national surveys may give better estimates of how many people consider themselves to be Catholic, born-again Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Mormon, etc., than estimates and official figures say.

- Don't assume that everybody in a particular faith adheres to prescribed beliefs and practices. We know that not all church or synagogue members go along with their faith traditions. Likewise, some immigrants succumb to the secular environment in this country. Representatives of the Sikh religion, for instance, may say that Sikh men do not cut their hair or trim their beards and must wear the symbolic kirpan, or sword, within their garments. But many don't, even overseas. The textbook description of faith is one thing, practice is another.

Personal Beliefs: Hide or Disclose?

Martha Allen of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis said that when she covered politics, no one ever asked her what party she belonged to. She said she was shocked when she moved to the religion beat and someone inquired what church she went to. She continues to get that question on the religion beat.

"Now I practically volunteer it when I start an interview so people know who I am," she says.

The handling of questions about personal faith varies greatly from writer to writer. Many say they never respond to that question because it is irrelevant.

Another says, "I tell them the truth, very briefly. Telling a source that I have a faith of my own loosens them considerably to talk in that realm. I make it clear, however, that I'm not interested in talking about me."

One religion writer begs off thusly: "Because it is my duty as a journalist to be as fair and unbiased as possible, I'm afraid public discussion of my beliefs would lessen the public's confidence in me."

When the reporter is not a conventional believer, then evasiveness may be the best answer. One such person tells inquirers, "I haven't decided yet." Some

MUST A RELIGION WRITER BE A BELIEVER?

Not necessarily. Four percent of the members of the Religion Newswriters Association who answered a First Amendment Center survey in 1992 identified themselves as “non-believer or humanist.”

In addition, some writers covering religion for the secular press have had satisfying careers, even though they have points of disagreement with their faith or feel they fall short in beliefs or behavior. A good editor will judge the religion reporter by his or her stories, not by her or his personal preferences. Nevertheless, logic says that someone with spiritual impulses is most likely to be happy on the beat. At the same time, an ardent, traditional believer may have problems meeting objective journalistic standards.

The survey of RNA members, which had a 67% response, showed that 50% identified themselves as “mainline Protestant,” 21% chose “Catholic,” 14% picked “evangelical Christian,” 5% chose “Jewish” and 6% chose “other religion.” None chose “fundamentalist Christian.”

reporters say their reply isn’t consistent, that it often depends on how badly the source’s comments and information are needed.

My own advice is to beg off, to explain that you are a professional journalist who has been able to work with liberals and conservatives of all faiths by showing everyone respect. If this does not end the discussion and the hoped-for interview is crucial, you might try suggesting that 1) you take great pains to be accurate and fair, and 2) that there are great psychological pitfalls here. Explain that if your religious perspective coincides with the subject’s then, like it or not, unrealistic expectations about the story will be raised, and if it doesn’t, you’ll feel that your professional ability to report independently of this and other obvious differences—gender, age, race—has been called into question.

Conflict of Interest

No religion reporter should have to curtail the practice of his or her faith. But editors or news directors might

justifiably object if you are an active leader in a newsmaking religious body or if you serve on its public communications committee.

A question to ask: Would your leadership in a religious body compromise your impartial coverage of that organization? Even if that were unlikely, would there be an appearance of conflicting interests?

The guidelines established by your news organization might be the most important consideration here.

But you do have the right to join a local congregation and worship, just as a political reporter may belong to a political party and vote.

A Final Word

For whom are you writing? Try: everyone. Report and write with enough clarity for those unversed in the subject and with enough new information to impress the knowledgeable. Both will appreciate a deft use of background. The uninitiated need context, and the expert will have confidence in the news report if the reporter shows a grasp of what's significant.

William Simbro of *The Des Moines Register* once described the challenge that can lead to professionally pleasing religion stories. Writing in *Quill* magazine in 1979, Simbro explained that the test of the religion writer's skill lies in his or her ability "to take a thorny theological problem and do a story with enough zip to get it past an editor, enough simplicity that the average reader will want to read it and will understand it, and enough intellectual integrity that an expert in the field believes you have enlightened and explained rather than trivialized"

May all your efforts at covering religion news achieve such success.

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Authority figures don't come any bigger than those covered by the writer on the religion beat, says veteran reporter John Dart. And although religion writers must "sometimes step cautiously through spiritual minefields," the payoff is a beat unsurpassed in the newsroom for the reporting possibilities it encompasses.

This book gives beginning religion writers the benefits of John Dart's decades of experience covering religion news for the *Los Angeles Times*. From reference books to newsletters to national organizations, Dart suggests sources for news stories and background information. He guides religion-news newcomers past common pitfalls, noting, for instance, that "it's 'Reform' Judaism, not 'Reformed' Judaism" and explaining the difference between "spirituality" and "spiritualism." He discusses possible conflict-of-interest issues and reassures new writers that newsroom colleagues will eventually quit calling them "Reverend."

Wisdom, wit—and a wealth of phone numbers—make *Deities & Deadlines* an invaluable sourcebook for all newcomers to religion reporting.



John Dart has covered religion news for the *Los Angeles Times* since 1967, a tenure which affords him senior status among religion reporters on U.S. dailies. He has served as president of the Society of Professional Journalists' Los Angeles chapter and of the 200-member Religion Newswriters Association.

While a 1992-93 Visiting Professional Scholar at The First Amendment Center, Dart co-authored with Dr. Jimmy Allen a study, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media*, which found that journalists' lack of religious knowledge contributed to conflicts between these vital institutions. Dart continues to address religion/news-media relations in professional and academic circles. Queries may be sent to 20000 Prairie St., Chatsworth, CA 91311, or faxed to (818) 772-3338, or emailed to john.dart@latimes.com.

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