
RELIGION AND THE GLOBAL MEDIA: IMPROVING A STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

—NANCY NIELSEN—

With 42 armed conflicts in 32 locations around the world during 1994, many of which had a religious dimension, accurate news coverage of cultural conflicts and religious influences is more important than ever before.¹ Quite simply, in today's world a distorted understanding of a skirmish "over there" could easily ripple into a civil war closer to home. Put more dramatically, our survival as human beings may depend upon getting timely and accurate information about each other. All the major international problems are increasingly interrelated—mass poverty, population, food, energy, military expenditures, and the world monetary system—and problems in one area may easily ignite problems in another.² Remember the slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally"? Today, in many respects, globally is locally.

News coverage of a conflict may alleviate or agitate a situation. While it is not the job of a journalist to promote peace, news reports can profoundly affect the way people understand—or misunderstand—their world, their safety, their options, and their future. Journalists can serve the public good by promoting an informed citizenry. When people get complete and accurate information from a variety of uncensored voices, they are better equipped to make sensible choices.

The global news media also affect how people understand different ethnic and religious groups. Contrary to the perception that growing interaction among different ethnic groups would reduce tensions because the groups come to know each other as people, interaction often makes tensions worse, according to a seminal essay by Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington, who says that interaction stirs awareness of differences, which revives and exacerbates old hatreds. Future wars and conflicts will be based on those cultural factors that define people by their history, language, ethnicity—and especially their religion, the least mutable of all factors.³

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Increasing diversity within societies and increasing contact between nations through travel, trade, and communication suggest a growing need for the media to cover religious and cultural issues. Given the media's ability to shape public perception, it follows that there will be a greater need to examine how the global media cover religious issues.

Unfortunately, there is no foundation, academic institution, private think tank, or polling organization whose expressed mission is to monitor the interaction of the global media and religion. The World Council of Churches may monitor media coverage of major religions, and the United Nations may monitor press coverage of its conflict management efforts worldwide, but no one monitors the complete picture of religion, the media, and conflict. Research must be conducted to examine how media of different structures and philosophies interact with various conflicts in different socio-political environments, especially when religion is a component in the conflicts.⁴

Deep misunderstanding and mistrust between religious leaders and journalists exists, undermining news coverage.

For example, the revolt in Chechnya involved the tensions of Muslim insurgents pitted against a predominately Christian Eastern Orthodox state. For the first time in Russian history, the media were free to report on the war as they saw fit. Some military authorities tried to control the news reports, but for the most part, journalists had free rein.

Surprisingly, a study by the Center for War, Peace and the News Media of the Russian media's war coverage illustrated that Russian society was shaken by the candor, violence, and propaganda of the war coverage. Before the invasion was launched in December 1994, Russians had had confidence in their leaders despite critical economic and social problems. Since then, the people have lacked confidence and have been disturbed by the media's questioning of the territorial integrity of Russia. The study further warned that public despair and cynicism were deep enough to result in anarchy.⁵

Chechnya was not a religious war, but the conflict had a religious component. In Chechnya and other volatile places around the globe, the media are faced with the challenge of how to cover the invisible. Often, religion's influence is hidden because the search for spirituality increasingly proliferates unofficially outside temple and church walls. Much of this spiritual search takes place in the privacy of an increasing number of informal, lay-led, small groups devoted to prayer, the study of Scripture, and self-help discussions. The ideas and worldviews that evolve there are seldom the subject of public discourse.

As a result, covering religious themes means that journalists must step outside the familiar secular frameworks and political models to understand what's really happening. To report actions while misinterpreting motives misses the point, or worse, misses the truth.⁶

Today, religion enters the public discourse in more ways than ever. Examining *The New York Times* on any day reveals an abundance of stories that include a component of religion. For example, the July 13, 1995 issue had 10 such articles and one editorial including:

- "Judge in Terror Trial Bars Witnesses on Islamic Law"
- "Hand Over Israeli Bases? No Way, Rabbis Tell Troops"
- "Spanish Woman Battles Buddha for Her Son, the Lama"
- "Editorial [in Jewish Weekly] Provokes A Debate on Inter-marriage"
- "Ulster Protestants March, Celebrating History, as Catholics Jeer"

Add to this list all the other current ethnic-religious conflicts, the recent U.N. International Conference on Population and Development that dealt with abortion issues, the rise in fundamentalism across world religions, and the ethics of medically assisted suicide. Religion-related issues have claimed center stage and are here to stay.

Deep misunderstanding and mistrust between religious leaders and journalists exists, undermining news coverage. A 1993 Freedom Forum study of 900 American journalists and members of the clergy nationwide stated that their "chasm of misunderstanding" was due more to ignorance and lack of resources than to animosity.⁷ A 1980 survey of the media elite in New York and Washington, DC, found that 86 percent of the journalists seldom or never attended religious services, and that half of them did not have a religious affiliation. The two studies had a common finding: journalists do not take religion seriously.

Several factors put the clergy and media at odds. The two groups see the world differently, approaching it with different motivations and goals. Journalists define situations in terms of their differences in order to clarify events. Religious peacemakers define situations by their commonalities in order to foster peace.

For example, journalists would identify the differences between the mainstream Sunnis and minority Shi'a. They would explain why those differences are important, illustrate how Islam's historical split is relevant to current events, explain what it means to that day's story, and examine future implications. Religious peacemakers in this situation would seek the common ground between Sunnis and Shi'a, discuss why specific commonalities are important and how they could be used as building blocks for peace, bring the combatants together in person, and suggest a plan for moving forward.

By personality, journalists tend to be skeptical, iconoclastic, and suspicious of authority; religious people tend not to be. Journalists rely on facts; religious people ultimately rely on faith. However, many fact-seeking journalists overlook the fact that world religions are built on intellectual foundations.

Structural Reasons for Poor Coverage

There are a number of structural reasons why the global news media cover religion poorly. First, the global news system is dominated by the Western media, which act as global gatekeepers who overlook or are blind to the religious component of many stories.

The global media system includes approximately 15 to 20 open societies with sophisticated technologies. Once an important story appears in London, Tokyo, Rome, or New York, for example, the story flows through the arteries of the world's news system. As a result, that story is likely to be widely reported elsewhere even if it has little relevance to that population.⁹ That story also may bear the cultural bias of the author's society, where religion may be less important than in the society where the event occurred.

Second, the media influence how news issues are framed. Often they focus on events and individuals rather than on points in a continuing process. Sometimes it is hard for the public to relate cause and effect, and identify real problems that need real solutions.

For example, a study on the more than 2,000 stories on terrorism covered by the three American television networks between 1981 and 1986 found that 74 percent of the stories focused on people or on events such as bombings and hijackings. Only 26 percent of the stories were thematic and focused on terrorism as a political problem rooted in history, geography, ideology, and religion.¹⁰ Within this framework, it would be hard for viewers to draw sensible conclusions about how their government should combat terrorism—the larger, more important theme behind the events reported in the news. Similarly, coverage of the Pope is predominately based on events such as his travels, holiday messages, or physical injuries, and not on his key theological positions such as moral absolutism. To miss the ongoing development of the themes is to miss the message.

Meanwhile, the media grapple with how to cover the world in a way that makes sense of global interdependence. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, it was easy to define Western players in opposition to the Soviets, and to write about the resulting implications for world order. A reporter's story could involve life and death matters of national security, so it was easier to make page one or be included in a broadcast. Now, in the absence of a consistent Western foreign policy, there is no framework from which the media can define what is consistent, what is critical, and what is at stake in the coverage of world events. All the while, global politics and world order continue to shift. No one has discovered how to cover international thematic topics such as economics or the environment in a way that is useful to the intelligent reader or viewer. At the same time, news organizations have been reducing their number of foreign correspondents to cut costs as they place more emphasis on domestic news coverage.

Another structural reason why religion is covered poorly is that the rate of technological change has raced ahead of people's ability to use technology to

communicate. Television instantly brings members of the global community into each other's homes, where they can make snap judgments about each other. Technology has taken away the buffers of time and distance, and the public, journalists, and policymakers alike are in a muddle about how to process the continuous stream of information about complex subjects such as religion. Moreover, since religions often make exclusive claims about a single path to salvation and other matters, the public needs context and time to process such information, as do journalists.

Technology also has accelerated the rate at which media ownership has become concentrated in the hands of the few, limiting the number of editorial decision makers who are willing to examine religious themes and implications. The media have different voices, standards, ethics, and technologies, but the number of voices is shrinking. In the early 1980s, 46 companies in the world controlled most of the global media business. Today the number is less than half that.¹¹

The spoken word, written text, music, still and moving images, and statistical data can all be digitized. This, in part, has hastened Rupert Murdoch's ability to start with an Australian newspaper chain, add newspapers in the United States and United Kingdom (where he owns one-third of all national newspapers sold in Britain), branch out into television, build the Fox chain of stations into America's fourth television network, form a partnership to dominate the satellite television market in Latin America,¹² establish the Sky system as Britain's monopoly supplier of direct-to-home satellite services, and purchase the Star satellite system that covers markets from Japan to Turkey and includes India and China.¹³ Murdoch's voice is now on five continents, where he controls \$20 billion of the world's media outlets.¹⁴

Institutional Reasons for Poor Coverage

There are institutional as well as structural reasons for poor coverage of religion. Whether in times of conflict or peace, the journalist often works under the pressure of deadlines, with the task of explaining complex issues briefly and clearly to the general reader.

Professor Richard F. Boylan of the American University in Cairo cites the Bosnian conflict as an illustration of how people's perceptions are shaped by the media's definition of terms and issues in a conflict.¹⁵ The war in Bosnia has become so complex that it is difficult to draw generalizations. Although the media have described the three main warring factions as the Bosnian Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims, Boylan interviewed Yugoslavs living in Cairo who said they did not recognize this terminology as descriptive of the population back home. In fact, they had not heard of using the term "Muslim" in this way. Specifically, they said the population included people who were Turkish by descent, but not Muslim by practice.

Early in the conflict, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) referred to Bosnia as a Muslim state even though Muslims made up only 44 percent

of the population. Asked why, the BBC reporter said she "oversimplified." How else can one describe a complex multiethnic state with just one minute to tell a story? Later the BBC began using the terms "Muslim-led government" and "Muslim-led army." Equally relevant, why are the Croats not regularly labeled Catholics, and the Serbians not labeled Orthodox?

Another factor in this case is that the Serbs named their enemy as Muslims and the media continually reported it. One Bosnian woman said last summer, "We never, until the war, thought of ourselves as Muslims. We were Yugoslavs. But when we began to be murdered because we were Muslims, things changed. The definition of who we are today has been determined by our killers."¹⁶

The media were not directly or solely responsible for creating the impression that Muslims are the Serbs' enemy. The modern media did not create the age-old divide between the West and Islam. But there are many examples of the media stereotyping Muslims by not reflecting the complexity of their history, their people, and current events. For example, some Egyptians who refer to themselves as Muslims are actually Christian by faith. Even the press in Muslim states have added to the confusion, Boylan said in his study. They frequently fail to make distinctions among the many kinds of Muslim activities around the world. One is not sure if they are talking about political, civil, or religious matters.

Part of the problem is that Westerners are trying to impose a Western construct of religion onto Islam. Another problem is that there is great diversity within the Muslim world and Muslims themselves cannot agree on what defines "a Muslim." Therefore, it is not only the journalists' responsibility, it is also the Muslims' responsibility to put the definition of religious identification into context whenever it is used.

Stereotyping is dangerous because it can lead the public to create social scapegoats and focus on the wrong issues and the wrong priorities. These misleading characterizations can be picked up by the global news services and satellite systems, which have the power to perpetuate the distortion, and could fuel further conflict.

In reporting during times of conflict, reporters may face huge obstacles over which they have little or no control:

- They are forbidden access to people and places;
- They may be censored;
- They may be refused access to transmit their stories;
- They are hit with propaganda from all sides;
- They see, smell, and hear the horrors of war up close;
- They may experience the shortage of water and food like the local people;
- They may be targeted as enemies and killed simply because they are journalists. In 1994, 72 journalists around the world died in such action, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The Media and the Clergy Can Work Together

Despite the gulf between religious leaders and the media, both can play important roles in preventing deadly conflict. Both can provide a critical or prophetic voice independent of government. Both seek to interpret the world, clarify situations, and foster understanding as they see it. And both communicate by telling stories—either through broadcast and print, or through sermons and readings of Scripture.

Religious leaders and media executives are mutually responsible for improving communication and understanding between their two worlds. By doing so, they can make vast inroads to new opportunities for peace. Specifically, it is in the clergy's interest to actively work with reporters, keeping in mind that knowledge is cumulative. Why? Because a reporter's insight and objectivity are functions of his or her understanding.

In sports, for example, one could teach a new reporter the history and rules of baseball, the names of players and teams, and how to keep score. But if that reporter does not understand the pain of missing a key play and how that miss influences the psychology of both teams, then the real story could be lost.

The same scenario applies to reporting about religion and conflict, but the consequences of missing the story could be far more serious. In sports, there are clear winners and losers, everyone plays by the rules or is penalized, and the outcome of the contest is confined to a specific period of time. In religion, the situation is far more complex.

For example, in August 1995, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church in Moscow put out a news release warning that a religious confrontation could be on the horizon. He said the Union of Muslims in Russia was planning to put up a slate of candidates for election to Russia's parliament, which could "bring confrontation in Orthodox-Muslim relations and generate another division in society."¹⁷ While the patriarch recognized the right of any individual to participate in government, he warned that church authorities do not approve of religious organizations getting involved in "pre-election struggle." He also distanced the church from ultranationalist groups who claim to be Christian and Russian Orthodox. Is this a serious warning of future deadly conflict, or just patriarchal rhetoric? Let us hope for the sake of society that journalists know when there is a story and that they get it right. To date, the Russian patriarch's warning has not made major headlines in the secular press.

Recommendations to the Clergy

Religious leaders must take the initiative to get their messages into the secular press. There are a few key steps they can take immediately.

First, developing an honest, open relationship with a reporter is the single most important building block for future stories. Such a relationship lays the

foundation from which mutual education flows, story ideas are generated, context is created, insights are sparked, and, most importantly, trust is built. If a crisis hits a religious institution or high holy days are to be celebrated, the reporter and clergy member already have a common language and understanding from which to do their jobs. And both will know that saying no is part of their natural give-and-take.

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The best way to start a relationship with a reporter is to ask a mutual contact to make the introduction. Another way is to meet journalists when they are covering events or conferences. Or pay attention to bylines and figure out what information would be worth that reporter's time. Then write a letter and follow up with a telephone call.

Second, religious leaders can choose journalists with whom they want to build a relationship. There are good reporters and bad reporters, just like there are good and bad members of the clergy. Likewise, there are reputable news organizations and shoddy ones. But most reporters and news organizations do not fall into a simple good/bad category. The great dividing line is between experienced reporters and inexperienced ones. It is always better to work with a reporter who knows the issues than with one who does not. One may think a new reporter would provide a "clean slate" to receive the message, but a knowledgeable reporter has perspective and is less likely to make egregious errors.

Third, in today's media-savvy world, it is smart for religious leaders to level the playing field by hiring their own public relations professionals. Every reporter wants to go right to the top rabbi, cardinal, or imam, but that is not always in the clergy's best interest. Certainly there are times when it is appropriate for the top person to do the talking, but remember the saying that the lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client. In addition, a public relations professional can work with the clergy to be proactive and suggest story ideas rather than only reacting to telephone calls from the press.

Religious leaders often complain they cannot get news coverage, but that is because they do not understand the definition of newsworthiness. The rule of thumb is: "When dog bites man, it's not news; when man bites dog, that's news." But a story does not have to be negative to get coverage. One might be: "Dog saves man's life."

What's more, the availability of individual communications tools, such as computers, desktop publishing, and camcorders, has opened new doors for religious entrepreneurs to get the word out themselves. The Internet, for ex-

ample, has home pages, news groups, and discussion groups from every world religion as well as from many religious orders, denominations, splinter groups, theologians, academics, individual places of worship, and New Age groups. New media products based on religion and morality, especially on cable TV and radio, so far have been well-received.

Recommendations to the Media

Some news executives know they have a consistent gap in their coverage. Of the 1,500 daily newspapers in America, only about 70 have full-time religion reporters.¹⁸ While more coverage is not always better coverage, the media could use more and better. They can improve their coverage of religion and the religious dimension of other stories by taking the following steps.

First, the media can help place religion rightfully in the realm of public discourse by asking questions about religion. Had Henry Kissinger been questioned by the media about the relationship between religion and statecraft when he was secretary of state, he and others might have been forced to assess religion as a factor in international affairs. After leaving the State Department, Kissinger wrote *Diplomacy*, his massive study of modern world politics, the index of which contains no entry for religion, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Nor does it contain any entry for Mahatma Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., or Pope John Paul II.¹⁹

Can questions from the media make a difference in war and peace? When a Central Intelligence Agency analyst proposed examining the religious leaders in Iran under Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the idea was reportedly rejected as mere "sociology."²⁰ Journalists can help place religion on the foreign policy agenda by asking questions about its influence. Had journalists had an eye on fundamentalist movements in Iran in 1978, and asked questions or written more stories about the political roles of religious leaders, the international community might not have been caught off guard by the Iranian Revolution.

Second, all journalists must become better educated about religion, regardless of the subjects they cover. Religion weaves its way through art, politics, local government, personal relationships, music, ethnic cultures, values, legal systems, culinary arts, sciences, history, lifestyles, international diplomacy, sports, business, literature, psychology, terrorism, and war.

Third, the key is to have sustained interaction with religious leaders so their different ideas can be put into context and perspective over time. News organizations can regularly invite religious leaders, clergy members working in the field, theologians, and scholars to off-the-record meetings to hear their views, ideas, and concerns.

Evidence That Change Is Possible

In the last few years, some initial steps have been taken to promote understanding between religion and the media. Now is a good time for the clergy

to reach out to news organizations. Consider some of the recent evidence in the United States:

- In 1994, ABC's *World News Tonight* became the first television network news program to hire a full-time correspondent to cover religion. The same year, National Public Radio hired its first full-time religion reporter.
- In the last few years, there have been approximately 10 major forums or reports on religion and the media sponsored by respected news industry foundations, universities, or mainstream religious publications.²¹
- John Dart, a religion reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, in 1995 published *Deities and Deadlines*, an excellent resource guide for journalists on how to cover religion.
- In 1994, the Newhouse News Organization purchased a religious news-wire service, *Religious News Service*, and expanded its operation to cover all religions.
- *The Dallas Morning News* dedicated one editor and three full-time reporters to a new weekly six-page section on religion.
- A *Boston Globe* reporter, Larry Tye, took a course at Harvard Divinity School and learned about the phenomenal growth of worldwide Pentecostalism. Tye was inspired to write a series about it, and his editors invested in the story by underwriting his travel to five continents. Now, information from that series is often quoted by other journalists.
- Harvard University's *Nieman Reports* published "God in the Newsroom" during the summer of 1993. It was the most popular issue in the journal's 48-year history and was recently reprinted. In its fall 1995 issue, the *Nieman Reports* followed with an article called "The Faithful and the Media," which asked the clergy what their followers would like from the press.
- The Medill School of Journalism and the Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, both at Northwestern University, recently began offering a master's degree in religion and journalism. Meanwhile, the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and Union Theological Seminary in New York now offer a class on religion and the media.
- Medill-Garrett also founded the "Center for Religion and the News Media," which will do research, train journalists and the clergy, convene forums, and establish a religious information service for journalists.

All of this is evidence that groundwork is being laid to improve the relationship between religion and the media. A similar situation existed 20 years ago between business and the media. In the 1970s, most newspapers had one reporter assigned to cover business. Then the recession hit and the need for much expanded business coverage became obvious. The dilemma for the news industry then was: do we send reporters to business school to learn business or do we teach business school graduates to become journalists? Ultimately, both approaches were used, and today most newspapers have a daily business section written by well-educated reporters.

Just as the recession was a catalyst for better business reporting, increased ethnic and religious conflict can be a catalyst for improved religion reporting. Religious leaders and the media must revolutionize their relationship to foster a well-informed citizenry. It is only then that the public will have enough understanding of the religious dimension, from a variety of uncensored voices, to make well-informed decisions about war and peace.

Notes

1. Data are from Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, which supplies data to the respected Swedish International Peace Research Institute. The latest data available are for 1994. "Armed conflict" is defined as "a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory, where the use of armed force between two parties (of which at least one is the government of a state) results in at least 25 battle-related deaths." Thus, interethnic conflicts within a single state would not be included.
2. William A. Hachten, *The World News Prism: Changing Media, Clashing Ideologies*, 2d ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987), 10.
3. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993).
4. Joseph Man Chan, "Media Framing Social Conflicts: A Theoretical Review," *Media Development* 39 (3d quarter 1992): 27.
5. Andrei Richter and Paul Janensch, "Analyzing Russian Media," *Editor & Publisher* (July 1, 1995): 36-37.
6. Jessica Crist, "First Learn Some Basics About Religion," *Nieman Reports* (Fall 1995): 75.
7. The 1993 study was conducted by John Dart, a religion reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Rev. Jimmy R. Allen, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Referenced in Peter Steinfels, "Study Says Misunderstanding Exists Between Clergy and the News Media," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1993.
8. The 1980 study was conducted by Robert Lichter of George Washington University and Stanley Rothman of Smith College; referenced in Peter Steinfels, "Study Says Misunderstanding Exists Between Clergy and the News Media," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1993.
9. Hachten, 109.
10. Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 27.
11. Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 3d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 21-22.
12. Mark Landler, "Murdoch and Three Partners Set Latin Satellite-T.V. Venture," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1995.
13. Graham Murdock, "The New Mogul Empires: Media Concentration and Control in the Age of Convergence," *Media Development* 48 (4th quarter 1994): 4.
14. Michael Lewis, "Rupert Murdoch, Conqueror! What Does This Man Want?" *The New York Observer*, June 19, 1995.
15. Richard F. Boylan, "International Journalism and Naming the Other," *Media Development* 49 (1st quarter 1995): 28-30.
16. Chris Hedges, "War Turns Sarajevo Away from Europe," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1995.
17. The Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, press release, August 30, 1995.
18. David Shaw, "The Pope and the Press," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1995.
19. Peter Steinfels, "Scholars and Diplomats Look at Why Religion Remains the Missing Dimension of Statecraft," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1994.
20. Ibid.

21. These forums include: The Nieman Foundation at Harvard University; The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University; The Knight Center for Specialized Journalism at the University of Maryland; The Unity Conference, Atlanta, 1994; and *Commonweal* magazine, which held forums in New York, Washington, DC, and Chicago in 1994 with prominent journalists and religious leaders.

