

Courses, Practice Help Journalism Majors Find Jobs Reporting Religion

by Debra Mason, Vice-Head

An e-mail I received from a recent college graduate with a journalism degree is typical of the types of queries I get as executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association. The student was determined to find a job as a religion reporter, but was having no luck.

Getting hired in a tight job market is tricky enough, but trying to nab one of the few openings for religion reporters can be downright impossible for a new graduate.

Here are some tips for journalism professors advising students interested in making a career of religion reporting:

1. To be a great religion reporter, you have to first be a great reporter. So make sure you are well-grounded in the basics of reporting, writing and editing the news-any news.

2. If your school has a religious studies department, try minoring in religion or taking some courses in religion. Especially useful can be courses in non-western religious traditions.

3. Try to write religion stories at your student newspaper. It's rare for a student newspaper to have a religion beat. But a good story is a good story. So try to think of stories with religion angles. How do members of a particular non-western faith practice their religion in a Judeo-Christian society? What insight can your school's professors of religious studies provide on a particular international religious conflict? Ask your admissions office for statistics on religious preference and compare how those figures have changed in the last 5, 10 or 20 years. (This is especially good at a private, religiously affiliated school. You might find that your "Methodist" institution has more Roman Catholics than Methodists.)

Teaching Religion And Media: Some Issues And Dilemmas

by Kyle Huckins, RMIG/ Head

Teaching religion and media is a tough job, to say the least. It's like the television producer of the Brownsville (Fla.) Assembly of God said when I did a research interview with him: "I was a bit hesitant to talk with you because you're a journalist, and a professor to boot, but I prayed and felt it would turn out fine." People in religion are naturally suspicious of media reporters, and when newspeople are interested in spirituality, sources - and even students - strain to find the motivation.

As a longtime member of the media, academia and Christianity (such an unlikely troika), I feel the problem in teaching religion and media is that we instructors often see our subject matter as black and white instead of shades of gray. The great tenet of journalism is objectivity, and the great tenet of religion is an exclusive definition of truth, and never the twain shall meet. In other words, either you have to be constantly uncovering scandal or fallacious thinking in the church or endlessly quoting John 3:16 or its Muslim or Thoit equivalent.

We faculty members teaching in this intersection of faith and follow-up must learn to be flexible. I very strongly believe Jesus calls Christians to varying fields; some of my students at Christian Institute of the West are to become public-relations practitioners and others are to be secular journalists. Neither calling is above the other.

As an old song jangles, "He ain't wrong - he's just different." It's a little like the church, really. Some in a congregation are gifted to be preachers, others teachers, others apostles,

others evangelists, still others prophets. If everyone were a prophet, we'd never get into the established revelation of God, namely, the Bible. If everyone were an apostle, we'd have a lot of new - but empty - church buildings. If everyone were a teacher, there would be no students. A diversity of gifts in the field of religion and media is a blessing, not a curse.

When we educators have in our classes a budding PR practitioner who wants to work for his or her denomination or other fellowship, we need to encourage that student to do so. We also need to give encouragement to those wanting to head to the religion desk of a mainstream daily.

While the setting for the career of each type of student will be different, the real challenge is the same: telling the truth. Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make ye free." PR people need to be straightforward in reporting the news of their church or other religious organization; there is no room for "evangelistic" numbers. Reporters need to give proper coverage of the role of religion in sources' lives and a measure of plausibility to their beliefs; there is no room for cynicism. To quote the Master Teacher, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

As professors, we must encourage the gift of God in each student. When we do so, we are used of the Lord to do His will. We must not let our own prejudices about career fields enter into our teaching. As we show understanding, we will promote understanding in our students, and, ultimately, the world.

Courses, Practice

Continued from Page 1

4. It is highly unlikely to get hired right into the religion beat straight out of college. Instead, try to find the best general assignment reporter's post available. Once hired, work on story ideas with religion angles. Build a portfolio of religion stories that way. Editors are often open to good story ideas, no matter the topic. (But if your employer has a religion reporter, be sure to communicate with them about your story ideas so you don't create any animosity between the two of you.)

5. Once you have several great clips on religious topics, you can try to create a religion beat at your current employer, if none exists. If the beat does exist at your paper, try to help the existing religion reporter.

6. Religion beat jobs at secular broadcast outlets are extremely rare. If you are determined to cover religion in radio or television, be sure you like other areas of reporting as well.

7. Professors should know that RNA has a mentoring program for new religion reporters and an annual educational conference attended by 150 of the nation's leading religion journalists. RNA also has a recently published "Frequently Asked Questions," guide to religion that has useful information for students or beginning journalists. Copies are free by asking RNA at info@religionwriters.com.

8. Students also should consider careers in denominational or religious journalism. While RNA represents people who write about religion in the secular media, there are many more jobs in the religious press, either working for religious newspapers, denominational communication /PR departments, religious book publishers, religious video/film makers and religious magazines. Your school's library can point to reference works with some of these publications listed.

New Resource for Teachers: Publication Devotes Entire Issue to Religion and Media

by Eleanor S. Block, Secretary

Managing editor, Paul Soukup, SJ offers a scholarly and cogent analysis of religion and communication research from a Christian perspective in Volume 21 (2002), no. 2 of *Communication Research Trends*. The journal, which is published quarterly by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture is sponsored by the California Province of the Society of Jesus.

The entire issue titled, "Media and Religion" is devoted to a discussion of various frameworks for the study of media and religion and represents both the views of the author and that of other scholars. The frameworks are divided into four separate categories: Religious Studies/Sociology of Religion; Philosophy/Theology; Cultural Studies; and Rhetorical Analysis and Content Analysis. He then examines the relationship between various components of the media and religion in three chapters.

These include print media, journalism, broadcasting, film, radio, popular music, and a rather broad field that is called "entertainment." Of particular significance is his discussion of digital media and religion. The latter focuses on online religion and the internet.

In addition to Christianity, Soukup cites some recent research on the growing role of the internet in Islam and such new religious movements as Falun Gong. The issue concludes with an overview of the media and Christianity in a section he titles *Communication Theology*.

The six-page list of resources on communication media and religion is especially useful. The bibliography features books, articles, and electronic resources. The citations includes materials from 1989 to the present. A few 2002 sources are included. A 1995 edition of this journal reviewed some of this material in volume 15, number 2:

Religion in the Mass Media" (<http://cscs.scu.edu/trends>). The 2002 and 1995 publications update Soukup's *Christian Communication; A Bibliographical Survey* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

What Type of Training Might A Religion Reporter Need?

By David Briggs
Cleveland Plain Dealer

("Reprinted by Permission. Copyright 2002 RNF")

First, there is no one way to become a religion writer. There are and have been some great religion writers who transferred from other beats with little background in the subject, and people with all sorts of different academic backgrounds. A great reporter is a great reporter.

That said, give a great reporter the tools to do her or his job at the highest level, and then you can approach excellence. What I would recommend to best prepare is to obtain two degrees, a graduate or undergraduate degree in journalism and a graduate or undergraduate degree in religion studies. The better the schools in each field, the better prepared you will be in the profession, and the greater your flexibility and attractiveness will be in the job market.

My experience, which I would heartily recommend to anyone, is having obtained a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri, and after working on a mid-sized paper as a reporter and editor for a few years, a master's degree in religion from Yale Divinity School. Both have great value, but let's start with a graduate degree in religion. The bulk of my classes were in American religious history, biblical studies and con-

Continued on Page 3

What Type of Training

Continued from Page 2

temporary theology. Each of these areas has proved helpful in religion journalism.

What the history of this country teaches is that Scripture matters. That reality may be applied to issues from public education to slavery to civil rights to the range of issues in sexuality that are so divisive today.

Taking two years of classes from world-renowned scholars in biblical studies—so detailed we were expected to be able to identify in context nearly any passage from the Old and New Testaments (the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures)—is a huge advantage in daily religion reporting. The comfort level of sources and readers goes way up when you can present the different sides in volatile debates clearly and accurately.

The same goes for having an historical perspective of major religious groups and movements in American life. Even if some sources are patient enough to give you a primer in their beliefs, they are far less likely to trust you with the inside information that gives depth and insight to your reporting.

If I could do it all over again, one area I would devote more time to would be Islam. At the same time, I would not want to minimize the importance of earning a journalism degree from a college or university with a strong program.

Working with talented instructors who have professional experience also provides important lessons in collegiality. How you work with people will make an immense difference in what you can accomplish. If you come to the beat long after your schooling is complete, there are several options for training. Among them is to take courses in religion reporting offered by the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism or the Poynter Institute. Also, RNA offers a mentoring program and its annual conference is a great place to talk to others who've gone before you.

Religion And Media

A Bibliography of Selective Resources

Prepared for the Religion and Media Interest Group
By Eleanor S. Block, Ohio State University

The following is a highly selective list of major internet resources and electronic databases relevant to the disciplines of both religion and communication/journalism. All of the electronic databases are available at the Ohio State University. Other databases that may be useful such as ComAbstracts are not included since they could not be examined. Some of the descriptions have been adapted from the records available electronically at OSU.

RELIGION AND MEDIA DATABASES

ATLA RELIGION DATABASE.

1949-Present.

The ATLA Religion Index is composed of four indexes to religious literature. Included are Religion Index One: Periodicals, 1949-; Religion Index Two: Multi-Author Works, 1960-; Research in Ministry, 1981-; and the Index to Book Reviews in Religion, 1949-1996. Printed versions of these are available. This is an excellent source of book reviews on religious topics. A recent search of the keywords News and Religion in the online Religion Index One yielded 656 records in worldwide scholarly and more popular religion journals.

ComIndex. 1970-Present.

This is an author and title index to the core literature of the communication discipline and to related topics. It contains bibliographic citations to articles in almost 50 key international journals and annuals. It is a printed version of Communication Abstracts. Its most serious flaws are a lack of subject indexing and no full-text availability. Most relevant citations can be found by using the key word Religion or Religious.

ESSAY AND GENERAL LITERATURE INDEX.

1983-Present.

Offers an index on topics in fiction and non-fiction published in the United States in the English language in collections and anthologies. The emphasis is on humanities and social sciences. Access is by subject and author. Religion is one of its subject strengths. It is the online version of the printed Essay and General Literature Index. A brief search of the keywords Media and Religion yielded essays on such topics as mainline Protestantism and the media and the attractions of violent entertainment.

FRANCIS Database. 1984-Present.

FRANCIS is an electronic index to a worldwide list of journals in the humanities, social sciences, and economics. It is strong in religion and literature. It is both multilingual and multidisciplinary. A search of the keywords Religion and Media provided a number of very scholarly relevant articles, however most of the articles and abstracts were not in English.

HUMANITIES ABSTRACTS. 1984-Present.

Cites articles from almost 500 English-language periodicals in the humanities. Included are articles in the fields of journalism and communication as well as religion and theology. The printed version is Humanities Index. A search of the keywords Media and Religion found 111 records in Columbia Journalism Review, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, Critical Quarterly, the German Quarterly, and the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.

ISI CITATION DATABASES. 1980-Present.

The ISI Citation Databases provides access to three citation indexes: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science. They may be searched individually or as one file. Each of these index thousands of major journals. The first two of the three indexes provide excellent access to a host of relevant articles on religion and the media. Included are such journals as Media Studies Journal, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Nation, Zygon, and many religious journals. There are printed versions of these sources.

WEB SITES

THESE SITES, MOST OF WHICH ARE PORTALS WILL HELP YOU FIND HUNDREDS OF OTHER USEFUL SITES

AJMC RELIGION AND MEDIA INTEREST GROUP

<http://www.ajmc.org/about/reloff.htm>
Lists the officers of the interest group.

BELIEFNET; THE SOURCE FOR SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND MORALITY

<http://www.beliefnet.com>

A major portal for news, columnists, religions, advice, and other sites on religion. Its Top Religion News link includes the major current news and features from the Religion News Service and direct links to other religion news services, features, and discussions on many related issues.

JournalismNet==Religion

<http://www.journalismnet.com/religion.html>

Includes links to internet religion sources, religious bibliography, and major religion links. It also includes daily news and features related to religion of the major news services.

PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

<http://pewforum.org>

Provides information on major religious events, projects, and resources. It also offers direct links through its home page to full-text religious news.



Religion and Media

Continued from Page 3

The religious news may also be accessed more directly at <http://pewforum.org/news/list/php3>.

RELIGION RESOURCES
REFDESK.COM==WORLD
<http://www.refdesk.com/factrel.html>

An excellent link to religion news resources. It is maintained by Bob Drudge, father of Matt Drudge of the Drudge Report. It is part of My Virtual Reference Desk, which is a supersite for all sorts of useful facts. It is found by searching <http://www.refdesk.com>. Then search for Major Religion Resources.

RELIGION.HTML. ONLINE RELIGION JOURNALISM

<http://www.toad.net/~andrews/jreligion.htm>
A supersite that is part of another major site called WebSites for Journalists. It contains links

to religion in U.S. daily newspapers, additional religion news web resources and commentary, Journalist's online religion resources, denominational news services and a quick reference link to religion reference web sites. The daily newspaper list includes about 35 major newspapers from around the country.

RELIGION IN THE NEWS
<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RIN.htm>

Published by the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life, Trinity College, Hartford CT, the site includes links to its online journal, Religion in the News, its other publications, working papers, its Religious History Project and the like. Journalist's Online Religion Resources says this is a key site for religion journalists.

RELIGION NEWS LINKS
<http://www.zondervan.com/newslink/htm>

Maintained by Zondervan, a mighty religious book publisher, Journalist's Online Religion Resources

says this is, "the best single link to religion news resources for journalists." The links provide access to newspapers, press services, church presses, encyclopedias, organizations and associations, journals, other online religious journalism links, articles on religion reporting, Christian newspaper websites, and much more.

RELIGION NEWSWRITERS ASSOCIATION
<http://rna.org>
The web site of the association.

RELIGION RESOURCES ON THE NET
<http://www.religiousresources.org>
Links to thousands of religious web sites.

WORLD RELIGION NEWS.
http://yahoo.dailynews.com/world/religion_news
Provides full-text access to articles relating to religion in newspapers, wire services, broadcast news, and periodicals. Included are opinions and editorials.

AEJMC Religion & Media Interest Group

Head/Chairman: Dr. Kyle Huckins
Christian Institute of the West
Phone: 806-373-7490
E-mail: khuckins@aboutchristiancollege.org

Research Head: Eric Gormly
University of North Texas
Phone: 614-891-9001
E-mail: Gormly@unt.edu

PE&R Head: Barry Hollander
University of Georgia
Phone: 706-542-5027
E-mail: barry@uga.edu

Teaching Standards Head: Susan Willey
Florida Atlantic University
Phone: 561-799-8718
E-mail: swilley@fau.edu

Vice-head/Program Chair: Debra Mason
Religion Newswriters Association
Phone: 614-891-9001
E-mail: mason@ma.org

Asst. Research Head: Ken Loomis
University of North Texas
Phone: 940-369-7470
E-mail: Loomis@unt.edu

Secretary: Eleanor Block
Journalism Library
614-292-8747
E-mail: block.3@osu.edu

Newsletter Editor: Daniel Stout
Brigham Young University
Phone: 801-422-7551
Daniel_Stout@byu.edu

Religion and Media Bulletin
C/O Daniel Stout
Dept. of Communications
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602



Debra Mason
Religion Newswriters Assn.
PO Box 2037
Westerville, OH 43081-2037

30011