

# RELIGION MATTERS

NEWSLETTER OF AEJMC'S RELIGION AND MEDIA INTEREST GROUP

March 2000 — Vol. 2, No. 2

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: ALL THE NEWS NOT FIT TO PRINT

by Charlie Marler, Abilene Christian University

Gaffes in religion coverage – which we surmise are caused by low religion IQs among reporters and anti-religion biases – can instruct and amuse us if we will just loosen up.

After musing about this proposition a little further, a small, non-random search was conducted in January through daily newspapers with the help of Lexis/Nexis, probing for the term “Bible and corrections.” The search yielded a few hundred instances of errors of dates, times, places, speakers and subjects. These misdemeanors probably disturbed, rather than amused, the clerics and laity among readers; but these types of editorial sins seldom are the results of bias or poor understanding of religion.

Anti-religion bias, however, was identified as a problem by Jeff MacGregor, in the Feb. 14 issue of Sports Illustrated in his “Air and Space” column: “The only thing sports television hates more than total silence is the genuine expression of religious faith. Statements of personal belief, a quick shout out to the deity after a big game, create awkward moments that leave our beloved network reporters hemming, hawing and staring down at their tasseled loafers.”

Many errors found in the Lexis/Nexis search stand out as evidence of, at best, lack of knowledge or carelessness about reporting religion. These we present awards inspired by a Reader's Digest article of a few years ago about bloopers in newspapers. The magazine coined the phrase “Pullet's Surprise” for the eggs laid by journalists. Thus we award Pullet's Surprises to:

- The St. Petersburg Times, which inaccurately implied that Jewish inmates at Century Correctional Institution had not been allowed religious services although they had in fact continued to convene them under the oversight of a Christian chaplain (1998).
- Deborah Horan, a free-lancer based in Jerusalem, and the Houston Chronicle, who buried Jacob, Isaac and Abraham in Nablus rather than Hebron, and identified Jacob as a son of Abraham (1998).
- The Associated Press dispatch from Jericho reading,

“Japanese monks stood next to Palestinian nuns from Nazareth, the city where Jesus was born” (1986).

- L. M. Sixel and the Houston Chronicle, who misidentified Nancy Graves as a reverend. She is a corporate chaplain for Rectorseal Corp., a specialty chemical manufacturer in Houston (1998).
- Thomas Nord and The Louisville Courier Journal for misidentifying the last book of the Bible as the Book of Revelations rather than the Book of Revelation (1999).
- The Arizona Republic, which incorrectly characterized Ellis Sklar as a Holocaust survivor. Sklar was one of two Gilbert residents filing suit over Mayor Cynthia Dunham's Bible Week declaration (1999).
- Jean Torkleson and the Rocky Mountain News, who erred in an obituary of the Rev. Marcian O'Meara by describing Catholic deacons as lay people instead of duly ordained officers who often become priests.

To the credit of these Pullet's Surprise-winning newspapers, the self-correction movement – and the Internet record of the originals and the corrections – give newspapers new means of redemption. But the scars remain on their credibility.

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### Religion Matters

Submissions (especially by e-mail) are welcome!

Next deadline: May 1, 2000

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## EDITOR'S SAY: 20 YEARS OF FALWELL NEWS

*by Kyle Huckins, Regent University*

Marjorie Hyer didn't like him. She didn't even want to write about him.

Yes, as religion editor of *The Washington Post*, she had heard his name many times, but his politics and spirituality weren't hers. So when Southern Baptist leader Jimmy Allen, the Lutheran Council's Charles Bergstrom and like-minded clerics called a news conference to oppose his entrance into politics, she was ready for them.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell was leading the "Christian far right" and its efforts to create a "Christian republic," she reported. That 1980 story contained no quotes or information from Falwell, just her commentary and sources from the event.

Two decades ago, Falwell was one of the hottest, most controversial newsmakers around. Today, the opinionated preacher seems more institution than instigator. Getting at the difference requires a close look at coverage of what was once called the "fundamentalist phenomenon."

The entrance of religious conservatives into politics caused great concern in the traditional bastions of journalistic power, including *The Washington Post*. "I thought he was fairly radical," says Hyer, who retired from the *Post* in 1989. "I thought he was more interested in his point of view than a democratic perception of things."

Hyer was not alone. Carl Rowan called Falwell a "bring-the-bucks preacher" in his syndicated column. A *Houston Post* editorial argued his group, Moral Majority, was "notably out of phase with the national majority."

The acrimony had a couple of sources. One was the reporters themselves, who, like Hyer, often came from religious backgrounds seeing fundamentalism as anathema. The sermons at her United Church of Christ were more focused on tolerance than sin, so her reaction to Falwell was, perhaps, predictable. Political differences abounded as well, with the Virginia preacher's embracing of Ronald Reagan a major transgression.

The other reason was Falwell himself. In opposing Jimmy Carter's re-election bid, he said then, "People are saying, 'You're trying to get born-again Christians elected to office.' That's ridiculous. We're trying to get rid of some."

Falwell designed such statements to stir reaction. At times you've got to take on somebody," he now explains. "People like a fight."

He got one from the media. But the media liked it, since it made for good copy. Falwell didn't mind; he was getting publicity, and his followers already were skeptical about mainstream news.

Something intriguing happened to this two-fisted relationship over the intervening 20 years, however. Despite the occasional face-off, such as with the "Teletubbies," Falwell and major media have achieved a semblance of cooperation. "Some of the sharp edges rubbed off as he became more in contact with the world," Hyer says, "and some of his more drastic and radical views were moderated somewhat."

Listen to Falwell's rhetoric. He's no longer a "fundamentalist"; he's an "evangelical." He's not in the "Moral Majority," but part of the "pro-family movement."

Then look at his actions. Once, he could create a stir just by meeting with Ted Kennedy. Now, it takes promising to "seek understanding" with homosexuals following a meeting with gays at his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg.

Falwell sees sociology rather than philosophy behind changes in media coverage of him and his cohorts. "Just as they got to know us, we got to know them," he says.

The peace between reporter and source is uneasy, however. Hyer prefers to talk about the Episcopal church she joined after her 17-year career at the *Post*. "Falwell hasn't been at the forefront of my thoughts in a few years," she sighs, at least a little happy her byline doesn't go near his name anymore.

# AEJMC's Religion and Media Interest Group Needs You!

The Religion and Media Interest Group needs paper reviewers and moderators for the 2000 AEJMC meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. **The paper deadline is March 31, 2000.** Papers will be sent to reviewers the week of April 12, 2000. We would like to have comments returned by May 4, 2000, so that we can inform participants by mid-May. Your participation can help make this a success.

You can send paper submissions to Debra Mason, Department of Communication, Otterbein College, One Otterbein College, Westerville, OH 43081. If you have questions, call me at (614) 823-3377 or e-mail me at [Dmason@Otterbein.edu](mailto:Dmason@Otterbein.edu).

If you are willing to review papers or serve as a moderator, please call, fax, email me, or return the form below to Debra Mason, Department of Communication, Otterbein College, One Otterbein College, Westerville, OH 43081. The fax number is (614) 823-3367. Thanks for your help!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
College or University: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ FAX: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I prefer to read papers that deal with religion, media and: *(Check all that apply)*

- Advertising
- Broadcasting
- Education
- Ethics
- History
- International Focus
- Magazines
- Newspapers
- Popular Culture
- Public Relations
- Qualitative Methodology
- Quantitative Methodology
- Theory
- Other *Please fill in:* \_\_\_\_\_

## **THE ADVANTAGES OF AFFILIATION— PHOENIX AND NEW ORLEANS**

*by David Sumner, Ball State University*

I'm excited about the RMIG sessions coming up in Phoenix at the August convention. There will be co-sponsored sessions again this time, just like "The Wide, Wide World of the Religion Press" panel discussion at 1999's New Orleans convention I hosted on behalf of RMIG and the Magazine Division. The session showed how cooperating with other AEJMC groups can provide opportunities for members interested in networking, freelance writing, and journalism opportunities for students intrigued by the religion press.

The panel members' message: "Thousands of religious magazines and newspapers are published every year, an immensely satisfying and interesting career awaits those who choose it, and hundreds of job openings occur every year." They are eager to network with journalism professors who are willing to judge their annual contests and teach writing and editing workshops at their conventions. They also publish directories of member publications, which can help interested students make job contacts and freelance queries.

The panelists included Joe Roos, executive director of the Associated Church Press, which represents about 150 national Protestant publications. Roos has held this job a year. Prior to that, he was a founding publisher of Sojourners magazine (with Jim Wallis) and served as its managing editor for 25 years. He is also a member of the Evangelical Press Association (which was unable to send a representative) and spoke about its work and member publications.

Owen McGovern is executive director of the Catholic Press Association, which represents an international press service and several hundred Roman Catholic publications in the United States and Canada. Prior to that, he was editor of a Rhode Island diocesan newspaper as well as doing other stints in a long career in the Catholic press.

Robert Cohn has been editor and publisher of the St. Louis Jewish Light for 25 years. He is president of the International Jewish Media Association and a past president of the American Jewish Press Association. He also has a law degree from Washington University.

Barbara Straus Reed is associate professor of journalism at Rutgers University and past head of the AEJMC history and magazine divisions. She is a noted scholar of the Jewish press and published a 1994 Journalism Monograph on the early history of the American Jewish press.

I served as moderator and organizer of the panel. I was editor of *Interchange*, an Episcopal Church diocesan magazine in Cincinnati, from 1981-1986, and published a book on the history of the Episcopal Church in 1987. Those years in the religion press were among the most enjoyable and formative of my career, and I will be forever grateful for the wonderful experiences and friendships that they gave me.

Interested readers may contact these panelists for more information on how they or their students may get involved in their work:

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# COVERING GEHENNA IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

by Michael Longinow, Asbury College

Gotta hand it to U.S. News & World Report. The editors and Jeffery Sheler dived in the deep end — with no snorkle — in a Jan. 31 cover story about hell, allowing the nation to observe them splash in living color through five pages of narrative, images and graphics. Quite a show. Unfortunately, the commotion was more instructive for what it missed than what it said.

We should back up, though, and ask why a news magazine would choose such a cover idea. Momentary editorial madness? Editorial chutzpah? Or has somebody really been watching the weather vane? U.S. News wasn't blazing untested ground on this one. Time and Newsweek have each tackled similar topics. It makes sense in this case. The Wall Street Journal's metaphor captures it best. Taking on a topic like hell is akin to putting one's journalistic finger on the 800-pound gorilla.

Other publications are doing it. The Journal's Feb. 3 issue called presidential character the 800-pound gorilla — what everybody knows is standing there but nobody dares mention publicly — in the New Hampshire primary. Perhaps we can call public morality, or should we say the incentive for public morality, the 800-pound gorilla of post-modern American journalism. Opinion polls have told us for decades of Americans' keen sense of there being a spiritual dimension to life, Federal Reserve Chairman Greenspan's actions aside.

But the news media too seldom take this important religious demographic to heart. John Dart, Stewart Hoover, Mark Silk, Judith Buddenbaum and others have lamented news professionals' reticence to tackle religion as that part of American culture which drives more of the front page's data, quotes, and background statistics than we know. Why not ask about hell? Better yet, why not leave the question on the table at the end of the article so those who want to keep looking for answers may do so? It might lead to more credibility for journalism rather than less.

Alas, American journalism's commitment to neat packages and pretty wrapping paper militate against such honesty. Also grievous is the tendency among American journalists to study the mirror longer than they study the landscape. The U.S. News project on hell hurt itself by choosing graphics, headlines and other elements that made the text — some of it quite thoroughly researched and well written — work overtime to get a read.

The front-cover art pointed so much hilarity at the topic that those who lifted this issue off waiting-room tables weren't prepared for the serious stuff inside. "You don't really believe this concept, right?" the cover's cartoon scene seems to ask. The inside headline, which might have been better put as a question, reads "Hell Hath No Fury," then follows with the subhead that plays with the notion of heat.

Do the editors really want us to play with this topic? Did Sheler? Probably not. Why not credit the American readership with enough seriousness to dig into this without a silly grin? To be fair, it should be noted that the piece itself covered the ground with fairly good depth, bringing in Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu insights.

Maybe the error was more in method than approach. Ernest Hynds' research on rising religious coverage in newspapers (Newspaper Research Journal, 20:1, Winter 1999) suggests that to tap into young peoples' readership interests, younger journalists need to dive into the fray. But young doesn't have to be goofy. Cornerstone, a niche publication out of Chicago published by Jesus People USA, digs into meaty socio-cultural issues (e.g., anorexia, Goths, neo-Nazism) and keeps a straight face, albeit one draped in tie-dye and tattoos.

Moreover, by keeping the tone more sedate, U.S. News might have made hell a topic that older readers, more numerous than younger ones, would have been willing to ponder.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR: FAITH BY THE NUMBERS

*by Paula Whatley Matabane, Howard University*

I read Stephen Perry's piece on "Are Issues of Religion Verifiable" (October 1999) and would like to comment on some of his ideas.

Perry takes on the old issue of whether or not matters of faith are verifiable. He decides that indeed they can be. I somewhat agree with him, except he proposes a revised version of some discredited approaches of the past. Western science clearly lacks adequate language and methodology for measuring or explaining matters of faith. The tendency to then dismiss religion as irrelevant and possibly not valuable to human experience is an outgrowth of Western racial arrogance and intolerance that culminated in the European enslavement of Africans and the Nazi slaughter of Jews. If something does not look like us, dismiss it, then destroy it.

Which brings me to my real issue, my real concern: Professor Perry's call to compare and rank order the value of different faiths. I consider that a dangerous idea whose time passed off the stage a very long time ago. How can someone not of a faith community decide whether or not that faith has valence for its members? I have no use for the beliefs of a Satanist, but I also do not believe that a Satanist or atheist can effectively evaluate my beliefs as a Christian.

Further, because I am trained as a social scientist I probably inject rational thought and organization into all that I do and think. On a "test" of faith, I will probably look more effective in my practice of faith than my 91-year-old godmother who does not have the benefit of my education in responding to your highly biased test. Does that mean I have a more effective faith than her? I dare say not. Will Presbyterians and Episcopalians, with their upper-middle-class adherents, look more effective than faiths that appeal to less-educated believers, etc?

Will we move to ban "ineffective" faiths? Give more coverage to the "effective" faiths? Why

does our search to understand faith always lead to the pyramid of rank ordering, evaluating by some presumed cultural assumptions that are neither universal nor necessarily appropriate for the study of religion except the stains of eurocentricism and racism have crept in?

Perry does not question his assumption that religions and faiths **MUST** be rational and verifiable to have some social value or recognition. Is art required to be rational in order to be worthy of our societal attention? Respecting other religions, even those we might find offensive is not just about following through on democratic principles. It is also about respecting the rest of humanity enough to try to understand their faith from their own perspective and not in that same old, tired comparative mode where European culture and thought are the baseline markers.

Almost all religions support the belief that all is not knowable. If God were completely knowable to us, then God would not be God by definition. Perry does not offer suggestions on what social scientists might do with such God talk or theological suppositions in designing tests of faith effectiveness (if you insist on conducting such). I suggest journalists and researchers study systematic theology to learn the language of faith as well as study world religions from a phenomenological perspective. Spend time trying to develop appropriate methodologies and language for capturing the faith experience and expression from the adherents' perspective with respect for the depth and mystery of faith. We ought to look at faith and religion from perspectives other than the scientific method, then look at the adequacy of the scientific method for the task. This is my recommendation as both a communications researcher with a Ph.D. and ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church with the M.Div. degree.

[Ed. note: The preceding was edited slightly for space.]

# OPEN LETTER TO RMIG FROM MAGAZINE DIVISION

by David Sumner, Ball State University

Dear RMIG members:

Is print dying? Think about these facts:

- Circulation of the top 200 magazines rose an average of 4.3 percent during the first six months of 1999.

- Magazine ad revenue grew 12.5 percent during 1999, according to Folio magazine. One in five advertising dollars goes to magazines.

- 18,606 magazines were published in 1998, an increase of 32 percent since 1990, according to the National Directory of Magazines.

We learned in our co-sponsored panel in New Orleans last August, "The Wide, Wide World of the Religion Press," that thousands of these magazines come from the religion press. In Nashville, a religious publishing center, the printing business is larger in annual dollar volume than the music business. The magazine industry adapted to television's economic threat and became a larger influence in American life than it was before. The same thing is happening as magazines adapt to the Internet. Almost all major magazines now have online editions. A growing number of successful magazines have online-only editions.

One thing will never change regardless of new technology: Our students need to know how to write clearly, report accurately, and edit skillfully. For those who do those things well, there are plenty of jobs. I get a monthly mailing from Christianity Today that has several editorial, advertising and graphic design vacancies each month.

Do you want to be a part of this? If you plan to teach any kind of writing, editing, or advertising courses, then you should be a part of the AEJMC Magazine Division. We will help you stay informed. With only about 150 members, you will find a warm and friendly group of colleagues.

Think about these other benefits:

- Magazine Matter, an 8-page quarterly newsletter edited by former division head David Abrahamson of Northwestern University.
- Journal of Magazine and New Media Research, an electronic refereed journal of magazine and new media scholarship.
- A mid-year meeting with research, teaching, and professional panels held annually in conjunction with the AEJMC Southeast Regional Colloquium.
- An annual student contest which attracts more than 200 entries from 30 universities.

The division received a lot of praise in recent reports from the AEJMC Teaching Standards, PF&R, and Research committees.

You can join the Magazine Division immediately for \$5. All you need to do is send the enclosed form and a \$5 check to Jennifer McGill at the AEJMC office in Columbia, S.C. This will put you on our mailing list for the newsletter, student contest information, and calls for research papers. When your AEJMC membership comes up for renewal, you will be asked to pay the normal \$10 annual dues to renew your membership in the Magazine Division. If you will send me an e-mail message to: [desumner@bsu.edu](mailto:desumner@bsu.edu), I will also put you on an e-mail news list. I sometimes send out announcements about research and professional development opportunities.

Please introduce yourself to me in Phoenix. Our business meeting is scheduled at 6:15 p.m. on Thursday. We tried to schedule it at a time when other divisions were not holding their meetings so that new and prospective members would have a chance to join. We hope to see you there.

[Ed. Note: Sumner is a former Religion Matters editor.]

## NOTES FROM ALL OVER

An RMIG member is the author of two just-released books on a well-known religious men's movement.

Dane Claussen is the author of "The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity," published by McFarland & Co., Inc., in November. His "Standing on the Promises: The Promise Keepers and the Revival of Manhood" came out in December, the work of Pilgrim Press.

Claussen is assistant professor of communication and mass media at Southwest Missouri State University.

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The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the

Philippines has approved "Social and Pastoral Communication" as a major of the master of arts in theology at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) of the Dominicans in Manila.

The course will start in summer 2000 with "Faith and Film" and prerequisites "St. Thomas on Critical Thinking" and "Research Methodology."

In the first semester of the 2000-2001 academic year, "Introduction to Social Communication" will be facilitated by Franz-Josef Eilers, executive secretary of the Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

Other subjects in the program include religious

journalism, the church and broadcasting, public communication, and church applications of modern communication technologies.

"This is probably the first time that such a course is introduced in Asia," Eilers says.

The course is open to priests, religious, seminarians and interested lay persons in the Philippines or elsewhere in Asia.

Inquire at UST Graduate School . Tel: (+63 2) 731-5396. Fax: (+63 2) 740-9732. E-mail: odgs@ustcc.ust.edu.ph; also, FABC-OSC at tel: (+63 2) 732-7170. Fax: (+63 2) 732-7171. E-mail: fabc.osc@worldtelphil.com or fabc.osc@pacific.net.pb

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