Religion in the basic course?
Some arguments and suggestions

By Daniel A. Stout
2000-2001 RMIG head

Although religiosity has played a profound role in society and culture, it is afforded little, if any attention in the introductory mass communication course. While basic textbooks in sociology and anthropology recognize that human behavior cannot be fully analyzed without attention to religion, comparable resources in our field tend to leave it out. However, if teachers of our basic course have a responsibility to cover significant developments in research, it would seem that the religion-media interface deserves more attention.

In this brief column, I argue that religion, as a sociological and cultural phenomenon, should be addressed in the introductory course in mass communication. If great care is taken to assure that such discussions are framed within parameters of good scholarship, and are kept to an optimal amount of time, the richness of class discussions as well as the overall quality of the course can be enhanced. I will suggest specific ways to do this within the standard topics of the basic course.

The first argument for inclusion of religion is its salience at both micro and macro levels of society. Mass communication cannot be studied adequately apart from these contexts. More than half the U.S. population is affiliated with a particular religion and there is little evidence that religion is on the decline in the U.S. (Cimino & Lattin, 1999). From a global perspective, religion is a cultural universal; it is emergent in all societies. For this reason, Brinkerhoff, White, & Ortega, (1999) argue that the “scientific study of religion does not ask whether God exists, whether salvation is really possible, or which is the true religion. Rather it examines the ways in which culture, society, and class relationships affect religion and the ways religion affects individuals and social structure” (p. 293).

Capital-izing on Opportunity

RMIG’S ’01 Convention schedule

By Kyle Huckins,
RMIG co-chairman/program chair

The Religion and Media Interest Group will have its name on more slots at a national convention than ever before when the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convenes for its annual meeting this summer in Washington, D.C.

RMIG will be primary sponsor of two panels, co-sponsor of two others, have three refereed paper sessions, and host a reception as well as a business meeting and executive meeting. And, in general, these slots are in prime time or close to it, meaning higher potential attendance at Religion and Media functions.

The higher number of slots than usual comes from the fact that RMIG was able to work with AEJMC divisions to co-sponsor each of its panels. Each panel cost only a half-chip, making for a total of two, with a half-chip spent on each of three research sessions. The other events were cost-free (at least chip-wise).

Looking to quality rather than quantity, the convention schedule should help the interest group in the association’s annual report. Of the four panels, two are teaching-oriented, one focuses on PF&R, and another explores research potential. Stronger emphasis on teaching and better balance between areas will shore up AEJMC-identified problem areas.

RMIG is lead (or primary) sponsor and the Media Ethics Division the co-sponsor for “Teaching Religion and Media: Journalism and Spirituality,” 2:45-4:15 p.m., Monday, August 6. This panel will examine not only religion and media courses, but also how to teach about spirituality in the context of journalism classes.

The interest group is also lead sponsor for “Keeping (or Losing) the Faith: The Role of Religion in Politics,” set for 2:45-4:15 p.m. Tuesday, August 7. Mass Communication and Society Division is co-sponsor. This panel could be the “hot item” of the convention, mixing veteran news people with religious conservatives and liberals as they discuss how spiritual values fit into the political landscape and are depicted in the media.

See inside for more articles on media and religion instruction

We welcome your ideas, news stories and notices for this newsletter. Please contact: Susan Willey, RMIG newsletter editor; 5353 Florida Atlantic University, MLC 246: Jupiter, FL 33458 or Email: swilley@fau.edu

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Religion in the basic course
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In our basic course, it is likely that students will raise similar questions about how religion affects media and how media affects religion.

The sociological study of religion also expands knowledge about media audiences and content. We have seen, for example, how religion has influenced behavior in the Disney Boycott as well as in film viewing selection (See Warren, 2001; Stout, 1996). Because it often structures networks of social interaction, religion helps explain who people talk to about media and what they talk about.

Addressing religion in the basic course

When are questions about religion likely to come up in the basic course? Students often raise them in discussions of history of communication technology. For centuries, religious groups have sought to influence public discourse about media, from Pope Alexander VI’s taxing of the printing press to nineteenth century condemnation of novels by American clergy. These discussions help students understand how institutions seek to frame the debate about “media effects.”

Another place religion comes up is in discussions of media audiences. The intro course typically uses demographics, psychographics, geographics, and cultural considerations to define subgroups with specialized tastes and media habits. How religion helps define such groups, however, is often ignored. Therefore, some of the best instructors at least know something about Jewish, Islamic, Christian, and other religious audiences.

Another learning opportunity for students is the question of how religion is depicted in media content. Journalists covering the religion beat, for example, are often criticized for emphasizing conflict and sensationalism. On the other hand, a number of scandals (e.g., Jimmy Swaggart, The Bakkers) have been uncovered in the public interest. These topics encourage deeper analysis by students as they consider news coverage in terms of inclusivity and objectivity.

There is also a wide range of media content produced by religious groups themselves. While it is impossible to address them in much depth, their impact on society probably deserves some mention in the basic course. From contemporary Christian music (CCM) to religious newspapers, there is a vast media industry whose social and cultural influence has only begun to be explored.

For example, when an instructor covers advertising, the issue of “religious branding” might be interesting to students. Annual sales of religious books, music, gifts, clothing, and jewelry recently passed $3 billion (See Haley, White, & Cunningham, 2001). This topic can spark class discussions of the role of media in sustaining subculture as well as the impacts of social segmentation and isolation on the larger public discourse. Finally, religious ownership of media might also be worthy of brief discussion. How do institutions like religious groups bias media content through ownership? Such a question might lead to discussions of agenda-setting, hegemonic influence, and public opinion issues.

Students might also consider media and religion as they think about research paper subjects in the basic course. Possible topics might include:

- News coverage of religion
- Media and the “culture wars”
- Depiction of religion in popular film
- Religious use of the Internet
- Media use within various religious communities
- Religious impact on media law and policy

These are some ideas on how the religion-media interface might be incorporated into the basic course. If instructors do so thoughtfully and inclusively, this topic can enhance class discussions and add to the overall depth of the class. Much is yet to be learned about religion’s role in the study of media and society, and the introductory course is a good place to frame such issues and create more discussion.

Notes

1. Writers in the Technological School such as Innis, McLuhan, and Postman all mention religion in their historical treatment of the media.

2. Such issues are currently being raised in Salt Lake City, for example, where one of the daily newspapers is owned by the Mormon Church and the other is independent of the dominant religion.

References


I was eager to teach this course because, for the past 10 years, my studies have focused on religion and media. When I proposed the special topics course last year, my chair agreed to let me teach this first course on media and religion ever offered at FAU.

My first challenge was the syllabus. Although I was able to examine some other professors’ syllabi, I decided to create my own, focusing on journalism and religion’s role in a democratic society. I used Judith Buddenbaum’s text, *Reporting News about Religion: An Introduction for Journalists* and supplemented it with Mark Silk’s book, *Unsecular Media* and a packet containing numerous articles on religion and media.

Trying to determine which articles to include and which to omit was a real challenge, and again I was struck by the complexities of religion reporting. I wondered how journalism professors could possibly examine the topic in one or two class sessions when I was barely scratching the surface in a semester, even though I assigned my students a lot of reading.

I decided to ask more experienced professors how they taught religion and media courses. Judith Buddenbaum, a professor at Colorado State University, includes discussions of religion and media in several courses and also has taught a “Religion, Media and Society” freshman seminar. These have been very popular, she said.

“Mine are usually the first to fill.”

The seminars are essentially social science “effects” courses, exploring how, from colonial time to the present, people’s beliefs have shaped their opinions and behaviors in ways that have had cultural and political effects. Also explored is how—how any have (or have not) covered religion and how that may affect society.

Professor Edmund Lambeth of the University of Missouri School of Journalism teaches graduate and upper-level undergraduates in a course he originated—“Religion Reporting and Writing.”

Lambeth said the course is unique in the number of connections it allows journalists to make with consumers of news.

“That’s because religion focuses on meaning and direction in both private and public life. Religion’s potential for stirring deep emotion and sharp controversy also has a way of demanding that journalists develop not only their traditional abilities, but others less frequently found in our craft/profession. Not surprisingly accuracy and fairness are foremost.

“Perhaps less appreciated are the special needs the religion journalist has for empathy, sensitivity, patience and the range of knowledge required by the specialty.”

Daniel Stout, RMIG head and professor at Brigham Young University taught a graduate seminar on religion and media. His course also requires a great deal of reading.
Teaching religion & media

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"We had a section on religion news coverage and also discussed what various religious groups teach their members about media use," he said. "We also talked about how religious groups are portrayed in the media. I would say the class was as much on mass media social research as it was on the coverage of religion."

There are challenges in teaching religion and media courses, but there are also opportunities. For example, my class this semester is captivated by the many references to "faith" and "religion" in the political arena, all of which reflects current news reports. Buddenbaum says, when she teaches the course in election years, she asks her students to examine the role of religion on voting behavior and how candidates tailor their messages to garner support from those religious groups that can deliver the vote.

"I use local clergy, religion reporters and spokespersons from groups such as the League of Women Voters and ACLU as guest speakers," she said.

Guest speakers are a popular and important element when teaching religion and media. During my master's studies, I examined syllabi from professors teaching religion and media classes and found that many of them had speakers or encouraged their students to attend religious services of faith traditions other than their own.

Like other professors, I also scheduled speakers for my class. This semester, during two class periods where we will discuss the importance of sources, I have eight people - clergy and lay from different faith traditions - scheduled to talk with the class. I hope the students will gain new perspectives on how our sources see us and how we see them.

As usual, the speakers were very eager to come and talk about their faith and about the media, and I had no difficulties finding religious people to come speak to the class.

Buddenbaum said one major challenge is that students know very little about religions, including their own.

"You have to be prepared to spend an inordinate amount of time teaching them what different religions actually believe before you can get them to understand why members of different faiths tend to have different opinions and why they behave differently," she said.

"But the real challenge is getting them to think about those opinions and behaviors - religious effects on media and on society and effects of media and society on different religions - from the perspective of an outsider."

Despite the complexities and the challenges, there are, as I found, great rewards from teaching religion and media courses. Buddenbaum agrees.

"The real reward is seeing students develop a greater appreciation for religious freedom and, through that, a better understanding of how and why religion, broadly defined, has made, and still makes, such an impact on our culture."

Interested in sharing syllabi?

New web site debuts this spring

By Debra Mason

Associate Professor of Journalism, Otterbein College
& Executive Director, Religion Newswriters Association

Educators interested in sharing syllabi and textbook ideas for courses in religion and media will soon have an important new resource.

With the help of a grant from The Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Religion Newswriters Association is creating a new web site intended to be a central resource for religion reporters, student journalists, educators and researchers on the topic of religion and media. RNA is the nation's only trade association for journalists who write about religion in the secular press.

The site, www.religionwriters.com, is set to debut later this spring. Among the site's features of interest to educators will be links to bibliographic references on religion and media research, listings of colleges offering religion and media courses, course syllabi, and an electronic bulletin board for educators interested in the topic.

The site is also intended as a major resource for people who write about religion, including student journalists. Among the other site features is a proposed glossary of religion terms as well as a stylebook to cover the many religion terms not found in the AP Stylebook.

The site will link to major important religion sites, including denominational sites, sources for religion databases, ecumenical groups and parachurch organizations.

The content and planning of the site is being done by the Religion Newswriters Foundation, the charitable, educational arm of the Religion Newswriters Association. The basic site infrastructure is expected to be done by May 2000, although not all the content will be available at that time.

If you have syllabi, course listings or other information you would like to submit to the site, please send it to the Religion Newswriters Association at RNASTUFF@aol.com.
In the news...

RMIG participates in Regional AEJMC conference

The Religion and Media Interest Group, along with several other AEJMC divisions, sponsored a mid-winter conference at Fordham University Feb. 10 in New York City. The conference consisted in a full day of panels and research paper presentations. During a lunch forum, Daniel Stout, RMIG Head, made a presentation to the group on the new Journal of Religion and Media to be published by Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hispanic newspaper blends religion, social service, education interests

By Michael A. Longino,
Professor of journalism, Asbury College

Census officials might not know how many are out there, but migrant Hispanics are media consumers! My students – at Asbury College in central Kentucky – produced a bilingual newspaper and the response from civic groups and religious organizations has been gratifying.

The eight-page tab, titled La Esperanza (Hope) is about 50-50 Spanish and English and includes photos of Hispanics on the job, as well as promo photos and graphics of Hispanic businesses. The newspaper also features organizations that serve the Hispanic community.

Prominent among those groups serving needs of migrant Hispanics are churches – notably Baptist, Methodist and Roman Catholic congregations in the Lexington area. Most Hispanic workers in Central Kentucky, over the last decade, could be found working on tobacco or horse farms, but since the late 1990s, restaurants, hotels, and the poultry industry have been a draw.

Asbury wasn't the first to produce a publication for Hispanics in the Lexington region of Kentucky, but its four-color publication was the first produced by students in the area. The newspaper launched its first edition in May. A local weekly agreed to insert it in a 6,000-issue press run. Extra bundles got snapped up by readers at area Hispanic restaurants, businesses and Hispanic or bilingual congregations. The second edition, in December, published more copies. Those copies also went fast.

Students from a local high school Spanish class intend to write articles or participate in producing the newspaper. The Lexington Hispanic Association pledged its support for the project.

The RMIG listserv is a teaching tool

Have a question about religion and the media? Log onto the Internet and send a message to the RMIG listserv. Chances are somebody there will either know the answer or will be able to provide you with information on how to find it.

The listserv of the Religion and Media and Interest Group is named "RMIG" and is managed by Charlie Marler at Abilene Christian University. Currently, 74 persons are subscribers to the list.

Marler said members can use the list serve to exchange ideas and get feedback on their own research. Members can share syllabi, papers, projects, or bibliographies and discuss new reports, books or articles on media and religion.

If you want to post a message, you can do so at RMIG@lists.acu.edu. If you'd like to subscribe, send your email address to charlie.marler@acu.edu.
Teaching about religion

By Judith M. Buddenbaum

Editor’s note: This is an edited version of remarks given at an Religion & Media Interest Group’s convention panel on the teaching of religion in media courses.

We believe that it is important for journalists to have a basic grasp of religion -- what people believe and why that is important. But few schools are doing much to help students gain that understanding.

Part of the problem is, of course, that few of us received our education in schools where religion was mentioned in journalism classes, with perhaps the exception of some of the First Amendment cases involving Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Hare Krishnas. And, as creatures of habit, we all have a tendency to teach as we were taught.

But even those of us who do believe religion is important and would like to do more to share that understanding have been faced with a very practical, and in some sense, almost insurmountable problem. The resources simply weren’t there. I have been studying various aspects of religion and the media for almost 20 years; I probably know the literature as well as almost anyone. Yet, when I first tried to teach a media and society course seven years ago, pulling together the scattered resources and assembling them into a coherent -- well, semi-coherent -- package for classroom use, I found that it took an inordinate amount of work. Much more than most professors could, or would want to, invest. But that problem is disappearing. More books are available; there are also more articles in journals and trade magazines than there once were. So now it’s possible.

And we believe it is important to incorporate some of that into the basic journalism curriculum. In RMIG, we realize that few of our students will be religion reporters. Making religion reporters isn’t really our overriding goal. Our goals are (1) to improve journalism in general and (2) to counter the myth of the religiously ignorant and antagonistic journalist.

But it isn’t just journalists -- reporters -- who need to understand religion. In public relations and advertising, failure to understand religious sensibilities can create nightmares -- campaigns that don’t translate well into other cultures and even ones that backfire.

So with that in mind, let’s look at some places attention to religion can and, I would argue, should be, incorporated into standard courses within the journalism/mass communication curriculum.

- Reporting courses -- from basic beginning newswriting through advanced reporting courses -- is the logical place to start.
- Journalism history and media and society courses also are obvious choices. Religion has affected and still affects the way media operate, the stories covered and the ways they are covered as well as the individual decisions of owners/reporters/etc.
- For public relations and advertising students, some attention to religion can help them see where negative reactions (as well as positive support) for products, campaigns, etc. may come from. And in those courses, as in reporting ones, inviting people from the religious community to come into class and discuss their reactions to various campaigns could be very instructive.
- Because our culture is diverse -- and becoming increasingly so -- religion can also be a natural adjunct to teaching about diversity -- racial and ethnic diversity. There are, for example, important differences between black and white Christian churches, Islam and Nation of Islam, for example. How do the media cover these religions? What are the implications?
- Then there are media law courses. I’m sure almost everyone who teaches law discusses the major First Amendment cases which protect religious speech, but more might be done in introductory lectures to discuss the religious climate that made the First Amendment seem necessary as a protection against federal government power while, at the same time, no such protection at the local level seemed necessary.

Help your students think about balance/fairness in selecting sources -- analyze stories with a religious dimension -- what does it mean, for example, when a story about proposed legislation concerning abortion includes an anti-abortion/pro-life spokesperson identified as a conservative Christian and then balances that with a pro-choice spokesperson from Planned Parenthood? Is it really that all Christians are on one side of the abortion issue and that there are no people who are pro-choice out of religious conviction?

You’ll note that so far I haven’t discussed requiring students to write stories about religion. That’s because the goal here isn’t to turn out religion reporters. But that doesn’t mean I don’t think it’s appropriate to require all reporting students to write at least one religion story. Here are some possibilities:

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- The ubiquitous holiday feature – instead of the usual suspects – assign each student to write a suitable feature to be run in connection with a holy day from a different religious tradition – then share and discuss the stories in class.
- Or, with an election coming up, send your students out to the churches – find out which ones will/will not be passing out voters guides and why; have them read bulletin boards, religious magazines etc. for clues to organizing and issue concerns.
- In beat-oriented classes, require each student to produce one story that incorporates religion.
- In civic journalism classes, invite leaders from a broad spectrum of churches/synagogues (and don't forget the alternative religions – check your phone book!) to come early in the semester to help students focus on community interests and needs.

The possibilities are almost endless. And they don't really require more than some tweaking of your basic, standard syllabus. So think creatively – with a little effort, you can put a bit of religion into almost any course. Doing it will almost certainly pay dividends in terms of turning out professionals who are better prepared to meet the challenges they will face in working with and in a society where religion remains an important part of people's lives and of the culture.

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**AEJMC's Religion and Media Interest Group needs you!**

The Religion and Media Interest Group needs paper reviewers and moderators for the 2001 AEJMC meeting in Washington, D.C. The paper deadline is April 1, 2001. Papers will be sent to reviewers the week of April 9, 2001. We would like to have comments returned by May 4, 2001, 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) 823-1022 or email me at Dmason@otterbein.edu or at mastuff@aol.com. (See the “Call for Papers” in this newsletter.)

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) 823-1023. Thanks for your help!

Name: ________________________________
College or University: ________________________________
Address: ____________________________________________

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

- Advertising
- Broadcasting
- Education
- Ethics
- History
- Newspapers
- Theory
- International Focus
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- Qualitative Methodology
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