



*Helping journalists cover religion with  
accuracy, balance and insight.*

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# The basics

## *The who, what and why of religion coverage*

Ask people why they read, listen to or watch the news and they'll probably mention sports, politics, crime, schools, business and lifestyle features. Religion almost never makes the top of the list. But, belief and spirituality are a powerful undertow in so many of the stories of our day. Too often, that undertow remains invisible to media audiences because journalists don't acknowledge its persistent pull. Life is full of tales of good versus evil, struggles amid hardship, transformation, reconciliation, forgiveness, success against the odds, grief, community and family—all themes highlighted by religious traditions.

## What is religion news?

Religion news is any story in which religion, faith, spirituality beliefs, values or ethics play a significant role. Any topic and any type of story can be religion news:

- Breaking news, investigative reporting, trend stories, features, profiles and analysis.
- International, national and local news, politics,

sports, business, education, crime, arts and entertainment, science, health, lifestyles, fashion, travel, food and more.

- Stories about one religion, several religions or interactions among them; stories about institutional religion (individual houses of worship, denominations or entire religions); stories about religion or spirituality that take place outside institutional walls and stories about non-believers of all types.

- Beyond news, religion is a frequent topic of opinion columns, commentary, editorials and blogs.

## The case for covering religion

Religion is interesting and important, but media organizations should also cover religion because it's a good business move. We now have better data than ever regarding what audiences want and need, but listener/reader/viewer surveys on religion coverage are relatively scarce. There is a persuasive case to be made that a disconnect exists between what audiences think and what journalists say about religion news quality.

**1** Religion is one of the most complex subjects journalists cover, requiring precision in wording, attention to nuance and knowledge of a wide range of religious traditions.

**2** Religion stories connect with readers and viewers. Connecting with audiences is a universal goal of media organizations. Many religion journalists say they get more audience feedback than any other types of stories they've covered.

**3** Many issues around religion are related to scripture. Religion news specialists must become knowledgeable about scripture and which experts they can rely on to interpret debates over it.

**4** Journalists are expert at reporting facts, but religion reporters also become skilled at reporting about beliefs that cannot be proved. They learn to ask questions in a respectful manner while maintaining the skepticism necessary to report the news.

**5** Public records and open meeting laws don't apply to most religious groups in the U.S. and other countries, so religion reporting depends heavily on interviews. To get great stories, it helps immensely to have a reporter who has cultivated sources.

**6** Religion journalists' expertise is invaluable for breaking news coverage of shootings at houses of worship, terrorism attacks done in the name of faiths, hate crimes, court rulings and legislation involving religion.

# Trends in religion news

Notions about what religion news is and where it belongs have changed dramatically in the past few decades. For 100 years in the U.S., religion was usually relegated to the “church page,” where stories of denominational policies and church anniversaries played a starring role. Now news about many different faiths tops front pages and homepages around the world. What’s changed?

- Many countries are more religiously diverse, and their religious demographics are constantly shifting.
- People are practicing their faiths in different ways, often switching houses of worship, eschewing the faith they were raised in, blending the practices of more than one tradition, or choosing to express their faith outside of religious institutions.
- Crimes such as sexual abuse, terrorism and financial wrongdoing have thrust religious groups onto the front page.
- Religious freedom and accommodation debates around abortion, end-of-life issues, marriage, gender, sexuality, education, immigration and more are raging internationally.

While the number of reporters assigned to the

religion beat seems to have peaked in the 1990s, in 2013 news organizations such as the Boston Globe and the Washington Post unveiled experiments with online verticals—in-depth religion pages on their news websites. New jobs on the beat are emerging all the time.

## What about religion on other beats?

Religion reporters don’t have a monopoly on spirituality and generally appreciate it when other reporters acknowledge faith and belief in their stories — especially if it’s done well.

Some guidelines:

- Whenever religion and faith are significant factors in a story, that should be acknowledged, no matter who is covering it. When a mother says God saved her baby from a fire, quote it. When a politician says his Catholic faith led him to vote against stem cell research, quote it. Better yet, ask more questions.



### FAST FACTS

A major newsweekly once misquoted the late Rev. Jerry Falwell as referring to an “assault ministry” when he actually said “a salt ministry,” a reference to Matthew 5:13.

- Include religion in breaking news and team coverage. When a student's speech is censored because she talked about Jesus or when a mosque's windows are shot out, religion journalists can help with coverage, provide sources and background, and/or urge editors and producers to explore where faith fits in.

- Religion journalists should be good ambassadors for their beat. When another department is working on a story that touches on religion, offer sources and background to help them get the religion angle right.

- Most religion stories overlap with other beats. If a faith leader is a radio personality, turf battles can be minimized if the entertainment and religion reporters coordinate.

## Should journalists be religious themselves?

Just as political reporters are not required to be partisan, journalists who report on religion for general circulation media aren't required to align with a particular faith. Religion beat reporters include Christians of all kinds, Jews, Muslims and members of other faiths, as well as atheists and agnostics. Whatever their own beliefs, good journalists must adhere to the professional values of balance and fairness when writing about people's beliefs, whether or not they agree with them.

## How to specialize in religion news

Religion News Association estimates that up to 500 journalists in North America regularly spend part of their day reporting on religion. Many of those cover religion full-time, particularly at newspapers but a good number do not. Few news outlets have more than one reporter on the religion beat full time, and even fewer have editors or producers who specialize in religion.

If you want to specialize in religion, you can apply for a full-time position, or begin including religion in your stories and use your track record to lobby for a full-time position. Some reporters write for features editors, while others work for local news desks. A few cover religion nationally for large-circulation newspapers, news magazines, websites or television.

Internationally, religion reporters are a rarity. Most



### EVERYDAY ASSET

53% of Americans surveyed in 2014 by Pew Research Center said religion was "very important" in their daily life.

23% said religion was "somewhat important," 11% said it was "not at all important," and 11% said they did not know.

people writing about religion outside the U.S. are columnists or bloggers.

Outside the U.S., the greatest number of religion writers work in one small place: The Vatican. The Catholic Church is the world's largest single faith group and, as such, it garners sizable attention from media. Yet even that can wax and wane. Media outlets expanded their Vatican coverage as Pope Francis' popularity grew beyond that of his more reserved predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

There is no one “right” way to cover religion. Reporters and news organizations tailor the beat to the demands and interests of their readers, viewers and listeners; the area they cover; and their staffing. Most extol the value of a mix of religion stories — hard news, trends, feature stories, profiles, perspective or analysis pieces, and daily coverage of events.

What can you do to improve your ability to cover religion? Most religion reporters recommend a degree in journalism. A good number acquire an undergraduate or graduate degree in religion, either through a religious school or a secular university program. Many learn on the job through reporting and reading extensively on their own. More and more, reporters take advantage of the expanding opportunities to attend conferences, such as Religion News Association's annual conference, as well as workshops and fellowships that focus on religion.

## Who makes a great religion journalist?

Other traits that are assets for religion journalists:

- Respect for the role of faith in people's lives.
- Immense curiosity about religion and a willingness to learn — and keep learning — about it.
- An abiding sense of fairness and balance, and an understanding that there are often more than two sides to a story.
- The absence of any interest in pushing any religious viewpoint.
- A commitment to covering all kinds of diversity — of faith, both within Christianity and outside of it, and of ethnicity, gender, economic status and geography.
- Willingness to spend time with all sorts of people in the places where they live, gather and worship. Willingness to work through language and cultural challenges.
- Strong news skills, because religion includes much more than feature stories.

# Best practices

## *Finding the right tools*

**T**o produce great religion stories, journalists need a good toolbox. Most tools are the same as for any other beat. Religion, however, requires some special skills. When journalists encounter religion in a story, they often end up reporting on a powerful, unseen authority that many people say they believe in. Unfortunately, God doesn't grant interviews.

Stories that include spirituality, faith and ethics aren't just for religious people; they're for everyone. Writing and producing religious stories in ways that resonate with ardent believers, well-read worshippers, spiritual dabblers and unconcerned agnostics requires skill. Read on for some of our best advice.

## Get oriented

**LEARN A LITTLE — OR A LOT — FAST.** Search the web for blogs, sites and information about current topics in religion. Read international and local religious magazines and newspapers for windows into what religious communities care about. Pay attention to movies, books, television shows, computer games and other places where religious themes are present.

Sign up for email newsletters and Google Alerts to help you spot big religion stories. Stay on top of Google trends, top tweets and Facebook posts that touch on faith.

## Get out

Out where people of faith gather, that is. This could include a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, book store, quilting group, sports field, festival, conference or meditation center.

### GETTING TITLES RIGHT

Getting religious titles wrong is one of the quickest ways to lose your audience's trust. They'll think you don't know what you're doing or you don't care enough to get things right. Some titles indicate an official position and endorsement from hierarchy; other titles people bestow upon themselves. Some such as rabbi or reverend are familiar; but many—mufti (in Islam), metropolitan (in Eastern Catholic or Orthodox churches), rinpoche (in Buddhism), primate (in Roman Catholic churches or reader (in Christian Science)—might not be.

Ask people what their titles are and what kind of authority they represent. If someone uses a title you're not familiar with, check it. More guidance on religious titles can be found at the website [www.ReligionStylebook.org](http://www.ReligionStylebook.org)

## Redefine the religion beat

**MILLENNIALS AND RELIGION.** Millennials in the U.S. and Western Europe have been moving farther away from organized religion, especially Christianity. Some attribute this shift to religion's entanglement with politics, to numerous sex abuse scandals, and to consumer capitalism, among other factors. Despite being branded “nones,” many religiously unaffiliated young people still pray and embrace strong notions of spirituality. Millennials sometimes combine religious teachings in order to formulate belief systems that suit their own views. While a growing number of Millennials may not want to attend church, many do crave a feeling that they are part of something larger than themselves.

**LOOK OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION.** Fewer people are affiliating with houses of worship. One of the fastest-growing segments in religion surveys is people who profess spiritual beliefs but don't attend worship. Stories about their expressions of spirituality — through environmental groups, books, conferences, yoga, house churches and more — say a lot about religion in America.

**INSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION: FIND GREAT STORIES.** Houses of worship and religious organizations still remain rich, powerful and, in some cases, influential forces in many places. Stories about

their inner workings can be fascinating, telling or disturbing. How does a 13-member church end up with 40,000 or a 2,000-member church shrink to 40? What happens after a pastor's fall from grace? How do houses of worship attract younger members and increase diversity?

**PATROL THE PUBLIC SQUARE.** Bitter clashes, unlikely alliances and surprising resolutions all mark the high-profile stories found when religion intersects with education, government, health, science and more. From public holiday displays to graduation prayers to abortion legislation, ask why conflicts or alliances exist, or why some issues can be resolved and others will never be.

**WHEN POSSIBLE, BE LOCAL AND NATIONAL — OR LOCAL AND GLOBAL.** One of the best ways to pump up the impact of a religion story is to connect it to a national or global trend or event. It gives readers, viewers and listeners a sense that the values debated in their town are being tested on a larger playing field. Most local stories can be placed in national or international context, and most houses of worship and religious organizations have strong international ties because of immigration, missionary or relief work, sister congregations, funding of overseas projects or concern for members of their faith involved in violent conflicts internationally.

**ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION.** Rather than report on one faith group at a time, focus on issue stories that reflect the thinking of a variety of faiths. How do faith groups differ in their approach to today's most controversial social topics?

**BE TIMELY, BUT DON'T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT TIME PEGS.** With religion, some of the best stories result from following up later to find out what effect a vote, a change in leadership or a new policy had on real people's lives.

## TEACHING, PREACHING AND PROSELYTIZING

What's a journalist's mission when reporting about religion in general circulation news? To report on it, telling truths according to verifiable facts, accurately describing people's beliefs and experiences, and interpreting events for readers, listeners and viewers. Readers will certainly learn from your stories. They may decide to take some action because of what they read or hear from you. They may even be inspired to explore faith or return to it. These are all likely byproducts from the work you do, and your audience will likely tell you that. Your mission, however, is not to preach, teach or proselytize. Those goals will get in the way of reporting the truth, as uncomfortable, confusing or even

**DON'T DREAD THE HOLIDAYS.** Yes, most religion reporters write stories about the major holidays of major faiths. Yes, most reporters approach these stories with some amount of dread. But smart reporters use holidays as an opportunity to explore issues related to wider themes—identity during Rosh Hashana, birth at Christmas, freedom during Passover. Good reporters find a person, an event, an issue, a ritual or a trend to view through the lens of the holiday. While covering holidays may not seem that important, they offer a unique window through which we can understand how people live out their faith (consult the online Interfaith Calendar for dates and descriptions: [www.interfaithcalendar.org/.](http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/))

Some time-strapped editors may discourage reporters from producing enterprise pieces for each major religious holiday. Creative alternatives include photo essays or single photos, Q&As, book reviews and stories by writers in other departments about something related to the holiday—travel, food, etc.

## Rely on people power

**MATTERS OF FAITH AND BELIEF ARE ALWAYS ABOUT PEOPLE.** Whenever possible, stories about doctrines, institutions or legislation should go beyond officialdom. If a vote is important enough to write about, it's important to take the extra steps to find out how it will impact people's lives.

**LET PEOPLE TALK ABOUT FAITH AND BELIEF.** Too often, reporters steer clear when sources bring up how faith guides their actions. By encouraging those conversations, reporters can learn about core values and decisive moments. Asking sources about religion is delicate; many people find it intrusive. But you can always ask, "How did your beliefs or values affect your decision?" David Crumm, an award-winning religion reporter for the Detroit Free Press, advises reporters to always ask another question: "Invariably, the answers to your first questions about religion will have traditional words and phrases that are really code words religious people use to describe their experiences. When someone says, 'God spoke to me,' ask: "Did you actually hear an audible voice? What did the voice sound like? Were there really words or was it more of a feeling? Did you feel happy or scared? Did you sense an image of God? What did God look like?"

**BE WARY OF RELYING TOO HEAVILY ON QUOTES FROM CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS.** While there are smart and prophetic voices among them, there are often wide gaps between what clergy preach and what congregation members do or believe.

**CULTIVATE SOURCES.** Fewer stories "break" in religion than on other beats, so cultivating sources is extremely important for ferreting out stories.

## Report news and nuance

**GOOD RELIGION REPORTING BEGINS WITH GOOD JOURNALISM.** “Without a love for non-religion news, you won’t love religion news,” says veteran reporter Richard Ostling. Use your best reporting skills on every story to provide solid facts and illuminating interpretation.

**NOTHING IS OFF-LIMITS.** Question everything. International coverage of the Roman Catholic clergy abuse crisis has shown that religion requires relentless reporting. Reaction to it has also shown that most readers and viewers want tough questions to be asked of religious leaders and institutions. While it is important to treat faith groups with respect, reporters should never skip questions or background checks just because they’re dealing with religious issues or people.

**FOLLOW THE MONEY.** Finances are a woefully under-reported area of religion, partly because nonprofit religious organizations are sometimes exempt from some of the financial reporting businesses contend with. Learn what religious organizations have to file with the government and what information they share with their congregations. Ask questions about money and ask for copies of budgets. Financial improprieties can and do happen in congregations, many of which don’t have professional accountants on staff. Religious organizations often benefit tremendously from donations, but

there is usually little examination on how this money is spent unless a problem is uncovered.

**GO WITH GRAY.** Religions deal with good and evil, but in everyday life, there’s little black and white. More often we find a thousand shades of gray. Honor that. When reporting on a family whose faith saw them through a crisis, include the fact that they don’t regularly attend religious services. Religion often confounds expectations, which is one reason it is fascinating to write about.

**DIG DEEPER.** Investigative reporting has yielded great journalism on the religion beat, from sex abuse scandals to financial wrongdoing. All were a result of dogged investigative reporting. Seek out online resources and offline trainings to hone your computer-assisted reporting and data journalism skills.

## Remain calm amid conflict

Reporting about religion often involves dealing with extremes, and extremes generate conflict.

Some advice:

- The loudest, most aggressive voices — or those with the best P.R. teams — are usually on the fringes of any issue, while most people have opinions that fall somewhere in

between. There are almost always more than two sides to any issue involving faith. Seek them out.

- Long-running conflicts — such as those over sexual orientation or gender identity and expression — tend to be stoked by extreme voices. Look for other sources who offer constructive ways of moving debates forward — mediators, ethicists, observers, people who have unique or unusual perspectives.
- Don't overemphasize conflicts because of aggressive sources or fascination in the newsroom. Does the issue affect everyday life? Do affected communities care about it? Tailor coverage accordingly.
- Don't automatically give prominent play to the latest proclamations from the usual voices in a debate. How many people actually agree with their views? For whom are they speaking?
- People with extreme views generate news because they are often willing to take extreme actions based on their convictions. Be savvy about carefully gathering information on groups' beliefs and potential for action.
- Some people are, in fact, delusional. Most

religion reporters have gotten at least a few phone calls or letters from people making impossible accusations or far-out religious claims. Politely, but firmly, explain that you won't pursue their story and get backup from supervisors if the person persists.

**BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS.** Many labels — including liberal, fundamentalist and pro-life— are loaded and can mean different things in different countries and contexts. Characterize beliefs with specifics rather than giving them general labels. Allow people to characterize their own beliefs and ask sources how they identify, but be wary of allowing them to explain opposing views.

## Embrace diversity

**BE INCLUSIVE.** Strive to write stories that people of all viewpoints — and with all levels of religious knowledge — can appreciate and understand. When writing about an issue, explore which faith traditions are involved; don't limit yourself to the ones you're familiar with. Avoid faith-specific terms such as church or minister when you really mean houses of worship and clergy.

**BE DIVERSE.** When reporting about religion, every kind of diversity can enrich a story — diversity of faith, ethnicity, race, economics, geography, age, etc. Make an effort to explore them. Religious beliefs and practice

are usually affected by where people live, where they come from, how much money they have, and what stripe of what faith they practice.

### **IN RELIGION, THE MAJORITY DOESN'T ALWAYS RULE.**

Minority voices matter — within a faith or across the spectrum of belief. One of the biggest stories in religion is the way people of an ever widening array of faiths are learning to live and work more closely together. Minority voices are crucial because they often raise concerns shared by many beyond their group or offer a “canary in a coal mine” first alert to a conflict. Religion also makes for strange bedfellows, with surprising alliances forming around issues, so reporters can't always assume they know who represents the majority view.

## It's a miracle!

Well, maybe. Religion has always involved reports of supernatural phenomena that can't be verified. Scripture is full of them, and most religions are based on them. So what should journalists do when faced with faith healings, exorcisms, answered prayers, speaking in tongues, crying statues or divine images appearing in everyday objects?

- Describe, in detail, what happened. Be clear about what you witnessed, and what others said took place. Your story is likely to be largely about what people believe happened, and how they reacted to it.

- Put the event in context of religious tradition, and explain how much the event follows or deviates from religious teaching. For example, describe the work of an exorcist among Catholic immigrants, and then explain how it compares with church teaching on exorcism. Give examples of reports of similar happenings, and, if appropriate, say whether any were proved false.
- Report if money is involved. Was someone promised healing if they gave a big donation?
- Be respectful but neutral. You're dealing with people's sacred beliefs, and it's not your job to endorse or dismiss them. It's not likely to work, anyway: A recent medical study concluded that

### **JUDGE NOT, LEST YE BE JUDGED**

People of faith sometimes refer to themselves or others as “committed” Christians, “devout” Catholics or “observant” Jews as a way of indicating faithful practice of a religious tradition. Journalists shouldn't do the same. It is not a journalist's job to judge the depth of a person's faith or steadfastness of practice. Instead, describe a person's faith and practice with specific details. Journalists also can't assume that what a person says is accurate; if it can't be verified, simply attribute the statement to the person rather than proclaiming it as fact. For example, if an Orthodox Jewish candidate for political office doesn't campaign on the Sabbath, you can state that as fact. But if a profile subject says she tithes (giving 10 percent of her income to her congregation) but doesn't give you access to financial records, say she says she tithes; don't take her word for it.

- Seek verification. If someone says their cancer was healed by a preacher, ask for medical confirmation from before and after the alleged healing.

## Social Media

Writing and tweeting your opinions or personal beliefs will change your relationship with sources and audiences. In some cases, that can hurt people's ability to believe that you can report with fairness and balance. For that reason, most news reporters choose not to write their opinions or personal beliefs, and some news organizations forbid beat reporters from doing so.

Other religion reporters have found that columns, commentaries, blogs and social media accounts enhance their standing as a reporter, and lead to stronger connections with readers, viewers and listeners. Some write religion columns and rarely write news, lessening any impact their published opinions have on their reporting. Many others use blogs or columns for purposes other than stating opinions: they share color, context or other details that didn't make it into their main story, engage in conversations with readers or explore topics using a lot of voice without adding a lot of opinion. Many newsrooms are also requiring reporters to tweet and publish their work on social media platforms like Facebook.

In religion, opinions are news. Journalists in general-circulation media have their own opinions, of course, but most audiences expect them to keep their viewpoints out of their reporting so that they can fairly represent the news. A few journalists manage to do it all: writing news, opinion, columns, and a blog. But it's a delicate balance on a beat where beliefs can trump facts.

## Sharpen your pencils

**GREAT JOURNALISM USUALLY INVOLVES CONFLICT, TENSION AND CHANGE.** Religion has all of these. Use them. Writing about faith — whether for print or broadcast — offers wonderful opportunities for rich narratives, heart-rending storytelling and stories about personal transformation.

**WRITE SIMPLY, BUT DON'T OVERSIMPLIFY.** Religion involves rhetoric, complex jargon and language laden with thousands of years of debate. You must be accurate and attuned to nuance, but you also need to write in clear language that can be understood by both insiders and casual observers. Be aware that word choice can convey bias in ways you're not aware of. Run paraphrasing and descriptions by sources to check your accuracy and understanding. Be careful when you say "Christians believe ..." since beliefs vary widely within any faith.

# Resources

## *Numbers, experts and sources*

**R**eligion reporting is more complicated than ever because of the vast amount of information available to reporters through experts, websites, polls, books, advocacy groups, public relations agencies, research reports and more. Most of this information is instantly accessible through the Internet but not all of it is reliable. What's more, faith groups have gotten more sophisticated about pushing their interests, so reporters often end up with conflicting information

Our tools website ReligionLink posts a wide variety of resources, including the Internet's most extensive list of links to religious media. Also check out Religion-Stylebook.com, an independent supplement to The Associated Press Stylebook. Here are some tips on dealing with statistics, experts, websites and books.

# Numbers, and why you can't count on them

Whoever said “Numbers never lie” was not a religion reporter. Beware of confidently using specific numbers about religious identification or belief. Here’s why.

- Censuses are the usual standard for counting people and their characteristics, but many do not ask people their religious affiliation.
- Many countries count newborns as members of their parents' faiths and issue identity cards stating this faith. Changing or removing this label can be difficult or impossible, regardless of what individuals actually believe.
- There is no single religion survey that is considered to be the most reliable (see Page 41). The results differ depending on what options are offered, how people are contacted, how many people are surveyed and other factors. Numbers can vary widely, and many faith groups are so small that they rarely show up on surveys in proportion to their actual numbers. Some traditions are typically underrepresented because of difficulty in obtaining numbers.
- With Roman Catholics, there is one pope and a highly structured hierarchy that tracks

membership. But in many religions, such as Islam, there is no official governing body and no official count.

- Some faiths, such as the Pentecostal movement, include people from many denominations, so there is no central record-keeping. Evangelical Christians are difficult to count because they often belong to nondenominational churches, official denominations or sometimes none at all.
- Denominations and religions count their members differently, if at all, so it is difficult to compare their sizes. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, which does not baptize infants, counts people who are baptized. The United Methodist Church, which baptizes infants, counts people once they are confirmed. Mosques don’t require membership, so estimates of Muslims are just that — estimates.
- Formal affiliation with a religious group doesn’t give a complete picture. Many Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and others are not affiliated with houses of worship, other factors must be used to determine religious or spiritual identity.
- Some houses of worship or faith groups can be competitive about touting numbers of adherents or members, to the point that the number of Muslims and Jews in America has become

highly politicized. For example, one survey by Jewish researchers counted fewer than 3 million Muslims at a time when Muslim groups were claiming numbers as high as 6 million. In contrast, some churches, such as the Church of Christ, Scientist, do not publish statistics because its numbers have declined so much.

- Categories are controversial. Mormons consider themselves Christian but most Christian groups do not. Messianic Jews, who believe Jesus was the messiah Jews await, consider themselves Jewish, but most Jews consider them Christian.
- In the U.S. there are only estimates of the number of Buddhists, who are difficult to count in part because immigrants and American converts practice so differently. Also, some people meditate or practice aspects of Buddhism but don't consider themselves Buddhist, or they combine Buddhism with another faith, such as Judaism, resulting in people who call themselves "JewBus."
- Beware of calling any faith the "fastest-growing" in any context without documentation, which can be impossible to procure.
- Poll results differ depending on how questions are asked. This applies not only to believers,

but also to descriptions of their beliefs. For example, people's stated beliefs about a divine role in creation vary depending on the number and types of choices they are given.

- People frequently lie when asked about religion, perhaps out of a desire to look good and perhaps out of denial. Surveys have shown that more people say they attend worship services than actually show up.
- In countries where certain faiths or ethnic groups are not recognized, reporting is bound to be skewed. Counting the number of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Baha'is in Iran, Christians in North Korea or Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar would be a difficult if not impossible task given government restrictions and social hostilities.
- Sophisticated advocacy groups promote their own polls, which support their own agendas. Beware of spin.

## How to make it all add up

Don't let the size of faith groups — either nationally or locally — overly influence your coverage. American reporters will likely do more stories on Catholics and evangelicals because of their numbers, but many groups' impact and influence outstrip their size.

The Episcopal Church is small, but its battles over homosexuality are closely watched. Jews are less than 2 percent of the U.S. population but have an important voice, as do Muslims. Buddhism has relatively few followers in the U.S. but is easily found in American popular culture.

All the general guidelines of good journalism apply when quoting statistics in religion stories. In addition:

- Be specific about what numbers represent. For example, specify what numbers are based on (worship attendance, membership, baptism, etc.).
- Be careful with comparisons. If you have apples and oranges, say so and note that two groups' definition of "member" differs.
- Look carefully at poll questions and results yourself, rather than accepting one statistic without question. The poll, as a whole, may tell a different story.
- Check to see if different organizations have done polls on the same subject. Polling Report.com ([www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)) and search engines make this easy.

## Disputed statistics

**1** Give a range of numbers or qualify a statistic if it is in doubt: There are 3 million to 7 million Muslims in America, according to various surveys. There are well more than 1 million Hindus, experts say.

**2** Note when numbers are disputed: Write that a group says it has 5 million followers, but others (specify who and why) say otherwise.

**3** Quote several numbers from different sources.

**4** Characterize the amount, if the specific number is not necessary. Sometimes the number is not controversial in a story and it is enough to say that the denomination has "more than doubled," without debating whether it has tripled.



### FAST FACTS

According to a 2014 Gallup poll, 61% of Americans support daily prayer being spoken in the classroom. This is trending downward from 66% in 2001 and 70% in 1999.

## Religious identification surveys

These surveys ask people how they identify their religious beliefs or what religious groups they are affiliated with. Answers depend upon what options they are given and how many people are surveyed. Results vary widely. For example, people who say they are Christian may be then given a list of denominations to choose among, or they may be given categories that include such terms as evangelical or Pentecostal. Some ask people questions over the phone or in person, while others gather data from religious groups that keep track of their own numbers. Each has its strengths and shortcomings, and most journalists find some surveys' categories to be more trustworthy than others.

## Experts and where to find them

Religion is the most studied topic on the planet, so there are thousands of “experts” out there. Your mission, however, is to find one or just a few who are knowledgeable, articulate and helpful on your particular story.

There probably is no such thing as an impartial expert on religion. However, there are experts who, by their training or by the requirements or politics of their job, offer analysis or context about a topic without advocating any one faith's position. Ask potential sources what makes them an expert in an area and what their own

opinions and involvement are on the issue. Accurately characterizing sources' expertise is important.

Don't assume that because someone is a leader or member of a faith group that they agree with all of that group's policies and beliefs. There are widely divergent opinions within every faith group.

## Who is an expert?

**CLERGY.** Most faith groups require ordination, which includes education, training and endorsement from hierarchy. But, some groups call people minister or other titles without requiring any formal training.

**ACADEMICS.** They include professors in religious studies in undergraduate or graduate programs, who may or may not be religious themselves, and professors in seminaries, theological schools or other religious schools, who approach religion from belief in a specific faith. Many professors in other fields also have strong interests in religion and can be helpful sources, particularly social scientists, anthropologists, pollsters and political scientists.

**PEOPLE WHO WORK AT NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS THAT INVOLVE RELIGION.** They include religious advocacy groups, think tanks and research centers. Some of these push a religious viewpoint, and others study religion's role in specific areas, such as

education, politics or health. Be aware that many organizations call themselves nonpartisan, but nonetheless advocate a certain point of view and may be active lobbyists.

**BLOGGERS AND OTHER ONLINE SOURCES.** More and more, bloggers are making news with their opinions and ability to sway others. Religion is, in many ways, the great equalizer. Everyone has access to religion and religious experience, whether they have religious education or training or not. You'll find many articulate people who have acquired tremendous expertise through volunteer work and life experience.

## Online experts

**RELIGIONLINK** ([www.ReligionLink.com](http://www.ReligionLink.com)) The Religion News Foundation's resource site provides primers and source guides on topics involving religion, public policy and culture. ReligionLink provides international and regional interview sources (with contact information), story angles, resources and background. The service is free, and its archives are searchable. New issues are distributed regularly by email and posted on the ReligionLink home page.

**RELIGION STYLEBOOK** ([www.ReligionStylebook.com](http://www.ReligionStylebook.com)) The Religion Stylebook is an easy-to-use guide created for journalists who report on religion in the mainstream media. It's an independent supplement to The Associ-

ated Press Stylebook and is a service of the Religion Writers Association.

## Websites

There are millions of websites about religion.

Here's how to use them carefully:

- Official websites of religions, denominations and religious organizations are generally reliable, though they are not always up to date. It's generally best to check every fact and name you take from websites. Don't forget even official sites can be hacked.
- Be aware that critics often create websites with URLs similar to those of whatever group they're criticizing, so always check who posts the site. Never use information if you don't know whose website it is.
- Some professors keep their sites meticulously updated, while others don't even list the names of their own books correctly. Double check anything you find.
- If you're seeking background on a topic or group — particularly if it involves religious beliefs or practice — read what's online with the understanding that it may be wildly inaccurate.

- Surf smartly. Read articles about effective ways to research online.
- To gather background for a story, start with a LexisNexis, Dow Jones or similar database search of published articles, which are likely to

## SHOW ME THE MONEY

Resources on charitable giving and fiscal accountability. Although these organizations are based in the U.S., they often monitor ministries with large global outreach.

**RESEARCH** — The Center on Philanthropy ([www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/](http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/)), Center on Wealth and Philanthropy ([www.bc.edu/research/swri/](http://www.bc.edu/research/swri/)), National Center for Charitable Statistics (<http://www.nccs.urban.org/>), and Independent Sector ([www.independentsector.org/](http://www.independentsector.org/)).

**WATCHDOGS** — WallWatchers ([www.wallwatchers.org/](http://www.wallwatchers.org/)), an independent source for ministry ratings, posts financial profiles ([www.ministrywatch.com/](http://www.ministrywatch.com/)). The American Institute of Philanthropy ([www.charitywatch.org/](http://www.charitywatch.org/)), GuideStar.org ([www.guidestar.org/](http://www.guidestar.org/)) and Charity Navigator ([www.charitynavigator.org/](http://www.charitynavigator.org/)) post evaluations of nonprofits. Empty Tomb ([www.emptytomb.org/](http://www.emptytomb.org/)) is a Christian research service on church finances and giving.

**NEWS** — The Chronicle of Philanthropy (<http://philanthropy.com/>) and the Philanthropy Journal ([www.philanthropyjournal.org/](http://www.philanthropyjournal.org/)).

be reasonably accurate. Then when you search the web, it will be easier to quickly discern which pages have inaccurate or biased information.

- The internet is a good place to figure out different sides to an issue. If there is dissent or opposition, you'll generally find it online, which can help guide your reporting.
- Many publications and centers distribute free email newsletters with stories, updates and press releases about religion. This is an easy way to look for trends and to gather string for stories.
- Many religious magazines post all or most of their content online, so you can read a variety of publications from a variety of religious viewpoints for free.
- Wall Watchers, an independent source for ministry ratings, posts financial profiles ([www.ministrywatch.com/](http://www.ministrywatch.com/)) for readability; but, there are plenty of other choices, many of them lushly illustrated.

# Etiquette

*When visiting places of worship*

**T**here is no substitute for visiting churches, mosques, synagogues or temples for worship and other gatherings. The sights, sounds, rituals, textures, mood and conversations will tell you more than any book ever can. Here's some advice on getting started.

**ON THE RECORD?** If a worship service is open to the public, you can consider what is said in it on the record in most countries. Sermons can usually be quoted because they are public proclamations. Reporters should be careful about quoting prayers, however; people have filed lawsuits over their private problems being made public.

**ADVANCE NOTICE.** In most cases, reporters find their visits go more smoothly if they call in advance. Many journalists consider it a professional courtesy to let the religious leader know a reporter will be present. There are, however, plenty of exceptions. If you have been tipped that the preacher is endorsing a politician against federal rules, you obviously don't want to let him know you'll be listening. Similarly, a meeting after a worship service may include discussion of a controversial issue, such as tearing down a historical building or splitting a congregation.

**WHAT TO WEAR.** If you're unsure how to dress or act, call in advance and ask. Houses of worship welcome visitors and want to make them feel comfortable. You can also consult the book *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, edited by Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida (Skylight Paths Publishing), which details dress and customs for most traditions. Some houses of worship also post information for visitors on their websites.

**SHOW RESPECT.** The most important thing is to be respectful, which means being silent during prayer, standing when others do, removing your shoes if the tradition requires it, etc.

**SHOULD YOU SING?** If you're attending a worship service as a reporter, you are not expected to participate. Some reporters find it easier to sing during songs or close their eyes during prayer in order to blend in. If you're visiting a place of your own tradition, you may feel comfortable singing and praying, but remember: If you're on assignment, it's your job to observe and report. And, if people see you participating, they may expect coverage that extols their faith rather than simply reports on it.

**IF YOU'RE FEMALE ...** Many traditions have particular customs or rules regarding what women wear and how they act. Some are easy for reporters to comply with, but others hamper your ability to report.

- Many mosques require women to cover their heads, and most reporters don't mind bringing a headscarf or donning one made available to them. Similarly, some traditions—Muslims and some Pentecostals, for example—expect women to dress modestly, so reporters intentionally wear clothes that cover their arms and legs.

- When religious customs limit reporting, most veteran journalists handle restrictions with ingenuity and perseverance rather than confrontation. If women are not expected to approach men and initiate conversation, you might enlist a woman to ask her husband to explain your need to interview men. If men and women are segregated during worship, as they are in some mosques and synagogues, you might quietly try to reposition yourself so you can see the men's section.

- Some groups prohibit men from shaking hands with women. Wait until a hand is extended to you before attempting to shake someone's hand.

**PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND RECORDING.** You must get permission in advance to photograph, film or record a worship service. Many religious leaders will set restrictions on whether flash can be used (often not) and where photographers or operators may stand.

They may restrict what can be filmed or recorded.

**TAKING NOTES.** Orthodox Jews frown on doing work on the Sabbath, and that includes taking notes. Reporters tell stories about running into restrooms to scribble notes or hiding notebooks under their coats.

**OFFERING?** Some reporters give small donations when entering a place of worship to be courteous; many do not. The decision is yours.

**CONVERSION.** Journalists sometimes become targets for conversion or are invited to join “altar calls,” where people confess their faith. Such invitations are best handled with aplomb. Jeffrey Weiss of *The Dallas Morning News* has a standard reply when people ask if they can pray for his salvation: “I never turn down a prayer.” If people persist journalists should feel free to be firm about not engaging in conversation.

# Religion outside the box

*Spirituality, ethics and interfaith efforts*

**F**aith and belief aren't based on buildings and institutions. Stories about faith and belief shouldn't usually be based on them, either.

Religion is increasingly being lived outside the walls of synagogues, mosques, churches and temples. Relationships among people of different faiths affect international, national and neighborhood affairs. In this age of increased individualism, people are expressing their spirituality in unusual and nontraditional ways. Many of today's best religion stories cover what happens when people live out their beliefs in everyday life, particularly when they interact with people who hold different beliefs. Others emerge when clashes of belief occur in public over such issues as religious holiday displays and government policies on scientific research. In this chapter, we'll explore four areas that represent fertile ground for stories on education, business, politics, pop culture, and beyond

# Spirituality

Most religion coverage deals with institutions and the people who frequent them, but official institutions rarely provide an adequate portrait of faith. Journalists can complete the picture by asking people to explain how they express their beliefs in everyday life.

Good places to start include online forums, bookstores, conferences, yoga and meditation classes, volunteer efforts and clubs that may draw people with spiritual but not necessarily religious beliefs. Ask people you meet about rituals that sometimes take place outside of institutions including prayer, weddings, funerals, home altars, journaling, etc.

# Ethics and values

Questions of ethics seem to be everywhere: government, schools, hospitals, religious institutions, science labs and journalism organizations. Few of the questions involve obvious answers, leaving us to puzzle over what's right, what's wrong and where to turn for moral standards. "Ethics and values" are talked about a lot, but in general terms. It's the specific circumstances that make for penetrating narratives.

Moral standards are drawn from a variety of sources—professional codes of conduct, family values, human instincts and, often, religion. Journalists now have

more ways than ever to chronicle the ethical questions of our time. They should ask insightful questions, conduct thorough interviews and pay attention to details. They also can consult a wide range of experts in ethics to give perspective and context to the debates of the day.

Some ethicists' work is based on their religious beliefs, while other systems of ethics are secularly based. Compare perspectives between them, and also explore the ethical perspectives of different religions. On many topics, juxtaposing different faith traditions' moral standards can illuminate why right and wrong can be so difficult to determine in specific situations.

# Interfaith efforts

For all of religion's talk of love and peace, religion reporters continually face the question: Can the world's religions learn to get along? Many of the world's most violent conflicts are stoked by potent mixtures of religion and politics. These conflicts are countered by the fact that more families and communities are made up of more members of different faiths. This interreligious mingling provides new personal avenues for understanding religion as well as conflict.

- With interfaith marriages, look for stories of adapted traditions or tensions in marriages, funerals, holiday celebrations, adoptions and the

religious education of children.

- Religious tensions often play out in pop culture or the public square through reactions to movies, television shows, music, public holiday observances, rites of passage and more.
- Some faith groups eagerly participate in interfaith efforts, including some Jewish groups, Sikhs and more liberal Christian denominations. They are willing to pray with other faiths without excluding them (such as by praying in Jesus' name). Others, particularly conservative Christians, shun interfaith events because they believe making their message acceptable to others requires watering down their own beliefs.
- Great stories can be found when faith groups are unexpectedly thrown together in a common cause (like helping victims of natural disasters) or when they form unlikely alliances. Most conservative Christians, Mormons and Muslims agree regarding same-sex marriage, for example, but disagree on much more. Sometimes, opinions do change, offering tales of transformation. Jews, Christians and Muslims have found that individual friendships can transcend differences over Middle East politics.

## Resources

- Most denominations and religions have a person or office that monitors or oversees interfaith relations.
- Many cities have centers that intentionally bring together members of different faiths for dialogue.
- The KAICIID Dialogue Centre (King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue) based in Vienna encourages dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures around the world.
- The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions ([www.cpwr.org/](http://www.cpwr.org/)), based in Chicago, sponsors interfaith dialogue and encourages cooperation among religious and spiritual communities and institutions.
- The United Religions Initiative ([www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)), based in San Francisco, promotes interfaith cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence. It has "cooperation circles" around the globe.
- Interfaith Youth Core ([www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)) based in

Chicago brings together young people of different religious and moral traditions for cooperative service and dialogue around shared values.

- Religions for Peace ([www.religionsforpeace.org](http://www.religionsforpeace.org)) an international coalition and network of religious representatives dedicated to promoting peace.



## INTO THE MIX

Pew Research Center's 2016 report found that one-in five U.S. adults were raised in Interfaith homes. Additionally, 12% were raised by one person who was religiously affiliated, and one who was not. Yet, mixed religious backgrounds

## Religion in the public square

The most telling religion stories aren't usually hidden inside churches, synagogues, mosques or temples. They're out in public,

where people of all different belief systems mix and mingle. They happen in schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, hospitals, government meetings, theaters, courts, science labs, football stadiums and more. Often stories begin when one person lives out his or her beliefs in a way that feels uncomfortable or unfair to others. Sometimes they occur when someone asks for an accommodation to practice faith — such as a student who wants to wear her hijab despite rules against head coverings or an inmate who requests a special diet.

Internationally, public debate or discussion may be limited, however. Although a 2016 Pew Research Center report entitled "Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion" found an overall decline in religious hostilities and restrictions, religion-related terrorism continues to rise and brutal attacks on journalists or bloggers of certain faiths continue. Pew found that of the 198 countries studied, nearly one-fourth of them had high levels of religious restrictions. In fact, 77% of the world lives in a place where freedom of religion or belief is restricted, often affecting free speech due to hate speech and blasphemy. Journalists should be aware of this fact and research the nuances of laws, faith and politics in the regions on which they are reporting.

Religious freedom is enshrined in many other countries' constitutions, but just because it's written down in places like North Korea certainly doesn't mean it's being protected. In practice, government restrictions and social hostilities often restrict how people live out their beliefs. Journalists must look beyond propaganda, speaking with citizens, faith leaders, academics and non-governmental organizations for a more accurate picture of facts on the ground.

Several international declarations and covenants have been drafted to protect religious freedom. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees everyone "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in com-

munity with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides similar protections with the caveat that “freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” Many disputes that involve this balancing of rights end in increased restrictions on the media.

The most obvious restrictions reporters face when covering religion in some countries are legal ones. Constitutions and laws prohibiting apostasy, blasphemy and defamation of religion are often used to muzzle the press and free expression.

Some journalists also fear social and political backlash when broaching religious topics. Faced with these legal, social, political and economic constraints, journalists and bloggers should be cautious when covering cover sensitive religious issues in their countries and abroad.

# Issues for reporters and editors

## *Transparency, disagreement and conflicts*

**P**olitical journalists who begin covering religion beat express surprise when sources start asking them about their religious beliefs. If they weren't asked how they voted, why should they be asked where — or whether — they worship? Religion is an intimate, emotional and revealing topic, which is one reason it makes for such great stories. It's also the reason that sources and media audiences will be interested in what you believe. After all, journalists report on facts, but religions are based on beliefs that can't be proved or disproved. People's religious beliefs affect the way they vote, raise their children and spend their time and money. Why shouldn't they also affect their work as journalists?

People who report on religion can be sure of two things: Sources will ask about your own beliefs, and you will have to report about people whose beliefs you disagree with. While ethics and conflicts of interest are important topics for all journalists, religion journalists will find there are special considerations on the religion beat. Here is some guidance on how to handle questions when they

# Revealing personal beliefs

Veteran religion reporters have various ways of responding to questions about their own faith. There's no single right way to respond; every person has to handle the question in a way that feels comfortable to him/her. Some journalists also find they answer the question differently over time or in different situations. Some options:

**BE UPFRONT.** Say what your faith is and where you worship. Some reporters say that they feel they need to be honest and open with sources because they are asking sources to be honest and open with them. It is a way to build trust.

**ANSWER IN GENERAL TERMS.** Say, "I'm Christian" or "I'm Jewish" or "I'm Muslim," but leave it at that and quickly begin the interview.

**ASK WHY THE PERSON WANTS TO KNOW.** You may want to tailor your response to the person's agenda. Are they trying to figure out if you're on "their side"? Or is it a casual question that doesn't carry weighty baggage? Some reporters justify not revealing details by telling sources they worry that if their tradition is the same as the source's, the source will expect favorable coverage; but, if their tradition is different, the source won't feel they can trust them.

**IS SALVATION AT STAKE?** Veteran religion reporter, Julia Lieblich, offers this anecdote: "When asked, 'Are you a Christian?' the writer replied, 'I don't like to talk about my religion when I am working. But if you are wondering whether I will be sensitive to the beliefs of Christians, the answer is yes.'"

**DEFLECT, OR REFUSE TO ANSWER.** Some reporters say, "The most important thing you need to know is that I will listen to you and that I am committed to representing your faith accurately and fairly. This interview is about your faith, not mine."

**CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS.** Some reporters find that because of their name, appearance or ethnicity, sources assume they belong to a particular faith. Sometimes they challenge (or affirm) that assumption, explaining that they won't assume anything about the interview subject.

**CONSIDER WHERE YOU ARE.** Journalists in some countries report that they are asked about their faith in almost every interview; journalists elsewhere say the question comes up only occasionally.

**USE HUMOR.** You can always say, "I'm still considering," or "It depends on how this interview goes!" if you'd rather not answer.

## Reporting on people you disagree with

Most journalists have had plenty of practice reporting about people they disagree with. Religion introduces a new intensity to that challenge. It's one thing to be a political reporter who votes for one party and interviews candidates of another. It can be another when a reporter's sacred beliefs are ridiculed by a person who's likely to be the lead story. Reporters have many ways of deftly handling such situations:

- Remember that your job is to report, not to comment or judge.
- Add context. Context doesn't have to take much time or space. Accurately characterizing a person's beliefs by quoting an expert or a fact can quickly show readers/viewers/listeners whether the person is on the fringe or in the mainstream, how much support he has or how much opposition he faces.
- Represent the other side(s). Fairness demands that claims are balanced by counter-claims. Don't let a person's quotes or accusations stand alone. If there's another view, state it or quote it, and try to characterize how prevalent each view is. This is much easier now that surveys of religious beliefs are instantly acces-

sible on the Internet.

- Truth doesn't require falsity. Jeffrey Sheler, who covered religion for U.S. News & World Report, suggests remembering what he heard two religious leaders in dialogue say: "Being true to one's faith does not require being false to another's."
- Bow out if necessary. If you can't accurately and fairly report on someone you disagree with, consult your editor/producer and ask to be removed from the story.

## Conflicts of interest

Every journalist encounters a conflict of interest at some point, but there are special considerations when it comes to religion. In general, reporters don't join organizations that they cover, but prohibiting a journalist from belonging to a religious group violates that person's right to practice religion freely. Thus, religion journalists can practice a faith without violating any ethical guidelines — in fact, being a member of a religious group can add insight into reporting. Some editors expect that you do not report on your own faith tradition, but in most cases, it's nearly impossible to avoid. Whether you're the religion reporter or the education reporter, if you belong to a faith you may have to do stories that involve that faith.

Some journalists may wonder: If you feed homeless people at a shelter once a month with your faith community, should you avoid writing about homeless people? If you're in a choir, should you avoid writing about debates over contemporary vs. traditional music? If you're a Sunday school teacher, should you avoid writing about religious education? The answer is no; it is perfectly acceptable to report on religious activities that you participate in, as long as you are not reporting on your own choir or Sunday school class.

There are, however, some things you should avoid:

- Reporting on your own congregation or place of worship in any way.
- Promoting your faith tradition above others or endorsing its beliefs in any way.
- Profiling people you know through your religious life.
- Reporting on issues for which you're involved in advocacy on behalf of your faith group. It's one thing to profile a homeless person if you feed homeless people; it's another if you are representing your church in lobbying the city council to build a new homeless shelter.
- Reporting on issues from which you cannot separate your religious beliefs. For example, if

your tradition teaches that homosexuality is a sin and you do not feel you can impartially write about debates on gay ordination, you should recuse yourself from coverage.

- Any leadership position that would compromise your ability to report impartially about a religious tradition.

## Ethics

It doesn't take long for religion journalists to discover that they will end up reporting on plenty of saints who are sinners. In other words, some religious people may do tremendous good for others even though they embezzle money or are drug addicts or sexual predators.

You're not expected to be a saint to report on religion, but it's best to be clear about your ethical standards. If your media organization has ethical guidelines, become familiar with them and follow them. The Society of Professional Journalists posts its Code of Ethics



### ETHICS ADVICE

Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

— SPJ Code of Ethics

([www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp)) online, and they all apply to reporting on religion. Many national press councils also have media codes of conduct you can refer to.

## Hate Speech

With great power comes great responsibility. Reporters have a responsibility to cover the facts, but we also have a responsibility to avoid unnecessarily stoking hatred and violence, especially when political tensions are high and sectarian conflict looms.

Hate speech masked as journalism is all too common in many parts of the world and does a disservice to readers and societies. Sometimes hate speech merely reinforces unpleasant stereotypes, other times it contributes to evils far worse. Look no further than Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, which played a supporting role in Rwanda's 1994 genocide through its hate-filled broadcasts.

**WHAT CONSTITUTES HATE SPEECH.** If only there were an easy answer. There's little consensus on how to define "hate speech" across the world. Broadly speaking, we can think of it as speech aimed at denigrating people based on some aspects of their individual or group identities.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights defines hate speech as any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. Some countries consider blasphemy a form of hate speech likely to incite violence while others protect blasphemous speech as a form of free expression. The same quote from a source or line in a story can be considered discriminatory, hateful, offensive, dangerous, libelous, blasphemous, treasonous, seditious or perfectly acceptable depending on where you're reporting. It's important to familiarize yourself with local laws and sensibilities. You won't always need to self-censor, but you should always be aware of your work's potential consequences.

Avoiding biased, misleading or otherwise inaccurate portrayals of people is just good reporting. Hateful slurs, stereotypes and dehumanizing language do not benefit the public and often exacerbate conflicts. As journalists, we have a duty to minimize harm. Sensational and gratuitous rhetoric have no place in a responsible and professional journalist's toolkit.

# About Religion News Associa-

*Organization, training, conferences and scholarships*

**R**ELIGION NEWS ASSOCIATION (RNA) is the world's only journalism association for people who write about religion in the news media. We offer training and tools to help journalists cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight.

**Mission:** To promote excellence in religion reporting in the news media.

**Vision:** RNA will achieve its mission by providing education and other resources for its members by raising awareness of the importance of religion coverage in the secular media.

For more information: [www.RNA.org](http://www.RNA.org)

## Religion News Foundation

RELIGION NEWS FOUNDATION (RNF) is the 501(c)(3) educational and charitable arm of the Religion News Association.

**Mission:** The mission of the Religion News Foundation is to strengthen and encourage religion reporting as a means of improving public understanding of religion.



**IN THE NEWS**

Religion news first appeared as a distinct section in U.S. daily newspapers in the mid-1880s. By 1910, most major papers had sections that included listings of religious events.

The primary means of doing this is by providing journalists in the secular media access to useful resources, examples of best practices via its wholly owned news service and opportunities for increased communication with one another.

**Vision:** RNF shall accomplish its mission by supporting and funding

the work of the RNA and through its own programs to promote excellence in religion reporting.

For more information: [www.Religion.News](http://www.Religion.News)

## Religion News Service

RELIGION NEWS SERVICE (RNS)

**Mission:** Religion News Service (RNS) is an independent, nonprofit and award-winning source of global news on religion, spirituality, culture and ethics, reported by a staff of professional journalists. It is wholly owned by

Religion News Foundation. Founded in 1934, RNS seeks to inform readers with objective reporting and insightful commentary, and is relied upon by secular and faith-based news organizations in a number of countries. RNS is affiliated with the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri.

**Vision:** to be the largest single source of news about religion, spirituality and ideas. RNS strives to inform, illuminate and inspire public discourse on matters relating to belief and convictions.

For more information: [www.ReligionNews.com](http://www.ReligionNews.com)

## Religion Link

ReligionLink is the only online news service created to help journalists write about religion. Produced by a team of award-winning journalists, ReligionLink is an invaluable tool, providing story ideas, national and regional interview sources and background on a wide range of issues related to religion, public policy and culture. Its extensive archives are searchable by topic and by date. Sign up to join more than 5,000 journalists and editors in receiving our free regular source guides by email.

For more information: [www.religionlink.com](http://www.religionlink.com)

## Training

RNF has created and delivered more than 100 customized training opportunities for journalists and me-

dia professionals around the world. These range from short lectures and panels in the U.K., Canada, Kosovo, Turkey, France, Austria, South Africa and Azerbaijan to week-long trainings and writing workshops in the U.S., Myanmar and beyond.

Our hands-on trainings equip journalists, bloggers, editors and publishers with the knowledge and skills they need to report on religions and belief systems with accuracy and insight. These workshops enhance our educational mission to improve media coverage of how religion affects cultures, conflicts and human rights around the world. Topics we tackle include religious demographics, faith practices, media ethics, religious freedom, media freedom, hate speech, local reporting constraints, media development challenges, and conflict-sensitive reporting.

## Annual conference

More than 250 people routinely attend Religion News Association's annual conference, which takes place in a different city each year. High-profile religious leaders and scholars address current topics. Members, who work for large and small newspaper, broadcast and web outlets, have a chance to network with each other about jobs, freelance opportunities and challenges on the beat. The conference also includes other training opportunities, such as workshops on writing or investigative reporting.

## Annual contests

Each year RNA awards nearly \$15,000 in several contest categories recognizing excellence in religion reporting, including Best Religion Story of the Year, Religion Reporter of the Year, Religion Writer of the Year and Best Radio or Television Story of the Year. Check the RNA.org website for annual deadlines.



### THE FIRST OF MANY

The first religion beat reporter for a national wire in the U.S. was George Cornell of The Associated Press, who was assigned to the beat full-time in 1951.

## Scholarships

To help RNA continue its good work, consider a tax-deductible contribution to our Foundation. Donate online at [www.RNA.org](http://www.RNA.org). Contact our staff for more information.

## About the author

Diane Connolly was the founding editor of ReligionLink ([www.ReligionLink.com](http://www.ReligionLink.com)), Religion News' free Internet news service on religion, public policy and culture. Before that, she was religion editor at The Dallas Morning News. During her tenure, the staff won seven awards for producing the best newspaper religion section in

the country. She held a master's of theological studies degree from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

## About the editor

Dr. Debra L. Mason is executive of the Religion News Foundation. Under her leadership, RNA became the world's preeminent trainer for journalists writing about religion. No other organization has more resources to help writers cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight. She is the author of numerous articles on religion reporting and co-edited the only collection of religion news reports: *Reporting on Religion*, with Judith Buddenbaum. She has a master's of theological studies from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, a master's in journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from Ohio University.

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