

# OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO REPORTING ON ISLAM AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN CONTEXT:

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

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*At the Social Science Research Council sponsored workshop, "Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context," held at Harvard University in November 2008, academics, Muslim community members, and journalists affirmed the importance of combating religious illiteracy in the U.S., particularly around Islam and Muslim communities. Journalists are increasingly being asked to report on Islam and Muslim communities in diverse contexts. This article is designed to assist them, and the general public, by focusing on a series of proven best practices that aide the process of reporting and understanding Muslim communities in context.*

# DEFINITION OF TERMS

## RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY

A lack of understanding about 1) the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions; 2) the diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions that emerge and evolve in relation to differing social/historical contexts; and 3) the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life in both contemporary and historical contexts.

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY

The ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Diane L. Moore, "Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach." World History Connected, 4(1), November, 2006, paragraph 2. <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuc.edu/4.1/moore.html>

# INTRODUCTION

The United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world yet it is arguably one of the most illiterate about religion.<sup>2</sup> Few citizens possess even a basic understanding of the beliefs and practices associated with the world's religious traditions, and many who profess faith in a religious worldview are ignorant of the diversity of expressions that exist within their own belief systems.

This should come as no surprise given that the main sources of information about religion in the U.S. are one's own faith tradition (if/when one is an adherent; some have none) and the media. Neither religious leaders nor media representatives should be held responsible for providing citizens with a comprehensive understanding of religious traditions and the complex roles that religion has played and continues to play in all facets of human existence. That responsibility resides in the schools, yet due to a host of factors too numerous to outline here, there are very few schools that provide students with the training they need for enhanced literacy about religion from a nonsectarian religious studies perspective.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of a robust and comprehensive treatment of religion in the schools, the public understanding of religion is profoundly shaped by 1) religious communities that promote particular theological views of their faiths, and 2) media professionals who primarily report on or comment about particular dramatic expressions of religion that are newsworthy precisely because they are extraordinary and/or represent conflict. As a result, for many citizens the category of religion itself is primarily equated with devotional expression that promotes particular truths (often over and against others) and religious belief is associated with extreme behaviors that are often negative.

To further complicate matters, this simplistic, partial, and skewed understanding of religion is accepted by many as sufficient. This lends credibility to anti-religious atheists on the one hand (who dismiss the legitimacy of religion altogether as naïve escapism) and to religious extremists from all faiths on the other hand (who justify violent acts of aggression in the name of religion). What gets lost is an understanding of religion as a complex social/historical phenomenon that is embedded in human social, cultural, and political life in profound ways.

I would go so far as to say that the discrepancy between the public understanding of religion and the truth about the place religion holds in public life is so great that it is akin to a widespread, commonsensical public belief that the world is flat with only a handful of opportunities for students in school to acquire the skills necessary to understand scientific claims to the contrary. Though true of religion in general, this situation is especially pronounced in relationship to the public understanding of Islam and Muslims.

<sup>2</sup> See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion about the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching about religion in K-12 public schools, see Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

# RELEVANCE FOR JOURNALISTS

This larger context of religious illiteracy in general and illiteracy about Islam in particular poses several challenges for journalists, including two overarching ones: First, like most citizens, few journalists have had training in Islam from a religious studies lens, or the opportunity to understand the diverse and complex representations of Islam in different cultural contexts. As a result, the perpetuation of problematic assumptions about Islam and Muslims may unwittingly take the form of false generalizations, a failure to recognize and represent the cultural differences within and between sects, and a bias toward expressions that align with “secular” values.<sup>4</sup>

A second overarching challenge for journalists is that their audiences interpret their stories through lenses shaped by the widespread illiteracy about religion outlined above. Anticipating how an audience will receive a piece of journalism is common fare for the profession, but religion poses special challenges that are often overlooked or unanticipated. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life helps to illustrate this point. In September of 2007 the Forum published a survey on public views about Islam and Mormonism, two traditions that have gained substantial national visibility in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Among the several findings outlined in the study, two are significant for our project: The first is that “public attitudes about Muslims and Islam have grown more negative in recent years.”<sup>6</sup> The second finding is that “the biggest influence on the public’s impressions of Muslims, particularly among those who express an unfavorable opinion of Muslims, is what people hear and read in the media.”

*About a third of the public (32%)—including nearly half of those who offer a negative opinion of Muslims (48%)—say what they have seen or read in the media has had the biggest influence on their views. Other factors, such as personal experience and education, are less influential, though they are cited far more often by those who have favorable impressions of Muslims than those who express negative views.<sup>7</sup>*

Though it is impossible to draw broad conclusions from these findings, they do support the assertion that in the absence of widespread education about religion, the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent set of articles by journalists and religious studies scholars on these and related challenges associated with reporting about Islam since 9/11, see the summer 2007 edition of the Nieman Reports entitled “Islam: Reporting in Context with Complexity.” <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports-item.aspx?id=100205>

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism,” September 25, 2007. <http://pewforum.org/surveys/religionviews07/>.

<sup>6</sup> In 2004, 48% of Americans held favorable opinions about Muslims and 32% reported holding unfavorable opinions. In 2009 those percentages shifted to 43% who hold favorable opinions of Muslims while 35% report holding negative views. See The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, pp. 4-5.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS TO ENHANCE REPORTING ABOUT ISLAM

Though I urge journalists to pursue more formal study to enhance their literacy about religion in general and Islam in particular, the following are some suggestions to help avoid perpetuating the most common errors. This section is divided into two parts: General Approaches and Specific Suggestions.

## GENERAL APPROACHES

### **UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DEVOTIONAL AND A RELIGIOUS STUDIES APPROACH TO RELIGION.**

A religious studies approach to religion recognizes the legitimacy of diverse expressions within a tradition and the profound role that religion plays in human cultural and political life. A devotional approach represents a particular theological understanding of the tradition and promotes certain values and beliefs consonant with that representation. From a religious studies perspective, the Taliban are as authentically Muslim as His Highness, the Aga Khan, even though their theological understandings of what devotion to the faith means are radically different and often opposing. For example, the previous Aga Khan was a world leader in promoting education for girls within and outside of Ismaili circles while the Taliban opposes education for girls altogether. From a devotional lens, members of the Taliban and Ismaili Muslims each privilege their own interpretations of Islam and directly or indirectly challenge the legitimacy of opposing views. Approaching traditions from a religious studies lens also helps illuminate the diversity of expressions and beliefs among the Taliban and among Ismailis in differing social and historical contexts.

### **EMPLOY A RELIGIOUS STUDIES APPROACH WHEN REPORTING ABOUT RELIGION.**

I suggest that journalists recognize there are diverse theological and cultural expressions *within*, as well as *between* faith traditions. By recognizing this basic tenant, journalists can avoid making normative claims. I recommend that journalists (like educators) represent different expressions of religion and religious traditions accurately and respectfully, but never exclusively.

## SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

### **INTERROGATE YOUR OWN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT RELIGION, ISLAM AND MUSLIMS.**

We all come to certain topics and groups with deep-seated and often unconscious assumptions. This is especially true about topics that are either very familiar or very foreign. One exercise that can be employed to make such unconscious assumptions more conscious is to write down (in rapid succession) the most immediate associations that come to mind in relationship to different words or phrases such as Islam, Muslim, etc. In giving only a few seconds for each phrase, immediate associations are revealed and may give some indication of deeply imbedded assumptions about a group, a religion, or any number of other categories.

### **AVOID GENERALIZATIONS AND CONTEXTUALIZE ALL ACCOUNTS.**

For example, some expressions of Islam in the United States have their roots in Muslim communities elsewhere in the world, whereas other practices have originated here. I encourage journalists to understand the historical and social context of the religious group or leader they are describing and to know how those groups are organized and funded. This simply means doing what journalists do best: Engage in advance research and ask plenty of questions about every angle imaginable, even if it is clear that it won't be possible to include all the details in the final article. Careful research will be evident in the way that journalists frame and define movements and events. Given continual time pressures and tight deadlines, journalists who engage in thorough initial research will be better equipped to understand the complexities involved in the next story that comes along.

### **DO NOT ASSUME THAT RELIGIOUS LEADERS OR PRACTITIONERS ARE “EXPERTS” IN THEIR OWN TRADITIONS.**

This is one of the most common errors that citizens (including journalists) make. Religious leaders and practitioners learn about their faith through a particular theological lens and will rarely be sympathetically exposed to alternative views in their faith context. For an expert opinion regarding the relationship of a particular theological expression in context with other expressions within the tradition, religious studies scholars can be a useful source to consult. Do your best to find a scholar who has researched the specific topic or group you are writing about to avoid making an inaccurate generalization. (See religious studies scholar references on both the Religious Newswriters Association website and Religion Source sponsored by The American Academy of Religion. Both are listed under “Suggested Resources”.)

**ASK THE “RELIGION QUESTION” OF ALL STORIES AND DO NOT ASSUME THAT RELIGION IS ONLY RELEVANT WHEN IT IS THE STORY’S FOCUS.**

Some of the best “religion stories” can be found on the political pages, the education or health sections, or even the sports or entertainment pages! For example, journalists may want to ask how religious assumptions in a given community shape or impact debates about school curricula, health care concerns, fashion trends, and/or immigration policy.

**CONVERSELY, WHEN COVERING STORIES ABOUT RELIGION, BE SURE TO EXPLORE HOW OTHER SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS ARE RELEVANT.**

Religion is a complex topic and is always interlinked with other dimensions that are crucial to understanding it. For example, the controversies regarding the headscarf ban in Turkey represent the intersection of religious, political, cultural, and economic issues that are central to understanding these phenomena.

**WRITE ABOUT STORIES IN A WAY THAT HIGHLIGHTS CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AND WITHIN DIFFERENT SECTS OR COMMUNITIES.**

This can be done by writing feature stories aimed at challenging commonly held stereotypes (e.g. that Islam is inherently oppressive against women) or by writing news stories that qualify certain actions or events as particular vs. universal expressions of the faith (e.g., when covering suicide bombers who act in the name of Allah, also include the voices of Muslims in the same sect or region who abhor such actions).

**ENHANCE YOUR OWN LITERACY ABOUT RELIGION IN GENERAL AND ISLAM IN PARTICULAR.**

Minimally, I recommend reading one or more selections from the list of suggested texts and articles below. Ideally, I encourage journalists to take courses in religious studies at a local college or university. No course will provide a comprehensive introduction to religion or Islam, but a good course will provide an understanding of the complexity of religion and tools for further research. When it comes to religion, there is always more to learn. The best journalists, like the best teachers, have an insatiable appetite for knowledge and are always educating themselves (in formal and informal ways).

# CONCLUSION

Journalists are in an untenable position when it comes to reporting about religion. Like most citizens, few journalists have the background in religious studies necessary to tackle all of the complexities of religion, yet journalists are often held responsible for reporting on the myriad of contemporary dimensions of religion in public life in an accurate, respectful, and contextualized manner. This is a formidable challenge, but journalists who continually improve their own literacy about religion can make substantial contributions to enhancing overall religious literacy among citizens, due to the impact that the media has on the public understanding of this misunderstood dimension of human life.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### ON REPORTING ABOUT ISLAM

#### **NIEMAN REPORTS, SUMMER 2007: “ISLAM: REPORTING IN CONTEXT AND WITH COMPLEXITY”**

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100205>

An excellent collection of articles by journalists and religious studies scholars on how to report about Islam responsibly. Published by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.

### ON REPORTING ABOUT RELIGION GENERALLY

#### **RELIGION NEWSWRITERS ASSOCIATION**

<http://www.rna.org/>

An association founded by journalists to help journalists “cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight.” The resources listed below sometimes reproduce the problematic assumptions outlined in this article (such as making generalizations about religion and religious traditions) but they also provide helpful information.



*Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism's Best Beat*

<http://www.rnasecure.org/guide/welcome.html>

A useful guide by journalists for basic reporting about religion.

*Reporting on Religion 2: A Stylebook on Journalism's Best Beat*

<http://www.religionstylebook.org/>

A companion resource to the Primer.

**RELIGIONLINK.COM**

<http://www.religionlink.com/>

Frequently updated religion story ideas and source lists and extensive database of news ideas and resources.

**RELIGION SOURCE: A JOURNALIST'S SHORTCUT TO 5,000 SCHOLARS**

<http://www.religionsource.org/Contents/JournalistHome.aspx>

A free resource for journalists provided by the American Academy of Religion for referrals to scholars with specific expertise in a variety of news related areas. "Our more than 1,000 expertise categories include religion and politics, social issues, education, popular culture, ethics and more. We include scholars regardless of whether they're AAR members. Most, but not all, live or work in North America." Journalists need to register for access to a database of contact information organized by topic and geographical location.

## **NEWS STORIES ABOUT RELIGION**

**RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY NEWS**

<http://pluralism.org/news/index.php>

An extensive database of national and international news stories about religion that is searchable by topic, region, and/or tradition provided by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University.

## BOOKS ABOUT ISLAM

### INTRODUCTION

*Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*

by Carl Ernst (University of North Carolina Press, 2004)

An excellent resource that introduces readers to the diversity of Islam through contemporary issues and examples.

### PARTICULAR REGIONAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

*Islam outside the Arab World*

edited by David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg (Routledge, 1999)

A somewhat uneven but useful collection of essays focusing on Islam in differing regions of the world.

*Islam in America*

by Jane I. Smith (Columbia, 2010)

An updated version of this excellent introduction to the diversity of Muslim communities here in the U.S.

### THE QUR'AN

*Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*

2nd Edition by Michael Sells (White Cloud Press, 2007)

One of the best introductions to the Qur'an currently available. Includes an excellent introduction placing the Qur'an in historical context, a translation of early surahs with commentary, and a CD of diverse recitations.

### REFERENCE

*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*

Four volumes, edited by John Esposito (Oxford, 2001)