

[When Religion Is the Focus](#)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS

When Religion Is the Focus

Religious organizations need to understand how to deal with the media

On September 11-15, 2006, Montreal was host to World's Religions After September 11: A Global Congress, organized by Dr. Arvind Sharma under the auspices of McGill University. The following article is adapted from the plenary session address, "Religion and Media, " given by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami.

The events of 9/11, the subsequent terrorist attacks and the military actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East have received extensive media coverage. The need to accurately report on the religious components of these events has challenged and highlighted the media's limitations of expertise and time, and its known institutional peculiarities.

In this article, media refers to journalistic reporting via newspapers, magazines, television and the Internet. It does not include fictional presentations, such as art, movies, music and the stage even though these, too, can strongly influence public opinion.

The organizer of this Congress, Professor Arvind Sharma, hopes to show how "the media might use its persuasive power to promote harmony among religions and bridge the secular/religious divide." The goal is to promote mutual understanding, appreciation and harmony, not only among religions but also between the religious and nonreligious elements of society.

The media will not be willing or able to meet this challenge without help. Religious

groups must learn to work with the media in specific ways understanding and working around its limitations, recognizing the many opportunities to educate and favorably impact the media locally and globally, and using the most effective means to do so.

What the media considers "news"

It's an obvious but crucial point that media such as newspapers, magazines and television networks are businesses. With the exception of public broadcasting and government-controlled outlets, they must turn a profit in order to survive. Their product, "news," comprises information and entertainment. Every day, journalists around the world ponder whether a particular event or issue is "news" according to established criteria, such as the following seven-point system:

- 1) Effect: how many people were, are or will be affected and to what extent?
Examples: the 2004 tsunami and the wars in Iraq and Lebanon have affected tens of millions of people. Religious events fitting this criterion would include a split in the Anglican church or a major change in Catholic doctrine, as they would affect large numbers of people. In general, war, crime, violence of any sort, accidents, natural disasters are always considered "news," because they have a dramatic, jarring impact.

- 2) Timeliness: did the event occur recently? As information becomes older, it is less newsworthy. For example, a major accident snarling traffic downtown for hours is news the day it happens, but not the next morning. Likewise, an annual religious holiday is news when it happens, but not at other times of the year.

- 3) Revelation: does the story involve significant new information? Examples: a new cure for a disease, an archeological discovery, medical breakthrough or--a religious example--the discovery of the Gospel of Judas.

- 4) Proximity: was the event nearby? For example, the local weather is always considered newsworthy.

5) Oddity: was the event highly unusual? An adage in journalism says, " 'Dog bites man' is not news, but 'Man bites dog' is." Recently in Ottawa a fleeing suspect actually did bite a police dog, generating reports as far away as South Africa and Malaysia. Unfortunately, articles about religious events are often written from the "oddity " perspective. Every year the wire services run photos of bloodied Shi'ite Muslims flaying themselves to mark the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. This practice is treated as a curiosity; the motivation is rarely explained. Likewise, when Christian ministers handle poisonous snakes--as a testament of their faith--the media run photos but ignore the fact that the minister is rarely bitten.

6) Entertainment: would it make for a fun or engaging story? Cute stories about children and animals, sports stories and some religious activities qualify as news under this criterion, such as a traditional wedding, festival or coming-of-age event that is colorful and interesting to people of all faiths.

7) Celebrity: was anyone famous involved? Some publications operate within this single category, deeming it "news " to run a photo of a famous movie star walking down the street. The celebrity effect is cumulative, as seen in the frequent reports and photos of the Dalai Lama with actor Richard Gere.

When an event falls in multiple categories, "news " value increases. Example: a recent photo of the Toronto Film Festival, a culturally significant event, showed a charming group of children surrounding a celebrity--Lassie, the movie-star dog.

But is it important?

Unfortunately, this system of evaluating news doesn't necessarily identify many truly important issues and events, and may actually marginalize them. In practice, the media tends to focus most strongly on conflict, and overlook issues and events that are critical but not tragic, sensational or engrossing. Professor Beverly Keever of the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii observes, "There is an inverse relationship to what is considered news and what is important." She gives the example of the breakdown of the foster child care system in Hawaii, which will ultimately have a disastrous societal impact but goes unreported. Global warming gets more press these days than it did 20 years ago--largely because Al Gore's documentary made it "celebrity news "--but still precious little considering its

importance to the future of our planet.

Important religious issues, even those vital to all major faiths, rarely qualify as news. How often does one see a story on declining religiosity among youth or on the decline in the number of youth entering the clergy--both issues in all religions? What, in the long run, is the human consequence of an unreligious generation, compared to, say, the results of a province's next elections, which could be but a minor blip in political history?

The journalist's world

Experienced reporters are excellent writers and information gatherers. They are capable of a quick study of complex issues and expert at detecting deception and trickery. However, they almost always work under the pressure of deadlines that allow only limited time for research. They are not given weeks or months to investigate their topic. A report on an event today must typically be filed tonight and published in the morning, or even in today's evening news. They can only include in their report the information they can gather in the short time they have.

The reporter's work often reveals to him the dark side of life: crime, drugs, fraud and conflict. After years of seeing the worst mankind has to offer, he may become jaded and cynical, having encountered too many people willing to say anything to get in the news, been deceived by too many politicians or businessmen with hidden agendas, and seen more than his share of man's inhumanity to man.

Because of the analytical, dispassionate nature of their trade, journalists are generally not sympathetic toward religion. "We don't talk about religion in the newsroom. We consider religion just another special interest group," a prominent journalist confided. Another said bluntly, "We will report on your activity, but we don't care about your core beliefs." Other reporters are respectful toward religion but acknowledge that such cynicism is common in their field. That fact is unlikely to change, and should be taken into account in any attempt to obtain coverage for religious news.

Just because reporters are in a hurry doesn't mean they are not prepared to observe minute details in their reports. The Associated Press, the largest news gathering organization in the world, publishes a Stylebook, which is a mini-encyclopedia for reporters. Its entries range from correctly spelling problem words, to lists of official acronyms, to short descriptions of major religious denominations.

For example, the Stylebook explains that it is the "Canada goose, not Canadian goose." Similarly, any reporter can tell you that Jeep should be capitalized, as should Jacuzzi and Rollerblades, because they are all trademarks. Reporters are instructed to use "letter carrier " instead of "mailman " because women hold the job, and that there is no apostrophe in "Pikes Peak."

The Stylebook contains numerous passages on religion. Entries on Christian sects are multiple and comprehensive. In contrast, Islam is covered in one page. Hinduism and Buddhism are each dismissed in a single column. Sikhism and Jainism are not covered at all. The information on Hinduism is simplistic and inaccurate, stating, for example, that it has "no formal clergy " (ignoring its legions of priestly and monastic lineages), and that one million Hindus live in the US (when the correct number is 2.2 million). Every English-speaking reporter in the world has the Stylebook on his desk. And every religious organization should buy a copy to learn what reporters follow as an authoritative source and identify any misconceptions that may need to be countered. The lesson to learn from the style book is that reporters are quite capable of dealing with minute details of a subject. We are not asking too much that they learn and understand a basic and correct outline of the history, theology and current manifestation of any religion or religious movement which enters their sphere of reporting.

Two forms of interacting with the press

There are two basic forms of interaction between religious groups and the media, proactive interaction and reactive interaction. In proactive interaction, religious groups or persons approach the press with the intent of creating a news item, such as an article on their activities. In reactive interaction, the press seek out religious groups or individuals after a news event has happened--a terrorist attack by or against its members, for example. In a second form of reactive interaction, religious groups' approach the media to protest false or otherwise objectionable coverage of issues related to their faith.

Proactive interaction

In proactive interaction, religious groups take the time and make the effort to use the media to educate the community about their faith. There are various means to bring religion into the media in benign circumstances, that is, when not faced with a crisis or mishap. Environmentalists have a saying that to save the planet we must "think globally and act locally." Applying this adage, religious leaders can evaluate the global situation as it relates to religion and determine what things can be done at the local level to bring about improvement.

The first step in proactive interaction is getting to personally know the local media. The goal is not necessarily to make the front page or prime-time TV report. Rather, it is to establish a consistent, low-key presence through news items, photo opportunities, educational features, opinion pieces and letters to the editor. In North America, most newspapers and magazines have an editor responsible for religious reporting. TV stations may have a reporter assigned part time to matters of faith. Proactive religious leaders make it a point to meet in person and get to know their local religion editors and make it known they are readily available to be interviewed or consulted when the need arises. They also make themselves accessible to reporters who are not religion editors but whose stories occasionally touch on religious matters. A reporter who regards you as a "good source"--reliable, accessible, able to provide well-worded direct quotes and concise, accurate background information--is apt to call you when a story breaks and his deadline looms.

Religion editors want to reflect their community's religious diversity in their publication, and religious leaders can be of great assistance to them. The religion editor at the Honolulu Advertiser newspaper told Hinduism Today that most of the material she receives is from Christian evangelicals. She, like other religion editors, must seek out other religious groups and develop stories on her own. The media conglomerate Gannett Corporation, of which the Advertiser is a part, actually grades its publications on the number of different ethnic and religious voices that they carry.

One fruitful area of news, she explained, are the "intersecting circles " between religious communities areas of concern, activity or ceremony that they have in common. For example, one community's concern for passing on their religious heritage to the next generation makes a good story to a religion editor, because it

will be of interest to all communities. Celebrations and rites common to all faiths, such as marriage or coming of age, likewise make interesting stories and serve to educate readers about mankind's varied traditions. Background information on one's faith can be provided to the editor to weave into such stories. An article on a colorful Sikh wedding, for instance, might include insights into the Sikh view of marriage and family.

To facilitate both local and wider coverage, proactive religious groups develop attractive websites that explain the basics of the faith in simple terms. Such sites include a section specifically to fill the needs of journalists, with well-written press releases on recent events, high-resolution photos and contact information. Naturally, offering contact information requires having someone ready to respond promptly to inquiries. Well-funded groups may hire a public relations firm to manage their website, issue press releases and interact with the media.

The Roman Catholic church sets a good example in this area (photo, right). When a reporter googles "Vatican, " the first link is www.vatican.va an immense site which includes a specific page for press contacts; whereas if he googles "Islam, " he finds a portal site, <http://www.islam.com/>, with little original content and no press contact.

Religious communities have many opportunities to invoke favorable news coverage. One that works well for Hinduism Today is an open house held every two years, inviting friends on the island, local clergy, politicians and the media. There is a tour, entertainment, food and small talk, all of which allows those of other religions, or no religion, to better understand what our organization is doing.

Weddings, especially if colorful, are apt to receive good coverage on the religion page or the society page. Festivals are another excellent opportunity. Churches, mosques and temples can work personally with local media people to schedule annual coverage of their main festivals and holy days.

Most communities have interfaith organizations. While participation rarely generates media coverage, it does serve as a forum in which to interact, establish rapport and share information with leaders of other faith backgrounds. Such gatherings build a foundation of respect and tolerance which spreads to each member's constituents, influencing attitudes and actions, subtly but inevitably

influencing how religion is covered in the media.

A simple, if not inexpensive, outreach method is to buy paid advertising space in newspapers, magazines and on television. One group made a splash with billboard space calling for the ordination of women as priests in the Catholic Church. Less controversially, ads can invite the community to a special function, explain an upcoming religious holiday or offer a heartfelt, sympathetic response to a tragic event.

Favorable media coverage and community appreciation can be earned through social service activities, such as feeding the poor, holding medical camps and providing disaster relief. For example, the Sikh religion has a 500-year-old tradition of free feeding, the langar, which they have begun putting into action during disasters in the US. Those in India are familiar with the tradition and have learned to expect the much welcomed langars when disaster strikes an area, such as the tsunami-devastated shores of South India in 2004. But this is something unusual to Westerners--a noble, charitable tradition that made the news during massive relief efforts in New Orleans in the wake of the Katrina hurricane.

Not reaching out to serve the broader community can invoke mistrust and animosity. A member of one major US Hindu temple that has no public-service programs told Hinduism Today they are regarded as a "cult " by the local community. Conversely, temples that support the food bank and local charities and interact with the broader community are generally well regarded.

One natural way for Hindu groups to become known as a positive and valuable force in the community is to institute programs that foster tolerance. A good model is "Teaching Tolerance, " a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center in the US. One of its activities is to arrange for children to meet children of other religions. Instituting such programs is an effective way of becoming known in the community.

Television programs are obviously the most wide-reaching venue. Moderate Muslims came into world view on a recent panel discussion program aired by the Public Broadcasting System program to debate issues about Islam.

Clearly, it takes effort and sophistication for religious groups to interact with the media to their benefit. It requires responding to vital events and developing ways to garner interest. Successful pro-active groups have well-trained speakers on call to speak on short notice to the media and at community events, such as forums organized by civic leaders and elementary school presentations. It goes without saying that such spokespersons must speak from the heart and be educated in their faith.

Some religions have national or international groups which, among other activities, monitor and respond to media coverage as watchdog or advocacy groups. B'nai B'rith, the National Council of Churches and the Hindu American Foundation respond aggressively to events that involve their faith and also to the manner in which it is treated in the media.

An organization can also create its own media agency to carry news and teachings relevant to its religion or denomination. One example is Hinduism Today and its daily e-mail news summary service, Hindu Press International. But, being your own press is different than creating a watchdog or advocacy group. To be effective, it must be conducted in a thoroughly professional manner, on a par with mainstream publications, such as Newsweek and Time magazine. The reporting must be consistently accurate and unbiased, so that other media groups come to trust and rely on it.

Reactive interaction

The day a religion or religious group is badly portrayed in the press is not the best day to develop a working relationship with the media. An existing, well-developed relationship is a preferred starting point. Yet, events that attract wide attention require an immediate response, on both the global and local levels.

Organizational structure is an key factor. The unified structure of the Catholic church enables it to respond in a one voice, whereas the variegated nature of most religions can make it difficult for majority opinions to be heard.

Occasionally a news story will be biased, unfair or demeaning to a religious community. On October 4, 2003 (in sharp contrast to their exemplary record of inclusiveness and respect in reporting on minority religions), the Toronto Star upset the Hindu community with their coverage of the annual Durga festival in India, a multi-day celebration involving hundreds of millions of Hindus. The one and only photo included in this article to represent one of Hinduism's largest festivals was of an unclad statue of the Goddess being prepared for the procession. Hindus found this insulting, as the provocative image created a misleading impression of the sacred festival and presented Hinduism in a bizarre manner.

The events that followed were typical of protests against the media. Hindus voiced their objections to the Star. Initial complaints, including 1,000 e-mail "letters to the editor, " were ignored. Demonstrations in front of their office, coupled with contact from concerned Hindu community leaders, finally got their attention. Meeting with the editors, Hindu leaders explained that although the photo itself simply showed part of the normal process of festival preparation, its use as the only image depicting the festival was obviously calculated to create a bizarre impression and evoke a laughing or snickering response from non-Hindus.

The paper responded with a half-hearted apology on October 11 that concluded with the statement, "When asked, several Hindus said the photo didn't offend them." The Star did not identify the "several Hindus " as community leaders, temple priests, scholars of Hindu iconography or even devout Hindus, but still used their anonymous opinions to justify the photo. Hindus rejected the apology and continued to protest. The Star's editors ultimately concluded that Hindus were genuinely offended by the photo and issued a proper apology. In the course of doing so, they also acknowledged to community leaders that the Star already had a policy in place to present religious images in a "dignified " manner. They admitted they had failed to abide by their own rules.

Methods of protesting coverage

If you call a newspaper or magazine to complain about an article, the most common response will be, "Write a letter to the editor." This is a simple way for the publication to dispatch the concern. While letters to the editor are useful in responding to other letters to the editor, some editorial pieces and to factual errors in reports, they have little effect on a publication's policies or attitudes. Letters can easily be ignored.

It is common for religious groups to respond to injustice or insult by rallying their members to deluge the offending press and various politicians with letters of complaint and blogs on the Internet. Unless done in a sensitive, nonabusive manner by a responsible group, this tactic can easily backfire by creating further hostility. Most campaigns we've seen launched online by Hindus degenerate into name calling and threats that do more harm than good.

A thoughtful, polite approach is much more productive than a brash assault with condemning, accusatory diatribes. For example, the Muslim community in Phoenix, Arizona, arranged a face-to-face meeting with the editors of the local newspaper. They said, "We don't see our community in your newspaper." This polite but strong objection resulted in a permanent shift: one reporter was assigned part-time to cover news and events in the Muslim community, which numbers over 70,000.

The 2006 case of cartoons insulting Prophet Mohammed is instructive as a public campaign that got out of hand. Perhaps most notable was the hypocrisy of the Western press in defending the cartoons as an expression of free speech. Muslims rightly pointed out that in several European countries, it is against the law to publish anti-Semitic cartoons. Likewise, it is against the policy of every major Western publication to publish anti-Semitic or racist cartoons. The Western media got the message that it should extend this policy to protect Muslim sensibilities as well. Whether this was best accomplished by deadly riots and death fatwas against the cartoonists is another question. Making enemies of the press is never a good strategy.

Community leaders in Denmark could have tried to solve the issue locally, before others became involved who saw an opportunity to create civil unrest. A group from any religion could have taken the lead. We were told that the Muslim community had, in fact, approached Denmark's king, but were rebuffed. Had the papers and cartoonists been convinced to apologize promptly, it is unlikely the situation would have escalated into an international scandal in which lives were lost.

Conclusion

Dr. Sharma asked how the "media might use its persuasive power to promote harmony among religions and bridge the secular/religious divide." The responsibility

to make this happen belongs with religious groups. Each group needs to work to improve its relationship with the media. They should learn how the media thinks and operates. The media has its institutional peculiarities, some of which work against religion. Each group should be proactive, opening more channels to those who report the news, understand their opportunities and restrictions and make it easy for the media to accurately and sympathetically report on their religious events. They need to be prepared and organized to respond quickly in a positive way when crisis situations occur.

One way to bridge the secular/religious divide is to share our lives with one another, which can be accomplished, in part, by stories in the media. People can gradually learn that we all have many experiences, concerns and challenges in common. We all seek to live life for a higher purpose, even if we don't conceive of that purpose in terms of God. Through programs such as Teaching Tolerance, our children can meet children of other races, religions and ethnicities and learn of their commonalities. In these and other ways we can dispel fears and stereotypes and develop an honest respect for one another and for the religious--or nonreligious--path that each of us is following through life.

Reporters Need a More Positive Outlook

Dr. Karan Singh, son of the last Maharaja of Kashmir, is a prominent politician and a scholar of religion. He has been a member of India's parliament and served as India's ambassador to the United States. He has represented Hinduism at international conferences and is a major figure in the interfaith movement. He addressed the issue of how the media selects news:

"It is the big responsibility of the media to report factually and accurately on what has happened. At the same time, the media should throw its weight in favor of communal harmony. Presently the media hardly takes note of the interfaith movement. For example, there was a huge gathering for the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999. There was not a word in the press about it. Twenty years ago, the environmental movement was similarly ignored or on the periphery of media coverage. Now it has moved to the center. The same needs to happen with the interfaith movement."

He also remarked with regard to the terrorist attacks in the UK: "A million Muslims have lived peacefully in England for 30 to 40 years, now the whole community is under suspicion. This is a tragedy, but brought on by the way these jihadis have acted, which has demonized Islam. The press should report on the softer aspects of Islam. The teachings of Sufism, for example, should be brought to the fore, whereas now Wahhabi Islam has more exposure." "In general, he concluded, "religions need to project more universal principles. Hinduism has a strong tradition of pluralism."

Understanding India's Media

Madhu Kishwar of Delhi, India, is the editor of Manushi magazine. She is one of India's leading activists for women's rights and social justice for disadvantaged communities. Her comments concern the peculiar situation of the media in India:

"India is one country in the world where the majority community, the Hindus, complains that they are not being given a sympathetic coverage by the press as against the minority communities, Islam and Christianity, which get a better treatment by the press. Our mainstream national press is greatly influenced by the leftists who, in turn, are influenced by the colonial critique of Hinduism. As well, they are influenced by Karl Marx, who portrayed Hinduism as a stagnant civilization which is a cesspool of dehumanizing practices. So it is the Marxist description and that of the British missionaries through which most of the scholars and media see Hinduism. Our educated elite is poorly informed about our own religion and culture. Experts on Hinduism are in short supply. The best that exist have inadequate knowledge and are biased as well. The whole information structure is of a shoddy quality."