

Global Journalism Initiative Builds Partnership to Strengthen Religion Reporting



For Diane Winston, a nationally recognized scholar on the role of religion in media, it's impossible to ignore the many ways religion influences national and global affairs.



■ A priest blesses the faithful at Holyrood Episcopal Church, a multi-lingual congregation in New York City that serves both the hearing and deaf in English and Spanish services (above). ■ Police guard a shrine in Shringar, India, while Kashmiri Muslims pray on the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's birth (left).

"Religion looms large in almost every aspect of society, particularly in the United States," says Winston, who holds the Knight Chair in Media and Religion at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. "The intersection of religion and politics, for example, has been very clear. But that's not the only place where religion is front and center."



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Winston cites a series of national and global news events with religious implications, including the treatment of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel, refugee crises in Europe and in Latin America, and the struggles among Muslims in the Middle East. Even views about climate change policy can be influenced by a person’s religious convictions about how people care for the Earth, she says.

That lens—a clear view of how religion plays a role in daily news events—is shared by many journalists trained to cover religion as a beat, according to Bob Smietana, editor-in-chief of Religion News Service (RNS), an independent nonprofit news organization that has been dedicated to religion news coverage for more than 80 years.

“Being a religion reporter is like being an interpreter. If someone translates a document for you word for word from English to Spanish, for example, you would get the gist of the document. But you may not understand what it means fully,” Smietana says. “Religion reporters know the context, the history and the meaning of the language that people of faith speak. We work to help the public understand how religion matters when we cover the events unfolding each day.”

Yet, during the last two decades, economic forces have severely disrupted U.S. news organizations. News operations once significantly funded by paid advertising now must reckon with digital communications and new ways of measuring what kinds of content interests audiences. According to a Pew Research Center report issued in 2019, newsroom employment in the U.S. dropped by 25 percent between 2008 and 2019—a loss of about 28,000 jobs.

“News organizations have had to adapt to digital forms of storytelling, where use of social media and webpage clicks have pushed for up-to-the-minute coverage of a story,” Smietana says. “Often, religion reporting, which requires explanation and context and the expertise of a journalist who understands religion, doesn’t lend itself to shorter, clickable content. It works for a political horse race or for breaking news but not for religion reporting.”

As a result, news media companies have cut back on religion content. Fewer reporters are dedicated to covering religion in 2019 than even a decade earlier, says Winston, who calls the decline in coverage alarming. “In a time when religion looms large we have seen the ranks of religion journalists shrink,” she says. “But to be well-informed in 2020, you need to know more than just the surface of these issues. We don’t dare ignore it.”

reporter in religion; two visual journalists; and a reporter based in Cairo who is covering Islam around the world. At RNS, which has benefited from Endowment grants for religion reporting since 2000, the Global Religion Journalism Initiative grant is supporting the work of the managing editor, a national reporter and a reporter based in Rome who covers the Vatican. At The Conversation US, the grant is helping to fund two religion editors who are strengthening the organization’s coverage of religion and ethics, which began with support from a \$1.3 million 2016 Endowment grant.

Even though the initiative is a pilot, early outcomes have been positive. In the first six months, the three organizations published more than 150 religion stories in addition to their regular output. The stories ranged from breaking news at the Vatican and in the Middle East to a feature about mental health after the suicide of prominent pastor Jarrid Wilson to an explanation of how Sikhs practice faith in the United States. Many of the stories are reaching new readers through the combined efforts of the publications.

“This is the right time for this initiative,” says Sally Stapleton, one of the new AP editors, who recalls a time when most newspapers were staffed with religion reporters. “Even as digital communication has created a more interconnected society, we’re less educated about what’s going on with beliefs and ethics worldwide at a time that it matters the most. In many ways we feel more fractured.”

Stapleton suggests one cause of that division is increasingly aggressive commentary that can dominate social media. The Global Religion Journalism Initiative is dedicated to balanced, fair and accurate reporting—about religion in the news and about people of faith—focused on increasing the public’s understanding of religion.



■ Hasidic Jewish leaders gather during the International Conference of Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries in New York (opposite). ■ A Buddhist man lights an oil lamp and prays at a temple on the outskirts of Colombo, Sri Lanka (left). A young worshipper attends a prayer service in Santa Rosa, Brazil, a remote village in the Amazon Rainforest (below).

Grant seeks to significantly expand religion reporting

Support to increase the volume, quality and reach of religion reporting is at the heart of a \$4.9 million Endowment grant to develop the Global Religion Journalism Initiative, a collaboration among The Associated Press (AP), RNS, and a third news partner, The Conversation US, which provides explanatory journalism from academic authors. The grant was awarded to the Religion News Foundation (RNF) that supports RNS, to help fund the costs for the 18-month startup phase, including the hiring of religion reporters, editors and other staff members.

Through the initiative, The AP created a global religion editor position to lead a new team of eight journalists who report on faith and its influence throughout the world. The grant helped The AP also hire a religion news editor; a religion and politics reporter; a journalist focusing on youth and faith; an investigative



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Collaboration is central to strengthening that approach, so editors from the three publications gather regularly to discuss coverage plans and how each organization’s journalism can contribute. Coverage produced in 2019 featured such overarching themes as religious organizations that face institutional change, the role of religion in conflicts around the world, and the religious and spiritual experiences of ordinary people.

Success is in the work

Reflecting on 2019, leadership at both The AP and RNS highlighted a multimedia story about worship among people who are deaf. It’s an example of how cooperation can bring success. The story focused on Holyrood Episcopal Church-Iglesia Santa Cruz in New York City. RNS reporter Luis Andreas Henao told the story about parishioners who believe, as he wrote, “that what might be considered a limitation has strengthened their sense of community and expanded their understanding of God and the sacred gift of silence in a noisy world.”

“We mentioned it to The AP, and the editors there were excited to capture video for the project,” Smietana recalls. Then, editors at The Conversation US connected with the story. One of their contributors, Jana Bennett, a professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton, authored a personal essay about her research into how people with hearing loss engage their faith through unique forms of worship and prayer. The project was distributed to several thousand of The AP’s members and customers worldwide.

As part of the initiative, the three partners are tracking religion stories produced through the collaboration and the reach of those stories across their national and international networks. And they continue to experiment with new approaches for their collaboration while still in this pilot phase. Stapleton says she is hopeful that the collaborative approach will increase the value of religion content to news organizations.

It’s already happening among journalists at AP bureaus around the world. They’re embracing the increased emphasis in religion coverage by adding their own stories to the mix and reaching out to new colleagues with expertise in religion to enhance those stories. Inspired by the initiative’s quality at The AP, journalists in Paris stepped up with a Christmas feature in 2019 about the venerable 855-year-old Cathedral de Notre Dame, which had been nearly destroyed by fire earlier in the year. “This is the first time since the French Revolution, that there will be no midnight Mass (at Notre Dame),” the cathedral’s rector told the AP reporter.

Wilson says the impact of the Global Religion Journalism Initiative has the potential to be far-reaching, especially in addressing divisions across the United States. “People don’t typically get access to objective, evidence-based, well-sourced content about religion,” he says. “Often it is very opinionated. A lot of the media generated is playing to segmented audiences, giving people the information they think they want.”

All of us are “attempting to bring really good content to the public that brings hope and objectivity,” Wilson says. “It allows people to see things from different perspectives. We will distribute the same news to the left, right, red, blue, urban and rural. They all will have access to the same objective journalism.”

That’s what makes the Global Religion Journalism Initiative groundbreaking, Wilson adds. “At the end of the day, the public is now getting access to really well-written and fact-based information,” he says. “By funding really good journalism, Lilly Endowment is helping to democratize knowledge. The initiative is showing what’s possible.”

■ A Buddhist family (opposite) approaches a temple on the outskirts of Kandy, Sri Lanka, where religious tensions have emerged amid political change. ■ Students gather early to attend former U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga. (below).

Leveraging relationships to expand reach

For The Conversation US, the new religion reporting collaboration is an opportunity to expand the reach of its work: promoting explanatory journalism produced by academic authors from colleges and universities across the United States.

The Conversation began in Australia in 2011. It launched in the U.S. in 2014, focusing on arts and culture, government and politics, environment and energy, education, science and technology, business and economics, and health, adding religion and ethics content two years later.

In 2019, religion content from The Conversation US was republished in media outlets as varied as Fox News, MSNBC, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, CNN, and *The Washington Post*, according to Bruce Wilson, chief innovation and development officer for The Conversation US.

