

Religion news coverage is suffering, says journalism professor: "The collapse of an institution"

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The 21st-century world cannot be understood without an understanding of religion, says religion journalist-turned-professor Gustav Niebuhr.

"It's a terrible irony that religion is so prominent in the world and yet so absent from the news," Niebuhr told a May gathering in Indianapolis of the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association.

An associate professor at Syracuse University teaching both religion and journalism, Niebuhr said that since his days as national religion reporter at the *New York Times* (1994-2001), newspapers have been cutting back on news about religion and the civil society with which it intersects.

"The coverage of religion news is suffering," said Niebuhr. He warned that the recent closures of newspapers such as the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* and Colorado's *Rocky Mountain News* and the near-closure of the *Boston Globe* were a pointer to "the collapse of an institution."

Niebuhr said journalists in the ACP and the EPA, the so-called religious media, carry a larger burden to tell the stories of Christians today. "I cannot think of a time when your work is more important. . . . You are going to challenge the dark times."

While working for the secular media, Niebuhr said, he often needed to turn to the specialized religion news outlets for his insights. "Your words mattered to me and they continue to matter, especially in the present climate.

"Economically these are exceptionally bleak times for the institution of newspapers," lamented Niebuhr. He described the *Los Angeles Times*, once known for its strength in the coverage of religion, as a nationally known newspaper that is a shell of its old self and suffering the fate of other publications.

“The coverage of religion in print journalism beats is suffering in this recession,” noted Niebuhr, whose 16-year newspaper career included stints at the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. -*Ecumenical News International*