

Expert advice: Covering religion

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

Religiously ignorant journalists.” That was the headline that accurately captured the flat-out judgment of an unhappy essayist in *Books & Culture* (January-February). Sociologist Christian Smith, who holds an endowed chair at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, lit into unnamed journalists who have sought his expertise but who invariably botch words like “evangelical” and display their biases in their clueless questions.

Surely, I thought, Smith is writing about general-assignment reporters who have the unenviable task of tackling any subject when asked, or of filling in for beat reporters. These generalists, whose numbers are legion, must put pride aside and ask dumb things, perhaps poorly articulated, of experts in medicine, science, law, architecture and so on—testing their patience.

No. After saying there were a few exceptions such as *Newsweek*’s Ken Woodward, Smith said that “most ‘religion journalists’ actually seem quite ignorant about religion generally. Which is precisely why they are calling me.” His university had listed him as an expert source, but Smith said the problem is that many callers are seeking more than a few quotes. They stay on the phone up to an hour asking him “to educate them” on other points.

“Even then, in my experience,” Smith said, “they often don’t really ‘get’ many of the ideas we have discussed, sometimes to the point of positively misreporting on religion in their stories.” He also said much religion coverage is trivial or obsessed with sexual abuse and violence. “Why should Americans have to put up with all-too-often religiously ignorant and biased journalists and editors?” he asked. “It is high time that things changed.”

Actually, things have changed enormously over the past decade. Most academic experts in things religious have been grateful for the chance news media offer for reaching the public with observations drawn from research and scholarly give-and-take. And with the financial backing of several foundations, education opportunities for journalists have, by most accounts, yielded solid advances in religion news

coverage.

Smith's experience with journalists is atypical among scholars if we consider the giant steps taken by the American Academy of Religion, based in Atlanta. In August 2002 AAR added to its Web site a database dubbed Religionsource (<http://www.aarweb.org/news/Religionsource.asp>), which lists more than 5,000 scholarly experts as resources. Designed expressly for journalists by its director, Steve Herrick, and supported by Pew Charitable Trusts, the Religionsource team has pulled names from university lists and other sources, categorized them according to areas of expertise, and posted the experts' phone numbers and e-mail addresses. If a scholar wants to limit contact information or be removed altogether, all he or she has to do is tell AAR.

"Overwhelmingly, the scholars in the database with whom we've talked are enthusiastic about being included and talking with journalists," said Kyle Cole, AAR's religion news adviser. Some sources volunteered their home or cell phone numbers.

"Scholars have said they enjoy being included in news stories, seeing it as an opportunity to educate the public about their field," Cole said. As of early January, 5,146 scholars were on the database. Only a handful of scholars asked AAR to remove their names, some plainly saying they "don't talk with reporters," Cole said. A scholar who studies race-supremacist groups opted out in order to avoid endangering his field research.

Scholars get frank advice on the Religionsource site. Yes, some reporters will not have done their homework. And no scholar is obliged to comment on subjects too sensitive or outside his or her expertise. Professors may set ground rules for interviews, just as anyone else can (but are not likely to get to see the story before it's published). Cole also holds seminars for scholars on news media relations at the annual joint meetings of AAR and the Society of Biblical Literature as well as at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion/Religious Research Association conference.

Indicative of AAR's official attitude is the Martin E. Marty Public Understanding of Religion Award given yearly to a scholar who conveys insights from religious studies to popular audiences. And the SBL Web site now features each month a forum of short articles on biblical topics written for interested laypeople and fellow scholars.

This shift in academic thinking is partly spurred by market necessity. Publishers want books for wider audiences. Religion scholars who have a flair for popular writing once drew frowns for “dumbing down” their work. But reputable scholars are commended increasingly for making their ideas understandable.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky of the University of Chicago Divinity School said that when she took a manuscript on women of the Bible to a major publisher a dozen years ago she was warned about risking her scholarly standing. Yet that and other book projects have done well, and today “scholars have been very supportive,” she told *Publishers Weekly* (November 11, 2002). In the same issue, another article extolled evangelical historian Mark Noll, a frequent contributor to *Books & Culture*, for writing fluently for both academic and trade readers without “diluting his reputation in the academic world.” Noll and Frymer-Kensky, by the way, also return reporters’ calls.

In his critique of religion news coverage, Christian Smith was partially correct in saying that “few magazines and papers have ‘religion beats’ comparable to their coverage of sports or politics or entertainment, staffed by seasoned experts.” Those ratios are not likely to shift dramatically, given budget restraints and the fact that readers are creatures of habit.

But Smith is wrong about the breadth and depth of seasoned religion reporting. During the economic upturn in the late 1990s, news executives were inundated with articles, reports and public requests urging increased coverage of religion, ethics and spirituality. Coincidentally it became safe to talk more openly about things of the spirit, partly thanks to popular TV shows and movies. The first-ever Pulitzer Prize to go to a religion specialist was awarded in 1996. By 1998, religion news analyst Mark Silk could write that “criticism has tailed off—probably because there’s more religion news in the media than at any time in recent memory.”

The Freedom Forum’s First Amendment Center challenged news organizations to get it right in the mid-’90s with special reports and seminars. Since then the Lilly Endowment, Pew, the Templeton Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Knight Foundation have increased their support of academic and professional initiatives. They back religion-and-media centers, graduate programs, contests that honor excellent reporting, and programs like PBS’s long-running *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. Grants have made the once all-volunteer Religion Newswriters Association a valuable resource for informed, balanced reporting in the secular media.

The economic downturn in the past few years has taken its toll in the newsroom, but most advances in the religion beat have stayed in place. Partly that's because of demands placed on the news media by complex stories such as those about Islamic movements and ever-new twists in sexual controversies.

These days, a novice on "the God beat" is in a good position to become knowledgeable in a hurry. And we tip our press hats to the religion scholars willing to share their expertise.

A version of this article appeared on John Dart's Web log at www.religionwriters.com.