Reporting on Religion: A Primer on Journalism’s Best Beat

A resource guide from Religion Newswriters: Version 2

Editor: Debra L. Mason, Religion Newswriters Foundation

Authors: Diane Connolly with updates by Brian Pellot

Designer: T.J. Thomson

Copy Editor: Mary Gladstone

Proofreaders: Katie Beverly, Tyra Damm and Kimberly Winston

Copyright 2014, Religion Newswriters Association, Westerville, Ohio

All Rights Reserved. No portion of this book may be copied or used without express permission of the copyright holder.

**Welcome**

Some journalists ignore it until it pounces at them. Others pursue it like a skilled hunter. For some, it’s a full-time job. For others, it’s an occasional factor in the occasional story. For all, it’s a powerful force that can enhance coverage of almost any topic.

However you came to report about religion, you’re in the right place. Whether you’re a newcomer to the religion beat, a student or a veteran journalist who keeps encountering religion in stories, this booklet will guide you through the basics of reporting on religion. We’ll point you to important resources, warn you of potential pitfalls and help ease you into what many of us think is the best beat in the business.

We also hope this booklet convinces you that religion can enrich your stories by explaining people’s motivations and providing details that can transform run-of-the-mill reports into surprising or provocative narratives. Religion shapes people’s actions and reactions in

both private and public ways across a range of news and features. Without it, you’re often not getting the whole story.

Religion journalism — like journalism in general — is undergoing seismic shifts because of changes in the news business as well as changes in society. To prevent this guide from being outdated as quickly as yesterday’s news, we keep it updated at ReligionLink.com.

**Chapter One: The Basics**

Ask people why they read, watch or listen to the news and they’ll probably mention sports, politics, crime, schools, business and lifestyle features. Religion almost never makes the top of the list. But faith and spirituality are a powerful undertow in so many stories of our day. Too often, that undertow remains invisible to media audiences because journalists don’t acknowledge its persistent pull. Life is full of tales of good versus evil, struggles amid hardship, transformation, reconciliation, forgiveness, success against the odds, grief, community and family — all themes highlighted by religious traditions. There are great stories to tell. Let’s get started.

**What is religion news?**

Religion news can be any story in which religion, faith, spirituality, beliefs, values or ethics plays a significant role. This includes:

* + Breaking news, investigative reporting, trend stories, features, profiles and analysis.
  + International, national and local news, politics, sports, business, education, crime, arts and entertainment, science, health, lifestyles, fashion, travel, food and more.
  + Stories about one religion, several religions or interactions among them; stories about institutional religion (individual houses of worship, denominations or entire religions); stories about religion or spirituality that take place outside institutional walls; and stories about people who avow no faith.
  + Beyond news, religion is a frequent topic of opinion columns, commentary pieces, editorials and blogs.

**Trends in religion news**

Notions of what religion news is and where it belongs have changed dramatically in the past few decades. Years ago, “religion news” usually meant stories about one faith’s denominational policies. Now news about many different faiths leads televised and radio broadcasts, inspires thousands of websites and tops front pages of newspapers around the world. It’s also found in every section of the newspaper. What’s changed?

* + Many countries are more religiously diverse, and their religious demographics are constantly shifting.
  + Religious freedom and accommodation debates around abortion, end-of-life issues, marriage, gender, sexuality, education, immigration and more are raging around the world.
  + Crimes such as sexual abuse, terrorism and financial wrongdoing have thrust religious groups onto front pages.
  + People are practicing their faiths in different ways, often switching houses of worship, eschewing the faith they were raised in, blending the practices of more than one tradition or choosing to express their faith outside religious institutions.

**The case for covering religion and assigning beat reporters**

Many media outlets are trimming religion news under the mistaken notion that it doesn’t attract new audiences.

In reality, religion is a factor in the issues people consistently name as their top concerns (war, terrorism, education, health care, immigration, the environment and the economy), and stories about religion can connect with readers and viewers in unique ways. Many religion journalists say they’ve gotten more feedback on the religion beat than any other they’ve covered.

If religion can be part of every beat, why have one or more journalists in an organization concentrate solely on covering it?

* + Religion is one of the most complex subjects journalists cover, requiring precision in wording, attention to nuance and knowledge of a wide range of religious traditions.
  + Many issues around religion are related to scripture. Religion news specialists must become knowledgeable about scripture and which experts they can rely on to interpret debates over it.
  + Journalists are expert at reporting facts, but religion reporters also become skilled at reporting about beliefs that cannot be proved. They learn to ask questions in a respectful manner while maintaining the skepticism necessary for news.
  + Public records and open meetings laws don’t apply to most religious groups in the U.S. and other countries, so religion reporting depends heavily on interviews. To get great stories, it helps immensely to have a reporter who has cultivated sources.
  + Religion journalists’ expertise is invaluable for breaking news coverage of shootings at houses of worship, terrorism attacks done in the name of faiths, hate crimes, court rulings and legislation involving religion and more.

**Tips for covering religion on other beats**

* + Most religion stories overlap with other beats. Newsroom turf battles can be minimized if reporters coordinate and collaborate.
  + Include religion in breaking news and team coverage. When a house of worship is vandalized, religion journalists can help editors and producers explore where faith fits in.
  + When another department is working on a story that touches on religion, offer sources and background to help them get the religion angle right.
  + Whenever religion is a significant factor in a story, acknowledge it. When a mother says God saved her baby from a fire, quote it. When a politician says his faith led him to vote against a bill, quote it. Better yet, ask more questions.

**Do you need to be religious to report on religion?**

NO. Just as political reporters are not required to be partisan, journalists who report on religion aren’t required to have certain beliefs (unless perhaps they live and work in countries with oppressive religious freedom policies). What’s most important is that journalists understand that faith can be an important part of some people’s lives. Whatever their own beliefs, journalists should write about others’ beliefs with respect, whether or not they agree with them.

There is no one “right” way to cover religion. Reporters and news organizations tailor the beat to the demands and interests of their audiences and the areas they cover. Most provide a mix of religion stories that includes hard news, trends, feature stories, profiles, commentary, analysis, and daily coverage of ev nts.

**Who makes a great religion journalist?**

* + Respect for the role of faith in people’s lives.
  + Immense curiosity about religions and a willingness to learn — and keep learning — about them.
  + An abiding sense of fairness and balance, and an understanding that there are often more than two sides to a story.
  + The absence of any interest in pushing any religious viewpoint.
  + A commitment to covering all kinds of diversity — of faith, ethnicity, gender, economic status and geography.
  + Willingness to spend time with all sorts of people in the places where they live, gather and worship. Willingness to work through language and cultural challenges.
  + Strong news skills, because religion includes much more than feature stories.
  + The ability to accurately and fairly describe the nuances of different beliefs, even if you personally disagree with them or if a news report raises questions about them.
  + Excellent writing skills, with the ability to describe rituals and traditions in ways that invite readers and viewers into worlds they’ve never experienced and the ability to be precise about doctrines and beliefs.

**Chapter Two: Best Practices**

Stories that include spirituality, faith and ethics aren’t just for religious people. They’re for everyone. Writing and producing them in ways that resonate with ardent believers, well-read worshippers, spiritual dabblers, unconcerned agnostics and avowed atheists requires skill. Read on for some of our best advice.

**Preaching, teaching & proselytizing**

Journalists reporting about religion should tell truths according to verifiable facts, accurately describe people’s beliefs and experiences, and interpret events for their audiences. Readers may be inspired to explore their faith, return to it or leave it based on your reporting, but your mission is not to preach or to proselytize. Those goals will get in the way of reporting the truth.

**Get oriented**

Search the web for blogs, sites and information about current topics in religion. Read international and local religious magazines and newspapers for windows into what religious communities care about. Pay attention to movies, books, television shows, computer games and other places that religious themes show up.

Sign up for email newsletters, Google Alerts and RSS feeds to help you spot big religion stories. Stay on top of Google trends, top tweets and Facebook posts that touch on faith.

**Get out**

Out where people of faith gather, that is. That could be a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, gurdwara, bookstore, quilting group, sports field, festival, conference or meditation center.

**Get titles right**

Getting titles wrong is one of the quickest ways to lose your audience’s trust. Religious titles can be quite a challenge. Some titles indicate an official position and endorsement from hierarchy; others people choose to bestow upon themselves. Some are familiar, but many might not be. Ask people what their titles are and what kind of authority they represent. If someone uses a title you’re not familiar with, check it. More guidance on religious titles can be found at www.Religionstylebook.com.

**Redefine the religion beat**

WATCH FOR CHANGES. People’s search for meaning and connection amid cultural shifts breeds new expressions of spirituality. Don’t cover the same old story. Many people get their spiritual fix in ways that were unthinkable two decades ago — gathering at coffee houses, spas, sports arenas, film festivals or in front of video screens. Different ages, religions, ethnicities and races are finding their own ways to define faith in the 21st century, from spiritual programs for Alzheimer’s patients to Hindu summer camps and faith-based Internet dating services.

LOOK OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION. In many countries, fewer people are affiliating with houses of worship. One of the fastest-growing segments in religion surveys is people who profess spiritual beliefs but don’t attend worship. Stories about their expressions of spirituality — through environmental groups, books, conferences, yoga, house churches and more — say a lot about religion.

INSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION, FIND GREAT STORIES. Houses of worship and religious organizations still remain rich, powerful and, in some cases, influential forces in many places. Stories about their inner workings can be fascinating, telling or disturbing. How does a 13-member congregation grow to 40,000 or a 2,000-member congregation shrink to 40? What happens after a faith leader’s fall from grace? How do houses of worship attract younger members and increase diversity?

PATROL THE PUBLIC SQUARE. Bitter clashes, unlikely alliances and surprising resolutions all mark the high-profile stories found when religion intersects with education, government, health, science and more. Ask why conflicts or alliances exist, why some issues can be resolved and why others never will be.

WHEN POSSIBLE, BE LOCAL AND NATIONAL — OR LOCAL AND GLOBAL. One of the best ways to pump up the impact of a religion story is to connect it to a national, regional or global trend or event. This gives readers, viewers and listeners a sense that the values debated in their town are being tested on a larger playing field. Most local stories can easily be placed in national or international context, and most houses of worship and religious have strong international ties because of immigration, missionary or relief work, sister congregations, funding of overseas projects or concern for members of their faith involved in violent conflicts internationally.

ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION. Rather than always reporting on one faith group at a time, focus on issue stories that reflect the thinking of a variety of faiths. How do faith groups differ in their approach to today’s most controversial social topics?

BE TIMELY, BUT DON’T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT TIME PEGS. With religion, some of the best stories result from following up later to find out what effect a vote, a change in leadership or a new policy had on real people’s lives.

DON’T DREAD THE HOLIDAYS. Most religion reporters write stories about the major holidays of major faiths. Most also approach these stories with some amount of dread. But the smart ones use holidays as an opportunity to explore issues related to wider themes. They find a person, an event, an issue, a ritual or a trend to view through the lens of the holiday.

There is an argument to be made for not observing major religious holidays with enterprise pieces—after all, seven or more holidays can eat up a lot of one reporter’s time during a year. Creative alternatives include photo essays or single photos, a Q&A, a book review or stories by writers in other departments about something related to the holiday—travel, food, etc.

**Rely on people power**

MATTERS OF FAITH AND BELIEF ARE ALWAYS ABOUT PEOPLE. Whenever possible, stories about doctrines, institutions or legislation should go beyond officialdom. If a vote is important enough to write about, it’s important to take the extra steps to find out how it will affect people’s lives.

LET PEOPLE TALK ABOUT FAITH AND BELIEF. Too often, reporters steer clear when sources bring up how faith guides their actions. By encouraging those conversations, reporters can learn about core values and decisive moments. Asking sources about religion is delicate; many people find it intrusive. But you can always ask, “How did your beliefs or values affect your decision?”

BE WARY OF RELYING TOO HEAVILY ON QUOTES FROM CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS. While there are smart and prophetic voices among them, there are often wide gaps between what clergy preach and what congregation members do or believe.

CULTIVATE SOURCES. Fewer stories “break” in religion than on other beats, so cultivating sources is extremely important for ferreting out stories.

**Report news and nuance**

GOOD RELIGION REPORTING BEGINS WITH GOOD JOURNALISM. “Without a love for non-religion news, you won’t love religion news,” said veteran reporter Richard Ostling. Use your best reporting skills on every story to provide solid facts and illuminating interpretation.

NOTHING IS OFF-LIMITS. Question everything. In countries with little press freedom, report hat you can. International coverage of the Roman Catholic clergy abuse crisis has shown that religion requires relentless reporting. Reaction to it has also shown that most readers and viewers want tough questions to be asked of religious leaders and institutions. While it is important to treat sources with respect, reporters should never skip questions or background checks just because they’re dealing with religious issues or people.

FOLLOW THE MONEY. Finances are a woefully underreported area of religion, partly because in some countries such as the U.S. nonprofit religious organizations are exempt from some of the financial reporting businesses contend with. Learn what religious organizations have to file with the government and what information they share with their congregations. Ask questions about money and ask for copies of budgets. Financial improprieties can and do happen in congregations, many of which don’t have a professional accountant on staff. Religious organizations often benefit tremendously from donations, but there is usually little examination on how this money is spent unless a problem is uncovered.

GO WITH GRAY. Religions deal with good and evil, but in everyday life, there’s little black and white. More often we find 50,000 shades of gray. Honor that. When reporting on a family whose faith saw them through a crisis, include the fact that they don’t regularly attend religious services. Religion often confounds expectations, which is one reason it is fascinating to write about.

DIG DEEPER. Investigative reporting has yielded great journalism on the religion beat, from sex abuse scandals to financial wrongdoing. These stories require journalists to dig deep.

**Remain calm amid conflict**

Reporting about religion often involves dealing with extremes, and extremes generate conflict. Some advice:

* + The loudest, most aggressive voices are usually on the fringes of any issue, while most people have opinions that fall somewhere in between. There are almost always more than two sides to any issue. Seek them out.
  + Look for sources who offer constructive ways of moving debates forward — mediators, ethicists, observers, people who have a perspective that is seldom heard.
  + Don’t overemphasize conflicts because of aggressive sources or fascination in the newsroom. Does the issue affect everyday life? Do affected communities care about it? Tailor coverage accordingly.
  + Don’t automatically give prominent play to the latest proclamations from the usual voices in a debate. How many people actually agree with their views? For whom are they speaking?
  + People with extreme views generate news because they are often willing to take extreme actions based on their convictions. Be savvy about carefully gathering information on extreme groups’ beliefs and potential for action
  + Some people are, in fact, delusional. Most religion reporters have gotten at least a few phone calls or letters from people making impossible accusations or far-out religious claims. Politely but firmly explain that you won’t pursue their story and get backup from supervisors if the person persists.

BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS. Many labels — including liberal, fundamentalist pro-life— are loaded and can mean different things in different countries and contexts. Characterize beliefs with specifics rather than giving them general labels and always ask sources how they themselves identify.

**Embrace diversity**

BE INCLUSIVE. Strive to write stories that people of all viewpoints — and with all levels of religious knowledge — can appreciate and understand. When writing about an issue, explore which faith traditions are involved; don’t limit yourself to the ones you’re familiar with. Avoid faith-specific terms such as temple and minister when you really mean house of worship and clergy.

BE DIVERSE. When reporting about religion, every kind of diversity can enrich a story — diversity of faith, ethnicity, race, economics, geography, age, etc. Make an effort to explore them. Religious beliefs and practice are usually affected by where people live, where they came from, how much money they have and what stripe of what faith they practice.

IN RELIGION, THE MAJORITY DOESN’T ALWAYS RULE. Minority voices matter — within a faith or across the spectrum of belief. One of the biggest stories in religion is the way people of an ever-widening array of faiths are learning to live and work more closely together. Minority voices are crucial because they often raise concerns shared by many beyond their group or offer a “canary in a coal mine” first alert to a conflict. Religion also makes for strange bedfellows, with surprising alliances forming around issues, so reporters can’t always assume they know who represents the majority view.

**Judge not, lest ye be judged**

People of faith sometimes refer to themselves or others as “committed,” “devout,” or “observant” as a way of indicating faithful practice of a religious tradition. Journalists shouldn’t do the same. It is not a journalist’s job to judge the depth of a person’s faith or steadfastness of practice. Instead, describe a person’s faith and practice with specific details. Journalists also can’t assume that what a person says is accurate; if it can’t be verified, simply attribute the statement to the person rather than proclaiming it as fact. For example, if an Orthodox Jewish candidate for political office doesn’t campaign on the Sabbath, you can state that as fact. But if a profile subject says she tithes (giving 10 percent of her income to her congregation) but doesn’t give you access to financial records, say she *says* she tithes; don’t take her word for it.

**It’s a miracle!**

Well, *maybe*. Religion has always involved reports of supernatural phenomena that can’t be verified. Scripture is full of them, and most religions are based on them. So what should journalists do when faced with faith healings, exorcisms, answered prayers, speaking in tongues, crying statues or divine images appearing in everyday objects?

* + Describe, in detail, what happened. Be clear about what you witnessed, and what others said took place. Your story is likely to be largely about what people believe happened, and how they reacted to it.
  + Seek verification. If someone says their cancer was healed by a faith leader or deity, ask for medical confirmation from before and after the alleged healing.
  + Put the event in context of religious tradition, and explain how much the event follows or deviates from religious teaching. Give examples of reports of similar happenings, and, if appropriate, say whether any were proved false.
  + Report if money is involved. Was someone promised healing if they gave a big donation?
  + Be respectful but neutral. You’re dealing with people’s sacred beliefs, and it’s not your job to endorse or dismiss them.

**Sharpen your pencils**

GREAT JOURNALISM USUALLY INVOLVES CONFLICT, TENSION AND CHANGE. Religion has all of these. Use them. Reporting on faith offers wonderful opportunities for rich narratives, heart-rending storytelling and stories about personal transformation.

WRITE SIMPLY, BUT DON’T OVERSIMPLIFY. Religion involves rhetoric, complex jargon and language laden with thousands of years of debate. You must be accurate and attuned to nuance, but you also need to write in clear language that can be understood by both insiders and casual observers. Be aware that word choice can convey bias in ways you’re not aware of. Run paraphrasing and descriptions by sources to check your accuracy and understanding. Be careful when you say “Muslims believe …,” for example, as beliefs vary widely within any faith.

**Blogging and social media**

Writing and tweeting your opinions or personal beliefs will change your relationship with sources and audiences. In some cases, this can hurt people’s ability to believe that you can report with fairness and balance. For that reason, most news reporters choose not to write their opinions or personal beliefs, and some news organizations forbid beat reporters from doing so.

Other religion reporters have found that columns, commentaries, blogs and social media accounts enhance their standing as a reporter and lead to stronger connections with readers, viewers and listeners. Some write religion columns and rarely write news, lessening any impact their published opinions have on their reporting. Many others use blogs or columns for purposes other than stating opinions: They share color, context or other details that didn’t make it into their main story, engage in conversations with readers or explore topics using a lot of voice without adding a lot of opinion. Many newsrooms are also requiring reporters to tweet and publish their work on social media platforms like Facebook.

Before you begin blogging and tweeting:

* + Find out what editors and producers expect.
  + There are thousands of religion blogs; how many people will read yours? You may want to consider whether a blog is the most efficient way to reach or expand your audience, or whether your regular outlets, be they print or broadcast, are better.
  + Be thoughtful about what you want to accomplish and what content you want to include in your blog and on social media platforms. Make sure you and your supervisors are comfortable with how much opinion and personality you plan to project.
  + If your blog will be an extracurricular venture outside of work, talk to supervisors about how it will affect the perception of your work.

In religion, opinions are news. Journalists in general circulation media have their own opinions, of course, but most audiences expect them to keep their viewpoints out of their reporting so that they can fairly represent the news. A few journalists manage to do it all, writing news and opinion, but it's a delicate balance on a beat where beliefs can trump facts.

**Avoiding and covering hate speech**

With great power comes great responsibility. Reporters have a responsibility to cover the facts, but we also have a responsibility to avoid unnecessarily stoking hatred and violence, especially when political tensions are high and sectarian conflict looms.

Hate speech masked as journalism is all too common in many parts of the world and does a disservice to readers and societies. Sometimes hate speech merely reinforces unpleasant stereotypes, other times it contributes to evils far worse. Look no further than Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, which played a supporting role in Rwanda’s 1994 genocide through its hate-filled broadcasts.

**What constitutes hate speech?**

If only there were an easy answer. There’s little consensus on how to define “hate speech” across the world. Broadly speaking, we can think of it as speech aimed at denigrating people based on some aspects of their individual or group identities.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights defines hate speech as any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. Some countries consider blasphemy a form of hate speech likely to incite violence while others protect blasphemous speech as a form of free expression.

The same quote from a source or line in a story can be considered discriminatory, hateful, offensive, dangerous, libelous, blasphemous, treasonous, seditious or perfectly acceptable depending on where you’re reporting. It’s important to familiarize yourself with local laws and sensibilities. You won’t always need to self-censor, but you should always be aware of your work’s potential consequences.

Avoiding biased, misleading or otherwise inaccurate portrayals of people is just good reporting. Hateful slurs, stereotypes and dehumanizing language do not benefit the public and often exacerbate conflicts. As journalists, we have a duty to minimize harm. Sensational and gratuitous rhetoric have no place in a responsible and professional journalist’s toolkit.

CHAPTER THREE

**Issues for reporters and editors**

Political journalists who switch to the religion beat express surprise when sources start asking them about their religious beliefs. If they weren’t asked how they voted, why should they be asked where — or whether — they worship? Religion is an intimate, emotional and revealing topic, which is one reason it makes for such great stories. It’s also the reason that sources and media audiences will be interested in what you believe. After all, journalists report on facts, but religions are based on beliefs that can’t be proven or disproven. People’s religious beliefs affect the way they vote, raise their children and spend their time and money. Why shouldn’t they also affect their work as a journalist?

People who report on religion can be sure of two things: Sources will ask about your own beliefs, and you will have to report about people whose beliefs you disagree with. While ethics and conflicts of interest are important topics for all journalists, religion journalists will find there are special considerations on the religion beat. Here is some guidance on how to handle questions when they arise.

**Revealing personal beliefs**

Veteran religion reporters have various ways of responding to questions about their own faith. There’s no single right way to respond; every person has to handle the question in a way that feels comfortable to him or her. Some journalists also find they answer the question differently over time or in different situations. Some options:

BE UPFRONT. Say what your faith is and where you worship. Some reporters say that they feel they need to be honest and open with sources because they are asking sources to be honest and open with them. It is a way to build trust.

ANSWER IN GENERAL TERMS. Say, “I’m Buddhist” or “I’m Jewish” or “I’m Muslim,” but leave it at that and quickly begin the interview.

ASK WHY THE PERSON WANTS TO KNOW. You may want to tailor your response to the person’s agenda. Are they trying to figure out if you’re on “their side”? Or is it a casual question that doesn’t carry weighty baggage? Some reporters justify not revealing details by telling sources they worry that if their tradition is the same as the source’s, the source will expect favorable coverage, but that if their tradition is different, the source won’t feel they can trust them.

IS SALVATION AT STAKE? Veteran religion reporter Julia Lieblich offers this anecdote: “When asked, ‘Are you a Christian?’ the writer replied, ‘I don't like to talk about my religion when I am working. But if you are wondering whether I will be sensitive to the beliefs of Christians, the answer is yes.’”

DEFLECT, OR REFUSE TO ANSWER. Some reporters say, “The most important thing you need to know is that I will listen to you and that I am committed to representing your faith accurately and fairly. This interview is about your faith, not mine.”

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS. Some reporters find that because of their name, appearance or ethnicity, sources assume they belong to a particular faith. Sometimes they challenge (or affirm) that assumption, explaining that they won’t assume anything about the interview subject.

CONSIDER WHERE YOU ARE. Journalists in some countries report that they are asked about their faith in almost every interview; journalists elsewhere say the question comes up only occasionally.

USE HUMOR. If culturally appropriate, you can always say, “I'm still considering,” or “It depends on how this interview goes!” if you'd rather not answer.

**Reporting on people you disagree with**

Most journalists have had plenty of practice reporting about people they disagree with. Religion introduces a new intensity to that challenge. It’s one thing to be a political reporter who votes for one party and interviews candidates of another. It can be another when a reporter's sacred beliefs are ridiculed by a person who’s likely to be the lead story. Reporters have many ways of deftly handling such situations:

* + Remember that your job is to report, not comment or judge.
  + Add context. Context doesn’t have to take much time or space. Accurately characterizing a person’s beliefs by quoting an expert or a fact can quickly show readers/viewers/listeners whether the person is on the fringe or in the mainstream, how much support he has or how much opposition he faces.
  + Represent the other side(s). Fairness demands that claims are balanced by counterclaims. Don’t let a person’s quotes or accusations stand alone. If there’s another view, state it or quote it, and try to characterize how prevalent each view is. This is much easier now that surveys of religious beliefs are instantly accessible online.
  + Truth doesn’t require falsity. Jeffrey Sheler, who covered religion for U.S. News & World Report, suggests remembering what he heard two religious leaders in dialogue say: “Being true to one’s faith does not require being false to another’s.”
  + Bow out if necessary. If you can't accurately and fairly report on someone you disagree with, consult your editor/producer and ask to be removed from the story.

**Conflicts of interest**

Every journalist encounters a conflict of interest at some point, but there are special considerations when it comes to religion. In general, reporters don’t join organizations that they cover, but prohibiting a journalist from belonging to a religious group violates that person’s right to practice religion freely. Thus, religion journalists can practice a faith without violating any ethical guidelines — in fact, being a member of a religious group can add insight into reporting. Some editors expect that you do not report on your own faith tradition, but in most cases, it’s nearly impossible to avoid. Whether you’re a religion reporter or an education reporter, if you belong to a faith you may have to report on stories that involve that faith.

Some journalists may wonder: If you feed homeless people at a shelter once a month with your faith community, should you avoid writing about homeless people? If you're in a choir, should you avoid writing about debates over contemporary vs. traditional music? If you're a Sunday school teacher, should you avoid writing about religious education? The answer is no; it is perfectly acceptable to report on religious activities that you participate in, as long as you are not reporting on your own choir or Sunday school class.

There are, however, some things you should avoid:

* + Reporting on your own congregation or place of worship in any way.
  + Promoting your faith tradition above others or endorsing its beliefs in any way.
  + Reporting on issues for which you’re involved in advocacy on behalf of your faith group. It’s one thing to profile a homeless person if you feed homeless people; it’s another if you are representing your faith community in lobbying local authorities to build a new homeless shelter.
  + Reporting on issues from which you cannot separate your religious beliefs. For example, if your tradition teaches that homosexuality is a sin and you do not feel you can impartially write about debates on gay ordination, you should recuse yourself from coverage.
  + Any leadership position that would compromise your ability to report impartially about a religious tradition.

**Ethics**

It doesn’t take long for religion journalists to discover that they will end up reporting on plenty of saints who are sinners. In other words, some religious people may do tremendous good for others while simultaneously embezzling money or soliciting prostitutes.

You’re not expected to be a saint to report on religion, but it’s best to be clear about your ethical standards. If your media organization has ethical guidelines, become familiar with them and follow them. The Society of Professional Journalists posts its Code of Ethics (www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp) online, and they all apply to reporting on religion. Many national press councils also have media codes of conduct you can refer to.

CHAPTER FOUR

**A roundup of religions**

Religion stories are about people, events, conflicts, alliances and change. That means you’ll be reporting on politics, pop culture, sex, science, ethnicity and economics. Along the way, you’ll wrestle with people’s beliefs about faith, hope, forgiveness and redemption. Whether you’re reporting a religion story or a story that just happens to involve religion, you need to know your way around the major faith traditions. Learn about them, and about as many of the smaller ones as you can. This expertise will distinguish you among your colleagues; it’s one reason religion specialists are needed. It also will help you interpret the news in ways that connect with how people live and what they care about. Any religious tradition is worthy of a lifetime of study, and there are countless resources available on each. Here are some basics to get you started. But remember: There’s no substitute for experience, whether you are crammed in the corner of a tent for a small-town revival or sitting silently with a crowd before a giant Buddha.

Below is a brief overview of some of the world’s major religions. For full reporting guides on Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Protestant Christianity, visit to ReligionLink.com/reporting-on/

**The global religious landscape**

1. Christianity (2.2 billion)

1. Islam (1.6 billion)
2. Atheism/secularism/non-religion/agnosticism (1.1 billion)
3. Hinduism (1 billion)
4. Buddhism (500 million)
5. Folk religions (400 million)
6. Other religions (58 million)
7. Judaism (14 million)

This order reflects 2010 data from the [Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/)

**The Abrahamic faiths** (Christianity, Judaism and Islam)

Abrahamic faiths revere Abraham as a spiritual and/or physical ancestor. Some believe that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the same God; others adamantly disagree. Regardless these faiths do share some basic beliefs, histories and traditions.

**Christianity**

Christianity is stunningly diverse. It ranges from tiny house churches to megachurches, from strict fundamentalists to liberal Protestants, and from homogenous congregations to multicultural and multiethnic traditions. Some denominations are imported, some are homegrown, and some are adapted from other religious traditions around the world.

Some advice:

BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS. Most faiths, Christianity included, express deep differences among denominations. Don’t assume that the label “Christian” carries with it a long set of beliefs; people’s beliefs vary greatly, even within a denomination. Ask what tradition people follow or describe their specific beliefs and practice.

AVOID JARGON, BUT LEARN WHAT IT MEANS. Journalists must contend with a dizzying array of structures, hierarchy and titles among Christian denominations. Then, they must translate the jargon into understandable language for readers/viewers and listeners. Some denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church, have a strict hierarchy, ranging from the head of the church (the pope or a bishop) down to the congregational level. Many, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or United Church of Christ, are congregationally governed, with a national body that issues guidelines but can’t enforce them. Most journalists bypass denominational meetings in favor of enterprise reporting or issue stories. Occasionally, denominational gatherings make big news. If you cover one, learn the issues and the jargon so you can clearly interpret the impact or importance of the event.

THE MAJOR HOLIDAYS and observances in Christianity are Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, Advent and Christmas. Religion journalists generally cover these in some way, whether through enterprise stories, photography or daily coverage of events.

**Ups and downs**

The U.S. is a predominantly Christian country, but the percentage of Americans who say they’re Christian is falling while those who say they are unaligned with any organized religion is rising.

**The 10 largest denominations in America**

1. Roman Catholic Church: 68.2 million
2. Southern Baptist Convention: 16.1 million
3. United Methodist Church: 7.7 million
4. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 6.2 million
5. Church of God in Christ: 5.5 million
6. National Baptist Convention USA: 5.2 million
7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 4.2 million
8. National Baptist Convention of America: 3.5 million
9. Assemblies of God: 3 million
10. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): 2.7 million

SOURCE: [2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html" \l "largest)

**Roman Catholics**

The Roman Catholic Church was established in the first century as one of the original Christian communities, and it claims to embody the truth of the faith of Jesus Christ. Its claims to primacy are exercised through the pope. His authority derives from an unbroken apostolic succession that goes back to St. Peter, who the Catholic Church believes was invested by Jesus with authority over fellow church leaders and Christian communities. It is the largest Christian tradition in the world.

**Judaism**

Judaism is the faith of the Jewish people, who believe that God revealed himself through Abraham, Moses and other prophets. The faith came to be called Judaism after the sixth century B.C. and was centered in Jerusalem. Jews have endured severe persecution throughout their history, particularly in the Holocaust, during which the Nazis killed 6 million

Jews. There about 14 million Jews worldwide.

SCRIPTURE

TORAH is the name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Jews also commonly refer to the entire Hebrew Bible as the Torah. (Tanakh is the technical name for the Hebrew Bible, but even Jews don’t use the term frequently.) The Hebrew Bible has the same content as the Christian Old Testament, but it numbers and arranges some of the books differently.

TALMUD is a collection of ancient rabbinic commentary that elaborates on how to follow the rules set out in the Torah. It was written from the third to fifth centuries. Orthodox Jews consider it as important as the Hebrew Bible.

MIDRASH refers to explanations and stories about the Torah written during the first millennium. It suggests interpretations and fills in the gaps between the details and stories laid out in the Torah.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The High Holy Days begin with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, and end 10 days later with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Passover, celebrated in late March or early April, commemorates the freeing of the Israelites from Egypt under Moses' leadership. Families typically observe Passover with a meal called a seder, in which the story of the Exodus is retold. Hanukkah, also called the Jewish Festival of Lights, lasts for eight days and celebrates the Maccabees’ victory over the Syrians in the second century B.C. Hanukkah usually falls in early or mid-December. Most congregations also observe Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, in March or April.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

There are three major branches of Judaism. They divide theologically on whether they believe the Torah was written by God or written by people:

* + Reform Jews (http://rj.org/) believe that the spirit of Jewish law can be adapted to the time and place, so they tend to emphasize social justice issues more than dietary laws.
  + Orthodox Jews practice strict adherence to traditional Jewish laws based on the Bible, including the kosher dietary laws that prohibit such things as eating meat and dairy products together.
  + Hasidism is a movement within Orthodox Judaism founded by 18th-century mystics. Men wear beards, sidelocks, black hats and long coats.
  + The Chabad-Lubavitch movement (www.chabad.org/) is a branch of Hasidism that emphasizes reaching out to nonpracticing Jews.
  + Conservative Jews follow a middle path between Reform and Orthodox Judaism and are the second largest branch in both America and Israel.
  + Reconstructionist Judaism is a very small, liberal branch of Judaism that emphasizes culture and community and rejects some tenets of traditional Judaism.

ISSUES

* + The number of Jews is declining wolrdwide. Jews are focusing on reducing rates of intermarriage, which often results in children who are not raised as Jews; encouraging childbearing; strengthening Jewish education for children and adults; countering attempts at conversion; and reaching out to secular Jews who are not observant.
  + The generation of Jews who survived the Holocaust is dying out, adding urgency to how the experience is described and relayed to younger generations. Anti-Semitism continues to be an issue in the United States and worldwide.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

* + Jews observe their Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. In fact, all days on the Jewish calendar run from sundown to sundown.
  + Jewish congregations worship in synagogues and temples. Many Reform congregations use the latter term, while Orthodox and many Conservative Jews believe the word temple can refer only to the temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 70 A.D. and which Jews hope to rebuild. Do not call a Jewish congregation a temple unless it uses that word in its name.
  + Be aware that Judaism is as much a culture as a theology. Most Americans who consider themselves Jewish have little or no affiliation with any synagogue. Modern Jewish literature sometimes describes Judaism as a “peoplehood,” reflecting the combination of faith, inherited tradition and culture.
  + Reform Jews ordain women as rabbis, but Orthodox Jews do not. Conservative Judaism also has female rabbis, though far fewer than Reform.
  + Many issues of importance to Jews involve a mix of political, religious and social factors. Be aware that religion is part of conflicts such as those in the Middle East, but that the high number of secular (or cultural) Jews means that religion is not necessarily the only, or most important, factor.
  + Messianic Jews, who believe that Jesus is the Messiah that Jews await, consider themselves Jewish, but the vast majority of Jews don’t. This is a highly sensitive issue, and journalists should refrain from listing Messianic Jewish services in the same category as other Jewish services or referring to them in stories without explanation. Messianic Jewish leaders use the title of rabbi, which is offensive to traditional Jews.

**Islam**

\*\**For Burma trainings, see ReligionLink’s Reporting on Islam guide\*\**

**Beyond the Abrahamic faiths**

There are literally thousands of religions and spiritual practices. As journalists, you need to determine what questions to ask and where to get more information. Veteran religion reporters will counsel you to start each story with a healthy respect for what you don’t know — that way, you’re more likely to get the details and nuances right. Here are some good starting points for gathering information about other religions and belief systems.

* + Religion Newswriters Association’s site (RNA.org) includes thousands of links, including an extensive Resource Library, links to religious media, and
  + ReligionLink (ReligionLink.com) offers primers on many faiths and beliefs, such as Sikhism, Native American spirituality, Wicca/Paganism, atheists and more.
  + Religion Newswriters’ Religion Stylebook (religionstylebook.com) has entries on religions and lists information on titles, scripture and history.
  + The Pluralism Project at Harvard University posts news and research about minority faiths (www.pluralism.org/).
  + Beliefnet posts information, articles, essays and discussions about a variety of faiths (www.Beliefnet.com).
  + The BBC’s Religion & Ethics site offers journalistic snapshots on the basic beliefs (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/).
  + Religion Source allows journalists to search for scholars by area of expertise (www.religionsource.org), and the American Academy of Religion has program units listing scholars on many minority faiths (www.aarweb.org).
  + The Religious Tolerance website posts information about world religions. While it is not always current or with opinion, it can be helpful (www.religioustolerance.org).
  + Most religions have websites, but check to see who creates the content. Some faiths, such as Sikhism, have one official site. Others, such as Buddhism, have many websites posted by different traditions.

**Hinduism**

Hinduism is the third-largest organized religion in the world with almost a billion followers, most of which are in India. Hinduism has no single founder, teacher or prophet, or set of beliefs; there are variations by community and region. Hinduism’s primary belief is that the soul does not die; it is reborn as either a human or animal every time the body dies. Under Hinduism’s rule of karma, every act affects how the soul will be reborn. This cycle of birth and rebirth continues until the soul achieves spiritual perfection and is united with the supreme being. Hinduism has many deities, which all are manifestations of one god. The primary trio is made up of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva (also spelled Siva), the destroyer. Hindus believe that animals have souls, and some are worshipped as deities. These beliefs have evolved over several thousand years and are embedded in ritual, mystical and ascetic practices.

SCRIPTURE

There are many sacred texts in Hinduism. The best-known:

* + The Bhagavad Gita is a philosophical dialogue between the deity Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. It is a popular and accessible text that discusses Hindu values and philosophy.
  + The four Vedas are the primary texts of Hinduism. They contain hymns, rituals and incantations from ancient India and have influenced Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The oldest is the Rig Veda.

MAJOR HOLIDAY

Diwali, the five-day Hindu festival of lights, is the most popular festival and is celebrated by Sikhs and Jains as well as Hindus.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

* + Hindus worship deities, which are representations of the one god they believe in; they are monotheistic, as Christians, Jews and Muslims are. Don’t refer to Hindu deities as gods or goddesses. Hindu worship involves meditating, chanting and worshipping icons of the deities, which can include bathing them and making offerings to them.
  + Outside of India, many people are introduced to Hinduism through the spiritual practice of yoga, which is sometimes adopted by other faiths or stripped of spiritual content altogether.
  + Hinduism is not one religion but is a collection of traditions with great variations among them. Don’t assume all Hindus have the same beliefs and practices.
  + In India, the various Hindu traditions are often at odds—sometimes violently—with each other. This is a sensitive topic, but Hindus are aware of it.
  + Do not confuse Hindu with Hindi, which is a language.

RESOURCES

* + The BBC posts a guide to Hinduism ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml)), which also explains the caste system and its religious roots.
  + ReligionLink’s [Reporting on Hinduism](http://www.religionlink.com/reporting-on/reporting-on-hinduism/) guide (http://www.religionlink.com/reporting-on/reporting-on-hinduism/)

**Buddhism**

*\*\*For Burma trainings, see ReligionLink’s Reporting on Buddhism guide\*\**

**Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, founded by Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1830, believes that it is the restoration of the original church Jesus established and that other Christian traditions have gone astray. Mormons, as church members are called, regard themselves as Christian, but no other major Christian tradition does. The church has more than 6 million members in the U.S., making it the fourth-largest religious body in the country, and 15 million worldwide. Some of its practices are well-known, such as the missionary work required of young adults, but its beliefs are less well-understood. Some, such as the practice of baptizing non-Mormons after their death and the now-renounced practice of polygamy, are the source of news reports. Mormons believe that God has a physical body. They believe that humans are “sealed” to their family in a temple ceremony and will live eternally as gods in the highest celestial kingdom if they are faithful to church teaching. They do not consume tobacco, alcohol, coffee or tea.

SCRIPTURE

The church uses four books of Scripture: the Bible (King James Version), the Book of Mormon (subtitled “Another Testament of Jesus Christ”), Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith’s translation and revision of the Bible. The church teaches that Mormon, an ancient American prophet, inscribed what’s known as the Book of Mormon on golden plates that his son Moroni buried on a hill in what’s now upstate New York. Moroni later was said to have returned as an angel and led Smith to the plates, which Smith translated and published in 1830, after the golden plates were taken away from him. The Book of Mormon describes God’s interaction with the people of ancient America and recounts the visit of the resurrected Jesus to the New World.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

* + The official LDS church site (www.lds.org)
  + The LDS church’s educational site (www.mormon.org/) has an area with FAQs and facts for media.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

* + Whether or not Mormons are Christian is a contentious matter. Journalists should always be clear that the Mormons regard themselves as Christian but that Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians say Mormon beliefs do not agree with Christianity and its creeds. When this distinction is not important to a news report, journalists use phrases such as “Catholic, Protestant and Mormon churches are involved …” to avoid the issue. Journalists should avoid phrases such as “Christian churches, including Catholics, Protestants and Mormons,” which make a theological judgment about the church’s beliefs.
  + Journalists should take care to describe Mormon beliefs and practices in accurate and nonjudgmental ways. When teachings are controversial, journalists can state as fact or quote scholars explaining how they differ from traditional Christian teaching.
  + The LDS church has changed its position on the term Mormon. Most recently, the church asked not to be referred to as the Mormon church, but it does not object to adherents being referred to as Mormons. For journalists, the Mormon church is acceptable in references to the LDS church, though the church’s full name should be used on first reference.
  + Mormons welcome visitors in churches, but visitors are not allowed to enter Mormon temples. (Churches, or meeting houses, are used for Sunday worship, while temples, which serve numerous churches, are used only on weekdays for special rituals.) Even family members who are not Mormon cannot enter a temple for weddings and funerals. For that matter, only Mormons who are deemed sufficiently “worthy”— by paying their tithe and being active in their ward — are allowed in.
  + The LDS church has an unusual structure. The top authority is the First Presidency, made up of a president and two counselors. When the president dies, the First Presidency is dissolved and the Council of the Twelve Apostles selects a new president. Under the First Presidency is the three-member Presiding Bishopric, which governs in temporal affairs. There is also the First Quorum of Seventy, which oversees missionary work. The church is divided into territorial groups called stakes, and each stake is headed by a president, two counselors and a stake high council. Individual congregations are called wards. The pastor of a ward holds the title of bishop but is not salaried or a professional religious leader. The terms minister or the Rev. are not used. As of 2014, the church did not ordain women as priests.

**Sikhism**

Sikhs, whose men wear turbans and beards, are sometimes mistaken for Muslims. Sikhism, however, is a distinct monotheistic religion that originated in India in the 15th century and draws on elements of Hinduism and Islamic Sufism. Family and moral purity are prime values; the union of each human spirit with God’s is believed to end a karmic cycle of rebirths. Worldwide there are more than 20 million Sikhs, making it the world’s ninth-largest religion.

SCRIPTURE

The Sikh scripture is called the Guru Granth Sahib. The 10th Sikh Guru decreed that after his death the book’s teachings would be Sikhs’ spiritual guide. Sikhs show it the respect they would give to a human Guru.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

Vaisakhi marks the Sikh new year, in April, and commemorates the religion’s birth. Like Hindus, Sikhs also observe Diwali, a festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

* + The Sikh place of worship is called a Gurdwara, a punjabi word meaning gateway to the Guru.
  + Sikh men all take the name Singh, meaning lion. Women take the name Kaur, which means princess. Sikh men have uncut hair, carry a wooden comb and a steel sword, and wear a steel bracelet and cotton underwear.

RESOURCES

* + See ReligionLink’s guide to Sikhism (http://www.religionlink.com/source-guides/sikhs-at-a-crossroads/).
  + The Sikhism Homepage (www.sikhs.org/) is an online resource of all things Sikh.

New Religious Movements

New Religious Movements has come to be the accepted term for religious groups that are outside the mainstream. “New” is sometimes a misnomer, in that many of these traditions have roots in ancient faiths. Sometimes, NRMs, as they are called, are suspicious or even dangerous in their goals or treatment of followers, but many times they are not. Some groups develop over time into religions that are accepted in the mainstream. New Religious Movements are a serious topic of study for hundreds of scholars.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

* + Journalists should take great care with the word cult, a term that has come to be associated with religious groups with overly controlling leadership or dangerous practices. However, the word cult has such negative meanings for most people that it should be avoided unless it is absolutely clear that it would not unfairly denigrate a group.
  + The word sect refers to a group that has broken off from another. Journalists should take care with this label as well and avoid it unless they are sure it fits.
  + Journalists who encounter unfamiliar religious groups can easily consult with experts to find out whether they are part of a larger group or how the group’s beliefs and practices compare with other groups’. They should also be aware that just because a group might sound unusual doesn’t mean it is unique. A group called the Raelians falsely claimed they had cloned a human in 1997, inciting lead news stories across the country. The nation then learned that serious scholarly study of UFO religions such as the Raelians was, in fact, already taking place and that the Raelians were hardly the only group with such beliefs.

RESOURCES

* + The Religious Movements Homepage (http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/) at the University of Virginia profiles 200 groups and movements.
  + The Hartford Institute for Religion Research posts extensive links to organizations and scholars who study and catalog NRMs. Many of these directories include profiles of hundreds of NRMs (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith\_new\_religious\_movements.html).

**Visiting places of worship**

There is no substitute for visiting places of worship and other gatherings. The sights, sounds, rituals, textures, mood and conversations will tell you more than any book ever can. Here’s some advice on getting started.

ON THE RECORD? If a worship service is open to the public, you can consider what is said in it on the record in most countries. Sermons can usually be quoted because they are public proclamations. Reporters should be careful about quoting prayers, however; people have filed lawsuits over their private problems being made public.

ADVANCE NOTICE. In most cases, reporters find their visits go more smoothly if they call in advance, and they consider it a professional courtesy to let the religious leader know a reporter will be present. There are, however, plenty of exceptions. If you have been tipped that the preacher is endorsing a politician against federal rules, you obviously don’t want to let him know you’ll be listening. Similarly, a meeting after a worship service may include discussion of a controversial issue, such as tearing down a historical building or splitting a congregation.

WHAT TO WEAR. If you’re unsure how to dress or act, call in advance and ask. Houses of worship welcome visitors and want to make them feel comfortable. You can also consult the book How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook, edited by Stuart M.Matlins and Arthur J. Magida (Skylight Paths Publishing), which details dress and

customs for most traditions. Some houses of worship also post information for visitors on their websites.

SHOW RESPECT. The most important thing is to be respectful, which means being silent during prayer, standing when others do, removing your shoes if the tradition requires it, etc.

SHOULD YOU SING? If you’re attending a worship service as a reporter, you are not expected to participate. Some reporters find it easier to sing during songs or close their eyes during prayer in order to blend in. If you're visiting a place of your own tradition, you may feel comfortable singing and praying, but remember: If you’re on assignment, it’s your job to observe and report. And, if people see you participating, they may expect coverage that extols their faith rather than simply reports on it.

IF YOU'RE FEMALE … Many traditions have particular customs or rules regarding what women wear and how they act. Some are easy for reporters to comply with, but others hamper your ability to report.

* + Many mosques require women to cover their heads, and most reporters don’t mind bringing a headscarf or donning one made available to them. Similarly, some traditions—Muslims and some Pentecostals, for example—expect women to dress modestly, so reporters intentionally wear clothes that cover their arms and legs.
  + When religious customs limit reporting, most veteran journalists handle restrictions with ingenuity and perseverance rather than confrontation. If women are not expected to approach men and initiate conversation, you might enlist a woman to ask her husband to explain your need to interview men. If men and women are segregated during worship, as they are in some mosques and synagogues, you might quietly try to reposition yourself so you can see the men’s section.
  + Some groups prohibit men from shaking hands with women. Wait until a hand is extended to you before attempting to shake someone's hand.

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND RECORDING. You must get permission in advance to photograph, film or record a worship service. Many religious leaders will set restrictions on whether flash can be used (often not) and where photographers or operators may stand. They may restrict what can be filmed or recorded.

TAKING NOTES. Orthodox Jews frown on doing work on the Sabbath, and that includes taking notes. Reporters tell stories about running into restrooms to scribble notes or hiding notebooks under their coats.

OFFERING? Some reporters give small donations when entering a place of worship to be courteous; many do not. The decision is yours.

CONVERSION. Journalists sometimes become targets for conversion. Jeffrey Weiss of The Dallas Morning News has a standard reply when people ask if they can pray for his salvation: “I never turn down a prayer.” If people persist journalists should feel free to be firm about not engaging in conversation.

CHAPTER FIVE

**Religion outside the box**

Faith and belief aren’t based on buildings and institutions. Journalists need to remember that stories about faith and belief shouldn’t usually be based on buildings and institutions, either. One of the most important trends in religion coverage is the increasing number of stories that show that religion is mostly lived outside the walls of synagogues, mosques, churches and temples. Many of the best religion stories are about what happens when people live out their beliefs in everyday life, particularly when they interact with people who hold different beliefs. In this chapter we’ll explore four areas that are fertile ground for stories on all kinds of topics, from education and business to politics and pop culture. In this age of individualism, people are expressing their spirituality in unusual and nontraditional ways. Stories about ethics — from the largest corporations to the smallest choices in everyday life — are an increasingly telling barometer of modern life. Relationships among people of different faiths affect international, national and neighborhood affairs. In the end, many of the highest-profile stories

about religion occur when clashes of belief occur in public, from religious holiday displays to government policies on scientific research.

**Spirituality**

Most religion coverage deals with institutions and the people who frequent them, but official institutions rarely provide an adequate portrait of faith. Journalists can complete the picture by asking people to explain how they express their beliefs in everyday life.

Good places to start include online forums, bookstores, conferences, yoga and meditation classes, volunteer efforts and clubs that may draw people with spiritual but not necessarily religious beliefs. Ask people you meet about rituals that sometimes take place outside of institutions including prayer, weddings, funerals, home altars, journaling, etc.

**Ethics and values**

Questions of ethics seem to be everywhere: government, schools, hospitals, religious institutions, science labs and journalism organizations. Few of the questions involve obvious answers, leaving us to puzzle over what’s right, what’s wrong and where to turn for moral standards. “Ethics and values” are talked about a lot, but in general terms. It's the specific circumstances that make for penetrating narratives.

Moral standards are drawn from a variety of sources—professional codes of conduct, family values, human instincts and, often, religion. Journalists now have more ways than ever to chronicle the ethical questions of our time. They should ask insightful questions, conduct detailed interviews and pay attention to details. They also can consult a wide range of experts in ethics to give perspective and context to the debates of the day.

Some ethicists’ work is based on their religious beliefs, while other systems of ethics are secularly based. Compare perspectives between them, and also explore the ethical perspectives of different religions. On many topics, juxtaposing different faith traditions’ moral standards can illuminate why right and wrong can be so difficult to determine in specific situations.

**Interfaith efforts**

For all of religion’s talk of love and peace, religion reporters continually face the question: Can the world’s religions learn to get along? Many of the world’s most violent conflicts are stoked by potent mixtures of religion and politics. These conflicts are countered by the fact that more families and communities are made up of more members of different faiths. This interreligious mingling provides new personal avenues for understanding religion as well as conflict.

* + With interfaith marriages, look for stories of adapted traditions or tensions in marriages, funerals, holiday celebrations, adoptions and the religious education of children.
  + Religious tensions often play out in pop culture or the public square through reactions to movies, television shows, music, public holiday observances, rites of passage and more.
  + Some faith groups eagerly participate in interfaith efforts, including some Jewish groups, Sikhs and more liberal Christian denominations. They are willing to pray with other faiths without excluding them (such as by praying in Jesus’ name). Others, particularly conservative Christians, shun interfaith events because they believe making their message acceptable to others requires watering down their own beliefs.
  + Great stories can be found when faith groups are unexpectedly thrown together in a common cause (like helping victims of natural disasters) or when they form unlikely alliances. Most conservative Christians, Mormons and Muslims agree regarding same-sex marriage, for example, but disagree on much more. Sometimes, opinions do change, offering tales of transformation. Jews, Christians and Muslims have found individual friendships can transcend differences over Middle East politics.

**Resources**

* + Most denominations and religions have a person or office that monitors or oversees interfaith relations.
  + Many cities have centers that intentionally bring together members of different faiths for dialogue.
  + Religions for Peace is an international coalition and network of religious representatives dedicated to promoting peace.
  + The KAICIID Dialogue Centre (King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) based in Vienna encourages dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures around the world.
  + The Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/), based at Harvard University, tries to help Americans “deal with the realities of religious diversity” and has extensive Web resources on almost every faith tradition.
  + The Interfaith Alliance (www.interfaithalliance.org/), based in Washington, D.C., is an advocacy organization on issues of democracy and religious liberty and fighting religious hatred.
  + The Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions (www.cpwr.org/), based in Chicago, sponsors interfaith dialogue and encourages cooperation among religious and spiritual communities and institutions.
  + The United Religions Initiative (www.uri.org), based in San Francisco, promotes interfaith cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence. It has “cooperation circles” around the globe.
  + Interfaith Youth Core based in Chicago brings together young people of different religious and moral traditions for cooperative service and dialogue around shared values.

**Balancing freedoms: religion in the public square**

The most telling religion stories aren’t usually hidden inside churches, synagogues, mosques or temples. They’re out in public, where people of all different belief systems mix and mingle. They happen in schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, hospitals, government meetings, theaters, courts, science labs, football stadiums and more. Often stories begin when one person lives out his or her beliefs in a way that feels uncomfortable or unfair to others. Sometimes they occur when someone asks for an accommodation to practice faith — such as a student who wants to wear her hijab despite rules against head coverings or an inmate who requests a special diet.

In the U.S., most of these conflicts can be traced to tensions in the **First Amendment of the Constitution**, which states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Such conflicts often draw journalists into the nuances of laws, faith and politics. The U.S. Supreme Court has yet to rule decisively on many church-state issues, so journalists should be aware that court rulings may vary region to region, allowing people to act in differentways depending on where they live.

Religious freedom is enshrined in many other countries’ constitutions, but just because it’s written down in places like North Korea certainly doesn’t mean it’s being protected. In practice, government restrictions and social hostilities often restrict how people live out their beliefs. Journalists must look beyond propaganda, speaking with citizens, faith leaders, academics and non-governmental organizations for a more accurate picture of facts on the ground.

Several international declarations and covenants have been drafted to protect religious freedom. ***Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*** guarantees everyone “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** provides similar protections with the caveat that “freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” Many disputes that involve this balancing of rights end in increased restrictions on the media.

The most obvious restrictions reporters face when covering religion in some countries are legal ones. Constitutions and laws prohibiting apostasy, blasphemy and defamation of religion are often used to muzzle the press and free expression.

Some journalists also fear social and political backlash when broaching religious topics. Pakistan hasn’t executed anyone for blasphemy in recent decades, but people are still being killed by vigilantes accused of the crime. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has bombed media outlets and murdered journalists for “distorting” portrayals of the radical terrorist group. And in the Netherlands, some media professionals are still afraid to cover religion after an Islamist murdered one of their colleagues in 2004.

Reporters also take their economic livelihoods into account. Websites that discuss religion in Brunei must register with the government or face up to $200,000 in fines. In Jordan, journalists face fines of up to $40,000 for denigrating religion. And in Ireland, blasphemy fines top $30,000.

Faced with these legal, social, political and economic constraints, journalists and bloggers should be cautious when covering cover sensitive religious issues in their countries and abroad.

**Resources**

The resources available are endless, so we will not try to list them all here. We recommend checking the [ReligionLink](religionlink.com) archives on the topics you encounter for interview sources and background on many issues.

* + Two primary sources are ReligionLink’s extensive Guide to Church-State Experts and Organizations (www.ReligionLink.org) and Guide to Experts on Religion and Pop Culture.
  + The First Amendment Center (www.firstamendmentcenter.org/) offers research, news and analysis of First Amendment issues.
  + The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (http://pewforum.org/) distributes information, surveys and expert opinions about issues at the intersection of religion and public affairs. Check out their annual global restrictions on religion report.
  + Brian Pellot has written a great deal on religious freedom and freedom of expression issues around the world at brianpellot.religionnews.com. Search the blog archive for specific issues or countries.

CHAPTER SIX

**Resources**

Religion reporting is more complicated than ever because of the vast amount of information

available to reporters through experts, websites, polls, books, advocacy groups, public relations agencies, research reports and more. Most of this information is instantly accessible online, but not all of it is reliable. What’s more, faith groups have gotten more sophisticated about pushing their interests, so reporters often end up with conflicting information.

The ReligionLink library posts a wide variety of resources, including the Internet’s most extensive list of links to religious media and a daily roundup of headlines. Also check out ReligionStylebook.com, an independent supplement to The Associated Press Stylebook. Here are some tips on dealing with statistics, experts, websites and books.

**Numbers**

Why you can’t count on them

Whoever said “Numbers never lie” was not a religion reporter. Here’s why you need to beware of confidently using specific numbers about religious identification or belief.

* + Censuses are the usual standard for counting people and their characteristics, but many do not ask people their religious affiliation.
  + Many countries count newborns as members of their parents’ faiths and issue identity cards stating this faith. Changing or removing this label can be difficult or impossible, regardless of what individuals actually believe.
  + There is no single religion survey that can considered most reliable. Results differ depending on what options are offered, how people are contacted, how many people are surveyed and other factors. Numbers can vary widely, and many faith groups are so small that they rarely show up on surveys in proportion to their actual numbers. Some traditions are underrepresented because of difficulty in obtaining these numbers.
  + With Roman Catholics, there is one pope and a highly structured hierarchy that tracks the number of baptisms. But in many religions, such as Islam, there is no official governing body and no official count.
  + Some faiths, such as the Pentecostal movement, include people from many denominations, so there is no central record-keeping. Evangelical Christians are difficult to count because they often belong to nondenominational churches, official denominations or sometimes none at all.
  + Denominations and religions count their members differently, if at all, so it is difficult to compare their sizes. The Southern Baptist Convention, which does not baptize infants, counts people who are baptized. The United Methodist Church, which baptizes infants, counts people once they are confirmed. Mosques don’t require membership, so estimates of Muslims are just that — estimates.
  + Formal affiliation with a religious group doesn’t give a complete picture. Many Jews are not affiliated with synagogues, other factors must be used to determine Jewish identity.
  + Some houses of worship or faith groups can be competitive about touting numbers of adherents or members, making these numbers highly politicized. Some congregations simply do not publish statistics because their numbers have declined so much.
  + Categories are controversial. Mormons consider themselves Christian, but most Christian groups do not. Messianic Jews, who believe Jesus was the messiah Jews await, consider themselves Jewish, but most Jews consider them Christian.
  + In the U.S. there are only estimates of the number of Buddhists, who are difficult to count in part because immigrants and American converts practice so differently. Also, some people meditate or practice aspects of Buddhism but don’t consider themselves Buddhist, or they combine Buddhism with another faith, such as Judaism, resulting in people who call themselves “JewBus.”
  + Beware of calling any faith the “fastest-growing” in any context without documentation, which can be impossible to procure.
  + Poll results differ depending on how questions are asked. This applies not only to believers, but also to descriptions of their beliefs. People’s stated beliefs about a divine role in creation vary depending on the number and types of choices they are given.
  + People frequently lie when asked about religion, perhaps out of a desire to look good and perhaps out of denial. Surveys have shown that more people *say* they attend worship services than actually show up.
  + In countries where certain faiths or ethnic groups are not recognized, reporting is bound to be skewed. Counting the number of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Baha’is in Iran, Christians in North Korea or Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar would be a difficult if not impossible task given government restrictions and social hostilities.
  + Sophisticated advocacy groups promote their own polls, which support their own agendas. Beware of spin.

**How to make it all add up**

Don’t let the size of faith groups — either nationally or locally — overly influence your coverage. American reporters will likely do more stories on Catholics and evangelicals because of their numbers, but many groups’ impact and influence outstrip their size. The Episcopal Church is small, but its battles over homosexuality are closely watched. Jews are less than 2 percent of the U.S. population but have an important voice, as do Muslims. Buddhism has relatively few followers in the U.S. but permeates American culture.

All the general guidelines of good journalism apply when quoting statistics in religion stories. In addition:

* + Be specific about what numbers represent. Specify what numbers are based on (worship attendance, membership, baptism, etc.).
  + Be careful with comparisons. If you have apples and oranges, say so and note that two groups’ definition of “member” may differ.
  + Look carefully at poll questions and results rather than accepting statistics without question. The poll, as a whole, may tell a different story.
  + Check to see if different organizations have done polls on the same subject. PollingReport.com and search engines make this easy.

**Disputed statistics**

* 1. Give a range of numbers or qualify a statistic if it is in doubt: Various surveys put the number of U.S. Muslims at between 2.6 million and 7 million.
  2. Note when numbers are disputed: Say a group *says* it has X million followers, but others (specify who and why) say otherwise.
  3. Quote several numbers from different sources.
  4. Characterize the amount, if the specific number is not necessary. Sometimes the number is not controversial in a story and it is enough to say that the denomination has “more than doubled,” without debating whether it has tripled.

**Religious identification surveys**

These surveys ask people how they identify their religious beliefs or what religious groups they are affiliated with. Answers depend upon what options they are given and how many people are surveyed. Results vary widely. For example, people who say they are Christian may be then given a list of denominations or different categories to choose among. Some ask people questions over the phone or in person while others gather data from religious groups that keep track of their own numbers. Each has its strengths and shortcomings, and most journalists find some surveys’ categories to be more trustworthy than others.

Although the U.S. does not ask about religion in its official census, many countries do, including the United Kingdom. Look for official figures online.

THE PEW-TEMPLETON GLOBAL RELIGIOUS FUTURES PROJECT analyzes religious changes and its impact on societies around the world. Pew-Templeton surveys cover religious breakdowns of the world population, religious affiliations of the world’s 200+ million migrants, and global restrictions on religion (http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/).

THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY by Trinity College in Hartford, asks more than 50,000 people about religious identification and affiliation. The ARIS website includes data from comparable phone surveys in 1990, 2001 and 2008.

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY was a 2010 survey of U.S. congregations of different faiths by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary. Reports continue to be issued based on ongoing research (http://fact.hartsem.edu/).

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS & MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES: This 2010 survey by Glenmary Research Center presents data reported by religious bodies that participated in a study sponsored by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. The study is conducted every 10 years. 2000 was the first year non-Christian groups were included. Some data is available free, and the whole survey is available for purchase (www.glenmary.org/grc/RCMS\_2000/method.htm).

THE 2001 NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY, prepared by the United Jewish Communities, surveys about characteristics of Jews and Jewish life (www. ujc.org/content\_display.html?ArticleID=60346).

THE NATIONAL CONGREGATIONS STUDY was conducted in 2012 and included data about a representative sample of religious congregations (http://s6.library.arizona.edu/natcong/about.html).

THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES posts a variety of surveys, reports and maps on religion (www.thearda.com/).

THE CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE at Georgetown University conducts social scientific research about the Roman Catholic Church (http://cara.georgetown.edu/).

THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH DATA collects social scientific studies of American Jewry BANK (www.jewishdatabank.org/).

**Polls and surveys**

Many organizations do polls that include questions about religion. Here are some good places to start.

THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER (http://pewresearch.org/), in conjunction with other Pew centers, including the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (http://pewforum.org), conducts

polls about religion.

THE BARNA RESEARCH GROUP ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)) conducts polls about Christians and their beliefs and practices. Polls are searchable.

GALLUP POLLS (http://poll.gallup.com) include many on religion. News releases are available on the website when a poll is released, but after that they are only available to paying subscribers.

POLLINGREPORT.COM (www.pollingreport.com) collects polls from different sources on various topics, including religion.

THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES (www.thearda.com/) compiles data on religion.

**Experts**

Where to find them

Religion is the one of the most studied topics on the planet, so there are thousands of “experts” out there. Your mission, however, is to find one or just a few who are knowledgeable, articulate and helpful on your particular story.

There probably is no such thing as an impartial expert on religion. However, there are experts who, by their training or by the requirements or politics of their job, offer analysis or context about a topic without advocating any one faith’s position. Ask potential sources what makes them an expert in an area and what their own opinions and involvement are on the issue. Cross-check what they say with what you find online. Accurately characterizing sources’ expertise is important.

Don’t assume that because someone is a leader or member of a faith group that they agree with all of that group’s policies and beliefs. There are widely divergent opinions within every faith group.

**Who is an expert?**

CLERGY. Most faith groups require ordination, which includes education, training and endorsement from hierarchy, but some groups call people minister or other titles without requiring any formal training.

ACADEMICS. They include professors in religious studies who may or may not be religious themselves, and professors in seminaries, theological schools or other religious schools, who approach religion from belief in a specific faith. Many professors in other fields also have strong interests in religion and can be helpful sources, particularly social scientists, anthropologists, pollsters and political scientists.

PEOPLE WHO WORK AT NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS THAT ADDRESS RELIGION. They include religious advocacy groups, think tanks and research centers. Some of these push a religious viewpoint, and others study religion’s role in specific areas, such as education, politics or health. Be aware that many organizations call themselves nonpartisan but nonetheless advocate a certain point of view and may be active lobbyists.

BLOGGERS AND OTHER ONLINE SOURCES. Bloggers make news with their opinions and ability to sway others. Religion is, in many ways, the great equalizer. Everyone has access to religion and religious experience, whether they have religious education or training or not. You’ll find many articulate people who have acquired tremendous expertise through volunteer work and life experience.

**Finding experts**

RELIGIONLINK (www.ReligionLink.com) The Religion Newswriters’ Foundation’s resource site provides primers and source guides on topics involving religion, public policy and culture. ReligionLink provides international and regional interview sources (with contact information), story angles, resources and background. The service is free, and its archives are searchable. New issues are distributed regularly by email and posted on the ReligionLink home page.

RELIGIONSOURCE (www.religionsource.org), a service of the American Academy of Religion, is a searchable database of religion scholars across the country.

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION (https://www.aarweb.org/) has study sections on a wide variety of topics. Most sections have a Web page listing members.

**Show me the money**

Resources on charitable giving and fiscal accountability

RESEARCH

* + The Center on Philanthropy (www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/), [Center on Wealth and Philanthropy](http://www.bc.edu/research/cwp/), National Center for Charitable Statistics (http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/), and Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org/).

WATCHDOGS

* + [Ministrywatch.org](http://www.ministrywatch.org), an independent source for ministry ratings, posts financial profiles (www.ministrywatch.com). The American Institute of Philanthropy (www.charitywatch.org/), GuideStar.org (www.guidestar.org/) and Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org/) post evaluations of nonprofits. Empty Tomb (www.emptytomb.org/) is a Christian research service on church finances and giving.

NEWS

* + The Chronicle of Philanthropy (http://philanthropy.com/) and the Philanthropy Journal (www.philanthropyjournal.org).

**Websites**

There are millions of websites about religion. Here’s how to use them carefully.

* + Official websites of religions, denominations and religious organizations are generally reliable, though they are not always up to date. It’s generally best to check every fact and name you take from websites. Don’t forget that even official sites can be hacked.
  + Be aware that critics often create websites with URLs similar to those of whatever group they’re criticizing, so always check who posts on the site. Never use information if you don’t know whose site it is.
  + Some professors keep their sites meticulously updated, while others don’t even list the names of their own books correctly. Double check anything you find.
  + If you’re seeking background on a topic or group — particularly if it involves religious beliefs, doctrines or practice — read what’s online with the understanding that it may be wildly inaccurate.
  + Surf smartly. Read articles about effective ways to research online.
  + To gather background for a story, start with a Nexis, Dow Jones or similar database search of published articles, which are likely to be reasonably accurate. Then when you search the Web, it will be easier to quickly discern which pages have inaccurate or biased information.
  + The internet is a good place to figure out different sides to an issue. If there is dissent or opposition, you’ll generally find it online, which can help guide your reporting.
  + Many publications and centers distribute free email newsletters with stories, updates and press releases about religion. This is an easy way to look for trends and to gather string for stories.

Many religious magazines post all or most of their content online, so you can read a variety of publications from a variety of religious viewpoints for free.

**Books and yearbooks**

Books. You remember them. A a good number of reference books are still worth owning if you’re serious about religion reporting. Check Amazon and the Google Play Store to see which ones are available as e-books.

This list is minuscule compared with what’s available. In evaluating books, look for major publishers or prominent authors. Google Books and the reference departments of universities, public libraries and seminaries are great places to scan some of the variety of major religion reference works available.

* + Scriptures of most major faiths are available online, including different translations. Beliefnet posts sacred texts of more than a dozen traditions ([www.beliefnet.com/](http://www.beliefnet.com/)). This site is useful if you are trying to verify the language of a specific verse quoted by a source.
  + Oxford University Press has nearly 50 “Very Short Introduction” books covering a wide range of religions and belief systems.
  + “How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook” provides useful guidance to what might be unfamiliar religious ceremonies and traditions.
  + J. Gordon Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions (Gale Group) profiles nearly every religious group in America, from the largest to the smallest, and groups them in “families” so you can see how their beliefs compare.
  + Keep a good book or dictionary on world religions. Many veteran reporters recommend Huston Smith’s The World’s Religions (Harper San Francisco) for readability, but there are plenty of other choices, many of them lushly illustrated.
  + In predominantly Christian countries, a Bible dictionary and commentary can come in handy. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford University Press) allows you to look up just about anything related to Christianity and Christian history. Blueletterbible.org allows you to compare 11 translations and versions of the Bible. Dictionaries for other world religions are widely available online.

Some religions and denominations publish annual directories, which can be helpful for tracking down sources and statistics. Examples in North America include:

* The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches ([www.ncccusa.org/yearbook](http://www.ncccusa.org/yearbook))
* The Handbook of Denominations in the United States by Frank S. Mead, Samuel S. Hill and Craig Atwood (Abingdon Press, 2005), which includes information on U.S. denominations within Christianity, Judaism and Islam
  + The Catholic Almanac (www.osv.com/catholicalmanac/index.asp), published annually by Our Sunday Visitor, which includes news, information and history about the Catholic Church.
  + The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada (www.routledge-ny.com/ref/namuslim/#details) by Mohamed Nimer (Routledge), which includes data, lists of organizations and information about how Islam is lived in North America.
  + The American Jewish Year Book (www.ajc.org/site/c.ijITI2PHKoG/b.1333613/k.C711/American\_Jewish\_Year\_ Book\_2005.htm), published annually by the American Jewish Committee, contains data and information on Jews in the United States and other nations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

**About Religion Newswriters**

Religion Newswriters Association was founded in 1949 by 12 religion beat journalists gathered to cover a denominational meeting of Presbyterians in the U.S. RNA grew steadily throughout the years and by 2014 included more than 500 members and subscribers, about two-thirds of whom are journalists.

The association helps journalists cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight. It does so by providing tools and training, including this guide.

RNA’s foundation, created in 1999, serves to improve the public’s understanding of religion. Its projects and services reach more than 5,000 journalists each week.

The Religion Newswriters Association and its Foundation provide dozens of resources. As of this printing, all services are free, although some services are restricted to members only.

**Resources**

**RNA.org**

Our website RNA.org links to hundreds of resources on religion, including scholars and databases.

**ReligionLink.com**

ReligionLink.com is the ultimate resource for journalists reporting on religion. ReligionLink includes free tools and tips for writing about religion with balance, accuracy and insight; comprehensive source guides and story ideas on the most timely and controversial issues in religion and ethics; the latest headlines on specific faiths and topics from around the world; an international database with thousands of links to news items, research reports, educational opportunities and more; a calendar of major religious holidays and events around the world; expert responses to the most frequently asked questions on the religion beat; integrated entries from our Religion Stylebook; in-depth reporting guides on the world’s major faiths; paid press releases announcing upcoming book launches, events and initiatives, and much more. You can read automated translations of content in more than 80 languages using the Google Translate widget at the top of each page.

**Trainings**

Religion Newswriters customizes trainings to suit any media outlet or organization’s needs around the world. RNA has conducted more than 100 trainings, from week-long workshops in Myanmar to brown bag lunches in Washington, D.C. Contact RNA’s training coordinator at [www.RNA.org](http://www.RNA.org) for more information.

**Annual conference**

More than 250 people routinely attend Religion Newswriters’ annual conference, which takes place in a different city each year. High-profile religious leaders and scholars address current topics. Members, who work for large and small newspaper, broadcast and online outlets, have a chance to network with each other about jobs, freelance opportunities and challenges on the beat. The conference also includes other training opportunities, such as workshops on writing or investigative reporting.

**Annual contests**

Each year RNA awards nearly $15,000 in several contest categories recognizing excellence in religion reporting, including Best Religion Story of the Year, Religion Reporter of the Year, Religion Writer of the Year and Best Radio or Television Story of the Year. Visit RNA.org for contest entry details.

**Support**

To help RNA continue its good work, consider a tax-deductible contribution to our Foundation. Donate online at www.RNA.org. Contact Executive Director Debra Mason at 573-882-9257 or [mason@RNA.org](mailto:mason@RNA.org) for more information.

**About the authors**

Diane Connolly was the founding editor of ReligionLink (www.ReligionLink.org), Religion Newswriters’ free Internet news service on religion, public policy and culture. Before that, she was religion editor at The Dallas Morning News. During her tenure, the staff won seven awards for producing the best newspaper religion section in the country. She earned a master’s of theological studies degree from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

Brian Pellot is Religion Newswriters Foundation’s director of global strategy. He reports on religious freedom and freedom of expression issues around the world and leads international RNF trainings from his home base in London, U.K. Pellot earned bachelor’s degrees in international multimedia journalism and Middle Eastern studies from the University of Missouri and a master’s degree in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Oxford.

**About the editor**

Dr. Debra L. Mason is executive director of Religion Newswriters Association and the founding executive director of the Religion Newswriters Foundation. Under her leadership, RNA has become the world’s preeminent trainer for journalists writing about religion. No other organization has more resources to help writers cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight. She is the author of numerous articles on religion reporting and co-edited the only collection of religion news reports: Reporting on Religion, with Judith Buddenbaum. She has a master’s of theological studies from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, a master’s in journalism from Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism and a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from Ohio University.

**Acknowledgments**

This guide is possible because of the expertise, ingenuity, camaraderie and commitment of dozens of religion journalists from the Religion Newswriters Association. What is written here was learned from them. They are also responsible for two predecessors to this guide that were invaluable resources: A Guide to Religion Reporting in the Secular Media: Frequently Asked Questions (2002) and Deities & Deadlines: A Primer on Religion News Coverage by John Dart

(1995, 1998).

Special thanks are due to Mary Gladstone, Kate Fox, David Gibson, Juli Cragg Hilliard, Marilyn C. Lewis, Marcia Z. Nelson, Leslie Scanlon, Janet Perez, Kimberly Winston, Beryl Benderly, Jeffrey Weiss, Holly Lebowitz Rossi, Adelle Banks, Michael Kress.

Religion Newswriters

Helping journalists cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight.

[www.RNA.org](http://www.RNA.org)