

To: Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, Chair, Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

From: Catherine Pepinster, Editor, The Tablet

Overview

Every day, every hour, the news bulletins put out by TV and radio, the comments on Twitter, the websites and pages of newspapers are full of religion. Whether it's protests in Germany over Islam, Justin Welby's comments about Wonga, the consolations of the Archbishop of Glasgow to the dying following a dreadful accident in a Christmas shopping street, Pope Francis' diplomatic efforts over the US and Cuba, or the victims of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East or in Paris, religion in its broadest sense dominates the news agenda.

Lack of knowledge and understanding

Yet never has there been a time when there has been such a lack of knowledge about the basics of religion or a lack of enthusiasm for appointing specialists with acute knowledge of their sphere.

Let me cite an example of that lack of even basic knowledge. Over Christmas 2014, the BBC produced a series of University Challenge specials, in which celebrity graduates took part, representing their alma maters. In the episode televised on 31 December 2014, the

University of Hull team, consisting of Channel Four news presenter Cathy Newman, actor/director Sam West, novelists Philip Hensher and Michelle Paver, struggled to name major Christian feasts celebrated in winter and described by Jeremy Paxman. They got December 28's Feast of the Holy Innocents wrong, struggled with the Feast of the Circumcision, and came up with the Epiphany only after a great deal of debate. Surely 20 years ago every reasonably educated child would have known immediately which date and which feast mark the day the Wise Men visited the manger!

Nor was this lack of knowledge a one-off. As a regular contributor to the Today Programme's Thought for the Day slot, I was once told by a producer to avoid using the term Advent on the grounds that most people would not know what it was.

Decline of specialist reporting

In recent times we have also seen a marked lack of enthusiasm for specialist knowledge of religion. Only five years ago, all the quality papers had religious affairs correspondents. Now none of them have such a specialist, other than the Daily Telegraph, but its man, John Bingham, has to double up as social affairs correspondent.

A common argument of those who advocate the need for people to be at least informed about religion, particularly Christianity, is that it is part of British

heritage, part of the roots of the nation, and heavily influenced our legal system, our literature and our art.

This is clearly true, but fails to acknowledge the role played by religion today. A substantial number of people still attend Church, and in the Catholic Church migration has increased Mass attendance. Similarly, other faiths, particularly Islam are strongly represented among migrants. People in the media in London fail to understand the role played by, say, the Church in rural life, or the importance of cathedrals as meeting points in the regions.

There is also a failure to understand the significant role that religion plays in the shaping of political ideas and greater discourse, from the part played by people at constituency level in general elections to the role played in parliament, whether it is bishops speaking in debate in the Lords, or MPs driven by faith to, say, advocate funding for international aid, debate medical interventions in care of the dying, or speak up about welfare and poverty.

Interest in religion

Yet there is contradictory evidence of how important the media thinks religion is. The Guardian, despite not having a specific, specialist correspondent has considerable space given to religion on its website, where Guardian Belief gives writers and readers the opportunity to explore all faith and ethical issues. It has

also hired the Anglican vicar and commentator Giles Fraser to provide a weekly 'God slot'.

The BBC has also made religion more of a priority, appointing heavyweight reporter Caroline Wyatt as its religious affairs correspondent. But this perhaps suggests a sense within the BBC that religion is above all about conflict: before this post, Wyatt as defence correspondent was reporting on wars in the Middle East, with their roots in Islamic fundamentalism.

Wyatt herself has commented on the importance of religion in the era of globalisation and in doing so she highlights a particularly important issue. The ignorance about religion on the part of the media and the lack of specialist correspondents is not just an issue that should make us sentimental about a previous time when most journalists had a fuzzy, Anglican background, giving them at least the basics about Christianity. It should concern us because it means that the media is failing to understand and communicate some of the most important drivers of human behaviour in the 21st century.

Failure to understand religion's importance in a globalised world

The combination of the lasting influence of the Reformation and the Enlightenment has made many decision makers and commentators in Britain averse to religion, or at least overt manifestations of it. It is a

curious fact that a country without separation of Church and State, and with an Established Church, has been so muted in its response to religious belief. But globalisation and migration have brought more explicit religious beliefs into the open: Britain is no longer a monochrome Anglican society, but a country with significant numbers of practising Muslims, Catholics, Hindus etc whose faith is a seamless robe that impacts on everything that they do.

Globalisation has also brought the rest of the world much closer to our shores, whether through troubles in which our troops and aid agencies are involved or through terrorism. The British secular world has yet to fully grasp that its view of the world is neither superior nor the most popular; the secular outlook is a minority perception in the 21st century.

Reporting religion using a politics template

Religious beliefs therefore need to be understood to better understand the conflicts that affect us all – and to be clear as to what extent the views expounded by those engaged in political conflict and/or terrorism are typical of believers, or the extent to which they represent a distortion of a particular creed.

The difficulty is that the role of religion both abroad and in this country is perceived by the mainstream media as akin to the reporting of politics: it's essentially about conflicts: rows, appointments, scandals, who's in the

ascendant, who's quitting or being sacked, leaked documents, who's behind conflict.

If this means the media is not afraid of religion, then that is good. Religious institutions are not always benign forces for good. It was only after the press dug away across the globe, particularly in the US, Ireland, Germany and the UK, that the extent of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church – and even worse, its cover-up by senior hierarchs – became evident.

While the media is strong on this kind of religious story, it fails when it comes to discourse. There is a clear theological illiteracy in the media with little grasp, for example, of the distinction between Sunni and Shia forms of Islam. The ordination of women as priests or their appointment as bishops is seen as entirely similar to the promotion of women in any other professional sphere; the subtleties of theological debate are rarely given space.

Religious broadcasting is particularly prone to encouraging rows, and wants black and white, either/or arguments when religious discourse in the 21st century is often more complicated. This can cause a distorting lens to be focused on important stories. For example, I was once asked to speak on the Today programme about prayers regarding Jews in the Old Rite of the Mass which was being revived during the papacy of Benedict XVI, and the conversation would have included a representative of Jews. At the last minute I was stood down and another Catholic was invited on to the show

who approved of the revived prayers. But only a tiny minority of Catholics approve of them; my voice would have represented the more general concern among Mass-going Catholics about these anti-Semitic prayers. The producers could have argued that having someone pro and someone anti on the show provided balance, but that balance was actually imbalanced, as the listeners might have assumed from listening to the pro-Old Rite speaker that Catholics in general approved of the controversial prayers.

Another distortion that happens frequently, particularly in the broadcast media is the acceptance of a particular line of thought. So the general view taken is that the shooting of the 12 journalists and police in Paris in January 2015 was taken as an attack on press freedom and therefore the people whose work was attacked as seen as entirely worthy.

But the cartoon images created of Mohammed and Muslims that so angered certain Muslims were in many ways racist. That does not mean that the killing should be condoned, but should the narrative that emerged have been accepted so readily without examination of different angles? It seemed that no reporter questioned the extent to which the right to free speech and the right to offend should slide into Muslim baiting and plain racism. Some of Charlie Hebdo's images of Muslims and Mohammed were along the same lines as the images of Jews in *Der Stürmer* published in Nazi Germany.

Reshaping religious leadership via the media

One of the most significant impacts that the media has had on religion in recent years is the way in which it has reshaped religious leadership. The media loves a soundbite and its loves charismatic individuals.

This is evident through the extent to which Justin Welby with his intriguing backstory – alcoholic father, mother the secretary of Winston Churchill, life as a successful businessman before ordination, tragedy of his daughter’s death – gets far more positive coverage than his more cerebral Archbishop of Canterbury predecessor, Rowan Williams. But the most obvious case in point is the coverage of Pope Francis. From the moment he walked on to the balcony of St Peter’s after his election in 2013, the world – Catholics, non-believers, the media alike – have fallen for Pope Francis. His demeanour, his gestures, his direct way of speaking have captured the imagination of the world.

Among the moments that have dominated the headlines were his washing of the feet of prisoners, including a Muslim woman on Maundy Thursday; his embrace of a disfigured man covered in boils in St Peter’s Square, and his “who am I to judge?” comment about gay people during a Q and A session on a plane coming back from World Youth Day in Rio.

When the media responds so positively to a religious leader, it means that soundbites and gestures take over from more well-thought out ideas. No encyclical or

apostolic letter will have the influence over the faithful as these moments imparted through journalists. This is a new age of charismatic religious leadership via the media.

The Churches, the new media age and PR

The Churches, understandably, lap up this coverage and have become adept users of the media. Justin Welby tweets regularly as do many Anglican bishops. No doubt a priest within the Pontifical Council for Social Communications tweets as @pontifex, rather than Pope Francis, sitting hunched over a keyboard, but millions of followers monitor his thoughts through this medium. The Vatican has always understood the power of media tools, from the days of Marconi when it founded Vatican Radio, to more recently when it quickly latched on to YouTube, created a user-friendly website, News.va, and set up the Pope App. More than ever, religious organisations are able to transmit their own version of events without the intermediary of the media – in effect, they are putting out more and more unfiltered propaganda/PR. That makes specialist journalists even more important than ever – but just when they are needed, the general media is cutting them.

Specialist press

Even the commercial side of the media can work against specialist knowledge being imparted. The specialist religious publications are all run by small publishers and

have small circulations. If they are to increase these and become better known they need to be more available. But WH Smith, still the biggest force in newsagency, demands what is effectively rent for publications to take up shelf space in its outlets. And the specialist religious magazines can't afford it.

What of the future?

Given the above, coverage of religion and belief is clearly unsatisfactory. In an ideal world, the media would recognise that if it is to understand better the role that religion plays on the national and international stage, then it needs to encourage more specialist knowledge among reporters by hiring specialists.

The media's responsibilities

I am not convinced that it is the duty of the media to 'teach' the general population – the Butler Sloss Commission request for evidence referred to the media 'promoting a greater degree of religious literacy in the population as a whole'. It is the duty of the media to keep people informed and that role will be better performed if the media communicate ideas and knowledge about religion more effectively. It will do that if it ensures a greater degree of religious literacy amongst its staff – and that means it should demand that literacy of its staff, just as it would demand its reporters are informed about politics or the NHS. If

journalists realise that is expected of them, then they will seek better education.

Journalism training

Large media organisations can also help by using experts to offer basic courses in religion and they can also lobby the major university training courses for journalism to make religion a key topic/ subject area. When so many young people have had little exposure to religion at school and in the home, religion as part of the training curriculum is essential.

Your question about the criteria required for critiquing or appreciating pieces of work about religion in the media only serves to highlight the complexity of the issue of religion. Who, after all, is doing the critiquing and appreciating? Is there some sort of value-free body which could do this, or one with a particular set of values by which anything and everything could be judged? How a piece of work is received will depend on the beliefs and values of the individual reader. It is hard to conceive of a situation where, for example, every Catholic would find an account of the Synod on marriage and the family , entirely reasonable and accurate when there have been countless arguments among the hierarchy, participants and Catholics around the world as to what the Synod was about and what it achieved.

Special codes – a return to blasphemy laws?

Would a special set of religious reporting codes help? I think we need to stick to the general principles of journalism as governed by professional codes and by the laws of libel. Otherwise we are in danger of creating a situation where religion gets special treatment, either treating it with kid gloves or too harshly.

The general codes of conduct for journalists, emphasizing the need for honest, accurate information, the protection of sources, the importance of distinguishing between fact and opinion, the avoidance of material that is likely to incite hatred, should apply here. All these key points highlight how important it is for the journalist to be as well informed as possible about religion when reporting on it, particularly in an era when inaccuracy and sensationalism could even lead to violence. Commentators, including satirists and cartoonists, should also be bound by the same restrictions on their freedom of expression as exists for coverage of other matters by the media. That means the existing law, existing journalist codes, and notions of taste should inform the way the media covers religion, and decisions made about coverage that could hurt, insult, and degrade people and their most precious beliefs. But I would never advocate a return to the blasphemy laws or their extension to cover religions other than Christianity. That puts too much power in the hands of clerics and fanatics.

Better understanding of the changing audience/readership

The way in which those concerned about religion and its reporting will convince media outlets to improve their coverage is by proving to them that it is what their audiences want. Newspapers such as The Guardian (despite its Belief section on its website) and The Independent seem at times unaware that liberal-leaning people – their potential readerships – include sizeable numbers of people of faith. The hostility they display, particularly in their Comment pages, is often at odds with the views of their readership, as evidenced by the numbers of notable public figures who do have a religious faith. They are failing to keep up with the demographic of changing Britain which has seen believers increase through migration.

The BBC at its best, meanwhile, can produce imaginative programming through its religion and ethics department but there is still an old-fashioned approach to its coverage – one thinks of Songs of Praise. But the other broadcasting companies act as if religion only matters in the context of personalities and terrorism.

Time for the media to catch up and learn from retailers

Curiously, the media has not on the whole caught up with the extent to which people of faith live in Britain. They should take a look at the most profit-sensitive businesses in Britain – supermarkets. The sizeable sections given to religious products for Eid, Christmas, Easter, Diwali, Passover etc tell the story the media

hasn't entirely understood yet – Britain in the 21st century is a country of different faiths, not a monochrome secular, increasingly atheist culture.

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