

Religion and media: showing the full iceberg

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Religion and media: showing the full iceberg

A Review of *Spiritual News: Reporting Religion Around the World*, edited by Yoel Cohen, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2018, 418 pp., ISBN 978-1-4331-2863-9

Harmony in the binomial of religion and news has never been easy. Religion is a complex dimension, which resists entering the moulds of conventional journalism, where there is not always room for nuance. As if religion were an iceberg, the journalist is interested in the part that stands out, but he has to keep in mind the part that is not seen for his story to be coherent. In addition, to increase the complexity, although religious sensitivity is inherent to every human being, we must not forget that not all religions are the same. The role of the media and the meaning of freedom of expression are also very different in the various religions.

The variety and interest of the topics covered in *Spiritual News: Reporting Religion around the World* is a new demonstration that – contrary to certain forecasts – religion is still alive, also in the field of communication. Paradoxically, as Stewart Hoover critically points out, ‘it might be said that journalism is in a larger sense responsible for the fact that the emergence or re-emergence of religion into the public sphere in the present century has caught many by surprise’ (p. 18).

Perhaps one of the book’s accomplishments is its structure and the variety of perspectives of the nineteen studies that make it up. Not all articles have the same value, but I think the reader can learn something from each one. Overall, it is more than a good introduction. Bearing in mind such a variety, I think that a description of the content, highlighting those points that I have found of greatest interest, may be useful.

In the introductory section, editor Yoel Cohen presents a brief overview on the theme of ‘Religion and the News’ in recent decades, mentioning some renowned works. This section is complemented by Stewart Hoover’s chapter in which he delves into the problems inherent in journalistic coverage of religion and suggests some present and future trends. For this veteran scholar, new channels and sources challenge the conventional treatment of religion, which has been negatively influenced by a rationalist mentality characteristic of Anglo-Saxon journalism. Now, ‘expression’, ‘sensation’ and ‘celebration’ also occupy space in new media and social networks. In the face of this multiplication of voices, warns Hoover, the journalist – conscious of his role as legitimator – must be careful not to listen only to extremes.

The second section of the book, dedicated to newsgathering, deals with the problems posed by treating religion as foreign news, in a context in which there are fewer and fewer specialized journalists and more news stories with religious substrates at the international level (Joyce Smith), hence the importance of the figure of the religion reporter and his contribution to the whole of the newsroom (Yoel Cohen). A unique type of religion reporter is constituted by the *vaticanisti*, that is, journalists who cover the Vatican, whose evolution has been parallel to a growing awareness of the Catholic Church about the role of the media (Miriam Diez Bosch). If one speaks of newsgathering, it is essential to refer to how digitalization has influenced the production and distribution of religious news and how journalists use online sources (Tim Huntchings).

One of the objectives of the book, in the words of its editor, is ‘to go beyond the United States – which is much of the focus of existing media and religion research – to other regions and countries’ (p. 8). The third section of the book deals with the cases of the United States (Daniel A. Stout), Russia (Victor Khroul), Brazil (Magali do Nascimento Cunha), Nigeria (Walter C. Ihejirika & Andrew D. Dewan), India (Keval J. Kumar) and China (Qingjiang Yao and Zhaoxi Lui).

I found the studies on India and China particularly interesting. On the one hand, how the social and cultural power of the dominant Hindu religious community is expressed in India and how ‘minority religious groups make it to the front pages only when they happen to be a source of interest to the majority group’ (p. 194), is an observation that may not be exclusive to India, judging by other cases presented in this volume. As far as China is concerned, interest is increased by the greater ignorance about how political control of religion evolves and to what extent it is reasonable to think that it is fully effective.

Journalistic information about religion is often associated with events of a religious nature. The fourth part of the book concentrates on two religious events with very different characteristics. Without a doubt, one of the events with the greatest global impact is the election of a new Pope. Although it is always a ritual that has elements in common with the previous ones, the election of Pope Francis in 2013 was preceded by the unusual gesture of Pope Benedict’s resignation and gave way to the unprecedented experience of the coexistence of two Popes, one emeritus (Giulia Evolvi).

Radically different was the terrorist attack on the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 (Leo Eko), which – among other issues – caused an intense debate on the role of religion in the public sphere, continuing the controversy that arose in 2005 with the publication of the cartoons on Muhammad by the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*. The peculiarity of both Mohammed cartoon events was that media outlets were the main actors which showed that freedom of expression is a universal idea with many interpretations, as the media all over the world responded in different ways.

The global view is also present in the fifth part of the book, devoted to the influence of religion on religion reporting. This is the case of Saudi Arabia (Noa Mellor), where the role of censorship historically represented by the religious establishment has been somewhat altered by the attacks of 9/11 and by two tragedies that occurred in the Peninsula. The popularity of social media has allowed the diffusion of critical voices but has also been used by the establishment to reinforce its position.

The other two studies in this section concern Malaysia and Israel. The first (Haryati Abdul Karim) deals with the diverse coverage of an LGTB festival by two influential newspapers with antagonistic editorial visions. The second (Yoel Cohen) focuses on the different coverage of Jewish religious holidays by Israel’s secular and religious press, and how superficial coverage can affect religious identity.

The last section of the book is dedicated to the impact of New Media in Religion. The French case of ‘Marriage for All’ (Christian Bourret and Karim Fraoua) is studied: how digital media were used in the public debate on the law about homosexual marriage, extending the discourse to the interpretation of the *laïcité* and the role of social networks in democratic society. Another article (Babak Rahimi) refers to a Shia Muslim online news agency, *Shafaqna*, which fosters a growing culture of participation among different Muslim institutions, demonstrating that not all Muslim online activities are limited to propaganda.


I think the study on ‘The Catholic Church and Twitter’ (Daniel Arasa, Lorenzo Cantoni and Juan Narbona) offers notes of interest for any type of institution. In addition to summarizing in a few paragraphs what has been the evolution of Catholic doctrine on the media (from an ‘instrumental’ vision to a ‘cultural’ one), the article offers an empirical

analysis on the use of Twitter on the occasion of the Synod convened by Pope Francis in 2015 to deal with the family. The conclusion is that the online debate focused on a few of the themes of the Synod debate, demonstrating that ‘the rhythm and type of debates imposed by Twitter, and the social media in general, are very fast and many times inconclusive’ (p. 340). While the Internet favours ‘horizontal’ dissemination, the authors find that ‘Twitter is probably not the best tool to project Catholic doctrine to the faithful’ (p. 340).

Throughout many of the pages of the book is there is the latent question of what is and what should be the role of the journalist in this new scenario. It could be concluded by underlining that he must be first and foremost a professional, a quality perhaps more necessary today than in other times. ‘Social networks on religion’ – says the editor of the volume – ‘have become online pulpits for all, even citizen journalists, gurus, and fellow-travellers anxious to spread the Word. But a closer look at this shows that, in many cases, there are no pretensions to be objective or balanced. This, therefore, gives professional journalism an added lease on life – to guide the news consumer through claims, counterclaims, messages, disinformation, and fake news’ (p. 13).

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