

# ENHANCING ALL THE RELIGION NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT

By John M. Mulder

If you lived in New York City during the 1890s, each Monday you would be treated to (or burdened with) a full page of reports on the sermons that were delivered the day before—Sunday. The print was very small; the page was very large—much bigger than contemporary newspapers. More than a dozen sermons were covered in each of several newspapers. The featured churches were all Protestant congregations—except occasionally the Ethical Culture Society made its way into this page; less occasionally a Jewish or Catholic homily was covered.

Such attention to church life is inconceivable in twenty-first journalism, and that leads to one of the points of this article. “Church journalism” has become religion journalism during the twentieth century. The “church page” still exists in newspapers large and small, but there are dramatic differences. First, churches *pay* to print notices listing their services and other activities. Second, the church page runs on Saturday in preparation for Sunday—not on Monday. Third, these notices are essentially advertising, or in church terms, they might be and often are seen as evangelism—a public attempt to attract people to worship and fellowship in a particular congregation.

Although a congregation might make the pages of a contemporary newspaper—especially if there’s a bitter dispute—articles about religious life are precisely that. They focus on developments that appear in a particular community but are essentially part of broader movements in American religion. In short, church journalism has become religion coverage—embracing the religious diversity of America and delineating the influences affecting religious institutions (rather than only churches).

The symbolic date for this transition might be 1949 when the Religion Newswriters Association was formed. The RNA marked the professionalization of journalists who reported on religion and their self-conscious attempt to define themselves as people who covered a significant part of American social, economic, and political life.

The challenge religion journalists (and their editors) confronted was fairly clear. It’s relatively easy to summarize sermons. It’s harder to deal with the complex and complicated changes in American religion, such as *American Christianity* and its theological disputes (fundamentalism vs. modernism, neo-orthodoxy, neo-evangelicalism, liberation theology, post-Christian theology, etc.). It is much more difficult to deal with *religious movements* — e.g., the rise of pentecostalism

(which is probably the most important story in twentieth-century religion, both in the U.S. and throughout the world); *the role of religion in politics* (such as the civil rights movement or the rise of the New Right in the late twentieth century); *the nature of religious conflict* (Protestants vs. Catholics throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Muslims vs. Christians and Jews, or Mormons vs. Christians; and *the vitality of religion itself* (is America becoming more secular or is religion more vibrant than ever before?))

Even more challenging is digging deeper into *the nature of belief and behavior* — why religious people are more tolerant today than a century ago, why increasing numbers of people define themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” why most people are worshiping in large rather than small congregations, why church membership hovers at about 60 percent of the population but 90 percent believe in God and pray regularly, why conservative forms of religion seem to be flourishing, or why young people are increasingly outside of religious institutions rather than seeking membership.

Covering religion is a tough beat, and nobody knows it better than the religion journalists themselves. Frequently, they are religious people themselves, but their editors are often skeptical of the importance of religion stories. Short of pursuing a degree in religious studies, religion journalists frequently lack the education and background to report on such an elusive and complicated phenomenon as religion in American culture. Technology represents a revolution in how all news is reported and received. The result is often inadequate coverage of religion.

Some argue that religion is the most under-reported area of American life. However, the same might be said of science, education, or technology. The fact remains that if you live in a major metropolitan area or subscribe to a national newspaper (e.g., the *New York Times*), you will get some coverage of religion. But if you live in a medium-size or small community, religion coverage is sparse. And if you depend on television and radio for your knowledge of religion in America, you’ll find religious programming but little insight into the complexity of American religious life.

To address this issue, the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment some years ago launched an initiative called “The Public Understanding of Religion.” Its grantmaking “seeks to engage the powers of mass media and major cultural institutions to increase the general (and church) public’s knowledge about, understanding of, and appreciation for Christianity and other religions and the roles they play in our society and the personal lives of a great many Americans.”

Some of this grantmaking is highly visible. For example, Lilly provides generous support to “Speaking of Faith With Krista Trippett” (now “[Krista Tippet on Being](#)”) which is carried on National Public Radio and 240 stations (see [an interview with Tippet](#) on her program.) Tippet’s show is an admirable and creative attempt to

go beyond religious conflict to the phenomenon of “lived religion” — namely how individuals actually deal with the dilemmas of belief in the contemporary world.

In addition, Lilly is a funder of “[Religion & Ethics Newsweekly](#),” hosted by Bob Abernethy (see [an interview with Abernethy on his program](#)) This show appears on more than 250 stations through WNET and the Public Broadcasting System, and its website provides rich coverage of religion with a global perspective.

But Lilly has also funded less visible programs to strengthen the reporting of religion, and this article focuses on three of these areas of grantmaking. One focuses on helping the members of the Religion Newswriters Association gain more knowledge of religion in America. A second focuses on a research project that demonstrates the regional variations of American religious life. A third uses the Internet to provide access to the multitude and variety of research projects funded by Lilly.

Lilly’s goal is not to determine the content of religion coverage but to enhance it by making it more knowledgeable, more insightful, and more nuanced.

### **I. Strengthening Religion Journalists**

Over the past decade, Lilly has provided a series of grants to the Religion Newswriters Foundation, an affiliate of the [Religion Newswriters Association](#). The grants have supported two major efforts:

- Financial support for religion journalists to take courses in various aspects of religion in America
- Financial support for a website, [ReligionLink](#), which provides ideas for covering stories of religion in America and substantive background for those stories

#### ***The Lilly Scholarships in Religion***

Here Lilly has provided money to support journalists to take courses at an institution of higher education that will expose them to a particular aspect of religion. In making these grants, Lilly noted:

“Many journalists who are assigned to cover religion come to their jobs with little or no formal training or education in religion. By offering scholarship for tuition and books through this program, Religion Newswriters Foundation makes it possible for journalists to study in-depth some aspect of religion at a seminary, divinity school, or college religion department. In their courses and studies, reporters are exposed to information and resources that expand their understanding of the field of religion and improve their ability to write and communicate with greater sensitivity, accuracy, clarity, and credibility.

“Secular news media are the largest and most influential source of news and information about religion and faith outside of one’s personal faith community. Therefore, coverage of religion news that is accurate, credible, and nuanced is vital to the public’s understanding of religion and its role in creating values and behaviors that guide individual lives and world events. Journalists who have taken classes with the support of this program have reported that their studies have been transformative for their professional work, while they have also in many cases had a significant impact on their own lives of faith.”

The scholarship program supports a wide variety of course work, including those that involve Lilly’s interest in developing the understanding of clergy leadership and the life of congregations. Over the life of this continuing program, the [Religion Newswriters Association](#) has supported more than 250 grants to journalists. In turn, they have taken a striking variety of courses, such as:

- American religious megatrends
- Canon law
- Contemporary cults
- Gender and Islam
- Hinduism
- Introduction to pastoral care
- Jewish American culture
- Ministry in daily life
- Morality and society
- Native American Religions
- Spiritual development
- Understanding Japanese religions
- Death and afterlife in the Bible

Equally striking is that the journalists who received the grants report that the educational experience not only broadened their knowledge but deepened their own faith. In fact, a few have abandoned the practice of journalism to enter ministry themselves as members of the clergy. This is not surprising since the largest number of recipients have taken courses in a theological seminary or divinity school; a smaller number have received their education through religion programs at a local college or university.

Debra Mason, Executive Director of the Religion Newswriters Association, explains, “Seminaries are frequently more accessible. We have also found that journalists are often taking courses for more than just knowledge. The courses trigger exploration of personal, spiritual introspection. Most of the time they didn’t expect that. This has been one of the best and most unexpected outcomes of the program.”

Journalists’ response to the Lilly scholarship program has been enthusiastic. For example, one journalist wrote, “The Lilly Scholarship has given me, a mid-career

journalist, a much needed chance to grow spiritually and intellectually, as well as the hope to advance toward a better future in journalism.”

After taking a course, “Journalism as Christian Practice,” another journalist declared, “I can see that [the professor] has an expansive view of what journalism can accomplish. He sees parallel impulses in both the church and in the newsroom to ‘afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.’ So it may be that what the church expects from its journalists is not all that different from what journalists expect from themselves . . . . This class is appealing in that it would allow me to read, think, and dialogue about why I do what I do. There are precious few opportunities for this, especially in a difficult financial climate when productivity seems more important than public service.”

The Religion Newswriters Association surveyed grant recipients, and among the findings were these:

- One hundred percent of survey recipients said the course they took made them a better journalist. It expanded their knowledge, and they felt enriched through the process.
- About 90 percent said the course helped them examine their own spirituality or faith.
- Nearly 65 percent indicated their experience helped them to better understand the role and training process of clergy and other religious leaders.

Commenting on the last of these results, Mason of the Religion Newswriters Association observed, “Lilly funds stories on denominations and church life, pastoral leadership, and congregational life. These are hard stories for journalists to see because they’re hidden. Lilly is the only place that is really concerned about congregational life and pastoral leadership.”

### ***ReligionLink.com***

The other focus of Lilly grants to the Religion Newswriters Association is the development of a website, [www.religionlink.com](http://www.religionlink.com). It has now become a trusted source of religion news; in a survey of journalists, ReligionLink was ranked No. 1 as the single most useful tool helping journalists write about religion. As the website declares, it is “the only religion story idea and source list by journalists, for journalists.” Its goal is “to help journalists write about religion with balance, accuracy, and insights.” It provides story ideas that are “independent of any religious or political viewpoints.”

ReligionLink sends out its story ideas to more than 5,000 people on a weekly basis, and most of them are journalists. Here is a sample of the variety of stories available through this website:

- “Big-box Christianity: A guide to megachurches”
- “The abortion debate: A new poll, plus experts and organizations”
- “Muslims at Ramadan: Showcasing a diverse minority”
- “A guide to Scientology: Beyond sects and celebrities”
- “A guide to experts on religion and poverty”
- “A guide to evangelicals and politics”
- “Love and forgiveness: experts and organizations”
- “A guide to end of life issues”
- “The future of faith: expert ideas and trends”
- “Race and religion in America”
- “A guide to experts on religion and pop culture”
- “Pentecostalism: Azusa Street Centennial”
- “A guide to church-state experts and organizations”

As Mason observes, [ReligionLink](#) is really “a Rolodex of ideas for journalists.” “It’s the most used resource for non-religion specialists,” she says. The website, she adds, has “a lot of funders, but Lilly is the single most important source of money.”

Not surprisingly, [ReligionLink](#) is used mostly by newspaper journalists. In 2008, 1,861 newspaper reporters subscribed to the website. This contrasts sharply with only 325 television reporters and 184 radio reporters who subscribe, underscoring the importance of reaching newspaper reporters. There are simply more of them.

About 27,000 monthly visitors use [ReligionLink](#), and the response demonstrates its value. For example, one journalist said, “You can make changes, but that doesn’t mean ReligionLink would be improved. You already are doing what I wanted you to do: expand coverage of the range of issues that are affected by religion and spirituality.” Another declared, “I think [ReligionLink] is about as comprehensive and sharply crafted as it could be. Your continuing to provide this service is greatly appreciated!”

### ***A Look at the Future***

Over the past decade, newspapers as well as radio and television have been hit by tsunami of technological change and economic challenges. Many newspapers now provide the news to a dwindling number of readers—lost to a dizzying number of websites for both general and specialized news. This has meant a decline in both subscription income and advertising revenue. The result: cutbacks in staff, sometimes reducing the number of religion journalists, expanding their reporting responsibilities, and occasionally the loss of their reporting altogether. The reduction in personnel worsened with the Great Recession of 2008. Some anticipate the demise of newspapers entirely in both small and even large markets, and since newspapers are the single most influential source of religion news, this represents a major challenge.

Mason and the Religion Newswriters Association are well aware of the powerful forces transforming their media and religion journalist practitioners. “This is a very messy time because of technology,” she says. “It’s an in-between time, and we’re trying to look beyond today. The fact is the national coverage of religion is probably better than it’s ever been, but local and regional coverage is suffering.”

As she looks to the future, she sees the Religion Newswriters Association providing more resources for local and regional coverage, expanding awareness of international news about religion, and building a climate for civil discourse about religion. “Journalists and media managers are gradually learning how to deal with these controversial religious issues,” she says. “They’re becoming aware of how to deal with the marketplace of ideas and how to navigate the shoals. The goal is always to be fair but also be careful to maintain civility.”

A great deal has been accomplished, she maintains. “Publishers are starting to get the idea that religion is a major factor in global conflict and global healing. We now have a growing public awareness that we need to understand religion better. We recognize in our gut that we need to understand greater religious diversity and polarization. Like a 12-step program, leaders in journalism need to recognize a problem and recognize the need for help to deal with the problem.”

“Media will always play a role in shaping people’s understanding of religion,” she declares, “and new technologies will be very significant. Technology will be less of a problem when the issue of civility is solved. Technology will also help religion news become more accessible. I expect that most of the technological issues will be resolved in five years, but now it’s a messy, confused time.”

As a prescription for religion journalists and their publishers, Ms. Mason advances three proposals:

- Focus on regional and local markets. “There are easy technological solutions to reaching these markets,” she says. Individuals and groups “are desperate for faith communities and local connections. Faith communities have huge problems of connecting with people, especially youth. We need to develop hubs of local partnerships within the media.”
- Expand international coverage. “More and more, we’re seeing the recognition of the need for good religion coverage on an international basis,” she says, both within the journalistic community and the constituencies they serve.
- Emphasize the need for knowledgeable journalists. “Training, training never stops,” she declares. “We have to keep plugging away at building trained, knowledgeable journalists. And that’s what makes the Lilly scholarship program so valuable, both now and in the future.”

## **II. Research on Religion and Region**

Acknowledging the importance of local and regional coverage of religion, Lilly funded a major research project on the regional variations of religious affiliation, belief, and behavior. The project was directed by Mark Silk of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

Silk was an ideal person to lead this effort because he has spanned both the worlds of journalism and academia. He graduated from Harvard College in 1972 and earned a Ph.D. in medieval history at Harvard University in 1982. After teaching at Harvard for three years, he became editor of the *Boston Review*, and then joined the staff of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* from 1987 to 1996 where he was a reporter, editorial writer, and columnist. Most of his work there focused on religion in America.

In 1996, he became the founding director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and in 1998 he became the founding editor of *Religion in the News*, a magazine published by the Center that examines how the news media handle religious subjects. In 2005, he was named director of the Trinity College Program on Public Values, which includes both the Greenburg Center and a new Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, directed by Barry Kosmin. In 2007, he became Professor of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College. Currently he writes a [blog on religion and American political culture](#) and [blogs for Beliefnet.com](#).

In 2001, Silk and his assistant director of the Greenberg Center, Andrew Walsh, received a Lilly grant for a research project on the role of region in American religion. It's not as if the subject has been ignored. For example, historians have created a mountain of scholarship on religion in New England. The role of religion in the South has been probed by generations of historians interested in the intersection between race and religion. The Middle States have provided the prism for understanding the origins and development of religious pluralism. And, though relatively neglected, the Middle West and the West have provided fertile ground for understanding how religion changed through migration and immigration.

However, the Religion and Region project was launched with a contemporary focus, and it was intentionally aimed at journalists. Furthermore, it proposed to describe and analyze American religion in specific geographical confines, which proved to be one of its most controversial elements.

For example, the Religion and Region project used demography and state lines to define the various regions. While some of the regions were largely predictable (e.g., New England and the South), others were unexpected and more controversial. For example, Idaho is connected to the Mountain West, rather than the Pacific Northwest, because the heavily Mormon population of southern Idaho relates more closely to Utah. Likewise, developments in the Midwest's religious population were tracked across an enormous expanse from North and South Dakota to Ohio.

In one area, the Religion and Region project definitely broke new ground by delineating a new region named "the Southern Crossroads." It includes Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas." The researchers convincingly demonstrate unique features of the region and the factors that have made this region the fascinating birthplace for three recent Presidents — Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush.

The Religion and Region project produced eight volumes of research, each edited by Silk and a co-editor, and each containing essays on various facets of religion within the region. The series was published during 2004-2006. The eight volumes are as follows:

*Religion and Public Life in New England: Steady Habits, Changing Slowly.* Andrew Walsh and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).

*Religion and Public Life in the Middle Atlantic Region: The Fount of Diversity.* Randall Balmer and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira, 2006).

*Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).

*Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West: Sacred Landscapes in Transition.* Jan Shipps and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).

*Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone.* Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).

*Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Region: Fluid Identities.* Wade Clark Roof and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2005).

*Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode.* Charles Regan Wilson and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2005).

*Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads: Showdown States.* William Lindsey and Mark Silk, eds. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2005).

As the titles indicate, the series is united in its emphasis on “public life,” defined largely as religion and politics. In addition, the titles also suggest the differences—sometimes profound, sometimes nuanced—between regions and how these differences create a mosaic of American religious life, rather than a homogenous whole.

In a scintillating essay review of the series in *The Journal of American History*, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, who teaches religious studies at the University of North Carolina, wrote:

This is a wonderful resource for anyone with an eye to the vast geographical and religious diversity of the nation. . . . The individual essays in the volumes are rich and rewarding, offering detailed snapshots of religion in local settings. Moreover, because of the data now available on new immigrants and non-Anglos, we are afforded glimpses into religious worlds left untouched in earlier regional overviews. Native Americans in the Southwest, indigenous Hawaiians, and Asian communities on both coasts take their place alongside Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, and Jews. The data also include those who self-identify as having no religion, a feature that illuminates characteristics of public life that are then explored in the essays (*The Journal of American History*, September 2007, 523).

Fortunately, Silk and Walsh have provided a summary volume for the series, *One Nation: Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). Each chapter encapsulates the findings of the eight volumes in the series, followed by an analytical conclusion that sets the regional findings in a national perspective.

That concluding chapter narrates—not surprisingly, in good journalistic prose—the demise of what the authors call “Pan Protestantism” (“America is a Christian nation”) in the twentieth century. The result was initially Will Herberg’s famous description of America as “Protestant, Catholic, Jew.” By mid-century (when Herberg wrote), this synthesis of faiths was breaking down into the disparate and competing claims of various religious *expressions*, rather than denominations or faith traditions. The result has been a pluralism created more by competing ethical and religious visions, rather than religious institutions. The pluralism has seeped into politics—with divisive and acrimonious results, focused on a variety of issues, especially abortion and homosexuality.

Silk and Walsh wrote in the aftermath of the 2006 Presidential election, and they cautiously predicted that the emerging religious and political impulse in American politics will come from the Midwest “because the Midwest is where the country comes together now. It is the place with the largest political deviations—from deep red states like Kansas and Nebraska to the deep-blue state of Illinois to the swingiest of swing states—Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Although it is

far from the most religiously diverse region, it is the one where the country's main religious players all have strong hands to play. . . . If there is to be a new style of religious pluralism in America, there is something to be said for having it emerge from the Midwest (*One Nation Divisible*, p. 227).

Silk and Walsh were perceptive, if not prophetic. In 2010, the African-American Christian, Barack Obama—born to a Muslim father from Kenya and a non-religious mother from Kansas, and son of Indonesia, Hawaii, California, Massachusetts, and Illinois--was elected President of the United States. He became a Christian in Chicago.

By 2010, the symbol of Obama as a representative of the crossroads of religious and cultural diversity was marred by the fractious character of American politics and by the devastating effects of the Great Recession. But Silk and Walsh's larger point may prevail. The constructive and hopeful future of American religion and politics might be those individuals and institutions capable of embodying the diversity which various faith traditions and various political interests represent. Time will tell.

In the meantime, the Religion and Region research project is a valuable tool—not only in understanding the diversity of American religious and political life historically but also in interpreting contemporary social and political movements.

This is clearly a project that saw history as a handmaiden to analyzing America in the twenty-first century. The project directors also hoped to bring their findings to journalists to illumine their understanding of the regions in which they worked. In this regard, they were only partially successful. Seminars for groups of journalists were convened in various cities with the hope that these educational events would be attended and impart the important results of the research project. Silk's reputation as a journalist helped attract the journalists, and the central question was: What do religion writers in your region need to know? With some exceptions, the seminars were sparsely attended.

The lesson seems to be that religion journalists—pressured by conflicting demands and guided by editors watching the economic bottom line—find it difficult to set aside significant time for their own education and edification. Instead, they'll get it, if they do, on an individual basis—by taking a course, reading a book, surfing the Internet. Silk also emphasizes that religion reporters frequently learn from one another and the people they cover. "The value of reporters covering religion is relationships," he emphasizes.

Silk frankly confesses that he doesn't know how much impact the Religion and Region project has had or will have on religion journalists. "I'm hard pressed to say," he says. But he also notes, "National trends and developments are fairly easy to follow, but what's lost is the regional angle—the distinctive characteristics of each region. Religion journalism is both more sophisticated and more divisive

and parochial because it is heavily influenced by blogs and denominational news services. It's quite a different world. Religion journalism is knowledgeable but very partisan."

Silk expects that religion journalists won't disappear, but they may likely be freelance writers, rather than staff members of a newspaper or other media. "We're moving toward a world in which reporting is going to come from unconventional sources, for example, non-profit institutions. There's a possibility that seminaries might become major avenues for reporting on religion."

Whatever the source of religion journalism, Silk emphasizes that it has to be seen as "a human phenomenon — individuals and institutions." "It's not the God beat," he declares. "Journalists should write about religion with a respectful spirit but a sharp eye. Sometimes it should be amusing and ironic. People should enjoy reading it. It's the story of people who behave with remarkable seriousness and virtue, but not always. Piety is only part of the story."

The more educated religious journalists are, the more accurate and insightful their articles will be. Presumably, people will enjoy reading that. Silk and Walsh's study will gradually modify the story so that the accents of region will affect knowledge of religious visions about what human life can be.

### **III. A doorway to knowledge of religion through the Internet**

There is simply no question that Lilly Endowment has been the single greatest funder of research on American religion. Much of that research has appeared in articles and books, and increasingly the research has appeared on websites that display the research and often additional background material.

The trouble — for journalists, researchers, religious leaders, and anyone else who is interested — is that the research has been hard to find. And the explosion of websites makes it difficult to decide which ones are reliable.

#### ***The ARDA***

One way through this morass of electronic information is [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com) or the Association of Religion Data Archives. The site is supported by Lilly Endowment, the John Templeton Foundation, and Penn State University. Guided by Roger Finke, Director of ARDA and professor of sociology at Penn State University, this website has become the holy grail for anyone interested in hard data on American religion. It was started in 1997 and went online in 1998 as a website devoted to researchers in American religion, but since then it has expanded to become a resource for educators, journalists, and religious congregations.

The mine of data available through [The ARDA](#) is impressive by any standard. A quick visit to its home page makes it possible for users to find information on a wide variety of issues. For example, by simply entering a zip code, you can find the congregations and the demographic information about your neighborhood. Or, put in the zip code again, and you can find reports on congregational membership in your areas. Or, you can do cross-cultural comparisons of the United States and other countries. Or, by selecting a topic, you can download information about the issue drawn from sociological studies. And there's much more.

[The ARDA](#) has become an enormously helpful tool in educational settings, but it has also become a reliable source for denominations and congregations in planning new church development or redevelopment of existing congregations. Use of the website is impressive. In a two-year period from 2006 to 2008, the number of pageviews increased more than threefold from 548,924 per month to 1,755,182. On an annual basis, the ARDA provides more than 15 million page views. (Page views are a more reliable measure of a site's usefulness than "hits.")

[The ARDA](#) is an enormous source of help for journalists. "What we discovered," says Finke, "is that what works for religious leaders works for journalists as well." A reporter can find reliable data about the religious composition and demography of a particular community, as well as background for nearly any article. "We want to democratize religious data," Finke declares. "We want to assemble the very best and most recent data and make them accessible to anyone—all the time. This is a trustworthy source."

Recently, [The ARDA](#) added a feature specifically aimed at journalists. Known as "The Press Room" on the website, this section funded by the Templeton Foundation provides a weekly column, "[Ahead of the Trend](#)," written by David Briggs. He is an award-winning journalist who is consistently honored among the Top 10 secular religion writers and reporters in North America. He was the former national writer for The Associated Press and holds a master's degree from Yale Divinity School.

Briggs' goal is to bring religion research from throughout the world to a wide audience but especially his fellow journalists. Every column is based on some study that illumines an important issue in American religion and culture and/or is linked to a current newsworthy story. Like The ARDA itself, Briggs' range is wide and deep. For example, in the last six months, using hard data and rigorous research, he has written columns on the following:

- How faith in God and access to a religious support system help NFL players avoid falling into deviant behavior
- The role of religion in helping people suffering from obesity

- How a view of God as love moves Americans beyond the polarization in our culture and contributes to “civility at the core of nearly all Americans’ faith life”
- The importance of welcoming poor parents in congregations in order to provide support for their children
- Religious freedom as “messy [and] fragile,” not because of the presence of diverse religious groups but because of governments that impose restrictions on religious freedom as a way to protect the public good.
- The need for faith communities to hold violent men accountable for abuse against women to curb further violence
- How zoning battles endanger religious freedom
- The stiff competition between religious communities and secular options for the time, energy, and resources of American adults and their families

Some of Briggs’ columns have been picked up by the Huffington Post, and “the feedback from readers has been perceptive and intelligent,” he notes. “The response from pastors and researchers to the columns has been very strong.”

“What I’m trying to do,” says Briggs, “is to provide hard data and the context for the data. Religion reporting has often suffered from lack of attention to both of these. It’s even more critical now that journalists have reliable and trustworthy access to both of them to produce the kind of reporting that is needed in our society and our world.”

“I’ve been a huge fan of ARDA as a writer,” he declares. “I’ve seen it grow from an idea to a powerful source of knowledge and information about religion in American life and increasingly religion across the globe. It’s the premier research site for sociologists, but it can also be an enormous help to journalists, as well as students, educators, and religious leaders.”

“I believe that journalists haven’t made good use of research,” Briggs contends. “I think I can point them to solid research so they can be held to the highest standards. Too often religion journalism has been celebrity journalism, or it has focused on polarization in American religious life. We’re not going to take sides, and we encourage journalists to do more research on their own. We want to connect with the news without sensationalizing it, and religion research is really, really helpful in that regard.”

When asked about what religion writers are missing, Briggs cites the role of the black church as the most underreported story in American journalism, especially the temptation and tendency of African-American congregations to leave the city for the suburbs. “These congregations are facing real pressure to go to the suburbs,” he says. “What that will mean to cities is enormous. In many cases, the mainline churches, the Roman Catholic parishes, and the Jewish congregations have already left. The black churches have been anchors for their neighborhoods. They are really the last source of hope for inner cities.”

Briggs also believes that the story of sexual abuse of children has been underreported by focusing only on its appearance within the Roman Catholic Church. “The issue is the same across denominations,” he declares. “That has been lost in the reporting. About two to three percent of religious leaders are involved in sexual abuse of children, regardless of the denomination. And the pattern of response is very much the same—denial, revictimizing the victim, acceptance, and hopefully and eventually seeking justice.”

Briggs is in the process of redesigning “The Press Room” for The ARDA, offering new and valuable services to journalists. In fact, he is offering his services as a mentor and guide on a personal basis to any journalist who inquires. He urges interested writers to contact him at [briggsdlbriggs@aol.com](mailto:briggsdlbriggs@aol.com). “I’m available to anyone who needs help,” he says. “Researchers often don’t have time to do this, and journals can’t provide this assistance.”

He is particularly interested in expanding the scope of his work to include assistance to journalists in other countries, a program he has already begun with courses at the International Center for Journalists, a program for religious communicators in Zimbabwe, and an online course for writers in Malaysia. “Journalists in some areas face enormous challenges to their safety and livelihood,” he declares, “and it’s very important to help them in whatever way we can.”

Both Finke and Briggs agree that despite the notable success of The ARDA, the main task is “getting the word out.” From Briggs’ offer of mentoring assistance to Finke’s encouragement to users to make corrections and to request new features, The ARDA has been and will continue to be a moving target—literally and hopefully, a work in progress. Says Briggs, “We’re really looking to be partners in promoting religious research and telling the story that will really engage people.”

### ***A Portal: Insights into Religion***

In another fascinating new project, Lilly has made a grant to develop “a portal”—a way for people to go through a door to find Lilly research websites and their valuable information.

The website is “[Insights into Religion](#).”

As the name denotes, this website is primarily a way of “opening up” Lilly-funded research on American religion and deepening the public’s knowledge. In contrast to The ARDA, it is not designed to provide content itself. Rather, interested individuals walk through “a door” or “portal” and are referred to websites containing relevant research for their inquiries. A [video about the portal](#)

is available through YouTube. Ads about it will also appear in magazines such as *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*.

Here are some of the highlights of the portal project:

- “[Insights Into Religion](#)” provides links to twenty-seven websites covering research on a multitude of topics in American religion. More links will be available in the future.
- It differs from the website you are reading—(“[Resources for American Christianity](#)”), which is a *content-based* website highlighting Lilly projects, some of which do not have a website of their own. “Resources for American Christianity” has a tilt toward providing resources for congregations and religious leaders. It includes both in-depth articles on a range of related projects within a Lilly religion division initiative and interviews with directors of projects whose work seems timely and transformative for congregations and/or religious communities. It also lists funding opportunities related to the Lilly endowment that are available on the web.
- On the other hand, “[Insights into Religion](#)” does not aim at providing content but moves users to *other* affiliate websites, containing a broader scope of knowledge and appealing to a wider audience. It aggregates Lilly-sponsored research, rather than providing it, for the convenience of those who use it. It sponsors short articles that connect important pieces of information, reflection, and research on a subject that may be found on several websites. It allows advertising of all affiliates’ sites at once, as well as the interconnections between the sites’ content.
- “[Insights into Religion](#)” and its affiliate sites will be packaged to members of the press through involvement with the Religion Newswriters Association and frequent press releases.
- Anyone can keep up to date with “[Insights into Religion](#)” by signing up for its e-mail newsletter.
- “[Insights into Religion](#)” will provide cross linkages between sites that should increase their appearance more prominently in search engines like Google.

Milton J Coalter, Director of the Library and Professor of Bibliography at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and Scott Thumma, Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Hartford Theological Seminary co-direct the project from which [Insights into Religion](#) has emerged.

Coalter says, "The portal project really has two clear goals: first, to make people aware of other sites" and second, "to relate the sites in such a way that the public recognizes the interconnections between the information to be found on multiple sites."

A set of annual consultations of the scholars and technical experts who manage the sites represented on the portal provided the seed for the development of the portal. Funded by the Lilly Endowment, these meetings have become one of the most valuable parts of Lilly's use of the Internet to provide knowledge about American religious life.

According to Thumma, "the consultations are actually a community of Lilly-based programs learning from one another. The meetings offer of critique of the websites and access to experts. It's really a community of support. We've learned that all of the groups would be stronger if we had one base from which others could draw."

Coalter says, "These continuing consultations will stimulate new forms of collaboration and a continual refinement of both the sites involved and the portal site as well as provide tools for all the site managers to use."

"Insights into Religion" represents "an umbrella designed to give access to the range of Lilly's work," says Thumma. "It's a nice, searchable way to find what people need, and that includes pastors, religious leaders, journalists, and interested individuals." The portal will provide links only to Lilly-sponsored research projects, but Thumma notes that is not a difficult problem since the affiliate sites often have links to non-Lilly sponsored resources. He adds, "This may also become a portal and a repository of old websites for projects that have been completed."

Coalter puts the new website into a broader perspective. "The world wide web is expanding exponentially each day so that individual websites find it increasingly difficult to raise their profile above the ever-expanding host of sites on the web and users search for reliable sites that can guide them to substantive material. Consequently, it is imperative that websites advertise their existence, and in the case of Lilly-related websites, it is equally essential that the quality and interrelated content of the sites . . . are publicized."

A special benefit of the new portal is available to alumni/ae from 150 seminaries and divinity schools that have contracted with the American Theological Library Association to provide free access to its [ATLASerials](#), commonly known as ATLAS. Through "Insights Into Religion," they have a link to ATLAS, also funded by Lilly. Coalter explains, "ATLAS allows an individual to search more than 140 major journals in religion that are of special interest to pastors, religion leaders, and scholars, and with the results of a search, the user can call up the full text of an article *online*."

Will the new portal, “Insights into Religion,” be successful? Coalter replies that it will only work “if it can effectively attract users to its site and then redirect the same users to one or more of the participating websites. . . . The number of users should increase on the portal over time, and the number of referrals from the portal to participating websites should likewise grow over the portal’s lifespan.” Statistics will be gathered and shared at the annual consultations, which will also serve as a continuing forum for evaluation and improvement of the portal. Even the consultations will be evaluated by those who attend.

Thumma declares, “The challenge of the web is that you’re never done. It requires continually tweaking and revising, and that’s why the consultations are so important. Even though things are said about the Internet replacing human contact and friendships, there still has to be both. In this project, there’s an irony of digital processes grounded in human relationships.”

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Over the last couple of decades, we have witnessed a revolution in communicating knowledge—from words and pictures on paper to digital verbiage and images. Essentially, this is yet another step toward the democratization of information, represented initially by the invention of the printing press, the increased availability of the printed word, and rising literacy. The Internet is the most recent example of this movement toward information (indeed, practically *all* information) for the masses. And nearly all of it is available *free*.

Publishers of newspapers and magazines, managers of other media, have been deluged by these rapid changes, and their dilemmas have been exacerbated by vast economic changes to the information business and the Great Recession. Their publications and news shows are nearly always available free of charge on the Internet, and no one has quite figured out how and whether advertising and/or subscriptions can provide enough money to make it all worth it.

The point that is often missed amidst the anguish of publishers and broadcasters is that this same Internet that threatens their operations can be an opportunity to provide news and information that are substantially better. The Internet is an unbelievably powerful resource for learning “virtually” anything.

Lilly’s work in providing education for religion journalists, the research it funds (such as the religion and region project), the continued development of The ARDA, and the ambitious new portal for information on religion represent a multi-faceted attempt to address the new world of communicating “Insights into Religion.” Publishers and news managers need to be reminded of the importance of religion in American life, and nothing will substitute for knowledgeable reporters and newswriters. Those will be perpetual challenges, but the Lilly initiatives in religion journalism and providing research and resources

for anyone interested in American religion are notable for enhancing the religion news “that’s fit to print.”