

10-13-2015

Time to “get” religion? An analysis of religious literacy among journalism students

Jeremy Littau

Lehigh University, jjl409@lehigh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-journalism-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Littau, Jeremy, "Time to “get” religion? An analysis of religious literacy among journalism students" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 6.

<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-journalism-faculty-publications/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journalism at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

Time to “get” religion? An analysis of religious literacy among journalism students

By Jeremy J. Littau, Lehigh University

Accepted for publication in *Journal of Media and Religion*
Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 145-159

doi: 10.1080/15348423.2015.1080081

ABSTRACT

Research shows the earlier students are exposed to a topic, the greater the potential for long-term knowledge gain. A survey (N=513) tested religious knowledge for journalism students and non-journalism students. Results indicate journalism students scored poorly on basic religious knowledge and in fact fared no better than non-journalism students.

We argue that small changes in curriculum emphasis can help increase religious knowledge and improve job performance for journalists, who face an increasing diversity in both readership and news sources.

INTRODUCTION

After being sworn into office on January 21, 2001, President George W. Bush gave an inaugural address that appealed for citizens of the United States to adopt an attitude of what he called “compassionate conservatism.” Speaking of America’s ability to care for the poor, he said:

“Many in our country do not know the pain of poverty, but we can listen to those who do. And I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side” (Bush, 2001).

The invocation of the biblical story of the Good Samaritan¹ is but one example of how politicians in the U.S. mix politics and religious imagery in their public rhetoric. While such mixing is not unique to America, scholars and political strategists have long noticed how at ease American politicians are when it comes to mingling imagery and ideas from these distinctly different disciplines into the speech that helps craft U.S. public policy (Domke & Coe, 2008; Kradel, 2004, Warber & Olson, 2007; Ritter, 2007).

As Domke notes, journalists at times appear clueless about the presence of religious imagery in public policy debate and speech (Domke, 2004). Perhaps to overcompensate for their lack of religious knowledge, journalists strain at times to find the religion angles or worse, repeat mischaracterizations by others. Consider the December 2007 media controversy when Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee was accused of putting a subliminal cross (formed by the frame of a bookshelf) in the background of an advertisement made for the Christmas season. Huckabee himself said he was surprised that the media went for the “subliminal” message of the cross background, while missing the more obvious point that he was making a Christmas

¹ Story is recounted in the New Testament book of Luke 10: 25-37

television advertisement (Peterson, 2007). More recently, the media failed to provide nuanced coverage of Democratic Presidential hopeful Barack Obama’s relationship with his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. While the media put Obama’s relationship with Wright under the microscope, it ignored endorsements of John McCain by two prominent televangelists – the Revs. John Hagee of Texas and Rod Parsley of Ohio – despite their often inflammatory comments about Islam, Catholics and homosexuality (Winston, 2008).

On the question of Bush and his reference to the road to Jericho, some have mistakenly believed the word “Jericho” referred to Old Testament stories about the prophet Joshua and the battle of Jericho (Prothero, 2007). He actually was invoking the story of the Good Samaritan, a parable about a man left beaten and bruised along the road to Jericho, and ignored by everyone except his ethnic enemy. Using the Good Samaritan story, Bush spoke allegorically about poverty in a way that resonated with certain listeners in his audience. Having knowledge about the basic beliefs and stories that define particular religions, in this case Christianity, is important to understanding media messages and their interpretation by diverse audiences. By better understanding religion, journalists can better avoid cultural misunderstandings and conduct deeper queries in the news reporting process. Hearing subtle cues in a source’s words could also help a reporter better identify religious angles, leading to more thorough and accurate reporting.

This leads to two questions for those interested in media and its role as an interpreter and watchdog of democracy. First, how prepared are journalists to give context and meaning to stories, especially political reports, imbued with religious imagery? Secondly, what happens when the media find themselves unable to recognize

the imagery or ideals invoked in political speech, and what impact does this have on credibility with audiences for whom such imagery is obvious?

This paper is as an exploratory study focused on the first question, by evaluating religious literacy among those studying journalism at the university level and comparing it to non-journalism majors. A secondary goal is whether or not one’s faith background is a factor in one’s knowledge of religion. Psychologists have noted a dramatic difference between those who score highly on knowledge tests early in the learning process and those who score on the lower end of the scale. While both groups tend to increase their scores over time with knowledge, the earlier someone is educated more thoroughly on the topic the greater the potential for successful achievement over time (Muthen & Khoo, 2000; Duncan, Duncan, Alpert, Hops, Stollmiller & Muthen, 1997; Loehlin, 2004). If we begin with the assumption that religious knowledge is important for journalists, who interact with people from many different cultures and faith backgrounds daily as part of their job, then the question becomes where the education process about religion should begin for the journalistic practitioner in training. By surveying university students studying journalism, this research attempts to form a clearer picture about knowledge differences between journalism students and their peers going into other fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious belief and American public life

By many different metrics, Americans are a religious people. Nearly every major study of media and religion has noted how Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, in his early 19th century tour of America, observed religion’s importance in shaping the lives of

Americans and their institutions, as compared to Europe (Tocqueville, 2001). Later that century, German Max Weber noted after visiting the United States, that religious practice was integral to social and entrepreneurial success. In essence, Weber said, one had to “speak the language” of religion to prosper economically in American society (Weber, 1946).

The image of U.S. citizens as a people of faith continues today. In past surveys, more than 90% of Americans say they believe in God or a higher power (BRS, 2005a), 77% say religion is important in their lives (ANES, 2004), and almost half of the U.S. population attends services at least monthly (GSS, 2006).² Religion also still plays an important role in our public lives, affecting our attitudes toward political candidates and moral issues.

College Students and Faith

While religion is important in many ways to adults, a number of studies have sought to understand the religiosity of college students. The largest is the “The Spirituality in Higher Education” project by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The research included surveys in 2003 and 2004 of more than 100,000 freshmen from almost 200 colleges and universities. Nearly 80 percent of the respondents reported that they believed in God and a similar number attended religious services at least occasionally. While almost 70 percent said religious beliefs gave them strength and guidance, those secure in their beliefs were just over 40 percent.³

Thus, spirituality also changes during the college years, the study found. Although

² Material comes from The American Religious Data Archives, which is among the largest archive of religion-specific surveys about public opinion. Many of the surveys deal with the public’s attitudes toward political and moral issues. See http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_45.asp for links to some of the surveys examining these issues.

³ Complete reports can be found at <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>

attendance at religious services declines, college students grow in their spiritual and ethical thinking, the study found in its 2007 follow-up reports. “While 41.2 percent of freshmen in 2004 reported they considered developing a meaningful philosophy of life ‘very important’ or ‘essential,’ just three years later in 2007 a 55.4 percent majority of those same students agreed,” according to the report.⁴

Other studies, however, suggest a greater decline in religious practice among college-aged students or young adults. The Barna Group, an evangelical research and advocacy organization, reported in September 2006 that only 20 percent of young adults in their 20s maintained spiritual activities at the same levels as in high school. Thus some argue that the university can be used to cultivate those beliefs or to deconstruct them in favor of new attitudes (Astin, 2004).

Religious literacy

Distinct from the issue of a person’s belief and practice of religion is the issue of how much people know about the factual details of a faith—either their own or others—and described here as “religious literacy.”

Literacy takes on different dimensions depending on the field being studied. Wells (1990) said that literacy applies to more than merely reading and writing, but also the ability to think critically by connecting knowledge with abstract thought in both written and oral form. Bruce (1997), on the other hand, described a type of “information literacy” theory in which people who become literate in the basic fundamentals of a topic thus have the ability to use that knowledge to their advantage in a way that makes them

⁴ For another major report on spirituality of teenagers, but not specific to college students see *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005. The book reports the results from the National Study of Youth and Religion.

work or function better in the workplace or society.

For the journalist, Bruce’s view represents an attractive reason why journalists should be literate in topics that intersect with their area of coverage, because the more they understand a topic, such as religion, the more they can tap into that knowledge to better perform their jobs.

Kirsch (2001) combines many of the views on literacy and splits what he calls “print literacy” into the forms of basic, text, and functional literacy. Text literacy refers to the ability to read and use text to reflect complexity and format, whereas functional literacy is the ability to perform a specific task. Basic literacy is most salient for the purposes of this study, as Kirsch defines it as the ability to read, write, or speak a given language based on background knowledge in it. In a sense, Kirsch is speaking of a type of fluency in the ideas and customs of a particular group.

Religious literacy, in that sense, is a sense of understanding built on basic facts. Despite the fact that Americans profess religion’s importance in their lives, Americans know very little about religion, even their own. Prothero (2007) concluded that “faith without understanding is the standard” in America. Only half of American adults can name one of the four Gospels (Gallup, 1990); a majority of Americans think that the Bible says Jesus was born in Jerusalem (Economic Values Survey, 1992); and most Americans don’t know that Jonah is a book in the Bible (Barna, 1996). Surveys showed that a quarter of Americans never read any sacred texts, and close to half read sacred texts once or twice a year, or less (BRS, 2005b).

Lack of religious knowledge or study exists across the religious spectrum. A 2001 study found “a low level of knowledge of the Catholic tradition and a limited

command of Catholic cultural symbols” among U.S. Catholic youth (Hoge, et al, 2001).

Wells observed that Christian evangelicals demonstrated an “astounding theological illiteracy” (Wells, 1993).

In fact, American’s declining religious literacy is not new: as early as 1954, it was discovered that only three out of 129 students within Protestant and Roman Catholic faiths could correctly name the three parts of the Trinity (Lissovoy, 1954). Education, some have suggested, could be a way of solving this problem because it has the ability to educate people about the basic principles of a religion’s doctrine (Bosacki, 1999).

The notion of religious literacy became popular in 2007 with the widely publicized book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t* by Stephen Prothero (2007). In it, Prothero creates a theoretical framework and practical tool for future studies aimed at measuring a particular group’s religious literacy. He defined a religiously literate person as one who can understand and use one or more religions’ key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices and metaphors.

To determine religious literacy, Prothero developed an instrument with basic questions about Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, and administered it informally to about 360 Boston University students in his religious studies courses. He defined a basic level of religious literacy as someone who achieved a 60% correct response rate on the measurement instrument, or quiz, as he called it.

In Prothero’s view, religious illiteracy is a fundamental problem for American citizens because U.S. society functions so much on religious concepts and imagery. Because religion is embedded into culture, a person who doesn’t understand the ideas and allusions behind this interaction will not completely understand the forces that drive such

processes as they play out in public policy or community government. In addition, Prothero notes that religion is far more entwined with everyday life than we initially might think.

Religion and journalists

Scholars have long studied the role journalism plays in providing the context needed to understand society. Lippmann (1922) noted that journalists provide readers with “pictures in their heads” in order to make sense of events that they don’t understand or news in faraway places. The service provided is practical in terms of understanding, but it also allows news users to negotiate the sometimes difficult social relationships necessary for self-governing in a democracy (Fine, 2001; Habermas, 1962).

Journalists have been compared to mapmakers in the sense that they provide users a survey of all the different possibilities and ways of thinking in their community. This requires a diversity of thought, but also a knowledge of the special “terrain” within communities; a knowledge that could also be defined as a sort of literacy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2005) . As a result of this mapmaking function of the press, and the high level of religiosity in the U.S., religion coverage is and has been an important content area for the news industry.⁵

Despite religion’s importance to U.S. and world public affairs, the media’s ability to cover religion well has been a subject of disagreement. Although Hoover found in the 1980s and 1990s that media companies improved their emphasis on religion news (1998), and another survey showed that large dailies have improved the quality and quantity of

⁵ Religion news was an important component even with the establishment of Colonial America’s earliest newspapers. (Buddenbaum, et. al., 2000) and religious printing economically sustained early printers (Williams, 2000). The distinction between religious and secular media was not always clear, even into the early 1900s and mirroring a trend in American life (Buddenbaum, 1998).

religion coverage, (Hynds, 1999) significant problems still exist in the public’s satisfaction of religion news.

Silk (1985) found that the American public perceived religion coverage as relatively neutral and satisfactory, but later research showed the public believed religion coverage could be improved and that it was generally dissatisfied with religion coverage (Buddenbaum, 1990; Readership Institute, 2001).

The disconnect between the importance of religion in American culture and the lack of enthusiasm among both audiences and editors for its coverage is complex. No definitive study of the problem exists. Some, however, have noted the religious makeup of the media as one problem in the media’s reporting of religion as news. Whereas a number of scholars have criticized the methodological flaws and limits to a widely reported 1986 study by Lichter, et. al, of East Coast media elites showing a high percentage of journalists did not practice any religion, subsequent, larger studies have found some similarities with the Lichter report. In the most recent version of a survey of 1,000 U.S. journalists conducted each decade, Weaver, et. al, (2007) found a greater percentage of journalists identified themselves as non-religious than the general public, a trend that was about double that of the general population. In addition, Weaver, et. al, noted that religious practice tends to differ between smaller news outlets and larger outlets devoted to state or national coverage, with journalists becoming less religious as the media outlet trends more toward non-local coverage. The religious breakdown of journalists reporting a faith tradition also differs from the general population, with evangelicals, particularly, underrepresented compared to the population as a whole (Weaver, et. al, 2007).

In addition to the issue of the religious makeup of journalists—which has yet to be explored in large-scale studies as to its impact on mainstream religion coverage—audience satisfaction with religion news could relate to the religious knowledge of journalists. Religion news is complex and a lack of knowledge could affect the accuracy and thoroughness with which faith and values are reported. In a 1993 survey of religion reporting specialists, nearly three-quarters of the respondents said formal training in religion was either helpful or essential. In the same study, two-thirds reported that they actually received it (Dart & Allen, 1993). The more recent Knight Foundation “Newsroom Training: Where’s the Investment” (2002) report found that only one-third of the journalists surveyed believed that their religion specialist was receiving the training they needed to do their job (Knight & Knight, 2002).

If the training journalists who are religion specialists receive is poor, training for non-specialists in covering religion is similarly hard to find, at a time when the religious makeup of the United States is shifting, making it harder for the public and journalists alike to know details about the hundreds of religious groups that call the U.S. home. (Pew, 2008) Such training is also important for non-specialist on the religion beat, given the extent to which religion is a component in all local, national and global news reports.

Training in religion also is a void in the coursework of college journalism students, despite one study’s finding that journalism school administrators perceived their students as having poor knowledge of religion. The administrators also reported that their programs had no mechanism to increase religious knowledge among their students in terms of the required curriculum (Gormly, 1999).

Despite the perceived and explicitly stated need to improve the religious

knowledge of journalists, no study examining a diverse religious literacy among journalists or journalism students exists. This study seeks to rectify that void and to understand the relationship among faith traditions, field of study (major), and religious literacy. Information about the nature of religious literacy among tomorrow’s journalists can help us then develop the tools and training needed to bridge the gulf between audience satisfaction for and the production of religion news.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the differences in religious background between journalists and non-journalists as found by Weaver et. al (2007) and others, the first two hypotheses are as follows:

H₁: There will be differences between journalists and non-journalists in their faith tradition.

H₂: Non-journalism students will be more likely to believe that religious knowledge is important for journalists for their jobs than their journalism student counterparts.

Also, given some of the discussion about journalism education, we would expect that few journalists are getting any comparative religion classes, because it is not a required part of the curriculum. While non-journalism students would have the same opportunities, given how the religious involvement of journalists skews away from organized religion more than non-journalists, we would expect to find the following:

H₃: There will be a difference between non-journalists and journalists in religious knowledge.

H₄: Students going into mass media would know less about religion than non-mass media students.

We are splitting the analysis from these two hypotheses to see what differences we find depending on how we account for strategic communication majors studying advertising or public relations. While they are considered part of the journalism school at many institutions, they take different courses and have different degree requirements. As such, there might be a different understanding of religion, depending on how they are grouped.

METHODS

A survey instrument was used to collect data for this study, with responses from 513 students at a large Midwestern university. Data were collected in two ways in order to assure adequate sample numbers for journalism majors and non-majors. First, students in two large journalism classes completed the survey, to assure a sufficient number of journalism majors, who are one target for this study. For the purposes of H₃, only students majoring in one of the journalism sequences (print, convergence, broadcast, and magazine) were coded as journalism majors. H₄, we defined “mass media majors” as students studying within the school of journalism, meaning all of the journalism majors from H₃ were coded with advertising and public relations students together as a group.

Secondly, we recruited survey respondents in the student commons area on campus, to assure enough responses for non-journalism students used in comparison. All surveys were completed on paper in person and collected immediately upon completion, to assure that no students searched for answers on the Internet. This method also allowed us to have more confidence that the people taking the survey were, in fact, among the intended subjects (compared to validity issues related to online surveys).

The independent variable used to predict all hypotheses, journalism student or

non-journalism student, was collected by having each respondent report their major in an open-ended question. A journalism student for the purposes of this study was defined as someone studying the practice of journalism, including convergence, photojournalism, print journalism, magazine journalism, and broadcast journalism students. Students who identified themselves as public relations/strategic communication or advertising students were coded as non-journalism students even though they were part of the journalism school at the university sampled. All other majors beyond those described as journalism majors were also coded as non-journalism majors.

The first part of the survey (See Appendix for all survey questions) collected basic demographic and attitudinal information about the respondent and his or her perceived knowledge of religion. We asked each respondent to rate the importance of journalists possessing religious knowledge, using a 1-5 interval scale ranging from “no importance” to “very important” and this served as the dependent variable for H₁. This hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test.

The respondents also answered questions about their faith tradition as well as their current activity level within that faith tradition for the dependent variable in H₂. A person’s faith tradition is defined as the religion with which they identify with no emphasis placed upon whether they are an active practitioner. Responses were collapsed into the major world faith categories such as Christian, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jew, etc. represented by a response. For example, “Baptist” or “Methodist” was coded as Christian. Those who answered “none” or marked “atheist” were coded as “atheist.” Those who answered as “agnostic” or “deist” were coded as “spiritual, no affiliation.” Hypothesis H₂ was tested using crosstab analysis and a Chi-square test for

significance.

The dependent variable used for H₃ was religious knowledge, or literacy, which we defined conceptually as a person’s ability to identify basic tenets of the world’s major religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), U.S. religious practice and Constitutional religious protections (such as being able to name the First Amendment’s free expression clause or identify the largest religious group in the U.S.). As a way to assess validity and compare past research to our results, we chose to use Prothero’s religious literacy quiz, which consists of 16 questions in which each correct answer received one point, totaling 55 points. (Some of the questions had several answers and were worth more points; others had one question and were worth only one point.) For example, one of Prothero’s questions asks respondents to name the four Gospels. A perfect score on the question (naming Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the answer) yielded four points, with one point being given for each correct book of the Bible. Questions on the Ten Commandments, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, and the Five Pillars of Islam all were scored similarly.

For the purpose of data recording, each answer was given a score and then a subject’s scores on each question were entered on a spreadsheet and imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. A scoresheet was used to grade the results of the test.

One potential confound we attempted to mitigate was that Prothero’s religious literacy test tends to skew toward Christianity questions in terms of the total possible points. Prothero’s argument is that, for Americans, Christianity is the dominant religion and thus knowledge of Christianity is most essential for understanding American culture, with an example being politicians invoking Christian metaphor in speeches. Of the

points possible from the Prothero’s original 16 religious literacy questions replicated in this study, 32 of the 55 points were for questions related to knowledge of Christianity.

As a result, we were concerned about getting results that were heavily skewed in favor of Christianity, and thus decided to consider both the raw score and a weighted score where each question was worth only one point, awarding fractional points for multi-point questions, in our tests for data normality. Analysis for H₃ was done using an independent samples t-test.

RESULTS

We had 513 respondents for the survey but removed 10 responses from the sample because the subjects did not fill out the entire survey, yielding a final N of 503.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be differences between journalists and non-journalists in their faith tradition. This hypothesis was supported at $p < .01$ ($\chi^2 = 17.281$).⁶ See Table 3 for Chi-square test results. Journalism students made up 66.0% of the sample compared to 34.0% for non-journalists. Both journalists and non-journalists were reported being atheist in equal percentages, relative to their category’s sample size. Few differences were recorded in most other categories, although those who self-described themselves as Christians (non-Catholics), Spiritual but unaffiliated, and Jews were proportionately higher among journalists than non-journalists. However, small numbers, particularly in the Mormon, Muslim, and Jewish categories, make any real distinction between journalists and non-journalists difficult.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that non-journalism students will be more likely to believe that religious knowledge is important for journalists for their jobs than their journalism

⁶ The minimum acceptable p value for all of the tests applied for the hypotheses is the accepted threshold of $p = .05$, where there is only a 5% probability that the test of statistical significance was supported by random chance. When $p < .01$, this means there is less than a 1% chance the results are the result of random chance.

student counterparts. This hypothesis was not supported (non-journalist $M=4.13$, $SD=.962$; journalist $M=4.08$, $SD=.942$; $t=.496$; $p=.620$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted there would be a difference between non-journalists and journalists in religious knowledge. The variable for religious knowledge was found to be heavily skewed toward lower scores when using the raw score data as well as being platykurtotic, meaning scores did not regress toward the mean and thus were not clumped together in the middle of the score distribution curve. When we made each question worth one point as discussed in the methods section (vs. each response), we got a normal distribution, and thus chose to use the latter method of scoring for the analysis. Using this procedure and categorizing public relations and advertising students in the non-journalism group, no differences were found, although it was approaching significance at $p<.1$ (non-journalism $M=6.879$, $SD=3.2237$; journalism $M=7.312$, $SD=2.8101$; $t=-1.555$; $p=.121$; see Table 5 for means and Table 6 for t-test results).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that students majoring in mass media professions (recall that this group includes journalists as well as strategic communication majors) would know more about religion than non-mass media students. This hypothesis was supported at $p<.01$ (non-journalism media $M=6.418$, $SD=3.4270$; journalism media $M=7.419$, $SD=2.7432$; $t=-3.338$; $p=.001$; see Table 7 for means and Table 8 for t-test results). Further analysis showed why adding the public relations and advertising students brought the test into significance, as both groups scored above their group’s mean (advertising= 7.543 ; public relations= 8.413). See Table 9 for the results.

Taken together, H_3 and H_4 , indicate that while there are differences between journalism majors and non-journalism majors in religious knowledge, once we perform a

secondary analysis and account for those who are not studying to practice in the news industry (e.g. public relations and advertising students, who get a degree in journalism but go through a different sequence of classes) that difference is no longer statistically significant. None of the groups analyzed (journalism majors, mass media majors, non-journalism majors for either H₃ or H₄) achieved a mean score that matched the 60% threshold for religious literacy, meaning that more than half of all these groups are, by Prothero’s definition, religiously illiterate. Only 21.7% of respondents scored at least 9.6 out of 16 questions, the threshold for a 60% score.

DISCUSSION

Recall that, in using Prothero’s test, we were looking at the major tenets of world faiths as well as religion’s interaction with culture in the United States. The context needed to understand these results is found in the mean scores for both groups, as neither group managed to even get a 50% score on the religious knowledge test (journalism M=6.879; non-journalism M=7.312; see Table 5). The results demonstrate that students studying journalism are not any more knowledgeable about religion than their non-journalism counterparts, even though both groups agree that journalists need to have religious knowledge to do their job effectively. Few students could name even one of the five pillars of Islam (435 students, or 86.5%) or one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism (483 students, or 96%). Questions about the Ten Commandments (72.1% could name at least four) or the Golden Rule (359 students, or 71.8%) were the ones that garnered the most correct responses.

Journalists are mapmakers for their audience according to Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001). The notion that journalists, who have to both navigate a diverse public and

construct stories about unfamiliar topics, would score as poorly as the general public on religious literacy is a concern. By trade, journalists often are called upon to learn about subjects their audience doesn't know about so that they might relay that information to the public in the form of journalistic storytelling. It would be helpful, then, for reporters to be able to see beyond ethnicity and find religious contexts embedded in news stories. It also might make students conducting interviews in a journalistic context more sensitive to religious contexts inherent in interpersonal exchanges.

The difference between the journalism sample and the mass media sample (which included advertising and public relations students) does not tell us why the difference exists, but it does suggest potential ways for understanding the problem. Those in the strategic communication fields are taught to think about audience, and in fact this is not always part of a reporter's education. In order to design an effective advertising campaign or news strategy, a strategic communications major learns to consider the views and interests of those they are trying to reach. Does thinking about this audience make public relations and strategic communications students more curious about the world around them, or do they bring a more curious view of the world to their chosen field? Some might object to the comparison, noting that journalists are also curious by nature. It might be that journalistic curiosity is different in the sense that it is topically focused. Regardless of causality or even group differences, demonstrating this in future research might be a possible next step to understanding the differences better.

Another area for further research could be to conduct experimental work that examines the effect of a more diverse education at the university level in the area of religion. It would be helpful to understand whether requiring journalists to take classes in

comparative religion can aid them in having better religious understanding by the time they graduate and enter the field.

The reasons for the difference in knowledge could possibly be found in the results from H₃. Journalism students were more likely to consider themselves spiritual but unattached to an organized religion, and this might mean they haven’t gone through the formal educational training that comes with such experience. Catholics, for example, attend catechism classes and thus learn about the main tenets of their faith. Other religions have similar processes that allow their followers to become educated in their religion, and sometimes these processes also allow students to learn about other world views in a comparative manner. However, students who classify themselves as spiritual but unattached to organized religion do not tell us anything about their religious upbringing or level of prior religious training. Further research could better distinguish the role of past training in religion in journalism students’ lives and how it relates to their present knowledge levels.

It is important to note that we sampled students for the specific purpose of ascertaining their religious knowledge or literacy within a specific population and did not use a random sample. Still, while those conditions limit the ability to generalize these results to broader populations, it is worth noting that at least at this Midwestern university, students going into journalism generally knew less about religion than their peers. The earlier students are educated on a topic, the greater the proportional gain in long-term knowledge on that topic. If you think about an increase in knowledge as a line going upward from different time points of measurement, those who learn early tend to have a steeper line of progression than those who start the learning process late (Muthen

& Khoo, 2000; Duncan et. al, 2000). Put another way, those who learn early tend to learn more. Knowing this, the results showing journalists are scoring as “religiously illiterate” and also lower than their non-journalism peers could be helpful as journalism schools review curriculums and seek to determine core skills and values for an era in which the media industry faces significant upheavals. There is some support for this idea from the results, as the two highest-scoring groups (Catholics, $M=8.053$; Mormons, $M=9.112$) often are involved in religious instruction during their youth as part of their church-going activities. As the industry’s gurus proclaim the importance of creating new audiences, and as religion continues to be a fixture on many top news stories, the importance of understanding religious audiences and recognizing religious themes in public life is clear.

Future research could compare religious knowledge between professional reporters and the general public. It also could examine differences between professionals and students, in order to discover whether the process of journalism actually adds to a person’s knowledge about religion or whether journalists lose their knowledge over time, as they become more focused on the beats and topics that are part of their day-to-day routine. In addition, because journalism students in this study were less likely to practice organized religion, when compared to the general population, and professional journalists show a similar result, it would be interesting to study why this occurs; is it a component of a journalist’s personality, upbringing, cultural setting, or other variables. Finally, because we are a predominantly Christian country, the numbers of non-Christians in this study were, as expected, small. However, that makes drawing any conclusions related to non-Christian students’ knowledge of religion difficult without a larger sample. Such a project, while ambitious and expensive, is another area of additional research.

APPENDIX

1. Which statement best describes your knowledge about religion (circle one)
 - No knowledge about religion
 - Little knowledge about religion
 - Don't know my knowledge level about religion
 - Somewhat knowledgeable about religion
 - Very knowledgeable about religion
2. Which statement best describes the knowledge of religion among your classmates or peers? (circle one)
 - No knowledge about religion
 - Little knowledge about religion
 - Don't know
 - Somewhat knowledgeable about religion
 - Very knowledgeable about religion
3. Which statement best describes how important is it for journalists to have knowledge about religion to perform their jobs? (circle one)
 - No importance
 - Little importance
 - Do not know the importance
 - Somewhat important
 - Very important
4. Which statement best describes your religious background? (circle one)
 - I was not raised in a faith tradition.
 - I grew up in a faith tradition and no longer practice it.
 - I grew up in a faith tradition and now rarely practice it.
 - I actively participate in the faith tradition in which I was raised.
 - I actively participate in a different faith tradition from the one in which I was raised.
 - I actively participate in a faith tradition although I was not raised in one.
5. Please fill in your current faith tradition, if any: _____
6. What is your major in college, if any? _____
7. What is your age? 18-24 _____ 25-35 _____ 36-45 _____ 46-60 _____ over 60 _____
8. What is your gender? (circle one) Male Female
9. Are you an international student? (circle one) Yes No
8. What is your class? (circle one)
 - Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
 - Graduate

Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Please write legibly and spell as accurately as possible. Answers that are spelled incorrectly will still be counted as correct provided a majority of the letters in the word are correct. One word answers are sufficient.

9. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
10. Name one sacred text of Hinduism.
11. Name the holy book of Islam.
12. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?
13. President George W. Bush spoke in his first inaugural address of the Jericho road. What Bible story was he invoking?
14. What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament? List as many as you can.
15. What is the Golden Rule?
16. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God": Does this appear in the Bible? If so, where?
17. Name the Ten Commandments. List as many as you can.
18. Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. List as many as you can.
19. What are the seven sacraments of Catholicism? List as many as you can.
20. The First Amendment says two things about religion, each in its own "clause." What are the two religious clauses of the First Amendment?
21. What is Ramadan?
22. What is the largest Christian group in the United States?
23. Karma is a concept found in what major world religion?
24. Name the five pillars of Islam. List as many as you can.
25. Match the Bible characters with the stories in which they appear. Draw a line from the one to the other.

Adam and Eve

Paul

Moses

Noah

Jesus

Abraham

Serpent

Exodus

Binding of Isaac

Olive Branch

Garden of Eden

Parting of the Red Sea

Road to Damascus

Garden of Gethsemane

REFERENCES

- ANES (2004). American National Election Studies. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_31.asp
- Astin, A.W. (2004). Why spirituality deserves a central place in liberal education. *Liberal Education*, 90(2), pp. 34-41.
- Barna, G. (1996). *The index of leading spiritual indicators*. Dallas: World Publishing.
- Bosacki, S. (1999). Spiritual Literacy: Can schools provide nourishment for children’s brains and souls? *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 4(1), 91-95.
- BRS (2005a). Baylor Religion Survey. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_63.asp
- BRS (2005b). Baylor Religion Survey. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_56.asp
- Bruce, C. (1997). *The seven faces of information literacy*. Auslib Press, Adelaide.
- Buddenbaum, J. (1990). *Network Coverage of Religion*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Buddenbaum, J. (1998). *Reporting news about religion: An introduction for journalists*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Bush, G.W. (2001). *President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address*. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>
- Dart, J., Allen, J. (2000) *Bridging the gap: Religion and the news media*, Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center (reprint of 1993).
- Domke, D., Coe, K. (2008). *The God strategy: How religion became a political weapon in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Domke, D. (2004). *God willing: Political fundamentalism in the White House, the ‘war on terror’ and the echoing press*. London: Pluto Press.
- Duncan, T., Duncan, S., Alpert, A., Hops, H., Stolmiller, M., Muthen, B. (1997). Latent variable modeling of longitudinal and multilevel substance use data. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 32(3), 275-318.
- Economic Values Survey. (1992). The Association of Religion Data Archives. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from <http://www.thearda.com>

- Fine, B. (2001). *Social capital versus social theory: Political economy and social science at the turn of the millennium*. London: Routledge.
- Gallup, G. (1990). *The role of the bible in American society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center.
- Gormly, E. (1999). The study of religion and the education of journalists. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 54(2), 24-39.
- GSS (2006). General Social Survey. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_105.asp
- Habermas, J. (1962). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.
- Hoge, D., Dinges, W., Johnson, M., Gonzales, J. (2001) *Young adult Catholics: Religion in the culture of choice*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hoover, S. (1998). *Religion in the news: faith and journalism in American public discourse*. Sage, CA: Thousands Oaks.
- Hynds, E. (Winter, 1999). Large daily newspapers have improved coverage of religion. *Journalism Quarterly*, 20(1), 44-48.
- Kirsch, I. (2001). The framework used in developing and interpreting the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 16(3), 335-361.
- Knight, J.S., Knight, J.L. (2002). Newsroom training: Where's the investment? Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.knightfoundation.org/global/pdf/2002_Newsroom_Training_Wheres_the_Investment.pdf
- Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2001). *The elements of journalism*. New York: Crown.
- Kradel, A. P. (2004). Partisan ideology and the religious rhetoric of recent U.S. presidents. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.
- Lichter, S., Rothman, S., Lichter, L. (1986). *The media elite*. Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler.
- Lissovoy, V. (1954). A sociological approach to religious literacy. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 27(9), 419-424.
- Loehlin, J. (2004). *Latent variable models: An introduction to factor, path, and structural equation analysis*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Muthen, B., Khoo, S. (2000). Longitudinal studies of achievement growth using latent variable modeling. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 10(2), 73-101.
- Olasky, M. (1988). *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Peterson, L. (2007). Huckabee defends Christmas ad, jokes about subliminal message of white cross. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/12/19/news/politics/14_47_0512_18_07.txt
- Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008). U.S. religious landscape survey. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from <http://religions.pewforum.org>
- Prothero, S. (2007). *Religious literacy: what every American needs to know - and doesn't*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Readership Institute (2001). Research from the impact of newspaper readership. Retrieved March 28, 2008 from http://www.readership.org/impact/power_to_grow.pdf
- Ritter, T. (2007). “Blood of the lamb” - use of religious rhetoric by presidents. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Hotel InterContinental, New Orleans.
- Silk, M. (1995). *Unsecular media: Making news of religion in America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Tocqueville, A. (2001). *Democracy in America*. New York: Signet.
- Underwood, D. (2001). Secularists or modern day prophets?: Journalists’ ethics and the Judeo-Christian tradition. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 16(1), 33-47.
- Underwood, D. (2002). *From Yahweh to Yahoo! The religious roots of the secular press*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Warber, A.L., Olson, L.R. (2007). Religion and Ronald Reagan’s rhetorical presidency. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.
- Weaver, D., Beam, R., Brownlee, B., Voakes, B., Pu, S., Wilhoit, G. (2007). *The American journalist in the 21st century: U.S. news people at the dawn of a new millennium*. Manwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Weber, M. (1946). The Protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism. In Gerth, H., Mills, C.W., eds. *From Max Weber*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wells, G. (1990). Talk about text: where literacy is learned and taught. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 20(4), 369-405.

Wells, D. (1993) *No place for truth, or whatever happened to Evangelical theology?* MI: Eerdmans.

Williams, J. (2000) *Evangelism and the genesis of printing in America*. Northport, AL: Vision Press

Wimmer, R., Dominick, J. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education.

Winston, D. (2008). Obama and the Pastor: A Question of Faith, or Race? Retrieved March 28, 2008 from <http://election2008.usc.edu/2008/03/obama-and-wright.html>

TABLES

Table 1

Group statistics on importance of religious knowledge based on student major

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Non-journalism major	218	4.13	.962	.074
Journalism major	285	4.08	.942	.052

Table 2

Independent samples t-test for importance of journalist’s religious knowledge for journalism vs. non-journalism students

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	.493	501	.620

Table 3

Chi-square test of significance for journalism students vs. faith tradition

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	17.285 ^a	6	.008**
Likelihood ratio	18.739	6	.005**
N of valid cases	503		

a. 4 cells have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 0.68.

Table 4

Crosstabs for faith tradition vs. journalism major

Faith Tradition		Journalism	Non-journalism
Catholic	Count	63	99
	% within major	38.9	61.1
Christian (non-Catholic)	Count	57	137
	% within major	29.4	70.6
Jewish	Count	3	12
	% within major	20.0	80.0
Mormon	Count	2	0
	% within major	100.0	0.0
Muslim	Count	4	0
	% within major	100.0	0.0
Spiritual, no affiliation	Count	9	24
	% within major	27.3	72.7
Atheist	Count	33	60
	% within major	35.5	64.5
TOTAL	Count	171	33.2
	% within major	34.0	66.0

Table 5

Group statistics for religious knowledge test score based on student major with strategic communication majors coded as non-journalism majors

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Non-journalism major	171	6.879	3.224	.247
Journalism major	332	7.312	2.810	.154

Table 6

Independent samples t-test for religious knowledge test score based on student major with strategic communication majors coded as non-journalism majors

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	-1.555	501	.121

Table 7

Group statistics for religious knowledge test score based on student major with strategic communication majors coded as journalism majors

	N	Mean	SD	SE
Non-journalism major	128	6.418	3.427	.303
Journalism major	375	7.419	2.743	.142

Table 8

Independent samples t-test for religious knowledge test score based on student major with strategic communication majors coded as journalism majors

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	-3.338	501	.001**

Table 9

Religious knowledge scores vs. type of journalism major

	Mean	N	SD
Non-journalism	6.418	128	3.427
Print journalism	7.503	116	2.724
Broadcast journalism	6.364	56	3.032
Photojournalism	8.303	35	3.320
Convergence journalism	6.487	29	2.303
Magazine journalism	6.322	49	2.845
Public relations	8.413	57	1.861
Advertising	7.543	33	2.515