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Press Credibility and Faith-Based Politics

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“Let the Explaining Begin!” exclaimed the Washington Post’s press critic Howard Kurtz shortly after the re-election victory of President Bush in the 2004 campaign.<sup>1</sup> In the latest election cycle, a press corps that had been stung by premature projections four years earlier found itself with yet another opportunity to reflect on some things it might have missed.

In the fall campaign, there hadn’t been much emphasis on “moral values” in the overall campaign coverage, although there had been some reporting on the GOP strategy of targeting Christian evangelicals and Catholics in battleground states. But this “values” topic emerged as the leading concern in exit polling that asked voters what really mattered in choosing a president. Of those who gave values as the top concern, the overwhelming number voted for Bush.

The results turned up most noticeably for the press in its own survey, a poll conducted for the National Election Pool, a consortium of ABC News, The Associated Press, CBS News, CNN, Fox News, and NBC News. For anyone thinking, quite accurately, that “moral values” also can be a vague, all-encompassing term, there was a convincing suggestion that these voters generally had religious values in mind. The New York Times’ account of the poll results made it clear that Bush had run very well in almost all categories of religious voters.<sup>2</sup>

Kurtz polled some leading media observers after the election, and found some of these explanations:

“Bush did a very good job of creating some wedge issues on the moral values front,” says CBS correspondent John Roberts. “That was a real surprise, something we didn’t catch on to until late in the game. We all kind of missed the boat on that.”

“Journalists don’t understand red-state America,” says Newsweek’s Howard Fineman. “I’m an indicted co-conspirator...Most people in what is left of the big media live and work in blue-state America, and that shaped our view of the election.”<sup>3</sup>

The press at times has done an adequate job in covering the so-called "culture wars," but often seems at loose ends in reporting on the large group of Americans who occupy what might be called the faith-based center. Such exit polling in the election of 2004 found these correspondents and many news organizations scrambling to account for the preoccupation with

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<sup>1</sup> “Let the Explaining Begin!” Howard Kurtz, washingtonpost.com, Nov. 8, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> “Moral Values Cited as Defining Issue of the Election,” Katherine Q. Seelye, New York Times, Nov. 4, 2004. The polls were conducted by Edison Media Research of Somerville, N.J. and Mitofsky International of New York City for the National Election Pool. According to the Times’ account, the results were based on questionnaires filled out by 13,660 voters in 250 precincts nationally. Telephone interviews also were conducted with absentee and early voters.

<sup>3</sup> Kurtz, Ibid.

"moral values" that turned up, not on the far right of American politics, but among mainstream voters.

In fact, those mainstream voters are also mainstream readers. The press has taken laudable steps to increase religion coverage in recent years, but old complaints remain: that it is too compartmentalized in "religion news" and that the regular news report focuses too much on extremists left and right in politics and policy.

There are a number of reasons why the press isn't getting it quite right. These range from conventional and familiar laments about why the press isn't doing a better job on everything it does, to more subtle challenges in writing about policies and politics that are informed by religious attitudes and beliefs.

Ironically, it is no longer for a lack of recognition of religion's importance that the press is struggling with this important story. Rather, news organizations have become more aware than ever before that religion is 'out there' as an important concern. It was not always so.

As recently as 1990, religion writers from the Associated Press and other major news organizations were lamenting openly their difficulties getting their own newsroom bosses to pay attention to the significance of religion in public life. The rise of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" had gone largely unreported until it became a force. The religious faith of Jimmy Carter was not adequately recognized as important in his run for the presidency in 1976. Ronald Reagan's initial courtship with religious conservatives did not get adequate attention.<sup>4</sup>

For much of the post-World War II era, the Washington press corps, which set the national news agenda, generally regarded religion as something Americans did in private on weekends. What happened in the White House, in the halls of Congress, in the formulation grass-roots politics and policies at the state and local levels, was considered unrelated and strictly secular business. The religion beat existed at some major news organizations, but it was often a kind of happy hunting ground for reporters or editors who were wrapping up their careers or otherwise burned out. The commitment from top editors to space and to finding the religious component in major trends was not there.

And then news organizations literally got religion. They had been chastened by the missed national stories, and no longer could disregard burgeoning piety in local communities where they sought to attract and hold readers. Orange County, California provides dramatic examples. As the county was transformed from agricultural fields into housing tracts and shopping malls, one new kind of house of worship, Saddleback Church in Lake Forest targeted a new audience for its many ministries and new kind of devotional experience, believers who hadn't been going to church. Today, it claims 20,000 people who attend services regularly.<sup>5</sup> The local press could ill afford to overlook this story.

Editors and producers at local and national news organizations in recent years have added religion writers and pages devoted exclusively to religion coverage. Today, the Religion Newswriters Association estimates that there are between 400 and 500 people who spend a large part of their time covering faith and values. And the size of newspapers matters: those over 100,000 circulation almost all have at least one full-time religion reporter; many over 50,000 have reporters who cover religion in addition as part of their beat assignments. Broadcast is a

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<sup>4</sup> See "Reporting Religion: Facts & Myth," Benjamin J. Hubbard, editor (Polebridge Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> "About Saddleback Church," from "Saddleback in the Press," at the church's web site, "saddleback.com".

different story. TV stations generally don't have religion reporters, and of the networks, only ABC news has a person who makes it a specialty but not a full-time assignment.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, newspapers are adapting existing religion coverage to recognize the nation's new religious diversity. When its longtime religion columnist Dale Turner retired recently, the Seattle Times launched "Faith & Values" page, featuring rotating columns from a Muslim, a Jew, a Roman Catholic, a mainline Protestant, and an evangelical Protestant. The inclusion of different perspectives resonated with one reader, Barbara Dahl, who was quoted as having written in, "...because his [Turner's] philosophy and writings appeal beyond the Christian belief system, and because the times we live in so urgently demand tolerance and consideration of diverse beliefs, I respectfully suggest that representatives of an interfaith perspective carry on the tradition set forth by Rev. Turner"<sup>7</sup>

So the press has an increased awareness of the importance of religion coverage and an accurate perception of our diversity. Yet why does it still miss the impact of religious and moral values on our national politics and policy-making, as happened by its own acknowledgment in the election of 2004? The answer is twofold.

First, the press has certain shortcomings and limitations on the way it covers almost everything that happen to apply to the way religion plays out in public life. It is not necessarily singling out religion for lapses in its coverage or understanding.

The second is that the press is too clumsy to get its arms around moral and religious centrism. The principal characters are not newsmakers, but rather, ordinary folks. They are not always predictable on where they will come out on what the press calls the "hot button" issues, such as abortion and gay marriage. Their importance to the political process in campaigns still does not make writing about them as people who are both devout and democratic any easier.

On the first point, we all have heard the traditional laments. The press has a notoriously short attention span. It is drawn to conflict and immediacy. It prefers its controversies writ large and its characters colorful. In general, if there is no conflict, there is no story.

The long-running developing trend that produces a significant social movement, such as feminism, or the emergence of faith-based politics, may escape the media searchlight unless something dramatic happens. Sometimes it takes having Pat Robertson in a snowball fight with the American Civil Liberties Union.

Because it is constantly running after the story of the hour, the press's spotty attentiveness may inhibit its recognition that something happening now connects to something that happened before. In covering the conflicts between the religious right and the secular left, the press inhabits a time zone that is constantly in the present. There is rarely any contextual reporting to show that some of the obsessions of the religious right already have been put to the test in the political arena and come up short.

For example, the 1996 Republican National Convention was a clear signal to the press of a defining moment in the social and religious politics in our time. The religious right was put in its place on the political fringe so convincingly that even Ralph Reed, at the time the executive director of the powerful Christian Coalition, said that single-issue politics wouldn't work any

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Debra L. Mason, executive director, Religion Newswriters Association, responding to an e-mail inquiry on Feb. 17, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Fancher, "Times launching new religion page," The Seattle Times online edition, Jan. 16, 2005.

more for religious conservatives. Yet in every election cycle since, the press has continued to regard the religious right as an ominous player.

Some of the press's limitations are structural. It allocates specific types of information to designated sections or pages, and assigns coverage only to reporters assigned to particular beats. There are practical journalistic and financial reasons for doing this, in many cases. However, the result is that religion news may end up being reported in a limited and event-driven context, and relegated to the Saturday morning edition. This is so even when editors think they are paying attention and responding to the needs of readers by providing a religion page and assigning a religion writer.

It is important to understand that compartmentalized or limited-vision journalism is by no means exclusive to religion and politics. This is a significant point to keep in mind when critics complain that the press has a secular left-leaning bias that makes it hostile to religious points of view. Moreover, the nervousness about stirring up controversy that inhibits vigorous press coverage is essentially the same for abortion and faith-based perspectives as it may be for the lending practices of leading banks in Atlanta, or the policies of local car dealerships in the Silicon Valley.

The real question is, can the press step back and write about the big picture. In fact, as an antidote to shortsighted coverage of national trends, some of the press's own most thoughtful members began to talk in recent years about a new kind of journalism that provided connections. Writers like Ronald Brownstein of the Los Angeles Times have exemplified the practice of this journalistic form by writing political pieces that were both timely and overarching. He told Columbia Journalism Review that he was endeavoring "to build a box around the information – some kind of conceptual framework."<sup>8</sup>

The result was a kind of interdisciplinary journalism, weaving forgotten moments from American political history into the interpretation of current events, or borrowing from sociologists or philosophers to explain the ramifications of policy. This approach would be a good tool for identifying religious impulses in the attitudes of Americans on controversial issues like abortion or gay marriage, or discerning the influence of faith on voting behavior or trends. Unfortunately, there is too little of it, even in our best daily journals. For the most part, conceptual journalism remains most easily recognizable in longer forms of writing, such as can be found in publications like *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic Monthly*.

If we want to see how the press approaches a big religion and policy story in fits and starts, one place to look is the biggest early news out of the first administration of President George W. Bush, a story that is with us today. It began in early 2001 with the announcement of the creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. A new White House office would lead the charge for a substantial package of tax incentives for charitable organizations, aid to faith-based groups working with drug addicts, teen-age mothers and gang members. The idea would be to make it easier for faith-based groups to compete for federal dollars with other agencies.

The press has reported on the controversies at various points, giving it big play in the beginning, and noting obstacles en route. These include the concerns that this represented a radical departure in government support for religion. There was coverage of the departure of the first director, the subsequent removal of the tax incentives as part of tax cut legislation, the issuance of executive orders by Bush in response to congressional inaction, and a rare intramural GOP spat over a former office staffer's lament that even the president's own party abandoned the

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<sup>8</sup> "The Conceptual Scoop," Paul Starobin, *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1996.

initiative when it most needed help.<sup>9</sup> Recently, Jim Towey, director of the office, gave a press briefing for reporters on a requested \$150 million increase in the 2006 budget in money for the work of the faith-based groups.<sup>10</sup>

Los Angeles Times reporters Peter Wallsten and Tom Hamburger have even gone beyond the headlines to explore how the administration's approach to religion-based social services built political bridges to black churches. When the president sent his 2006 budget to Congress, they pointed out that religion-based programs would benefit while more traditional programs for the poor in housing and health coverage would suffer.<sup>11</sup> This was good journalism.

However, there has not been enough reporting of the conceptual sort mentioned earlier to adequately link the faith-based initiative to its true origins in the "charitable choice" provisions of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, a bill signed by a Democratic president, Bill Clinton. That legislation expanded opportunities for faith-based programs to help people get off welfare. The Bush plan from the beginning has represented an extension of that philosophy into other areas of social services. In the campaign of 2004, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry backed away from the clear interest expressed by the last standard bearer for his party, former Vice President Al Gore, in having a similar plan.

You would hardly know from most press coverage that religion-based initiatives have found support in both major parties for some time. This is an important point when one considers that much of the public conversation about Bush as an openly religious president, and the general concern from liberals about church and state separation in the administration, arise from conclusions drawn from attention given the Bush team's emphasis on the Faith-Based Initiative.

Moreover, it is by no means clear that Charitable Choice and its descendant, the Faith-Based Initiative, would fail to pass constitutional muster. It may be unacceptable to those who believe, as Justice Hugo Black did in 1947, that there should be no relationship between church – based organizations and the state. But that view is now squarely located on the secular left side of the religion and government spectrum. Subsequent court decisions have put a much finer point on the relationship between government and religious groups, allowing interaction in some instances and rejecting it as improper entanglement in others.<sup>12</sup> In fact, an important Supreme Court decision on vouchers for parochial schools in Cleveland in 2002 would suggest the likelihood of a favorable high court hearing for the White House's faith-based initiative.<sup>13</sup> It is of course true that a changing relationship between government and religious groups may always raise the question of excessive governmental entanglement at any given point. However, the search for a new relationship and understanding is not just something that interests the religious right. The Clinton Administration gave evidence of a keen understanding of these evolving nuances. It appeared to be on track to reclaim religion from being the province of conservative Republicans when it launched a series of initiatives aimed at making clearer to school districts and others what would be acceptable religious practices in government settings.

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<sup>9</sup> "Please, Keep Faith," David Kuo, Beliefnet, Feb. 17, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> "Press Briefing from the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives," Beliefnet, Feb. 7, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> "President Puts Faith in Religion-Based Social Services," Peter Wallsten and Tom Hamburger, Los Angeles Times, Feb. 8, 2005, A14.

<sup>12</sup> Most notable is "Lemon v. Kurtzman," in which the court devised a test for determining the validity of challenges to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

<sup>13</sup> "Voucher Ruling Seen as Narrowing Church-State Division," Laurie Goodstein, The New York Times, June 28, 2002.

The press should have set the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in its proper context in both these ways, both its bipartisan legislative history and its potential importance to the nation's changing understanding of the relationship of church and state under the First Amendment. It could have sorted things out for confused readers by identifying hiring more clearly as the real problem area both for bi-partisan support and on the question of constitutional muster. Given the importance of this narrow provision, it missed an opportunity to report on the untold story of why the Bush administration, either through political calculation or ineptitude, failed to clear things up in the employment area and perhaps win wider acceptance for its plan.

The press seemed to miss the point that this long-running story is really mostly about differences in emphasis between the two parties, and their positioning for key constituencies. Bush has wanted to make a political statement of his belief in the efficacy of faith, so he has trumpeted the need to remove restrictions on the ability of faith-based groups to compete with everybody else for federal funds. In doing so, his administration was clear to guard against discrimination against recipients, but either carelessly or intentionally overlooked the problem of discriminatory hiring. When the Democrats last were in the White House, they wanted the program expanded too, because the successful centrism espoused by the Clinton Administration presented a friendly face to religion. But they wanted to be sure that any expansive legislation protected people like janitors working in churches if they were gay or divorced, and were paid with federal funds.

That's one continuing story with lots of specifics, but the press also has had a more formidable challenge in its understanding of how religion informs day-to-day political attitudes and behavior of citizens and readers. The difficulty is making sense of the faith-based concerns of the vast political center of the country, which is the very realization that came to the press wags after they reviewed exit polling on Election Day in 2004. While it is in the forefront of delivering the results of survey research in its news report, the press has not proven adept at integrating these data into its reporting on the influence of religious attitudes on the shaping of politics, policy and voting behavior.

Part of the problem also for the press is that the faith-based center, or moral middle, is so difficult to identify without looking at a lot of survey research. In poll after poll, it is evident that this is a very religious country, and Christian by a very high percentage. One poll done by the City University of New York in 2001 found that 75 percent of the population either is religious or somewhat religious, with only 16 percent secular or somewhat secular. The rest were don't know or refused. That's a lot of religiously inclined people.<sup>14</sup> This poll seems to be in line with the general trends found in other ones.

For the press, it may be factoring a religious perspective into the news analysis and approaches to mainstream stories about how most Americans think and act is something that takes conscious effort. The press knows what motivates the religious right on policy choices, because those activists wear their positions on their sleeves. The press knows that many on the left are alarmed about perceived threats to the separation of church and state.

But mainstream voters who are informed by faith and can be found in both major parties, or are independent, are much harder to pin down. Some belong to denominations; others are spiritual but not necessarily churched. Some, as has been happening in the Catholic Church for years, make their own decisions about things like reproductive rights and choices. The press has

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<sup>14</sup> American Religious Identification Survey, 2001, The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

a special challenge in figuring these people out because the ways in which they reach conclusions are not all the same, nor are their bottom lines.

In fact it may well be that many of these voters approach policy choices informed with a kind of American pragmatism, that is shaped by dual sets of powerful values. That is, they get their attitudes both from their faith and from their notions of what matters in citizenship. They see themselves both as religious people, and as Americans who share with all citizens a set of assumptions and commitments to fair play, toleration and equality.

When their values come into conflict – what I was taught in Sunday school versus what I was taught in civics class – these citizens may “consult” parallel sets of core values to reach a decision that seems to make sense to them. Consider, for example, these two sets of findings from recent polls: Americans have very strong religious beliefs and far less concern than one might think about religious expression. For example, a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll from the summer before the 2004 election has nearly three quarters of American voters thinking that a president should have strong religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup> A CBS poll from the same year had similar findings, and a 90% comfort level with “in God We Trust” on coins, and about 78% comfortable with non-denominational prayer at public events.<sup>16</sup> However, the Pew poll also found that 64% of people who consider religion very important in their lives don’t think Catholic politicians should be denied communion if they differ with church teaching on policy questions, like abortion rights. About the same number from this group don’t want churches endorsing political candidates.

No wonder this group is hard for the preoccupied and harried press to get its arms around. Nevertheless, if the press wants to understand this important group, it needs to a better job understanding what makes it tick.

Even some basic newsroom logic would help. After all, why should it be only religious conservatives who form opinions and decide how to vote based on the dictates of faith? It just makes sense that many religiously inclined people consult their faith when reflecting and acting on matters of politics and policy. They are not necessarily people who would be thought of as religious conservatives.

It may be helpful to think of this faith-based center as something that can be inferred, if not identified by sight. When astronomers announce the discovery of a new planet at some distant sun, we hear that the conclusion came from observing the gravitational pull in the area, not by seeing an actual celestial body. This group acts a little in that way, pushing and pulling on our politics in a way that is not dramatic, but influential. Many politicians have developed a kind of radar for sensing the hopes and wishes of the moral center. It would make sense for the press to cultivate and develop the same facility.

Of course, we are back to one of the earlier limitations of the press. It is hard to encapsulate in short stories how religious people who are to the center and left of the religious right might be leaning on controversial issues, such as abortion, gay marriage and stem cell research. The press doesn’t always have the time or patience to read tea leaves. And yet, ironically, it has done a good job of conducting and writing about the findings of sophisticated survey research, which suggests that these religious forces are in play.

The press faces a complex set of challenges. It is very aware that a perception of a liberal bias exists in the nation and Washington. Yet while it is mindful of criticisms that it is tone-deaf to moral America, it also has taken laudable steps to improve religion coverage. Efforts such as

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<sup>15</sup> Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Aug. 24, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> CBS Poll, May 20-23, 2004.



the Knight Foundation's establishment of a chair in media and religion at the USC Annenberg School for Communication are positioning the press corps for smarter and deeper religion reporting in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Developing an understanding of the faith-based center is well worth the press's time, and crucial to its job performance. Abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, relations between government and religious groups, all are issues that will be with us, and will require nuanced reporting. To be smarter and deeper, the press needs to report and write about religion's influence, its triumphs and tragedies, with confidence. The Boston Globe's surefooted reporting on the child abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston was a premier example of democracy's watchdog in action. But to write the tough stories, the press is well advised to pave the way with informed coverage of how faith comes into play in the decisions ordinary people make about their world.

A big part of its task is to develop a better understanding of the faith-based center. If the press can take the time to learn how the people in the vast middle think and act, maybe it can begin to address the lament of the journalist who said that the "blue-state" press just doesn't get "red state" America.

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<sup>17</sup> "Knight Foundation Taps USC Annenberg to Establish Chair in Media And Religion," Office of Public Affairs, USC Annenberg School for Communication, Sept. 12, 2002.