

BILL DENSMORE'S FILE NOTES /
SYMPOSIUM ON RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND JOURNALISM
Harvard Divinity School, Dec. 8-9, 2016

The Religious Literacy Project
<http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/>

<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/12/religious-lit-symposium/>

SCHEDULE:

<http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/initiatives/religious-literacy-and-professions-initiative/journalism/schedule>

SPEAKERS/LEADERS:

<http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/initiatives/religious-literacy-and-professions-initiative/journalism/leadership-speakers>

CASE STUDIES:

<http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/initiatives/religious-literacy-and-professions-initiative/journalism/case-studies>

THE RELIGIOUS LITERACY PROJECT

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The symposium was one of four planned through 2018, said Diane Moore, who heads the Project on Religious Literacy at the divinity school. The idea is to explore how to embue professions – journalism, humanitarian action, government and business, with a deeper sense of understanding of the impact of religions, faith and spirituality on each field.

When it comes to understanding religion, “our collective ignorance is a civic problem,” added co-convenor Stephen Prothero, a Boston University religion professor and author. The process which elected Donald Trump has created “an important moment for us to work together” across religion and professions.

Prothero datapoints: 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump; some 30% to 40% of evangelicals are black, Latino or Asian.

White evangelical voters “thought of Hillary as Lucifer” according Jeff Sharlet, a symposium participant to teaches English at Dartmouth College and writes for national magazines. Trump’s focus on winning fit the stories favored by the followers of “the prosperity gospel,” he added. Said another symposium participant: “In sum, the American religion of winning (and the gospel of getting rich) produces a lot of losers.”

The national press before Nov. 8 believed the “prophesy of the number crunchers” instead of what religion reporters in the field were hearing from voters, according to Laura Goodstein, religion writer for The New York Times, whose keynote talk opened the symposium.

KEY POINT: After each domestic mass killing, multiple Muslim groups condemn the violence, but these condemnations don’t make it into mainstream media, symposium participants said. But the condemnations are available at the “World Wide Muslims Condemn List.”

<http://www.teenvogue.com/story/teen-makes-spreadsheet-muslim-groups-leaders-denouncing-terrorism>

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:

- Become familiar with federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and state variants.
- SOURCE: Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life: <http://www.pewforum.org/>
<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study>
- SOURCE: Religion News Association and Foundation: <http://www.rna.org>
- SOURCE: The Revealer (<https://wp.nyu.edu/therevealer>) at NYU Center for Religion and Media
- SOURCE: Wash Post: Acts of Faith / <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/>
- SOURCE: Religion Dispatches website at USC Annenberg <http://religiondispatches.org/>
- SOURCE: Religion & Politics at the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at WashU St. Louis <http://religionandpolitics.org/about-us/>
- SOURCE: PBS Religion and Ethics Newsweekly <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/>

FRIDAY FIRST PANEL TOPIC: Black Lives Matter

Adelle Banks, an editor at Religion News Service, said the Black Lives Matter manifesto includes a focus on economic co-operatives and alternatives. “This is a vital . . . aspect coursing through this, but we never see it in the news.” There is a focus on BLM reaction to the latest conflict and police relationships, rather than the deeper aims of the movement. “There are sides of these movements that get through,” said Banks. “And then there are sides that don’t, which may be more important.” She adds: “How can we open up our narratives to entertain more stories?”

BLM is building food pantries to deal with “food desert” areas, said Lilly Fowler, edit of PBS Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.

The mainstream media tends to “cover most social movements for what they do,” said Diane Winston, of USC Annenberg, “not what they stand for.” The BLM movement is about healing and recognition and it has a spiritual dimension, she said. Winston said legacy media “has a bias for [covering] people who carry Bibles and say they are authorities on religion.” She said the public can no longer look to what she called “legacy media” for religious literacy because it is in financial decline, and its mission in monetization. “They are run by market economics which have other values than humanistic concerns involved,” she said. The future help will come the nonprofit sector, she believes.

Panelist Winston talked about BLM as a spiritual movement which should be reported as such. “Americans have a very thin image of what religion is,” said the USC-Anneberg scholar. “We have religion kind of walled off.” She also noted: “It’s very hard to get sophisticated stories that challenge the status quo into the corporate media.”

Religion plays a role in almost every story newspapers report, said symposium participant Cristela Guerra, a Boston Globe general-assignment reporter. “There is a spiritual string and a religious string through almost everything we do,” she said. “We are there already, we just have to find a different way to tell the narrative.”

SECOND PANEL TOPIC: Donald Trump and Evangelicals

NPR reporter Jason DeRose theorizes that evangelicals may be in the first instance political conservatives who take on evangelical qualities to support their point of view on abortion, gay rights and other issues. This would be in contrast to thinking of them as evangelicals first. Which comes first, political ideology or religious/spiritual orientation?

Eddie S. Glaude Jr., magazine columnist and Princeton University religion and AfroAm Studies professor, thinks the Trump election was a consequence of rising economic insecurity “and moral panic – white panic.” White evangelicals were 22% of the electorate in 1988, 21% in 2008 and are only 17% today. Only three in 10 white adults are Christian. “This may be white Christian America’s last gasp,” he said.

Dartmouth’s Jeff Sharlet said multiple “rightist” movements converged around Trump. His expertise is in narrative journalism and he thinks part of the reason Trump won is “because he told good stories.” Actually, he said, they were terrible stories in that they played loose with facts. But a good story with flawed facts still motivates believers. “The crookedness of his story becomes an amenity,” he said. “You believe it and you don’t believe it at the same time . . . Moses really didn’t part the Red Sea either. But it works.”

Symposium participant Bruce McEver, a divinity-school graduate, poet and Wall Street mergers-and-acquisitions specialist, asked this question: “It’s ironic that Trump’s victory is because of the media – so much free publicity. We built him up and we’re now tearing him down. How do we change our system that allows this to happen?”

Princeton’s Glaude, in a partial answer to McEver’s question, seemed to say that the media had failed to tell the complex stories of the election in forms simple enough – like Trump’s speeches – to be heard by the public. The media shouldn’t avoid complex stories, he implied, but should work harder at them. “Use simple sentences to tell complex stories,” he said. “People like simple stories, but they also love Game of Thrones.”

Glaude’s analysis of the November results: Voting among minorities was depressed, and some millennials voted for third parties after Bernie Sanders lost the Democratic nomination to Clinton. His idea for a post-election story: “What happened to Bernie Sanders? He didn’t cause anything; he was the result of something.”

The media has never had the authority to control the message, said Sharlet. “What we do have is the authority to expand the noise of democracy.”

In retrospect, said NPR’s DeRose, Trump voters heard and liked his message, and understood it, whether fully truthful or not. But those people were not the people newsrooms were talking to pre-election.

THIRD PANEL: Refugees, Immigration and National Security

Washington Post religion reporter (now on a Nieman Fellowship year) Michelle Boorstein asked: “Why isn’t immigration seen as a religion story?” She also speaks later in the panel about

confusion over what we mean by journalism. “We’re all journalists now,” she said of bloggers, tweeters as well as people who work in the daily news business.

Immigration crosses boundaries, said Angela Zito, co-founder of the Center for Religion and Media at New York University. “Why are we OK with corporations crossing boundaries, but not OK with immigrants crossing boundaries?” She called religion “an aspect of the assemblage of anxiety and desire.”

Diane Moore, of the divinity school, wonders, “Is religion the same as morality?” She asked: If it is, then why don’t churches mobilize around issues of refugees, immigration and national security? The befriending of immigrants strengthens pluralist communities, she feels. But at present, she concluded, insecurity trumps pluralism.

“Secular liberals have been historically tone deaf about religion,” said panelist Stewart Hoover of the University of Colorado at Boulder’s Center for Media, Religion and Culture.

WRAPUP PANEL: Roundtable ideas for further exploration for journalists to promote religious literacy:

- Can we challenge the idea that whoever wins is automatically “good”?
- Laurie Goodstein of the NYTimes wonders whether it is time to ask people in faith communities: What does your God require (around justice)?
- Focus more on the “why” rather than the “what” – Jason DeRose, NPR
- Steve Prothero of BU said “we have a Twitter president.” He agreed with Glaude that it is time to take up the challenge of telling complex stories simply – “It’s an interesting intellectual challenge to do so.”
- IDEA: Better storytelling – Goodstein / partner with artists as storytellers
- Question terminology – does it inhibit meaning?
- No monoliths – find diverse voices
- Seek more partnerships between corporate and nonprofit media
- When reporting stories, ask, what is the religious motivator?
- Academia should learn to talk to the press better
- AAR should hold workshops on talking to the press
- Institutions should emphasize scholarly outreach
- Get Religion Writers Association and News Service better funded by philanthropy
- Fund the World Religion Database at Boston University (Prothero)

AMONG CLOSING OBSERVATIONS:

Bruce McEver observes that the day had revealed some intellectual baggage . . . and political bias. “I think we’ve got to bury the hatchet and get on here.”

DIANE MOORE’S CLOSING THOUGHTS

She focuses on story telling as necessary art. “Storytelling allows us to make complicated points.”

The Divinity School continues to study how it should be training its graduates for “this new time.” The religion, politics and ethics major is the most popular major at the moment.

She asks: “What would it mean for us to really say ‘let’s collaborate’ . . . to get out of our silos?”

“How do we take seriously our civic responsibility – a larger responsibility to shore up the foundations of democracy?”

POST-EVENT IDEAS FROM BILL DENSMORE

- While religion scholars may think of “religion” broadly, the public thinks of it as denomination focused. Elevate more words like faith, ethics, spirituality, community, justice and peace studies – things which ARE part of divinity education now, and should be part of religion reporting, but may not be perceived to be.
- See if there is a need to fund additional religion/faith writing/media prizes
- Consider Journalism That Matters followup convening of religion writers, scholars and policy folks
- More focus on what inspires political, and business actors – spirituality, faith, whatever
- Use Harvard convening power to start to build cross-sector coalitions