



Covering Religion with Sensitivity and Understanding in an Interdependent World

Background Note

With the tremendous rise in the power of the media in the past couple of decades, it has become vital for journalists to introspect on the influence their coverage has on the minds and lives of people. One area where such introspection is urgently needed is in the coverage of religion.

In the contemporary world, the phenomena of religion manifests itself in paradoxical ways - as a means for inculcating goodness and virtue and at the same time as a tool for spreading hatred and dissension. On the one hand religion has and continues to play a crucial role in people's lives as a source of meaning, purpose and values. Religion's contributions to culture, law and morality have helped strengthen the social fabric. Historically, religion has had a profound role to play in civilizing human nature and contributing to the advancement of civilizations. On the other hand, religion has also been made the basis of fierce prejudices. Fundamentalism, sectarianism and superstition have all been spread in its name by vested interests with disastrous consequences.

The positive influence of religion as a source of meaning and ethics can be seen in the lives of the majority of the world's people. This influence, although life sustaining and vital, is often inconspicuous and unarticulated. It can be discerned in the countless hopes, aspirations and acts of goodness, of charity, and kindness that sustains civilized life. The negative ways in which religion have been used, on the other hand, tends to attract a lot of attention, especially from the media. The media's coverage of religion or religion-related issues is often framed by its proclivity for conflict and controversy. In the process, religion's meaning-bestowing and civilizing function in the lives of people tends to get obscured. Numerous instances of cooperation and loving co-existence between people of different religions are overlooked while cases of conflict due to religion receives much attention. The role of religious convictions in people's commitment to virtues such as decency, kindness, forgiveness and mercy are ignored while instances of violence caused by a misguided interpretation of religion gets highlighted by the media.

Such negative images of religion in the media are a cause for deep concern due to the effect they have on our social reality. They tend to perpetuate a profound confusion in society about the true nature of religion by identifying religion with the divisive and superstitious beliefs and practices that are propagated in its name. In other words, by routinely focusing attention on the malignant expressions of the religious impulse, the media can normalize these malignancies and gradually deprive society of the conception of what healthy expressions of religious conviction and belief should be like. In the process, a sense of cynicism is bred towards religion which

weakens humanity's link with the positive and vitalizing influence that true religion can have for the moral and spiritual development of individuals and societies.

No doubt religion has been and is being misused by various vested interests. But so have other major institutions and system of knowledge such as politics, business or science. The answer to this misuse has not been to abandon these institutions or systems of knowledge; it has rather been to emphasize their true nature and purpose. The test of true religion is the wholesomeness of the fruit it bears. As the Bahá'í writings put it, religions must be "the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction." If religion "becomes the cause of estrangement then it is not needed, for religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary."

This roundtable meeting on the theme 'Covering Religion with Sensitivity and Understanding in an Interdependent World' is aimed as an opportunity for media persons to come together and reflect on the way their profession views religion and on the need for a more mature, balanced and sensitive coverage of this phenomena that has such a profound influence on individual and collective life. Given below are a few questions to stimulate reflection:

- How can journalists help their readers and audiences distinguish the true nature and spirit of religion from the various distortions that flourish in its name? Among the most common of these distortions is religious fanaticism and the spread of intolerance and communal hatred in the name of religion. What normative goals should media organizations adopt in their coverage of religion and religious communities so that they don't become unwitting tools for the spread of communal prejudices and stereotypes? How can they promote social cohesion by countering derogatory stereotypes of particular communities, intolerant attitudes and hate speech?
- Religion is also widely misused by the numerous unscrupulous godmen who exploit the gullibility of the masses to turn religion into an instrument for enriching and empowering themselves. How can the media help its readers and audiences to distinguish the sayings and doings of these pretenders from true religion? How can they ensure that in reporting about them they do not indirectly serve their purpose by turning them into celebrities?
- In reporting about religious practices and beliefs, journalists have often confused superstition with religion. How can journalists differentiate true religion which is amenable to reason, from superstition, empty rituals and blind imitation?

- Reporters often have to do their job at a breakneck pace in an age of digital news. This leaves them with little time to think and reflect about their coverage of complex issues such as religion. Coverage of such issues often requires a deep appreciation for the context in which actions take place and a sensitivity to ethical implications. How can journalists find or create spaces for reflection where they can introspect on the way they cover issues such as religion and the influence this coverage has on the world?

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