

THE RELIGION TABOO

DR JENNY TAYLOR¹



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Something's changing. Journalists are beginning to 'get religion'. Up to now, it's been a badge of professional honour not to; a taboo if you like. But it starts as something personal.

Journalists are struck by genuine altruism. Their stock in trade is human failure (sin) and self-serving, and indications of genuine self-sacrifice make an impression. Yes, journalists

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have souls, and part of our challenge in the recovery of a plausible Christian narrative in the dominant discourse is to recognize and service that.

Too often, and certainly for the secularized young, Christianity is seen as intellectually insupportable, politically dead in the water, the antithesis of radical or chic. Journalists are formed early and the Christian

Union is generally seen by outsiders as out of touch with what concerns them—as self-preoccupied, evasive, losers. Prejudice against Christians who seem weak becomes a habit of mind, and by the time you get your first newspaper job, this prejudice has become professionalised. Religion exists for journalists, for sure, but is best kept private. Worse than that, 'vicars' rhymes with 'knickers', as the great British

columnist Bernard Levin pointed out. Philandering clergy, loony extremists ... it's much easier to

make religion the news, than see the world with religion-aware curiosity.

But the other problem is the facile binary tug-of-war that exists in every journalist's mind, rendering every question a game of two halves, to use a sporting metaphor. In our western adversarial politics there are generally two main parties who must each be given equal airtime. So, it is believed, it

should be with religion. For every story about a Mother Teresa there must be a knock-down opponent to debunk her motivation. For every Christian source, there must be a Muslim or National Secular Society one. But religion does not work like that, and never has. Journalists generally don't have a clue. Why should they? What did we ever do to help them? The usual solution is to skip it altogether.

As well as personal prejudice, and professional habituation, atheist philosophy perhaps more than anything underpins the whole problem. The secularisation thesis that religion was dying out is well and truly past its sell-by date—but it's still residually there in newsrooms. This was the view, with roots in the 1880s but particularly prevalent from the 1960s on when Max Weber's work began circulating in translation, that traditional worldviews, together with witches and werewolves, were a thing of the past, due to the pressures of modernity (mobility, technocracy). Journalists merely reflected the zeitgeist. That this was said to be an accelerating process, thanks in large part to Marxist materialism and the 'inevitable withering away of the state', no doubt caused a problem of occultation—the rendering invisible or irrelevant of the transcendent. The evolutionary thrust of predictions by the likes of Oxford professor Bryan Wilson and others who took up Weber, that the transcendent would increasingly disappear as a referent in the affairs of state, made it almost career suicide to be identified as a believer. Who wants to be seen as gullible? Newsrooms tended to emerge as religion-free environments,

sanitised against superstition, as well as all its baggage—imperialism, and white male triumphalism (unless, as with Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* and similar, there were breasts involved). Neutrality became the watchword. But media managers failed to see that neutrality is not objectivity. Neutrality is a commitment to the view that there is no truth to be found. ‘As to religions, the law stands neutral’ has been a famous and operative legal axiom. Objectivity, on the other hand, is a belief that the truth is out there, and will reveal itself if reportage is fair, balanced and accurate.

A very senior commentator in Britain, Peter Osborne of the *Daily Telegraph*, filmed a documentary in Northern Nigeria for Channel 4’s *Unreported World*² in which he blamed Christians for the massacres in that tormented part of the world. After I returned from my own trip to Jos, following up the same contacts, peering down the same wells where dozens of bodies of children were said by Peter still to be rotting—and seeing no room for four let alone corpses of hundreds—I reported the exact opposite: that in fact it was a combination of Fulani, Hausa and al-Qaeda influenced Boko Haram torching villages, shooting point blank all who professed the Christian faith—and Christians struggling not to retaliate in circumstances Osborne clearly could not imagine.³ And what did this fearless scribe, who is also an Anglican, say? He shrugged: ‘Who knows where the truth



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lies?’ Yet the truth lies where it always has—with the best facts available: the first ever survivor of a Boko Haram massacre to testify to Congress, Adumu Habila, told his harrowing story in Washington on 14 November this year.⁴

An attitude of ‘neutrality’ like this is alarming because it prescribes the sources that will be consulted. Christian leaders are generally ignored because of their ‘bias’. Muslims are preferred because they are assumed to be the [Christian] West’s underdog. When a crisis breaks, foreign correspondents would rather consult the secular *Médicins sans Frontières* who flew in last week, than church pastors who have laboured in the area all their lives—and who also speak English. So I was not surprised, on challenging our John Simpson, World Affairs Editor of BBC News, about why the BBC never

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used church leaders as sources, to hear him say: ‘You know, I never thought about it’.

We journalists rightly pride ourselves on our scepticism. Rogues and fools will always speak from their own perspective, and several sources are required for any story to ‘stand up’. (It’s what makes four Gospels more reliable than one.) But appropriate scepticism, a tool of the trade, is easily hijacked by a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ which doubts everything, and which theologians like Lesslie Newbigin have written about.⁵ If you doubt even the intellectual and epistemological branch on which you are sitting, you cease to maintain contact with reality. Journalism becomes entertainment; reportage becomes opinion; and our newspapers today are the worse for it.

We need to recover our intellectual heritage as journalists; be proud of the shoulders on which our free press stands; understand the historic



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scaffolding that made freedom not just our goal, but our trade. And signs are that recovery is not far away. The *Times* in London has an overtly evangelical Christian Comment Editor, Tim Montgomery (founder of the politically influential ConservativeHome.com website)—perhaps the most important job on the paper. Only today *Times* columnist Matthew Parris took up cudgels against New Atheist Richard Dawkins, under a headline: ‘Christianity opens minds. Even to atheists.’⁶

When Tom Holland wrote the essay ‘Kingdoms not of this World’⁷ for the left-leaning *New Statesman* on the Christian underpinnings of contemporary secular values, it received the biggest postbag in its history. The presence of Muslims in newsrooms—the *Statesman* has the virulently outspoken and occasionally amusing Mehdi Dibaj—is now taken as justifying a tentative welcome back to Christian opinion.

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Veteran sociologist Kim Knott concludes a recent survey in her book with Elizabeth Poole and Teemu Taira *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred*, stating that ‘the media account is not unfailingly secular or driven by an ideologically secularist media’, and even anecdotally, this is true.⁸ The authors concede however, with the *Guardian’s* Andrew Brown, that ‘many media professionals are over-stretched in a context where funding has been reduced and time for research



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squeezed; they are expected to cover areas in which they have little expertise, and they do not have ready or easy access to convenient, accessible sources of information about religion.⁹ The book *Blind Spot: when Journalists don’t get Religion*, which Lapido launched in Britain for Oxford University Press, prompts the question with which the survey begins, namely: ‘Given that those who work in the media don’t always ‘get religion’ and, according to some, are less likely to be religious than the

population as a whole, is their portrayal of religious people, issues and events biased?’, indicating a lively debate in the academy that is beginning to resonate throughout the West. The conclusion, it would seem, is more ‘cock-up’ than ‘conspiracy’—as is so often the case. And speaking personally as someone who has operated on both sides of the media divide, all too often the real problem is the churches failing to communicate their stories in ways the media can use, or Christian agencies refusing to invest in proper media infrastructure.¹⁰ Too often they bludgeon the messenger for their own failure to understand how the game works, alienating those who could help the most.

9/11 was the story of all stories for contemporary media folk. It seemed to come literally out of the blue. Suddenly religion was back on the agenda, exposing our blind spot and the decay of a host of presuppositions that are no longer the case. We must all ‘get religion’ now—and the best thing for Christians to do, if they seek influence with the media, is to provide good stories, put up articulate sources who have the facts and contacts at their fingertips—and, as often as not, take a journalist out for a beer.

Lapido Media—the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs—

was set up to do just that. We work directly with journalists in a variety of ways (including in the pub). Our slogan is ‘Telling a truer story’. We’ve sought to do it on the war in Northern Uganda; *kindoke* child witches in London; the megamosque in Newham; and the Coptic revenge massacres in August this year, to name a few. Each time we’ve secured the coverage we sought, helping provide nuance, complexity and truth; undermining dangerous stereotypes (for example that all Christians are

predisposed against Muslims; that all Africans practise voodoo ...); and successfully addressing the prevalent view that all religions are the same.

We’ve been commended by senior Muslims for our objectivity; been offered lunch by grateful tabloid journalists for securing for them an ‘exclusive’—and only *then* winning a respectful hearing for what motivates us. And in September, we achieved an unprecedented cover page for the issue of Christian persecution in the top current affairs weekly *The Spectator*, after our event in Whitehall ‘Misreporting Egypt: Why the Truth is Getting Lost’,¹¹ at a time when attacks against Christians were almost universally and abjectly reported as justifiable revenge by the Muslim Brotherhood for the Morsi ouster and ‘coup’. Lapido is now written about without the need for explanation about what we do.

My prediction is the taboo will not be with us much longer. Truth is our business, and good journalism is increasingly getting it. But is the church? ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dr Jenny Taylor is the CEO of UK-based Lapido Media—Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs, a think tank launched in 2007 at the Frontline Club, London to help journalists handle the ‘new religious discourse’. www.lapidomedia.com Follow @LapidoMedia
- 2 <http://www.quicksilvermedia.tv/productions/production/nigerias-killing-fields>, accessed 23 Nov 2013.
- 3 ‘Nigeria: A Case of Too Many Faultlines’ in *Church Times*, 29 June 2010.
- 4 <http://www.lapidomedia.com/nigerian-tells-miraculous-deliverance-execution>, accessed 23 Nov 2013.
- 5 See, for example, Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Ethics and Public Policy Centre, Inc., 2007).
- 6 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3929426.ece>, accessed 23 Nov, 2013.
- 7 <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2009/04/muslims-essay-islam-state>, accessed 23 Nov, 2013.
- 8 Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change* (Ashgate 2013), p182.
- 9 Andrew Brown, ‘Cumberland Blues’. Jolyon Mitchell and Owen Gower (eds), *Religion and the News* (Ashgate, 2012), pp125.
- 10 See Jenny Taylor, ‘Confessions of a Journalist’. Paul Weston and Mark Laing (eds), *Theology in Missionary Perspective: Lesslie Newbigin’s Legacy* (Cascade, 2013).
- 11 <http://www.lapidomedia.com/resources>, accessed 23 Nov 2013.