

Submission to APPG on Religious Education – Religious Literacy Inquiry

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4 May 2016

Is there a perceived lack of religious literacy in the media?

I am the chief executive of Lapido Media - the Centre for Religious Literacy in Journalism. My doctorate is in the sociology of religion, specifically the effect of Islamic immigration on British secularization, studied through the prism of the governance of Britain's inner cities in the 1990s.

I speak as a journalist who trained with the Yorkshire Post and has worked in news all her life except for the five years of my doctorate which was completed in 2001, before 9/11.

For sure the media has a problem with religion. After all, as Bernard Levin famously quipped: 'Vicars rhymes with knickers.' It's difficult to take seriously.

'It was not until my own eyes became religiously attuned that I realized the West had become a menace to the whole world because of its secularist blinkers.

'The world is full of religion – and we meddle at our peril unless we understand that.

'Where the media do not "get religion" they pose a serious threat to democracy and ultimately to the well-being of the country, through misinterpretation and bias which governments then feed off.

'The media tell the nation's stories. Where there are lacunae in Britain as vast as we have at present, whole communities remain ghostlike, their reality a chimera.'

Some years after Levin made his somewhat myopic remark, 9/11 happened. The British analyst Paul Marshall at the Hudson Institute in Washington said for a press release in 2009 when we launched his book *Blind Spot: When Journalists don't get Religion* for Oxford University Press:

... 'When 9.11 happened America literally did not know what had hit it.'

That was, he explained, because the media, like the culture more broadly, re-interpreted bin Laden's actions through their own ideological filters of poverty or foreign policy or even sexual frustration!

Anything except the terrorists' 'repeatedly stated desire to restore a worldwide caliphate ruled by Islamic law' (2010, p. 4).

This was echoed by historian Simon Schama on Radio 4's Start the Week on 30 December 2014: 'To live now is to understand that religion actually shapes allegiance, it is not simply a reflection of it'.

By just 'gluing religion on' to what was *really* going on, the media had convinced themselves and us of the extraordinary notion that religion was dead. Aaqil Ahmed said as much at a BBC panel only last week. The Marxist revolution was complete.

But religion is and always will be undead: a Frankenstein upsetting the hubristic Marxist evolutionary apple-cart.

In fact, as the biologist Steve Jones says: 'Simply on birth rate the world is becoming more religious.' That's because secular cultures have more or less stopped replacing themselves demographically.

This is borne out by the Pew Foundation, which shows that the religiously unaffiliated are expected to *decrease* as a share of the world's population between 2010 and 2050 (from 16% to 13%). The world's Muslim population on the other hand will increase because of birth-rate and young populations, from 1.6 billion people (23% of the world's population as of 2010) to 2.76 billion people (30% of all people in 2050).¹

Journalists are simply missing big stories because of their inability to see what they're looking at. It diminishes the electoral mandate, and reinforces social isolation from which as we now know, conflict emerges.

If the government does not know anything about what a major segment of our population actually believes, then it is not a government but an ignorant and dangerous dictatorship.

When Hafiz Patel, British emir of the biggest Muslim missionary group in the world, the Tablighi Jamaat, died a month ago, only one mainstream news outfit reported it – and that was

¹<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/02/7-key-changes-in-the-global-religious-landscape/>

the BBC. Yet thousands and thousands of Deobandis– converged upon Dewsbury to pay their respects.

Richard Porritt, former News Editor of the Press Association says the religion beat was traditionally despised. That must change. ‘A journalist who is not confident of the facts is dangerous. The industry cannot afford to let ignorance grow.’

Bishop Angaelos who witnessed massive misreporting of the Egyptian revolution said: ‘A failure to understand and communicate [religious motivations] threatens communities and whole nations’.

Stereotypes are no substitute for truth, but journalists are now trading in them, partly out of a contempt for the religion beat, partly out of dread of getting too deeply into the subject: What Schama calls the ‘scream-filled caves of sectarianism’ . . .

. . . When a severely schizophrenic man in Edmonton beheaded his female neighbour, the Sun headline next day was: “‘Muslim Convert” Beheads Woman’ with no evidence, as Tehmina Kazi of British Muslims for Secular Democracy said, of a connection between the convert’s religious beliefs and his homicidal actions.

So what is religious literacy?

It is the understanding that religion has social and political impact. It shapes the very worlds we live in.

Lapido Media is ten years old. Religious literacy has been part of our brand since 2005. We were the first to build on the expression first used by sociologists of religion. We produce handbooks on hot-button issues – the next will be an Introduction to Religious Literacy with contributions from two of the panellists here assembled! We run a website demonstrating what religious literacy in the media looks like. We have worked with Reuters, and we are developing training for the NUJ, and the Press Association. We are funded by civil society organizations and well-wishers. We do not depend on the state in any way, or any religious institution.

What more do we need from you?

1. Interest and encouragement!
2. Advocacy with the News Media Association to give leadership in terms of media training, and the re-deployment of religious expertise in their newsrooms.

3. We also need a freeing up of funding streams, so we can develop the contribution we have been trying to make for a decade now, in terms of training and resourcing journalists.

Thank you.