

*Covering Jerusalem:
In Search of Journalistic Religious Literacy*

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In this essay I consider the ways in which journalists, both professional and non-professional, can become more religiously literate. My discussion is structured around three simple questions: First, why does religious literacy matter for journalists? Second, what are the obstacles to developing religious literacy? Third, how can these obstacles be overcome and journalistic religious literacy be developed? In order to do this, I draw largely on examples emerging from one of longest running clashes in the world: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More specifically I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on the challenges faced by covering news related to the contested religious spaces, narratives and traditions of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is one of the most reported on cities in the world. Given its claimed population of less than one million people, its asserted size of less than fifty square miles, and its location largely built upon a couple of hills and adjacent valleys, with neither a port nor a river crossing, it should lack strategic or geo-political significance.

Nevertheless, it attracts journalists, broadcasters, and film-makers from all over the world. They are not alone, being joined by over three million other annual visitors: tourists, pilgrims, and religious leaders from across the globe. For many Jews, Christians and Muslims it is perceived as a holy city, permeated with sacred memories and religiously significant places. For some this is the historic capital of Israel, for others it is the capital in waiting for a Palestinian state. For many this contested city is the “open wound of the Middle East,” which if healed could help to contribute to just peace throughout the region. The old city, in particular, less than half-a-square mile continues to

exert a magnetic pull, drawing many Jewish, Christian and Muslim visitors.

Inside the Old City, The Temple Mount or the *Haram al-Sharif* (The Noble Sanctuary) is regularly at the centre of new stories from Jerusalem. It is commonly described by journalists in dramatic, even incendiary terms, such as: “A flashpoint ready to ignite,”¹ or “Jerusalem’s flashpoint holy site.”² Journalists commonly provide basic background, describing how it is believed to be the site of the First and Second Temples, Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, as well as the Night Journey of Muhammad, and the site of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Asqa Mosque. Images of the Western Wall as a place of fervent Jewish prayer, or of the Jordanian run complex above, as a place of Muslim devotion, are regularly used, but more common are images of stone-throwing Palestinian youths juxtaposed with young Israeli heavily armed soldiers firing tear gas. Another common visual trope is from the nearby Holy Sepulchre Church, claimed to be the site of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, of Christian Monks engaged in pushing, shoving or even fist fights over who has the right of access to which space. These different dramatic images of conflict are used more regularly than the slower more hidden and peaceful conversations that take place out of the camera’s gaze.

Like the city itself, Jerusalem’s Abrahamic religious traditions have layered and complex histories. News items that are related to them in Jerusalem are often the hardest stories to cover well. Coverage invariably provokes complaints from within the Israeli or Palestinian communities and their supporters. Criticisms, condemnations or counter stories rapidly emerge via both traditional and social media sources. Religious leaders, bruised by previous interactions with journalists or digital diatribes, can withdraw from

¹ Amos Harel and Nir Hasson, ‘Temple Mount, A Flashpoint Ready to Ignite’, 20 April 2014, *Haaretz* (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-temple-mountain-flash-point-1.5245653>)

² Yolande Knell, BBC Middle East correspondent, ‘Jerusalem’s flashpoint holy site’, BBC News, 15 October 2015 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-34537296/jerusalem-s-temple-mountain-haram-al-sharif-explained>).

the public sphere, eschewing engaging with reporters. Journalists can become cynical or wary interacting with religious leaders, representatives or communities. This divide between journalists and religious leaders breeds further misunderstanding and is another reason why developing more religiously literate journalists is vital for enriching the portrayal of diverse religious traditions and practices, as well as on going conflicts.

Why Does Religious Literacy Matter for Journalists?

If journalists, both international and local, become even more religiously literate then coverage of complex stories, such as the role of religion in the past, present and future of Jerusalem, can develop greater depth, insight and empathy, and thereby contribute to moves toward the search for a just peace.³ Nevertheless, it is noticeable how religion can either be ignored or overlooked or stereotyped and caricatured in stories about contested spaces, histories and borders, such as in Jerusalem. Arguably, the same is true in relation to other news stories in which religion plays a significant role. Some scholars, such as Paul Marshall, have argued that many journalists have a “blind spot” when it comes to covering religion and can also be understandably hesitant in covering unknown territories or unknown areas of expertise. Marshall’s approach is representative of those scholars who focus on the inadequacies of journalists’ coverage of religion.⁴ What Michael Rubin, the editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, argues in relation to Iran and Iraq is also true for Jerusalem, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, that journalistic

³ This essay draws on “The Refugee Crisis and Developing Religious Literacy” by Jolyon Mitchell with Sara Ashfari, ‘Reporting Refugees: The Theory and Practice of Developing Journalistic Religious Literacy’ in *The Routledge Companion of Religion and Journalism and Religion* (forthcoming).

⁴ See Paul Marshall, Gilbert, L. and Ahmanson R. G., editors, *Blind Spot: When journalists don't get religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). In his chapter on ‘Misreading al Qaeda’ Marshall considers in some detail bin Laden’s pronouncements regarding the occupation of Islam’s holiest places including the Al-Aqsa (commonly thought to be the site of Islam’s ‘Furthest Mosque’, the ‘destination of the Prophet’s night journey, and as such Islam’s third holiest place’.), 34.

analysis “without an awareness of religion will always be faulty.”⁵

There are other qualifying perspectives. “Over the last three decades the coverage of religious news,” according to Gower and Mitchell, “has radically changed” as “religion is no longer” seen by many journalists as “a ‘soft’ story.” They argue that religious topics and issues “pervade the reporting of many stories related to domestic politics and foreign affairs alike.” Like other scholars before them they cite coverage of “the terrorist attacks in Western cities such as New York (11 September 2001), Madrid (11 March 2004) and London (7 July 2005), as well as the invasions of Afghanistan (from October 2001) and Iraq (from March 2003),” as evidence that “religion has increasingly broken into mainstream Western news agendas.”⁶ They also observe that others claim that “this process began even earlier with the Iranian Revolution (1979), the global performances of a ‘media friendly’ Pope, John Paul II (1978-2005), and the rise of the ‘religious right’ in the USA (from the late 1970s).”⁷ Along with scholars such as Stewart Hoover, they go on to argue that the “cumulative result is that religion is less commonly marginalised, and is sometimes used as an interpretative key for making sense of many news stories.”⁸

There is already a notable body of research into the relationship between religion, journalism, and the news emerging out of North America.⁹ This stands in contrast to

⁵ Michael Rubin, ‘Three Decades of Misreporting Iran and Iraq’, in Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Roberta Green Ahmanson, editors, *Blind Spot: When journalists don't get religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 47-64.

⁶ See Owen Gower and Jolyon Mitchell, editors, *Religion and the News* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1. See also Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 1-17.

⁹ See, for example: Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (London: Sage, 1998); Judith Buddenbaum, *Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1998). See also: Diane Winston (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on Religion and the American News Media* (Oxford: Oxford

books by academics and journalists in Europe that tend either to overlook religion, or to deal with it only in a superficial fashion.¹⁰ Moreover, some scholars and religious leaders claim that in certain settings some journalists appear to have reflected public anxieties and confusion about religion, especially Islam and/or their own religious tradition, or holy sites and contested sacred spaces found in Jerusalem. Arguably, ignorance or suspicion about what is currently the world's second largest religious tradition, as well as blurring between religious extremists and all Muslims, has contributed to some negative or superficial reporting of this evolving and diverse global religious tradition. This is slowly changing in Europe and other parts of the world, especially following the increased interest in the place of Islam, as well as the plight of refugees,¹¹ reflected in a wide range of news outlets.¹² The conversations around how media and educational representations can be improved at the opening of the Ansari Institute, contribute to these developing discussions, demonstrating the vital and timely nature of such dialogues.

News stories about Jerusalem are one among many examples of where coverage of the religious dimension could be further improved. A number of other scholars and commentators have emphasized that religion is an important element in many of today's

University Press, 2012) and her *Heartland Religion: The American News Media and the Reagan Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ See, for example, Howard Tumber, ed., *News: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). It is noticeable how this wide-ranging collection of essays and articles on news lacks any detailed treatment of religion and news. The British journalist Andrew Marr's, *My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism* (London: Macmillan, 2004), provides another example, from many personally informed discussions of the British press that overlooks detailed reflection on the relation between religion and the news.

¹¹ For example, the November 2015 Paris attacks further strengthened the negative image of many refugees in Europe, with a link to their religion, Islam. Arguably such negative reporting contributed to heightened anxiety and fear in such a way that it may have contributed to the increase in "Islamophobia" and hatred against refugees within Europe and elsewhere.

¹² See, for example, K. Moore, P. Mason and J. Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: Cardiff University and Channel 4, 2008); and Jake Lynch, *Debates in Peace Journalism* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), 163-182.

news stories,¹³ encouraging journalists to take religion far more seriously and to report religion and religious minority groups more accurately. To do so, it has been suggested and implied through a number of different studies that many journalists would do well to deepen their understandings of the religious dimensions of both local and global international stories.¹⁴ The improvement of journalistic religious literacy does matter for a number of reasons, including the sensitive nature of many religious aspects of news stories, the friction between certain religious communities, and the tendency for misunderstanding of religious traditions, beliefs and practices. Precisely what is meant by religious literacy is also an area of debate.¹⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, we follow another participant in the Ansari opening seminar Diane Moore's commonly used definition:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and

¹³ See the UK's new Religion and Media Centre, <http://religionmediacentre.org.uk/>

¹⁴ See Stewart Hoover. "Quantity, Equality and religion in the news since 9/11," in Winston D., ed. *The oxford handbook of religion and the American news media*. 81-92. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mitchell and Gower, editors, *Religion and the News* (2012).

¹⁵ See Adam Dinham and M. Francis, eds. *Religious literacy in policy and practice*. (Bristol, Great Britain: Policy Press, 2015).

cultural expressions across time and place.¹⁶

A religiously literate account of the various conflicts over and in Jerusalem will therefore bear in mind the pertinent historical texts, beliefs, practices, as well as relevant social, historical and cultural contexts. Increased religious literacy among journalists has the potential to enrich understanding of what lies behind religiously charged news stories, such as those that emerge on a regular basis from Jerusalem.

Understanding not only religion's role in local residents' lives, but also why some people feel rage, sadness, and joy would enrich interpretation of conflicts in and about Jerusalem. It might even dissipate some fear. Limited or superficial coverage of these issues can heighten anxieties, accentuate complexities and difficulties, as well as misinterpret different religions' roles in contributing to or alleviating the conflict. In the two sections that follow, other theories and practices will be discussed, particularly in order to consider how religious literacy among journalists, news reports, and audiences can be developed and improved.

What Prevents the Development of Religious Literacy among Journalists?

There are some obvious obstacles to developing religious literacy among journalists. These include time and money. Training costs both time and resources. Of course, misunderstanding or misreporting the religious element of major stories can be even more costly in the long term. Less obvious but equally significant obstacles include audience expectations, complex networks, pressurized environments, communicative contexts, and journalists' existing world views.

¹⁶ Diane Moore's 'Definition of Religious Literacy' was also accepted by AAR. <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy> (accessed 9 April 2018). 'Critical to this definition is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and *as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*'.

Audiences' beliefs, anxieties, and hopes can influence both the professional and the amateur journalist. If an international professional journalist primarily attends to Israeli accounts of the conflict, then it is not surprising that Palestinian perspectives are marginalized. If a local reporter is unable to visit Ramallah or Tel-Aviv, or cannot easily speak with members of the other community, it is not surprising that coverage is limited. Similarly, if the most extreme voices from both sides are used to provide journalistic copy, then the atmosphere of conflict is heightened. Fear of the 'other' can be heightened. These are commonly related to fear of the unknown: who are these people, what is their history, their culture, their religion, why are they fighting each other or protesting against us? In response to such questions the journalist may well create stories that mirror and even heighten their primary audience's concerns. The negative portrayal of certain religious groups in the Old City of Jerusalem in both terrestrial and digital media, and especially their perceived links to religious extremism and fanaticism, may further increase anxiety. As audiences become more concerned, for example, about Jews attempting to pray on the Temple Mount in contradiction to religious and civic laws, some journalists will reflect their concerns uncritically, which in turn contributes to heightened anxiety. In this way a communicative vicious circle develops, and religious literacy is perceived as an unnecessary skill to develop.

A related obstacle to journalists developing religious literacy is the complex networks of social relations and the communicative contexts that professional reporters inhabit. News stories, such as those about the move of the American Embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, are produced in complex cultural and social contexts as well as pressurised political and economic settings. This inevitably affects both how journalists are inculturated and trained, as well as how they cover news stories. In *The Language of*

News Roger Fowler claims that: “News is not a natural phenomenon emerging from ‘reality’, but a *product*. It is produced by an industry, shaped by the bureaucratic and economic structure of that industry, the relations between the media and other industries and, most importantly, by relations with government and with other political organisations.”¹⁷ Who owns news organisations and who pays journalists’ salaries matters. All these factors contribute to coverage of the many layers of the Israeli-Palestinian context. This also adds to the complexity of the relationships between religion, journalists, and audiences in an already divided land. In this tangled network of relationships, various experimentations, negotiations and dialogues take place, sometimes creating new narratives that can make sense to wider societies and communities. As Fowler goes on to suggest, news “reflects, and in return shapes, the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context.”¹⁸ This can become far more complicated when history is itself contested, however.

In addition, the growth of social media and citizen journalism has also created challenges that affect the treatment of original news stories and, as a result, the journalistic treatment of conflictual spaces such as found in Jerusalem. For example, political or religious polarization, especially through social media, has led many to search not for the truth but rather for confirmation of prior beliefs or feelings. This so-called ‘post-truth’ communicative environment can be hard to see through.¹⁹ Nevertheless, this is a vital task that applies to both professional journalists and unpaid commentators as well as to audiences, as the “risk is that people remain locked in their own filter bubbles

¹⁷ Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991), 222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁹ Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (London: St Martin’s Press, 2004) and James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2017) and Matthew d’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017).

and fail to understand other beliefs beyond their own.”²⁰ Filter bubbles, or as they are more commonly known, echo chambers, can feel like safe places to live and to interpret the world from, but they can close down conversations and reduce empathy with those living beyond known spaces. There are many different echo chambers to be found in and around Jerusalem. More religiously literate journalists can contribute to more religiously literate audiences and vice versa.

The complex network of relationships is further complicated by the communicative context in which the news is produced. Daily journalistic rituals, routines, and habits shape how reality is put together.²¹ The ‘manufacturing’ of news, is in the words of John Eldridge a “massive feat of social construction.”²² Journalists, photographers and editors join forces to retell news stories from a particular angle. The shape of news organisations, influenced by corporate culture, economic constraints and owners’ priorities all contribute to the formation of mainstream news. Around one hundred years ago, in Britain, Lord Northcliffe (1865-1922) directed his newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, to demonise Germans, thereby cultivating an environment where it was all the easier to tumble into and then continue the so-called ‘Great War’.²³ Demonization of the ‘other’ continues in many contexts, including in Israel-Palestine.

A further obstacle to developing religious literacy is the journalist’s own unrecognized bias or “blind spots.” In *Unreliable Sources: How the Twentieth Century Was Reported*, leading foreign affairs journalist Simpson argues that “Journalists are like portrait painters: their work will be accurate and fair, or inaccurate and distorted,

²⁰ Ibid. 17

²¹ Schlesinger, *Putting Reality Together* (London: Routledge, 1987).

²² John Eldridge (ed.), *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power* (London: Routledge, 1994), .4.

²³ Jolyon Mitchell, *Promoting Peace, Inciting Violence: The Role of Religion and Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 1.

according to their individual capability.”²⁴ This interpretation of journalism is too individualistic. As we have seen it is more than just a journalist’s personal capabilities that shape coverage of religion and its relation to conflicts relating to Jerusalem. There are other factors and pressures that inform a story.²⁵ Even if they seek to maintain balance and impartiality, a journalist’s own upbringing, life story and worldview will impact their angle on any story that they cover, whether it be the American Embassy in Jerusalem or another more explicitly religious story.²⁶ Some researchers claim that journalists working in the USA “tend to be more sceptical towards religious beliefs than the wider population.”²⁷ There is less empirical data about journalists working in Europe, but nevertheless the background, training, and beliefs of individual journalists will inform the way they cover a story, including its religious aspects. On the basis of conversations (2017-18) with a range of Israeli and Palestinian journalists this is clearly the case for those attempting to cover stories emerging out of Jerusalem.

How Can Religious Literacy Be Developed among Journalists?

In this third and final section I consider how these obstacles can be overcome and how journalistic religious literacy be developed. Traditionally, experimenting, negotiating and resisting have described audiences’ activities as they read, interpret and reproduce the news and information they receive. Journalists covering the religious aspects of the conflict over Jerusalem can embrace these practices: they too can experiment, negotiate, and resist. This approach will give journalists the potential to bring

²⁴ John Simpson, *Unreliable Sources: How the twentieth century was reported* (London: MacMillan, 2010).

²⁵ See, for example, Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message - Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content* (Longman: New York, 1991).

²⁶ See Japp van Ginneken’s discussion of a journalist’s religious background in his *Understanding Global News: A Critical Introduction* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 66.

²⁷ One of the earlier and best known of these studies is S. R. Lichter, S. Rothman and L. Lichter, *The Media Elite: America's New Power-brokers* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986).

to light hidden data and unfamiliar facts, to offer more accurate interpretations, to include multiple and diverse voices. This process will render the unfamiliar familiar, and in complex situations, in which it is not easy to collect and report the facts truthfully, it will help journalists to seek, analyze, and interpret what they see as the reality behind the contested spaces in Jerusalem. To cover stories in depth journalists obviously need to go beyond the public's assumed knowledge in order to negotiate with different sources of meaning. In this way, new, richer narratives can be created in the midst of multiple competing views.

Given the growing recognition of the significant and complex role of religion in many major news stories, it is not surprising that over the last two decades increasing numbers of journalists, broadcasters, and editors have recognized the importance of developing greater religious literacy in order to produce more balanced, accurate and insightful coverage. For example, in an extensive report on Religion and Ethics coverage in 2017 the BBC admitted that “there is more we can do to increase levels of religious literacy within our teams.”²⁸ In order to develop religious literacy in the BBC they propose more work in at least three areas. First, to improve training at all levels (including on journalism foundation and leadership courses), as well as “online training in religious literacy.” Second, to establish an “ongoing cycle of briefings with external figures from religious and secular groups talking to relevant BBC teams on a particular theme.” Third, to create “an audience portal that brings together audience data, qualitative and quantitative surveys, and external material to inform creative decision-making.”²⁹ It is striking how little emphasis there is upon experiential learning and discovering the reality of lived religions. The success of such proposals will take some

²⁸ See *BBC Religion and Ethics Review*, December 2017, 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, .26.

time to evaluate, especially as it is difficult to measure any increases in religious literacy in broadcasts, news reports, and among journalists.

Developing religious literacy is easier said than done, as religion is a broad and often contested realm, meaning different things to different people. Superficial forms of religious literacy may not be enough for journalists who report events or represent religion in their news reports, because religious belief and practice are enormously diverse. One danger is to turn a particular religious belief or practice into a recurring global or universal pattern, to assume that one representative of a religious tradition acts or speaks on behalf of that entire religion. For religion is an evolving entity, which must be interpreted through the diverse lenses of the experiences and histories of the individuals who practice it. Over time, and in different places, as practice changes, religious meaning and interpretations change too. These are living, evolving traditions. Therefore, a religiously literate journalist is better equipped to serve as an interpreter of fragmented, evolving and diverse religious traditions. Religious literacy will enable a journalist to give better coverage of the particular religious experiences and memories of both Palestinians and Israelis, as well as the similarities and differences within Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities living in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, others argue that religious literacy ensures that persons are treated not as objects of news stories but as 'subjects' in their own right. In order to present them as subjects, the journalist needs to consider realistic ways of building a relationship with them involving dialogue and discussion, not simply for the purpose of building networks, exchanging knowledge, discovering facts, but for a deeper insight into the subject's world. In other words, journalistic religious literacy means going beyond cerebral knowledge of religious traditions, to empathetic appreciation of the diverse nature of

lived religion. Empathy matters. This issue becomes even more vital given that in Jerusalem residents, visitors, and refugees come from different religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Religious experiences may become more familiar through meaningful conversations, but this will inevitably take time. Time is in short supply in journalistic settings. Nevertheless, in spite of what Philip Schlesinger memorably described as the “stop-watch culture” of news,³⁰ it is noteworthy that several media organizations (not just the BBC, but also Google and Reuters) are developing courses on religious literacy, to provide journalists with some knowledge about different religious traditions and practices. This input aims not only to educate journalists about central beliefs and core practices, but also to prepare journalists to listen carefully, in order to be able to cover complicated, controversial, and unfamiliar territories.

Alongside a pedagogical approach is a conversational approach for developing religious literacy among journalists. Proposed by a number of practitioners, this approach includes several elements. First, a journalist will enter into a dialogue with the people whose stories they are covering. For example, the Dutch government supported a project that aimed to bring together Israeli and Palestinian journalists with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders through conversations. In this dialogue the journalist’s task will be not only to add to their existing knowledge and understanding of the subject’s situation, but also to resist their pre-existing knowledge, through relationship and conversation with their subject. Second, as time permits, journalists can be in continuous conversation and negotiation with the information they receive, through experimenting, negotiating and resisting: experimenting with new methods of interpretation, negotiating with different sources of meaning, and resisting obvious or clichéd readings of a

³⁰ See Philip Schlesinger’s discussion of ‘A Stop-Watch Culture’ in his *Putting Reality Together* (London: Routledge, 1987), 83-105.

contested Jerusalem. A conversational model allows for a multi-dimensional analysis of a religious story, and will include the voices of powerless or silenced groups. This can be much easier said than done, as inter-communal and inter-religious dialogue in Jerusalem can not only be difficult but also dangerous to participants who may develop a scent of the “enemy.”

Closely related to pedagogical and conversational approaches to developing journalistic religious literacy, are related skills, which can be described as different aspects of experiential approaches: first, the skill of listening carefully to an individual’s stories, secondly, the skill of observing the impact of conflicts, chronic degradations, and spectacular events upon religious practices and beliefs. For example, in the case of covering Jerusalem, some Western journalists understandably focus on immediate, dramatic, or spectacular events. The 2017 “Temple Mount Crisis” led to extensive coverage of the killing of the two Israeli-Druze soldiers by three Palestinians and the subsequent protests in response to the Israeli attempt to put up metal detectors and then new CCTV cameras. But there was less in depth analysis of why the Palestinians responded so passionately and why some ultimately felt that it was a minor victory. Such events had a personal impact upon those covering this story. Different religious traditions and beliefs have been brought into contact with others, further complicating the evolving religious landscape. Listening to, observing, and participating in these experiences can be a source of experiential learning for both professional and citizen journalists.

Up to this point I have argued for the value of pedagogical, conversational, and experiential strategies for developing religious literacy. As a result of these and other educational processes, journalists are beginning to understand that in order to describe any stories of Muslim, Christians, or Jewish Europe one needs to go beyond the

contemporary borders of Jerusalem and Israel-Palestine into both the recent and distant past, as well as the wider Middle East, where religion plays a complex role in the ongoing conflicts and civil wars. With the rise of Islamic extremism, the recurring conflicts apparently related to religion, and the massive migrations into Europe and other parts of world, religion has become a crucial factor in addressing these situations, not only socially and politically, but also in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people.

In an earlier section we described some of the practices that can increase religious literacy among journalists, including pedagogical training, experiential learning, and conversation rooted in careful listening. These practices may provide some of the necessary foundations to overcome many of the obstacles described in the previous section. This is a valuable project as both professional and amateur journalists still have the opportunity to not only influence meaning making, but also to put different perspectives about an event into conversation with each other and then present that complexity to their audiences. In this context, if there is othering, suspicion, and hatred among citizens, combined with a rise of radicalism on all sides, then journalists, editors, and other broadcasters can play a significant role: enabling a broader diversity of subjects to speak for themselves can create more nuanced and empathetic stories. Digital media makes this technologically simpler. How? Journalists can develop a more conversational form of engagement with their subjects so that the audience will in turn hear different voices and opinions, and so learn what is driving the ongoing conflict. In turn, this may elicit greater empathy between participants in the conflict and fearful or apathetic audiences. This could then lead to both sides—or the multiple sides—being seen not as disposable objects but as valuable persons with distinct cultures, histories, and beliefs. It could reveal that they could enhance our communities by affirming the “golden rule” of

loving your neighbour as yourself, as the three Abrahamic traditions all prescribe. In this way religious literacy begins with careful listening, moves toward conversation, and generates empathy.

Conclusion

How can the web of competing stories about Jerusalem be untangled? Behind each of these news narratives are multiple contexts, journalists, and audiences. They are not frozen in time, but reflect dynamic elements within the creation of news. Stories evolve, contexts are contested, journalists are creative, and audiences weave new meaning into stories that they are offered. For those living in Jerusalem and those living outside these stories inevitably take on different meanings. Where a story is produced and then consumed can transform its meaning. There is a multiplicity of representations, reporters, and receptions emerging from a range of settings. The digitization of communication has further complicated this layered reality. We have seen that in order to develop a nuanced analysis of how to cultivate religious literacy among journalists it is useful to reflect upon both obstacles and practices.

Increasingly religiously literate journalists have the opportunity to report news in a way that is enriched by their deeper understanding of religious beliefs and practices. In fact, stories about religion in Jerusalem as well as other stories with religious undertones, have created new potential for religiously literate reporters to find new ways practicing their craft. The same is true for ethnographers, some of whom discern how distant history can be experienced as present reality by local residents in Jerusalem.³¹ One of the ways is to adopt the audiences' activities of experimenting, negotiating, and resisting the news that they receive, while going through the process of investigation, interpretation, and

³¹ See Dana Herbergs, Dana. *Overlooking the Border: Narratives of a Divided Jerusalem* (Wayne State University Press, 2018).

reporting. This process might be more complex than simply mirroring audiences' playfulness with news, however, since professional journalists must also navigate within news organizations and their demanding agendas and complicated histories.

Elsewhere I have argued that the majority of scholarly studies and critical journalistic reflections have concentrated upon the content, contexts, and producers of a religion news story.³² It is much rarer to consider the role of the audience. Nevertheless, more interactive forms of news production is emerging with the digitization and convergence of communicative technologies, the growth of “digital,” “online,” and “citizen” journalism. These audience-centred approaches, ask how viewers, readers, and listeners respond to and interact with what they learn? This approach helpfully notes that any news story about Jerusalem or beyond is engaged by multiple audiences that, in turn, bring a variety of beliefs, traditions, theologies, memories, experiences, and narratives. With the increase of digital citizen journalism, younger audiences (especially those 19 - 34 years old) are increasingly turning to unexpected parts of the web for news. As Rupert Murdoch argues this age group “don't want a God like figure from above to tell them what's important.”³³ Increasingly, audiences attempt to tell journalists which stories are noteworthy, even though it is unclear if new media actually builds bridges between amateur and professional news gatherers. Some stories do circulate through independent media and enter the public sphere in such a way that gets onto the professional news journalist's agenda. In other words, the range of agenda-setting sources has radically increased for both audiences and journalists over the last two decades.

Audiences now have more channels for public expression and therefore have the

³² See Jolyon Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Stuart Allen, *News Culture*, 3rd Edition, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010), 143.

capacity, even if it is underused, to influence mainstream news frames. In the light of this, the traditional news values,³⁴ which determine where and whether a story is covered, are open to further question. While the journalistic craft may have become more professionalized in some circles, religious leaders have become more criticized— by both journalists and audiences. This is a significant phenomenon, which media scholars, cultural theorists, social anthropologists, and other social scientists have mapped in detail.³⁵ Drawing upon these insights, the complex activity of the audience should be taken into account. And when arguing for improved journalistic religious literacy it is important to understand that audiences are not passive receivers of news stories, but have the potential to become dynamic respondents. Increasingly, expressive audiences add to what Michel de Certeau described in another context as the “interminable recitation of stories.”³⁶ As stories are repeated, they are edited, adapted, and elaborated by audiences. As they circulate, stories can swell or shrink in significance, just as news stories about Jerusalem often take on a life of their own. By more carefully considering the reception of those stories, other social actors—audiences—move to the center of the discussion about how to improve literacy. The news audience also must become more religiously literate and media savvy. That, in turn, might hold journalists accountable while also aiding in their quest to understand religion more deeply. That widened sphere of interaction might shed more light on the sources of human conflict and possible paths to building peace.

³⁴ J. Galtung and M. Ruge, “Structuring and Selecting News”, in *The Manufacture of News*, S. Cohen & J. Young, eds. (London: Constable Firm, 1973).

³⁵ See Livingston 2006 [2003]: 337-359), cultural theorists (Miller 2006 [2001]), anthropologists (Rothenbuhler and Coman 2004; Askew and Wilk 2002, especially 237-322).

³⁶ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall, (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 186.

