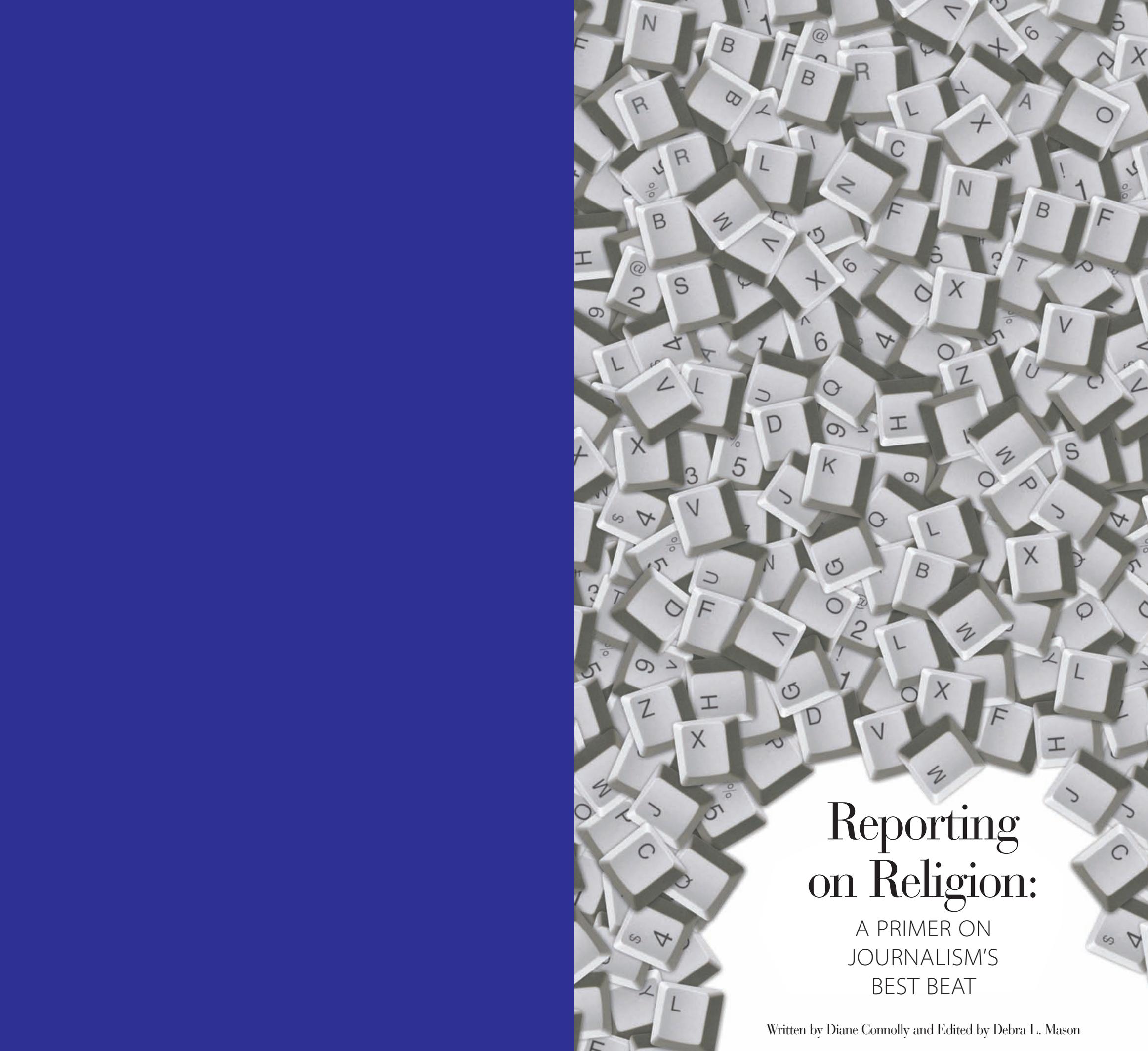


R E P O R T I N G O N
R E L I G I O N :
A P R I M E R O **N**
J O U R N **A** L I S M ' S
B E S T B E A T

A resource guide from
RELIGION | NEWSWRITERS



Reporting on Religion:

A PRIMER ON
JOURNALISM'S
BEST BEAT

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Welcome

Some journalists ignore it until it pounces at them. Others pursue it like a skilled hunter. For some, it's a full-time job. For others, it's an occasional factor in the occasional story. For all, it's a powerful force that can enhance coverage of almost any topic.

However you came to report about religion in the mainstream media, you're in the right place. You may be a newcomer to the religion beat, a student or a veteran journalist who keeps encountering religion in stories. You may work in print, broadcast, radio or on the Web. This booklet will guide you through the basics of reporting on religion, pointing you to important resources and considerations and warning you about potential pitfalls. It will help ease your way into what many of us think is the best beat in the business.

We also hope this booklet convinces you that religion can enrich your stories by explaining people's motivations and providing details that can transform run-of-the-mill reports into surprising or provocative narratives. Religion shapes people's actions and reactions in very private and very public ways across the range of news and features. Without it, you're often not getting the whole story.

Religion journalism — like journalism in general — is undergoing seismic shifts because of changes in the news business as well as changes in society. To keep this guide from being outdated as quickly as yesterday's news, it resides on the Web on the Religion Newswriters' home page, www.RNA.org. Check there for updates and for the Religion Newswriters' Resource Library, which offers extensive resources for religion reporting.

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The basics

Ask people why they read or listen to news media and they'll probably mention sports, politics, crime, schools, business and lifestyle features. Religion almost never makes the top of the list. But faith and spirituality are a powerful undertow in so many of the stories of our day. Too often, that undertow remains invisible to media audiences because journalists don't acknowledge its persistent pull. Life is full of tales of good versus evil, struggles amid hardship, transformation, reconciliation, forgiveness, success against the odds, grief, community and family — all themes highlighted by religious traditions. There are great stories to tell. Let's get started.

What is religion news?

Religion news is any story in which religion, faith, spirituality or religious ethics plays a significant role. Any topic and any type of story can be religion news:

- Breaking news, investigative reporting, trend stories, features, profiles and analysis.
- International, national and local news, politics, sports, business, education, crime, arts and entertainment, science, health, lifestyles, fashion, travel, food and more.
- Stories about one religion, several religions or the interaction among them; stories about institutional religion (individual houses of worship, denominations or entire religions); stories about religion or spirituality that take place outside institutional walls.
- Beyond news, religion is a frequent topic of opinion columns, commentary, editorials and blogs.

The case for covering religion

Religion is interesting and important, but media organizations should also cover religion because it's a good business move. Reader/viewer/listener surveys on religion are relatively scarce, but when combined with anecdotal evidence and other poll findings, there is a persuasive case to be made that covering religion is smart:

- 1 Six in 10 Americans say religion is “very important” in their lives. That means they’re likely to read/watch/listen to stories about religion. ¹
- 2 Religion stories connect with readers and viewers. Connecting with their audiences is a universal goal of media organizations. Many religion journalists say they’ve gotten more feedback on the religion beat than any other they’ve covered.
- 3 A quarter of Internet users have searched for information about religion online, and half of those have looked for information about faiths other than their own. That implies they’re interested in reading about religion. ²
- 4 Religion is a factor in the issues Americans consistently name as their top concerns: war, terrorism, education, health care, immigration, the environment and the health of the economy.
- 5 Many media outlets fail to include religion in their own market studies. If your outlet does not ask about religion, encourage your market survey employees to do so. Generally, local studies support the case for religion news. Although the audiences for faith and values stories tend to be older than the average news media consumer, more women than men are interested in religion news.
- 6 Across the nation, some media outlets are trimming religion news under the mistaken notion that more and better religion news will not help attract new audiences. The Readership Institute, a massive research project on newspaper readership that is based at Northwestern University, showed that readers are highly unsatisfied with existing religion news. Based on that and other findings, the institute did not include religion news as among the top nine content areas on which newspapers need to focus. However, some religion and media scholars believe the problem is in how questions about religion are asked, since religion clearly is a motivating factor in the use of many other types of media, including film, books and online content.

The case for religion specialists

If religion can be part of every beat, why have one or more journalists in an organization concentrate solely on religion?

- 1 Religion is one of the most complex subjects journalists cover, requiring precision in wording, attention to nuance and knowledge of a wide range of religious traditions.
- 2 Most religion issues are related to the Bible or other scripture. Religion news specialists are — or become — knowledgeable about scripture and the experts they need to interpret debates over it.
- 3 Journalists are expert at reporting facts, but religion reporters also become skilled at reporting about beliefs that cannot be proved. They learn to ask questions respectfully while maintaining the skepticism necessary for news.
- 4 The names of religious groups alone require an expert to get them right. While most Baptists in the United States belong to one of four denominations, there are more than 70, with a variety of practices, traditions and beliefs. Meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Presbyterian Church of America have vastly different beliefs, as do the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Get them wrong, and you’ll hear about it.
- 5 Public records and open meetings laws don’t apply to the majority of religious groups, so religion reporting depends heavily on interviews. To get great stories, it helps immensely to have a reporter who has cultivated sources.
- 6 Religion journalists’ expertise is invaluable in breaking news coverage of shootings at churches, terrorism attacks done in the name of faith, hate crimes, court rulings and legislation involving religion and more.

Oops!

A major newsweekly once misquoted the Rev. Jerry Falwell as referring to an “assault ministry” when he actually said “a salt ministry,” a reference to Matthew 5:13.

Trends in religion news

The notion of what religion news is and where it belongs has changed dramatically in the last decade. Years ago, religion was usually relegated to the “church page,” where stories of denominational policies and church anniversaries played a starring role. Now news about many different faiths leads televised and radio broadcasts, inspires thousands of Web sites and tops front pages of newspapers around the country and around the world. It’s also found in every section of the newspaper. What’s changed?

- The country is more religiously diverse, and its religious makeup, even among Christians, is changing. More faiths are more common in neighborhoods throughout the country, and some of their practices require special accommodations from schools and workplaces.
- Crimes such as sexual abuse, terrorism and financial wrongdoing have thrust religious groups into the news.
- Politics is heavily engaged with issues affected by religious beliefs, including abortion, end-of-life issues, stem cell research, same-sex marriage and more.
- Religious denominations are entrenched in bitter conflict over homosexuality, abortion and women’s roles.
- People are practicing their faith in different ways, often switching houses of worship, eschewing the faith they were raised in, blending the practices of more than one religion or choosing to express their faith outside religious institutions.
- Religion has a prominent role in many international conflicts.
- The increasing numbers of evangelical Christians, who are committed to sharing their faith in all venues of their lives, has increased the number of religious debates about the proper role of religion in schools, workplaces and government.

What about religion on other beats?

Religion reporters don’t have exclusive rights to writing about spirituality and generally appreciate when other reporters acknowledge it in stories — especially if it’s done well.

Some guidelines:

- Whenever religion and faith are a significant factor in a story, that should be acknowledged, no matter who is covering it. When a mother says God saved her baby from a fire, quote it. When a politician says his Catholic faith led him to vote against stem cell research, quote it. Better yet, ask more questions.
- Include religion in breaking news and team coverage. When the valedictorian’s speech is censored because she talked about Jesus or when a mosque’s windows are shot out, religion journalists can help with coverage, provide sources and background, and/or urge editors and producers to explore where faith fits in.
- Religion journalists should be good ambassadors for their beat. When another department is working on a story that touches on religion, offer sources and background. Other journalists may then be more likely to ask for the resources that will help them get the religion angle right.
- Most religion stories overlap with another beat. If a pastor is a radio personality, turf battles can be minimized if the entertainment and religion reporters coordinate.

Everyday asset

Fifty-nine percent of Americans surveyed in April 2006 said religion was “extremely” or “very important” in their daily life. In the CBS News Poll, 26 percent said religion was “somewhat important,” 13 percent said it was “not important,” and 2 percent weren’t sure.

Do you need to be religious to report on religion?

NO For reporting in general-circulation media, the answer is no. Just as political reporters are not required to be Democrats, Republicans or even voters, journalists who report on religion aren't required to have certain beliefs. In fact, religion beat reporters include Christians of all kinds, Jews, Muslims and members of other faiths, as well as atheists and agnostics. However, it is critical that journalists respect faith as an important part of people's lives, and they must be committed to the core journalistic values of balance and fairness. Whatever their own beliefs, journalists must write about others' beliefs with respect, whether or not they agree with them.

If you want to specialize in religion news ...

Religion Newswriters estimates that up to 500 journalists in North America regularly spend part of their day reporting on religion. Many of those cover religion full time, particularly at newspapers, but a good number do not. Few outlets have more than one reporter on the beat full time, and even fewer have editors or producers who specialize in religion.

If you want to specialize in religion, you can apply for a full-time position or begin including religion in your stories and lobby for a full-time position. Some reporters report to features editors, while others work for local news desks. A few cover religion nationally for large-circulation newspapers, news-magazines, Web sites or television.

There is no one "right" way to cover religion. Reporters and news organizations tailor the beat to the demands and interests of their readers, viewers and listeners; the area they cover; and their staffing. Most, though, extol the value of a mix of religion stories — hard news, trends, feature stories, profiles, perspective or analysis pieces, and daily coverage of events.

What can you do to improve your ability to cover the beat? Most religion reporters recommend a degree in journalism. A good number acquire an undergraduate or graduate degree in religion, either through a religious school or secular university program. Many learn on the job through reporting and reading extensively on their own. More and more, reporters take advantage of the expanding opportunities to attend conferences, such as Religion Newswriters' annual conference, as well as workshops and fellowships that focus on religion.

Who makes a great religion journalist?

Other traits that are assets for religion journalists:

- Respect for the role of faith in people's lives.
- Immense curiosity about religion and a willingness to learn — and keep learning — about it.
- An abiding sense of fairness and balance, and an understanding that there are often more than two sides to a story.
- The absence of any interest in pushing any religious viewpoint.
- A commitment to covering all kinds of diversity — of faith, both within Christianity and outside of it, and of ethnicity, gender, economic status and geography.
- Willingness to spend time with all sorts of people in the places where they live, gather and worship. Willingness to work through language and cultural challenges.
- Strong news skills, because religion includes much more than feature stories.
- The ability to accurately and fairly describe the nuances of different beliefs, even if you personally disagree with them or if a news report raises questions about them.
- Excellent writing skills, with the ability to describe rituals in ways that invite readers and viewers into worlds they've never experienced and the ability to be precise about doctrines and beliefs.

1 "Among Wealthy Nations ... U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion," a 2002 survey from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=167>

2 "Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online," a 2001 survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project. www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_CyberFaith_Report.pdf

Best practices

Finding the right tools

To produce great religion stories, journalists need a good toolbox. Most tools are the same as for other beats. Religion, however, requires some special skills. Government reporters deal with plenty of authorities, but when journalists encounter religion in a story, they often end up reporting on a powerful, unseen authority that 9 in 10 Americans say they believe in. Unfortunately, God doesn't grant interviews.

Veteran religion journalists can offer good advice for those new to the beat or journalists who simply need to know where to turn for resources when religion is part of a story. For example, reporters should never assume they know what deities, angels or demons are up to. Always attribute statements. Say: "She *saw* an angel at the door as she turned to run out of the burning house" instead of "an angel *appeared* at the door."

Stories that include spirituality, faith and ethics aren't just for religious people. They're for everyone. Writing and producing them in ways that resonate with ardent believers, well-read worshippers, spiritual dabblers and unconcerned agnostics requires skill. Read on for some of our best advice.



Preaching, teaching & proselytizing

What's a journalist's mission when reporting about religion in general circulation news? To report on it, telling truths according to verifiable facts, accurately describing people's beliefs and experiences, and interpreting events for readers, listeners and viewers. Readers will certainly learn from your stories. They may decide to take some action because of what they read or hear from you. They may even be inspired to explore faith or return to it. These are all likely byproducts from the work you do, and your audience will likely tell you that. Your mission, however, is not to preach, teach or proselytize. Those goals will get in the way of reporting the truth, as uncomfortable, confusing or even disturbing as it sometimes can be.

Get oriented

LEARN A LITTLE — OR A LOT — FAST. Surf the World Wide Web for blogs, sites and information about current topics in religion. Read national and local religious magazines and newspapers — *Tricycle*, *Sojourners*, *Hinduism Today*, *Minaret*, *Christianity Today*, *Charisma*, *Christian Century*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *The Forward*, and *Science & Spirit*, among them — for windows into what religious communities care about. Pay attention to movies, books, television shows, computer games and other places that religious themes show up.

Sign up for email newsletters to help you spot trends in religion. Among them:

- Christianity Today's CT Direct (www.christianitytoday.com/ctmag/) daily email includes news and commentary from an evangelical perspective.
- The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (<http://pewforum.org/>) distributes a free weekly email with news, surveys and expert opinions about issues at the intersection of religion and public affairs.
- Sightings (<http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/index.shtml>), a twice-weekly email from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago, reports and comments on religion in public life, mostly from a mainline Protestant perspective.
- Crosswalk.com's Religion Today (www.crosswalk.com/) summarizes news from around the world.

Get out

Out where people of faith gather, that is. That could be a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, book store, quilting group, sports field, festival, conference or meditation center. See Page 78 for tips on visiting places of worship.

Getting titles right

Getting titles wrong is one of the quickest ways to lose your audience's trust. They'll think that you don't know what you're doing or you don't care enough to get things right. In fact, religious titles are quite a challenge. Some titles indicate an official position and endorsement from hierarchy; others people choose to bestow upon themselves. Some — rabbi or reverend — are familiar, but many — sheik (in Islam), metropolitan (in Eastern Catholic or Orthodox churches) or reader (in Christian Science) — might not be. Ask people what their titles are and what kind of authority they represent. If someone uses a title you're not familiar with, check it. More guidance on religious titles can be found at the Web site www.Religionstylebook.org.

Redefine the religion beat

WATCH FOR CH-CH-CHANGES. People's search for meaning and connection amid cultural shifts breeds new expressions of spirituality. Don't cover the same old story. Many people get their spiritual fix in ways that were unthinkable two decades ago — gathering at coffee houses, spas, sports arenas, film festivals or multi-site churches that project the pastor on a video screen. Different ages, religions, ethnicities and races are finding their own ways to define faith in the 21st century, from spiritual programs for Alzheimer's patients to Hindu summer camps and faith-based Internet dating services. Schools and workplaces are the new hot sites for religious expression. Attitudes toward caring for the poor and oppressed are changing, too.

LOOK OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION. Fewer people are affiliating with houses of worship, and one of the fastest-growing segments in religion surveys is people who profess spiritual beliefs but don't attend worship. Stories about their expressions of spirituality — through environmental groups, books, conferences, yoga, house churches and more — say a lot about religion in America.

INSIDE INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION, FIND GREAT STORIES. Houses of worship and religious organizations still, however, remain rich, powerful and, in some cases, influential forces in America. Stories about their inner workings can be fascinating, telling or disturbing. How does a 13-member church end up with 40,000 members? How does a 2,000-member church end up with 40? How does an all-Anglo church become multiracial? What happens after a pastor's fall from grace? How does a mosque or synagogue attract younger members?

PATROL THE PUBLIC SQUARE. Bitter clashes, unlikely alliances and surprising resolutions all mark the high-profile stories found when religion intersects with education, government, health, science and more. From public holiday displays to graduation prayers to abortion legislation, ask why conflicts or alliances exist or why some issues can be resolved and others will never be.

WHEN POSSIBLE, BE LOCAL AND NATIONAL — OR LOCAL AND GLOBAL. One of the best ways to pump up the impact of a religion story is to connect it to a national or global trend or event. It gives readers, viewers and listeners a sense that the values debated in their town are being tested on a larger playing field. Most local stories can be placed in national context with a quick clip search. And most houses of worship and religious organizations — even those that aren't part of a global faith — have strong international ties because of immigration, missionary or relief work, sister congregations, funding of overseas projects or concern for members of their faith involved in violent conflicts internationally.

ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION. Rather than report on one faith group at a time, focus on issue stories that reflect the thinking of a variety of faiths. How do Jewish, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant Christian and Muslim believers differ in their approach to stem cell research? How do Buddhists and Hindus approach end-of-life care differently from Christians, Jews or Muslims?

BE TIMELY, BUT DON'T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT TIME PEGS. With religion, some of the best stories result from following up later to find out what effect a vote, a change in leadership or a new policy had on real people's lives.

DON'T DREAD THE HOLIDAYS. Yes, most religion reporters write stories to advance the major holidays of the major faiths. Yes, most reporters approach them with some amount of dread. But the smart ones use holidays as an opportunity to explore an issue related to the theme of the holiday — identity for Rosh Hashana, birth for Christmas, freedom for Passover. They find a person, an event, an issue, a ritual or a trend they view through the lens of the holiday. An ethnic community's unique observance can be helpful. Holidays aren't that important, but the way people live out their faith is. (Consult the online Interfaith Calendar for dates and descriptions: www.interfaithcalendar.org/.) There is an argument to be made for not observing the major religious holidays with enterprise pieces — after all, seven or more holidays can eat up a lot of one reporter's time during a year. Creative alternatives include photo essays or single photos, a Q-and-A, a book review or stories by writers in other departments about something related to the holiday — travel, food, etc. (The most commonly covered holidays are listed by faith under the Roundup of Religions, Page 39).

Rely on people power

MATTERS OF FAITH AND BELIEF ARE ALWAYS ABOUT PEOPLE. Whenever possible, stories about doctrines, institutions or legislation should go beyond officialdom. If a vote is important enough to write about, it's important to take the extra steps to find out how it will affect people's lives.

LET PEOPLE TALK ABOUT FAITH AND BELIEF. Too often, reporters steer clear when sources bring up how faith guides their actions. By encouraging those conversations, reporters can learn about core values and decisive moments. Asking sources about religion is delicate; many people find it intrusive. But you can always ask, "How did your beliefs or values affect your decision?" David Crumm, an award-winning religion reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, advises reporters to always ask another question: "Invariably, the answers to your first questions about religion will have traditional words and phrases that are really code words religious people use to describe their experiences. . . . When someone says, 'God spoke to me,' ask: Did you actually hear an audible voice? What did the voice sound like? Were there really words or was it more of a feeling? Did you feel happy or scared? Did you sense an image of God? What did God look like?"

BE WARY OF RELYING TOO HEAVILY ON QUOTES FROM CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS. While there are smart and prophetic voices among them, there are often wide gaps between what clergy preach and what congregation members do or believe.

CULTIVATE SOURCES. Fewer stories "break" in religion than on other beats, so cultivating sources is extremely important for ferreting out stories.

Report news and nuance

GOOD RELIGION REPORTING BEGINS WITH GOOD JOURNALISM.

"Without a love for non-religion news, you won't love religion news," says veteran reporter Richard Ostling, recipient of the 2006 William A. Reed/Religion News Service Lifetime Achievement Award. Use your best reporting skills on every story to provide solid facts and illuminating interpretation.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A SACRED COW. Question everything. Coverage of the Roman Catholic clergy abuse crisis has shown that religion requires relentless reporting. Reaction to it has also shown that most readers and viewers want tough questions to be asked of religious leaders and institutions. While it is important to treat faith groups with respect, reporters should never skip questions or background checks just because they're dealing with religious issues or people.

FOLLOW THE MONEY. Finances are a woefully underreported area of religion, partly because nonprofit religious organizations are exempt from some of the financial reporting businesses contend with. Learn what religious organizations have to file with the government and what information they share with their congregations. Ask questions about money and ask for copies of budgets. Financial improprieties can and do happen in congregations, many of which don't have a professional accountant on staff. Religious organizations are a tremendous beneficiary of donations in this country, but there is little examination on how it is spent unless a problem is uncovered (See sources, Page 9).

GO WITH GRAY. Religions deal with good and evil, but in everyday life, there's little black and white and mostly a thousand shades of gray. Honor that. When writing a profile of a minister who runs an amazing program for underprivileged kids, don't ignore the fact that he owes child support. When reporting on a family whose faith saw them through a crisis, include the fact that they don't go to church. Religion often confounds expectations, which is one reason it is fascinating to write about.

DIG DEEPER. Investigative reporting has yielded great journalism on the religion beat, from the Catholic sexual abuse scandals to televangelists' financial improprieties. All were a result of dogged investigative reporting. Thanks to journalism organizations and workshops, computer-assisted reporting is within the grasp of any reporter with a computer.

Remain calm amid conflict

Reporting about religion often involves dealing with extremes, and extremes generate conflict. Some advice:

- The loudest, most aggressive voices — or those with the best P.R. people — are usually on the extremes of any issue, while most people have opinions that fall somewhere in between. There are almost always more than two sides to any issue involving faith. Seek them out — even if they don't have P.R. people.
- Long-running conflicts — such as those over homosexuality — tend to be stoked by the most extreme voices on both liberal and conservative sides of the issue. Look for other sources who offer constructive ways of moving the debate forward — mediators, ethicists, observers, people who have an unusual perspective.
- Don't overemphasize conflicts because of aggressive sources — or because editors or producers are fascinated. Does the issue affect people in everyday life? Do the people in the pews care about it? Tailor coverage accordingly.
- Don't automatically give prominent play to the latest proclamations from the usual voices in a debate. How many people actually agree with their views? For whom are they speaking?
- People with extreme views generate news because they are often willing to take extreme actions based on their convictions. In 1993, David Koresh led the Branch Davidians into a deadly clash with the federal government in Waco, Texas. Since then, reporters have gotten much savvier about carefully gathering information on extreme groups' beliefs and potential for action. Resources on New Religious Movements (see Page 77) can help.
- Some people are, in fact, delusional. Most religion reporters have gotten at least a few phone calls or letters from people making impossible accusations or far-out religious claims. Politely but firmly explain that you won't pursue their story and get backup from supervisors if the person persists.

BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS. Many — including pro-life, liberal and fundamentalist — are loaded. Characterize beliefs with specifics rather than giving them general labels. Also, allow people to characterize their own beliefs, but be wary of allowing them to explain opposing views.

Embrace diversity

BE INCLUSIVE. Strive to write stories that people of all viewpoints — and with all levels of religious knowledge — can appreciate and understand. When writing about an issue, explore which faith traditions are involved; don't limit yourself to the ones you're familiar with. Avoid faith-specific terms such as church or minister when you really mean houses of worship and clergy.

BE DIVERSE. When reporting about religion, every kind of diversity can enrich a story — diversity of faith, ethnicity, race, economics, geography. Make an effort to explore them. It is still fairly easy to produce religion stories that quote only Anglo men. Religious beliefs and practice are usually affected by where people live, where they came from, how much money they have and what stripe of what faith they practice.

IN RELIGION, THE MAJORITY DOESN'T ALWAYS RULE. Minority voices matter — within a faith or across the spectrum of belief. One of the biggest stories in religion is the way people of an ever-widening array of faiths are learning to live and work more closely together. Whether they are Jews, Sikhs, Muslims or groups within Christianity, minority voices are crucial because they often raise concerns shared by many beyond their group or offer a “canary in a coal mine” first alert to a conflict. Religion also makes for strange bedfellows, with surprising alliances forming around issues, so reporters can't always assume they know who represents the majority view.

Judge not, lest ye be judged

People of faith sometimes refer to themselves or others as “committed” Christians, “devout” Catholics or “observant” Jews as a way of indicating faithful practice of a religious tradition. Journalists shouldn't do the same. It is not a journalist's job to judge the depth of a person's faith or steadfastness of practice. Instead, describe a person's faith and practice with specific details. Journalists also can't assume that what a person says is accurate; if it can't be verified, simply attribute the statement to the person rather than proclaiming it as fact. For example, if an Orthodox Jewish candidate doesn't campaign on the Sabbath, you can state it as fact. But if a profile subject says she tithes (giving 10 percent of her income to her congregation) but doesn't give you access to financial records, say she says she tithes; don't take her word for it.

It's a miracle!

Well, *maybe*. Religion has always involved reports of supernatural phenomena that can't be verified. Scripture is full of them, and most religions are based on them. So what should journalists do when faced with faith healings, exorcisms, answered prayers, speaking in tongues, crying statues or divine images appearing in everyday objects?

- Describe, in detail, what happened. Be clear about what you witnessed, and what others said took place. Your story is likely to be largely about what people believe happened, and how they reacted to it.
- Seek verification. If someone says their cancer was healed by a preacher, ask for medical confirmation from before and after the alleged healing.
- Put the event in context of religious tradition, and explain how much the event follows or deviates from religious teaching. For example, describe the work of an exorcist among Catholic immigrants and then explain how it compares with church teaching on exorcism. Give examples of reports of similar happenings, and, if appropriate, say whether any were proved false.
- Report if money is involved. Was someone promised healing if they gave a big donation?
- Be respectful but neutral. You're dealing with people's sacred beliefs, and it's not your job to endorse or dismiss them. It's not likely to work, anyway: A recent medical study concluded that intercessory prayer had no discernible effect, but telling people that isn't going to stop them from praying.

Sharpen your pencils

GREAT JOURNALISM USUALLY INVOLVES CONFLICT, TENSION AND CHANGE. Religion has all of these. Use them. Writing about faith — whether for print or broadcast — offers wonderful opportunities for rich narratives, heart-rending storytelling and stories about personal transformation.

WRITE SIMPLY, BUT DON'T OVERSIMPLIFY. Religion involves rhetoric, complex jargon and language laden with thousands of years of debate. You must be accurate and attuned to nuance, but you also need to write in clear language that can be understood by both insiders and casual observers. Be aware that word choice can convey bias in ways you're not aware of. Run paraphrasing and descriptions by sources to check your accuracy and understanding. Be careful when you say "Christians believe ..." since beliefs vary widely within any faith.

Columns and the brave new world of blogging

Writing pieces that state your opinions or personal beliefs will change your relationship with sources and readers/viewers/listeners. In some cases, that can hurt people's ability to believe that you can report with fairness and balance. For that reason, most news reporters choose not to write their opinions or personal beliefs, and some news organizations forbid beat reporters from doing so.

Other religion reporters have found that columns, commentaries and blogs enhance their standing as a reporter and lead to stronger connections with readers, viewers and listeners. Some write religion columns and rarely write news, lessening any impact their published opinions have on their reporting. Many others use blogs or columns for purposes other than stating opinions: They share color, context or other details that didn't make it into their main story, engage in conversations with readers or explore topics using a lot of voice without adding a lot of opinion.

A few veterans offered advice to consider before you begin blogging:

- Find out what editors and producers expect before starting a blog. A true blog, written solo, can be an enormous eater of time; combining efforts with other people is easier.
- There are hundreds of religion blogs; how many people will read yours? You may want to consider whether a blog is the most efficient way to reach or expand your audience, or whether your regular outlets, be they print or broadcast, are better.
- Be thoughtful about what you want to accomplish and what content you want to include in your blog. Make sure you and your supervisors are comfortable with how much opinion and personality you plan to project.
- If your blog will be an extracurricular venture outside of work, talk to supervisors about how it will affect the perception of your work.

In religion, opinions are news. Bloggers were credited with pushing a long-shot candidate into the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in 2006. Web sites, LISTSERVs and emails are factors in swaying opinions in denominational battles. Journalists in general circulation media have their own opinions, of course, but most audiences expect them to keep their own viewpoints out of their reporting so that they can fairly represent the news. A few journalists, such as Cathleen Falsani at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, manage to do it all, writing news, opinion columns and a blog. But it's a delicate balance on a beat where beliefs can trump facts.

Resources

Religion reporting is more complicated than ever because of the vast amount of information available to reporters through experts, Web sites, polls, books, advocacy groups, public relations agencies, research reports and more. Most of this information is instantly accessible through the Internet, but not all of it is reliable. What's more, faith groups have gotten more sophisticated about pushing their interests, so reporters often end up with conflicting information.

Here are our best tips on statistics, experts, Web sites and books, but information is constantly changing. The Religion Newswriters' Resource Library (www.RNA.org/library.php) posts a wide variety of Web resources, including the Internet's most extensive list of links to religious media. The affiliated RNA sites include a daily roundup of headlines at www.religionheadlines.org and a Religion Stylebook at www.ReligionStylebook.org.



Numbers

Why you can't count on them

Whoever said “Numbers never lie” was not a religion reporter. Beware of confidently using specific numbers about religious identification or belief. Here's why.

- The U.S. Census, the usual standard for counting people and their characteristics, does not ask people their religious affiliation.
- There is no single religion survey that is considered to be the most reliable (see Page 27). The results differ depending on what options are offered, how people are contacted, how many people are surveyed and other factors. Numbers can vary widely, and many faith groups are so small that they rarely show up on surveys in proportion to their actual numbers. Some traditions — predominantly African-American denominations, for example — are typically underrepresented because of difficulty in obtaining numbers.
- With Roman Catholics, there is one pope and a highly structured hierarchy that tracks membership. But in many religions, such as Islam, there is no official governing body and no official count.
- Some faiths, such as the fast-growing Pentecostal movement, include people from many denominations, so there is no central record-keeping. Evangelical Christians are difficult to count because they often belong to nondenominational churches, official denominations or sometimes none at all.
- Denominations and religions count their members differently, if at all, so it is difficult to compare their sizes. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, which does not baptize infants, counts people who are baptized. The United Methodist Church, which baptizes infants, counts people once they are confirmed. Mosques don't require membership, so estimates of Muslims are just that — estimates.
- Formal affiliation with a religious group doesn't give a complete picture. Only about half of Jews in the U.S. are affiliated with synagogues, so the National Jewish Population Survey (www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=60346) uses four questions to determine Jewish identity.

- Some houses of worship or faith groups can be competitive about touting numbers of adherents or members, to the point that the number of Muslims and Jews in America has become highly politicized. For example, one survey by Jewish researchers counted fewer than 3 million Muslims at a time when Muslim groups were claiming numbers as high as 6 million. In contrast, some churches, such as the Church of Christ, Scientist, do not publish statistics because its numbers have declined so much.
- Categories are controversial. Mormons consider themselves Christian, but most Christian groups do not. Messianic Jews, who believe Jesus was the messiah Jews await, consider themselves Jewish, but most Jews consider them Christian.
- There are only estimates of the number of Buddhists, who are difficult to count in part because immigrants and American converts practice so differently. Also, some people meditate or practice aspects of Buddhism but don't consider themselves Buddhist, or they combine Buddhism with another faith, such as Judaism, resulting in people who call themselves “JewBus.”
- Beware of calling any faith the “fastest-growing” in any context. Any number of faiths have been called the fastest-growing in the United States or the world, often without any documentation. *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack wrote a 2006 story debunking the myth that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was the fastest-growing faith in the world and reporting that the Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God and Pentecostal groups were growing faster.
- Poll results differ, depending on how questions are asked. This applies not only to believers, but also to descriptions of their beliefs. For example, people's stated beliefs about a divine role in creation vary depending on the number and types of choices they are given.
- People frequently lie when asked about religion, perhaps out of a desire to look good and perhaps out of denial. Prominent national surveys such as those by Gallup and others generally show that about 40 percent of those in the U.S. say they attend worship services on any given Sunday, but numerous studies have found that the actual number is much closer to 25 percent.
- Sophisticated advocacy groups promote their own polls, which support their own agendas. Beware of spin.

How to make it all add up

Don't let the size of faith groups — either nationally or locally — overly influence your coverage. You'll likely do more stories on Catholics and evangelicals because of their numbers, but many groups' impact and influence outstrip their size. The Episcopal Church is small, but its battles over homosexuality are closely watched. Jews are less than 2 percent of the population but have an important voice. Buddhism has relatively few followers but permeates the culture.

All the general guidelines of good journalism apply when quoting statistics in religion stories. In addition:

- Be specific about what numbers represent. For example, specify what numbers are based on (worship attendance, membership, baptism, etc.).
- Be careful with comparisons. If you have apples and oranges, say so and note that two groups' definition of "member" differs.
- Look carefully at poll questions and results yourself, rather than accepting one statistic without question. The poll, as a whole, may tell a different story.
- Check to see if different organizations have done polls on the same subject. Polling Report.com (www.pollingreport.com) and search engines make this easy.

Disputed statistics

- 1 Give a range of numbers or qualify a statistic if it is in doubt: There are 4 million to 7 million Muslims in America, according to various surveys. There are well more than 1 million Hindus, experts say.
- 2 Note when numbers are disputed: Say a group says it has 5 million followers, but others (specify who and why) say otherwise.
- 3 Quote two numbers from different sources.
- 4 Characterize the amount, if the specific number is not necessary. Sometimes the number is not controversial in a story and it is enough to say that the denomination has "more than doubled," without debating whether it has tripled.

Religious identification surveys

These surveys ask people how they identify their religious beliefs or what religious groups they are affiliated with. Answers depend upon what options they are given and how many people are surveyed. Results vary widely. For example, people who say they are Christian may be then given a list of denominations to choose among, or they may be given categories that include such terms as evangelical or Pentecostal. Some, such as the ARIS survey, ask people questions over the phone, while others, such as the Glenmary survey, gather data from religious groups. Each has its strengths and shortcomings, and most journalists find some surveys' categories to be more trustworthy than others. In addition, some religious groups — Jews, Catholics and Baptists, for example — keep careful track of their own numbers.

THE 2001 AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York was a telephone survey of 50,281 people about religious identification and affiliation. The ARIS Web site (www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm) includes data from a comparable 1990 survey.

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY (<http://fact.hartsem.edu/>) was a 2000 survey of 14,000 U.S. congregations of different faiths by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary. Reports continue to be issued based on ongoing research.

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS & MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES: 2000, a survey by Glenmary Research Center, presents data reported by 149 religious bodies that participated in a study sponsored by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. The study is conducted every 10 years, and 2000 was the first year non-Christian groups were included. Some data is available free on the Web at www.thearda.com/; the whole survey (www.glenmary.org/grc/RCMS_2000/method.htm) is available for purchase.

THE 2001 NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY (www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=60346), prepared by the United Jewish Communities, surveys about characteristics of Jews and Jewish life.

THE NATIONAL CONGREGATIONS STUDY (<http://s6.library.arizona.edu/natcong/about.html>) was conducted in conjunction with the 1998 General Social Survey and included data about a representative sample of religious congregations. A new study is under way in 2006.

ADHERENTS.COM (www.adherents.com) collects national and international religion surveys from many sources and meshes them into responses to questions about numbers that journalists often ask.

THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES (www.thearda.com/) posts a variety of surveys, reports and maps on religion.

Other research

THE CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE (<http://cara.georgetown.edu/>) at Georgetown University conducts social scientific research about the Roman Catholic Church.

THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH DATA BANK (www.jewishdatabank.org/) collects social scientific studies of American Jewry.

Polls and surveys

Many organizations do polls that include questions about religion. Here are some good places to start.

THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER (<http://pewresearch.org/>), in conjunction with other Pew centers, including the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (<http://pewforum.org/>), conducts polls about religion.

THE BARN A RESEARCH GROUP (www.barna.org/), headed by George Barna, conducts polls about Christians and their beliefs and practices. Polls are searchable.

GALLUP POLLS (<http://poll.gallup.com>) include many on religion. News releases are available on the Web site when a poll is released, but after that they are only available to paying subscribers.

POLLINGREPORT.COM (www.pollingreport.com) collects polls from different sources on various topics, including religion.

THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES (www.thearda.com/) compiles data on religion.

Bible basics

When asked whether teaching the Bible in a public school violates the Constitution and the separation of church and state, 46 percent of Americans said yes and 46 percent said no, according to an April 2006 CBS News Poll.

Experts

Where to find them

Religion is the most-studied topic on the planet, so there are thousands of “experts” out there. Your mission, however, is to find one or just a few who are knowledgeable, articulate and helpful on your particular story. Some tips:

There probably is no such thing as an impartial expert on religion. However, there are experts who, by their training or by the requirements or politics of their job, offer analysis or context about a topic without advocating any one faith’s position. Ask potential sources what makes them an expert in an area and what their own opinions and involvement are on the issue. Accurately characterizing sources’ expertise is important.

Don’t assume that because someone is a leader or member of a faith group that they agree with all of that group’s policies and beliefs. There are widely divergent opinions within every faith group.

Who is an expert?

CLERGY. Most faith groups require ordination, which includes education, training and endorsement from hierarchy, but some groups call people minister or other titles without requiring any formal training.

ACADEMICS. They include professors in religious studies in undergraduate or graduate programs, who may or may not be religious themselves, and professors in seminaries, theological schools or other religious schools, who approach religion from belief in a specific faith. Many professors in other fields also have strong interests in religion and can be helpful sources, particularly social scientists, anthropologists, pollsters and political scientists.

PEOPLE WHO WORK AT NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS THAT INVOLVE RELIGION. They include religious advocacy groups, think tanks and research centers. Some of these push a religious viewpoint, and others study religion’s role in specific areas, such as education, politics or health. Be aware that many organizations call themselves nonpartisan but nonetheless advocate a certain point of view and may be active lobbyists.

BLOGGERS AND OTHER ONLINE SOURCES. More and more, bloggers are making news with their opinions and ability to sway others.

Religion is, in many ways, the great equalizer. Everyone has access to religion and religious experience, whether they have religious education or training or not. You’ll find many articulate people who have acquired tremendous expertise through volunteer work and life experience.

Experts on the web

RELIGIONLINK (www.ReligionLink.org) The Religion Newswriters' Internet news resource provides primers and source guides on topics involving religion, public policy and culture. ReligionLink provides national and regional interview sources (with contact information), story angles, Web resources and background. The service is free, and its archives are searchable. New issues are distributed weekly by email and posted on the ReligionLink home page.

THE RELIGION NEWSWRITERS RESOURCE LIBRARY

(www.RNA.org/library.php) posts a wide variety of Web resources on religion.

RELIGIONSOURCE (www.religionsource.org), a service of the American Academy of Religion, is a searchable database of religion scholars across the country.

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION (www.aar-site.org) has study sections on a wide variety of topics. Most sections have a Web page listing members.

Show me the money

Resources on charitable giving and fiscal accountability

RESEARCH

■ The Center on Philanthropy (www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/), Center on Wealth and Philanthropy (www.bc.edu/research/swri/), National Center for Charitable Statistics (<http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/>), and Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org/).

WATCHDOGS

■ Wall Watchers (www.wallwatchers.org), an independent source for ministry ratings, posts financial profiles (www.ministrywatch.com). The American Institute of Philanthropy (www.charitywatch.org/), GuideStar.org (www.guidestar.org/) and Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org/) post evaluations of nonprofits. Empty Tomb (www.emptytomb.org/) is a Christian research service on church finances and giving.

NEWS

■ *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (<http://philanthropy.com/>) and the *Philanthropy Journal* (www.philanthropyjournal.org).

Web sites

There are millions of Web sites about religion. Here's how to use them carefully.

- Official Web sites of religions, denominations and religious organizations are generally reliable, though they are not always up to date. In general, it's best to check every fact and name you take from Web sites.
- Be aware that critics often create Web sites with URLs similar to those of whatever group they're criticizing, so always check who posts the site. Never use information if you don't know whose Web site it is.
- Some professors keep their Web sites meticulously updated, while others don't even list the names of their own books correctly.
- If you're seeking background on a topic or group — particularly if it involves religious beliefs, doctrines or practice — read what's on the Web with the understanding that it may be wildly inaccurate.
- Surf smartly. Read articles and Web sites about effective ways to research on the Web.
- To gather background for a story, start with a Nexis, Dow Jones or similar database search of published articles, which are likely to be reasonably accurate. Then when you search the Web, it will be easier to quickly discern which pages have inaccurate or biased information.
- The Web is a good place to figure out the different sides to an issue. If there is dissent or opposition, you'll generally find it on the Web, which can help guide your reporting.
- Dozens of online publications and centers distribute free emails with stories, updates and news releases about religion. This is an easy way to look for trends and to gather string for stories.
- Many religious magazines post all or most of their content online, so you can read a variety of publications from a variety of religious viewpoints for free.
- The more you use the Web, the more you become familiar with which sites have accurate, up-to-date information.

Books ...

Books. You remember them. Yes, a good number of reference books are still worth owning if you're serious about religion reporting. This list is minuscule compared with what is available. In evaluating books, look for major publishers or prominent authors. The reference departments of universities, public libraries and seminaries are great places to scan some of the variety of major religion reference works available.

- Scriptures of most major faiths are available online, including different translations. You still may want to own some in book form. Beliefnet posts sacred texts of more than a dozen traditions (www.beliefnet.com/). This site is useful if you are trying to verify language of a specific verse quoted by a source. www.Blueletterbible.org allows you to compare 11 translations and versions of the Bible.
- A Bible dictionary and commentary come in handy. Choose one, realizing that different traditions favor different interpretations.
- J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Gale Group) profiles nearly every religious group in America, from the largest to the smallest, and groups them in "families" so you can see how their beliefs compare.
- *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press) allows you to look up just about anything related to Christianity and Christian history.
- Keep a good book or dictionary on world religions. Many veteran reporters recommend Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco) for readability, but there are plenty of other choices, many of them lushly illustrated.
- Subscribe to *Publisher's Weekly's* free Religion BookLine (www.publishersweekly.com/index.asp?layout=eletters&industry=Religion+BookLine) and *Christianity Today's* free online version of Books & Culture (www.christianitytoday.com/books/) to keep on top of what's being published in religion.
- Most religions and denominations publish annual directories; request a copy of any you contact regularly or get to know their Web sites.

... and yearbooks

These yearbooks and directories are helpful for tracking down sources and statistics:

- *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (www.nccusa.org/yearbook), published annually by the National Council of the Churches of Christ.
- *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* by Frank S. Mead, Samuel S. Hill and Craig Atwood (Abingdon Press, 2005) includes information on U.S. denominations within Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
- *The Catholic Almanac* (www.osv.com/catholicalmanac/index.asp), published annually by Our Sunday Visitor, includes news, information and history about the Catholic Church. Some content is posted online and is searchable.
- *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada* (www.routledge-ny.com/ref/namuslim/#details) by Mohamed Nimer (Routledge) includes data, lists of organizations and information about how Islam is lived in North America.
- *The American Jewish Year Book* (www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlT12PHKoG/b.1333613/k.C711/American_Jewish_Year_Book_2005.htm), published annually by the American Jewish Committee, contains data and information on Jews in the United States and other nations.
- *Directory of African American Religious Bodies: A Compendium by the Howard University School of Divinity* (www.hupress.howard.edu/depot/directory.htm), edited by Wardell J. Payne (Howard University Press), includes contact information and background on African-American religious bodies and organizations.

A roundup of religions

Religion stories are about people, events, conflicts, alliances and change. That means you'll be reporting on politics, pop culture, sex, science, ethnicity and economics. Along the way, you'll wrestle with people's beliefs about faith, hope, forgiveness and redemption. Whether you're reporting a *religion* story or a story that just happens to involve *religion*, you need to know your way around the major faith traditions. Learn about them, and about as many of the smaller ones as you can. This expertise will distinguish you among your colleagues; it's one reason religion specialists are needed. It also will help you interpret the news in ways that connect with how people live and what they care about. Any religious tradition is worthy of a lifetime of study, and there are countless resources available on each. Here are some basics to get you started. But remember: There's no substitute for experience, whether you are crammed in the corner of a tent for a small-town revival or sitting silently with a crowd before a giant Buddha.



The world's largest belief systems

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Christianity | 6. Buddhism |
| 2. Islam | 7. Primal/indigenous religions |
| 3. Atheism/secularism/
nonreligion/agnosticism | 8. African traditional
& diasporic religions |
| 4. Hinduism | 9. Sikhism |
| 5. Chinese traditional religion | 10. Juche |

* This 2005 ordering from www.adherents.com takes into account statistical and sociological information.

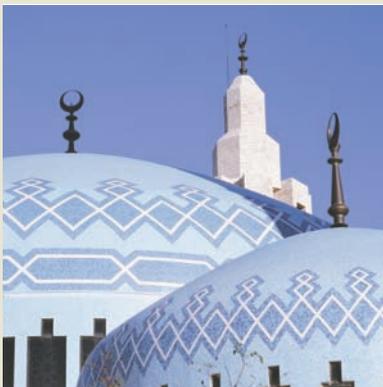
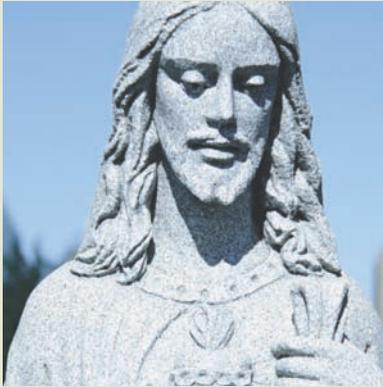
The big three

Christianity, Judaism and Islam

The United States is often called a country founded on Judeo-Christian values. Now Islam has firmly joined Christianity and Judaism as one of the three most prominent faiths in America. Prominence is about more than numbers. More than three-quarters of Americans say they're Christian; Jews and Muslims each make up less than 2 percent of the population by most measures.

These three religions are the most prominent because they are considered Abrahamic faiths, faiths that revere Abraham as a spiritual and/or physical ancestor. Some believe that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the same God; others adamantly disagree. Regardless, the three faiths do share some basic beliefs — in one God and in the Golden Rule, for example — that have been foundational in this country.

Most faiths are global, and religion in America plays out against a worldwide stage. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are considered the Big Three worldwide as well, even though the numbers for Christianity and Islam (they are first and second, respectively) dwarf Judaism, which is also outnumbered by Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and others. Judaism's status, even as its numbers decrease, is based on its prominence as the faith from which Christianity and Islam sprang and in its role in world events, particularly through the state of Israel.





Christianity

America is overwhelmingly Christian and always has been, but what a difference 200-plus years makes. Christianity in America is stunningly diverse. It ranges from tiny house churches to megachurches, from the strictest fundamentalists to the most liberal Protestants, and from the neatly ordered worship of all-Anglo churches to expressive multicultural services that draw on dozens of ethnic traditions. The United States is home to hundreds of Christian denominations and traditions. Some arrived with the earliest settlers. Others, such as the Pentecostal movement and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are home-grown. Many more have been imported or adapted from religious traditions rooted in nearly every corner of the globe. Some advice:

Ups and downs

The percentage of Americans who say they're Christian is falling, and the number who say they are not aligned with any organized religion is rising.

BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS. Christianity is incredibly diverse, with deep differences among denominations. Don't assume that the label "Christian" carries with it a long set of beliefs; people's beliefs vary greatly, even within a denomination. Ask what tradition people follow or describe their specific beliefs and practice.

AVOID JARGON, BUT LEARN WHAT IT MEANS. Journalists must contend with a dizzying array of structures, hierarchy and titles among Christian denominations. Then, they must translate the jargon into understandable language for readers/viewers and listeners. Some denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church, have a strict hierarchy, ranging from the head of the church (the pope or a bishop) down to the congregational level. Many, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or United Church of Christ, are congregationally governed, with a national body that issues guidelines but can't enforce them. Most journalists bypass denominational meetings in favor of enterprise reporting or issue stories. Occasionally, denominational gatherings make big news. If you cover one, learn the issues and the jargon so you can clearly interpret the impact or importance of the event.

THE MAJOR HOLIDAYS and observances in Christianity are Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, Advent and Christmas. Religion journalists generally cover these in some way, whether through enterprise stories, photography or daily coverage of events.

The 10 largest denominations in America

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Roman Catholic Church:
67.2 million | 6. National Baptist Convention
USA: 5 million |
| 2. Southern Baptist Convention:
16.4 million | 7. Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America: 4.9 million |
| 3. United Methodist Church:
8.2 million | 8. National Baptist Convention
of America: 3.5 million |
| 4. Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints: 5.5 million | 9. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):
3.2 million |
| 5. Church of God in Christ:
5.4 million | 10. Assemblies of God:
2.7 million |

SOURCE: 2005 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches

Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic Church was established in the first century as one of the original Christian communities, and it claims to embody the truth of the faith of Jesus Christ. Its claims to primacy are exercised through the pope. His authority derives from an unbroken apostolic succession that goes back to St. Peter, who the Catholic Church believes was invested by Jesus with authority over fellow church leaders and Christian communities. It is the largest Christian tradition in the world.

SCRIPTURE

The U.S. Catholic Bishops use the New American Bible translation. Many Catholics also use the Catholic Study Bible or the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. The Catholic Church includes books of the Apocrypha in the biblical canon. (The Apocrypha, from the Greek word that means “things hidden,” is made up of religious writings included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but not the Hebrew Bible. Roman Catholics and Orthodox accept them as divinely inspired, but Protestants do not.)

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Vatican (www.vatican.va/)
- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org)

ISSUES

- The church is grappling with a number of serious problems, led by a severe priest shortage and the ongoing clergy sexual abuse scandals. A number of other topics had led to divisions in the church, including the role of women, the role of Catholics in public life, teachings on sexuality, and reforms in the liturgy.
- At the same time, the Catholic Church remains the largest U.S. denomination which poses challenges. A fast-changing demographic led by Hispanics is also a challenge.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Catholicism is a hierarchical religion, with authority vested in the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests and deacons. Information is relatively easy to find because everything is interrelated. That said, there are also dozens of Catholic organizations that are not officially part of the church. They include a range of Catholic charities, advocacy groups and dissenting organizations.

- Titles are particularly important in hierarchical religions and getting them right conveys a writer’s grasp of the church’s traditions. For example, don’t refer to a bishop or diocese when archbishop and archdiocese are the proper names.

- Many issues in Catholicism are related to authority. Get a good understanding of what’s authoritative and what’s not. For example, a document issued by the Vatican may be considered binding on all Catholics, or it may not, depending on its purpose and who issued it. Authority is a sensitive issue that also affects whether people are labeled as dissenters who are violating church teaching or people who are working for change within the church.

RESOURCES

- Catholic News Service, a well-respected news service that is owned and funded by the U.S. bishops (www.catholicnews.com/).
- *Catholic Almanac* (www.osv.com/catholicmanac/).
- *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*.
- *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (www.newadvent.org/cathen/index.html) online is the 1917 version. Journalists should be aware that it contains no updates, such as church reforms made during Vatican II and should not be relied upon for current information.
- There are hundreds of Catholic publications, ranging from diocesan newspapers to national newspapers and magazines. Among the most prominent national publications are the *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent newspaper viewed as liberal (<http://ncronline.org>); *America*, a Jesuit magazine (www.americamagazine.org); *U.S. Catholic*, a church-run magazine for lay Catholics (<http://uscatholic.claretians.org>); *Our Sunday Visitor*, a popular weekly viewed as conservative (www.osv.com); *Commonweal*, an independent journal associated with a more progressive Catholicism (www.commonwealmagazine.org); and *Crisis*, an independent journal from a more conservative viewpoint (www.crisismagazine.com).

Evangelicals

Except perhaps for the “born again” label, no religious term is more common today, or more important, than “evangelical,” and none is more difficult to define. By definition, all Christians are evangelicals. The word *evangelical* is derived from the Greek word *evangelion*, which means “the good news” or “the gospel.” But the term *evangelical* has generally come to mean Protestants who emphasize personal conversion; evangelism; the authority, primacy and inerrancy of the Bible; and the belief that Jesus’ death reconciled God and humans. Evangelicals tend to be conservative theologically, but the terms *evangelical* and *conservative Christian* aren’t synonymous, though they both may apply to some people. Fundamentalists, who say that the Bible is the literal word of God and generally separate themselves from what they see as a sinful culture, are distinct from evangelicals, who tend to embrace culture and use it to build up the church. Today, the term *evangelical* has become so popular that it has become almost trans-denominational, with many mainline Protestants and even some Catholics using it.

SCRIPTURE

The New International Version is most popular among evangelicals, but many refer to the King James Version when quoting Scripture.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The National Association of Evangelicals (www.nae.net) is a fellowship of 60 denominations in addition to individual churches, parachurch organizations and individuals.
- The Southern Baptist Convention (www.sbc.net), with 16 million members, is the largest group within the evangelical world, as well as the second-largest faith group in America (behind Catholics).
- The most influential evangelical leaders are pastors of megachurches or lead parachurch ministries. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research posts research and a database on megachurches (http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches.html).
- There are hundreds of parachurch ministries — nonprofits organized outside of the church — ranging from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Focus on the Family to Campus Crusade for Christ. The Baptist Missionary Association of Texas posts a list of more than 50, with Web links (<http://bmaweb.net/>).

- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (www.thefellowship.info/) is a network of 1,800 Baptist churches known for its moderate views.
- Individual denominations have extensive Web sites with background and contact information.

ISSUES

- Evangelicals are gaining numbers and influence in America, particularly in the political arena. Surveys indicate they make up a quarter or more of the population. They are known for steadfastness to tradition as well as creativity and innovation in programs for youth and young adults. The emergent church movement is a good example.
- Debates include the proper role for the church in politics, the role of women in leadership, differences over biblical interpretation, and relations with other Christians and other faiths. Conflicts occur when evangelicals express their faith in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods — through teachings about evolution, creationism and sexuality; through workplace Bible studies; or through holiday observances — in ways that may infringe upon others’ freedom from religion or freedom to practice their own beliefs.
- While evangelicals have been known for commitment to issues involving morality and family, they are increasingly becoming involved in issues such as poverty and environmentalism.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- There is rich diversity among evangelicals in belief and practice as well as in approaches to living out faith outside church walls. Evangelicals run Sojourners/Call to Renewal (www.sojo.net), organizations focused on social justice and poverty which call their agendas “progressive,” as well as very conservative organizations such as Focus on the Family (www.family.org).
- Baptists make up a huge portion of evangelicals, and with more than 60 denominations, Baptists are an entire world unto themselves. In recent years, that

Attendance

A 2005 survey identified 1,210 American megachurches with an average weekly attendance of 3,612.

SOURCE: Megachurches Today 2005, a survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Leadership Network in Dallas

world has been marked by fierce debates between moderates and conservatives over doctrine and policies regarding women, evangelism of people of other faiths, missionary work, homosexuality and other issues. Churches have chosen sides by leaving or joining different national Baptist organizations. These debates have been well-chronicled and play out in every state in the nation. Out of the spotlight, Baptists in the pews are active in a tremendous array of mission work and other activities that affect communities around the country and around the world.

RESOURCES

- *Christianity Today* (www.christianitytoday.com/ctmag/) is the most prominent magazine for evangelicals. It has several associated publications, such as *Books & Culture*.
- Wheaton College's Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (www.wheaton.edu/isae/) offers a range of resources.
- Evangelicals are the topic of dozens of books. Good primers include the *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* by Randall Balmer (Westminster John Knox Press) and books by Mark A. Noll, including *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (Intervarsity Press) and *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans).
- The Ethics and Public Policy Center runs a program on evangelicals in civic life (www.eppc.org/).
- The Baptist Press (www.bpnews.net/) is a news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Associated Baptist Press (www.abpnews.com/) is an independent news service about Baptists. Crosswalk (<http://crosswalk.com/>) offers a daily news service.

Mainline Protestants

This term refers to a group of moderate-to-liberal Protestant denominations: the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Predominantly African-American Methodist denominations are also sometimes associated with this grouping: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the AME Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The term “mainline” harks back to a time when this mostly white group was tied to the political and cultural establishment. Since the 1960s, membership in most mainline denominations has fallen precipitously, as has their influence.

SCRIPTURE

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is generally preferred.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The National Council of Churches USA (www.nccusa.org/) encourages ecumenical cooperation among a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, historic African-American and Peace churches. It represents 45 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations.
- Church World Service (www.churchworldservice.org/) is the relief, development and refugee assistance ministry of 35 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican denominations.
- Individual denominations have extensive Web sites with background and contact information.

ISSUES

- Nationally, mainline denominations are mired in bitter battles over homosexuality; several have considered splitting after years of annual conventions dominated by votes on the issue. Only a few officially allow the blessing of same-sex marriages or ordain noncelibate homosexuals; some clergy have been defrocked for performing same-sex marriages or acknowledging their same-sex partner.
- Mainline denominations remain predominantly white but are working to reach out to immigrants and other races and ethnicities, with mixed success.

- Clergy shortages are increasing and, in some denominations, severe. Most pastors are older — only 5 percent are younger than age 35 — and many are on the brink of retirement. Many seminary graduates are not interested in pastoring churches, where pay can be comparatively low.

- The mainline denominations all ordain women and were among the first to do so. Women account for about half of seminary students. Still, male clergy far outnumber women, particularly in senior pastor and regional and national ministry positions. Many female clergy complain of unequal treatment, pay and opportunities and leave church work for other fields.

- Mainline denominations continue their longtime advocacy of social justice issues, often by combining forces with other religions and sometimes secular groups. Common causes include poverty, civil rights, interfaith understanding, environment and church/state separation issues.

RESOURCES

- *The Christian Century* (www.christiancentury.org/) is the major magazine, aimed mostly at clergy and scholars.

- Several centers offer research and resources pertaining to mainline denominations. They include Pulpit & Pew, Duke University's Center on Pastoral Research (www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/); the Alban Institute: Resources for Congregations (www.alban.org/) in Herndon, Va.; the Indianapolis Center for Congregations (www.centerforcongregations.org/); and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion (www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/) at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind.

- These denominations are active in ecumenical (among Christians) and interfaith groups on local, national and international levels and have long-standing relationships with Jews, Muslims and other faiths as well as an openness to working with most Christian denominations. These groups include Churches Uniting in Christ (www.cuicinfo.org/), whose nine member denominations have pledged to show unity by coordinating more closely, and the Interfaith Alliance (www.interfaithalliance.org/).

Pentecostals

Pentecostals are people who have undergone a “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which is usually accompanied by speaking in tongues and sometimes by dancing or “holy laughter.” While there is no official count of Pentecostals, the movement is spreading quickly in America and even faster worldwide, where they may account for a quarter of all Christians. Pentecostalism began with a local revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906. Now there are at least 60 Pentecostal denominations, though many Pentecostal churches are non-denominational as well. Charismatics are related but distinct from the Pentecostal tradition. Like Pentecostals, they believe in the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” but charismatics generally encourage people to stay within their church communities, be they Roman Catholic, Protestant or others. Unlike Pentecostals, charismatics believe a person can receive the Holy Spirit without gaining the ability to speak in tongues.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The two largest Pentecostal denominations are the Assemblies of God (<http://ag.org/top/>), which is predominantly Anglo, and the Church of God in Christ (www.cogic.org/), which is predominantly African-American. The two groups reconciled in 1994.

- Some of the highest-profile Pentecostals lead non-denominational churches or ministries, usually in combination with television, radio and publishing efforts. They include Bishop T.D. Jakes of the 30,000-member Potter's House in Dallas (thepottershouse.org), Benny Hinn (www.bennyhinn.org/), Joyce Meyer (www.joycemeyer.org/) and Kenneth Copeland (www.kcm.org).

- The Association of Religion Data Archives lists more than 60 Pentecostal denominations (www.thearda.com/).

- The Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America (www.pccna.org/) lists member churches.

ISSUES

- Pentecostalism began as a multicultural gathering at Azusa Street that was also diverse economically. Today, while Sunday morning is still considered the most segregated time of the week, the multiculturalism of Pentecostal churches is an enviable example to churches that have had trouble diversifying.

- Pentecostalism is known for spawning grassroots revivals that end up drawing people from across the nation. Two relatively recent and large revivals are the Toronto Blessing and the Brownsville Revival or Pensacola Outpouring.

- Though Pentecostals tend to be socially and politically conservative, the movement's practices and beliefs are not accepted by many other conservative Christians. The Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board issued rules in 2006 barring candidates using "private prayer language" or "charismatic manifestations," for example.

- Women have long held leadership positions in Pentecostal churches, a departure from many conservative traditions, some of which have been increasing restrictions on women's roles.

- Pentecostalism has an unfortunate history of scandals involving sex, money and false promises by the likes of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- One of the primary challenges of covering Pentecostals is its supernatural aspects, which include faith healings and speaking in tongues. Reporters will want to know: Is this real? In fact, Pentecostalism has been haunted by scandals — financial and otherwise — since its beginnings, and reporters have reason to be wary. Reporters should become familiar with the tradition so they know where the people and congregations they're covering fit in. They should describe what they see and what people say they experience, but seek verification when possible of faith healings. See "It's a miracle!" on Page 20 for tips on covering services.

- Speaking in tongues is usually either "glossolalia" (speaking in extra-human, mystical language that requires an interpreter who is also in a state of ecstasy) or "xenoglossia," also known as "zenolalia" (speaking in a foreign language that the convert never knew before). Pentecostals and charismatics know the distinction, and journalists should, too.

RESOURCES

- *Charisma* magazine (www.charismamag.com/) is a leading magazine of the Pentecostal movement.

- The Azusa Street Centennial in April 2006 inspired celebrations and events, many of which resulted in Web sites with helpful information for journalists. See the Web site of the official celebration and The Society for Pentecostal Studies.

- The University of Pennsylvania's Religious Studies Department posts extensive resources (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/%7Ekbanner/pentec.html>).

- See ReligionLink's guide to Pentecostalism (www.ReligionLink.org/tip_060130.php).

Orthodox Christianity

Orthodox Christian churches are rooted in the Middle East or Eastern Europe but do not recognize the pope as their leader. The Orthodox Church split with the Roman Catholic Church in the Great Schism of 1054, largely over issues of papal authority. The pope in Rome claimed supremacy over the four Eastern patriarchs, while the Eastern patriarchs claimed equality with the pope. Today the spiritual head of Orthodoxy is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, who has no governing authority over the other patriarchs but is called "first among equals." The Orthodox Eucharistic service is called the Divine Liturgy, and worship is very sensual, involving incense, chants and the veneration of icons. The Eastern Orthodox Christian churches include the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem and the Orthodox Churches of America, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Finland, Japan, Mount Sinai and China.

SCRIPTURE

Eastern Orthodox Christians include most parts of the Apocrypha in the biblical canon. (The Apocrypha, from the Greek word that means "things hidden," is made up of religious writings included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but not the Hebrew Bible. Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics accept them as divinely inspired, but Protestants do not.)

The Greek Orthodox Church collaborated on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published by the National Council of Churches USA, which includes the Apocrypha. However, the Eastern Orthodox canon includes different Apocrypha books than either Protestants or Roman Catholics do. The variations are based on which books were present in the Septuagint and its early manuscripts. (The Orthodox omit 2 Esdras from the Protestant Apocryphal but add 3 and 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151.)

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- Orthodox denominations are members of the National Council of Churches USA (www.nccusa.org).

- The Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) (www.scoba.us/) is comprised of Orthodox church leaders.

- International Orthodox Christian Charities (www.iocc.org/) is the humanitarian arm of SCOBA.

- The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (www.goarch.org/) is the largest Orthodox denomination in America, with about 1.5 million members.

- The Orthodox Church in America (www.oca.org) is the second largest, with 1 million members.

ISSUES

■ Ethnic and religious identities are closely tied in Orthodox churches, which often serve as places to preserve the language and culture of immigrants. Churches now include more non-immigrant members — the American-born children and grandchildren of immigrants and converts (often through marriage) — forcing them to grapple with how the church serves both groups.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Orthodox denominations are rarely a source of breaking news, but journalists may be interested in their growing numbers. Together, Orthodox churches account for many more members than some Protestant denominations that receive much more news coverage.
- The Eastern Orthodox follow the Julian Calendar instead of the Gregorian Calendar used by Western churches. Christmas falls on Jan. 7, and the date of Easter differs each year.
- Priests may be married in Eastern Orthodox traditions if they marry before ordination, but monks and bishops must be single.
- The Oriental Orthodox Churches churches split from the Eastern Orthodox churches in 451 A.D. because they rejected the Christological definition of the 4th Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, which asserted that Christ is one person in two natures, fully human and fully divine — a definition that the Eastern Orthodox Churches accepted. The Oriental Orthodox Churches include the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, Malankara and Eritrean churches.

RESOURCES

- Orthodoxy in America (www.orthodoxyinamerica.org/) describes beliefs and practices and lists parishes across the country by tradition and location.
- The Orthodox Christian Information Center (www.orthodoxinfo.com) posts information for members and nonmembers.
- The Orthodox Church in America posts its annual Sourcebook and Church Directory (www.oca.org/).
- The Association of Religion Data Archives posts a list of Orthodox denominations (www.thearda.com/).

African-American

African-American Christians belong to many kinds of churches — Pentecostal, Baptist, nondenominational, mainline, Catholic, evangelical and Orthodox. Whatever the brand, religion holds a prominent place in black communities. Surveys show that more African-Americans describe themselves as religious than do other races/ethnicities and put a higher priority on religion in their life. Churches are central as places of belonging, spirituality and community, and predominantly black churches reflect the issues that concern African-Americans as a whole.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

In addition to traditional Christian holidays, African-American churches observe Watch Night, on New Year's Eve, and Kwanzaa, starting on Dec. 26. The Watch Night service harks back to the days of slavery; tradition says some Southern blacks waited throughout the night on Dec. 31, 1864, for word of the Emancipation Proclamation. Kwanzaa, a seven-day festival, honors the principles of unity, self-determination, work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- African Methodist Episcopal Church (www.ame-church.com/)
- African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (www.c-m-e.org/)
- National Baptist Convention, USA (www.nationalbaptist.com/)
- National Baptist Convention of America (www.nbcamerica.net/ministry.htm)
- Progressive National Baptist Convention (www.pnbc.org/)
- Church of God in Christ (www.cogic.org/)
- National Missionary Baptist Convention of America (www.nmbca.com)
- Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (www.fullgospelbaptist.org/)
- Independent Holiness churches (www.holiness.ca/)
- Most major denominations that are not predominantly black have organizations or departments focusing on African-Americans, such as the National Black Catholic Congress (www.nbccongress.org/).

ISSUES

- African-American churches have a storied history of activism and political involvement, and church leaders are redefining what activism looks like in the post-civil rights era.
- African-American churches are known as incubators of political and community leadership and musical talent in a range of genres as well as repositories of black history, both local and national.
- Churches confront black men's issues, including high rates of imprisonment, drug use, suicide and early death, and their effect on African-American family life. Family issues include single parenthood, high pregnancy rates among teenagers, high divorce rates and high dropout rates.
- Black churches struggle with HIV/AIDS infection rates in the black community as well as attitudes toward homosexuality, and many programs now address these issues in churches.
- Many black urban churches have become commuter churches as members join migrations out of cities. Many members then feel disconnected to neighborhoods surrounding churches, and churches feel unable to meet the needs of those neighborhoods.
- Pentecostalism is growing rapidly among blacks, and many of the nation's largest black churches are Pentecostal.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- African-American church services can be unpredictably long, both because they are planned to take more than an hour and also because preaching and singing are extended as people feel moved by the spirit.
- Many black churches observe rituals of formality, with ushers wearing white gloves or white uniforms and people dressing in Sunday best.

RESOURCES

- The Interdenominational Theological Center (www.itc.edu/) is a consortium of six predominantly black seminaries in Atlanta.
- Howard University's School of Divinity (www.howard.edu/divinity/) is dedicated to producing leaders for the black church. Many seminaries have programs in black church studies, including the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies (www.vanderbilt.edu/divinity/kmsi/default.htm) at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Duke Divinity School (www.divinity.duke.edu/programs/bcs/),
- Candler School of Theology (www.candler.emory.edu/ACADEMIC/BCSP/) at Emory University, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School (<http://crcds.entexp.com/orgmain.asp?orgID=114&storyID=76>) and McCormick Theological Seminary's Center for African-American Ministries and Black Church Studies (www.mccormick.edu/).
- The Public Influences of African-American Churches (www.morehouse.edu/leadershipcenter/pubinfl/index.html) produced research at Morehouse College.
- The Balm in Gilead (www.balmingilead.org/) is a nonprofit that gives faith communities resources to help stop the spread of AIDS.
- The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice sponsors a National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality (www.rcrc.org/programs/blackchurch_summit10_program.cfm) each year.
- See ReligionLink's issue on "Black megachurches' mega-outreach" (www.ReligionLink.org/tip_040908b.php).

Hispanic

The exploding number of Hispanics in America virtually guarantees that their religious choices will have a large impact on wider society. While most Hispanics identify themselves as Catholic, surveys show that many end up in Pentecostal, evangelical and other Protestant churches and that second- and third-generation immigrants are not as committed to the Catholic Church as their forebears. Hispanics, who tend to be politically liberal but socially conservative, are heavily courted by both major parties, and their religious and political views are the subject of much research.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

In addition to the traditional Christian holidays, Hispanic Catholics observe the Feast Day of Guadalupe (Dec. 12), commemorating the Virgin Mary's appearance in 1531 before St. Juan Diego, and some Hispanics observe Las Posadas (Dec. 16-24), re-enactments of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem just before Jesus' birth.

ISSUES

- "Hispanic" and "Latino" are umbrella terms that include people from many countries. Instead of doing stories on "Hispanics," do stories on Mexican-Americans, Cubans, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans and others. Become attuned to cultural differences.
- Watch for a growing national voice from Hispanic church leaders on political issues, increasing Spanish-language resources for Hispanic Christians, and the continued adaptation of Hispanic cultural traditions into church practice.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Roman Catholic Church has numerous Hispanic initiatives, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs (www.nccbuscc.org/hispanicaffairs/demo.shtml), the National Association of Hispanic Priests (www.christusrex.org/www1/NAHP/Ansh.htm) and the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry (www.ncchm.com/).
- Esperanza USA (www.esperanza.us/) is a network of Hispanic Christians, churches and ministries.
- Most denominations have Hispanic outreach programs, from the Southern Baptist Convention's annual Hispanic National Church Planting Celebration to the National Association of Evangelicals' Hispanic Commission to the United Methodist Church's Office of Hispanic Ministries (www.gbod.org/hispanic/default.asp).

RESOURCES

- The 2003 report *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life* (www.nd.edu/~latino/research/pubs/HispChurchesEnglishWEB.pdf)
- The Pew Hispanic Center published the 2005 report *Hispanic Trends: A People in Motion* (<http://pewhispanic.org/>) and posts other research.
- The University of Notre Dame's Center for the Study of Latino Religion (www.nd.edu/%7Ecslr/) and the Mexican American Cultural Center (www.maccsa.org/) do research on Hispanics and religion.
- The Hispanic Theological Initiative and the American Academy of Religion's Latina/o Religion, Culture and Society Group can provide resources.

Asian

Asian-American Christianity is expanding quickly and is the source for many as-yet-untold stories. Asians and Asian-Americans are joining churches of many traditions, but more importantly, they are forming churches, associations, research centers and theological journals of their own. Some denominations — Presbyterians, Baptists and United Methodists — have aggressively reached out to Asians, starting churches to appeal to them. Asians also frequent Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical churches. The resulting mix of cultures, religious beliefs and values is a rich source of stories.

ISSUES

- Asian Christian converts sometimes wrestle with balancing cultural values with their new religious values. For example, Asian cultures emphasize respect for elders, but new Christians may find they are disappointing or disobeying their parents by converting to Christianity.

RESOURCES

- Many denominations and organizations have ministries focusing on Asian-Americans, such as the National Korean Presbyterian Council (www.pcusa.org/korean/org-nkpc.htm) or InterVarsity's Asian American Ministry (<http://virtually.net/aaministry/>).
- Associations include the Chinese American Christians Forum (<http://cacforum.sitesled.com/>); Ministries for English-Speaking Asians (www.mesanetwork.org/); and Pacific, Asian and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (www.panaawtm.org/pages/1/index.htm).
- The American Academy of Religion has an Asian North American Religion, Culture and Society Group (www.aarweb.org/programunit/progunits/list-item.asp?PUNum=AARPU006). The Asian Pacific Americans and Religion Research Initiative (www.psr.edu/pana.cfm?m=93) meets annually.
- Numerous universities and seminaries have centers for Asian-American ministry, including the Pacific School of Religion's Institute for Leadership Development and Study of Pacific and Asian North American Religion (www.psr.edu/page.cfm?l=62&id=170), the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity (www.asianamericancenter.org/b_cur_si06.htm) at the American Baptist Seminary of the

West, the Center for Pacific and Asian-American Ministries at Claremont School of Theology (www.cst.edu/CPAAM/mission.htm), McCormick Theological Seminary's Center for Asian American Ministries (www.mccormick.edu/academicprograms/ministry/asianamerican/) and the International Theological Seminary in Los Angeles (www.itsla.edu/index.html).

Asian fellowship

"On campuses across America, student movements like IV (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) and CCC (Campus Crusade for Christ) have deliberately split into ethnic fellowships. An Asian American group is almost always one of those groups. Most large universities also have Chinese or Korean fellowships rooted in ethnic churches."

— *Christianity Today*, April 2006

Judaism

Judaism is the faith of the Jewish people, who believe that God revealed himself through Abraham, Moses and other prophets. The faith came to be called Judaism after the sixth century B.C. and was centered in Jerusalem. Jews have endured severe persecution throughout their history, particularly in the Holocaust, during which the Nazis killed 6 million Jews. There are between 5 million and 6 million Jews in the United States, and about 14 million worldwide.

SCRIPTURE

TORAH is the name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Jews also commonly refer to the entire Hebrew Bible as the Torah. (Tanakh is the technical name for the Hebrew Bible, but even Jews don't use the term frequently.) The Hebrew Bible has the same content as the Christian Old Testament, but it numbers and arranges some of the books differently. There are 24 books in the Torah, arranged in three sections: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Old Testament splits some books into two, so that there are 39 books, and changes the order. Different translations of the Torah are preferred by different groups within Judaism.

TALMUD is a collection of ancient rabbinic commentary that elaborates on how to follow the rules set out in the Torah. It was written from the third to fifth centuries. Orthodox Jews consider it as important as the Hebrew Bible.

MIDRASH refers to explanations and stories about the Torah written during the first millennium. It suggests interpretations and fills in the gaps between the details and stories laid out in the Torah.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The High Holy Days begin with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, and end 10 days later with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Passover, celebrated in late March or early April, commemorates the freeing of the Israelites from Egypt under Moses' leadership. Families typically observe Passover with a meal called a seder, in which the story of the Exodus is retold. Hanukkah, also called the Jewish Festival of Lights, lasts for eight days and celebrates the Maccabees' victory over the Syrians in the second century B.C. Hanukkah usually falls in early or mid-December. Most congregations also observe Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, in March or April.



MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

There are three major branches of Judaism. They divide theologically on whether they believe the Torah was written by God or written by people:

- Reform Jews (<http://rj.org/>) believe that the spirit of Jewish law can be adapted to the time and place, so they tend to emphasize social justice issues more than dietary laws. They are the largest branch in America and the smallest in Israel. They are represented in the U.S. by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The Religious Action Center speaks out on public issues. The UAHC says that the Torah was written by people but inspired by God.
- Orthodox Jews practice strict adherence to traditional Jewish laws based on the Bible, including the kosher dietary laws that prohibit such things as eating meat and dairy products together. They are the smallest branch in America and the largest in Israel. Most U.S. Orthodox congregations are represented nationally by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (www.ou.org/), with most of its rabbis members of the Rabbinical Council of America (www.rabbinical.org/). Orthodox tradition holds that the Torah was dictated by God to Moses, letter by letter.
 - Hasidism is a movement within Orthodox Judaism founded by 18th-century mystics. Men wear beards, sidelocks, black hats and long coats.
 - The Chabad-Lubavitch movement (www.chabad.org/) is a branch of Hasidism that emphasizes reaching out to nonpracticing Jews.
- Conservative Jews follow a middle path between Reform and Orthodox Judaism and are the second-largest branch in both America and Israel. They are represented by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (www.uscj.org/index1.html) and the Rabbinical Assembly (www.rabbinicalassembly.org/indexfl.html).
- Reconstructionist Judaism is a very small, liberal branch of Judaism that emphasizes culture and community and rejects some tenets of traditional Judaism. It is represented by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (www.jrf.org/).

There are hundreds of Jewish organizations that focus on a combination of religious, political and social issues. They include:

- Anti-Defamation League (www.adl.org), which monitors anti-Semitism and hate crimes.
- American Jewish Committee (www.ajc.org)
- American Jewish Congress (www.ajcongress.org)
- Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (www.conferenceofpresidents.org)
- Hillel, the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (www.hillel.org)
- National Council of Jewish Women (www.ncjw.org)
- Hadassah (www.hadassah.org)

ISSUES

- The number of Jews in the U.S. and worldwide is declining. Jews are focusing on reducing rates of intermarriage, which often results in children who are not raised as Jews; encouraging childbearing; strengthening Jewish education for children and adults; countering attempts at conversion; and reaching out to secular Jews who are not observant.
- The generation of Jews who survived the Holocaust is dying out, adding urgency to how the experience is described and relayed to younger generations. Anti-Semitism continues to be an issue in the United States and worldwide.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Jews observe their Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. In fact, all days on the Jewish calendar run from sundown to sundown.
- Jewish congregations worship in synagogues and temples. Many Reform congregations use the latter term, while Orthodox and many Conservative Jews believe the word *temple* can refer only to the temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 70 A.D. and which Jews hope to rebuild. Do not call a Jewish congregation a temple unless it uses that word in its name.
- Be aware that Judaism is as much a culture as a theology. Most Americans who consider themselves Jewish have little or no affiliation with any synagogue. Modern Jewish literature sometimes describes Judaism as a “peoplehood,” reflecting the combination of faith, inherited tradition and culture. So one can be a secular Jew, though “secular Christian” makes no sense.
- Reform Jews ordain women as rabbis, but Orthodox Jews do not. Conservative Judaism also has female rabbis, though far fewer than Reform.
- Many issues of importance to Jews involve a mix of political, religious and social factors. Be aware that religion is part of conflicts such as those in the Middle East, but that the high number of secular (or cultural) Jews means that religion is not necessarily the only, or most important, factor.
- Messianic Jews, who believe that Jesus is the Messiah that Jews await, consider themselves Jewish, but the vast majority of Jews don't. This is a highly sensitive issue, and journalists should refrain from listing Messianic Jewish services in the same category as other Jewish services or referring to them in stories without explanation. Messianic Jewish leaders use the title of *rabbi*, which is offensive to traditional Jews.

RESOURCES

- The National Jewish Population Survey (www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=60346), prepared by the United Jewish Communities, surveys about characteristics of Jews and Jewish life.
- The North American Jewish Data Bank (www.jewishdatabank.org/) collects social scientific studies of American Jewry.
- The American Jewish Year Book (www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.1333613/k.C7111/American_Jewish_Year_Book_2005.htm), published annually by the American Jewish Committee, contains data and information on Jews in the United States and other nations.
- *The Jewish Week* (www.thejewishweek.com/) and the *Jewish Forward* (www.forward.com/) are respected newspapers.



Islam

The word “Islam” literally means “surrender” or “resignation,” and Muslims take it as their primary religious responsibility to surrender to the will of Allah, the Arabic word for God. Muslims, who are monotheists, believe that Muhammad, a merchant who lived in the 6th and 7th centuries in the Arabian cities of Medina and Mecca, was the last of God’s prophets (the first was the original man, Adam). Muslims worship five times every day. On Fridays, Muslims gather in mosques for communal prayers led by religious leaders called imams. Muslims follow the Five Pillars of Islam: shahadah, or faith (a declaration that there is no god worthy of worship except God, and that Muhammad is his messenger); salat, or prayer (five times a day, at prescribed times); zakat, or charity (giving a set percentage of one’s income to those in need); sawm, or fasting (during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims refrain from food, drink and sexual relations during the day); and hajj, or pilgrimage (all Muslims who are able are required to travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, once in their lifetime).

SCRIPTURE

The Quran, which Muslims believe God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. It is written in Arabic. Muslims also refer to the Hadith, the collected sayings of Muhammad, as authoritative. While not regarded as scripture, the sharia system of jurisprudence contains teachings, proscriptions and rules governing everything from permissible food to marriage and divorce.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

Ramadan commemorates the time during which the faithful believe Allah sent the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad in Mecca and gave him the teachings of the Quran. During this month-long observance, Muslims fast from sunup to sundown. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan. The hajj is the annual period when many Muslims journey to Mecca; doing so at least once in life is one of the Five Pillars, or requirements, of Islam. Eid al-Adha marks the end of this period.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Islamic Society of North America (www.isna.net) promotes unity and leadership among Muslims.
- The Islamic Circle of North America (www.icnait.com) is a grassroots organization working to establish Muslim identity and to further good works.
- The Council on American-Islamic Relations (www.cair-net.org) is the largest advocacy and civil liberties group for Muslims in the U.S.

- The Muslim Public Affairs Council (www.mpac.org) is a Muslim public policy advocacy group with offices in both Washington and Los Angeles.

- The Mosque Cares (www.themosquecares.com/) is headed by W. Deen Muhammad.

ISSUES

U.S. Muslims face a range of issues:

- The most high-profile are related to fallout from terrorist attacks, in the U.S. and worldwide, carried out by Muslims who claim to be acting in the name of God. Civil rights, immigration rules, travel restrictions, investigations of Muslim charities and public perceptions of Islam are of deep concern to Muslim communities. As a result, Muslims are becoming increasingly engaged in politics.

- Muslims often require special accommodation in order to follow Islam's rules on prayer, dress and eating. When refused by schools, workplaces or prisons, these requests can lead to conflicts and sometimes lawsuits. Muslim communities also struggle with engaging youth and young adults in a faith whose practices — from modest dress to certain foods — are often at odds with U.S. culture.

- As their numbers increase in the U.S., Muslims are creating an infrastructure of Muslim schools, health services, civic organizations, banks (Islam forbids collecting or paying interest) and more.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- There is no worldwide leader of Islam, or even the major branches of the religion. In addition, imams and other local leaders serve different functions from most pastors and rabbis and often focus most of their work on interpreting Islamic law. Because there is no central authority, theological and legal interpretations can vary by region, country or even from mosque to mosque. There is no one Muslim leader or even group of leaders who have the responsibility or authority to speak for Islam, or even a branch of Islam, in the United States or worldwide.

- Islam split into two major branches after Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. His followers disagreed about who should succeed him and formed the two main branches, Sunni and Shiite. These are not easily characterized, and reporters should be careful not to make generalizations. Both sects, for example, have given rise to extremist leaders; Osama bin Laden is Sunni and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is Shiite.

- Sunnis make up an estimated 85 percent of all Muslims and are the predominant branch in the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and most other Arab nations, as well as Turkey and Afghanistan. Sunnis also make up most Palestinian and West African Muslims. A subgroup of the Sunni branch is the fundamentalist Wahhabi sect, and most of its adherents are found in Saudi Arabia.

- Shiites are a majority in Iran and Iraq. Lebanon also has a large Shiite population.

- Sufism is a mystical tradition in Islam that includes both Sunnis and Shiites. It is known for poetry (by such writers as the 13th-century Persian writer Rumi), worshipful dancing (such as whirling) and music.

- Islam is very diverse, and there are many misperceptions about who is Muslim. Many Arabs are Muslims, but many are not. In addition, many Muslims are not Arab, including the growing number of African-American Muslims and Muslim converts (although Muslims believe people "revert" to Islam instead of "converting" to it). Some U.S. mosques are dominated by Muslims from a particular country or region, but many mosques draw worshippers from dozens of countries.

- Muslims do not engage in rigorous historical-literary criticism of the Quran as Christians and Jews do with their scripture, and Muslims consider it inappropriate to do so. Trained Quranic scholars interpret the Quran's teachings for application in modern life but do not question what is true or analyze how the Quran was assembled.

- While Islam is known for its rules about how women dress and act, there is a wide range of acceptable behavior. Women within the same mosque or family may follow different interpretations of the Quran's command that women be modest, for example. Some women wear hijabs, or head scarves, while others do not. In some cultures, women cover their entire bodies. Some U.S. Muslims who call themselves "progressive" are urging that women should be allowed to lead prayers or sit with men during prayers.

- Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet but do not believe he is the son of God.

- When you visit a mosque, dress conservatively and take off your shoes. Women should cover arms and legs and bring a headscarf. Avoid wearing clothes with photographs or images of faces.

- Avoid luncheon meetings during Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. Also, many Muslims follow dietary laws, which prohibit eating pork, its byproducts, blood and the flesh of animals that died without being ritually slaughtered.

- The Nation of Islam (www.noi.org) is an organization of African-Americans led by Louis Farrakhan. It does not follow mainstream Islam. The Nation of Islam was founded by Elijah Muhammad in 1930. The black separatist organization preached against Christians, Jews and others. When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, his son W. Deen Muhammad took over and began moving the organization toward mainstream Sunni Islam beliefs. He eventually changed its name to the American Society of Muslims. Farrakhan disagreed with this new direction and restarted the Nation of Islam in the early 1980s. While he has moderated its views somewhat, the Nation of Islam, based in Chicago, is still associated with intolerant views toward some groups. Farrakhan organized the Million Man March in 1995. W. Deen Muhammad now heads a large black Sunni Islam organization called the Mosque Cares (www.themosquecares.com), in Calumet City, Ill.

RESOURCES

- See “Islam: A guide to U.S. experts and organizations” (www.religionlink.org/tip_060807.php#nationalog) from ReligionLink.
- The Pluralism Project posts links to Muslim organizations (www.pluralism.org/weblinks/weblink_direct.php?tradition=Muslim) and religious centers (www.pluralism.org/directory/results.php?sort=state%2Ccity%2Ctitle&tradition=Islam).
- Numerous Web sites offer information on Islam including IslamiCity (www.islamicity.com/), Islam 101 (www.islam101.com/), Islam.com (www.islam.com/) and Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com).

Beyond the big three

There are literally thousands of religions and spiritual practices. We’ve tried to cover the major religions here, but there are many more you’re likely to cover. As journalists, you need to determine what questions to ask and where to get more information. Veteran religion will counsel you to start each story with a healthy respect for what you don’t know — that way, you’re more likely to get the details and nuances right. Here are some good starting points for gathering information about other religions and belief systems.

- Religion Newswriters Association’s site (www.RNA.org) includes thousands of links, including an extensive Resource Library, links to religious media, and ReligionLink. ReligionLink (www.ReligionLink.org) offers primers on many faiths and beliefs, such as Sikhism, Native American spirituality, Wicca/Paganism, atheists and more (www.ReligionLink.org).
- Religion Newswriters’ Religion Stylebook has entries on religions and lists information on titles, scripture and history (www.ReligionStylebook.org).
- The Pluralism Project at Harvard University posts news and research about minority faiths (www.pluralism.org/).
- Beliefnet posts information, articles, essays and discussions about a variety of faiths (www.Beliefnet.com).
- The BBC’s Religion & Ethics site offers journalistic snapshots on the basic beliefs (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/).
- ReligionSource allows journalists to search for scholars by area of expertise (www.religionsource.org), and the American Academy of Religion has program units listing scholars on many minority faiths (www.aarweb.org).
- The Religious Tolerance Web site posts information about world religions. While it is not always current or with-opinion, it can be helpful (www.religioustolerance.org).
- Most religions have Web sites, but check to see who creates the content. Some faiths, such as Sikhism, have one official site. Others, such as Buddhism, have many Web sites posted by different traditions. Critics of a religious tradition often post Web sites, though it’s not always obvious from the contents.

From A to Z

In 2000, Harvard University’s Pluralism Project mapped the number of U.S. religious centers and temples from non-Judeo-Christian faiths:

Afro-Caribbean	30	Native Peoples	39
Bahai	91	Pagan	236
Buddhist	2,149	Shinto	6
Hindu	715	Sikh	244
Jainism	93	Taoist	38
Muslim	1,588	Zoroastrian	38

Hinduism

Hinduism is the third-largest organized religion in the world, with almost a billion followers, behind Christianity and Islam. Most Hindus are in India, but there is a growing population in the United States. Hindus often land in news reports when they are the object of a hate crime or act of discrimination or are targeted for conversion; when a temple is opening or installing deities; or when there is a dispute over recognizing holidays in schools. Doing stories about Hindus often involves seeking them out.

Hinduism is an unusual religion because there is no single founder, teacher or prophet, or set of beliefs; there are variations by community and region. Hinduism's primary belief is that the soul does not die; it is reborn as either a human or animal every time the body dies. Under Hinduism's rule of karma, every act affects how the soul will be reborn. This cycle of birth and rebirth continues until the soul achieves spiritual perfection and is united with the supreme being. Hinduism has many deities, which all are manifestations of one god. The primary trio is made up of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva (also spelled Siva), the destroyer. Hindus believe that animals have souls, and some are worshipped as deities. These beliefs have evolved over several thousand years and are embedded in ritual, mystical and ascetic practices.

SCRIPTURE

There are many sacred texts in Hinduism. The best-known:

- The Bhagavad Gita is a philosophical dialogue between the deity Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. It is a popular and accessible text that discusses Hindu values and philosophy.
- The four Vedas are the primary texts of Hinduism. They contain hymns, rituals and incantations from ancient India and have influenced Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The oldest is the Rig Veda.

MAJOR HOLIDAY

Diwali, the five-day Hindu festival of lights, is the most popular festival and is celebrated by Sikhs and Jains as well as Hindus.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Hindu American Foundation (www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/) is a human rights group that fights against hate, discrimination, defamation and terror. It posts five common journalistic misperceptions about Hinduism (www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/media_toolkit_misconceptions.htm).
- Hindu.org (www.hindu.org/teachers-orgs/#Organizations) and the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/weblinks/weblink_direct.php?tradition=Hindu) post links to major Hindu organizations.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Hindus worship deities, which are representations of the one god they believe in; they are monotheistic, as Christians, Jews and Muslims are. Don't refer to Hindu deities as gods or goddesses. Hindu worship involves meditating, chanting and worshipping icons of the deities, which can include bathing them and making offerings to them.
- Explore ways that Hindus are adapting rituals to American life (home altars, arranged marriages, house blessings) or passing on their faith to American-born generations.
- Many Americans' introduction to Hinduism is through the spiritual practice of yoga, which is sometimes adopted by other faiths or stripped of spiritual content altogether.
- Hinduism is not one religion but is a collection of traditions with great variations among them. Don't assume all Hindus have the same beliefs and practices. In India, beliefs and practices vary widely by region; in America, these variations are sometimes maintained and often are not.
- In India, the various Hindu traditions are often at odds — sometimes violently — with each other. The same is sometimes true among Hindus in the United States. This is a sensitive topic, but Hindus are aware of it.
- Do not confuse *Hindu* with *Hindi*, which is a language.

RESOURCES

- The BBC posts a guide to Hinduism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml), which also explains the caste system and its religious roots.

Buddhism

Journalists may encounter Buddhism in several ways — among immigrants, among American converts or among people who adopt Buddhist practices, such as meditation, without its beliefs. Though immigrant Buddhists outnumber Anglo converts, there is strikingly little overlap between the two groups, and Buddhism's profile in America is largely due to its cultural influence.

One of the five largest religions of the world, Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in India in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. He gave up a life of royalty to live as a monk and eventually attained enlightenment (nirvana) through meditation. He did not believe he was a god, so some people call Buddhism a philosophy, not a religion. Buddha taught personal enlightenment through the Four Noble Truths: Life includes suffering, which is caused by attachment and can be stopped by following the “middle way” or Eightfold Path (right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration). He believed in karma (actions have consequences) and cycles of death and rebirth. Buddhism has several branches:

- Theravada Buddhism — The oldest form of Buddhism, it emphasizes the difference between monks' authority and practice and lay people's. Those who attain enlightenment are equal to the Buddha, who is not regarded as a god.
- Mahayana Buddhism — The second-oldest form of Buddhism, it offers gradations of Buddhahood — in bodhisattvas — to more people instead of concentrating authority among monks. Buddha is regarded as a god.
- Tibetan Buddhism — The Dalai Lama is the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, who were forced into exile in India when the Chinese occupied Tibet in 1959. Tibetan Buddhism is based on Mahayana teachings, and its followers still campaign to return to Tibet.
- Zen Buddhism — A combination of Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, it has roots in China, moved into Korea and Japan and became popular in the West. Zen teaches that everyone is a Buddha, and each person can discover that through Zen practice.

SCRIPTURE

There are many Buddhist scriptures and texts. The major ones include:

- The Tripitaka (Pali Canon), which means “three baskets,” is the earliest collection of Buddha's teachings and the only text revered by Theravada Buddhists.
- The Sutras are held sacred by Mahayana Buddhists.
- The Tibetan Book of the Dead records the stages of death and rebirth.

MAJOR HOLIDAY

The Buddha's birthday (and in some traditions, his death) is the focus of a festival in May called Wesak.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Pluralism Project posts links to major Buddhist organizations (www.pluralism.org/weblinks/weblink_direct.php?tradition=Buddhist).

RESOURCES

- See ReligionLink's guide to Buddhism (www.religionlink.org/tip_060123.php).
- The BBC gives a simple overview of Buddhism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/index.shtml).
- *Tricycle* (www.tricycle.com) is a quarterly journal about Buddhism.
- Buddhanet (www.buddhanet.net/) and other Web sites are resources on Buddhism.
- The Buddhist Studies WWW Virtual Library (www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html) is a guide to Buddhism and Buddhist studies on the Internet, with expansive links.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, founded by Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1830, believes that it is the restoration of the original church Jesus established and that other Christian traditions have gone astray. Mormons, as church members are called, regard themselves as Christian, but no other major Christian tradition does. The church has almost 6 million members in the U.S., making it the fourth-largest religious body in the country, and 12 million worldwide. Some of its practices are well-known, such as the missionary work required of young adults, but its beliefs are less well-understood. Some, such as the practice of baptizing non-Mormons after their death and the now-renounced practice of polygamy, are the source of news reports. Mormons believe that God has a physical body. They believe that humans are “sealed” to their family in a temple ceremony and will live eternally as gods in the highest celestial kingdom if they are faithful to church teaching. They do not consume tobacco, alcohol, coffee or tea.

SCRIPTURE

The church uses four books of Scripture: the Bible (King James Version), the Book of Mormon (subtitled “Another Testament of Jesus Christ”), Doctrine and Covenants, and the *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith’s translation and revision of the Bible. The church teaches that Mormon, an ancient American prophet, inscribed what’s known as the Book of Mormon on golden plates that his son Moroni buried on a hill in what’s now upstate New York. Moroni later was said to have returned as an angel and led Smith to the plates, which Smith translated and published in 1830, after the golden plates were taken away from him. The Book of Mormon describes God’s interaction with the people of ancient America and recounts the visit of the resurrected Jesus to the New World.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The official LDS church site (www.lds.org)
- The LDS church’s educational site (www.mormon.org/) has an area with FAQs and facts for media.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Whether or not Mormons are Christian is a contentious matter. Journalists should always be clear that the Mormons regard themselves as Christian but that Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians say Mormon beliefs do not agree with Christianity and its creeds. When this distinction is not important to a news report, journalists use phrases such as “Catholic, Protestant and Mormon churches are involved ...” to avoid the issue. Journalists should avoid phrases such as “Christian churches, including Catholics, Protestants and Mormons,” which make a theological judgment about the church’s beliefs.

- Journalists should take care to describe Mormon beliefs and practices in accurate and nonjudgmental ways. When teachings are controversial, journalists can state as fact or quote scholars explaining how they differ from traditional Christian teaching.

- The LDS church has changed its position on the term *Mormon*. Most recently, the church asked not to be referred to as the Mormon church, but it does not object to adherents being referred to as Mormons. For journalists, *the Mormon church* is acceptable in references to the LDS church, though the church’s full name should be used on first reference.

- Mormons welcome visitors in churches, but visitors are not allowed to enter Mormon temples. (Churches, or meeting houses, are used for Sunday worship, while temples, which serve numerous churches, are used only on weekdays for special rituals.) Even family members who are not Mormon cannot enter a temple for weddings and funerals. For that matter, only Mormons who are deemed sufficiently “worthy” — by paying their tithe and being active in their ward — are allowed in.

- The LDS church has an unusual structure. The top authority is the First Presidency, made up of a president and two counselors. When the president dies, the First Presidency is dissolved and the Council of the Twelve Apostles selects a new president. Under the First Presidency is the three-member Presiding Bishopric, which governs in temporal affairs. There is also the First Quorum of Seventy, which oversees missionary work. The church is divided into territorial groups called stakes, and each stake is headed by a president, two counselors and a stake high council. Individual congregations are called wards. The pastor of a ward holds the title of bishop but is not salaried or a professional religious leader. The terms *minister* or *the Rev.* are not used.

RESOURCES

- Light Planet’s Mormonism site, created by Mormons and supportive of the church, posts information on Mormon life and beliefs and links to dozens of other sites (www.lightplanet.com/mormons/index.htm).
- Brigham Young University (www.byu.edu/) is a Mormon university, and its scholars can speak about beliefs and practices.
- There are numerous good books on the Mormon church. *Mormon America* (HarperSanFrancisco), by RNA member Richard Ostling and his wife, Joan, is a helpful examination of the church’s history, beliefs, culture and influence.

Sikhism

Discrimination experienced after the 9/11 terrorist attacks forced Sikhs to defend and define their faith. Since then, this growing community has raised its profile in U.S. cities, workplaces and on campuses and stepped up its fight for civil rights. Sikhs, whose men wear turbans and beards, are often mistaken for Muslims. Sikhism, however, is a distinct monotheistic religion that originated in India in the 15th century and draws on elements of Hinduism and Islamic Sufism. Family and moral purity are prime values; the union of each human spirit with God's is believed to end a karmic cycle of rebirths. There is a relatively small number of Sikhs in the United States, but worldwide, there are 20 million, making it the world's ninth-largest religion.

SCRIPTURE

The Sikh scripture is called the Guru Granth Sahib. The 10th Sikh Guru decreed that after his death the book's teachings would be Sikhs' spiritual guide. Sikhs show it the respect they would give to a human Guru.

MAJOR HOLIDAYS

Vaisakhi marks the Sikh new year, in April, and commemorates the religion's birth. Like Hindus, Sikhs also observe Diwali, a festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

- The Sikh Coalition (www.sikhcoalition.org/) is an umbrella group established by several Sikh groups after the 9/11 attacks to protect Sikh civil rights.
- Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (www.sikh-mediawatch.org/) is a news and information site for Sikhs run by an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.
- The Sikh Foundation (www.sikhfoundation.org/) is a nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, Calif., that promotes Sikh culture, art and heritage, especially in the West and to young people.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- The Sikh place of worship is called a Gurdwara, a Punjabi word meaning gateway to the Guru.
- Sikh men all take the name Singh, meaning lion. Women take the name Kaur, which means princess. Sikh men have uncut hair, carry a wooden comb and a steel sword, and wear a steel bracelet and cotton underwear.

RESOURCES

- See ReligionLink's guide to Sikhism (www.religionlink.org/tip_040809b.php).
- The Sikhism Homepage (www.sikhs.org/) is an online resource of all things Sikh.

New Religious Movements

New Religious Movements has come to be the accepted term for religious groups that are outside the mainstream. "New" is sometimes a misnomer, in that many of these traditions have roots in ancient faiths. The United States has been a fertile incubator for a wide variety of religious movements, particularly since the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished quotas based on national origins and resulted in the introduction of a range of religious beliefs. Sometimes, NRMs, as they are called, are suspicious or even dangerous in their goals or treatment of followers, but many times they are not. Some groups develop over time into religions that are accepted in the mainstream. New Religious Movements are a serious topic of study for hundreds of scholars.

TIPS FOR COVERAGE

- Journalists should take great care with the word *cult*, a term that has come to be associated with religious groups with overly controlling leadership or dangerous practices. In some cases, the word *cult* fits, such as with Heaven's Gate, whose members died in a mass suicide in California in 1997. However, the word *cult* has such negative meanings for most people that it should be avoided unless it is absolutely clear that it would not unfairly denigrate a group.
- The word *sect* refers to a group that has broken off from another. Journalists should take care with this label as well and avoid it unless they are sure it fits.
- Journalists who encounter unusual religious groups can easily consult with experts to find out whether they are part of a larger group or how the group's beliefs and practices compare with other groups'. They should also be aware that just because a group sounds unusual doesn't mean it is unique. A group called the Raelians falsely claimed they had cloned a human in 1997, inciting lead news stories across the country. The nation then learned that serious scholarly study of UFO religions such as the Raelians was, in fact, already taking place and that the Raelians were hardly the only group with such beliefs.

RESOURCES

- The Religious Movements Homepage (<http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>) at the University of Virginia profiles 200 groups and movements.
- The Hartford Institute for Religion Research posts extensive links to organizations and scholars who study and catalog NRMs. Many of these directories include profiles of hundreds of NRMs (http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_new_religious_movements.html).



Visiting places of worship

There is no substitute for visiting churches, mosques, synagogues or temples for worship and other gatherings. The sights, sounds, rituals, textures, mood and conversations will tell you more than any book ever can. Here's some advice on getting started.

ON THE RECORD? If a worship service is open to the public, you can consider what is said in it on the record. Sermons, in particular, can be quoted because they are public proclamations. Reporters should be careful about quoting prayers, however; people have filed lawsuits over their private problems being made public.

ADVANCE NOTICE. In most cases, reporters find their visits go more smoothly if they call in advance, and they consider it a professional courtesy to let the religious leader know a reporter will be present. There are, however, plenty of exceptions. If you have been tipped that the preacher is endorsing a politician against federal rules, you obviously don't want to let him know you'll be listening. Similarly, a meeting after a worship service may include discussion of a controversial issue, such as tearing down a historical building or splitting a congregation.

WHAT TO WEAR. If you're unsure how to dress or act, call in advance and ask. Houses of worship welcome visitors and want to make them feel comfortable. You can also consult the book *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, edited by Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida (Skylight Paths Publishing), which details dress and customs for most traditions. Some houses of worship also post information for visitors on their Web sites.

SHOW RESPECT. The most important thing is to be respectful, which means being silent during prayer, standing when others do, removing your shoes if the tradition requires it, etc.

SHOULD YOU SING? If you're attending a worship service as a reporter, you are not expected to participate. Some reporters find it easier to sing during songs or close their eyes during prayer in order to blend in. If you're visiting a place of your own tradition, you may feel comfortable singing and praying, but remember: If you're on assignment, it's your job to observe and report. And, if people see you participating, they may expect coverage that extols their faith rather than simply reports on it.

IF YOU'RE FEMALE ... Many traditions have particular customs or rules regarding what women wear and how they act. Some are easy for reporters to comply with, but others hamper your ability to report.

- Many mosques require women to cover their heads, and most reporters don't mind bringing a headscarf or donning one made available to them. Similarly, some traditions — Muslims and some Pentecostals, for example — expect women to dress modestly, so reporters intentionally wear clothes that cover their arms and legs.
- When religious customs limit reporting, most veteran journalists handle restrictions with ingenuity and perseverance rather than confrontation. If women are not expected to approach men and initiate conversation, you might enlist a woman to ask her husband to explain your need to interview men. If men and women are segregated during worship, as they are in some mosques and synagogues, you might quietly try to reposition yourself so you can see the men's section.
- Some groups prohibit men from shaking hands with women. Wait until a hand is extended to you before attempting to shake someone's hand.

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND RECORDING. You must get permission in advance to photograph, film or record a worship service. Many religious leaders will set restrictions on whether flash can be used (often not) and where photographers or operators may stand. They may restrict what can be filmed or recorded.

TAKING NOTES. Orthodox Jews frown on doing work on the Sabbath, and that includes taking notes. Reporters tell stories about running into restrooms to scribble notes or hiding notebooks under their coats.

OFFERING? Some reporters toss a dollar or two into the collection plate as a courtesy; many don't. Reporters who cover political candidates end up in churches a lot and tell great stories about their own "contributions" on the campaign trail.

CONVERSION. Journalists sometimes become targets for conversion or are invited to join "altar calls," where people confess their faith. Such invitations are best handled with aplomb. Jeffrey Weiss of *The Dallas Morning News* has a standard reply when people ask if they can pray for his salvation: "I never turn down a prayer." If people persist journalists should feel free to be firm about not engaging in conversation.

Religion outside the box

Faith and belief aren't based on buildings and institutions. Journalists need to remember that stories about faith and belief shouldn't usually be based on buildings and institutions, either. One of the most important trends in religion coverage is the increasing number of stories that show that religion is mostly lived outside the walls of churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. Many of the best religion stories are about what happens when people live out their beliefs in everyday life, particularly when they interact with people who hold different beliefs.

In this chapter we'll explore four areas that are fertile ground for stories on all kinds of topics, from education and business to politics and pop culture. In this age of individualism, people are expressing their spirituality in unusual and nontraditional ways. Stories about ethics — from the largest corporations to the smallest choices in everyday life — are an increasingly telling barometer of life in America today. Relationships among people of different faiths affect international, national and neighborhood affairs. In the end, many of the highest-profile stories about religion occur when clashes of belief occur in public, from religious holiday displays to government policies on scientific research.



Spirituality

The number of Americans who claim no religious identity in surveys, dubbed “nones” by some experts, has doubled in the past decade, making them possibly the third-largest group in the country, after Catholics and Baptists. Yet most of these 29 million people have spiritual beliefs, according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm). Two-thirds believe in God, and more than one-third consider themselves religious.

The challenge for religion journalists: finding them, and finding ways to write stories about the ways they express their beliefs. Most religion coverage still deals with institutions and the people who frequent them. In the early 21st century, official religion doesn't provide an adequate portrait of faith in America, but journalists can complete the picture by asking people to explain how they express their beliefs in everyday life.

Resources

- Blogs, chat rooms, Web page forums and LISTSERVs. A quarter of Internet surfers have searched online for religious information, and 81 percent described their faith commitment as “very strong,” according to “Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online” (www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/53/report_display.asp), a 2001 survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Check out bookstores, conferences, yoga and meditation classes, volunteer efforts and clubs that may draw people with spiritual beliefs.
- Ask about rituals that take place outside institutions — prayer, weddings, funerals, home altars, journaling, etc.

Ethics and values

Questions of ethics seem to be everywhere: Congress, corporate America, schools, hospitals, religious institutions, science labs and journalism organizations. Few of the questions involve obvious answers. Rather than black-and-white issues, America seems to dwell in shades of gray, where people puzzle over what's right, what's wrong and where to turn for moral standards. “Ethics and values” are talked about a lot, but in general terms. It's the specific circumstances that make for penetrating narratives.

More religion journalists find themselves covering beats that are called faith and ethics or spirituality and values. That's a reflection of the high profile of ethics questions in this country and people's thirst to determine what's right and what's wrong, from the largest to the smallest matters. Should the United States go to war? Should a severely brain-damaged woman be kept on life support against her husband's wishes? Should I turn my child in to her teacher if she tells me she copied one answer from someone else's math test?

Should I tell an acquaintance his wife is having an affair? Should the largest religious groups be able to legislate moral standards that must be followed by smaller groups who disagree with them?

Moral standards are drawn from a variety of sources — professional codes of conduct, family values, human instincts and, often, religion. Journalists now have more ways than ever to chronicle the ethical questions of our time. They should ask insightful questions, conduct detailed interviews and pay attention to details. They also can consult a wide range of experts in ethics to give perspective and context to the debates of the day.

Some ethicists' work is based on their religious beliefs, while other systems of ethics are secularly based. Compare perspectives between them, and also explore the ethical perspectives of different religions. On many topics, juxtaposing different faith traditions' moral standards can illuminate why right and wrong can be so difficult to determine in specific situations.

Here are some resources to start with.

RELIGIOUS ETHICS

- Seminaries, religious graduate programs and schools of religion have ethicists on their faculties.
- The Society of Christian Ethics (www.scethics.org/)
- The Society of Jewish Ethics (<http://society.bioethics.net/sje/index.php>)
- The Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College (www.wheaton.edu/CACE/events/events_main.htm) posts links (www.wheaton.edu/CACE/links/linksmain.htm) to other ethics centers.
- ReligionLink posts a guide to bioethics experts and organizations (www.religionlink.org/tip_060530.php).

UNIVERSITY CENTERS

- The Ethics Resource Center (www.ethics.org/) is the oldest nonprofit in the U.S. devoted to organizational ethics.
- The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (www.indiana.edu/~appe/) is an umbrella group.
- Harvard University posts a state-by-state list of ethics centers (www.ethics.harvard.edu/resources_sister.php).
- The Kenan Center for Ethics (<http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/>) at Duke University posts links to ethics organizations in a number of areas (<http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/links9.asp>).
- The Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University (<http://kennedyinstitute.georgetown.edu/index.htm>)

Interfaith efforts

For all of religion's talk of love and peace, religion reporters continually face the question: Can the world's religions learn to get along? Many of the world's most violent conflicts are

stoked by potent mixtures of religion and politics. In the United States, religious groups are constantly skirmishing over how religion plays out in public, from movies to the Pledge of Allegiance and prayers before city council meetings. Those conflicts are countered by two growing trends: More marriages — and families — are made up of members of different faiths, and more communities are made up of more

Mixing it up

Interfaith activity among congregations has more than tripled since 2000, according to the Faith Communities Today 2005 survey. Minority faiths outside of Christianity were the most involved in interfaith activity, followed by mainline Protestant congregations.

members of different faiths. Both these trends provide new, personal avenues for understanding as well as conflict.

- The increasing number of interfaith families is a largely undocumented trend. Several organizations serve the needs of interfaith families, though mostly Jewish-Christian. Look for stories of adapted traditions or tensions in marriages, funerals, holiday celebrations, adoptions and the religious education of children.
- Religious tensions often play out in pop culture or the public square through reactions to movies, television shows, music, public holiday observances, graduation prayers and more.
- Some faith groups eagerly participate in interfaith efforts, including some Jewish groups, Sikhs and the more liberal Christian denominations. They are willing to pray to God with other faiths without excluding them (such as by praying in Jesus' name). Others, particularly conservative Christians, shun interfaith events because they believe making their message acceptable to others requires watering down their own beliefs — that the only way to salvation or to pray is through Jesus Christ.
- Great stories can be found when faith groups are unexpectedly thrown together in a common cause (like helping hurricane victims) or when they form unlikely alliances. Conservative Christians, Mormons and Muslims agree regarding same-sex marriage, for example, but disagree on much more. Sometimes, opinions do change, offering tales of transformation. Jews, Christians and Muslims have found individual friendships can transcend differences over Middle East politics.

Resources

- Organizations for interfaith families include the Dovetail Institute for Interfaith Family Resources (www.dovetailinstitute.org/), based in Boston, Ky.; InterfaithFamily.com (www.interfaithfamily.com/), based in Newton, Mass.; and the American Association of Interchurch Families (www.interchurchfamilies.org/aaif/index.shtm). Some cities, such as Chicago and Washington, D.C., have regional organizations for interfaith families.
- Most denominations and religions have a person or office that monitors or oversees interfaith relations.
- Many cities have centers that intentionally bring together members of different faiths for dialogue, ranging from the Interfaith Center of New York (www.interfaithcenter.org/) to the Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston (www.imgh.org/).
- Look for dialogue groups that form around specific issues, such as the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group (<http://traubman.igc.org/dg-prog.htm>) in California.
- The Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/), based at Harvard University, tries to help Americans “deal with the realities of religious diversity” and has extensive Web resources on almost every faith tradition. Its founder, Diana L. Eck, wrote *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperSanFrancisco).
- The Interfaith Alliance (www.interfaithalliance.org/), based in Washington, D.C., is an advocacy organization on issues of democracy and religious liberty and fighting religious hatred.
- The North American Interfaith Network (www.nain.org/) works to build understanding and cooperation among interfaith organizations.
- The Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions (www.cpwr.org/), based in Chicago, sponsors interfaith dialogue and encourages cooperation among religious and spiritual communities and institutions.
- The United Religions Initiative (www.uri.org/), based in San Francisco, promotes interfaith cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence. It has “cooperation circles” around the globe.

Religion in the public square

The most telling religion stories aren't usually hidden inside churches, synagogues, mosques or temples. They're out in public, where people of all sorts

of different faiths mix with each other, along with people who have no faith at all. They happen in schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, hospitals, government meetings, movie theaters, courts, science labs, football stadiums and more. Often stories begin when one person lives out his or her beliefs in a way that feels uncomfortable or unfair to others — such as a supervisor who invites workers to a weekly Bible study in her office, a pharmacist who refuses to fill a prescription for birth control or an atheist

who posts anti-religion bumper stickers in his cubicle.

Sometimes they occur when someone asks for an accommodation to practice faith — such as the middle-school soccer player who wants to wear her hijab despite rules against head coverings or the inmate who requests a special diet.

These conflicts mostly can be traced to the tension in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits the government from endorsing one religion over others while also protecting all Americans' right to practice their faith, whatever it is. Such conflicts often draw journalists into the nuances of the legal system and faith, with a good dose of politics as well. The U.S. Supreme Court has yet to rule decisively on many church-state issues, so journalists should be aware that court rulings may vary region to region, allowing people to act in different ways depending on where they live.

Many disputes involve people's responses to other religious traditions. A movie about Jesus' death or a cartoon about the Muslim Prophet Muhammad can set off reactions throughout the world.

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Resources

The resources available are endless, so we will not try to list them all here. We recommend checking the ReligionLink archives (www.ReligionLink.org) on the topics you encounter for interview sources and background on many issues.

- Two primary sources are ReligionLink's extensive Guide to Church-State Experts and Organizations (www.ReligionLink.org) and Guide to Experts on Religion and Pop Culture.
- The First Amendment Center (www.firstamendmentcenter.org/) offers research, news and analysis of First Amendment issues. It has offices in Nashville, Tenn., and Arlington, Va., and is an operating program of the Freedom Forum.
- The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (<http://pewforum.org/>) distributes information, surveys and expert opinions about issues at the intersection of religion and public affairs. It doesn't take sides on policy issues and is a project of the Pew Research Center.

Several email services will help journalists keep abreast of news about religion in the public square. They include:

- Sightings (<http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/index.shtml>), a twice-weekly email from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago, reports and comments on religion in public life, mostly from a mainline Protestant perspective.
- Crosswalk.com's Religion Today (www.crosswalk.com/) summarizes news from around the world.
- Christianity Today's CT Direct (www.christianitytoday.com/ctmag/) daily email includes news and commentary from an evangelical perspective.

Issues for reporters and editors



Political journalists who switch to the religion beat express surprise when sources start asking them about their religious beliefs. If they weren't asked how they voted, why should they be asked where — or whether — they worship? Religion is an intimate, emotional and revealing topic, which is one reason it makes for such great stories. It's also the reason that sources and media audiences will be interested in what *you* believe. After all, journalists report on facts, but religions are based on beliefs that can't be proven or disproven. People's religious beliefs affect the way they vote, raise their children and spend their time and money. Why shouldn't they also affect their work as a journalist?

People who report on religion can be sure of two things: Sources will ask about your own beliefs, and you will have to report about people whose beliefs you disagree with. While ethics and conflicts of interest are important topics for all journalists, religion journalists will find there are special considerations on the religion beat. Here is some guidance on how to handle questions when they arise.

Revealing personal beliefs

Veteran religion reporters have various ways of responding to questions about their own faith. There's no single right way to respond; every person has to handle the question in a way that feels comfortable to him/her. Some journalists also find they answer the question differently over time or in different situations. Some options:

BE UPFRONT. Say what your faith is and where you worship. Some reporters say that they feel they need to be honest and open with sources because they are asking sources to be honest and open with them. It is a way to build trust.

ANSWER IN GENERAL TERMS. Say, "I'm Christian" or "I'm Jewish" or "I'm Muslim," but leave it at that and quickly begin the interview.

ASK WHY THE PERSON WANTS TO KNOW. You may want to tailor your response to the person's agenda. Are they trying to figure out if you're on "their side"? Or is it a casual question that doesn't carry weighty baggage? Some reporters justify not revealing details by telling sources they worry that if their tradition is the same as the source's, the source will expect favorable coverage, but that if their tradition is different, the source won't feel they can trust them.

IS SALVATION AT STAKE? Veteran religion reporter Julia Lieblich offers this anecdote: "When asked, 'Are you a Christian?' the writer replied, 'I don't like to talk about my religion when I am working. But if you are wondering whether I will be sensitive to the beliefs of Christians, the answer is yes.'"

DEFLECT, OR REFUSE TO ANSWER. Some reporters say, "The most important thing you need to know is that I will listen to you and that I am committed to representing your faith accurately and fairly. This interview is about your faith, not mine."

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS. Some reporters find that because of their name, appearance or ethnicity, sources assume they are Jewish, Catholic or other faiths. Sometimes they challenge (or affirm) that assumption, explaining that they won't assume anything about the interview subject.

CONSIDER WHERE YOU ARE. Journalists in the Bible Belt report that they are asked about their faith in almost every interview; journalists in other regions of the country say the question comes up only occasionally.

USE HUMOR. You can always say, "I'm still considering," or "It depends on how this interview goes!" if you'd rather not answer.

Reporting on people you disagree with

Most journalists have had plenty of practice reporting about people they disagree with. Religion introduces a new intensity to that challenge. It's one thing to be a political reporter who votes Democrat and interviews Republicans. It can be another when a reporter's sacred beliefs are ridiculed by a person who's likely to be the lead story. Reporters have many ways of deftly handling such situations:

- Remember that your job is to report, not comment or judge.
- Add context. Context doesn't have to take much time or space. Accurately characterizing a person's beliefs by quoting an expert or a fact can quickly show readers/viewers/listeners whether the person is on the fringe or in the mainstream, how much support he has or how much opposition he faces.
- Represent the other side(s). Fairness demands that claims are balanced by counterclaims. Don't let a person's quotes or accusations stand alone. If there's another view, state it or quote it, and try to characterize how prevalent each view is. This is much easier now that surveys of religious beliefs are instantly accessible on the Internet.
- Truth doesn't require falsity. Jeffrey Sheler, who covered religion for *U.S. News & World Report*, suggests remembering what he heard two religious leaders in dialogue say: "Being true to one's faith does not require being false to another's."
- Bow out if necessary. If you can't accurately and fairly report on someone you disagree with, consult your editor/producer and ask to be removed from the story.

Conflicts of interest

Every journalist encounters a conflict of interest at some point, but there are special considerations when it comes to religion. In general, reporters don't join organizations that they cover, but prohibiting a journalist from belonging to a religious group violates that person's First Amendment right to practice religion freely. Thus, religion journalists can be members of a church or other place of worship and practice a faith without violating any ethical guidelines — in fact, being a member of a religious group will add insight into reporting. Some editors expect that you do not report on your own faith tradition, but in most cases, it's nearly impossible to avoid. Whether you're the religion reporter or the education reporter, if you're Catholic or Baptist, you may have to do stories that involve Catholics and Baptists.

Some journalists may wonder: If you feed homeless people at a shelter once a month as part of your synagogue, should you avoid writing about homeless people? If you're in a choir, should you avoid writing about debates over contemporary vs. traditional music? If you're a Sunday school teacher, should you avoid writing about religious education? The answer is no; it is perfectly acceptable to report on religious activities that you participate in, as long as you are not reporting on your own choir or Sunday school class.

There are, however, some things you should avoid:

- Reporting on your own congregation or place of worship in any way.
- Promoting your faith tradition above others or endorsing its beliefs in any way.
- Profiling people you know through your religious life.
- Reporting on issues for which you're involved in advocacy on behalf of your faith group. It's one thing to profile a homeless person if you feed homeless people; it's another if you are representing your church in lobbying the city council to build a new homeless shelter.
- Reporting on issues from which you cannot separate your religious beliefs. For example, if your tradition teaches that homosexuality is a sin and you do not feel you can impartially write about debates on gay ordination, you should recuse yourself from coverage.
- Any leadership position that would compromise your ability to report impartially about a religious tradition.

Ethics

It doesn't take long for religion journalists to discover that they will end up reporting on plenty of saints who are sinners. In other words, some religious people may do tremendous good for others even though they embezzle money or are drug addicts or sexual predators.

You're not expected to be a saint to report on religion, but it's best to be clear about your ethical standards. If your media organization has ethical guidelines, become familiar with them and follow them. The Society of Professional Journalists posts its Code of Ethics (www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp) online, and they all apply to reporting on religion.

Ethics advice

Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

— SPJ Code of Ethics

About Religion Newswriters

Religion reporting has existed since the earliest colonial newspapers. Samuel Kneeland, in *The New-England Weekly Journal*, wrote on March 20, 1727, (original capitalization and spelling preserved):

It would be needless to mention the particular reasons for Publishing this Paper; and will be sufficient to say, That the Design of it is with Fidelity and Method to Entertain the Public every Monday with a Collective of the most Remarkable Occurrences of Europe, with a particular Regard from time to time to the present Circumstances of the Publick Affairs, whether of Church or State.

It was more than 220 years later, however, before the beat would professionalize to the point of creating a membership association.

Religion Newswriters Association was founded in 1949 by 12 religion beat journalists gathered to cover a denominational meeting of Presbyterians. RNA grew steadily throughout the years and by 2006 included more than 500 members and subscribers, about two-thirds of whom are journalists.

The association helps journalists cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight. It does so by providing tools and training, including this guide.

RNA's foundation, created in 1999, serves to improve the public's understanding of religion. Its projects and services reach more than 5,000 journalists each week.

The Religion Newswriters Association and its Foundation provide dozens of resources. (As of this printing, all services are free, although some services are restricted to members only.)



Resource Web site

WWW.RNA.ORG Our Web site links to hundreds of resources in religion, including scholars and databases. No other site serves as a single stop for links to religious media, a stylebook, daily headlines, scriptures, polling data and hundreds of other resources.

In the news

Religion news first appeared as a distinct section in U.S. daily newspapers in the mid-1880s. By 1910, most major papers had sections that included listings of religious events.

able tool, providing story ideas, national and regional interview sources and background on a wide range of issues related to religion, public policy and culture. Its extensive archives are searchable by topic and by date. Sign up at www.ReligionLink.org. You can also have each week's ReligionLink alert delivered to your desktop via an RSS feed.

Religion News Headlines

WWW.RELIGIONHEADLINES.ORG Religion Newswriters provides a daily snapshot of the top religion stories in the mainstream media. Users can scan the headlines or read entire stories. Headlines are available via RSS feed as well. A veteran journalist selects the stories from more than 100 sources.

Training

Religion Newswriters customizes training to suit any media outlet or organization's needs. RNA participates in more than a dozen training events each year, from day-long workshops to brown bag lunches. Contact RNA's training coordinator, listed at www.RNA.org.

ReligionLink

WWW.RELIGIONLINK.ORG

ReligionLink is the only Internet news service created to help journalists write about religion. Each week, more than 5,000 journalists receive an email linking them to the latest free issue. Produced by a team of award-winning journalists, ReligionLink is an invaluable

Annual conference

More than 250 people routinely attend Religion Newswriters' annual conference, which takes place in a different city each year. High-profile religious leaders and scholars address current topics. Members, who work for large and small newspaper, broadcast and Web outlets, have a chance to network with each other about jobs, freelance opportunities and challenges on the beat. The conference also includes other training opportunities, such as workshops on writing or investigative reporting.

Annual contests

Each year RNA awards nearly \$15,000 in several contest categories recognizing excellence in religion reporting, including Best Religion Story of the Year, Religion Reporter of the Year, Religion Writer of the Year and Best Radio or Television Story of the Year. Annual deadline to enter: Feb. 1.

Scholarships

Full-time journalists on any beat are eligible for up to \$5,000 in scholarships that allow them to take any college religion course, at any time. The Lilly Scholarships in Religion for Journalists are available to reporters, editors, copy editors, photographers, designers and other journalists.

To help RNA continue its good work, consider a tax-deductible contribution to our Foundation. Donate online at www.RNA.org. Contact Executive Director Debra Mason at 614-891-9001 ext. 1, mason@RNA.org, for more information.

1951

The first religion beat reporter for a national wire service was George Cornell of The Associated Press, who was assigned to the beat full time in 1951.

About the author

Diane Connolly is the founding editor of ReligionLink (www.ReligionLink.org), Religion Newswriters' free Internet news service on religion, public policy and culture. Before that, she was religion editor at *The Dallas Morning News*. During her tenure, the staff won seven awards for producing the best newspaper religion section in the country. She has a master's of theological studies degree from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

About the editor

Dr. Debra L. Mason is executive director of Religion Newswriters Association and the founding executive director of the Religion Newswriters Foundation. Under her leadership, RNA has become the world's preeminent trainer for journalists writing about religion and no other Web site has more resources to help writers cover religion with balance, accuracy and insight. She is the author of numerous articles on religion reporting and co-edited the only collection of religion news reports: *Reporting on Religion*, with Judith Buddenbaum. She has a master's of theological studies from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, a master's in journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from Ohio University.

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