



In partnership with *The Rayne Trust*

# Religion and the News



Cumberland Lodge  
The Great Park  
Windsor, Berkshire  
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## **Religion and the News**

11 – 13 October 2009

*Speakers:*

**Jobeda Ali**, Director, Fair Knowledge & Founder of the Muslim Women's Summit

**Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari**, Muslim Council of Great Britain

**Simon Barrow**, Director, Ekklesia

**Charlie Beckett**, Director, POLIS

**Andrew Brown**, Editor, CIF Belief, The Guardian

**Zaki Cooper**, Trustee of the Council of Christians and Jews

**Professor Malcolm Evans OBE** Professor of Public International Law, University of Bristol

**Ruth Gledhill**, Religion Correspondent, The Times

**Professor Lord Harries of Pentregarth**

**Professor the Worshipful Mark Hill QC**, Barrister and Fellow, Centre for Law and Religion, Cardiff University

**Imam Monawar Hussain** Muslim Tutor, Eton

**Christopher Landau**, Religious Correspondent, BBC World Service

**Dr Jolyon Mitchell**, New College Edinburgh University

**Catherine Pepinster**, Editor, The Tablet

**Professor Gurch Randhawa**, Director, Institute for Health Research, University of Bedfordshire

**Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain**, Chair of the Assembly of Reform Rabbis UK

**The Revd Canon Roger Royle**, broadcaster and writer

**The Revd Ruth Scott**, Anglican priest, writer and broadcaster

**Dr Indarjit Singh OBE**, Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations

**The Rt Revd Dr Alan Wilson**, Bishop of Buckingham

70 people gathered at Cumberland Lodge to discuss the interaction between religion and the news. Over the past twenty years the coverage of religious news in the media has radically changed: religion is no longer a “soft” story. Religious issues pervade the reporting of domestic politics and foreign affairs, and even if a religious story seems self-contained, its ramifications often generate comment from unrelated parts of the secular press. The recent visit of the relics of St Therèse to the UK, for example, generated a huge amount of coverage from commentators and reporters not normally associated with religious news.

Religion is “good” news, but – as delegates heard at this conference – it is often portrayed in the idiom of confrontation. Much as religious leaders would like to see their faiths represented as being harmonious, reconciliatory, and profoundly ethical, the media picks up on their disharmony, disunity, and scandal. Why is there this contrast between what religious leaders want reported and what journalists feel is newsworthy about religions in the UK?

One reason is, of course, that disharmony is what we – the public – want to read and hear about. Another is that religions in the UK are perhaps not as harmonious as their representatives would like them to be.

The upshot is that religious representatives often feel misrepresented in the press. Equally, journalists at the conference felt that religious people do not always fully appreciate how the media operates: it is not there to provide free publicity. On the contrary, reporters must investigate, uncover and analyse, and that often leads to the coverage of stories that embarrass religious leaders. Where does this leave the relationship between faith representatives and journalists? Is there an inevitable clash of values and priorities between the two groups?

This meeting offered the unique opportunity for journalists and faith leaders to explain their frustrations to one another. It also gave them the opportunity to learn from each other. So as the tensions simmered down, there was a real meeting of minds. Religious spokespeople became aware that to work with the media they perhaps need to be more savvy about its priorities and modes of operating. The journalists agreed that better, authoritative information about the details of each particular faith would help them to do their job better – a reliable online encyclopaedia of faiths would be an ideal. In sum, this was a fascinating opportunity to build better relations between two groups who often feel misunderstood by the other – and this is what Cumberland Lodge does best.

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## Journalism

What is newsworthy?

- (1) Strong personalities
- (2) Conflict
- (3) "Out of the ordinary" events.

By contrast, faiths value:

- (1) Equality in the sight of God
- (2) Reconciliation and forgiveness and
- (3) Peace and harmony.

So there is a clash of values which needs to be taken account of when representatives from these two groups meet. The commercial environment in which news reporting occurs made it difficult to see how the values of journalism could change – at least at the national and international level. Might it be possible for religious leaders to take advantage of journalistic values without compromising their own? The conference took stock of examples of great religious leaders who show extraordinary canniness about how the media operates, and how they use this awareness to their advantage without compromising their own values.

Market forces influence journalism: why should someone pay a pound to read a paper? The sad fact is that nobody is interested in the aeroplane that lands safely. Confrontation "sells" because people find conflict interesting. It is also true that 24 hour news coverage has changed the way news is sold – more than ever before "date pegs" have become paramount. If it didn't happen within 24 hours, it isn't regarded as news.

"Template" journalism is both a pitfall and a necessity: Why is the label "Islamic terrorist" more common than "Catholic terrorist" ever was? Labels are a journalistic

necessity: short air-time and limited word counts are one thing, but journalists also have to package a story in a way that is immediately intelligible to their audiences. Journalists of course have a duty to use these labels responsibly. But equally, religious spokespeople could think more creatively about the way they refer to their organisations, their projects and their goals. The fact that 10% of a journalist's 600 word article may be used on the title of a faith project will not go down well with sub-editors. Labels and templates are easily misused, but they can also be a useful tool.

There is still a great deal of ignorance about faith: The latest Higher Education statistics show a fall of 7.7% of undergraduates taking theology and religious studies this year. This is reflected in the newsrooms and on the news desks: basic information about what distinguishes the faiths is lacking among non-specialist journalists. So while religion is increasingly newsworthy, it has become increasingly difficult to guarantee a base-line level of understanding amongst news reporters and their editors and producers. Stories about one faith are read out in front of buildings dedicated to another; Sikhs are mistaken for Muslims; there appears to be a basic confusion about the doctrinal distinction between Catholics and Protestants, let alone between Shi'a and Sunni; and so on.

What is to be done about this? Religious spokespeople have a responsibility to correct whatever inaccuracies they see reported: it is easy to let inaccuracies slide, without writing a letter or making a comment. But – contrary to impression – journalists and news corporations are extremely responsive to corrections and to comment: editors hate having to print corrections about things journalists ought to have checked. For the journalists, this is career-threatening. It is incumbent on the members of all the faith traditions themselves to respond to what they see as ill-informed reporting. It is, perhaps, easier to vent frustrations privately, but a letter in the right place will give a practical outcome to the problem of journalistic ignorance.

It should not be forgotten, too, that religious correspondents do offer a link, a bridge, between reporters of other kinds and religious spokespeople. Even if they are not themselves covering a story, colleagues will sometimes check facts with them. So, specialists are vital and the relationship between religious leaders and religious correspondents should be cultivated.

Local and National News Agencies have different priorities: The values of the national news agencies are not necessarily replicated at the local level. So local news reporters may very well be more willing to run "good news" stories in a way would not get past the sub-editors at the national level. This is a paradox: surely the markets for local and national news are overlapping? However paradoxical, the differences between local and national news were made several times and religious spokespeople frustrated with the modus operandi of national news were encouraged to engage the local media more effectively.

## Religion

Faith communities are more diverse than acknowledged by the press: Journalists working under pressure need a sound-bite from a religious leader, but even within one faith there are many spokespeople. It is not clear who represents who. During the conference the thought was expressed that religion fosters a diversity of opinion even within one faith tradition. If so, perhaps there should not be an expectation that each faith tradition should have a "single" view. But this makes the life of the religious correspondent extremely difficult: with 600 words they sometimes have no choice but to report the view of a religious leader as if they represent everyone within that faith. In doing so they generate a mistrust of the media by those people who do not recognise this to be a fair representation of their faith. Diversity within the religions needs to be handled more carefully by the press, and within the faiths there is much work to be done to establish a more unified voice.

Could there be a "theology of conflict"? Time and again, the conference was reminded that the media thrives on conflict. Without causing strife within or between faith traditions, might there be a way of expressing a faith in terms which can be understood by the media? Many religious traditions contain elements of conflict – at the very least faiths have always fought against injustice. Could there be a way of harnessing this mode of describing a faith, without thereby creating conflict?

Faith leaders are politically and culturally influential: When the leader of a faith community speaks out, their views are newsworthy. But often religious leaders are wary of taking a unilateral stance. They may have been scorched by the press in the past, or the moral and political issues of the twenty-first century may be simply too complex to yield a one-sided response. Comparisons were made with religious leaders in South Africa during the apartheid. Their voices, under the restrictions on journalists in South Africa, were vital to reporting the situation there. Religious leaders do still carry enormous moral authority – is it their role to comment on the burning political and cultural issues of the day? If so, might they take a clear, bold stance or is this inimical to the moral issues we now face in society?

Religiosity in the UK is thriving: For the first time in 2001, the national census asked: "What is your religion?" The answer showed that 7 in 10 people claimed membership of a religion (63.4% ticked the box marked „Christian“). During the conference, Islam was linked to this statistic: the thought was aired that because Muslims have stood up for their religion in the UK, they have shown that religious people generally do not have to be apologetic about their faith. What this shows is that religion is not an issue that can be side-lined by the media. The point was made that in this light it is disappointing that much coverage of religion features sex, scandal, sackings and controversy. Perhaps journalists could assume that large



portions of their audience would be interested in debate within the realm of theological ideas and beliefs?

There is an increasingly vocal anti-religion movement in the UK: there is a growing intolerance of religion in certain sections of society which is being reflected in some sections of the press. Ridicule and scorn of religious practices regularly replaces comment and analysis. This needs to be taken account of by religious people wishing to engage the media.

Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are often characterised as oppositional: Partly this is a result of the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which often uses defensive language. The central point is, however, that freedom of expression cannot be used as a defence in a case where a malicious intent has been exposed. The underlying principle of both rights, therefore, is one of respect. It is under this constraint that the reporting of religious news takes place.

## New Media

Having better media communications requires investment: Press officers are obviously useful, but if religious organisations are to keep up with technological innovations, then they must be prepared to commit their resources into creating and updating webpages, blogs and twitters.

There has been an explosion in new media technologies:

1. It is easier than ever to get your message out, but it is more difficult than ever to get it heard.
2. It is impossible to predict which technologies will have lasting value: is „Twitter“ a fad? Do people read blogs? Maybe, maybe not, but the only way to find out is to experiment with technological innovations and see whether they suit your purposes. No organisation can afford to be without these resources.
3. Technological diversity is the key to communicating successfully: you need a webpage and a blog and an electronic newsletter and a „Twitter“ account and so on.
4. User generated content is becoming increasingly important. The opportunity for members of the public to respond to news, and to indicate what they consider to be newsworthy, is becoming the norm.

New media opportunities are radically changing both journalism and spirituality: “User generated content” is not just a free way to add content to your publicity

machine, nor is it just a way of getting more people to subscribe to your news service. The expectation that members of the public should comment on what they read online is altering the status of what they read and it is altering the nature of their commitment to their faith. For one thing, the public is being given increasing opportunities to “steer” what counts as news. If they don’t agree with a story, they comment and they blog. For another, the individual’s expression of their faith may be becoming as important as their membership of a community. If so, then religious organisations must engage with new opportunities for their members to express themselves.

## Ideas for the Future

An authoritative “Wikipedia”-style online encyclopaedia of faiths: Journalists need a quick, authoritative source of information about the details of particular faiths, but there is no authoritative central source for this. Science correspondents have the Science Media Centre, which is an independent organisation which promotes clarity and accuracy in the reporting of science issues, couldn’t there be an equivalent organisation for religious affairs? Perhaps “Wikipedia” itself could be improved by religious representatives?

A series of work placements to give members of religious organisations a better understanding of journalism: but there was some scepticism about the possibility of journalists “giving up the time” to do corresponding placements in the offices of religious groups.

More courses on “religious journalism”: The US has a number of specialist courses available for people to study how journalism works in relation to religious issues. The UK has very few. The BBC’s College of Journalism runs a module on this as part of their internal training. This is an online course only available via the BBC’s intranet. There was a suggestion that this module be made public.

Investment in press relations officers: Religious organisations should be clear that investing in press relations and communications officers is worthwhile.

*Dr Owen Gower*  
*Senior Fellow*  
*2 November 2009*



## *Testimonials from Conference Delegates*

There is no substitute for bringing people on different sides of the fence together to debate and learn.

Such a special opportunity, in a beautiful setting, to meet and learn from people of faith with similar concerns.

The venue sets the highest standards but the quality of participants and discussion lived up to it. The experience was well worth the time out of the office.

This was a genuinely high-calibre gathering of figures from the media and religious world whose honest exchanges were thought-provoking and enlightening.

Cumberland Lodge is one of the, if not the best place to host and attend a conference in the UK.

The venue is the most conducive I've been to for enabling immersion in a topic and sustaining a high quality of thinking.

Cumberland Lodge provided a wonderful opportunity for thinking aloud, widely and freely and safely, in a way that is not often possible, and with stimulating company.

This is a fantastic, world-class venue for serious discussion of serious issues... Cumberland Lodge is a delight-filled place – a wonderful setting,

## ***About Cumberland Lodge***

Cumberland Lodge is a former royal residence built in the middle of the 17th century by John Byfield, a captain in Cromwell's army. Taken over by Charles II, for much of its subsequent history it was the official residence of the Ranger of The Great Park. Among those who have lived at the Lodge are the first Ranger, Baptist May, Sarah Churchill Duchess of Marlborough and William Augustus Duke of Cumberland.

Since 1947, Cumberland Lodge has been an independent educational charity, which aims to promote ethical debate and cross-sector cooperation on a range of matters affecting the development of society. Cumberland Lodge fulfils its mission by designing and running about ten conferences a year which enable invited guests to discuss contemporary issues of national and international significance. In addition, Cumberland Lodge encourages university students and academics to discuss the social and ethical implications of their work. Each year the Lodge is used by over 4,000 students and their teachers, predominantly from the colleges of the University of London, but also from other universities and institutions of higher education, including the Inns of Court. Over 8,000 other visitors a year from charities, learned societies, national organisations and the corporate world come here to talk about ethical, moral and spiritual issues.

## ***Staying in touch with Cumberland Lodge***

If you would like to stay in touch with us after your visit, there are a number of ways to do so. On our webpage ([www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk](http://www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk)) you can find information on forthcoming events, reports on past conferences and you can also listen to podcasts of talks which have taken place here. You can, for example, hear The Rt Hon Lord Justice Laws, Shami Chakrabarti, HH Judge Daniel Pierce-Higgins and The Rt Hon Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers. Cumberland Lodge podcasts are also available via *iTunes*. Cumberland Lodge is on *Facebook* and *Twitter* (@cumberlandlodge).