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## Religion Beat Unpopular with Editors

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

Of 1,586 dailies in the US, less than 50 have full-time religion writers. Only 2 newspapers employ 2 full-time religion writers. Some editors treat religion as a beat not worth hiring a specialty writer for. It is a news beat that gets misplaced in the features section even though it should be on the news side with education, the environment, the military, and medicine. Every newspaper should have someone who covers religion, and larger dailies should have at least 2 religion writers. Religion news is a money-maker. For example, when the 20,000-circulation Vacaville Reporter created a Saturday religion section front 5 years ago, their Saturday sales jumped to the 3rd-best day. Newsstand sales increased by 1,000 alone. A 1989 Religious News Service survey showed that readers prefer news on religion over sports, entertainment, and the arts. Religion coverage has been down in the 1990s, but religion and religious interest are starting to take off.

### Full Text (1048 words)

*Copyright Editor & Publisher Nov 14, 1992*

Religion used to be an up-and-coming beat not so long ago when the likes of Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker, the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II and Muslim fundamentalists regularly graced our pages.

Editors looked long and hard around the country to hire journalists who specialized in that complex topic. A number of us went into the field, hoping that religion reporting would be the success story of the 1990s as business reporting had been in the 1980s.

Instead, it has become a Rodney Dangerfield of beats, drastically losing ground on newspapers that used to devote space and personnel to the subject. Editors are sending out signals that the religion beat is peripheral to decent coverage.

Since mid-1990, 10 major newspapers--the St. Petersburg Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Sacramento Bee, the Seattle Times, the Rocky Mountain News, the Arizona Republic, the Miami Herald, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Philadelphia-Inquirer and the San Jose Mercury-News--have had openings on their religion beats.

These are good papers. They all have filled the posts (some with part-time people) from within. To be fair, some editors consider the beat a plum assignment they wish to award to an insider. Others treat religion as a beat not worth hiring a specialty writer for--it is a beat "anyone" can do. It is a news beat that gets misplaced in the features section even though it should be on the news side with education, the environment, the military, and medicine.

This is not a promising outlook for religion writers who want to transfer to other papers or--such as I myself--want to re-enter the field after getting a graduate degree.

We cannot totally blame the downscaling of the beat on the economy or the fact that our industry is on the ropes. The Religion Newswriters Association, an organization that works to advance the standards of religion reporting in the secular press, has argued for years that religion is a specialty beat that demands a journalist with some expertise to cover it.

But who is listening?

Not the Arizona Republic. Their former religion writer, Kim Sue Lia Perkes, had an award-winning religion section before she left the beat to cover Arizona politics. The section now is a shadow of its

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former self.

When I talked to a top editor there, he implied that economics was not a problem but he wanted to hire someone in graphics before tackling religion.

When I called him a few months later, none of my calls were returned until finally another editor informed me they had no intention of hiring a religion writer any time soon.

The Oregonian, the Northwest's largest newspaper, is similarly discouraging. When I told some editors last December that Billy Graham was having a crusade there in September 1992, and wouldn't it be nice if they had a full-time religion writer, they admitted their religion coverage was shoddy but said that hiring a religion writer "was not a priority." They gave excellent coverage to Graham when the time came but they have more than 300 people in editorial. Isn't there room for one religion writer?

There is a saying that people spend millions on sports but billions on religion. That sentiment is not reflected in the nation's newsrooms, which have plenty of sportswriters but lack religion writers.

Of 1,586 dailies in the United States, less than 50 have a full-time religion writer. Only two newspapers in the country employ two full-time religion writers.

Every newspaper should have someone who covers religion, and larger dailies should have at least two. Of course, this is not happening. The two mega-newsweeklies, Time and Newsweek, allow very little space for religion. Cable News Network, which sits in one of the country's most religiously vibrant cities, does not cover it at all.

Why is this? Is it because there is no money to be earned in running religion news? That is not true.

Religion news is a moneymaker. It pays for itself. For example, when the 20,000-circulation Vacaville Reporter created a Saturday religion section front five years ago, their Saturday sales jumped to the third-best day. Newsstand sales jumped by 1,000 alone. Aggressive seeking of religion advertising is unexplored territory on most newspapers but there is vast potential out there. There are many possible advertisers other than churches and synagogues.

In these tight economic times, newspapers are trying all sorts of things to increase readership. Why don't they follow the advice of reputable surveys, such as the wide-ranging 1989 Religious News Service survey that showed that readers prefer news on religion over sports, entertainment and the arts?

The RNS survey got sent to editors around the country but it seems that most ignored it. If editors know that religion news is a reader favorite, why do they neglect the topic?

Perhaps they do not respect the beat. Why else would Florida Times-Union reporter Barbara White have the country's best religion section two years in a row, only to see that her paper cut it out from under her by reducing her 12-page tab to less than two pages?

Why else would Gannett News Service have a columnist for gay-lesbian issues but not one for religion?

Think about it: The homosexual percentage of the population is estimated at 10%. Weekly church and synagogue attendance is 43%. Church membership is even higher at 59%. It does not make sense why Gannett would cover a smaller segment of the population while ignoring a larger segment.

Fortunately, there are a few exceptions to the downward mobility of the religion beat. U.S. News & World Report has upped its religion coverage. Despite the poor economy, the Dallas Morning News and the Indianapolis Star hired from the outside this year to replace retiring religion writers. The Washington Post also hired from the outside to fill a new religion writing position on its national desk. The Salt Lake City Tribune created a new religion beat by hiring a writer who had investigated the

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These newspapers are leading the way in a decade that, as the year 2000 approaches, is bound to explode in apocalyptic religious fervor. So far in the '90s, religion coverage has been declining, but religion and religious interest are just starting to take off.

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