



Article

The State of Religion Reporting in America

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A dialogue between Emma Green and David P. Gushee

Donald Trump's Electoral College victory in the 2016 presidential election exposed fundamental flaws in the way the media covered major social and political issues. When it came to issues such as racism, gender and sexual violence, migration and citizenship, and poverty, mainstream media outlets amplified the most headline-grabbing statements made by the presidential candidate, failing to offer the public a deeper understanding of the issues or the stakes. According to journalist Emma Green and religious studies professor David P. Gushee, the limitations of the media's reporting on religion were especially clear. What Green describes as the "religious illiteracy" of the media was a primary line of discussion in her talk with Gushee.

Emma Green on Addressing Religious Illiteracy in the Media

"How the Media Discovered Religion: Covering Faith in 2018 and Beyond" was organized by the American Council of Learned Societies and hosted by the Columbia Journalism School. In her introductory remarks, Green (then a reporter for *The Atlantic* and currently a staff writer reporter at *The New Yorker*) discussed the challenges that media outlets faced while

on reporting on religion. After the 2016 presidential election, she noticed, “Newsrooms and editors waking up and suddenly realizing that there are significant aspects and dynamics of American culture and politics that we’ve been missing.” To illustrate, she referenced Terry Gross’s [interview with Dean Baquet](#) on NPR’s program *Fresh Air*. At the time, Baquet was the executive editor for the *New York Times* and admitted to the religious illiteracy of many in his profession.

The New York-based (and Washington-based, too, probably) media powerhouses don’t quite get religion. We have a fabulous religion writer [Laurie Goodstein], but she’s all alone. We don’t get religion. We don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives, and, I think we can do much, much better, and I think there are things we can be more creative about to understand the country.

—Dean Baquet *Fresh Air*



Source: Markus Spiske via Unsplash.

Green identified three areas in which journalists should increase their focus and attention regarding to religion in America:

1. “Political power and influence and the role that religious actors and religious groups have for influencing elections and political coverage.” She identifies white evangelicals in the United States as the “big elephant in the room” given how 80-81 percent of this

group supported Donald Trump in 2016.

2. “Voter mobilization and the way that religious organizations are key to voter mobilization.”
3. “Whether or not there will be an emergent political Left in the US.”

David P. Gushee on the Changing Landscape of Religious Journalism

David P. Gushee is a scholar of Christian ethics. He spoke about the “Left-Right whiplash” that contextualizes his understanding of religious issues. He first trained at Southern Baptist Seminary, “now one of the strongest bastions of the Christian Right” and then at Union Theological Seminary, “one of the strongest bastions of the Christian Left that still exists.” Drawing on his years of work blogging and opinion writing in the area of religious journalism, he suggested that religious illiteracy has been a long-standing feature of most media outlets. He attributed this to the broader issue of “the weakening of newsrooms” and the “thinning out of coverage in most areas,” which both of which contribute, in his view, to “the dumbing down of America.” He lamented that reporters who dedicate their career to understanding religious phenomena in the contemporary newsroom “is now confined to less than twenty people in the United States” and shared Green’s concern for more nuanced religious reporting.

Part of what I have noticed that has changed the most since I began this work thirty years ago is how vicious the atmosphere of conversation is now. It used to be unusual to get death threats. I got my first death threat

probably about 1993, but it was rare. Now it is routine. The social media environment especially appears to be breeding hate and contempt in a way we all must take seriously...I've also watched the ups and downs of evangelical engagement in politics almost back to the beginning of the Christian Right (the New Christian Right) in the late 1970s. So, I don't think the media rediscovered evangelicals—I don't think it ever stopped paying attention to evangelicals or the Christian Right. I do think that every election cycle gives us new information about what is happening with the organized, political Christian Right, and what is happening with American Evangelicalism, the largest Protestant movement in America, and I think the Trump phenomenon and how white evangelicals have offered his widest base of support is new information that needs to be analyzed and discussed.

—David P. Gushee

This talk was part of the inaugural symposium of the Luce/ACLS program in Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs. Below, you can watch the dialogue in full.