



# SPECIAL REPORT

## AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

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March 28, 2005

### RELIGION IN TV NEWS: Secular Orthodoxy Still Reigns

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After all the dramatic events of last year's religion news, from the installation of an openly gay bishop and the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic pontificate to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, religion coverage on the broadcast TV networks could be expected to decline. To measure the trends in religion coverage in 2004 and the beginning of 2005, Media Research Center analysts surveyed every religion news story on ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs in the 12 months from March 1, 2004 through February 28, 2005 and compared the results with our study of the same time period a year earlier.

Major findings include:

- **Religion coverage has more than doubled from ten years ago.** The trend of religion coverage declined measurably — until the Pope's health scares in February. Religion coverage is down, but not as much as might have been expected. Overall, there were 648 total religion news stories in the 2004-05 study period, down from 705 religion news stories on the Big Three last year. The slippage came in evening news coverage, which fell from 292 a year ago to 239 this year. By contrast, the number of morning show segments was nearly the same (331 in 2003-04, down to 320 in 2004-05) and the number of magazine and interview show segments went up slightly (from 82 to 89). Without all the stories in February, the number of evening news stories would have been close to half of last year's total.
- **The Catholic Church received the most coverage among faiths, but the percentage of Catholic coverage devoted to the aftermath of sex-abuse scandals has dropped.** The health scares surrounding the Pope exaggerated the usual broadcast network tendency to focus on the nation's largest religious affiliation. The church's sex-abuse

scandals headed toward the margins of coverage, with only 10 reporter-based stories on the evening news, or one-sixth of the stories on the Catholic Church. Last year, almost half of the reporter-based stories on the Catholic church – 35 out of 75 – focused on clergy abuse scandal news. The percentage of morning show segments was also one-sixth of the Catholic coverage, about the same level in the morning as last year.

- **Reporters approached religious issues from a very secular and political perspective, especially in stories on the presidential campaign.** When some Roman Catholic bishops announced that they would deny Democratic candidate John Kerry the sacrament of the Eucharist over his decades of pro-abortion voting and advocacy, network reporters placed all their scrutiny on the church leaders, not on Kerry. Not only did they fail to explain the Eucharistic rules of the Church, they misquoted bishops as claiming Catholics shouldn't "vote for sinners," while they described Kerry as a "devout," "observant," and "practicing Catholic" despite his pro-abortion record. Kerry's opponents were labeled "conservative," but Kerry and his supporters were never described as "liberal."
- **TV news often ignored religion news that the Religion Newswriters Association found were the top stories of the year.** Surprisingly, after all of last year's supportive coverage of gay Episcopalian bishop Gene Robinson, the networks barely touched the church trials of two lesbian Methodist ministers. During the study period, only NBC noticed the Christian ministers that have topped the list of best-selling books, especially Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, which recently entered the media spotlight after the Atlanta courthouse killings.

The MRC SPECIAL REPORT concludes with four ways the networks could improve their coverage of religion in the future: hire a full-time religion correspondent; hire reporters who are themselves religious; present the religious and theological dimensions of social issues instead of focusing solely on political elements; and present viewers with a balance of religious experts, not just a few favored (generally liberal) theologians.

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BY TIM GRAHAM, DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS  
AND KEN SHEPHERD, MRC NEWS ANALYST

As America approached Easter last year, it seemed the 25th anniversary of John Paul II's pontificate and the religious and commercial phenomenon surrounding the movie *The Passion of the Christ* had ushered in a new height for religious discussion in the news media, but it would have been easy to predict that this focus would not last. The Pope's failing health means less headline-grabbing action, less globe-trotting evangelism, and more symbolic suffering with the burdens of age and the ravages of disease. Pre-release publicity about *The Passion's* potential effect for violence and hatred was hotter and heavier than post-release coverage of the movie's peaceful and profitable reception.

Did the network news divisions predictably lose their interest in religious news topics? To measure the trend, MRC analysts surveyed every religion news story on ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs in the 12 months from March 1, 2004 through February 28, 2005. We then compared those numbers to the numerical highs of last year's study of the matching months.

Religion coverage is down, but not as much as might have been expected. Overall, there were 638 total religion news stories in the 2004-05 study period, down from 705 religion news stories on the Big Three last year. The real slippage came in evening news coverage, which fell from 292 a year ago to 239 this year. By contrast, the number of morning show segments was nearly the same (331 in 2003-04, down to 320 in 2004-05) and the number of magazine and interview show segments went up slightly (from 82 to 89).

One major reason for the smaller-than-expected decline was Pope John Paul's two hospital trips in February. Without the surge in Vatican stories in February, the previous 11 months contained only 175 evening news stories, which would have been close to only half of last year's total. The morning show total would have declined by 63 stories to 257. The magazine and interview shows were almost unaffected.

The other finding of last year remains: Network coverage continues to explore religious issues through secular and political lenses, skeptical of religion's claims on the American imagination. Journalists were taken aback after the 2004 elections at what pollsters discovered about the electorate. *Newsweek* found 82 percent of Americans believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and 67 percent agreed that the Christmas story, "the Virgin birth, the angelic proclamation to the shepherds, the Star of Bethlehem, and the Wise Men from the East is historically accurate," instead of "a theological story written to affirm faith in Jesus Christ." A Gallup poll found that 82 percent of Americans believe the Bible is either the literal Word of God, or the inspired Word of God, compared to just 15 percent who said the book was comprised of "fables."

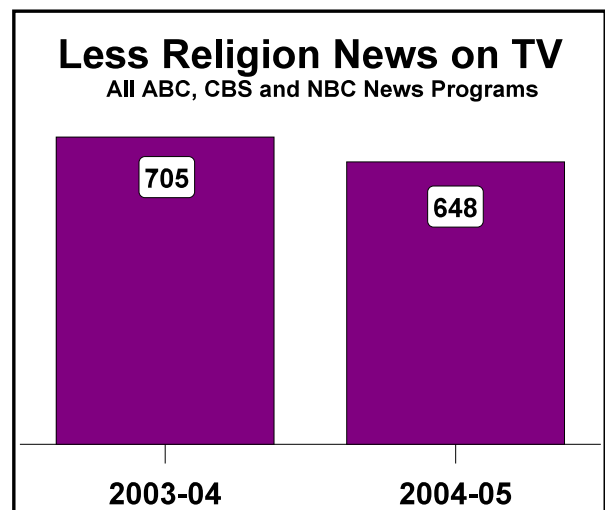
Depending on the poll, anywhere from 72 percent to 77 percent of Americans support posting the Ten Commandments on government property, even if they're more skeptical about politicians taking too many cues from religious leaders, or having preachers endorse candidates from the pulpit.

Journalists, by contrast, are historically a class that has feared that religion is exclusionary, intolerant, and latently theocratic. ABC morning host Diane Sawyer spoke for that viewpoint in relaying the concerns of "Kerry voters" on November 4 to Bush adviser Rev. Joe Watkins: "There's a definite sense this morning on the part of the Kerry voters that perhaps this is code, 'moral values,' is code for something else. It's code for taking a different position about gays in America, an exclusionary position, a code about abortion, code about imposing Christianity over other faiths."

On the November 7 *Meet the Press*, host Tim Russert announced: "One Democrat said to me, 'Are we on the verge of a theocracy, where if you don't agree with the president and evangelical Christians on abortion or on gays, there really is no room for you to practice what you believe in the United States?'"

What bill would be introduced in Congress to "impose" Christianity? What "theocracy" is emerging? They did not explain.

That disconnect on religious faith between the media elite and the public comes through on network television, no matter how routinely the religion stories are reported. Their coverage suggests that religious Americans should meet the demands of a secular orthodoxy, never daring to bring religious beliefs into the political agenda or let religious ideas influence public opinion on social issues. Even when the amount of religion news increases, the media's tone remains wary of ancient dogmas, preferring modernist interpretations that



require few changes in attitude and behavior that would set a believer apart from the popular culture, or at odds with the secular media worldview.

### ***Evening News Programs***

In the last study period, the number of evening news stories on ABC's *World News Tonight*, the *CBS Evening News*, and the *NBC Nightly News* rose to 292, up dramatically from the 121 news stories our first annual survey found in 1993. In the 2004-05 study period, the number of evening news stories declined to 229. Without February, it would have been 175, less than 60 percent of the last study's story total.

This total includes both the longer, reporter-based story ranging from 90 seconds to a few minutes, as well as a small number of anchor-read news bites, often about 30 seconds in length. CBS had the most stories with 98, compared to 74 for ABC and 67 for NBC. (Last year, CBS also had the most stories with 103, compared to 95 for NBC and 94 for ABC.) But in the study period, CBS also had a much higher number of anchor-read stories with 32, while ABC aired 11 and NBC aired 17. So in reporter-based stories, CBS led slightly with 66 to ABC's 63 and NBC's 50. Of those 169 reporter-based stories, 45 of them (or 27 percent) came in February. NBC in particular would have plummeted to only half of the last study's total without February (from 74 full stories and 21 briefs to just 36 and 15).

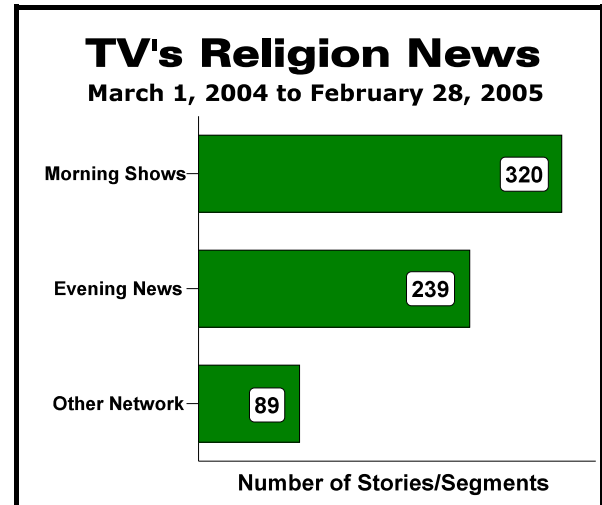
Part of that decline (without a comparative decline in morning news stories or magazine stories) might be attributed to the rise of campaign news in a presidential election year. But as evening news story counter Andrew Tyndall has demonstrated, the number of minutes devoted to electoral politics on the evening news in 2004 was unquestionably light in many weeks. (For example, Tyndall's June total of evening news coverage from Monday to Friday was 46 minutes on the three networks, little more than 15 minutes a month for each network.) Not only did John Kerry's campaign almost disappear from the national scene in slow weeks, the networks in recent election cycles have not shown much interest in other state and national campaigns, unless a movie star is running.

### **THE FAITH BREAKDOWN**

True to the pattern of previous MRC religion news studies, the Catholic Church received the most coverage among faiths. The Catholic Church was the subject of 60 out of the 169 reporter-based stories (35 percent), and 27 of the 60 anchor briefs (45 percent). Last year, the Catholics drew 75 out of 208 reporter-based stories (36 percent), and 53 of the 84 anchor briefs (63 percent). The coverage of the Pope's health troubles (and perhaps the

networks preparing to scramble over who would get the best access to the next papal conclave) drew a more positive tone and more church officials to the February coverage.

In relation to past years, the number of stories on clergy sexual abuse headed toward the margins of coverage, with only ten full stories and 11 anchor briefs. (In the 2003-04 study, almost half of the reporter-based stories on the Catholic Church – 35 out of 75 – focused on clergy abuse scandals.) The stories centered on the conviction of Boston priest Paul Shanley, the controversy over the Diocese of Boston closing more than 60 churches due to poor attendance and financial decline spurred by the scandals, and abuse-related bankruptcy declarations by dioceses in Portland, Spokane, and Tucson.



Islam came in second, with 23 reporter-based stories and 11 anchor briefs, about half of the coverage it received in our study last year (48 full stories and 14 briefs). It should be noted that our study measures the number of TV news stories on the religion of Islam, not the political entities of Islam. Daily news coverage of Iraq during the study period often mentioned the prospects of civil war between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, or as the elections drew near, explained their differing approaches on the road to democracy. (See more on that later in the report.)

TV journalists continued to press American officials about the way their actions are perceived in "Muslim nations" or the "Muslim world," even though the same reporters wouldn't dream of describing America as a "Christian nation" or as leader of the "Christian world." Muslims make up a little over two percent of the American population, and Christians are about three percent of the Iraqi population. Ironically, reporters are sensitive to these terms on our home turf because of our tradition of religious liberty, but the media do not seem to expect growing toleration of minority religions in the "Muslim world."

With election-year controversies over religion and politics and Supreme Court cases like atheist Michael Newdow's complaint against a school district making his daughter utter the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, church-and-state issues came in third with 40 full stories and seven anchor briefs.

## *Morning News Programs*

For this study, the network morning shows are on a slightly uneven playing field. NBC's *Today* is the air-time champion, airing seven days a week, three hours on weekdays, and generally two hours on Saturday and one hour on Sunday. CBS airs *The Early Show* for two hours from Monday to Saturday, and also airs the 90-minute show *Sunday Morning*. ABC's *Good Morning America* aired only from Monday to Friday in the study period, until they unveiled weekend editions on September 4.

The morning show total of 320 was divided into 216 reporter-based stories or interviews to 104 short anchor briefs. Perhaps due to its time advantage, NBC led with 82 full stories and 38 briefs (120 in total), compared to CBS with 64 and 38 (102), and ABC in third with 70 and 28 (98). NBC's total was up from 2003-04, while CBS and ABC both declined. In last year's study, CBS was first with 118 reports (76 stories/interviews, 42 anchor briefs). ABC was strongest on weekdays with 109 segments (76 and 33). Despite its extra air time, NBC was third last year with 104 (62 and 42).

Without the numbers-boosting month of February, all three networks would have been in a more noticeable decline, with NBC posting 85 total stories, CBS with 84, and ABC with 80. As in the case of the evening shows, the larger number should be put in context — the networks are each still averaging little more than two morning segments a week in seven days of programs.

The Catholic Church led the morning coverage with 122 stories (72 reporter-based stories/interviews and 50 anchor briefs), down from last year's total of 145 stories (78 reporter-based stories or interview segments, and 67 anchor briefs). The Catholic sexual abuse story drew almost the same amount of morning coverage in last year's study, with 14 out of 72 full stories, or a little more than a sixth of the coverage. Abuse angles carried only 13 of the 78 morning show full reports on Catholics last year.

The second largest group of stories are those dealing with generic Christianity, including controversies over a tacky Nativity scene at Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London, and new trends like Nelson Publishing's "Bible-zines" that present the Bible in glossy, illustrated magazine packaging. Church-state questions, including controversies

### **"Under God," a Bad Idea?**

"Personally, I do believe there's something else out there, be it a higher power....the Godfather of Soul, Buddha, Krishna, Allah, Oprah, Yahweh, Goddess or Elvis. Since I'm sure I left out others worth worshiping, please accept my apologies. But I also think it's nobody's business who you worship or whether you worship or not, and certainly no child should be pressured to say, or not say, anything that would give kids any additional reason to tease them....Haven't these differences of religious opinion caused millions of people to be killed, discriminated against, hated, reviled or thrown out of their homeland? Bad things have happened. Pledging to the country is one thing, but let's leave who we worship at home."

— **CBS *Sunday Morning* commentator Nancy Giles opposing the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, March 28, 2004.**

over teaching “intelligent design” theories in addition to evolution in schools, came in third with 19 full stories and eight anchor briefs.

### AN ATHEIST MOMENT

Atheists were represented in an NBC interview with comedian George Carlin, who was promoting his book *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* *Today* co-host Matt Lauer joked: “Let’s say right off the bat, anything offensive here is not my idea, it’s all your idea, okay?” Carlin said of the title: “I realized about a week later, and it might have been my brother who pointed it out, that it offends all three major religions, plus the vegetarians. So there’s a bonus in there.”

When Lauer said it was safe to say “you don’t hold organized religion in the highest regard,” Carlin added, “No, I think religion has been one of the biggest, unfortunate things done to mankind in the history of this....It’s produced more death and wars than any other political purpose, land grabbing or anything. It’s always been about my God and your God and the fight of religion against other religions, or religion against no religion. The thing I don’t like about it in particular is it has given people largely a sense of powerlessness, and guilt, and shame, and fear. These things are brought about by religion.”

### ***Magazine/Interview Programs***

To round out this portrait of network news coverage of religion, MRC analysts also reviewed prime-time magazine programs (ABC’s *Primetime Live* and *20/20*, CBS’s *60 Minutes*, *60 Minutes Wednesday*, and *48 Hours*, and NBC’s *Dateline*), ABC’s *Nightline* in late night, and the Sunday interview shows (ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, CBS’s *Face the Nation*, and NBC’s *Meet the Press*). Since the segments are much longer than the average evening news story and there are almost no anchor briefs, the magazine shows offer the most in-depth coverage of religion news and issues.

*Nightline*, *Primetime*, and *Dateline* devoted entire programs to religious topics. In those cases, segments were determined by commercial breaks. Hour-long shows counted as five segments, half-hour *Nightline* programs as three segments. ABC led with 57 segments, far ahead of NBC with 20, and CBS with 12. Last year, ABC also led with 43 segments, compared to 31 for NBC and just eight on CBS. Among individual programs, *Nightline* aired 24, *Dateline* had 19, and all by himself, Peter Jennings did 15 segments in his three-hour special *Jesus and Paul: The Word and The Witness*. Several of the segments in the count were repeats: thanks to a rebroadcast of 2003’s *DaVinci Code* special, *Primetime* had 13 segments.



All three Sunday morning shows aired religion segments in the study period, compared to only ABC last year. CBS's *Face the Nation* reported on the Pope and interviewed Zbigniew Brzezinski about his personal meetings and conversations with the Pope on February 27. On November 28, both ABC and NBC featured balanced panels of conservative and liberal religious leaders to discuss the trends set in religion and politics by the election returns.

While ABC had a balanced and sober panel – evangelical Gary Bauer and Catholic George Weigel on the right, and former Democratic congressman and minister Floyd Flake and Tony Campolo on the left – NBC aimed more for fireworks by including controversial figures and tested TV battlers Jerry Falwell and Al Sharpton (as well as Richard Land on the right and Jim Wallis on the left).

Not only did NBC start with a *Crossfire*-style formula, but Russert threw his typically tough paragraph-length chunks of quotations at Falwell and Land, using dated comments that were widely attacked, such as Falwell's declaration two days after 9/11 that gays and lesbians and feminists brought an attack from the Almighty. But Russert asked about nothing controversial from his liberal guests. He quoted Wallis's newspaper ads back to him. He replayed no controversial quotes from the Sharpton playbook, not even his remarks at the 2003 NARAL dinner, proclaiming that the "Christian Right" ought to meet the "right Christians" who favor abortion.

In past MRC studies, magazine and interview programs had the most variation in their focus on denominations. For example, while the top three topics in last year's study were 16 segments on the Catholic church, 15 on *The Passion of the Christ*, and 14 on evangelical or Protestant churches, this year, only five magazine or interview segments focused on Catholics. The largest category was generic Christianity with a total of 36 segments, beginning with the 15 parts in ABC's three-hour special on the apostle Paul.

Magazine shows did focus on sexual abuse in faiths other than Catholicism during the study period. ABC's *PrimeTime* and *Dateline* NBC each focused on sexual abuse in Amish communities. On CBS's *60 Minutes*, Christiane Amanpour reported on sexual abuse in a Muslim community on the outskirts of Paris. In all these cases, reporters highlighted how young women could be raped, even by family members, and then be shunned if they tried to hold anyone accountable for it.

**ABC on Gay Marriage:  
"Nothing to Do with Religion"**

"So, if marriage between men and women has changed, what's the great problem societally, or in any other way, ethically, of marriage between two men or two women?"

"As you well know, Reverend, the main reason for marriage being what it was, 500 years ago, 1,000 years ago, had nothing to do with religion, it had nothing to do with romance. It had to do with very practical considerations....So, when those practical considerations change, why not change the nature of marriage?"

— ABC *Nightline* host Ted Koppel to Rev. Eugene Rivers, July 13, 2004.

## *Kerry's Catholic Communion Battle*

As in last year's spate of stories on gay Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson, the network reporters covering the year's major religion controversies treated these issues as primarily political and secular. Take the controversy over some Catholic bishops publicly declaring Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's record of pro-abortion voting and advocacy made him unqualified to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. Senator Kerry replied that his public life was entirely separate from his private life. In their set of stories (comprising eight evening news stories and two anchor briefs, as well as four morning segments) traditional church teachings were portrayed as a "conservative" violation of church-state separation and an unnecessary obstacle for "observant Catholic" Kerry. Networks preferred the Kerry Catholic Church to the Roman Catholic Church.

TV reporters did not explain official Catholic teaching on reception of the Eucharist. They also did not explain that priests should not give communion to someone who is in a state of "objectively" grave sin, i.e., a clear rejection of basic Church teaching. For example, the gay protesters of the Rainbow Sash movement wear sashes to Communion to suggest that by granting them the sacrament, the priest endorses their lifestyle as acceptable to the Church. They are regularly refused.

On *Good Morning America* April 9, ABC's Diane Sawyer began the first network morning story by reporting, "There are some in the church, apparently, who believe that Kerry, although he is an observant Catholic, should not be allowed to take Communion." Reporter Dan Harris said the Kerry campaign was not worried about "an implied threat from the city's top church official" that Kerry might be denied Communion. Harris highlighted that Kerry "is a former altar boy who says he once considered becoming a priest. But his support of abortion rights has Vatican officials, U.S. bishops, and conservative Catholics concerned." While they would identify's Kerry's critics as "conservative," none of the network stories on this controversy used the label "liberal" for Kerry or his supporters.

Harris quoted Kerry stressing his own secular media-pleasing principle to never bring his religious beliefs to work: "I fully intend to practice my religion as separately from what I do with respect to my public life. And that's the way it ought to be in America." The ABC reporter then shifted the "implied threat" from Kerry back on to church officials: "Even as the Boston archdiocese is still reeling from the priest sex scandals, the archbishop might not want to invite any more controversy."

### **Devout Kerry, Scripture Expert**

**Reporter Mark Strassmann:** "Church and state may be separate, but faith and politics are not. In fact, 70 percent of Americans say they want their President to be a person of faith."

**John Kerry:** "I can tell you it's in Luke 10. I don't have to go here."

**Strassmann:** "A devout Catholic, John Kerry can quote scripture by heart."

**Kerry:** "It's written in James: 'What does it mean, my brother, to say you have faith if there are no deeds?'"

— *CBS Evening News*, Oct. 29, 2004.

On CBS, reporter Jim Axelrod ended his April 9 *Evening News* story with what could have been labeled commentary: "Clearly, a quarter-century of conservative appointments by Pope John Paul II is having its effect on American politics. But church leaders need to be careful, and not just to avoid a backlash by those who think Kerry is being bullied. There's a much bigger risk than that." Then Joe Feuerherd of the liberal *National Catholic Reporter* newspaper suggested the Church ought to take dictation from the state: "After all, Senator Kerry might one day be President Kerry, and it's a difficult circumstance to have distanced yourself from the head of a major superpower when you have world interests like the Catholic Church does."

### Is "Divisive" Religion Necessary?

"The truth of God can be divisive. Jesus foretold this. Truth is especially divisive when it challenges opinions that we hold dear. Jesus wanted his followers to accept His truth rather than their own opinions. Some did and some did not. But Jesus never stopped teaching the truth. And the Church will never stop teaching the truth."

— Colorado Springs Bishop Michael Sheridan in a newspaper column, June 2, 2004.

On April 12, the morning after Easter, NBC reporter Carl Quintanilla reported the church "targets" politicians who "according to priests" don't vote their way. Kerry "defended his faith....dismissing some conservative Catholic bishops." Quintanilla concluded that "polls show Catholics don't believe the church should tell them or politicians how to vote, one reason Kerry believes he can ignore the protests without losing the voters."

*Today* continued the discussion by interviewing not a church official or religious scholar, but liberal historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who dismissed the controversy: "It seems like it's still a small group of conservative Catholics who are claiming...he's not able to take Communion. It's not really what the general feeling of the Church is, as I understand it." But the networks often confused the "general feeling" of Catholics, churchgoing and non-churchgoing, with official teachings. That night, NBC reporter Kelly O'Donnell summarized it right: "Kerry is Roman Catholic, but some of his positions are not."

On the April 23 *CBS Evening News*, Bill Plante described Kerry as a "practicing Roman Catholic," and quoted Deal Hudson for rebuttal, labeled as a spokesman for "conservative Catholics." The networks often underlined their religious illiteracy or willingness to accept Democratic spin when they called Kerry an "observant Catholic," a "practicing Catholic," and even a "devout Catholic."

The definition of "practicing" begins with the duty of Catholics to attend Mass on all Sundays and holy days of obligation. Is that what Bill Plante meant in his report? More importantly, it should seem obvious that John Kerry cannot be both in very public disagreement with Church teachings on a core issue like legalized abortion and yet be presented with adjectives like "observant" or "devout." You could argue that in his

campaign speech to NARAL Pro-Choice America in January 2003, Kerry was condemning the Catholic Church when he proclaimed, "We need to take on this President and the forces of intolerance on the other side."

### CLAMORING AGAINST COLORADO

The networks upped the ante on Catholic officials when *The Denver Post* reported that Michael Sheridan, the Bishop of Colorado Springs, wrote a pastoral letter that stated that not merely pro-abortion Catholic politicians, but Catholics who vote for them, are outside of full communion with church teaching and should not receive Communion.

Here's the essential paragraph: "Any Catholic politicians who advocate for abortion, for illicit stem cell research or for any form of euthanasia ipso facto place themselves outside full communion with the Church and so jeopardize their salvation. Any Catholics who vote for candidates who stand for abortion, illicit stem cell research or euthanasia suffer the same fateful consequences. It is for this reason that these Catholics, whether candidates for office or those who would vote for them, may not receive Holy Communion until they have recanted their positions and been reconciled with God and the Church in the Sacrament of Penance." That is the teaching of the Catholic Church — not the "conservatives" or the "liberals" in the Church, but the Church.

In a June 2 newspaper column, Bishop Sheridan protested the media treatment: "The most serious misrepresentation of my letter was the conclusion drawn by many that I or other ministers of Holy Communion would refuse the sacrament to people who voted in a particular way. Nowhere in the letter do I say this or even suggest it....How, in fact, could I deny anyone Holy Communion since I would not know the condition of the communicant's soul?" If the bishop had written abortion advocates "should not" receive communion instead of "may not," it may have been seen as less of a command. But the networks were in a fighting mood.

On ABC's *World News Tonight* on May 16, reporter Brian Rooney put all the pressure on the Church, not Kerry. Typically, Rooney began with the liberal assumption: "The bishop says he's not violating the separation of church and state, merely instructing Catholic parishioners that when they vote, they should vote according to Catholic teachings." Rooney then used liberal Georgetown theologian Chester Gillis to claim President Bush was also an unsuitable voting choice for Catholics, who would have to vote for someone closer to perfection, like Mother Teresa. Rooney ended by pressing Bishop Sheridan on who he was going to vote for, as if it was improper for him to have a public opinion. (The bishop declined to endorse Bush.)

CBS liked the angle of church "punishment." On the May 14 *CBS Evening News*, Dan Rather said "some Roman Catholic voters may soon face a hard choice between a matter of

faith and the orders of their church superiors and casting a ballot in line with their own political beliefs. CBS News correspondent Jim Axelrod reports on the politics of punishment for voting against church doctrine on abortion and other issues."

On the May 30 *CBS Evening News*, substitute anchor John Roberts announced "A new CBS News poll tonight finds that Democrat John Kerry enjoys overwhelming support among Catholic voters, which makes it particularly ironic that Kerry has recently run afoul of church doctrine because of his support for abortion rights. And Kerry is not the only one. Sharyn Alfonsi tonight on parish politics and punishment."

Alfonsi touted more CBS poll results: "And 78 percent of Catholics polled by CBS agree. They said they don't think it's appropriate for bishops to refuse communion to elected officials who differ with official positions of the church, people like presidential candidate John Kerry." Alfonsi brought on Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of the liberal Catholic magazine *America*, to state there could be a pro-Kerry backlash among Catholic voters. CBS even concluded by leaving the distinct impression that the bishops were graver sinners than abortion-enabling John Kerry. (See box.)

When *NBC Nightly News* picked the story up on June 17, the tone was still putting church officials on the defensive, as Tom Brokaw promoted the report: "God and politics: where's the line that separates church and state in this election year?"

Reporter Roger O'Neil began with liberal Catholics: "With their Bibles, signs, and voices, some of the faithful are hoping to persuade Catholic bishops, their leaders, to reject the latest explosive issue facing the Church: playing politics with God."

The burden of scandal rested on church leaders, with O'Neil using bomb terminology: "The Archbishop of St. Louis, Raymond Burke, lit the fuse in January, saying he'd refuse communion to Sen. John Kerry, a Catholic, because he's pro-choice, defying church law. Then last month, Michael Sheridan, Archbishop [sic] of Colorado Springs, shortened the burning fuse, writing 'even rank-and-file Catholics who vote for sinners should stay away from the communion rail.'"

This was the worst case of utter network misquotation. NBC was not quoting from Bishop Sheridan, who didn't use terms like "rank-and-file Catholics" or "vote for sinners" (as if President Bush was without sin!) in either his pastoral letter or the June 2 newspaper

### **Bishops Are The Worst Sinners**

**Reporter Sharyn Alfonsi:** "Most Catholics think it's a bad idea; 61 percent of those polled say it's inappropriate for religious leaders to urge people to vote for a candidate."

**Rev. Thomas Reese:** "What are we going to do, get a sin detector like you have at airports?"

**Alfonsi:** "Leaving some Catholics to wonder who should go through the detectors — the parishioners, or the bishops themselves."

— *CBS Evening News*, May 30, 2004.

column. *The Denver Post* routinely used the phrase “rank-and-file Catholics,” but not the bishop.

O’Neil quoted Catholic author George Weigel with a rebuke of Kerry, but the reporter concluded: “But for Catholics who sit in the pews, like Denver’s Amy Sheber-Howard, Communion shouldn’t be a divisive weapon...which if denied, could divide rather than unite.” Here again, O’Neil misled the audience: Sheber-Howard does not just “sit in the pews.” She’s a vice president of the left-wing Catholic splinter lobbying group Call To Action, which lobbies for an end to priestly celibacy, the ordination of women, and ultimately, an overthrow of the teaching authority of the Pope, giving way to a church run by majority vote. To portray this lobbyist against “authoritarian and hypocritical” Catholic tradition as opposed to “division” is to provide a clear example of misleading liberal bias.

For all of their First Amendment alarm, none of the networks contemplated their own secular interpretation as threatening church-state separation in reverse: that candidates for federal office or their supporters would tell the Church what their teachings should be about reception of the sacraments. After all, if John Kerry didn’t want to accept Catholic teaching, he is free to join a Protestant church instead. No one took offense at the idea that Catholicism would be defined not by bishops or pontiffs or the Scriptures, but by focus groups assembled by political organizations like the Democratic National Committee or CBS News.

### ***What Stories Did Reporters Want to Skip?***

Since the number of TV network religion stories has declined, the question emerges: What did the networks fail to cover? What stories could have been pursued by a creative TV producer interested in religion news? One easy way to find out is to look at the top 2004 stories as selected by the Religion Newswriters Association (RNA). Stories about President Bush’s faith and *The Passion of the Christ* — which the networks addressed — tied as the number one story of the year. But some other stories the RNA listed were largely ignored by the networks, including:

■ **Gays and the clergy:** In a year when the first openly gay bishop was installed in the Episcopal Church and gay marriages were permitted in Massachusetts, one might expect significant coverage of gay marriage controversies in American churches, particularly the Methodist Church, which saw two defrocking trials within a year’s time with different results. Surprisingly, given last year’s 64 stories largely celebrating Bishop Robinson, this wasn’t the case with network treatment of the trials of two openly lesbian ministers in the United Methodist Church.

In mid-March 2004, a church jury tried and acquitted lesbian Rev. Karen Dammann of Seattle of violating the teachings of the Bible on homosexuality and her church’s disciplinary guidelines on sexual ethics for ordained clergy. In December, across the



country in Philadelphia, a similar proceeding tried and convicted lesbian Methodist pastor Beth Stroud and removed her ministerial credentials later in the year.

The broadcast networks aired stories on Dammann but not on Stroud, and neither trial generated interview pieces with conservative Methodists. ABC in a four-day period (March 18-21) aired two stories and one anchor mention on the trial and acquittal of Dammann, but ignored Stroud. CBS aired no stories on Dammann, but did air one anchor brief on *The Early Show* on December 3, 2004, the day after Stroud was convicted. NBC ran one story on March 21, 2004 on Dammann's acquittal. The piece was slanted toward Dammann's position, featuring both laity and a Harvard feminist theologian rejoicing in the decision, against one unnamed lay person who is leaving the Methodist church in protest. NBC didn't run any stories on Stroud's conviction.

The Anglicans' Lambeth Commission pleased neither conservatives nor liberals and offered no resolution to the rift in the Anglican Communion over the installation of openly gay Bishop Gene Robinson. Other than a March *60 Minutes* profile of Robinson, TV coverage of the ongoing Anglican dispute almost vanished from the networks.

■ **Rick Warren and Joel Osteen:** Southern California pastor Rick Warren's best-seller *The Purpose Driven Life* has been all over the news since former hostage Ashley Smith talked about reading it to murder suspect Brian Nichols. But well before the fatal Atlanta courthouse shootings, Warren's book has been a bestseller for two solid years, selling more than 20 million copies by last October. By February 28, 2005, the last date studied for religious stories in our report, the hardcover edition had been on the *USA Today* best-seller list for more than 110 weeks. This year, many churches across America, both mainline and evangelical, have adopted the book during Lent to help guide the devotional lives of their parishioners. Yet aside from NBC, none of the networks took notice.

NBC's coverage consisted of two pieces, one a *Dateline* piece by correspondent Josh Mankiewicz on Sunday, October 3, 2004, the other an Ann Curry interview on the *Today* show for October 18. The Mankiewicz piece focused more on Warren's pastoral ministry and casual style, while Curry touched mainly on the themes of the book and its success beyond strictly Christian audiences. Unlike Curry, Mankiewicz also prodded unsuccessfully for a taste of Reverend Warren's politics.

Houston pastor and best-selling author Joel Osteen wrangled just one taped interview in February 2005 with Jamie Gangel on *Today*, a few soundbites from a December 2004 *World News Tonight* report on ABC, and zero stories or interviews on CBS. Osteen's book, *Your Best Life Now*, which topped the charts at number two, has been on the *USA Today* list since last October 21. Osteen might consider himself blessed for getting media attention so soon after publication: a Nexis search shows no interviews or reports on Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* from the time that book initially hit bookstores in October 2002 until the *Dateline* piece two years later.

Gangel reported and questioned Osteen about critics of his preaching style and theology, including Westminster Seminary's Michael Horton, who derided Osteen's preaching as a "fortune cookie" Gospel. The *World News Tonight* piece by reporter Erin Hayes ignored theological disputes, instead portraying Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, and Catholic priest Francis Mary of Eternal Word Television Network as leading voices in a new generation of television evangelists which cater to the heart of President Bush's electoral base, social conservatives. Once again, a religious story was covered purely from a political template.

■ **Sunni vs. Shi'a Theology:** In all of their coverage of Iraq's religious factions and their political aims, none of the broadcast networks ever gave a basic explanation of the key religious differences between these sects of the Islamic faith. For all their warning of impending civil war, they haven't explained why their differences on matters of faith have proven a consistent source of conflict.

The differences are these: Upon the death of Muhammad, two major factions emerged from disagreement on the question of prophetic succession. Those siding with Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, claimed he was the rightful heir to Muhammad's prophetic office, and possessed with it the ability to teach the Islamic faith and govern the Islamic ummah (worldwide communion of Muslims) infallibly. He was chosen as the first Imam. Opposing Ali's claim were the Sunnis, who thought it wiser to elect a successor (or caliph) from among elders to serve in the place of Muhammad. Unlike Shi'a imams, the Sunni caliphs needed not be descended from Ali, nor were they considered doctrinally infallible.

Today, many Shi'a have an eschatological belief that the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, shall reemerge from his "occultation" to lead Muslims in the future. It is somewhat similar to the Christian belief in the second coming of Christ. This belief in an imminent return of the Mahdi has inspired, in fact, the Mahdi Militia of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose supporters suggest he is in effect the Islamic Messiah, and the Americans are trying to kill him. No such explanation was aired on the broadcast networks, a disservice to American viewers regardless of their personal religious faith.

## ***Recommendations***

How could the balance and fairness and context of TV religion coverage improve? There are some simple recommendations to increase the quality of religion reporting on TV news.

**1. Hire a religion reporter.** Networks continue to assign general-assignment reporters to the religion beat instead of hiring a religion specialist. None of the networks have a religion specialist. The reporters cited in this study – from ABC's Brian Rooney and Dan Harris to CBS's Jim Axelrod and Sharyn Alfonsi to NBC's Roger O'Neil and Carl



Quintanilla – have no noticeable background in religion coverage, nor do they have degrees in religious studies.

**2. Hire reporters who are religious.** Both opinion surveys of journalists and the tone of religion news suggest that the majority of reporters remain in the pattern of hostility toward traditional religious values. More religious reporters would bring greater knowledge and fairness to religious debates. Editors prefer to assign minority reporters to cover minority groups. Why can't they find religious reporters to cover religion?

**3. When covering religion stories, use religious questions and approaches, not just secular or political ones.** The media elite have taken the separation of church and state into another dimension: the separation of church and culture, or ultimately the separation of church and news. Once again this year, news stories on the social issues that inflamed religious Americans the most, from "gay marriage" to embryo-destroying stem cell research, didn't often find a place in those stories for a religious perspective. Religiously inspired political views are no less valid in the public square than atheistically founded political views.

**4. If TV news wants to dabble in theology, the sample of experts interviewed ought to balance conservative and progressive experts.** NBC still enjoys bringing on liberal Catholic priest and author Andrew Greeley to speak for Catholics. As previously explained, CBS liked finding liberal Catholic experts and journalists to warn the bishops away from criticizing John Kerry. ABC found its expert in God with its own liberal medical reporter (and minister) Dr. Timothy Johnson, giving him two segments to plug his book, *Finding God in the Questions*.

Airing stories on complicated religious subjects is an ambitious undertaking. But viewers with traditional, more orthodox religious views often don't see their worldview discussed so much as dismissed.

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**The Media Research Center**

325 South Patrick Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314  
(703) 683-9733 • [www.mediaresearch.org](http://www.mediaresearch.org)

**L. Brent Bozell III**, President

**Brent H. Baker**, Vice President for Research and Publications

**Richard Noyes**, Research Director • **Tim Graham**, Director of Media Analysis

**Michael Chapman**, Director of Editorial Services • **Kristina Sewell**, Research Associate

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