



SPECIAL REPORT

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

THE MEDIA RESEARCH CENTER • 325 SOUTH PATRICK ST. • ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314 • WWW.MRC.ORG

April 6, 2004

RELIGION ON TV NEWS: More Content, Less Context

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent months, a number of dramatic religious stories have unfolded, from religious freedom in Iraq, to the installation of an openly gay bishop to the religious and commercial phenomenon around Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. To measure the upsurge in religion coverage in 2003 and the beginning of 2004, Media Research Center analysts surveyed every religion news story on ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs in the 12 months from March 1, 2003 through February 29, 2004. We then compared those numbers to the MRC's first religion news study of 1993.

Major findings include:

- 1. Religion coverage has more than doubled from ten years ago.** Overall, the networks aired 705 segments in the study period, up from 336 in 1993. The number of evening news stories on the three networks is up fairly dramatically (121 in 1993, 292 in the 2003-04 period). The number of religion segments on prime-time magazine shows and late-night and Sunday interview shows is way up (18 in 1993 to 82 in the 2003-04 period). A smaller jump came on the morning shows (197 in 1993, 331 in the 2003-04 period).
- 2. The Catholic Church received the most coverage among faiths, but coverage of Islam rose dramatically.** The 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's pontificate drew significant coverage with a balance of positive and negative angles. Media outlets continued to press stories on Catholic clergy sexual abuse and other ministerial failings. Coverage of Islam was up dramatically from ten years ago, even if it was largely contained to Iraq. The handful of stories on Islam in America mainly portrayed Muslims as victims of discrimination by non-Muslims.

3. Reporters often approached religious issues from a secular and political perspective. When the Episcopal Church USA appointed openly gay Bishop Gene Robinson, reporters focused relentlessly on the political, not scriptural or theological matters. Most of the TV interview time went to Robinson and his supporters (ten interviews to just one for a neutral church spokesman and one for an opponent). In news stories, the talking heads were almost balanced between supporters and opponents (39 to 45), but the labeling was very imbalanced (42 “conservative” labels for opponents to five “liberal” labels for the church or Robinson’s supporters).

4. The tone of network TV religion coverage was hostile to orthodox faiths, and supportive to minority religions and progressive fads. Gibson’s movie was by far the largest anti-Semitism story of the year. News coverage didn’t shift from offending Jews to inspiring Christians until February, when a box-office boom became apparent. A much less orthodox product, author Dan Brown’s Vatican-bashing novel *The Da Vinci Code*, was promoted with the mildest of factual challenges, without any notion that it was inaccurate or anti-Catholic, while Gibson’s film was questioned thoroughly about its accuracy, its fairness, and its potentially violent impact.

5. The media’s Rolodex of religion experts was dominated by those hostile to religious orthodoxy. The networks heavily favored “religious” scholars and journalists who strongly question orthodox religion and the accuracy of the Gospels, but did not describe them as liberals or secularists.

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 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.

April 6, 2004

RELIGION ON TV NEWS: More Content, Less Context

BY TIM GRAHAM
MRC'S DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

In the last 12 months, it seems, the mainstream media have rediscovered religion. It wasn't spontaneous, of course: a number of dramatic religious stories have unfolded recently, from religious freedom in Iraq, to the installation of an openly gay bishop, to the religious and commercial phenomenon around the movie *The Passion of the Christ*.

But has the media's newfound interest also meant new respect for religious institutions and traditional values? To measure the upsurge in religion coverage in 2003 and the beginning of 2004, MRC analysts surveyed every religion news story on ABC, CBS, and NBC news programs in the 12 months from March 1, 2003 through February 29, 2004. We then compared those numbers to MRC's first religion news study of 1993.

The numerical findings were dramatic. Overall, the networks aired 705 segments in the study period, up from 336 in 1993. The number of evening news stories on the three networks is up significantly (121 in 1993, 292 in the 2003-04 period). The number of religion segments on prime-time magazine shows and late-night and Sunday interview shows is way up (18 in 1993 to 82 in the 2003-04 period). A smaller jump came on the morning shows (197 in 1993, 331 in the 2003-04 period).

But the skeptical tone of religion coverage — covering religious issues like everyday political debates, favoring “religious” scholars who strongly question the authenticity of the Bible — doesn't match the religious belief that Americans state in polls. In a Fox News-Opinion Dynamics poll last September, 92 percent expressed belief in God. A broad majority also expressed belief in Heaven (85 percent), miracles (82 percent), angels (78 percent), Hell (74 percent), and the Devil (71 percent).

In February, an ABC News poll found a majority of Americans believe in the literal truth of the Bible. When asked if a story was literally true or not literally true, nearly two-thirds of respondents believed in the story of Noah and the flood (60 percent true, 33 percent not literally true), the creation of the world in six days (61-30), and Moses parting the Red Sea to escape Egypt (64-28). By contrast, polls over the years have established that journalists seldom or never attend religious services and are much less religious than the public as a whole.

That disconnect between the media elite and the public is especially risky for journalists when religion news is “hot,” as it is right now. Even when the amount of religion news increases, the media’s tone remains cold, questioning, even hostile. The more traditional or orthodox the religious belief, and the more influential it threatens to become in the culture at large, the more the television networks seem to explain it away, as something “scholars” and “experts” dismiss.

1. Religion coverage has more than doubled from ten years ago.

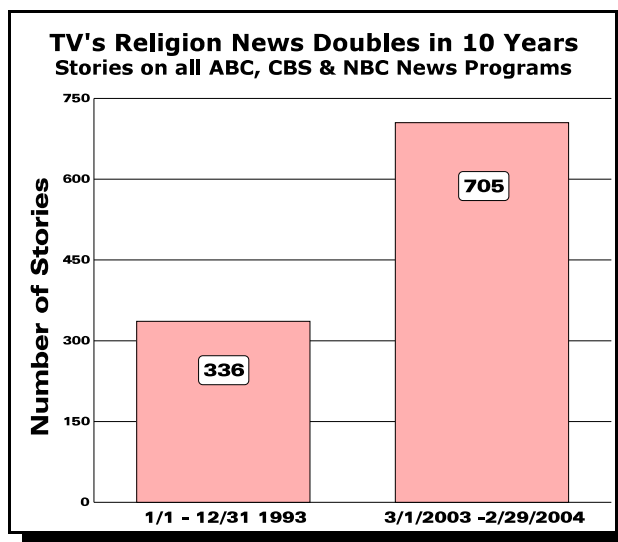
EVENING NEWS STORIES

When the MRC first performed a religion news study ten years ago, covering the calendar year of 1993, the number of evening news stories on ABC’s *World News Tonight*, the *CBS Evening News*, and the *NBC Nightly News* was small: just 121 stories. That’s less than two stories a week on the three networks combined. In 2003, thanks to some major religion stories, from Iraq to Pope John Paul’s 25th anniversary to *The Passion of the Christ*, the number of evening news stories is up dramatically to 292. That led to an average of about two stories a week per network, a more regular and noticeable presence in newscasts.

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. There was not great numerical disparity between the three evening news programs in their coverage of religion. (This is a slight difference from 1993, when ABC led with 46, while NBC had 44 and CBS lagged behind with 31.) In terms of overall numbers, CBS 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 40, while ABC had 23 and NBC aired 21. So in reporter-based stories, NBC led with 74, ABC had 71, and CBS had 63.

MORNING NEWS COVERAGE

For this study, the network morning shows are on a slightly uneven playing field. ABC’s *Good Morning America* airs for two hours Monday through Friday, but currently has no weekend programs. NBC’s *Today* airs 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*.

The increase in morning news coverage was not as dramatic as the evening shows, from 197 stories in 1993 to 331 in the 2003-04 study period. But since the anchor-brief count is almost the same (110 in 1993, 117 in 2003-04), the number of reporter-based and interview segments shows a more significant climb, from 87 to 214.

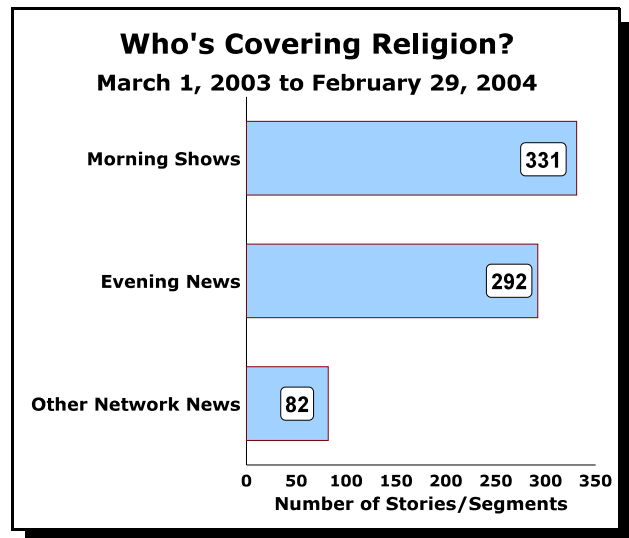
With the inclusion of 12 *Sunday Morning* reports, CBS was first with 118 reports (76 stories/interviews, 42 anchor briefs). Due to its exclusive arrangements with the Vatican for the papal anniversary and with Mel Gibson and his cast for *The Passion of the Christ*, ABC was strongest on weekdays with 109 segments (76 stories or interviews, 33 anchor briefs). Despite an extra hour every weekday and both a Saturday and Sunday edition, NBC was third with 104 (62 stories/interviews, 42 anchor briefs).

ABC's coverage waxed and waned heavily with their exclusives. They aired 25 stories or interviews during their Vatican period in October, and 13 stories or interviews in February, almost all of them on *The Passion*. In August, between Gene Robinson and Roy Moore, ABC filed another 13 full segments. (Other months were much leaner, with just 11 full segments in the five months from March through July.) As in the case of the evening shows, the larger number should be put in context – the networks are still averaging a little more than two morning segments a week.

MAGAZINE/INTERVIEW SHOW COVERAGE

To complete the picture of network news coverage of religion, MRC analysts also reviewed prime-time magazine programs (ABC's *Primetime* and *20/20*, CBS's *60 Minutes*, *60 Minutes II*, 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.

In 1993, a review of that year's magazine, late-night, and Sunday interview shows found only 18 stories. ABC did 10 segments, with NBC (4) and CBS (3) lagging behind. In the 2003 study period, religious subjects have been much more prominent, with 82 segments. *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 43 segments, while NBC aired 31, and both networks featured some positive or inspirational coverage. CBS not only lagged behind with eight, but its segments were almost entirely critical in tone.

Some programs favored religious topics more than others. *Dateline* (31) and *Nightline* (27) were the busiest. With an hour devoted to each *The Passion of the Christ* and the religious theories behind the novel *The DaVinci Code*, *Primetime* had 12 segments, but *20/20* only aired three. *60 Minutes* had seven, with a single segment on *60 Minutes II*. The *48 Hours* shows aired nothing. On the Sunday morning interview shows, only ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* carried religious segments (one on the papal anniversary, one interview with gay bishop Gene Robinson).

An Authoritarian, Antiquated Pope?

"Many of the Pope's critics have a hard time reconciling his outspoken championing of human rights, of human dignity with what they see as his somewhat authoritarian, antiquated view of women and sexuality."

— ABC's *George Stephanopoulos on This Week, October 12.*

"For some, the celebrations will be bittersweet. The Pope's conservative views on abortion, contraception, divorce, woman priests and homosexuality have alienated many Catholics, as did the sex abuse scandals involving priests."

— NBC's *Dawna Friesen, on the October 12 Nightly News.*

2. The Catholic Church received the most coverage among faiths, but coverage of Islam rose dramatically.

EVENING NEWS COVERAGE

True to the pattern of previous MRC religion news studies, the Catholic Church received the most coverage among faiths. The 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's pontificate drew significant coverage with a balance of positive and negative angles. But due to its status as the largest church in America, media outlets continued to press stories on Catholic clergy sexual abuse and other ministerial failings. The Catholic Church was the subject of 75 out of 208 reporter-based stories (36 percent), and 53 of the 84 anchor briefs (63 percent). The most common religious anchor brief was an update on one of the pontiff's foreign trips, or his saying Mass on a holy day like Good Friday.

The American church's continued attempts to deal with the criminal and spiritual nightmare of clerical abuse drew almost half of the reporter-based stories (35 out of 75). The Catholic Church was nearly alone in facing this scrutiny. CBS reporter Jane Clayson broke the mold by providing one report on sexual abuse allegations within the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Coverage of Islam was up dramatically from 1993, when coverage was rare. In the 2003-04 study period, it came in second place with 62 stories (14 of which were anchor briefs). Much of the coverage was about the new religious freedom in Iraq – for example, the ability of the Shi’ites to make a pilgrimage to the Iraqi town of Karbala, which they were not allowed to do under Saddam Hussein. ABC and NBC also reported on the first liberated Easter for Iraqi Christians.

Ten Commandments = Segregation?

“A number of things have been said...one is that this is, in some respects, a replay of what we saw in Alabama a generation and a half ago, when the Governor defied a federal court order on segregation, which he said was unlawful. Can you tell me why you view this as different, if in fact you view it as different, from what Governor Wallace did?”
— CNN anchor Aaron Brown to Roy Moore on *NewsNight*, August 20.

The 13 stories on Islam in America mainly portrayed Muslims as victims of discrimination by non-Muslims. NBC’s Lisa Myers reported a story on Washington D.C.-area Muslims who came under FBI investigation because they liked to play paintball in the woods. ABC’s Dean Reynolds reported from Cedar Rapids, Iowa on local protests of Muslim Dick Aossey’s plans for a Muslim youth camp that would include foreign youth. One exception to that victim line was the investigation into Muslim chaplain James Yee on charges of espionage (which were recently dropped). MRC analysts did not count as religion stories the more secular or political usage of the Muslim faith, news reports on how the Iraqi factions might fit into the new Iraqi constitutional system, or how leaders of “Muslim nations” are feeling about American foreign policy.

The Episcopalian Church came in third with 30 stories (six of them anchor briefs) on the election and installation of openly gay bishop Gene Robinson. CBS aired 13, ABC had 11, and NBC did six. The church-state struggle of Alabama Supreme Court chief Roy Moore to maintain his monument of the Ten Commandments in his state judicial building drew 19 stories, four of them anchor briefs. Unlike more substantial coverage in other parts of the television day, *The Passion of the Christ* drew only 11 evening-news stories through the end of February.

MORNING NEWS COVERAGE

The Catholic church led the coverage with 147 stories (78 reporter-based stories or interview segments, and 67 anchor briefs). The Catholic sexual abuse story was less prominent in the morning. While abuse problems drew almost half of reporter-based stories on the evening news, only 13 of the 78 morning show reports (17 percent) focused on abuse. Due to their exclusive access to the Vatican, *Good Morning America* had fully half (39 of 78) of the longer network segments on Catholic subjects.

Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* drew 40 segments (just three of them anchor briefs), 16 on ABC to 13 on CBS and 11 on NBC. Two-thirds of the coverage (27 segments) arrived in February. While ABC and NBC first reported on the movie in August, all thirteen segments on CBS came in January and February. Despite Gibson’s traditionalist

Catholic faith, none of the religious leaders featured in interview segments on *The Passion* were Catholic. The networks did consult Jewish rabbis and evangelical leaders.

The Roy Moore imbroglio in Alabama was the third largest story with 34 stories (11 of them anchor briefs), followed by the Episcopalian Church's "historic" changes with 33 stories (16 anchor briefs). Perhaps due to the softer focus of the morning programs, Islam was not as heavily covered as it was on the evening shows, with just ten segments (four of them anchor briefs).

MAGAZINE/INTERVIEW SHOW COVERAGE

Magazine and interview programs had the most variation in their focus on denominations. Sixteen segments focused on the Catholic church, 15 on *The Passion of the Christ*, 14 on evangelical or Protestant churches, eleven on the general question of faith in God, seven on Jews, four on general Christianity, two on the Mormons, and one on the gay Episcopal bishop.

The Catholic segments included an hour-long *Dateline* on an unfaithful priest who fathered children and left the mother as she lay dying several decades ago. *Nightline* had three shows (or nine segments) on Catholic topics – two shows on clergy sex-abuse scandals, and one on Indiana priest Raymond Schaeffer, who told his parishioners from the pulpit that he was gay, and that gay rights must be supported as a "justice issue." The papal anniversary was only marked by a segment on *This Week* and a *60 Minutes* piece on the beatification of Mother Teresa.

The Passion of the Christ attracted an entire hour of *Primetime*, an entire hour of *Dateline*, and a *Nightline*. It also drew a controversial *60 Minutes* commentary by Andy Rooney in which he claimed God spoke to him and God called Mel Gibson "a real nut case." Evangelical Christians were the subject of two *Nightline* half-hours on a preaching competition, three *Dateline* segments on the American missionary Gracia Burnham, who had been taken hostage in the Philippines, and two negative *60 Minutes* segments – one on evangelicals supporting the retention of Israel's occupied territories, and the other on the theology in the best-selling "Left Behind" books, as critiqued by gay black Harvard theologian Peter Gomes.

The segments with a general focus on God included a one-hour *Dateline* on the healing power of prayer, following the recovery from leukemia of TV reporter Lance Williams. The Mormons drew a positive story on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on CBS's *60 Minutes II*, and a Tom Brokaw story for *Dateline* on author Jon Krakauer's book about Mormon extremists in Utah. The seven Jewish segments were all on Rabbi Fred Neulander, convicted of hiring a killer for his wife, although throughout this study, most segments on *The Passion of the Christ* featured analysis and debate from Jewish leaders.

3. Reporters often approached religious issues from a secular and political perspective.

When religion confronts social issues, reporters usually present the controversies through their own secular and political lenses. As New Hampshire Episcopalians elected openly gay Bishop Gene Robinson, reporters focused relentlessly on the political and cultural angles, not scriptural or theological matters.

But for all the focus on church politics, the networks failed to employ one old news-making strategy they routinely use with the American Catholic church: a poll. Even as ABC used the papal anniversary to do another poll of Catholics on October 15, finding 62 percent of self-proclaimed Catholics thought the pontiff was “out of touch” on church policies (including on sexual issues), the networks attempted no poll of self-declared Episcopalians to get a nationwide opinion on the Robinson ascension. This is especially odd since Catholics do not elect their bishops, as the Episcopalians do.

To secular liberal reporters, the ascent of Bishop Robinson was “historic” in the most inspiring sense and a “landmark” for the culture in 64 stories (22 of them anchor briefs). On CBS’s *The Early Show* on November 3, reporter Gretchen Carlson declared: “It was a landmark moment as Gene Robinson was consecrated as the first openly gay Episcopalian bishop.”

But to the orthodox believer, the observer of Scripture, which clearly decries homosexuality as an “abomination,” the installation of the first gay Christian bishop marks not only a departure from God’s word, but the installation of a false prophet, a spokesman for pride in sin and defiance of God, with the dangerous result of leading a flock of believers away from their path toward Heaven. To them, it’s a little like celebrating the first chef to use arsenic in his recipes. That theological complaint rarely surfaced.

The traditionalists’ emphasis on the fact of the Bible’s view against homosexuality was treated as merely an unsubstantiated charge. On the October 7 *CBS Evening News*, reporter Bob McNamara claimed that the Episcopal church “becoming officially all-inclusive to gays is a scriptural gray area these U.S. conservatives vow not to accept.” To the believer, this sounds strangely neutral on an easily checked factual matter, like reporting “According to conservatives, the Bible mentions the Ten Commandments,” or in a more secular vein, “According to oil company spokesmen, cars can be operated with gasoline.” It suggests to viewers that the expert cited is making a self-interested assertion that should be viewed as factually questionable, or at least as a fact highly favored by people with a questionable agenda.

The center of the story was reserved for the gay protagonist and his worldview. On the morning shows, Canon Robinson and his supporters drew almost all the network interview time: ten interviews, compared with just one for a neutral church spokesman, and one for an opponent. The church spokesman (Daniel Englund on ABC's *Good Morning America*) and the opponent (Bishop Kendall Harmon on NBC's *Today*) both appeared on August 5, when Robinson's ascent was briefly halted by an allegation of inappropriate touching that church officials dismissed. Without that charge, critics could wonder if opponents would have been interviewed at all.

Gene Robinson, Imperialist?

"Some of your fiercest critics have been primates from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America, from the developing world, from the Third World. And what they say is that this is one more example, to put it in political terms, of a U.S. imperialism going forward, going your way without concern for how we think or how we feel."

— ABC's George Stephanopoulos to gay bishop Gene Robinson, Oct. 26 *This Week*.

Many questions to Robinson were procedural (how does the church vote go?), political (what do you think of President Bush's remarks on gay marriage?), or personal (how do you feel?). But Robinson was occasionally asked a question about religious doctrine. The most thorough, theological interview with Robinson came on *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* on October 26. Stephanopoulos asked some religious questions like "You said you discern God's voice? How can you be sure?" He also inquired, "Isn't the point, some would say of Christianity, that it is exclusive? That it is open only to those who believe certain things and act in certain ways?"

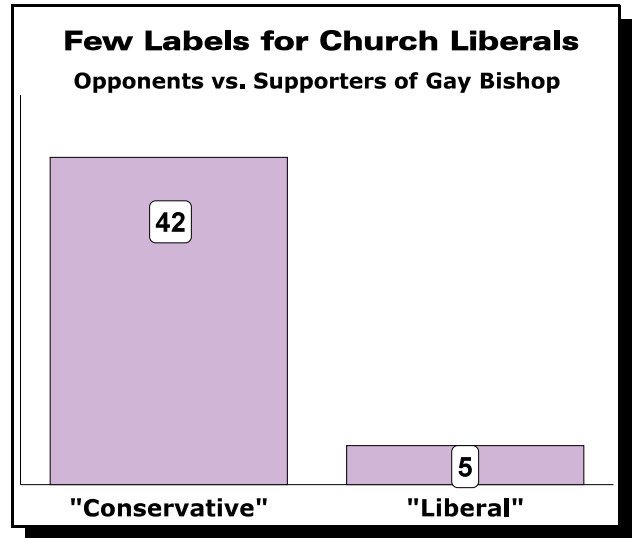
On August 6, the morning Robinson was interviewed wall-to-wall on all three network shows, CBS *Early Show* host Harry Smith suggested, "Strict adherents to Scripture say homosexuality is against the teachings of the Bible. What do you say to them?" Robinson responded with a notion of biblical elasticity: "The Bible does not address what we are talking about today, which are faithful, monogamous, lifelong intentioned relationships between people of the same sex. It's not that the Bible is explicitly supportive of such a thing. It was just unknown to people at the time that that was written." Smith did not follow up.

In this epic cultural battle between conservatives and liberals, reporters failed to describe each side equally, describing the conservatives accurately as conservatives, but portraying the liberals inaccurately as non-ideological. On the August 6 *World News Tonight*, substitute anchor Elizabeth Vargas relayed the two sides as conservative versus inclusive: "Some conservative Episcopalians say homosexuality is contrary to scripture and therefore totally unacceptable. But supporters of the decision call this a step toward a more open and inclusive church."

In news stories, reporters nearly achieved balance in soundbites between Robinson opponents and supporters: 39 for opponents to 45 for Robinson and his supporters, with another 27 neutral or informational soundbites. But the labeling was very imbalanced:

reporters and anchors used 42 “conservative” labels for opponents, compared to just five “liberal” labels for the church or Robinson’s supporters. Robinson himself was never described as “liberal” or “radical,” and reporters never even used the word “activist” to describe him.

CBS was perfectly one-sided in its labeling, with 14 conservative labels and zero liberal ones. (In two stories, CBS tried to cast the Robinson decision as part of an inevitable historical process that would be eventually accepted by referring to the Episcopal decision to ordain women in the 1970s as a “then-radical” idea.) ABC offered the most liberal labels (three), but that was nowhere near their 14 conservative tags. All three were used by reporter Tamala Edwards in her stories. She did match the two: “No matter how this turns out, it appears the dividing lines have grown only deeper between church liberals and conservatives.” NBC’s labeling count was 18 to 2.



Another word that secular reporters avoided was “sin.” A Nexis search of the words “Gene Robinson” within 25 words of “sin” during the study period found that ABC aired one Tamala Edwards story (airing on the August 3 *World News Tonight* and the August 4 *Good Morning America*) where one man in a soundbite declared homosexuality was a “sin.” CBS and NBC searches came up empty: “No documents were found for your search.”

4. The tone of network TV religion coverage was hostile to orthodox faiths, and supportive to minority religions and progressive fads.

Even if the amount of religion news coverage increases dramatically, is that a good thing for religion or religious Americans? One part of that answer is the tone of news coverage. Is it open to both sides, both the orthodox approach to faith and the more heterodox, modernist view? News coverage in this study period demonstrates that the tone on ABC, CBS, and NBC is still hostile to orthodox religion, and supportive to minority religions and progressive fads.

This contrast is perhaps best explored by two commercially successful products: Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*, which presents the central Christian story in traditional biblical terms, and Dan Brown’s novel *The DaVinci Code*, which suggests in a much less orthodox way that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, who was impregnated by Jesus, and moved with her baby to France, where the child became part of the

Merovingian line of kings. Dan Brown's Vatican-bashing novel *The DaVinci Code*, was promoted with the mildest of factual challenges, without any notion that it was crudely and falsely anti-Catholic, while Gibson's film was questioned thoroughly about its accuracy, its fairness, and its potentially violent impact.

Like *The Passion*, the theories behind *The DaVinci Code* were promoted by all three networks, but the best comparison comes from ABC's *Primetime*, which devoted a Monday night hour to each subject. One was divisive and scary, while the other was mellow and intriguing. On February 16, 2004, Diane Sawyer began by welcoming viewers to this special event about *The Passion*, "the film that set off an explosion of debate, controversy, and feeling in America....And not only between Christians and Jews, but Christians and Christians, historians and scholars, true believers and secularists, and everyone who falls somewhere in between."

On November 3, 2003, Elizabeth Vargas began by lowering the bar of accuracy and draining out the notion of divisiveness: "There is a legend that sometime in the first century, just after the death of Jesus, a boat full of refugees from the Holy Land arrived in France." She then added that the show would explore "extraordinary claims" from *The DaVinci Code*: "Some of the claims that book makes are simply not credible, and some of the claims have been made before. But there are some surprising truths behind the story of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Leonardo daVinci."

Sawyer reported Gibson's film suggests "echoes, the critics say, of what were called 'Passion plays,' which through the ages, were used to inflame Christians against their Jewish neighbors. Ghettos were sacked, the Jewish populations terrorized." (Sawyer didn't relate that Passion plays are read or performed annually around the world in millions of Christian churches without outbursts of anti-Semitic violence.)

Vargas reported the *DaVinci Code* theories also can be traced back to...church-inspired violence: "Why not just say, Mary Magdalene, impregnated by Jesus?" Author Henry Lincoln, who helped inspire Dan Brown, explained: "That is not the way that our orthodoxy would have it. You can't have a married Jesus." Vargas replied: "It was too dangerous to tell?" Lincoln charged: "Anything that runs counter to orthodoxy has always been dangerous. The Church has always responded with violence. Think of the Inquisition."

The big question behind *The DaVinci Code* special was, why would a "hard news" division devote an hour to a novel, and to a theory that's highly improbable, a "legend"

God, According to Andy Rooney

"I heard from God just the other night. God always seems to call at night. 'Andrew,' God said to me. He always calls me 'Andrew.' I like that. 'Andrew, you have the eyes and ears of a lot of people. I wish you'd tell your viewers that both Pat Robertson and Mel Gibson strike me as wackos. I believe that's one of your current words. They're crazy as bedbugs....Mel is a real nut case. What in the world was I thinking when I created him?'"

— CBS commentator Andy Rooney on *60 Minutes*, February 22.

instead of a history? Vargas sounded serious even as she explained the most fanciful allusions: “The First Merovingian queen was impregnated by a creature from the sea, the fish, which you theorize, could symbolize Jesus.”

But Sawyer hounded Gibson about matters of fact: “What about the historians who say that the Gospels were written long after Jesus died, and are not merely fact, but political points of views and metaphors? Historians, you know, have argued that in fact it was not written at the time [of Christ]. These [gospel writers] were not eyewitnesses.” Gibson protested, and Sawyer insisted: “But historians have said they don’t think so.” It all came back to politics, that the Gospels were better understood as partisan tracts instead of the word of God.

In general, Gibson’s movie was covered first as a political problem. It was without question the largest anti-Semitism story of 2003 on the TV networks, since nearly every one of the 66 network segments on ABC, CBS, and NBC touched on those complaints. News coverage didn’t shift from offending Jews to inspiring Christians until a week into February, when it became apparent that the film could fuel a box-office boom. Even then, the anti-Semitism angle was still strong. Anti-Semitism in Europe, or the Muslim world, was apparently of little concern in the newsrooms, while the real threat to Jews worldwide was being cooked up in a Hollywood editing room. ABC and NBC did segments promoting the is-it-anti-Semitic angle heavily in the waning months of 2003.

When Peter Boyer’s interview with Gibson for *The New Yorker* came out in September, the Gibson criticism was in full swing. Matt Lauer elaborated in an interview with Boyer: “The Anti-Defamation League expressed concern over whether it would portray the Jews as, quote, ‘bloodthirsty, sadistic, and money-hungry enemies of Jesus.’ You spoke to the head of the ADL. Did he think it was an anti-Semitic movie?” The networks never provided the ADL or other Jewish and secular critics with any countering scrutiny, as in: Are you also responsible for fomenting division, for driving a wedge in Christian-Jewish relations? What if the film isn’t anti-Semitic and doesn’t lead to any anti-Semitic incidents? And most importantly, how can you attack a film you haven’t seen? That’s certainly the take reporters had for critics of the doubting, sex-starved savior of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988.

Most of the network coverage was a politicized rollout. Gibson was described as “ultraconservative” and a “Catholic fundamentalist,” but his critics were never described as “ultraliberals or “hard-line secularists.” People magazine writer Jess Cagle summarized

Mel’s “Ecumenical Suicide Bomb”?

CBS reporter Mark Strassmann: “Yet to many devout Christians, Gibson has produced a passion of love. But the few Jews who’ve seen it felt a passion of hate. Does it have the potential to worsen interfaith relations?”

Rabbi Aaron Rubinger: “Yes, I think it does have that potential. I think in some ways, it’s an ecumenical suicide bomb.”

Strassmann: “Controversy may really detonate when the movie’s released on February 25th, Ash Wednesday.”

— End of a CBS Evening News report on *The Passion*, January 22.

the media take on “extreme” Mel vs. his unlabeled critics on CBS’s *The Early Show* on January 8: “I think at the heart of the controversy is Mel Gibson’s extreme passion for his very ultra-conservative Catholic faith, and Jewish leaders who are worried that a film about the crucifixion could feed into anti-Semitism. That’s at the heart of it.”

5. The media’s Rolodex of religion experts was dominated by those hostile to religious orthodoxy.

When religious scholars are presented, the scholar Rolodex is dominated by experts who match the media viewpoint of hostility to religious orthodoxy. The networks heavily favored “religious” scholars and journalists who strongly question orthodox religion and the accuracy of the Gospels, but did not describe them as liberals or secularists.

For example, there were no labels in ABC’s *DaVinci Code* special. But the soundbite count was very slanted: 58 soundbites in favor of the liberal theological interpretation (Richard McBrien 15, Dan Brown 12, Elaine Pagels 12, Karen King 10, Margaret Starbird 6, Henry Lincoln 6, and Robin Griffith-Jones 2) to just ten opposed (Darrell Bock 5, Umberto Eco 3, Jeffrey Bingham 2, and one soundbite of a woman on the street denouncing the theory as “sacrilege”). This does not include quotes about Leonardo daVinci.

Another example came on February 25, the debut of *The Passion of the Christ*. On ABC’s *World News Tonight*, Peter Jennings concluded with a replay of his 2000 special, *The Search for Jesus*. The experts were N.T. Wright, an Anglican bishop widely respected by traditionalists on one side, and on the other, liberal Jewish scholar Paula Frederiksen, and John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg of the “Jesus Seminar,” a group of skeptical academics which have voted as a group that most of the Gospels are false. Jennings never explained who these men were. One was labeled as a professor emeritus at DePaul, the other as a professor at Oregon State University. ABC did not explain the more vivid details of their scholarship, for example, Crossan’s suggestion that the body of Christ was more likely torn apart by wild dogs rather than raised from the dead.

In this story, as in others, the soundbite for the traditionalist was used merely to provide a limited recounting of what the Gospel says (for example, that Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple), and then the liberals are asked to determine the broad question of the historicity of the Gospels. The result is not a debate, but a stilted discussion where apparently disinterested “experts say” the Gospels and history are two distinctly different things.

But even this Jennings replay contained a lot of conjecture. “The way I imagine it is that they know that Pilate is getting nervous about the crowds,” began Frederiksen in one sentence. Borg stated that “it’s possible” Pilate acted without Jewish goading, but most

scholars would suggest that “most likely,” the Jewish elite was involved. With so much uncertainty in the equation, why isn’t there a more balanced debate?

As Associated Press religion reporter Richard Ostling wrote in reviewing the 2000 Jennings special, “as the old saying goes, a reporter is only as good as his sources. In Jennings’ lopsided lineup, the key talking heads consist of five American liberals, a middle-roader in Israel and a lone traditionalist from England. Jennings seems to have discovered none of the estimable moderate and conservative scholars in America.”

Recommendations for Improved Coverage of Religion

How could the balance and fairness and context of TV religion coverage improve? Here are some simple recommendations:

1. Hire a religion reporter. Ten years ago, ABC hired local religion reporter Peggy Wehmeyer in Dallas to contribute to *World News Tonight*, which did not lead to a significant increase in ABC’s religion coverage, but did provide a more sensitive, less hostile portrait of religious issues. ABC ultimately let her go, and she was not replaced. None of the networks have a religion specialist.

2. Hire reporters who are religious. Surveys and the tone of religion news suggest that the majority of reporters remain in the pattern of hostility toward traditional religious values. As national journalism organizations publicly declare diversity in the newsroom as a requirement for a balanced reflection of the communities they serve, why is that any less compelling for people of faith than other constituencies in the viewing audience?

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. On social issues from abortion to so-called gay marriage, religiously inspired political views are no less valid in the public square than atheistically inspired political views.

4. If TV news wants to dabble in theology, the sample of experts interviewed ought to reflect the actual playing field in seminaries and universities, balancing conservative and progressive experts and scholars instead of relying on a preponderance of progressives. Airing stories on complicated religious subjects is an ambitious undertaking. But viewers with orthodox views often don’t see their world view discussed so much as dismissed.

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