

The Media Get Religion

National Media Coverage of Religion in America 1969 - 1998

Major findings:

■ **Finding Religion** - Major media religion coverage doubled in the 1990s. *Page 2*

■ **Getting Religion** - Journalists' churchgoing also doubled. *Page 6*

■ **Ye of Little Faith** - Only one story in 14 mentioned theology or spirituality. *Page 3*

■ **Politics Worship** - Political issues dominated religion news; coverage of church-state relations tripled over time. *Page 3*

■ **Fallen Idols** - Coverage of crimes and scandals also tripled. *Page 4*

■ **Split Decision** - Traditional views dominated debates over sexual morality, while progressive opinions prevailed on church governance. *Page 4*

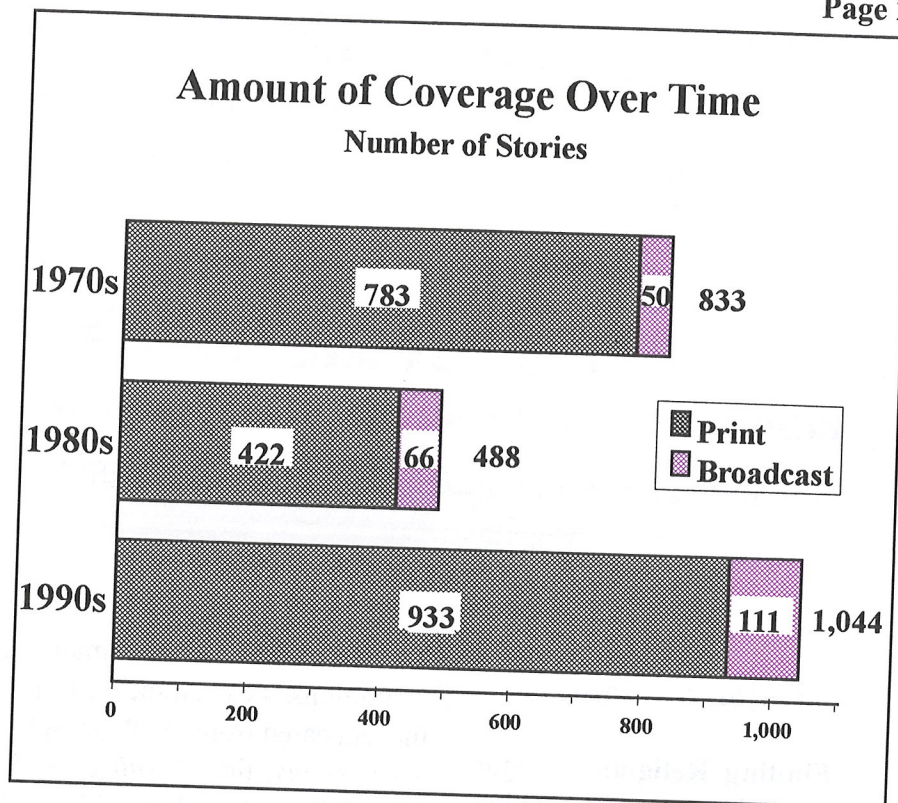
To determine how the major media portray religious faiths and institutions, we examined a 10 percent random sample of 2,365 stories that appeared from 1969 through 1998 in eight media outlets: *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. (CMPA conducted this research in partnership with the Ethics and Public Policy Center. The study was supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts).

Whose News?

The bulk of the religion stories (84%) appeared in the two daily newspapers. The *Washington Post* accounted for nearly half (49%) of all stories, and *The New York Times* ran just over a third (35%). Although the *Times* ran fewer stories, on average they were longer than those in the *Post*. The differences were even sharper among the three weekly news magazines. Out of 150 stories, nearly half (47%) appeared in *Time*, 35 percent ran in *Newsweek*, and only 18 percent appeared in *US News & World Report*. However, *US News* ran longer pieces than its competitors, diminishing the differences in coverage. Finally, the three TV networks aired a total of 227 stories. ABC, which is currently the only network with a reporter assigned to the religion beat, led with 38 percent of the total. The remaining 62 percent of stories were about evenly divided between NBC and CBS.

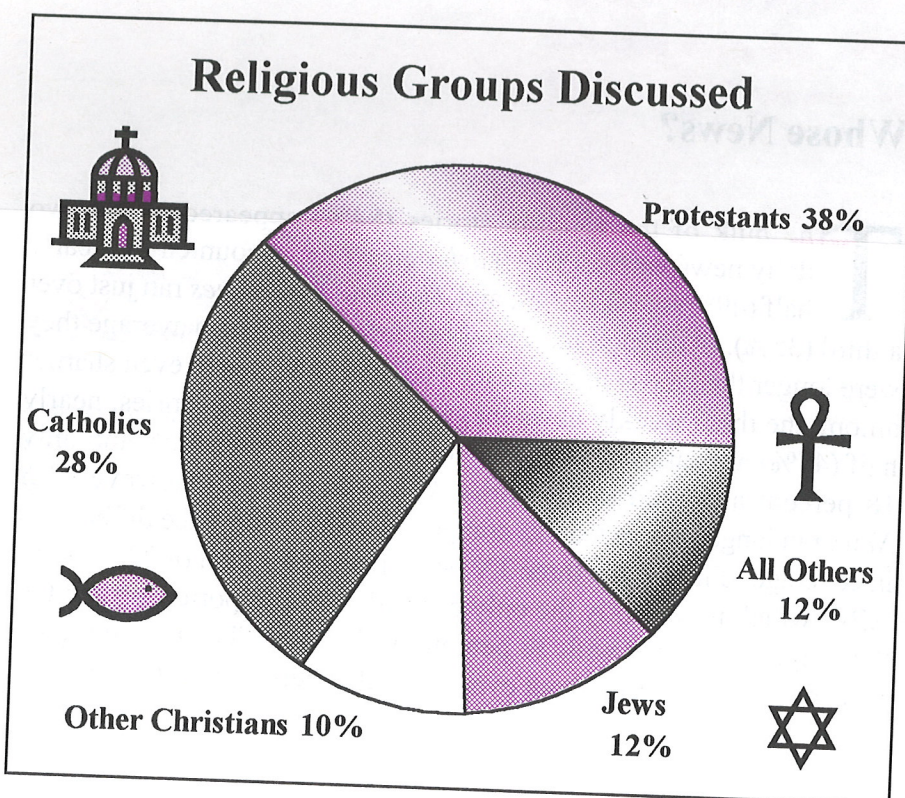
(continued on page 2)

The amount of religion coverage rose to new heights in the 1990s. (For simplicity, we refer to coverage in each of the three decades, though the actual data cutpoints came over one year earlier, e.g., 1969 - 1979 for the 1970s.) For all newspaper and magazine stories, 37 percent (783) appeared in the 1970s. In the 1980s, print coverage fell dramatically to 422 stories (18 percent of the total). But in the 1990s the coverage rebounded to 933 stories, nearly half (47%) of all those appearing in print outlets over the three decades studied. Thus, the most recent decade contained nearly as many print stories as the previous two decades combined. TV reflected the same pattern in recent years with the 1990s accounting for just under half (49%) of all stories broadcast. However, the increase in television coverage continued across the entire study period. Of the 227 reports appearing on the network newscasts, 22 percent (50) ran in the '70s, 29



percent (60) appeared in the '80s, and 49 percent (111) were shown in the '90s.

Spreading the Faith



Although mainstream Western religions received the most attention, Eastern faiths and new religious movements became increasingly prominent over time. The various Protestant churches together accounted for 38 percent of all discussions (1,183). Catholics (both Roman and Eastern Rite) took the number two spot, with 28 percent of discussions (888). They were followed by Judaism, at 12 percent (385) of the total, while another 10 percent were identified as broadly Christian. Islam accounted for 3 percent (90 stories), as did new religious movements, defined as those established during the 20th century. Rounding out the list were Greek and Russian Orthodox faiths (2%) and Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (2%).

As a broad indicator of diversity in religion news, we combined the coverage of "other Christians," new religious movements, Eastern faiths and "other" religions. Coverage of these non-mainstream faiths doubled in size from 12 percent of all coverage in the 1970s and 13 percent in the 1980s, to 24 percent in the 1990s – nearly one out of every four religion stories. As the coverage broadened, the proportion of news items devoted to Protestants and Catholics dropped significantly, but the absolute number did not. The overall increase in coverage meant that Protestants and Catholics make up a smaller piece of a larger pie.

Little Faith in Religion

Despite the increased attention to religion, most stories contained little information about theology or spirituality. In fact, only one in 14 (7%) referenced any religious beliefs or doctrines. Further, theological referents were disproportionately connected to non-Christian religions with a small membership in this country. Chief among them were Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, about which 26 percent of discussions mentioned religious beliefs. Islam followed with 19 percent, while 11 percent of stories about new religions contained a spiritual dimension.

In contrast, the beliefs or doctrines of America's predominant Christian faiths – Protestantism and Catholicism – were cited only 5 percent of the time. An exception to this trend was a 1977 *Time* article on the Campus Crusade for Christ, which outlined the "four spiritual laws" on which the organization's evangelical activities were based.

However, most religion news more closely resembled the coverage of George W. Bush's visit to Bob Jones University during the 2000 presidential primaries (which occurred too recently to be included in our sample). The university's restrictions on interracial contact were frequently debated, but they were rarely discussed in terms of the biblical interpretations on which they were based.

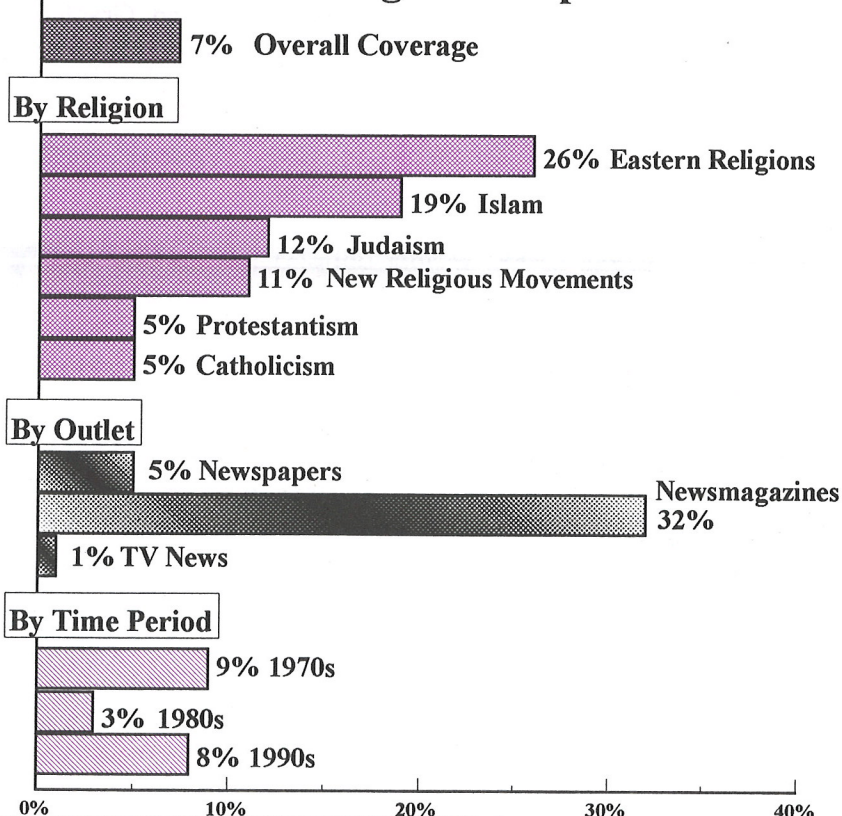
There were sharp differences among news outlets on this dimension. The news magazines were over five times more likely to mention spirituality than were the daily newspapers (32 percent versus 6 percent of their respective articles). At the other end of the spectrum, television news stories referenced spirituality only 1 percent of the time. This widespread absence of references to theology or spirituality in daily journalism may marginalize

the role of faith in public discourse about religion.

Rendering Unto Caesar

In contrast to the spiritual vacuum in religion stories, the coverage focused heavily on political angles. Apart from routine stories such as the promotion of clergy or profiles about prominent church members, religion made news most frequently in all three decades when it involved policy debates or authority conflicts. Church involvement in politics accounted for 9 percent of all religion news. Moreover, coverage of church-state relations tripled from the 1970s to the 1990s, accounting for one out of every eight religion stories during the past decade. Among the controversies that generated heavy coverage were attempts by churches

Percent of Coverage with Spiritual Focus



to influence politicians, prayer in the public schools, state-supported vouchers for religious schools, and debate over clergy holding elected office.

An equally frequent source of politically related stories were controversies over church governance, including doctrinal dissent and censorship of members. This was followed in frequency by ecumenism, representing 8 percent of all topics discussed, and codes of sexual conduct, with 6 percent of discussions. Completing the list of frequently covered topics were crimes and sexual scandals, and the roles of women and minorities in religious institutions. Each of these topics provided about 5 percent of all coverage. As political coverage and stories about wrongdoing increased over the past three decades, the coverage dropped for church governance issues and

debates involving women and minorities

Falls from Grace

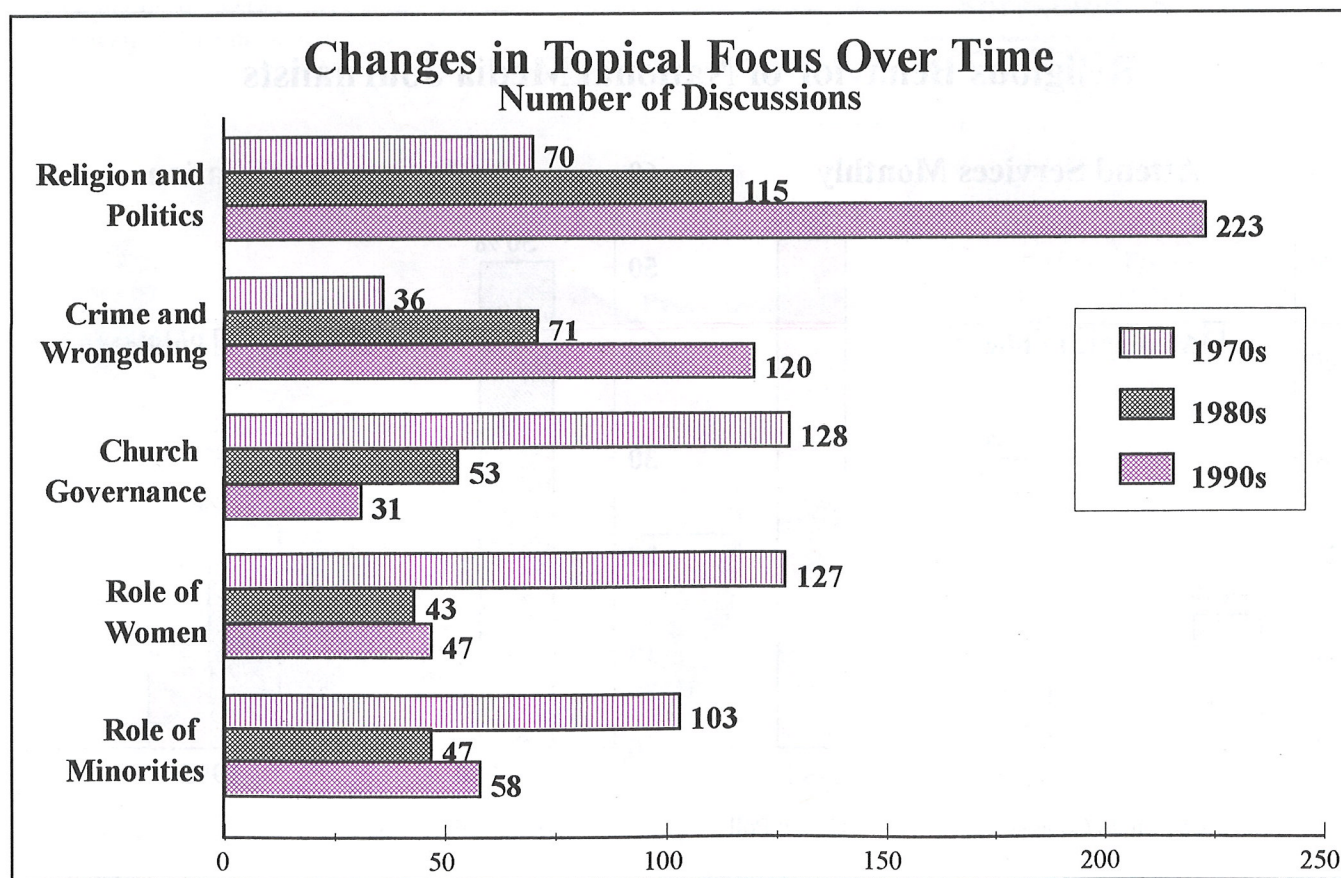
Coverage of alleged crimes and scandals involving churches and clerics tripled from the 1970s to the 1990s. Reports about crimes or other forms of wrongdoing jumped from only about one in 50 stories to one in 14. The single largest group (34%) involved sexual offenses such as pedophilia, sexual harassment and unwanted sexual contact. Another 22 percent concerned financial crimes such as fraud or embezzlement. A third category, child neglect, constituted 18 percent of all charges.

The role of churches in handling these charges was rarely addressed,

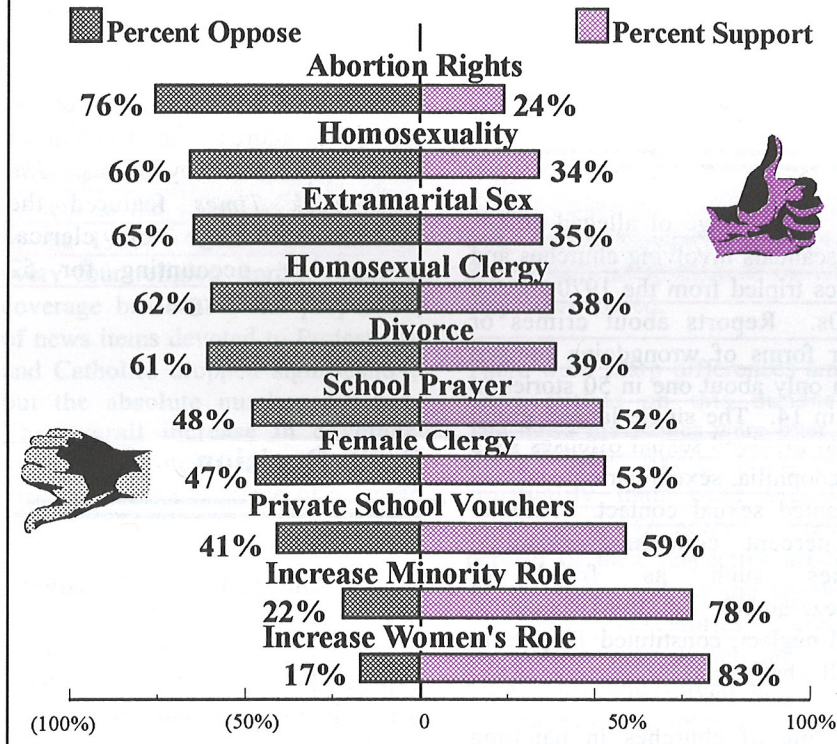
with the most criticism focusing on sexual wrongdoing. When this issue was raised, however, nearly all stories were critical of the church's reaction. The Catholic Church was a particular target for failing to address the problem of sexual exploitation by priests. *The New York Times* featured the heaviest coverage of clerical wrongdoing, accounting for 52 percent of all charges.

Split Decision

The contours of religion news are set not only by the topics discussed, but also by the views expressed on related controversies. The opinion debate on controversies involving religion clustered in five



The Opinion Debate

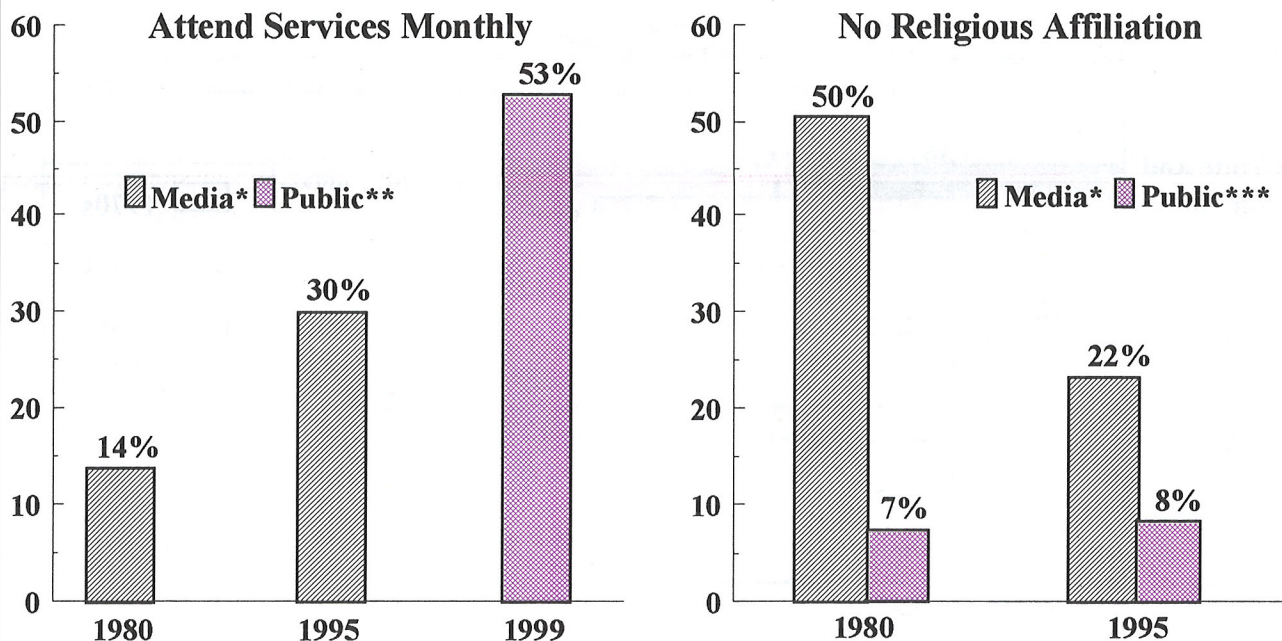


major issue areas. Leading the list were questions of sexual morality, which accounted for 377 opinions. This was followed by views on church-state relations (275 opinions), the treatment of women (212), aspects of church governance (109), and issues related to racial and ethnic minorities (95).

The tone of coverage varied sharply by topic. A majority of opinions in the news favored traditional values on controversial issues such as abortion, homosexuality and having religion play a role in public life. Over three-quarters of opinions were pro-life, while two-thirds condemned homosexuality. Smaller majorities favored prayer and other religious activities in public schools.

In contrast, the balance of opinions took a more progressive turn in advocating more inclusive church policies for women and racial

Religious Behavior of National Media Journalists



*Survey by Smith College and CMPA **Gallup Poll

***US Statistical Abstract

minorities, as well as making church authority structures more egalitarian. Eighty-three percent favored a greater role for women in the church, and 78 percent advocated increased rights for minority groups.

More "Good News"

While there is no definitive explanation for the increased volume and breadth of religion news

in recent years, opinion surveys show that today's national media journalists are more attuned to religious matters than their predecessors. A 1980 survey by Smith College political scientist Stanley Rothman and CMPA president Robert Lichter found that major media journalists were less religiously observant than most Americans. But a more recent survey by Rothman and his colleagues found sharp increases in the religiosity of leading journalists. The proportion of major media

journalists who attend religious services at least once a month more than doubled, from 14 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1995. During the same period, the proportion of journalists claiming no formal religious affiliation dropped from 50 percent to only 22 percent of those surveyed. (Despite these changes, journalists are still less religiously observant than the general public. A 1998 National Opinion Resource Center poll found that 51 percent of Americans attend services at least monthly.)

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