

MEDIA COVERAGE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA 1969 - 1998

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INTRODUCTION

The public image of major social institutions, including religion, depends largely on their media portrayal. This image takes on added importance as America becomes a more religiously diverse nation. Regardless of their own religious orientations, journalists are trained to cover individuals, issues and institutions in a fair and balanced manner. The question is whether they succeed in accurately conveying different faith traditions and the critical role they play in the lives of individual Americans as well as in the public arena.

Answering this question requires a clear and comprehensive understanding of what the coverage looks like. To accomplish this, we conducted a scientific content analysis of the major media's coverage of religion in America from 1969 through 1998. This extended time frame insures that the results are not skewed by a temporary surge in press attention to a particular issue or faith. Our analysis included all large established religions, as well as small sects and cults.

A comprehensive and systematic analysis of this subject requires consideration of many facets of the coverage. Among these are the relative prominence of different religions in news stories, the topics covered, the sources cited, and the range of views presented on a host of controversies. This study is intended to provide a baseline against which future developments in religion coverage can be gauged.

To analyze media coverage of religion in America over the past 30 years is a daunting task, due to the sheer magnitude and diversity of the material. To reduce this project to manageable proportions, we concentrated on a sample of the most influential national media outlets in continuous operation since the 1960s. This sample included *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which have been the nation's most influential general-interest daily newspapers over the past quarter century; the three leading weekly news magazines – *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* – and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

These outlets were the most influential agenda setters for both the news audience and the journalistic profession at the onset of the sample period. Despite the dramatic changes that have occurred in the gathering and dissemination of news, they remain among the most influential, although a similar study beginning today might include more recent entrants such as CNN and *USA Today*, not to mention such recent genres as talk shows and Internet sites.

To make substantive comparisons of the coverage over time, we divided the material into the three decade-long time blocs that immediately preceded our research: 1969-78, 1979-88 and 1989-98. For narrative ease in discussing changes over time, we use the convention of writing about coverage in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively, although the actual cutpoints came in the year preceding the beginning of each new decade.

We restricted our sample of news items to those that dealt with some aspect of religion in the United States. For example, we included news about policy statements by the Vatican that would

affect Roman Catholics in this country, but not those that focused primarily on the Catholic Church or its members in other countries. News that was not primarily about religion, but included a religious component (e.g., a discussion of the Catholic Church's position within a broader story on the abortion debate), was included if at least one-third of the item dealt with religion.

Items were selected from *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* indices, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, and the Vanderbilt University Television News Index.

We defined news items as including both news and editorial material. We analyzed unsigned editorials, signed columns and op-ed pieces but not letters to the editor, which are produced by readers rather than journalists. (We also excluded editorial cartoons, since this is a different genre of expression.) In the event, however, the sample included only 33 editorial pieces, representing barely 1 percent of all news items. Further, this material generally reflected the trends in news stories on the dimensions we measured. As a result, we did not break them out separately in conducting the data analysis.

The report that follows considers in turn the amount of religion news; the topics that were covered, with special reference to the presence of spiritual or theological references; the sources who were cited; and the issues that were debated. The issue debate focuses on five major areas of controversy – sexual morality, church-state relations, church governance and interfaith relations, and the roles of women and minorities respectively, vis-a-vis both religious institutions and the society at large.

Within each chapter, we also examine how the coverage changed over time, and how it varied from one news outlet to another. Then, after analyzing the various components of the coverage, we consider the question of whether the content of religious news differs according to its placement. Does the news that is featured most prominently differ in any measurable way from the bulk of the coverage? And how does news that appears in religion pages or sections differ from religious news in the general-interest portions of the same publications?

Finally, we broke out two substantive areas of religion news for separate consideration. The first of these is coverage of the Catholic Church. Among all the religious institutions in the study, Catholicism proved to have the most distinctive media profile. These features are discussed in Appendix I. The second is coverage of the so-called Christian right, a term which generally refers to theologically traditional Protestant groups that promote socially conservative public policies. Because of the considerable media attention that has been focused on this phenomenon, we tried to determine whether its coverage differed substantially from other religion news. These findings appear in Appendix II.

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

We examined a random sample of 10 percent of the coverage in the eight major media outlets listed above. Thus, the raw numbers mentioned in this report can be multiplied by 10 to approximate the actual totals of news coverage. The final sample yielded total of 2365 news items across all eight outlets. The distribution of coverage is shown in Table 1. Not surprisingly, the great majority of stories – five out of every six – (84 percent), appeared in the two daily newspapers. Another 10 percent were broadcast stories, and the remaining 6 percent appeared in the three news magazines.

Among the newspapers, the *Washington Post* alone accounted for nearly half (49 percent) of all news items, while *The New York Times* had just over a third (35 percent). Although the *Times* ran fewer stories, on average those stories were longer than those appearing in the *Post* -- 14 inches versus 12 inches respectively. This lessened the *Post*'s lead in terms of column inches of text, with 13,271 column inches versus 11,984 column inches for the *Times*.

The differences were even more dramatic among the three weekly news magazines. Out of a total of 150 news items, nearly half (47 percent) appeared in *Time*, 35 percent ran in *Newsweek*, and only 18 percent appeared in *U.S. News & World Report*. However, *U.S. News* compensated for its low number of stories by printing much lengthier pieces than its competitors. The average length of a *U.S. News* story was 44 inches, well over twice that of *Newsweek* (19 inches) and *Time* (17 inches). As a result, there were relatively small differences among the three news magazines

TABLE 1
AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

	NUMBER OF STORIES	COLUMN INCHES/ AIRTIME
ABC	86	3 hr. 12 min.
CBS	69	2 hr. 16 min.
NBC	72	2 hr. 45 min.
S/T Television	227	8 hr. 13 min.
Time	71	1193 in.
Newsweek	53	1009 in.
US News	26	1150 in.
S/T Magazines	150	3352 in.
NY Times	833	11,984 in.
Washington Post	1155	13,271 in.
S/T Newspapers	1998	25,255 in.
TOTAL	2365	28,607 in.

in terms of column inches of coverage. *Time* led with 1193 inches, followed by *U.S. News & World Report* with 1150 inches. *Newsweek*, with a total of 1009 inches, had the lowest volume of coverage on religion.

Finally, the three television 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. Total air time followed the same pattern. ABC topped the list at three hours, 12 minutes. NBC had a total of two hours, 45 minutes, while CBS trailed with two hours, 16 minutes. There were no significant differences in the average story length among the networks.

There was considerable variation in the amount of coverage over time. As Table 2 demonstrates, print and broadcast outlets followed different patterns of change. Out of 2,138 newspaper and magazine stories, 37 percent (783) appeared in the 1970s. Print coverage dropped dramatically in the following decade, bottoming out at 422 stories, or 18 percent of the total. In the 1990s, however, the coverage more than doubled to 933 stories, totaling nearly half (47 percent) of all stories appearing in print outlets over the three decades. Thus, the last decade covered by this study contained nearly as many stories as the previous two periods combined.

The same pattern held for volume of coverage, as measured in column inches. This fell from a total of 8,905 inches in the 1970s to 5,589 in the 1980s, before climbing again to a peak of 14,065 in the 1990s. However, this unit of measurement reveals that the decline in coverage during the

TABLE 2
AMOUNT OF COVERAGE OVER TIME

PERCENT OF STORIES				
	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
Print	37	20	44	101%*
Broadcast	22	29	49	100%
Total	35	21	46	100%
NUMBER OF STORIES				
	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
Print	783	422	933	2138
Broadcast	50	66	111	227
Total	833	488	1044	2365

* Does not sum to 100 percent due to rounding error

1980s was somewhat mitigated by a rise in the mean length of news stories. The average story in the 1980s was approximately 13 inches in length, compared to 11 inches in the previous decade. Story length rose again in the 1990s to an average of 15 inches. Thus, print coverage of religion peaked during the most recent decade in terms of both the number and length of news stories. Religion news on television also peaked in the 1990s. In contrast to the print outlets, though, this was the culmination of a steady rise in coverage. Of the 227 stories appearing on the network newscasts, 50 (22 percent) ran in the 1970s, 60 (29 percent) appeared in the 1980s, and 111 (49 percent) aired in the 1990s. Thus, as we found with print coverage, the most recent decade alone accounted for just under half of all stories on television. Not surprisingly, more stories also meant more air time. The coverage climbed from one hour, 49 minutes in the 1970s to two hours, 23 minutes in the 1980s, before cresting at three hours 57 minutes in the latest decade. Mean story length remained consistent across all time periods, at just over two minutes.

RELIGIOUS FAITHS COVERED

At the outset, we sought to determine which religions made the most news and how much coverage each received relative to the others. To do so, we identified every religion discussed in any news story. As Table 3 shows, this yielded a total of 3,144 discussions of named religions. To qualify for inclusion as a discussion, any mention of a religion had to continue for at least two paragraphs of a print story or 20 seconds of a television story.

Nearly two-fifths of all discussions (38 percent or 1,183 discussions) fell under the umbrella category of Protestantism. In addition to mentions of Protestants in general, 11 distinctive faiths were included in this category. Most prominent among them were Episcopalians (195 stories), followed closely by Baptists (184). Presbyterians were third (104), with Lutherans close behind (99). The remaining Protestant groups were featured in far fewer discussions. They included Mormons (56 stories), Anglicans (45), those designated as “Evangelicals” (40), a combined group of African Methodist Episcopal Zion and African Methodist Episcopal churches (31), those identified as “fundamentalist” Christians (28), the United Church of Christ (24) and Assemblies of God (22).

Catholics (including both Roman and Catholic Eastern Rite) constituted the second most heavily covered major religion, accounting for 28 percent of discussions – 888 in all. They were followed by Judaism, which constituted 12 percent of the total (385). Among the various branches of

TABLE 3
RELIGIOUS GROUPS DISCUSSED

RELIGIONS	PERCENT OF DISCUSSIONS
Protestants	38
Episcopalian	6
Baptist	6
Presbyterian	3
Lutheran	3
Anglican	2
Catholics	28
Orthodox	2
Other Christians	8
S/T All Christians	76
Judaism	12
Islam	3
New Religious Movements	3
Eastern Religions	2
Other	4
Total Responses	100%
Number of Discussions	3144

Judaism, orthodox Jews were featured most frequently, but few stories focused on a particular subgroup. The next largest category, representing 8 percent of all news items, was comprised of groups broadly identified as “Christian” without further detail, along with those who follow specific Christian traditions that are neither Protestant nor Catholic. Among these were Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Islam accounted for 3 percent of the coverage (90 stories), as did new religious movements, defined as those established in the 20th century. Most prominent among the latter was the Unification Church. Orthodox religions (including both Greek and Russian variants) made up 2 percent of those discussed, as did Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Completing the list was a residual category, which accounted for 4 percent of the total. (Occult groups were included here.)

CHANGES OVER TIME

Even as the media’s overall coverage of religion increased in the 1990s, the news agenda broadened outward toward groups that had received less attention in the past. Thus, the proportion of the coverage devoted to Protestants and Catholics declined significantly, in favor of increased attention to a variety of much smaller groups in this country, such as adherents of Eastern religions and new religious movements.

As Table 4 shows, the proportion of coverage devoted to Catholics declined from 31 percent in

TABLE 4
COVERAGE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS OVER TIME (%)

	1970s	1980s	1990s
Protestants	40	38	36
Catholics	31	31	24
Orthodox	4	2	1
Jews	11	14	12
Muslims	3	2	3
Other	11	13	24
Total	100%	100%	100%

both the 1970s and the 1980s to 24 percent in the 1990s. Thus, Catholicism represents nearly one-third of all religious coverage during the first two decades of the study period, compared to one-quarter of the coverage in the most recent decade, a proportionate drop of 23 percent. Protestantism encountered a drop of similar magnitude, from 40 percent of overall coverage in the 1970s and 38 percent in the 1980s to 30 percent in the 1990s.

It must be emphasized that this falloff in coverage of America's most widely practiced religious faiths was proportionate rather than absolute. The overall increase in religious coverage over the years meant that the actual number of stories devoted to Catholic and Protestant churches did not decline; they simply accounted for a smaller share of a larger pie. For example, the number of stories about Catholics in the 1970s (337) was almost identical to the number in the 1990s (336), although the latter total accounted for a lower proportion of the decade's overall religious coverage. Conversely, the number of stories devoted to other Christian groups nearly quadrupled, rising from 45 in the 1970s and 39 in the 1980s to 178 in the 1990s. These groups went from attracting only one out of every 25 stories on religion in the 1970s to one out of every eight in the 1990s.

As an even broader indicator of the increasing diversity of the coverage, we combined the categories of "other Christians," new religious movements, Eastern religions, and "other religions." The resulting composite category, representing a host of relatively small groups, doubled in size from 12 percent of all religious coverage in the 1970s and 13 percent in the 1980s to 24 percent – nearly one out of every four religion stories – in the 1990s.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

There were few significant variations among news outlets in the amount of coverage devoted to various religions. These findings appear in Table 5. In one exception to this general rule, *The New York Times* accounted for nearly half of all coverage of Judaism (49 percent), substantially higher than the 35 percent overall coverage represented by *The Times*. This may reflect the large Jewish population in New York City.

The only other difference of this type was the focus by news magazines and television news on new religious movements and Eastern religions. The news magazines accounted for 12 percent of the coverage accorded to these movements compared to only 6 percent of overall coverage, double the rate we would expect. Similarly, television news accounted for 20 percent of coverage of new religious movements but only 10 percent of total coverage.

This pattern was even more pronounced with regard to Eastern religions. The news magazines accounted for one-sixth (16 percent) and television news nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of all coverage of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc. Indeed, television accounted for nearly as many stories about Eastern religions as *The New York Times* (11 versus 13 respectively), despite the fact that the *Times* carried nearly four times as many religion-related stories overall.

TABLE 5
COVERAGE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS BY OUTLET (%)

	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>	News Magazines	TV News	Total
Protestants	33	54	6	7	100%
Catholics	38	45	7	10	100%
Orthodox	53	40	1	6	100%
Other Christians	29	45	11	15	100%
Jews	49	37	9	5	100%
Muslims	36	47	11	7	101%
New Religious Movements	40	28	12	20	100%
Eastern Religions	26	36	16	22	100%
Other	31	51	12	7	100%

NEWS TOPICS

After identifying the various religions that were covered, we sought to determine what was said about them. We began by identifying the major topics discussed in stories about religion. A particular story could discuss more than one topic; we identified 4,520 topical discussions, an average of about two per story. The proportion of religious news that was devoted to the various different topics is presented in Table 6.

Much of the news about any social institution will be uncontroversial, and religion is no exception. The factual, straightforward and nonjudgmental recounting of routine events provides the backdrop for the more interpretative accounts of trends and controversies. Thus, the single largest group of stories concerned announcements of routine events. These included religious observances or organizational changes, such as the promotion of clergy. This category alone accounted for over one thousand topical discussions, or nearly one quarter (23 percent) of the overall total.

Another noncontroversial subject involved stories about lay church members (as opposed to clergy). This category included profiles of prominent church members or feature pieces on how ordinary people express their faith in the course of their everyday lives. (It excluded coverage of crimes or scandals involving lay people.) Nine percent of the topics we coded dealt with such individuals. Taken together, these two noncontroversial categories (routine church news and

TABLE 6
TOPICS (%)

Routine church news	23
Individuals in the news	9
Church involvement in politics	9
Church governance	9
Ecumenism	8
Codes of sexual conduct	6
Crime and wrongdoing	5
Role of women	5
Role of minorities	5
Changing demographics	4
Internal church debates	4
Reproductive issues	3
War and militarism	3
Other	7
Total	100%

individuals in the news) constituted nearly a third (32 percent) of all religion coverage.

The remaining subject matter of religious news consisted of topics that were newsworthy because of the controversies and conflicts they provoked. Most prominent among these was the multifaceted debate over the propriety of church involvement in politics or public policy debates. This cluster of topics accounted for nine percent of the coverage (410 discussions). They included numerous areas of concern over the separation of church and state, such as controversies over clergy holding elected office and churches attempting to influence politicians through appeals to their religious beliefs. Other prominent topics included in this category were the debate over prayer in the public schools, state-supported vouchers for religious schools, and religious pronouncements on war and military actions and weapons.

Another 9 percent of topics (381 discussions) dealt with aspects of church governance. This category included organizational matters and financial decisions as well as forms of worship and theological debates. Doctrinal dissent and censorship of members, along with related dimensions of the internal dynamics of church structure, accounted for another cluster of church governance topics. Many of these conflicts were labeled politically or ideologically in news stories. Discussions of “liberal” dissent edged out reports of “conservative” dissent by a three to two margin (39 to 26 discussions).

Close behind internal church matters in attracting media attention was ecumenism, which accounted for 7 percent of all topics discussed (341 instances). Items included here focused on

unity and reconciliation among different churches, sects or factions. Another type of reconciliation included in this category concerns the Holocaust. Specifically, this coverage addressed the question of what religious institutions did or did not do during World War II to protect individuals from Nazi genocide, and whether current action was required to address past failings. Much of this coverage dealt with relations between Judaism and Catholicism.

Several recurring topics which revolved around codes of sexual conduct together accounted for another 6 percent of all discussions. Of the 282 items in this category, about a quarter (24 percent, or 68 discussions) dealt with activities of clergy, such as debates over clerical celibacy. Nearly as many discussions (65) concerned homosexuality, followed closely by discussions of heterosexual codes of conduct (58), including marriage, adultery and extramarital sex. About half as many instances (29) were specific to divorce, including discussions of how churches treated divorced members, as well as the legitimacy and fairness of the annulment process.

A related group of issues focused on reproductive rights and reproductive technologies. Because these issues are so distinctive in terms of the nature of their coverage and the controversies associated with them, we broke them out as a separate topical category. These areas of discussion accounted for 3 percent of all coverage (151 instances). About two-thirds of these (64 percent) referenced abortion, while another third (32 percent) dealt with some aspect of birth control.

Criminal and sexual scandals involving religious figures or institutions comprised 5 percent of all

topics discussed (227 instances). Within this category, nearly three in five (58 percent) were connected to one of four specific types of offenses. These were financial improprieties, noncriminal sexual scandals (such as a pastor having a mistress), sexual assaults against children, and other charges of child abuse, such as cases of parents who prevented a child from receiving medical treatment because of their religious beliefs.

Another 10 percent of topical discussions were divided evenly between the roles of women and minorities respectively. Of the 217 items dealing with women, the lion's share – 150 – were concerned with the status of women within particular religious faiths, rather than the role of religion in shaping the struggle for women's rights in the larger society. Within religions, most of these discussions were specifically related to ordination. Nearly as many discussions (208) involved the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities. Once again, the coverage was divided between racial issues within a given church, on one hand, and the role of personal faith and religious institutions in confronting racial issues in the broader society, on the other.

The remaining topics each accounted for less than 5 percent of the total. Most prominent among these were the changing demographics of church populations; the practices of churches using new technologies or engaging in nontraditional ministries to preach or establish their identity; the relationship between science and religion; discussions of economic justice; and new religious movements.

CHANGES OVER TIME

Just as the media's focus on particular religions shifted over time, so did the relative amount of play that was given to different topics. It should come as no surprise that the prevalence of issue discussions over time followed the same U-shaped curve as did overall coverage, dipping to a low of 999 in the 1980s, compared to 1,744 in the 1970s and 1,777 in the 1990s. However, this overall pattern conceals some significant linear trends in the coverage of particular topics over time.

As Table 7 shows, the amount of media attention paid to some of the most controversial topics at times deviated from the general pattern of religious news. In particular, the past three decades saw a shift away from coverage of church governance issues and discussions related to the role of women and minorities. Conversely, the coverage increased on issues involving the intersection of religion and politics, as well as on crimes and other scandals involving religious institutions and their representatives.

The sharpest proportionate decline in attention concerned issues associated with church governance. The number of discussions devoted to this general topic dropped from a high of 128 during the 1970s to only 53 in the 1980s and 31 in the 1990s. Thus, there was less than one-quarter as much coverage of this topic in the third decade covered by this study as there was in the first. Indeed, over 60 percent of all coverage of church governance issues that we encountered in the sample appeared before 1979.

TABLE 7
CHANGES IN TOPICAL FOCUS OVER TIME*

NUMBER OF DISCUSSIONS			
	1970s	1980s	1990s
Religion and Politics	70	115	223
Crime and Wrongdoing	36	71	120
Church Governance	128	53	31
Role of Women	127	43	47
Role of Minorities	103	47	58

* For selected topics

Even more notable was the decline in coverage of the role of women and minorities vis-a-vis religion, despite the continued prevalence of racial and gender-related issues in the larger society (not to mention an increased journalistic commitment to newsroom diversity). The number of discussions of racial minorities declined from 103 in the 1970s to 58 in the 1990s. Attention devoted to women's issues dropped even more sharply, from 127 discussions in the 1970s to only 47 in the 1990s. When the two categories are combined, they account for 13 percent of all religious coverage in the 1970s, 9 percent in the 1980s, and only 6 percent in the 1990s, a proportional drop of over 50 percent.

Conversely, the sharpest rise in coverage came in the area of religion and politics. The coverage of this multi-faceted topic more than tripled over the course of the study period, rising from 70 discussions in the 1970s to 115 in the 1980s and 223 in the 1990s. The intersection of religion and politics accounted for only one out of every 25 discussions of religion in the 1970s but one out of every eight in the 1990s.

The only other issue area to receive a proportionately sharp rise in coverage involved the breaking of various religious commandments. Coverage of crimes and other ethical or moral offences tripled, rising from 36 discussions in the 1970s to 71 stories in the 1980s and 120 in the 1990s. Coverage of crimes and other misdeeds was a rarity a generation ago, accounting for only one out of 50 issue discussions related to religion. By the 1990s accounts of criminal or other wrongdoing made up one out of every 14 discussions of religious topics.

The overall increase of coverage in the 1990s also reflected the rise of several topics that had received little or no press attention in previous decades. For example, 17 out of the 18 discussions of euthanasia appeared in the 1990s, as did 29 out of the 46 discussions on the role that the Catholic Church and other religions played with regard to the Holocaust. The trends that accounted for the greatest overall shifts in the focus of coverage, however, were the diminished focus on church governance and the role of women and minorities, and the attendant increase in discussions of politics, crime and scandal.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

The New York Times and the *Washington Post* covered the various topics in rough proportion to their share of the overall coverage, with one exception: The *Times* accounted for a majority (52 percent) of all religious news concerning the Holocaust, reflecting the attention to Judaism that we noted earlier. Perhaps more surprisingly, no topic stood out as being the special province of television news. Coverage of potentially “sensational” topics, such as charges of crime and wrongdoing and codes of sexual conduct, received slightly disproportionate attention on the evening news (12 percent of all coverage in both cases), but not nearly enough to suggest a distinctive news agenda for this medium.

By contrast, the weekly news magazines were the only outlets with a distinctive topical focus. Their general tendency to spotlight broad social trends extended to their coverage of religion. For example, despite accounting for just over one out of every 20 stories in the sample, the news

magazines comprised about one-fifth of all coverage of internal church debates (19 percent), new outreach ministries (19 percent), and the changing demographic profiles of churches (20 percent). Even more striking, they accounted for 38 percent of all discussions on the relationship between science and religion, and 41 percent of discussions of new religious movements. News magazines provided a plurality of the coverage for both of these topics, outstripping their daily counterparts in both newspapers and TV newscasts.

SPIRITUAL FOCUS OF RELIGION NEWS

One aspect of the topical focus of news has special significance for religious coverage. Every religion has a body of beliefs and practices that influences the attitudes and behavior of its members in the public and private spheres. To determine whether this crucial dimension of religion was reflected in the coverage, we noted whether any aspect of theology or spirituality was included in each discussion of religion.

We were especially interested in whether reported beliefs were connected to the actions or positions taken by a particular religious group. For example, to explain fundamentalist Christian opposition to abortion, a reporter might reference believers' literal interpretations of the Ten Commandments. Buddhist opposition to the Vietnam War might be connected to the teachings of Buddha on violence. A religious group might demand greater social services for the poor based on the Biblical story of Sarah's hospitality.

For example, a *Time* article profiled Bill Bright, the head of the Campus Crusade for Christ. The article traced Bright's belief "that Christians must carry out Christ's message to his followers to 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'" It also cites the "four spiritual laws" on which his organization's evangelical activities are based: "Law 1: God loves you and offers you a wonderful plan for your life. Law 2: Man is sinful and separated from God. Law 3: Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin... Law 4: We must individually receive Jesus Christ as savior and Lord: then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives." (*Time*, 1/3/77).

The results of this analysis are summarized on Table 8. Overall, we found almost no consideration of theology in the media's coverage of religion. Out of the 3,144 discussions we coded, fully 93 percent contained no spiritual dimension. Further, theological referents were disproportionately connected to non-Christian religions with a small membership in this country. Chief among them were Eastern religions, for which 26 percent of discussions contained references to religious beliefs. Discussions of Islam mentioned such beliefs 19 percent of the time, and 11 percent of discussions of new religions contained a spiritual dimension.

In contrast, America's predominant Christian faiths – the Protestant and Catholic churches – were far less likely to have their beliefs noted as part of the news coverage. The beliefs or doctrines of these two groups were referenced only 5 percent of the time. The rate was 6 percent for Orthodox groups and 7 percent for those in the "other" (non-Christian) category. Compared to Protestants and Catholics, those categorized as "other Christians" fared better, with twice the proportion of spiritual references (13 percent).

One of the rare examples of a news story that explored the theological rationale for a mainstream church's position on a social controversy appeared in a *Washington Post* article on the Catholic Church's refusal to ordain women as priests. The article quoted extensively from a Vatican doctrinal statement: "Christ was male; the priest in celebrating the Eucharist functions as a stand-in for Christ... Christ did not call any women to become part of the 12 [apostles].... The apostles, the early fathers of the church, did not ordain women to the priesthood." (*Washington Post*, 1/28/77)

TABLE 8
PERCENT OF COVERAGE WITH SPIRITUAL FOCUS

By Religion	
Eastern religions	26
Islam	19
Other Christian	13
Judaism	12
New religious movements	11
Orthodox	6
Protestant	5
Catholic	5
By Outlet	
New York Times	6
Washington Post	5
News magazines	32
Television News	1
By Time Period	
1970's	9
1980's	3
1990's	8
All Coverage	7

One possible explanation for this disparity is the comparatively exotic nature of some religions, including Christian groups that are outside the mainstream in terms of the number of adherents. Reporters may feel the need to explain the tenets of Eastern faiths, Islam and new religious movements to an uninformed audience that has little or no experience with such groups. For example, *Time* described the spiritual basis of an Eastern sect attracting American adherents: “The core of Suma Ching Hai’s teachings is what she calls Quan Yin meditation. It involves no chanting, no mantras, but a contemplation of the inner sound stream.... [Her] lectures are laced with Taoist, Buddhist and Christian references.... She denies she is an incarnation of the Chinese goddess of mercy.” (*Time*, 1/20/97)

Conversely, such explanations may be deemed unnecessary for the mainstream Christian faiths that claim the great majority of Americans as members. Yet this presumes that people are aware of how different Christian traditions influence the positions taken by their churches on various issues. The absence of references to spirituality in news coverage may marginalize the role of faith, both individual and institutional, in the public sphere of debate.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

Despite the overwhelming tendency of religious news to bypass any theological aspect of the topics covered, there were sharp differences in this regard among the various news genres. The news magazines were about six times as likely as the newspapers to inject discussions of spirituality within their coverage. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of all news magazine stories

explored the spiritual dimension of the topic at hand, compared to only 6 percent of discussions in *The New York Times* and 5 percent in the *Washington Post*.

Indeed, despite accounting for only 6 percent of the overall coverage, the news magazines contained a plurality of all coverage that focused on the spiritual side of any topic – 79 discussions in all, compared to 75 in the *Washington Post* and 71 in *The New York Times*. At the other end of the spectrum, the television news shows considered the spiritual dimension of a story only twice, accounting for less than one percent of their religion coverage.

SOURCES IN THE NEWS

The topics covered by the media represent a broad outline of how religion is presented to the news audience. But it is equally important to determine who supplied the information for these stories. To measure this dimension of the coverage, we identified every named identified source who provided information or commentary. We then categorized these sources in terms of their religious or secular affiliations and, for religiously affiliated sources, their status or as a member of the leadership hierarchy or the laity. The results appear in Table 9.

Not surprisingly, individuals with religious affiliations dominated the source list. Among 7,240 named sources, nearly three-fifths (59 percent) were members or leaders of some religious group. An additional 10 percent were federal, state or local government representatives. Five percent were experts on religion, such as professors of theology. The remaining 26 percent of sources were an eclectic mix of business people, advocacy groups, foreign government officials and other individuals not connected to particular religions.

Although Protestantism was the most frequently discussed faith, Catholics topped the list of sources with 1,617; Protestants followed in the number two spot with 1,546. These two groups alone accounted for 69 percent of all religiously affiliated sources. Each of the remaining religions accounted for 10 percent or less of all sources. In general, church leaders (including clergy) had a much stronger voice than lay members, accounting for three quarters (74 percent) of

TABLE 9 SOURCES (%)		
Protestant		21
Leaders	15	
Laity	6	
Catholic		22
Leaders	19	
Laity	3	
Other Christian		5
Leaders	3	
Laity	2	
Jewish		7
Leaders	4	
Laity	3	
Other Religions		4
Leaders	2	
Laity	2	
Government Officials		10
Experts		5
All Other		26
Total		100%

religious sources.

Nonetheless, there were important distinctions in this regard among the different faiths. In reporting on Jews and Christians, the media relied heavily on leaders. In contrast, lay members dominated among those minority religions that were more likely to have their spirituality discussed in news stories. For example, among the sources connected to Eastern religions, 68 percent were lay members, as were 59 percent of Islamic sources. For new religious movements, sources were fairly evenly divided – 53 percent were leaders and 47 percent were lay members.

We found the opposite pattern for religions with a longer history in this country. A striking 85 percent of Catholic sources were leaders, more than five times the rate for Catholic laity (1,373 versus 244 citations). Our definition of leaders included priests and sisters, even though the latter are technically considered lay by the official church. (In adopting this approach, we followed the media's tendency to treat women religious as distinct from other lay Catholics.) Among Protestant sources, 72 percent were leaders, over twice the total for lay Protestants (1,099 versus 447). The gap was smaller for other Christian groups, but leaders still dominated by 61 percent versus 39 percent. Similarly, among Jewish sources, 58 percent were leaders.

CHANGES OVER TIME

In light of the relative decline in coverage of Protestant and Catholic churches over time, it should come as no surprise that the leadership of these religious groups (including priests and ministers)

played a smaller role in the sourcing of news stories as time went on. Citations of Protestant leaders declined from 20 percent of all sources in 1970s to 14 percent in the 1980s and 13 percent in the 1990s. The decline among Catholics was even stronger. The Catholic hierarchy accounted for 26 percent of all quotes in the 1970s, 21 percent in the 1980s, and 14 percent in the 1990s, just over half the sourcing rate from two decades earlier.

When grouped together as representatives of the numerically and historically predominant religions in the United States, the voices of the Protestant and Catholic leaders accounted for nearly half (46 percent) of all sources cited in religion news during the 1970s. That total dropped to just over one-third (35 percent) of sources in the 1980s and one-quarter (26 percent) of sources in the 1990s. At the same time, lay members of these same churches slightly increased their role in sourcing, rising from a combined 8 percent of sources in the 1970s to 10 percent in both the 1980s and 1990s.

The only group of sources whose representation increased substantially over time was that of government officials. They appeared more frequently in religious news as issues involving the relationship between church and state become more prominent. Government officials rose from only 5 percent of sources in the 1970s to 10 percent in the 1980s and 13 percent – one out of every eight sources quoted in religious stories – in the 1990s.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

There were no distinctive source profiles among the various news genres, and the few distinctions that did exist stemmed from the differences in topical focus discussed above. For example, *The New York Times* accounted for a majority (52 percent) of Jewish leaders quoted in religious news, a reflection of its relatively heavy coverage of Jewish affairs. And the orientation of the news magazines toward broad topics and trend stories was reflected in their relative reliance on religious scholars and other experts as sources. The news magazines accounted for one-third (33 percent) of all such sources in the sample.

THE ISSUE DEBATE

The coverage of ideas involving religion cannot be assessed fully from the number of stories or the distribution of topics and sources. We must also examine how the news presents controversies and debates over religious institutions and doctrines, along with their relationship to major social, political and economic issues. To understand how the policies and teachings of religious institutions are viewed in the media, we analyzed all opinions given by sources or reporters on issues that related to religion and its role in American life.

For an opinion to be included, it was necessary for a source or reporter to make a clear appraisal of a policy or action. Since many controversies elicited only occasional opinions, our analysis here is limited to five clusters of issues that attracted the most media attention: Sexual morality, church-state relations, church governance, women's issues and minority issues.

To appreciate the significance of our findings on issue debates in religion coverage, it is important not to lose sight of the parameters of this study. We tabulated the opinions that were printed or broadcast on social and political controversies only insofar as they were referenced in news stories dealing with religion. Thus, our results represent only a partial account of the overall coverage of broader debates that contain a religious component.

The most frequently debated dimension dealt with religion's role in matters of sexual morality. This category included views on abortion, extramarital sex, the use of artificial birth control, and

homosexuality. A second dimension dealt with the relationship between religion and the state. Included in this grouping were conflicts over the role of prayer and other religious activities in public schools, the use of state funds for religious schools, the display of religious symbols on public property, and whether clergy should serve as elected officials. This category also contained remarks on the broader question of the separation of church and state, as well as church policies regarding war and military defense.

A third cluster of viewpoints referenced internal power relations and governance within and among religious structures and institutions. The issues grouped together in this category included such questions as how much power the laity should exercise, whether churches tolerate diverse opinions among their members, and the desirability of mending ideological rifts within or among different faiths.

A fourth dimension dealt with women's issues. This category contained the debate over women's ordination and the question of how much progress women have made within religious institutions and in the larger society. The final dimension addressed in this report focused on the status of racial and ethnic minorities. This section dealt with the question of whether minorities are treated equally in society, and what role religion should play in fighting racism. Within this dimension we also examined debates over how well minorities fare within religious institutions and whether their role should be expanded.

As Table 10 shows, the largest group of opinions concerned matters of sexual morality. We

TABLE 10
NUMBER OF OPINIONS BY ISSUE AREA

Sexual Morality	377
Church - State Relations	275
Women's Issues	212
Church Governance	109
Minority Issues	95

coded 377 opinions on religious teachings regarding sexual matters, accounting for 35 percent of all opinions in the five major issue areas. Church-state relations were the next most frequently discussed dimension. There were 275 opinions on this group of issues in our sample, representing a quarter (26 percent) of all viewpoints.

Women's issues were third in frequency, comprising 212 opinions, or 20 percent of the total. Fourth on the list were matters of church governance and interfaith relations. The 109 opinions in this category accounted for 10 percent of the total. Completing our five clusters of viewpoints, with 95 opinions, were those related to racial and ethnic minorities. This set of viewpoints accounted for 9 percent of those we identified.

SEXUAL MORALITY

Overall, the views expressed on issues of sexual morality had a decidedly traditional or conservative bent. This trend can be seen in the data summarized in Table 11. The most frequently debated issue related to sexual morality was that of abortion. This category included attitudes towards the practice of abortion at all stages of pregnancy as well as debates over public funding and parental notification. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of the opinions on abortion supported the right to life position, versus 24 percent that upheld a woman's right to choose.

The pro-life views can be illustrated by a 1989 *Washington Post* article in which Archbishop Roger Mahoney presented the Catholic Church's position as being "fully committed to defend and protect the rights of the unborn." (*Washington Post*, 11/8/89) Five years later the *Post* presented an even stronger statement from the Pope: "It is not possible to speak of the right to choose when a clear moral evil is involved, when what is at stake is the commandment 'Do not kill!' Might this commandment allow of exceptions? The answer in and of itself is no." (*Washington Post*, 11/1/94)

Conversely, *The New York Times* presented a spirited defense of abortion rights by the Reverend Christine Grumble of the First Presbyterian Church: "I am pro-choice because I am Christian, not in spite of the fact." (*The New York Times*, 11/19/89) Similarly, a *Washington Post* piece (12/4/81) recounted why United Methodist leaders distinguished their position from the official teaching of the Catholic Church: "Because there may be extreme circumstances that warrant

TABLE 11
OPINIONS ON SEXUAL MORALITY

Extramarital Sex		
Tolerate	35	
Oppose	65	
	100%	n = 51
Abortion		
Pro-choice	24	
Pro-life	76	
	100%	n = 87
Homosexuality		
Tolerate	34	
Oppose	66	
	100%	n = 50
Homosexual Clergy		
Support	38	
Oppose	62	
	100%	n = 52
Birth Control		
Support	63	
Oppose	37	
	100%	n = 40
Divorce		
Tolerate	39	
Oppose	61	
	100%	n = 23

abortion, and because we do not believe that the Constitution of the United States should reflect a particular religious or sectarian point of view, we stand strongly opposed to a constitutional amendment designed to prohibit abortion.”

There was also strong support for the traditional view of many religions on homosexuality. Two-thirds (66 percent) of the 50 viewpoints criticized homosexual activity or same-sex unions, while only one-third expressed approval or tolerance of these practices. One critical view revealed how divisive this issue is for Christian groups. “A Greek Orthodox Archbishop has warned the National Council of Churches that his church will secede from the council if it admits a homosexual denomination: ‘They are completely un-Christian and contrary to accepted Christian ecclesiology.’”(*The New York Times*, 10/20/83)

Representing support for both homosexuality and same-sex marriages was a *Washington Post* report on a group of clergy who publicly promised, in a statement quoted in the paper, “to celebrate the rites of union with all couples, regardless of gender, as part of the pastoral responsibilities consistent with the gospel and spirit of Jesus Christ, entrusted to us by the United Methodist Church.” (*Washington Post*, 3/21/98)

Echoing the general condemnation of homosexuality, 62 percent of all opinions criticized the idea of permitting homosexuals to serve as priests or ministers. For example, a 1979 article cited a report prepared by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, which presented the church’s position that its members and officers are “not free to adopt a life style of conscious,

continuing and unresisted sin in any area of their lives. For the church to ordain a self-affirming practicing homosexual person to ministry would be acting in contradiction to its charter and calling in scripture.” (*Washington Post*, 6/1/79)

In contrast, a pro-ordination view was presented by a rabbi in a *New York Times* article: “Arguing for admission of gay rabbis was Rabbi Yoel H. Kahn of San Francisco who said Reform Judaism has always considered Jewish tradition in light of contemporary developments and knowledge. He said that today homosexuality was widely considered to be an unalterable feature of personality rather than a sin or mental illness.” (*The New York Times*, 3/26/86)

Among the Christian supporters of ordination were the Stone Catchers, a group that opposed the Presbyterian Church USA’s position barring sexually active singles from ordained leadership roles. Representing the Stone Catchers was the Rev. Bryant George, who said, “We dissent because the true purpose of this amendment is to exclude gays and lesbians from meaningful participation in the church. We believe this intent and act to be un-Christian.” (*Washington Post*, 5/19/97)

Another heated debate concerned the propriety and morality of extramarital sex (including both non-marital and adulterous sexual relations). Sources rarely expressed support for sexual activity outside marriage. Instead the debate revolved around whether extramarital relations should be condemned outright, or whether circumstances existed that justified a more tolerant or forgiving stance. Opinion split about two to one along these lines, with 65 percent of sources expressing

opposition and 35 percent arguing for toleration.

For example, a *New York Times* article emphasized the vehemence with which the New Testament gospels express disapproval of extramarital sex: "the term fornication is broadly used to describe sexual activity outside of marriage, with a warning of spiritual punishment to come to the unrepentant. In I Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul lists fornicators as among those groups who 'will not inherit the kingdom of God.'" (*The New York Times*, 9/27/98)

By contrast, a *Washington Post* article quoted a church elder who emphasized forgiveness in the case of President Clinton's admitted affair with Monica Lewinsky. "At the Way of the Cross Church of Christ on Capitol Hill, Elder Ronald Frazier told several hundred people gathered for services that Clinton, in many ways, is like the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts, when Paul was on a ship in a storm. 'It doesn't matter what the world says about President Clinton. If God says you are forgiven, you are forgiven and we forgive you. It doesn't matter what your situation is, Jesus is able to get on the ship and turn that situation around.'" (*Washington Post*, 9/14/98)

Of the 23 opinions we coded on divorce, only two in five (39 percent) found the practice to be morally acceptable. An example of the dominant view appeared in a *Washington Post* story on Pope John Paul's statement that, "...divorced persons who have remarried 'are unable to be admitted' to holy communion because 'their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist.'" (*Washington Post*, 2/16/81) Among those arguing for greater tolerance toward divorce was

Reverend Peter Gerety, who told the *Post*, "...the Church...must help people who are in pain, who have suffered from broken homes, and she must above all embrace them with the love of Christ."

(Washington Post, 6/22/79)

Coverage of artificial birth control methods bucked this conservative trend on sexual morality issues. Among the 40 opinions expressed on birth control, 37 percent were opposed, while 63 percent deemed it acceptable. Typical of the dominant view, which was often specifically Catholic, was a *New York Times* recount of an "apostolic exhortation" in which the Pope "condemned the practice of artificial birth control as a 'manipulation and degradation' of human sexuality. He said the church 'condemns as a grave offense against human dignity' all attempts by governments 'to attempt to limit in any way the freedom of couples in deciding about children.'"

(The New York Times, 2/16/81)

CHANGES OVER TIME

As might be expected in light of changing standards in American society, the balance of opinion on several of these controversies changed over time. However, the direction of the change was sometimes counterintuitive or based on atypical stories. For example, nearly three out of five sources (59 percent) who were quoted in the 1970s favored the use of artificial methods of birth control. Thereafter the balance of opinion was reversed, with only 22 percent of sources favoring artificial birth control methods and 78 percent opposed during the 1980s and 1990s.

Similarly, a majority (56 percent) of sources quoted during the 1970s argued that homosexuality was not morally wrong. This was an era that saw the rise of the Metropolitan community churches that welcomed homosexuals. The debate nearly disappeared during the 1980s, with only three sources quoted, but in the 1990s 76 percent of sources (26 out of 34) argued that homosexuality was indeed immoral. This resurgence of the debate reflected renewed battles of the propriety of ordaining homosexuals.

The only issue involving sexual morality that saw a liberalizing trend in opinion over time was that of extramarital sex. The controversy rarely arose during the 1970s and 1980s. When it did, however, extramarital sex was almost always condemned (89 percent opposition). But 82 percent of the opinions that were voiced on this issue appeared during the 1990s, when over two out of five sources (41 percent) voiced toleration (although not necessarily approval) of extramarital affairs.

Upon closer inspection, this change in perception turned out to be linked closely to one particularly newsworthy story – the White House sex scandal that dominated the nation’s news agenda throughout 1998. From 1990 through 1997, only 18 percent of sources expressed tolerance for extramarital affairs. In 1998, by contrast, opinion was almost evenly divided, with 48 percent expressing tolerance and 52 percent unconditional disapproval. Moreover, the 31 opinions expressed during that year alone exceeded the entire sum of judgments on this issue in the preceding 29 years of the study period.

Finally, because of the long-term controversy that has surrounded it, the issue of abortion is notable for the absence of any clear change in the balance of opinion. Anti-abortion views outnumbered expressions of support for abortion rights by roughly a three to one margin in each of the three decades included in the study. However, the amount of debate increased gradually over time, from 23 opinions in the 1970s to 27 in the 1980s and 36 in the 1990s.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

There were few differences among news outlets in the patterns of views expressed on such issues. For example, the predominance of pro-life over pro-choice views could be observed with little variation in *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the news magazines, and the network news shows. One exception to this rule was the debate over extramarital sex. A large proportion of the opinions quoted disapproved of extramarital sex in every genre except for television news, where opinion was split evenly between disapproval and toleration. Given the special circumstances noted above, however, this anomaly reflects the Clinton administration's ability to make its views heard on the evening news shows during the Lewinsky scandal, rather than any sexually permissive perspective on broadcast news.

CHURCH AND STATE

The second highest number of views concerned church-state issues. As Table 12 shows, opinions on some of these issues were more evenly divided than were those expressed on sexual morality. Overall, however, there was solid support for having religion play an active role in public life. For example, opinions in the news favored permitting prayer and other religious activities in public schools by 52 percent to 48 percent. The 129 opinions on this issue accounted for nearly half of all those dealing with church-state issues.

Supporting religious activities in public schools was John Stoors of the American Life Lobby. Defending the Equal Access amendment, which prohibits public schools from interfering with student-organized religious meetings outside class hours, Stoors told *Time* magazine, “It’s surprising that we had to grovel for the same rights already given to Communists, Nazis and chess clubs.” (*Time*, 8/13/84) In another story on school prayer, a board of education official took this bluntly sectarian view: “What I want to do is promote Christianity as the only true religion. This nation was founded to worship, honor and glorify Jesus Christ, not Mohammed, not Buddha.” (*Washington Post*, 5/17/97)

Similarly, of the 27 views on public funding for private schools, nearly three-fifths (59 percent) approved the use of such funds, while 41 percent were opposed. Illustrating the majority view, the *Washington Post* quoted the Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, superior general of the Jesuit

TABLE 12
OPINIONS ON CHURCH - STATE ISSUES

Religious expression in public schools		
Support	52	
Oppose	48	
	100%	n = 129
Public funding for private schools		
Support	59	
Oppose	41	
	100%	n = 27
Religious expression on public property		
Support	83	
Oppose	17	
	100%	n = 12
Church-state separation		
Is threatened	76	
Is not threatened	24	
	100%	n = 25
War/Nuclear weapons		
Accept	4	
Oppose	96	
	100%	n = 69
Clergy in elective office		
Support	46	
Oppose	54	
	100%	n = 13

order, who called the United States

One of the relatively few countries in the free world that does not provide government funds to enable parents to exercise their right to choose the education they want for their children...There seems to be awareness on some levels and in different parts of your country that equitable financing of privately sponsored schools which are competently conducted and non-discriminatory is an urgent matter of social justice. (*Washington Post*, 6/10/89)

On the other side of the issue, Rep. John Conyers of Michigan criticized efforts to “force the Government to fund religious organizations in the same way it funds secular activities, with an ultimate goal of supporting school vouchers and de-funding the public education system.”

(*Washington Post*, 3/5/98) Another voucher critic, Carole Shields of People for the American Way, phrased her opposition more succinctly: “Public money has to be for public use.”

(*Washington Post*, 5/2/97)

Another aspect of church-state relations deals with expressions of religious beliefs or displays of religious symbols on public property. Of the 12 opinions on this issue that appeared in news stories, ten favored bringing religion into the public arena. For example, a *New York Times* article quoted the Religious Freedom Amendment, which was sponsored by religious conservatives. The amendment stated, “The people’s right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed.” (*The New York Times*, 5/9/97)

In contrast, President Clinton represented the opposition to loosening the boundaries between church and state: “I do not believe that we should have a constitutional amendment to carve out

and legalize teacher or student led prayer in the classroom. I think that is inherently coercive in a nation with the amount of religious diversity we have in this country.” (*The New York Times*, 11/23/94)

Reversing this trend in the debate over the public expression of faith, three-quarters (75 percent) of the 24 sources who were quoted endorsed the idea that church activities or positions threaten the separation of church and state. Regarding specific actions by the state, virtually all (96 percent) of the 69 of opinions in the news challenged the legitimacy of war or the use of nuclear weapons. Condemnation of nuclear weapons was illustrated in a 1986 article in the *Washington Post*: “The United Methodist bishops unanimously took a position to all forms of nuclear war: ‘therefore we say a clear and unconditioned no to nuclear war and to any use of nuclear weapons.’” (*Washington Post*, 5/3/86)

Likewise, Bishop Leroy T. Matthiesen told the *Post*, “We beg our military to use common sense and moderation in our defense posture. We urge individuals involved in the production and stockpiling of nuclear bombs to consider what they are doing, or resign from such activities and seek employment in peaceful pursuits.” (*Washington Post*, 3/20/82) A more generalized critique of war was offered by the Pope in his 1990 Christmas message: “May leaders be convinced that war is an adventure with no return. By reasoning, patience and dialogue with respect for the inalienable rights of people and nations, it is possible to identify and travel the paths of understanding and peace.” (*The New York Times*, 12/26/90)

The one issue in the sphere of church-state relations that produced a fairly balanced split in opinion concerned the appropriateness of clergy serving in elected office. Of the 13 opinions that appeared, seven opposed this idea and six supported it. Illustrating opposition to clerical involvement in electoral politics was Bishop Louis E. Gelineau's reaction to the Pope's demand that Jesuit priest Robert Drinan resign his congressional seat: "I must agree with the (Pope), who considers the candidacy of priests and religious for political or public offices contrary to what the church expects of those chosen by Christ and dedicated to the church." (*Washington Post*, 1/28/84)

CHANGES OVER TIME

The only church-state issue on which the distribution of opinion changed significantly over time was the general question of whether politically-oriented religious activities pose a threat to the constitutional separation of church and state. During the 1970s, opinion on this issue was evenly divided. Thereafter, it shifted decisively in the direction of those who see such a threat. The proportion of opinions affirming a threat to church-state separation rose from 50 percent in the 1970s to 78 percent in the 1980s and 89 percent in the 1990s.

On several other issues involving the intersection of religion and politics, the debate was clustered in time periods that were dictated by broader legal and political debates. The most obvious of these was the profusion of sources voicing moral objections to nuclear weapons during the 1980s, in response to cold war tensions and the nuclear freeze movement. Five out of every six opinions

on nuclear weapons appeared during the 1980s, and almost all opposed their use, testing or deployment.

Similarly, support for religious displays in public areas was clustered almost entirely in the 1990s, in response to public controversies and court cases concerning this issue. Finally, the debate over prayer or other religious expression (such as Bible study groups) in public schools was concentrated in the 1990s. The number of opinions expressed on this cluster of questions rose from only 4 during the 1970s, to 19 in the 1980s, before skyrocketing to 106 in the 1990s. Despite this eruption of debate in recent years, the distribution of opinion has changed little over time, rising only from 48 percent support during the 1970s and 1980s to 53 percent support in the 1990s.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

In light of the *Washington Post's* focus on the world of politics, it is not surprising that this newspaper accounted for a majority (54 percent) of all viewpoints on church-state issues. In fact, the *Post* featured nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of all opinions expressed on three specific church-state matters: the public funding of private schools, opposition to war, and opposition to nuclear weapons. All these topics were the subject of political protests and legislative attention. *The Post's* coverage of these debates tapped into religious components in each case.

The only church-state issue to produce differences in the tone of coverage at the various news

outlets was that of prayer and other religious observances in public schools. Opinions expressed in *The New York Times* split nearly two to one (63 percent) in favor of permitting such activities. Conversely, a majority (56 percent) of opinions in the *Post* were opposed to public expressions of religious beliefs in this setting.

The distribution of viewpoints in the news magazines and on television was slightly more favorable than unfavorable, although the number of opinions coded was too low to permit any clear inference. Thus, on this issue, America's two leading newspapers presented opposite trends in opinion on a major religious controversy. However, this instance was the exception to the rule of similar coverage at different outlets.

WOMEN'S ROLES

Views on women's roles ranked third in frequency among the clusters of issues that we encountered. While traditional views dominated on matters of sexual morality, reformist positions prevailed on women's issues, as Table 13 demonstrates. Of the 212 opinions in this sphere, the great majority (68 percent) concerned ordination. Out of the 145 opinions on the ordination of women, 53 percent approved while 47 percent were opposed. Exemplifying support was Episcopal Bishop Kilmer Myers, who told *The New York Times* of his change of heart on the matter: "I speak as one who has long opposed ordination of women to priesthood. I have now come to the conclusion that our experience would be enriched by the ordination of women to priesthood." (*The New York Times*, 10/19/74)

Similarly, the Roman Catholic group Priests for Equality asserted that the exclusion of women from the priesthood "violates the justice we preach, frustrates the needs of our community for more adequate ministry and contradicts hearts of not a few women." (*Washington Post*, 7/25/75)

On the other side of this issue, the Catholic Church's official opposition to ordaining women appeared in a *New York Times* piece that quoted the Vatican Declaration on Women and the Priesthood: "... the church in fidelity to the example of the Lord does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination." (*The New York Times*, 1/28/77)

Support was even stronger on the more general issue of expanding women's roles in religious

TABLE 13
OPINIONS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Ordination of women		
Support	53	
Oppose	47	
	100%	n = 145
Role of women in church		
Increase role	83	
Accept current role	17	
	100%	n = 48
Role of women in society		
Increase role	68	
Accept current role	32	
	100%	n = 19

institutions. Of the 48 opinions quoted, 83 percent favored increasing women's power in the church, while only 17 percent expressed satisfaction with the status quo. Despite the official Catholic refusal to ordain women, Archbishop Leo Byrne said in a *Washington Post* article, "No argument should be used to exclude women from any service in the Church if it stems from male prejudice, blind adherence to merely human traditions that may have been rooted in the social position of women in other times, or questionable interpretations of scripture." (*Washington Post*, 10/23/71)

Similarly, an article on sisters working to widen their role in the church quoted one who believes, "that women should have a clear position in the church. Jesus did not exclude people because they were female. To deny women the right to bring out the best within them is not to follow the gospel." (*The New York Times*, 12/27/92) Liberal views also held sway on the question of women's progress in society. Over two-thirds of the 19 opinions (68 percent) favored expanding their roles, while the remainder thought women had made sufficient strides.

CHANGES OVER TIME

The debate on women's roles saw the reverse of the trend on church-state relations. Opinion clustered heavily in the 1970s and nearly disappeared during the following decades. For example, the heated debate on women's ordination in the Catholic church produced 89 opinions in the 1970s, compared to 29 opinions in the 1980s and 27 in the 1990s. Overall, five out of eight opinions on the role of women (62 percent) were voiced during the 1970s. Despite this

slackening of opinion, supporters of women's ordination held a slight majority in each of the three decades.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS NEWS OUTLETS

The only significant variation by outlet in this issue area concerned the ordination of women.

Most opinions appeared in the two newspapers, which produced similar distributions of opinion.

At *The New York Times*, 54 percent of sources supported the ordination of women and 46 percent rejected it. At the *Washington Post*, the split was 60 percent in favor and 40 percent opposed. In the news magazines and on television, however, the tilt was in the opposite direction. Six out of seven sources in the magazines and eight out of nine on TV news rejected the ordination of women, for a combined rejection rate of 88 percent. Despite the small number of sources involved, it is still unusual to see such a difference in the balance of opinion from one genre of news to another.

MINORITY ISSUES

Dissatisfaction with the status quo that surfaced in news coverage of women's roles extended to the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities. This pattern of opinion is clear from the data presented in Table 14. The coverage encompassed three distinct areas of debate – the status of racial minorities in American society, the appropriate response of religious institutions to this situation, and the role of minority groups within religious structures. Of the 95 views expressed on some aspect of this issue, 85 percent supported increased rights for minority groups.

First, every one of the 28 sources who commented on the status of minorities in the larger society asserted that these groups are denied equal treatment or that their rights should be expanded. In one especially poignant instance, the death of John Paul I soon after his election was seen as a sign of divine displeasure over racial injustice: "The man is saying something to us. He's telling us to get right with him. There's too much racism, too much double-crossing and all going on," said Robert L. Robinson of the Black Catholic Lay Caucus." (*Washington Post*, 9/29/78)

Likewise, every one of the 21 opinions on the part religion should play in securing minority rights affirmed an active role for churches in combating racism, discrimination and intolerance. For example, *Time* featured a program developed by the Archdiocese of Chicago "to help Roman Catholics confront racism in their community, long considered the most racially segregated big northern city and recently the scene of racial tensions. 'We want to get all Catholics engaged in

TABLE 14
OPINIONS ON THE ROLE OF MINORITIES

Role of minorities in society		
Increase role	100	
Accept current role	0	
	100%	n = 28
Church's role in change		
Increase role	100	
Accept current role	0	
	100%	n = 21
Role of minorities in church		
Increase role	78	
Accept current role	22	
	100%	n = 46

thinking about the racism problem and facing their moral issue,' said the Rev. Thomas Hickey, who chairs the Priests Senate Social Ministry Committee." (*Time*, 7/1/96)

In an even more dramatic gesture of racial healing, the Christian Coalition pledged a million dollars to help rebuild black churches allegedly burned by racists. Then-Coalition head Ralph Reed "acknowledged that white Evangelicals had often been 'on the wrong side' of the civil rights struggle: We come with broken hearts, a repentant spirit and ready hands to fight this senseless violence." (*Time*, 7/1/96)

The final question dealt with the position of minorities within religious structures. On this issue 78 percent of the 46 viewpoints agreed that minorities do not yet enjoy full equality in religious institutions, while the remaining 22 percent thought minorities had made progress in those institutions or were treated better there than in other sectors of American society. Reflecting the majority opinion was Sister Thea Bowman, who told Catholic bishops "that blacks will remain 'second-class citizens in the Holy City' until they share in the leadership of the church. Church leaders from bishops on down, she said, fail to consult blacks about decisions that will affect the black community for years to come." (*Washington Post*, 6/14/89)

CHANGES OVER TIME AND BY OUTLET

The pattern of changes over time was almost identical to the one we encountered on the status of women. Opinions were clustered to an even greater degree on minority issues in the 1970s, with

fully two-thirds of all viewpoints (67 percent) voiced in that decade. As with women's issues, however, we found no changes over time in the generally strong support for a more inclusive approach to minorities within both religious institutions and in the larger society. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the tone of opinions that appeared in the different news outlets.

CHURCH GOVERNANCE AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Although issues of church governance and interfaith relations were covered more infrequently than church-state relations, conflicts over power and authority in all major institutions are intrinsically newsworthy. In our study, this thematic dimension consisted of debates over ecumenical outreach and internal authority within religious institutions. The results appear in Table 15.

About a quarter (24 percent) of the opinions in this sphere addressed the desirability of mending doctrinal rifts between factions or among different faiths. The bulk of opinions on this issue (81 percent) approved of pursuing reconciliation. For example, Patriarch Aleksy II of the Eastern Orthodox Church told *The New York Times*, “the future belongs to a united Orthodox church in America. That is my profound conviction.” (*The New York Times*, 11/25/91)

Further, most sources also thought progress had been made on the ecumenical front. Two-thirds of the views expressed on this point were sanguine versus a third who said progress had not been made. This question alone accounted for over half (53 percent, n=58) of all opinions we coded on the issue of church governance. Among the optimistic assessments offered was one by then-Archbishop Joseph Bernardin on the recommendation by a joint Anglican and Roman Catholic commission that the two churches be united under the supreme authority of the Pope. Bernardin “hailed the document as ‘a cause for rejoicing among those involved in the quest for that unity

TABLE 15
OPINIONS ON CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Doctrinal Rifts		
Support mending	81	
Accept differences	19	
	100%	n = 26
Ecumenical efforts		
Are progressing	67	
Not progressing	33	
	100%	n = 57
Laity influence		
Increase role	89	
Accept current role	11	
	100%	n = 9
Diverse opinions		
Authorities tolerant	31	
Authorities intolerant	69	
	100%	n = 16

Christ willed for the church.” (Washington Post 1/9/77)

Opinion on internal authority relations showed support for greater diversity and democracy within religious institutions. Eight out of nine views advocated a greater voice for the laity in decision-making, while only one opinion registered approval of the laity’s current status. Indicative of the dominant view was Dean Hoge, a sociologist at Catholic University of America who told *The New York Times*, “In the old days, it felt natural that the clergy ran the whole show....But it doesn’t feel natural to the American Catholic laity anymore.” (*The New York Times*, 11/6/94)

Dissatisfaction with the status quo was also reflected on attitudes towards doctrinal differences.

11 out of 16 opinions (69 percent) characterized religious authorities as intolerant of opinions that clash with institutional doctrines, while only five opinions portrayed them as tolerant. Indicative of dissatisfaction with theological uniformity was this excerpt from *U.S. News and World Report*:

What concerns dissident parishioners of Christian Science church more than anything else is the atmosphere of repression they perceive in their church, marked by threats of dismissal and even excommunication directed at employees who openly criticize church leaders or their decision. ‘It’s creating a polarization that I never thought I’d live to see in this church,’ says Brooks Wilder, who resigned as general counsel earlier this year, in part to protest church leaders’ “intolerance of constructive criticism.” (*U.S. News & World Report*, 11/6/89)

In sum, the debates over interfaith and intrachurch relations came down mostly on the side of support for greater tolerance of diversity and power sharing by religious institutions.

DIFFERENCES OVER TIME AND BY OUTLET

As with issues involving women and minorities, though to a lesser degree, the debate over church governance was heaviest during the earliest years of our sample period. A majority (52 percent) of all opinions on church governance and power relations were expressed during the 1970s. However, there were no significant shifts in opinion over time on this cluster of issues.

All news outlets in the study shared the tilt in opinion toward ecumenical outreach and increased influence by the laity. What is notable is the degree to which this opinion debate clustered in *The New York Times*, where 71 percent of all opinions appeared. Television news was at the other end of this spectrum. In the entire three decades covered by the study, we never encountered a viewpoint on any church governance issue expressed in a TV newscast.

CHARGES OF WRONGDOING

Thus far we have considered what might be called the “issue debate” that was presented in the coverage of religion. This consists of evaluative statements in the news indicating either criticism or support for a variety of beliefs and practices. However, there was one distinct area of debate that revolved around questions of right and wrong rather than opinions pro and con. This last area involved various charges of wrongdoing by clergy and the ways in which churches responded to these situations.

We focused not only on questions of individual guilt or innocence but also on the linkage of the alleged wrongdoing to religious institutions, as well as the question of whether the institutional response to such cases was sufficient. Even in this relatively narrow context, charges of wrongdoing generated more debate than two of the five major areas of contention discussed above – those involving women and the treatment of minorities. The results are presented in Table 16.

The sample contained 151 charges of wrongdoing, which can be divided into five categories. Among these, the single largest group – 34 percent – involved sexual crimes. These included pedophilia, any unwanted sexual contact and sexual harassment. For example, *The New York Times* reported the case of the Rev. Robert Robertson and his wife who “would conduct a regular Bible class in their church, and then line up the children downstairs with selected adults to have

TABLE 16
CHARGES OF CRIMES AND WRONGDOING (%)

By Charge	
Sexual misconduct	34
Financial misconduct	22
Child neglect	18
Drug violations	11
Other	15
	100%
By Outlet	
New York Times	52
Washington Post	30
News Magazines	9
Television News	9
	100%
By Time Period	
1970's	9
1980's	18
1990's	73
Total	100%
Number of charges	151

sex.” (*The New York Times*, 4/10/95)

In another abuse case involving a cleric, *The New York Times* reported that Catholic priest Rudolph Kos was suspended after being charged with sexually molesting four young men “who told police they were molested about 1,350 times.” (*The New York Times*, 3/25/98) A different type of sexual impropriety was detailed by a clergywoman on the “NBC Nightly News” (NBC, 12/1/90): “The kinds of sexual harassment that disturb me more are the actions of my brother clergy, who seem to offer unsolicited looks, touches and comments to the more attractive clergywomen fairly frequently.”

Another 22 percent of these instances concerned financial crimes such as fraud or embezzlement. A notorious recent case involved the Rev. Henry Lyons, head of the National Baptist Convention, USA. He was served an 82-page arrest affidavit of charges on racketeering and grand theft, as *Time* reported. (*Time*, 3/30/98)

Financial improprieties were compounded by charges of mind control in a case involving a campus ministry sponsored by the International Churches of Christ: “Former members of the church say that the group took their money and brainwashed them. The group has been banned at several campuses.... Church leaders say they are just ‘extra loving and extra caring’ and that their actions are misrepresented by religious groups that are jealous of their ability to appeal to young adults.” (*The New York Times*, 11/30/94)

The third category of wrongdoing was child neglect, which constituted 18 percent of all charges.

Among them was a report of a Christian Science couple who were “fined \$5000 each and ordered to serve 300 hours in volunteer community service work after being convicted of child endangerment for relying on prayer instead of medical treatment for their eight-month old daughter, who died of meningitis in 1984.” (*Washington Post*, 11/11/89) Another 11 percent of charges referenced drug violations, while the remaining 15 percent involved a variety of other crimes. Drug-related incidents included one in which a priest was arrested for sale and possession of crack after being discovered smoking a crack pipe while typing a sermon. (*The New York Times*, 1/19/97)

The church’s role in handling these charges was rarely addressed . This dimension was absent in the coverage of 88 percent of these cases. When the media did raise this issue, it was almost exclusively with regard to sex crimes. Three-quarters (76 percent) of statements that assessed the church’s role concerned sex crimes. Among the 12 percent of discussions that referenced the church’s role, all but one criticized its reaction. The sole case that garnered approval dealt with child neglect.

The Catholic Church was a frequent target of criticism for failing to address the problem of sexual exploitation by its priests. For example, a *Time Magazine* reporter labeled the U.S. Bishops “sluggish” in their reaction to a scandal in Fall River, Massachusetts. In that case, 68 lay members accused the diocese of ignoring their charges that a cleric abused them during the 1960's. (*Time*, 12/14/92) *The New York Times* reported another case involving the Church’s failure to act: “A

man said in undisputed court testimony that he had been abused by Rev. Adamson. The plaintiff and his parents said that the archdiocese and the diocese showed indifference by failing to remove Father Adamson from duty despite knowing his 20-year history of abusing boys.” (*The New York Times*, 12/9/90)

DIFFERENCES OVER TIME AND BY OUTLET

Among all the areas of controversy that we examined, charges of wrongdoing were the most heavily concentrated in one time period. The number of reported instances rose from only 13 in the 1970s to 28 in the 1980s, before soaring to 110 in the 1990s. That means that nearly three out of four charges of wrongdoing that were reported over the last three decades (73 percent) occurred during the 1990s. The concentration was heaviest in the realm of sexual misconduct. All but five of the 51 charges of improper sexual conduct (90 percent) appeared during the final decade of the study period.

Charges of clerical wrongdoing appeared most frequently in the pages of *The New York Times*. Although overall religion coverage was greater in the *Washington Post* (which carried 49 percent of all stories, compared to 35 percent that appeared in the *Times*), these proportions were nearly reversed for reported charges of all of crime and misbehavior. The *Times* contained a majority (52 percent) of all charges, compared to only 30 percent in the *Post*. The remainder were split evenly between the news magazines and the network news shows at 9 percent apiece.

WHERE'S THE NEWS?

One of the oldest adages of journalism is that a story should convey the four “w’s” of a newsworthy topic – the what, when, where and why. Thus far this study has focused on the “what” and “when” of religion news – what the news audience could learn about religion and when they could have learned it over the past three decades. The “why,” which examines the news product but not the production process, is beyond the scope of this study. That leaves the question of “where.” Specifically, does the content of religion news vary according to the place in which it appears?

We have already addressed this question in part, in our analysis of differences in news genres – television, newspapers, and magazines. Aside from the nature of the organization that produces the news, however, two additional aspects of where a story is located may influence its reception and impact. These factors are those of prominence and subject matter. First, do the most prominently placed religion stories, which presumably attract the largest and widest audience, differ in any measurable manner from other stories on religion? Specifically, do front page or lead stories differ from those on the inside pages or in the “back of the book”?

Second, do the stories featured on the religion pages differ from those appearing in either general news or other topical sections, e.g., a story on the Fellowship of Christian Athletes that appears in a sports section? We shall consider in turn the most prominently displayed religious news and the news that appears in a section or page devoted to religion. (Television was excluded from this

comparison, since topics are not catalogued for viewers. In any case, religion coverage has only rarely been treated as a separate beat on network news.)

The most obvious indicator of news prominence is whether an item is located on the front page of a newspaper, featured on the cover of a news magazine, or chosen as the lead story in a television newscast. (We will use the shorthand term “front page” news to refer to lead placement in all three formats.) The most notable characteristic of front page religion news is how little we found. Only four percent of all religious news items – one out of every 25 – were prominently placed. This figure reflects only one percent of television newscasts and three percent of magazine covers, and four percent of all newspaper articles.

Apart from their scarcity, the content of front page stories resembled that of all other religion news on most measures of tone and focus. The major exception to this overall pattern was the heightened visibility of the Catholic Church. Discussions of some aspect of Catholicism accounted for 41 percent of all front page news, compared to only 28 percent of religious news overall. The relative prominence of Catholicism came at the expense of stories about Protestantism and Judaism. The Protestant churches collectively accounted for nearly a third (32 percent) of all religious news, but only a quarter (25 percent) of front page news. Similarly, 12 percent of religious news was devoted to the Jewish faith, but only 9 percent of front page news about religion referenced Judaism.

In other respects, however, the content of front page news was less distinctive than one might

expect. It should come as no surprise that the mostly prosaic events collected under the rubric of "church news" were underrepresented in the most visible news slots. Such stories accounted for nearly one quarter (23 percent) of all news but only one eighth (12 percent) of front page news. Conversely, stories about the intersection of religion and politics were somewhat overrepresented, comprising one out of seven front page stories (14 percent) compared to one out of eleven (9 percent) overall.

More notable are the topics that might be expected to play a more prominent role in major religious news than they actually did. Such hot topics as reproductive issues, war and militarism, the Holocaust, the role of women and minorities, economic justice, dissent against church doctrines or practices, and codes of sexual conduct were not significantly more likely to make the front pages than were other topics.

For example, reproductive issues comprised 3 percent of all religious news and 4 percent of front page news. Issues related to women and minorities commanded 9 percent of the overall newshole and 10 percent of front page news. Internal dissent made up 2 percent of news overall but none of the front page discussions in the sample. Even the potentially inflammatory topic of crime and scandal news accounted for five percent of total coverage and six percent of front page coverage.

This pattern of slight differences in topical focus was echoed in the opinion debate. The general tone and balance of viewpoints across all coverage was typically duplicated in the most prominent stories. On this dimension, however, the lack of significant differences was partly attributable to

the relatively low number of opinions on most issues that appeared in front page stories. Of course, this in turn reflects the rarity of prominent stories in the sample. For example, the 51 viewpoints on extramarital sex included only two – both negative – in front page stories. The 50 judgments of homosexuality were negative by a two-to-one margin, including two out of the only three opinions that ran on the front pages.

When differences appeared, they were usually a matter of degree rather than direction. For example, coverage of the abortion debate featured pro-life opinions over three times as often as pro-choice views. In front page stories the opinion debate was more balanced, but the raw numbers still favored the pro-life position by a three to two margin. Similarly, opinion was almost evenly divided on prayer and other forms of religious expression in public schools: 51 percent of the 129 opinions expressed support, while 53 percent of those in front page stories (eight out of 15) were opposed.

This mosaic of topics and viewpoints is less notable for any particular differences than for the underlying uniformity that predominates throughout: Religious news that makes the front page differs little from stories placed elsewhere. As a result, casual readers are likely to get the same general picture of religious issues and events as are readers who seek out this news on the inside pages as well. But does the same uniformity hold true with regard to news that appears in special pages or sections devoted to religious news? The answer is yes, though with some qualifications.

Overall, dedicated sections contained one-quarter of all religious coverage. If religion sections

are distinctive in terms of their topical or issue focus, then the proportion of coverage of particular subjects appearing in these sections should differ significantly from this 25 percent benchmark. However, such differences were minimal. For example, proportional variations in the coverage accorded to different religions were minor. Protestant and Orthodox churches were slightly overrepresented, accounting for 30 and 29 percent respectively of all news in religion sections. Catholicism and Judaism were proportionately represented at 24 percent each.

Topical differences were greater and more varied, with many highly newsworthy issues underrepresented in religion sections. But these statistical differences can be traced to a single source – the predictable overrepresentation of the “church news” category in the religion pages. Thirty-seven percent of these mainly quotidian items were relegated to the religion pages. Since church news was by far the largest single news topic, its clustering on religion pages left most other topics underrepresented. In fact, the two topics of church news and individuals in the news combined to make up a majority (52 percent) of all religion section coverage, although they constituted only one-third (33 percent) of total coverage.

Three specific topics were among the most overrepresented in general interest and other sections, and therefore underrepresented in religious news sections. These were codes of sexual conduct (12 percent of religious section coverage, about half the overall average), charges of criminal and other ethical or moral misconduct (11 percent), and the relationship between religion and politics (8 percent, only one-third of the average for all topics). On the other hand, even some major areas of controversy appeared in the religion pages in rough proportion to their overall coverage.

Among them were the role of women and minorities, ecumenism, and reproductive issues.

Because religious news sections were tilted toward coverage of prosaic everyday events, they were correspondingly less likely to focus on debates over controversial issues. While comprising one-quarter of all coverage, they contained only one-sixth (17 percent) of the opinions on the two most frequent areas of controversy – sexual morality and the intersection of religion and politics. Religion sections also contained one-fifth (21 percent) of the opinions on church governance issues and about one-quarter (27 percent) of the views expressed on women's issues. The only major field of controversy to be overrepresented was the debate over race and minorities, on which 36 percent of all opinions appeared in the religion pages.

The relative paucity of opinions in religion sections often preclude meaningful comparisons with the opinion distribution in other sections. For example, the religion sections in the sample contained only one opinion each on controversies over extramarital sex and homosexuality, public funding for private schools with religious affiliations, and the practice of euthanasia. On views where the numbers were large enough to permit comparisons, the distribution of opinions in the religion pages usually reflected that of overall coverage. Examples include the abortion debate, school prayer, the ordination of women, and evaluations of ecumenical efforts.

Only rarely did opinions printed in the religion pages differ in tone from those appearing elsewhere. One such issue was divorce: six out of seven opinions in the religion pages expressed toleration of divorce or laws permitting divorce. Elsewhere, eight out of nine opinions criticized

either the practice of divorce or the ease with which it can be obtained. Another instance was the debate over artificial means of birth control. In the religion pages, six out of ten opinions argued in favor of permitting or encouraging the use of condoms, birth control pills, or other such means of preventing conception. Elsewhere in the same print outlets, by contrast, 71 percent of sources (17 out of 28) argued against such methods. However, such divergences were clearly the exception rather than the rule in religious news.

In sum, the placement of articles was the dog that didn't bark in our study. One might have expected to find differences in either the tone or topical focus of religious news that appeared on the front pages or in the religion sections. With the exceptions described above, however, we failed to find any consistent patterns of variation according to where the news appeared.

CONCLUSION

The broad reach and rich diversity of religion in America is reflected in the wide-ranging news coverage of personal faith and its institutional expressions. It is difficult to make meaningful generalizations that capture the many ways in which the major media have depicted this protean phenomenon over the course of three decades. Nonetheless, our systematic inquiry has identified a few broad themes that may provide the foundation for a clearer understanding of religion's media image.

If there is a single leitmotif in religious news, it is the media's tendency to emphasize the political elements of religious ideas and institutions. Events in this sphere of life tend to make news to the degree that they either intersect with public policy debates or illuminate authority conflicts involving religious institutions. Thus, the role of religion in politics and conflicts involving church governance are two of the most heavily covered areas of religious news.

Moreover, coverage of religion in politics has increased sharply over time (although church governance issues have attracted less attention in recent years). The role of religion in the struggles of women and minorities for greater influence has also attracted considerable attention. And issues involving sexual morality tend to revolve around how religious standards should influence legal and legislative dictates.

Conversely, theological and spiritual questions are rarely presented as newsworthy, either on their

own terms or in relation to broader social issues. In a recent column entitled "Religion and Politics," E.J. Dionne succinctly expressed the news judgment that underlies this exclusion. While covering the pope, he recalls, a frustrated colleague complained after reading through a packet of papal addresses, "There's nothing but religion here." (*Washington Post*, 12/28/99)

Even discussions of religious inputs into public policy debates only infrequently explore their theological rationale or spiritual foundation. Insofar as the spiritual dimension is treated as newsworthy, it is concentrated in coverage of relatively marginal or little-known faiths, presumably as a way of explaining tenets that might be unfamiliar to much of the news audience.

If religious news is often overlaid onto a political template, the result has produced no consistent partisan or ideological tilt. (With regard to all aspects of the issue debate, our findings apply only to the intersection of each issue with religious news. For example, much of the general news coverage on issues ranging from abortion to minority rights falls outside our sample.)

On questions of sexual morality, the predominance of opinion reaffirms traditional theological principles or conservative social standards on such hot-button issues as abortion, homosexuality, and extramarital sex. Only on the debate over artificial means of birth control are traditional views, frequently represented by Catholic doctrine, in the minority.

Similarly, several divisive issues involving the relationships between church and state are presented in ways that favor supporters of an active role for religion in public life. These include

long-running debates over prayer or other expressions of religious faith in public schools, the use of public funding for religiously affiliated private schools, and religious displays (such as Christmas creches) on public property.

In other major issue areas, however, opinion is more likely to favor positions associated with progressive politics, along with institutional changes that would make church structures more egalitarian or inclusive. Most prominent in this sphere are debates over the role of women and minorities vis-a-vis religious institutions. Most opinions in the news favor both increasing the influence of these groups within religious structures and the involvement of churches in assisting these groups in the society at large.

A similar set of values has informed much of the debate over authority relations within and among religious institutions. The balance of opinion consistently favors those who portrayed current church authorities as lacking tolerance of internal dissent, supporters of an increased role for lay members in relation to church hierarchies, and proponents of ecumenical outreach to overcome sectarian differences.

Finally, there have been significant changes in the coverage over time. One change that has produced controversy is a sharp increase in reports on changes of criminal and other forms of wrongdoing against clerics. Much of this coverage concerns sexual misconduct, and many of the charges were directed against Roman Catholic clergy.

In the larger landscape, however, the past decade has brought increased attention and a more diverse perspective on religious news. A sharp increase in coverage allowed journalists to cover faiths and developments that might once have escaped their notice, without significantly reducing their coverage of the main foci of religious news – Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, in that order. And despite an increase in politically orientated coverage, the proportion of stories referencing the spiritual dimension of religious news also increased from the previous decade.

It is impossible to determine definitively the degree to which the more extensive and diverse coverage in recent years reflects the changing play of events in religious life, as opposed to the media's increased attentiveness to those events. There is no empirical basis for sorting out these factors, since the very question of whether the number of newsworthy events has changed presumes a constant definition of what is newsworthy.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence to suggest that today's major media journalists may be more attuned to this sphere of life than their predecessors were. A 1980 survey, which is frequently cited in debates over news coverage of religion, found that only one out of seven major media journalists (14 percent) attended religious services as often as once a month, and fully half (50 percent) had no religious affiliation. When the survey was repeated in 1995, however, the proportion of those attending religious services at least monthly had more than doubled to 30 percent, and the proportion with no religious affiliation had dropped from 50 to only 22 percent. These results are summarized in Table 17. (Both surveys sampled from all eight outlets whose coverage is included in this study, along with the *Wall Street Journal* and PBS. In addition, the

TABLE 17 RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR OF NATIONAL MEDIA JOURNALISTS (%)						
Affiliation	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	None	Other	Total
1980	20	12	14	50	4	100%
1995	36	19	19	22	4	100%
Attended Services		Weekly	Monthly	Annually	Never	Total
1980		8	6	37	49	100%
1995		11	19	31	39	100%

Note: 1980 survey of *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS news divisions, N = 240;
 1995 survey of above outlets and *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Associated Press*, CNN, N = 242

Source: S.R. Lichter, L.S. Lichter, and S. Rothman, *The Media Elite* (New York: Hastings House, 1986); S. Rothman and A. Black, "Elites Revisited," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1999, Vol 11: No.2.

1995 survey drew from personnel at *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, CNN, and the Associated Press.)

Whatever the reasons for the expanding scale and scope of religious news, these trends in the coverage provide an important opportunity for journalists to evaluate their approach to covering this topic. The United States is by far the most religiously observant of all advanced industrial nations. Yet people of faith have often complained that the centrality of religion to everyday life in America is not fully reflected in the media images that shape the common culture of its citizens.

In recent years, religious faith and its institutional expressions have commanded greater attention in the national media newsrooms that set the tone for their profession. If this intensely personal yet inextricably communal sphere of human experience is to play a greater role in the national dialogue, journalists need to be aware of the content and consequences of the narrative they craft. The ephemeral events and deadline pressures that define their profession do not encourage self-reflection. But the dawning of a new millennium may be a propitious moment to step back and take stock of the ways their work conveys the experience of religion in America.

APPENDICES

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Among the many different faiths we studied, the Catholic Church had the most distinctive media profile. Its coverage frequently diverged from the overall pattern of religious news. In particular, the Church played a highly visible role in many of the most newsworthy controversies that defined coverage of religion. Although Catholicism accounted for 28 percent of all coverage, the Church was featured in a much higher proportion of discussions and debate on key divisive issues.

Thus, among the various topics of discussion, the Catholic Church was the subject of over three-fourths (76 percent) of coverage on reproductive issues and over two-thirds (70 percent) of coverage concerning the relationship between lay members and clergy of all faiths. The Catholic Church also accounted for nearly one-half the coverage of several other ongoing controversies, including internal church dissent (47 percent of all coverage), euthanasia (44 percent), and the Holocaust (44 percent). (Judaism accounted for most of the remaining Holocaust coverage.) Other areas in which the Church exceeded its benchmark of 28 percent include church governance issues (42 percent), codes of sexual conduct (40 percent), and war and militarism (40 percent).

The Catholic Church was even more heavily overrepresented in much of the opinion debate, especially sexual morality and gender relations. On most such issues, the distribution of opinion did not differ significantly from the overall patterns reported above, precisely because the Church accounted for so much of the total debate. This was most evident in the debate over sexual

Appendix I: The Catholic Church 1969 - 1998

morality. The Catholic Church was the subject of nearly three-fifths (59 percent) of all viewpoints expressed on this cluster of issues. Specifically, the Church dominated the debate over issues such as clerical celibacy (93 percent of all opinions expressed), artificial birth control measures (85 percent), the abortion debate (79 percent) and the appropriateness of divorce (74 percent).

Church representatives also played a distinctive role in the debate over extramarital sexual activity. One-third (35 percent) of all opinions on this issue expressed tolerance of extramarital sex. In contrast, only one out of the nine opinions (11 percent) identified with Catholic sources or doctrines expressed lenience toward extramarital sex. One other element of the Catholic media profile involved a sexual component: The Church was implicated in all forms of misconduct roughly in proportion to its overall coverage – 31 percent of all charges. But for sexual transgressions, over two-thirds of all charges (69 percent) were leveled against representatives of the Catholic Church.

The only debate over church-state relations that revolved mainly around Catholicism was the question of whether clergy should serve as elected officials. The Church accounted for 85 percent of all opinions expressed. Finally, although the Catholic Church did not figure as heavily in the debate over women's issues, but it was still overrepresented, accounting for 41 percent of all opinions. Contrary to our expectations, this result was not linked to the debate over women's ordination as priests. Protestant denominations accounted for the bulk of opinions on women's ordination. However, this was one of the few issues areas where Catholic viewpoints diverged

Appendix I: The Catholic Church 1969 - 1998

from those of other faiths. Opinions against women's ordination outnumbered those in support by 55 to 45 percent. In contrast, support exceeded opposition for all other faiths by 57 to 43 percent.

In addition to the ordination of women, Catholicism was central to other debates over the role of women in religious movements and in secular social institutions. This area included opinions on the status of women regarding property rights and workplace issues such as family leave, etc. The majority (55 percent) of opinions on such gender-related issues were connected to Catholic doctrine or Church representatives. These opinions fit the dominant pattern of liberal or progressive positions emphasizing women's rights.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

One area of religious news that has sparked repeated controversy is the coverage of faith-based communities that are variously identified as conservative Christians or the Christian Right. Such terms are used in the media to identify churches, denominations, and allied organizations that not only adhere to traditionalist theological doctrines with socially conservative implications but also actively promote those doctrines or values in the public policy arena. Further, despite the umbrella term “Christian,” this designation is usually applied to Protestant groups, apart from the mainline sects.

Although such terms are sometimes used loosely, we tried to identify a limited number of groups that are typically included in such definitions. Structuring our analysis in this way allows us to examine whether these groups share a distinctive media profile that differs in significant ways from that of other religions. Thus, our operational definition of the so-called Christian right was limited to Protestant groups that are both theologically conservative and politically active on behalf of socially conservative policies.

Some groups within this category were identified in the news under broad labels such as “evangelicals,” “fundamentalists,” “Pentecostals,” and “charismatics.” Among the specific denominations included were the Assemblies of God, Evangelical Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, and the Presbyterian Church of America, as well as more eclectic organizations such as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition and Promise Keepers. Our analysis excludes Christian

groups or denominations that share traditionalist theologies or socially conservative doctrines but generally do not engage in faith-based political activism. Such groups are Mormons (LDS Church), the Amish and Seventh Day Adventists. We also excluded religious groups that actively promote liberal or progressive causes.

Using this definition, we identified 259 discussions of conservative Protestant groups. This represents six percent of all religious coverage and 15 percent of all coverage about Protestants. To determine whether these groups shared a distinctive media profile, we noted where they exceeded the benchmark of six percent in various topical discussions and issue debates.

Coverage of conservative Protestants surpassed the six percent mark in four areas of discussion. Most prominently, these groups accounted for nearly one discussion in five (19 percent) regarding the relationship between science and religion. In two other areas of discussion, they accounted for 11 percent of all coverage, nearly twice what would be expected on the basis of their representation in the sample. These topics were the involvement of churches or religious organizations in politics, and internal church debates. The latter category included discussions of how religious precepts should influence secular social and political institutions.

The remaining area of discussion in which conservative Protestants were overrepresented highlights the controversy that this news coverage has sometimes generated. This is the category of crimes and other moral or ethical offenses. By cross-referencing this category against the specific charges of wrongdoing that we identified, we discovered that this debate clustered mainly

in the area of sexually-related offences. One out of six accusations of sexually-related wrongdoing (16 percent) was directed toward representatives of conservative Christian groups. Among the most prominent examples of this topic were charges of sexual misconduct involving televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker.

Conservative Protestants were represented disproportionately in the issue debate over extramarital sex. They accounted for nearly one quarter (24 percent) of all opinions on this topic, four times the rate of their overall coverage. Opinions that referenced conservative Protestant doctrines or representatives on this issue also differed significantly from those of other Protestant groups. Eight out of nine opinions from conservative Protestant sources (89 percent) expressed complete disapproval of sex outside marriage. In contrast, a majority (57 percent) of other Protestant sources expressed tolerant or forgiving views of individuals who engaged in some type of extramarital sex. As we noted in the main body of this report, much of the debated centered on a single case – that of President Clinton’s sexual behavior with Monica Lewinsky.

Conservative Protestants also figured disproportionately among sources who criticized homosexuality as immoral or unacceptable. In addition to accounting for 15 percent of all criticisms of homosexuality that appeared in the news, they were less likely than other Protestants to express tolerance or acceptance of this practice. Only one out of six opinions from conservative Protestants expressed tolerance, compared to over one out of three (37 percent) viewpoints from other Protestants.

Appendix II: The Christian Right 1969 - 1998

Conservative Protestants had a distinctive opinion profile on one other controversy – prayer and other acts of religious expression in public schools. While they were not overrepresented in the frequency of their opinions, they were much more likely than other Protestant sources to express approval or support for such practices. Two out of every three conservative Protestant sources endorsed the practice of school prayer or some other religious activity (such as Bible study groups) in public schools. By contrast, the vast majority (79 percent) of other Protestant sources rejected such practices. Apart from these controversies, few debates produced distinctive opinion profiles of conservative Protestants. In general, they resembled other Protestants in their opinion distribution on abortion, divorce, church-state issues, church governance, and the role of minorities and women.

In sum, the media profile of conservative Protestants provided no surprises with regard to their role in religious news. They diverged from other Protestants on a few controversial areas of sexual morality and the role of religion in public education and secular social institutions. But equally notable is the absence of a distinctive media profile on most major areas of religious news coverage. The sometimes strained relations between news organizations and conservative Protestants can probably be attributed to two major factors – their high-profile link to charges of wrongdoing and the broader coverage of social issues that are important to conservative Christians.

PERCENT OF COVERAGE DEVOTED TO CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANT GROUPS

Topics

Science and religion	19
Political role of churches	11
Internal church debates	11

Opinions

Extramarital sex	24
Sexual misconduct	16
Criticism of homosexuality	15

<u>All coverage</u>	<u>6</u>
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