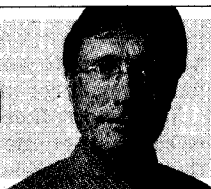


THE READERS' EDITOR ON... ISLAM AND THE MEDIA

Stephen Pritchard



With the tragedy of last week's hajj stampede, Pope Francis entering the climate change debate in the US and the archbishop of Canterbury considering loosening the ties of the worldwide Anglican communion, religion is never far from the news – but just how literate is the press when it comes to discussing matters of faith?

"The media's coverage of religion is a bit like covering football from the point of view of hooliganism and never really watching the game," said Michael Wakelin, former head of religion and ethics at the BBC, at a fascinating, though occasionally depressing day of discussion held in London recently on Islam and its treatment in British

broadcasting and newspapers. After years of conflict in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Muslims in Britain feel that they are too often associated with the crimes of extremists while too little attention is paid to the positive contribution they make to civic life or to the peaceful aims of their faith.

Understanding that faith – and indeed all faiths – is an urgent priority, said Wakelin, quoting Professor Adam Dinham of Goldsmiths University of London: "Billions of people around the world remain religious, despite the assumptions of secularity. Millions are in Britain, Europe and the west. After decades in which we have barely talked about religion and belief in public discourse, society has largely lost the ability to do so. Diversity, global trade and extremism make it pressing to do so now."

Wakelin maintained that a generation of neglect, with education failing the religious curriculum, the major religions failing to engage with the wider public – and the media not

understanding religion and therefore keeping it at arms' length – had resulted in a society that lacked the confidence to deal with religious subjects and religious people.

Inspired by the success of the Science Media Centre in transforming the way science is reported, he is now involved in setting up a religion media centre. "We do not want to promote religion or even say that it is a good thing, but we are wanting to have a recognition that it matters and therefore it needs to be reported, discussed and examined with knowledge, fairness and respect. And to carry on mocking it, misreporting it with unhelpful shorthand and careless choice of images, or pretending it is going to go away or that it is only of interest to people who are only intent on destruction is simply not going to wash any more."

Some of that mocking, misreporting and unhelpful shorthand is starkly evident in our media every day, and confirmed by Professor Tony McEnery and Professor Paul Baker of Lancaster

University. They have analysed some 220m words of coverage on Muslim matters published in the British press from 1998. Their latest research, commissioned by Muslim Engagement and Development and due to be published next month, spans the period 2010 to 2014, and while it reports some improvement in press discourse it indicates that many obvious faults remain.

Islam, for instance, is often wrongly portrayed as a single entity and while broadsheets tend to feature reporting of Islam-related war and violence overseas, tabloids focus on fears about the "Islamification" of the UK (with particular focus on child grooming – the *Mail*; burkhas and immigration – the *Express*; violence – the *Mirror*; fanatics – the *Sun*; and halal meat and poppy-burning – the *Star*).

Since 2010 there has been a small but significant increase in the positive portrayal of Muslim women, but the media continue to focus on them as

victims. The main argument against the veil, for instance, has changed from one of the oppression of women to difficulties surrounding communication with the veil wearer. (When tabloids continue to describe the veil as a shroud and veiled women as Daleks or Darth Vader, there is still a very long way to go.)

The day of discussion was organised to mark the 25th anniversary of the *Muslim News*, established, as its campaigning editor Ahmed Versi said when Muslims in Britain were crying out for a medium that would reflect back at them. "We were a nascent community, only just getting our voice heard," he said, identifying the burning of the *Satanic Verses* in the streets of Bradford as a pivotal media moment. "That act alone provided the iconic photograph that would join a gallery of negative imagery of Muslims, providing the optics to demonise the community that carry on until this day."

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