

RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND THE RELIGION MEDIA CENTRE

by Jonathan Elliott

For Lapidomedia.com

The Independent Press Standards Organisation wants to raise the levels of religious literacy in the media, step forward the Religion Media Centre, due for launch this year. It has laudable goals and impressive people behind it, but can it deliver? Jonathan Elliott investigates.

Question 1. A man wielding a knife attacks a woman in a park in London and attempts to behead her. He is arrested shouting "God is Great" in Arabic before the woman dies from her injuries. As a tyro reporter on a national tabloid, you find out that he is from Tunisia and attends the local mosque. You know it will make a fantastic headline and your news editor agrees. The paper is planning to run the story as an IS-inspired terrorist attack, with the implication that the man was a recently-arrived Tunisian migrant.

You then discover that the man had a long term diagnosis of schizophrenia, that he had attended the mosque only once and that he had come from Tunisia with his family several decades before. What do you do?

Question 2. You are the editor of a struggling regional title. You hear that an African-led church in your town has been served with a noise abatement order for loud worship on a Sunday because the mainly Muslim neighbours have complained to the council. All your reporters are overworked, none of them understands religious matters and the last time you reported a local controversy involving religious people, you never heard the end of it. Do you 1. report the story anyway, and take the risk or 2. run a picture spread on the church bazaar and rehearsals for the school nativity play?

These scenarios might well make up an examination paper for trainee reporters of the future, to test their awareness of religion in the lives of the people they report. But today, no such examination exists, nor any such training. Trainee reporters are rigorously drilled in libel law, shorthand and court reporting, but, once qualified, enter their profession oblivious to even the basics of belief or how religious institutions work.

To many, this is becoming an increasingly big problem. Secularisation in readerships and the public combined with lack of resources and nervousness about causing offence, mean that issues of belief are shunned in policy-making, the press and in public life. Religious literacy, not just in the media, but in professional development and human resources, healthcare, law and social care is rapidly becoming an important field of research and practice attracting resources and attention.

Professor Grace Davie, a long standing specialist in the sociology of religion at University of Exeter, points to two trends in the media specifically that should

be a cause for worry : the increasing prominence of religious debate in public life and the declining capacity of news (and other media) organisations to act as adequate forums. In short : there's more religion about, but the media is less interested in or able to report it accurately. She told Lapidomedia :

"Quite a lot of people look at the media and say there's tons more about religion and religion is dominant and they jump to the conclusion that religion is therefore ascendant, whereas in Europe, in this part of Europe, it's in decline. And it's that combination that we become more secular, but we talk more about the topic.... I think that's one reason we don't talk about it very well, because all the kinds of tools and concepts and narratives and sensitivities that you need to have a constructive conversation about faith are in decline, just when you need them most."

The good news is that the long-established Lapidomedia Centre for Religious Literacy in Journalism is being joined by new players in the field, all ambitious to address the problem of religious literacy generally and in the media, specifically. The bad news is : bringing about much needed change in reporting standards seems far from straightforward.

After years of development and fundraising, the much-anticipated launch of one initiative is in sight. The Religion Media Centre (RMC), will be an independent source of information for journalists - a one stop shop for reporters who need to get to grips with a story and quickly understand complexities they rarely have to deal with day to day. It will be housed in Goldsmiths, University of London [[url http://www.gold.ac.uk/](http://www.gold.ac.uk/)] and its development is under the collaborative stewardship of Professor Adam Dinham and its programmes director, Michael Wakelin.

Mr Wakelin told Lapidomedia that the RMC was set up at the instigation of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) [[url https://www.ipso.co.uk/](https://www.ipso.co.uk/)] and will be modeled on the highly regarded and very successful Science Media Centre (SMC) [[url http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/](http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/)], which has been running for 8 years. The SMC has a staff of 7 and currently enjoys an annual income of £576,000. Part of its success is down to the fact that it is entirely independent, there are no generous benefactors in, for example, big pharma, or energy companies pushing their agenda on climate change. Only £40,000 of its funding comes from government, the rest from donations from a wide variety of individuals and organisations and they're capped to 5% of its income.

The RMC has - in its funding structure - the same challenge, and arguably, its need to appear independent is even more pressing. As some news stories are energised by the perception of, for example, an Islam/west tensions, it has never been so important to be seen to be free of influence. At the same time, the RMC has to be trusted by all faiths, as well as a highly sceptical news media. So how to structure the funding to ensure this?

According to Michael Wakelin, the RMC currently has substantial in-principle commitments already in place but is looking for match funding from partners. "We are trying to get all our ducks in a row" Wakelin said. It seems a delicate balancing act is needed if the funding structure is to win the same trust enjoyed by the SMC.

Certainly the RMC enjoys wide support and impeccable credentials. It is an offshoot of a UK-based organisation, Coexist House [url <http://www.coexisthouse.org.uk/>], which in turn, has strong links to the US-based charity, the Coexist Foundation [url <https://www.coexist.org/>]. It was originally the idea of Dr David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge; and is supported in the UK by the Inner Temple, the Corporation of the City of London, the Victoria and Albert Museum. At its launch in 2015 with a £20-million fund-raising appeal, it was heralded as "one of the most significant interfaith centres in the world".

Even though it is still in a "without-walls" phase, it retains its ambitious goals - including an interfaith centre in London which will include a visitor centre, a space for exhibitions and performances, as well as supporting educational programmes and activities. It has recently forged strong links with EY [url <http://www.ey.com/gl/en/newsroom/news-releases/news-ey-launches-religious-literacy-training-program-for-organizations>] , the accounting and professional services firm formerly known as Ernst and Young. Last November, EY launched an online training programme "Religious Literacy for Organisations" with the assistance of Professor Dinham's Religious Literacy Partnership. It is aimed at improving religious literacy in the workplace.

The RMC has already in place, a constitution, charitable status, a business plan and a launch is planned in the summer. But the vital importance of credibility means being avoiding the appearance of being beholden to any single interest group.

"Its all about trust, our opinion is that journalists won't go near an organisation wearing any kind of faith badge, because immediately its suspicious, so its very important from our point of view that the RMC is neutral " Mr Wakelin said.

Even if the funding structure avoids, as the SMC has done, any questions over bias, the idea of a neutral advisory service on religion even as an idea presents problems for some observers. The writer and classical scholar Tom Holland, who is a trustee of Lapidomedia and a frequent speaker on religious literacy, questioned the ability of any organisation to offer a truly independent position on matters of faith. For him, the RMC's goal is fraught with difficulty.

"The pretence that people have that there is a neutral position, that somehow you can step out of this and be neutral, is a fantasy." he said "The idea of coexistence between religions is in itself a highly ideological position to take, one with which many believers, however you want to define them, would

disagree. It is a player in the religious jungle, it is not one standing outside it. Therefore any claim that it can offer objective, neutral, universally accepted definitions of what religion is about is equally arrogant in the extreme. It's deluded, utterly deluded."

Michael Wakelin is, however, entirely confident that the RMC will be able to provide a valuable point of reference that is free from accusations of partisanship, and differed from Mr Holland's view.

"Religious literacy is an entirely secular endeavour" he told Lapidomedia " its nothing to do with religiosity, in a sense, we're leaving God out of it, in a way - we're saying ' this is the sort of language that's used, these are helpful phrases which will get away from the lazy shorthand that seems to filter into journalism so often' "

The problem of independence and the ability to offer definitive information about religion, is further compounded by the many different agendas and constituencies of news organisations themselves. National tabloids paint in primary colours to millions, local community-focused papers write about people and institutions who all know each other. How each handles sensitive matters of faith varies greatly.

Professor Grace Davie points to the distinction between religious reporting in local newspapers and the national press. These are, in her view, category differences.

"The local media are much better than national media, local media report religious activities, do a Sunday column on what the churches are doing in the local town and they're more sympathetic, mainly because the journalists know the people they are writing about and when they come back next week next month for the next story, they need to have these guys on side."

Professor Davie believes that religious literacy in the national media is less evident because the distance between reader and journalist is greater.

"[local reporting] is a completely different set of relationships from the national media which ...is looking for the toxic and the negative. The [national] media are on a very different level and their goals are different, they want readership and the nitty gritty of religion is not terribly interesting or newsworthy."

How the new Religion Media Centre handles these conflicting priorities remains to be seen. It is expected that a director will be appointed in May or June, and a launch date announced for September. Until then its architects will have to persuade a diversity of stakeholders that it can be an independent and objective reference for journalists in an increasingly contentious field.