ETHICS, RELIGION AND JOURNALISM IN THE USA

Their roles within political dialogue and the peacemaking process

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Introduction

While hostility toward Christianity, Islam and other theological systems can be found in the scholarship about journalists’ attitudes toward religion, the preponderance of research evidence shows American journalists applying their fundamentally tolerant professional outlook – the quest for balance and commonsensical solutions to controversy and division as well as the desire to communicate with audiences across the human spectrum – whenever they deal with religious matters (Said 1981, xi–xii, Lichter, Rothman and Lichter 1986, 21–53, Dart and Allen 1993, Hoover 1998, 56, Underwood 2002, 256, 264–270, Rubin 2009, 47–64). Throughout American history, one can find even the doubters among famous journalists holding two ideas in their minds at the same time: in Benjamin Franklin’s embracing his deist skepticism of Christian orthodoxy while advocating for the necessity of religious faith as the underpinnings of a moral democracy (Aldridge 1967, 129, Reichley 1985, 101, Underwood 2002, 119–120, 129, 141, 205, 275); in Thomas Paine’s slashing attacks upon the Bible and Christian teachings while pleading for the political liberation of humankind as a near mystical right ordained by a benevolent higher power (Gaustad 1996, 131, Underwood 2002, 28, 58–59); in Mark Twain’s bitterness at the hypocrisy of Christian teachings but his attachment to Christian idealism as reflected in his faith in Huckleberry Finn’s primal goodness (Underwood 2002, 24–25, 91–92, 141) and in newspaper publisher E. W. Scripps’ posting of the Ten Commandments as the operating guidelines in his news-rooms, even while declaring himself an “infidel” and an “atheist” in his personal beliefs (Underwood 2002, 117–118, 132).

And yet, there have been 20th- and 21st-century developments that have eroded the concept of the USA as a monolithically Judeo–Christian country in its moral and religious outlook – as well as the image of journalists as dual-minded guardians of American culture’s civic and ethical values which (whether acknowledged by journalists or not) have grown out of the nation’s religious heritage. This has included the spread of scientific values and secular higher education, continued in migration from non-Christian parts of the world, the role of cable television and the Internet in exposing Americans to video Christian proselytizing and extremist messages from religious groups around the globe and in the advocacy of a humanistic alternative to theistic religion as the basis of morality by Walter Lippmann...
and like-minded contemporary thinkers (Lippmann 1929, 8, 12, 320, 326). These circumstances have had a major influence on press coverage of religion that has declined and/or has responded to a more diverse and pluralistic market for religion news. Training in public universities has led journalists to identify more with the progressive and professionalized values of other specialist fields, and few openly look to religion as guidance for journalistic conduct. Studies show that, while fewer Americans define themselves as religious believers, they still retain high levels of religiosity compared to many European countries – as well as a general belief in religiosity as the basis of morality (Gallup Jr. and Castelli 1989, 47, Gallup Jr. and Lindsay 1999, 13, 15, 25, Lipka et al. 2015). However, this is less so the case in journalism where journalists rank conscience, universal moral principles, the nation’s laws and individual intuition as the sources of their ethical value system ahead of such Judeo-Christian teachings as the ethical values espoused by Jesus, the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses and the excoriation of Israel’s moral transgressions by the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures (Underwood 2002, 153–154). And while religiosity among regular Americans has dipped some in the last few decades, the already lower rates of journalists’ backgrounds in and connections to religious faith have declined even more (Lipka 2015, Lipka et al. 2015, Willnat, Weaver and Wilhoit 2017, 47–48).

Since the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, the somewhat tenuous connection many Americans make between their religious beliefs and their ethical values has only grown more controversial and sometimes left journalists in a bind. In their tense relationship with Trump, American journalists almost have had to act prophetically – rather than objectively – just to do the basic work of journalism in covering him. With Trump’s dismissal of legitimate allegations against him as fake news and his presentation of alternate facts when news coverage is not framed to his liking, he has launched an existential challenge to the role the modern American press has served as the largely secular protectors of the Judeo-Christian moral value system laid out in key biblical passages. In the Trump Administration, religion itself is not a big story but morality continually is. Trump’s prevarications, his history of salacious behavior and his hypocrisy do not phase his followers – including his religious followers. As an observer of President Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal once commented, when the churches lose their interest in condemning immoral political behavior, the press steps in (Niehaus 1984, 203). In Trump’s case, journalists on an almost daily basis have challenged Trump’s words and actions and played the role of moralists and righteous scolds not unlike the prophetic figures in the Bible. And yet, much of the press’ leverage in this endeavor has been based in a trust in the essential moral decency of Americans to react with indignation to the exposure of political turpitude. Not only has Trump’s breaking of historical political and moral norms left the press grasping for strategies for dealing with him, it also has left observers of Trump’s supporters in the Christian community wondering how they can explain their backing of him in the context of their past support for family values and biblically-based moral accountability.

Terms and concepts, study thesis and literature overview

My thesis in this chapter is similar to what I have written previously: That journalists in the USA are solidly connected to the nation’s dominant religious heritage – Judeo-Christian in broad form and Protestant in particular – and operate in many respects as personifications of the old religious virtues and the values and ethics that have directed American life throughout much of its history (Underwood 2002, 117–118, 147, 151, 160–161).
Much of my thinking has grown out of a nationwide survey published in 2001 that my University of Washington colleague, Keith Stamm, and I conducted with American and Canadian journalists asking them about the basis of their ethical values and if and how religion tied into them (Underwood and Stamm 2001). This research revealed that – despite their embrace of ethics within the context of their seemingly secular and professional value system – most had grown up in religious homes, indicated that religion and spirituality were important in their lives and signaled in many ways that there was a connection (even if sometimes a largely unconscious one) between their ethical and religious values (Weaver and Willhoit 1996, 13–15, Underwood 2001, 33–47, Underwood and Stamm 2001, 771–786, Underwood 2002, 130–162).

However, since the turn of the 21st century, scholars have explored a variety of themes that have focused on the changing relationship of journalism, religion and ethics in the USA – including indications that journalists report lower levels of religiosity than they have in the past (Weaver and Willhoit 1996, 13–15, Willnat, Weaver and Willhoit 2017, 343). The declining religious background of American journalists (particularly Christian backgrounds) has led to studies that have expanded the discussion by examining the ethical values that can be found in most major religions and how this connects to mass media performance throughout the world (Christians and Traber 1997, Gunaratne 2010, 473–500, Fortner, Fackler and Christians 2011, Gunaratne 2015a, 409–515). Others have looked at the ways atheism, secularism and the declining numbers of Americans who identify themselves as religious or as followers of a religious tradition – including young people, in particular – have come to be reflected in news coverage and influenced the journalism profession (Sloan 2001, 52, Stephens 2014). Some scholars have examined the role of religiously influenced terrorism and the politics of hate, which has affected how religion is framed in the news (George 2014, 74–90, Tan 2016, 295–317). The coming of the Internet and the many ways that digital communication has changed culture also have been probed as catalysts for altering the relationship between media and audiences in the environment for religious news and political discussion (Gunaratne 2015b, Christians 2016, 2760–2773).

Thus, an important question touched upon in this analysis is: Has the political polarization of Americans and the dip in the data measuring their religiosity, as well as that of the journalists who cover them, influenced the professional orientation of media organizations and the ethical calculations of journalists as they report on religion’s role in American cultural and political life?

The term religion in this study will be used in the traditional sense that it describes a network of diverse viewpoints from around the globe, which involves devotion to a spiritual practice and/or the worship of and belief in a form of superhuman agency that governs the universe and explains humankind’s place in it. The term can incorporate the roles of revelation, ritual, theology, metaphysics and creeds and doctrine in guiding people to understand and experience a qualitative realm of existence beyond scientific explanation and the material facts of daily life. Ethics and moral behavior will be discussed in the context of their place within the teachings of religious groups and the formulations of individuals and organizations – including journalists and press operations – which have been influenced by the religious values of the broader culture and incorporated into professional practices and institutional codes of conduct, often now treated as secular in nature and civil in operation. My shorthand definition of journalism is the professional activity of people who write or broadcast the news and other publicly disseminated communication materials for media organizations.
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The muckraker, Lincoln Steffens, once demonstrated the distinctiveness of the reform tradition in American journalism at a time when the neutral or objective practice of news writing was coming (along with a heavy dose of sensationalism) to dominate the turn of the 20th-century newspaper industry. As the city editor of the *New York Advertiser*, Steffens (1931, 285–291, 311–319) explained how he preached to his reporters that they should write a story with such empathy, compassion and societal context that the newspaper’s audience would not want to execute even a convicted killer. Steffens believed that Christian moral ethics should be the guiding principles in a news business that – among a number of his press competitors – was using sensationalized crime accounts to stimulate the public’s desire for retribution, inflaming the divisions within American political dialogue and trying to foment overseas wars by doing all it could to sabotage the peacemaking process. As a socialist and a supporter of the communists in Russia, Steffens was no pacifist – but he opposed the imperialism of the USA and the European powers and soured on revolution in his later years. Steffens believed throughout his career that newspapers should try to advance values of peace and dialogue through their reporting. He was an opponent of such figures as the *New York World*’s Joseph Pulitzer and the *New York Journal*’s William Randolph Hearst who used so-called yellow journalism tactics to sensationalize the events leading up to the Spanish-American War and whip up public support for American intervention in Cuba and the Philippines.

Steffens’ views about the dangers of a highly commercialized press polarizing public opinion for monetary gain were shared by a number of his contemporaries, including *New York World* Sunday editor Elizabeth Jordan, whose *Tales of the City Room* (1898) and other writings expressed her resistance to the exploitative values of sensational journalism, and Will Irwin, whose series about corruption in the news business, *The American Newspaper* (1911), contributed to an undercurrent of reform advocacy that exists among working journalism professionals and press critics to this day. This can be seen in such developments as the adoption in the late 20th century of the do no harm clause in the ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the rise of the Public Journalism movement which opposed press adversarialism and encouraged journalistic organizations to help solve social problems and invite the public into civic dialogue engendered by the news.

The former *Atlanta Constitution* journalist and scholar Mark Silk has offered a different interpretation of the way mainstream journalistic culture reflects a covert religious viewpoint, which connects to the dialogue and peace-making process. Silk (1995, 142–143) points to a variety of values that grow out of the Judeo-Christian tradition – applause for good works, embrace of tolerance, contempt for hypocrisy, rejection of false prophets, denunciation of scandal and concern about religious decline – that routinely can be found on the typical newspaper editorial page. In a similar vein, some scholars – such as Clifford Christians, John Ferré and Mark Fackler (1993, 18–48) – have focused on universal values that can be found in all major religions and which journalists often have endorsed in surveys as a sign of religion’s continuing influence within American journalistic culture. But others have been offended – as the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* editorialized – by those the newspaper believes have suggested that only a religious person can be a moral person. “The argument that religion is essential to moral behavior is insulting and dangerous,” wrote the *Star Tribune* editorialists (Underwood 2002, 300n3). Since American journalists operate with no formal legal or professional oversight to expel people from the profession, they often are quite comfortable in simply trusting their gut in ethical decision-making.
'My father once told me in attempting to decide if a given action is right or wrong, you may think you do not know... but you know. Follow that kind of guidance... and you will never lose faith in yourself as a journalist,' as the Associated Press journalist, Ray Cave, put it.

(Underwood 2002, 128)

In addition, the American press of the later 20th and 21st centuries has played an important role in the peace-making process by covering anti-war dissent and chronicling the failures in American military policy in conflicts in Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq, Libya and other places. Unlike Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s day, the main body of today’s American press often editorially supports the use of diplomatic tactics and moderate responses to threats of war. However, critics complain that the American press is nonetheless too willing to abandon positions of dispassion and balance when global developments put at risk American interests. It is prone to cover US government military policies uncritically and often shapes news about American military action with little interest in or knowledge about the peoples or societies that have been targeted. In the Arab world, for example, many Moslems believe the American press still presents its picture of the region’s conflicts within the centuries-old rivalry between Christianity and Islam for dominance in politics and military affairs in Europe and the Middle East (Said 1981, xi-xii, Adnan 1989, 63–70, Abdallah 2005, 123–128, Rubin 2009, 47, 63–64).

Cultural and political developments in the late 20th and 21st centuries have only intensified the polarization between religious and secular forces and brought anxiety about how the press should treat religious dialogue in the news pages. The culture wars have turned this issue into a hot button one, and American journalists – often insecure about their knowledge of such a fraught and contested arena – sometimes have been reluctant to dive in or to do so in a thorough and contextualized fashion (Ahmanson 2009, 164–165). Publishers and editors have come to recognize how important religion is to American readers, and there was a big growth in religion coverage among the market-oriented press organizations of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Internet have changed this landscape. The polarization around the role of religion in world affairs – and particularly so the Islamic Middle East – has caught up American news organizations in what can feel like a new Cold War between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Aggressive defenders of atheism – such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Bill Marr – have made Islam the target of their claims that religion causes much of the world’s violence and division, both today and historically. Immigration from non-Christian societies combined with declining religious identification by Americans in some quarters of the population have altered the assumptions that journalists once made about the nature of their audience’s religiosity. For example, the association of Christianity with the critiques of a hegemonic, colonial history has helped to turn certain institutions (colleges and universities, in particular) into citadels of secularism. The move to the political extremes (with religious attitudes reinforcing political differences) has squeezed the mainline churches and precipitated their decline. Fears of the end of a monolithically Christian USA have fueled the forces of nativism and hostility to immigrant populations. Press discourse has been bifurcated in this environment, with two worlds of truth emerging in broadcast and Internet journalism. The ironically labeled fair and balanced FOX News has captured the conservative and evangelical Christian television audience with its War on Christmas mantra and similar themes. The New York Times and Washington Post, the three legacy television networks and the cable channels MSNBC and CNN have fought off charges of liberal bias and seen their claims to neutrality in coverage belittled by the political Right.
De-regulation of broadcasting, the success of evangelical Christian forces in raising their political profile over the last 50 years and the availability of cable television and the Internet to highlight conservative causes and muster online conservative outrage – all have contributed to shifting rightward the center point of national political debate and breaking down the old gate-keeping and agenda-setting edifice of one-way news dissemination associated with licensed, over the airways radio and television broadcasters with federally required rights of reply, newspapers on printed paper and journalists in full charge of their communication with the public (Gaddy 2005, 49–55, Moore 2005, 87–99).

The online environment has been a particularly big influence in this tribalization of American religious culture. The Internet has been used as a megaphone for religious extremists to connect and make their message visible. Digital networks are available to people pushing ideological causes, conspiracy theories or serving as channels for alternatives to legacy media’s concept of balanced news. With conventional, fact-based journalism distrusted, the pugnacious and conspiracy-oriented right-leaning web sites Breitbart News, InfoWars and The Federalist have helped to convince conservatives to view news organizations once thought of as moderate with such aversion that they believe little they report. At the other end of the partisan spectrum, Internet news and opinion sites like HuffPost, Salon and Vox have sprung up as counterweights that draw away left-leaning audiences from legacy media. A measure of the divisions within the diffusion of American political news can be seen in a 2016 Pew Research Center study that found more than one-third of Americans (and around 50% between the ages of 18 and 49) get their news from social media and online platforms (Mitchell et al. 2016). In addition, the Internet’s contribution to the eroding financial condition of mainstream media companies has seen major cutbacks in resources for traditional broadcasters and newspaper outlets – with staff cuts hitting religion reporting particularly hard. Thus, news consumers on the Internet often are left to view religion only through the lens of religious belief as it affects politics and foreign policy, hyped-up conflicts between atheists and believers in biblical literalism and online polemics from web sites with strong religious and ideological viewpoints.

Today both Christian conservatives and secular liberals see themselves as guardians of the nation’s ethics and morals. In both camps there is lots of relativity and inconsistency – if one takes Jesus as one’s personal savior, if the political agenda of a politician reflects the right ideology, there is much forgiveness by Republicans for the moral failings in one’s personal life. Democratic candidates who are religious hesitate to discuss it in their campaigns for fear of unsettling their base; President Barack Obama talked about religion and his religious beliefs in his 2008 campaign but said little about them in 2012. In reality, a candidate’s religiosity has not been as important as his or her political rhetoric for some time now. President Ronald Reagan – who was weak on church attendance but had Christian conservatives in love with his political views – defeated the born-again Jimmy Carter in 1980 despite Carter’s commitment to Christian good works. Republicans in 2016 chose a presidential candidate whose moral and ethical behavior and provocations against women, immigrants and minority populations were well outside what had once been party norms and political audience expectations.

The historical background

It has been called the greatest moment in American literature: Huckleberry Finn’s pronouncement that, even if he burns in hell for it, he is going to rescue his raft-mate and escaped slave, Jim, after he has been sold back into bondage. In his story of the pre-Civil
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War Mississippi River Valley, Twain's scene offers a dramatic illustration of the historical connections that a famous journalist-turned-novelist made between literature, religion and ethics in 19th-century American life. Twain knew that his post-Civil War readers would readily grasp that Huck's decision to ignore his deformed conscience, as Twain once described it, was a heroic moral act in its defiance of the laws of the slave-owning states. Like Twain, Huck had no use for Christian concepts — e.g., if Miss Watson, the church-going owner of Jim, was going to be in heaven, he had no interest in going there, as Huck put it early in the novel. In this sense, Huck's badness was Twain's barometer of true morality and his creation of the big hearted, freedom-loving, hillbilly boy in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884–1885) the embodiment of Twain's disdain for the values of the culture in which he had grown up.

Irony about religion and morality was everywhere in Twain's writing. His bitter screeds — many published posthumously in his *Letters from the Earth* (Twain 1938) — persistently attacked the gap between Americans' moral behavior and the ethical values espoused in the Bible. However, Twain hated the inconsistencies he found in Judeo-Christian scriptural teachings as well — and particularly the cruel accounts of conquest in the Hebrew Scriptures and the suggestion that God rewarded this behavior. In scene after scene in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain implied that Huck — the untutored youth with virtually no religious training — was the good person versus a parade of remorseless villains, evangelizing true believers and unctuous characters that he and Jim found in the civilized towns along the banks of the Mississippi River. These people — often peddling what Huck called soul, butter and hogwash — demonstrated very little of the love thy neighbor philosophy of Jesus and preferred to spray bullets during family feuds, gun down an unarmed man in the street or swindle credulous village residents.

The Church still prizes the Moral Sense as man's noblest asset today, although the Church knows God had a distinctly poor opinion of it and did what he could in his clumsy way to keep his happy Children of the Garden from acquiring it.

*(Twain 1938, 23)*

It is most difficult to understand the disposition of the Bible God, it is such a confusion of contradictions; of watery instabilities and iron firmnesses; of goody-goody abstract morals made out of words, and concrete hell-born ones made out of acts; of fleeting kindnesses repented of in permanent malignities.

*(Twain 1938, 31)*

Twain's grasp of the disconnect between true morality and Christian morality as it was interpreted in the monolithically Christian-believing Missouri of his youth has set the tone for other American journalists, including those who moved into novel and literary writing, in their critiques of the warped nature of ethics in the religious culture of their times. Besides Twain (“If Christ were here there is one thing he would not be – a Christian,” Twain 1898), well-known journalist-literary figures have complained at the way such biblical teachings as the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' moral parables were ignored in the mainstream activities of American life. This included the escaped slave and abolitionist journalist Frederick Douglass (who distinguished the “Christianity of Christ” from the “Christianity of America” and considered slave-holders and clergy who justified them “sinful,” Finkelman 2006, 129); Steffens (who said, “I have never heard Christianity, as Jesus taught it in the New Testament, preached to Christians,” Steffens 1931, 526) and Scripps (who added, “All that Christ taught is good. Most, perhaps all, of the interpretations...
of Christ’s teachings by the theologians have been untrue, unscientific, un-Christian, unnatural, wicked,” Knight 1966, 166, 731–732).

In one respect, these figures only confirmed what has become a common perception about members of the American press since the late 18th and 19th centuries: Journalists see themselves as Enlightenment-inspired rationalists who are debunkers of Christian theology, hostile to the idea of religion playing a role in public or political life and deeply skeptical of the moral sincerity of Christian believers. However, while this may be true for some of American journalism’s most famous literary alumni, a number of studies of American working journalists have shown them to be not nearly so irreligious in their personal values (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 13–15, Underwood 2002, 130–162). These studies have indicated that the religious views of American journalists and the way they are reflected in press coverage need to be treated in a nuanced fashion, and the role that religion plays requires reading between the lines to understand its influence on journalists’ professional and ethical principles. In particular, religion’s place in undergirding journalism’s reformist values – both contemporaneously and in history – has been more powerful than journalists themselves or the public often recognize.

The historical fusion – and modern separation – of religion and ethics

The fusion of theological pronouncements with moral and ethical standards can be seen at the very beginning of Judeo-Christian culture that has so influenced American life – in the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. The first four of the commandments – beginning with “thou shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2) and ending with “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8) – are imbedded in a theological belief system and divine pronouncements meant to be applied specifically to the tribe of Israel. However, the next six – beginning with “honor thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12) and ending with “thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s wife” (Exodus 20:16) – can be read as more general moral precepts and could be accepted by people across different cultures and religions. A favorite way of making the point that there can be universalities, and particularly ethical ones, common to all major religions is by examining the way that reciprocity ethics – or what in Western history has been called the Golden Rule – can be found not only in the teachings of Jesus (“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” Matthew 7:12) and the Hebrew Scriptures (“Love your neighbor as yourself,” Leviticus 19:18) but in similar textual exhortations from Islam (“None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself,” Prophet Muhammad, Hadith), Buddhism (“Hurt not others in ways that you would find hurtful,” Udana-Varga 5:18), Hinduism (“One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self,” Mahabharata 5:1517) and other religious systems around the globe.

From an anthropological point of view, reciprocity ethics can be understood as at the core of ancient tribal codes that evolved as humans came together to live in groups and were absorbed into advanced religious systems as they developed. This ethical bedrock – I will give up some of my freedoms (such as to do violence to you) for you doing the same – can be seen as necessary to making civilization work. In Judaism, this was expressed as a compact – those who follow God’s commandments are favored, but things may not go so well for those who do not. This so-called covenant thinking applies to individuals but also to a people as a whole. The prophets taught that the Israelites were punished by conquest and exile when they ignored God’s expectations by growing wealthy and powerful and neglecting their poor and their vulnerable; they were forgiven when their circumstances became broken, and they
needed God’s support and reassurance. After the Hebrew Scriptures were incorporated into the Bible and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD, medieval rulers allied with church leaders to wield the promise of heaven and the prospect of hell for those who came under the authority of the church and the laws of the state. Protestants who broke from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s treated ethical conduct less as an institutional matter and more as one of an individual’s personal relationship with God. But while abandoning certain transactional elements of Catholic practice – such as the seeking of forgiveness in confessing one’s sins to a priest, paying indulgences to improve the prospects for loved ones in the afterlife or regulating economic and moral behavior in clerical courts – the risks of hell fire were still powerful constraints as Protestants wrestled with their consciences and their fear of damnation.

These trends led to a teleological view of interpreting events that one can see in the early news environment of the American colonies. Puritan leaders, such as Cotton and Increase Mather, saw God’s punishment manifested in fires, storms and disease, and they considered their sermons and writings about this God’s scorecard for those trying to understand how the Massachusetts colony was faring. Interestingly, it was the Mathers’ conflict with a newspaper editor – Benjamin Franklin’s brother, James, the editor of the New England Courant – that highlighted the cultural splits that would continue to test the nation and its journalism. James Franklin’s hectoring of the Mathers in the Courant in the 1720s and his scorn for what he felt were their authoritarian Protestant views led to a famous encounter on the streets of Boston where Increase Mather rebuked him for “bantering and abusing” the ministry (Olasky 1996, 103–106, Underwood 2002, 57). The Enlightenment views of James Franklin, as well as the practical skepticism of Benjamin, both became infused in early American journalistic tradition as it evolved during the years after the American colonies’ break with England. As his imprisonment in 1722 by the British authorities for his printed abuse heaped upon the leadership of Boston signaled, James represented the tradition in American journalism of iconoclastic and dissident firebrands willing to suffer for their outspoken views. Benjamin, the cautious publisher who always looked out for his business interests first, represented the more tempered approach and (despite privately sharing many of his brother’s Deist views) decided he would prefer to avoid “printing such Things as usually give Offence either to Church or State” (Underwood 2002, 28) as he tried to do in the publications that he founded after leaving his apprenticeship in his brother’s print shop.

Despite the hypocrisies that sometimes plagued early American commercial journalism, reciprocity ethics played into the contract thinking of the philosophers who have had a great impact upon the journalism tradition in the USA. John Locke’s optimism about human nature operating in a free and democratic fashion and his belief in natural rights (so influential with the founding American figures, who built them into the First Amendment freedoms granted the press and religious worshippers) played a major role in the ethical landscape in which American journalism developed (Altschull 1990, 49–54). The other compact theorists, including Thomas Hobbes, with his belief in the sanctity of the bond between citizens and their leaders who would secure the public against the natural savagery of humankind and Jean Jacques Rousseau, with his differing belief in the fundamental goodness of people that would emerge if they put their emphasis upon the collective social good, offered updated, Enlightenment-era versions of the reciprocity values that undergirded Moses’ Ten Commandments, Plato’s belief that educating and informing people will lead them to be good and Jesus’ and the Hebrew prophets’ teachings that one should love thy neighbor as thou self (Newman 1989, 22–27, 74–76, 87–88, 111–122, Altschull 1990, 44–48, 85–92, 285, 359). The English poet John Milton’s self-righting principle in his pamphlet, Areopagitica (1644),
which is seen as so fundamental to Anglo-American free press values ("Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; whoever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?") was written with a capital ‘T’ in truth – meaning that it was right-thinking, Protestant believers whom Milton felt could be trusted with the granting of free expression as demonstrated by his later role in helping to censor Catholic writings as part of the Protestant Oliver Cromwell’s Interregnum government (Altschull 1990, 36–42). The Enlightenment – so important to shaping journalistic thought as it came of age in the 17th and 18th centuries – still provides the rationalist foundation of modern American journalistic values which can be seen in its role in freeing many journalist-literary figures from rigid, doctrinaire interpretations of Christian orthodoxy while maintaining the humanistic aspects of Judeo-Christian morality and ethics (Lambeth 1986, 27, Newman 1989, 183–185).

In its skeptical and investigative spirit, journalism as it evolved in America also retained some of the judgment of Puritan righteousness and its focus on the sin side of human nature. Just as the regulation of moral laxity and self-interested behavior was built into the US Constitution (such as in the adoption of divided power as a restraint against unchecked authority), journalists in the USA increasingly saw themselves as watchdogs for and exposers of offenses against the citizenry. Journalists also absorbed some of western philosophy’s more cynical teachings about human nature – Hobbes’ view of humans as self-willed and violent, the Scottish philosopher David Hume’s skepticism about all forms of human claims to knowing the truth, along with their recognition of leaders’ attraction to Machiavelli’s advice about seeking power and success at all costs (Strauss 1987, 297, Altschull 1990, 45–46, 59–64). This duality in journalistic thinking about human nature sometimes has been transformed into pragmatic axioms, as it was with Benjamin Franklin who, despite his skepticism about conventional religion, said, “If men are so wicked as we now see them with Religion, what would they be without it?” (Underwood 2002, 129).

Reform versus the objective/commercial tradition in American journalism

Benjamin Franklin abided by a maxim at his publications – to cover the news in a respectful and proper fashion – that has become infused in the traditional value systems of many of today’s news organizations. In his journalism, Franklin introduced the idea of balance – to quote both sides of any controversy and then let the reader decide who was right. He knew this was good for business; it encouraged people of all political views rather than only party partisans to want to buy the paper. By following Franklin’s model, commercialism became the tie that bound ethics to the business prospects of American publications. The Calvinist infusion of the notion of business achievement as a sign that a successful Christian was predestined for salvation became an animating principle that sustained the journalistic practices of many early American editors. Even for those who did not subscribe to orthodox Christian belief, the Puritan emphasis upon thrift, discipline, industry and personal righteousness became a prominent element in the journalistic ethics of the period. Yet, while fairness and even-handedness were promoted in some quarters of the journalism industry, the period between the Revolutionary War and the 1830s saw many American newspapers subsidized by political parties – and factionalism, propaganda and the undermining of reputation became the operational principles for many editors rather than a commitment to facts and honest, dispassionate debate.

When the steam-powered printing press was introduced in the USA in the 1830s, it allowed many publishers to forsake the political subsidies of the party press era and to sell as
many cheap, mass-produced newspapers across the political spectrum as possible. During the
period of these so-called penny press newspapers, the ethics of the reporters that urban
publishers hired could be freewheeling in their moral standards and opportunistic in how they
got the story (Smythe 1980, 6, 8). However, as industrialization transformed the publications
industry, American daily newspapers – although dallying with sensationalism throughout
much of the 19th and into the early 20th centuries – came for the most part to follow the
all the news that is fit to print business model of The New York Times, where balanced news
combined with high-minded editorial policies aimed at comfortable, civic-minded readers
won out over the anything-goes, low-market strategies aimed at working class readers. Even
as the various Great Awakenings of the Protestant evangelistic movements washed over the
general population in the 18th and 19th centuries, American news organizations began to
downplay church coverage to the back pages, increasingly reported about religion only when
controversy was involved (such as the skirmishes between Darwinists and biblical literalists)
and saw the church and religious press largely withdraw from news coverage to focus on de-
nominational matters. In the free-wheeling, laissez-faire environment of American business
culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Milton’s self-righting principle was transformed
into the marketplace of ideas concept of the aggressive secularist, Justice Oliver Wendell
Holmes, Jr. – with its emphasis on celebrating free opinion but implying at least figuratively
that the capitalist marketplace was the best place to practice this.

By the late 19th and into the 20th century, American journalists treated the ethic of bal-
ance almost as a moral principle, and – while it was sympathetic to compromise, civility and
moderation – it also hardened into a formula that emphasized balancing opinion no matter
its credence. Other developments of the era – journalism’s pretense that its news practices
mimicked scientific objectivity; the use of a neutral form of news gathering and writing by
the wire services needing to serve a wide clientele; the corporate consolidation of newspa-
pers that diminished competitive expression – encouraged editors to produce a product
tailored to the marketplace where news organizations operated as bastions of the economic
status quo and newsroom overseers promoted workplace conformity. Meanwhile, the idea
grew in journalism that religion should be a personal matter – and that the separation of
church and state meant discouraging religious reflection in the public square. Ethics were
interiorized and relativized, but journalists who wanted to rise in news organizations learned
by osmosis to follow the prevailing practices of their employer.

The turn of the 20th century also saw the reform tradition in American journalism flare
up, and the progressive and populist movements inspired the muckrakers in ways that have
lived on in today’s journalism. Figures such as S. S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, John Sanborn
Phillips, Ray Standard Baker, William Allen White and David Graham Phillips became
famous for their investigative articles aimed at cleaning up corruption and self-dealing in
industry, government and politics. Media sociologist Herbert Gans (1980, 246–247) has
noted that – although some embraced radical political philosophies – most of the muckrakers
were progressives motivated by a faith in responsible capitalism to guard the interests of the
common person without unduly shaking up the prevailing commercial order. A number of
the muckrakers – including McClure, Tarbell, Baker, Steffens and Upton Sinclair – came
from highly religious backgrounds. However, most shed their faith in Christian theology
but not Judeo-Christian ethics or the prophetic approach to challenging corruption and in-
justice in American institutions. The socialists, Steffens and Sinclair, for example, repeatedly
praised Jesus as an ethical and moral model but not a savior – and they were unrelenting in
their critique of the mainline Christian churches as complicit in the sins of capitalism and
compromised by their arrangements with the business and government establishment. In this
way, the so-called social gospel of Victorian reformers was a great influence on a number of the muckrakers, even as their critics called them anything but peaceable in the vehemence of their broadsides.

In fact, the tag *muckrakers* was given by President Theodore Roosevelt – who was both a critic and supporter – in comparing them to the character in the devout John Bunyan’s allegorical novel, *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), who was so intent on raking the muck that he forgot to look up at the stars. However, as the newsroom ethic became more secular, religion receded to a background influence, which became built into law, the practices of institutions and the conduct expected of professionals in many fields. Many journalists came not to think of themselves as religious – but religion was there in what sociologist Robert Bellah (1967, 1–21) would call “civil religion.” In this indirect fashion, the vestiges of religious ethical values were retained within the promulgation of the ethics codes of media operations and the standards adopted by professional organizations, which proliferated as university journalism education expanded and newsrooms professionalized in the post–World War I and World War II years.

**Faith decline and the secularity of journalists-to-be – a case study**

For the last 12 years, I have been engaged in an unscientific, longitudinal study of the religious and ethical values of University of Washington students studying communication and/or training to be journalists as an informal way to sample whether Americans – as reflected by young media professionals-to-be – are becoming more secular in orientation as some studies show. Although there are indications that many of my students (544 over a period from 2006 to 2017) had only moderate involvement with religious life, my findings did not fully align with the only (slightly) similar study of American university students’ relationship with religion during this period – a 2015 examination of 503 journalism, mass communication and non-communication students by Jeremy Littau of Lehigh University, which found that journalism students scored poorly on questions of religious literacy (Littau 2015, 145). My results from the ten media ethics classes I surveyed suggested that in a number of key areas – such as whether they attended church at least once-in-awhile (ranging from a low of roughly two-thirds in one class to a high of three-quarters in another), belonged to a church (roughly a quarter to a half of each class did) and had been raised in a religious home (from a classroom low of two-thirds to a high of nearly 90%) – the students maintained at least some connection with religious life. However, a decline in religious orientation showed up when students were asked if they believed in God or a divine power: 69, 85 and 82% of the classes said *yes* from 2006 to 2008 but dropped off to around 50% class averages from 2009 to 2017. On the question if religion or spirituality was important to them, more than 80% responded with *yes* in 2006 but fell off to affirmative percentage levels in the 30s–50s in the classes for the years following.

Recent research has indicated that young people have contributed to a rapid rise of Americans with no religious affiliation. Pew Research Center says this group grew from just over one-third of the population in 2007 to more than 54% in 2014 (Lipka 2015). At high levels, young Americans report a lack of religious affiliation – and more than a third of millennials say they are atheists or agnostics or have no religious beliefs, which is one-third more than the percentage of Gen-Xers and more than double the Baby Boomers who say the same thing. Although little should be extrapolated from informal samples of university journalists-to-be, my findings align with past research showing American journalists – while more spiritually oriented than their critics often believe them to be – to be significantly less religious than the population they cover (Underwood 2002, 2–3, 145–147, 300 note 20). As also found in studies of working journalists, the media students I surveyed consistently
indicated that their ethical values were more secular in orientation than religious. Thus, there was nothing in my results that deviated from past findings of a religious divide between journalists and their audience. But the downward trend lines in measurements of the religiosity of young people in general – which also was reflected in my study – suggests that researchers should be alert to the possibility that these patterns may continue to change among coming generations of journalists and their audiences (Underwood 2002, 153).

Conclusion

New technologies, social and multi-media developments, increasingly intricate tools for measuring and controlling digital messaging and communication devices that are open to the whole universe of human voices make it difficult to predict how future media may operate – let alone foretell ethics’ and religion’s place within them. As with so many areas of life, the Internet has re-engineered the ethical framework that was established by industrialized press organizations and opened the field to everybody operating together within a collective, new ethical zeitgeist. The staggering expansion of digital communication has meant that the algorithm-driven schematics of big data – as much as conscious choices made by journalists – may come to drive the ethical communications dynamic of a future that is bringing us advances in artificial intelligence, virtual reality, digitally curated news, robotically controlled vocational tasks and more blended forms of news, advertising and marketing material. Whether this flux will continue to find a place for religion’s truths that have been considered fixed and eternal, as well as the ethical values attached to them, can only be a matter of speculation. The interactive, computer-engineered changes have come so rapidly – and journalism has been so disrupted by them – that one cannot presume that the human connection with the spiritual realm and its ethical dimensions will survive in historical form given the technological transformation taking place within American culture and the press.

In teaching about journalism ethics today, one has to teach two versions – one for those headed to professional news organizations, the other for those using the Internet. In a sense, everyone is a journalist today – and everything (whatever writers’ ethics) appears online. People are protected by anonymity; practices that would not be approved by most mainstream media organizations – hidden cameras, doctored video, manufactured news, tweets passed along without verification, automation determining news placement, threats used to keep people from speaking out by putting them in the social media hot-seat – are everywhere in cyberspace. Increasingly one can choose among multiple news realities where it is hard to maintain ethical standards when people disagree on the very nature of facts. The temptations of click bait, the dark web and the constant pressure from Internet hackers and trolls and ghosts permeate the digital environment. Institutionalized ethics have been replaced in good part by the collective opinions of an anonymous crowd. Some news organizations, like The New York Times, are trying to survive by offering the balanced approach as its brand for readers looking for reliable news with a transparent best practices approach. However, it is an ethical Wild West on the Internet with the lowest form of behavior often getting the greatest attention. And in the USA, where free speech rights are strong and the large tech companies hold sway, there is less willingness to regulate for Internet privacy or to attempt to enforce policies of online conduct as there is in Europe. Within this vast stew of information and disinformation, news and opinion, journalists – now more actively, joined by the public – are making the choices, asserting their voices and influencing the collective ethical judgments that are driving the vestiges of the nation’s moral and religious heritage into our uncertain digital future.
Further readings


Two iconic scholars of media moral philosophy team up to offer essays about major historical figures whose insights can be applied to the ethical dilemmas of modern journalism.


This edited volume of essays discusses the intersection of religion and modern secularity. It examines how media technologies, changing ethical values, and other cultural factors have mixed the sacred and profane and often left secular standards to serve religious purposes.


Two veteran journalists and teachers of peace studies detail the way they have analyzed peace journalism and contrasted it to the news idioms and discourses that they call war journalism.


Rodgers examines religion’s historical influence on the news ethic of American journalism. In particular, he focuses on the importance of the social gospel movement in reshaping the moral mission of the media business.


Peace journalist Youngblood lays out the methods and concepts that can make up the foundation of journalism as a non-polarizing force and an instrument of peace.

References


