

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF THE RELIGION BEAT

By Terry Mattingly

These headlines are all stated C.S. Lewis Screwtape letters style. In other words, they are stated in the affirmative when I mean the exact opposite of that.

1. Use simplistic labels as often as possible,

such as “moderate” and “fundamentalist” -- rather than describing the details of what religious believers believe and do (with everybody).

Now, to turn that around to a positive point: Don't use fundamentalist, for example, unless a group embraces the use of this term as a way of self-identification. See the Associated Press Stylebook on this point. The journalism point here is crucial: Focus on where specific groups stand on the issues driving your story and how this affects the practice of their faith. When in doubt, quote people accurately. Substitute bites of information for simplistic labels.

2. Assume that religion equals politics

Period. After all, politics deal with things that are real, as opposed to “spiritual” things that are mere beliefs. Thus, whenever people claim that their actions are based on centuries of doctrines and traditions, journalists should assume that those actions are actually rooted in political biases, party politics, economics, sociology, etc. Whatever you do, go out of your way to ignore doctrine. This is in many ways the worldview of a lot of newsrooms -- that politics is what is really real. It is the religion of most American journalism. So there.

3. Treat religious doctrines and traditions as mere opinions,

with no facts, no deep, complicated roots in centuries of history. Pretend that factual precision doesn't really matter, since religious is just about feelings. History is important. It is especially important to religious people in ancient faiths. The past is never just the past, when covering religion..

4. Be lazy

Always settle for a quote or two from the usual “authority of title” activists and academics, rather than talking to real people in your own community and region. Ignore people who have the “authority of experience” and first-hand knowledge -- based on the lives they have led. Quote the same “inside baseball” experts over and over, like all the other reporters.

5. Focus on the lurid angles of religious life,

turning believers into National Geographic specimens on a laboratory slide as framed by secular elites. At best, traditional believers are amusing, colorful, old-fashioned fools whose creaky traditions will seem as strange as those of a remote, primitive tribe somewhere. This is especially true with sex and marriage.

6. Big vs. Small

Ignore the role of faith in the small and the ordinary, such as the landmark events of birth, marriage, birth and death. Assume that big stories are only found in big, powerful

places, such as big cities, universities and major denominations and religious groups. Why talk to the people next door to your readers?

7. Ignore role religion plays in other hot topics in modern life,

such as sports, entertainment, science and business. When superstars talk about God, don't ask about how this affects their lives, their giving and their convictions.

Finale

Are you covering debates close to the lives of your readers? Are you showing them respect as stakeholders in your stories? Or are we producing news that matters to activists who have clout with leaders in the newsroom?

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