“Sex, Lies, and Videotape:”
The Interface Between Secular Media and Religious Institutions

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When it comes to the various public media reporting on churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, religious schools, and missionary organizations, scandalmongering appears to be the order of the day. But are secular media organizations adequately equipped to evaluate the underlying beliefs and practices of religious organizations?

The Tanakh’s Book of Proverbs states that “evildoers do not understand what is right, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully” (Proverbs 28:5). Would not the secular media fall into the category of “evildoers,” seeing that a majority of media personnel admit to an atheistic or agnostic philosophy of life? When the apostle Paul states that “the spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment” (1 Corinthians 2:14-15), is this statement nothing more than a form of spiritual arrogance and a failure to be held accountable for one’s actions? Or do Christians actually operate with an epistemology that is inaccessible to non-Christians? When the Qur’an notes that “it is not fitting for a man that Allah should speak to him except by inspiration…” (Sura 42:51), implying that the spiritually devout have access to “inspired information” that the unbeliever does not have, is such information essentially incontestable by secularists?

This essay will examine the ways that secular media acquire, interpret, and disseminate information regarding religious movements and institutions and will seek to evaluate the media’s fundamental biases in relation to various religions’ claims that their teachings and practices are divinely inspired and essentially incomprehensible to “unbelievers.”

Introduction: “Though Seeing, They Do Not See”

In each of the Abrahamic religions, “believers” claim to be the recipients of knowledge and understanding that is denied to “unbelievers.” For instance, in the Tanakh/Old Testament one of the commands given to Isaiah when he volunteers to be a mouthpiece for God is the following:

Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’ (Isaiah 6:9-10)
This same command formed the underlying reason for Jesus’ use of parables, as explained by Matthew’s gospel:

‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you [the apostles], but not to them [the crowds]…This is why I speak to them in parables: though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah…’ (Matthew 13:11-17)

This same idea is further explicated by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it…However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ – but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit…This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: ‘for who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:6-15)

Thus in both Judaism and Christianity there is a tradition of “special knowledge” limited to God’s chosen. Those who are not part of the covenant people are either denied access to this knowledge in its entirety or are incapable of understanding it when they encounter it.
The Muslim Qur’an contains similar ideas. Sura 16:102-104, for instance, is a command to Muhammad to “Say, ‘the Holy Spirit has brought the revelation from thy Lord in Truth, in order to strengthen those who believe, and as a Guide and glad tidings to Muslims... [but] those who believe not in the Signs of Allah—Allah will not guide them, and theirs will be a grievous penalty.’” A similar statement appears in 21:45: “Say, ‘I do but warn you according to revelation’; but the deaf will not hear the call, even when they are warned!” The message of the Qur’an is that no human being can comprehend the spiritual depth of its content; it is on a plane utterly divorced from human wisdom. The Muslim scriptures also indicate that Allah speaks to human beings through inspiration and revelation, and only those who are true believers will be able to apprehend these communications:

"It is not fitting for a man that Allah should speak to him except by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by the sending of a Messenger to reveal, with Allah’s permission, what Allah wills: for He is Most High, Most Wise. And thus have We, by Our command, sent inspiration to thee; thou knewest not (before) what was revelation, and what was faith; but We have made the (Qur’an) a Light, wherewith We guide such of Our servants as We will...” (Sura 42:51-52)

One can understand how utterly alien most of what the adherents of Abrahamic religions believe and practice appears to “outsiders” who do not share the presuppositions and worldviews of believers. The existence of an all-powerful Deity, accounts of creation, the fall into sin, the need for and means of attaining “salvation,” complex lists of moral principles and expectations, teachings regarding an end-of-life judgment and entry into an afterlife—such items do not form the everyday vocabulary of the average person on the street. The apostle Paul is perhaps the most cognizant of this fact when he says to the Corinthians that
… the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God…Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles…For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-25)

There are, of course, various ways of interpreting the claims of the Abrahamic religions to “special knowledge” restricted to their adherents alone. Such claims could be seen as

1. a religious form of what philosophers designate gnosticism;
2. an elitism that is nothing more than unmitigated arrogance;
3. illusions of grandeur rooted in a simplistic naivete;
4. expressions of an actual spiritual phenomenon.

One does not need to assume that religionists are referring to a “mystical” or “supernatural” form of knowledge. While certain aspects of the scripture passages cited above could be interpreted in such a fashion, they could also be seen as referring simply to sheer ignorance on the part of the non-religious. An academic presentation by a nuclear physicist, for instance, will be incomprehensible to persons of any age, race, ethnicity or gender who is unfamiliar with nuclear physics. But the content communicated by such an expert is not “special” in any kind of “spiritual” sense. So when “religious knowledge” is being dealt with, one will need an interpretive scheme that leaves open the possibility that there exists a “higher order” of spiritually-related knowledge, but one’s scheme should mainly seek to establish the best possible ways of understanding, interpreting, contextualizing and communicating the more “mundane” aspects of the various religious systems.
Given the fact that so much information about religions, religious phenomena and adherents of religions is communicated today through modern forms of mass media, is it not appropriate—and even essential—to inquire as to the backgrounds and presuppositions of those who prepare news clips and documentaries and who produce the scripts for television, major motion pictures and other media outlets?

“The Blind-[ly Faithful] Leading the Blind-[ly Ignorant]?”

A majority of media personnel claim no relationship of any kind to any religion. Such persons are self-admittedly “secular” in orientation. Indeed, the disparity between the “news-media elite” and the American population at large was already so great that almost 25 years ago it was being noted by political candidates and commentators. In 1992 George Mason University’s Center for Media and Public Affairs reported that whereas 85% of the American public believed that adultery was wrong, only 49% of 104 top television writers and executives believed this to be true. While only 4% of Americans had no religious affiliation, 45% of Hollywood producers did not. While 76% of the American public believed that homosexual acts were wrong, only 20% of Hollywood agreed, and while only 59% of Americans believed that women have a right to an abortion, 97% of Hollywood’s elite believed this (Woodward 55).

Despite their commitment to secularity—or perhaps because of that commitment—journalists and TV anchors regularly make comments regarding religion. In many cases the comments are derived solely from stereotypes or mythologies. For instance, in 2004 the MSNBC talk show host Don Imus called the book publishers Simon and Schuster “thieving Jews” and added later that the phrase was actually “redundant.” In an earlier show he had referred to the “Jewish management” of CBS Radio as “money grubbing bastards” (Rendall 1). But if Imus had been educated concerning the financial regulations of the Mosaic Law (including
its Year of Jubilee), the ambiguities of Jewish eschatology (which result in a “this-worldly” orientation as opposed to an “other-worldly” point of view for Jewish life), the intricacies of the Diaspora’s *kahal* system with its strictures regarding weights, measures, and fair wages, would he (and countless others) have adopted the stereotype that reigns regarding Jewish people and finances?

In other cases, the comments of well-known religious personages are reported with or without reference to the context in which such statements appeared. Jerry Falwell, for instance, became infamous after the events of September 11, 2001 for his statement that “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say ‘You helped this happen” (Ambinder 1). In the same vein, on June 16, 2012 the Huffington Post reported that Chick-fil-A president and COO Dan Cathy had stated “I think we are inviting God’s judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, ‘We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage.’ I pray God’s mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have the audacity to define what marriage is about” (“Dan Cathy” 1). Some media commentators reported these remarks as summarizing the views of “Christians in general.” But are such commentators well-versed concerning the highly nuanced teachings of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures regarding marriage in general? Have they ever taken the time to understand the teachings of these religious systems with respect to sexuality, procreation, the ensoulment of the fetus, etc.? Are they familiar with the prophetic traditions of these religions, and the teachings of their scriptures regarding the ways in which God has directly or indirectly influenced events in human history? Do they understand the ways that Jews—and Christians—
interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, for instance? Or the way the Muslim world interpreted the Mongol invasions of the 13th century?

On occasion, the press chooses to highlight pronouncements made by religious leaders and portray them as bordering on the hysterical or as hinting of conspiracy theories. Franklin Graham, for instance, told CNN’s Campbell Brown in December 2009 that “true Islam cannot be practiced in this country. You can’t beat your wife. You cannot murder your children if you think they’ve committed adultery or something like that, which they do practice in these other countries. Islam is a religion of hatred. It’s a religion of war.” And on another occasion: “The Muslim Brotherhood is very strong and active in our country. It’s infiltrated every level of our government. Right now we have many of these people that are advising the US military and State Department on how to respond in the Middle East, and it’s like asking a fox, like a farmer asking a fox, ‘How do I protect my henhouse from foxes?’ We’ve brought in Muslims to tell us how to make policy toward Muslim countries” (“Franklin Graham” 1). But no journalist has (as of yet) asked whether Franklin Graham is qualified to speak concerning the disciplines of Islamic Studies or International Politics; he is quoted because of his namesake and his remarks are taken as examples of “Christian extremism.” Does Graham know – or do any of his critics know – anything about the history of Islam and the Mongol and Turkish overlays of the original Arab religious system? Are they aware of the nuanced teaching of the Qur’an regarding the role of women and children? Do they know the history of the Muslim Brotherhood and what it actually stands for as far as the ordinary Muslim is concerned?

Not all media is “secular,” of course, and not all personnel who work in general media venues are “unbelievers.” An example of this would be how the Des Moines Register addressed the scandal involving the homosexuality of evangelical leader Ted Haggard contrasted with how
an article in *Christianity Today* rendered the story. The former publication took a sarcastic and critical tone, scathing and skeptical of an alleged “90-day miracle cure for homosexuality, which flies in the face of much scientific and psychological research that suggests homosexuality is not something you choose, just as you do not overtly choose to be heterosexual.” The judgment of the *Register* was that Haggard was “a man who is trying to be something he is not” (“Rev. Haggard” E1). In contrast, the *CT* article was based on an interview with Ted Haggard’s wife and was sympathetic and redemptive in nature, focusing on love, compassion, forgiveness and restoration. According to Gayle Haggard, confession can undo the power of secrecy and “secrecy is what empowers sin” (Bailey 63). Can a media venue that is unabashedly committed to a liberal and non-religious worldview appreciate or properly render an alternative worldview, particularly one that emphasizes compassion and forgiveness while simultaneously condemning activity that is pronounced “sinful” and “worthy of death” by the scriptures of each of the Abrahamic religions?

**“Celluloid Spirituality?”**

Reporting and journalism such as that described above necessarily operate according to a “sound-byte” mentality that squeezes the maximum amount of content into the shortest timeslot or column-inches possible. When one has between one and five minutes of airtime, or a single column of print, a writer may perhaps be excused for failing to provide adequate context for a listener or reader to comprehend a religious subject. But what about hour-long television programs or full-length feature films? Would not these forms of media have much more time (and space) to provide the nuances of history and theology that would be necessary for proper understanding?
Even with additional time for added context, however, depictions of religious subjects are entirely a matter of the producer’s, director’s, and/or screenwriter’s personal preferences. The depiction, for instance, in Charles Shyer’s *Father of the Bride II* (1995) of the Middle Eastern contractor “Mr. Habib” was completely unnecessary to the integrity of the film and served only to offend Muslim viewers:

The rich, unfeeling and unkempt Mr. Habib smokes, needs a shave and talks with a weighty accent. When his wife attempts to speak, Habib barks mumbo-jumbo phrases at her, supposedly exemplifying Arabic. Mrs. Habib heels, perpetuating Hollywood’s stale image of the Arab woman as a mute, submissive nonentity… The next morning, Habib, who purchased the house only to destroy it, steers a huge yellow wrecking ball, asserting, “See, I demolish house, put two in its place…” Habib becomes Shylock. He will return the house, only after extorting $100,000 from poor George. (Shaheen)

The portrayal of Habib was raw and unsubtle, reflecting, perhaps, a pre-September 11 carelessness regarding such depictions. But when one takes the time actually to study and comprehend religious theology and history, the results can be commendable and educative. Consider the Muslims in Kevin Reynold’s *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) and Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). In the former, Azeem is a highly sophisticated, medically skilled and compassionate human being, making the European “Christian” Robin look foolish on more than one occasion. The writer has obviously learned of the tremendous contributions that the Abbasid Muslims made to world civilization in general and to the West in particular. In the latter film, the Turkish commander Salah ad-Din is presented as a noble, shrewd and highly disciplined soldier, and the contrast between him and the “Christian” king of Jerusalem could not
be greater. Again, earnest study of a significant historical figure produces a presentation that is far more accurate than the other instances mentioned above.

A further example of contemporary religious filmmaking is David Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014) which has caused a stir in recent weeks among conservative Christians who had expected to see a big screen portrayal of the Genesis flood narrative. Although some of the scenes provided imagery that might be viewed as “faithful” to the Biblical account, many other aspects were completely altered or added. The portrayal of God not wanting the human race to survive (thus only one “barren” wife of child-bearing age for the three sons), of Noah who desires to carry out God’s supposed intention to wipe out mankind by being willing to murder his twin grand-daughters with a knife, and the depiction of the “Watchers” as fallen angels transformed into rock giants with glowing eyes and deep voices are just a few of the liberties taken with the Genesis narrative. But as Brian Mattson explains, Aronofsky’s version is a “pagan retelling of the Noah story direct from Kabbalist and Gnostic sources” (Mattson). Consequently, with respect to “special knowledge,” is it Aronofsky who is ignorant (or dismissive) of the Biblical narrative – or is it the conservative Christian audience who is ignorant (or dismissive) of Kabbalism and Gnosticism? If “proper knowledge” is expected of the filmmaker, should not “proper knowledge” also be expected of filmgoers?

In contrast to the many “liberties” Aronofsky took with the scriptural account when making *Noah*, Cecil B. DeMille kept very close to the scriptural storyline in writing the script for *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Because American society was characterized by Judeo-Christian values to a much greater extent in the 1950s than it is today, it would have been much more difficult to deviate from the details the average man on the street was familiar with. But
this fact did not mean that DeMille could take no liberties at all. On the contrary, he sought to adapt the story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt to the cold-war setting (Nadel 421-422), and

…by presenting this truth in the wide-screen production financed by Adolph Zukor’s Paramount Studio, DeMille combined the infusion of Jews into corporate America with the myth of Christian redemption. Just as Christianity validates Judaism, deMille’s film validated the Jewish origins of its own production by subsuming them under the rubric of cold war Christianity. Jews in high places need not be feared, the film indicates, because such Jews are proto-Christians, not to be confused with those Jews who are actually disguised atheist intellectuals – that is, Communists. In this scheme, the “free” world is safe because true Jews are Christians and because subversives are false Jews. (Nadel 426-427)

This was an interesting application of the Biblical narrative, to be sure—though certainly not the intent of the original author (i.e. Moses).

Margaret Atwood does not see her *The Handmaid’s Tale* (film version 1990) as portraying a feminist dystopia, but rather as a story that seeks to give women a voice and an inner life (Atwood 513). She uses this scenario to push the religious right to consider what it would be like to have a “Biblical” or God-centered economic, judicial and moral governmental system. Since the New Testament primarily includes moral principles rather than a prescribed model for a socio-political system, she turns to the Old Testament for the specifics of what a “Christian America” could look like. But does Atwood truly understand the purpose behind the judicial, economic and moral laws of the Old Testament? Is she aware that these laws actually value and protect women, granting them inheritance rights, the security of dowries and providing material support for vulnerable widows? And has she considered the fact that the Old Testament
contains accounts of intelligent and powerful women such as Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, Ruth, Abigail, the Queen of Sheba, Esther and others?

It is claimed that *The Jesus Film* (1979) has been seen by over 6 billion people and is allegedly the most watched and most translated film in world history (Merz 111). This production combines story, drama and music, and those responsible for translating it into other languages are careful to take the words directly from Scripture and provide visuals that are as historically and culturally accurate as possible. But are these measures enough to communicate the message of the New Testament Gospel accounts to such a wide variety of races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds? Is it possible to adapt a single movie production to such widely disparate audiences? People viewing visuals will always interpret them in the context of their respective cultures, and this can create misunderstandings and false impressions of who Jesus really was. It has been reported, for instance, that West African viewers come away from the film believing Jesus to have been “a successful traditional priest or marabout. From their cultural context it is obvious to them that Jesus keeps his fetishes from which he draws his powers in the bag he carries with him” (Merz 111). And easterners who require that people use only the right hand when interacting respectfully with others find it both shocking and inexplicable that in the film’s depiction of the Last Supper, Jesus, presented as the almighty Son of God, offers the cup and the bread with his left hand. In overlooking such details, is it not possible that the producers could be said to be “*bearing false witness*” against the historical figure of Jesus Himself?

With respect to the medium of television, a study conducted in 1993 appears to provide support for the conventional wisdom that religious leaders are most often portrayed in a negative light. A random sample of 100 prime time episodes airing on ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC were
taped during a 5-week period in 1990. 1462 speaking characters were identified, and of these only 82 (5.6%) were affiliated with any type of religious group or belief system. Of the 100 random sample episodes, only eight of them included a Christian leader in a speaking role. Analysis was done to evaluate nine types of behaviors in the portrayals of these Christian leaders as compared with other characters, and “what has emerged on television is a Christian leader that is infrequently seen and more than occasionally engaged in nonreligious activities that are unlawful...Christian leaders are not presented as pillars of goodness or as cloaked villains.” The conclusion drawn by the authors is that “Christian leaders are little more than convenient mechanisms for moving a story around other more interesting, attractive, and nonreligious characters. In the final analysis, we must conclude that Christian leaders on television rarely behave as Christians or exhibit a capacity for leadership” (Skill and Robinson 83).

A “Happy Medium?”

As noted in the introduction, some of the adherents of the Abrahamic religions put forth the claim that they have access to spiritual forms of knowledge that are inaccessible to “non-believers” and that the religious are “not subject to any man’s judgment” (1 Corinthians 2:15). But there are no scientifically acceptable ways in which claims on the part of Jews, Christians, or Muslims to “special esoteric knowledge” can be empirically verified. The doctrines and/or practices of the adherents of any of these religions may indeed be indecipherable to non-adherents, but such items cannot be automatically assumed to be on a “higher plane” and therefore impervious to evaluation. In the final analysis, then, it may be necessary to divide the areas with which the media interface with religions into distinct categories, each of which requires different prerequisites for understanding. These categories would include:
1. Reportage and commentary on general statistics regarding religious groupings. This area includes such things as the overall growth or decline of any of the Abrahamic religions in a specific country or continent, as measured by proportions of the population, synagogue/church/mosque attendance, trends such as the overall “tone” of the respective religions with respect to “liberalism” and “conservatism” and the like.

2. Reportage and commentary on the political involvement of religious adherents. “The Religious Right,” for instance, has long been the subject of media commentary, as has fundamentalist groups within Islam and ultra-orthodox movements within Judaism. Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority,” Ralph Reed’s “Christian Coalition,” the new “Joel’s Army” and other versions of religiously-oriented political action groups are examples of this category.

3. Reportage and commentary on the moral and ethical influence of religious adherents. Religiously-oriented persons are often quoted or form the basis for commentary with respect to ethical issues such as abortion, stem cell research, gay rights and marriage and the like.

4. Reportage and commentary on the “scandalous behavior” of religious adherents. Included in this category would be the Jonestown Massacre, the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals of the 1980s, the David Koresh/Branch Davidian tragedy of the 1990s, and the downfalls of such persons as Gordon McDonald, Ted Haggard and Dinesh D’Souza and others.

5. Feature programming on television and in film. Major motion pictures such as Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, and
Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* represent one way of approaching religious themes, while films such as *Bruce Almighty, Evan Almighty, The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The Da Vinci Code* represent an entirely different genre.

It is not expected that any of the media will ever be “objective” in the sense of striving for a strict neutrality with respect to any of the above categories. Indeed, objectivity has never actually been a goal of either print or screen media. From the beginning of recorded American history, publishers and editors have been scathing in their remarks concerning the concept of “unbiased reporting.” Alexander Martin, the editor of the *Baltimore American and Daily Advertiser* at the turn of the 19th century, could be said to speak for all journalists when he stated that “it was just as unlikely for a newspaper to be politically neutral as it was for a clergyman to preach ‘Christianity in the morning, and paganism in the evening.’” “Only cowards,” said Martin, “strived for impartiality” (Dunn, 140). A certain amount of “bias” on the part of the media is to be expected, and it is therefore the responsibility of the adherents of religious systems to present a balanced and nuanced response whenever possible.

With respect to the first category mentioned above (i.e. “statistics”), the media may be considered generally reliable. Statistics are, after all, nearly always connected with numerical values (i.e. percentages) which may easily be verified by referring to primary source materials. But as soon as one advances into the area of *interpretations or implications* of such statistics, the likelihood of accuracy becomes directly proportional to the amount of knowledge a reporter or screenwriter has regarding the religious system he or she is discussing.
In each of the other four categories, there are nearly always theological, cultural, and historical considerations involved that make it difficult for the media to write or visualize in ways that would be considered “fair” by the adherents of any particular religion which is their subject. For instance, to report on or write about the beliefs and activities of religious adherents as they pertain to politics or political involvement, the following is a sampling of what a screenwriter, reporter, or newscaster would need to understand:

1. The Mosaic Covenant’s governmental system for the Israelites as described in the *Tanakh* (i.e. the Old Testament);
2. The monarchical system of government adopted by the Israelites, including the connections of the monarchy to the teachings regarding the Messiah;
3. The New Testament’s teachings regarding the Christian’s relationship to governmental structures, centering on Paul’s discourse in Romans 13:1-5;
4. The history of Islam’s debate regarding the successors to Muhammad, including the doctrine of the Sunni caliphate, the succession of the *mujaddids*, and the development of the Shi`ite system of imams;
5. The historic discussion of the Christian’s relation to culture in general as encapsulated in H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic *Christ and Culture*;
6. The “Two Kingdoms” view of Martin Luther;
7. The writings of John Calvin and his successors regarding the Geneva, Switzerland experiment;
8. The writings of Theodor Herzl and Benjamin Disraeli regarding the construction of the modern nation-state of Israel.
To report on or write about the beliefs and activities of religious adherents as they pertain to morals and ethics, a screenwriter, reporter, or newscaster would need to understand:

1. The Mosaic Covenant as recorded in the Jewish Tanakh plus the commentaries on the Tanakh through the centuries;
2. The Jewish Talmud and the commentaries on the Talmud through the centuries;
3. The precepts of the New Testament writings, in particular the teachings of Jesus as contained in the four gospels, the teachings of Paul, James, Peter and John;
4. The precepts of the Qur’an in general;
5. The precepts of the four Law Schools of Islam which provide interpretational schemes for the Qur’an;
6. The precepts of the Hadith, in particular as recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim;

To report on or write about the beliefs and activities of religious adherents as they pertain to religious “scandals,” a screenwriter, reporter, or newscaster would need to understand:

1. The precepts of the Mosaic Law, including the 613 laws and the commentaries regarding the meaning of each;
2. The teachings of the New Testament regarding what acts are specifically designated as “sin” and therefore make a Christian liable for church discipline;
3. The teachings of the New Testament regarding what forms such punishments are to take (i.e. excommunication as seen in 1 Corinthians 5);
4. The legal and moral precepts of the Qur’an and the Hadith;
5. The various usages of the terms “cult” or “alternative religious movement” by sociologists, psychologists, and members of religious communities;
To report on or write about the beliefs and activities of religious adherents as they pertain to or are presented in *television and film productions*, a screenwriter, reporter, or newscaster would need to understand:

1. The overall purpose/motive for the production;
2. The documented evidence regarding the scriptural or historical narrative that is being portrayed;
3. The items listed previously that would be appropriate for whichever religious topic the program or film includes.

It would be impossible, of course, for any single reporter, journalist or newscaster to acquire all the kinds of knowledge and information outlined above. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that articles or scripts that deal with religious subjects could be the product of team efforts, with persons coming from a variety of backgrounds, educations, and experiences cooperating together to produce nuanced presentations. It would also be desirable, of course, to have members of individual religious communities speak for themselves, using whatever terminology they believe will be most appropriate and will communicate most accurately and representatively. But even so, will it ever be so that truly “spiritual” beliefs and practices—those which William James labeled ineffable, noetic, passive and transient (James 299-301)—can be adequately communicated to those who are completely lacking in such facets of life? Most likely not. And so humility and patience must be the order of the day, both on the part of media disseminators and on the part of recipients. “*Those who have ears to hear, let them hear…*”
References


