

*Sightings* 9/8/08

Religion Reporting  
-- Martin E. Marty

As we hope subscribers noticed, *Sightings* took off for a month. This week we are back, "full of zest," I'd like to say, recalling the fun of my Septembers in school from 1933 to 1998. This September you might expect us to do some block-busting comment, given the huge amount of religion-in-public-life news during the Presidential campaign and Party Convention season. I'll resist the impulse, knowing that anything said here will be lost amidst the debris of punditry, bloggery, and 24/7 cable TV comment.

Instead, I'll begin quietly, and with some sense of sadness coloring this report on religious reporting and the featuring of religious features. The event that prompts this elegiac comment is the cutting-back of newspaper news and the firing of first-rate religion reporters. "No Whining?" Yes, no whining. But yes, Lamentations. The first inhibition against whining as news coverage gets cut back and news writers get cut off grows from an awareness that simple brute facts occasion most of the change. We hang out with enough capitalists to share the observation of Joseph Schumpeter, who spoke of capitalism as "creative destruction." Destruction, because old technology cannot survive and some new technology does wonders. The printing press displaced much slow monk-work, and electronic media have long challenged print, with some positive consequences. I am, after all disseminating this in cyberspace, and you can receive its message a micro-second after it is sent out. So the first rule is: Don't be a Luddite, the historic group which warred against invention and technology.

At 4:44 each morning four newspapers bounce against our door for our reading. The bounce is now lighter, week by week. With newspaper advertising declining and the use of the web for delivery of some of what newspapers have done for centuries, the old four-inch-thick bundle of papers now rarely is more than 1.5 inches thick. That's good for Canadian forests, though not for Canadian foresters or paper-millers or printers or us.

The second inhibitor against moaning is this: Religion news is not unique. The thinning scythe cuts through all news departments, and much more. But this is occurring ironically in religion departments, we at *Sightings* say, during the decade(s) in which secular news organizations are at last recognizing the role and power of religion. True, there are some wonderful examples of religious comment on TV and radio (see note at the end). But most religious news in such media has to be sensational, sound-bite length, accessed by those who are lured by grabbing headlines, and less frequently attracting attention by those who now learn much about religion in news because it leaps out from or sneaks into pages in which other items, mainly non-religious, are also being treated.

The scythe has cut at the very top. Sadly, Lynn Garrett, who covered religion books so well for *Publishers Weekly*, and Mark Pinsky, who set the pace for so many while at the *Orlando Sentinel*, were moved on and out, perhaps as unceremoniously as less well known figures who were told to pack up their belongings and head for the door. Manya Brachear at the *Chicago Tribune* commented that a kind of secular Tisha B'av, the day of fasting which mourns the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, was being observed at her paper and elsewhere. We mourn, and will join Garrett, Pinsky, and others as they pick up the pieces and find ways to fulfill their vocations, helping keep the publics informed about things of the spirit.

*Note:*

For religious content on the radio, try American Public Media's *Speaking of Faith* (<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/>); or on television, WNET's *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* ([http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/index\\_flash.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/index_flash.html)).

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