OVERVIEW

For citizens of a country that, according to global surveys, is the most religious in the industrialized world, Americans in general are oddly reluctant to discuss questions of belief. Among journalists writing for U.S.-based publications, most of whom are trained to prioritize facts and objectivity and professionally allergic to earnestness, this aversion is often pronounced. When confronted with an expressed belief, particularly one that contradicts the journalist’s own values or education, there’s a tendency to report it as stated—“X person or group believes Y”—without directly engaging with it in any depth. The result, often, is reporting that universalizes, presenting climate change deniers, for example, or followers of political Islam, in a cartoonish, oversimplified way.

Yet a different approach is possible and, at a time when Americans’ collective trust in facts is eroding, may be increasingly necessary; in an NPR interview shortly after the 2016 election, New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet suggested the fact that journalists “don’t quite get religion” as a key reason for the growing disconnect between mainstream media outlets and the populations they aspire to cover and to inform. This course is designed for students who are inclined to view the disintegration of our communal public reality as a challenge and, perhaps, an opportunity. In it, we’ll examine the difficulties of reporting beyond reason, and the limitations of conventional methods. We’ll talk about the notion of objectivity and the importance of respect, empathy, and context. We’ll address the practical difficulties of reporting on matters that are both intimate and controversial, and the special challenges of reporting on beliefs that we may personally find abhorrent. We’ll read articles and essays by journalists who have overcome these frustrations with grace, and whose work rewards readers with fresh understanding of complex and unfamiliar worldviews. We’ll discuss best practices for reporting on superstition, prejudice, and political ideology, in addition to religious doctrine, lived religion, and debates among believers. Most importantly, students will apply and hone these techniques through a series of reporting and writing assignments.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Books:
The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches From the Fault Line Between Christianity and Islam, by Eliza Griswold
Notes on a Foreign Country, by Suzy Hansen
Holy Days: The World of the Hasidic Family, by Lis Harris
The Great Derangement, by Matt Taibbi
The Way of the Strangers: Encounters With the Islamic State, by Graeme Wood
Remembering Satan, by Lawrence Wright

Articles (available electronically):
“The Hills of Zion,” by H.L. Mencken
“Leaving the Witness: A Preacher Finds Freedom to Think in Totalitarian China,” by Amber Scorah
“Prodigal Son,” by Ariel Levy
“The Devil’s Bait,” by Leslie Jamison
“The White Flight of Derek Black,” by Eli Saslow

Photocopied selections from: Denialism, by Michael Spector; Hillbilly Elegy, by J.D. Vance; and When Skateboards Will be Free: My Reluctant Political Childhood by Said Sayrafiezadeh will be handed out in class.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Because of the sensitive and time-intensive nature of belief reporting, each student will be asked to choose a “beat”—a particular group of believers in or near New York City—to focus on in his or her reporting throughout the semester. During the
first half of the semester, while students are getting to know their beats and beginning to develop story ideas, they will be asked to turn in biweekly beat notes and to sign up for meetings with me to discuss them. For their first formal written assignment, students will be asked to choose an issue related to their chosen beats and, after carefully examining existing coverage of the issue, to write an 800-word news analysis piece.

During the second half of the semester, students will be asked to expand on their reporting during the early part of the semester, reporting and writing two articles of roughly 1000 words each. For these assignments, they may choose any two of the following forms: a profile; a feature on belief education, broadly speaking (this might be education in a more formal sense, like a Marxist study group or an Islamic school, or less formal efforts, like street-corner proselytism or campaigning of some kind); or a news story about “belief in conflict.” Students will be expected to meet with me at least twice during the second half of the semester to discuss their reporting as it progresses and so that we can address any difficulties as they arise.

**GRADING**

75% of the grade will be based on the written assignments, and 25% of the grade will be based on class participation.

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WEEK 1. Introduction. Sensitivity issues, special challenges of reporting belief. Avoiding dogmatism, condescension, and stereotyping.

WEEK 2. Confronting our own (often unconscious) beliefs.

WEEK 3. Religion reporting in a secular society.

WEEK 4. Religion reporting in a devout society.

WEEK 5. Understanding belief systems from within.

WEEK 6. Reporting on belief education (Part I).

WEEK 7. Reporting on belief education (Part II).

WEEK 8. Reporting on religion in politics.


WEEK 10. Reporting religious conflict (Part II).

WEEK 11. Reporting on superstition, vaccine skepticism and other forms of scientific rejectionism.

WEEK 12. Addressing belief when it arises as a major secondary theme in another reporting project.

WEEK 13. Closing thoughts.