

Sightings 3/19/07

The Decline of Print News

-- Martin E. Marty

Sarah Pulliam wrote an obituary for a formerly vivid medium in which we did our sightings. It appears in the April 2007 issue of *Christianity Today*, and has a second life on the web (see "References," below). Its headline: "Religion Sections Deleted." Pulliam was referring to three kinds of phenomena: The *Dallas Morning News*, formerly publisher of the best Religion section, killed that section in January. The second-best, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "folded its Faith and Values section into the Living pages," where it'll be harder to find. Meanwhile, *The Wichita Eagle* is dropping its religion editor, and some other papers are doing the same. Are the editors and publishers villains?

One could rather argue that they are victims. Bob Mong, editor of the *Dallas Morning News*, was the pioneer, risk-taker, and leader, but he could not support and sustain the Religion section he helped develop. The economic situation of newspapers, newsmagazines, and other print media is dire: Almost all the graphs depicting subscribership trends point downward. The internet has become the favored medium for the dwindling minority that cares about news. Who am I to complain about electronic transmissions? You wouldn't be reading today's *Sightings* were I a Luddite about the web, news on the web, and comment on religion on the web. Still, we should put the decline of print-media religion news in perspective.

First, the Religion and Faith and Values sections are dying not because there is not enough to report on in "religion." Religion has seldom been so newsworthy or comment-inducing as it has become in recent decades.

Next, special religion columns and sections do not sustain themselves in the competition for space in print media because publishers depend upon advertisements to pay for them. Look at the fashion ads in the Style sections or the supermarket ads in the Food sections. Religious organizations by and large do not find metro newspaper advertising to be as profitable as it was when travelers-by-train came for meetings "downtown" -- back when people had weekend time to kill and churches of their kind actually in the downtown. Train travel dwindled and churches "of their kind" moved out. Churches and synagogues do not have to do newspaper advertising to attract their own faithful. There are more efficient ways.

Third, the editors are correct in saying that, even without segregated sections in the papers there is a great deal of religion coverage because there is so much religion news. It's simply too often newsworthy for reasons churches would just as soon not advertise. And religion stories are mingled with other news on the pages of many newspapers.

Still, we have reason to shed a tear, since so much news on the web features only major or outrageous or attention-grabbing coverage, while religion in the quieter separate sections could be served up as "features," and not only "news." This meant that, while the stories were not public relations expressions for organizations, their writers could discover a good mix of themes for coverage, including positive but less flashy material than that which comes with conflict,

clerical abuse, or televangelist scandals.

Whether in print or on the internet, radio, or television, we'll keep sighting, but may have to squint more than before to find the offbeat and -- admit it -- the inspiring.

References:

Sarah Pulliam's article "Religion Sections Deleted" (*Christianity Today*, March 7, 2007) can be read online at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/april/2.19.html>.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.

The current Religion and Culture Web Forum features "Secularism: Religious, Irreligious, and Areligious" by W. Clark Gilpin. To read this article, please visit: <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum/index.shtml>.