

THE READER

A publication of the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

Why Journalism Matters

By Roberta Green Ahmanson – A speech delivered to The Media Project on October 20, 2015, at Tribeca Grill in New York, N.Y. (Republished with permission)

This gathering would make sense if I were Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., a fifth-generation journalist and chairman of the board and publisher of The New York Times, and had become a Christian. I would be a wealthy heir to a journalism dynasty. But that is NOT my story. I am the working class daughter of a railroad engineer in Iowa, the middle of America. I grew up, had a great high school journalism teacher named Leonard Rossman, became a journalist after much wandering, and eventually married a man who had a lot of money and understood why journalism matters. We are all here, in short, because I was taught by Leonard Rossman and married Howard Ahmanson. You could say it is a God thing.

Tonight, I want to tell you how I became a journalist and what I came to see as central to the profession. Then, I'll give you an example of a major story that fell short of that vision. I'll end with my dream for each of you and for the Media Project.

My first professional job as a reporter came in 1981, by surprise. I had managed to get a job as a copyeditor on the news desk of the San Bernardino Sun, then owned by Gannett. I worked nights – Wednesday through Sunday. Not great for social life. But, one Saturday night all that changed. I was sitting at my desk, editing away, when I walked two California Highway Patrol officers, the famous CHiPs, or they may have been county sheriffs. They had come for Nevin Miller. With a straight jacket in their hands. Why? Nevin Miller was the religion editor. He had managed to alienate everyone—the Catholic Bishop wouldn't talk to him, the Southern Baptists, the American Baptists, the Buddhists, the Jewish rabbi, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Calvary Chapel guys, the swami. Nevin began every story with a Bible verse and then argued with whomever he had interviewed. Only the Greek Orthodox priest, Fr. Costarikis, would talk to him. He had a kind heart. For some reason, Nevin had feared for his job and refused to leave the building for four days. The newspaper called the cops. The officers found him in the men's bathroom. The next thing I saw was Nevin, in the straight jacket, being led

out of the building: more excitement than we'd had in that newsroom in a while.

The next morning my boss, Fred Meier, took me aside and asked if I'd like Nevin's job. That made me a little nervous. Did I remind him of Nevin?! No. He just thought I could do it. Well, he was right. I loved the job. I was getting paid to ask people questions I had been dying to ask. And, the paper paid the phone bills!! Nor did I have to work weekend nights. The rest became local history. I won many awards and even a six-month fellowship to the University of North Carolina in a Rockefeller Foundation-funded program in religious studies for journalists. While there, I was offered a job at the then much larger Orange County Register – as a religion reporter, no longer needing to write up the tedious weekly calendar of church events!

That led to bigger and better stories, often on the front page, when that still mattered, and to the best day of my reporting life: the day Indira Gandhi was shot.

On October 31, 1984, All Hallows' Eve, I walked into the newsroom at my usual 9:15, one minute before I would be clocked in late at 9:16. My editor called out to me: Whatever you were planning to do today, forget it. Indira Gandhi has been shot by her own Sikh guards. I need you to find out why. And, if there are any Sikhs in Orange County and what they think about it. AND, if there are Hindus in Orange County and what they think about it. By 6 o'clock, if possible.

Well, in the end, I had until 8:30. Somehow, I knew that common Sikh names were Singh, Khalsa, and Kaur—Singh for lion for men—Khalsa for sovereign or free, Kaur for princess for women. I grabbed the phonebook. We still HAD phonebooks back then. After about 10 calls, I had heard the same name over and over. Dr. Wadhwa, not Singh, a pediatrician in North Orange County. I got him on the phone.

What did he think of Gandhi's assassination? Without pause, he said: "I would have been surprised if no assassination attempt was done within the last few months... Indira Gandhi was a bad politician. She was like a Hitler."



ROBERTA GREEN AHMANSON

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She is the co-author, along with Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert, of "Islam at the Crossroads: Understanding Its Beliefs, History, and Conflicts." She is a co-editor of "Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion." Her interests are journalism, art, art history, city planning, religion, history, embroidery, and murder mysteries. She is also the chairperson of The Media Project Board of Directors.



Indira Gandhi and Jacqueline Kennedy, 1962 Photo: Creative Commons

‘Without pause, he said: “I would have been surprised if no assassination attempt was done within the last few months....”’

Well, I knew right there I had my lead quote. And, needless to say, the Associated Press thought so, too.

I learned there were 600 Sikhs in Orange County, many more in LA and Northern California. I talked to a professor who studied religion and violence at the Claremont Colleges. He explained that by sending troops into the Sikh holy place of the Golden Temple in Amritsar on June 5th that very year, Gandhi had so angered the Sikhs that retaliation was inevitable. He also helped me see that Gandhi had died for her faith in the possibility of a secular India. Sikhs had been the guards of Indian rulers since 1857 when they had done great service in the mutiny against the British. Knowing that her actions had incensed the Sikhs, Gandhi kept Sikh guards because of her faith in a secular India. Keeping the guards was a symbol of all she stood for. She had staked her political career and, in the end, her life on the belief that religion did not matter. We were beyond that, into a secular world. The Sikhs weren't buying it.

Years later a friend who was the managing editor of yet another Southern California newspaper told me I was the ONLY religion reporter in America to get that story that day. Stunned, I asked why? “Rob,” he said, “only political reporters got assigned that story. Somehow you had convinced your editors you would get the better story. And, you did.”

Now, move to October 2014. We're with friends on a history-culture exploration trip to Puglia, the heel of the Italian boot. October 27 began with the International New York Times. It ended with the 800 martyrs of Otranto and the realization that The Times had missed the heart of a major story.

Breakfast opened with a headline about eyewitness reports of the torture of James Wright Foley, the American journalist beheaded live on video on August 19. The front-page photo showed a hand holding a cellphone with an image of the prison camp. I read on.

Horror piled on horror. Pieced together from interviews with released hostages, local witnesses, relatives and colleagues of the captives, and advisers who visited the region, Rukmini Callimachi's Times report said Foley had suffered “the cruelest treatment”—hung by his ankles in shackles upside down, beaten repeatedly, subjected to mock

executions, waterboarded over and over, weeks spent in darkness with no mattresses and few blankets.

Then came the surprise. Belgian Jejeon Bontinck, 19, released late 2013, told The Times that Foley had converted to Islam shortly after capture and that his conversion seemed sincere. Others said Foley was “captivated by Islam” and spent hours engrossed in reading the Koran in English.

I was surprised because I had read how Foley, a Roman Catholic, had said his Christian faith had sustained him during his 44-day captivity in Libya in 2011. The Times said nothing about that. I wondered: Was Foley's story of a convert to Islam who was killed simply for being a Western journalist, or was he a martyr for his Christian faith? Did he really convert and did ISIS defy Muslim teaching and kill someone who had become a member of the Umma? Getting this story right had much greater significance than simply war coverage.

So, later I did some checking, the kind of checking I would have done in the past. The Times sources, however, could not be checked because, other than Bontinck, they refused to give their names for security reasons. But reports of Foley's strong faith were easy to find. In a letter to Marquette University's magazine in late 2011, Foley said it was praying the rosary on his knuckles that kept him focused. He wrote: “If nothing else, prayer was the glue that enabled my freedom, an inner freedom first and later the miracle of being released....”

Just then my companions interrupted my reading to go first to Lecce, a city called (justly I'd say) the Florence of the South, and then to Otranto. First Greek, then Roman, Byzantine, briefly Ottoman, Norman, part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and finally Italian, Otranto is steeped in history. But it was an event from 1480 that drew my attention that evening, an event that gave a historical perspective to Foley's story.

Walking on rain-dusted cobblestones, our main goal was Otranto Cathedral, a Norman church, built in 1068 on the remains of a much earlier Christian church. Best known for its giant 12th-century floor mosaic of the Tree of Life, the Church drew my attention with the Shrine to the 800 Martyrs just to the right of the altar. Three walls stacked with their skulls and bones surrounded a statue of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child. I knelt in prayer, Foley on my mind.

Next, I started to report, to check the details of the account of the Martyrs' experience. Their story actually began in

the early morning of May 29, 1453, when Ottoman soldiers broke through the seemingly impregnable walls of Constantine's capital, Constantinople, founded in 325. Later that day, their leader, the 21-year-old Sultan Mehmet II, rode proudly into the city and promptly turned Hagia Sophia, Justinian's great 6th-century church, into a mosque. Mehmet is then widely alleged to have said his final goal was to stable his horses in St. Peter's in Rome. Whether the general actually said those words or not, his goal was clear: The entire Mediterranean would be a Muslim lake. Only Italy, the southern coast of France and northern Spain remained to be taken. Otranto, only some 30 miles west of Albania, was the first stop. This is a vision not unlike that of the Islamic State, Foley's murderers, today.

Sources dither over what exactly happened there. Some historians say the story of the Martyrs is legend only. Written sources didn't appear for two decades. All agree, however, that Mehmet II did indeed send a fleet of some 250 ships with 18,000 soldiers to establish a beachhead for the march to Rome. On July 29 the assault on Otranto, a city of between 6,000 and 12,000 (sources differ), began. By August 14, with thousands of citizens dead defending their city, Otranto was in the hands of the Ottoman forces. Remaining women and children were taken into slavery, just as ISIS does today. And, 800 men between ages 15 and 50 were, according to legend and the earliest sources, given the choice to convert or be beheaded, much like Foley. The city's Bishop Stefano Pendinelli was killed, some say sawn in half, and so was Archbishop Stefano Agricoli. Led by a courageous tailor named Antonio Primaldi or Pezzulla (those sources again) the 800 men refused and one-by-one were beheaded on the Hill of Minerva just outside the town. no video. According to chronicler Giovanni Laggetto's *Historia della Guerra di Otranto del 1480* (one of those early sources), Primaldi said:

"...we fight to save our souls for our Lord, so that having died on the cross for us, it is good that we should die for him..."

Historian Norman Housley, author of *Crusading and the Ottoman Threat, 1453-1505*, said it was "the fall of Otranto, rather than Constantinople, that constituted their '9/11 moment.'" Ferdinand I, king of Naples, rallied his forces. Mehmet II died on May 3, 1481, distracting the Ottomans with wars of succession. In September, Ferdinand's son Duke Alfonso, along with help from

papal and Hungarian forces, recaptured Otranto. The Ottomans never landed on Italian soil again.

Though historians question the Martyrs' story, the Roman Catholic Church, I discovered, does not. The 800 Martyrs were beatified in 1771. The process stalled. But on October 5, 1980, John Paul II visited Otranto; in July 2006 Benedict XVI reopened the canonization process; and Pope Francis canonized all 800 on May 12, 2013, in Rome. He said:

"They refused to deny their faith and died professing the Risen Christ. Where did they find the strength to stay faithful? In the faith itself, which enables us to see beyond the limits of our human sight, beyond the boundaries of earthly life."

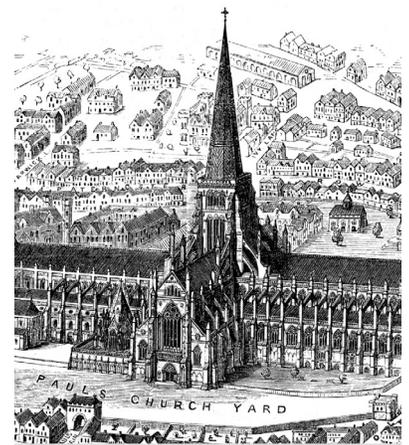
When it comes to James Wright Foley, I found, the Church is also clear. First, Bontinck is hardly a reliable witness, being in jail in Belgium awaiting trial for being a member of Sharia Belgium, a terrorist group, a fact *The Times* did not report. Next, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom states that the right to religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the person. "This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion..."

Fr. Luke Mata of Los Angeles said that if Foley did convert to Islam, it is likely he did it to end the torture, not to deny his Christian faith. "The circumstances, mainly torture, mitigate or completely absolve any culpability," he said, another perspective not told in *The Times*.

James Wright Foley was surely coerced, tortured mercilessly. In the eyes of his church James Wright Foley most likely died a faithful Roman Catholic, just like the Martyrs of Otranto. Could it be that the Church did a better job telling the story than did *The New York Times*?

In the days and weeks after that, Foley's brother Michael wrote a letter to *The Times* arguing that the story was not fair to his brother. *GetReligion* blogger Bobby Ross Jr. wrote his first of five posts on *The Times* October story and those that followed on October 29. My own report appeared in *World Magazine* in November and in a different version on the *QIdeas* blog that same month. On February 21, 2015, *The Times* ran a story by Jim Yardley on the challenges of evaluating the truth of reports of conversions under torture, casting doubt on the veracity of Bontinck's assertion that Foley's conversion was genuine.

Michael Foley wasn't satisfied. On April 4, *The Times* published a piece by



Old St. Peter's Photo: Creative Commons



The Golden Temple of the Sikhs in Amritsar Photo: Creative Commons



Journalists from around the world. Photo by Eric Corpus

its Public Editor – a position that used to be called Ombudsman – Margaret Sullivan, detailing how *The Times* had covered the Foley story from the first video of the beheading on August 19 through the Yardley story.

There were some issues in the Callimachi story Sullivan did not address. Not only did *The Times* fail to mention Foley’s own professions of faith or the research into the reality of conversions under torture, let alone the Catholic Church’s position on them, but there was no historical background. Here was Foley, beheaded for being a Western journalist, possibly for being a Christian – ISIS is capable of having researched Foley’s Christian profession. Foley is beheaded by militant Muslims claiming to reinstate the earliest teachings of Islam, those shared by Mehmet II, in a part of the world first conquered by Muslim armies in the 7th-century. Those armies eventually destroyed the last remnant of the Roman empire in 1453. Foley’s experience stands in a long line of similar experiences at the hands of Muslim armies going back nearly 1400 years.

The Martyrs of Otranto are but one major example. And, they were Foley’s fellow Roman Catholics, dying for their faith. Without researching Foley’s faith, without checking into the psychology of conversions under torture, without putting Foley in a historical context, the original *Times* account failed to give its readers the whole picture.

Why do I tell you this in such detail? Because it is the reason you are all here today.

The Orange County Register’s account of Indira Gandhi’s assassination got to the root of the matter because the paper had a reporter

who asked the question behind the question, the question that took religion seriously as a motivation for human action. I thought that Gandhi’s assassination by Sikh guards was motivated by actions she had taken against their religion and its sacred site.

So, I asked questions that would prove me right or wrong – my task as an honest reporter. But, in asking those questions, I found my instinct was spot on and that the story was even deeper than I knew. Dr. Wadwha was my first affirmation, the religion and violence professor my second. But, Callimachi’s *Times* story had not taken Foley’s earlier account of the power of his faith seriously. It wasn’t even mentioned in her October story. She hadn’t questioned the account of his conversion nor how the Catholic Church would regard a conversion under severe torture. *The Times* didn’t get to the heart of the story. Yardley did better, but even there, Foley’s faith is not seen as decisive.

We live in a world where daily headlines show the power of religion. Most stories show religion gone wrong. They make news. ISIS provides fresh fodder. If it doesn’t, Boko Haram or another branch of what’s left of Al Qaeda or the Taliban does.

In March of 2015, the *Atlantic Monthly* published Graeme Wood’s cover story that placed religion at the core of ISIS and everything it does. It was the first story I read that did so. It was the first story that understood the first century of Islamic conquest and the enormity of Mehmet II’s victory.

Some of you live in countries, I think of India, where religion cannot be reported head-on. It would lead to riots and killing. “Community violence” it is called. You have to be careful. In yet other parts of the world, societies have become so secular that you are challenged to be able to cover religion as anything other than a dusty historical fact.

You all could tell me more about these issues than I’ll ever know. And yet, the story, the true story, the full story, needs to be on the record, perhaps in the West, perhaps under another name.

But not all stories are so fraught. There are other stories you see every day that provide needed background without naming the beast that can be religion. Don’t get me wrong; this project is not about covering religion. It is about covering the world – its culture, its politics, its economics, its direction, and its conflicts – in the most honest and complete way humanly possible. To do that, a good reporter must factor in religion where it applies. And that may get you a front page or top of the feed story, what used to be called a scoop, a story that catches the attention of the world and changes the way its leaders think. That’s the goal: the power of the truth, the real story, to make needed change.

This afternoon, we went uptown to the Museum of the City of New York to see an exhibition about a journalist whose stories changed the face of this city in the late

19th-century. Jacob Riis was born in the ancient cathedral town of Ribe, Denmark. He made his way to America where his stories on the horrors of tenement life made people think. His 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives*, building on his 1889 *Scribner Magazine* article, changed the way New Yorkers thought and acted toward the poor in their city. You saw up close how journalism can change the world. It is a high calling. It demands truth telling.

As journalists who are Christians, we have a double calling to tell the truth. We have the witness of Jeremiah the Prophet who spent time in cisterns and prisons because his rulers did not want to hear the truth about their situation. We have the message of Jesus who said: “The truth will set you free.” That, of course, has metaphysical implications, but it begins with the concrete kind of reporting about events and their meaning that fills blogs and news posts and radio and television blasts every day. Jesus also tells us in Luke 16:10 that if we are faithful in little things, we will be given charge over greater things. It starts with telling the truth about the reality around us. The tradition of journalism also dares us to tell the truth – as Riis did.

The goal of the Global Media Project is to do whatever such an institution can to help you be the best journalist you can be, to enable you to become voices for your countries, reporters who tell the whole story and thus contribute to making the world a better place. Those last words are often seen as a cliché. But we know the power of truth. Indira Gandhi died because she refused to face reality. James Wright Foley died because he was faithful both to his call to follow Jesus and to report on the suffering of the world. Our job is to tell their stories.



The Reader is a publication of The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute (MPJI) is based at The King’s College in New York City. MPJI provides education, training and professional development projects for journalists at the high school, undergraduate and professional levels. It is named after the late John McCandlish Phillips, a legendary reporter at *The New York Times*.

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