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## Work out media-religion differences

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Yen Feng sums up recommendations at this year's Asef Journalists' Colloquium.

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### In SEOUL

THEY did not see exactly eye to eye, but faith leaders and journalists hunkered down in a downtown Seoul hotel to work out their differences.

They had come from all over Asia and Europe, representing diverse religions and cultures. Their concerns, however, had much in common.

What the faith leaders wanted to know: Why is media only interested in religion when there's conflict?

The journalists' riposte: How about not clamming up every time a crisis hits?

The dialogue between the two groups, at times serious, candid but more often heartfelt, was organised and sponsored by Singapore's Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef), an inter-cultural relations group.

Previously, it was attended only by journalists; this year, the group invited for the first time to the colloquium religious leaders, to discuss the challenges of religion reporting in the two regions.

The meeting was also attended by academics in media and religion. Altogether, 17 representatives from 15 countries, including your correspondent from Singapore, participated in the event.



**A group of participants take their discussion outside for some fresh air!**

For two days since Monday, the two groups traded their experiences to find common ground with each other.

Among the areas faith leaders were most concerned about were journalists' lack of religious knowledge, and their potential to sensationalise negative reports.

"There is certainly a lack of trust," said Father Eamonn Conway, an Irish Roman Catholic priest and President of the European Society for Catholic Theology. "Sometimes I agonise for hours what to say, and it gets cut into a soundbite."

Mr Hermen Shastri, a minister and general-secretary of the Council of Churches in Malaysia, said that there was too much stereotyping of religion in the media.

"You cannot ignore that there are many different viewpoints even within just one faith. There needs to be more in-depth and high-level reporting for religious stories," he said.

This was a point brought up also by Pakistan-born Abdullah Khan, an assistant Imam of the Rabtatul Alamia Al-islamia in Denmark; and Mr Hans Ucko, a minister of the Church of Sweden and President of Religions for Peace Europe. The journalists, in response, tried to explain media constraints, including deadline pressures and the lack of editorial space or clip-time.

"Furthermore," said Ms Lola Banon, a Spanish TV journalist and specialist in political Islam, "Truth is not the only value in journalism. It is difficult to explain the news quickly and easily.

"In Europe, especially, we prefer the spectacular first."

Mr Christopher Landau, the BBC World Service's religious affairs correspondent, asked that religious leaders not "draw up the bridges and shut up shop" when confronted with media attention.

He referred to an interview he did last year with Britain's Archbishop of Canterbury, after which his comments on adopting Syariah law in the UK were misrepresented in other newspapers.

Instead of clarifying his position, however, the Archbishop declined further interviews and posted a response on his website – four days later.

"By that time, his comments had been running on the top of the news bulletins for days," said Mr Landau.

Other journalists present were Mr Daniel Raus of Czech Public Radio, Bangkok Post's Vasana Chinvarakorn, Danish TV correspondent Simi Jan, China's Wang Nan from People's Daily, and Mr Otto Friedrich from Austria.



**Discussing the roles of media journalists and faith leaders at Seoul's Lotte Hotel. From left to right: Austrian journalist Otto Friedrich, Mr Hermen Shastri from Malaysia, Mr Wang Nan from People's Daily in China, and Mr Christopher Landau, the religious affairs correspondent from BBC World Service. Photos courtesy of Asia-Europe Foundation.**

After two days of discussions, a list of action plans was devised, the thrust of which was on building trust between the two groups.

It included more personal, regular contact between the two groups, and a proposal for religious leaders to recommend credible sources of information – whether online, in print, or authorised experts in the field – that journalists can tap on.

Both groups agreed on the need for better-quality, sensitive and nuanced reporting on religion.

The group's recommendations was presented to the fifth Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) Interfaith Dialogue, which ends today.

Asef's Journalists' Colloquium was put together with the help of South Korea's

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The annual two-day Asem Interfaith Dialogue, held in Seoul, was organised by the governments of South Korea and Finland.