

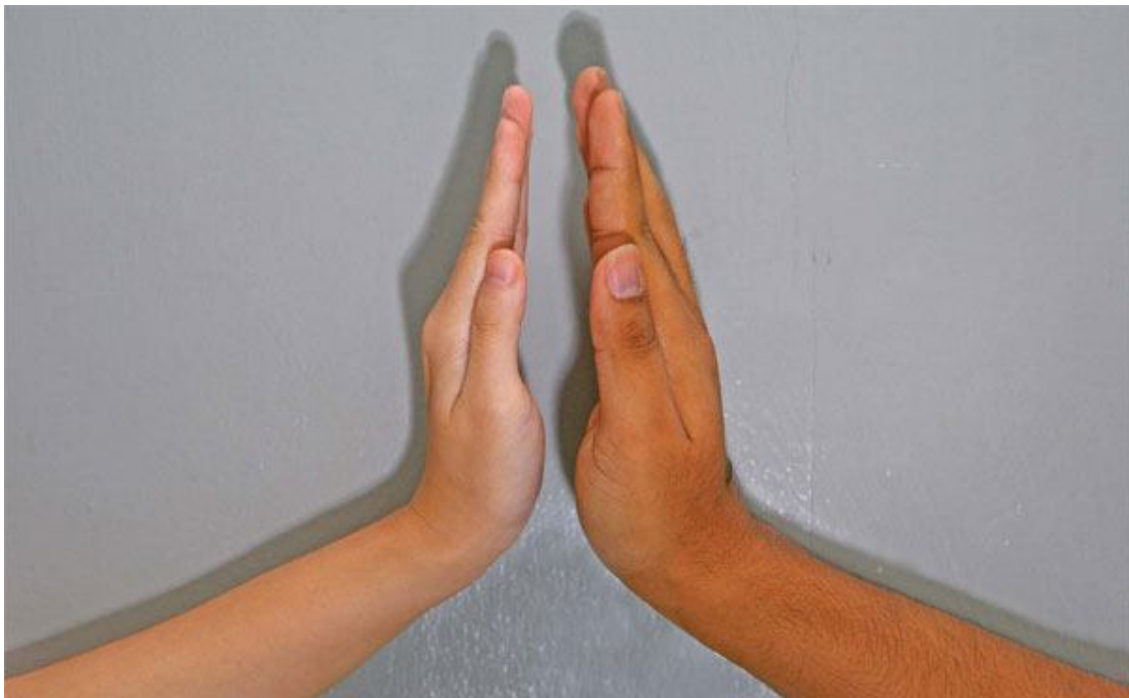
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| Name of Media   | The Bangkok Post, Thailand                   |
| Date of Article | 29 October 2009                              |
| Author          | Vasana Chinvarakorn                          |
| Title           | Keeping the Faith                            |
| Project Name    | 7 <sup>th</sup> ASEF Journalists' Colloquium |

## Keeping the Faith

### Journalists covering religion have more challenges and rewards than meet the eye

- Published: 29/10/2009 at 12:00 AM
- Newspaper section: [Outlook](#)

Scepticism or cynicism. Advocacy or sabotage. Freedom of expression or religious sensitivity. Recent years have witnessed conflicts and rampant violence in different corners of the world. Interestingly, religion and mass media have often been attributed to being among the key factors behind the growing spats, and in turn, each often eyes the other as the party at fault.



Can the divide between faith leaders and the media ever be narrowed, if not completely bridged? Last month, 17 religious leaders and media representatives from Asia and Europe gathered in Seoul, South Korea. According to the organiser, the Asia-Europe Foundation, the two-day event was the first time in their series of journalists' colloquiums that the two interests have met face to face.

The more the two groups aired their grievances, however, the more commonalities they found. Each admitted to knowing very little about the other. Both pointed out the seeming lack of respect and trust, which could be a reciprocal phenomenon. Apparently, the realms of faith leaders and media practitioners feel like two totally different worlds that come into collision every now and then.

But do they have to be at odds with each other? Father Eamonn Conway, an Irish Roman Catholic priest and president of the European Society for Catholic Theology, captured the gist of both sides well when he asserted: "I'd like to think that religion and media are both the services of the truth, at our best."

In practice, though, interpretations vary regarding what constitutes the truth, if there is one, and how best to convey it. Father Conway intriguingly cited the late Iris Murdoch: "You may have a truth, but you must be either a poet or an artist not to utter it as a lie."

Moreover, there are other contesting values that might cut through the lines of one's profession. Lola Banon, an award-winning TV journalist from Spain and a specialist in Middle East affairs, shared her wry observation: "Truth is not the only value in journalism. In Europe, especially, we prefer the spectacular first." Father Conway has had a fair dose of experience with such conflict-hungry media. Sometimes, he said, he would "agonise for hours" on a certain issue only to find his comments shrunk into, say, a "one-minute sound bite" with very little supportive context.

Other times, the media would deliberately pit him against another person or group just to stir up some controversy.

"So you deal with someone who for the most part have their own agenda, rather than to serve as a mediator or reporter."



In and outside the meeting room the debate goes on—17 faith leaders and media representatives from Asia and Europe recently met in Seoul to discuss the need to bridge their differences and bring about better trust between the two professions. COURTESY OF THE ASIA-EUROPE FOUNDATION

At the other end of the spectrum, journalists have their grumblings as well. BBC World Service's religious affairs correspondent Christopher Landau noted how he sometimes has to spend a lot of time trying to convince some religious leaders not to get themselves "stitched up" in the wake of certain disputes.

Last year Landau had a radio interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury, in which Britain's top clergyman made a suggestion about the possibility of adopting Shariah law in the country. The subsequent uproar, due in part to misrepresentation by other UK media, prompted the archbishop to decline any follow-up clarifications with the media. Four days later, his office issued a statement on his website, but by that time, Landau said, "his comments had been running on the top of the news bulletins for days."

Notably, Landau is one of the few journalists who is well-groomed in the issues he covers. A Cambridge graduate in theology and religious studies, he is one of the

two assigned by the BBC to cover the beat specifically. But Landau said the unique opportunities that he has had, such as in being the only correspondent to gain access to the work in Rome of the Opus Dei movement (scandalised by Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*), has a lot to do with the trust element.

With regard to the Opus Dei story, Landau said he first reported on one of its priests who was given unprecedented control of a parish in the UK. "I was fair," he recalled, "while most of the other journalists were completely unfair to him. "If you build trust with people, giving reason that they can trust you, then the door will open for you. And I don't think people mind that in the broader context, you then ask a difficult question."

To many journalists, the religious brief usually does not gain as much prestige or attention despite its significance and possible repercussions (just think of the Danish cartoon incident in 2005/6 that turned bloody beyond any expectation). Daniel Raus, Czech radio journalist, related his own unease when he was first transferred to the religion beat three years ago. In a survey at Czech Public Radio, the religious programme, Raus noted, ranked at the bottom in the popularity rating, even lower than the poetry reading time slot (incidentally, Raus is also a published poet).

"At my office, we used to have a sort of playful greeting among colleagues. My friends would ask me, 'So what is new in religious reporting?' and I'd tell them: 'The dog has died,' meaning nothing happened."

But over time, Raus said he has discovered the thrills of his new assignment. A similar sentiment was expressed by Yen Feng of Singapore's *Straits Times*. The young reporter said being the only person to handle the religious portfolio at the paper has given him something "very meaningful, and makes [him] excited about going to work every day".

Excited about religious issues \_ and in Singapore? Feng showed a very long list of story ideas that he would like to pursue. He said he has signed up to several search engines, Twitter sources and newsletters of different religious groups that will alert him when any "happening" takes place in the city state. "There are stories to pursue every day," he insisted, "I enjoy it so much because it's a composite of many aspects of humanity \_ philosophical, intellectual, history, a deep sense of community, something very meaningful that really appeals to me ...

"Every time I visit a temple or a church, my brain is full-on because there's so much that I don't know. A lot of the excitement actually happens at my desk, because I'm reading a lot, researching, talking to people on the phone ..."

Still, some of Feng's ventures into ecclesiastical affairs sound not much different from investigative reporting. He recalled once spending days hunting down a certain religious group whose members were charged with spreading a message of hate. Upon locating the group, though, Feng said none wanted to expose themselves to media scrutiny. The Singaporean said on such occasions he would have to rely on all of his wits and "savviness" in order to get the individuals to talk to him. At the same time, Feng confided he also has to deal with the delicate issue of how to "balance my journalistic professionalism with my understanding and compassion [to leave them alone]".

"It seems like religion correspondents in [secularised] Europe have a hard time because people don't care much about it, and in Asia we have a hard time because we care too much about it," the Singaporean reckoned.

For Otto Friedrich, editor for religious affairs at the Austrian weekly *Die Furche*, (a lack of) popularity should not predetermine whether or not a story gets published. A very secular society like Austria, he noted, is beset with misconceptions and prejudices about certain religions and there is a crucial need for unravelling the stereotypes. Friedrich recently wrote a piece on Islamophobia in his country where he subsequently received a lot of "angry calls" from readers.

"They thought Muslims wanted to take power, which was ridiculous," he said.

"That does put more pressure on my work, but some topics are very important to raise in society."

Unfortunately, sometimes it is the media that exacerbates public fear and bias. Friedrich cited another incident when a journalist covered only part of a lecture on Jesus Christ by an imam of Palestinian origin, and reported it as if he was preaching against Christianity. Worse, other media just followed suit without double-checking the facts, and the imam was unduly nicknamed "preacher of hatred" in several headlines and put under investigation by the authorities.

"The [first] journalist did not wait to listen to the whole talk [in arabic language]. His translator was not very good either. And they did not understand the attitude [style] of Islamic lecture which was done in very picturesque language, citing the Koran, where you listed all the arguments, pros and cons. The journalist just heard that Muslim scholars some centuries ago were talking badly about Christians, then they went away.

"Actually, the conclusion of the sermon was that Christians and Muslims share a lot together \_ it was very peaceful. Of course, the investigators could not prove that the imam did anything wrong. But in the public's eye, he was a dangerous man."

Friedrich said his weekly magazine tried to tilt the balance by reporting the episode in a thorough manner, but "we only have a small circulation," he lamented.

A trickle is better than nothing, though. Lola Banon of Spain's Channel 9 TV accepted the limitations of mass media, in terms of time and space. Through her book on the Palestinians, which was published a few years ago, she sought to provide a broader, more comprehensive picture of Middle East conflict in order to create better understanding of the situations.

The result has been quite gratifying.

"People who have read my book told me, 'Before I used to hate Arab people so much. But now I feel sorry for them.'

"As journalists, we are not important. We are not like doctors who can save lives. But we also have a special work to do: [through our writings] we can create an atmosphere where good ideas can grow, where politicians can make decisions that will affect a lot of people," said Banon, who also sits on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

A labour of love, it seems, is self-rewarding. Feng said since his shift from the crime and celebrity beats to religion, he has been undergoing a deep personal transformation.

"I've become a lot more patient, more nuanced in understanding religion," said the young Singaporean.

"It's a very humbling experience for me. When you pride yourself as an intelligent person, you tend to miss a lot of what you consider to be supernatural or you think would need more scientific proof. I always believed that knowledge could be accumulated from the works of others, that I could learn anything from books. But there's something about religion that it's not about reading a book, or asking about proof. And to accept that is a very humbling experience."

Father Conway would agree on the merits of humility.

"Yes, we do believe," he said, "there is truth, but truth is not a possession as such. Our formulation of doctrine, dogma, is going to ever be only an approximation. So we're always journeying towards a fuller understanding and expression of that truth."

For Banon, although it may not be possible to ever achieve the whole truth, as a human being, a journalist, one can at least work towards creating a more just and peaceful society. And to help people nurture hope in their minds, despite all the adversities in life. A goal she said would require honesty, courage, a sense of responsibility and faith, or what Banon would call "love":

"My personal view about journalism is that it's not a religious job, but it is a spiritual job."

**Relate Search:** [South Korea](#), [Asia-Europe Foundation](#), [Father Eamonn Conway](#), [Middle East affairs](#)

## About the author



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