

FAITH IN THE MEDIA

COVERING THE INTERSECTION OF
RELIGION AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT





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Center for Communication Action Bangladesh (c-cab.org) uses the power of research and strategic communication to help improve development outcomes and support people in understanding their rights. C-CAB's mission is to inform, communicate and empower communities and promote behaviour change in a broad range of sectors. Our interventions aim to catalyze social change and influence policy by fostering the free flow of ideas, access to information and knowledge, and telling stories that matter.

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About WFDD

World Faiths Development Dialogue is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development, with formal relationships with the World Bank and Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Peace, Religion, and World Affairs. WFDD supports dialogue, fosters communities of practice, collects case studies on faith-based organizations, and promotes understanding on religion and development.

To learn more, please visit: <http://wfdd.us>

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Why Cover Faith?.....	06
a. Introduction.....	06
b. Faith matters – where coverage comes up short.....	11
c. Lessons from the ‘Faith in the Media workshops’ in Bangladesh.....	13
d. A Better Life For Everyone.....	15
e. The Nexus between Faith, Diversity & Sustainable Development.....	17
Case Study A: Examining the development mandates of FBOs....	20
Main Take-aways from Chapter 1.....	22

Chapter 2

Understanding Religion for Journalists in Bangladesh.....	16
a. Religious literacy Sketching of our Belief Systems.....	16
- Animism.....	24
- Buddhism.....	25
- Hinduism.....	26
- Islam.....	27
- Christianity.....	28
- Sikhism.....	30
- Bahá’ism.....	31
- Atheism & Agnosticism.....	32
Case Study B: Religious Tolerance in the Qur’an & other holy books.....	35
Main Take-aways from Chapter 2.....	36

Chapter 3

Challenges of Reporting on Belief Systems.....	37
a. Key Findings of a New Study on Faith & the Media.....	37
b. Considering Newsroom Realities.....	39
c. Examining Community Perspectives.....	42
d. Addressing bias and ignorance in coverage of religious & faith communities....	45
e. Peace & Development Religion Reporting...	49
Case Study C: Searching for social justice: a Catholic school in Dhaka.....	50
Main Take-aways from Chapter 3.....	57

Chapter 4

Conflict-Sensitive Journalism	58
a. Locating CSJ within Theories of Journalism.....	58
b. Understanding Motivations for Conflict.....	42
Case Study D: 9-11 & the damage done by religious bigotry in the media.....	63
c. The Shapes of Conflict.....	66
d. Principles of Operating in a Conflicted Community.....	68
e. Preparing to Work in the Field.....	72
Case Study E: Covering extreme communal conflict.....	75
Main Take-aways from Chapter 4.....	77
Summing up: What we have Learned in this Manual.....	78

Resources & Further Reading

a. Religion & Development Resources.....	80
b. Covering Religion Resources.....	80
c. Safety & CSJ Resources.....	82

Chapter 1

Why Cover Faith?

1.a. Introduction

The media acts as a mirror of society. Journalists track social trends, shine a light on social justice issues and provide information and analysis that help people make sound decisions in their lives. To remain true to this mission in the age of social media and digital communications, news organizations must cover what is important to audiences, or risk losing relevance. This often means venturing outside comfort zones and looking into issues that are generally underreported or neglected.

Religion has long been a media blind spot or taboo. Despite the importance of faith as a powerful motivator of individual and community behavior, most news organizations rarely cover faith issues or faith-based organizations. When religion is covered, it is often in the context of conflict or politics. Event-based reporting of festivals usually misses the socioeconomic and even political impact of religious actors, beliefs, and practice.

A recent study that polled thousands of news consumers globally found that 53% of respondents said the media actively ignores religion as an aspect of society and culture today while 61% said media perpetuates faith-based stereotypes. The majority of journalists interviewed as part of the study said coverage of faith issues was marginalized in newsrooms.

Globally, more than 80% of people identify with one religion or another. For millions of Bangladeshis, faith is an integral part of their cultural identity and social life. Religious leaders have a powerful influence on individual and collective behaviour in many communities across the country.

While religious conflict or abuse rightly makes headlines, what is often missed is the enormous influence faith has on society and its institutions: schools, social welfare, universities and, above all, values.

The misuse and abuse of religion can be a barrier to development – the restrictions on women's mobility and access to resources, the





marginalization of vulnerable communities and the rejection of public health measures are examples. Religious actors, however, have been engaged in positive ways across every facet of development, from providing humanitarian relief to caring for the sick and delivering essential social services.

There is little dispute that religion can be a tremendous force for good or ill. It is far too important for the media to ignore. Missing the faith dimensions of a story often results in incomplete reporting or getting the story completely wrong.

The news media's coverage of faith issues – or the lack of it – has implications for the credibility of the media. A recent Gallup poll showed that conservative Americans are more likely to report a lack of trust in the media because they feel journalists do not adequately cover topics important to them.

If the mainstream media chooses not to cover issues that are important to communities of faith, a large segment of the population is more likely to turn to alternative – and often more radical – sources of information. This accentuates fragmentation of the

information ecosystem, making it increasingly difficult to reach communities with accurate, verified information, with profound implications for everything from social cohesion to gender rights to public health responses.

The popularity of waaj or religious sermons on social media in Bangladesh illustrates the demand for faith-based content. For example, Rose TV, one of the most popular sermon-based YouTube channels, has 7.8 million subscribers.

Technology has made it possible to tell more engaging stories, and to connect more directly with communities and audiences through digital platforms. However, this also means that journalists can lose their position as gatekeepers of news. Media organizations can no longer control what people read or see.

Today, when waves of misinformation and hate speech on social media fan the flames of bias and violence from Myanmar to the Middle East, the importance of accurate, balanced, and ethical coverage of religion to foster understanding, harmony, and respect

among the major religious traditions is greater than ever.

In short, religion matters to a large proportion of humanity, and should be covered with fairness and accuracy.

Center for Communication Action Bangladesh, with support from the World Faiths Development Dialogue at Georgetown University, organized a series of participatory workshops involving journalists and religious leaders to explore how the news media could strengthen objective coverage of the role of faith in socioeconomic development.

Participants highlighted the media tendency to present a rigid and false dichotomy – religious vs secular. Although the majority of Bangladeshis identify with a religious faith, there are nuances that this characterization misses. The idea that religious people are ‘spiritual’ and therefore must be ‘unworldly’ propagates harmful stereotypes that can result in marginalization.

Some participants said the media often has an entrenched ideology that faith is private and must be excluded from the public domain. The narrative is that in order to be tolerant, one has to be secular. However, to many people of faith, this kind of aggressive secularism is itself intolerant, something that leads to marginalization - often forcing them to choose between being religious and availing themselves of



livelihood or educational opportunities.

Participants pointed out that most newsrooms in Bangladesh assign political reporters to cover faith issues, automatically applying a political color to the story that often ignores the social role of religion and silences nonpolitical voices. Participants also highlighted a lack of religious literacy, sensationalism and harmful stereotyping as factors that hinder objective coverage of the role of faith in society.

This manual aims to examine some of the ethical issues in covering belief systems and to present practical steps that journalists and media organizations can take to strengthen objective and meaningful coverage of faith issues and faith communities. In the process, journalists can unearth new stories and broaden their audience base.

This manual deliberately moves away from using the conflict lens to covering religion. Conflict sensitivity is an important tool in the modern journalist's toolkit, and is included here in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 16 – building a peaceful, prosperous and inclusive society. However, we widen our focus to explore the intersection between religion and sustainable development more broadly, an angle often missing in news coverage.



STRUCTURE: The manual has four chapters, each of which contains short exercises to sharpen skills, that the reader can either perform alone or together with colleagues. Each chapter concludes with a Case Study encouraging the reader to think deeper about the issues covered, followed by a quick boxed check-list of the main take-aways , which readers can refer back to when in a hurry, as journalists always are!

- In Chapter 1, **Why Cover Faith?**, we look at why coverage of faith is important, where the gaps are, and why media organizations so often appear to ignore faith in news coverage. We also focus on the world's projects for universal human upliftment agreed by the United Nations and codified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and the key role that religious non-profits such as those in Bangladesh play in making those goals a reality.
- In Chapter 2, **Understanding Religion for Journalists in Bangladesh**, we look at the wonderfully diverse multi-belief origins of Bangladeshi society, provide thumbnail sketches of our country's main belief systems, and look briefly at the debate over Bangladesh's unique vision of inclusive, multi-faith "secularism."
- In Chapter 3, **Challenges of Reporting Belief Systems**, we look at a new study on how varied publics view the way we report on religion – and it's not always complimentary! – and examine the hard realities we face in our newsrooms, then draw out some best practices on how to cover communities of faith and their vital work in the developmental field.
- Chapter 4, **Conflict-Sensitive Journalism**, advances into the specialist field of peace-building journalism, looking at understanding the dynamics of conflict, and at the principles and safety rules of working in conflicted communities. We wrap up with a general boxed check-list that sums up all you will have learned through this manual.
- The concluding annex, **Resources & Further Reading**, provides pointers to enable you to do a deeper dive into covering belief systems through reference to religion and development, religion journalism, and safety and conflict-sensitive journalism resources.

1.b. Faith matters – some examples of where coverage comes up short

There is an old adage in journalism - when a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news. This partly explains why the news media's coverage of faith issues appears distorted.

Many organised religious communities, groups and individuals professing various faiths, plus large multi-faith initiatives, have had an immense impact on improving the quality of life on earth for all through a diverse array of projects and creative interventions involving decades of hard work.

Yet, it is the juicy scandal, the embarrassing slip-up or the deranged act of extremism that steals the headlines. When interviewing people for a story involving a faith angle, some reporters, in search of a viral soundbite, will often seek out voices at the fringes.

Reputable media organizations are sometimes guilty of elevating extremist voices. A BBC Question Time panel discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2023, for example, had no Muslim or Palestinian panelists, and included an activist who had described Muslim culture as a 'death cult'.

Some leading news organizations have taken steps to include faith-based content in their programming. The BBC, for example, regularly broadcasts Sunday morning church services. CNN ran a popular blog on faith issues called the Belief Blog.

However, many journalists are uncomfortable if they have to report on religion. Many lack knowledge of the issues involved. Others feel that religion is a personal matter and has no place in the public domain. Many consider religion a 'banana skin' and are wary of controversy.

Faith communities often decry media bias. Conservatives in the US complain that liberal media organizations treat them with contempt, pointing to the coverage of the religious beliefs of Supreme Court justices, for example. Denominations such as the Mormon Church have accused news organizations like the New York Times and CBS News of unfairly targeting them (something the news outlets tend to deny).

Some analysts have pointed out how the media has got major stories wrong because of a failure to understand the religious dimensions of the stories – ranging from the Iraq war to US presidential elections.

Media bias often propagates stereotypes and can fuel violence against entire communities. Critics say media prejudice played a big role in genocidal violence in Rwanda and Myanmar.

Muslim communities in many countries felt they were vilified largely as a result of biased media coverage in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Media analysis shows that stereotypes can be reinforced both by expression and omission, by naming, or not naming, the religion or ethnicity of terrorists. For example, Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik is not described by the

media as a Christian terrorist, although he self-identified as a Christian and would-be protector of European Christianity. The media largely described his actions as political and not religious, in contrast to the descriptions of Muslims who murder for political-religious reasons.

The massacre at Srebrenica during the Bosnian war is another example. This is widely described by media as the killing of 8,000 'Muslim' men and boys by 'Serbs', without noting their religion as Christians. The Serb military and political leaders charged with war crimes are not referred to as Christian terrorists.

In Bangladesh, news reports have used derogatory language (e.g., 'intruders') when describing Rohingya refugees who fled violence in Myanmar and compared them to insects (e.g., 'swarming ants'). Their religiosity has been mocked, and they have been portrayed as problematic and primitive.

It is the media's responsibility to convey an accurate picture of the breadth and role of religion in society, the issues the religions are grappling with, their contributions and failures. It is not always easy to do, for reasons we will examine in the following chapters.



1.c. Lessons from the ‘Faith in the Media workshops’ in Bangladesh

Between October 2022 and January 2023, Center for Communication Action Bangladesh, with support from the World Faiths Development Dialogue, organized a series of participatory workshops to explore how the news media could objectively cover the role of faith and faith communities in socioeconomic development. The roundtables and workshops held in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna, brought together journalists and religious leaders to discuss balanced coverage of faith issues.

A summary of the discussions follows

The secular vs. religious dichotomy

Participants highlighted the media tendency to present a rigid and false dichotomy – religious vs secular. Although the majority of Bangladeshis identify with a religious faith, there are nuances that this characterization misses. The idea that religious people are ‘spiritual’ and therefore must be ‘unworldly’ propagates harmful stereotypes that can result in marginalization.

Some participants said the media often propagates the notion that faith is private and must be excluded from the public domain. The argument is that in order to be tolerant, one has to be secular. However, to many people of faith, this kind of aggressive secularism is itself intolerant, something that leads to marginalization - often forcing them to choose between being religious and availing themselves of livelihood or educational opportunities.

The political lens

Most newsrooms in Bangladesh assign political reporters to cover faith issues, automatically applying a political color to the story that often ignores the social role of religion and silences nonpolitical voices. In looking for faith leaders to interview, reporters often go to political religious leaders, who are sometimes not representative of the community.

Poor religious literacy

Sports reporters need to understand sports, and business reporters need knowledge of business and commerce; when reporting on religion, however, reporters come unprepared – this was how one panelist described the lack of religious literacy among journalists in Bangladesh. Most agreed that reporting on festivals quite often missed the inner significance and spirituality of the events due to a lack of knowledge. Many stories mixed up historical facts and figures, some said.

Sensationalism

The media thrives on sensational news, magnifying the flaws of specific members of the community. When the media focuses on scandals and flaws of individuals, it misses the forest for the trees. It propagates negative stereotypes and renders voiceless those who otherwise think critically and compassionately about the world and try to be a force for good.

Stereotyping

A problem identified in the workshops is the use of labels, where Muslims are always ‘moderate’ or ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘radical’, and Christians are ‘devout’ or ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’. Such labels create a ‘Us vs Them’ mentality and widen social fault lines.

Missing the socioeconomic impact of religion

Many journalists only report on religion when there is conflict, or if there is a festival. This misses the important role faith has in motivating and influencing individual and community behavior.

Understanding the news cycle

Religious communities often assume that negative coverage is the fault of the media: “They don’t understand us”; “They are out to criticize us — make us look stupid.” Some panelists said faith leaders and organizations don’t understand the news cycle and what is newsworthy. News organizations need news content, but won’t publish something that is not newsworthy.

Demanding accountability

Faith leaders often expect the same deference from journalists that they receive from their faithful. But it is a journalist’s job to demand accountability and ask searching questions. Faith leaders must not expect adulation from journalists, panelists said.

A lack of buy-in from gatekeepers

Some argued that journalists wanted to cover faith issues but do not receive



1.d. A Better Life for Everyone

The major religions of the world share a common concern for the poor and the obligation to protect the vulnerable. Examples include the exhortation to 'feed the hungry' in Christianity, the notion of Tikkun Olam within Judaism to repair the world from injustice, and the pillar of Zakat within Islam. Many religious injunctions align well with the sustainable development goals adopted as a blueprint by the United Nations.

In 2000, UN member states unanimously adopted eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to reduce extreme poverty by 2015. And in that target year of 2015, the MDGs were updated and expanded, based on the widest consultation the UN has ever engaged in, and reoriented to impose duties on the Global North as well as the Global South, into 17

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a target implementation date of 2030 under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which, as the UN puts it, "provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future."

Only five years into progress towards the SDGs, the UN itself noted significant advances among **faith-based organisations (FBOs)** in assisting countries attain the Goals. In a landmark report 'Faith Action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Outlook' the UN said: "Greening houses of worship is becoming mainstream in many religions with a move to renewable energy being a priority activity. In some circumstances, the clean power

generated by FBOs can be used not only be use for their own purposes but also shared with nearby communities or fed directly back to the electric grid. Rooftop solar is the most popular choice, but community solar is gaining traction as well."

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Among many case studies, it cited: "Several Islamic countries, including Jordan, Kuwait, and Indonesia, are undergoing a renewable energy transformation to green their mosques. A project administered by the Jordan Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Fund and the Jordanian government funded solar installations on over 500 mosques from 2015 to 2020."

And that's just relating to the clean energy Sustainable Development Goal

– not the first thing that usually comes to a journalist’s mind when considering stories on religion!

We will examine the SDGs relating to communities of faith in greater detail later, but note how the UN sees the developmental importance of faith-based organisations: “FBOs are uniquely positioned to make progress toward the SDGs. Nearly every religious, indigenous, and spiritual tradition teaches a moral obligation to protect the planet. Aside from these moral considerations, however, are some very compelling statistics. Did you know that faith-based organizations control 8 per cent of the Earth’s habitable land, 5 per cent of commercial forests and 10 per cent of financial institutions? Well, they do, which gives them a potentially outsized role in the battle to combat poverty, reverse environmental degradation and limit climate change, say experts. The potential aggregate impact of faith-based organizations on sustainable development is immense...”



1.e. The Nexus Between Faith, Diversity & Sustainable Development

Other multilateral institutions such as the World Bank have recognized the importance of engaging faith-based organizations to achieve development goals.

The World Bank has since 1998 formally acknowledged the distinct strategic value of faith organizations. FBOs have deep local roots and offer opportunities for partnership and advocacy on a broad range of key development issues, according to the Bank. The World Bank has also emphasized the role of faith and faith organizations in promoting peace and diversity, including the engagement of youth. “In light of increasing engagement between faith institutions and global development programs”, the Bank highlighted “both actual and potential faith-based development activities that directly involve—and benefit—youth.”

World faith communities and faith-based organisations (FBOs) recognise their crucial roles in assisting their societies in the implementation of the SDGs – especially important in countries like Bangladesh where more than 99% of people say religion is “an important part of their daily lives” (the world’s highest country ranking, compared to a global average result of 84%). In recognition of the key role of religion in development, in 2016, a new **International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)**, was created, with strong German government support. PaRD describes itself as a “multi-stakeholder global

partnership that actively includes religious and faith-based actors, organisations, initiatives, and communities working towards achieving the 2030 Agenda,” focusing on health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), environment, water, and climate action (SDGs 6, 13, 14 & 15), and peace (SDG 16). “PaRD operates under the human rights framework and the assumption that inclusion and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (FoRB) is an integral part and a horizontal theme in the nexus of religion and development.” PaRD’s member organisation in our country is the Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC).

The Charter of the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)** arguably the world’s most powerful Muslim body, embracing as it does 57 nation-states including Bangladesh as members, makes it clear that foremost among the OIC’s aims is: “... to preserve and promote the lofty Islamic virtues of peace, compassion, tolerance, equality, justice and human dignity...” We stress that the Charter describes such virtues as tolerance and human dignity as Islamic virtues, strengthening this point by further talking about the OIC’s aims “to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, rule of law, democracy and accountability in Member States in accordance with their constitutional and legal systems;” which is in turn linked to fostering “noble Islamic values concerning moderation, tolerance, respect for diversity, preservation of Islamic symbols and common heritage and to defend the universality of Islamic religion;...” The OIC thus comfortably situates the promotion of Islam

alongside respect for diversity.

The push to engage faith communities in global development has gathered pace, with the ‘turn to religion’ by global development policy and practice from the early 2000s. The World Bank and Georgetown University linked **World Faiths Development Dialogue** kicked off in 2000 amid a marked increase in interest from secular global development institutions in funding and working with faith actors around poverty reduction and humanitarian relief.

The World Faiths Development Dialogue notes: “Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in human development since independence with noteworthy increases in life expectancy, primary education enrollment, sanitation and access to safe water. Religious and faith-inspired development institutions in Bangladesh play distinctive and intersecting roles that affect many dimensions of social, economic, and political development.”

Below is a simplified table on how the key SDGs intersect with aspects of universal principles of faith, whether derived from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity or almost any other religion:

Sustainable Development Goal	Intersecting religious principle
SDG 1 Ending Poverty	Scriptural injunctions to take care of the weak, the poor, the powerless, and widows and orphans.
SDG 2 Ending Hunger	Scriptural injunctions to offer hospitality to strangers, to feed the hungry, and offer alms to the poor.
SDG 5 Gender Equality	Scriptural injunctions to respect mothers and women.
SDG 6 Clean Water & Sanitation	Scriptural injunctions to preserve the sanctity of the earth, and to maintain the purity of what enters our bodies.
SDG 10 Reducing Inequality	Scriptural injunctions to uplift the downtrodden.
SDG 16 Building Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	Scriptural injunctions to good-neighbourliness, judicial balance and fairness, and to establishing legitimate authorities.

In 2020, the UN noted areas in which FBOs were already contributing to the SDGs, many of which would not, on the face of it, appear to have anything to do with faith, but which offer great opportunities for journalists to report on interesting development stories:

– **Conservation:** “a natural focus for FBOs [which] has long been an emphasis. In addition to land-based conservation, several FBOs are engaged in fisheries conservation, which is covered by **SDG 14 [life under water]**. Also worth noting is the intersection of **SDGs 14 and 15 [life on land]**. Land conservation often will have benefits for marine ecosystems. For example, restoring coastal wetlands can benefit fishery habitat. Additionally, most conservation projects have co-benefits of sequestering carbon in soils and plants, which mitigates climate change pursuant to **SDG 13 [climate action]**. Several conservation projects also incorporate partnerships with local farmers promoting sustainable agriculture, which contributes to **SDG 2 [ending hunger]**.”

– **Renewables:** “FBOs have helped this transition [to renewables] by purchasing renewable energy and advocating for new infrastructure. These efforts also help draw down carbon emissions and establish the renewables industry as the dominant energy provider, furthering **SDGs 13 [climate action]** and **12 [responsible consumption & production]** respectively.”

– **Clean Energy:** “FBOs have led the way in divesting from fossil fuels, reinvesting in sustainable sectors, and pursuing direct action to raise awareness about the sources of financing for dirty energy infrastructure. These efforts also help the world transition to renewable energy and stave off the worst effects of climate change, furthering **SDGs 7 [affordable & clean energy]** and **13 [climate action]** respectively.”

– **Education & Training:** “The SDGs do not exist in siloes, but rather in overlapping circles, where multilateral thinking is required... Creating learning opportunities [**SDG 4; quality education**] that promote greater knowledge of the SDGs, while also providing applicable skills-training to reach the goals, is an important space for FBOs. In truth... this could be the most valuable education humans can give one another. FBOs are making notable contributions in several SDG intersections, each of which assumes education and training as integral to ongoing success.”

So we encourage you to look in your reporting on your dynamic society for the intersections between these actors in the realm of religion and the critical aspects of the attempts to implement the SDGs in Bangladesh.



Case Study A: Examining the development mandates of FBOs

Non-profit organisations (NGOs) emerged in Bangladesh in the post-WWII era. One of the best known is **Anjuman Mufidul Islam**, established in 1947 by AK Fazlul Huq and others. Today, Anjuman manages nine orphanages, ambulance services and educational programmes. Another well-known charity is the **Kumudini Trust** formed in 1947 by businessman and philanthropist Ranada Prasad Saha. Today, the hospital has 750 beds serving the poor, charging only nominal fees for surgical procedures, while among several colleges established, the Bharateswari Homes girls' school provides education for 1,200 pupils.

Other NGOs which have sprung up subsequently and which include many run by faith-based organisations (FBOs) focus on a wide range of developmental issues from agricultural improvement to micro-finance for poor people starting small businesses. For further study, a summary of the evolution of such activities is in Shahadat Baser and Syed Abu Hasnath's book chapter The Rise and Fall of the NGOs in Bangladesh.

Short exercise: Go online and find an FBO that is not of your belief system and find out what sort of social development work they do in the communities in which they are active. Then, using the table and subsequent UN report extracts in the previous section, write down which SDGs are covered by such work. Consider (if you are alone) or debate (if you are among colleagues):

- How these NGOs and FBOs were founded by people of different faiths (Kumudini by Hindus and Anjuman by Muslims) yet how similar their societal objectives are.
- How much their social development work contributes to the upliftment of the communities where they work.
- Any programmes or projects on which the FBOs collaborate with FBOs of other faiths, and what this means for building bridges across religious lines.
- Any aspects of the mandates of such FBOs that make it explicit that they provide aid and services to all deserving people, regardless of factors such as faith, creed, race, language, or colour (for example, the Muslim charity Gift of the Givers has proven from its foundation in 1992 that it will provide emergency and developmental aid to “all people of all races, of all religions, of all colours, of all classes, of all political affiliations and of any geographical location.”).
- Any areas in which the FBOs have failed to meet the high objectives set by their mandates and what this means for their reputations.

Main Take-aways from Chapter 1

- Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and faith communities have crucial roles to play in implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the target date of 2030 under Agenda 2030 to build a more peaceful, prosperous and inclusive world. This is especially true in a developing country like Bangladesh, where faith and faith leaders exert considerable influence.
- The Charter of the world's most powerful Muslim organisation, International Islamic Cooperation (IOC), which counts 57 nation-states including Bangladesh as members, explicitly links "Islamic virtues" such as tolerance, diversity, and human dignity and rights, to its aims of multi-faith dialogue, intellectual excellence (including, we argue, journalism), women's full participation, peace-building, and sustainable development.
- Because they work within society, FBOs' estimation of the importance and challenges associated with the 17 various SDGs tend to be focused on those that are people-centred rather than on those centred on economic and ecological questions – and tend to find the goal of achieving gender equality as both the most important and the most challenging.
- Since 2000, FBOs and other faith actors have regained the attention of developmental agencies up to UN level and have initiated their own ecumenical (multi-faith) dialogues to engage with the SDGs. This process has empowered local faith actors to get better data on pressing issues – and to use that data to advocate for positive change.
- NGOs and FBOs involved in developmental work come from a wide range of belief system backgrounds, tend to have mandates that serve all people in need regardless of their beliefs, often collaborate with organisations from other faiths in local and large-scale projects, and, while there are many problems and debates in the sector, tend to be supportive of the SDGs.

Chapter 2.

Understanding Religion for Journalists in Bangladesh

Does a reporter need to be religious to write about religion? Obviously not, but it is surely an advantage if one is familiar with religious culture, debates, and challenges. It follows the same rulebook given to every reporter: know your beat!

2.a. Religious Literacy - Sketching our Belief Systems

Every country has a unique landscape of religious, spiritual, and non-religious beliefs that develop and adapt over time, due to specific circumstances of the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires, changes of language and culture, of impositions by imperialism and of missionary proselytising. World religions like Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism have over centuries developed different theological schools of thought and practice, some of which have absorbed elements of earlier or competing belief systems; this creates a rich tapestry of differentiation, even within specific schools which makes the study of religion endlessly interesting – and challenging – to journalists.

What follows is a series of thumbnail sketches of the primary belief systems in Bangladesh; in all cases things are far more nuanced and tangled than these brief introductory remarks can cover.



– Animism

Origin and establishment in Bangladesh	Lost in the mists of time, though ritual behavior that was most likely animist is evident from archaeological evidence of stone age ritual burials.
Primary beliefs	All nature is a living expression of multi-faceted, often multi-personality godhood, and is animated by spiritual forces which can act on a believer's life for good or ill; such forces can be interceded with to improve one's life.
Sources of authority	The faith is guided by traditions usually passed down orally by shamen, sometimes called faquirs, who act as intercessors for good with the spirit world, which includes the deceased ancestors who can be consulted via the faquir to guide better life choices. The faquir may also augment these spirit consultations by using supporting passages from the holy books of other mainstream religions dominant in the area. Other animist authorities include spiritual healers who may combine traditional medicines with spiritual intercession, and sorcerers (the "evil" version of a faquir).
Main festivals	Wangala, celebrated at length over October to early December, is dedicated to the sun god, Misi Saljong, with the aim of encouraging good harvests.
Issues of Reporting	Animists do not worship their ancestors, but rather consult them for guidance. The interventions or consultations of faquirs and spiritual healers should be called as such, not characterised as "magic."

– Buddhism

<p>Origin and establishment in Bangladesh</p>	<p>Buddhism originated in the 5th Century BCE in what is today Nepal based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who gave up his worldly wealth for a life of monkish ascetic meditation, achieving spiritual perfection as the Buddha (the awakened). By tradition, Gautama himself proselitised in what became Bangladesh, but the faith only truly got established here during the reign of Buddhist emperor Ashoka the Great over c.268 CE to 232 CE.</p>
<p>Primary beliefs</p>	<p>The soul reincarnates until it achieves spiritual perfection (nirvana), but until then is encased in a body that undergoes suffering, decay, and death because it is attached to worldly things and desires. So there is an “eightfold path” to enlightenment – putting the seeker on par with the Buddha – that consists of perfecting one’s correct views, intentions, actions, speech, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. This path constitutes a “middle way” between sensual indulgence and severe asceticism.</p>
<p>Sources of authority</p>	<p>The Tripitaka is the earliest collection of the Buddha’s’ sayings and the only scripture held as canon (inspired doctrine) by Theravada Buddhists, the oldest denomination, who uphold the distinction between the authority of the monks (who are most likely to achieve enlightenment, but who do not believe Buddha is a god) and lay believers. The Sutras are held sacred by Mahayana Buddhists to whom lay people can also achieve enlightenment, but who do believe Buddha is a god. The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes the cycle of reincarnation. Monks, ordained teachers, and to a lesser extent nuns possess the authority of spiritual intercessors.</p>
<p>Main festivals</p>	<p>Vesak, held each May, celebrates the birth, enlightenment (and in some traditions, the death) of the Buddha, with offerings of flowers, candles, and joss-sticks.</p>
<p>Issues of Reporting</p>	<p>It is important to distinguish between the theism of Mahayana Buddhism, and the non-theism of Theravada Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, which combines aspects of Taoism and which teaches that everyone is inherently a Buddha. The monastic tradition can be hard for journalists to penetrate: be aware that there can be intense competition between different schools and monasteries which may shape how stories on Buddhism play out. Also there is a large gap between monks and lay and pilgrim Buddhists, the latter of whom often do not even seek to achieve nirvana in this life, but rather work towards achieving it in some future incarnation.</p>

– Hinduism

Origin and establishment in Bangladesh	Hinduism arose in the period 2,300 BCE and 1,500 BCE in the Indus Valley. Hinduism can be said to have properly established itself in Bengal during the Gupta Empire at its height over 319 to 467 CE, a period in which many Hindu scriptures were codified.
Primary beliefs	There is one Supreme Being with innumerable aspects, the three primary ones of which are Brahmin (the creator), Vishnu (the maintainer), and Shiva (the destroyer). All humans and animals have souls and these souls go through cycles of life, death, and rebirth into other bodies with the objective of attaining spiritual perfection when the soul is united with the Supreme Being.
Sources of authority	The Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between the Krishna god-aspect and the warrior Arjuna that details values and philosophy while the four Vedas are texts that contain hymns and rituals. A wise man or woman priest called a pandit, either trained from an early age for the priesthood at a large temple or self-educated in scripture and tradition, conducts worship services (puja) at Hindu temples and officiates over other spiritual events such as weddings. Religious scholars, ascetics, and holy men are also revered as sources of authority. Enlightened people called gurus (“teachers”) often establish their own denomination of faith, so Hinduism is very broad and non-uniform.
Main festivals	Diwali / Deepavali, the “Festival of Lights,” hailing the spiritual victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance, is celebrated over five or six days between mid-October and mid-November with innumerable candles and sweetmeats.
Issues of Reporting	Despite its plethora of “deities,” these are not gods and goddesses, but merely aspects of the Supreme Being; in other words, despite what it may seem because of various worshippers’ preference for one or another aspect of that Being, Hinduism is in fact monotheistic. Yet, some denominations privilege one god-aspect significantly over all others. Being a very broad tradition, beliefs and practices can vary widely from purist to pluralist, from folkish to scholarly, and different schools are sometimes even violently opposed to each other: the journalist needs to be very specific what tradition is referred to.

– Islam

<p>Origin and establishment in Bangladesh</p>	<p>Islam rose in the Arabian Peninsula in 610 CE when tradition holds that Prophet Muhammad – venerated as a prophet like Abraham and Jesus before him – received revelations from God urging a return to the original virtues of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Christianity). By 1342, the Bengal Sultanate ruled over large parts of what is now Bangladesh and ingrained Islam here.</p>
<p>Primary beliefs</p>	<p>Prophet Muhammad preached that there are “five pillars” to faith: the declaration of faith (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”); prayer five times a day; fasting especially during the holy month of Ramadan; charity to those less fortunate; and pilgrimage (hajj), if possible, to the holy city of Mecca now in Saudi Arabia. Two main divisions arose in the wake of the Prophet Muhammad’s death over who should succeed him: the majority Sunnis (who also dominate in Bangladesh) who believed that Islamic leaders should determine the succession of the next Caliph (faith leader), and the minority Shias who believed only Prophet Muhammad’s family and descendants should succeed him as Caliph.</p>
<p>Sources of authority</p>	<p>The primary scripture is the Holy Qur’an which Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel; it is held to be a final perfection of earlier Abrahamic texts like the Jewish Torah and Christian New Testament. Tafsir are commentaries and explanations on the Qur’an by scholars called mufasssir, while Hadith are traditional accounts of the sayings of Muhammad, and Sunna (ways of life) are cultural traditions of the ummah (Islamic faith community); Unlike Catholicism with its Pope, since the abolition of the post of Caliph by the secular government of Turkey in 1924, there is no longer a world leader of the ummah, though today there are competing attempts to reinstate a caliphate. The faith is preached by imams who lead prayers and worship and who interpret scripture in Islamic mosques, while muftis interpret Islamic law; both thus hold spiritual authority within their communities.</p>
<p>Main festivals</p>	<p>The holy month of Ramadan celebrates the period in which Gabriel delivered his revelation to Mohammed, during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. The month ends with the Eid al-Fitr breaking-of-the-fast celebration. The Eid al-Adha is a three-day festival when Muslims sacrifice animals in homage to the sacrifice of Abraham.</p>

Issues of Reporting

Most Muslims in Bangladesh adhere to Sunni belief, and are followers of the Hanafi madhhab, a school of thought started by Imam Abu Hanifa, an 8th century scholar. The rise of a more austere revivalism in recent years has been linked to the Salafi school of thought, mostly influenced by Saudi clerics. Journalists should be aware that about 2% of the population adheres to minority Shia Islam. With no central spiritual authorities, journalists cannot assume all Muslims practice identically, so it may be hard to identify appropriate spokespeople: for example, different communities have different rules regarding acceptable dress and spiritual / societal roles for women.

– Christianity

Origin and establishment in Bangladesh

Christianity arose out of Judaism in Palestine in the 1st Century CE, based on the teachings of Jesus, called Christ (Anointed One), and early church tradition tells that Thomas the Apostle of Jesus proselytised on the Malabar coast of India in 52 CE. The beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church were codified in 325 CE in what is now Turkey, but the first Catholic missionaries arrived in what became Bangladesh in 1510, and by 1672, the Bengali Catholic community had grown to 20,000. The first Protestant church was only established here in 1770.

Primary beliefs

That God is a trinity of three aspects that are simultaneously both one being and separate beings: the Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit. That God the Father created the world, that he sent Jesus to Earth in human form to experience suffering, and die by execution but then be resurrected, thereby absolving all of humanity who believes in him of their sins against the Father, who shall order that the good and wicked shall receive reward in Heaven and punishment in Hell, respectively, in the afterlife. Meanwhile, in this life, salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus, and motivated by the Holy Spirit, should be added to by good works such as charity to the poor. In 1054, the Eastern Orthodox Church split off the Roman Catholic Church in a theological dispute over the relation of the Holy Spirit to God's other personalities.

Sources of authority	<p>The primary scripture is the Holy Bible, consisting of the Old Testament (originally Jewish) and the New Testament, though there are four main versions: the Protestant Bible has 66 books, the Roman Catholic Bible another seven, the Eastern Orthodox Bible another 15, and there are yet another 52 Gnostic texts that are usually considered to be outside the canon. The Roman Catholic Church, the world's largest Christian denomination, is distinctly hierarchical, with its head, the Pope, believed to be able to speak in certain circumstances <i>ex cathedra</i>, that is, with infallible doctrinal precision; beneath him are cardinals, bishops and lesser ranks of priests, all of whom wield certain spiritual authority to hear and absolve petitioners of their sins. Celibate monks and nuns are more involved in contemplative and charitable work. Catholic Church tradition is in itself a source of authority. Protestant churches which split off the Roman Catholic Church starting with Martin Luther in 1517, protesting what they saw as deviations from original teaching, privilege scripture over church tradition but are very diverse and range from Anglican whose authorities are mirrors of the Catholics' in many respects, to Pentecostal / Charismatic whose authorities include individual guidance by the Holy Spirit.</p>
Main festivals	<p>Christmas, celebrated on 25 December each year with masses / church services, recalls the birth in human form of Jesus, while Easter occurs on a shifting date after the northern spring equinox, and celebrates Jesus' death and resurrection.</p>
Issues of Reporting	<p>While the Roman Catholic Church is a monolithic institution, it too has its diversity of doctrinal emphases from conservative to liberal and there are even Catholic churches which fall outside the Pope's Roman Church. The Protestant churches are far more varied and often fractious, and can often be extremely different from one another, especially on issues such as women acting as pastors, on proselytising among other religions, or on gay rights but also on major doctrinal matters (Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses would disagree on even calling each other Christian). It is also critical to distinguish between authorised church-directed organisations and the many para-church groupings such as charities that may not have formal ties to a specific church authority.</p>

– Sikhism

<p>Origin and establishment in Bangladesh</p>	<p>Sikhism arose in the Punjab from 1507, based on the teachings of Guru (“Teacher”) Nanak and the nine Gurus who followed him until 1708, the last being Guru Gobind Singh. This faith is reputed by tradition to have entered what became Bangladesh when Guru Nanak himself visited during the Bengal Sultanate and established gurdwaras (Sikh temples; literally, doors to the Guru) in Sylhet and Jafarabad.</p>
<p>Primary beliefs</p>	<p>There is one creator God, Ik Onkar, whose light permeates all of the universe, also known as Waheguru (“Wondrous Teacher”), who was revealed to the ten Gurus who taught that the values of the world are an illusion and that we are living in a dark age (the Kali Yuga). The aim of Sikhism is to escape the “Five Thieves” of ego, anger, greed, attachment, and lust, by devotion and by seeking the grace of Ik Onkar and so eventually escaping the cycle of reincarnation and achieving unity with the divine. Yet the devotee is also enjoined to lead an active, socially-involved, self-aware, and ethical life.</p>
<p>Sources of authority</p>	<p>The primary scripture is the Guru Granth Sahib, compiled and codified by Guru Gobind Singh in 1678 (who asserted the text was the final revelation and thus his successor as Guru). The poetic text of the Guru Granth Sahib combines the wisdom of seven Sikh Gurus, thirteen Hindu saints, and two Muslim saints. A scripture of lesser authority is the Dasam Granth, a compilation by Guru Gobind Singh of prayers, renderings of Hindu myths, and of moral parables, and the Janamsakhis, which are tales of the life of Guru Nanak. Readers of the Guru Granth Sahib in gurdwaras can be either male or female, and are called granthi, ordained to lead hymns, ceremonies, and prayers; meanwhile the Panj Pyar are an ad hoc group of “five beloved ones” appointed on merit to lead the broader initiated Sikh community, the Khalsa.</p>
<p>Main festivals</p>	<p>Vaisaki, celebrated each April, marks the birth of the faith and of the Khalsa. Sikhs also celebrate Diwali, the “Festival of Lights,” like Hindus, marking the triumph of good over evil.</p>
<p>Issues of Reporting</p>	<p>Despite the male Sikh’s turban and beard and the female Sikh’s headscarf, their monotheistic religion is very different to Islam. While Sikhism does acknowledge the authority of Hindu scriptures like the Vedas and of the Qur’an, it is not a synthesis of these other religions. Granthi are not priests in that the priestly intercessor role is absent in Sikhism.</p>

– Bahá'ism

<p>Origin and establishment in Bangladesh</p>	<p>Bahá'ism began in 1844 with the Persian prophet Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad who called himself the Báb (“the Gate”) and preached the coming of another messenger like Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed before; that messiah is held to be one of the Báb's followers who took the title of Bahá'u'lláh (“Allah's Glory”) in 1848. The first Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'ís was established in Dhaka in 1952.</p>
<p>Primary beliefs</p>	<p>There is one God who has revealed himself progressively through the world's great monotheistic religions via messengers called “Manifestations of God” who stress the essential unity, though increasing purity through time, of these faiths. Humanity is likewise one, with no divisions of race, colour, creed, or gender and the aim is for humans to recognise God through his Manifestations and to attempt to obey him through following their injunctions, especially service to humanity and regular prayer. In the afterlife the soul will be judged according to how well such injunctions were followed, though heaven and hell are merely the soul's final relevant nearness to or distance from God.</p>
<p>Sources of authority</p>	<p>The faith's sacred texts, considered divinely-inspired, are the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh such as the latter's Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude) and Gems of Divine Mysteries which lay out the fundamental doctrines, while his Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book) lays out ways of living for the faithful. Lesser authority is ascribed to interpretive texts by Bahá'u'lláh's son and successor 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of his son and successor in turn, Shoghi Effendí. The nine members of the Universal House of Justice, elected every five years by national Spiritual Assemblies around the world, is the ruling council of the Bahá'í faith; as with Sikhism, there is no clergy.</p>
<p>Main festivals</p>	<p>The Nineteen-day Fast is marked each March and is spent on prayer and meditation, stressing empathy with the poor, and focus on spiritual rather than material concerns.</p>
<p>Issues of Reporting</p>	<p>Although the Bahá'í faith arose from Shia Islam, it should not be treated as an apostasy or breakaway sect of Shia Islam but rather as a religion in its own right. Like many mainstream religions, the Bahá'í faith is conservative regarding homosexuality, but in its case, controversy arises from the tension between this stance and its otherwise progressive social</p>

– Atheism & Agnosticism

Origin and establishment in Bangladesh	There have arguably always been a minority of people in what became Bangladesh who questioned or disputed the existence of a spiritual world. But from the Charvaka school of materialist philosophy which spread from India in the 6th Century BCE, atheism (denying there is a deity) or agnosticism (not knowing whether there is a deity) have played a role within various schools of Bengali thought.
Primary beliefs	That there are no knowable deities or invisible spiritual forces (nor any afterlife), but that the universe is entirely material and knowable through contemplation, both via the input that the mind receives from the body's senses, and also from its own pure conjectures. Since at least the 17th Century, this philosophical base was added to by "the scientific method" which involves systematic observation of phenomena, their measurement, experimentation with them, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses on how such phenomena work.
Sources of authority	There is no central written source of authority, but rather the accumulated body of continually-contested and updated global scientific and philosophic knowledge – and those expert in specific fields of endeavour – are largely held to be authorities. The scientific method itself, which produces an ever-evolving set of hypotheses explaining the universe, is a source of authority in its own right.
Main festivals	These belief systems have no specific festivals.
Issues of Reporting	Atheists, agnostics, and materialist philosophers cannot be mischaracterised as "Satanists" or as anti-religious simply because of their lack of faith. It is also wrong to claim that they are automatically immoral or amoral: because they don't believe in an afterlife, they usually have very well-thought-out concepts of how to live highly ethical lives here and now. Though less than 1% of Bangladeshis identify strongly as convinced atheists, according to a 2015 Gallup International poll, another 5% said they were not religious; it is also important to recognise the atheistic, agnostic, or materialist components in some forms of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism.

Exercise: Crossing Religious Lines

Religious organisations often realise the importance of promoting peace and understanding not only between different denominations of their own faiths (in Christianity, say, this is called an “ecumenical” approach) but in reaching out to other faiths to reduce inter-communal conflict by helping each group understand the other. For example, the St Gregory’s Catholic School recently held a talk for Class VII pupils on Sikhism, delivered by a woman adherent of that religion.

Consider (if you are alone) or debate (if you are in a group of colleagues) how important it is to social cohesion in Bangladesh to have the main belief systems building bridges of understanding and co-operation between each other. Write down in your notebook instances you know of where religious-affiliated non-profit organisations (NGOs) operating in Bangladesh (especially if they are not of your own belief system) deliver aid such as food or housing to poor people regardless of their religion and consider how such a humanitarian approach improves the livelihoods of all Bangladeshis.

Important Note on Terminology:

In reporting on religion, it is very important to be wary of contentious words such as “cult” and “sect”. In academic terms, all religions are cultic, but in its popular usage, a cult is a shady, fly-by-night false religion, so it is best to avoid the term entirely unless the religious group so named engages in obviously socially aberrant behaviour such as kidnapping people to convert them, or initiating mass suicides. Likewise, in academic terms, sects are either dissenting groups within a wider religious body, or splinter groups off that body, but it too can have negative connotations; we have here preferred to use “denomination” rather than “sect.”

Similar caution should be observed with loaded terms such as “Islamofascist,” “jihadist,” or “extremist.” All these words have their own interpretive problems depending on the context in which they are used: for example, within Islam, “jihad” can also be a concept of pious self-purification that has nothing to do with military warfare against unbelievers. It is important to note, however, that most communities or organisations that are described by terms such as “radical,” “reactionary,” “ultra-conservative,” “revivalist,” or “fundamentalist,” (terms which may have their own contextual problems) do not adopt terrorist methods to advance their beliefs – though most do adopt a closed form of ethnic and religious communalism, thereby creating community conditions in which terrorist appeals might flourish. The term “moderate” also can suggest negative connotations such as tepid beliefs, although the concept of a “middle path” has roots and appeals in many traditions.

Short exercise:

Consider the possibility that the two principles can co-exist in balance: that majority Islam and the other minorities can comfortably co-exist within a constitutionally secular, yet Islamic, state. Consider whether the vastly dominant demographic position of Islam is at all threatened by constitutional secularism (multi-faith principles). Is it truly possible that the health, security, development, or happiness of the huge majority could ever be threatened by living peacefully with their neighbours from minority traditions?



CASE STUDY B: Religious Tolerance in the Qur'an and other holy books

The debate over secularism is far from over, but it is possible – by one leading spiritual interpretation – to discern a clear basis for secularism, in its Bangladeshi sense of religious tolerance, as a principle embraced within Islam. Several examples follow from the Qur'an:

“To every People have We appointed rites and ceremonies which they must follow, let them not then dispute with you on the matter, but do invite (them) to your Lord: for you are assuredly on the Right Way. If they do wrangle with you, say, ‘God knows best what it is you are doing. God will judge between you on the Day of Judgment concerning the matters in which you differ’.” (Qur'an, Al-Hajj: 76-69).

“There shall be no compulsion in the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong.” (Qur'an 2:256).

“For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.” (Qur'an 109:6).

Exercise: Reflecting on Tolerance

Look through the Qur'an – or any other faith's holy scripture (you can look these up online if you don't have a physical copy to hand) – and see if you can find five quotes that advocate for religious tolerance between people of different faiths. Write them down in your notebook or on your computer.

Consider (if you are by yourself) or debate (if you are in a group of colleagues) the similarities and differences between these scriptural injunctions to practice tolerance, then decide what following these rules might look like in practice in your community.

Main Take-aways from Chapter 2

- Bangladesh has always gloried in a society that expressed multiple ways – both religious and non-religious – of appreciating the mysteries of the universe.
- Most of these belief systems, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, have in various eras ruled in relative peace and multi-faith tolerance for hundreds of years – this is Bangladesh’s true historical religious heritage.
- All major and some minor religions in Bangladesh are monotheistic and often owe a debt of inspiration to each other: sacred sites to animism, or Sikhism to Hinduism and Islam, Islam to Judaism and Christianity, and Bangladesh’s unique form of Sunni Islam to Hinduism. Most importantly, the ethics of doing good to all neighbours is shared by all belief systems.
- After the restoration of democracy in 1991, the debate on secularism has continued.
- And yet, religious tolerance is a key Qur’anic principle (replicated in many other holy books), and as such supports the Bangladeshi notion of “secularism” as meaning embracing a diversity of faiths.



Chapter 3.

Challenges to Reporting on Belief Systems

Religious leaders and communities of faith often complain that journalists fail to adequately cover news related to faiths, or that they present biased or caricatured representations of beliefs in their reporting. This problem is usually rooted in the fact that, with limited resources, few newsrooms are able to

actually have a specialist “religion beat,” or have adequate access to well-balanced experts in religious affairs. Another root cause is that even in countries such as Bangladesh where religion plays such an important part of daily social and civic life, it is usually seen by editors and journalists as a background, rather than a primary, issue. The result of a lack of dedicated religion reporters and of treating religion as ever-present but insignificant “wallpaper” rather than as important elements “in the room” of the issues of the day, means that issues that touch on spiritual or philosophical conviction are either distorted or left out of reporting altogether.

3.a. Key findings of a new study on faith and the media

In 2022, what is believed to be the first-ever international study on the portrayal of faith and religion in the news media as seen by newsroom decision-makers and the general population was published. The Global Faith & Media Study 2022 by the Radiant Foundation, a US faith-based non-profit organisation which runs “faith fluency seminars” for media professionals, produced results that should be fascinating for editors and journalists. It covered 18 countries and major religions on six continents – including Pakistan and India. Some of the key findings follow:

- 82% of global respondents define themselves as religious, spiritual, or a person of faith. This is as against a result of 90% for India. Remember, that a previous study on religiosity mentioned in this manual showed that 99% of people surveyed in Bangladesh say religion is “an important part of their daily lives” (the world’s highest country ranking).
- And yet, inside newsrooms, even “Journalists feel that coverage of faith & religion is poor, inconsistent, and becoming more marginalized. They express fear around ‘getting right’ religious coverage, particularly in largely secular newsrooms.” Religious stories are not seen as a good fit for hard news, and that it is easier for them to do soft coverage of faith communities and only focus on hard news on times of controversy or scandal.
- Together, this results in “a growing gap between the coverage of religion and the needs of the faithful – [a] global desire for better coverage, understanding and representation of faith in media”

- 53% of respondents say the media actively ignores religion as an aspect of society and culture today;
 - 59% of respondents believe it's important that the news media covers a diverse set of faith and religious perspectives or content; and
 - 63% of people globally said that high quality content on faith and religion is needed in their respective countries.
- This all suggests that, while religious groups themselves need to “provide more relevant spokespeople” in terms of greater “diversity and lived experiences” (ie: communities of faith themselves need to recognise different expressions of belief and real-life challenges), the following needs to be done by journalists: “People want faith and religious stereotypes to be addressed”:
- 61% say media perpetuate these stereotypes rather than protect against them; and
 - 78% believe such stereotypes should get the same or more attention as race and gender stereotypes.

Let's dig down into that study a little deeper, firstly by looking at what your colleagues in those 18 countries had to say about the challenges they face in reporting on religion, and what the public has to say about what needs to be fixed.



3.b. Considering Newsroom Realities

1. We all know that most newsrooms are facing a “perfect storm” of slashed budgets driven by economic constraints, and a flood of unverified information on social media. This combination marginalises serious media coverage of faith communities and their concerns, let alone their important contributions to developing and uplifting poor and excluded people.

The study noted: “Media respondents reported on squeezed budgets leading to a lack of specialist journalists in newsrooms. They cited a ‘hollowing’ out of specialisms within the news teams leaving generalists to cover topics – with faith & religion included.” For example, a journalist in Mexico said: “In Mexico it’s really focused on covering political news and covering crime... sometimes it’s really selective the moments when we talk about religion.” The study added: “In an era defined by some as a time when religion has become increasingly politicized, news coverage, often at speed, brings with it the tacit acceptance that it is impossible to cover the topic with a level of nuance and sensitivity given the time and resources available.” A journalist in Britain commented: “Religiosity rarely makes it through any parts of coverage except where the correspondent has a religious background and is able to pick up some of the nuance.”

Short exercise:

Write down for yourself in your notebook three examples of stories current in today’s news that have a “background” religious or spiritual element that you feel is being under-reported because the story is seen as more “political,” or is framed in another way: as sports, or as science, or as business, for example.

Then ask yourself in each instance how you would bring forward the religious aspect of the story in a way that both respects the religion – and delivers quality journalism in terms of balancing the religious influence with other factors shaping the story.

Do you think that including such elements improves your story over-all? If so, would you be able to make a better pitch to your editor or news editor on covering that or a similar story?

2. The study found a prevailing fear in newsrooms of getting the story wrong, of upsetting people's spiritual sensitivities, of delving into what was seen as a "private" rather than a "public" matter, or of being perceived as biased by their colleagues and readership / audiences. One Indian journalist wrote: "I am religious, but I would never let that intrude on my story because it's so important to be seen as impartial." A British journalist said: "People don't talk about their faith in the newsroom. Journalists try and protect their reputations and being openly religious invites scrutiny."

But even if the journalist is themselves religious, they might feel they are being used by their news team as a token representative to cover matters of faith even though they might not have a deep understanding of or interest in the spiritual issues in play. For example, one journalist in Britain complained: "I was asked to write a piece [about Islam] because I was the only Muslim on staff."

The report concluded that "Journalists are explicitly and implicitly discouraged from exploring religious / faith stories." This was because on the one hand "secular cultures" within newsrooms meant the "topic is not seen as a driver of engagement" with the readers / audiences the journalists are addressing, while on the other hand "religious cultures" in society meant that journalists "do not pursue these stories for fear of disturbing the local religious or political orthodoxy and placing themselves in danger."

Short exercise:

Write down in your notebook three things that worry you personally about covering religion and other matters of belief in your society.

For each of these fears, can you think of constructive ways in which you might be able to resolve your concerns?

Some answers might include having a round-table discussion with your colleagues on how to address the difficulties of covering stories involving belief systems, or making appointments with local religious leaders to establish better relations.

Short exercise:

Write down in your notebook at least one way in which you – whatever your own belief system is – can improve your reporting by finding out about a different community of belief in your home neighbourhood and focusing on what sort of social assistance programmes they run, or in what ways they are involved in charity work, or in multi-faith dialogues, etc. Think how those aspects of that belief community might be useful in your reporting on that neighbourhood.

3. Meanwhile, the immediacy (and shallowness) of social media, combined with media marketing agencies' readership / audience metrics based on "clicks" or "likes" rather than in-depth surveys, plus a newsroom tendency to pigeon-hole stories on belief systems within soft news, or lifestyle features, devalues the importance of such belief systems in the eyes of many journalists. The survey notes that: "References to religious stories often covered as part of a travel, culture, history or 'lifestyle' content. Coverage in this context does not carry the same risk of controversy. The human celebration of faith, the spectacle of the spiritual makes for impressive pictures either in TV or in print."

Other than pretty pictures, religion tends to become a focus only in times of scandal or controversy: one Turkish journalist said that the religious stories his media house ran "are usually negative because people need to know about double-standards," meaning the media is lecturing the faithful on their own morals. At the same time, Twitter culture "reduces the ability for a pluralistic viewpoint to be communicated," and leads to journalists looking for more drama and "outspoken dogmatic spokespeople over more middle-ground religious observers with mainstream views."

Short exercise:

Think of a major religious scandal in our country in recent times and consider how your news outlet and your competitors covered it.

How do you think coverage could have been improved in terms of eliminating bias, and advancing understanding of the real issues in play? Consider how, even in short and breaking news stories, a little bit of context goes a long way!

3.c. Examining Community Perspectives

The Faith & Media Index 2022 says much about what our intended readership / audiences think about our coverage – and how we can improve it. While the survey said that “Religion is frequently positioned [by the media] as a conservative or extreme force in coverage,” in fact, this focus on its controversial aspects “runs counter to findings which suggest that 63% of people globally said that high quality content on faith and religion is needed in their respective countries.” The survey concluded that despite the often-secular approach of news organisations, “Around 1 in 3 global respondents follow media sources focused on faith-based news; [the] number increases to 47% in highly faithful / religious countries,” which would include Bangladesh (in India for example, the percentage is 56%, the second-highest of the 18 countries surveyed). Other findings include:

- There is a strong agreement that the news media needs to cover a diverse set of faiths or religious perspectives or content.” Here, it is fascinating to note that in “highly faithful / religious” countries (such as Bangladesh), this agreement rises to 74% of public respondents. This means that a majority of media consumers who strongly identify with spiritual traditions actually want more diversity in their religion coverage, both within and beyond their own religions.

Short exercise:

Think of a religious community in your neighbourhood that you know very little about. Do some online research and write a page on their belief system, paying special attention to what practical social development work (say, running a soup kitchen) they do to improve your neighbourhood and uplift the destitute and excluded there. See if you can quantify this work in some way (ie: number of poor people fed each month). Can you describe how their religious beliefs translate into their social work?

- This strong desire then leads to the finding that “56% say they are more likely to engage with a publication with high quality faith and religious reporting.” Again, this community need is more strongly expressed in religious countries: 66% of respondents.

- “56% of respondents want more coverage of complex religious issues, showing that a robust market exists for in-depth coverage of religion among the world's media organisations.” This is as important for the business side of news outlets as it is for the editorial side as it says that adopting nuanced and detailed religious coverage is an economically smart bet. The survey’s highest result here, at 81%, is actually in another Muslim country, Egypt, well ahead of the United States, which is well-known for its highly-politicised religious environment, at 60%
- Despite this pressing demand, 53% of media consumers believe the media “actively ignores religion rather than adequately addressing it.” Of greater concern is that 43% feel that the media’s current approach to coverage of religion and faith “creates unease and anxiety” in their societies and 61% feel that the media perpetuates stereotypes about religious people – distinctly worrying results, given that peace-building and encouraging diversity within social cohesion should be key contributions of the media to society.

Short exercise:

Go through an edition of your leading local newspaper with a pair of scissors. Cut out every article that mentions your religion / belief system.

Hold up the remains of the newspaper after your cutting work and consider what the news would look like with all those missing stories, how much poorer its coverage of your society would be.

If you managed to cut nothing out of the newspaper, consider what the lack of such coverage means for the newspaper’s diversity of coverage – and how you feel about your cultural interests being excluded from public debate.

- On media characterisation of religions, 81% felt that the media perpetuated at least one of the following stereotypes, that religions are: homophobic, promote extremism, have child-abusing clergy, and discriminate against women at leadership level. Fully 78% felt that such media misrepresentations and distortions that actively discriminate against people’s deeply-held beliefs should be treated as serious infringements of human rights.

Short exercise:

Consider each of these four categories of stereotypes and write down in your notebook if you can recall one local significant religion-related story for each category.

Then consider whether those published / aired stories are truly representative of the particular faith-based community concerned, as a whole, or whether they are perpetuating caricatures. What type of coverage do you prefer as a professional journalist?

- Together, while the results of the study show “a worldwide deficit in the coverage, treatment and quality of understanding of faith and religion in modern society,” the survey points the way for journalists to improve their reader / audience engagement and even economic performance of their media outlets if they provide in-depth, nuanced coverage of faith-based issues.



3.d. Addressing bias and ignorance in coverage of religious & faith communities

The problems associated with even well-intentioned but misguided journalists in attempting to cover the confusing diversity of expressions of belief (or disbelief) in their societies is not only prevalent in Bangladesh, but as the survey cited above shows, is a global concern. You will probably be aware, for example, of the poor representation of many Muslim minority communities in the Western mainstream media. Biased, racist, bigoted, or just plain ignorant reporting typically tends to cluster around areas of conflict – whether these are intra-community tensions, terrorist attacks, outright war between national states, or global geopolitical shifts – where differences of belief are (or are perceived to be) a component of the dynamics driving the issues at stake.

Ex-journalist and sociology of religion scholar Dr Abby Day of the University of London, wrote in a London School of Economics blog in 2016 about the primary findings of her book *Believing in Belonging*, which makes cross-cultural comparisons of belief in European and American societies. She notes several European examples of unbalanced and inequitable mainstream reporting on religion in Europe, saying that the “unfair treatment of Muslims by certain journalists is another failing of the media. In particular, that media attention to religion often consists of stories about ‘extremist’ Muslims, ignoring the high levels of Christian extremism that could also be described as such,” giving the following examples:

- “The story of good Christian / bad Muslim is told both by expression and omission, by naming, or not naming, the religion or ethnicity of terrorists. For example, Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik is not described by the media as a Christian terrorist, although he self-identified as a Christian and would-be protector of European Christianity. The American religious scholar Stephen Prothero points out that Christians swiftly denounced him, describing his actions as political and not religious, a generosity not extended to Muslims who murder for political-religious reasons.”
- “The massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 is another example. This is widely described by media as the killing of 8,000 ‘Muslim’ men and boys by ‘Serbs’, without noting their religion as Christians. The Serb military and political leaders charged with war crimes are not referred to as Christian terrorists. That is apparently not ‘the story’.”

If that kind of mistreatment makes you angry, whether as a Muslim and / or as a journalist who believes in balance and fairness, it’s entirely understandable. Day explores the interconnected roots of why religion and the media often seem to talk past each other, without achieving true understanding:

1. Both sides claim to tell ‘the truth’:

“First, I suggest from my experience both as a former journalist and, currently, as a sociology of religion scholar, that each side would claim it speaks ‘the truth’. Media and religion are institutions largely composed of ardent, hard-working people who believe in what they do. ‘Belief’ is understood here as something deeper and more significant than just signing up to a series of statements about the existence of gods or press regulations but believing in gods or press standards means trusting those sources and acting in specific ways because of that belief. In practice, both religious and media people often fail to do that. Their failures do not prevent them from clinging to their idea that the truth they speak is sacred, especially when they understand ‘sacred’ as something that is... ‘non-negotiable’. When two different groups of people each claim that their truth is non-negotiable, problems are inevitable. What is needed is a form of religious literacy that [is] focusing less on an exchange of facts and more on a better quality of conversation. To complicate the conversation further, I suggest, is a belief held by both journalists and religious people that they have the true ‘story’, as if the ‘story’ is already out there, pre-packaged and simply awaiting uncovering. In practice, the ‘truth’ is composed of multiple stories. Media and religion will choose, and create, one. It’s what’s called ‘an

Short exercise:

Consider the popular concept of “the truth” carefully. It is much trickier than it may seem at first! Is it possible that people’s different experiences of the same thing may result in each one holding their own personal experience to be the truth of what happened, rather than a truth, one of many possible perspectives of that event?

For example, two people walking side-by-side down a crowded street may seem to experience exactly the same things – the din of hooting traffic, the jostle of pedestrians, the heat of the day, the smells of food cooking in the pavement stalls – but may relate their truths of the walk quite differently:

Person 1: “It was too hot today, and that street-trader was rude towards me!”

Person 2: “It was a lovely warm day, and the delicious smell of the street-trader’s food made me hungry!”

Both stories are “true,” and together provide contrast, not necessarily contradiction.

2. Sources and expertise are contested:

Day writes: “The second area of potential conflict between religion and media pertains to ‘the source’. My multi-dimensional analysis of religion concluded that it is more often the ‘source’ rather than the ‘content’ that divides religious and non-religious people. Journalists will often call upon ‘experts’ to comment on a story because they believe that knowledge can and is created through education, training and practice. Such experts are typically schooled in universities or academies of some kind. Religious people may view those secular sources with suspicion and deride the research that backs the experts’ claims.” In fact, religious people claim their own sources of authority, which include scriptures, clerical commentary on their scriptures, and historical mosque, church, synagogue, or temple traditions.

Short exercise:

Consider which sources you might use in your daily reporting that have been, or might be, contested by people with a different belief system. Are there any obvious gaps in your knowledge base – that you can fill in with a more holistic approach to sourcing?

An example: you are covering issues that touch on women’s lives such as, say, the quality of maternity care in your local hospital – but if you haven’t interviewed any female obstetricians, women readers or listeners might distrust the veracity of your story.

3. Both sides claim their understanding is superior:

“The final area of conflict is,” Day suggests, “the claim to legitimate authority. Not only does media and religion tell their chosen story, they explain why the events happened. Media professionals see themselves as legitimate commentators on what happens and why. Particularly when events are surprising or disturbing, journalists, columnists and leader writers rush to offer explanations and, taking a quasi-religious role, try to shape chaos into order. Such matters are traditionally seen as the province of the religious leader, acting with a prophetic voice. The media calls this process ‘analysis’; religions call it ‘theodicy’.”

Short exercise:

Consider covering a story concerning a religion that you are not very familiar with relating to, say, contested access to a holy site that more than one religion considers sacred and wishes to venerate in their own, differing ways.

Do you think that any one of the contesting faiths has priority rights to the site? If you think so, how can you justify this? Does the age or the size of a congregation or the sophistication of its spokespeople or leaders give them superior rights to those of a young or smaller congregation with less media-savvy spokespeople or leaders?



3.e. Peace & Development in Religion Reporting

By now you will have realised that reporting on religion has its own sets of challenges and requires specialised knowledge and cultural sensitivity. A particular focus on the intersection between faith-based organisations and peace and development work, especially as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires special attention.

In her very detailed handbook on reporting religion, ReligionLink editor Diane Connolly in the US cites **eight qualities of good religion beat journalists**:

1. They have respect for the role of faith in people's lives. no matter his or her religious affiliation, he or she should not cast aspersion on other people's regions.
2. A religion journalist should have immense curiosity about religion and a willingness to learn about it. He or she should not only learn the peculiarities of every religion but he or she should also keep learning about it.
3. A religion journalist should abide by the sense of fairness and balance. The news report should not be biased. Rather, there should be an understanding that in a story, there can be more than two sides to it.
4. In every story, a religion journalist should not push for his or her religious viewpoint. This is to help him or her to be objective in the news presentation.
5. A religion journalist should commit to cover all kinds of diversity of faith, both within his or her religion and outside of it. It should also apply to ethnicity, gender, economic status, and geography.
6. A religion journalist should have the willingness to spend time with all sorts of people in the places where they live, gather and worship. He or she should not isolate anyone irrespective of the person's religious affiliation or denomination.
7. A religion journalist should have the willingness to encounter language and cultural challenges. He or she should appreciate other people's culture and their belief system, including their underlining challenges.
8. A religion journalist should have strong news writing skills in order to skillfully present news without inciting people against other people's religion.

CASE STUDY C: Searching for social justice: a Catholic school in Dhaka

The Roman Catholic Church in Bangladesh accounts for only 350,000 congregants – a tiny faith community by Bangladeshi standards. So it will not be surprising if you have not heard of the attempts by the Notre Dame College in Dhaka to not only instill a sense of “social justice” – equality, fairness, dignity – in its pupils, but to put these ethics into practice in its community, particularly regarding assisting tribal peoples, the poor, and the marginalised with access to education. But as with all social upliftment efforts by various communities of faith, such high ethical objectives are not without their challenges in the real world. Here, we look at the lessons learned from a 2022 study on Notre Dame College’s efforts by Md Shaikh Farid of the University of Dhaka.

A. The College’s Mission:

- The school was founded in Lakshmibazar, Dhaka, in 1949 by the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Holy Cross (itself active in the country since 1853), moving to its current campus in Motijeel in 1954. It was originally an English-medium college, becoming one of the best colleges in East Pakistan, but after Independence, changed its language of instruction to Bengali. Today it has 3,000 pupils in classes XI and XII and 120 doing their BA.
- In line with the global Roman Catholic Church’s approach to education, which is largely aligned to the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Farid argues: “students who graduate from Catholic schools should be marked by a passion for social justice. The Catholic school’s Catholic nature is evidently more than its role in faith formation. Catholic schools are Church-run organizations dedicated to upholding and promoting human dignity.” The College is thus not merely aimed at turning out good little Catholics, but at uplifting all its neighbours.
- “From its inception,” Farid writes, “the college had two main goals: to give college-level education to Christian students and to provide quality and value based education to students to contribute to the development of the country. In keeping with social justice ideas, special attention is given on students who would otherwise be denied the opportunity for such a quality and value-based education

due to their economic circumstances, ethnicity, and rurality.”

- “Social justice draws on several essential notions from Catholic social teaching, such as the common good and human dignity... As one of their primary ways of acting in a socially just manner, Catholic schools identify ways to assist the needy... Thus, Notre Dame College has been operating a literacy school for the slum dwellers and street children and has special programs for the poor and underprivileged.”
- “Social justice draws on several essential notions from Catholic social teaching, such as the common good and human dignity... As one of their primary ways of acting in a socially just manner, Catholic schools identify ways to assist the needy... Thus, Notre Dame College has been operating a literacy school for the slum dwellers and street children and has special programs for the poor and underprivileged.”
- In 1977, the Church’s Congregation on Catholic Education determined: “Since it is motivated by the Christian ideal, the Catholic school is particularly sensitive to the call from every part of the world for a more just society, and it tries to make its own contribution towards it. It does not stop at courageous teaching of the demands of justice even in the face of local opposition, but tries to put these demands into practice in its own community in the daily life of the school.”
- Farid continues: “Education is a fundamental human right... As a natural consequence of this right, all children have the right to an education that is free of discrimination based on disability, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, capabilities, culture, and other factors... From Catholic social teaching to the example of Jesus as a teacher in the scriptures, the basis for inclusion is In this vein, Catholic school education like that at Notre Dame College is explicitly open to non-Catholics and non-Christians – with a special emphasis on enabling access to pupils from poor backgrounds, minorities, the marginalised, and those with special needs (including those with disabilities) because education is seen as a key factor in improving their circumstances. Somewhat uniquely for a religious institution, the College explicitly aimed at “providing opportunities for religious practices for all students belonging to all religious traditions.”

B. The College's Challenges:

- And yet, Farid notes, the reality is that, because they usually do not benefit from state subsidies, Church schools have to be self-funded and therefore often have to attract wealthier pupils which, combined with the higher tuition fees required to make such schools sustainable, restricts access to more disadvantaged applicants. So, the schools' twin missions to provide quality and affordable education often clash.
- "There are tremendous temptations, he cautions, "for Catholic schools to admit students who will 'add value' to the school's reputation and image in nations where visible academic results published in league tables and amplified by the media are particularly important. This could mean that children from lower socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds do not have the same access to the best Catholic schools compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds."
- In particular, even where small state grants are available for this purpose, it has proven difficult to integrate pupils with disabilities because of factors such as a lack of specialist staff and technical equipment, a lack of a culture of integration (including teacher fears of the difficulties involved), and a lack of alternative curricula and activities.

C. Farid's Findings:

Having done his background, literature and archival research, Farid then conducted 14 interviews, including with four former Notre Dame College principals. The interviews were recorded with their informed consent. The combined result of his research and interviews was as follows:

- Since Independence in 1972, Notre Dame College has been operating a literacy school for slum-dwellers and street-children. Initially comprising a class of 40, today the classes run in three shifts totaling 1,200 people, from kindergarten to Class VII. The night shift is for slum-dwellers and street-children who work during the day. "Of all the social projects conducted at NDC, the school seems to have the widest impact and must therefore continue to be given top priority," Farid notes.
- The literacy classes are in turn taught by College pupils themselves, living on the grounds in its Martin Hall. The 140 Martin Hall pupils are poor youths "on a special work program" started in 1976 "that enable[s] them to pay their college fees and thereby study at the

college for free.” Thus, in exchange for the tuition they provide to the slum-dwellers and street-children in the literacy classes, as well for as performing extra duties such as gate-keeping, working on the College grounds or assisting in its laboratories, some 50 poor but students selected each year for their aptitude for further study work their way through a two-year intermediate College course. Farid writes: “The student work program is Notre Dame’s main means of making education available to students from poor families, particularly for Christian students,” though “a small number are Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists.” One former principal claimed that successful Martin Hall graduates were sought-after in the workplace as they had practical as well as academic experience and were not afraid to get their hands dirty.

- “The college has also a trade school for poor students, there is a dispensary and sick shelter, and handicraft work for destitute women.”

And yet...

- “Although the... missionaries claimed that NDC had been serving the poor and underprivileged through formal and non-formal educational programs, the poor students who got financial support or who were admitted under the Martin Hall programs and related programs belonged to the Catholic community. The poor and underprivileged belonging to other religions were mostly excluded from this program.”
- “When asked how effectively [the] institute upholds Catholic education principles, such as social justice, Catholic social teaching, the responses were mixed. Many view that the college is very effective in discipline, but not very good in values such as humanity, social interaction, human dignity, helping others in need, and respect for others because the current education system does not give them these opportunities.” In other words, though social justice is, on paper and in principle, a guiding light of the College, because it is not an explicit part of an academic curriculum (preparing pupils for entry to top universities), outside of the College’s social projects, it tends to be sidelined in daily life.
- “When asked the question: ‘How do you address issues like social justice, human rights in the college?’ Many of them replied that while they could not discuss the subject with their students, they could still uphold human rights in the classroom by making an effort to treat all students with respect in interactions and throughout their college life.”

- When asked, ‘What Catholic principles guide Notre Dame College?’ In response, many of them said that they do give marginalized pupils extra attention and give them an opportunity to study in the college, have some rural and minority [intake] quota, follow up with the students, care for the marginalized, love for the impoverished, for one another, [and] shoulder one another’s problems.”
- “Principals at the... college stressed the need of upholding strict academic standards, and they frequently turned away many applicants who lacked the necessary preparation or performance. They claim that in order for the college to remain competitive and uphold a respectable nationwide, the institution’s reputation is important to the academic achievement of its pupils.” Setting the academic entrance bar so high probably, in itself, limits the access of poor students who have had a shoddy educational experience so far, from getting into the College.
- “Although Holy Cross Congregation in Bangladesh provides educational opportunities for the poor, the... institution is among the most elite and narrowly selective in the city, providing a privileged option to the wealthy and well-connected. Although the participants in the study emphasized the humanitarian message of Holy Cross education, in practice the... elite college places a strong focus on academic results and excellence. Moreover, the college mostly fails to incorporate students with disabilities as there is no provision in the college to give access to the students with special educational needs.”
- With no state subsidies for its pupils and no longer any monthly pay orders for its teachers, Notre Dame College survives on its high tuition fees, which excludes many deserving poor pupils – other than those on its Martin Hall work-study programme (who form only 4,81% of the total student body) or those who “qualify for tuition scholarships or financial grants, which are only available for Christian students.”
- “Notre Dame College in Bangladesh is not an exception to market economy policy as the college compromised its educational missions and preferential options for poor and underprivileged with academic excellence that exclude the poor and students with special educational needs from formal and regular educational programs. However, the college is also confronted with the problem of the nation’s educational system that divides the rich and the poor.”

E: Considerations for journalists covering religion:

Consider (if you're by yourself) or debate (if you're among a group of colleagues) the following regarding the Notre Dame College case study:

- **Tolerance & Diversity:** How this faith-based institution, representative of the tiny 0,2% of the population of Bangladesh that is Roman Catholic, has an explicit mission to provide high-quality education to people of all faiths, not only Catholics, enabling them to enter the country's top universities. How this principle is taken to the extent of encouraging pupils of non-Catholic faiths to practice their religion at the school.
- **Social Justice:** How, in living its principles of improving social development, which are universally promoted by the Catholic Church, the College actively seeks out 50 deserving (that is, top-performing) pupils from disadvantaged (poor, tribal, marginalised) backgrounds across the country each year to enter its classrooms and be prepared for tertiary education, and in addition, provides scholarships and grants to selected poor pupils. How it also actively trains 1,200 slum-dwellers and street-children a day in literacy, and also runs a trade school for poor students, a dispensary and sick shelter, and provides handicraft work for destitute women.
- **Principle v Practice:** How in practice, Martin Hall work-study programme pupils form a small 4,81% minority of the total student body, and how most Martin Hall pupils are Christian with only a few from other faiths, while scholarships and grants are only available to Christians. How social justice principles, while practiced in its literacy, work-study and other programmes are not part of the academic curriculum, and the fact that teachers prefer to demonstrate rather than explain human rights principles like equality and fairness.
- **Excellence v Inclusion:** How the very excellence for which the College strives has created a disconnection between its stated mission to uplift the disadvantaged and its focus on ensuring its graduates get into the top universities. How market economics mean that with no government subsidies, the school has been forced to charge high tuition fees that automatically exclude the poor from entry. How budget constraints mean no specialist staff or facilities are available for disabled pupils.
- **How would you cover these issues?:** By now you will be able to see how nuanced are the differences between what this faith-based institution preaches and what it actually does. Some of these

contradictions are imposed by outside forces (economic pressures to be self-sustainable versus the demands by world Catholic bodies for inclusivity), and others may be just down to internal forces such as how human nature often create hierarchies (most poor students have to work outside of classroom hours to earn their place there, something never required of rich students), or how, despite attempts at diversity, FBOs tend to prefer having pupils of their own faith in the majority at school. Every FBO you encounter in your work will most likely have similar practical difficulties in achieving the high ethical standards they have set for themselves; it is as important to honestly assess the reasons for these failings as it is to celebrate the good developmental work they actually manage to achieve, regardless of which deity they pray to.



Main Take-aways from Chapter 3

- 99% of people surveyed in Bangladesh say religion is “an important part of their daily lives” – but 53% of respondents in an 18-country global study say the media actively ignores religion as an aspect of society and culture today.
- Professional journalists surveyed in those 18 countries say that religion, faith and spirituality-related stories are viewed in newsrooms either as soft stories only suitable for colourful lifestyle features, or as only worthy of hard news treatment when they involve scandals among the clergy, or as too dangerous to touch at all because of the extremism of minority religious factions.
- 59% of media consumers globally – including people who are very religious – believe it’s important that the news media covers a diverse set of faith and religious perspectives or content; and 63% of people globally said that high quality content on faith and religion is needed in their respective countries.
- 61% say media perpetuate these stereotypes rather than protect against them; and 78% believe such stereotypes should get the same or more attention as race and gender stereotypes, in other words those who perpetuate them should be ostracised and condemned in the same way in the public sphere as racists or sexists.
- Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) naturally set themselves high ethical objectives in their developmental and social upliftment work, but this will create shortfalls in what they are actually able to achieve in practice in the field.
- Many FBOs and faith communities work intensely on social development projects, even when they represent minority faith in their communities and when their objective is not to make converts to their way of thinking, but to be inclusive of all belief systems.
- Journalists covering faith communities and their work in the field need to honestly and in a balanced manner research and assess their policies, personalities, and practices so as to provide the sort of nuanced, in-depth reporting on religious matters that media consumers are demanding.

- Given such media consumer demand, high-quality investigative journalism into the complexities of social and religious processes in your communities which seeks out pluralistic voices should drive higher print readership and electronic audience-shares.
- Note how similar Farid's process of combining research, paper documentation, and interviews is to the process of investigative journalism. We'll now look at sharpening your habits to make you a pro investigative journalist.

Chapter 4

Conflict-Sensitive Journalism

Covering religious conflict and tensions between communities is among the most sensitive assignments a journalist can undertake. It is a heavy responsibility – get it wrong and you risk fanning the flames of conflict; get it right, and you may contribute to defusing a volatile situation.

When we think of covering conflict, we tend to think of the job of a war-correspondent – wearing a flak-jacket and helmet, draped in cameras, and dramatically ducking behind a wall in Afghanistan as the bullets fly. But conflict doesn't necessarily involve open warfare and can be present at almost imperceptible levels in the society as people struggle for food, love, a home, and a place in the world, often causing them to clash with other people seeking exactly the same.

4.a. Locating CSJ within Theories of Journalism

Firstly, we need to think of the four rather different ways in which journalism is usually taught – because the way you understand your profession is important to how you perform – and where conflict-sensitive journalism (CSJ) sits within them. We will examine four schools of journalism here: partisan, objective, advocacy, and holistic:

- Partisan journalism is explicitly aligned to certain ideas, often to a political party or to a general left or right political / cultural / economic stance. This is not unusual in the world, and has a long and proud tradition in many countries, dating back to the mid 19th Century. For example, if you go to Paris and read Liberation, you know you are reading a generally left-wing newspaper, and if you read Le Figaro, you are reading a generally right-wing paper; both are reputable mainstream newspapers, but differ in their political orientation.

- Objective journalism is that which most of us are taught in the Western-influenced tradition. Its core principles are balance in terms of hearing the other sides of arguments, and objectivity in terms of a dispassionate and judicial assessment of the facts. This journalism arose in the early 20th Century and gained strength since then in the Western media. It resulted in the notion of “newspapers of record,” who have such a reputation for probity and insight that they are considered the bed-rock of responsible, civic-minded journalism. Such “objective” coverage established the reputation of the likes of the New York Times in the US or The Guardian in the UK. But it has been criticised in recent decades for often by design or by default being “corporate media,” the voice of the establishment , of big business, and of the military-industrial complex – which means in its darkest moments, objective journalism sometimes winds up justifying war.
- Advocacy journalism explicitly pursues political / social / economic objectives as it advocates for certain definite progressive changes in the world. It arose largely in the 1960s out of social activism which embraced national liberation struggles in Asia and Africa, and the struggles for gender and racial equality in the West. It is deliberately provocative of the establishment, challenging inherited certainties and assertions, and promotes an alternate vision of progress towards what it sees as a better world.
- Holistic journalism is a hybrid of the objective and advocacy schools and it is the youngest school in the set of four, trying to combine the strengths of objective adjudication with the strengths of impassioned engagement. However, unlike the objective school, it recognises that journalists are not impartial judges of their society, but that they are real human beings living in and influenced by their societies. And unlike the advocacy school, it relies on strong standards of evidence and argument derived via conscientious study and investigation to

Four Theories of Journalism



Now that we have seen where CSJ is located, we need to turn to a better understanding of what conflict is all about, because as with all social processes, it is usually more complex than it may appear...

4.b. Understanding Motivations for Conflict

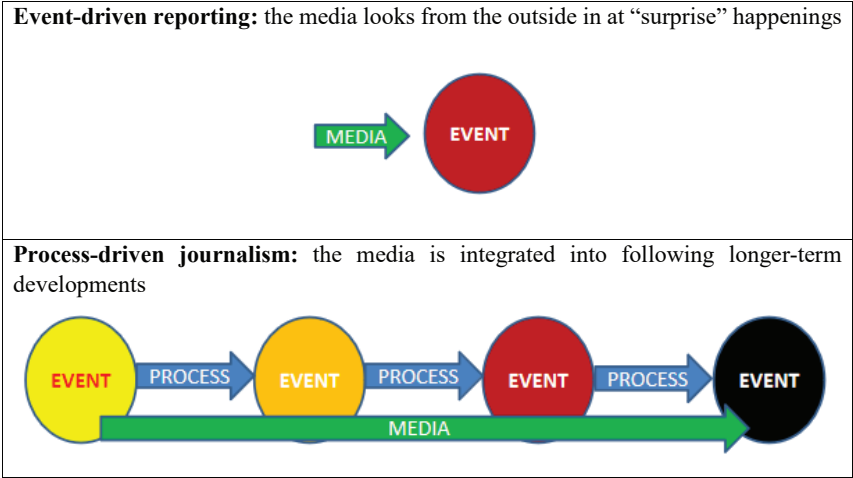
The problem for a journalist in covering conflict – and in attempting via their journalism to “turn the heat down” and enable conflict-wracked communities to re-establish peace – is that those players who exaggerate the issues and stoke the fires of resentment between groups, especially politicians and other community (and even religious) leaders, often do this deliberately for their own and their group’s advantage. This usually results in an oversimplified, in fact a crude, account of the causes of the conflict that can often beguile journalists with its brutal black-and-white logic

CSJ is process-driven rather than event-driven:

An inherent fault in much of the media, especially regarding the production of daily news reports, is that it tends to divide things that are happening into “events.” For example a daily newspaper headline reads “Muslim mob ransacks Hindu temple near the park.” The person merely reporting such an event is an observer looking in at a single episode of communal violence that suddenly erupted one afternoon. The reporter presents the event as having happened within a closed time and space – in a defined local arena at a specific hour – that may or may not have its roots somewhere else, be replicated tomorrow, or morph into something different, but doesn’t bother to explore these aspects. There is no sense of history, of what lead to the ransacking of the temple, or of long-standing grievances, real or imagined, between the two communities. Indeed, the two “communities” themselves are viewed as undifferentiated and opposed masses with no diversity of experience or opinion or organisation among them. Event-oriented reporting only allows events to be explained by their immediately proximate happenings and environments. This oversimplifies and leads to wrong conclusions by the journalist and allows for a crude blame-game to evolve.

Instead of event-reporting, CSJ encourages journalists to engage in process-driven reporting. The headline on that same story might then read “Long-running park access dispute leads to temple ransacking.” The conflict-sensitive journalist has seen that the event is located within open time and space, within a long-standing dispute between two religious associations over the use of a local public park for their processions: the need to exercise their constitutional rights to do so is legitimate, but resorting to ransacking a place of worship out of sheer frustration isn’t. The story has a sense of history, it is rooted in a real (and not a cartoon) community of diverse faiths, and is not in fact a general conflict between the Muslim and Hindu faiths, but between, say, two hard-headed men who lead small local religious associations.

It is actually a story over finding a solution on how to balance access to public resources like parks between legitimate competing claims, as much as it is about managing the egos of these two relatively unimportant men, and honestly informing the reader about true nature of the dispute, differentiating the real (constitutional) and invented (communalist) aspects of their squabble. Process-oriented reporting includes the historical background of events and the social context, circumstances and conditions (e.g. the aspirations of the key actors) within which they have arisen. As such, it presents the larger picture which allows the readership / audience to understand why the event happened and what can be done to resolve the dispute.



CSJ speaks to interests & needs, rather than policies & positions:

in public disputes, the conflicted parties (not only political parties, but a wide variety of other social groups too) tend to focus on statements about their position on the issues at hand. This makes sense as they want their audience to easily understand what their views are. They don’t want things complicated by nuances. After all, they have probably spent years internally debating those issues among their senior members and leaders, and have long-since devised policies to guide them, practices to put into effect, and positions to sell to their hoped-for supporters. For a reporter who is perhaps young and a little swept up in it all, this presents a dangerous oversimplification. The disputing groups are able to force the reporter to focus on what they say they want – but the problem is that if there is little middle ground because of a lack of negotiation, these positions can often be mutually exclusive (only one party can have all the land, all the jobs, etc). Such inflexible and mutually exclusive positions rapidly become demands – which becomes “a dialogue of the deaf” as neither side is attempting to understand the other, a mistake the reporter can’t afford to make. This means that:

1. The concept of mutually exclusive demands is stressed by a “two-party geometry” (meaning the dispute is simplified into two warring sides).
2. This creates the logic of a zero-sum game, in which each gain for one side is automatically considered a loss for the other side.
3. Driven by the logic of these aggressive demands, the only way for the parties to get what they want is to “win,” meaning victory or defeat are the only options.
4. Since defeat is unacceptable this leads to competition and escalation of the dispute, with the reporter lamely following in the wake of the protagonists, being lead by the nose!
5. In such a polarised situation, the best outcome the reporter can present is a settlement based on a compromise which is, however, still a win-lose outcome in the views of the competing groups.
In contrast, the CSJ journalist is always interested in nuance, and knows that even within the united front presented by each group’s public policies and positions is a series of much deeper motivations – interests and needs – and there is likely to be a great diversity of these within each group. So it is important to realise that all social groupings, whether cricket clubs, religious associations, book clubs, charitable associations, or even political parties are internally mixed because of the diversity of interests and needs of the sub-groups (say, a group of friends) and of individuals within them. This means that:
6. The desires of stakeholders in a conflict situation are multilayered like an onion. The outer layer are the positions, the demands that social groups openly express packaged to strengthen and justify their claim (e.g. the land is mine, it has to be given back to me because I have the written land title).
7. Behind those positions, however, are interests. Interests describe what the groups really want (e.g. a safe, cheap and beautiful place to bring up children and enjoy retirement).
8. In turn, these interests are built on the social group’s real needs (e.g. safety, income, water, food, shelter, etc). Needs are fundamental and drive the social group’s actions. Interests and needs are not mutually exclusive.
9. A fair balance of interests and needs between legitimately competing groups can be achieved through fair and honest negotiation – and it is the CSJ journalist’s job to seek out such solutions.
10. Therefore all groups can achieve their interests and all “win” without the other groups having to “lose.” This is described as a positive-sum game. A positive-sum game is the ideal outcome for a conflict-sensitive journalist who is pursuing peace-building within a conflicted community, rather than crudely fanning the flames of communalist violence through simplistic reporting.

Case Study D: 9-11 & the damage done by religious bigotry in the media

Consider how US conservative and right-wing media portrayal of all American Muslims as potentially “terrorist” in the wake of the 9-11 attacks deeply damaged the overwhelmingly peaceful Muslim community there in terms of their ability to live normal lives, such as qualifying for access to specific programmes or jobs. Of course the reality of how those Muslims live their lives as US citizens and what they believe in differs vastly from the demonic picture painted by irresponsible and frankly hate-mongering media outlets.

In 2011, a decade after the attacks, the United Nations’ Alliance of Civilisations and the Arab League, a key partner, identified Islamophobia as a serious global concern, and Gallup released a policy guide, based on polls undertaken across many countries in the world including Bangladesh, on what public sentiment was around the issue both inside and outside Muslim communities. Some of the key results that interest us follow:

- **Respect:**

“Globally, many Muslims report not feeling respected by those in the West. Significant percentages of several Western countries share this sentiment, saying that the West does not respect Muslim societies. Specifically, 52% of Americans and 48% of Canadians say the West does not respect Muslim societies. Smaller percentages of Italian, French, German, and British respondents agree.”

- **Fairness:**

“Gallup asked representative samples from a subset of [seven] majority-Muslim countries [including Bangladesh and Indonesia] about public perceptions of fair treatment of Muslims in the U.S., France, Britain, and China. While about one-third of this subset say that Muslims living in each of those countries are treated as equal citizens regarding their rights and freedoms, about one-quarter of respondents say these Muslims are not... The notion that Muslims in these countries are treated unfairly supports the idea that Muslims in general believe that unfair treatment of Muslims – a component of Islamophobia – does exist in Western societies... Research in a subset of majority-Muslim countries from within the MENA region [10 countries surveyed], though, finds that more than one-half [57%] do not agree that Muslims in the West are treated as equal citizens.”

- **Prejudice:**

“According to ‘Fear, Inc.,’ a report by the Center for American Progress, a network of misinformation experts actively promotes Islamophobia in America. The promotion of Islamophobia creates both prejudice and discrimination among the general population. Prejudice plays a key role in the existence and proliferation of Islamophobia. Prejudice alone, as a negative judgment, opinion, or attitude, is a detriment to a population's overall well-being. Prejudice combined with overt actions, rising to the level of discrimination, creates a dangerous environment for its victims... The 48% of Muslim Americans who say they experienced racial or religious discrimination is on par with Hispanic Americans (48%) and African Americans (45%), as calculated from a combination of these same groups.”

And yet there is hope...

- **Muslim Openness:**

“Muslim respondents globally [polled in 30 countries] are no different from Western societies in their level of integration and openness to people of other faiths.” For example, significant majorities of the general populations in France (57%), Germany (72%), and Britain (65%) believe that people from minority ethnic groups “enrich the cultural life” of their home / host countries, while even higher proportions of Muslims in those countries believe the same: 77%, 72%, and 78% respectively. Meanwhile, only 3% of British Muslims believe that people with different religious practices threatened their way of life.

- **Fixing things:**

“Majorities of representative populations within [30] majority-Muslim countries globally [including Bangladesh] say each of five actions Western societies could take are very important to showing respect to Muslim societies. About 8 in 10 say it would be very important to them, personally, if Western societies were to abstain from desecrating the Qur’an and other Muslim religious symbols. About 6 in 10 say it would be very important to them if those in the West treated Muslims fairly in the policies that affect them, protect the rights of Muslim minorities in these societies, accurately portray Muslims in Western media, and work with Muslim societies as equal partners on issues of mutual interest.”

Considerations for journalists covering religion:

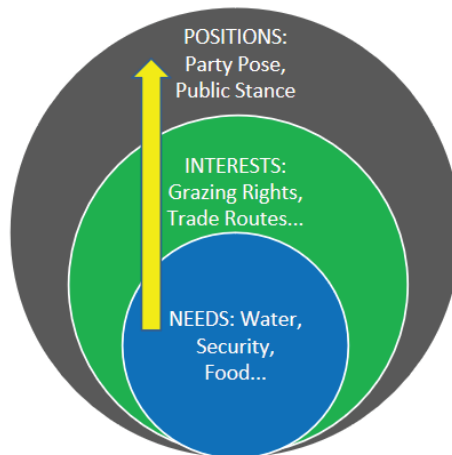
- **Encouraging openness:** Think about how, just as the conservative / right US media deliberately skewed reporting on the true intentions of Muslim communities in the USA as being closed to American culture, in real life, those communities are far more open than the dominant religious

denomination in the country, Protestantism, to engaging in a friendly manner with people of other faiths: 44% versus 35% respectively. Surely it is the task of the media to encourage such inquisitiveness and multi-faith dialogue?

- **Encouraging moderate voices:** How the vast majority of Muslims in the USA abhor terrorism and in fact, most tip-offs to the authorities about Al-Qaeda-linked plots originated in the local Muslim community. In the hunt for more dynamic quotes, we journalists can fall into the error of seeking out the more vocal, colourful, extreme spokespeople. But ask yourself: are they truly representative of the broader community on whose behalf they claim to speak? Where are the voices of the often-silent majority for whom religion is not an aggressive politics?

- **Encouraging a rethink:** Imagine that the sort of hatred directed by the media in the US and by nervous neighbours in Western Europe were turned towards you in your daily life – just because you are Muslim (or even only appear to be to the ignorant eye, because you are Sikh), or even because you are Hindu or Christian or of some other belief system. It would no doubt provoke you to protest, anger, despair. After all, as we all know, the mainstream, alternative, and social media can be powerful instruments for good – and harm. What kind of a journalist do you want to be when it comes to covering religion?: someone who advances hatred like that directed at

Positions, Interests & Needs



In the previous section, 5.c, we spoke of a “two-party geometry” to mean the oversimplification of a dispute into two undifferentiated blocs, and reminded ourselves how this way of viewing a dispute is not helpful to a journalist; they are not “seeing the story” in all its complexity. But conflict itself has a “geometry” that is equally complex...

4.c. The Shapes of Conflict

Conflict within society, as we have seen, can range from low-temperature tensions between groups of people, and escalate right up to communal violence and even war between nations. But this is not simply a sliding scale of more people engaged in greater levels of violence. It is useful to think of the shape of conflict in three dimensions, like an iceberg, with direct violence visible above the water-line – but with a much larger and differently-shaped mass lurking beneath the surface of the water that we will call cultural-structural violence. The difference between direct violence and cultural-structural violence are important for understanding the roots of communalist conflicts.

An inexperienced reporter might take an approach towards communalist conflicts that we can call “dualistic geometry,” by which we mean that the shape of the conflict is divided into a duality, two competing blocs, good versus evil, with two parties fighting over one goal. Every gain of one party is a loss for the other party. The only possible outcomes are victory or defeat. Journalists count the wins and losses, focusing on the death toll, territory won or lost and the rhetoric used by the opponents. Violence is regarded as caused by religious or political fanaticism or supposedly inherent ethnic traits of aggression or barbarism. It always fails the accuracy test as no conflict is that simple. **The key question posed by dualistic geometry is: Who will win?**

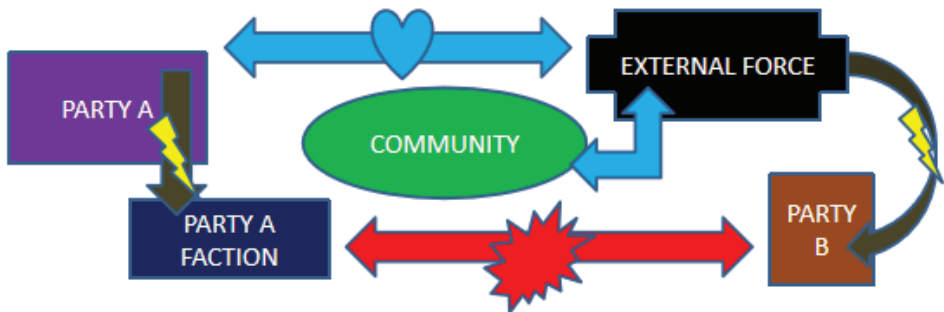
But we know that real life – that complicated place we all share with so many different types of people who will never all agree with us, let alone with our leaders – isn't that simple and social conflict actually has an irregular shape, what we can call an “asymmetrical geometry.” By this more accurate way of seeing practiced by the experienced journalist, conflict is viewed as multifaceted. Journalists identify all stakeholders, explore their interests behind their positions and see each of their contributions, interests and needs as equally important. By presenting all stakeholders' views and needs, media reports become a channel for communication among the various actors in a conflict situation. **The key question posed by asymmetrical geometry is: What does everyone have in common?**

Thus a CSJ journalist seeks for commonalities of interests and needs, which are likely to be less obvious (the large part of the iceberg hidden below the water) than what is openly presented as policies and positions by the groups in conflict (the small part visible above the water). Now let's look at the differences between the shapes of violence itself:

Dualistic Geometry: views conflict simplistically and only asks who will win?



Asymmetrical Geometry: views conflict as multifaceted and asks what does everyone have in common?



CSJ assesses cultural-structural violence instead of direct violence:

if a reporter only focuses on the immediate violence of events stripped of their context, they are only able to identify the perpetrators, stress gory details and provide graphic descriptions. Violence is seen and used as entertainment or emotional shock treatment. Their audience reacts emotionally and with anger against the perpetrators which demonises the perpetrators and thereby justifies a “tough” response (e.g. a military crackdown). In contrast, a journalist who focuses on identifying the structural and cultural contestations that underlie and cause direct violence, will be able to describe the objective societal conditions that nurture and trigger direct violence. By “cultural violence” we mean ingrained factors such as racism, bigotry, and discrimination, that are evil learned cultural attitudes, based in false assumptions about “other” people, people who because of their differences from us are illogically viewed as inferior or dangerous. By “structural violence” we mean formalised environmental factors built into our society such as poverty, militarism, or communalism, which are evil structural conditions mostly created by elites, which illegitimately justify the erosion of universal human rights, democracy, and the natural fraternity of all peoples.

4.d. Principles of operating in a conflicted community

By now you will realise that a real journalist like Rashid, with a sensitivity towards the complexity of conflict, will not be writing a story that reads like a crude morality tale, or a script for a bad Western cowboy movie, with “white hats” versus “black hats.” At times of course, you will indeed encounter good guys and bad guys, but even the bad guys’ stories are far from straight-forward. We will examine a few principles that apply when working in communities riven with conflict:

Avoid loaded language:

It’s an old saying that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” and naturally in communities struggling with religious conflict – whether low-temperature cultural-structural violence or high-temperature direct violence – it only makes things worse if you bandy about slurs and pejorative terms for those involved. If someone engages in a riot then loots a store, they can legitimately be called a “rioter” and a “looter” in the media. Of course if the action was caught on camera and the rioter / looter is accurately identifiable, then they can indeed be identified and described by their actions – but we have to take care of the legality of apportioning criminal blame before the matter has been decided in a court. But there are many other situations in which you want to avoid loaded language: a religious dissident simply cannot be described as “Satanic” unless the faith of Satanism is their actual and not merely their rumoured religious practice (there is a case to be made for the exaggerated polemics used in satire – but we are rather talking about straight news stories here). You could rather describe them as belonging to a breakaway sect, or as having controversial views on ritual purity; the more accurately they are described the better.

Avoid being elite-oriented:

An exclusive focus on the leading public figures obscures what happens to the majority on the ground. Journalism only acts in the public good when it interacts with that public as well as those who claim to “represent” their interests.

Recognise your own limitations:

Only take calculated risks not only regarding your physical safety and that of your colleagues, fixers, and those you interview, but also regarding the legal and ethical parameters within which you operate.

Avoid justifying violence or retribution:

It may be perceived as someone’s just deserts that after years of stirring trouble in their community, it is the trouble-maker’s own house that burns down, but this is inflammatory talk – rather reserve it for those satirists. It is indeed important for us as journalists to identify – with all of the rigours that proper proof demands – of the misdeeds of damaging, injurious, unconstructive, obstructive, or outright evil people: that is, after all, what we do when we, using irrefutable proof, expose the wheeling

and dealing of a corrupt politician. But we must take great care not to “paint a target” on another person’s (or community’s) back by our reporting that may incite others to take up arms against them. Also, obviously, cheering on a murderous mob from the sidelines, abusing the privileged public platform of the media, is totally unacceptable and contradicts all journalistic ethics; in fact in international law, any incitement to genocide is identical to the crime of genocide.

Avoid creating a martyrology:

many religious conflicts around the world – as in the Palestinian / Israeli conflict – are further inflamed by martyrology, the tendency for the warring parties to turn their dead into “martyrs” whose deaths need to be avenged. This is particularly common regarding children who have been killed in conflicts as they are perceived as innocents cut down in the spring of their lives, and of representing the unfulfilled potential of their people – so naturally a very emotional appeal attaches to the concept of a dead child being held up as a martyr. But we journalists are not in the business of making martyrs and saints, and should strongly avoid that language and imagery as it is so often used to justify further violence.

Avoid apportioning blame:

unless you have clearly and holistically understood the root causes of an issue and the needs and interests in play beneath the surface of apparent motivations, of the processes that drive the events, take great care in pointing the finger. The media has great power and, as the saying goes, with that comes great responsibility to be fair, equitable, and accurate in your assertions.

Deal plainly and honestly with everyone:

there are seldom occasions in which the subterfuge of claiming another identity, or of operating undercover are actually required by a journalist to achieve their objectives. It is permissible, of course, when needed, just to blend into the crowd and observe happenings without having to openly declare yourself and your intentions, but that ethic changes in one-on-one interviews.

Handle victims – and perpetrators! – with care:

even real bad guys can turn out to be valuable sources if handled professionally, with clarity and firmness. Even real bad guys started out somewhere, long ago, as an innocent child: see if you can tap into who they really are, and were, to give you greater insight. Never impose yourself on a victim, demanding answers, in their time of utmost distress or loss! Even if your news desk is hounding you for that crucial interview, take your time and make the victim feel comfortable, and confident in your kindness, understanding, and humanity

Provide a channel of communication between parties:

the peace-building journalists literally strives to act as a bridge between the various parties to a conflict. This is a delicate and dedicated task and it involves:

- Building trust by dealing honestly with all parties to the conflict and by publicising in full all commitments to resolution and peace made by such parties during negotiations so that communities can hold their leaders accountable;
- Providing an open channel of communication between the interest groups (in addition to using the the actual news outlet itself, journalists can broker, for example, public consultations or inter-faith dialogues to help increase mutual understanding, eliminate false narratives, and resolve substantive issues);
- Providing holistically-sourced information, more in-depth analysis, and identification of true needs and interests, enabling parties to the conflict (and those caught inbetween) with more reliable knowledge on which to base their decisions, especially regarding openings, avenues, opportunities and models for conflict resolution;
- Allowing for emotions, fears and grievances to be properly aired so that no party feels bottled-up (this is particularly true of religious communal violence where emotions play a subtle yet very key function);
- Giving adequate voice to marginalised parties and groups, especially non-combatants or other ordinary people who are trapped in the middle of a conflict (bear in mind that together these groups might constitute the actual majority in your society so deserve to be given equitable airtime or page space; against such a truly balanced backdrop of majority voices, it is likely that the minority extremists will be revealed as hysterical, bigoted, impractical, and as not truly having peoples' interests at heart); and
- Being solutions-oriented, always broadening the debate to be as inclusive as possible, but with a keen eye to cut through the "fog of war" to realistic, constructive, multi-partisan, and durable options for peace (here it can help looking at other local or international models such as, say, Northern Ireland, where deadly religious communal conflict was resolved).

Pay attention to how you might be perceived:

your language (including dialect, word-use, and tone) send invisible signals to others that may make you seem hostile or unsympathetic, creating problems for you that you might not expect. Likewise, things that you can change or improve, such as your clothing, how you carry yourself, and your manners might open doors for you or have them slammed in your face; it might even affect your safety

Pay attention to what you bring to the story:

an agnostic or non-practicing journalist covering a religious procession might feel alienated – or entranced! – by the experience, but the important thing is for them to recognise who they are in that situation, and what strengths and weaknesses they bring to the story. This includes recognising faults: their blind-spots (things about which they are ignorant in the other’s culture); limitations (say, an inability to speak the local dialect); dislikes or likes (say, a distaste of, or appreciation for, statues of deities); leanings (say, a lack of interest in the assignment); and even prejudices (say, wariness of self-described “holy men” because of a previous bad experience with a charlatan).



4.e. Preparing to work in the field

Do a risk assessment of your daily working environment:

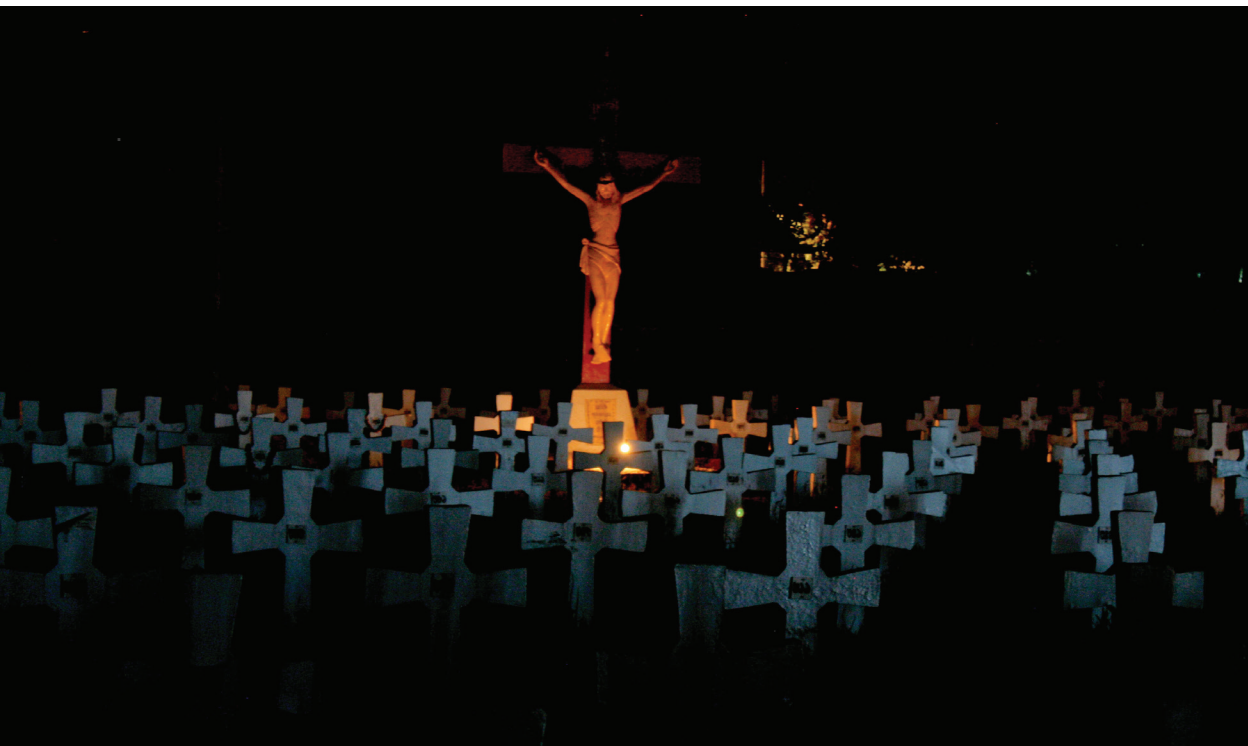
- A. Reassess domestic threats:** Recognise that most journalists killed are murdered in their home countries in “peace-time,” covering ordinary beats such as crime and communal violence. Syndicate crime is a very dangerous beat. Check your home environment: home security locks, bars, cameras, alarms; don’t let anyone but friends and family know where you live; get those living with you to report suspicious strangers.
- B. Death threats:** Always treat these seriously, but understand why they are being made, and in whose interests. Some killers can be negotiated with if you understand their motivations and can navigate those (professional killers won’t kill unless it is absolutely necessary), others can’t (you can’t negotiate with a fanatic, or a fired-up mob).
- C. Natural disasters are deadly:** Unlike war-zones or areas of communal violence where there are (shifting) islands of calm inbetween the battle zones where you can find peace, shelter and sustenance, in natural disasters, all civil order and infrastructure have often collapsed and you may battle to find basic necessities such as drinking water.
- D. Learn the cultural environment:** Culture is often ignored in favour of formal politics, but cultural issues may prove more powerful drivers of social processes. Don’t break cultural taboos. Understand how your own culture or dress or language or appearance or attitude could be seen by outsiders. Look at why certain traditions are upheld and others eroded.
- E. Maintain contacts on the ground:** Knowing community leaders – and other residents – can help ensure your safe passage when you enter an area, can provide you with an early-warning system when trouble is brewing, and help you assess a community’s true needs and interests.
- F. Analyse the balance of forces:** Do an in-depth evaluation of who wields power in the community and how. The answers may surprise you (matriarchs in some cultures are immensely important power-brokers). Recognise the tensions between formal and informal influence. Know which lines you can cross – and which you can’t.

Plan your field-work:

- A. Safety Training:** Get your news organisation to pay for proper hostile environment training. Get proper medical and insurance cover.
- B. Contacts:** Make contacts well in advance with international aid agencies and other official players on the ground who have resources and assets you may be able to access (you may be able to travel in a protected convoy with the Red Cross, African Union forces, etc). Get them to give you their own Risk Assessment before you go in.
- C. Briefing:** Make sure you know before you go out exactly what your objectives are and don't bite off more than you can chew. Be sure to always have a Plan B if things change – and they usually do! The Briefing should focus on your prior Risk Assessment of the situation.
- D. Communications:** Make sure you have the necessary cellphone, satphone or other means of communicating with your newsdesk while in the field. Always have a back-up technology should one fail. Make a schedule of regular calls to your newsdesk.
- E. Safety & Logistics:** Operating in some areas requires protective gear such as bullet-resistant vests and kevlar helmets. Never forget the importance of water, food and medical kits. Plan for where you will be staying and how you will get around. Make sure you know how you will pay your way (cash or card) and in what currency.
- F. Fixers & Translators:** If you are not operating in an area you know, especially if there is a different language or culture, try to hire skilled fixers (local guides & organisers) and translators who are recommended by foreign correspondents or aid agencies working in the same area.
- G. Exit strategy:** Have several alternate plans to get out of the situation. Whether this involves exiting with the help of military, aid agency or civilian flights / convoys.
- H. Debriefing:** This needs to include an evaluation of stress and possible signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by a trusted colleague. Don't be macho; recognise and manage the impact on your mental health of violent or emotional stories. Talk to a psychologist.

Critical gear:

- A. **Water and food:** water especially is crucial to survival so make sure you have a water-bottle of at least one litre on you at all times.
- B. **Footwear:** Comfortable, hard-wearing footwear like hiking boots or trainers with proper support are a must when you expect to be on your feet the whole day.
- C. **Clothing:** Your clothing must all be natural fabrics like cotton as they don't melt and stick to you if burned. Wear a hat and sun-screen if you expect to be outdoors all day.
- D. **Backups:** Make sure to fully charge your cellphone and all other equipment or you have extra batteries / ways to recharge. Carry a second cell or even a satellite phone if necessary.
- E. **Protective gear:** If there is a threat of rocks, bottles etc being thrown, carry a bicycle helmet. In more extreme situations, get your newsroom to invest in a bullet-resistant vest and helmet.
- F. **Paramedical gear:** Always have a basic medical kit on hand for minor cuts, burns, bruises and breaks (camping med-kits are great). Tampons are perfect for staunching bullet or other bleeding wounds and petroleum jelly for smearing under your nose and eyes to combat teargas. Ideally, get your news organisation to sponsor you for a First Aid Level 2 course. If you have a medical condition, make sure your meds are with you.



CASE STUDY E: Covering extreme communal conflict

Consider the following true historical scenario that has been covered by many professional conflict journalists and see if it sounds familiar to you:

- It's a narrow strip of coastal territory of 26,936km².
- It is home to an indigenous Muslim ethnic group – but over time, they were progressively displaced by a more powerfully-armed group that adheres to a different religion.
- At one point, driven by a supremacist ideology, the dominant group embarked on a war of violent dispossession.
- The violence was marked by massacres and terrorism committed by partisan militia on both sides.
- As a result, 700,000 civilian members of the indigenous group were forced to flee abroad as refugees – where they were detained in unsanitary refugee camps.
- In the aftermath, the dominant group bulldozed the indigenous group's villages in an apparent attempt to deny them the right of return.

Short exercise:

Take five minutes and consider (if you are alone) or debate (if you are with your colleagues) the following question: Which country is this and what year did this happen? The answer is at the end of this chapter* – but don't cheat and look it up now! Once you have decided, write your answer down. Consider / debate the following:

- You are used to operating in a majority Muslim country, but now think about how the terrible experiences of this Muslim minority was covered in the media. Can you cite examples when the media covering this Muslim community experiencing extreme stress:
 - Was more focused on the events happening there than on processes?
 - Oversimplified the conflict using a white hats v black hats dualistic narrative rather than a more nuanced asymmetrical narrative that went beyond cartoons of good and evil?

- Focused exclusively on the public propaganda of the parties to the conflict instead of examining their real (and often hidden) needs?
- Focused exclusively on obvious instances of direct violence instead of examining structural causes of violence?
- Advocated for revenge and increased violence rather than peace-building?
- Valorised dying for a cause by creating martyrs out of innocents not involved in partisan politics caught in the crossfire rather than treating them as victims of that political conflict?
- Used loaded language around race, colour, language, religion, creed or some other feature to demonise one side of the conflict and valorise the other?

Consider how, like the racist reporting post-9-11 in the USA, this was extremely harmful to the real victims – and in fact, enabled a genocidal narrative to become somehow acceptable in the mainstream. Consider / debate:

- What would a journalist operating in that very difficult place have to do to tell a story that has a great, well-thought-out hypothesis that is accurate, balanced, fair, humane, well-sourced, and which contributes to peace-building rather than stoking the fires of resentment and conflict? Write down five things that you as a pro investigator and CSJ practitioner would do to improve coverage in such troubling circumstances.

Main Take-aways from Chapter 4

- Conflict-sensitive journalism combines the best practices of objective journalism (accuracy, fairness, and equity) with advocacy journalism (passion for human rights and social justice) to pursue a solutions-oriented path towards peace-building in traumatised communities, creating narratives that help heal society.
- Conflict-sensitive journalism is driven by a focus on longer-term processes within society rather than on flash-in-the-pan event reporting, it is driven by a focus on more than the often-manufactured surface positions and policies of groups in conflict with one another, preferring to dig down into the very real and justifiable interests and needs that motivate the groups.
- Conflict-sensitive journalism understands conflict as a multi-faceted, asymmetrical problem that is rooted far deeper in the social and structural environments (like prejudice and poverty) from which it springs, than is given credit by crude “white hat” versus “black hat” reporting which repeatedly stimulates fresh conflict by focusing only on the visible violence that boils over from time to time.
- CSJ journalists try their level best to defuse communal conflicts by being ethical: avoiding loaded language, justifying violence or retribution, creating martyrologies, and pointing the finger of blame without adequate proof. They also deal openly and honestly with all they encounter, especially their interviewees, and are especially gentle with victims and children.
- CSJ journalists take care on managing how they are perceived and are continually aware of how their own faults might distort their story – preferring to use their weaknesses as strengths.
- CSJ journalists prepare themselves for their work by doing risk analyses of their domestic living and working environments, by planning their field work in detail, by ensuring they have the right gear for the field, know best how to get safely in and out – and by taking care of their mental health.

*** Answer to Case Study E:**

This occurred in 1948 with the expulsion of the Palestinians from territory occupied by the Israelis; but you might have noticed the very close resemblance of that terrible experience to that faced by mostly-Muslim Rohingyas expelled from Myanmar in the current era. Either way, the exact same principles of conflict-sensitive journalism apply – as they do in a Muslim-majority country like Bangladesh!

Summing up: What we have learned in this manual

- The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to improve life on the planet for all who live here, building more peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, and healthy communities by the year 2030 – and faith-based organisations (FBOs) and communities of faith and belief have a crucial role to play in achieving these goals, especially through social development projects that serve all poor and marginalised people, regardless of their colour, race, creed, gender, identity, language, or nationality.
- Bangladesh is blessed with a diversity of belief systems, mostly dating back centuries, that are intricately interwoven into the fabric of our society – notably animism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'ism, Christianity, and atheism & agnosticism – that add colour and vibrancy to our key Constitutional pillar of “secular” religious tolerance and equality before the law, which Constitution also recognises the leading role in our society of Islam which is likewise enjoined in the Qur'an to let other faiths flourish.
- The relationship between the media and people practicing these belief systems are strained by shoddy, shallow, and sometimes even racist, bigoted and genocidal coverage that increases tensions between communities of different beliefs, whereas news consumers express a great desire for detailed, nuanced, intelligent coverage that properly expresses the huge diversity of experience of communities of belief and which encourages their attempts – fraught with challenges though they are – to build a more sustainable world for all through social development projects that support the SDGs.

- The key to acting like a pro investigative journalist (which is really, the foundation of all good journalism) is to truly “see” the story in all its complexity, holistically hypothesised, with a well-thought-out set of sources, both human and documentary, that have been rigorously triaged and ranked to assess the quality of the light they can shed on the core issue, with a clear plan of attack, and with the journalist skilled in recognising important patterns that embrace the depth, breadth, and nuance of each story.
- Conflict-Sensitive Journalism (CSJ) is the most advanced school of journalistic practice, in which the journalist goes beyond tired old black-and-white propagandistic descriptions of communal violence that demonises one side and valorises the other, to mine down and understand the real needs and interests at the roots of conflict, the whole diversity of the parties involved (and those innocents caught in the middle), and what they can bring to the table, with a constant eye on peace-building by establishing channels of communication within the conflicted society, and by finding solutions to the conflict, especially those that strengthen the SDGs.



Resources & Further Reading

Further religion-reporting handbooks for journalists as well as reading and resources for reporting on religious communities and faith-based organisations' contributions to building an inclusive & prosperous society.

a. Religion & Development Resources:

- **International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD):** Founded in 2016 as a multi-stakeholder global partnership that actively includes religious and faith-based actors, organisations, initiatives, and communities across the world working towards achieving the 2030 Agenda: <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/>
- **UN Environment Programme (UNEP) “Faith for Earth Initiative”:** Following a series of initiatives and conventions organized in partnership with FBOs, UNEP launched the Faith for Earth Initiative in November 2017. The goal of Faith for Earth is to strategically engage with faith-based organizations and partner with them to collectively achieve the SDGs and fulfill the objectives of the 2030 Agenda: <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative>
- **United Religions Initiative (URI):** A URI Cooperation Circle is a self-organising group of at least seven members from at least three religions, spiritual expressions, or indigenous traditions, including atheists and agnostics. Cooperation Circles work on two levels: by giving people of different backgrounds a chance to work together, and by tackling important community issues their members care about: <https://www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circles>
- **Parliament of the World’s Religions:** The Climate Action, Peace & Justice, Women’s Dignity, and Next Generation projects, initiatives of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, are online resources that connect communities around the world and facilitate resource and tool sharing in the fight against climate change, and for peace and justice, and for women’s dignity, and for the future of youth:
 - Climate Action: <https://parliamentofreligions.org/climate-action/>
 - Peace & Justice: <https://parliamentofreligions.org/peace-and-justice/>
 - Women’s Dignity: <https://parliamentofreligions.org/womens-dignity/>
 - Next Generation: <https://parliamentofreligions.org/next-generation/>

b. Covering Religion Resources:

- **Reporting on Religion:** A Primer on Journalism’s Best Beat: by Diane Connolly of the Religion News Association, this is a great

- introductory guide to journalists covering faith communities, though it has a US focus: <https://www.religionlink.com/reporting-on-religion/>
- **The Hartford Institute for Religion Research:** Much information on the bewildering array of new religious movements, including groups often characterised as “cults” or “sects,” which you may come across in your work as a journalist is available here (includes a list of official websites of various denominations):
http://hirr.hartsem.edu/denom/new_religious_movements.html
- **Online Academic Books:** There are several books that take a deeper dive into the topic; being more academic in nature, they tend to focus on philosophical, theological, and theoretical debates, and are thus better for research purposes or for improving your background understanding. You can get them through an online account with an academic institution if you, a colleague, or friendly academic have access, and include:
 - The Routledge Handbook of Journalism and Religion:
<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Religion-and-Journalism/Radde-Antweiler-Zeiler/p/book/9780367568252> (has significant relevant parts on conflict, radicalisation, and populism, as well as on dialogue and peace-building)
 - The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media:
<https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/36307>
- **Books to Buy:** Some books on religion and the media are available for purchase, if you would like deeper insights, or would want to specialise on the religion beat and build your own library. Books with a more global focus include:
 - Claire H. Badaracco (ed.), Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture:
<https://www.amazon.com/Quoting-God-Media-Religion-Culture/dp/1932792066>
 - Robert Abelman & Stewart M Hoover (eds.), Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions:
<https://www.amazon.com/Religious-Television-Controversies-Conclusions-Communication/dp/0893916447>
 - Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert & Roberta Green-Ahmanson, Blind Spot: When Journalists don't get Religion:
<https://www.amazon.com/Blind-Spot-When-Journalists-Religion/dp/0195374363>
 - Daniel A Stout & Judith M Buddenbaum (eds.), Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations:
<https://www.amazon.com/Religion-Mass-Media-Audiences-Adaptations/dp/0803971745>

- Yoel Cohen & Paul A. Soukup, The Handbook on Religion & Communication:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781119671619>

c. Safety & CSJ Resources:

- **International Federation of Journalists (IFJ):** Founded in 1926, the IFJ, the world's largest organisation of journalists, represents 600,000 media professionals from 187 trade unions and associations in more than 140 countries. The IFJ is the organisation that speaks for journalists within the United Nations system and within the international trade union movement. Its Asia-Pacific project is here: <https://www.ifj.org/actions/projects/asia-pacific> And its Conflict-Sensitive Journalism manual, Live News: A Survival Guide for Journalists, is downloadable at the bottom of this page:
<https://www.ifj.org/what/safety>
- **International News Safety Institute (INSI):** A member-based organisation dedicated to journalists' safety, managed by journalists and overseen by a Board of Trustees representing major news organisations from around the world. INSI offers more than 40 leading television, radio, print and online outlets a vital forum for networking and information sharing:
www.newssafety.org
- **Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma:** A resource center and global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy. It is a project of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City, with international satellite offices in London and Melbourne: <http://dartcenter.org>
- **Reporters Without Borders (RSF):** Founded in 1985 by four journalists, RSF is at the forefront of the defence and promotion of freedom of information. Recognised as a public interest organisation in France since 1995, RSF has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the International Francophone Organisation (OIF):
<https://rsf.org/en>
- **The Frontline Club:** A gathering place in London for journalists, photographers and other likeminded people interested in international affairs, to champion independent journalism & freedom of speech, to rally the protection of press freedom and fight for the safety of freelancers in doing their important work around the globe: www.frontlineclub.com
- **Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR):** Empowers local voices to drive change in countries in conflict, crisis and transition. Where hate speech and propaganda proliferate, and journalists and civic activists are under attack, IWPR promotes reliable information and public debate that makes a difference: <http://iwpr.net>



