

Newspapers rethink religion sections

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NEW YORK (ABP)—The [Dallas Morning News](#) recently received the Religion Communicators Council award for the nation's best religion section. It was the 10th time in 11 years the *News* had won. Unfortunately for the *News*, there's no chance of an 11th title.

In January, the newspaper discontinued the section, citing economic concerns.

It isn't the only publication deciding to drop sections devoted to religion. The [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) recently combined religion with its "living" pages, while [U.S. News and World Report](#) and the [Wichita Eagle](#) in Kansas have cut religion editors and downsized the beat altogether.

It's not immediately known how many religion reporters and editors have lost their jobs. But the religion cutbacks match an industrywide trend of declining newspaper circulations and increased layoffs. According to the [Annual Report on American Journalism](#), there was a net loss of 600 full-time professional employees at daily newspapers in 2005. And early indications are that 2006 may have been twice as bad.

Christian scholar Martin Marty, a 50-year columnist for [The Christian Century](#) magazine, has written about the “dire” economic situation of newspapers, magazines and other print media. In an essay titled “The Decline of Print News,” Marty wrote that the “religion and faith-and-values sections are dying not because there is not enough to report on in ‘religion.’ Religion has seldom been so newsworthy or comment-inducing as it has become in recent decades.”

It’s a lack of advertising and the perception that religion sections are “fluff” that often make them the first casualties of cutbacks.

Some experts believe the decline in newspaper circulation is directly related to the growth of online editions and blogs. Convenience and the ability to sift news in a topic-specific medium have caused previously devoted print subscribers to substitute the Internet for their daily paper. And when you lose print readers, you lose the seed money that funds special sections.

[Brad Owens](#), a journalism professor at [Baylor University](#), described the current status of print media as in a transition rather than a decline. He teaches students “multiple models” of media in order to help them anticipate how the market for professional journalism will change.

Now more than ever, religion tends to be a topic especially covered on the Internet, he said.

“I think religion is a type (of news) where special websites and blogs kind of feed people’s interest more than the traditional model of journalism would,” Owens said. “People of faith are heavy, heavy users of the Internet.”

A negative side of that specialization is that users generally visit the web looking for specific information. That means they may miss more of the subtler or peripheral news they would get in a religion section. Owens

doesn't necessarily lament the demise of the religion section, but he did cite potential side effects.

"When you use the web for information, you tend not to be surprised very much," Owens said. "You tend to see only things you're looking for. When I go on the web, I go there for what I need, and I don't get as many surprises."

Richard Oppel, editor of the [Austin American-Statesman](#), said termination of a religion section is not the tragedy it's made out to be. The *Statesman* covers faith-based news throughout its pages and includes a "faith page" inside the features section on Saturdays.

"I never believed in religion 'sections,'" Oppel said. "They were a showy response to an obvious reader interest when newspapers were in their salad days. But they were dependent on advertising, and advertising can be thin in that sector. Also, if you are slave to a section, then you deprive the front page of some great stuff."

In fact, the absence of a strictly "religious" section means faith-based stories must appear throughout all news—a distribution that more closely reflects real life. Like preachers often say, faith isn't just for Sundays.

Debra Mason, [Religion Newswriters Association](#) executive director, echoed the sentiment. In an RNA newsletter, she wrote: "Hundreds of daily newspapers do not and never have had religion sections. Instead, religion news is integrated throughout the paper. We should not confuse religion sections with religion news as a whole."

The *Dallas Morning News* has taken the proliferation of faith-based stories to heart. The Jan. 13 cover story in the local section discussed Jewish history in Texas. The newspaper's religion blog and newsletter continue to grow in popularity.

A potential problem of integrating religious news throughout the paper is that, by default, it could mean only the sensational faith-based stories are covered. And with front-page stories devoted to televangelist scandals and terrorism, some worry that heartwarming features usually reserved for inside pages of the paper will disappear entirely.

Oppel doesn't share that concern. In his opinion, front-page news doesn't have to be sensational.

"The rise of Muslims in Austin, trends toward nondenominational suburban churches, and the difficulty of recruiting celibate candidates for the priesthood all are important issues worthy of the front page," he said.

Oppel edited [The Charlotte Observer](#) when it won a Pulitzer Prize for covering the Jim and Tammy Bakker scandal. In that case, any tinge of sensationalism was justified by the outcome, he said.

"We won the Pulitzer Prize for public service for that coverage," Oppel said. "Was that sensational? In some ways, yes. But remember it put Bakker in the federal pen and stopped him from the fraudulent use of the public airwaves to rake widows of their Social Security checks."

Oppel said he most definitely believes print newspapers will continue to thrive, even 20 and 30 years from now. And he says he'd rather be in the newspaper business than the magazine business.

Indeed, some magazines have declined sharply in content, while others continue with dependence on wealthy backers. In contrast, Oppel pointed out, newspapers have increased distribution on several platforms. For instance, the *Statesman* produces its primary website (statesman.com), the entertainment-based austin360.com, seven Austin-area weekly newspapers, the Spanish *Ahora Si!*, and *Glossy* for the luxury market.

"We're very healthy and intend to stay that way," Oppel said. "Paid

circulation may decline. But tell me when magazines, radio and TV ever had 'paid circulation.' Readership of newspapers—in print and online—is increasing.”

The bottom line, according to most in the know, is that religion coverage in general isn't disappearing, and that's what matters. Owens, for one, is optimistic.

“I'd be more worried if the religion beat reporters go away,” he said. “I'd hate to see any one reporter confined to just one section.”

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