

# Self-serving media study denies religious bias

by Patrick Riley

A nationally heralded report that aims at “bridging the gap” between religion and the news media features a dismissive critique of a similar study sponsored by the Catholic League and the Knights of Columbus (*Media Coverage of the Catholic Church*) and chalks up perceived bias as simply lack of knowledge on the part of reporters.

According to the report, titled “Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media,” *Media Coverage of the Catholic Church* is “not convincing,” and merely articulates “what traditional Catholics dislike about news coverage of Catholic controversies.”

“Bridging the Gap” was published by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, which has behind it a three-quarter *billion* dollar fund established by presslord Frank E. Gannett, who died in 1957. The fund is administered by the Freedom Forum, chaired by Al Neuharth. Neuharth, founder of *USA Today* is a self-styled “S.O.B.” who portrays himself in his autobiography (*Confessions of an S.O.B.*) as a Machiavellian moral scofflaw.

The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center is chaired by John Seigenthaler, a former subordinate of Neuharth’s at *USA Today* who provides the study’s introduction. The report was written by John Dart, a religious affairs reporter at the Los Angeles Times, and Dr. Jimmy R. Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Allen was on the losing side of a struggle that brought traditionalists into control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Allen and Dart fail to make clear just why they adjudge the

League's media study "not convincing." Despite their emphatic if subjective conclusion, the only criticism of their own that they offer is that the study "makes no note of the key role of religion writers in the stories analyzed by that study." But they do not show that religion writers played the role they claim for them, or what that role would signify.

They offer no analysis, no reasons of their own for the League study's failure to convince. Rather they uncritically echo remarks made by others. They make no mention of the study's methodology, far less analyze it or even describe it. Strictly speaking, their critique does not justify any conclusion whatsoever.

With poetic symmetry, the Dart-Allen study reaches conclusions favorable to the industry that sponsored it, however remotely, namely the press media. On the basis of a survey whose actual questionnaire they do not reveal, it declares that "an anti-religious bias in the media is a myth." With the finding that 72 percent of journalists surveyed say religion is meaningful in their lives, it confronts a widely quoted survey of the media elites published in 1981 by S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman (Dr. Lichter happens to have been the director and author of the Catholic League – Knights of Columbus study!).

That earlier study found that fifty percent of those in the media fail to name a religious affiliation and only eight percent admit to going to church or synagogue weekly.

The First Amendment Center's survey was broader than the Lichter-Rothman poll because it reached out to include local newspapers and churches, but it went only to journalists to write about religion. Lichter- Rothman, on the other hand, limited their survey to a much smaller number of media elite who influence the nation's major electronic and print media.

All of this is not to imply that the Dart-Allen survey has no

merit. It brings some important truths to the fore. But it is gravely defective, not only because of its factual mistakes and methodological errors but for philosophical reasons, such as when it repeatedly counterposes the media's preoccupation with "facts" and religion's concern with "faith" – as though faith cannot deal in facts, and as though religion has nothing to do with morals. Far from "Bridging the Gap," this study widens it.

The First Amendment Center report needs a thorough, painstaking revision, and the Catholic League will be happy to help.

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