

Telling the Story of Religion and American Life

Faith Matters



When Chuck Ritz announced to the adult Sunday school class at Otterbein United Methodist Church, Lebanon, Ind., that he planned to lead a discussion about Albert Einstein's faith, "some of the more fundamental folks were wary," recalls Ritz. He describes the class as small, only a dozen or so each week; intergenerational, with ages ranging from the 20s to 85; and theologically diverse. "We have lots of viewpoints, and that makes for interesting conversations." A series about Einstein, who often made half-serious, half-whimsical references to God, would be no exception. But the lively exchange that ensued after the group listened to a podcast called "Einstein's God" that aired on national public radio "didn't turn out to be as controversial as they feared," says Ritz. Similar to other class discussions, this one ignited a rich dialogue about how faith connects with everyday life and how society functions.

The podcast and its educational resources came from *On Being*, a weekly broadcast hosted by Krista Tippett, a seasoned journalist and Yale Divinity School graduate who launched the show in 2003. The hour-long program, originally called *Speaking of Faith*, extended its reach in 2005 with the addition of teaching aids funded by Lilly Endowment. Live events, lesson guides, CDs, videos and podcasts enable leaders such as Ritz to create conversations in settings ranging from churches to schools to kitchen tables. Tippett conceived the project—broadcast and spin-off resources—as a response to what she called the "black hole" or "wasteland," where intelligent media coverage of religion should exist ... but often didn't.



"I started thinking about this in the late '90s," Tippett says. "There had been a resurgence of strident religious voices that were exciting for journalists because they made great sound bites." However, the news that resulted sometimes "had no spiritual or intellectual content. It was all about this or that position on this or that issue. I wanted to talk about faith as it is lived in modern life. I envisioned something that would enrich and deepen the public understanding of religion."

Faith's ongoing impact

Whether called *Speaking of Faith* or *On Being*, the broadcast has always recognized the powerful impact that faith has had on American culture in the past and continues to have today. The program is among several Endowment-supported initiatives that share two goals:

- To provide solid and reliable information about the role religion plays in shaping American society.
- To provide resources and tools for religious leaders, students, teachers, journalists and the general public that help communicate how faith informs the ways Americans live and think.

How the initiatives accomplish these goals differ. Depending on the program, the tools developed vary in sophistication from grade-school lesson plans to a digital archive produced by America's foremost scholars. Users of the tools range from church leaders to educators to journalists to casual media consumers. Some Endowment-supported programs are new, such as the Odyssey Network's lectionary-based *On Scripture* commentaries and videos that connect scripture with everyday life. Others date back more than 15 years, such as the public television series *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, which the Endowment helped launch in 1997 with a \$5 million grant. The Endowment has remained the primary funder of the series. Its \$4.2 million grant in 2012, for the series' 16th season, brought support to \$94 million.

Unlike *On Being*, which selects a topic and builds hour-long conversations around it, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* uses a magazine-like format. Longer stories are followed by shorter pieces linked to trends or news items that have religious or ethical elements. "*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* fills a need for reporting on religion that is knowledgeable, sensitive, respectful and fair," states Robert Abernethy, the program's host and executive editor. "Viewers tell us they appreciate this

kind of coverage of all religions and of religion's often-overlooked role in national and international developments."

Abernethy continues, "We are gratified that other journalists and news organizations often pick up our stories. Teachers use our material in schools, colleges and congregations, and pastors tell us that the existence of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* on national television is a kind of validation of their vocations."

When Abernethy approached Kim Lawton

about serving as managing editor of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, he asked her, "Do you think we'll have enough material to fill the program week after week?" Sixteen years later, Lawton says, "We laugh about that because we have way more stories than we can fit into the show." The popularity of the broadcast hasn't dissipated. A quarter million viewers tune in weekly, and the show's website attracts more than 800,000 visitors annually.

Beyond traditional media

Both *On Being* and *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* use Internet resources to extend on-air discussions and reach new and diverse audiences with relevant content. With support from a \$500,000 Endowment grant, in 2012 Tippett hosted a series she called "Civil



For a broadcast titled "Becoming Detroit," Krista Tippett (opposite, third from left) visited Motor City with Barbara Jones, Gloria Lowe and Barbara Stachowski. More recently, her Civil Conversations Project took Tippett to the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., (right) close to the studio where Robert Abernethy (above) hosts *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*.

Conversations" about complex and often controversial issues. "We did one on marriage," she says, "and an Episcopal bishop in Texas pulled together a group of 25 clergy, downloaded and passed around our video and

then hosted a discussion. Not everyone agreed on the issue, but they were able to sit in the same room and grapple with the topic in a civil way.”

Lawton and the *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* staff rely on Facebook and Twitter as outlets for ongoing stories. For example, at this year’s political conventions, Lawton filed mini-reports in addition to preparing a summary for the TV broadcast. She sat in on committee meetings, conducted interviews and then posted her findings. “Facebook and Twitter enabled us to show in an immediate way the role religion played at both conventions,” says Lawton, who likens social media to “a giant beast you must keep feeding” to satisfy its appetite.

A recent audience-impact study, funded by the Endowment, revealed that *On Being* attracts a listenership more diverse and slightly younger than the average public radio audience. Still, Tippett jokes that *On Being* hasn’t achieved the same success as *Car Talk*, NPR’s top-rated weekend show that went off the air this fall after 35 years. “What we’re doing is counter-cultural,” she says. “And yet I know a whole world of people want to be part of this kind of conversation. The question is how we reach more people and help them deepen the discussion?”

Expanding religion news

Tippett’s belief that faith-related content has mass appeal is shared by Debra Mason, director of the Center on Religion and the Professions at the University of Missouri and executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association and the Religion Newswriters Foundation. “People crave these kinds of stories,” says Mason.



“Research tells us they attract tremendous readership. What we don’t have a handle on is how to make religion reporting a priority within the larger media industry.”

Staff cutbacks in that industry have had a negative impact on the quantity and quality of religion stories. Compounding the situation is an explosion in self-publishing. “You have people who talk about religion casually—online and in print—who aren’t knowledgeable in a sophisticated or educated way,” she says. As nontraditional outlets have increased, “so has the amount of uninformed coverage of religion.”

Under Mason’s leadership and with support from the Endowment, two initiatives are aimed at upgrading and expanding religion news in the media. First, journalists who cover religion have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge by going back to school. Since 2003 the Religion Newswriters Foundation has offered Lilly Scholarships in Religion to reporters interested in enrolling in classes at a seminary, divinity school or college religion department. Recipients this year included journalists from The Associated Press, CNN and *USA Today*, as well as from small-city newspapers and regional radio and television outlets. “A lot of the people who take courses are not religion specialists, and we’re pleased about that,” says Mason.

Second, a grant for \$3.5 million to Religion News

(this page) As managing editor of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, Kim Lawton has interviewed everyone from Paul Simon to the Archbishop of Canterbury. She says her favorite assignments take her out of the studio to talk with “real people doing amazing things, motivated by their religion.”

LLC is helping build a network of community-based religion news hubs and has supported the acquisition of the 78-year-old Religion News Service (RNS) that distributes faith-related content. Stories that journalists post on RNS's website are available to all website visitors but can be republished only by subscribers. The opportunity to reprint materials enables subscribing media outlets that don't have religion reporters to include religion news in their publications and broadcasts. Mason, who serves as publisher of RNS, spearheaded the acquisition of RNS because "we saw it as a way to revitalize coverage of religion and ensure that an important historic wire service survives and grows."

Repository of reliable data

A source of information on all aspects of faith is the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), an Endowment-funded project launched in 1995.

"I use it as a researcher, and it's helpful in the classroom because it's one-stop shopping for students," says Philip Goff, executive director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "I teach about the diversity of religious experience in the U.S., and ARDA has everything I need to make key points. I am able to deal with what's going on in real time and also make historical comparisons."

ARDA is an equally powerful tool for church leaders and communicators because it identifies trends, tracks their growth and surveys their followers. A pastor thinking about planting a church can visit the archive to learn about other faith communities that serve the proposed area and about residents' religious and cultural makeup. A congregation interested in launching a food pantry can assess the need for such a ministry and count prospective clients. A journalist writing about the secularization of America can discover the percentage of survey respondents who say they do or don't believe in God. "ARDA contains information that helps users interpret their surrounding society and the world in which they live," says Goff. "They can access facts and learn to interpret the facts through the website."

Originally envisioned as a repository for scholarly studies of religion, ARDA "has taken off from that point," says Roger Finke, a professor at Penn State University and director of ARDA. The archive collects research findings and makes them available free of charge. Communication between Finke and ARDA users is two-way. "We conduct focus groups, do interviews and make presentations to find out what information is most helpful, what is clear and what is unclear," says Finke.

Putting research to work

In addition to creating learning modules to help students explore American religion, ARDA distributes press releases to alert media to new data, publishes a column on its website by a past president of the Religion Newswriters Association, and helps journalists verify facts or statistics. When *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* did a series on the growing number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, ARDA had a wealth of documentation to offer.

"We rely on ARDA," says Kim Lawton. "Anytime we tackle a major project, we want to know what research is out there, what we can learn from it and how we can build on it. We also have a close partnership with the Religion News Service. The religion-reporting community is a small, collaborative world," says Lawton. "We often work together in telling the story of religion in America and beyond."



Students in Phil Goff's religion classes at IUPUI use ARDA to prepare for their assigned visits to various faith communities in the Indianapolis area.

