



Keeping the Faith: Reporting on Religion
A dialogue between faith leaders and leading media practitioners

In conjunction with the 5th ASEM Interfaith Dialogue

21-22 September 2009 | Seoul, Korea

23 September 2009

Whether our societies are experiencing the oft-debated religious revival or decline, religious leaders, practices, inter- and intra-faith relations and developments intermittently make the news. The media and faith leaders engaged in interfaith dialogue both struggle to be in the service of truth and of society. Both are mindful of their credibility and relevance; they are also concerned about the deep distrust that appears to characterise their working relationship. The media often reports on religion when it is related to issues of conflict. This has put media professionals in the discomfiting position of being perceived as having a tendency towards negativism and stereotyping of some religions and religious communities, particularly Islam, and for neglecting the diversity of views and actions within these faiths.

Given the cherished value of freedom of expression in ASEM countries, both in religion and of the press, there is a need for deep reflection by both faith leaders and the media and on how to work towards achieving mutual understanding and respect.

To this end, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) gathered a group of 17 distinguished faith leaders and journalists from Asia and Europe for a two-day dialogue on the challenges of reporting on religion. They exchanged views on their respective experiences and challenges, and collectively proposed practical solutions for faith and media practitioners to work together and build more trust between them. The following are some recommendations made by the 7th ASEF Journalists' Colloquium held in Seoul on 21-22 September 2009:

1. ASEM Interfaith Dialogue partners should initiate and maintain processes and platforms that will build trust between faith leaders and the media. Both are important stakeholders who influence public opinion and the religion debate in society.
2. Interfaith dialogue partners should also consider investing in education programmes for both faith leaders and journalists, which can reduce the mutual suspicion and knowledge gaps on both sides. They include:
 - 2.1. **Media literacy for faith leaders.** Faith leaders need a better understanding of media processes, how to engage the media and how to select and create media-relevant messages. This will allow faith leaders and organisations to avoid misrepresentation by the media, and to be able to respond more effectively during crises.
 - 2.2. **Religious literacy for journalists.** Journalists need to acquire more knowledge and understanding of the religious systems and issues that they cover, especially when reporting on conflicts that have a religious dimension.
3. Interfaith leaders should recognise the important role played by journalists who specialise in religious affairs. They occupy the shared space between religious leaders and the media as an institution. These specialists can become the connecting channel between the two sides, and play a vital role in challenging stereotyped perceptions of religion in society.

4. Faith leaders and journalists should endeavour to increase personal contacts to improve their working relations. Practitioners on both sides need to pro-actively engage each other on issues of public concern, as trust is best established through direct and regular contact.
5. Both faith leaders and journalists should work towards establishing guiding principles in the coverage of religious issues.
6. Faith leaders can initiate, participate in and support multi-stakeholder dialogues and debates as a way of informing their respective communities and publics on difficult issues that involve religion and religion reporting.
7. Journalists should recognise that religion is and continues to be important to a significant segment of their publics, and can also have an impact on international relations. Religious beliefs and values contribute to social cohesion. Coverage of religion should be sensitive and balanced, and not be related to conflict situations only.
8. On controversial issues, reporting should be more nuanced. Journalists should spend time on getting a good background or follow up stories to complete their reporting. This will also ensure the public receives more information and allow the representation of more diverse voices.
9. Civil society organisations and national agencies can consider the creation of a national or regional online community or facility for faith leaders and journalists to improve their common understanding of contentious issues. They may wish to work towards:
 - 9.1. A debate on contentious terminology and language that are commonly used in media reporting, so as to arrive at a consensus on correct terminology to be used;
 - 9.2. An exchange of views on evolving trends in community needs and perceptions of religious affairs;
 - 9.3. An improved access to media literacy and religious literary resources.
10. Civil society organisations in ASEM countries should also support younger constituencies (e.g. trainee journalists, student leaders, religious youth, etc) in dialogue programmes that incorporate elements of debate, exchange and training, in order to increase awareness of young leaders and journalists of the need to improve coverage of religious and interfaith affairs. They could also replicate the media-faith colloquium format on a local and regional level in and across ASEM countries.
11. The ASEF Journalists' Colloquium acknowledges the existing work of organisations featured in the landscape scan report (available online at www.civdialogue.asef.org), including the UN Alliance of Civilisations, Media Diversity Institute and Search for Common Ground, whose programmes and resources assist the media and faith leaders in developing their mutual understanding and respect.

.