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Conference report: Covering Science and Religion in the Middle East, June 23, 2011, American University of Sharjah

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Abstract

Recently, I attended a session of the conference Belief in Dialogue: Science, Culture and Modernity at the American University of Sharjah, organized by the British Council, in partnership with the University in association with the International Society of Science and Religion. Billed as a media roundtable, the session closed the three-day conference that included scholars from Europe, North America, UK, Asia, and the Middle East discussing how science and religion might be reconciled in an Islamic context and in the context of other religions.

Covering Science and Religion in the Middle East, June 23, 2011, American University of Sharjah

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Recently, I attended a session of the conference Belief in Dialogue: Science, Culture and Modernity at the American University of Sharjah, organized by the British Council, in partnership with the University in association with the International Society of Science and Religion. Billed as a media roundtable, the session closed the three-day conference that included scholars from Europe, North America, UK, Asia, and the Middle East discussing how science and religion might be reconciled in an Islamic context and in the context of other religions.

It was impossible for me to participate for three days, but I was eager to hear local media representatives talk about how they handled coverage of science and religion and made it to Sharjah for the final event. As often happens, the panel was somewhat ill-assorted. Several non-journalists who were included - perhaps because they were guests at the conference - didn't add much to the discussion.

However, foreign journalists of the caliber of Martin Redfern who reports on science and religion for BBC's World Service; Andrew Brown who does the same at the Guardian; Essam Assoud who writes for Nature magazine; and John Scammett who writes opinion columns at USA Today were matched with major local figures: Francis Matthew, Editor at large, Gulf News; Nabil Khatib, Executive Editor, Al Arabiya; and Mishaal Al Gergawi, columnist, Gulf News.

Why isn't there more coverage of science and religion? The journalists and editors from the US and Europe talked about the difference in audiences. "The problem is with academic writers who don't write for mass media," Scammett said. Brown agreed that the material he sees provides either "a niche picture" or is broadly general. They were reflecting a concern with readership, reaching the largest number because topics that don't interest readers get minimized or ignored.

The concerns are totally different in the Middle East. Because television is not like print and is the major source of information for people in the region, Khatib said, it cannot go against local culture, and "issues of religion and science are of special sensitivity." Not coincidentally, Al Arabiya, one of the major satellite news channels broadcasting in Arabic, has neither a religion editor nor a science editor.

When Al Arabiya decided a year ago to do more stories about global warming to increase awareness in the region about the problem, Khatib added, the audience reaction was lukewarm. On the other hand, viewers everywhere have followed the manifestations of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere with tremendous interest.

The difficulty in covering science and religion in the Middle East is that the first isn't considered interesting while the second is off limits. Al Gergawi said that science isn't seen as a good career choice, at least not in the Gulf. People study science to teach, not to perform research. He noted too that secularism tends to be identified with atheism which limits discussion and news coverage. "We don't have much of a sense of dialogue between science and religion," Matthew concluded.