

## Religion Experts Column

*This is the response to this week's question for the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature of the Sunday Ottawa Citizen. Questions are provided by the editor. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Sunday , January 2, 2011

**Q** : What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

**A** : Most reputable media seem to have already established appropriate principles. We generally only get identifying information where it has something to do with the point of a story. So, we may get "Christians gathered at a St. Mary's Church in honour of..." rather than a "group of Jewish kids were playing basketball on ...". This goes along with non-identifying reporting on ethnicity and sexual orientation. The policy can be said to work. Although for people who know the make-up of city neighbourhoods, there still may be assumptions when they read/ hear about "18 year old Ahmed Muhammed" being arrested in a predominantly Palestinian-inhabited part of town.

A more troublesome media tendency is to identify individuals using outdated and biased terms which only serve to blunt distinctions or fix people in stereotypes. Thus, we still read about wheel-chair users as "wheelchair-bound" or , in faith circles, people who hold to certain kinds of religious teachings as being "fundamentalists". We have learned over the past decades

that words matter and words have a power to confine and restrict us. One only has to compare the difference between the use of "liberal" in American and Canadian media. Reporting has come to mean characterizing for the benefit of your demographic, rather than the exploration of issues and ideas.

This fits with an even more disturbing tendency in contemporary media, what one might call "Twitterreporting". Less and less are we getting thoughtful analysis and carefully checked facts. In the race to be the first to break this second's gossip, in the scramble to ensure top spot in month's ratings or circulation, media are too often relying on superficialities. Stories splash, like boulders in a pond, without ever leaving any ripples of meaning or analysis behind. The transformation of news into entertainment has left us poorer and even more encouraged to accept a flickering attention span. The use of such handy, but finally discriminatory, words of identification only sustains a superficial and trivializing understanding of our world.

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