

Susan Reinbold discusses media treatment of the Unification Church

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Recently the director of the Unification Church Public Affairs Department, Susan Reinbold, was invited to discuss the media's treatment of the Unification Church at the Religious Public Relations Council. Following is a press release from the Council describing the meeting.

New York City, NY - "The straight news story always helps much more than it hurts," Kenneth A. Briggs, religion editor of The New York Times, advised a capacity audience attending the regular monthly meeting of the New York Chapter of the Religious Public Relations Council at the Interchurch Center here on October 20.

The advice was given during a panel discussion on reporting new religious movements in the United States. Joining Mr. Briggs were George Cornell, religion writer for the Associated Press, Tom Dorris of the Lutheran Council in the U.S., Ms. Susan Reinbold of the Unification Church, Ron Haugen of the Church of Scientology, and Romapada dasa Brahmachary representing the New York temple of Hare Krishna.

The panel of media professionals and public relations officers from new U.S. religious movements was chaired by Warren Day, executive director of News and Information Services, National Council of Churches.

Introducing the discussion, Day said that the new religious movements like the Unification Church, Hare Krishna and Church of Scientology pose a serious challenge to journalists -- how to report the news about such groups both accurately and fairly without compromising either the journalistic profession or the new religious movement. He offered the representatives of the three controversial movements a series of questions -- Do you believe that the media has given the general public a correct image of your group? If not, how do you intend to rectify the distortions and errors? If the media have presented your group fairly and accurately to the public, what are the reasons for such an outcome?

Speaking for the Unification Church, Ms. Reinbold said that the media had generally not represented her group accurately and fairly. Attributing this failure to a lack of communication between the church and media, Reinbold admitted blame on both sides. Many church members are still naive in relating to the media, she said, while the media itself, both religious and secular, tries to judge the church by paradigms other than those of church, thus negating its theological aspects and treating it "like a business association."

The Unification Church is taking vigorous steps to correct its public image, she said, through a newsletter, additional press releases, paid air time for broadcasting a church-sponsored film about Rev. Sun Myung Moon, and parents' conferences around the country.

While Ron Haugen was somewhat satisfied with media treatment of the Church of Scientology, he regretted the superficial treatment often given the teachings and practices of Scientology. "The media prefers to concentrate on events rather than content," he concluded.

One way the Church of Scientology has attempted to improve its public image, Haugen said, has been to correct, remove or replace information in the dossiers and files of government agencies concerning the church. Availing itself of the Freedom of Information Act, the group has filed nearly 2000 requests with government agencies and accumulated a pile of reports more than eight feet high. Through greater information and public relations efforts, the church has improved its reputation among media people and thereby with the general public.

According to Romapada dasa Brahmachary, Director of Community Affairs of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Hare Krishna in New York has few complaints about its treatment by the media. Noting that some West Coast temples of Hare Krishna have much more sophisticated public relations organizations, Romapada said that the New York temple concentrated on printing the Vedic writings among the media and the public. "This effort is intended to show people that we are not a new, strange group but come from an ancient religious heritage of the East."

"The best public relations efforts," Romapada declared, "is the example shown by our members, the lives they lead and their public behavior."

Responding to these remarks, Briggs noted that every new religious group in America goes through a process with three stages. First, such groups must handle an unfavorable public image created by the exotic nature of the group and public fear. Then the groups lose their naiveté about the media and seek to improve their image, even while retaining some anxiety about the effects of public hostility on them.

Finally, Briggs said, the new religious groups accept the fact that they belong to two worlds, their own self-contained world with its symbols, rituals and languages, and the outside world, all of which is not hostile to them. As the process unfolds, both relations with the media and public image gradually improve.

Tom Dorris noted that new religious movements are also new at the "media game" and that time and experience will take care of many of their public relations problems. Eventually they will receive the same kind of media coverage as other religious groups, Dorris predicted, but they should not expect coverage to be very attentive to nuance and shades of meaning or able to go very far beyond events into content.

Supporting his colleagues' observations, George Cornell noted that new religious groups "are fascinating because they are unusual." Media fascination results in excessive coverage and attention, thereby giving the public a false impression of where U.S. religion is at present. Cornell said the media should be careful not to lose the main picture of the U.S. religious scene while overplaying the new, different and exotic aspects of smaller groups. He urged the media to regain and keep its sense of proportion in reporting religious news. While new groups deserve fair and accurate reportage, they must not expect that they will go untested or untried either by the media or by the public.

Commenting on the discussion, the Rev. James Gardiner, SA, president of the New York Chapter of the Religious Public Relations Council and communications director of the Atonement Friars, said that "one of the functions of the RPRC is to improve relations and understanding among its own members."

Noting that both Ms. Reinbold and Mr. Haugen are members of the New York Chapter, Gardiner said that the program was unique in the chapter's history and an indication of how the organization acts as a catalyst for professional people to meet one another, respect each other's differences, and yet derive mutual benefit, professionally and personally.