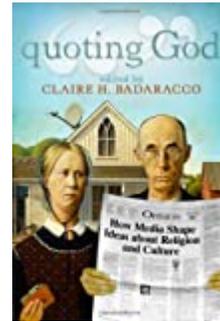


**Claire Hoertz Badaracco, ed.** *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005. 317 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-932792-06-5.



**Reviewed by** Barbara S. Reed (Rutgers University)

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This paperback volume has all the good points of an anthology and none of the bad. It reads well; and it is organized logically and packed full of insight and analysis. Moreover, despite the stand-alone essays, it allows the reader to move seamlessly from one set of chapters to the next, not often the case with anthologies. This achievement can only be traced to the fine editorial skills of Claire Hoertz Badaracco and her sweeping introduction to the volume. She is the author of two other books pertaining to culture and economy. Of the twenty-three essays collected here, only four originated in part or in full from other media sources; the rest were written expressly for this book.

The idea for *Quoting God* originated in Badaracco's media and religion class at Marquette University, a Jesuit school, where she teaches in the College of Communication. In that class, Badaracco used Internet sources to include not only other American schools, but also schools in Central and South America, finding a student community that spanned borders, culture, individual and national identity, and languages used in the public square. In this book, Badaracco has put together a similarly varied group of academics and journalists, not like-minded but rather religiously engaged and committed, and representing a number of different faiths. The volume is a natural in both journalism and religion curricula, partic-

ularly in the relatively new courses joining the two areas of study, and also in American Studies courses and possibly sociology as well. It should be assigned reading in seminaries, too.

John Dart, the highly respected former religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, provides the foreword for the book. (Dart currently serves as news editor of the *Christian Century* magazine, a bimonthly news and commentary mostly for and about Protestant denominations.) The perfect choice for this task, Dart co-authored two significant studies of the recurring tension between organized religion and the secular press, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media* (1993) and *Deities and Deadlines* (1995). The first of those reports led to the hiring of more sensitive, religion-savvy journalists who embraced religion scholars and nonpartisan experts as sources, providing richer coverage of the role religion plays in public and private life.

Each of the eleven chapters in *Quoting God* pairs an academic and a journalist. First, the scholar holds forth, followed by a "View from the News Desk." Together, they represent many and diverse voices. Badaracco's book shows the relationship between media culture and spiritual culture, recognizing how news and religious values influence political life, and how science, modernity, and disbelief come together to suggest social fragmentation

or consolidation. Through the media, audiences learn, often with passion, what they believe, what they resist religiously, how to respect other religious ideas, and how to construct their own religious identity in a world of both mediated and actual communities.

The book's conceptual and theoretical frame addresses emerging religions as well as traditional faiths. The first four chapters focus on the legal and constitutional frames informing national identity and the ideological climates of newsrooms where journalists "construct the mediated religious public square" (p. 14). The next four chapters discuss cross-cultural reporting in which a reporter navigates between two (or more) cultures in the required roles of being fair and balanced. The next three chapters explore faith and reason, science and religion, and the complexity of religious issues. The volume concludes with Gustav Niebuhr, formerly with the *New York Times* and now a member of the academy at Syracuse University, summing up the care and commitment of the journalist who covers religion in American life.

"To report well about religion, a journalist must be prepared to be surprised," Niebuhr says (p. 260). He or she must also avoid preconceptions and seek out a variety of sources, including scholars of religion. Such a commitment will not result in a dialogue but, rather, Niebuhr says, in overlapping conversations that contribute to and illuminate, "enrich and diversify human experience" (p. 263).

I will touch upon a few highlights. I especially appreciated the analysis of fundamentalism by Rebecca Moore, chair of the religion department at San Diego State University. Moore's work is extremely well organized, thoughtful, and carefully stated. In her background section, she describes precisely what fundamentalism is, where it comes from, and how it developed both inside and outside the United States. Further, she examines why fundamentalists criticize and oppose some aspects of modernity while still embracing a sophisticated

use of technology to evangelize on their own.

For all its strengths—and there are many—a weakness is that nearly all the journalists in the book report for the mainstream press—the *New York Daily News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and *Detroit Free Press*. Two not-so-main-stream sources are the Pacific News Service and the *Minaret and Muslim Observer* (on Muslim stereotyping in U.S. media). Certainly, though, other specialized reporters from so-called alternative, ethnic, and religion publications could have contributed to presenting religious and spiritual life in a secular world.

Still, the volume is predicated on the concept that faith matters, and the editor correctly notes that our language and imagery account for self-perception, community definition, and individual and national identity. Our culture of belief comes both from scholars in religious studies and from journalists who connect with each other, and "whose written words help shape popular ideas about culture" (pp. 8-9).

Based on Badaracco's own design, even the book's cover warrants attention. It is a take-off of the classic Grant Wood 1930 iconic painting of a farm couple, titled *American Gothic*. But, it has been doctored with an intriguing effect: the poker-faced wife wears an MP3 player, while her equally sober husband wears gold hoop earrings and looks down at a newspaper turned to the opinion page. The farmhouse they stand in front of has a satellite dish on its roof. Almost resembling clouds, white quotation marks hang in the sky, "quoting God." Altogether, an arresting cover, it speaks to Badaracco's creativity and playfulness.

In sum, this absorbing and many-faceted anthology shows how the news of the day reverberates with religious currents and how two important and pervasive institutions act and intersect in our lives today. *Quoting God* strikes this reader as a worthwhile, erudite effort that should be on many syllabi, and in many hands.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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