Innovative Joint Degree Program Prepares Journalists to Cover Religious Issues

BY KATZIE KASER

Ever since she was a fresh- man at Waco High School in Texas, Manya Brachear knew she wanted to be a reporter. She joined the school newspaper and when she enrolled at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, she majored in communication to gain as much experience as she could. She took every class imaginable in the small journalism program there to prepare her for her career.

A year after she graduated, Brachear says she "began the editors at The News and Observer daily in Raleigh, North Carolina, to hire her. She began freelancing for them and soon the position turned into a regular beat covering religion for a weekly suburban publication..."

"Religion is something people are so passionate about; it's such a powerful source of meaning, so it can be a source of conflict," Brachear says. "I felt every religion story I wrote made a big difference, and I was carrying some weight than the average education piece I was writing. Education was important, but covering religion was more satisfying for me."

"In the process of such a discovery, I began to feel the lack of little about the various religions of the world. As a secular few growing up in suburban, Manya only had a general understanding of the basic tenets of those belief systems. Still she knew she needed more education "to be the best religion writer I could be." So Brachear began looking for graduate schools that trained journalists and taught religion.

What she found was the unique partnership between Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences religion department which began in the fall of 2001. Today, Brachear—who will graduate in the spring of 2003 with a M.S. in Journalism and an M.A. in religion—is the first student to go through the dual program. Offer- ing graduate students the best of both worlds, students spend the first ten months completing their journalism courses and the second year fulfilling religion requirements.

"I knew when I applied there, it was a place I was crazy about. And as the first student in the joint program, I would have the freedom to help shape it," Brachear says. "It’s certainly not been easy. But that’s why I came to..."

The joint degree program was initiated primarily when Ryuoichi Abe, chair of the religion depart- ment and Karin Grava, a pro- fessor of Japanese Religions, approached Ari Goldman, the director of the Scripps Howard Program in religion, journalism at the Graduate School of Journalism. Abe and Grava, together with many religion students had expressed an interest in journalism and their repeated and always had an interest in religion reporting, the two professors began talking about how to incorporate the disciplines.

"Religion is at the top of the list of the students and the faculty’s understanding of what is going on glob- ally without having an under- standing of religion," Goldman says. "This is true from Kabul to Baghdad to Jerusalem to Paris to Washington, D.C. Newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets need people who have a strong background in religion. Columbia’s joint program in religion and journalism can fill that need..."

Abe agreed that many of the skills journalism training offers can also be an advantage to reli- gious scholars. One of the goals of the joint program, he believes, is to foster the knowledge of religious scholars in the media and multi-field skills journalism offers. "In the religion department, there’s been a sense that print and broadcast religious reporting on religion has been shallow and not analyt- ical," says Annie Barry, adminis- trator for the department of religion. "Even before September 11, the country had become so multicultural that we felt such a program was a need whose time had come."

It also has become a competi- tive program in its short life. This year, for instance, the program attracted 20 applicants, 16 of whom are from across North America and only three were accepted for the dual studies, according to Barry. In addition to the unique require- ments needed for entrance to jour- nalism school, Barry says his depart- ment looks for people with strong backgrounds in humanities and writing, because they’re journalists at heart but the rigors of both academic disciplines must be con- sidered. Students are required to take survey and methods courses in social sciences and humanities because "they’re journalists at heart but the rigors of both academic disciplines must be con- sidered."

Barry says. “They’re preparing for a growing field and our pro- gram should give them ideal can- didates.”

Barry also believes the grow- ing immigration trends have increased religious news interest, creating more exposure to different thoughts, ideas and beliefs. In addition, religious fundamen- talist movements have grown in influence around the world; politicians are discussing their religious beliefs alongside their political plat- forms, and widely read religiously-affiliated hospitals have raised questions about the role of religion on health care.

Before they complete their reli- gion courses, students in the jour- nalism program will write a comp- lete, comprehensive report, in- cluding Goldman’s popular course, "Covering Religion," whose six credits are and then applied toward the completion of the reli- gion degree. Barry says more than 60 students apply for the spring course each year and only 16 are accepted.

The popularity of the class has as much to do with its unique content as it has to do with the growing interest in coverage cov- erage, according to Brachear. "Students look forward to the classes here. They look forward to covering stories and writing about the world from the perspective of..."

While the trip gives journalism students first hand experience in covering difficult religious issues, Barry also notes that the pro- grams provide the necessary bal- ance and academic experiences that will help students be better equipped for the field.

Brachear, who grew up in New York City, current writing the nearly 900-page book for McGraw-Hill, "Religious Pluralism and American Cities: Choices for Communities" (McGraw-Hill, 2003)—a culmination of his life’s work—began working on the materials he has collected throughout his career. Grava wrote the nearly 900-page book in a year and a half.

With chapters focusing on urban modes such as parachute, rapid transit, heavy rail transit and automobiles, the work appears to be a textbook. But Grava hopes to reach a wider, lay audience, and this is less possible, more focused on educating and informing the general public. "The trip gives journalism students the opportunity to cover the entire Lower Manhattan district. The city, the region, and the nation..."