

Christianity & Journalism
Perspectives from Photojournalists of Color
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Committee
David Rees – Chair

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As an undergraduate I traveled to India to research the adverse affects of globalization on poverty. I traveled to my motherland and photographed the poor and destitute. What I learned from my experience greatly affected my approach to photography. I began feeling conflicted in taking photographs of individuals in distressed situations. Not only were my subjects in extremely helpless situations, I felt guilty and disrespectful for framing and ‘using’ subjects for photographs. I felt as if I were creating what others have described as “Poverty Porn” - the making of photographs of subjects in distressed situations, which may highlight the issues of plight of people but also do not address subjects as individuals, seemingly focusing more on the abilities of the photographer than the suffering of the subject(s).

After my experience in India, I felt guilty for using my subjects through photography. I decided from then on I would no longer make photographs of individuals trapped in vulnerable situations. As a student photojournalist I intentionally chose not to photograph images that may frame or cast my subjects in a negative light. This decision stemmed from my spiritual conviction to show and represent my subjects with integrity and not to exploit them for alternative gains.

I became intrigued with understanding how other photojournalists handled the dilemma found in my own personal life, and so I chose to interview photojournalists of color since I am a woman of color and because I believe the voices of people of color are

limited in today's journalism literature. I interviewed three males and three females for the project. All worked for secular publications for the majority of their professional careers. Almost all photojournalists interviewed identified with a Protestant Christian denomination. Five out of the six of my interview subjects identified as practicing Christian, with the seventh, Kimberly Mitchell identifying with no religion but considering herself as 'humanist'.

Biographical sketch of the photojournalists interviewed here:



Gary Fong
San Francisco, CA
Principal, Genesis Photo Agency

Gary Fong is the Principal of Genesis Photo Agency. Genesis is a group of professional photographers with a dream of elevating the effectiveness of photography in evangelical and secular publications around the world. Fong is also the former Director of Editorial Graphics Technology at the San Francisco Chronicle. He is the Chief Photography Officer of WeArePhotographers.com, a new website dedicated to educating and advancing photography for professional and enthusiasts alike.

<http://www.genesisphotos.com/>



Sonja Foster
Hampton, VA
Funeral Photographer

Sonja Foster typed obituaries while working as an editorial assistant for The Virginian-Pilot, which gave her the grace and experience to console others in documenting the loss of life. Foster formerly worked for USA Today, the Milwaukee Sentential Journal, and Bloomberg before becoming a freelance and funeral photographer.

<http://www.fosterfarewellphoto.com/>



Kenny Irby
St. Petersburg, FL
Senior Faculty, Poynter

Kenny Irby founded Poynter's photojournalism program in 1995 and currently serves, as it's senior faculty and Director of Community Relations. Irby directs The Write Field initiative, an academic enrichment and mentoring program for minority male youth. He formerly chaired the 2007 Pulitzer Prize photography categories, currently serves as a member of the Eddie Adams Workshop board, and is a founding member of National Press Photographers Association.

<http://about.poynter.org/about-us/our-people/kenny-irby>



Danese Kenon
Indianapolis, IN
Multimedia Photojournalist, The Indianapolis Star

Danese Kenon is an award-winning visual journalist who serves as a full-time multimedia photojournalist at The Indianapolis Star. Kenon formerly worked at The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle and teaches multimedia journalism to Chips Quinn Scholars, the Diversity Institute Scholars at the Freedom Forum, and to students at the National Association of Black Journalists.

<http://www.danesekenon.com/>



Kimberly Mitchell
Detroit, MI
Photojournalist, Detroit Free Press

Kimberly Mitchell is a staff photojournalist and video producer at the Detroit Free Press. She is a graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism and finds a strong connection with creating socio-economic change through dynamic, story-telling photography. In 2006 Mitchell received an NPPA award for runner-up photographer of the year for the state of Michigan.

<https://twitter.com/souldelightfull>

Anacleto Rapping
Thousand Oaks, CA
Freelance Photographer



Anacleto Rapping is a freelance photographer who is currently entrepreneuring to establish a photography business. Rapping served as a staff photographer for the Los Angeles Times for over two decades and won three Pulitzer Prizes for team news coverage with the publication. He was also nominated for an individual Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for his photography in the Atlanta Summer Olympics. Rapping has a passion for people, places, and global events, he says, “Every time a photograph is taken, that moment become a part of history.”

<http://www.arapping.com/>

The experience of these photojournalists ranged from newsroom settings, to owning their own business to working as freelancers. These journalists often shared their personal testimony in finding faith. Many also identified the deciding moment in which they committed to becoming ‘Christian-identifying’.

A number of photojournalists stated their ‘walk’ with God was a process and journey that grew over time. All identified challenges, set backs, moments of courage, and strength as they discussed these personal and candid aspects of their faith journey. These photojournalists commented on their Christian faith as a lifestyle. Just as with any skill or craft, spirituality and religiosity was an aspect of their lives that needed to be cultivated and maintained. For some, this involved attending church every Sunday, reading the Bible, as well as designating a quiet time for prayer. All of the Christian identifying photojournalists interviewed identified a community or a body of people they turned to to keep them strong and grounded in faith- family members, a group of friends, a church community, or all of these factors combined.

The adage “what would Jesus do” sums up the theme of the interviews. Most photojournalists said being a Christian did not mean making overt statements about their

faith when working in the professional arena. They often cited their faith as a de facto mode rather than a clear verbal or behavioral dividing line separating them from others. These photojournalists considered faith as something that informed their lives even though it did not receive explicit mention when pursuing their professional work.

Framing & Telling Stories

Prominent photojournalist Gary Fong, founder and principle of Genesis Photo Agency in the Bay Area, explained how his Christian beliefs influences how he makes photographs. Citing an example of a well-composed photograph he made several years ago of a man practicing Taichi. Fong stated God spoke to him while making the photograph saying, “Gary watch this, watch what I can do in front of your lens. Move a little bit right, and then He says, move a little bit left and now watch this..., and literally the clouds parted in front of me and this Taichi guy was going at it doing his exercise and the sun kinda was right there as the clouds were parting. And I said, Lord, its beautiful, I don’t have to take a picture of this as I can remember it on the back side of my mind forever,... and God would say, in a funny kind of way, just don’t stand there, take some pictures, show other people. So I said ‘ok’.”



For Fong, both his personal and professional work involves constant and consistent internal conversation with God. There is no separation of his life in faith and in the newsroom.

Danese Kenon staff photojournalist for The Indianapolis Star said her faith is simply “who I am.” Kenon spoke about a small gold cross she wears around her neck regularly. One day, she entered a Sikh temple and a man referenced her necklace and asked her “Is this what you believe?” “Yes” she responded and he replied with, “Then welcome.” Kenon explained that for her, she did not give a second thought to the religious icon she was wearing, but it surprised her that this man noticed the cross she wore and in seeing it, respected her specific religious belief.

When asked if her faith affects the way she frames or photographs stories, Kenon stated, “I don’t think so... A lot of photojournalism, particularly if you’re on the streets and shooting spot news, a lot of its instincts.” Recently, Kenon photographed a

motorcycle accident in which a cyclist was pinned to a car, yet he lived. Following the assignment, she mentioned she was not going to write a caption about how she witnessed the grace of God in this event, which she felt happened, but she would share this story with friends outside of work, opting instead for a more 'cut-and dried' journalistically accepted outline. Kenon says that faith does not affect the way she takes pictures, however, her profession, with the versatility of stories she is able to witness, allows her to appreciate and reflect on the grace of God every day.

Christian Values & Human Values

Freelance photojournalist Sonja Foster shared similar ideas about photographing. Foster is a funeral photographer and worked with various publications before becoming a freelance photographer. As a funeral photographer, Foster takes photographs of the grieving by request, from the families connected to the deceased.

In her own life she distinguishes between Christian and human values. Foster gave an example of a time when she photographed a set of children at a carnival. The children were playing in an inflated play pen and she framed a number of photos of the children interacting, however in one of the photographs, a little girl's dress had flopped up as the child was climbing the playpen ladder. Before sending out the full take to her client, Foster excluded the photograph of the female child's dress out of place to protect the child. While on assignment, Foster says she does not have time to focus on anything else but shooting. However, during editing, she is deliberate about which photos she will send to her client and which she will not. She states, "I don't want to leave it up to someone else to make a moral decision about something I submitted. I have to make the decision because it's my work." While Foster mentioned that she believes it was the

'Christian' in her that compelled her to exclude this female child's photograph from the full take, she did not know if it was strictly from her Christian values, her conservative upbringing, or her human instinct to protect the child as a woman.

Many other photographers interviewed tended to agree that most Christian values are indeed humanistic i.e. protecting the value and dignity of life and the golden rule of treating others with respect, as you would like to be treated. Poynter faculty Kenny Irby touched on this subject stating, "The spiritual guides the secular." Irby discussed the landscape of the Christian faith in relation to the secular world and notes the two are not mutually exclusive. The difference in universally human values from Christian values is the aspect of motivation. For self-identified Christians, aspiring to follow Christ as the primary moral example provides the motivation for attempting to live out certain values and ideals regardless of whether they are unique to Christianity. For Foster, there was certainly an inter-mingling of origins from where her practiced values derived from, whether they were Christian or humanistic.

One's traditional practices whether religious or secular are influenced by far more than one single known experience or tradition, and can be influenced by a spectrum of teachings combined. Such is the point of view of photojournalist Kimberly Mitchell who noted she was raised in the Christian faith but no longer identifies as Christian, but humanist.

Mitchell mentioned that she respects religion overall and that there is a great deal to learn from the Christian faith, however she did not want to confine herself to one category. There are aspects about the institutionalized religiosity of some conservative denominations, which she disagreed with, such as casting someone to hell for not

believing in Jesus Christ or using the Bible to justify inequalities in law i.e. the position for denying LGBT rights to marry asserted by many traditional Christian denominations.

Mitchell mentioned it is important to maintain the dignity and integrity of every human being both in ones personal and professional work. Maintaining the integrity of ones subjects remained the core value and priority for her when photographing and communicating with her subjects on the job. These very human values are what Mitchell make an effort to practice each day.

Controversial Issues

Most photojournalists interviewed said they were comfortable photographing any situation. However, photojournalist Anacleto Rapping mentioned in his early years of Christian formation he encountered a controversial topic.

More than twenty years ago, when homosexuality was an underreported topic in the media, Rapping, in his early Christian formation period at the time and given his understanding of Christian teaching on the topic, felt uncomfortable photographing the topic of homosexuality. Rapping approached the news editor and said he would prefer not to photograph this story, however the editor responded that no matter what his personal opinion on the matter, he needed to get the job done.

Rapping spoke to church elders and sought guidance on what action to take concerning his dilemma and was encouraged to complete the assignment and to view it as God giving him a unique purpose in photographing this topic. Rapping completed the assignment, and reflecting on this incident now, he states it was his youth that made it a difficult decision, "I just did it... I went in as much as I could with a... mind of 'I'm still going to take the best picture I can.' It may not be what I agree with, but I'm going to

take the best picture I can because that's part of being a professional... that's part of being a photojournalist- Is that you're there to tell a story and you're there to document what is happening, and so I went and shot.”

After years in the field, Rapping said there are times when he still feels conflicted photographing a situation he may not fully agree with, however he takes on the story because he believes God has purposed him to do so.

In summary, I had hoped through conducting these interviews to provide understanding about how Christian religious or spiritual convictions affect the manner in which photojournalists tell stories. My findings overwhelmingly reveal it did not. However, all the photojournalists interviewed said they saw every situation, story, and event they photographed as a spiritual lesson. One factor evident in almost all the interviews was the desire of each photojournalist to be open to the instruction from God while remaining an active photojournalist.

Photojournalist Gary Fong emphasized while one may be a Christian working as a photojournalist, you must strive for excellence in making photographs. He advised the younger generation; while being a Christian is a wonderful experience it is critical that faith not dull but sharpen one's craft. Photojournalists who identify as Christian and want their work to be consistent with that identity must demonstrate powerful skill and commitment to the profession of photography if they wish to excel. He emphasized that in doing so God will use their gift as a means to impact others lives as well as their own.