

# CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN WORLD AFFAIRS

Lapido Media is an internationally networked, British-based philanthro-media charity working to change understanding of religion's impact on world affairs.

Spring 2014

## Reporting the Middle East event: 'Exceeded any expectation'



(L-R) Lapido's Jenny Taylor, Bishop Angaelos, Betsy Hiel, Henry Jackson Society's Douglas Murray, Nina Shea and Tom Holland

Photo: Stephen Sizer

The leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK has praised the quality of Lapido's joint event with the Henry Jackson Society, which explored the complexities of reporting the situation in Egypt.

In mid-August, 52 churches, Christian-run orphanages, 40 church schools and clergy vehicles were destroyed – all within the space of just 24 hours.

Yet the coverage, or lack of, of these incidents in the Western press was telling. *Sky News* had described the attacks as 'understandable' revenge, while *The New York Times* had referred to them as 'unverifiable'.

Lapido felt a duty to bring together leading thinkers in the area to challenge the misreporting together with The Henry Jackson Society – the first time the organisation had partnered with a religious literacy group.

As a result we influenced the international debate, thanks to coverage in *the Spectator*, *the Guardian*, *Fox News* and others.

His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, joined international human rights lawyer Nina Shea, award-winning historian Tom Holland and Betsy Hiel – foreign correspondent at the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* – on the panel at the event which took place on 19 September at the National Liberal Club in London.

'The "Reporting the Middle East – Why the truth is getting lost" event in Whitehall not only highlighted the various difficulties and

potential dangers and impacts of reporting and misreporting in Egypt, but it also advocated for the rights of those most affected by violent acts unprecedented in our contemporary history,' said Bishop Angaelos.

'The panellists were amongst the best and most informed voices I have heard on the issue of Egypt, and they served in presenting a precise and authentic picture of the current climate and its impact on the Christian population.

'Overall the general outcome exceeded any expectation, and highlighted the need for news coverage that faithfully portrays the effect of the rapidly developing events in Egypt on the entirety of the community.'

It is thanks to Lapido's supporters that this event was made possible. The partnership with the Henry Jackson Society signifies the increasing interest in religious literacy in reporting world affairs.

We are looking forward to hosting more events, including on the persecution of Muslims in Burma.

*Bishop Angaelos on Reporting the Middle East event: 'The panellists were amongst the best and most informed voices I have heard on the issue of Egypt.'*



## Fleet Street journo – turned lobbyist: 'Lapido is invaluable'

A journalist who is not confident about the facts is dangerous.

And with a specialism like religion mis-reporting can lead to widespread misunderstanding. For too long religious affairs – as editors deem fit to call the specialism – has been a job palmed off on reporters. It is a role that has traditionally been dodged by the cream of the newsroom for specialisms thought to be more glamorous or hard-hitting. But there is no more vital role in a modern society cluttered with half-truths and myth surrounding religion.



'Religion affects us all – whether we have faith or are atheists. The industry cannot afford to let ignorance grow. Many newsdesks shun real religious news because they believe the subject matter is too tricky to get across properly – and the fear of getting anything wrong is too great.

'But ignoring these stories, or not reporting them fully, is anti-journalism. It is the exact opposite of why every reporter signs up in the first place – to uncover the truth and educate your audience.

'The media must not avoid hard truths just because they are hard. The time for thoughtful, incisive and investigative coverage of religion and faith is long overdue.

'That is why the work of Lapido Media is already proving invaluable. Lapido will, I predict, become the leading voice in promotion of religious literacy and understanding and a huge resource for those journalists who want to shine a light in corners that must not remain darkened. And with the workload of journalists everywhere growing all the time as the industry suffers seismic changes, Lapido is gaining much-deserved momentum at precisely the right time.

**Richard Porritt,**  
former Fleet Street journalist,  
now lobbyist for Slater Gordon UK

# Aspiring intern: Lapido fills a crucial hole



Flossie Baker

A recent application to our internship programme demonstrates how great the need is for organisations like Lapido dedicated to increasing religious literacy in world affairs.

Flossie Baker, a third year international development and social anthropology student at the University of East Anglia who had previously interned at IPS News in their United Nations office made clear the lack of knowledge about religion and her passion to rectify that.

'Since hearing of Lapido Media, I have drawn inspiration from its work to enrich my dissertation which is on the potential for the media to play a constructive role in post-conflict Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC].

I am still in the process of writing it but have been struck thus far about the lack of guidance and training for journalists in war zones on how to understand the role religion plays in contemporary warfare.

'I was also struck by the urgency for journalists and policy makers to have a

greater understanding of religious literacy after spending the summer as an intern working for global news agency, Inter Press Services at their United Nations bureau. This granted me access to many conferences and meetings held at the UN that summer, many of which were policymaking decision meetings regarding action in troubled states. Almost every meeting, it seemed, was interested in how to either incorporate gender issues or disability issues into policy programming. Not once was there any mention of the importance that religion plays in the success of such policies, and as a result, a religious perspective was absent from all the news stories I read that summer.

'Lapido is filling a crucial hole in media and civil society and I would therefore be extremely grateful for the opportunity to be part of the Lapido team as an intern. I am passionate both about the constructive role that the media can play in strengthening civil society and communicating to wider audiences the importance of a deeper and more heuristic understanding of faith.'



'Lapido Media is a unique organisation with a strong vision to tell the whole story. Their refusal to ignore the religious element in stories has made

them one of the most exciting organisations I have worked with since completing a journalism degree in 2011.'

Sam Hailes, Lapido stringer

## The religion blind spot



'Something's changing. Journalists are beginning to "get religion".' These were the opening words of Dr Jenny Taylor in her article for Case magazine's Media Matters-themed edition.

The quarterly journal, published by the University of New South Wales, sees Jenny explore the 'religion taboo' within the news media. She argues that there is a greater understanding of the religion dimension among journalists, and describes how Lapido is addressing it.



# Baroness Warsi: Religious persecution a global crisis

**Religious persecution is not just a faith problem; it's a global crisis, says Baroness Sayeeda Warsi.**

She was speaking at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University – at an event attended by Lapidó's Dr Jenny Taylor.

The UK's first minister for faith urged action on promoting religious freedom globally. 'Religious persecution is blighting lives, ruining lives, ending lives; right now, right across our world,' she said.

'This is not just a problem for the people who are affected. It's not just a faith problem. It's a global crisis. And it can no longer be ignored.'



## Global Uncertainties Consultation – Make a Date

The need for an increase in religious literacy in world affairs is becoming ever more urgent. In January, Jenny Taylor attended a workshop hosted by the Open University in Milton Keynes on behalf of the £340 million Global Uncertainties Programme. It aimed at understanding the role religion plays in modern conflict.

Writing in her blog, Dr Kate Cooper, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Manchester – who also attended the event – said: 'As an ancient historian, I find I am often surprised by the easy causality which modern journalists think they find between "religious motives" and modern social conflict.'

How the international media cover conflict with often casual and misplaced references to 'tribalism' or 'religious

sectarianism' may merely fuel the fires of division that have other roots.

Taylor also notes that the 'securitization' of religion by governments and commentators anxious about extremism may also downplay other roles for faith. 'Faith may mean making yourself insecure on purpose', says Taylor. 'In the interests of others, many believers put themselves at risk daily to deliver pastoral care and advocacy in Baghdad, mental healthcare in Malawi, surgical training in Ethiopia, braille training in Kabul, or spur the tiger of social change in China. We want to see a nuanced perspective in policy making and reportage.'

To that end the Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs is co-hosting a one-day consultation with the Global Uncertainties Programme's Leadership Fellow on Security, Professor John Wolffe.



*'No easy causality': Professor Kate Cooper*

The consultation will be held in London on Monday 8 September, and is for supporters, journalists, academics and policy makers. We will be seeking your views and a broad mandate to develop the work we have pioneered. Venue and speakers to be confirmed.

## Lapido web hits soar



The Lapido website continues to go from strength to strength, drawing visitors from across the world attracted to our unique and expert analysis of religion in world affairs.

In the past six months, [www.lapidomedia.com](http://www.lapidomedia.com) has seen nearly half a million visits and over a million page impressions.

The website is also drawing visitors internationally – particularly the US and China (which accounts for around a third of all the site's traffic). Visits are also coming from Germany, the Ukraine, Australia and Russia.

The most popular article of 2013 was David Sseppuuya's account of the moral stand of a brave Ugandan Anglican priest. 'This story highlighted the international thirst for a conscientious practice of religion,' said Jenny Taylor, director of Lapido.

The next most-read article detailed the story of Adamu Habila in Nigeria – the first Boko

Haram victim to testify before the US congress.

And 2013's third most-read article was a little closer to home and explored Channel 4's blind spot over the role of Christian women in the suffragette movement in its coverage of the centenary of Emily Wilding Davison's death.

'We are delighted that our stories are capturing attention globally. The majority world is full of faith – and is watching us in Europe struggling to catch up with it,' said Jenny Taylor.

### Web stats

- 424,928 visitors in the past 6 months
- 1.18 million page impressions in the past 6 months
- Saturday most popular day on Lapido

**'It's hard to understand the Middle East without religious questions'**

**– Ed West, *The Spectator***



'Coming from a religious newspaper, I often see articles just about Catholicism (which is not exactly an obscure religion on their isles) written without a basic understanding of the religion. But I think that's pretty widespread. North-western Europe is something of a world anomaly in that religion is no longer a consideration or presence in public life, which is not the case elsewhere. In particular it's pretty hard to understand the Middle East only in terms of material questions, as Western academia of the twentieth century did, rather than religious questions.'

**Ed West, deputy editor of the *Catholic Herald* and blogger for *The Spectator***

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