

The Shepherd

Michael Cromartie is guiding media elites into a more accurate view of conservative Christians.

Timothy Dalrymple/ APRIL 26, 2013

Image: Scott Suchman

When Rick Warren arrived at the Faith Angle Forum in Key West, Florida, in May 2005, the megachurch pastor addressed one of the last remaining groups in America that knew almost nothing about him: journalists. In the room were 20 of the most influential voices in media, including *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell, and *The New Yorker's* Elsa Walsh.



Although *The Purpose Driven Life* had already sold 25 million copies, says Brooks, "I'm not sure many in the room had heard of him."

For many elite journalists at the time, modern American Christianity was a strange and vaguely menacing hydra featuring the heads of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and the crazed sandwich-board prophet who breathed fire in their general direction on the local street corner. Yet here was Warren, an exemplar of evangelicalism's West Coast variety, a species redolent of sunshine and casual conviviality. He distributed handshakes and hugs and thoughtful compliments on recent columns and reports. "Suddenly you saw a very different world," says Brooks. "This was not some fringe preacher. That had an impact on the group."

Now, eight years later, a new evangelical standard-bearer, Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, is addressing the same assembly. The move from Warren to Keller speaks to how American Christianity has changed in the interim. Whether the media have kept apace on such changes is debatable.

There's no question that the mavens of mainstream media are still wont to treat "fringe" figures as central ones. Witness the elevation of Qur'an-burning Florida pastor Terry Jones to the status of an evangelical icon and a convenient counterpoint to radical imams on the Muslim side—in spite of the fact that Jones has no leadership or influence among American evangelicals. Yet it's also true that top journalists and columnists seeking Christian comment on social issues today are less likely to seek out the controversialists and the firebrands than to contact thoughtful representatives like Keller or scholars and statesmen like Mark Noll or Richard Mouw. All of these leaders, in fact, have cultivated relationships with writers and broadcasters at the Faith Angle Forum.

A Rare Talent

In the world of American media, an invitation to the Faith Angle Forum, now in its 14th year, is a golden ticket, and the man sending out the invitations is Michael Cromartie, a beltway believer whose meandering political and religious journey has rendered in him a rare talent for friendships on both sides of the aisle.

Cromartie converted to Christianity as a teenager in the Vietnam War era, proclaimed himself a progressive pacifist, and joined a Christian commune. Shortly after joining Chuck Colson's then-new Prison Fellowship, however, he was literally mugged by reality when thieves invaded his hotel room in Denver in 1978 and left him bound and gagged. (Cromartie managed to convince the burglars to leave his new tie so he could still attend his meetings with dignity.) That experience and Colson's influence produced a paradigm shift, and Cromartie went on to work for the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, where he is now vice president and director of the Evangelicals in Civic Life project. From his perch on M Street five blocks from the White House, he has served as a *consigliere* for conservative Christians in the nation's capital.

He has also helped countless journalists, whose only map to evangelicalism reads **HERE BE DRAGONS**, chart a more finely drawn geography of the American Christian landscape. In fact, the concept for the forums took shape as Cromartie received one call after another from knowledgeable journalists who wanted to know whether all evangelicals hate sex, or whether he could provide contact information for the author and publisher of the Book of Ephesians.

Cromartie could have easily joined the drone of evangelical complaints over the media's unfair treatment. In 2009, 52 percent of evangelicals—the highest percentage of any major religious group—told the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that they felt the media was "unfriendly" toward religion. When the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center asked clergy whether they believed that "most religion coverage today is biased against ministers and organized religion," 58 percent of mainline Protestants agreed strongly or somewhat, compared to 70 percent of Catholics and a soaring 91 percent of conservative Protestants. As scholars Bradley R. E. Wright, Christina Zozula, and W. Bradford Wilcox reported recently in the *Journal of Religion & Society*,

conservative Christians are the "most likely" of all religious groups "to view the media as negatively targeting their faith."

Complaining that you're unfairly treated in the papers is, of course, as old as the papers themselves. Yet conservative Christians have plenty of examples. From perpetuating rumors that Sarah Palin banned library books in Wasilla, Alaska, like some small-town theocrat, to assuming that intolerant evangelicals would not support a Mormon as President, to engaging in opportunistic feeding frenzies over Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock's embarrassing comments on rape and abortion, mainstream media so often seem eager to highlight the worst and the weirdest. Too often they seem blind to or blithely uninterested in the best and the brightest lights in American evangelicalism.

A Real Bias

Studies, too, lend credence to evangelical complaints. While evangelicals receive plenty of attention and frequently positive coverage from local media, on the national level the coverage is disproportionately unfavorable. In one study, *The New York Times* was found to be twice as negative in its coverage of evangelicals as local newspapers in Atlanta and Dallas. This is, of course, not entirely surprising. Elite journalism is closely allied with elite academia, as fresh ranks of journalists spring every year from academic programs and many top journalists retain close affiliations with universities. On such campuses, according to a 2012 study from the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, faculty harbor far more negative attitudes toward evangelicals than they do toward any other religious group. Worse, evangelicals are overwhelmingly identified with political conservatism, and political conservatism is rarely loved in journalism's most exclusive precincts.

When mainstream media treat evangelicals poorly, the question is whether the mistreatment stems from real animosity against evangelicals among the largely secular media in Washington, D.C., and New York, or whether it's due to simple ignorance and the limitations of journalism itself. Cromartie found the latter.

"Journalists have a vocation to get at the truth," he says, but many find religion "a universe of discourse that's unfamiliar to them." With the support of the Pew Foundation and the Pew Forum, then, Cromartie hosted a series of lunches in Washington that expanded into the three-day Faith Angle Forums, first in Maine in 1999, then in Key West and now in South Beach, Miami. *The Economist's* Adrian Wooldridge calls them (in his book *God Is Back*) "one of the most pleasant as well as one of the most instructive experiences in journalism." The forums would fail, of course, if they pushed a political or religious agenda. Cromartie invites the finest scholars, and some religious leaders, to provide journalists with deeper and more nuanced views of people of faith. He aims to help "journalists who are liberal and conservative and work for important outlets to become better informed about this extremely important part of American life." Presenters have ranged from Jim Daly of

Focus on the Family to former Pakistani ambassador Husain Haqqani, from Walden Media's evangelical president Micheal Flaherty to Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago.

The forums let scholars like Peter Berger and James Davison Hunter share their work with the men and women who raise the sluice gates of our public information channels. At one forum Hunter debated Alan Wolfe on the topic of the culture wars, and the debate exploded onto the Internet and spread further through a book published by the Brookings Institution. Hunter says the experience was "intense, stimulating, and very exciting." The Faith Angle Forum, he says, is "a wholly unique form of cultural engagement" that is "neither politicized nor partisan," but "takes seriously the vocation of journalism and seeks to serve those who inhabit that vocation through education and collegiality." The public then benefits, he believes, from "a better informed and more discerning group of elite journalists."

"We want [journalists] better informed. The argument is not advanced if all you do is curse the darkness." ~ Michael Cromartie

The forums may be "one of the best kept secrets in journalism," as ABC's Dan Harris called them, but their influence is easy to trace. Immediately after the Warren session in 2005, Brooks lauded in a column the transformative work of Christians like Warren in addressing extreme poverty in Africa, and *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. opened his book *Souled Out* with an extended quotation from Warren's talk. The session, says Dionne, gave him a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of Warren "as a fuller human being." A 2009 session with Francis Collins ended with the famed Christian geneticist, who now directs the National Institutes of Health, singing a worship song on his guitar. Peter Boyer was so fascinated that he wrote an admiring profile in *The New Yorker* of one of the world's foremost scientists finding harmony between science and faith. Similarly, one month after a session in November 2011 with Oxford professor Ard Louis, a young Christian at the frontier of theoretical physics, Michael Gerson cited Louis in his *Washington Post* column, arguing for a faith-friendly wonder at the intricacy of the cosmos.

Sociologist and Gordon College president D. Michael Lindsay found that that the number of times he was consulted or quoted in articles or columns multiplied after he presented to the forum. Indeed, says Dionne, one of the most positive effects of the forums has been to highlight the work of profoundly talented scholars who are also profoundly devout. "It's hard to hear someone like Mark Noll," says Dionne, "and then pretend there aren't seriously intellectual evangelicals."

A True Believer

Pew no longer bankrolls the conferences, so Cromartie pulls together smaller grants to keep them going. Recent economic turmoil has made finding funding difficult, but Cromartie remains a true believer. Evangelicals are

still misunderstood, but that's only cause for greater engagement. He says, "We're sometimes asked, 'Why are you bringing *that* person, who wrote some misinformed pieces?'" That's precisely why we're inviting them. "We want them better informed. The argument is not advanced if all you do is curse the darkness."

Ross Douthat, a devout Catholic and the youngest *New York Times* columnist in the newspaper's history, has become an avid supporter and member of the forums. The conferences "vindicate evangelicals' sense that the media has particular deficits when it comes to understanding religion in general and evangelicalism in particular," and also show that evangelicals "are wrong to see it as a gap forged from malice, bias, and antipathy." If the press "just doesn't get religion," to quote CNN political analyst William Schneider, it's "a deficit of knowledge and not of sympathy or interest," says Douthat.

"Most reporters go into the business because they're curious, and if you present them with something interesting, they'll listen," agrees Brooks, whose late-night conversations with Christopher Hitchens at the forums are the stuff of legend. "You can complain or you can be helpful. Mike has chosen to be helpful."

Tim Keller arrived at the most recent Faith Angle Forum, in March, to explain the faith and future of American evangelicals. He presented an image different from Warren's but no less compelling—more urban, cultured, and intellectual. Today's younger generation of evangelicals, he says, are more complex politically, more multiethnic, more likely to enter the cultural industries and "captivated by the idea of sacrificial service and pouring themselves out for the poor." Pressed repeatedly on Christian opposition to same-sex marriage, he explains that evangelicals see sex "not as a consumer good but a form of self-donation." Evangelicals believe that "male and female have unique glories" and marriage must bring those glories together. This makes sex "a kind of Eucharist for married people, a reunion of the alienated genders."

Whether or not it convinced the skeptics in the room, it was a winsome and impressive response. Afterward, Keller reflected that events like these "destroy stereotypes and clear away the fog." He only wished, he said, there could be more events to accommodate more journalists, and more pastors could experience facing the journalistic firing line and having to justify their views in public language.

Of course, without Cromartie's affable guidance and his enthusiasm for his friends on both ends of the spectrum, the forums could not have navigated the treacherous waters of faith and politics for so long. At the 2005 session, several journalists pressed Warren on the issue of damnation. The questions were pointed, the atmosphere tense. Cromartie intervened: "Questions about eternal destination are best handled over the cocktail hour soon to follow."

And discussed over cocktails they were, in the warm evening air in Key West, by Rick Warren and many of the country's leading journalists—much as, in South Beach eight years later, Keller and another group of writers and columnists adjourned from their discussion for a friendly lunch. Such is the singular accomplishment of Cromartie, who decided that lighting a candle was better than cursing the darkness.