

Sightings

Sightings posts are short (800–1000 words), accessible articles that bring the insight and expertise of people who study religion to bear on a topic that is in the public eye—or should be.

Each *Sightings* post makes two arguments: the argument on its surface about religion and contemporary issues and concerns, and the underlying argument that the methodologies of religious studies, broadly understood, can help us make sense of the world around us.

Since Martin Marty created *Sightings* in 1999, contributors have included religious leaders, informed citizens, and academic specialists from the University of Chicago Divinity School and beyond. Our hope is to serve as a resource for members of the media, the general public, and teachers who are seeking rigorous analysis of current events and popular culture through the lens of religious studies and related fields.

Sightings posts take several different forms:

- an argument that we can understand a news story better once we contextualize it in religious history (e.g., Islam and elections in Western Europe, [nativity scenes and immigration protests](#))
- a reflection on contemporary problems from one of the methodologies that make up religious studies (e.g., the pandemic and collective effervescence, [martyrdom and the George Floyd protests](#))
- a close reading and interpretation of the roles religion plays in a contemporary news story (e.g., [narrations of Christianity in the 1776 Report](#), [biblical language in the Jericho March](#))
- an interpretation of something in popular media from a religious studies perspective (e.g., [priesthood and Fleabag](#), [Muslim representation in Midnight Mass](#))
- an intervention in an ongoing debate or a response to a present problem that brings clarity through engagement with a religious text or theorist of religion (e.g., Hannah Arendt and mask mandates, [the Qur'an and consolation during COVID](#))
- an exploration of a phenomenon that may not make American headlines but is of interest to people who think about religion (e.g., Sikh community kitchens in New Delhi, [religious discrimination law in Australia](#))
- a commemoration of a historical event or public figure (e.g., [reflecting on the life of Hans Küng](#), explaining the significance of Tenzin Chogyel's *Life of the Buddha* on its two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary)

All submissions should be sent to Russell Johnson at rpjohnson@uchicago.edu.

The typical structure of a *Sightings* post is as follows:

1. **Identify an occasion.** Why think about this topic *now*? What current event does your post illuminate? What hot-button issue does it relate to? What recent media does it respond to? What anniversary does it commemorate?
 - “In a recent *Washington Post* article, the author expresses surprise at the growing number of female priests who identify as Roman Catholics...”
 - “Fifty years ago this week, the first American prisoners of war were released from Vietnam...”
 - “Courtesy of Netflix, North American audiences can now see the documentary *Come and See* about the controversial Dhammakaya sect in Thailand...”
 - “More than ever before, Americans are using videoconferencing instead of traveling to spend time with their families over the holiday season...”
2. **Recognize a problem.** What might many people not understand about this? What is missing from the conversation? What can we gain from a closer look or a different perspective?
 - “Women have been performing Catholic rites since at least the fifth century. This neglected history can help us better understand the movement...”
 - “Three former POWs wrote memoirs about their experiences in captivity, and their books demonstrate the significance of routine for survival...”
 - “The film raises the question of how to distinguish authentic Buddhism from superstition. This is a question many Buddhists face in their day-to-day lives...”
 - “Though he never made a Zoom call, Franz Rosenzweig’s writings clarify what gets lost when we only interact with people in mediated ways...”
3. **Give an interpretation.** This is the bulk of the article, where the author explains the relevant history, offers context, argues for a conclusion, or summarizes key ideas. The audience for *Sightings* posts are readers who have a general interest in religion and society but are not well-versed about the topic in question.
4. **Conclude.** Conclusions typically hint at the broader issues at stake or suggest possible implications. Sometimes they refer back to the occasion of the post, helping readers revisit it with the perspective they have gained through reading the post.