



Women rabbis read from the Torah at Robinson's Arch, near the Western Wall in Jerusalem. PHOTO BY MEGHAN MCCARTY



USC journalism students in the West Bank city of Hebron. PHOTO BY MEGHAN MCCARTY

Covering Critical Issues

RELIGION AND WORLD AFFAIRS

Few journalism students have a chance to hone their reporting skills by traveling to a part of the world that is front-page news back home. The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California offers a course that provides this unusual experience. For the past two years, the Reporting on Religion class has included a ten-day field trip to Israel and the West Bank. Students meet with activists, journalists, political and religious leaders and ordinary people whose lives are directly affected by the region's crosscurrents. The goal is to couple classroom study of religion's role in culture, politics and world affairs with on-the-ground immersion in these issues. At the same time, students are expected to tackle the usual challenges of overseas reporting—delving deeply into subjects that are new to them and producing a range of thoughtful stories on tight deadlines.

"In today's world the intersection of religion and geopolitics is key, and journalists need to be prepared to think critically and write clearly about this reality," says Diane Winston, Knight Chair in Media and Religion, who teaches the course. "Very few news outlets can devote time and money to this kind of reporting, and most of the stories that appear focus on conflict. I want to train students to look beyond that, to report important stories about individuals and communities that are not being covered." Interest in these kinds of stories has allowed Winston's students to post their pieces on multiple media platforms: online blogs, public radio, *The Washington Post* and *Global Post*, among other outlets.

The graduate journalism class is part of a broader Luce-funded

project at USC that seeks to address a significant gap: while religion is an increasingly critical factor in world events, its role is poorly understood by the public and only marginally covered by the media. Shrinking budgets have forced media outlets to cut back on specialty beats and overseas reporting. The Annenberg School provides Knight Luce Fellowships that give working journalists an opportunity to report religion-related international stories they might otherwise lack the financial resources to pursue. These investigative pieces from around the world have focused on such topics as Saudi Arabia's global export of its particular brand of Islam; the growing U.S. evangelical foreign-adoption movement; and the unraveling of Tibetan Buddhist traditions as exiled lamas are forsaking their vows in order to lead more worldly lives. Since the fellowships began in 2010, a number of Fellows' stories have been published in high-profile outlets and featured on national broadcast programs.

The project also promotes scholarly exploration of the ways in which religious beliefs affect different communities and influence national and international politics. USC is developing a new master's program in Religion and International Relations, and a public seminar series, *Religions on the Move*, brings together faculty and graduate students from different disciplines to discuss and deepen their research. The project's academic and journalism strands reinforce each other. Each spring, several Knight Luce Fellows will discuss their work at the seminar series and other campus forums and will provide master classes on covering global religious issues.

In 2011 the Reporting on Religion class was part of an innovative collaboration with the American Public Media program *On Being*, another Luce grantee. With the Foundation's support, host Krista Tippett and her team took their first international reporting trip and joined the USC journalism students in Israel. The students' stories were posted on the *On Being* blog and Tippett devoted six programs to the interviews she conducted in the field. ■