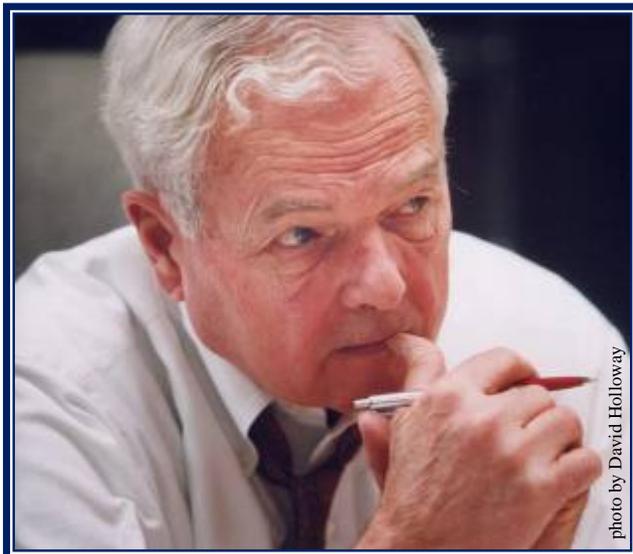


Agent of the Audience:

Bob Abernethy of *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*

By John M. Mulder



Bob Abernethy is the executive editor and host of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, a television program produced with support from Lilly Endowment, Inc. It is aired on most PBS stations and is also available on its website, www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics.

Each 30-minute show covers the significant news in religion, worldwide, and ranges across all religious traditions. Currently the program appears on more than 250 public stations.

Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly has been widely praised by critics and has won numerous awards for its thoughtful and insightful coverage of all religions, all denominations, and all expressions of spirituality in American life, as well as for balanced presentation of profound moral issues and of religion's role in national and international news.

Thomas Reese, S.J., of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University, flatly concludes, “*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* is the most intelligent and fair coverage of religion on both television and the Web. Their coverage of religion's impact on individuals, culture, and politics is essential for understanding our world today. I never miss a program.”

Mr. Abernethy was a correspondent for more than 40 years with NBC News, covering news from Washington, Los Angeles, London, and Moscow. As his

career with NBC was winding down and retirement loomed, he returned to Washington and began exploring the possibility of a TV news program devoted to religion, probably the most underreported area of American culture. With the backing of PBS station WNET in New York and Lilly Endowment, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* was launched in 1997.

Mr. Abernethy is a graduate of Princeton University where he received both bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He also studied for a year at Yale Divinity School and has received the Yale Divinity School’s Alumni Association’s award for distinction in lay ministry.

He is the co-editor with William Bole of the widely-acclaimed book, *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World* (Seven Stories Press, 2007), a collection of insightful interviews done for the television program.

Mr. Abernethy is married to the former Marie Cheremeteff Grove and has two daughters, one stepdaughter, and three stepsons. He lives in Jaffrey, NH, and Washington, D.C., and is a member of the United Church of Christ.

Mr. Abernethy created the program for PBS, but in submitting to this interview, he declared, “I want to represent *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* as a group accomplishment, not just mine. True, it was my idea, but there is no way it could have grown as it has and become as strong as it is, most of the time, without both my work and the work of Arnie Labaton, our Executive Producer; Kim Lawton, Managing Editor; Missy Daniel, Information Editor, and many others.”

This conversation is edited.

Q. *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* is an extraordinary program that has broken new ground in television journalism. How did it get started?

A. I was stationed in Moscow from 1989 to 1994. It was time to come home, and I was at retirement age, but I did not want to stop work.

You may recall that there was a lot of conversation at that time about the perceived absence of religion in most network news reporting. I thought it might be a niche I could help fill, so I started making the rounds in late 1994. I talked to Bill Baker, then the President of WNET in New York, and he was instantly encouraging. “Let’s do it,” he said, and then I discovered that in public broadcasting “Let’s do it” means, first, “Let’s find the money to pay for it.”

It quickly became clear that Lilly Endowment was the major potential source of funding for such a program, so Tamara Robinson of WNET and I flew to Indianapolis to talk with Craig Dykstra and his then-colleague Jim Wind. We found out that they had been thinking about this issue of religion and the media at least as much as we had. It was precisely the right time. Lilly wanted to get into media just as we needed help.

Q. And you were just the right person.

A. I hope my credentials helped, as did WNET’s. So Lilly gave us a development grant, which stipulated that we find another funder. We tried hard, but we failed, and had to go back to Lilly to report that. I thought that might be the end of the project, but Lilly told us they thought what we were attempting could be of so much importance to American religious life that they would fund the program by themselves. Since then we have had help from other funders, but from the start the Endowment’s backing has been critical. We went on the air in September of 1997 and are now entering our 14th year.

Q. How has the program shown it’s been worth doing?

A. I think we have demonstrated without question that there are wonderful religion and ethics stories to be told, and that they can be told beautifully on television. Our stories often get picked up by other news outlets, and we have a loyal audience. The program and our website have become a valuable resource for teachers, pastors, reporters, and many others. And beyond content, the very existence of the program on most PBS stations seems to be an important validation for people who are giving their lives to religious work.

As we have produced the program, we have become intensely aware of the growing breadth of religion news. It is not just the “church pages” anymore. There is an important religion component to almost every major national and international story—about war, health care, environmental protection, and a host of other issues. We try to identify these for our viewers and readers.

Meanwhile, the recession has caused serious cutbacks in religion reporting at most newspapers. So informed, professional religion coverage is more important than ever.

Q. You spent more than four decades reporting for NBC, covering politics and just about everything else. How did you get interested in religion?

A. Both my grandfathers were (Northern) Baptist ministers, and one of them raised me. He was the pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. My father had been a religion teacher, and several uncles and cousins were pastors. So there was a certain amount of pressure on me to become a minister, too. But I never heard a call. Instead, as a reporter, I often did religion stories.

As for going to Yale Divinity School for a year, my first wife had died and our daughter was just finishing college. It was possible to take a year’s leave of absence, and I chose to spend it at YDS. I hope my grandfathers would have been pleased.

Q. What was it like to study at Yale after all those years in television news?

A. It was wonderful. I will never forget the kindness of my teachers, especially David Kelsey in theology and Margaret Farley in social ethics. They really cared that we learn.

I must add that some of my old friends were surprised at my choice of ways to spend a “sabbatical.” When I got back to Washington, I ran into a guy I had known who asked me, “What’s new?”

I said, “I took a year’s leave from NBC and went to divinity school. I got married and we had a baby. What’s new with you?”

Q. What have been some of the differences between your reporting for NBC and your reporting now on Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly?

A. The most obvious one is that we can run stories now that are seven or eight minutes long, or more, compared to the typical minute-thirty on most network news shows. Our reporters and producers, many of whom used to work for the networks, think they are in heaven.

Q. But don’t you find that the subject matter—religion—means a different style or strategy of reporting?

A. Perhaps. But the same standards apply to religion reporting as to any other beat. You have to do everything you can to be accurate, interesting, informative, and fair. We try hard to get our tone right. It’s important to be respectful of religion in general. At the same time, it’s also important to keep our reportorial distance, and not let the show become too soft. Never cynical, but appropriately skeptical.

When we were starting out, we talked to more than 100 people about what we intended. I remember the good advice of a rabbi in Chicago. He said, “Don’t make it too sweet.”

I also remember the advice of Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention. I was concerned that our interest in covering all major religions might upset people who might think we were not paying enough attention to their own particular brand of Christianity. Dr. Land told me, “As long as you respect the religious impulse, you’ll be all right.”

We do, and I hope we are.

Q. *What has impressed you most about religion reporting?*

A. I think it’s what you might call the spiritual heart of religion news. The institutional stories are important, and we cover them—the splits, the scandals, the achievements. And we try to identify the beliefs and traditions underlying what churches and denominations do. But, for me, the essence of religion is in what individuals believe about God and life. What is their foundation?

Getting at that, usually through profiles, has made this the most satisfying work I have ever done.

I remember interviewing Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and asking him how he begins each day. He spoke of prayer:

“I have come to realize more and more that prayer is just being in the presence of one who loves you deeply, who loves with a love that will not let you go, and so when I get up in the morning I try to spend as much time as I can in the sense of being quiet in the presence of this love. It’s like I’m sitting in front of a warm fire on a cold day. I don’t have to do anything. All I have to do is be there. And after a while, I may have the qualities of the fire change me so I have the warmth of the fire. I may have the glow of the fire, and it is so also with me and God. I just have to be there, quiet” (*The Life of Meaning*, p. 133).

As “the Arch,” as he said some of his friends called him, spoke, everyone in the room seemed to be holding our breath. It was just wonderful, and I and others have done a lot of profiles of thoughtful, articulate believers, talking from their hearts about what their beliefs and practices and spiritual experiences have meant to them.

Q. That had a profound effect on you.

A. I’m really inspired by these people. They look the world squarely in the eye and see all its pain and cruelty and disappointment and suffering and say, “Nevertheless . . . ” and go on to talk about their faith and its implications for living in the everyday world. And such people are all around. They keep office hours. They’re in every congregation.

Q. Has the program changed you?

A. “Not enough,” I often say. It’s made me much more aware of the astonishing diversity of religious practice and experience. It’s also encouraged me to try to be more like the people I have talked to—people who insist there is “Something more” than what we can see and measure, and who live lives of great insight and courage.

Q. What effect do you think this program has on others?

A. Reporters tend not to think much about the influence we are having. If what we are doing is interesting and useful to our viewers and readers, then we have realized our primary objective. Inspiration, should it occur, is wonderful, but it is a by-product. That’s the only way to function. If you don’t do that, you can seem to be an advocate or propagandist, and you will lose people’s trust.

I think we’re going through a time when a lot of believers are depressed about religion. Their congregations are dwindling. They go to bookstores and see attacks on their faith. In the Catholic Church they are sickened by the abuse of children and its cover-up. There is a great need for morale boosting. It’s not my job to say, “Three cheers for belief.” But the very fact that Lilly funds this program and WNET produces it and PBS distributes it is very encouraging to people.

Q. *This is a news program about religion and ethics. How do ethical issues play a role in your reporting?*

A. A lot of our coverage of ethics has involved the wrenching issue of more and more powerful medical technology. For example, we did a story about a baby born terribly premature. The outlook was not good—disease, handicaps, early death. The parents asked that the baby be allowed to die, but the hospital and doctor, devoted to preserving life at all costs, could not do that. When we run such a story, we get a lot of response from people facing the same issues. We’ve also done stories on, for example, the ethical issues of immigration reform and health care and war.

Q. *Much of what you do involves interviews. What does it take to do an interview?*

A. We do several types of interviews. One is in the field, as part of a long, produced piece, letting the interviewees help us tell and illustrate the story.

Another is the profile, which requires a lot of preparation.

There are also short studio interviews for three or four minutes. These are rarely adversarial. I try to help the guest say what he or she has to say as clearly, forcefully, and briefly as possible.

In all these, I see the reporter as the agent of the audience.

Q. *That’s a beautiful phrase—“the agent of the audience.” What does it mean?*

A. I try to imagine what a person watching might want to ask this individual or hear him or her talk about.

Q. *Your program is entering its 14th season, and you’re expanding its delivery through not only television but the internet and books and other educational events. What does the future look like to you?*

A. We are happy that our program has led to our terrific website, to a book, to help to teachers, and to many other extensions of its presence. We want to have an even broader reach. We would like the program to appear at better times on more stations. We would also like to make full use of the new media. Religion online could be a much wider source for reporting and discussion, and I would like to be around indefinitely to see it all happen.

Q. *When you have to “lay this burden down,” in the words of the old Spiritual, and give up doing this program, how do you want to be remembered?*

A. Kindly.