
PRESS & TELEVISION

competition" rather than how best to inform the public.

A case in point is press coverage of the April 9 presidential straw poll conducted at the Massachusetts Democratic Party's "issues convention." Democratic officials cooked up the poll merely as a "diversion" from the "dull" or possibly divisive conference proceedings for both the media and the 4,100 delegates, Linsky says, and few politicians or journalists took it seriously—at first.

But then, presidential contenders Walter Mondale and Alan Cranston, recalling the media prominence Jimmy Carter won by his triumph in the Iowa caucuses that kicked off the 1976 campaign, began wooing the delegates in earnest. Other candidates, notably Gary Hart and John Glenn, followed suit. The major news media joined in, running daily stories on what had become a Massachusetts horse race.

By April 9, 400 reporters and back-up personnel were on hand in Springfield, Mass., including teams from the Big Three TV networks, *Time* and *Newsweek*, and every major daily in the country. To its credit, Linsky says, the *New York Times* buried the story in its middle pages; elsewhere, the poll results (Mondale won with 30 percent of the votes) were played as big news. Lost amid the straw poll hoopla was the original purpose of the meeting: discussion of state political issues.

The journalists themselves appeared troubled by the "hype," Linsky notes. Newspaper columnists constantly reminded their readers that the poll was meaningless—but covered it anyway. And as the real presidential campaign gets underway, working reporters and TV producers will have no time for reflecting on such contradictions. That is one reason, he argues, why news organizations' top management, more removed from the daily hubbub, should take a stronger hand in distinguishing between real news and hype.

A few have already made such efforts. During the 1980 presidential campaign, for example, ABC News emphasized comparisons of the candidates' positions on the issues, not campaign trivia. But more needs to be done, Linsky says, if election coverage is to be more than news about who's ahead on the merry-go-round.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Quiet Nuns

"The Cloistered Life" by Julia Lieblich, in *The New York Times Magazine* (July 10, 1983), 229 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

To most Americans, the cloistered nun—silent, isolated, devoted solely to prayer—is a relic of the Middle Ages. But cloisters still exist, writes Lieblich, a freelance writer, and since the mid-1960s, they have opened their doors, if only a crack.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Until A.D. 1200, all nuns were cloistered. Most were the daughters of aristocrats who could afford the dowries demanded by the cloisters; many women were attracted by the independence and intellectual life not available elsewhere.

Today, more than 200 Roman Catholic cloistered convents in the United States house 3,800 "contemplative" nuns. While their "active" sisters (some 120,000 strong) teach, heal, and do missionary work, says Lieblich, these secluded women seek solitude "to witness the primacy of prayer in the Church, to serve as a reminder of the contemplative dimension in all lives, and to intervene for others before God."

Some cloisters conform to age-old practices—the 38 Poor Clare nuns in Roswell, New Mexico, go barefoot year-round and whip themselves with knotted cords three times weekly. But most have abandoned "the hairshirt habits and the almost total silence of the past" in the wake of the liberalizing 1962–65 Second Vatican Council, Lieblich reports. Most sisters can talk to outsiders or even leave the cloister to shop, vote, or see a doctor.

Even so, sisters, for the most part, lead lives of self-denial and unvaried routine. After the two years of college or other "real-life" experience required for entry into a cloister, another five to seven years must elapse before the nun takes her final vows. "We want women," says one prioress, "not girls."

Despite such demands, as well as the American public's vague dismay and the not uncommon resentment of the nuns' families, the cloisters' population rose slightly between 1977 and 1979. (During the same period, 3,807 "active" nuns left their orders.) Anachronistic as the cloisters may appear, the future of the contemplative life seems secure.

Discovering Judaism's Mystics

"The Greatness of Gershom Scholem" by Hyam Maccoby, in *Commentary* (Sept. 1983), 165 East 65th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Judaism seems the most earthbound of the world's major religions, focused on the conduct of everyday family and community life and on personal morality. Yet the faith has a powerful mystical dimension that went largely unrecognized for centuries before historian Gershom Scholem (1897–1981) brought it to light.

Scholem, born in Berlin, rebelled against the staid, assimilationist German-Jewish milieu of his youth. Early in his university career, he became fascinated with ancient Jewish mystical writing. Jewish scholars of the day disdained this "wild, strange subject," writes Maccoby, a librarian and lecturer at Leo Baeck College in London. Indeed, among rabbis, access to the texts was accorded to only a few.

Scholem's first task was to collect the widely scattered manuscripts written by many different Jews over 18 centuries. By dating and analyzing them, he discovered that Jewish mysticism had changed dramatically over time. Two chief bodies of writing emerged: the Merkavah, dating from the first few centuries A.D., and the more sophis-