



Robert H. Phelps. *God and the Editor: My Search for Meaning at the New York Times.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009. xiv + 284 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-0914-8.

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Robert Phelps: One Editor's Search for Meaning

In the opening pages of his memoir, *God and the Editor*, Robert H. Phelps, a former copyeditor and news editor, says: "Throughout my career I had quietly but persistently sought spiritual truth.... In fact, for most of my life journalism became, in effect, my religion" (p. xii). *God and the Editor* is a story of one man's experience in journalism at some of the country's most important newspapers between 1940 and 1985, as well as his spiritual journey throughout his life. Ultimately, though, the two paths—spirituality and journalism—never fully converge into one cohesive narrative. As a result, even though Phelps states that he viewed journalism as a substitute for religion, the reader is left without a clear understanding of how or why.

Phelps's journey evolves in three parts. The first part of the book recounts Phelps's childhood and college experiences, and it is in these chapters that he delves most deeply into his spiritual journey. Born in 1920 during the Great Depression, he describes a secular childhood, but one where he had a curiosity about religion. In college, he says he identified himself as an agnostic, but was "skeptical of agnosticism" (p. 11). In this part of the book, the reader gets a glimpse into why Phelps chose a career in journalism when he writes: "I wanted to write about events and change the world" (p. 10).

He held several jobs in journalism after college, including one as a reporter at a small daily newspaper in Pennsylvania, and later at the United Press Association. He had sought status as a conscientious objector during World War II (based on the fact that he was a pacifist), but his application was denied because he did not belong to an organized religion, such as the Quakers, that the military recognized. While in the navy, he continued to work as a journalist, and developed a narrative style, long before it was officially known in the field as "narrative journalism." After the war, he graduated from Columbia Graduate School of Journalism under the G. I.

Bill, but had difficulty finding a job in journalism. He briefly worked in public relations before landing a job as a copyeditor, first at the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island, and later at the *New York Times*.

The second part of the book deals with his experiences at the *New York Times*. These chapters will be the most intriguing for those who worked in journalism during the same time Phelps did, as well as for those who worked in or studied journalism in later decades. Indeed, in this section, Phelps discusses notable articles published while he was at the *Times*, including those about the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in the 1960s, and the Pentagon Papers and Watergate in the 1970s. Some key observations include the difficulty editors had in determining how to print hundreds of pages of the Warren Commission at a time when the copy was manually input (they decided to photograph the pages); the lengthy process in getting access to the Pentagon Papers (Daniel Ellsberg first provided copies to members of Congress, but upset by the "refusal of congressional leaders to act" decided to "turn to *The Times*" for exposure [p. 161]); and the decision, ultimately, to print the Pentagon Papers (Phelps says: "by definition, publishers are supposed to publish. It is the nature of the job" [p. 163]). In other observations, he offers insight into why the *Washington Post* beat the *New York Times* in breaking the Watergate story. Phelps acknowledges that the *Times* had information from sources at the FBI, but because of internal office politics and schedules, essentially, no one was officially assigned to follow up on the story, enabling the *Washington Post* to get the scoop.

In the third and final part of the book, Phelps describes his time working at the *Boston Globe*. Realizing there would be little opportunity, if any, for advancement at the *New York Times* (which he attributed to his age), Phelps left New York to join the *Boston Globe*, where he

oversaw reporting on school desegregation. The reporting led to the publication receiving a Pulitzer Prize, and Phelps was later promoted to executive editor there.

While Phelps offers a glimpse into newsrooms at major publications in the country between 1940 and 1985, the title of the book suggests that he will also explore the convergence of his two specific quests—spirituality and journalism. Ultimately, he deals with these separately, for the most part, and incompletely. For example, in discussing the Pulitzer award at the *Boston Globe*, he admits: “We did what publishers and editors always deny: we sought to win a prize, not just inform our readers” (p. 243). There is no further explanation about whether that goal affected the final reports that were published, or whether he viewed the articles as being as good, better, or worse as a result of the focus on winning a Pulitzer. He also does not connect this statement to his spiritual journey: Did he feel this was an ethical goal?

At another point in the book, discussing a coworker at the *New York Times* in the 1950s, Phelps says the man was “barred by the Jewish Sulzberger family that controlled the paper from the title (of executive editor) be-

cause of a long-standing policy against Jews in the top editor’s job” (p. 103). In a memoir entitled *God and the Editor*, more of an explanation is expected of this policy, of his reaction to this policy, and of his coworkers reaction to this policy.

This is the type of memoir that is most interesting when the author is someone who is well-known, such as when Barbara Walters discussed her unique experience in journalism in the memoir *Audition* (2008). Readers of *Audition* who had a public perception of Walters and the stories she covered over the years were given a behind-the-scenes look into them, from her perspective, as well as insights into her own personal experiences. Since Phelps is not a well-known public figure, the factual account of his experiences will likely be most relatable to his peers, specifically those who worked in newsrooms across America between 1940 and 1985 and had similar experiences. If he had placed his experiences in a broader context and compared them to current journalistic practices, the book would be more relatable to contemporary journalists working in the field today—especially, perhaps, those who still think of the profession as something of a religion.

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