

2010 AAR Newswriting Contest Winners

News Outlets with Circulations over 100,000:

First Place: Daniel Burke, Religion News Service
Second Place: Todd Jones, *Columbus Dispatch*
Third Place: Michael Paulson, *Boston Globe*

News Outlets with Circulations under 100,000:

First Place: Brett Buckner, *Anniston (Ala.) Star*
Second Place: John Dart, *Christian Century*
Third Place: Adam Parker, *Post and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina)

Opinion Writing:

First Place: David Gibson, PoliticsDaily.com
Second Place: Tracey O'Shaughnessy, *Republican-American* (Waterbury, Connecticut)
Third Place: Joel Engardio, WashingtonPost.com and *USA Today*

Read some of our past [and](#) current award-winning articles

Daniel Burke of Religion News Service, Brett Buckner of the *Anniston (Ala.) Star*, and David Gibson of [PoliticsDaily.com](#) [Poli](#), won the 2010 American Academy of Religion Awards for Best In-Depth Reporting on Religion. Burke won the contest for journalists at large news outlets; Buckner, small outlets; and Gibson, opinion writing.

The annual awards, given out since 2000, recognize “well-researched newswriting that enhances the public understanding of religion,” said John R. Fitzmier, Executive Director of the AAR.

Burke submitted articles on religious syncretism in America; Barack Obama’s participation in the Saguaro Seminar and its impact on his presidency; an Episcopal Church controversy magnified by information accessible on the Internet; [an in-depth look at Katharine Jefferts Schori](#), the first woman elected as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church; and a review of the church-going habits of United States presidents. Burke “wove scholarship throughout the pieces and wasn’t afraid to dig deep to provide sharp insights into controversial people and issues,” said one judge. “This writer produced my favorite piece of the competition,” noted another, “a lovely profile of an oceanographer-bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori. It’s full of excellent quotes and sure-footed writing touches, but more important than either of those qualities, it gives us a real sense of this fascinating woman.”

Buckner submitted articles on a prison chaplain and the inmates he serves; [a study of Charles Darwin](#) on the bicentennial of his birth and the continuing debate over evolution; a criminal justice professor who researches convicted killers and ministers to them; the Bible and what it has to say about alcohol consumption; and a youth minister who uses boxing to reach at-risk kids. Buckner's submissions were "highly readable, with nice writing touches and appropriate use of scholars," said the judges. Commenting on the prison chaplain article, one judge added "the writer parachutes us right into a situation we'd all prefer to avoid, and gives us a strong connection to the sadness and hopelessness that come with deprivation of liberty. Like the other pieces in this submission, it's full of deft turns of phrase and acute observations."

Gibson, who took top honors in the opinion writing category last year, submitted articles on a congressman's resolution to designate a "National Year of the Bible" and what that might mean for Americans, especially the biblical illiterate; an analysis of Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech and the influence of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr on the president's address; and the [legacy of the Hebrew Bible's Queen Esther for some Christian women](#) in today's spotlight. "Witty, smart, and quirky — who would have thought Queen Esther could be so relevant in modern America? The article had me on the edge of my seat, waiting to see what would come next," said a judge, highlighting one of Gibson's first-place entries.

In the large news outlets contest, Todd Jones of the *Columbus Dispatch* placed second and Michael Paulson of the *Boston Globe* placed third. Jones submitted a [series on a Catholic seminarian](#) that evoked a "strong respect for the humanity of the men portrayed...and captured their spirituality without losing touch of the daily life that surrounds their religious education," said the judges. Paulson's articles, especially the one on [Mormon writers](#), noted the judges, "go beyond the surface and ask the harder 'why' questions. There was an analytical quality to the articles provided by an astute weaving of scholarship with story."

In the small news outlets contest, John Dart of the *Christian Century* placed second and Adam Parker of the *Post and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina) placed third.

[Dart's articles](#)

“gave me a glimpse into worlds that I didn’t know about. I liked how they illuminated the politics of religious organizations,” remarked one judge. In commenting on

[Parker's entries](#)

, one judge said, “My favorite was the story of the Vengrov Torah. The article truly showed the strength of survival through the care of a colorful list of characters.”

In the opinion writing contest, [Tracey O’Shaughnessy](#) of the *Republican-American* (Waterbury, Connecticut) placed second and Joel Engardio, writing for [WashingtonPost.com](#)

and

USA Today

, placed third. O’Shaughnessy “has a seemingly effortless, almost athletic skill at creating memorable phrases. The writer’s facility with words made me smile in the way I do when an outfielder makes a humanly impossible, wall-climbing catch of a ball that should have been a home run,” said a judge.

[Engardio's opinion pieces](#)

were “compelling,” said the judges, while praising the “honesty of the autobiographical reflections” in his work.

Each contestant submitted articles published during 2009. Names of contestants and their news outlets were removed from submissions prior to judging. Each of the first-place winners receives \$1,000. The judges for all three contests were Robert F. Keeler, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and editorial writer for *Newsday*; Colleen McDannell, a professor of history and religious studies at the University of Utah and a member of the AAR’s Public Understanding of Religion Committee; and Bob Smietana, an author and religion reporter for the

Tennessean