

John Blake of *CNN.com* placed first in the 2011 American Academy of Religion Awards for Best In-depth Newswriting on Religion. Dan Gilgoff of *CNN.com* placed second, and Jason Berry, a freelance journalist writing for the *National Catholic Reporter*, placed third.

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

Blake submitted articles on black preachers and the art of whooping; sports figures who publically thank God for their victories; born-again author Don Miller and the mentor who changed his life; the early career of anti-gay activist Fred Phelps; and new research on how American teenagers view and practice Christianity. Blake’s work “represented the strongest collection in terms of general interest to the public and excellent use of scholarly resources in religion,” said one judge, highlighting the art of whooping article as “best article overall.” Another judge, commenting on the Phelps story, remarked, “Who would have thought that the much-reviled anti-gay crusader Fred Phelps was once a courageous worker for civil rights with what was described as a ‘brilliant’ career defending the downtrodden? To find that out and tell the story in a balanced fashion is outstanding journalism.”

Gilgoff submitted articles on the decline of Protestant representation on the Supreme Court; survey results on what Americans believe about President Obama’s religious affiliation; Glenn Beck’s emerging role as a national leader for Christian conservatives; the interfaith support group of Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Park51 imam; and contemplative neuroscience, the brain science of meditation. “This writer understands the importance of the intersection between religion and public life and also found a compelling story about religion and science. Both topics are frequently in the news, but these stories have an edgy, stimulating way of approaching the subject,” noted one judge, who went on to praise Gilgoff for giving readers “well-researched information...that encourages thought and reflection.”

Berry submitted articles from an investigative series on the late Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legion of Christ. “This writer knows how to dig deeply and tell a good story,” said a judge. Berry’s “in-depth reporting within the context of the pedophilia scandal in the Roman Catholic Church probes a little-known aspect of that scandal, uncovers significant news, makes surprising connections, and broadens the reader’s understanding. The reporter gets to the right people, asks the right questions, and makes sure that they are answered....And

although the reader is presented with a huge amount of material, the information is skillfully packaged and the writing is tight and compelling.”

Forty-four journalists entered the contest for articles published during calendar year 2010. Names of contestants and their news outlets were removed from submissions prior to judging. The first-place winner receives \$1,000; second-place winner receives \$500; and third-place winner receives \$250.

The judges were Charles Austin, former religion reporter with Religion News Service, *The Record* (Hackensack, NJ), and *The New York Times*, and former director of news for the Lutheran Church in America; Alan Cooperman, associate director for research at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, former religion reporter with *The Washington Post*, and former foreign editor of *U.S. News and World Report*; and Lawrence Mamiya, professor of religion and Africana Studies at Vassar College, and a member of the AAR’s Committee on the Public Understanding of Religion.