

RNA CONTESTS**Dart chosen as 2008 lifetime achievement recipient****By Steve Maynard**

The News Tribune



July 10, 2008—For 40 years, John Dart has chronicled the cutting edge of religious life, writing about the first gay church, the emergence of Scientology and the growing strength of evangelicals and charismatics.

In his 31 years as a religion writer at the *Los Angeles Times*, Dart also opened up the world of biblical scholarship to readers. Dart explored topics such as the Nag Hammadi Library, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jesus Seminar.

"I do like the intellectual side and the research side," Dart said. He enjoyed seeing stories in the complexities of research that many didn't pursue.

He continues that quest at *Christian Century* magazine, where since 2000 he's served as news editor.

Dart's exhaustive contributions to religion reporting have earned him the 2008 William A. Reed/Religion News Service Lifetime Achievement Award.

Dart, who soon turns 72, said he has no plans to retire. The task of finding and telling good stories continues to drive him.

"Motivation almost invariably comes from hearing about a great story that hasn't been told yet, or told well enough to bring out its significance," Dart said.

Dart and his wife, Gloria, live in Northridge, Calif., and have four grown children. They will celebrate their 51st wedding anniversary a few weeks before the Sept. 18–21, 2008 RNA conference, where Dart will receive his award.

Dart's written six books, starting with "The Laughing Savior, the Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library" and most recently "Decoding Mark."

In his spare time, Dart plays tournament-level table tennis, competing annually in the U.S. Nationals.

One of his special writing interests, as Dart put it, has been "the borders between humor and faith, satire and the sacred."

He once took a long shot and asked Woody Allen's agent for an interview with Allen while he was making his 1977 movie "Annie Hall." To Dart's surprise, Allen—who normally wouldn't give interviews during filming—wanted to talk about his spiritual angst over life, death and the existence of God, Dart said.

"I actually ran out of questions during our phone interview," Dart recalled. "He was in no rush."

Dart has won numerous awards, including RNA's Supple Award. He was president of RNA from 1990–92. One of his accomplishments as president was obtaining a law firm to do pro bono work to re-establish RNA's non-profit, tax-exempt status.

The next year, Dart was a visiting scholar at the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. At

the center, he and former Southern Baptist Convention president Jimmy Allen explored the tensions between religion and news media. They wrote, "Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media." The study was the catalyst for numerous newspapers to ramp up their religion coverage.

Dart then wrote what became the first widely used primer for religion news coverage, "Deities & Deadlines," published by the center.

For nearly 18 of Dart's 31 years at the *Times*, Dart and colleague Russell Chandler both worked as religion writers, covering tumultuous times on the beat and setting the day's standard for religion reporting. Chandler won the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.

Chandler said he and Dart shared lots of laughs and fascinating on-the-job experiences during their many years as colleagues working the same beat together.

"Longevity and commitment to the beat are hallmarks of John's professional career," Chandler said. "John Dart is a true professional—and a scholar's scholar, recognized by both peers and the academic world alike," Chandler said.

Chandler noted Dart's interest in research.

"John has always loved research, as well as writing, and he practically salivates over biblical studies, theology, ancient texts and codes, numbers and 'secret' riddles," Chandler said.

A native of White Plains, N.Y., Dart didn't set out to become a religion writer.

"I wanted to be a sportswriter," Dart recalled.

After earning his bachelor's degree in journalism at the University of Colorado, Dart served in the U.S. Army Security Agency for several years. From 1961–65, Dart worked as a staff writer for United Press International. He covered Dodgers baseball games and scored the first-ever interview with Ronald Reagan about his political aspirations.

A career in full-time sports writing never broke Dart's way so he pursued science writing at Caltech public relations for two years.

After that, he found his home—and niche.

"I applied at the *Times* in 1967 and hooked on there," Dart said in his understated fashion.

He was a religion writer at the *Los Angeles Times* until 1998.

His diverse coverage included Buddhists and Muslims finding their U.S. roots and Native Americans and indigenous Hawaiians struggling to keep their religious traditions alive.

Dart said his interest in research, the intellectual segments of religion, and the "almost unlimited borders for reporting" hooked him on the religion beat.

"How many news beats can and sometimes must include details from history or ancient tradition to explain current conflicts?" Dart asked. "How many can deal with different ideas about the future, however misguided as many are, that are causing people to spend great amounts of money and time to spread their visions?"

While at the *Times*, Dart became one of the first religion reporters to mine the conferences of academic organizations for religion stories.

He's also written for journals and other academic publications and is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Once a newcomer to their research, Dart has been accepted into the circles of scholars because of the credibility of his reporting and writing during his long career.

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