


# Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture

Edited by  
**David Morgan**

**2008**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

## Contents

Contributors	vii
Preface	xi
<b>Introduction. Religion, media, culture: the shape of the field</b> David Morgan	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Aesthetics</b> Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips	<b>20</b>
<b>2 Audiences</b> Stewart M. Hoover	<b>31</b>
<b>3 Circulation</b> Johanna Sumiala	<b>44</b>
<b>4 Community</b> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu	<b>56</b>
<b>5 Culture</b> Angela Zito	<b>69</b>
<b>6 Economy</b> David Chidester	<b>83</b>
<b>7 Image</b> David Morgan	<b>96</b>
<b>8 Media</b> Peter Horsfield	<b>111</b>
<b>9 Narrative</b> Jolyon Mitchell	<b>123</b>
<b>10 Practice</b> Pamela E. Klassen	<b>136</b>
<b>11 Public</b> Joyce Smith	<b>148</b>

vi *Contents*

12 Religion	160
Sarah M. Pike	
13 Soundscape	172
Dorothea E. Schulz	
14 Technology	187
Jeremy Stolow	
15 Text	198
Isabel Hofmeyr	
Works cited	209
Index	235

## Introduction

# Religion, media, culture: the shape of the field

David Morgan

In recent years, mediation has come to be studied as a range of religious practices in different cultural settings and historical periods around the world. The assumption at work in social and cultural criticism, theology, and mass communication studies before the 1990s was often either that the study of mass media need not include any attention to religion or that mass media compromised, diluted, or eviscerated religious belief. In the United States, the realization that religion is indeed a mass-mediated phenomenon whose social agency and historical significance need to be scrutinized emerged during the 1970s and 1980s under two broad rubrics: the history of the book and print culture and the study of popular culture and religion.<sup>1</sup> There were several noteworthy exceptions to this, especially in the study of visual mass media and religion (Lange 1974; Milspaw 1986; Goethals 1990). But more generally, interest in popular religious media in the United States was bolstered by the rise of the religious Right as a political force that made aggressive use of media in the political sphere.<sup>2</sup> Though work before that time had certainly considered the meaning and effect of media among religious audiences, much of it was theological reflection or investigation conducted by religious researchers for use by clergy and religious organizations (Parker et al. 1955; Marty 1961; Kuhns 1969; Horsfield 1984; Fore 1987).

In Europe, scholars such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard advanced the study of popular media by developing sophisticated cultural theories that were widely influential.<sup>3</sup> But in large part because of the prevailing secularist sensibility of cultural studies, the study of religion and media in Europe was intermittent during the 1980s, not gathering great attention until the next decade. There were, however, studies of great relevance, such as Benedict Anderson's epochal discussion of nationalism (1983; rev. ed., 1991), which framed print and popular culture as the means of imagining national community; and Colin Campbell's grounding of consumerism in Romantic yearning (1987), which

has encouraged scholars to look for religious legacies in consumption and the marketplace (Anderson 1991; Campbell 1987).

Media scholarship over the second half of the twentieth century relied heavily on the theoretical as well as substantive fieldwork by leading scholars in many other countries, including Latin America, Israel, Canada, and Australia. Canadians Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan dominated the field during the 1950s and 1960s (Innis 1950, 1951; McLuhan 1964). Whereas prominent accounts of mass media such as those advanced by the Frankfurt School at one end of the political spectrum or the critical pronouncements of conservatives such as Ernst van den Haag, at the other, regarded mass media as a menace to democracy, McLuhan celebrated new media as progressive steps in the liberation of consciousness. New media disrupted existing forms of spatial and bureaucratic organization, serving to revolutionize the storage and use of information as well as the social arrangements that invested media with power. Though he was widely criticized for promoting a technologically determinist understanding of media, McLuhan infused new energy in the historical imagination of the social impact of media. If he has not been followed by a school or movement, his influence is nevertheless widely discernible, especially as regards the bedazzlement of media scholars by new media and the tendency to celebrate them for their expansion of personal agency, a process regarded by McLuhan and many since as inherently secularizing. One of the exceptions to this generalization is the work of the Latin American scholar, Jesús Martín-Barbero, which will be discussed below (Martín-Barbero 1987, 1993).

From the 1990s to the present, the study of religion and media in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa has steadily increased.<sup>4</sup> Since the mid-1990s, an academic book series, an international journal, and a series of biennial international conferences have fueled interest and served as important forums for continued research and discussion.<sup>5</sup> A number of useful collections of essays of diverse subjects have appeared since the mid-1990s under the general rubric of "media and religion," serving especially to advance theoretical and methodological considerations of the field.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these, other recent collections of historical studies and influential monographs and essays have contributed to the preliminary formation of media and religion as an academic field of research.

---

### The culturalist approach

---

If a single moment in scholarship can be said to have birthed a new way of thinking about the relationship between communication and religion, it may be an essay published in 1975 by James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication" (Carey 1975, 1989). Here Carey differentiated two

alternative conceptions of communication, the "transmission" and the "ritual" views, and pointed out that each was rooted in religious origins. He urged scholars to attend to the latter model as the "cultural approach to communication" because it regarded the purpose of communication "not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey 1989: 18–19). This cultural view of communication deeply informs the present book and the scholarly efforts in which its essays broadly participate.<sup>7</sup>

The role of media as practices and forms of meaning making in the construction of a meaningful world characterizes much of the interest of scholars engaged in the study of religious uses of media over the last three decades. By contrast, the transmission model tends to regard human beings as passive receivers of media influences, which direct them to vote, consume, or behave as the transmitter of the media wishes. Scholarship that has stressed this model when studying religion has often been the work of those with ties to religious organizations, which have wanted to know better how to use media to convey religious messages or affect the behavior of believers. But the cultural and humanistic side of the study of media does not wish to lose sight of the human being as a moral agent, as a being capable of choice and concerted effort directed by ideals, reason, feelings, and imagination. To be sure, all of these unfold within environments of strongly assertive, sometimes quite coercive social forces that often appear to leave little room for choice or chance. However, many scholars have noted the place for resistance and its power to carve out alternative or countercultural forms of identity in the popular reception of media.<sup>8</sup> The cultural approach to the study of the religious significance of media and mediated practices therefore proceeds without prescriptive assumptions about what religion properly is or how people ought to use or interpret media.

In an essay published in 1980, Stuart Hall offered a reflection on the historiography of cultural studies, focusing on the work of Raymond Williams, in which he found formulated two different emphases in the definition of culture (Hall 1980). The first was "the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect [on] their common experiences" (1980: 59). The second, Hall summarized as "those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves...within or underlying all social practices" (60). For Hall, cultural studies does right to engage both emphases in "the dialectic between social being and social consciousness" (63). Culture, in other-words, is both: the meanings that are embodied in the practices. Or, to push their dialectical relation to the logical end: culture is the meanings and the practices that produce one another in the three-fold dialectical process

described by sociologist Peter Berger as externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger 1969: 4). This means that culturalism regards culture not simply as the effect of human activity but as the constructive activity that makes social reality. Culture is what people do to negotiate their relationship to natural, social, and economic realities. Cultural studies is the academic inquiry into this interaction of everyday life, especially in the form of class, race, gender, and sexuality as it has been practiced since Hall's founding work.

Shaped as it was by British Marxist thought, cultural studies has almost entirely ignored religion. More recently, however, culturalism in the study of media and religion may be defined as the humanistic form of study that stresses the constructive role of culture in the investigation of religion and media, or anything else for that matter. Always seeking to temper any form of biological, historical, economic, or technological determinism as the basis for cultural interpretation, the culturalist approach seeks to integrate human agency with material factors that condition choice, preference, and disposition. Culturalism regards meaning making as shaped by social conditions such as class and prevailing institutions but not determined by them. Aspects of human identity as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity condition but do not prescribe experience, and they do so themselves as cultural constructions, not as biological determinants. The aim is not the study of mechanistic social forces that construct the world for individual agents but rather the interaction of social forces and individuals in the construction and maintenance of life-worlds, where phenomena at both the macro- and microscales combine to shape an ecology in which people live and interpret the world around them.

Carey's delineation of the "cultural approach" was carefully studied and presented for consideration by a key figure in the study of religion and media, Robert White, who contributed instructive literature reviews during the 1980s and 1990s to the journal *Communication Research Trends*.<sup>9</sup> In his assessment of Carey's work, White rightly pointed to the anthropological debt of Carey, primarily to Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner. Carey read Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* just after it appeared (1973) and wrote a long review essay on it, arguing for its relevance to the study of communication (Carey 1975a). Of special importance to Carey was the anthropologist's claim that understanding something as vast and detailed as culture could be done profitably by studying a ritual. The whole lies encoded within the part. It was a matter "of making large claims from small matters: studying particular rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, and myths and gingerly reaching out to the full relations within a culture or a total way of life" (Carey 1975a: 190). This approach was able to recognize the communicative significance of individual cultural artifacts and

practices, and thereby endorsed the cultural studies model of investigating communication.

Geertz also offered a definition of religion that was friendly to humanistic study because it stressed the importance of interpretation. In his widely read account of "thick description," in which he contended that culture consisted of the webs of significance spun by humanity, Geertz asserted that the analysis of culture was not "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973: 5). Applied to the study of religion, this meant that meaning was what religion did for its adherents, who needed it as an antidote to the threat of chaos, anomie, or lack of meaning posed by a universe that did not behave as a cosmos, or universal order. Religion, therefore, is a system of symbols that provides its believers with a coherent understanding or valuation of life, a meaningful, ordered world in which interaction and interdependence are enabled. For Geertz and Carey, religion was a shared, communal, intelligible way of life. It was about meaning making, a project of culture rather than society: that is, a cultural system of symbols that consisted of a people's ethos and world view, each of which Geertz explained as "the tone, character, and quality of their life" and "the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Geertz 1973: 89). To this, Carey added the insights of Victor Turner's anthropological study of ritual in order to stress the importance of practice in the definition of religion. Human beings make their worlds through the things they do, such as pilgrimage and a variety of other forms of ritual behavior. Turner and Geertz provided the example and intellectual warrant to apply the study of mass communication to religion, shifting from the heavily quantitative study of transmission to the qualitative investigation of cultural forms of meaning making.

However, the culturalist study of religion and media did not happen in a robust way for another decade or so, when White's articles began to appear and younger scholars began to think culturally about the religious significance of media. Significant works by Stewart Hoover (1988) and Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987) represent two of the earliest book-length studies to turn the corner on the transmission model. Hoover framed his study of televangelism with the concept of "religious consciousness," since he wished to understand how television as medium had changed American religion. Consciousness became the register for his investigation. Though it may seem inherently inchoate and elusive as a matrix for measuring a medium's impact, consciousness allowed Hoover to draw on recent anthropological theorizations of culture that stressed meaning making as the fundamental activity of religion. Furthermore, the term allowed him to avoid the sectarian influences of Protestant Christianity in framing his study, as "consciousness" readily captured the current spirituality of New Age and Eastern thought

and practice that permeated American society. The implications for the study of religion and media have been enormous. By situating the parachurch, noninstitutional phenomenon known as “the electronic church” within the marketplace of religion and the self-styling traffic of practices and symbols, Hoover’s work has encouraged other scholars to study contemporary non-Christian religious groups in the United States and far beyond for their use of media to gain market share, appeal to their followers, advertise themselves, engage in polemic, and forge new practices of communication as religious community.

Following a quotation of Clifford Geertz’s widely cited description of religion as a “system of symbols,” Hoover defined the “new religious consciousness” as he studied it in his examination of televangelism as “the individual’s relationship to such systems, symbolic and real, and the moods and motivations that evolve with that involvement” (Hoover 1988: 22). He made use of Walter Ong’s seminal work in elaborating the definition of religious consciousness as Ong, like McLuhan, stressed the constitutive role of media in the transformation of culture as people experience it (McLuhan 1964; Ong 1982). However, whereas McLuhan and Ong dwelt on broad social trends and cultural epochs to measure the cultural and social influence of new media, Hoover could integrate the study of broadcasters, preachers, and organizations with the much closer focus of qualitative research on individual audience members of the electronic church. The “individual’s relationship” to the symbolic system of religion signals the culturalist approach, which relies on the careful study of qualitative analysis to assemble compelling accounts of meaning construction. Accordingly, Hoover invoked Carey’s distinction of “transmission” and “ritual” definitions of media, relying on the latter to frame his approach to religious communication (Hoover 1988: 26).

Jesús Martín-Barbero moved the cultural analysis of the religious significance and experience of media ahead by formulating the idea of “mediation.” Rather than training attention on the media as fixed genres, rhetorical tropes or message bearers of religious content, Martín-Barbero argued that media are much better understood as the site of religious experience and meaning making. In contrast to a meaning of the term as recorded by Raymond Williams (“where certain social agencies are seen as deliberately interposed between reality and social consciousness, to prevent an understanding of reality” [Williams 1985: 206]), one might combine Hoover’s analysis with Martín-Barbero’s to define mediation as a consciousness of community or cohort. Rather than positing a discrete media product whose impact might be measured as this or that effect or gratification, Martín-Barbero urges us to reckon mediation as a process of engagement that includes struggle, resistance, and an ensuing transformation of consciousness

in which media take a part. This allows him to direct attention to media as forms of emancipation no less than as tools of oppression and social control. Media operate as a site in which different agents, communities, and institutions interact. In the utopian terms of Marxist liberation theology, Martín-Barbero speaks of this entire process as the “resacralization” of a world secularized by modernity. “I am suggesting,” he writes in a later essay, “that we should look for the processes of re-enchantment in the continuing experience of ritual in communitarian celebration and in the other ways that the media bring people together” (Martín-Barbero 1997: 108).

This is very much the direction in which a great deal of study has gone since the 1990s. The media are not delivery devices but the generation of experiences, forms of shared consciousness, communion, or community that allow people to assemble meanings that articulate and extend their relations to one another (Shepherd and Rothenbuhler 2001). In fact, this is the way in which media have always performed, but now their operation is not controlled or interpreted by religious organizations but studied as cultural phenomena by social analysts.

Though Geertz’s definition of religion was the most widely cited and affirmed approach to the humanistic study of religion in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it has attracted a number of critiques, some of which are quite important to consider for their implications for the study of media and religion. One of these is an essay by Talal Asad in his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), in which he argues that the search for an essence of religion leads to its insulation as a cultural phenomenon from its actual formation within the social, economic, and political domains of power (Asad 1993: 27–54).<sup>10</sup> Geertz’s notion of religion as a cultural system, he claims, promotes this isolation of religion as a self-contained, autonomous domain of human activity. The quest for a single, universal definition of religion can only ignore the social and historical aspects of human experience and does so, Asad argues, in response to the liberal Christian anxiety about the crisis of biblical authority. With the edifice of the Christian faith straining under the attack of historical-critical methods of studying the sacred text, formerly understood to be fully inspired by the deity and therefore the only true religion, Victorian thinkers reasoned that Christianity need not be undermined by scholarship nor bothered by its faulty claim to exclusive truth if the focus of study were not its truth but the way in which all religions responded to the core or essence of religion as most Europeans felt it was most perfectly manifest in Christianity. This allowed them to organize all religions in various taxonomies, usually organized chronologically and with the help of a progressive march from the primitive toward the monotheistic. Beliefs became the focus of the anthropological study of religion in the nineteenth century as local variations on a universal essence. Geertz, Asad

points out, inherited the idea and plied it in his universal definition of religion: "Geertz's treatment of religious belief, which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world" (Asad 1993: 47). Instead of analyzing religion as a cultural system of symbols that act on the psychic state of one's beliefs, Asad urges analysts of religion to integrate it with the study of the social exercise of power. It is not symbols alone that construct religious dispositions, as he discussed in the case of St. Augustine's willingness to discipline heretics with the heavy hand of state-enforced authority, but power in all of the forms that shaped Augustine's experience, such as imperial and ecclesiastical laws, such religious sanctions as death, damnation, and penance, and such rewards as salvation and good repute (Asad 1993: 35). By drawing out the stark difference between medieval Christianity and latter-day liberal Protestantism, Asad makes the point very clearly that Christianity is not a single essence but historically constructed as part of a matrix of social forces.

Recent work on religion and media has not defined religion as a discrete and universal essence but has regarded religion as fundamentally mediated, as a form of mediation that does not isolate belief but examines its articulation within such social processes as consumption, cohort formation, political resistance, transnationalism, postcolonial nationalism, and globalization (Meyer 2006a; Hoover 2006; Stolow 2006; Armbrust 2006; Morgan 2005: 220–55). This has meant looking at ways in which the self dissolves in and emerges from mediated practice as unstable, discontinuous, and processual, flowing locally and globally into extended communities and articulated in a great variety of practices. Symbols are in flux and do not crystallize into fixed formations of belief. The constructive action of media receives appropriate attention as scholars move from former preoccupation with firmly defined religious profession of beliefs to practice-centered study of religion as media. Martín-Barbero directed his remarks to the power of the electronic church in Latin America to create a site that was able to reinfuse the modern world with the sacred by recognizing television's ability to visualize "the integrating myths of our societies" (Martín-Barbero 1997: 111). He cited sports events and rock concerts as further examples of mythic resources aptly mediated by television and successfully generating communities among viewers. A very influential study by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz argued for the power of television to facilitate such unifying or centralizing effects by televising "epic contexts of politics and sports, charismatic missions, and the rites of passage of the great—what we call Contests, Conquests, and Coronations" (Dayan and Katz 1994: 332). Televised media events are not identical to their contents, though that is often the illusion they exert. A media event is experienced

within the bounds of a medium, which condenses time, combines distinct perspectives, expands the experience of presence, and fuses a diversity of contents into a singular field of vision, fashioning a coherent narrative that brings the event to the viewer. Such live events as the funerals of world leaders, presidential inaugurations, papal elections, state ceremonies, or the Olympic Games are retold as "a primordial story about current affairs," resulting in mediated events "that hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience" (ibid.). Media events are fashioned from ritual occasions and therefore exhibit several features: they are live and they are "presented with reverence and ceremony" (336). The awe and aura endow the events with a rhetorical stature that invites a reverent response from viewers and presumes to address them in the uniform and heady tropes of nation, polis, people, world, Christendom, humanity, and so forth, seamlessly extending the bounds of community to the mediated space of the televised rite. Though Dayan and Katz have been criticized for endorsing a myth of the center, a center that does not in fact exist, the criticism fails to recognize the power of myth. States, nations, and peoples commonly rely on such a story to cast a spell of unity, to generate a magnetic field that enables a polity to celebrate its coherence, its imagined community.<sup>11</sup>

A group of media researchers examining and comparing media uses in several demographically different American homes has shown that some groups within American society imagine themselves "at the heart" of the culture, whereas others perceive themselves as off-center or at the periphery, which they believe is a better place to be (Hoover et al. 2004: 103–29 and 79–101). In both cases, media help them do so. An evangelical Christian family selected media for home use that affirmed, in effect, its participation in "a new cultural mainstream in U.S. society," the neoevangelical subculture, which often fondly asserts that America is a Christian nation (103). Contrarily, American Muslim parents in another case study attempted to secure their family's religious and cultural difference from the American mainstream by establishing rules against listening to popular music and strictly limiting the amount of time spent each week watching television or playing video and computer games. Naturally, the children found ways to break or stretch the rules (91).

The investigation of media practices as formations of consciousness allows scholars to understand better the many ways in which experiencing media structures thought and feeling. This is important for several reasons. First, we can learn more about the *mentalités* or encompassing cognitive and aesthetic patterns that media help to construct and maintain by drawing and reinforcing definitive boundaries such as inside and outside, us and them, center and periphery, top and bottom, frontline and rearward, first and last, old and new. These structures confer fundamental aspects of social

identity by mapping out such temporal, spatial, and imagined terrains of church, neighborhood, clan, nation, and world. Second, we can understand how something as local and embodied as sensation—seeing, hearing, and touching—mediates individuals and vast social forces and institutions such as media producers, corporate advertisers, religious organizations, governments, or entire nations, regarding the mediation as neither unilateral nor arbitrary but as nuanced negotiations that must be studied up close, though always with an eye to the macroecology that informs every media commodity. Third, how media practices offer access to and draw from collective imaginaries, the shared cultural resources of symbols, images, sounds, songs, ideas, and personae whose knowledge and symbolic use invest individuals in broad patterns of feeling that constitute their participation in communities of different kinds.

---

### Methodology, disciplinarity, research agenda

---

Though there is no reason to pit quantitative and qualitative research against each other, as has sometimes happened in various “method wars,” much of the work done by those who approach media from a cultural-studies standpoint leans on qualitative analysis. This was thematized in the study of communication in the late 1970s in an issue of *Communication Research*, which carried a set of important essays that argued for the significance of humanistic approaches to communication research, especially as regarded the study of popular culture.<sup>12</sup> Qualitative research is designed to focus attention on individuals and to capture what they say and do in terms of narratives, which exert a compelling evidential effect as ways of explaining what people think and feel. Meaning, the result of qualitative study, is not understood as a rational choice or a consumer preference, which may be very effectively measured by the apparatus of quantitative research as forms of information.<sup>13</sup> Meaning is what people feel, intuit, imagine, fear, repress, narrate, or symbolize. In an important essay on the study of reception, Klaus Bruhn Jensen pointed out that quantitative study is well applied where choices, behaviors, and concepts of value are routine, whereas “qualitative inquiry is called for in the attempt to discern the categories audiences use to decode specific media products” (Jensen 1987: 33). People can reply to a questionnaire by stating their preferences, but how are we to learn their criteria, their conceptualization or interpretive apparatus, and the often unarticulated categories on which they rely unless we engage them in interviews and observation? The cultural approach is one that is designed to cater to meaning making as a lived process, especially one that must be witnessed *in situ*. Yet the two methods of study should not be polarized. In fact, some scholars effectively combine qualitative with quantitative

research to understand how preferences are nestled in narratives and communities.<sup>14</sup>

For all the interest in qualitative audience research, none of the scholars represented in this book would deny that media are used instrumentally, and to considerable effect. Advertising, political propaganda, and public relations all work to one degree or another. The challenge is to integrate the study of production, circulation, and reception where possible and to regard reception as potentially creative and resistant forms of response to the preferred reading that producers encode in their media products. That said, popular response may be anything but creative. Sometimes consumers behave exactly as producers and advertisers hope they will. And that may be something to welcome, depending on the cause and one’s politics. In any case, recent scholarship has avoided a determinist view of media effects without ignoring the fact that media do work to shape response, even if consumers are not captive to intended influences.

If some cultural critics and media scholars were once inclined to dismiss as “kitsch” the mass-produced items of popular religious belief, that is clearly no longer the case. As formations of religious consciousness that are not to be understood in prescriptive terms, popular media attract enormous interest from historians, sociologists, and anthropologists working on media and religion today.<sup>15</sup> Popular culture is no longer defined in terms of non-elite culture but often as common culture, the everyday practices and artifacts that invest the ideas and feelings that are the cognitive medium of identity and social life. Much of the study of media and religion today trains attention on these ideas and feelings as they are worked out in diverse forms of sensation, as what one might call the *social body*, the extension of the senses to the imagined corpus of groups. This is evident in the way that age, gender, and ethnic and sexual cohorts dress, eat, play sports, dance, listen to music, and consume everything that enables them to behave as a member of a somatic collective.

The study of the religious significance of media was slow in coming to the fore for two important reasons. Cultural studies, as has been noted, was formulated within a neo-Marxist tradition in Britain and therefore had no interest in religion. Moreover, the secularization thesis, long in place among social scientists and cultural critics, considered religion vestigial and reactionary, something that modernity and the media as part of the modern project had jettisoned. Since the early 1990s, however, secularization has been called into question by a burgeoning body of work.<sup>16</sup> Second, the definition of religion that prevailed among many scholars in Europe, North and South America, and Australia was deeply shaped by Christianity. The sacred was associated with authoritative institutions and the creeds they disseminated and endorsed. Religion, in other words, was a message directed



by various instruments at believers and nonbelievers and was deeply invested in certain traditional notions of culture as the treasure of tradition, as a sectarian version of Mathew Arnold's characterization of culture as the "best that has been thought and said." In fact, modernity has not been consistently nonreligious. It is more accurate to say that scholars have preferred to ignore it because the theory of secularization told them that it was not there. In the meantime, religion has changed beneath the feet of scholars and institutional establishments alike.

The rise of the religious Right in places as diverse as the United States, the Middle East and India during the closing decades of the twentieth century, the new availability of media to emergent churches and charismatic religious leaders in postcolonial states and in post-Soviet nationalisms, and the global movement of immigrants from the developing to Western states made religion visible in new and unpredicted ways. Religious minorities of one sort and another made aggressive use of media to promote their interests, resulting in "electronic churches," that is, noninstitutional parachurch organizations whose public face was radio and television programs, bill boards, and print. The Internet and desktop publishing vastly expanded the possibility of media access and production, leading scholars to realize that media could no longer be understood only as instruments for message delivery but were inseparable from religious identity and practice. The inquiry into media, religion, and culture, as Jeremy Stolow has rightly pointed out, has shifted to understanding "religion as media" (Stolow 2005). The culturalist approach has raised the importance of the study of practice and reception, which has led many scholars to question the instrumentalist understanding of media and, instead, to look for the constructive operation of mediations. Moreover, "religion" no longer means only Christianity and Judaism but, as Sarah Pike's essay in this volume clearly shows, everything from Neopaganism, New Age, and Hinduism to self-help therapies, personal spirituality, and fandom.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the work in this book represents a broader tendency among scholars of media and religion nowadays to recognize in mass-mediated artifacts such as religious pictures and objects another sense of the word *media*. More than radio, newspapers, and televised news broadcasts, media also means Internet fan sites and blogs, circulating videos or cassette tapes, lithographic prints, billboard advertisements, bumper stickers, mass-produced commodities such as plastic statuary or music CDs, or symbols such as crosses, menorahs, and tapestries picturing the Ka'bah. However, neither is there any need to limit media analysis to mass-produced items. Any medium, even the hand-made and utterly unique, should be included in the definition of religious media. This registers a new interest among some media scholars to look beyond the canonical and taste-bound views of art history, musicology, and traditional aesthetics to the formation of lived

aesthetics to understand more about sensation and the senses as forms of cognition.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, several of the key words included in the present volume signal the growing recognition of the body as the matrix of sensuous cognition. In addition to regrounding research in the body and avoiding the traditional humanist privileging of mind and rational thought, many of the writers demonstrate keen interest in the history of media, seeking to correct the presentist bias in many studies of mass communication and new media.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the *mélange* of disciplines, geographies, and media supports the view that no single discipline has commanded the field of study. Sociology, anthropology, and history have contributed major methodological guidelines—quantitative and qualitative research, ethnography, and archival and artifactual study. However, media studies, cultural studies, feminism, art history, visual and material culture studies, and religious studies have brought a host of additional questions and methodological priorities to bear on the study of religion and media, resulting in a range of interests and a conversation that is really a set of conversations, including the study of journalism, mass communication, consumption, visual culture, theology, the public sphere, globalization, transnationalism, political theory, and cultural economy. To date, participants have felt no urgency to limit the discourse or dominate it by discipline, field, or methodology. For many of us, this is a sign of robust intellectual health.

---

### Key terms and the conceptual field they configure

---

This book seeks to discern the emerging conceptual framework in the recent study of media and religion. Rather than looking for fast boundaries or new foundations in an overlooked or a novel subject matter, the approach is to describe an intersection where no discipline dominates but several are engaged in serious conversation with one another. The writers are scholars from around the world who come to the study from different academic specialties. Their work over the last decade and more has been influential in shaping the field of media and religion.<sup>20</sup> One might add many names to the list and compile a substantial bibliography. The signs clearly indicate that the field is expanding and deepening: all of which makes one pause at the audacity of selecting a mere fifteen words for a list of key terms. Given the many different emphases in the far-from-unified field of inquiry, lists of even a few terms would vary considerably. Rather than trying to be comprehensive or universalizing or equitable, it seemed more important to look across a large number of inquiries, conferences, and consultations in search of patterns that might affirm themes, keyed to concepts and their terms, that have played a recurrent and influential role in the discourse.



Judging from the traffic that has traveled the intersection of disciplines, questions, and studies, the list of key words that comprises the book captures much of the energy and focus. The following remarks attempt to sketch out the conceptual field by clustering several of the terms into smaller groups.

Gathered together for critical definition here, I hope they push the discourse on media and religion to recognize more formally the most influential implications of recent work. The terms have been selected to represent the emergent network of ideas that have shaped investigation over the last three decades. Each of the authors has written within a matrix of ideas, artifacts, institutions, and practices that joins them to a larger framework. For example, one of the threads connecting several words (*audiences, circulation, public, community*) is the power that media practices have demonstrated time and again to create social forms of association. So in writing about audiences, Stewart Hoover considers the history of the treatment of mass media, the eclipse of traditional religious authority, the importance of the marketplace, and the emerging prominence of audiences as powerful agents rather than passive consumers. A significant consequence of these changes has been that scholars have come to focus on the meaning-making activities of media practices. Likewise, in discussing circulation, Johanna Sumiala examines ways in which the mass-mediated framing of images creates relationships between them and viewers. These relations inflect the reception of images, suggesting that scholars train their attention on the circulation and reception of media artifacts to learn how mediated events take on meaning.

Reflection on the social, cultural, and political functions of print and broadcast media has been importantly concerned with the formation of different publics, the public sphere, and public opinion. Joyce Smith examines the mediated construction of publics, asking how they are imagined, disseminated, consumed, contradicted. Where and how do media publics happen? Riffing on Jürgen Habermas's enormously influential study of the role of eighteenth-century coffee shops in forming the public sphere, Smith suggests that mediated publics today arise in the savory taste of coffee and the leisurely privacy of wifi connections. All of the analyses described so far unfold in dialogue with J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu's discussion of the community-forming effects of media consumption. He shows how this applies to face-to-face and urban—but also transnational—communities for whom media maintain an extended set of associations as religious groups take shape in the global flows of immigrants.

A second set of terms (*text, narrative, technology, economy*) responds to traditional approaches to the study of media and religion to show how it has changed. Thus, texts are not stable entities, drawing from abiding genres that provide clear meanings but, as Isabel Hofmeyr shows, are social events,

emerging from use, endlessly redacted and circulating. Careful historical study is able to demonstrate how each iteration is suited to particular circumstances and negotiates social and cultural differences. As a dominant structure in human communication and memory, narrative is one of the primary occasions on which news media's public constructs its sense of truth, community, and value. Jolyon Mitchell investigates the role of narrative in journalism, folklore, and the formation of national identity, focusing on the dynamics of narration as the story of a Philippine national hero is retold in word and image. Stories are framed and followed by journalists in the form of various narratives and are rejected, championed, and redeployed by consumers in rituals of communication. Through narrative, events and people are assembled into powerful figures that are linked to myths, religious stories, and other artistic forms in the forging of collective identity. Technology has long been the fetish of social histories of media, adorned with narratives of revolution as the primary trope in discourses on modernity, democracy, and Western supremacy. However, Jeremy Stolow proposes that technology needs very much to be reexamined within an approach that stresses practice, community, and reception. This allows him to argue persuasively for understanding religion as media, touching on perhaps the most fundamental idea in the turn to the humanistic study of media and religion. This shift allows for much greater attention to interpretations and uses of technology in the life-worlds of consumers, which may then, in turn, be instructively compared to ideologies and cultural myths about technological power and promise.

The "power of media" thematic carries with it a strong temptation to reduce media technologies to their commodity value, which is understood commonly as their capacity to deliver corporate profit. A great deal of mass communication research in the twentieth century was dedicated to measuring the intended and unintended "effects" of such media as film, advertising, public relations, and political propaganda—research that was often funded and relied on by business and political interests. This highly instrumentalist approach to media easily overlooks the culture of media reception, which involves the religious significance of consuming media. Production, circulation, and consumption of media form what may be described as a cultural economy of media. David Chidester ponders this as a religious phenomenon insofar as media reception performs such important cultural work as crafting or reinforcing representations of world, home, gender, race, self, clan, and enemy. All media come to people today as commodities, making us consumers engaged in acts of exchange that do far more than provide food or clothing. The culture of media practices may be very helpfully described as a system exchange that relies on different forms of belief, unbelief, and make-believe.

Another cluster of key words revolves around embodiment and sensation (*aesthetics, image, soundscape*). This represents a distinctive direction of recent research in media and religion, the result of interdisciplinary study by anthropologists, film scholars, and art historians. The body has yet to receive its due as one of the most fundamental registers in the cultural analysis of media, and this is due largely to the lack of methodological resources in the study of media to date. To this end, four scholars trained in appropriate disciplines explore the various ways in which the senses function in media practices as ingredients in the ways of knowing and feeling that interact with media to create their immediacy and effect. Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips revisit the modern word *aesthetics*, first coined in 1735 to designate the study of how poetry operates as a form of sensuous cognition. They urge scholars of media and religion to go beyond the question of art as visual representation to the body itself. The implications for inquiry are considerable: How do we study the body's experience, sensation and intuitions, feelings and moods as a principal aspect of the process of mediation? And how does the body enter into the construction of private and public experience and the creation of meaning? David Morgan develops a parallel account of seeing, understanding the image not merely in terms of symbolic forms of representation, that is, as iconography, but as cultural and biological operations that are grounded in the human face, where image meets body. The fear of images arises in just this corporeal registration of visual representation. And this fear has an august history that is deeply invested in the history of ideas about representation. Dorothea E. Schulz investigates the other dominant bodily medium of communication—sound—by framing it spatially as soundscape. This enables her to think productively of the power of sound to construct public spaces but also to study how religion is embodied and felt by believers, becoming a powerful form of sensation and thereby materializing the study of mediated communities.

The key words *religion, media, practice, and culture* are located throughout the warp and woof of the book, each serving to articulate and interpret the direction of the field over the last fifteen to twenty years. The study of religion, as Sarah Pike demonstrates, has shifted from an emphasis on institutions, creeds and the biographies of influential leaders to the stories and practices of groups and individuals who commonly appropriate materials from rival groups and from the past to fashion new narratives. They freely engage in commerce and marketing to position themselves to competitive advantage and make avid use of both new technologies and traditional forms of material and visual culture. Peter Horsfield surveys the dynamic nature of media in recent studies, articulating several influential models for the study and experience of media. In doing so, he is able to demonstrate how the term is a key to understanding lived religion as a set of material practices, as a

process of marketing belief, and as a social operation of mediation, in which religion is not simply here or there, invested in the traditional hardware of altar or holy site, but diffused in virtually ubiquitous media artifacts and the practices of consuming them. This state of affairs urges analysts to recognize the importance of understanding practice as the center of gravity of religion, and that is what Pamela Klassen does in her chapter on practice. By reviewing the recent history of theoretical reflection on practice among sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, Klassen shows the importance of the idea for the study of religion as mediation.

To date, many scholars of religion and media have operated with only an implicit notion of culture in mind. This tends to produce under-theorized accounts that stress the dominance of institutions and trendsetting individuals that take the place of more subtle perceptions of the cultural processes of mediation. A more robust account of culture in the study of media and religion will highlight the dynamics of constructing narratives, the performance of ritual practices, the mediation of religious belief, and the role of consumption in crafting communities and social identities. Angela Zito, therefore, conducts her discussion of culture as a history of how major thinkers over the last several decades have successively framed the study of media and religion in different approaches to culture. She argues that culture is more than the static reservoir of meanings and artifacts and the enduring hierarchy of authority that certain groups wish it to be. Culture is also the creative, countervailing, evolving, ever-transient, and always historically constructed range of activities that order and value human experience, forever building worlds up and tearing them down. Culture consists of the practices and epistemologies of embodiment and mediation that endow human experience with its meanings. Religions are prevailing forms of such ordering at work in institutions, markets, individual and collective rituals, various mediated publics and audiences, and the shifting shape of communities that each of these produces.

---

## Notes

- 1 Major work on the history of the book and religious print that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s includes that of Stout 1977; Hatch 1983; Hall 1989; and Nord 1984. Important work on religion and popular culture at this time includes Real 1977; Williams 1980; and Goethals 1981.
- 2 The winter 1985 issue of the *Journal of Communication* ran as a special feature entitled "The Mediated Ministry," consisting of six articles by scholars who examined the use of mass media for religious purposes, *Journal of Communication* 35 (1): 89–156. The following studies also register the interest of scholars occasioned by the new circumstances of religious communication

- and media marketing during the Reagan era: Frankl 1987, Hoover 1988, and Schultze 1990.
- 3 See the many references to Williams, Hall, Barthes, and Baudrillard in the bibliography. Two helpful and widely cited surveys of leading theorists, debates, and schools of thought regarding mass media since the 1950s in Europe, though including figures in Canada, Australia, and the United States, are McQuail 1994 and Stevenson 1995. Neither volume makes any mention of religion in the study of mass media.
  - 4 See, for example, Babb and Wadley 1995; Hackett 1998; Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Armbrust 2000; Rajagopal 2001; Ginsburg 2002; Ukah 2003; Pinney 2004; Abu-Lughod 2004; Oosterbaan 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Meyer 2006a; Jain 2007; Larkin 2007.
  - 5 The book series, entitled "Religion, Media and Culture" and published by Routledge (London), is edited by Stewart Hoover, Jolyon Mitchell, and David Morgan. The journal, *Media and Religion*, published by Erlbaum, is edited by Judith Buddenbaum and Daniel Stout. The International Conference on Media, Religion, and Culture has been held on six occasions: Uppsala, Sweden, 1993; Boulder, Colorado, 1996; Edinburgh, Scotland, 1999; Louisville, Kentucky, 2004; Sigtuna, Sweden, 2006; Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2008. The seventh and eighth conferences are scheduled at Toronto (2010) and Amsterdam (2012).
  - 6 Sweet 1993; Arthur 1993; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996; Hoover and Lundby 1997; De Vries and Weber 2001; Hoover and Clark 2002; Mitchell and Marriage 2003; Horsfield et al. 2004; Mitchell 2005; Meyer and Moors 2006; Sumiala-Seppänen et al. 2006; Henriquez 2007; Clark 2007b.
  - 7 Stewart Hoover has recently noted the importance of "the culturalist turn" and Carey's work as well as the relevance of Geertz's approach to religion to his own study of media and religion, Hoover 2006: 16–17, 23.
  - 8 De Certeau 1984: 165–76; Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992; Radway 1984.
  - 9 See White 1981 and 1994 for two authoritative overviews of current literature; for a helpful overview of the shift that White helped note and characterize, see White 1983.
  - 10 For a philosophical critique of Geertz's definition of religion, see Frankenberry and Penner 1999.
  - 11 Important discussion of the idea of the center begins with a seminal essay by Shils 1975. An instructive set of reflections on Shils's work and the topic is Greenfield and Martin 1988. The idea of a "social center" as developed by Dayan and Katz has been critically analyzed by Couldry 2003: 55–74. Couldry is, of course, correct that no such single center exists, but the appeal and cultural capital associated with the idea of or desire for one articulated in its mediated construction is the point I wish to underscore.
  - 12 The issue was introduced by Hirsch 1978.
  - 13 I borrow the distinction of "meaning" and "information" in regard to qualitative and quantitative method from Jensen 1987: 31. On the explicit distinction of the social scientific study of audience preferences and the cultural studies approach, see Kreiling 1978.

- 14 See, for example, the large body of work by Robert Wuthnow, such as Wuthnow 2003, which combined interviews with social survey instruments.
- 15 Examples might be enumerated a great length. Lynch 2007 and Clark 2003 serve to signal the range of recent work.
- 16 One of the early and widely influential studies that helped turn the corner for many scholars of media and religion was Warner 1993.
- 17 For discussion of this change and its relevance for the study of media, see Hoover 2006: 50–66. For a variety of reflections about religion and its conceptualization, especially in regard to the study of media, see De Vries 2007.
- 18 A call for and preliminary conceptualization of this research area is Meyer 2006a. Meyer and Verrips develop the approach in their contribution to this volume, "Aesthetics." See also Verrips 2006. Consideration of a popular aesthetic of mass-produced religious imagery occurs in Morgan 1998: 29–58.
- 19 Important recent historical studies of religion and media include Winston 1999, Peters 1999, Hangen 2002, Hendershot 2004, and Rosenthal 2007.
- 20 In addition to several items listed in previous notes, see Pike 2001; Hofmeyr 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Stollow 2005; Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti 2005; Chidester 2005; Meyer 2006a; Schulz 2006; Hoover 2006; Mitchell 2006; Klassen 2006; Morgan 2007; Mitchell 2006; and Zito 2007.