FOUR APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MEDIA AND RELIGION

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Over the past thirty years, there has been a growing research literature on media and religion. Although studies of religion and film have a somewhat longer history than this (reflecting the ways in which film was often treated as a 'serious' artwork and therefore more suitable for academic study), the emergence of phenomena such as televangelism led to renewed interest in the relationships between media and religion.

The aim of this paper is to give an outline of key approaches to the study of media and religion, and to direct you towards resources that can help you explore these in more depth.

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Within the broad field of work on media and religion, it seems legitimate to distinguish four overlapping approaches:

1. **SIMILARITY**: Media and religion involve similar processes of mediation between the self and the sacred
2. **DISTINCTION**: Media and religion are distinct 'fields', the one affects the other
3. **MEDIATIZATION** (or convergence): Religion has become a thoroughly mediatised experience
4. **ARTICULATION**: The way media and religion are related to each other is not stable, nor predictable and depends on audience uses and interpretations

THE BEST BOOK

To get an introduction into these various approaches, and a detailed account of particular articulations of media and religion is Stewart Hoover's *Religion in the Media Age* (Routledge, 2006). [http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415314237/]

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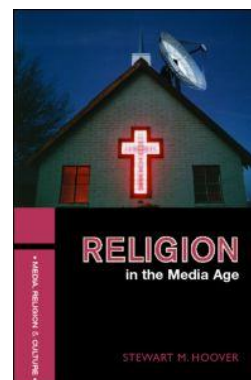
1. SIMILARITY

 In a way 'religion' can be seen as a medium in itself; it is sometimes considered to form a channel between the self and God that consists of a set of institutions, authorities and practices, such as churches, holy texts and preachers. Like media, religion also offers symbols, icons and stories to make sense of the world. Such an understanding has been well voiced by Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries, who claims that without these mediating practices and discourses religion would not be able to manifest itself at all (De Vries, 2001). Some authors have focused, in addition, on the cultural artefacts and commodities through which religion becomes possible (examples in Hoover, 2006).

The other way around, media themselves have often been framed as 'religion' or 'religious'. This equation is self-evident in the growing body of dedicated religious media and internet sites, but also comes out of less directly religious media expressions and experiences. Academics, journalists and fans alike have, for instance, identified football stadiums as 'holy grounds'. Gaffney (2008) has called stadium 'Temples of the Earthbound Gods', Trumpbour (2007) writes about stadiums as 'the new cathedrals' and more generally football has been interpreted as 'Ersatzreligion' or 'substitute religion' (Sutter, 2006). Next to football, popular music has often been compared to religion, not only through its manifest lyrics but especially through the way it constructs and maintains communities around specific subcultures of music (see for instance Sylvan, 2002). The Irish rock band U2 has often been framed in religious and spiritual terms, not only because the Irish catholic backgrounds of its members, but also because of the band's political and social agenda, its iconography and relation to its fan base (Stockman, 2005). More broadly, theories of media and communication have also been shown to have religious roots and precedents (Peters, 1999).

Methodology and methods:
Many of these analyses can be typified as elaborate cultural critiques, based on an eclectic combination of different theories and secondary sources. There is relatively little empirical research, neither in a deductive (theory testing) nor in an inductive (theory building) manner.

References and further reading

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Gaffney, C. (2008). *Temples of the Earthbound Gods. Stadiums in the Cultural Landscapes of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Peters, J. Durham (1999). *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stockman, S. (2005). *Walk on: the spiritual journey of U2*. Orlando, FL: Relevant Books.

Sutter, T. (2006). *Ein Vergleich von populärer Kultur und Religion am Beispiel des Fußballs.* Grin Verlag. [www.grin.com].

Sylvan, R. (2002). *Traces of the spirit: the religious dimenions of popular Music.*New York, NY: New York University Press.

Other resources:

The ***Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*** is an important outlet for these kinds of approaches. Website [http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/]

A helpful website on ***religion and popular music*** is maintained by Rupert Till, Ian McNaught and Caroline Pringle from the University of Huddersfield (UK). Good bibliography, links to other websites and list of scholars working in this area [http://www.hud.ac.uk/mh/music/research/pop_religion/].

2. DISTINCTION

Another set of approaches and questions comes about when we look at media and religion as two separate fields that influence each other.

Religious institutions and individuals have been and still are highly bothered by the rise of the modern mass media, which they quite often consider as instruments of evil. Initially these suspicions played out mainly in forms of censorship; in the US, for instance, the dime novels of the 19th century were considered as instruments of Satan and their Puritan critic Anthony Comstock succeeded in passing laws against their distribution through US-mail (Bates, 1995). Later on, with the media becoming more powerful, warnings and guidelines were more common instruments for religious authorities to warn against media dangers. In the Netherlands, in 1954, the Catholic bishops issued a so-called 'mandement' that prohibited Dutch Catholics to listen to non-catholic radio or watch non-catholic television. In current times, orthodox Christians have called for the Harry Potter books to be banned from schools libraries because of their alleged occult and paranormal content (Abanes, 2001). The books have caused controversy in Islamic countries as well. The list of such conflicts between religion and particular media is very long and suggests an inherent opposition between the two parties (Starker, 1989). Yet, religious institutions have been among the first to adapt media to spread their message. The televangelical movement in the US is the prime example but 'religion' has also been an early presence on the internet, with many people going online for their religious information and inspiration.

Religious institutions and individuals wouldn't be so opposed to media if they didn't believe the media to be very powerful and undermining for religious institutions and authority. Social theory and research have indeed pointed to the increased presence of media in everyday life as one of the factors in modernity that has changed religious experience. Neil Postman, in his classic tirade against contemporary entertainment culture complains that 'in courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, *churches* and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they *entertain* each other (1985, p. 95 – italics added). Other authors go a step further and suggest that television has contributed to the disappearance of religion (secularization) in modern societies (e.g. Bruce, 2002). The current wave of television series with paranormal and supernatural themes (think of *Charmed, Medium, Ghost Whisperer*, etcetera), has been found to transform the religious imagination of young audiences (Peterson, 2010).

Of course, the internet is the newest medium to affect religion in a very powerful way. Read more about that topic under the heading of ´Mediatization´.

Methodologies and methods
All arguments under this heading that assume that media affect religion in either negative or positive way, belong to an 'active media' paradigm which gives media power precedence over the agency of individuals or group to create their own meaning. In this paradigm, media

psychological experimental or survey research is popular, but qualitative methods have been used as well, specifically in depth interviews and focus groups. However, here too, there are many authors using descriptive procedures combining theory and secondary sources.

References and further reading

Abanes, R. (2001). *Harry Potter and the Bible.* Toronto: Horizon Books.

Bates, A. (1995). *Weeder in the Garden of the Lord: Anthony Comstock's Life and Career*. Lanham, ML: University Press of America.

Bruce, S. (2002). *God is dead: secularization in the West*. London: Blackwell.

Petersen. L. (2010). American television fiction transforming Danish teenagers' religious imaginations. *Communications, 35*(3), p. 229-247.

Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death. Public discourse in the age of showbusiness.* London: Methuen.

Starker, S, (1989). *Evil Influences: crusades against the mass media.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

 Other resources

US newspaper *The Washington Post* has a section **'On Faith'** in which many of the issues above are discussed by columnists and readers. One of them concerns the possibility that television's obsession with the paranormal/supernatural has influences Americans, of whom 75 % believe in the supernatural.
http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/07/spirituality_and_the_supernatu.html

More information on **Harry Potter and Christianity**: http://www.bible-knowledge.com/harry-potter-and-witchcraft/

One of the biggest websites for **fans of paranormal television** is *Extreme Ghost Hunters.* http://www.extremeghosthunters.com/

3. MEDIATIZATION

The increasing and ubiquitous presence of media of some kind in our daily lives, but also in various social, cultural, political and economic spheres has led to the introduction of a new concept in the social sciences and humanities, that of *mediatisation*. The concept was introduced to studies of media and religion by Scandinavian scholar Stig Hjarvard in his 2008 article *A theory of the media as agents of religious change*. In it, he claims that religion can no longer be studied separately from the media for four reasons:

- For most people in western societies, 'the' media have become the primary source of their religious ideas, whether they concern their own religion or those of others (e.g. Poole, 2002).
- They also have become the primary source of religious imagination (e.g. Plate, 2003)
- Many social functions of religion, especially where it concerns community building and rituals, have been taken over by the media" (Martin-Barbero, 1997).
- And religious institutions themselves have subsumed to 'media logic', i.e. framing their actions and activities in forms appealing to the media, and to audiences that live with media (e.g. Horsfield, 2004).

Other authors have built on this notion and argued that the 'branding' of religion is one dominant pattern of mediatisation. German scholars Andreas Hepp and Veronika Krönert (2009) say particularly that: "'branding religion' means on the one hand presenting religion in the 'profane' space of mostly commercialised media without losing on the other hand the 'sacred' aspect of the religious offer".

Mediatisation is probably most visible in the presence and practices of religion on the internet. In already classic distinction, Christopher Helland (2002) has argued that these take the form of 'religion online', i.e. traditional religious institutions establish a top-down online presence, and 'online religion' offering an interactive religious environment in which individual experiences and understandings of religion can be exchanged.

Methodologies and methods

The mediatisation thesis is in itself somewhat deterministic, assuming that the media act as agents of changes towards religion. Studies in this field thus often also take an active media perspective, but less from a psychological than from a cultural/sociological perspective. Quantitative and qualitative content, text and image analyses are often used here to collect evidence for mediatisation. With respect to the internet, the development of cybermetric methods for the social sciences offers a promising new direction to systematically collect and analyse massive and diverse online data. The Cybermetric Research Group of Wolverhamption University offers free to use, menu based software to collect data from blogs, YouTube or social network site, and soft ware to analyse the sentiments in online discussions (http://cybermetrics.wlv.ac.uk/)

References and further reading

See the special issue of the journal, *Culture and Religion*, 2011, 12(2), on the mediatization of religion debate, which includes articles by Stig Hjarvard, Mia Lovheim, David Morgan, Lynn Schofield Clark, Alexandra Boutros and Gordon Lynch.

Helland, C. (2002). Surving for salvation. *Religion, 32*(4), p. 293-302.

Hepp, A. And V. Krönert (2009). Media Cultures and Religious Change: 'Mediatization' as 'Branding Religion'. Paper presented at the Conference 'Religion, Media Process and the Transformation of the Public Sphere'. ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, 9. January 2008. http://www.imki.uni-bremen.de/fileadmin/mediapool/medienkultur/IMKI/Paper-Religion-3.pdf

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Horsfield, P. (2004). Theology, church and media: contours in a changing cultural terrain. In P. Horsfield, M. Hess and A. Medrano (eds). *Belief in media. Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 23-33.

Martin-Barbero, J. (1997). Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Culture. in S. Hoover & K. Lundby (eds.). *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 102–116.

Plate, S. (2003*). Representing religion in world cinema: film making, myth making, culture making*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Poole. E. (2002). *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. London: IB Taurus.

Other resources

There is a special network for the study of religion and **mediatisation**, which is run from the Nordic countries. Some of the info on the site needs updating: http://mrc-network.media.ku.dk/

A very helpful blog called '**Webreligion**' is hosted by German researchers (but mostly in English) and consists of reports of lectures, conferences, books, newspapers and so on. http://webreligion.wordpress.com/

4. ARTICULATION

'Articulation' is a rather general term that refers to processes of connection and disconnection, but also to the way people appropriate cultural forms for their own purpose. In the context of religion and media, it refers to the approach Stewart Hoover defines in his book *Religion in the Media Age* (see above) which locates the analysis of religion and media 'radically in the experience of lived religious or spiritual lives as they encounter their social and cultural lives, of which the media play an ever more important part' (p. 55). Yet, which media these are, whether they are always the same, under which circumstances, in which environment and in which times they change is a question that has hardly been addressed nor answered yet. The notion of 'articulation', however, implies that the starting point for any investigation should be with the people themselves and how they experience particular media as integrated in or separate from for their religious experience. While this is markedly different from the previous approaches, it does acknowledge the empirical possibility of similarity between media and religious experience, separation between media and religion, or completely mediatised religion. As a result of the situated nature of 'articulation', studies that would fall under this heading are quite diverse. One important area of research puts everyday experiences at the centre of the research (e.g. Clark, 2003; Hoover, 2006), another important one looks at different interactions between media, religion and the public sphere (e.g. Meyer and Moors, 2005; Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010).

Methodologies and methods
Research in this area assumes that audiences are active producers of meaning, in interaction with each other and the text of interest. This is in diametrical contrast with a notion of active media that is more prominent in the previous two approaches. The methodology of preference is inductive and often based in grounded theory, using methods like in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations.

References and further reading

Clark, L. Schofield (2003). *From Angels to Aliens. Teenagers, the media and the supernatural.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clark, L. Schofield (2011). 'Considering religion and mediatisation through a case study of J&K's big day: a response to Stig Hjarvard', *Culture and Religion*, 12(2), 167-84.

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Meyer, B. And A. Moors (2005). *Religion, media and the public sphere*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.

Zoonen, L. van, Vis, F. and S. Mihelj (2010). Performing citizenship on YouTube: activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna. *Critical Discourse Studies, 7*(4), 249 – 262.

Other resources

One of the leading research centres in the world, possibly *THE* most important one is the **Center for Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado, Boulder.** Many links to other relevant projects and organisations
http://www.colorado.edu/journalism/mcm/mrc/
A wide variety of **articulations between media and religion** can be found on the website of The New York Center for Religion and Media. Drawing on the expertise of working journalists and scholars from across the disciplines, the Center offers an accessible selection of the day's most interesting stories. http://www.therevealer.org/