

Researching religion in a school of media and cultural studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the reasons for the recent emergence of religion as a cultural and political influence, and why religion has been largely overlooked within media industries and by media studies academics. It outlines some of the rethinking and new directions in research that have been taking place in recent decades, arguing that the separation of media studies and religion studies in the academy can no longer be justified, practically or theoretically.

A spate of recent events of global and national significance has foregrounded in a new way the place of religion in contemporary societies and placed the question of religion into the centre of discussions about the nature of the public sphere. News reporting and public commentary of 9/11 and other catastrophic acts of violence has revealed that journalists have been struggling to understand how to think about and report on their religious character. This has exposed the fact that ways of thinking about religion within journalistic domains were less developed than in other scholarly frameworks as new religio-political concerns were putting renewed cultural, political and educational questions to the test of analysis.

This significant overlooking of religion in cultural analyses during the latter part of the twentieth century can be attributed to a significant degree to the practices of modern social-cultural-political life embodied in secularisation theory, the sociological view which saw religion in the modern world as a declining force and a matter of diminishing concern. More than just a logical deduction, this secularist argument is informed by an ideological view of religion as a significant agent of domination and social discordance rooted in ignorance and frustrated human need and aspiration. Advances made in the modern period, it has been argued, have gradually eroded these roots. New scientific discoveries and knowledge have dispelled many of the gaps in understanding that were formerly filled by religious belief. New technological developments and the national welfare state offered more practical solutions to the threats, problems and unfilled aspirations that provided the space in which the offerings of religion filled a practical social function.

This secular understanding of religion, which de Vries (2001: 19) describes as “the uncontested and often self-congratulatory narrative of Western ‘secularist’ modernity”, has also served a significant political purpose of neutralising religion as a political force in order to achieve what Toulmin identifies as one of the early motivators of secular thinking, containing religion’s disruptive social influence (Toulmin, 1990). Sociological data from some of the more technologically advanced countries in the West appeared to support the view that until recently there had been a progressive decline in involvement, support and resourcing for Christian churches, lending support to the secularist belief that the political importance of Christian institutions and thought has been steadily

diminishing. Globalising cultural, economic and political shifts through the twentieth century have been considered from a secularist view to be the death knell for all but residual superstitious religious positions, which lack the perspective to recognise their primitive irrelevance. The sociologist Steve Bruce, for example, as recently as the late 1990s was arguing this position in *Religion in the Modern World*:

In a nutshell, I will argue that the basic elements of what we conveniently refer to as 'modernisation' fundamentally altered the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices, and organisations so as to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals, in roughly that order. (Bruce, 1996: 2)

Bruce argues that the challenges posed to religion in the West by the growth of scientific rationalism and nation-states was assisted by changes within Christianity itself. For Bruce, the Reformation broke the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church in the West and introduced the voluntary principle into Christianity, opening the way for the element of choice in religious belonging. This diversifying of institutional Christianity led to the phenomenon of selective church membership and even optional belief, eventually relocating the decision about whether and how to believe away from the society to the individual. While individualism has always had a place in modern religious practice, the nature of individualism has shifted away from the freedom to hold a dissenting view, which is contrary to the dominant view, and towards the ability or likelihood of individuals to generate their own meaning. The fragmentation of religious culture that took place in the Reformation and post-Reformation period, according to Bruce (1996: 4), "was, in time, to see the widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined Christianity of the pre-Reformation period replaced by an equally widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined indifference to religion."

Religion and media studies

This broader secularisation framework has been influential in how religion has been considered within the disciplines of media and cultural studies until just recently. Media and cultural studies scholars have failed to a great extent to see the relevance of religion to their study and understanding of media. Hent de Vries provides a number of examples of this.

At a major Harvard conference some years ago entitled *The Internet and Society*, no one raised the question of religion; a more recent *Citizen's Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, entitled *We the Media*, also passes over religion in silence. So do most of the interesting studies in media and networks that originate in literary studies, hermeneutics, and system theory ... The renewed prominence of the religious and the proliferation of political theologies it entails, on the one hand, and the equally unanticipated revolution in information technologies, on the other, are analysed as if we were dealing with two totally independent developments. (de Vries, 2001: 3–4, 18–19)

This is not to say that religion and media have not been the subject of scholarly research in the second half of the twentieth century. There have been numerous empirical studies into different aspects of religion and media. Some of them, such as Parker's early sociological study of the radio-television audience of New Haven (Parker, Barry, & Smythe, 1955), have been innovative and comprehensive in their methodologies for their time. But these studies generally have been largely administrative research, focusing particularly on religious uses of media and as such of interest mainly to religious specialists. Other potential links that should be of interest to general media and cultural scholars – such as how some media uses reflect religious characteristics, or the way in which an understanding of religious practices may be relevant for understanding the nature of some media-cultural phenomena – have largely been overlooked, even in critical and cultural studies where one would think those topics would be of interest. Like De Vries mentioned above, Stewart Hoover considers that the separation of the two disciplines of study has made a cultural study of media and religion difficult and under-theorised. He writes:

These earlier considerations were rooted in a particular way of looking at both media and religion: as separate and separable entities that could be seen as acting independently of one another and

as having impacts or effects on one another. In this view, 'religion' and 'the media' are autonomous, independent realms, and the central questions involve a kind of competition between them. (S. Hoover, 2002: 1)

Hoover and Venturelli suggest that the reason lies in the origins of media studies within Enlightenment sociological thought, which has most markedly drawn a distinction between realms and behaviors it has considered to be either sacred or secular:

... this blindspot of contemporary media theory, to the extent that it exists, stems in large measure from deep roots in social and cultural theory ... This project invokes the notion of secularization ... with a bright demarcation coming to separate the realm of belief, spirituality, sentiment, piety, and ontologically-derived morality (as opposed to broadly utilitarian moral systems) from the realm of the tangible and material. The latter sphere, constructed, and privileged, as 'the social,' is seen as the pre-eminent one, with the 'intangibles' of the other sphere understood to exist in some more or less functional relationship to it. (S. Hoover & Venturelli, 1996: 252)

Graham Murdock considers that the sociological and political separation of sacred and secular within the secularisation model, and the presumption that the sacred is diminishing in extent and importance, underlies the failure of cultural studies to take up questions of religion to any extent, even where those questions were relevant to their investigations. Murdock writes:

This view of religion as a weak and waning presence in popular experience is the principal reason why British Cultural Studies has paid it so little attention. In a seminal article, Raymond Williams (1980) had no hesitation in including it among the 'residues – cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation.' And because the supporters of the new field had nominated the study of *contemporary* culture as their defining project, 'residual' practices held few attractions. Interest focused instead on the 'emergent' cultures forming around youth, gender, and ethnicity. (Murdock, 1997: 89)

For Murdock, this ideological prejudice blinded cultural studies scholars to those areas of contemporary culture in the UK in which religion was playing an important role in cultural resistance and identity, such as the new religious subcultures grouped around the resurgence of evangelicalism and the black churches in which women, particularly middle-aged or elderly women, played a central role.

The other perspective bearing on research in media and religion has been the practical and political issues around the study of religion within state funded universities in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Practically, until recently, it has been difficult for anyone studying media and religion to find support for research or opportunities to teach within the area in schools of media or cultural studies.

The avoidance of religion by media or cultural studies is not unique. It has been paralleled by a similar avoidance of media in the study of religion. While there have been a lot of studies undertaken and works published on different aspects of Christianity and the media, for example, their focus has been primarily on two concerns: the utilisation of mass media in communicating Christian ideas and messages, and critical analysis of the content of media from the particular ideological perspective of the religion. Underlying these studies have been two fundamental, largely untested assumptions. First, that media are to be understood primarily from an instrumentalist perspective, that is as useful technologies for carrying religious ideas and information once those ideas and information have been "independently" determined by the religious communicator outside the media context. Within this framework, religious communications have been understood and studied primarily as communications generated by religious leaders or figures. Theoretical developments that advocated a more pluralistic approach to thinking about media and religion, a more interactive understanding of the production of meaning, and the influence of media cultures, discourses and power, have until recently largely been ignored.

Second, it has been commonly assumed in most Christian writings that media and religion occupy different domains. Christianity, interpreted primarily by church leaders and theologians, has

been assumed to have its own distinctive world view, meanings and practices derived from its own distinctive sources of theology, scripture and liturgy. These “distinctive” and authorised Christian understandings are seen to be carried outwards through the instruments of communication and cultural engagement. A key text in this regard has been Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr, 1951). Niebuhr posited Christianity as having a distinctive culture all of its own which was brought into interaction with the wider “worldly” culture. *Christ and Culture* is Niebuhr’s exploration of alternative positions in this process of religion and culture engagement.

The fact remains that the Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament; and that this is a person with definite teachings, a definitive character, and a definite fate. Important as are the once debated question whether Jesus ever really lived, and the still moot problem of the trustworthiness of New Testament records as factual descriptions of actual events, these are not the questions of primary significance. For the Jesus Christ of the New Testament is in our actual history, in history as we remember and live it, as it shapes our present faith and action. (Niebuhr, 1951: 12–13)

The parallel Catholic discussions have been about “inculturation” and reflect a similar dualism: an unconditioned, unchangeable, divinely instituted a-cultural Christian truth that engages with the separate, outside cultural context. This is clearly enunciated in the following:

The liturgy has replaceable elements, but not everything may be replaced. In order to know what may be changed and what must stay, it is important to make a distinction, insofar as this is possible, between the theological content and the liturgical form of a rite ... The theological content is the meaning of the liturgical text or rite. Basically it is the paschal mystery present in varying degrees and under different aspects in the celebration ... The liturgical form, which consists of ritual acts and formularies, gives visible expression to the theological content ... With this distinction in mind we need to observe a rather rigid principle. If the theological content or the liturgical form is of divine institution, it may not be replaced with another content or form that will modify the meaning originally intended by Christ. (Chupungo, 1992: 41–42)

From within this perspective, key issues in religious engagement with media have been concerned with analysing and critiquing the content of film, radio and television, relating the Christian message to these meanings, and keeping check of uses of media by Christians to ensure that the “Christian” message or the character of the media practitioner or user are not contaminated by absorption of, or into, the ideas or practices of “cultural” media.

Questioning the dichotomy

The adequacy of the secularisation thesis for describing and explaining the place of religion in the modern and postmodern world has been challenged by a number of writers in recent years (Lambert, 1999; Stark, 1999; Swatos & Christiano, 1999), on several grounds. There has been a questioning of the secularist argument that in previous times religion was more widely practiced than it is today, indicating a decline in religion over the last several centuries, particularly since the Enlightenment. Studies of religious involvement in Europe during the medieval period are indicating that religious practice and observance were significantly less than they are today, with evidence that in many industrialised and post-industrial countries religious practice has grown and religious social influence has increased (Stark, 1999). The breakdown of (assumed) cultural homogeneities and the rise of cultural pluralism as social policy in many countries today are creating new spaces for religious identity and difference to become important social indicators, with religion becoming an active consideration in cultural assimilation, social coherence and public policy-making. Religion has become a significant element in post-colonial national rebuilding in a range of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Religious identity has become an important rallying agent for large portions of populations in non-western countries for resisting the colonialism of western popular culture and consumer capitalism and a defining factor for a number of transnational political movements and conflicts. The concept of “religious fundamentalism” has

become an important signifier for global news media in their reporting of political groups, actions and social movements across regions and religions. Religion has been an agent of rallying for some of the major political upheavals and revolutions in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as revivalist Islam in the Iranian revolution, the Roman Catholic Church in the Polish Solidarity movement and the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, the Eastern Rite Catholic Church in the democratic revolution in Ukraine.

Far from the secularisation argument that religion is in a process of progressive decline or eventual replacement, therefore, the question of the place of religion in the world of the new millennium is being actively reconsidered by scholars and journalists alike. So-called “secular nations” such as the USA, UK and Australia that previously had formal policies and procedures of separation of church and state are now actively consulting religious leaders on political and social problems, policy-development and strategy (see for example, The-White-House, 2005), a trend that is seriously challenged recently by critics from a secular Enlightenment perspective, such as Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007).

Some commentators use the term “the return of religion” to describe this resurgence of religion in the contemporary world. Others challenge this framing because it suggests that the secularisation view was right, that religion had been disappearing from the modern world but is now returning. Jacques Derrida supports the perspective of Talal Asad, who proposes instead that the Islamic concept of “awakening” may be more appropriate, advocating that religion has always been there but is now expressing itself in a different way:

... the expression “return of the religious” retains a theatrical dimension. The religious never disappeared; it was not dead, only repressed in so many colonial societies. The return does not signify therefore that religion *comes back*, but that it comes back *onto the stage*, and onto one that is global and public ... One need only look at what has happened in Russia and elsewhere. One has the impression that it was never as alive, religion, as when it was in hiding during seventy years of totalitarianism. And all of a sudden it returns to the stage, intact, more alive than ever before. Between *awakening* and *return* there is the outbreak of visibility: religion can finally be practised in a *manifest* manner, in the force of phenomenality, the alleviation of repression (repression as much in the sense of the unconscious as of politics). There is, because of the repression, an accumulation of force, a heightening of potential, an explosion of conviction, an overflowing of extraordinary power. (Derrida, 2001: 76)

This proposition argues that in considering the question of religion, one needs to distinguish between the non-existence of religion as a phenomenon, and the social conditions under which it finds expression or is denied expression. Its absence from the social agenda does not equate to nothing happening. Derrida shows how the return of religion onto the global stage comes with an accumulation of repressed power to the extent that it can no longer be avoided as a personal and public condition.

Casanova (1994) adds a further dimension to these apparent contradictions in his study of the place of religion in the public order in the modern period. In place of a simple dualism of sacred and secular, Casanova suggests that the theory of secularisation contains three main arguments. Firstly, there needs to be a differentiation of the religious and secular spheres in order for pluralistic societies to function effectively as nation states. Casanova considers this an important and defensible aspect of secularisation. While the question of how this applies is the cause of constant negotiations around a range of issues, such as state funding for various religious activities such as education, welfare and social heritage issues, the crunch generally falls around the matter of social law and its enforcement – on what basis are a society’s laws made and enforced and who has the final determination? Secondly, there is a related proposition that modern differentiation of these spheres necessarily entails the marginalisation and privatisation of religion, and therefore religion’s subsequent decline as a political contributor. Casanova considers such a position as debatable and unnecessary for the effective operation of modern secular states. Thirdly is the view that a public role for religion necessarily endangers the differentiated structures of modernity. Religion therefore

must be required to play only a private role in society – a view with which he also disagrees (Casanova, 1994: 214).

From this framework, Casanova identifies a variety of versions of the secularisation thesis. The view that religion had no role to play in public national life and therefore was in a process of inevitable decline he sees as a politically driven agenda and campaign rather than an objective assessment – a view shared also by Murdock (1997: 89) in his phrase “the totalising agenda of Modernity.” With greater nuance, Casanova notes that the decline of religion was most observable in those countries where religious institutions held significant positions of social control and opposed the modern processes of individual autonomy and differentiation because it challenged the churches’ own hegemonic positions. It was in these countries where the universal decline of formal religion thesis argued by secularisation theory was more characteristic. Here the progressive democratisation of power subordinated the power of what he calls the “caesaropapist” churches – churches that sought to maintain a position of political dominance. The major challenge of the Enlightenment was against those particular religious embodiments, “those religious worldviews which stood in the way of the legitimation and institutionalisation of modern scientific methods” (Casanova, 1994: 30). It was these religious positions, which most resisted secular political autonomy because it challenged their own political control.

It was the caesaropapist embrace of throne and altar under absolutism that perhaps more than anything else determined the decline of church religion in Europe ... While the cognitive critique of religion was directed against the truth claims of religious world views, the practical-political critique was directed against the ideological functions of religious institutions ... It is not resistance to modern differentiation *per se* which weakens religious institutions but, rather, resistance from a position of political or social establishment. (Casanova, 1994: 214–215)

In other modern national contexts, Casanova argues, religion has not only survived modernity but also thrived within it. Where this has occurred, it has most commonly been by religions accepting the pluralism and autonomy of the modern nation state – even affirming them theologically – defining a new role for themselves within it, and establishing effective new mechanisms for their revitalisation and growth within the terms established by the state. As Hitchens so capably highlights, while this has included religious institutions acting primarily to further their own interests, it has also included in some cases religious institutions or movements becoming agents for the upholding of key Enlightenment values of autonomy, equity and human worth against authoritarian or anarchic regimes that deny them, or religious institutions using their social voice to represent the needs of the marginalised or socially vulnerable, a position advocated recently in Australia by the new leader of the Labour opposition, Kevin Rudd (Rudd, 2006). Finke and Stark argue similarly from an economic marketplace perspective, offering historical evidence to show that those religions that have done well in the modern world are those that have been able to adapt to and be competitive within the new conditions of the diversified marketplace of the secular and religious economy (Finke & Starke, 1992).

More recently the weakening of the boundaries of individual nation states by the currents of globalisation has presented some religious movements with a significant role as a source of identification and belonging. In regions such as Latin America and Africa, the disruption to traditional social fabrics caused by colonisation and industrialisation and the failure of western economic and social development models has created a cultural and ideological vacuum that is being taken up by new religious movements. As Meyer and Moors have noted from their anthropological work in Africa and the Middle East:

With the diminishing capacity of the nation-state for constructing communities of belonging, sub-public and transnational publics that are grounded in religious convictions, imaginaries, and networks have become increasingly important. Essential for the emergence of these new publics has been the proliferation of new technologies of communication and representation. (Meyer & Moors, 2006: 12)

This approach provides a much more useful framework than a simply dualistic secularisation model for understanding the changes that can be seen in religious movements that are now global in their communication, reach, affiliation and influence. In relation to Christianity, for example, there has obviously been a number of Christian “brands” or denominations that have experienced significant decline in the latter half of the twentieth century – most obvious are those that have been known as “mainline” churches in developed Western countries who, it can be argued among other reasons, have failed to generate from within their ethos effective forms of recruitment of new members and to adapt to the demands of the technologies and cultures of new media.

Within the secularisation framework, decline in these figurehead brands of Western Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century was generally accepted as emblematic of the decline of Christianity in general. What was missed was a parallel growth of disestablished or fundamentalist churches or new religious movements in the developed countries, or in developing regions such as Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. If noticed at all, these new religious movements were frequently dismissed as irrelevant because they were more decentralised and therefore more difficult to track or because their particular expressions of Christianity were considered by more sophisticated social commentators and reporters in the West to be anachronistic and reactionary. This skepticism and the heavy emotionalism and decentralised organizational structure of Christian Pentecostalism in Australia, for example, meant that many social commentators missed its growth in numbers and social influence during the 1980s and 1990s.

Some of the significant changes that have taken place in Christianity over the past several decades, therefore, are still a surprise to many. The centre of Christianity has shifted from the northern to the southern hemisphere, with churches in developing countries now sending missionaries to evangelise their former colonisers, creating new and dynamic congregations in what was thought to be entrenched secularism in the West. While some western churches have declined in numbers and influence, others are growing in membership and exerting an increasing influence on social and cultural policy in line with their particular social or economic outlooks (Lohrey, 2006). In place of old denominational alignments based on doctrine or institutions, new alignments are taking place across denominations based on shared conservative or liberal moral or political agendas. Rather than abandoning religion, many young people brought up with no tradition of faith are actively seeking or creating their own religion or spirituality by rejoining authoritarian religious institutions, recovering and reconstructing past esoteric religious practices and traditions, or constructing eclectic religious meaning and practice from resources adapted from popular culture. In the US, the theological and cultural alignment of evangelical Christianity with free-enterprise capitalism is resulting in the growth of new genres of commercial cultural production with profitable crossovers between Christian commercial culture and wider commerce. This new blend of Christianity with free-enterprise capitalism is being exported world-wide and being taken up in developing countries as a new alternate religious-economic system in the wake of the failure of earlier secular models of Western economic development (see for example, Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

Religion and media studies

Links between these changes in religion and media began to be made in the late 1980s, with a convergence of three related areas that previously had been studied separately: media and cultural studies, religion and media, and culture and religion. Explicit articulations of these new theoretical and research directions grew during the 1990s with a number of international conferences on media, religion and culture,¹ the formation of an international collaboration of scholars which held a series of regional consultations,² and a number of key publications flagging or outlining the area (Arthur, 1993; S. M. Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Morgan, 1998; O’Leary, 1996). Since the turn of the millennium this tendency has continued, with a growing number of international conferences, publications, and a number of university research centres being established specifically to study the interface between media and religion.³

This more integrated cultural approach towards the study of media and religion has identified a number of key interdisciplinary concerns, theoretical interests, and useful methodologies. Key to the approach is a greater openness in thinking about religion as what people do *in practice* rather than as a theoretical construct developed within a modernist empirical segmentation. When one looks at what people actually do, it is argued, it becomes apparent that the theoretical demarcations between media practice and religious practice, between so-called secular cultural symbolism and religious symbolism and cultural practice are weak demarcations and are continually being crossed in the daily practice of people in specific contexts. This study of media and religion therefore has tended to affirm and incorporate into research methodologies a number of emphases (S. Hoover, 2002: 4–6).

One is recognition that the modernist separation of sacred and secular is an artificial division, and the theoretical allocation of religion to a private realm is continually being blurred in people's daily practice. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (2006), for instance, advocate that mediated religion now plays a significant role in the formation of social identities and the modern public sphere:

The presence of mediated religion in the public sphere is both constitutive of and constituted by political activism, especially identity politics or the politics of difference. Modern religion refuses to be bound to a distinct religious sphere – as is imagined in modern notions of society as differentiated into separate domains – and appears to be intermingled with politics and sometimes violent political action ... especially pertinent is the link between religions and new electronic forms of mediation in the context of the rise of network society, a connection that evokes important questions regarding the politics of identity. (Meyer & Moors, 2006: 11)

A second emphasis is taking seriously the dimension of the popular in religious thinking and practice. While it is widely recognised that most religions involve popular communication, ritual and material practice, "legitimate" religion is generally identified with its more elite expressions. In line with other cultural studies approaches, research into media and religion from a cultural perspective takes as seriously popular mediations and practices of religion as it does the more legitimised institutional expressions, giving attention also to the characteristics, power dynamics, and challenges that popularly mediated religious practices present to more institutional forms.

Linked to this is growing recognition that religious traditions that were previously understood as relatively homogenous phenomena are much more pluralistic and diverse in their practice. This change in perspective has opened the way for greater attention to be given to distinctive aesthetic, institutional, geographic, class or ideological roots and associations of different religious expressions and the contests that take place to establish particular forms of mediation as more legitimate embodiments of religious faith than others. Within religious movements and institutions, as with other social institutional forms, media hegemonies and hierarchies operate within and between different media forms such as the visual, textual, electronic, material and ritual. These forms can reflect and support particular institutional, geographic, class and ideological interests, which vie with each other in contests of legitimation, marginalisation and subordination. These contests can be seen in studies on Islamic uses of new media (Bunt, 2000; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003), historical contests in media and religion (Horsfield, 2005), and more recent phenomena such as the conflicts and critical analysis surrounding Mel Gibson's recent movie *The Passion of the Christ* (Corley & Webb, 2004; Horsfield, 2006).

A third recognition guiding new approaches to the study of media and religion is a focus on meaning, and meaning ascribed to symbols and material practices by the user through their use, not simply through official definitions or theoretical constructions of the researcher. Research in this area, such as the generational and family research being undertaken at the University of Colorado in Boulder (Clark, 2003; S. M. Hoover & Clark, 2002), studies on religious material and visual culture (McDannell, 1995; Morgan, 2004, 2005), and on religion and the internet (Campbell, 2005; Hadden & Cowan, 2000; Helland, 2000), uncovers the extent to which individuals are eclectic in their use of

a wide diversity of popular media, symbols and material artifacts in their idiosyncratic construction of religious meaning and community.

Increasingly religion is being understood as fundamentally a mediated phenomenon, which cannot be studied without considering also the nature of its mediation. Nor is it sufficient to study religion solely from within the framework of simply a so-called “sacred” realm of esoteric beliefs and practices. As more critical observers such as Hitchens (2007) also note, political, economic, relational and seemingly mundane material issues characterise and constitute religious beliefs as much as so-called esoteric, spiritual ones. A consideration of media power challenges the reification of existing religious hegemonies and opens up new dimensions of questioning, conceptualisation and research about how particular religious phenomena have been constructed, the political, economic, cultural and mediational mechanisms by which they are perpetuated and on which they hold their attraction, and the changes that occur within any religious phenomenon whenever any of those elements change.

Practically, it is apparent that over the past decade, religion has become an important political, economic and cultural influence and signifier in today’s globalised world. That influence is due in no small part to the ability of particular religious individuals, movements and institutions to master the technologies, economies, symbolic demands and strategies of new media to rally audiences and provide them with usable content that serves the needs of the individuals and the movements. As recent events have demonstrated, to fail to address those realities and to continue to ignore them in constructing media research agendas leaves important social, economic, and political issues unconsidered. Theoretically, the intellectual or cultural prejudices that considered religion a purely private social phenomenon unworthy or unsuitable for empirical investigation within a secular university setting have been contradicted by the theoretical and methodological models made available by the interdisciplinary concerns of cultural studies. This discussion argues for a recognition that the traditional separation of media studies and religious studies can no longer be justified, practically or theoretically, and Schools of Media Studies need to be open to consider research and teaching that take up some of the issues. A number of writers have provided outlines of potential research areas or emphases (e.g. S. Hoover & Venturelli, 1996; ISCMRC, 1998; Stolow, 2005; White, 2004). Significant benefit is to be gained by subjecting such research into religion and media to the sort of theoretical and methodological critique and scrutiny that is provided to other areas of media and cultural research.

Notes

1. International Conferences on Media Religion and Culture were held during the 1990’s in Uppsala in 1994, Boulder in 1996, and Edinburgh in 1999. Since then, international conferences specifically addressing media and religion have been hosted by universities in Louisville, Jyväskylä, Paris, Tehran, Sigtuna, Antwerp and Boulder.
2. The International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture – <http://www.iscmrc.org>
3. For example, the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, The Center for Media Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the Program for Media and Theology at the University of Edinburgh.

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