

# MEDIA *and* RELIGION



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by  
Stewart M. Hoover, Ph.D., Director  
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As we move further into the Twenty-First Century, we can see more clearly the trends that will dominate culture, society and politics for the foreseeable future. Among these trends is one that challenges important received ideas of the past: the persistence and resurgence of *religion* as a national, regional and global force. Seemingly contradicting the long-held prediction that it would fade from modern life, religion has instead gained new profile and prominence on the global stage.

This trend is, in fact, not all that new. Religion gained a new footing in American politics in the latter half of the last century at the same time that religions were achieving new prominence elsewhere in the world. Two iconic trends: the rise of neo-evangelicalism in American politics and the renewed profile of Islam in global politics emerged in the 1970s. In 1976, an evangelical was elected President of the United States, and the term “born again Christian” began to confound journalists and public intellectuals. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran became a signal event in the revitalization of global Islam, directly confronting American foreign policy and giving a powerful symbolic boost to Muslim identity both within Iranian Shi’ism and beyond it. There are many other religious issues and trends but these stand out, particularly in the American context, and—in certain places and by certain voices—these trends are being claimed to face each other as the “front” in a global “clash of civilizations.”

Each of these events—and the underlying trends they pointed to—directly challenged tried and true beliefs in scholarly, intellectual, governmental, and media circles. In each of these realms, experts found themselves confronting new realities that defied conventions and traditions, leading to a process of reflection, soul-searching and self-criticism that continues to this day. It had long been accepted that educational, economic and political progress would diminish interest in religion, in part because modern

individuals would need less of religion's explanatory and salvific powers. Thus, societies would become increasingly secular. Educators in the U.S. and Europe have taught with this trend in mind, social researchers have assumed that religion is in decline and journalists and other media professionals have addressed the world (and the worldviews of their audiences) as a secular—and secularizing—place.

Theories of secularization may yet prove to be correct in the long term. Social and cultural pressures in modernization and education do seem to undermine some of what makes traditional religions legitimate. Trends in religion (such as a decades-long decline in religious attendance among Christians in the West and in participation in the other Abrahamic faiths in many countries) seem to indicate such an overall trend. At the same time, world-changing events in recent years have at least some of their source in religion, and across a broad range of contexts, issues, and historical processes, religion persists and even dominates.

## THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The changing nature of religion in contemporary life has received more and more attention in the years since the September 11 attacks. In all this talk, however, the critical role of the media has been overlooked. While media are ubiquitous throughout the world, they tend to be taken for granted rather than noticed. This neglect is true in many sectors of modern life, but no more so than in religion, even though religions have always been mediated and many religious movements have had prominent involvement in modern media since at least the late 19th century.

The fact is that the major religious issues and trends that are so important today cannot be fully addressed or understood without attention to the media. Indeed, these trends are *rooted* in the media in important ways. The media are a source of information about religions, religious trends, and religious ideas. In the wake of the September 11, the July 2005 London and the Bali attacks, journalism has paid increasing attention to religion both as a local and domestic story and as an international or global one. Sectarian interests are increasingly at the center of situations of political tension, social strife and even

bloodshed. Religion is thus more and more in the news. The emergence of religious politics in the U.S. has likewise pushed it onto the news pages.

Religion has also appeared more and more in entertainment and popular culture. Where prime-time television once carried few programs with religious or spiritual themes, religion has become a staple of commercial television in the U.S. since the 1990s. Media diets in the U.S. and in the West more generally include religion and spirituality to a greater degree than in the past.

But the media don't just cover and represent religion. They actually *interact* with religion in ways that are changing both the media *and* religion. The events surrounding September 11 give some examples of such interactions. It is important to remember that the September 11 attacks were and continue to be presented and understood as at least partly rooted in religion, in religious truth claims and in a claimed "clash of civilizations." The media were the primary sources of the experience of the September 11 events for most people across the globe. The fact that these events were about *both politics and religion* did not escape those viewers in those presentations. There was much coverage and commentary on the religious bases and implications of the attacks.

But the media were even more deeply involved. It soon became obvious that much of what most people in the West knew about "others" elsewhere in the world was the result of the way Western media portrayed those regions and their religions. Questions about the reasons for the attacks could be answered only with well-known assumptions about the global situation derived from the media. The fact that there were more questions than answers revealed that the media coverage of global religious politics has lagged behind evolving realities. Thus the media determine the transnational civil sphere in important ways. A larger implication was that the role of religion in such knowledge and discourse is necessarily also a function of the media and their representations.

The media played a further role in the motivation of the Islamist interests behind these attacks. For decades, conservative movements in the Muslim world have been developing a powerful critique of Western immorality, decadence and irreligion. Some of those involved in the September 11 attacks and in the broader anti-Western Islamist movement based their ideas about the West on impressions derived

from Western media. Anyone who has traveled extensively outside the West has seen the plethora of second- and third-rate American films and television programs available there. Violence, sex, and immorality make for cheap, accessible and translatable content in film and television, and the result is a portrayal of the West and Western values that few who live in the West would recognize. The media are thus involved in creating, not just portraying, the moral confrontation that some see taking place between Islam and the West.

Finally, the media were also involved in the commemoration of the events of September 11 and their aftermath in more than just journalistic ways. Ever since the Kennedy assassination in 1963, Americans have come to expect that television would be the central context through which national and global publics would experience, mourn and commemorate events such as these. This quasi-religious function of the medium has taken on such events as the Challenger explosion, the death of Princess Diana, the Oklahoma City bombing and the Columbine High School shootings. Thus, by September 11 both the media and their audiences were well prepared for television to become a kind of civil religious space that could draw in both national and international audiences and participants.

We might say, then, that media can at the same time be a *source* of religion and spirituality, an *indicator* of religious and spiritual change, and *articulated into* religious and spiritual trends—*changing religion* through those interactions and also *being changed by* that relationship.

## RELIGIOUS AND MEDIA CHANGE

The interaction between media and religion is being made more obvious as both media and religion have undergone significant changes in recent years. In media, there have been trends in technology and in economics which have resulted in an increasingly diverse, decentralized and multi-channel environment. As more and more channels have emerged in the traditional media and in the digital, online and social-media realms, a growing market for a wider range of content has developed, significantly lowering what had been barriers to entry by religion. The media increasingly operate like a

marketplace, and as there is more and more demand for religion and spirituality, media supply has increased. Among other things, this increased supply of mediated religion means that religion and spirituality are increasingly available outside the boundaries of the formal “religions,” a situation that has world-changing implications for those institutions.

Their presence and persistence in recent years has been accompanied by important changes in many religions. Foremost among these has been a decline in the *authority* of religious leaders, institutions and doctrines. For a variety of reasons, people today are taking more responsibility for their own faiths, spiritualities and religious identities. Along with the decline in public confidence in institutions in general, religious institutions have also lost their prominence and their clerical authority is less important in determining what people believe and the way they live their lives. Religion and spirituality today are thus more determined by individuals and processes of individual choice. This trend in religion can be seen to be consistent with secularization. Feelings of individual autonomy are direct effects of modernity, education and media.

Religion and spirituality today are coming to be about identity and about the place that individuals make for themselves in the maelstrom of modern life. The fact that this autonomy in religion and spirituality is a kind of individualism has been the basis of much criticism from religious and theological authorities for whom historic, collective, organizational and institutional values are important dimensions of religion. The rise of personal autonomy and the decline of institutional authority are trends that cut across religions. In the establishment religions in the West, in Islam, in Buddhism, and even the conservative religions of American evangelicalism adherents are less and less loyal to the directives of clerics, doctrines and histories. This trend is also generational. It is even more pronounced among youth cultures.

The term “spirituality” is prominent in these trends. People are increasingly uncomfortable identifying with “religion,” which they define as a package combining institutional and clerical authority, and more at home with “spirituality,” which for them represents pure meaning and practice undiluted by its association with received and determinative ideas and histories. These emerging

“spiritualities” look for symbols and other resources outside the boundaries of specific religious traditions, seeking to create something new, synthetic and meaningful that works for them. While some of these resources necessarily come from the historic religions, it is the acquisition and combination of them (the “quest,” as it is often described) in unique and uniquely meaningful ways that is the task of the autonomous individual self. Most important to our purposes here, access to these resources involves the media. As people seek individual (and collective) spiritualities that make sense, they turn to the expanding marketplace of religious symbols that has emerged in local and global media.

## POPULAR CULTURE

Religion and the media are converging in popular, entertainment and even news cultures across the range of media from television and film, to publishing, to music, to the new media of the digital realm, including the new social media of Web 2.0 and 3.0. Characteristics of the media make them particularly amenable to such a role. Media provide rich symbolism, visual culture, salient contexts and practices of social participation and identity, and opportunities to make and remake identities and social relationships to fit evolving patterns of ideas and action. The media are, further, the dominant and definitive source of what is socially and culturally important in modernity. Journalism acts in this way by setting the agenda of public and private social discourse. The entertainment and advertising media do so by creating and maintaining taste cultures through which identities are given value.

Critiques of this situation tend to assume that there must be some necessary contradiction between religion, which is ancient, time-honored, and unquestionably “authentic,” and media, which are thought to be modern, superficial and inauthentic. The role of the market in the convergence of media and religion has also been troubling to some. The kinds of symbols, ideas, and other resources in the media marketplace of religious supply are commodities, which further undermines their claim to authenticity. At least that is the argument. But the fact that the media are embedded in markets is one of the most important sources of their significance to institutions like religion and the state. Simply put, the media

possess structural independence, fiscal autonomy and cultural authority outside these other centers of power, and these qualities are a direct result of their location in the global capitalist marketplace. Also, commodification of religion is nothing new. There are long and deep histories of religious and spiritual material cultures across most religious traditions. This commodification has arguably been particularly prominent in the so-called “democratic marketplace” of American Protestantism, but it is not limited to that religious context. The fact that important traditions of musical, cinematic and literary expression have their roots in religion is a further way that “religion” and “media” share a strong and complex relationship.

## A CHALLENGE TO JOURNALISM

Journalists have always found religion to be a special challenge. The Miltonian Anglo-American press tradition assumes that the primary turf of journalism is rational and conceptual. Accordingly, journalism should be about the facts on which rational political actors can exercise their democratic rights to participation in the public sphere. Journalists think of themselves as pursuing empirical truths that can be attributed to known, identifiable, sources. How, then, do you “source” the truth claims of religions? Journalists further tend to ensure balance in their coverage by seeking out at least two sources from known sides of a given issue or debate. In religion, such sides are hard to identify. Even more challenging is the sheer number of religions. In the religious marketplace of the U.S., for example, there can be dozens of different ones in any local setting. How are journalists and editors to choose between them?

Religion has also been challenging to journalism because of a desire for special expertise. News people have assumed that in most beats, any well-informed journalist can, with a reasonable amount of preparation and using the codes and conventions of the craft, provide competent coverage.

Specializations in areas such as business, sports, politics, and government have been thought to benefit



from special knowledge, expertise, and experience, but religion has been thought to be especially challenging in this way, and many reporters and editors have shied away from it as a result.

The problem of religion journalism is a conundrum in the United States, where religion has always been, and continues to be, an integral facet of personal and public life. Because of its ubiquity, religion might have been expected to be more commonplace in news. Prior to September 11, however, it was not, and as many observers pointed out, the attention given to religion by journalism bore little relationship to the actual incidence of religion in the society. Elsewhere in the West, particularly in Europe where public religiosity is less common than in the U.S., the relative lack of attention to it seemed less contradictory.

When religion did receive coverage, it was because it looked like other beats. Issues of direct involvement by religion in politics (such as the rise of evangelical politics), financial and other scandals, and internecine battles over authority and theology can all be covered as readily in religion as in other spheres of public life. In fact, these issues make better copy in religion because of the necessary taint of hypocrisy. As they are focused within the confines of religious movements and groups, these issues also *particularize* religion. Stories that might involve the interaction of religion with other beats are more complex and difficult to engage. One notable exception was the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Its deep roots in African-American religion were impossible to ignore, but led to a different kind of particularism: one that saw religion as authentic—and authentically meaningful—in those communities, but perhaps less of a force elsewhere.

The events of September 11 changed this situation. Here was an under-covered story, one that involved the interaction of religion with global politics, international relations, and social movements. It was clear that one could not fully understand this new reality without understanding the role that religion plays in it. This situation has persisted in the era of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts and in the so-called global war on terror. And yet, there is a tendency to extract religion from the mix, to focus on the geopolitical, post-colonial, economic, or strategic aspects of the situation, almost bracketing off the religion.

Proponents on the right—those who focus on a global clash of civilizations between Islam and the West—have tended to treat religion as a kind of black box whose interests and motivations are entirely predictable and known. Those on the left—those who see clash of civilizations rhetorics as oversimplified, over-determined and necessarily militarizing a situation that could be dealt with in other ways—nonetheless also underplay and undervalue the role of religion in their own way. They understand these new global tensions as being fundamentally about root causes such as economics, imbalances of global power, uneven patterns of international development and the interventionism of the world's dominant nations. In each perspective, a role for religion *as religion*, has not carried much weight.

Religion has exercised a kind of independent force in some cases, motivating individuals to do things that they otherwise might not do. There was much commentary, for example, about the fact that some of the ringleaders of the September 11 hijacks as well as the doctors and engineers involved in the Glasgow Airport bombing in 2007 were well-educated, upper class, Westernized and presumably rational people. Nonetheless, religion *per se* came to be an important part, if not the major part, of their motivation to act as they did. Similarly, the single-mindedness of many involved in the “culture wars” in the U.S. over the past few decades cannot be fully understood without attention to religious roots. Thus, an important challenge for journalism remains.

The September 11 events propelled a wave of religion coverage, nationally and globally. Both in the U.S. and in Europe, mainstream media (with some notable exceptions) have seen it necessary to pay more attention to religion. There is much more religion in news today, and major online (including blogs, sites and Web 2.0 practices) and print sources have devoted important and substantive attention. The screen media of broadcasting, cable and satellite services have lagged behind. And yet, it remains to be seen whether in this surge in coverage there has also been a change in the nature of that coverage. Have news media found ways of giving religion its due without *marginalizing* it from the core areas of politics, economics and international relations on the one hand or defining it *as* these things on the other?

## GLOBALIZATION OF CULTURAL PRODUCTS

For most of the last century, relations between religion and the media were usually understood within certain boundaries. These boundaries were often sectarian, where the communication of specific religions or the way those religions were covered by the press could be evaluated. Other boundaries were technological. How religions were affected by visual versus print media, and how certain media portrayed religions are examples of technological boundaries. Most important, perhaps, were the geographic boundaries that defined these relations. Religious media practices and the mediation of religion could be limited to certain national and regional settings. Much of the early concern about religious television, for example, was focused on the Christian world, with the most prominent examples of the form arising in the U.S. context and to a lesser extent in Europe.

The world, however, has changed in important ways. What we have come to know as globalization is a set of processes that have increasingly integrated the globe in social, cultural and economic terms. This integration has been most obvious in economic globalization whereby multi-lateral agreements have helped integrate world markets for everything from raw materials, to agricultural products, finished goods and so-called cultural products. This latter category is where media content and services fit, and the fact that global trade now recognizes and encourages free trade in media products helped to integrate global cultures.

The media are, in fact, involved in globalization in a number of ways. In addition to being directly involved as commodities in global markets, the media also provide much of the discourse of globalization that has achieved increasing prominence in recent years. What we know of the new globalized world, we know because the media (particularly the news media) cover it.

In fact, it is no longer possible to have a private conversation. The former geographic and sectarian bounded-ness of religion has given way to a situation where events in one region of the world are instantaneously accessible everywhere. A prominent example of this instantaneous access is the cartoon controversy of early 2006. Depictions of the prophet Mohammed printed in a Danish newspaper led to public reactions, including riots, in some Muslim countries. Similarly, when a year later the actor

Richard Gere publicly kissed the Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty at a charity fund raising event, there was a reaction of outrage in the Hindu world.

Religious institutions and clerical leaders have also experienced this reality as they found it impossible to shield themselves from public (i.e., media) scrutiny. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has found itself in a changing landscape as it has dealt with a series of revelations regarding sexual abuse by priests. The Anglican communion continues to struggle through a crisis brought about by the consecration of an openly gay bishop in the United States. In earlier times, distance might have made it less likely that Anglicans elsewhere in the world would have been affected by such an event. But in an era of globalization it was impossible to ignore, and—as several African Bishops have pointed out—media coverage of the consecration in Africa identified Anglicans there with this act and had serious implications for their self-described “competition” with other religions in those national contexts.

A second area where globalization has begun to affect religion is in the ability of modern, global media to support the maintenance of cultural identities—particularly religious identities—in the context of international migration. The transnational flow of cultural and religious identities has arisen as one of the most important challenges of the Twenty-First Century. Immigration continues to be a politically-charged issue in the U.S., and immigrant communities have become more and more politically important and divisive in Europe. The Paris *banlieue* riots of 2005 and similar tensions elsewhere on the continent have brought into focus the importance of understanding immigrant communities and the ways that identity and culture are formed and shaped in an increasingly complex global context.

As in other areas, the media are involved in covering these matters, and the fact that much of what is at stake in these communities and in these tensions involves religion again brings media and religion into interaction with one another. How do the representation of identity, culture, and difference by the media influence those identities and the general understanding of them? How do those cultures and identities *mediate themselves* internally and externally? How are those identities and cultures—in religious and non-religious terms—changed by their interactions with media?

But the mediation of religious identity has another, more recent implication. Transnational migrations today are more, not less, connected with their countries or regions of origin because modern media maintain such linkages in ways that are unprecedented in their speed and reach. People keep in touch with home in more instantaneous and direct ways than in the past through videos, satellite broadcasts, streaming video and mobile phones. This influence can flow both directions, of course. For example, a prodigious media production apparatus has emerged to beam Persian-language films, music videos and other youth culture back into Iran from the U.S. West Coast, from what is known colloquially as “Tehrangeles.”

A third issue in globalization moves beyond boundaries and linkages. A global media-cultural complex is emerging which transcends many of the issues and questions of the past. This media-cultural complex is most obvious in youth cultures, where the music video has emerged as a major genre of cultural—and religious—expression. Through YouTube and other sites, videos from Western pop culture to Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu youth cultures now circulate with few geographic limits. A global popular culture including videos and popular music forms such as hip-hop pervades the media in countries across the world. These expressions are less rooted and bounded than in the past, but they continue to bear meanings from their origins and sources. A kind of negotiation between the local and the global that some call “glocalism” is becoming the order of the day.

## RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE “COMMON CULTURE”

These trends in media mean that traditional religious differences are breaking down. The decline in religious authority that has accompanied the increasing mediation of religion does threaten religious institutions and traditions. The response has often been to look to media as a way of reinforcing those boundaries. Religious organizations, from the Vatican, to the Iranian Mullahs, to the Mormon Church, to the Muslim Brotherhood, to Orthodox Judaism, to Christian evangelical ministries, attempt to use media to define rather than transcend boundaries, differences and distinctions. Many such groups also

criticize the so-called secular media for their anti-religious biases and questionable values. Some have established formal and informal structures for the critique and control of media on behalf of their followers.

But the powerful forces of mediation today make such projects increasingly problematic. The centrality of the media sphere even in relation to religious identities is a social fact that must be taken for granted. Most people today do not distinguish between their faith and their media lives, at least not in any way that affects their media behaviors. On the contrary: the media today provide the context for participation in local, national and even global common cultures of shared ideas, symbols, issues and values. People want to be part of that common cultural conversation. They want to participate in interactions at work, in their neighborhoods, in their families, even at church, mosque, or temple, that are about the issues, questions and experiences that are shared in common, that is, through the media. Knowledge of what is going on in the common culture becomes a kind of currency of exchange that defines identities in contemporary life.

Religious leaders are right in sensing that the centrality of the media is a direct challenge to authority. Because they furnish a more homogenous cultural context within which most of us live and to which most of us refer in terms of our social relationships, ideas and values, the media make boundaries between a sacred culture inside the faith and a profane culture outside increasingly irrelevant.

This suggests a further implication for religion. There are a number of ways that mediation of religion in contemporary life leads to the relativization of that religion. There is relativism in the claims of this common culture in that it necessarily represents broader, more homogenous, more consensual social and cultural values (leaving aside for the moment that the center of gravity of such consensus is always in some measure established by the religious roots of the culture). With few exceptions, the media wish to appeal to a broad, general audience. This desire is true even of religious media. Few religions or cultures wish to withdraw completely from larger cultural contexts. Exceptions include the Amish and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Instead, most religions wish to present themselves and their truth claims to broader publics. Therein lies the problem. To do so, they

must blunt some of their most distinctive sharp edges. The result is a version of the religion that is necessarily relativized *vis a vis* its core claims.

Of course religious producers do claim to do things that are distinctive. The long and storied history of American evangelicalism is embedded with media products and mediations. Early fundamentalism was, in fact, largely a media phenomenon: its earliest expressions were in widely-circulated pamphlets and later its most prominent leaders were broadcast preachers. Neo-evangelicalism also had important media dimensions, though not all evangelicals would identify themselves with the televangelists of the 1970s. More pervasive mediations of conservative Christianity, such as the Billy Graham organization's extensive film, publishing and music productions, represented a commitment to answering Jesus' directive to preach the Gospel to all nations. And yet, these films and other productions faced a serious challenge in crossing over between their sectarian audiences and the more general secular ones.

Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has been an important initiative for crossing over. Prominent Christian artists and groups have been notable when they have found audiences outside their roots. However, few such audiences are misled. CCM performers' roots are clearly understood by their core audience within the faith (who celebrate them for their nearness to the norm in secular music). At the same time, secular audiences have not tended to be attracted to them (with a few notable exceptions). In recent years, some of the most prominent voices in CCM have actually begun to question the logic of such attempts at crossing over. The logic and substance of the common culture is in large measure determinative.

It is important to note that both the producers and audiences of these religious messages and genres accept the necessity of their relativism. Producers see it as a necessary condition of creative activity within these contexts. Insider audiences accept the compromises because they wish to participate in the production and distribution of such materials in a secular culture "that really needs it." Compromises are necessary to gain access to that culture, and those compromises become symbolic of the importance (and perhaps success) of these productions. In practice, it is nearly impossible to strike a balance between the distinctive claims of a religion and the pressures to accommodate to the marketplace.

## THE POWER OF MEDIA

In addition to their role in such nuanced and layered negotiations between specific religions and the public sphere, the media define the common culture through both entertainment and journalism. For example, the media—particularly the journalistic media—are the primary source of the facts of national and global life on a daily basis. Much of what we know about what is going on—and in the area of religion, about “our” religions and “their” religions—we know because of the media. The media also are seen to have a role in assessing the truth claims of religions and other institutions and traditions. This role is problematic, of course, but it is nonetheless one for which we look to the media, particularly in situations of social and political conflict.

This role is rooted in some fundamental facts of the media and the media age. First, the economic autonomy of the media supports their social, cultural and political autonomy in relation to religions and to national and multi-national state and non-state actors. Second, one of the basic functions of journalism in the Anglo-American press tradition is to provide a check on the power of other social institutions (primarily state institutions). The power of the media is the power of publicity, which means the power to make private arrangements public, and thus to expose corruption, misdeeds and injustice. The media thus have a particular power in relation to the culture and to cultural practices and institutions. The power of media surveillance also means that it can no longer be assumed that it is possible to have a private conversation, either globally or locally.

## THE MEDIA AND THE “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”

The events of September 11 renewed concern about religiously based global conflict. The focus has been on Islam and the West, though other sectarian battle lines also exist. While there are certainly



forces at work in the Christian and Muslim worlds that anticipate a real, violent confrontation at some point in the future, there is reason to expect that, to the extent that such a clash is likely, it will take place in ways other than (or in addition to) direct violent confrontation. Indeed, there is already a clash of cultures along these lines. Salafist critiques of the West, which are most prominently articulated by organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, focus on cultural practices and on cultural products. Western critiques of Islam similarly focus on the products of Muslim cultures. Most often, the specific cultural artifacts and practices identified are mediated ones.

The mediation of religious conflict goes deeper than mere representation and critique, however. Many religiously-motivated voices and forces actively produce media of various kinds which are then deployed nationally, regionally and globally in the service of certain ideas and commitments. While formal religious bodies are behind some of these, the vast majority are informal. The fact that digitalization has led to increasing diversification of channels and toward a greater role for social media has made it possible for the sources of such media to be radically informal. Anyone who wishes to can now have access to global audiences for their blogs, images and YouTube videos. Younger generations are more active in such productions, and because younger generations are more likely than their elders to question authorities and strong religious claims, these productions tend to move in that direction.

The vastness of digital media has important implications for the relativization of religion. The very range of such media means that the singular voices representing religious doctrine and tradition now face a plethora of other sources of religious and spiritual insight, meaning and advocacy. To the extent that such voices are discourses within large religious categories (Christian, Muslim, New Age, Wiccan, etc.) they also have the potential to re-make those traditions. It might be too much to suggest that new reformations are underway, but it is almost inevitable that these trends are changing religious traditions.

## SOMETHING NEW IS EMERGING

We can see the outlines of a new way of understanding the larger questions of secularization and the persistence of religion. Yes, societies today are secularizing in important ways, and yet religion persists. Rather than thinking of this situation as an either/or proposition, scholars of religion today focus on the question of how religions are changing. The interaction of media and religion is an important dimension of this. We have seen that religion has changed the media and that the media have changed and are changing religion. Something new is emerging. Whether we think of it as *a new religious media culture* or *a new mediatized religious culture*, it demands the attention of scholars and leaders in the fields of media and of religion.

### **Some Implications**

**For media ethics.** The increasing integration of religion and media presents important new challenges to the way we have thought about media ethics. To a greater extent than in other areas of professional media practice, media are playing an important role in the formation and evolution of religion, spirituality and belief, and in the conditions that lead to religious understanding or religious conflict. The media do not merely cover or convey religion or religious ideas. They actually help shape contemporary religion. Professional conventions stressing truth and objectivity are therefore increasingly complex and challenging when religion is part of the story.

For journalists in particular there is the ethical implication that the media sphere is increasingly the context wherein sectarian struggles over power, authority and truth claims are being fought. The role of journalism in covering and assessing these religious struggles is particularly significant because the representation of religious beliefs, practices and ideas can sometimes be a matter of life and death. At the same time, journalism cannot retreat from its responsibility to engage in the religion story. As we move further into the new century, religion is too important to ignore.

**For media scholars.** Scholars, researchers and public intellectuals have important roles to play in helping societies and cultures understand the shifting realities of contemporary life. The complexities of relations between religion and the media are thus particular challenges to them as well. To an extent, thinkers in the field of religion have engaged these questions to a greater degree than have their colleagues in the field of media. Media scholars have tended to overlook religion for both theoretical and methodological reasons. Media theorists have tended to adhere to a rather strict definition of secularization. Most media research has also been committed to methodological approaches which are insufficiently nuanced and sensitive to fully explore the complexities of these questions.

Fortunately, this situation is changing. Media scholarship has increasingly focused on culture and on the production of culture through media, taking more notice of trends in the interaction of media and religion. New approaches to media research and criticism have focused on the production of meaning through media rather than on the effects of specific media messages. In the age of digital and interactive media, and in the productive era of Web 2.0, it is impossible to miss the significant ways that new articulations of religion, spirituality and belief are emerging, and along with them new ways of articulating important rituals, myths and symbols in contemporary life.

**For professional practice.** Media professionals need to develop more expertise in religion. Religion has become more important, not less so, and its relationship to other dimensions of modern life is complex. In today's world, Will Herberg's classic formulation, identifying religions with their historical or denominational identities, is overly simplistic. To see American religion only in terms of "*Protestant, Catholic, Jew*" obscured the ways that religions were changing and evolving even at the mid-point of the 20th century. And in today's global cultural relations, any formulation that attempts to look only at one national setting—even one so prominent as the United States—is too narrow. Religions today are both historically *rooted* and contemporarily *fluid*. They are both institution and doctrine on the one hand and belief and practice on the other. The questions are no longer how the latter comply with the former, but how the dialectic between them is resulting in new forms and realities. And—even more importantly—the fact that the central question today is about religions' changing nature in relation

to other dimensions of culture and society means that the *interaction* of religions with these dimensions is a significant part of the story.

Journalists and others in the media need to be ever more sophisticated in their understanding of religion. Not only must they understand historical religions in more detail, they must also understand religions as they evolve into new forms and shapes. They need specialist knowledge of religions in formal terms as well as an understanding that belief, spirituality and doctrine are becoming more fluid. They also need to be able to parse the religious from the non-religious dimensions of contemporary movements and trends, and to interpret the evolving relationship between them.

There are some specific implications in all of this for professional practice in the media. First and foremost, media professionals need to focus on religion on its own terms. On the one hand, there has been a tendency to marginalize and particularize religion. Thinking of it as entirely unique, accepting at face value its claims to refer to things outside the material realm, journalists can leave religion at the margins and fail to see the ways in which it participates in broader social, political or material processes. On the other hand, there has been a tendency to reduce religion to an aspect of other things. It is easy to think of religion in terms of power, or economics, or class, or cultural politics, and lose sight of the unique and particular nature of the religious dimension of these. Instead, media professionals need to try to engage religion on its own terms. It is neither particular or marginal that it can be ignored, nor so fluid or global that it can be defined simply in relation to other social and cultural dimensions. The place of religion in such relations will necessarily be subtle, complex and nuanced. In some cases it will stand alone, in other cases it will appear in other guises.

Further, media professionals need to remember that in this area perhaps more than others, they themselves are part of the story. The ways that they choose to define and represent religion have real implications for those religions. An extra measure of caution is therefore justified, not in the traditional way that has had journalism shying away from covering religion, but in the sense that there is an understanding of the responsibilities involved.

There are, then, three dimensions to the challenge for media professionals as they look at the world of religion. *First*, there is increasing need for sophisticated understandings and interpretations of what religions are on their own terms. The needs of informed national and global publics demand this. *Second*, there is a need to understand and interpret the ways that religion interacts with other dimensions of social, political, and cultural life. Religion is neither irrelevant to these things nor entirely explained by them. *Finally*, a broader understanding is needed of how religion and media influence each other today. We can not fully understand religion without understanding media, nor can we fully understand media without understanding religion.

The responsibility of developing deeper and more extensive understandings of the relationship between media and religion is one that should be shared by scholarly and professional practice in both the religion and media fields.

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Phone: (int+1) 303-492-1357

Fax: (int+1) 303-492-0969

Web: [mediareligion.org](http://mediareligion.org)

School of Journalism and Mass Communication

1511 University Avenue 478 UCB University of Colorado at Boulder Boulder, CO 80309-0478 USA