

Media, culture and religion: an introduction

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In his book *Cosmopolis*, Stephen Toulmin suggests that the issue of religion is pivotal in understanding the rise and influence of the scientific rationalist movement in the Modern period. Even though science and rationalism claim to be rigorously secular and 'objective' in their interests and not concerned with matters of religion, religion is central to understanding the rise and influence of scientific rationalism in the Modern period (Toulmin, 1990).

Toulmin's work provides an analysis of the emergence of scientific rationalism out of renaissance humanism in the seventeenth century and how its influence spread into every arena of western life: through Galileo into astronomy and mechanics, through Descartes into logic and epistemology, and through Hobbes into political and social organization.¹ Toulmin notes the historical irony that this major social revolution whose emphasis has been on building a universe of unconditioned, objective knowledge and practice actually arose as a solution to a specific historical situation - the practical need to find an end to the religious wars of the seventeenth century.

The deep trauma and chaos of these long-running wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Central Europe created a longing for a basis of certainty by which the apparent arbitrariness and differences in religious doctrines and

knowledge could be managed politically. It led to a search for a practical intellectual basis for a secular nation state or what Toulmin calls 'a new cosmopolis', a view of the world (cosmos) as a basis for the ordering of society ('polis').

In this context the work of René Descartes opened up for people in his generation the hope of reasoning their way out of political and theological chaos and uncertainty. The alternative basis he proposed was human cognition deriving from the fundamental certainty, 'I think, therefore I am', a genuine alternative to the previous humanistic skepticism of Montaigne and the uncontested dogma of revelation.

Initially the intent of modern thinkers was neither anti-religious nor to do away with religion, but to find a more harmonious way of being Christian citizens. As it developed, however, scientific rationalism came into conflict with the approach of faith because of its alternative way of knowing and the different world and political views that emerged from this. If its major historical impulse was to find a basis for greater certainty then, as Graham Murdock has noted, as it developed the scientific rationalist movement took on characteristics of a 'totalizing project,' a quest not just to explain, but also to predict, manipulate and control, to create a cosmos in which there was no room left for any mysterious incalculable forces.

Its aim was to calibrate the messiness of the world so that Nature could be tamed, workers made more docile, books balanced, and complexity contained. To this end the champions of modernity waged an unceasing war to defend the sovereignty of reason against mystery, magic, and faith... . To win the stakes, to win all of them and to win them for good, the world had to be *de-*

spiritualized (Murdock, 1997, 86).

Changes in media were fundamental in these social and religious changes. The development and expansion of the printing press was fundamental to development of the western scientific movement. Among the first texts printed were early classic Hellenistic works that had codified and systematized scientific knowledge into well-organized textbooks in mathematics, geography, astronomy, medical science and grammar. These became the foundation of western European scientific inquiry. Printing as a medium allowed for the reproduction in textual form the linear logic, structural order and subdivision that was fundamental to scientific logical positivism. It enabled the accurate reproduction in large volumes of newly developed charts and tables, allowing for much wider distribution of emerging scientific discoveries and the opportunity for a wider body of people to improve on them. As Burns notes,

Almost all the books which provided Copernicus with his conceptual tools came off the presses during his lifetime, most of them precisely during Copernicus' formative study years. In contrast to Peurbach and Regiomantanus, who had to work from a single medieval translation of the *Almagest* (Ptolemy's text in Arabic) and to travel from one manuscript source to another, Copernicus working alone in his study in Frombork, 'in the remotest corner of the earth', as he described it, had a whole library of recent scholarly editions of ancient and contemporary sources right at his fingertips (Burns, 1989, 239).

One of the major impacts of the spread of the printing press on religious thinking and practice was that it provided the means for development of alternative centers of power based on ideological argument rather than military, political or ecclesiastical power. One of those significant alternative centers of power was the commercial printers, who through the processes of the commercial market serviced people's desire for alternative viewpoints and popular reading material (Febvre & Martin, 1957). Mark Edwards notes how the success of Martin Luther's religious reformation was due in no small measure to his ability to muster support through his dominance of print publications and his ability to write in a way that earned profit for and therefore the support of the commercial printers (Edwards, 1994). Burns quotes the example of Galileo in 1630 who, when censored by the Catholic Church, turned to the people through the printed word in his masterpiece, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. In order to reach the largest possible audience, as with other of his books, he wrote in Italian rather than the more scholarly Latin.

Because the book treated a contemporary controversy in Italian in an extremely readable satirical fashion, it was an immediate success. By the time the book was banned all copies had been sold and had become hot black market items. A Latin translation was published shortly thereafter by a group of Protestant scholars (Burns, 1989, 263).

The 'disenchantment' that scientific and technological rationalism required –

the questioning of the reality of faith, mystery, or the supernatural and rejection of these as satisfactory explanations for the cause of events – created tensions with those social perspectives and institutions that promoted or depended on faith and the supernatural. A significant part of the history of the modern period is a history of the contests and arguments that occurred in the intellectual, political, social and cultural arenas to negotiate and reconcile the various approaches and interests of parties along this secular and metaphysical continuum.

To a significant extent, the secular scientific-technological approach to social development and problem-solving became widely accepted in western societies to a large measure because the scientific technological world brought its own enchantment: it provided a seemingly all-encompassing framework of interpretation and control that continually generated new discoveries and solutions to age-old problems and mysteries, as well as generating substantial material benefits. Murdock notes that there was a conviction, widely held, that

the application of scientific rationality would lead to cumulative and irreversible gains, an aspiration that found attractive expression in the idea of ‘progress,’ modernity’s master narrative. People wanted to believe, and many did... . They saw steady improvements in the physical and material conditions of everyday life - sanitation, street lighting, vaccination against disease - and new opportunity for mobility and choice - the railway system, mass education, department stores (Murdock 1997: 86-87).

While ‘the totalizing project’ of Modernity was never fully total, the scientific-technological-rationalist approach to the development of social and public life was influential across all strata of society. Of course movements across societies cannot be reduced to simplistic generalizations. But the desirability of being seen to be rational, objective and scientific in one’s public life became the trademark of the elite in intellect, industry and commerce and set ideals or norms of thought and aspiration during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries against which other social frameworks needed to justify themselves and on the basis of which public resources were allocated. I recall that the first lecture given in my first undergraduate course in psychology in the mid 1960s was entitled, ‘Why psychology is a science’, a lecture justifying the seemingly nebulous study of the human mind and behaviour against scientific principles. This rapprochement is illustrated by the significantly different ways in which the study and teaching of religion takes place in public universities compared to church seminaries.

During the twentieth century, however, the progress that was promised and anticipated by the scientific-technological approach began to show cracks, cracks some say have reached the scale of chasms. These have surfaced in a number of critical outlooks:

Loss of faith in progress. The 1914-18 and 1939-45 wars, the horrors of the German and Russian holocausts, mass publicized wars in Vietnam, Bosnia and Kuwait, the failure of economic and social development to resolve endemic problems of poverty, the recent of terrorism on a world scale, and the perception that world political and

economic systems are not robust but profoundly vulnerable, have all contributed to a crisis of confidence in political and social goal-setting and a growing cynicism about the idea of progress.

A growing suspicion about modern institutions. Weber observed that one of the consequences of the demands of modernity for certainty and rational structure was an ‘iron cage of bureaucracy and routine based around an incessant drive to eliminate the haphazard and annihilate the spontaneous.’ The growth of bureaucracy in recent decades, however, and personal experiences of frustration with it, has led to widespread suspicion about the effectiveness of government institutions and cynicism about the capacity of leaders to reform them.

The questioning of consumerism. The enjoyment brought by the attainment and consumption of goods and services takes place within a total nexus of relationships and meaning. When that nexus is removed, the goods and services in themselves can quickly become empty and meaningless. The unreserved promotion of goods and services on a global basis through mass advertising, and the appropriation of social activities through commodification as a foundation of economic transaction raises questions on a broad scale about the emptiness of consumption. Murdock suggests that consumerism has diminishing value as a sustaining social philosophy.

People have been exhorted to behave as consumers rather than as citizens.

They have been discouraged from thinking of themselves as members of moral and political communities, and invited instead to assert their rights to choice in the marketplace. But as the underpinnings provided by public goods

are dismantled, the pleasures of possession are left to bear a greater and greater responsibility for delivering contentment and confirming personal identity and self-worth... . As David Harvey has argued, 'The moral crisis of our time is a crisis of Enlightenment thought... . The affirmation of 'self without God' in the end negated itself because reason, a means, was left, in the absence of God's truth, without any spiritual or moral goal. The secular theology of consumption was increasingly unable to address this lack. Consumerism had always promised 'something which it can't deliver' (Murdock, 1997, 94).

An intensified sense of social meaninglessness. The advance of scientific technologism has resulted in a stripping of human values and loss of a foundation for human meaning. In its drive to eliminate uncertainty, scientific positivism emphasized and over-valued those aspects of our experience about which we could be certain. But it failed at the same time to provide other essential aspects of the human situation, a coherent system of meaning that incorporated goals and values as well as mechanisms.

Initially science's disenchantment of the world was of little account, since it brought with it its own faith assurances and its own experiences of enchantment. In recent decades this faith and enchantment has worn off and we find ourselves in what Bar Haim calls a state of 'historical exhaustion of ideologies and social utopias'.

In summary, the social ideals that once defined and focused political energies, inspired new challenges for reform, paved the way to a more flexible

stratification, and gave legitimization to a secular morality have reached a point of ineffectiveness, incapable of mobilizing and fulfilling expectations. A perpetual search for leadership on both sides of the Atlantic has yielded an acute sense that the present malaise of Western society requires the remedy of altogether new and different kinds of leaders who have yet to make their appearance (Bar-Haim, 1997, p.141).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, therefore, one can argue that there is evidence of a renewed desire and search for a basis of re-enchantment. Murdock suggests:

The two strands in the growing disillusionment with modernity - the confrontation with the dark side of progress and the evacuation of meaning - left a gap in popular structures of feeling through which religion could re-enter people's lives. Weber understood this very well and argued strongly that the old gods were about to 'ascend from their graves' and resume their struggle 'to gain power over our lives.' The time was ripe for a re-enchantment of the world (Murdock, 1997, 88).

This does not mean a rejection of science or technology – the desire for products and gadgets is stronger than ever. Rather one can see in the use of technologies and cultural products a rejection of pure rationalism or empiricism and a re-emergence of those aspects of human experience and society that Modernity had

displaced: religion, mystery, myth and magic. The technologies of media have become central to this. Media have become the practical marketplace where individuals gather, converse, gain information, communalise their concerns, and build meaning, identity and world-views.

Jesus Martín-Barbero, writing from the perspective of the growth of popular religiosity in South America, comments:

Despite all the promise of modernity to make religion disappear, what has really happened is that religion has modernized itself... . What we are witnessing, then, is not the conflict of religion and modernity, but the transformation of modernity into enchantment by linking new communication technologies to the logic of popular religiosity (Martín-Barbero, 1997, 112).

In many ways the media have become the dominant governing institution of the emergent global culture. This applies not just in terms of the growth of a number of multi-national media organizations that have acquired a global reach, but also in terms of the expanding accessibility and adaptability of new media technologies that are shifting the control of construction of meaning out of the hands of centralized bodies into the hands of individual media users.

Writers such as Febvre (Febvre & Martin, 1957), Edwards (Edwards, 1994) and Eisenstein (Eisenstein, 1983) have identified in their work how the religious changes that occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth century European Reformation were the result of a complex interaction of individuals and cultural movements with the processes of print technologies, production, distribution,

commercial interest and market forces. In the same way, new and complex processes of visual and electronic media technologies, production, distribution, commercial interest and market forces are interacting with complex cultural movements in shaping new patterns of social and institutional religiosity and spirituality at the beginning of this new millennium.

This book explores different aspects of these changes in the interaction between media and Christianity. In difference from earlier work in this area, which has tended to be positivist in its frameworks and methodologies and perpetuated scientific distinctions between inner meaning and overt practice, this work explores the interfaces of these from within a cultural methodology and framework.

The work arises from an eight-year international and interdisciplinary collaboration within the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture, a group formed following an International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture held in Uppsala in 1995. With funding coordinated by Stichting Porticus, the Commission focused its work on developing new directions for theorizing the interaction of media and religion and fostering new research in the area.

Early in its life, the Commission identified four core issues that have informed and guided its work:

- **In what ways can we say that the media have come to occupy the spaces traditionally occupied by religion?** What religious functions do media fulfill? What are the new forms of spirituality that are emerging? Where/how is transcendence found or experienced? What are the means of meaning-making?

- **What is the relationship of religious authority to modes of symbolic practice?** Is there a necessary or historic relationship between authority and certain modes of symbolic practice, such as the linear modes? Are the visual modes inherently threatening to authority? If so, what kinds of authority? Where? Whose? What are the prospects of religious authority and its practices of legitimation as a consequence of these conditions?

- **How must we re-think the relationship between religion and the media?** How does the new situation call into question former dichotomies of sacred and profane spheres, ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ media, etc? How does the new situation call into question the traditional ‘instrumental’ understanding of media which has been supported: many media production activities of the churches; media reform activism of various kinds; and the so-called ‘media literacy’ movement?

- **What does this new situation imply about epistemology?** Does it call for new epistemologies in order to account for it? Is the new situation indicative of changed epistemologies in general, that is, that the whole way we think about reality has now been altered? What is the relation of media practice to epistemology (i.e., are the postmodernists right in claiming that the changed epistemology of the postmodern is a consequence of the media)?

In recognition of the cross-disciplinary nature of this new approach, the Commission has comprised a mix of scholars and media practitioners from different

disciplines, with different professional interests and from different continents (details of members of the Commission can be seen in the List of Contributors). In its eight years it has supported two international conferences and held ten consultations in eight countries on five continents, each of them engaging local scholars, activists and practitioners in discussions, debates and explorations on dimensions of research and theory in the interaction of media, religion and culture in global and local contexts. Reports of each of those meetings can be accessed at <http://www.jmcommunications.com/english/commission.html>. These perspectives are reflected in different ways through these chapters.

We recognize that one of the major developments in the area of media and religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the growing awareness in the west of the presence and difference of non-Christian religions as religious, cultural and political entities. The various ways in which these different religions and their own different expressions relate to and interact with western media and cultural products, and to their own media, is a huge and complex area and well worthy of a similar study to what we have been involved in. While Commission consultations in different countries have included representatives of religious traditions apart from Christianity, we have not been able to address that here because of the size and complexity of the task. We see the need of developing conversations on media, religion and culture between scholars and representatives of different religions as a crucial and fruitful future task.

Using this book

This book is organized in three sections. The first gives an introduction and overview of some of the approaches and issues in seeing media and Christianity from a cultural perspective. The second presents a number of case studies of the mediation of Christianity that illustrate either particular aspects of study or the complexity of factors that contribute to the shaping of religious belief and practice. The third section explores the impact that the new mediation of Christianity is having for the traditional embodiment of Christianity, the Christian institutions. A final chapter surveys the developments and study that have taken place by looking at ten key issues that have emerged as a basis for future development and research.

The book is a rich resource for teaching and study in a variety of contexts. It can be used effectively in a number of ways depending on that context. If you are an undergraduate student in a communication program who is new to the field of media or religion, or a teacher working with these students, it may be helpful to begin with Clark's chapter and then White's chapter, which provide overviews of some of the theoretical issues, and then select other chapters as case studies illustrating the theory.

If you are a student or teacher working from within a primarily theological or pastoral context, the chapters by Goizueta and Horsfield will give a better introduction to the theological and pastoral issues raised by media. The chapters by Plude, Hess and Santiskultarm will serve as good case explorations before moving on to the case studies from Africa and Latin America or the more theoretical chapters by Clark and White.

Those whose focus or interest is in the area of media production or media arts will likely find Medrano's chapter the best entry point, moving from there to those by

Morgan, Mitchell, Asamoah-Gyadu and White. Yet another possibility is to ask groups of students to prepare reflections on the material in the book in relation to the specific geographical areas that the authors represent.

There are several concepts that thread through all of the essays in the book. One is the shift in methodology in studying religion and media away from focusing on institutions and traditional religious behavior towards looking at the cultural nature of religion and spirituality and its foundations in common search for and construction of meaning. Focusing on actual practice rather than officially sanctioned or defined behavior and the processes by which meaning is created by the individual will often provide a scaffold that can give students access to the ideas under discussion and some grasp of the particular discourses in use.

While websites change regularly, many of the authors represented in this volume maintain extensive websites that can provide resources and additional reading material to further study. Clark and Hoover's research work at the University of Colorado can be found at www.Colorado.EDU/Journalism/MEDIALYF/. Hess's work in media and religious education can be found at www.luthersem.edu/mhess . Horsfield's site www.mediatedspirit.com introduces a CD Rom on media and Christianity that is an excellent adjunct to this volume. Medrano's website provides videos, resources and links in both English and Spanish: www.jmcommunications.com. This site also links to the Study Commission website, which has information on the media.faith listserv and the International Catholic Fellowship Program for doctoral research in the area.

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¹ Toulmin argues that there have been several stages of Modernity: the literary or humanistic phase in the 15th century, the scientific and philosophical phase from 1630 on, and the current phase, which he prefers to call a third stage of modernity rather than post-modernity. In this third phase, he argues for recovery of many of the positive aspects of the earlier humanistic phase.