

Theology, church and media – Contours in a changing cultural terrain

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The shifts that have taken place in thinking about the relationship between media and religion, from a primarily instrumentalist approach to a more cultural approach, have major implications not only for media research and understanding but also for religious institutions. For this change in thinking shifts the focus away from religious institutions as the primary definers and guardians of religious reality, who use media to disseminate that reality; towards seeing religion as a broader mediated cultural phenomenon within which religious institutions have a place, but along with a variety of other powerful cultural factors.

This is more than a change produced by change in theory. The approach that looks at the study of media and religion from a cultural rather than instrumental perspective is part of the broad range of intellectual, cultural and technological changes that took place through the latter part of the twentieth century.

My research and involvement in media and religion has spanned the last quarter of the twentieth century, when many of these key changes were taking place. Because much of my professional career has been spent working at the interface of media and the churches – as a theologian, church pastor, media producer, theological educator, and media scholar – the changes in my work reflect an attempt to understand and interpret the implications that the contours of this changing media cultural terrain have had on western Christianity in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In this chapter I want to explore some of the implications that changes in media thinking, research and practice have for religious institutions by tracing aspects of my own intellectual and professional journey, a journey that characteristically for the time is marked by significant changes in thinking and approach.

Churches and media in the 1970s

I became involved in the media field in the early 1970s on the advice of a perceptive colleague who told me that mass communication was going to be one of the crucial issues for churches in the future. The colleague also advised me to do more than simply media production, but to include theological study as well. This was easier said than done – there were few places in the world where one could study both media and theology at an advanced level. When I enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Boston University, I had to set up my own program, taking courses from both the School of Theology and the School of Public Communication. For supervision of my doctoral dissertation I had to organise a committee comprised of faculty members from both schools and introduce them to each other.

This life on the margins of two disciplines arises from the disciplinary structure of modern thought and has characterised most of my professional life and generally characterises the experience of those who seek to take seriously both media and theology.

My original intention in studying media was to understand how media worked as a basis for using them as tools for religious communication. The School of Public Communication was a good site for this. The School was strong in research and production within what had been the dominant theoretical

perspective of U.S. media research for almost half a century: an empirically based instrumentalist approach. This empirical, social science based approach to theorising and studying media was largely unquestioned at the time. Like other scientific disciplines, it was seen simply as objectively describing things the way they are. Today the “scientific” approach is subject to significant criticism for using the concept of objectivity to hide the particular political, ideological and administrative interests that are served by the presumption of objectivity.

From this critical perspective, it is possible now to see that there is a lot about this instrumentalist, empirical approach to thinking about media that makes it attractive as a communication model for church communicators (as well as others such as politicians, public relations professionals and marketers). As David Morgan illustrates in his chapter in this volume, texts such as James F. Engel’s *How to Communicate the Gospel Effectively* ((Engel, 1988), which use an instrumentalist model of media, are still common in theological and ministerial education.

One reason for this is that the instrumentalist approach is relatively simple to understand and maps onto our developing understanding of who we are - as we grow our tacit, subjective, experiential world generates within us an innate link between action and consequences. This simplicity sets the mind free to direct attention to the development of strategy.

A second is that it’s a theory for action. Communication is a process: learn the techniques and you can achieve the results, holding out the hope that people’s minds can be changed by the power of the message.

A third is that it corresponds to the dominant proclamation concept of communication that exists within churches. This makes it relatively easy for churches simply to transfer their central practices, metaphors, and understandings of preaching and teaching into their media work. (Conversely, it also meant that when churches’ work in television, for example, didn’t begin to produce the results of converts and church members that were expected, its expense was considered unjustified and churches withdrew from the television environment.)

A fourth attraction is that the instrumentalist approach structurally serves church institutional interests. The approach assumes that the meaning of a message is generated and determined largely by the person who constructs and produces the message in the process of production, very attractive to church leaders who assume that it is their task to interpret what Christianity means. The approach also assumes a fairly passive audience, which reinforces the hope of church leaders that by controlling the production of Christian messages they will be able to safe-guard its interpretation.

As I will note later, moving away from instrumentalist theories of how media work to more comprehensive cultural approaches changes not just thinking about media but thinking about religious institutions as cultural forms as well.

The dominant framework for thinking about culture at the time was Richard Niebuhr’s formative work, *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr, 1951). Aspects of Niebuhr’s five models of rapprochement between Christianity and secular culture were frequently questioned and debated. What was not questioned nor debated was Niebuhr’s modernist assumption that it was possible to see religion and culture as two separate entities. There was little debate also about whether one could talk about ‘Christ’ without at the same time talking about culture. It was still possible with integrity to think of a single entity called Christianity or “The Church” which was separate from the culture and what was needed to protect it from cultural contamination.

Televangelism: a case study of religion and the media

With a concern to understand how churches could best use media to communicate, in my doctoral dissertation I undertook a study of the American televangelists, who were running hot and controversial at that time. I integrated theological analysis with empirical research, defining theological issues and goals around the use of mass media for religious communication and evaluating these against what the empirical research said (Horsfield, 1981).

My research clarified a number of misconceptions about the religious broadcasters. In general, it showed that the televangelists were not as effective as they claimed to be: their audiences were not as large as was claimed; while they justified their huge fund-raising on the basis of evangelism, their programs were clustered around areas of the country that were already highly churched; and though they got a lot of responses to their programs, few of those respondents became involved in local church communities (Horsfield, 1988).

I concluded that the success of the televangelists, whatever that was, had come at the expense of theological integrity: 'in accommodating themselves to the demands of commercial television, (they) have lost the essence of the Christian message and have simply become indistinguishable facsimiles of other commercial television programs (Horsfield, 1984: p.39).'

Leonard Sweet would later describe such distaste for televangelism as arising in effect out of Liberal snobbery.¹ He may well be right. Hoover's work on televangelism in the late 1980s (Hoover, 1988) began to articulate an alternative theoretical perspective, moving analysis away from a linear effects framework towards a more cultural analysis of how televangelism was contributing to a coalescence of evangelical culture within the mainstream of American life. That cultural shift would be developed further in the following decades.

In many ways, in my doctoral research I argued myself out of one job into another. I concluded at the end of my study that if the televangelists with their traditional evangelical concern for right doctrine could be so influenced by the ideology of television, and with the vast amounts of money that was at their disposal were doing little more than circulating Christians from one church to another, a different approach had to be found. For me that had begun to focus in an interest in the culture of media rather than in seeing how media could be used. That became the focus of my subsequent study.

Christian critique of media

I returned to Australia to take up a position as minister of a suburban parish and taught at a local university in mass media and society, with a critical analysis of media function and institutions similar to that of the Frankfurt School (Boorstin, 1972; Ellul, 1985; Ewen, 1976; Postman, 1987). I wrote a guide for parents to assist them in mediating the influence of television on their children (Horsfield, 1986). This critique of media institutions and media culture left unquestioned the culture of Christianity and hence resonated with many church leaders. The perspectives and conclusions presented in my work over the course of the 1980s were quoted in various places as giving voice to an informed and scholarly theological critique on the relationship between Christianity and the media.

I now consider such an antagonistic stance to be inadequate, partly because it fails to recognise the value of different cultures, and partly because it fails to acknowledge churches' own cultural and media positioning and their associated interests. Yet this antagonistic attitude towards mass media and popular culture is still dominant among church leaders and theological teachers today (Horsfield, 1989).

In the mid 1980s I took a position as Dean at a theological faculty in Victoria, a position that involved me directly in the education and formation of men and women for ministry. This position provided more space and opportunity to explore alternative understandings of the relationship between

media and religion apart from the dominant religious antagonistic one. A number of influences, both media and theological, began to converge in this exploration.

I began to revisit the work of the cultural technologists Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong. This re-reading stimulated thought about the connections between dominant systems of mediation and their cultural outcomes, and the media base of particular cultures (Ong, 1967, 1982). This reading of Ong is reflected in Tom Boomershine's work on the place of media in the historical shaping of Christianity (Boomershine, 1987; Boomershine, 1991).

A traditional theological college, heavy in literate discourse, policy and practice provides a good context for observing Ong's proposals on links between media and culture. As in most religious seminaries, theological teaching and research was organised in the modernist disciplinary structure that has evolved from that originally proposed by Schleiermacher. My courses on media were located in the department of applied theology, reflecting the instrumentalist perspective that media were tools you considered once the ideas had been formed in the separate disciplines of scripture, history and theology. Despite my best efforts, after ten years I had made little progress in convincing my theological colleagues that media were a constitutive factor in theological thought, not just a functional one (Horsfield, 1989). This situation is not unique. Ken Bedell's study in the U.S. in 1990 found that courses in media at seminaries had dropped in the previous 10 years, not increased (Bedell, 1993).

Seeing media from a cultural perspective

I found greater stimulation in development of my thinking outside the theological college through part-time teaching in journalism and media studies in a nearby university. It began to dawn on me that there was operative in Australian media studies a quite different theoretical perspective to that which had guided my studies in the U.S. That was the more European-based cultural studies perspective, which sees and analyses media as cultural form within a cultural-literacy framework rather than the instrumental-social scientific approach dominant in the U.S.

Many of the elements of the cultural studies approach were not totally new –concepts such as textual analysis, semiotics, culture and context were familiar to me from biblical exegesis and theology, though often in different terms. The greater challenge of this approach for thinking about media and religion lies not so much in its different concepts, but in its underlying assumptions.

In contrast to the modernist, scientific approach that conceives of "reality" as an objective existent within a singular universe toward which all knowledge contributes, the cultural studies approach conceives of a variety of different, constructed "realities," which serve particular purposes for those who hold them and which continually contest with other constructions for access to social recognition and resourcing. In place of the instrumentalist view of media as tools for communicating ideas developed elsewhere, in a cultural view media are seen as arising from within the culture through different cultural processes and with particular cultural biases, and they function both as tools for maintenance of the culture and as cultural sites within which this power contest and reality construction is continually taking place.

A shift in theoretical perspective such as this brings not only an alternative way of integrating ideas, but also a different conception of how the world and social institutions function. As mentioned earlier, seeing media primarily as instruments is attractive to churches because it reinforces the importance of the church as an institution within a structured society, while at the same time hiding the vested interests of those who hold power within the institution.

The cultural perspective challenges this institutional determination in a number of crucial ways. In place of the common religious emphasis on commonality and universality, the cultural view affirms difference and argues that one needs to be open to the diversity of realities and truths that exist, and to the exceptions that do not fit into the norm. In place of the view of knowledge as a dispassionate, rational discovery enterprise, the cultural view sees knowledge as contested constructions reflecting the vested interests of those who are doing the constructing. In place of the view that the meaning of communication is created by the originator of the message at the point of production, the cultural view sees meaning as a negotiation between the text and the receiver at the site of reception.

Theological implications of a cultural perspective

Each of these perspectives has significant theological ramifications. Increased exposure to alternate theologies such as feminist and liberation theologies, visits to churches in Asia and the Pacific and the realisation that standard histories of Christianity have largely excluded the history of Christianity in Asia (largely because that significant history was not preserved in written documents (Philip, no date)) have increased my awareness of the difference there is within and between churches. It is becoming increasingly problematic to refer to “the Church” as if it is a single concept, and I find myself increasingly referring to “churches” and “Christian communities.”

The power dimensions of theology and the church became apparent during a lengthy involvement as one of the early advocates for women who had been subject to violence or sexual abuse by clergy in Australia. No education could teach as clearly as that experience the particular cultural stake and vested interests of church leaders and the lengths to which they will go to protect those vested interests. Insights into the dynamics of power within churches provided a good basis for re-examining how and why theology is formulated, how power is and has been used to suppress difference in order to achieve what is called Christian unity, and how communications are controlled in order to protect the interests of particular groups over others.

Kathryn Tanner’s work *Theories of culture: A new agenda for theology* provides a valuable re-examination of Christianity from this perspective of its plurality rather than uniformity and the power relationships that are involved in establishing coherence within this plurality (Tanner, 1997). Tanner argues that at its heart Christianity is and always has been a pluralistic, diverse and at times contradictory movement that defies any form of general summary or identification of some common ‘essence.’ She argues that we need to affirm this diversity in ideas and material practice rather than seek to suppress it. What it means to be distinctively Christian, for Tanner, is not some central fixed truths, but a continually changing diversity that finds coherence in relation to specific contexts and practical demands, not abstract principles:

The insistence that there is only one right way of being a Christian is even more likely to rupture Christian fellowship, to make a mockery of the unity of peace and love of Christ, than the existing diversity of practice for which it is the supposed remedy. (p.172)

Tanner argues that part of this realism involves a recognition that the concepts of culture and Christianity are inextricably intertwined and the artificial boundary that modern theologians such as Niebuhr have tended to erect when thinking about ‘Christianity’ and ‘culture’ are artificial:

The distinctiveness of cultural identity is therefore not a product of isolation; it is not a matter of a culture’s being simply self-generated, pure and unmixed; it is not a matter of ‘us’ vs. ‘them.’ Cultural identity becomes, instead, a hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as

much as within cultures. What is important for cultural identity is the novel way cultural elements from elsewhere are now put to work, by means of such complex and ad hoc relational processes as resistance, appropriation, subversion, and compromise. (pp. 57-58)

Tanner's argument provides a valuable theological perspective for thinking about the intertwining of media and media cultures with particular constructions or historical forms of Christianity. I explore this interface between media and the shaping of Christianity in fuller detail in my CDROM *The Mediated Spirit* (Horsfield, 2002).

A good example of this integrated analysis can be found in Marianne Sawicki's work *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices*. In that work, Sawicki examines the influence of different forms of mediation in the early construction of Christian thinking (Sawicki, 1994). Sawicki's is one of the first works I have read that integrates a cultural understanding of media as an integral element in analysing early Christianity, to demonstrate how different media reflected and shaped different cultural positions that became crucial in contests over how Christianity was to be understood, preserved, and communicated.

The other challenge posed to theological thinking by media cultural theory is in the area of reception theory. Reception theory explores the way in which meaning is constructed through the mediation of a text by the user at the point of reception, facilitated by a diversification and decentralisation of media production and the extension of consumer capitalism. Reception theory addresses much of the shift in social structure away from institutional determination and control of meaning towards consumer control.

The idea that religious meaning is created not by the producers of messages but through an interaction of the text, context and user represents a significant shift of power that challenges previous understandings and power structures of Christianity as a coherent movement. Yet in many ways it recovers many aspects of how Jesus communicated and simply affirms what most preachers know: that prepare as much as you like, people will make their own meaning out of what you say.

Seeking to find a supportive intellectual community when you work in an area that crosses boundaries is not easy. While both places were friendly, the Theological Faculty weren't really concerned about media, and the university media faculty weren't really concerned about religion. In 1997 I was invited to join the International Study Commission on Media Religion and Culture. The group provided a fruitful and enjoyable interdisciplinary, international and intercultural context within which to develop and integrate further this continuing ferment. After years of sitting on the fringe of theology because of my interests in media, and sitting on the fringe of media because of my interests in religion, the Commission has been one group to whom I haven't had to explain myself. Each meeting has been an experience of helping towards integration of new ideas, while at the same time delaying that integration by raising new dimensions to be considered.

A meeting of the Commission in Boulder in January 1999 was a fruitful one in expanding this emerging nexus between media, culture and religion. Two themes were explored at that meeting: the embodiment of faith in material culture, and the different apprehension of experience in visual culture (Morgan, 1998a, 1998b). It is fairly common to recognise that Christianity is much more than ideas and beliefs. But academic theology privileges beliefs and ideas over other aspects of faith. Work being done on the importance of visual media and material objects in popular practices of religious faith is crucial in understanding the complex ways in which religious practices are immersed in and arise out of rich beds of cultural life. Colleen McDannell's book *Material Christianity* provides a good framework and resources for exploring religious material culture further (McDannell, 1995).

Future directions

The new perspectives between media, culture and religion that are being explored by the Commission are a crucial exploration not just of media, but of the new interfaces emerging between media, cultural studies, theology and religious practice. It is just the beginning of what I think is still a largely uncharted field.

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¹ Sweet wrote, in his analysis of the debate around televangelism that occurred during the 1980s:

‘Clearly, much of the available scholarship shows tremendous distaste for the subject, especially that which emerges from liberal Protestantism. Peter G. Horsfield’s *Religious Television* (1984) is a case in point, *although Horsfield is of a different mind today.*’ (Sweet, 1993, p.64. Italics mine.)