

# **Australian Journal of Communication**

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by  
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# **Australian Journal of Communication**

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# Editorial

## Re-placing religion

Even as recently as a decade ago, it was widely considered in academic quarters that religion had all but disappeared as a social phenomenon and wasn't worthy of serious research or policy consideration. Today, religion is now widely considered—for better or worse—as being 'back' as a globally significant social, political, economic, and cultural force.

While most academic research today focuses largely on the political dimensions of this significant social change, this resurgence of religion is characterised by more than just traditional religions or religious institutions flexing their muscles or reasserting their influence within the various social spaces allocated to them by so-called secularised societies. It reflects a significant crossing of the previously defined sacred-secular divide in an eclectic reworking of traditional, non-traditional, commercial, and individual religious symbolisations, values, meanings, and practices within the public media marketplace.

The phenomena manifesting this changing marketplace are widespread, reflecting both institutional and de-institutionalised activity. Religious entrepreneurs across the world are using new media effectively to bypass traditional religious institutional constraints and national boundaries to build new global audiences by competing directly in the media market, with packages of branded religious and secular content that ignore old religious loyalties and sensibilities and cross previously defined boundaries of sacred and secular (see Aly and Gauthier & Uhl in this issue). Online and social media technologies are offering opportunities for globally networked eclectic experimentations with religious and spiritual themes, producing new hybridisations of religious ideas and practices with secular contexts and symbols. Regardless of their own faith or non-faith opinions or commitments, commercial media organisations are producing innovative religious or spiritual products to capitalise on what they perceive as a significant emerging commercial market niche (Clark, 2003). Contemporary Christian music and singers are crossing the previously relatively clear demarcations between religious and secular popular music, and between worship and commercial performance contexts (see Riches and Wagner in this issue). Old frames of institution-based religious authority and order are giving way to market appeal based on charisma, the attraction and maintenance of audiences, the management of brand, and

the generation of strongly competitive religious material of general consumer value—ideology, image, community, sensation, solutions, and products.

In post-colonial and emerging economy contexts, religion has re-emerged as a unifying ideology for a range of social and political actions designed to facilitate access or resistance by local communities to the re-colonising power of global capitalism and Western consumer culture. One aspect of this is political and terrorist action where religion serves as an alternative ideology for cohering and maintaining sacrificial political action. Another aspect, almost at the other end of the spectrum, is the quickly spreading religious prosperity movements that are developing and building vibrant globally networked, gathered communities and media audiences around a gospel of wealth creation in which God manipulates the global capitalist system to make faithful individuals more healthy and wealthy (Coleman, 2000; Yang, 2005). With extensive international networking between groups of like mind across northern and southern hemispheres, a new form of religious exchange globalisation is emerging that gives God a good hand in this religious transfer of wealth. As Meagher notes in her study, Africa's informal economy accounts for 42% of GDP, with a large proportion of that now generated by the religious sector. International transfers from global religious networks into Africa through the informal sector now exceed current aid flows (Meagher, 2009, p. 407). Spirituality may well be one of Africa's significant exports.

Some see this resurgence of religion within the old secular framework of a renewed contest between science and superstition, reason and faith, and seek to construct and argue it in that way (e.g., Dawkins, 2006). For others, however, the level, character, and location of this resurgent religious activity prompt the need to rethink the social and intellectual boundaries by which religion has been defined, understood, and socially managed throughout the modern period. The intent here is not necessarily to dispense with the advances of secularisation, nor to restore an old order of religion, but rather to recover a dimension of enchantment or a way of practically engaging with the numinous aspects of material life that may have been lost through the political processes of modern secularisation. So French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (2008), for one, has recently argued for the prospect of an atheist spirituality, one that sees material life in its fullness as having non-material numinous dimensions, separate from their theist, atheist, or nontheist interpretation, that need to be engaged conceptually and socially.

Historically, apart from artistic, romantic, and more recently environmental movements, these non-material dimensions of life have been articulated and organised primarily by what we know as religious processes and institutions, which in most cases have framed the non-material within theistic ideologies. In this process, they have also built significant political institutions and interests. However, as Comte-Sponville argues, the rejection of the political domination of theistic religious institutions that was a primary goal of the secularisation project throughout the modern period should not necessarily involve the rejection of the numinous dimensions of life that organised religion had appropriated. From this perspective, the recent phenomenon that Partridge (2004) identifies as 'the gradual and uneven emergence of personally and socially consequential alternative spiritualities' (p. 58), may be understood less as a widespread social desire for the return of religion and a rejection of a scientific approach of reasoned understanding, and more as a desire to recover a sense of enchantment within what many see as a bereft culture of crass consumerism.

What is different in the present time, however, is that this search is individual and eclectic, resourced not by any single institution but by the unlimited choices of the media marketplace. Some institutional religions are benefitting from this social movement, but not all are. Those that are are doing so because they offer symbolic and practical resources that address this search for enchantment, and because they mobilise themselves to make these resources available in the marketplace and in the market's terms. Even here, however, the terms have changed. Any individual religion is no longer authoritative in its own terms, but is authoritative only to the extent that individuals allocate authority to it. Except in those countries where religious leaders still hold the political power to enforce compliance, religious authority is being relocated from religious institutions to audiences. As with all non-coercive social institutions, those that are allocated authority are those that provide the audience with relevant resources that are also attractive and accessible.

Media has everything to do with these changes. Far from being simply an aspect of the nature of religious change, the changes taking place in religion and social religiosity are intimately connected with the opportunities created by new media formations for revisiting and reworking those previously discounted dimensions of human experience connected with transcendence, metaphysics, mystery, and enchantment. Part of this shift in religion, consistent with the audience-focus of media and cultural studies, is a shift away

from an institutional-dominated, centralised construction of meaning towards a more de-centred, audience-based, autonomously generated meditational matrix.

These changes raise questions about the adequacy of old models by which religion and media were studied and understood, and how the interaction between media and religion was to be conceptualised. The old divisions of sacred and profane, personal versus institutional, public versus private, are lacking in nuance and losing their hermeneutic effectiveness in accessing and explaining these significant changes and their media integrations. The current situation raises the question as to whether new approaches and methodologies may need to be built in order to understand what is going on.

## The placing of religion

The concept of 'religion' is a distinctively Western concept and a construct of the Modern period, intricately bound up with the politics of secularisation. As McCutcheon (2007) has noted,

*The modern invention that goes by the name of secularism is the only means for imagining religion to exist as an item of discourse...for those interested in talking about such things as religion, faith, spirit, belief, experience, etc., there is no beyond to secularism, for it constitutes the discursive conditions by means of which we in the modern world think religion into existence. (p. 178)*

Within the field of research and social theory, engaging with religion in an academic context has involved taking up the political project of containing the social power of religion by finding a means of conceptualising the social phenomena of religion(s) without ascribing legitimacy to it or providing support to religions' claims. A significant part of this, therefore, has involved finding a discrete bounded definition of what exactly religion is in secular terms and which aspects of religion may be legitimately studied and taught within secular academies. In effect, to re-create as a defined, bounded concept a social phenomenon that in practice, was "'everywhere", was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate 'sphere' of its own' (Taylor, 2007, p. 2).

The attempt to create such a definition of 'religion' from an empirical perspective became important with the rise of the social sciences. Numerous definitions and families of definitions have appeared. The

problem is that there has been no single consensus sufficient in itself to capture the full reality of the phenomenon that is being addressed. Even where there is common agreement that acceptable definitions of religion must be based only on observable phenomena that can be verified empirically, there is no common agreement on what those phenomena are. In social science research, such as in sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, for instance, it is now common for social science researchers simply to choose one of the numerous available definitions or even invent one of their own to suit their particular intent and methodology. Similarly, in the legal arena, where the greatest emphasis is placed on precision and lack of ambiguity, efforts to get a commonly agreed social understanding of religion have been fraught. In the 1983 Australian High Court case involving the Church of Scientology, for instance, the Justices of the Court ended up with not one but three different opinions, with none of them forming a majority opinion (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1998). In the United States, getting a clear definition of religion is a more pressing issue because of a constitutional prohibition on the government infringing on people's free exercise of religion, a requirement that has extensive policy, regulatory, and taxation ramifications. However, as Sullivan notes in her work *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), this constitutional requirement has created a paradoxical situation. The intention of the constitutional requirement is to prevent the state from intruding on or preventing the free expression and practice of religion, including debates about what religion is or is meant to be. However, in exercising its responsibilities of policy, legal and financial regulation, the state has been forced to enter the debate about what is and isn't religion by giving its own definition in order to ensure it doesn't infringe on religion. Sullivan sees this as an irresolvable paradox, that characterises the modern problem of defining religion in an adequate way.

Given this historical background of secular versus religious political contests, the political and personal sensitivities that still surround it, and the lack of common agreement on what religion is, researching recent phenomena of resurgent, boundary-crossing, re-mediated religious activity from within a secular academy or a national research quality framework is a fraught and precarious occupation. The serious researcher of religion and media within the secular academy can find themselves contending on different fronts for the legitimacy of their study: with suspicions that one is either an evangelist for one brand or another, perceptions that one is a religious coloniser of meaning-construction in cultural materialist practice, or simply a flaky proponent of uncritical intellectual anomie.

In most Australian academies, this issue becomes operational in such settings as research seminars and conferences where one may want to explore the significant resurgence of 'religious', or 'spiritual', or 'metaphysical' activity described above, using a more nuanced understanding of religion or religiosity. Even within the flexible methodologies of cultural studies, however, which itself can explore such nebulous concepts as ritual, meaning-construction, fandom, etc., one can find oneself constantly responding to challenges from colleagues based on very simplistic and unreflective dualistic understandings of religion. This is compounded when one is trying to find an acceptable basis on which to argue budget for teaching, or in deciding which of the national research imperatives one identifies for the purposes of Australian Research Council grant applications ('Health and Lifestyle' is generally the closest approximation).

The reality is that since 9/11 there is now plenty going on in the field of religion in the public domain that fits the legitimising social-scientific definitions, to keep social science-based religion researchers legitimately busy. To that extent, the religiously aligned perpetrators of the spate of terrorist attacks in the early years of the millennium have been successful in their intent in these attacks to break the stranglehold of Western secular control of social legitimisation. A number of universities in Australia have now established Centres for Islamic Studies where previously they had rejected any consideration of religious studies, even of the majority Western religion of Christianity. There is now also a growing interest in different aspects of the resurgence of public religion, with increased studies and in some cases funding into such things as new religious movements, political activities of religious bodies, religion and migration, religion and marketing, religion and popular culture, media and religion, religious prosperity movements, religion and consumerism, and changes in religious authority.

The problem created by the secularisation framework, however, is that 'legitimate' research into religion from a secular perspective is still limited to that which rises above the threshold of public marketplace activity. This places an emphasis in focusing religion research on phenomena that have moved beyond the private realm into the public—a constraint that is not applied to some cultural studies, for example, which can build a research project on the individual meanings read into media symbolisations of very small groups of people. This generally biases religion research to phenomena that are either institutionally organised or validated, that have some identifiable political significance, or are held in common by a large number of

people on either a national or global basis—ie., phenomena that qualify not just as religious but as ‘a religion’.

As Fitzgerald (2007) has noted, ‘the contemporary distinctions between “religion” and “politics”, “economics”, or “secularism” are ideological insofar as they naturalise the “secular” sphere as an ideologically neutral and objective space against which research into religion needs to justify itself’ (p. 44). This has a number of consequences. One is that young scholars can be discouraged from pursuing a research career in religion or religion and media research because of the constant need to justify the study of religion or aspects of spirituality in a way that is not required of the study of at times trivial topics in other equally diverse and no less coherent or bounded disciplines such as politics, economics, or cultural studies.

The second consequence of the secular placement of religion is that it discourages research into de-centered, private practices and explorations into the religious, spiritual, transcendent, numinous aspects of life that are formative of social construction but haven’t yet reached the threshold of becoming externalised, centred, public phenomena that can legitimately be studied as ‘a religion’ in secular terms. For example, within the terms of what is considered legitimate study of religion, a study of the personal religion of Osama bin Laden that provided the impetus for the events of 9/11 would be considered inappropriate. One could argue in bin Laden’s case and those like his, that the constraints placed by Western intellectual traditions on what is legitimate religion created blinkers that prevented academics, journalists, and policy researchers from noticing and investigating this very significant sub-threshold religious development that had such devastating political consequences.

## **Re-placing religion**

Along with the significant work now again being done into such public phenomena as developments in religious traditions, the reengagement of religion and politics, and the rapid growth of new religious and spirituality movements, there is the need also for a renegotiation of a definition and methodology for engaging those movements in social religiosity/spirituality/self-transcendence/metaphysics today that do not yet rise above the threshold of being publicly visible, nor fit the ideological definitions that make them into an identifiable ‘religion’, albeit it ‘a new religion’. Yet taken together, these sub-threshold phenomena are of significant social and intellectual interest and

relevance because they reflect the new shape of social religiosity as it is being transformed under the impact of social media changes. As Hoover (2011) proposes,

*Traditional ways of thinking about the mediation of religion have tended to focus on what has been called an 'instrumentalist' paradigm, assuming that the necessary mode of religious communicational practice is an impulse to project religious symbols or ideas in ways that are consistent with the aspirations of religious authorities of various kinds. For a number of reasons, this view of religious mediation must be "turned around"—consistent with the traditions of cultural studies—toward an inquiry into the ways that media instantiate meanings through the practices of audiences, and the ways that the mediation of culture accrues to and confirms power within social relations.*  
(p. 2)

When religion, or spirituality, or non-material experience and significance is studied not from the perspective of bounded formal categories but in terms of what people actually do it becomes apparent that, in practice, people do not live within or restrict themselves to categories of sacred and profane; they continually adapt and integrate resources from all sources in the processes of making meaning for their lives. Nor do they bind themselves to empirical or material legitimations of reality. In a way that directly reflects cultural studies's emphasis on the active participation of the audience in the construction of the meaning of symbols, events, and practices, individuals as a matter of course can apply religious or non-material significance to profane material, practices, and objects without displacing the essential materiality of the objects they are signifying. They do so, not by displacing a religious perspective for a secular one, but by layering different dimensions of material and non-material significance, at times in congruent ways, at others in ways that are self-contradictory. They may make profane the supposedly sacred, yet without losing respect for its sacredness, and at times ascribe sacredness to the most profane practices or artifacts. Formal categorisations of what constitutes something as religious can't handle these ambiguities or nuances.

Work on rethinking media and religion away from a categorical framework towards a cultural one is being pursued in works such as that of Hoover (2011), Meyer (2009), and Morgan (2010). Steps towards such a late-Modern reconceptualisation of the various phenomena encapsulated in the generic term 'religion' may be drawn

from the work of people such as Comte-Sponville in his explorations of spirituality from an atheist perspective (Comte-Sponville & Huston, 2008), Tracy's exploration of the concept of limit situations (Tracy, 1975), and Fitzgerald's work on the history of the category of religion (Fitzgerald, 2007).

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