

# *Historiography*

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# Historical Roundtable: Studying Media and Religion

By John P. Ferré, Tona J. Hangen,  
Peter G. Horsfield, and Mark R. Silk ©



Ferré

From the Gutenberg Bible to the tweets of Pope Francis, religion has always had a strong presence in popular media. Some contemporary scholars have argued that media shape how people think about God. Others show that media framing of religious groups affects how those groups are treated. Studies of mediatization suggest that changes in the meaning and authority of religion have everything to do with how religion adapts to the characteristics and constraints of media.

The best of these studies are historical. Most readers of this journal will be familiar with Elizabeth Eisenstein's monumental study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, which, among other things, showed how the printing press influenced religious thought, organization, and experience. They may be less familiar with the significant contributions of the three participants in our roundtable discussion. *Unsecular Media* by Mark Silk used journalism history effectively to answer press critics who complained that American news media are anti-religion. *Redeeming the Dial* by Tona Hangen explained how evangelical revivalists adapted to broadcasting so well that they paved the way for the emergence of the Religious Right. And *From Jesus to the Internet* by Peter Horsfield showed that media were central to the evolution of Christianity from a

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## Ferré, Hangen, Horsfield, and Silk



Hangen

local itinerant movement to a diverse global enterprise.

In this roundtable, Tona Hangen, Peter Horsfield, and Mark Silk reflect on the state of historical research in media and religion.

**Ferré:** *Why is the history of religion and media important today?*



Horsfield

**Silk:** It's important because of the advent of digital media. A few decades ago, Elizabeth Eisenstein argued for — and perhaps somewhat overstated — the crucial importance of printing in shaping religion in the West in a wide range of ways. As she made clear, printing opened Western minds to an array of religious possibilities, encouraged fundamentalist movements, and facilitated persecution of “others,” be they witches or Jews. The new digital environment is changing the reli-



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Silk

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gious equation in ways we are only beginning to understand. The history of religion and media provides necessary context for understanding and evaluating the current situation.

**Hangen:** The history of media and religion remains critically underdeveloped and poorly understood in mainstream popular culture. Everything that matters has a history that matters. Religion flourishes in every available medium and in every era — this is all the more true as media are the dominant cultural forms of our own time. “Traditional” religion encompassed face-to-face ritual, material culture, print, and oral transmission through speech and song. As media have grown, including print, broadcast, digital, and social media, so too has religion’s reach and diversity. Every imaginable media platform and format has religious dimensions, both with intrinsic media affordances unique to that particular medium and consistent elements particular to that religion. I’d add that knowing the past of any practice deepens our understanding of it, and that goes for knowing how a religion has used media in the past, and also knowing a given medium’s history when it comes to religious expression.

**Horsfield:** The influence that media have on religious beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and practices has, until recently, been seen and studied largely as a modern issue. This focus has led to the distorted understanding that the changes taking place in social and institutional religion today are unique. If one applies a broader view of the mediation characteristics of communication as one of the essential aspects of social construction, it becomes apparent that religion, like every social phenomenon, is not simply a given but is constructed historically in the processes of being communicated. Looking at these social construction processes historically gives the more nuanced perspective that the changes currently under way are not unprecedented, but are continu-

ous with changes that have taken place in the past.

**Ferré:** *Why have you chosen the subjects you have for your own research? What have you hoped to accomplish through your own research in the field?*

**Silk:** My interest in the field has largely been confined to issues involving the news media and the representation of religion by journalists and commentators. The premise of my research is that journalism is an underutilized resource for social and cultural history in general, and for religious history in particular. With the digitization of newspapers and magazines, it is now possible to explore the journalism of the past far more quickly and efficiently — and inexpensively — than ever before. It's my belief that more than any other source material, journalism discloses the moral architecture of the past — the values and mores of a given time and place. Being able to integrate this material into religious history provides unparalleled insight into the contemporary understanding and reception of religious figures and movements.

**Hangen:** I've studied religious radio. I'm interested in how radio programming captured religious voices, shaped religious organizations, and informed American culture more broadly. The past of sound is a fascinating topic all its own — sometimes recording technology has allowed us to hear human interactions in real time, but the portion of the past captured using that technology is infinitesimal. I was particularly drawn to the historical moment that opened the era of mass broadcasting, and how that changed or preserved religious traditions. I was surprised to discover how the then-new technology of radio could be transformative, disruptive, and disorienting and simultaneously conservative, placing, and orienting. Religious radio scholarship had fallen into the intersection (or gap) between media studies and religious

studies, and I hoped to remind scholars of media that religion matters, and remind scholars of religion that media matter. I remain interested in points of intersection between media, religion, and popular culture; the performance of religion in the public sphere; and the scholarly act of making historical subfields legible to one another.

To make a full confession here, studying how early twentieth-century Protestant religious separatists employed emerging new media to share their “old time gospel” message was a stealth way of looking peripherally at my own religious tradition (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism). The differences between these two religious families are important to the identity of both and shouldn’t be minimized, but there are certain structural and cultural similarities in the ways they employ (sometimes deploy) religious media that I could easily recognize as I pursued my research across denominational lines.

**Horsfield:** My interest in historical perspectives on media and religion was sparked a number of years ago when I ran workshops for church leaders and church workers on the impact of electronic media on contemporary society and contemporary religion. Participants resisted thinking about media in anything but negative or critical terms. In preparing for these workshops, I came across an article about a dispute in second-century Christianity over whether Christian teachings should be written down or not (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*). I found it most effective to begin my workshops not talking about modern media, but by exploring why some Christians in the second century were so reluctant to have their teachings written down, what were the consequences of what became the widespread use of writing in Christianity, and why there has been very little questioning of the validity of those consequences. While there has now been extensive research done on the contemporary interactions of media, religion, and culture, there have still been few studies of historical perspectives on media and reli-

gious change, and no one has tracked systematically the part media played in the development of a religious tradition. I decided to do that with Christianity — *From Jesus to the Internet* is the product of that research.

**Ferré:** *What changes have you seen in the history of religion and media during your career, and how would you characterize the state of religion and media history today?*

**Silk:** I would say that the major shift when it comes to the history of journalism is the defenestration of the Whig interpretation that saw journalism steadily becoming more professional, comprehensive, and objective. Some of the most interesting work being done today, to my mind, is in the examination of the ways information has been provided to those who required it outside the bounds of journalism as conventionally understood. My sense is that we are still in the beginning stages of exploiting journalistic sources and integrating them into the larger story of religion in society.

**Hangen:** In my career — which precisely bridged the birth of the internet and personal computers into the dizzying digital world of today — I've watched the emergence of new media with great interest for how they serve religion (and/or serve AS religion). There are new media for starters — internet, YouTube, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit), virtual reality, gaming, streaming, subscription satellite, cable, niche media (e.g., the “long tail” of the web), LPFM local & microbroadcasting, podcasting, and Skype. To all of these new species, religion unsurprisingly and impressively has proven remarkably adaptive. And there are many new tools, methods, and approaches that could be borrowed from digital humanities, crowd-sourced research, and big data analysis to stimulate the study of reli-

gion and media.

The state of religion and media history is vibrant, but uneven. It is highly developed in some areas (theory, televangelism, history of the book, film, and television), but less developed in others (digital media, radio, anything outside American Christianity). The field's a little bit homeless — which has its advantages and disadvantages, as it wanders among conferences and journals in communication, religious studies, literary/rhetoric studies, cinema/film studies, business history, and popular culture. But on the plus side, that means religious media studies engage in ongoing conversations with diverse scholarly threads and have never suffered from being insular.

**Horsfield:** One of the interesting debates in historical research has been between micro- and long-term historical study. Throughout the twentieth century, with the growth of post-graduate research and the search for suitable new topics, the pressures of publication, and the postmodern suspicion of “grand narratives,” the trend in historical research has been towards greater and greater depth in shorter and shorter time periods and a focus on exceptional individuals or events. This shift towards a short or event view of the past has lost what had been a traditional purpose of historical research: to contribute perspectives of the long term to the public sphere in its thinking about current issues and the future. For many of these same reasons, much historical research on media and religion has focused on specific issues, particular media developments or media characters. A number of my earlier writings did this. In *From Jesus to the Internet*, I deliberately wanted to write a big picture, because I thought it was necessary to show not just big moments, but also the media's constant influence in the shaping of Christianity's development. I acknowledge in my Introduction that there's a risk in attempting something so broad and that it was likely to be open to criticism on every page by specialists who know the partic-

ulars of every instance better than I do. But I think the time was right for such a long-view study that the risk was worth it.

**Ferré:** *What frustrations have you encountered in your research?*

**Silk:** Personally, none — other than the usual ones of not having enough time to do it. I do think that the shrinkage of religion reporting within the context of the decline of journalism as understood in the late twentieth century has had the unfortunate effect of turning academic attention away from news coverage of religion. On the other hand, the history of journalism has become far more interesting in recent years.

**Hangen:** Mine is the common scholars' lament: paucity of evidence! Not enough from the past has been well-preserved and accessible in archives for scholarly use. For example, there's no archive or library devoted specifically to religious media. National Religious Broadcasters is a faith-based lobbying group uninterested in scholarly access to its resources and apparently not maintaining much of an archive of its membership and their work. Denominational archives didn't always preserve media artifacts; media archives weren't focused on collecting religious material. Much of the material I encountered during my initial research in the 1990s was, of course, not in digital formats, but that situation sadly hasn't improved much. Religious media aren't sexy enough for digital humanities or digitization projects (unlike, say, popular music or politics). They're often in obsolete formats not easily upgraded, like for example a flimsy plastic "record" included as a tear-out novelty in a 1970s religious magazine to be played on one's home stereo. A lot of the material I ended up using was purchased from amateur collectors through word of mouth or collectors' forums, having been pirated onto cassette tapes, with murky provenance and probably murky copyright law compliance. What is and isn't in the public domain when

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it comes to radio broadcasting is unclear to begin with, and religious radio — often with its dual purpose of being a proselyting message to the world and, simultaneously, an expensive production needing constant revenue streams to continue — complicates this issue even further.

Conversely, however, when one considers how to research religious digital media, it's the opposite problem: too much data, with too little ability to locate, search across, analyze, and archive it. There are abundant digital riches but they often exist in unstable online environments vulnerable to paywalls, deletion, and alteration without evidence of change.

**Horsfield:** They're not frustrations so much as problems to be solved. The biggest one, and it's a problem with all long-term historical research, was working out how to handle the diversity of the topics involved. Christianity is massively diverse, and I chose to deal with it not through a narrow and restrictive lens of orthodoxy, but through the wide-angled lens of diversity and plurality. Similarly with media. Though the concept of "media" as diversified phenomena is a fairly modern concept, the things it covers — technologies, material artifacts, sensory experience, political, economic, and power relations, reception perspectives, etc. — operated in the same way historically as they do today. Working out how to handle this diversity took me a long time and a number of dead ends before I settled on a chronological structure to uncover the big picture of the development and cumulative effects of decisions made in one period on those that followed, and more detailed case studies to flesh out characteristics of each period and its dynamics. My hope is that other scholars will use this framework to locate more detailed studies.

**Ferré:** *What lessons have you learned while researching the history of*

*religion and media?*

**Silk:** The main lesson is that there's gold in them thar hills. More broadly, I'd say that, in the West, the history of religion is inextricably entwined with the history of media. It is impossible to understand the history of the book (a new and important area of study) apart from the history of Christianity. In this sense, we are, I believe, entering a Golden Age of religion-and-media historical study.

**Hangen:** One lesson I learned while researching religion and media is that there is a deep vein of nostalgia and affection for this topic, almost as deep and rich as the vein of suspicion, fear, and mistrust about religious media. I wasn't prepared for how much a part of personal, family, and spiritual lives religious broadcasting was and is, nor for how influential it proved on the shape and form of mass media and social media themselves.

**Horsfield:** For me the study of history is not just about the past; it's also about the present and the questions that our present confronts us with. The context of the present in this area has been the questions and debates arising from the growing interest in the contemporary interaction of media, religion, and culture and the changes that media are bringing to contemporary institutional and social religiosity. For me, the broad question has been, Is what is happening now different from what's happened in the past, or is it yet another manifestation of processes of change in human culture? The specific questions in my latest research were, Have media influenced the way in which Christianity has developed, and what have those influences been? The exciting thing when I set out was, though I had bits and pieces of ideas, I didn't know how they all fit together, so it was a genuine voyage of discovery.

**Ferré:** *What new research in the history of religion and media would you like to see? That is, are there unanswered questions that need to be addressed?*

**Silk:** I'd like to see more focused studies on particular publications, along the lines of Elisha Coffman's study of *The Christian Century*. What's most important, to my mind, is the integration of sophisticated media studies into the more general historiography of society and culture.

**Hangen:** "Religion" is all too often shorthand for American Protestantism. We need much more work on the full spectrum of religious traditions and practices found today, especially world and non-Christian and hybrid traditions, and on the actual diversity of religious media. We also need more on how media interact, not just studying different media and messages in isolation from each other but as parts of holistic ecosystems of thought and cultural expression. We need more on now-obsolete forms and formats, more recovery of "lost stuff" — think filmstrips (a popular didactic medium in mid-twentieth-century Mormonism, for example), vinyl, cassette, floppy disk, piano and phonograph rolls, obsolete video formats, slides, even View-Master. Just to name a few....

**Horsfield:** Researching such a long history exposed me to a wide range of people, events, and phenomena that I could only touch on, but are worthy of deeper study and story-telling. For example, many people and movements were written out of the Christian story in the political processes of censorship and suppression that were part of creating an "official" version of Christianity. The history of Christianity will be quite different when those people and movements are seen not as ancillary to the main Christian tradition, but as an inherent part of it. I've also

come out of my study on media and religion with a greater awareness that “religion” is just one ideological way of addressing what really are essential, generic experiences that arise from our human existence together. In the historical development of civilizations, organized religion has been given primary responsibility for giving meaning to these dimensions of human experiences, to the extent that religious ideologies, institutions, and people have had an exaggerated power in society. While alternatives have been present, for historical reasons there has never fully developed an alternative secular language free of religious dogma for giving expression to these transcendental dimensions of our shared humanity. I’d like to see more research focused on that, including its persistence throughout history.

**Ferré:** *What advice would you offer to young scholars interested in researching the history of religion and media?*

**Silk:** My advice is to be historians first, communications scholars second. The important questions for our society require seeing media within a larger historical context. We are living in a time of media dominance like no other, but without the historian’s mode of interpreting reality, we will never adequately comprehend the significance of media in our time. Of course, this is an historian speaking.

**Hangen:** I think the default is still to think denominationally about religion and media. For those interested in these issues, I’d advise resisting this narrowness and instead think syncretically, thematically, and comparatively. We need scholars not to emerge out of the study of an individual religious tradition and look around for fruitful comparative opportunities but to research trajectories cutting across religious traditions from the outset.

**Horsfield:** I would remind young scholars of a quotation from the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce: “The documents and other survivals of the past are dead to us until we ask them a question, until we want to know something from them.” So I’d suggest first, have a good question that engages you and recognize that the questions we most often ask of history are not so much about the past but about the present and our future, and that’s alright. A second would be, be open to serendipity. Sometimes in research we make a discovery or come across an event or insight that can change how we think about something, and that requires reworking our past studies and the frameworks we’d been working with. The third would be, have a long-term plan. Historical research requires at times delving into a lot of detail on very specific things. At times that specificity can seem piecemeal and disconnected. It helps if you have a bigger picture of what you want to achieve in the long term.

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