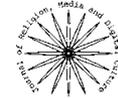




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Rethinking the Study of “Religion” and Media from an Existential Perspective

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Abstract

The broadening of the concept of religion from a substantive, anthropological definition to a more cultural, functional definition has enabled expansion of the study of media, technology and religion into a much wider field of social phenomena. It has been argued that this expansion has been so broad and unbounded that the more appropriate question in this field of study is no longer “What is religion?”, but “What isn’t religion?” This paper contends that the time is ripe to set aside a dualistic lens of religion and secular and look instead at embodied human reality as incorporating not only material, empirical and instrumental characteristics but also transcendental, metaphysical and non-empirical characteristics that also need to be theorised in secular terms.

Keywords

secularisation – media – religion – culture – transcendence – existentialism

When the field of media and religion studies began to emerge in the 1950s,¹ what was understood by “religion” and “media” were relatively clear concepts. Religion was generally understood through the social sciences of sociology and anthropology substantively as a particular system of faith in or worship of a god or gods, and the institutions, beliefs, rites and practices associated with that system of faith. Media were understood primarily as the mass media of newspapers, radio and television. The early study of media and religion was

¹ One of the significant early studies was that of Parker, Barry and Smythe, looking at radio and television audiences and religion (Parker, Barry, & Smythe, 1955).

focused, therefore, primarily on the media activities of clearly identified religious institutions: their publications or programming, audiences, finances, distribution and effects – a quite delineated focus.²

This focus began to broaden in scope in the 1980s, with a wider consideration of the cultural dimensions of that interaction, looking not just at what religious bodies were doing with media and in media, but at how what they were doing intermeshed with their ambient cultures.³ This widening of the focus was facilitated by wider theoretical developments in critical and cultural studies, deconstruction and reception studies, and the associated questioning of the hegemony of institutional formations, elite understandings of culture, and the constraints of defined fields and disciplines of study. This cultural turn, fertilized also by the break-down of the dominance of mass media through the rapid expansion and diversification of digital media, provoked a questioning of previous substantive approaches and understandings of what "religion" is. As a result, understandings of religion began to be expanded beyond the narrow lens of the formal beliefs, rituals and practices of traditional religious institutions, to a wider lens of what is believed, practised and named by people in their daily lives (see, for example, Bergunder, 2014; Hoover, 2002; Lynch, 2007a, 2009; Meyer, 2012; Saler, 2000; Woodhead, 2011).

This expansion beyond the social scientific definition of religion was facilitated also by the development of the functional approach to religion, which was valuable in widening the analysis of religious phenomena beyond just institutional perspectives to include the functions that religion serves for its adherents, such as community, ritual and ideological meaning-making.⁴ This widening of the field of media and religion study has been a very productive one. Disconnecting the study of religion from simply institutional practices, to the diversity of individual uses and practices – what people actually do with media and what they think they are doing as they do it – has produced exciting new insights into visual, material and sensory aspects of cultural religiosity and their connection with ideological and institutional formations. It has also provoked investigation into a much wider range of human and media phenomena and practices that look spiritual or religion-like but have little if anything to do with any sort of inherited religious system or organisation.

2 My study in the early 1980's of religious television in the U.S. reflected this approach (Horsfield, 1984).

3 Reflected in the work, for example, of Stewart Hoover (Hoover, 1988) and Jesús Martín-Barbero (Martín-Barbero, 1993).

4 I have used the approach myself in some of my writings and academic supervisions (See for example Horsfield, 1988).

While this expanded scope of study has been extremely fruitful, it has created a situation, as Smith notes, where it is now difficult to know what the “disciplinary horizon” of religion study is (Smith, 1998). As studies have progressed, a sleight of hand has gradually occurred, whereby those functions that religions are found to serve for their adherents, are reified as inherently religious, even when actors don’t self-identify as such or they occur in a totally non-religious context. This has produced a proliferation of derivative or subjunctive descriptors of these phenomena such as religion-like, pseudo-religion, functional religion, implicit religion, critical religion, invisible religion, spiritual but not religious, religiously unaffiliated, esoteric, secular-sacred, virtually sacred, or whatever (Geraci, 2014; Kirby, 2013; Knott, Poole, & Taira, 2013; Lynch, 2007a, 2007b). With this proliferation, it has become difficult now to be clear about what phenomena qualify, or don’t qualify, to be considered as religious and the legitimate object of religious studies or media-religion studies. A legitimate question is now raised, in what ways does what is being called religious or religion-like phenomena or behaviour have any substantial difference from what cultural studies, for example, may simply call culture, meaning-making, or ritual. Here I find myself in agreement with Fitzgerald’s (1997) earlier observation:

One finds in the published work of scholars working within religion departments the term ‘religion’ being used to refer to such diverse institutions as totems...Christmas cakes, nature, the value of hierarchy, vegetarianism, witchcraft, veneration of the Emperor, the Rights of man, supernatural technology possession, amulets, charms, the tea ceremony, ethics, ritual in general, The Imperial Rescript of Education, the motor show, salvation, Marxism, Maoism, Freudianism, marriage, gift exchange, and so on. There is not much within culture which cannot be included as religion. (p. 17)

In some ways, this disciplinary confusion may be seen as a very valuable and productive intellectual transition from historical demarcation categorizations which were primarily political, not conceptual in their origins. J.Z. Smith, for example, associates the historical origins of the modern concept of religion with 16th century colonization: “It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the term” (Smith, 1998, p. 269). The recent blurring of those disciplinary demarcations, therefore, can be seen as an inevitable and desirable consequence of the critical developments and fluidity of late modernity and post-secularization.

Yet I find myself in agreement with those such as Schilbrack, for example, who advocate that recent developments in the study of religion have become a little anarchic, and if the concept of religion is to have any honest analytic value it should have both a normative and functional component. In his view, it should be applied only to "those practices, beliefs and institutions that recommend normative paths based on super-empirical realities" and that "address a heterogeneous and open-ended variety of functions for their adherents" (Schilbrack, 2013, p. 313). That does not mean restricting our consideration just to formal understandings of what the religion is, but it does mean having a greater sense of coherence and basis of justification for what we give the name religion.

It is apparent that confining religion to the activities of powerful people and official structures of religious systems does not adequately deal with how what we have known as religious practices and beliefs are experienced and transformed in practice by the followers of the religion, or others who have no overt or declared religious affiliation. That is a legitimate intellectual consideration. But the effort to deal with these new phenomena (or perhaps old phenomena newly perceived) simply by broadening the old concept of religion, prompts a fundamental question as to whether this is the best or even legitimate scholarly way to deal with them; or whether, in the expansion of things being studied as spiritual, religious or religion-like, the concept of religion has become so broad that it is losing any real hermeneutical value for understanding the phenomena under investigation. Is the field expanding to such an extent that the critical question is no longer "what is religion?" but rather "what isn't religion?"

There are a number of reasons why retaining but extending the concept of religion for what they are studying has a certain pull for scholars working in the field of media and religion. One is historical. The extensive scholarly work that has been done on religion throughout the twentieth century has produced a wealth of theoretical perspectives, comparative analyses and taxonomical data that can be drawn on in explicating the dynamics and significances of current phenomena. As Lee (2015) has noted,

Using religion-related terms has some intrinsic value...while it inevitably means taking on the debates and controversies surrounding the definition of 'religion,' it also means benefiting from the term's many achievements. (p. 26)

A second benefit is professional stimulation. Frankly, for most media and religion scholars I have interacted with, it's a lot more interesting to study religion

by tracking something like death and dying online, fan culture or the mythological roots of digital virtual worlds, than by doing an analysis of the latest changes to the Vatican website, for instance.

A third compelling reason for preserving the term religion in the field of study is political and institutional. With the re-emergence of religion-based terrorism and the resurgence of particular religious groups as a political force, it is easier to defend university departments and get research funding for projects that have religion in their title than it used to be. It is certainly easier to get research funding for a project on religion than it is for a similar project on philosophy, for example. It is politically and academically advantageous, therefore, for those who study social and cultural phenomena to keep the term “religion” in their field of study, even if what is being studied is largely basic human behaviour.

Despite these advantages, a number of critical, fundamental questions still remain. One is definitional: if the concept of religion is expanded to such an extent, how is religion understood, and what doesn't count as religion?

A second is political: whether studying what are fundamentally human phenomena by widening the net of what is called religion supports the surreptitious, but historically prevalent colonization of human experience by the particular interests of religious institutions and religious ideologies. Despite the altruism that is claimed, religious organisations are at root political entities, with vested ideological, political and economic interests, and practical organisational needs that must be resourced through recruitment and solicitation and protected through social constraints, political muscle and if necessary violence. It strengthens these political and ideological interests of religious institutions therefore if the concept or phenomenon of religion in general remains an active one in social discourse. In marketing terms, it means they don't have to create a social awareness of the relevance of religion, they just need to market their brand.

This political issue has historical roots. As Toulmin (1990) among others have noted, this complementary relationship between religious institutions and secular society was forged out of the political trauma, contests and differentiation disputes of modern secularization. The result of these historic differentiation arrangements and intellectual divisions of Enlightenment secularisation is that in what is being called a post-secular society, we are still required to access a wide range of dimensions of our human existence through the lens and hegemonic discourse of religion, even though that discourse and its related practices no longer serve the purpose for a large number of people. It may not be doctrinal religion, or it may be differentiated as “common” religion, as Knott and her colleagues do (Knott et al., 2013), but it still validates the

domain of religion and therefore, in my view, reinforces the social hegemony of religious ideology and institutions over important aspects of human being.

A third issue raised by the expansion of the concept of religion and perpetuating the religious-secular dichotomy is that it leaves undeveloped or invalidated alternative reasonable discourses to enable people who reject religious discourse for any number of reasons, to give voice to or communalise shared ineffable experiences, existential challenges and ethical imperatives that are an integral part of everyday human experience.

To illustrate. A number of years ago I spoke at a lunch meeting of a Melbourne Rotary Club on the topic, "I'm not religious, but..." In it I looked at a number of dimensions of everyday life in which we experience or are forced to deal with situations which push us beyond our normal autonomous, intentional, logically instrumental ways of handling situations. After the talk, a man came up to me, introduced himself as a merchant banker and in a quite agitated way told me of a parachute jump his children had given him in the previous year for his 40th birthday. He recounted how he jumped out of the plane and opened his parachute, and as the plane disappeared he found himself suspended all alone in the silence above the earth. As he hung there, he said, "I had this overwhelming feeling of being extremely small, but at the same time very important." And then, with a mix of reflection and frustration, he said, "I'm not religious, but I don't know what to do with it."

This is a not unusual phenomenon, and it has been variously identified as a mystical experience, "non-ordinariness," (McClennon, 1994), something "special" (Taves, 2009), or "extraordinary experiences" (Shushan, 2014). But invariably, religious signifiers are attached to the phenomenon.

It seemed to me that what the banker was reflecting in his comment, "I don't know what to do with it," was the absence of a shared, intelligent, non-sectarian language for a person like him to deal with an out of the ordinary human experience: not just in terms of its physical occurrence or physiological explanation, but in terms of its existential significance. My contention is that if we could find a broader discursive way of giving expression to these dimensions of human experience, religious discourse would find its proper place as just one of several "languages" by which non-empirical aspects of human existence might be understood and expressed socially.

Empirical studies are now being undertaken looking at these deeper dimensions of human experience occurring outside a religious framework. But even there, investigators are almost forced to identify what they are studying as "not religion" to facilitate comprehension. Baker and Smith, for example, frame the focus of their work as secularism, which they define as "a general designation for people, organisations or institutions that are not religious" (Baker & Smith,

2015, p. 8). That is, secularism is a departure from the norm of religion, not a norm in itself. Lee's extensive study likewise is named *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Lee, 2015). Both texts recognize the problems with this innate connection with religion, and the absence and need for a new vocabulary enabling new parameters of research, but still find it necessary to retain the connection with religion.

Is it timely, therefore, to ask whether it is necessary to look for another approach to consider these wider phenomena in their own terms, not through widening the lens of religion and shaping these phenomena to fit this pre-existent category. I propose that we are at a point where we need, or are seeing the beginnings of a paradigm shift in the field (Kuhn, 1962). To my way of thinking, facilitating this shift involves two changes.

One is to challenge the colonizing diffusion of the concept of religion by returning to a more substantive and constrained understanding of what is meant when the word religion is used. I resonate with Lagerkvist's proposition, that we need to reaffirm that existence precedes religion, that human existence is a profoundly rich combination of material and immaterial, external and internal realities, containable and uncontainable phenomena, and that religion needs to be properly understood not as the catchall for anything or everything that has a touch of something ethereal about it, but as just one specific way by which some humans choose to understand and explain some of these pleasant surprises and inescapable demands of our humanity (Lagerkvist, 2016). This would mean adopting Schilbrack's recommendation mentioned earlier, of reserving the concept of religion only to "those practices, beliefs and institutions that recommend normative paths based on super-empirical realities" and that "address a heterogeneous and open-ended variety of functions for their adherents" (Schilbrack, 2013). Or in the analytical framework used by Knott and her colleagues, it means restricting the use of the concept of religion to refer only to phenomena that fall within her category of conventional religion, namely (within a U.K. perspective) "institutionalized religion, the religion associated with the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the parishes, other world faiths, and the new religious movements" (Knott et al., 2013, p. 10).

The second change that needs to be made is to recognise the constraints that the epistemological dualism of the secular-sacred paradigm has placed on our research and understanding. It is helpful to recall that in the restructuring and differentiation of political arrangement that took place in secular Modernity in the West to counter the domineering and damaging influence of religion, the institutions and ideologies of religion were not done away with altogether—they were contained by being assigned custody and allowed naming rights for particular aspects of social reality that empirical theory and investigation at the time saw as being if not totally discredited, then at best of

little importance. Though religious institutions and players have continually resisted this formal containment of their authority, once they adjusted to this secular re-positioning they found significant social prestige and political influence as the custodians or interpreters of some key and powerful dimensions of human existence and experience. As a result, as noted earlier, even in well-advanced secular societies we are still required to access and interpret those powerful subjective, numinous, metaphysical dimensions of human existence through the lens and hegemonic discourse of religion or spirituality, even if the ideologies and institutions associated with that discourse no longer serve the purpose for a large number of people.⁵ If one is to challenge this residual social hegemony of religion and its institutions over significant aspects of human existence, including the holism and richness of indigenous cultures and worldviews for example, it is necessary also to challenge this dichotomous, reductionist view of secularization.

There have been a number of writers who have sought to change this materialist reductionism of secularity, such as Comte-Sponville's *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* (2008) or de Botton's *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believers Guide to the Uses of Religion* (2012) (though their propositions still reference the concept, practices and language of religion).⁶ More recent studies of secularism or the "non-religious" are also challenging this flat plane view of life outside religion being seen as something subordinate or derivative marked by "the general absence of something concrete rather than the presence of something in particular." (Lee, 2015, p. 9. See also, among others, the work of Baker & Smith (2015), Baker (2008), Droogers and van Harskamp (2014)).

I want to advocate, therefore, that in place of considering these subjective human and social realities through a dualistic lens of religion or secular, we take a holistic perspective and see embodied human reality as incorporating not only material, empirical, and instrumental characteristics, but also qualities of transcendent, metaphysical or non-empirical reality or imperative that need to be recognized, analyzed and theorized communally with the same

5 It's surprised me at times to get reactions from my cultural studies colleagues in faculty seminars or research symposia to any attempt to broaden the concept of religion beyond a substantive one and opposition to applying functionally religious categories to what they see as essentially cultural activities. A number of scholars make similar arguments (See for example, Fitzgerald, 2000; Schilbrack, 2013). At first I thought these colleagues were being defensive, even simplistic in their understanding of religion, but looking at it again I can see a resistance to what they saw as the creeping colonising power of the concept of religion as the sole legitimate explanation of particular immaterial human experiences, and the political consequences that in legitimizing the hermeneutic frame of religion in general, one gives legitimation to the social and political power of the institutions and ideologies of religion.

6 Like a non-alcoholic beer perhaps – getting the taste without the intoxication.

attention given the material and empirical. Such a discourse of transcendence or the numinous within an empirical frame would still subject the transcendent aspects of experience to the same reasonable and empirical scrutiny as we do the causal, such as evaluating or integrating the significance of an event with its chemical, electrical and hormonal causes for example. These connections are increasingly being investigated in such fields as neurological research (see, for example, Andersen, Schjoedt, Nielbo, & Sørensen, 2014; Austin, 1998; d'Aquili, 1982; d'Aquili & Newberg, 1998; Reinerman-Jones, Sollins, Gallagher, & Janz, 2013; A.C.T. Smith, 2014, 2016; Wanga et al., 2011; Yaden et al., 2016). But an integrated approach would recognise also that along with the physical causes, a full engagement with our embodied human experiences requires addressing also in a personal and social way the transcending significances of those material and causal processes.

What are These Qualities of Existential Transcendence or Imperative?

What marks these “transcending” dimensions of human existence being talked about, and in what ways are they different from any other aspect of human experience or cultural practice? I’m aware that the word transcendent may not be the best word to use, and brings its own cultural associations, but I’m having trouble finding a better one. Numinous may be another possibility, metaphysical another. Sumiala’s concept of immanent transcendence is close to it also—situations or experiences that do not remove us into a different dimension but are inherent in many of our everyday experience (Sumiala, 2013). In my reckoning, they’re marked by three characteristics.

One is they bring a sense or realisation of realities beyond ourselves that are as much definitive of who we are or what the world is as is our individual autonomous being. Those realities may include the natural world; innate genetic, physical or psychological processes of development that impel us beyond who we are at any particular time; particular cause and effect processes beyond our control that we are immersed in as they run their course; inescapable interdependence on others as part of wider communities. As noted earlier, indigenous and matriarchal cultures, as much as they have survived, tend to retain and act within the holism of this cosmological reality because of their direct dependence on the earth or direct involvement in life’s gestation and protection.

A second is they lay upon us a sense of imperative. Without negating our freedom to choose, they are events, challenges or situations we encounter that appear to remove this sense of choice from us. Events, demands, or situations

that present themselves to us as inevitable or inescapable. As uncomfortable or demanding as they may be, they are things that just have to be done.

The third is that they often require responding or acting in faith. They are situations or experiences that require us to act upon or deal with something even though we do not have all the facts to understand and guide our actions, or where we need or choose to act where we cannot fully know, control or guarantee the outcome.

While most studies tend to focus on specific "experiences" of this sort, these transcendent aspects of our human existence are both situational and experiential in character—what Tracy distinguishes as "limit situations" and "limit experiences" (Tracy, 1975).

Situationally, they are encountered in the normal activities of life where we are required to deal with realities beyond ourselves or situations that are not of our making. This may be in the form of decisions we are required to make where the outcome is not predictable or guaranteed, demands that constantly interrupt our intentions or planning, set-backs we encounter, steps of faith we need to take in order to live. From a neurological perspective, they include cognitive belief sets we have developed as a way of organising our past experiences that we automatically call on to help us respond quickly when we need to (Smith, 2016). Situationally these aspects of our existence are generally routinized in our unconscious daily behaviour—"That's just life!" But this situational routinization reflects our acknowledgment of the immanent-transcendent nature of our existence as human beings: as contingent but also intentional, stable but also unpredictable, satisfying but also disrupted, self-directed but also other-demanding.

Experientially, there are times when we become conscious of these contingent, vulnerable, surprising aspects of our existence in a heightened and transformative way. Scholars have referred to these occasions variously as "extraordinary experiences," (Shushan, 2014), "wondrous events," (McClennon, 1994), "non-ordinariness" (Brainard, 1996), peak experiences (Sumiala, 2013), or something "special" (Taves, 2009). As noted earlier, research is being undertaken on the neuro-physiological bases of experiences such as these, including the possibility of reproducing such experiences in the laboratory (Andersen et al., 2014; Yaden et al., 2016).

In general discourse, these peak experiences are generally what is identified and referred to as "religious experiences." I would argue that categorizing them separately as religious experiences has a distorting effect by perpetuating a secular-religious dichotomy of human life that is no longer linguistically, ideologically or politically desirable, and sets up human experience as a site of contest between secular and religious ideology. On the one hand, secular

ideological perspectives argue that discovering the physiological or psychological causes of such experiences discounts their religious explanations or the significance attributed to them by individuals (though Andersen and colleagues report that the experiences of participants in their laboratory experiments had a high degree of authenticity and lasting effects in terms of memory and attribution (Andersen et al., 2014)). Equally sectarian is the use by religious bodies of intense experiences such as these to justify their religious perspective, and many actively seek to reproduce similar experiences in religious rituals or as recruitment devices in evangelism.

From a human perspective, it is generally in these occasional intense experiences that people become conscious of the contiguous, fragile, interdependent, personally insufficient yet personally distinctive, character of our routinized everyday lives. It is often in these everyday experiences of transcendence, brought into our consciousness by the intensity of a physiological rush, that we gain perspectives by which to recognize and examine the situations of transcendence we live within in the less focused mundane living of our daily lives. For this reason, these experiences of transcendence are often marked by a quality of imperative, unsettling our routines with ethical implications for how we view ourselves and how we “should” live our lives. It was this ongoing felt imperative that the banker reflected in his final comment, “I don’t know what to do with it.”

As noted earlier, while it is easier to identify these dimensions of transcendence with outstanding events or intense experiences, the transcendence of human existence is more commonly present and frequently acted upon in latent situations as part of the everydayness of life. Certainly such occasional, exceptional occurrences serve a particular function of heightening awareness or bringing into consciousness something latent that had not been “realised” in the same way before, but I’m using the concept of existential transcendence to apply to both everyday situations and occasional heightened experience. A number of examples can be given. These are intended as illustrative rather than definitive and are obviously not discreet nor separate from each other.

One is a sense of giftedness. These are situations or experiences we encounter marked by a quality of our being given something that is not of our creation, or effort, or deserving. It is as if it is a gift of life itself. Included in this are occasional intense moments of heightened awareness, awe and wonder, with a perceived quality of sacredness or specialness. In this I would include such phenomena as the earth or life as creation, innocence, beauty, tranquility, integration or wholeness, child-birth and nurture, love, forgiveness, the kindness of strangers, and what Comte-Sponville refers to as *communion* – a quality of relationship of sharing with others without the perception of

division (Comte-Sponville, 2008). These sort of situations or experiences frequently carry an ethical imperative towards gratitude, generosity, reciprocity and responsibility.

A second is in the impulse of expansion. It is a felt need or drive emerging from within ourselves to develop, to actualize, to expand, to grow, to continually improve or reach beyond ourselves. A lot of the time this is subconscious and involuntary, deeply rooted and sustained in the physical drive we inherit through the hormones, genetic material and growth impulses of our human bodies to re-create life. It is notable in human activities of invention, creativity, curiosity and travel.

A third is obligation. This is a transcending of a singular focus on ourselves, our self-survival and self-interest, due significantly to our socialization borne of our practical awareness of our interdependence and for the sake of group survival and prosperity. These practicalities tend to be routinised to such an extent that they frequently cease to be a conscious choice and become an internalized imperative of duty, community, love, or destiny that calls us out of ourselves into a larger identity. Occasionally they become more conscious when our sense of obligation is undermined or presents as a challenge to our personal self-interest.

A fourth are threats to our being that come from within us or beyond us, most often against our wishes. These are most frequently encountered in everyday experiences of sickness, loss, death, disruption, disturbance or disintegration. In these experiences we become conscious that though we perceive ourselves and live as a single being and unique centre of consciousness, we cannot escape the reality that as much as we would choose otherwise, our lives are beyond our control and shaped equally by events and processes beyond ourselves. Despite our personal strength, we are also fragile, easily dispensable and subject to being forgotten. One day we will cease to be, yet the world will carry on as if we were nothing.

To be considered within this experience of threat is the concept of evil. Though mythologised in most religions as a satanic or antagonistic supernatural being, or as a descriptive category in ethical systems of the good, the quality of experience is a sense that in some events or situations we encounter not just random or accidental setbacks or threats but the feeling that there is an antagonistic personal or impersonal dynamic beyond ourselves which intent is to do damage and harm. This physical-metaphysical quality of evil occasionally encountered in everyday life is exemplified in a scene at the end of the Danish television series, *1864* (Bornedal 2014), a drama about the Danish-Prussian wars. One of the main characters, Peter, a sensitive peasant farmer, returns from the war and is joined around the table with his family and close friends. He says in reflection,

We're simple folk, who've seen too much in too short a time. When I looked into the eyes of the enemy my heart beat rapturously like in a wild animal. It destroyed something. I know that if we're to fear anything at all it's the evil inside us. For it takes so little to release it. A tiny scratch, a loveless child, or just a stupid misunderstanding. We must take care every single day not to release the evil, but to cultivate all the things that hold it back. Let's cultivate joy and each other. The elation when the stocks bloom, when the log splits in one perfect blow, when Laust Junior and Peter Junior lie in bed giggling. When Sophia passes me and squeezes my hand. When the lark up above tries to tell us over and over again that life is good.

Another dimension of the transcendent nature of our human existence is the innate need we have to integrate. For physiological and cognitive processes beyond our making, it is not enough for us as human animals simply to have multiple, repetitive, sequential or random sensate experiences or thoughts. Neurologically, we are compelled "to work furiously to puzzle out why things are the way they are" (Smith, 2016, p. 3) – to go beyond the myriad immediate random sense experiences or thoughts we have in any particular moment or duration and link them into constructed conceptual or narrative connections of meaning that provide us with operative frameworks of understanding, identity and direction. The failure to do so effectively often presents us with the transcendental threat of disintegration or anomy.

In talking about human transcendence in this way, it should be apparent that I am not talking about a separate dimension of life that can be optionally engaged or dispensed with, or that occurs occasionally in "religious moments". It is seeking a more integrated view of human existence that sees, in the empirically observable, measurable and explainable physical and material processes and events of our lives, there are also dimensions that need a shared social discourse for validating and bringing their significance into the description and understanding of the physical.⁷ Such a discourse may need to find more inventive ways of integrating linguistically and conceptually rational-critical investigation and understanding with mythic, metaphorical or ritually expressive expression.

⁷ Among other systems or practices addressing these aspects of being human are philosophy, which explores transcendence in systems of thought and ethics; and the creative arts, which give expression to human transcendence in creative language, music, built environment, painting, dance, and the various virtual reality creations.

But to separate out such fundamental physiological, sociological and psychological needs, aspirations and experiences as religious, as is currently commonly done, is in my view to apply a historical political arrangement and sectarian label on what are inherently reasonable, empirically grounded characteristics of being human. Looked at from this perspective, religion and religions are to be more properly understood as particular hegemonic political and ideological formations that co-opt these common human situations and experiences and ideologises them in an exclusive way, at times forcefully, in institutions, systems of thought, language, communities and ritual practices. For that reason I find the secular-sacred, scientific-mythological frame for discussing these aspects of human existence quite inadequate, no matter how much we try to broaden the concept of the sacred.

What Does This Mean for the Study of Media, Religion and Culture?

Seen from this perspective, I propose it is reasonable, and perhaps more accurate, to say that what we are seeing from a media perspective in recent decades is not a resurgence of religion in non-institutional forms, but the breaking of the monopoly of religion over the interpretation of human transcendence, and new forms of media giving people a new freedom to re-explore transcendent dimensions of their human experience and existence beyond the historical "secular or religious" paradigm. Studying the significance of such cultural shifts, and the place media may have played or be playing in them, may be more effectively done if we abandon the distortions of an inherited secular-sacred dialectic, and the questionable extension of the concept of religion into activities that are not essentially religious, non-religious or anti-religious, but simply human.

A number of researchers have suggested alternative terminology to give some focus to this wider study. Droogers and van Harskamp suggest a shift from the concept of religious studies to "worldview studies" (2014). Baker and Smith propose the study of "cosmic belief systems," in which they include religious, noninstitutionalized supernatural or spiritual, and nonreligious belief systems (Baker & Smith, 2015). Coming from her fieldwork and reflection, Lee proposes an understanding of "existential cultures," in which she includes Humanism, Agnosticism, Anti-Existentialism, Theism, and Subjectivism (Lee, 2015).

What this means for the name of a nascent field of media study (media, religion and culture), a journal entitled *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital*

Culture, or the name of an International Society⁸ is open to discussion. It appears in the light of the analysis above that the research the concept has stimulated has progressed the field to the extent that the word and concept of religion are no longer adequate to the work being done and the insights being gained. Either the field restricts itself to the study of media as it functions or has functioned within religious institutions or the religious beliefs, perceptions and practises of those who identify with those institutions, or it expands its orbit and nomenclature to the broader study of, say, media, culture and existential/human transcendence.

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