

# Media and Religion

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## Introduction

We live in a new age, one variously described as ‘the age of information,’ ‘the age of interaction,’ ‘the network age,’ ‘the media age,’ and even ‘the second media age.’ It is, we are told, the age of post-modernity,’ ‘globalization,’ ‘late capitalism,’ ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘hyper-reality,’ and so on. The style of commentary associated with these terms may often seem bombastic or simply confused, when not outright obfuscatory. But, beneath the verbal effluence, lie two related ideas: everything has changed, and media has something to do with it. It is with a critical eye to these ideas that I would like to consider why—and precisely how—attention to media might prove important for an account of religion in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup>

We live in an era of what I choose to call intense globalization. Events as they happen are beamed into our living rooms at breathtaking speed. We, all of us, have become spectators and participants at once in events happening in the far reaches of the globe, across time zones and beyond our own immediate concerns. The pace of reporting of these events and the seeming urgency in the way they are brought to us make us more than spectators; we become perhaps, involved spectators. The attack on the twin towers was viewed in horrified disbelief from within the comfort of our living rooms; the war on terror and the hunt for Bin Laden played out in high definition clarity over the following years as did the attacks on the Indian Parliament, the Gujarat riots, the Mumbai attacks, the London bombings, the recent Paris attack and other defining moments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our access to the world and the events that affect us directly or indirectly has increased manifold until quite literally, the world is just a click away. The events that define us as a nation are no longer just the events that define us as a nation but the events that define each of us as humans and the way we relate to one another. The media, in its many forms, is perhaps playing a role in this redefinition and in very real ways informing our opinions of the world as is presented to us.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are some basic questions that one needs to ask when tackling the issue of understanding the role or the interplay of media and religion:

- Why do the Media matter to Religion?
- How does one merge Media technologies and determinism?
- Can mediation and communication be understood together?
- Do 'Traditional' Media – orality, image, text and performance (ritual, theatre) have a place today?
- Can the new forms of media encourage dialogue?
- Do Religion, Media and Politics in the contemporary world culture give rise to hegemony?
- Do the theories of Religion, particularly anthropological approaches examining religion in the public sphere?
- How do different media shape religious practices; issues of embodiment, ritual, performance, sensory and aesthetic disciplines?
- What is the impact of trans-national and global faith communities and the internet?
- Does the representation of religion in the news media, both in the East and West ensure a particular emphasis on the representations of religious revivalism and violence?

### **The Role of the Media**

The changing nature of religion in contemporary life has received more and more attention in the years since the September 11 attacks. In all this talk, however, the critical role of the media has been overlooked. While media are ubiquitous throughout the world, they tend to be taken for granted rather than noticed. This neglect is true in many sectors of modern life, but no more so than in religion, even though religions

have always been mediated and many religious movements have had prominent involvement in modern media since at least the late 19th century.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that the major religious issues and trends that are so important today cannot be fully addressed or understood without attention to the media. Indeed, these trends are rooted in the media in important ways. The media are a source of information about religions, religious trends, and religious ideas. In the wake of the September 11, the July 2005 London and the Bali attacks, journalism has paid increasing attention to religion both as a local and domestic story and as an international or global one. Sectarian interests are increasingly at the centre of situations of political tension, social strife and even bloodshed. Religion is thus more and more in the news.<sup>4</sup>

Religion has also appeared more and more in entertainment and popular culture. Where prime-time television once carried few programs with religious or spiritual themes, religion has become a staple of commercial television in the U.S., the West and even in India. But the media don't just cover and represent religion. They actually interact with religion in ways that are changing both the media and religion. The events surrounding September 11 give some examples of such interactions. It is important to remember that the September 11 attacks were and continue to be presented and understood as at least partly rooted in religion, in religious truth claims and in a claimed "clash of civilizations." The media were the primary sources of the experience of the September 11 events for most people across the globe. The fact that these events were about both politics and religion did not escape those viewers in those presentations.<sup>5</sup>

There was much coverage and commentary on the religious bases and implications of the attacks. But the media were even more deeply involved. It soon became obvious that much of what most people in the West knew about "others" elsewhere in the world was the result of the way Western media portrayed those regions and their religions. Questions about the reasons for the attacks could be answered only with well-known assumptions about the global situation derived from the media. The fact that there were more questions than answers revealed that the media coverage of global religious politics has lagged behind evolving realities.<sup>6</sup>

The media played a further role in the motivation of the Islamist interests behind these attacks. For decades, conservative movements in the Muslim world have been developing a powerful critique of Western immorality, decadence and irreligion. Some of those involved in the September 11 attacks and in the broader anti-Western Islamist movement based their ideas about the West on impressions derived from Western media. Anyone who has travelled extensively outside the West has seen the plethora of second- and third-rate American films and television programs available there. Violence, sex, and immorality make for cheap, accessible and translatable content in film and television, and the result is a portrayal of the West and Western values that few who live in the West would recognize. The media are thus involved in creating, not just portraying, the moral confrontation that some see taking place between Islam and the West.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the media were also involved in the commemoration of the events of September 11 and their aftermath in more than just journalistic ways. We might say, then, that media can at the same time be a source of religion and spirituality, an indicator of religious and spiritual change, and articulated into religious and spiritual trends—changing religion through those interactions and also being changed by that relationship.<sup>8</sup>

### **Religious and Media Change**

The interaction between media and religion is being made more obvious as both media and religion have undergone significant changes in recent years. In media, there have been trends in technology and in economics which have resulted in an increasingly diverse, decentralized and multi-channel environment. As more and more channels have emerged in the traditional media and in the digital, online and social-media realms, a growing market for a wider range of content has developed, significantly lowering what had been barriers to entry by religion. The media increasingly operate like a marketplace, and as there is more and more demand for religion and spirituality, media supply has increased. Among other things, this increased supply of mediated religion means that religion and spirituality are increasingly available outside the boundaries of the formal “religions,” a situation that has world-changing implications for those institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Their presence and persistence in recent years has been accompanied by important changes in many religions. Foremost among these has been a decline in the authority of religious leaders, institutions and doctrines. For a variety of reasons, people today are taking more responsibility for their own faiths, spiritualities and religious identities. Along with the decline in public confidence in institutions in general, religious institutions have also lost their prominence and their clerical authority is less

important in determining what people believe and the way they live their lives. Religion and spirituality today are thus more determined by individuals and processes of individual choice. This trend in religion can be seen to be consistent with secularization. Feelings of individual autonomy are direct effects of modernity, education and media.<sup>10</sup>

The term “spirituality” is prominent in these trends. People are increasingly uncomfortable identifying with “religion,” which they define as a package combining institutional and clerical authority, and more at home with “spirituality,” which for them represents pure meaning and practice undiluted by its association with received and determinative ideas and histories. These emerging “spiritualities” look for symbols and other resources outside the boundaries of specific religious traditions, seeking to create something new, synthetic and meaningful that works for them. While some of these resources necessarily come from the historic religions, it is the acquisition and combination of them (the “quest,” as it is often described) in unique and uniquely meaningful ways that is the task of the autonomous individual self. Most important to our purposes here, access to these resources involves the media. As people seek individual (and collective) spiritualities that make sense, they turn to the expanding marketplace of religious symbols that has emerged in local and global media.<sup>11</sup>

### **Media, Religion and the Indian Scenario**

Religion and politics have been mixed together in Indian society for so long it’s senseless to talk about them separately today, said Indian journalist [Vishal Arora](#) in a presentation to the Oxford Centre’s course on Religion & Politics in Washington,

D.C. With 1.1 billion people, India is the second most populous nation and the largest democracy in the world. The population is divided among a Hindu majority of 80.4%, a Muslim minority of 13.4%, a Christian minority of 2.3%, and the remainder composed of various religions. This makes for a very volatile political environment, though it was not always this way.<sup>12</sup>

“The use of religion in Indian politics can be linked to the country’s pre-independence era,” argued Arora. “It is believed that the British, who ruled India for more than 100 years around the 19th century, pitched one community against the other to weaken the freedom struggle.” The religious divisions affect both party organization and voting habits. For Arora’s study, the key political players are the [Bharatiya Janata Party \(BJP\)](#), which is the party most closely tied to the Hindu-nationalist agenda. Arora maintains that the Hindu nationalist agenda is not theocratic. It is more like civil religion, with an understanding that the nation-state “belongs” to Hindus. The political problems arise out of the Hindu nationalist’s violent fringe, which rejects “encroachment” by non-Hindus.<sup>13</sup>

The BJP’s primary political opponent is the [Indian National Congress](#) (also called “the Congress”), which advocates for “secularism” or the notion that all religions should be treated equally before the law. The Congress advocates a public square that functions more like the religiously “neutral” public square of Western, industrialized democracies. Of course the most important window into the religious-political tensions ought to be the news media, but Arora argues that Indian media do not always serve the public well in these matters. One issue is that Indian media do not have a religion beat, per se, and thus lack reporters with expertise. But the media often fail their public with poor reporting and by mislabelling violent events in a way that protects the perpetrators. The media consistently label communal violence as spontaneous “riots” even when the evidence implies they were premeditated.<sup>14</sup>

Arora’s presentation laid out many causes for concern, but he insists that the remedy is not to remove religion from public life. He claims that the remedy is simply to ensure that religion’s virtues come out in public life.” After all,” Arora noted,

“Mahatma Gandhi, known as the Father of the Nation, led India to win independence from the British rule through a struggle that was founded on religious beliefs.”<sup>15</sup>

In many parts of urban India, a new interface between media and religion is observed which is on par with the West. A.S. Byatt, an English novelist, sheds more light on this matter. She claims that Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites represent newer ways of understanding ourselves and how we construct a sense of self. “I’m sure it’s a religious matter,” she says. “You only exist if you tell people you’re there.” As “the new god,” Facebook, she thinks, operates as a mirror to reflect back to us who we think we are. While these words may not really have been spoken in the context of religion and social media in India, it definitely can be applied to the same, making just as much sense.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, it can also be argued that the social media can be just as popular with religious groups too. There are blog awards for Jewish and Israeli blogs, Catholic blogs and even for the best writing on the Muslim web. There are religious communities on social media (especially on Orkut, which was the most preferred social media site in India until recently), which are quite popular, having a number of fans and followers too. There are You-Tube clones dedicated to particular religious views and quite a few podcasts too, and these are amongst the most active in virtual world, such as Second Life.<sup>17</sup>

In one way, social media can be said to have a negative effect on the Indian youth when it comes to religion. Yet, in another way, it can be opined that controversial topics draw a lot more attention online – and this could possibly be one of the reasons for the popularity of the social media when it comes to religious groups. Moreover, using religion as a factor to be considered when drawing up an ad for business purposes may also get you more business with the people belonging to the religious group. Either way, one thing is quite evident from all this – social media is indeed a powerful means for people from one community to stick together and keep in touch with their beliefs regardless of where they are settled.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The trends in the way religion and religion-related issues are reported in the world and in India give us at least three inferences:

1. The media give substantial coverage to religion and religion-related issues, by highlighting mainly the negative and divisive aspects. For instance, many religious communities are doing commendable social work, but their work rarely gets the attention it deserves. This is perhaps a result of most media being market-driven, rather than having an agenda, which compels them to use only stories that are potentially sensational and can sell.
2. There is a decline in seriousness in the various religion columns in newspapers. Maybe this only reflects popular religiosity, which seems to lack spiritual substance.
3. Third, generally speaking, the media promotes false spirituality or a spirituality that promotes an emotional and an individual quest. Perhaps they, who seem to be very shallow in the spirituality they preach and practice, are good in public relations skills and are aggressive evangelists.

It would be naïve to expect that the media leadership will take any initiative to deal with these predicaments, but it is possible for individual reporters and editors to do their bit in bridging the gaps in reporting religion as news.

## End Notes

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