

MEDIATING FAITHS

Religion is living culture. It continues to play a role in shaping political ideologies, institutional practices, communities of interest, ways of life and social identities. *Mediating Faiths* brings together scholars working across a range of fields, including cultural studies, media, sociology, anthropology, cultural theory and religious studies, in order to facilitate greater understanding of recent transformations.

Contributors illustrate how religion continues to be responsive to the very latest social and cultural developments in the environments in which it exists. They raise fundamental questions concerning new media and religious expression, religious youth cultures, the links between spirituality, personal development and consumer culture, and contemporary intersections of religion, identity and politics. Together the chapters demonstrate how belief in the superempirical is negotiated relative to secular concerns in the twenty-first century.



Mediating Faiths

Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

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Permission

The advertisement for iWorship, *CCM* magazine, September 2003 (Fig. 10.1) is reprinted by permission of Integrity Music, Inc.

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Chapter 1 Editors' Introduction Religion as Living Culture

Michael Bailey and Guy Redden

A large majority of the world's population continue to identify as followers of religions. The word 'continue' is used advisedly here, because although few would doubt the importance of religion in world history, over recent decades few within the social sciences have viewed it as an important dimension of the present. Tacit secularism has informed inquiry across disciplines, despite heated technical debate about the secularization thesis within the sociology of religion. A.E. Crawley summarized the sentiment of social science secularism aptly back in 1905 when he declared that 'religion is a mere survival from a primitive age'. In this view it is little more than a remnant of previous socio-cultural formations – of traditional superstitions to be overcome by modernity.

While Crawley went on to predict that the extinction of religion was 'only a matter of time', a distinctive feature of the secularization theories developed from the 1960s onwards was that they did not reduce the process to decreased levels of religious belief and participation *per se.*⁴ Although putative declines in reported belief and practice in liberal democracies have played their part in the argument, the theories were compatible with the persistence of widespread religious affiliation among populations. They had to be. Their main point was that religion ceases to be *socially significant* in the modern world because religious ideation becomes supplanted by technical expertise in supplying the operating principles for social practice. In other words, the integrative influence of religion over primary institutions of the state wanes even though it may 'continue' to have an important place in the personal lives of individuals and families.

¹ United Nations, 'Population by religion, sex and urban/rural residence: each census, 1985–2004', Demographic Yearbook, 2005, at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dybcensus/V2_table6.pdf, accessed 1 October 2010.

² Malory Nye, 'Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religioning: Religious Studies and Contemporary Cultural Debates', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 12 (2000): pp. 447–76.

Rodney Stark, 'Secularization, R.I.P.', *Sociology of Religion*, 60/3 (1999): p. 250.

⁴ Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 149.

However, by the late 2000s the supposition that actually existing religion is merely a marginal, private affair has become problematic. The global awareness of the rise of Islamism and related conflicts since the September 11 attacks in the US acts as a headline reminder of both the role of religion in politics and the way it can act as a marker of ethnocultural identity. Meanwhile, although the debate is by no means finished,⁵ secularization theory has been roundly criticized.⁶ Peter Berger, one of the most prominent of secularization theorists, effectively recanted in the late 1990s, identifying the 'desecularization of the world' in the face of burgeoning religious movements around the globe.⁷ Fundamentalist variants of all the major religions have spread and orthodox religions remain globally popular in renewed forms such as Pentecostalism.8 New religious movements and alternative spiritualities proliferate, and there is evidence to suggest that participation in their less conventional (and countable) forums offsets much of the decline in traditional worship in countries with developed 'spiritual marketplaces'. 9 Overall, those who accept the existence of 'secularizing effects' tend to decouple them from anything like a normative theory of secularization's linear, inevitable spread. Rather, the accent is on more open-ended processes of adaptation and reformulation as religion responds to secular forces that are themselves not uniform.¹⁰

This volume seeks to contribute to the understanding of this environment – one in which religion remains a vital aspect of the present that is related to broader social dynamics, and is increasingly recognized as such. It brings together scholars from a range of disciplines around the challenge of thinking of religion as living culture again – that is, after the hiatus in which it was dealt with little seriousness outside of religious studies and sociology of religion, specializations that themselves developed in proportion to the effective expulsion of matters religious from other fields of social and cultural study. This first involves acknowledging

⁵ For one reformulation see Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

⁶ See Asad for a conceptual critique and Greely for a more empirical one: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Andrew M. Greeley, *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2003).

⁷ Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), pp. 1–18.

⁸ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁹ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

Martin Geoffroy, 'Theorizing Religion in the Global Age: A Typological Analysis', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* 18/1–2 (2004): pp. 33–46; Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms', *Sociology of Religion,* 60/3 (1999): pp. 303–33.

that religion, while having special features such as appeal to superempirical agents, is not a realm distinct from the rest of culture. It is mediated, administered, lived, contested and adapted by socially situated agents, just like other forms of culture – and in relation to them. Secondly, analysing religion as culture also involves reconsidering its social significance in light of other contemporary social, cultural, economic and political issues, and the theories that have been developed with reference to them.¹¹

It is somewhat ironic that founding figures in social studies, viz. Durkheim and Weber, did view religion as socially significant culture in no less than its capacity to integrate ideologically entire social systems (Durkheim) and to catalyze sociohistorical formations (modern capitalism for Weber). However, implicit in both arguments is the association of religion with particular arrangements that are superseded by modernity—primitive societies in Durkheim's case and early capitalism in Weber's. In taking religion seriously each thinker simultaneously helped to lay the foundations for secularization by identifying religion with originary points separated from the rationalized and functionally differentiated modern world.

In the face of religion's continued vitality in 'global modernity', determinations of its significance need to be opened up to multiple perspectives. The currency of received oppositions such as those between the sacred and the profane deserves questioning. As Asad argues, such distinctions may arise more from conceptual schemas of Western thought than they do from the logic of world religions. Whether the latter integrate institutions and practices across whole societies is a debatable measure for the relevance of religion in pluralized milieux. Its imbrication with social differences of class, race, nationality, ethnicity and gender may be just as important an influence on identities and public life.¹³

However, a limiting factor that bears upon any interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary religion is that religious studies and the sociology of religion were somewhat sequestered from the cross-disciplinary interest in the cultural aspects of social life that became known as the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s and

In making these distinctions, we are also implying that, while religious identity can be a highly individualized experience, religious experience is always more than a subjective – or cognitive – mentality; hence the reason for our emphasizing other socio-cultural relations and processes. Cf. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2nd edn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2nd edn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976).

¹³ For a fuller discussion of the changing relationship between different faith communities (viz. Anglicanism, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism) and civic society within the UK, see Zaki Cooper and Guy Lodge (eds), *Faith in the Nation: Religion, Identity and the Public Realm in Britain Today* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2008). For a more philosophical analysis of these issues, particularly the question of religious citizenship within liberal democracies, see Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14/1 (2006): pp. 1–25.

1990s.¹⁴ Cultural theorists working under rubrics such as postmodernism and poststructuralism destabilized models of a universal, progressive modernity of the kind assumed by secularization, but they had little interest in exploring their radical ideas in relation to religion. One of the legacies of this is that those working in cultural studies frameworks can construe almost any phenomenon as amenable to cultural analysis, but, in practice, they do not tend to admit religion to the cathedral. This is somewhat odd, as if anything the cultural turn that followed structuralism was about the discovery that the social is replete with the production and exchange of meanings.¹⁵ If religion – with all its constructions of the meaning of life and how to act accordingly – is not meaning-making *par excellence*, what is? The truth is that it continues to be an 'embarrassment' to many secularist academics.¹⁶ So it is that Rita Felski suggests that everyday life, the sphere of mundane practice that is of particular interest in cultural studies, is viewed as thoroughly secular in the field.¹⁷

Yet, for billions, religion does play a role in how life is lived, and scholars who attend only to the 'secular' or 'religious' aspects of diverse issues related to those lives risk conveying an impoverished understanding of the phenomena they study. In proposing this, it is not our intention to dismiss the specialized study of religion. Tim Fitzgerald is one who has argued against religious studies in its current form, which he sees as being organized around a reified category of religion that constructs it as different from everything else, especially matters of state. This, Fitzgerald argues, acts to create distorted discourses that separate out the religious from the secular in ways that are not borne out in practice. In these terms, religion should be researched within the frameworks of other disciplines to ensure that its imbrication with the rest of social and cultural life is an initial premise of inquiry. However, although the intent of this argument is commendable, we propose that the best means to loosen divisions is to promote exchange across already existing disciplines. Religion is distinctive in its cultural forms, even if it never stands apart, and religious studies and the sociology of religion generate

Mike Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism (London: Sage, 1991), p. 112.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage and Open University Press, 1997), pp. 1–74.

John Frow, 'Is Elvis a God? Cult, Culture, Questions of Method', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1/2 (1998): pp. 197–210.

Rita Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', New Formations, 39 (1999): p. 16.

¹⁸ Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The lack of consensus over a definition of religion and whether it is a cultural universal opens up questions about the forms religiosity can take in changing environments. Do we worship celebrities? Does advertising offer us heaven on earth? See Benthall for a recent take on the problem of defining religion and parareligion through a set of recurring features that can be instantiated in different combinations: Jonathan Benthall, *Returning*

detailed knowledge of its terrain. As Stewart Hoover notes, there has already been a notable turn towards culturalism – a context-sensitive focus on lived cultures, everyday life, and meaning construction, reception and negotiation – among those who study media and religion.²⁰ The problem is the limited number of forums through which those conducting such work can share broader theoretical resources and findings with those working outside of the domain of religious studies. Such opportunities are grossly disproportionate to the social pervasiveness of religion.

Along these lines this volume brings together scholars from religious studies, sociology, communication studies, media studies, cultural studies, gender studies, literary studies, history, anthropology, international relations and musicology to explore religious culture through cross-disciplinary rubrics of mediation, youth, consumption and lifestyle and politics. The intent is to see how a range of conceptual resources and approaches can be brought to the empirical study of religious issues as they appear across contexts. This arrangement is designed less to build up substantive knowledge of any particular object of study than it is to highlight the ways that religion can be tied up with key dimensions of the present. Chapters raise critical concerns including governmentality, post-feminism, neoliberalism, globalization, consumer culture, diaspora, new media and the politics of representation. The interest is to show that, whatever the situation, religion is part of contemporary sense-making and practice, and as such is an emergent property of socio-cultural change. In other words, that it is living culture.

In taking this approach *Mediating Faiths* is designed to complement other ongoing explorations that are bringing religion back into frames from which it has largely been excluded. The 'theological turn' in recent critical theory is one notable example. Since Derrida considered the spectre of faith in his later work a number of noted theorists, including Žižek, Kristeva, Badiou, Taylor and Rorty, have addressed religion.²¹ Another example is the increasing amount of work that has examined the links between religion, media and popular culture.²²

to Religion: Why a Secular Age is Haunted by Faith (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

²⁰ Stewart M. Hoover, 'The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion', *The Journal of Media and Religion*, 1/1 (2002): pp. 225–36.

Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001); Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (eds), *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1997); Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds), *Religion and Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (eds), *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Jolyon P. Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (eds), *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and*

The concept of mediation that lies behind our title refers not only to the expanded symbolic realm created by media technologies in which religious communications consist, but to the broader sense that apprehension of and practice in the world is mediated by material, cultural and social elements. Mediation in this sense is the intersection of multiple, co-determining factors amid any set of relations in which religiosity is implicated. Including but moving beyond media in the restricted sense of communications channels, the chapters collected present mediation as an ongoing social process of meaning-making through which religious discourses articulate with other contemporary forms. These relationships demand reconsideration of settled notions of the place and value of the sacred. In various ways throughout the chapters, the authors raise questions about the changing relations of authority over religious symbolization and practice that arise as religions interact with the rest of media and society. This happens through the ways that agents bind the religious to concerns of the everyday and to broader public spheres in the course of action and expression.

While not advancing any particular theoretical programme, this orientation can be explained with reference to Stuart Hall's development of Gramsci's concept of articulation.²³ Articulation describes the way that ideological elements form combinations with each other, social formations and subjects. The model leads to a particular way of reading in which the value of an ideological element is to be ascertained by its contingent relations with others. Religion is Hall's primary example: 'Its meaning – political and ideological – comes precisely from its position within a formation. It comes with what else it is articulated to'. In this view, it has no fixed political connotations, but is related to power structures in particular ways by particular movements, which inflect it, develop it and engage with it to construct narratives that transform people's awareness of themselves and their potential behaviour. Accordingly he notes 'the extraordinary diversity of the roles which religious formations have actually played' in the developing and modern world. For instance, he sees the 'funny language' of Rastafarianism in Jamaica as deriving from, but subverting the Bible, such that it became a

Culture (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2003); Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adan M. Medrano (eds), Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds), Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere (Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005); Lynn Schofield Clark (ed.), Religion, Media, and the Marketplace (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

Stuart Hall, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 141–4. Hall incidentally is one of the more influential intellectuals who has recently called for religion to be taken seriously again in the humanities and social sciences. See Laurie Taylor, 'Culture's revenge: Laurie Taylor interviews Stuart Hall', Newhumanist. org 121/2 (2006), at http://newhumanist.org.uk/960, accessed 2 September 2010.

conduit for the reconstruction of black history, a cultural resource that transformed experiences of poverty and colonialism into political subjectivity.

In this spirit, via Christian beauty competitions in the US to environmentalist Thai Buddhist monks protesting deforestation by ordaining trees, and almost any other contemporary religious culture one could mention, we propose that the significance of religion be interpreted through its place in socio-historical formations, not against universalist benchmarks that themselves prove to be creations of very particular histories.

Part I: New Media Religion

Throughout the volume contributors examine how religiosity is manifested in multiple ways with diverse consequences. Any material object, practice or representation effects signification upon being perceived. Communal worship, meditation and even vows of silence convey meanings and subjective effects that are shaped by the communications forms and physical environments in which they consist.

People often tend to think of media in terms of the most recent physical means for communicating messages. In our times these are electronic and digital. This section comprises chapters that show how changes in the media environment are directly implicated in how religion is expressed. However, in order to avoid the risk of fetishizing only the 'very latest' media technologies it is first necessary to acknowledge that religious communication and experience has always been mediated and that for as long as there has been recorded human history there have been new media of one kind or another. For instance, the 'very latest' in religious art, drama and music conveyed the Christian gospel to the illiterate European laity for generations while monks laid cultural foundations for the print revolution by fastidiously hand-copying manuscripts in their scriptoria.

The case of the European Reformation illustrates how mediation, in the sense we have proposed above, is much more than a matter of message formats. It is also the social relations that form around them and the cultures transmitted through them. Upon the publication of Gutenberg's Bible surely few at the time would have seen the potential mass dissemination of the word of God as leading to the decreased authority of the Catholic Church and the secularization of learning. However, as Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued, the capacity of printed media to store, index and distribute information promoted the specialization in and comparison between bodies of knowledge that underpinned both the Reformation and the Renaissance.²⁴ The heterodox monk Martin Luther was the first star author

²⁴ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

of the print age, new media entrepreneurs ensuring that his word was sold like any other for which there was demand.²⁵

Without the benefit of hindsight we can be less certain where the current electronic media 'revolution' might lead. Nonetheless, the increased volume of media messages and the proliferation in formats through which religion is communicated are certain, even if their effects may vary by context. This presents religious organizations with the strategic challenge of spreading their views amid changing media ecologies. Evangelical and Pentecostal movements appear to be the winners in this scenario because of their entrepreneurial willingness to adopt new avenues such as cable and satellite television.²⁶

However, others are more ambivalent about mediated public spheres that may favour particular modes of representation (such as entertainment and critique) and that may be subject to governmental regulation, commercial power and a range of other voices. The spread of religious representations is no guarantee that they can be controlled by those who consider themselves to be the custodians of creeds. As Bryan Turner notes with reference to films such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Last Passion of Christ*, popular media 'contribute to the circulation of religious phenomena, but at the same time they challenge traditional, hierarchical forms of religious authority and interpretation'.²⁷ With its bias towards decentralized and cheap cultural production, much generated by private users, the Internet in particular has the potential to further open up the range of interpretations. It allows the public expression of personal belief and of religious ideation that circumvents state-regulated or commercialized media.²⁸

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 39.

²⁶ See Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988); Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990); Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods (eds), *Understanding Evangelical Media: The Changing Face of Christian Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

²⁷ Bryan S. Turner, 'Religious Speech: The Ineffable Nature of Religious Communication in the Information Age', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25/7–8 (2008): p. 228.

For more about online 'participatory culture' see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006). For work about religion and the Internet see Brenda E. Basher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One In The Network* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); chapters 13 and 14 in Christopher Deacy and Elizabeth Arweck (eds), *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 219–51; chapters 19–23 in Mitchell and Marriage, *Mediating Religion*, pp. 213–82.

Stephen Hunt's contribution charts the changing fortunes of Christian broadcasting in Britain over the last 30 years. Hunt shows how religious broadcasting on the major terrestrial channels has changed in nature and scope. The broadcast 'religious voice' has been transformed from a privileged discourse intended to 'bind the nation' under the original paternalistic public service model of the BBC, to being one voice among many after the market reform of broadcasting. Mainstream religious programmes tend to be more secular, covering matters of general morality, with critics arguing they are indistinguishable from normal current affairs. New media, satellite, cable and the Internet offer new opportunities, but also generate conflicts and paradoxes. Broadcasting in Britain is highly regulated, in terms not only of ownership but also of content. As well as facing commercial realities. Christian broadcasters have to navigate regulations regarding funding, recruitment, and freedom and curtailment of speech, if their commitment to Christian mission is to be compatible with the conditions applied to broadcasting licences. Questions arise as to how the broadcasters convey distinctive Christianity in a highly pluralist culture.²⁹ They make concessions in order to have voices at all, and may principally reach confirmed Christians rather than converting members of the public.

In her chapter, Aini Linjakumpu considers the emergence of 'alternative' Islamic discourses made possible by the decentralizing and globalizing influences of the Internet. In reducing the communications advantage that large organizations have over small ones and individuals, and in favouring recursive discourses that respond to other mediations, the Internet is an important platform for alternative media.³⁰ Violent manifestations of Islam currently take centre stage in many discussions of the religion, but there are alternatives within the mainstream. Islam has never had a centralized authority and in the past people looked to local scholars for guidance. In annihilating space, the Internet has allowed Muslims to seek advice, guidance and interpretations anywhere. This is especially important for those who live in societies where there is little freedom of speech and where it is difficult to form political organizations independent of the state. The Internet allows freer exchange of ideas, leading to lifestyle-oriented discussion on topics such as 'Queer Islam' and 'Everyday Islam'. The latter includes the use by young Muslims of social networking sites, chat rooms and blogs, to circumvent restrictions on dating, for example. In these ways, Islam is being reconfigured from within in a way that was not possible prior to the development of the Internet.

In the next chapter, Knut Lundby discusses the results of a project initiated by the Norwegian government, who wished to review religious education in the interest of social cohesion. This contribution concerns the use of new media in exploring the meaning and place of religion in the lives of twenty-first-century Norwegian

²⁹ See, for example, Michael Bailey, 'Media, Religion and Culture: An Interview with Michael Wakelin', *Journal of Media Practice*, 11/2 (2010): pp. 185–9.

³⁰ Chris Atton, *An Alternative Internet* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).