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The Multiple Intersections of Religion and Media: An Introduction

Patrick Eisenlohr

There are few topics that provide better illustrations of the theme of media and social change than the issue of religion. Religion has always been linked to media practices in a broader sense; indeed, media are the very condition of possibility for religion. Against the background of very long histories of such intertwining, it is clear that religious transformations are closely connected to changes in media infrastructures and practices. One striking example is the great salience of religious mobilisations in the contemporary globalising world. In this introductory chapter, I would like to discuss the multiple ways in which religion and media intersect, at times being entangled so closely that it is difficult to draw a dividing line between the two. Having problematised this separation, discussions about the 'impact' newer media practices may have on religion will have to be thought anew. As I will point out, such questions have to be differently posed and fine-tuned in order to come to terms with current media configurations that touch on religious practices and identities.

First, there is probably no concept more troublesome in the social sciences and humanities today than the notion of religion. A number of critics have questioned the notion of religion as a universal comparative concept, arguing that it is the product of modern forms of governance. The idea of 'world religions' arose in 19th century colonial worlds to make the practices of religious others commensurable with European understandings of religion and the spiritual (Masuzawa 2005; van der Veer 2001). Moreover, the notion of religion has also been charged with carrying a heavy Christian, particularly Protestant baggage (Asad 2003). In the study of religion, this has been especially evident in the privileging of belief and doctrinal content over embodied public performance as well as disciplinary practice.

However, many of these conceptual problems of universalising Protestant notions of religion as 'religion' per se can be circumvented if one takes a different perspective on the matter. The institutions and practices commonly subsumed under 'religion' can also be understood as institu-

tionalised processes of interaction between people and non-human or semi-human agents in a spiritual otherworld that frequently is not immediately perceivable by the senses. Whether conceived as a transcendent otherworld or a more immanent sphere where such other actors are present, human beings draw on social institutions and forms of mediation in order to interact with such religious otherworlds and those inhabiting it. This is where the media question comes in and a 'media turn' in the study of religion (Engelke 2010) has recently taken place. The forms of mediation enabling such interactions necessarily involve material and technical aspects that work as media of the divine or the spiritual, whether through objects, images, language uttered or written, and nowadays also through the whole range of contemporary audiovisual media. It is here that we can discern an intimate link between media and 'religion' understood as forms and traditions linking people and other divine or spiritual actors and beings.

Three Dimensions of the Religion-Media Complex

There are at least three domains of intersection between religion and media: the politics of representation, public religion and religious mediation. I would like to comment briefly on each of them. First, there is a large body of scholarship that investigates the role of media in the production and circulation of representations of religion and religious difference. The focus here is not on the interaction between humans and a spiritual otherworld, however conceived, but on how social processes shape and are in turn shaped by such representations. The chief issue from this perspective on religion and media are questions of power and control over the representations of religion, religious others and religious minorities, and the political dynamics and conflicts resulting from them (Hew, this volume; Schäfer, this volume). Often such representations of religion and religious difference contain imbalances and biases that frequently feature as the expression of and as actively shaping hostility and conflict (Hackett 2003; Farmer 1996). The stereotyping of religious others may unfold in an exclusionary manner, such as in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Esposito & Kalin 2011; Poole 2002; Bunzl 2005; Silverstein 2010), and may also be a key constituent of normative ideals of religious diversity and coexistence that are frequently tied to nation-building (Vasudevan 2001).

Increasing scepticism about the power of media producers over diverse audiences has led media anthropologists to extend the cultural studies ap-

proach to the investigation of audiences. The latter's agency was usually sidelined in earlier theorising of the ideological effects of media consumption. Following a research line initiated by sociologists and cultural studies scholars who had begun to comparatively investigate media audiences (Liebes & Katz 1990; Ang 1985, 1991), anthropologists have for example demonstrated how the meanings people derived from the same television programs differed substantially across lines of gender and class as well as being influenced by the different social interactions that precede, accompany and follow television watching (Mankekar 1999; Abu-Lughod 2005). However, the question is not just one of hegemony over audiences in a contest over the representation of religious difference and diversity. Research on censorship, including the representation of religious figures, symbols and religious difference, has shown that the complex of religion and media is often drawn upon in attempts at 'cultural regulation' in which states seek to control and shape the affective sensibilities of publics in matters of religion and religious difference (Mazzarella & Kaur 2009; Mazzarella 2013).

Scholars have also focused on how the intersections of religion and media reconfigure modern public spheres (Meyer & Moors 2006). The widely shared observation that contemporary religious mobilisations heavily draw on the modalities and techniques of public spheres has resulted in a critique of the Habermasian notion of the secular public in which religion is privatised and public debate is primarily deliberative with no room for religious arguments and sensibilities. It has also led to the recognition that contemporary public spheres feature an intermingling of religion, entertainment and advertisement. Research on 'religious markets' has highlighted these connections (Clark 2007; Moore 1994), often showing how consumer preferences heavily favour the public presence of majority religions in many settings, coupled with the deployment of strategies of marketing and 'branding' religion. Such market-oriented religious mobilisations sometimes are in tension with normative ideals of religious diversity and even-handedness promoted by states (Hackett 2006). Overall, market discourses tend to cast religious affiliations and preferences as a matter of individual 'choice' in a field dominated by capitalist competition, thereby betraying the deep historical links between market liberalism and Protestantism, where understandings of religion are strongly organised around ideas of individual responsibility and choice.

Sometimes, followers of a religious tradition set themselves off from others through preference for a particular media technology, such as the

Senegalese murids who interact with the leader of their Sufi tradition through audiovisual media in their global migrations, a practice that distinguishes them from Sunni Muslims in Senegal (Bugenhagen 2010). This theme is also addressed by Jeanine Dayyeli's chapter on the circulation of religious videos in Central Asia (Dayyeli, this volume). Matthew Engelke has described how a group of Zimbabwean apostolics have come to reject the Bible, being convinced that they have found a 'live and direct' channel to God, far superior to scripture (Engelke 2007: 3). However, initial unease about a new media technology often gives way to trajectories of domestication into the modes of interaction characteristic of a particular media technology (Khan 2011).

Research on the intersection of religion and the public sphere has been organised around a set of dichotomies, of which the contrast between Habermasian deliberation and affective engagement and suasion mentioned earlier is only one (Cody 2011; Oosterbaan 2009). Much research has highlighted what many scholars have considered the pluralising and sometimes even democratising effects of newer 'small' media such as formerly audio- and videocassettes, CDs and DVDs. The literature on Islam and the public sphere is particularly important in this regard. In the latter case, the Internet and satellite TV have also been described as opening up a sphere of possibilities for a broad range of new actors to disseminate and debate new forms of religious authority, thereby undercutting the power of established authorities in the field of religion, such as the state and the 'ulema (Echchaibi 2011; Eickelmann 2005; Eickelman & Anderson 1999; Mandaville 2001). A related dynamic of opening up new opportunities for greater public presence to previously marginal groups and individuals has also been reported in the context of Christian radio broadcasting in West Africa (Grätz 2011). However, others have stressed that those same media practices also enable new avenues for religious discipline, or have argued that the dialogic and disciplinary dimensions of religious publics are mutually constitutive (Hirschkind 2006). The question of access and exclusion in modern publics that has played such a prominent role in critiques of Habermas's account of public spheres (Fraser 1992) has also been significant in scholarly debates on religion and media. The notion of the 'counter-public' as an alternative sphere of public engagement opposed to mainstream national publics in terms of the modalities of access and engagement has been a point where these debates have crystallised most clearly, and newer media practices have played key roles in the constitution of such alternative publics (Hirschkind 2006; Sreberny-Muhammadi

& Muhammadi 1994). Counter-publics are distinct from the mainstream publics they are opposed to by virtue of different genres of publicity, address and modes of participation (Warner 2002). Yet, new religious publics can also be constituted by transposing particular genres of publicity and modes of address into different context, as is happening with highly successful Muslim adoptions of televangelism (Gräf & Skovgaard-Petersen 2009; Larkin 2008; Moll 2010). Here, the boundaries of 'religion' as well as the boundaries separating religious traditions from each other become increasingly problematised, as genres and modes of public engagement cross over from entertainment to religion and from one religious tradition to another.

Finally, closely related to but distinct from the mutual imbrication of religion and media in the public sphere, media play a fundamental role in religious mediation in the narrower sense. With this I mean the forms of interaction and communication that connect religious practitioners to often non-human spiritual actors in a religious otherworld, however conceived. Such interactions necessarily involve media with their technical and material aspects (de Vries 2001), such as images, sacred objects, sound and religious language, and writing, to name only the most common types of media that enable access to spiritual worlds. It is no surprise that nowadays also the latest digital audiovisual technologies and the Internet have become part of this complex of religious mediation. Uses of media in religious settings have long been shaped by theologies of mediation, containing veritable media ideologies about desirable, efficacious and otherwise preferable kinds of media that enable the interaction with deities, ancestors or other spiritual beings. The dynamics of religious traditions are deeply entangled with their media histories. But one needs to be careful to simply associate one religious tradition with a clear preference for one sort of medium in the communication of the divine, such as for example sonic media in Islam or images in Hinduism. Religious traditions contain great internal diversity and contestation of media practices and preferences. There is a rich visual culture in Islamic engagements with the divine (Moll 2010), as there is a complex sonic theology in Hinduism (Wilke 2008). Christianity is a case in point, as the key role of images alongside scripture has repeatedly come under assault in different periods of history in both Eastern and Western Christianity. Further, predominant mediatic engagements with the divine have also left their imprint on modern public spheres. For example, Birgit Meyer has analysed the impact of Pentecostal forms of divine revelation through visual practices and media in Ghana as

resulting in a 'Pentecostalist style' permeating the public sphere in that country (Meyer 2004).

Contemporary media practices facilitate the participation of transnationally dispersed human actors in the same religious event (Zillinger 2013). Nevertheless, new media are also enthusiastically adopted in a broad range of religious contexts due to hopes that they might deliver a more 'direct' and immediate interaction with the divine. A desire for immediacy with the divine thus leads to the paradox that more and more complex media technology and infrastructure is deployed in order to enjoy a more immediate relationship with spiritual worlds; in other words, media technology is supposed to do away with mediation (Eisenlohr 2009, 2011). Moreover, claims to be in a more 'direct' contact with the divine have also played important roles in political contests and power struggles. This is especially the case in situations of crises where desire for immediate manifestations of the divine, such as Marian apparitions in the Philippines, mingle with wishes to unmask corruption and other obscure actions of the powerful (de la Cruz 2009). A media-enabled more direct connection to the divine is often drawn upon to justify claims of moral superiority as well as to be deployed in political arenas.

Another important issue is that media-enabled interactions with spiritual worlds tend to be synesthetic, that is they often engage a broad range of the sensorium even if they appear to privilege one particular sense. For example, the intense visual interaction known as *darshan* through which Hindus engage with divine images or the key role of sound reproduction in Islamic contexts where the reciting voice plays a central role in bringing about the presence of God is also frequently accompanied by sensations of touch through which the divine becomes manifest to religious practitioners (Pinney 2001; Schulz 2012). W. J. T. Mitchell has made a related point when he asserted that "there are no visual media," underlining that interaction with images in a visual field necessarily also involves other senses, to which one could also add the bodily emplacement and the kinesthetics of the viewer (Mitchell 2005). Alongside the great internal diversity of religious traditions, this is another reason why facile identifications of a particular religious tradition and a certain media technology privileging a particular section of the sensorium are misleading.

Nevertheless, despite the impossibility of exclusively identifying particular religious traditions with particular media and sensorial preferences, differences in underlying assumptions about the nature of signs and images have repeatedly been mobilised to exacerbate conflict between reli-

gious groups. A good example is the controversies and protests that erupted around the 2005 publications of derogatory cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Here, a Protestant semiotic ideology according to which images and signs bear no substantial and material relationship to the 'real' world and should therefore be protected as 'free speech' clashed with notions of filial dependency and piety in regard to the Prophet as well as with feelings of personal injury that the cartoons provoked among many Muslims (Keane 2009; Mahmood 2009). However, the feelings of outrage the cartoons caused among many Muslims are not far removed from Christian sensibilities towards the portrayal of Jesus and those cultivated in the Christian tradition of venerating icons (Mahmood 2009). This again underlines the inherent connections between religion and media but also points to the diversity and complexity of religious mediations not only across but also within particular religious traditions.

Mediatization of Religion?

The perspective outlined above, stressing the intrinsic connections between religion and media, can be brought into conversation with a trend in media studies and sociology according to which we are witnessing the 'mediatization' of religion in the contemporary world. There is a range of different usages of this term, beginning with the rather strong claim that the 'logic' of modern media as increasingly independent institutions is now increasingly reshaping other social domains such as religion: "religion is increasingly subsumed under the logic of media" (Hjarvard 2008: 11). Here, religion finds itself in a largely reactive role vis-à-vis processes of social, technological and economic change that essentially happen elsewhere. Others, in contrast, have taken mediatization to be more of a dialectical process between the 'moulding forces' of media and the reverse impact of other social domains on modern media and its institutions (Hepp 2009). A shared concern across much of the mediatization literature is that transformations in the domain of media are connected to structural changes in patterns of communication on the micro-level of interpersonal interaction in multidirectional ways (Krotz 2008, 2009), a theme that can also be extended to communication in religious settings. These positions share a lot in common with the paradigm of 'mediation' as conceived by Nick Couldry and Roger Silverstone (Couldry 2008; Silverstone 2002;

compare also Campbell 2010 on media and religion), which also takes the relationship between media institutions and practices with other spheres of socio-cultural action as a fundamentally dialectical one. However, such dialectical accounts rely on an analytical separation of religion and media, which is at odds with the anthropological perspective stressing the inseparability and inherent connectedness of media and religion. Indeed, the latter perspective seems much closer to the paradigm of media domestication into pre-existing social worlds (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992), which would account for how new media technologies and practices are domesticated into established paradigms of religious mediation, such as *darshan*, which themselves are not fundamentally altered in the process. Nevertheless, as media enable the experience of spiritual otherworlds in religious practice, changes in the materiality of such media can also be connected to religious change (Meyer 2013). This in turn leads back to the question of how media-related transformations of the public sphere are connected to processes of religious transformation, or more broadly, how the different levels of the religion-media complex I have described interact with each other. I suggest that the question of the mediatisation of religion can be reformulated as the processes and transformations that happen at the intersection between the public sphere dimensions of religion and the processes of religious mediation in the stricter sense of the term. While the latter are often characterised by scenarios of domesticating newer media practices into established forms of interacting with the divine in a given religious tradition, the public sphere is frequently the site where religious discourse and images intersect and blend with other types of discourse and images in often novel ways, transforming religious practice and institutions in the process.

To conclude, only a perspective taking seriously the multi-layered nature of the nexus of religion and media as politics of representation, public religion and religious mediation can account for the complex processes of transformation and domestication of media practices in religious settings. The question of the mediatisation of religion can only be successfully answered once one specifies the level of analysis at which particular media practices operate with a connection to religious institutions and forms of interaction. More in particular, the transformations referred to as mediatisation by sociologists and scholars in media studies can be understood as the result of particular forms of interplay between the different dimensions of the phenomenon of religion and media I have outlined above.

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A Counter-Public of a Different Kind: Tajik Youth, Religious Authority and the Medialisation of Islam¹

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The worldwide opening-up of the broadcasting sector and the rise of new media have been celebrated by some scholars in the Middle East and North Africa as a kind of democracy revolution offering diverse information access to everybody and ultimately turning even the illiterate into politically informed, mature citizens (see Mernissi 2005; Bax 2007; Sabra 2010). In addition to this, the impact of social media networks on the so-called Arab Spring and the Iranian Green Revolution preoccupied many Western observers. In some countries of Central Asia, if a bit belated, new media also triggered a change in media configurations away from ‘paternalistic’ patterns towards more ‘interactive’ ones (Ibraeva 2013: 71–85; see also Barlybaeva & Rakhimzhanova 2013 and Abazov & Toybayeva 2014 for a critique). Religion and specifically Islamic teachings, however, rarely come into the focus of these discussions of media and its role for social change.

The conceptualisations, potentials and traveling of a mediated, global(ised) Islam have been elaborated for the Middle East by Eickelman and Anderson (1999), Bunt (2000, 2003), Mandaville (2001), Salvatore and Eickelman (2004), Hoover (2006), Eisenlohr (2012) and others. Especially satellite TV and the Internet have received considerable attention (e.g. Sakr 2001; Bunt 2000, 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Braune 2008; Schulz 2012; Campbell 2013). Mandaville (2001: 85) termed as ‘new media’ vessels mediating between different groups, transmitting ideas, messages and perceptions and sometimes covering great physical as well as social distances. Edward Said (1991: 226) dealt with traveling theories moving “from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another”. He focuses on the change and transformations locally produced ideas (e.g. in the shape of videos) undergo when they become translocal.

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